

# Collaborative Toponymy: street names as linguistic fossils

London-based artist Laura Malacart focussed on a plot of land destined to be redeveloped into a new village and created all its future street names by researching its histories, ecologies, industries, arts, languages and spirituality. In collaboration with a range of local communities and individuals, she produced a narrative for this land that is ethical and multilayered, reflecting the nature and demographics of the place.

text and images: **Laura Malacart**

**C**ollaborative Toponymy features the entire compendium of street names for a new village yet to be built. Dunton Hills in Essex, UK, belongs to a new group of fourteen garden villages announced by the government in 2017 in an expansion of the ongoing garden town programme. The land to be redeveloped is currently agricultural land, ancient ponds and woodlands, a family golf course, and a listed farm inhabited by the landowner.

I co-created the names following an open call for a public art project asking artists to respond to a village not yet developed, ideally via a digital/immaterial art work, because, at this stage, the location could not accommodate the installation of any material interventions. I found these parameters stimulating and laden with potential: such as the possibility to create permanent land references in the guise of addresses that in turn reflected the actual demographics of the place.

When it comes to the identity of public places, a wave of revisionism is underway in several European countries with the re-naming of buildings and streets associated with the slave trade, clamorously epitomised by the case of the toppling of Edward Colston's statue in Bristol and subsequent acquittal of those responsible.

When names are imposed by the elite, naming can be an act of erasure. [...] By celebrating slavers and colonisers 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 [...] For some alumnae of the Colston School, for example, the notion of being 'Colston girls' was a significant part of their identity.'

When considering my intervention, I opted out of the verticality of statues, and chose a horizontal approach using language.

Authoring addresses via an aesthetic project offers the unique opportunity

to introduce permanent references in the landscape that are ethical and diverse and can work against dominant white European patriarchal and colonial biases.

My engagement with research and the communities followed three strands - histories, ecologies, and community values. Research of the histories and ecologies of this land was integrated with the input of local contributions - groups and individuals from the age of 8 to 90, sea cadets, young performers, a multi-faith women's group, paramedics - resulting in a narrativisation of the land that reflects a diverse set of references and an inclusive sense of agency.

The project demonstrates that naming practices can amplify the lived experience of ordinary people, and it provides a template for an alternative way of situating communities in space.<sup>2</sup>

The 'harvested'<sup>3</sup> names were eventually categorised according to nine broadly conceived topics (Water, Language, Arts, Jobs, Qualities, Folklore, Plants, Animals, Homonymy) and each name is tagged using these topics. For example (pic A) the topic tags for Agnes Waterhouse are J, Q, W, F. The purpose of these tags is functional as it is designed to enable future urban planners to shortlist name selections according to topics, should they wish to plan and map thematic areas.

Authoring street names via a creative practice introduces an alternative process, ethos and research method to what would otherwise be a standardised process, where the power of naming remains the exclusive domain of council officers and developers, whose practices might respond to standard systems of memorialisation, or are motivated by marketing targets.

In this sense, rather than being an add-on to the landscape, Collaborative Toponymy inserts itself within official legal practices that generate the street names and as such it operates as an activist work or a gesture of cultural activism. Since permanent references in the guise of street names, in turn, become bound to our legal identities, in bills, deeds, passports and driving licences, they are regularly 'performed' whenever we are asked to supply our address. By extending the naming agency to collective local participation and artistic research, the project 'interferes' with standard legal practices whilst contributing to a re-narrativisation of the territory that in turn becomes embedded in the practice of daily lives.

It is interesting to consider that when it comes to toponymy, street and place names are assumed as an 'always already', since, in our conventional experience, we are likely to inherit them rather than author them. Yet, in spite of the assumption that the street and place names precede us, we need to remember that they are references created by people at different times for different reasons.

The historical and chronological span of the street names collected in *Collaborative Toponymy* starts from the Iron Age to the present. Its compendium of over 300 names showcases the breadth of naming practices: from place names originating as functional tools to navigate the landscape, to name distortions following the linguistic diversity and overlap of different settlers, to systems of memorialisation to mark specific histories.

For example, The Flowing One is thought to have been the name of the Thames in 700 BC and was recorded from spoken Celtic in Roman characters and therefore witnesses the animistic spiritual nature of the land. Leghorn, a notable breed of chicken, is a corruption of the Italian port of Livorno from where the poultry was originally exported to North America in 1828. Aanchal Malhotra is an author and historian known for her work on the oral history of the Partition in India in 1947.

The thought that place names precede us as 'always already' along with the notion that, in some cases, their origins even pre-date written lin-

guistic expressions - as in the case of The Flowing One - hints at the idea of place names lodged in the landscape as 'linguistic fossils'. There is something paradoxical in creating the entirety of the street names for a new place in the present, just as it would be paradoxical to think of the creation of instant fossils. Yet, the alchemy of an aesthetic project can make it possible and also infuse the process with ethics and interdisciplinary rigour.

And just as temporalities intersect in geological fossils, they also do in linguistic ones, as witnessed by the names bearing linguistic corruptions, memorialising specific events or practices. For example in names beginning with G: Godgiftu is a Saxon name meaning 'good gift', Gorgies from Romani 'gadje' indicates 'non-Gypsies, outsiders' and Grace Chappelow was a notable suffragette (1884-1971).

The multilingual and interdisciplinary nature of *Collaborative Toponymy* is expansive and multilayered when we consider the broad realities featured. Anchored as they are in a relatively contained geographical area, these names demonstrate the nature of globalisation not in a capitalist but in an ecological sense.

A notable case is Windrush, a familiar term to UK audiences and scandalous for the UK Government. The Empire Windrush was a ship that in 1948 carried the largest contingent of Caribbean immigrants to the UK: they had responded to an invitation from the UK government to settle in the 1940s, then in 2018, they found themselves suddenly unlawfully deported with their legal Status to Remain in the UK questioned. The full story of this term was further unveiled as in my research Windrush is originally the name of a Cotswolds river but the ship Empire Windrush, prior to being captured by the British, was a Nazi ship deployed for Nazi package holidays and subsequently a carrier for Jewish prisoners to the camps.

What next? In waiting for the new garden village to emerge and allegedly embrace our choices, just as with other bodies of research generated in my practice - such as *The Little Book of Answers* - the content is to be activated and interacted with rather than archived. Collaborative Toponymy is now published independently as a reference guide with an essay by sociologist Meghan Tinsley, a collaboration with improvisation singer Iris Erderer created vocal scores of the street names, and individual names and their definitions as silkscreen print have made an appearance in public spaces on a London area with an immigrant connection to Essex.

#### Endnotes

[1] Meghan Tinsley, "The Radical Promise of Toponymy" in *Collaborative Toponymy*, reference guide, Laura Malacart, 2022

[2] Ibid

[3] I called my process of name gathering "harvesting" as a metaphor acknowledging the fact that my point of departure was a plot of arable land; at the same time, I used "harvesting" as a trope to describe a process of information gathering echoing data mining. In harvesting and mining, we take from the land but if the former follows a benevolent natural course (except industrial farming) mining comes with aggressive industrial connotations.



**Laura Malacart**  
*Collaborative Toponymy (The Site)*, pinhole photography,  
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## AGNES WATERHOUSE

Mature Essex working woman from Hatfield Peverel who probably had a small holding and spun wool - a common occupation at the time, where women took in piecework. They spun raw wool, dyed and returned the finished materials to cloth dealers.

First woman executed for witchcraft in 1566.  
She confessed to save her daughter Joanne.

Topic Tags J, Q, F, W

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Laura Malacart  
*Collaborative Toponymy (Windrush)*, silkscreen print 25x35 cm, 2021 © Laura Malacart

## WINDRUSH

Cotswolds river that gives the name to the Empire Windrush, the ship that landed in 1948 in Tilbury Docks delivering one of the first large group of Caribbean settlers in the UK. When the ship was first launched in 1930 it was called MV Monte Rosa and deployed as a Nazi-approved package holiday vessel. During the war it was used to deport Norwegian Jews to the camps.

When the ship was captured by the British in 1945 it was renamed.

Topic Tags J, Q, W

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*Collaborative Toponymy (Conundrums)*, silkscreen print 25x35 cm, 2021 © Laura Malacart