Why Tséhootsooí Does Not Equal “Kit Carson Drive”: Reflections on Navajo Place Names and the Inequalities of Language

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Abstract. This article reflects on the controversy in the Navajo Nation of changing the name of Kit Carson Drive to the Navajo place name Tséhootsooí. I outline the structure and use of traditional Navajo place names and then show that Navajo place names have had a renaissance in signage for shopping centers and elsewhere. I then detail the controversy over a proposal to change a street name in Fort Defiance. Place names are not neutral, but fully implicated in concerns about who has and does not have the right (and power) to name. In debates about linguistic relativity, questions of the inequalities of language need to be engaged.

What has prompted me to write over the years is the hunch that something needs to be told, and that if I don’t try to tell it, it risks not being told.

— John Berger (2016:7)

1. Introduction. Some years ago, I suggested that Apache place names are not commensurate with English language place names because of the politics that surround Indigenous place-naming practices and their confrontation with governmental place-naming practices (Webster 2000). I suggested that Apache place names index ongoing placedness, whereas English language place names imposed by state and federal governments attempt to erase such ongoing indexical linkages. I concluded by noting that arguments by, say, Steven Pinker (1994: 49) that “Dripping Springs” is equivalent to the Chiricahua Apache place name Tónoogah showed a remarkable lack of awareness of the history of the Chiricahua Apache.¹ Such arguments play a trick of removing language-in-use from one context—the lived reality of minority populations (and specifically a population that had been removed from their homeland)—and placing it within the context of the imagined free-floating ahistorical linguistic example, and then proclaiming that this imagined free-floating example constitutes the whole of the language at some basic or primary level and assuming that comparison is readily possible only at that level (thus, through this logic, Tónoogah comes to mean the same thing as “Dripping Springs”).² This is an argument cast in terms not just of referential transparency, presupposing as it does a monotelic semantico-referential vision of language, but also of the “equality” of languages (see Haviland 2003; Hymes 1973; Silverstein 1976; Webster 2015b). Only by pretending that languages do not exist within social and political fields—animated in the lives of human beings, and animating those lives—could such an argument be made. I
argued that any discussion of linguistic relativity needed to attend to the politics of language inequalities. Here, I want to take up that argument again—this time, however, in relation to Navajo place-naming practices and a recent debate concerning the name of a street in Fort Defiance, Arizona (within the Navajo Nation).

All of us who deal with the linguistic anthropology of Athabaskan place names live in the shadow of the work of Keith Basso (1984a, 1984b, 1996), which explored the intimate links of Western Apache place names with aesthetics and a moral order. Basso’s work was also, from the start, thoroughly entangled in the politics of ongoing claims to place (Basso 1996:70). While it was possible in 1984 for Basso to write that “the anthropological study of North American Indian place name systems has fallen on hard times” (Basso 1984a:78), that claim seems somewhat dated now. A whole generation of scholars—many inspired by Basso’s work—have been busy documenting, from a variety of perspectives, Indigenous place-naming practices (see, e.g., Collins 1998; Cowell and Moss 2003; Cruikshank 1990, 1997; Daveluy and Ferguson 2009; Dinwoodie 1998; Hill 2008; Hunn 1996; Kari 1989, 1996, 2010; Meadows 2009; Moore and Tlen 2007; Palmer 1990; Schreyer 2016; Thornton 2008; Topaha 2011; Whiteley 2011). David Samuels (2001) and Eleanor Nevins (2008), for example, have extended the analysis of Western Apache place-naming practices to concerns with ambiguity and with new English-language place-naming practices inspired by popular media. Stephen Jett (2001, 2011) and Klara Kelley and Harris Francis (1994) have discussed Navajo place-naming practices—especially as forms of wayfinding. My goal here is to extend the discussion of Navajo place names to include public sphere signage.

A complication worth pointing out is that public-sphere displays of the Navajo language (in a variety of orthographies) have increased over the last several decades (Webster 2012), despite the fact that literacy in Navajo is not widespread—most Navajos are literate in English, not Navajo. Navajo language signs function as both indexes and icons of Navajo emplacements, not primarily for their semantico-referential meanings (see Webster 2012, 2014).

2. Navajo place-naming. Some basic points about traditional place-naming practices among Navajos (see Webster 2009) are reviewed in this section.

- First, in talking with Navajos about place names, some were quick to note that many Navajo language place names are words of the ancestors or of Holy People. For some, this entailed a reluctance to translate place names (and clan names, which are also often place names) into English: the ancestors spoke in Navajo and so the names should be in Navajo. Other Navajos, however, although they would agree that place names were the words of the ancestors who traveled around Navajo country, did not see that as a hindrance to translating the names.
Place names are intimately linked with narratives, as Harry Hoijer pointed out to Basso in 1973: “even the most minute occurrences are described by Navajos in close conjunction with their physical settings, suggesting that unless narrated events are spatially anchored their significance is somehow reduced and cannot be properly assessed” (Hoijer as quoted by Basso [1996:45]).

There is also a strong tendency not to name places after the dead.

Navajo place names—and Athabaskan place names more generally—are also remarkably stable over time, showing what Kari calls “geolinguistic conservatism” (2010; see also Jett 2001).

Finally, Navajo place names vividly describe, or, through the use of ideophones, sonically evoke the locations they refer to (see Webster 2008). The morphology of the words of which place names are composed is often readily analyzable, which helps them to provide vivid pictures and to assist in wayfinding (see Kari 2010). Examples (1)–(4) should give a sense of the structural features of place names.

(1) *Tséhootsooí*
    
    *tsé*-hootsoo–í
    
    rock-meadow-PLACE
    
    ‘the place of the rock meadow’

(2) *T’iistsoh Sikaad*
    
    *t’iis*-tsoh   si–kaad
    
    cottonwood-big THIRD.PERSON.PERFECTIVE–spread
    
    ‘big cottonwoods stand spread out’

(3) *Tséé’dóhdoon*
    
    *tséé*-dóh–doon
    
    rock-rumbling-booming
    
    ‘rumbling rock’

(4) *Tó dildo’*
    
    tó   di–l-dq’
    
    water THEMATIC.PREFIX.FOR.SOUND-CLASSIFIER-produce.a.popping.sound
    
    ‘popping water’

Such place names are often valued for their expressive beauty. Some Navajos that I have spoken with find place names to be beautiful and pleasurable to say (for comparison with Western Apache, see Basso 1996:45–46).³

Naming practices change. What Nevins (2008) and Samuels (2004) have described for Western Apache is true for Navajo as well: some place names are inspired by English-language media (see also Basso 1996:151–52). For example, I lived in government housing in a poverty-stricken neighborhood in Chinle, Arizona, that local Navajos referred to as “Beverly Hills”—clearly a bit of social
commentary, and quite reminiscent of Nevins’s discussion of the social work of
media-derived English language place names among Western Apaches (see
Webster 2009:199). This practice is not particularly recent. Another place name,
“Blueberry Hill”—associated with the Fats Domino version of the song released
in 1956—was recalled fondly by a Navajo friend. When I asked him why this
name was used for the hill, he replied that it was because people had gone up
there to “find their thrill.” In short, while English-language place names are
used in the Navajo Nation, they are often employed for Navajo purposes—for
example, for the indexing of membership in local groups (see Webster 2009).

3. Navajo-language place-name signage in the public sphere. Most of my
research has focused on Navajo poetry. To connect this with a discussion of the
use of Navajo place names in public signage, note that Navajo poets sometimes
use place names in their poetry (as does a Navajo novelist; see below). For
example, a poem by Rex Lee Jim (1998:13) is titled Tó Háálí‘Spring’ (‘water it
flows up’), and concerns the changing character of that place; graffiti and vul-
garity now predominate in what once was a sacred place (see Webster 2015c).
Laura Tohe (2005) entitles an entire book Tséyi’: Deep in the Rock—a rumina-
tion, in poetry, prose, and photos, about Tséyi’ (‘inside the rock’, the Navajo
name of the place whose current English name is “Canyon de Chelley”). When
Tohe discussed the title of the book at a poetry performance (see Webster 2009),
she noted that she did not use the more widely known non-Navajo name and
that she was adamant that the Navajo form come first—thus iconically mapping
the history of Navajo-American history:

we have
Tséyi’ first because
Navajo language was here
before
contact (Tohe quoted in Webster 2009:201)

Tséyi’—or “Canyon de Chelley” (a name that is better known partly because it is
more widely publicized)—is located just outside Chinle and is the site of a
National Monument that attracts tourists from around the world (see Webster
2009). However, a shopping center in Chinle (which includes a grocery store
and some fast food restaurants as well), uses the Navajo name (figure 1),
although omitting the acute accent marking high tone. However, a shopping
center in Chinle (which includes a grocery store and some fast food restaurants
as well) links itself with the tourist destination by using its Navajo name (figure
1), although omitting the acute accent marking high tone (for comparison, see
Bender 2008). (English “Chinle” is from Ch’ínílí‘the place where water flows
out’ [ch’i–‘out’ + nílí’it flows’].)

One fairly frequently finds Navajo place names used in the names of shop-
ing centers in the Navajo Nation in an emblematic way (indexing Navajo
spaces), sometimes including an iconic visual image. Additional examples of Navajo place names in signs for shopping centers and in other public contexts are shown in the figures in the rest of this section.

Figure 1. Tseyi’ Shopping Center in Chinle, Arizona. (Photo by author.)

Figure 2. Tsé Bit’a’í Shopping Center, Shiprock, New Mexico. (Photo by author.)

In figure 2, the visual image of the physical feature that the English and Navajo place names refer to—"Shiprock" or Tsé Bit’a’í ‘winged rock’—appears on the sign. (As I discuss elsewhere [Webster 2012], tildes are used on this sign to indicate high tone, instead of the more standard acute accent.) As with “Canyon de Chelley” versus Tseyi’ in the discussion above, the English and Navajo names for the local community reference quite different things: while the
English name for the community is “Shiprock,” in Navajo it is often referred to as either Naat’áanii Nééz ‘tall leader’ or Toohdi ‘at the water/river’ (see Webster 2015a:89–126).

In figure 3, the English-language place name is “Crownpoint,” but the sign uses the older Navajo place name T’iists’oosí ‘slender cottonwood’. An alternative Navajo name that is sometimes used for this place is T’iists’oosí Nideeshgizh ‘slender cottonwood gap’, where nideeshgizh suggests that the tree has been cut open or gapped (see Wilson and Dennison 1995:17); the image that appears on the sign appears to be iconic of the gap in the cottonwood tree.

Figure 3. T’iists’oosí Shopping Center, Crownpoint, New Mexico. (Photo by author.)

Moving away from shopping centers, a particularly compelling example can be found at the top of Buffalo Pass going over the Chuska Mountains (see figure 4).

Figure 4. Sign at Buffalo Pass with multiple Navajo place names. (Photo by author.)
Much could be said about this sign, but here I note just a few things. First, it is found at a picnic area near the top of the pass that is used by Navajos and non-Navajos. Standing there, one can look out over the valley and see many of the mountains and rock formations that the sign identifies. (Some Navajos that I know have an abiding interest in Bigfoot; this is presumably why Bigfoot graffiti—both an image and the English word—have been added to the sign.)

Most of the names on the sign are given in the form of what we might call “place-name pairings”—first the English place name (which in most cases is not a translation of the Navajo place name) and then the Navajo place name in parentheses. Samuels calls this practice—which occurs among Western Apaches as well—a kind of adjacency pair, “two voices alternately naming places in one language and then another” (2001:285). Nevins, following Samuels, calls these “translation pairs” (2008:199, 2013:89); but they are decidedly not translations. Rather, as both Samuels and Nevins note, they are counterassertions of placedness. Nevins describes this practice as follows: “the effect of alternately using the two members of such a translation [adjacency] pair is to destabilize the air of naturalized reference accorded to the official name, and to flash between meanings and associations accorded to such places from alternate positions in the region’s history of colonial imposition” (2008:199).

The Carrizo Mountains, inexplicably as far as I can tell, are not given a Navajo place name in the sign in figure 4 (one name would be Dzil Náhoozíitii ‘whirling mountain’). Finally, there is a rather strange—and indeed telling—pairing: “Oil Field” and Diné Bikeyah—Diné Bikeyah (or as it is often written Diné Bikéyah) is a generalized term for Navajo country. While both are written in yellow (thus linking them visually), Diné Bikeyah is not put in parentheses and it is above “Oil Field.” Perhaps this juxtaposition tells us how Navajo country is imagined and understood as merely a site for resource extraction by those committed to the English language, but as the homeland—’where Navajos walk’—for those aligned with the Navajo language, and that the designers of the sign give priority to the Navajo understanding (see Webster 2009).

Other signs that, like the one in figure 4, seem to lack the imprint of institutions can be found in the Navajo Nation. For example, a sign near Lukachukai, Arizona, lists Navajo place names for five prominent places nearby (without directions) (see figure 5). There are no place-name pairings on the sign—the place names are only in Navajo. The steadfast monolingualism of this sign seems to index a Navajo space. One explanation for the sign that I have encountered is that it encourages the use of the Navajo language by Navajos. It is worth noting that this sign is near where I lived on the Navajo Nation in 2000–2001 and, at that time, no such sign existed; it is a relatively recent instance of public-sphere signage. Moreover, unlike the sign in figure 4, it is not on a main thoroughfare, but rather at the intersection of dirt roads that lead to a number of Navajo homesteads—not a road that one normally finds tourists on. This sign seems targeted to a Navajo audience, both in its placement and in its language.
A final place where Navajo place names are becoming more common is on signs for “chapters” (community political units). In the mid-2000s there was a trend to change the names of chapters, replacing English-language names with Navajo place names that were associated with those areas. In figure 6, the place name *Tiis Tsōh Sīkaad* (i.e., *T'iistsoh Sīkaad* ‘big cottonwoods stand spread out’) over the previous name of the chapter (“Burnham”). The Navajo-language portion is clearly newer than the rest of the sign, thus revealing the shift in naming practices. Yet, although the sign indexes traditional Navajo place-naming practices, the rest of the sign is in English (or acronyms predicated on English—NAPI stands for “Navajo Agricultural Products Industry,” and BHP for “BHP Billiton Energy Coal”). Just as the Navajo Nation is surrounded by the United States, the Navajo language is framed by English on the sign.
On the other hand, an entire new sign was erected when the chapter formerly named “Hogback” changed their name to the Navajo place name Tse Dáá K’áán (i.e., Tsétaak’i’ ‘rock that slants into the water’), long associated with a prominent feature of the landscape nearby (see figure 7). As Navajo Nation Council Speaker Lawrence Morgan stated in discussing this trend of changing chapter names, “Most of those are names [English names] given by the early settlers, and then they moved away. . . . The Navajo names have always been there” (Whitehurst 2007). Still, English surrounds Navajo here as well—reminding us that English is the dominant language. This, of course, should remind us that one language (English) is expanding and one language (Navajo) is contracting in use, even allowing for its increased presence in public sphere signage (see House 2002; Webster 2009). The processes by which English expands and Navajo contracts are not neutral, but entangled in ongoing forms of colonialism and structures of inequality (see Denetdale 2007a; House 2002; see also Kroskrity and Field 2009; Kroskrity 2012).

Figure 7. Tse Dáá K’áán Chapter House. (Photo by author.)

4. Tséhootsooi and the debate over Kit Carson. The preceding discussion offers only a sample of the ubiquity of Navajo-language place names in public-sphere signage. There is now a tradition of using Navajo-language place names on public signs around the Navajo Nation. From poetry to public-sphere signage, place names in Navajo continue to circulate. They are able to act as a counter-discourse to the naturalizing discourse whereby externally imposed English-language place names replace those in Navajo. Such contestations about place names, as well as their link with colonialist imaginings, are not new either (Bsumek n.d.). Navajo place names—especially on public-sphere signage—make Navajo presence visible.

In this section, I turn to a debate that occurred in the Navajo Times in early 2006 about changing a street name. As part of the Rural Addressing Initiative
(see Shebala 2006; Webster 2014), it was discovered that one of the main streets in Fort Defiance, Arizona, had as its name “Kit Carson Drive.” Most likely it was the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) that named the street long years ago (Shebala 2006). Since street signs, as I have discussed elsewhere (Webster 2014), are uncommon in the Navajo Nation, few Navajos knew the street had a name (Shebala 2006). Many Navajos associate Kit Carson with the Long Walk—a forced march across what is now New Mexico—and their imprisonment at Bosque Redondo, a place of massive suffering (Denetdale 2007a).

Navajo reporter Marley Shebala wrote an article in January 2006 on the 38–0 vote of the Fort Defiance Chapter in favor of changing the name of the street from “Kit Carson Drive” to “‘Tse Bi Hoot Sooi’ (‘meadow between the rocks’), the Navajo word for Fort Defiance” (Shebala 2006:A3). The article went on to discuss why Navajos in Fort Defiance disliked the idea of having a road named after Kit Carson and to include a narrative of Carson’s campaign against the Navajos and their removal during the Long Walk. The chapter resolution read as follows: “The Fort Defiance community members find it difficult to accept the name (Kit Carson) as its main community road after an individual who had a genocide policy against the Navajo people” (Shebala 2006:A3).

The article does not discuss why the chapter chose to name the street “Tse Bi Hoot Sooi”; it only mentions that it was “the Navajo word for Fort Defiance,” as pointed out above. *Tse Bi Hoot Sooi* or, as I have encountered it, *Tséhootsooí* ‘the place of the rock meadow; the place of the meadow between the rocks’, historically was a name associated with the area around Fort Defiance and is used, today, in Navajo to refer to what in English is called Fort Defiance. One can clearly see the use of the Navajo place name as a reassertion of Navajo presence and a rejection of English language place-naming practices (recall that Navajos tend not to name places after those that are deceased). This was, in many ways, similar to what Navajo chapters had been doing during this time as well—reasserting Navajo place-naming practices and making visible Navajo claims to place.

In the 16 February 2006 edition of the *Navajo Times*, bearing the front-page headline “Storm Clouds over Tséyi” for a story about the desire of some Navajos (especially residents of Tséyi’) to remove the National Park Service from managing Canyon de Chelley National Monument, there was a controversial letter by Camille Cazedessus II of Pagosa Springs, Colorado (see Cazedessus 2006). I do not want to repeat all of Cazedessus’s argument; suffice it to say, he argues that without Kit Carson, Navajo interactions with the United States “would have been much more deadly than they were.” That is, Navajos should be lucky that they were blessed with such a benevolent figure. He claims that Navajos do not know their history, challenges various points in the piece by Shebala, argues that “Kit Carson was a good man,” that Larry Anderson (a Council delegate quoted in Shebala’s article) “should apologize to the Carson family” and concludes by stating: “As for the Fort Defiance Chapter voting 38–0 to remove Kit
Carson’s name from its main road I will say this: A generation which ignores history—has no past, and no future. What a pity that not one person out of those 38 knows Navajo history.

It would be easy enough to mock Cazedessus and point out that he shows no awareness whatsoever of Navajo history—that the Navajo place name most certainly precedes Kit Carson, or that place names are intimately connected to Navajo historical narratives and are thus crucial parts of Navajos knowing their history (see Denetdale 2007a, 2007b; Johnson 1973). As, for example, the narratives of the Long Walk period published by Navajo Community College make clear, Tséhootsooi was the place where Navajos gathered before they were marched to Hwéeldi (Bosque Redondo) (Johnson 1973:104, 113). Tséhootsooi was also the place that many Navajos returned to after their four years at Hwéeldi (Johnson 1973:125, 142). Tséhootsooi is a part of Navajo history. So intertwined with Navajo history are Navajo place names that in narratives told in Navajo about the Long Walk period in Johnson’s collection (1973), the place names are presented in both Navajo and English, as adjacency pairs or place-naming pairs with Navajo first and then English language place names added by the translators in parentheses. Here, for example, is part of Curly Tso’s discussion.

What I am to tell you happened, for example, when a certain family was moving to Tséhootsooi (Fort Defiance), right after the order was issued for all Navajos to go there and that those that refused to go voluntarily would be shot on the spot. The family was slowly moving toward Tséhootsooi from north of Tónameesdí (Tuba City). [Johnson 1973:104]

Cazedessus is not, however, unique (a point made in responses by Morris and Denetdale; see below). Cazedessus’s letter partakes in the twin processes of “silencing the past” as erasure (it wasn’t that bad) and banalization (let me mire you in the details), as described by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995:96—97). The net result “is a powerful silencing: whatever has not been cancelled out in the generalities dies in the cumulative irrelevance of a heap of details” (Trouillot 1995:97).

Cazedessus appears to have briefly been on Twitter in 2013, again defending Kit Carson—this time against singer Bruce Cockburn (referred to in the tweet as “Bruck,” presumably a typographical error) and the lyrics to one of his songs (see figure 8).

According to his Wikipedia page, Camille Cazedessus was instrumental in creating in the 1960s the Edgar Rice Burroughs fanzine ERB-dom and, later in life, has written three books about Kit Carson (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camille_Cazedessus,_Jr.). I have been unable to track those books down.

In the 23 February 2006 edition of the Navajo Times, three Navajos responded to Cazedessus—Navajo historian Jennifer Denetdale, Navajo novelist Irvin Morris, and another Navajo, Leroy S. Dick. Denetdale (2007a) has written important work on decolonizing Navajo history, and Morris’s novel discusses something of the beauty of Navajo place names:
The word and name *Tséhílí* ['where it flows into the canyon'] refers simultaneously to the locality and the act of the creek entering the canyon there. The language is like that, full of motion. *Diné bizaad* ['Navajo language'] is verb-based, whereas English is noun-based. [Morris 1997:99]

While I have interacted over the years with both Denetdale and Morris, I do not know Leroy S. Dick at all, and thus say less about his letter. Nonetheless, the letters took Cazedessus to task for his hubris.

**Figure 8.** Camille Cazedessus defends Kit Carson on Twitter.

Morris (2006), for his part, challenges Cazedessus’s reliance on written history over Navajo oral tradition and links this with yet another assertion of power over Navajos:

> The real message comes through loud and clear: The official version of history, the written one, is the right one. The oral tradition is unreliable, irrelevant, inferior, and just plain wrong. We Indians might as well give up. [Morris 2006: A5]

Here, of course, Morris ironically links the oral tradition with familiar negative stereotypes of Native peoples (unreliable, irrelevant, and inferior), as he chastises an unreflexive faith in the impartiality of written history.

Denetdale also takes up this theme and the ways that “white historians” have “sanitized” (2006a) the history of American and Native interactions—they have written out of the story the trauma and violence of colonialism (see also Denetdale 2007a, 2007b). She also pushes back against the benevolence of Kit Carson:
Under Kit Carson’s command, Navajos were rendered destitute and humiliated by the mindless, vicious, and inhumane destruction of Navajo land, the slaughter of property, and the murder and capture of kin and family. [Denetdale 2006a]

Hers is a voice of both a Navajo and a professional historian pushing back against the arrogance and hubris of the non-Navajo and amateur historian Cazedessus. She also links Cazedessus’s vision of history with the ongoing forms of oppression against Navajos (and other indigenous peoples) and with the war in Iraq.

Leroy S. Dick also challenges Cazedessus’s view of Carson. Beyond that, he makes a particularly salient point:

Camille states that (Navajo Times reporter Marley) Shebala and (Fort Defiance Council delegate) Larry Anderson should apologize to the Carson family. This is like asking the Jewish people to apologize to Hitler because someone else could have done worse. [Dick 2006:A6]

The link between the Holocaust and Hitler and the Long Walk and Carson is not, in fact, novel here; it is a link that is often made by Navajos. Laura Tohe (2002:100–104), for example, in her poem “In Dinétah”—which recounts the events of the Long Walk and the perseverance of the Navajo people—links the events surrounding the Long Walk with Auschwitz, and in public performances of the poem that I recorded in the Navajo Nation, she explicitly links the Long Walk and the imprisonment at Hwéeldi with Hitler (Webster 2009:177–79; on Hitler and Native Americans, see Whitman 2017).

What is interesting here, though, is that none of the letters takes up the question why Tse Bi Hoot Sooi /Tséhootsooi is an appropriate name for the street. Rather, the arguments center around whether it is appropriate for Carson’s name to appear on a street sign and on the erasure of the horrors of the Long Walk—on the sanitizing of American history, in which Cazedessus is merely another in a long line of sanitizers and apologists. Perhaps it was simply obvious that Tse Bi Hoot Sooi /Tséhootsooi was an appropriate name.

Nonetheless, while unstated, it also seems clear that Tse Bi Hoot Sooi /Tséhootsooi is linked with a particular historical consciousness, a particular way of Navajo historical memory work, and that it taps into a different, but overlapping, understanding of, for example, the Long Walk. As we saw in Curly Tso’s discussion of the history of the Long Walk, the Navajo place name is the relevant grounding for such historical memory work. Navajo history is grounded or anchored (to use Hoijer’s term) in Navajo place names. They grant not only Navajos’ priority, a “here-first-ness” and an “on-going here-ness,” they also convey a particular aesthetic sensibility, a particular way of depicting, that is at variance with the use of “Kit Carson.”
Street sign debates are never dead, they are not even the past. Here, essentially, was where this essay ended—save for a clever conclusion restating the points from the introduction—when I finished drafting it over two years ago. But that is not the end of the story. William Faulkner was certainly right when he wrote in *Requiem for a Nun* that “the past is never dead. It’s not even past” (2012:73). Similarly, it seems that street sign debates are never dead, they are not even past. On 13 October 2016, I saw in the *Navajo Times* an article by Chrissy Largo stating that the Fort Defiance Chapter had again voted to rename Kit Carson Drive, this time as “Chief Manuelito Drive.” Why again? The article claims that the chapter failed to follow through on its earlier resolution—although it should also be noted that the article makes no mention of the debate in the *Navajo Times*, but only hints at the previous resolution. Let me make two additional points as a way of moving towards a conclusion.

First, the Rural Addressing Initiative, which led to the discovery of “Kit Carson Drive” in the first place, had as its mandate that street signs should be in English (see Webster 2014). The language of the initiative is quite clear: “There will be no road names using the Navajo Language due to Non-Navajos interpreting the language in emergency situations” (cited in Webster 2014:385). I have written about this initiative elsewhere and so do not want to belabor this point (other than to note again that it is only the Navajo language that is singled out here, no other language), but it seems clear that *Tse Bi Hoot Sooi* violates the mandate of the initiative. “Chief Manuelito,” however, might be regarded as not being in the Navajo language and, thus, as not violating the mandate. Of course, there are streets in the Navajo Nation with Navajo names and Navajo-language street signs, such as that in figure 9 (see also Webster 2014).

![Figure 9. Navajo street sign “Ayani’nee兹 Blvd.” in the Navajo Nation, Shiprock, New Mexico. (Photo by author.)](image-url)
Second, the BIA has to approve any name change for the street. It is unclear whether or not the BIA approved the original vote, or whether it was ever even taken up by the BIA. It seems clear, however, that the name was never changed from Kit Carson Drive. It is also unclear whether the BIA will approve the new proposed name change for the street. (Indeed, one of the themes of Largo’s 2016 article is the labyrinthine nature of the BIA bureaucracy.) Fort Defiance has now changed their proposal for what the new street name should be. Gone is the historically important Navajo place name, replaced by the name of an important figure in Navajo history, Chief Manuelito (see Denetdale 2007a). Manuelito, to make one small point about him, was important in helping the Navajo return to Diné Bikéyah after the Long Walk and internment at Hwéeldi (see also Denetdale 2007a:51–86). Fort Defiance is essentially saying, “Kit Carson is not worthy of having a street named after him; Manuelito is worthy.” Indeed, this is exactly the point made by Fort Defiance Chapter vice president Lorraine Nelson (Largo 2016). This choice of name does seem to go against certain Navajo naming practices—not naming places after the deceased—but it does align with the dominant society’s naming practices. There are as well various buildings in the Navajo Nation that are named after deceased Navajos (e.g., Annie Wauneka Arena and Ned Hataali Center). Names of buildings and streets—structures often associated with outside institutions by Navajos—may, in virtue of that fact, be less permanent and newer than geographic features named by the ancestors, and thus the use of personal names may be appropriate for these structures (compare with Nevins 2008). Naming the street after Manuelito is once again an assertion by the people of Fort Defiance that they should be able to commemorate what they wish in ways they deem appropriate—whether it be through the use of a Navajo place name or through naming a place after an important Navajo historical figure. This form of “semiotic calquing” (Webster 2014)—a transferring of semiotic logics—might be more a likely avenue for BIA approval.

What, in the end, have we learned from this natural history of Navajo placenaming on public sphere signage? What general points can we make from these particulars? Place names are not neutral, but rather are fully implicated in concerns about who has and does not have the right (and power) to name. Tséhootsooi or Tse Bi Hoot Sooi does not equal Kit Carson Drive because the Navajo and English names tap into different—although certainly overlapping—histories. They index different senses of placedness; they instantiate different claims to place. Place names do not exist in a social, historical, and ideological vacuum. To claim that place names are interchangeable is to erase the complicated realities and struggles that I describe above; it is to ignore the voices one can hear in these place names, the indexical linkages, and the iconities across time. To do so is to display profound hubris (of which we have seen a bit in this essay regarding Navajo history). The ongoing visibility of Navajo place names, from a variety of perspectives (functional, language ideological, structural,
semiotic, political, aesthetic), challenges a persistent view—really an undercurrent of many of those that critique Whorf—that all languages really look like English when the cultural miscellany is stripped away (see Webster 2015b). The point, as Bakhtin (1986) long ago noted, is more general than place names—although place names seem to be particularly salient sites of such struggle, as witnessed by yet another debate, that over Denali (also an Athabaskan place name) versus “Mount McKinley” (Merica 2017; see also Kari 1986). Indigenous place names matter, why else do they inspire such controversy? They are not neutral, nor easily interchangeable. Enmeshed in histories, they do not mean the same thing—they point to different histories; they evoke different voices.

This point is more general than Navajo, of course. All languages, all speakers of languages, are enmeshed in histories—to pretend otherwise is a disservice to those around us (including, but not limited to, the people we work with as linguistic anthropologists). An acknowledgment and engagement, then, with the inequalities of languages—that some languages are more equal than others, because not all people are equal (politically, economically, socially)—needs to be at the forefront of any discussion concerning linguistic relativities. This was true in 2000, it was true before then, and it is still true today. It will, of course, be true tomorrow. But then, so, too, will Navajo emplacements, as Navajo discourses of place—including the letters discussed here—should remind us (see also Denetdale 2007a; Tohe 2005). My hunch—given a kind of perpetual misreading and diminishing of linguistic relativity (see Webster 2015b; King 2017)—is that such arguments will need, as well, to be continually made. This is “linguistic relativity with an attitude”—taken out of the imagined free-floating ahistorical example and put back into the flow of history, into the lives of people—where, of course, languages have always resided. One task of the linguistic anthropologist (and here we can take a lesson from Basso [1976:117]) is to push back against views of language that would deny that languages are embedded within and constitutive of social and cultural worlds—that would deny, that is, “their fundamental inseparability.”

Notes

Acknowledgments. I dedicate this essay to the memory of Keith H. Basso. I thank Jennifer Denetdale for encouraging my interest in this topic years ago. I thank as well Aimee Hosemann, Jennifer Denetdale, David Samuels, Erika Bsumek, and Courtney Handman for useful discussions that have helped sharpen the arguments here. I thank as well Chrissy Largo for help along the way. I thank the staff at the Kinyaa’áaní Library, Diné College, Tsaile, Arizona, for their help in tracking down materials. Research in the Navajo Nation was conducted under permits from the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Office. I thank them. Funding for this research was provided by the Wenner-Gren Foundation, the Philips Fund of the American Philosophical Society, the Jacobs Fund from the Whatcom Museum, and a faculty seed grant from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. I thank them all. I thank as well the anonymous reviewers for a number of useful suggestions.
1. Pinker (1994:50), in his criticism of Benjamin Lee Whorf, also conflates Apache with Nootka and Shawnee (languages that are drastically different both from each other and from Apache), in fact labeling Whorf’s Nootka and Shawnee examples (Whorf 1956:233–45) as Apache. Pinker does not, of course, cite the actual Apache, Nootka, or Shawnee examples, but rather deals only in translation—English seems always enough. Whorf (1956) was far more careful in his handling of linguistic materials.

2. Many who desire to test some “linguistic relativity hypothesis” make this very same move. They do this, it seems likely, because they too assume a single function of language—a semantico-referential function (Silverstein 1976)—is the only (important) function of language. The approach adopted in the present article—let us call it linguistic relativity with an attitude, alluding to Fabian (2001)—seeks to recognize the social, aesthetic, and political embeddedness of languages. As Fabian writes, “Anthropology emerged, less as a science of human nature than as the study of the damage done by one part of mankind to another (and thereby to all of humanity)” (2001:204). Any theory of linguistic relativity—a cornerstone of anthropology and linguistic anthropology—needs to take that history—a history of colonialism—into account. Languages and their speakers are always enmeshed in histories and these histories are not divorced from theories of linguistic relativity. For a useful history of linguistic relativities, see Leavitt (2011; see also O’Neill 2008). For a different, though related, take on linguistic relativities see Webster (2015c, 2015d, 2017a). There are (or should be), to be sure, multiple kinds of relativities of languages.

3. Here, too, we could add William Bright’s contributions (2004, 2013); I thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out. I also thank Sean O’Neill, who years ago, graciously gave me a copy of Bright’s 2013 work.

4. Obviously, debates concerning the language of public-sphere signage have taken place beyond Indigenous communities and continue to do so. For example, as an anonymous reviewer points out, there is a long history of the use of Welsh in public-sphere signage in Wales (see Coupland 2012; Merriman and Rhys 2009). Following Coupland (2012), for example, a number of the signs discussed in the present article could be counted either as nonautonomous Navajo (see figures 1–3, 6–7, and 9) or as parallel-text bilingualism (see figure 4). For nonautonomous Navajo, it is important to note that in each case the Navajo place name is displayed in an English frame, e.g., “Tséyi’ Shopping Center” (see figure 1) or “Ayani’neez Boulevard” (see figure 9). This is, perhaps, most striking in figure 6, “Tiis Tsoh Sikaad Chapter,” where, although “Tiis Tsoh Sikaad” has replaced the previous chapter name, the word “chapter” is also included, framing the Navajo place name (to be sure, “chapter” here is Navajo English; see the discussion of figures 6 and 7 in section 3 below). For some discussion of the history of how Welsh has been imagined as a modern language, see Manning (2004). The question of imagining Navajo as a modern language and one compatible with modernity has been an ongoing issue (see Peery 2012; Peterson 2017). For comparison, see Cowell (2004) on the use of Arapaho place names in the Rocky Mountain National Park.

5. Note that Navajo dōh, doon, and –do’ in examples (3) and (4) are ideophonic. For a detailed discussion of Navajo ideophony, see Webster (2009, 2017a).

6. Peterson and Webster (2013:101–2) suggest that this geolinguistic conservatism noted by Kari (2010) is part of a broader Athabaskan aesthetic, perhaps best summarized by Navajo comedian Vincent Craig’s description of Navajo as “mental television” (Peterson and Webster 2013:105). Here Craig is tapping into that descriptive capacity of Navajo—that Navajo really describes things and that Navajos take a certain amount of pleasure in its capacity to describe, that Navajo offers Navajo speakers ways of picturing the world (which, I hasten to add, does not mean that forms are not simultaneously ambiguous as well—a point also made by Peterson and Webster [2013]).
7. This is actually an allusion to Superintendent William T. Shelton—an important figure in the area at the turn of the last century (Wilson and Dennison 1995:54).

8. I regret to report that on a recent trip to Buffalo Pass (2017), I found that the Bigfoot graffiti had been removed. I am reminded of Debenport’s (2015) point that one important feature of literacy is the capacity to revise. The Bigfoot graffiti are evidence of both the additive and the subtractive capacity of such revisions. The two signs in figures 4 and 5 seem good examples of what Bernard Perley calls “emergent vitalities” (2011:195)—sites of possibility and creativity in the face of language marginalization, stigmatization, and endangerment.

9. This differs from the examples that Coupland (2012:15) gives for the frame of exoticism. I have elsewhere written about the kinds of future publics that such usages are attempting to create (Webster 2014, 2017b).

10. There are also places in Fort Defiance that use the name on official buildings, e.g., “Tséhootsooi Medical Center.” The difference between Tséhootsooi and Tse Bi Hoot Sooi is reminiscent of Basso’s discussion of “shortened or contracted forms” (1996:90) of Western Apache place names. For example, Basso writes, “the name T’iiis Bitlín Tú ‘Olíjí’ (Water Flows Inward Under A Cottonwood Tree) is commonly heard as T’iiis Ti'h ‘Olíjí’ or T’iiis Tú ‘Olíjí’” (1996:90). What interests me here is the deletion of the third person prefix bi– in this and the other examples that Basso provides of contracted forms of place names. Tséhootsooi lacks the third person prefix bi– as well and may, then, be the shortened form. I have not investigated this sufficiently to offer this as anything other than a suggestion.

11. Jennifer Denetdale (2007a:77) deals with another popular example of the erasure and banalization of the Long Walk and the internment at Hwééldi. In that case, rather than saying that things would have been worse without Kit Carson, the argument is that things were not really that bad (see also Webster 2009:156–57). In both cases, one quite clearly sees at work the processes described by Trouillot (1995). Denetdale (2007b) provides a useful discussion of the tensions around commemorating Bosque Redondo.

12. Western histories—especially popular histories—have tended to be obsessed with the “great man” view and with the disappearing or vanishing Native, but as Denetdale (2006b, 2007a) notes, Navajo histories of the Long Walk and the internment at Hwééldi tend to focus on the maintenance of clan relations and the ways of maintaining hózhó ‘balance, harmony, beauty, order, control’—especially as they relate to the return to Diné Bikéyah and the reestablishment of life there as well. So, too, I should add, does poetry about the Long Walk (see Webster 2009).

13. Another critique of Whorf made by Pinker, and repeated without reflection elsewhere, is that Whorf’s translations “rendered the sentences as clumsy, word-for-word translations, designed to make the literal meanings seem as odd as possible” (1994:50). Note that Pinker does not seem much concerned with theories of translation—with the motivations behind questions of domesticating translations and foreignizing translations (see Becker 1995; Sherzer 1998; Leavitt 2006, 2015). Rather, he assumes that domesticating translations into English—because they make any language look like English—is the more accurate way of translation (here he sides firmly with the Les Belles Infidèles). Such a translation practice, of course, hides or obscures linguistic differences. Linguistic anthropologists like Whorf have tended to favor translations that highlighted linguistic differences (see Sherzer 1998; Leavitt 2006, 2015). It should be clear, of course, that all translations are both exuberant and deficient (see Becker 1995; Webster 2016)—and that translation is always entangled within ideological concerns (for an engaging examination of this topic, see Handman 2015). There are no neutral translations. That Pinker pretends that there are says more about Pinker’s ideological commitments—an attempt to obscure the social nature of translation, to couch his vision of translation in the neutrality of “science”—than about Whorf.
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