Introduction

Collaborative Toponymy is a compendium featuring all the street names for the proposed garden village known as Dunton Hills located near Brentwood, Essex. Dunton Hills belongs to a new group of 14 garden villages announced by the government in 2017 in an expansion of the existing garden town programme.

I conceived the creation of the street names following an open call for a public art commission inviting artists to respond to the site where the village was to be constructed. This is an area currently occupied by ancient woodlands and ponds, agricultural land, a listed farm and a golf course.

Less perishable and more pervasive than a sculptural object, language can be seen as a radical material when it comes to public art. And when language is deployed as toponymy, or the naming of places, this gesture is perhaps even more radical when applied to the identity of a future village. One reason for this is that addresses feature as a permanent legacy in the narrativisation of the land and we constantly own and perform them as an essential component of our legal identities.

Addresses and name places are generally 'always already', insomuch as we experience them as something inherited rather than authored, unlike with the agency we express through the naming of human and non human animals. Yet place and street names have still been created by people to fulfil different roles: as functional ways to be able to navigate across the territory bearing detailed descriptions of landscape features, or as ways to mark and celebrate specific histories.

This is why I saw this project as an opportunity to inject a sense of agency and intervene in this 'always already' and seemingly haphazard domain, where street and place names can be seen as linguistic fossils that often tend to align with the histories of the victorious.

In this sense the creation of street names for a new town can be equated to the instant creation of fossils. And if this process is by definition contradictory, in this case the creation of fossils can nevertheless become reality thanks to the alchemy of ethics and rigour of an aesthetic project.

I proposed for this creation to be a co-creation, to reflect the demographics and ecologies of the place. This is how *Collaborative Toponymy* produced over 300 street names 'harvested' in the context of the interactions with a range of local contributors alongside ad hoc research.

Groups and individuals from the age of 8 to 90 participated in person and remotely: sea cadets, young performers, a multifaith women's group, paramedics and many others. I joined in person and zoom meetings, developing ways to interact with the local communities in keeping with the restrictions of the pandemic.

My method of investigation set out with three topic strands - histories, ecologies and community values - and my strategy privileged histories that would be unacknowledged in canonical practices, as in the case of women (with scientists and ecologists, writers, business and sportswomen, politicians to name a few categories), or class and ethnicity (as in the case of the Essex Peasants' Revolt, the history of the suffragettes, the history of immigration and Romani culture).

The Radical Promise of Toponymy

Toponymy is a political act. It is political regardless of who does the naming, or what processes they employ: naming a place gives it a particular meaning, with an official status that supersedes all other informal, vernacular understandings of the place. Names are made material, and visible, through street signs, maps, and addresses. The geography of a place, its flora and fauna, and even the lived experiences of people who make a place significant, are imprinted with the name of a place. This, in turn, shapes the meaning of the name.

When names are imposed by the elite, naming can be an act of erasure. The heroes, memories, and values of a small ruling class are super-imposed on space and on the communities who live there, proclaiming the significance of those stories for society at large.

Flawed and complex individuals are lionised, and difficult histories are simplified, to conform the meaning of a space to the elite's understanding. Doing so legitimises the elite's hold on power. This process is profoundly gendered and racialised: the people memorialised by place names and statues in Britain are overwhelmingly white men who, frequently, actively perpetrated racism and patriarchy.

The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests highlighted the extent to which toponymy historically has been an act of erasure in Britain. Protesters demonstrated that many of the namesakes of streets and institutions – Colston, Dundas, Milligan, Rhodes – had acquired their wealth and status by trafficking and enslaving human beings.

By celebrating slavers and colonisers as as heroes, these naming practices had written enslaved and colonised people out of history.

Further, official place names, once imposed, were exceedingly difficult to change: through their everyday use and their association with power, the names had become part of the identity of a place. For some alumnae of the Colston School, for example, the notion of being 'Colston girls' was a significant part of their identity. Edward Colston, that is, was made a hero through naming practices, and remained a hero through his name's association with Bristolian institutions.

Toponymy as an act of violent imposition persists into the present: following the 2020 protests, the government doubled down on the authority of official names, introducing bureaucratic obstacles to changing them and threatening custodial sentences for cultural activists. The policies governing toponymy affirm naming as the domain of the elite and attempt to suppress those who proclaimed subaltern narratives of past and present. This is not, however, inevitable.

Language, so often an instrument of power, is also inherently fluid, and bound up with the understandings of people who articulate it. The elite may impose names on a place, but they cannot control the meanings that those names take on in vernacular practice. Indeed, meanings are constructed through a dialectic of speaker and listener, changing shape in light of temporal and spatial context, and the lived experiences of speaker and listener.

Examples abound in *Collaborative Toponymy*: Old Blighty, a term that invokes home for