The Politics of Apache Place Names:
Or Why “Dripping Springs” Does Not Equal “Tónoogah”

Anthony Webster
University of Texas at Austin

In this paper, I explore the poetics and politics of place-naming among the Mescalero Apache. I develop an argument about the political ramifications of place-naming practices and explore three Mescalero discursive claims to place. I first examine a hunting narrative and a prophecy narrative told in the 1930s and suggest how they make both subtle and overt claims to the land. I then analyze the Mescalero Apache Dictionary and the way it re-plots the landscape and challenges the state sanctioned Anglo and Spanish place names. Finally, I investigate an on-going debate concerning Apache place names and the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis using the analytical tools sketched out in the preceding sections.

1. Apache Place Names

Much has been written on Apache conceptions of place (Basso 1996; Carmichael 1994). Early on, Harry Hoijer (1953) wrote that the Chiricahua Apache “name the topographic features of their environment with care and precision” (559). More recently, Basso (1996) has described how place names in Western Apache are verbal art that evokes complex “moral” relations with the landscape. Carmichael (1994), in discussing Mescalero Apache conceptions of place, has focused on the “sacredness” of places and...

This is a substantially reduced version of an earlier version of this paper initially presented in a Linguistic Diversity seminar at the University of Texas at Austin. I would like to thank those in attendance for useful comments. I would also like to thank Joel Sherzer and Anthony Woodbury for useful comments on various manifestations of this paper. I would also like to thank Elaine Chun, Susan Smythe, and Yukako Sumaoshi for a number of useful suggestions on the form and content of this paper. Mistakes that remain are, as always, my responsibility.

Proceedings of the seventh annual Symposium About Language and Society-Austin
place as a resource area. Carmichael (1994) concludes that “belief in the sacred character of specific features of the landscape is an essential component of Mescalero self-identity” (96).

In this paper, I extend the argument of the politics of naming to three Mescalero claims about place. I argue that the use of place names can be understood as a spatial deployment because place names make claims about being of a place, of being connected to a place, of having an ability to name a place. In particular, it is a claim that is made in spite of Anglo or Spanish occupancy and to index that the Mescalero Apaches are here. My purpose is to sketch out a history of the poetics and politics of place names in Mescalero. Mescalero Apache are a Southern Athapaskan-speaking people that reside in south central New Mexico in a much reduced area of their “aboriginal” homeland (Basehart 1967).

I begin by briefly outlining a number of specific claims about Apache and generally Athapaskan place names. Basso (1996) has noted that Western Apache place names act as proverbial and are understood as the words of “the ancestors.” To use an Apache name is to invoke the voice of “the ancestors.” Place names are also used to create a mobile landscape through the situating of narrated events at specific named locales from specific points of view through the use of descriptive place names. Basso (1996) also pointed out that place names are a form a verbal art—both in the way they are used and in the way they are constructed. The descriptiveness of place names has been widely remarked upon by a number of scholars working on Athapaskan place naming practices (Basso 1996; Cruikshank 1990; Kari 1989; Collins 1998). Place names evoke images through the poetic deployment of uniquely Athapaskan poetic resources—they create a point of view from which to observe a specific place. Mescalero Apache place names are also quite descriptive. For example:

(1)  \textit{Tiis dasikaaya} “where there is a grove of cottonwoods”  
(Breuninger et al. 1982: 51)  
\textit{Ichqoosh sikaayá} “where there is a growth of wild roses”  
(Breuninger et al. 1982: 53)  
\textit{Gafideeze bitli’ddii} “water is under a Douglas Fir tree”  
(Breuninger et al. 1982: 53)

Collins (1998) has discussed the political import of place names regarding the Tolowa, a Pacific Coast Athapaskan people. He discusses the ways in which indigenous place names have been erased from the landscape and replaced by roads signs, maps, and monuments that assert another set of place names, and another claim to land and place.

2. “I was over there at White Mountain.”

The first narrative I examine is a brief narrative concerning a hunting trip told by a male Apache consultant to Harry Hoijer in the early 1930s. The narrative is from Hoijer’s unpublished field notebooks housed at the American Philosophical Society. I have updated the orthography from Hoijer’s hand-written notes. The title is Hoijer’s.

1 I would like to thank the American Philosophical Society for making Hoijer’s notebook available to me.
(2) "A Hunting Trip" as told by an Apache consultant to Harry Hoijer.

*Dziił gais’áñi*  ‘áká  *naanóóeya’
White mountain  over there  I was hunting

‘áá  *Litsoi  ‘e’néná  hich’iíyá’
toward  Potato Patch  to that place

dá’ághá‘étndah  túlyáahíítsááda’
in spite of that  I did not see anything

dá’taalkideoé  háhínaíí’t’o’
just turkey  I shot at it

*dá’ííná  dátee’í  sáátxí*
only one  I killed it

‘ákoo  ch‘óótxááld
then  it got dark

*hóonádsdzá*
I started back

‘ašhił’aá  koogqh’á  nánsdzá
and  to home  I went back

*dá’ákogo’*
that’s all

I was over there at “White Mountain”
Toward that place “Potato Patch”
In spite of that, I did not see anything
Just turkeys I shot at
I killed only one
Then it got dark
I started back
And I went back home
That’s all.

In this example, the Apache consultant situates his narrative on the Mescalero reservation by his use of the place name *Dziiłgais’áñi* “white mountain.” *Dziiłgais’áñi* is the largest mountain on the reservation and reaches an elevation of 12,000 feet. From many points on the reservation, it dominates the landscape. Snow often covers the higher elevations from November to early May. There is a rich body of narratives about the mountain, including a story I have been told that points out that a cluster of rock features on the mountain looks like the face of an Apache man. In this respect, the mountain is a “natural” Mount Rushmore. The Apache consultant also uses the place name *Litsoi  ‘e’néná* “potato patch.” Both names evoke images, descriptive images, of the places being referred to. This narrative, on first glance, is relatively unassuming—it is the kind of narrative one hears all the time. However, on closer inspection, it is just that unassuming
quality, that clear sense of place, that makes this narrative of interest. "I was hunting away there at White Mountain, toward that place Potato Patch." What is implicit in this knowledge of these places—the very matter-of-factness is a profound claim of being in a place, of knowing a place—to know a place is to be familiar with it. Both these place names, recorded in the 1930s, can be found in the Mescalero Apache Dictionary, where they have persisted (see Kari 1989).

3. "We are still here."

The second narrative I examine, also recorded in the 1930s by Hoijer, is more overt in its claim to place. In a narrative Hoijer titled "The Mescalero Prophecy," Fred Pelman, the narrator, makes an explicit claim about the nature of the relationship between Mescaleros and place. I present the opening section of the narrative below. The interview is from Hoijer's (1938) published collection of Chiricahua and Mescalero Apache texts. We have adapted the orthography and translation (primarily by including a translation of the narrative enclitic -ná'a) 'they say'.

(3) "The Mescalero Prophecy" as told by Fred Pelman to Harry Hoijer

ndii’ágoch’laaadé naaghéé’neesghánérí ‘ijee nahiíñjaaj lors that made Killer of Enemies right there he put them
Dzilgás’áñi bindádé White Mountain around it

"díi dzít dasíá Mascalero bikéyaaadaał. that mountain those on it Mescalero their land it will be"

"ákoo ‘ihee naaghéé’neesghánérí nahiíñjaajíí na-néí Mescalero (they) put them, they say

and so right here Killer of Enemies he put them, they say

‘áñí ‘it’áh naahe’etá. that still we are here

‘áñí yóosí ndii’ágólá: that god he made the earth

"díándí ‘ihee Mascalero bikéyaaadaal,” naahtíinlayíí na-néí is true right here Mescalero their land it will be" he said to us, they say

When the earth had been made, Killer of Enemies put us down right here in the vicinity of White Mountain.

"That which lies on this mountain will be the land of the Mescalero." And so Killer of Enemies put us down right here, they say.

We are still here. That god who created the earth:

"It is true that right here will be the land of the Mescalero," he said to us, they say.

(Hoijer 1938: 188-189)
In this narrative, Pelman achieves a forceful assertion of place through a variety of deictic devices. First, Pelman invokes the place name Dzilga'at'ani. He situates the events squarely within the known geography, a locale that was most likely visible at the time of narration. Second, Pelman repeats the phrase 'jii'ee 'right here.' In Mescalero Apache, there is a fourfold distinction between "here" (maximally inclusive) and "there" (maximally exclusive). The form that Pelman uses, 'jii-', is the maximally inclusive form. This deictic grounds the narrative at a specific spatial location and, as Pelman reminds the listener, "we are still here." That is, Pelman both grounds the discourse in the present and connects it to a prior discourse—a discourse event that has been transmitted from the ancestors. In doing this, Pelman uses the voice of the culture hero Killer of Enemies to take the claim about place. These are not Pelman's words, rather these are the words of Killer of Enemies. In addition, the use of the first person distributive at the end of Killer of Enemies’ second quote, “he said to each of us” Indicates that Killer of Enemies is speaking directly to a populace that would include Pelman and, potentially, Harry Hoijer. Furthermore, the second quote is attributed to yoo’sii ‘god.’ This, according to Hoijer (1939), is a loan-word from the Spanish word dios ‘god’ (the -si is a relative enclitic for persons) which has been phonologically adapted into Apache (111). One might argue that Pelman is both claiming legitimacy through the voice of the culture hero "Killer of Enemies" and the Judeo-Christian "God." Not only did "Killer of Enemies" proclaim that he was Mescalero land, but so too did the Judeo-Christian “God.” Finally, Pelman also uses the narrative enclitic -nd’a “they say,” which acts both as a narrative organizing device and also as an epistemic distancing device indicating that the speaker does not have first-hand knowledge of the events, but is reporting the words of those who have spoken before. In sum, the use of the place name and the narrative enclitic is a way, then, of connecting the words of the ancestors with the present “here-and-now” of the narrating event. Pelman is placing the claim of Mescalero rights to White Mountain in the mouth of the culture hero Killer of Enemies, mediated through the words of the ancestors. But the “here” is the here of the immediate narrative event and the audience is “us.”

The evidence for the validity of the claim of place is based on the observable fact that Mescalero live on “White Mountain.” They were put down “right here” and they are still here. The legitimacy and accuracy of the claims of the ancestors is borne out throughout the rest of the narrative as Pelman describes a number of events that have, as ancestors predicted, come to pass. In discussing prophecy narratives among Northern Taaapaskan women, Cruikshank (1998) argues that “words are not merely evidence for events...events legitimize words” (135). Pelman’s claim to the legitimacy of the homeland of Mescaleros is based on such an argument. This argument is entangled in notions of cultural authority and the simple observable fact that indeed the Mescalero are still in the vicinity of “White Mountain.” This is evidence for the legitimacy of the words of the ancestors. The places are as they are described and the ancestors said that the Mescalero would reside around Dzilga'at'ani and, indeed, they still do. Primary knowledge validates words of the ancestors (Rushforth 1992, 1994).

I want to step back, after having introduced two “textual” claims about place that occurred in the 1930s, and provide some historical contextualization. Why, possibly, did claims to place have been important to Mescalero Apaches in the 1930s? The larger, I believe, concerns Senator Albert Fall, of Teapot Dome fame. In the early 1910s,
Albert Fall twice attempted to turn the Mescalero Reservation into a National Park (Parman 1994). Fall owned a ranch that was adjacent to the Mescalero Reservation, and under the conditions of his bill, only part of the Mescalero Reservation would be declared a National Park while the rest would be available for leasing (Parman 1994). Both bills were defeated. Fall would later become Secretary of the Interior. In 1919, he was able to open up the Mescalero Reservation to mining leases, of which his daughter-in-law’s son-in-law took advantage. In 1922, Fall made one last attempt to make the Mescalero Reservation into a National Park. This proposal was also defeated.

The Mescalero Apaches were not unaware of Fall’s machinations. Opler (1975) reported that in the 1930s, when he conducted field work among the Mescalero, he heard “constant” rumors among Mescaleros that Fall was “plotting” to add land to his ranch and lease the land to the government at the expense of the Mescalero and that Fall was still trying to get the Mescalero Reservation turned into a National Park. Also, the Mescaleros were not passive in their response to the activities of Fall. For example, Opler (1975:13-14) writes that the relocation of the Chiricahua Apache from Oklahoma to the Mescalero Reservation:

The Mescalero did not allow the Chiricahua to settle with them because they had a great love they bore them. At the time the government was looking for a place to put the Chiricahua...the Mescalero had a worry of their own, the persistent rumor was circulating to the effect that the Mescalero had more land than they could well use and that part of the reservation was to be returned to the public domain. The Mescalero chose the lesser of two evils; they felt that the increase in the reservation population would still any demand that they yield of their territory.

4. On Dictionaries and Place Names

I now turn to a third example of Mescalero Apache claims to place. This example comes from the Mescalero Apache dictionary published by the Mescalero Apache Tribe in 1982 and continuously reprinted thereafter. The dictionary, compiled by Breuninger, Hugus, Lathan, and Scott Rushforth, is an interesting work that makes claims about place and connections to place. The dictionary is available for purchase at the Mescalero Cultural Center and costs about $20. It is a popular item with tourists, and because of its price is almost exclusively sold to tourists. The dictionary is organized as follows: Rushforth provides an introductory grammatical sketch at the start followed by a noun dictionary and then a few verb forms. The first section of the noun dictionary lists “Major Place Names (Surrounding Area)” and contains over sixty place names in Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. This section is then followed by “Reservation Place Names” which includes a list of over 70 place names found on the reservation. Following this section is a map of the Mescalero Reservation with the places plotted out.

Collins (1998) has suggested that the Tolowa’s use of Tolowa place names and names is a way of “replotting...aboriginal territory, a calling up and reasserting of old names in a way of knowing what has become a site of displacement as a prior placement” (Collins 1998:36). I would also suggest that in a small way the dictionary and its place names act as a reminder of that displacement. The Mescalero Reservation lies between Ruidoso, a tourist town in New Mexico, and White Sands National Monument along State Road 70. Tourists stop in on the way from Ruidoso to White Sands or vice versa, and tourists who are staying at the resort by the Mescalero Apache may also stop in. The dictionary seems innocuous enough besides place names it also includes the names of prominent discourses that have been deduced by the dictionary as indexing a relative legitimacy of the words (Collins 1998). It is important for living in the world.

Sapir-Whorf and the Apaches

I would like, as a way of argument in this paper, to lay out two prominent discourses that have argued for Apaches. Both discourses are not connected to the Apaches’ place names, i.e., the sanctioning of place names within their communities” (Silverstien 1997). Both discourses are available, and the relation of that local the accuracy of place names. The Mescaleros and Anglos academic discourse that the language is an index of the self-always relation to local and the Apaches’ place names.

I would like to use the term within the following. This is a short history of this term within the language of the Apaches, and the language of the Apaches. The history of this term within the language of the Apaches, and the language of the Apaches, the history of this term within the language of the Apaches, and the language of the Apaches. The history of this term within the language of the Apaches, and the language of the Apaches. The history of this term within the language of the Apaches, and the language of the Apaches. The history of this term within the language of the Apaches, and the language of the Apaches. The history of this term within the language of the Apaches, and the language of the Apaches. The history of this term within the language of the Apaches, and the language of the Apaches. The history of this term within the language of the Apaches, and the language of the Apaches. The history of this term within the language of the Apaches, and the language of the Apaches.
besides place names it also lists animal terms, kin terms, foods terms, and the like. However, the prominence of the place names, listed in the very first sections, suggests that claim to place—to having been here prior—is being made. It argues for another mapping of the landscape, a mapping without English or Spanish place names. These places have other names, names that challenge the monologic assertion of authority to name. The erasure of Mescalero connections and claims to place on official documents plays the old trope of the vanishing Native. The reassertion of Apache place names creates a counter-discourse that, to paraphrase Dylan Thomas, argues that the Mescaleros will not go gently into that good night.”

The dictionary is also a mode of language preservation. There is today a general language shift from Mescalero Apache to English. Mescalero is a moribund language. The people involved in the Mescalero Apache Dictionary are all committed to preserving the language. In the Preface to the Dictionary, the former Tribal writes Chairman (Breuninger et al. 1982:i),

we trust and hope that the dictionary will enable our people to keep our language alive and well. We sincerely hope that the dictionary will serve the coming generations of young Apaches so that it will help them understand themselves and appreciate the Apache way.

that knowing the place names is a part of understanding oneself as an Apache has only recently been deduced by anthropologists (Basso 1996). Knowing place names is also a way of indexing a relation to the ancestors, of asserting a claim about place based on the intimacy of the words of the ancestors. The dictionary preserves cultural knowledge, felt important for living the “Apache way.”

Sapir-Whorf and the Politics of Place Names

I would like, as a way of concluding, to close this paper with a point on translation. My argument in this paper has been twofold: 1) that Mescalero place names are poetic and political claims to place because they challenge the dominant discourse that has mapped Spanish and English names onto the landscape. I have argued that Apache place names are the words of the ancestors. In this way, Mescalero place names challenge the legitimacy of English names because those names are not connected to the words of the ancestors. The place names gain legitimacy not through the sanctioning of the state but through a relation with the words of the ancestors. In such cases as Mescalero, we see the creation and perpetuation of “local language communities” (Silverstein 1998), particularly in how a language community grounds itself—always relationally—in a locality through linguistic resources that both index relations to that locality and iconically evoke the legitimacy of that claim to locality. Place names accrue meaning in relation to the complex political relations between the communities.

I would like to use these two points to re-evaluate an ongoing debate about Chiricahua Apache place names and specifically the place name Tñoogah “water-whiteness extends downward.”13 This Chiricahua Apache place name has held a somewhat surprisingly

This is a short history of the struggle over the meaning of this place-name. A fuller analysis of the nature of this term within Whorfian debates awaits to be done.
central place in debates concerning the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. The form is first evident in this connection in Whorf’s (1956 [1941]) article “Language and Logic.” Whorf contrasted Tonoogah with the English place name “Dripping Springs” and suggests that Apache does not “paint the separate-object picture” that English does because each morpheme in Apache gains meaning in the ways they are combined.

Hoijer (1953) picked up on this place name, which he had collected during field work among Chiricahuas on the Mescalero Reservation. Hoijer argues that the difference between the English place name “Dripping Springs” and the Chiricahua Apache place name Tonoogah is that the terms accentuate different aspects of the topographic feature. The Apache term highlights the relationship between the water and a white streak of limestone, whereas the English place name focuses only on the movement of water. Hoijer (1953) is careful to note that “Dripping Springs” is not a translation of the Apache term, rather it is the English name for the place.

More recently, Pinker (1994) has claimed that Whorf greatly exaggerated the differences between the Apache term and the English term. Pinker cites a direct translation as evidence of an attempt to make strange the normalcy of the Apache term and that it does indeed mean the same as the English place name.

I think that one can disagree with Pinker’s analysis of the place name for purely etymological reasons by arguing that the combination of the tó- “water” noo- “downward motion” and -gah “to be white” is a form dependent expression (see Woodbury 1998) that loses something of its referential and poetic meaning when translated into English. However, my argument in this paper has been that the language of a place name matters for political reasons. To use the Apache form is to quote the ancestors, to make a claim to place that is rooted in the legitimacy of the words of the ancestors, and this cannot be translated into English as a simple gloss. To say “Dripping Springs” is an act of power; it is a way of denying the legitimacy of the ancestors. The United States forcefully took the land of the Chiricahua Apache, including the place denoted by Tonoogah, and placed them on a reservation outside of their traditional homeland. The use of the English place name erases the Chiricahua's historical connection to those places. It replicates an assertion of power over both the Chiricahua and the landscape. On the other hand, to use the Apache place name is to assert or index a connection to the place that is rooted in the words of the ancestors that is rooted in knowing the name and in challenging the dominant discourse that would erase the presence of the Chiricahua.

To have the authority to create a place called “Dripping Springs” is to make statements about the land and one’s relation to the land—it is to inscribe it in English. To create a place called Tonoogah is to invoke the words of the ancestors, to make a counter-claim about the land, and to invoke a myriad of complex connections. Places do not exist out there to be named, rather they are socially, morally, and politically constituted. Translations of place names, then, are not neutral because they situate and implicate an ongoing discourse about place and who knows and has the power to name it. Place names, at least, are incommensurable, not solely because of their poetic quality but because they are implicated in the assertions and counter-assertions of being from and the power relations they invoke. We need to understand, I think, that the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is based on implicature, not just of poetics but of the politics of using language and the connections those uses of language index. Languages are not comm
The form is first cited in "Mind and Logic." Whorf contrasted the languages are not politically equal; this fact needs to be remembered in any discussion of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis.

References


Department of Anthropology
University of Texas at Austin
Austin, Texas 78712
anthonywebster@mail.utexas.edu