

**Why *Tséhootsooi* does not equal *Kit Carson Dr.*:
Reflections on Navajo place-names and the inequalities of languages**

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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

1. Introduction

A number of years ago, I argued that Apache place-names were 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 indexed on-going placedness, whereas English language place-names imposed by State and Federal governments attempted to erase such on-going indexical linkages. I concluded by noting that arguments that 'Dripping Springs' is equivalent to the Chiricahua Apache place-name *Tónoogah*, by, say, Steven Pinker (2007: 49), showed a remarkable lack of awareness of the history of the Chiricahua Apache.¹ It played a trick of removing language-in-use from one context—the

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lived reality of minority populations that had been forcibly removed from their homeland—and placing it within the context of the imagined free-floating ahistorical linguistic example. This is an argument not just of referential transparency, but of the “equality” of languages (see Haviland 2003; Hymes 1973). Only in pretending that languages do not exist within social and political fields 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, however, as it concerns Navajo place-naming practices and a recent debate which concerns the name of a street in Fort Defiance, AZ (on the Navajo Nation).

When it comes to linguistic anthropology and Athabaskan place-names, we all live in the shadow of the work of Keith Basso (1983, 1984, and 1996). Basso explored the ways Western Apache place-names were intimately linked with aesthetics and the moral order. His work on Western Apache place-names was also, from the start, thoroughly entangled in the politics of ongoing claims to place (Basso 1996: 70). While it was possible in 1983 for Basso to write that, “the anthropological study of North American Indian place-name systems has fallen on hard times” (Basso 1983: 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, for example, 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; Thornton 2008; Topaha 2011; and 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 popular media inspired English-language place-naming practices. 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.

As a brief caveat, let me add that while literacy in Navajo is not widespread—most Navajos are literate in English, not Navajo—public sphere displays of the Navajo-language—in a variety of orthographies—have increased over the last several decades (Webster 2012). 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

Here are some basics about what we might call traditional place-naming practices among Navajos (see Wilson 1995; Webster 2009). First, in talking with Navajos about place-names, some were quick to note that many Navajo language place-names are words of the ancestors and/or Holy People—entailed in this, for some, was a reluctance to translate the 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, while they would agree the place-names were the words of the ancestors who travelled around Navajo

¹ Pinker (2007: 50), in his criticism of Benjamin Lee Whorf, also conflates Apache with Nootka and Shawnee and, thus, labels examples from Nootka and Shawnee that Whorf (1956: 233-245) used as all being Apache. Pinker does not, of course, cite the actual Apache, Nootka or Shawnee examples, but rather deals only in translation—English seems enough. Whorf (1956) was far more careful in his handling of linguistic materials.

country, did not see that as a hindrance in translating the names. Place-names, as Harry Hoijer noted to Basso in 1973, are intimately linked with narratives:

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 quoted in 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, what Kari (2010) calls *geolinguistic conservatism* (see also Jett 2001).² Finally, Navajo place-names provide vivid descriptions or—through the use of ideophones—sonic evocations (see Webster 2008). The forms are often readily analyzable into their morphology—this feature aids in their ability to provide vivid pictures and in wayfinding (see Kari 2010). Here are four examples (presented to give a sense of the structural features of place-names):

- (1) *Tséhootsooi*
tsé- *-hootsoo-* *-í*
rock meadow the place
The place of the rock meadow

- (2) *T'iistoh Sikaad*
t'iis- *-tsoh* *si-* *-kaad*
Cottonwood big 3si-perfective to spread
Big Cottonwoods stand spread out

- (3) *Tséé'dóhdoon*
tséé- *-dóh-* *-doon*
rock RUMBLING BOOMING
Rumbling Rock

- (4) *Tó dildq'*
tó *di-* *-ldq'*
water thematic prefix for sound to 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).

Naming practices change. As Nevins (2008) and Samuels (2004) have described for Western Apache, there are also English-language media inspired place-names (see also Basso 1996: 151-152). This is true for Navajos as well. I lived, for example, in government housing in a poverty-stricken neighborhood in Chinle, AZ called by local Navajos, 'Beverly Hills'—clearly a bit of social commentary and quite reminiscent of Nevins' 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,

² Peterson and Webster (2013: 101-102) suggest that this *geolinguistic conservatism* 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).

‘Blueberry Hill’—associated with the Fats Domino version released in 1956—was recalled fondly by a Navajo friend. When I asked him why the hill was called ‘Blueberry Hill,’ he replied that it was because people had gone up there to “find their thrill.” My point is that English-language place-names are in use on the Navajo Nation, but they are often used for Navajo purposes—indexing of local groupness, for example (see Webster 2009).

3. Public sphere Navajo-language place-name signage

Most of my research has focused on Navajo poetry and so to segue into a discussion of public sphere Navajo place-name signage, let me add that Navajo poets sometimes use place-names in their poetry (so too does a Navajo novelist use place-names, see below). For example, Rex Lee Jim (1998:13) has a poem titled *Tó Háálí* ‘Spring’ (‘water it flows up’) which concerns the changing character of that place (graffiti and vulgarity now predominate in what once was a sacred place) (see Webster 2015c). Laura Tohe (2005) has an entire book titled *Tséyi’*: *Deep in the Rock* (‘inside the rock’ also called Canyon de Chelley)—a rumination, in poetry, prose and photos, about *Tséyi’*. 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:

- (5) we have
 Tséyi’ first because
 Navajo language was here
 before
 contact

(Tohe quoted in Webster 2009: 201)

Tséyi’—or, again, as it is better known Canyon de Chelley (partly because it is more widely marketed)—sits just outside Chinle and is the site of a National Monument which attracts tourists from around the world (see Webster 2009). In Chinle, though, is a shopping center. A grocery store is there and some fast food restaurants as well. And this shopping center—like shopping centers around the Navajo Nation—is one common site to find Navajo place-names being used (see Image 1). Now Chinle is from *Ch’íníłí* ‘the place where water flows out’ (*ch’i-* ‘out’ -*níłí* ‘it flows’)—so the shopping center’s use of *Tséyi’* (written without the acute accent marking high tone) links with the tourist destination (for comparison see Bender 2008).

Image 1
Tseyi' Shopping Center at Chinle, AZ (photo by author)



The use of Navajo place-names on the names of shopping centers on the Navajo Nation—in an emblematic way (indexing Navajo spaces) and sometimes including an iconic visual image—is not particularly uncommon. Here are just a couple other examples:

Image 2

Tsé Bit'a'í Shopping Center, Shiprock, NM (photo by author)



In Image 2, we see the use of the iconic image of “Shiprock” or *Tsé Bit'a'í* ‘winged rock’ on the sign. As I discuss elsewhere (Webster 2012), the use of the tilde is used here instead of the more common use of an acute accent to indicate high tone. As with the previous example, while the local community is called in English “Shiprock,” the community, in Navajo, is often referred to as either *Naat’áanii Nééz* ‘Tall Leader’³ or *Toohdi* ‘at the water/river’ (see Webster 2015a: 89-126).

³ This is actually an allusion to Superintendent William T. Shelton—an important figure in the area at the turn of the last century (see Wilson 1995: 54).

Image 3

T'iists'oozi Shopping Center, Crownpoint, NM (photo by author)



In this example (Image 3), Crownpoint is the English-language place-name, but the older Navajo place-name is *T'iists'oozi* 'slender cottonwood'—sometimes also called *T'iists'oozi Nideeshgizh* 'slender cottonwood gap', where *nideeshgizh* suggests that the tree has been cut open or gapped (see Wilson 1995: 17). It seems like the image is iconic of that gap in the cottonwood tree.

Moving away from shopping centers, I want to pause on a particularly compelling example (for a variety of reasons, some only touched on here), which you can find at the top of Buffalo Pass going over the Chuska Mountains:

Image 4

Sign at Buffalo Pass with multiple Navajo place-names on it (photo by author)



Much could be said about the sign in Image 4, but here I just want to note a few things. First, it is found at a picnic area that Navajos and non-Navajos use near the top of the pass. Standing there, one can look out over the valley and see many of the mountains and rock formations identified. Second, some Navajos that I know have an abiding interest in Bigfoot. Third, most of these are, what we might call, *place-name pairings*—they give the English place-name (more often than not, not a translation of the Navajo place-name) and then the Navajo place-name in parenthesis. Samuels (2001: 285) 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.” Nevins (2008: 199; 2013: 89), following Samuels, calls these “translation pairs,” but note these are most decidedly *not translations*, they are—as both Samuels and Nevins note—counter assertions of placedness. Nevins (2008: 199) 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.

Note in this sign that the Carrizo Mountains, inexplicably as far as I can tell, are not given a Navajo place-name (one name would be *Dzil Náhoozilii* ‘Whirling Mountain’). Finally, there is a rather strange—telling—pairing here: ‘Oil Field’ and ‘*Diné Bikeyah*’—*Diné Bikeyah* 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 telling us more about the ways that Navajo country is imagined and understood as merely a site for resource extraction by those committed to the English language or as the homeland—the place where Navajos walk—for those aligned with the Navajo language, and in that, Navajo comes first (see Webster 2009).⁴

One final place where Navajo place-names are becoming more common is on signs for Chapters. Chapters are regional political units and in the mid-2000s there was a trend to change their names from English-language names to Navajo place-names that were associated with those areas. In the following picture (Image 5), we see that people at the Chapter have put the place-name *Tiis Tsoh Sikaad* (*T'iistsoh Sikaad* '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 is Navajo Agricultural Products Industry and BHP is BHP Billiton Energy Coal). Like the way the Navajo Nation is surrounded by the United States, English surrounds.

4 There are other signs like this on the Navajo Nation. For example, there is a sign near Lukachukai, AZ that lists Navajo place-names for five prominent places nearby (without directions). There are no place-name pairings on that sign—the place-names are only in Navajo. One explanation for the sign that I have encountered is that encourages the use of the Navajo language. As of this writing, 8/21/17, it lacks any Bigfoot graffiti. 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.

Image 5

Tiis Tsoh Sikaad Chapter, “Burnham,” NM (photo by author)



On the other hand, a new sign was erected when the Chapter formerly named “Hogback” changed their name to the Navajo place-name *Tse Daa Kaan* (*Tsétaak’á* [rock that slants into the water]), long associated with a prominent feature of the landscape nearby (Image 6). 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 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)—even with the increase in public sphere signage—is contracting in use (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).

Image 6
Tse Daa Kaan Chapter (photo by author)



4. *Tséhootsooi* and the debate over Kit Carson

I hope in the preceding discussion to have suggested the ubiquity of public sphere signage with Navajo-language place-names—that there is now a tradition of using Navajo language place-names on public sphere signage around the Navajo Nation. From poetry to public sphere signage, place-names in Navajo continue to circulate. I also hope to have suggested the ways that Navajo place-names can and do act as a counter discourse to the naturalizing discourse of externally imposed English language place-names replacing Navajo language place-names. This naturalizing discourse of the replacement of Navajo place-names with English place-names, of course, is a model of the displacement of the Navajo people by the dominant society. Navajo place-names—especially on public sphere signage—make visible Navajo presence.

I want to turn now 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, AZ had as its name *Kit Carson Dr.* The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), most likely, named the street long years ago (Shebala 2006). Since street signs, as I have discussed elsewhere (Webster 2014), are uncommon on the Navajo Nation, few Navajos knew the street had a “name” (Shebala 2006). Carson is associated by many Navajos with the Long Walk—a forced march across what is now New Mexico—and their imprisonment at Bosque Redondo (a place of massive suffering) (see Denetdale 2007a).

Navajo reporter Marley Shebala (2006: A3) wrote an article in January 2006 on the Fort Defiance Chapter voting 38-0 to change the name of the street from *Kit Carson Dr.* to “Tse Bi Hoot Sooi (“meadow between the rocks”), the Navajo word for Fort Defiance.” The article went on to discuss why Navajos in Fort Defiance disliked the idea of having a road named after Kit Carson and included 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)

Very little in the piece discusses why they chose to name it *Tse Bi Hoot Sooi*—other than, again, to note that it was the “word for Fort Defiance.” *Tse Bi Hoot Sooi* or, as I have encountered it, *Tséhootsooi* ‘the place of the rock meadow/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.⁵ 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 Feb. 16, 2006 edition of the *Navajo Times*—an edition, I might add that ran a headline for a story on the front page stating “Storm Clouds over Tséyi” concerning the desire of some Navajos—especially residents of *Tséyi*’—to remove the National Park Service from managing Canyon de Chelly National Monument—a letter from a Camille Cazedessus II of Pagosa Springs, CO (Cazedessus 2006: A6). I do not want to repeat all of Cazedessus’ argument, but suffice it to say, he argues that without Kit Carson, Navajo interactions with the U.S. “would have been much more deadly than they were” (2006: A6). Navajos, that is, 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 (Council Delegate and quoted in the article by Shebala) “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.
(Cazedessus 2006: A6)

⁵ There are also places in Fort Defiance that use the name on official buildings, see, for example, Tséhootsooi Medical Center. The difference between *Tséhootsooi* and *Tse Bi Hoot Sooi* may be akin to the discussion Basso (1996: 90) has about “shortened or contracted forms” of Western Apache place-names. For example, Basso (1996:90) writes, “the name T’iis Bitláh Tú ‘Oljǫ’ (Water Flows Inward Under A Cottonwood Tree) is commonly heard as T’iis Tl’áh ‘Oljǫ’ or T’iis Tú ‘Oljǫ’.” What interest me here is the deletion of the third person prefix *bi-* in this and the other examples that Basso provides of the 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.

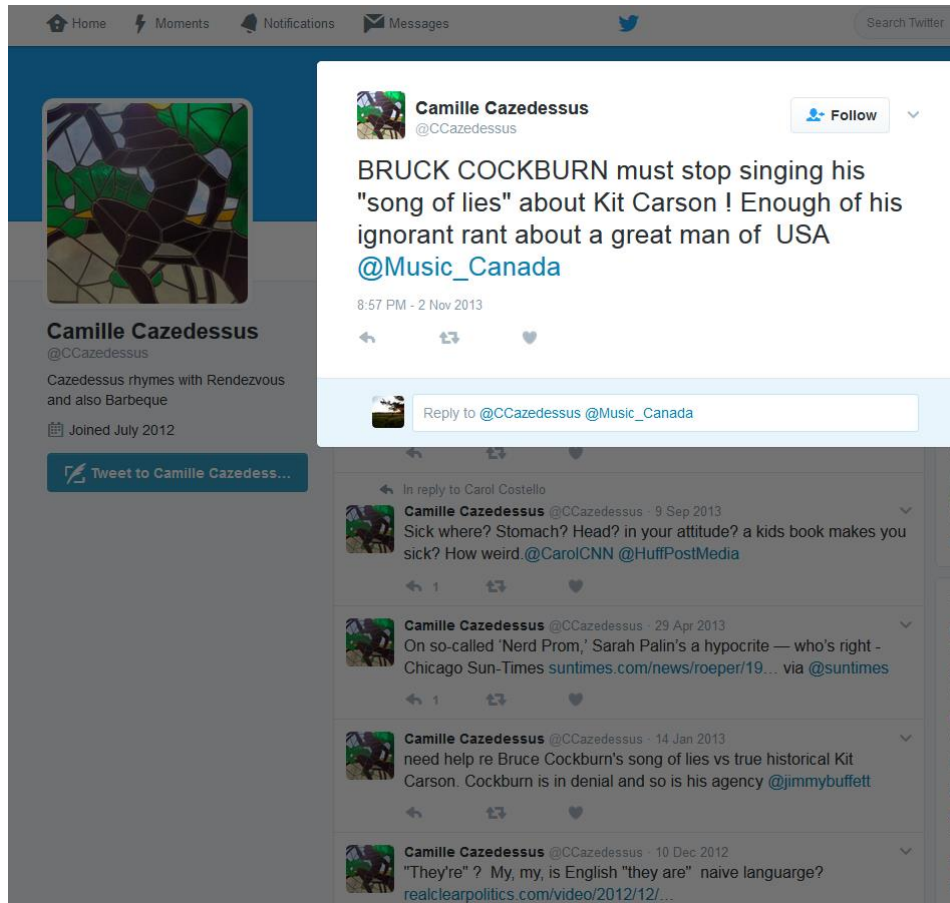
It would be easy enough to mock Cazedessus here and note that he shows no awareness, whatsoever, of Navajo history—that the Navajo place-name most certainly precedes Kit Carson, that place-names are intimately connected to Navajo historical narratives and are thus crucial parts of Navajos knowing their history (see Denetdale 2007a, 2007b; see also 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) (see, for example, Johnson 1973: 104, 113). *Tséhootsooi* was also the place that many Navajos returned to after their four years at *Hwéeldi* (see Johnson 1973: 125, 142). *Tséhootsooi* is a part of Navajo history. So intertwined with Navajo history are Navajo place-names that in the narratives—told in Navajo—collected about the Long Walk period, the place-names were presented in both Navajo and English, as adjacency pairs or place-naming pairs with Navajo first and then English language place-names in parenthesis (Johnson 1973). 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 *Tónaneesdizi* (Tuba City). (Johnson 1973: 104)

Cazedessus is not, however, unique (a point both Morris and Denetdale will make in their responses). Cazedessus’ letter partakes in the twin processes of “silencing the past” described by Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995: 96-97) as *erasure* (it wasn’t that bad) and *banalization* (let me mire you in the details). 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).

I should also note that Camille Cazedessus appears to have briefly been on Twitter in 2013 and was again defending Kit Carson against singer Bruce Cockburn—inexplicably referenced as “Bruck”—and the lyrics to one of his songs (Image 7).

Image 7
Camille Cazedessus defends Kit Carson on Twitter



And who is this Camille Cazedessus? According to the Wikipedia page for Cazedessus, he 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 Feb. 23, 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 responded with letters of their own. Denetdale (2007a) has written important work on decolonizing Navajo history and Morris’ novel discusses something of the beauty of Navajo place-names:

The word and name *Tséhili* [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 don't know Leroy S. Dick at all (so will say less about his letter). Needless to say, the letters took Cazedessus to task for his hubris.

Morris (2006), for his part, challenges Cazedessus' 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 (2006a) also takes up this theme and the ways that "white historians" have "sanitized" 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: A6)

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' vision of history with the on-going forms of oppression against Navajos (and other indigenous peoples) and with the war in Iraq.

Leroy S. Dick also challenges Cazedessus' vision 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 on the Navajo Nation that I recorded, she explicitly links the Long Walk and the imprisonment at *Hwééldi* with Hitler (Webster 2009: 177-179; on Hitler and Native Americans, see Whitman 2017).

What is interesting here, though, was that none of the letters takes up the cause of why *Tse Bi Hoot Sooi / Tséhootsooi* was an appropriate name for the street. Rather, the arguments center around the appropriateness of 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, of which

Cazedessus is merely another in a long line of sanitizers and apologists.⁶ Perhaps it was simply obvious that *Tse Bi Hoot Sooi* /*Tséhootsooi* is an appropriate name—following, as it was, on a recent trend of using Navajo language place-names on public sphere signage.

5. 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’s 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.” It seems, so too, street sign debates are never dead, they are not even the past. On October 13, 2016, I saw in the *Navajo Times* an article by Chrissy Largo that the Fort Defiance Chapter had again voted to rename *Kit Carson Dr.* This time they had voted to name the street *Chief Manuelito Drive*. Why again? The article cites a lack of follow through on the part of the Chapter concerning the earlier resolution. I should also note that the article makes no mention of the debate that occurred in the pages of the *Navajo Times* about that previous resolution. It hints only at the previous resolution. Let me make two additional points as a way of moving towards a conclusion:

1) The Rural Addressing Initiative, which led to the discovery of *Kit Carson Dr.* in the first place, had as its mandate that street signs should not be in Navajo (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’ve written about this initiative elsewhere and so don’t 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, is not in the Navajo language and, thus, does not violate the mandate. Of course there *are* streets on the Navajo Nation with Navajo names and Navajo language street signs (see Image 8) (see also Webster 2014).

6 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 weren’t really that bad (see also Webster 2009: 156-157). In both cases, one sees at work the processes described by Trouillot (1995) quite clearly. Denetdale 2007b provides a useful discussion of the tensions around commemorating Bosque Redondo.

Image 8

Navajo language street sign on the Navajo Nation, Shiprock, NM (photo by author)



2) 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 or not it was ever taken up by the BIA—it seems clear, however, that the name was never changed from *Kit Carson Dr.* It is also unclear whether or not the BIA will approve this name change for the street. Indeed, one of the themes of the article by Largo (2016) is the labyrinthine nature of the BIA bureaucracy. Fort Defiance has now changed what they want to change the street name to. Gone is the historically important Navajo place-name and that has been replaced with the name of an important figure in Navajo history: Chief Manuelito (see Denetdale 2007a).⁷ Manuelito, to make one small point about him, was important in helping the Navajo return to *Diné Bikeyah* after the Long Walk and internment at *Hwééldi* (see also Denetdale 2007a: 51-86). The people in Fort Defiance are 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). On a humane level, the use of Carson evokes negative associations; the use of Chief Manuelito can evoke pride. This choice in name does seem to go against certain Navajo naming practices—that tendency to not name places after the deceased—but it does align with the dominant society’s naming practices. There are as well various buildings on the Navajo Nation that are named after deceased Navajos (Annie Wauneka Arena and Ned Hataali Center). Names of buildings and

7 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 about 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 Bikeyah* and the reestablishment of life there as well.

streets, structures often associated with outside institutions by Navajos, may, in this regard, 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 to be able to commemorate in ways they deem appropriate—whether it be in the use of a Navajo place-name or in naming it after an important Navajo historical figure.

What, in the end, have we learned from this natural history of Navajo place-naming on public sphere signage? Place-names are not neutral, but fully implicated in concerns about who has and does not have the right (and power) to name. *Tséhootsooi/Tse Bi Hoot Sooi* does not equal *Kit Carson Dr.* because they tap into different—but 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 have described here. To do so is to display a profound amount of 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)—challenge 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).⁸ The point—as Bakhtin (1986) long ago noted—is more general than place-names. 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 acknowledgement 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 (see Webster 2000). This was true in 2000 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 should remind us [Denetdale 2007a]). My hunch is that such arguments will need, as well, to be continually made. One task of the linguistic anthropologist, and here we can take a lesson from Basso (1976: 117), is to push back against views of languages that would deny languages as embedded within and constitutive of social and cultural worlds, that would deny that is, “their fundamental inseparability.”

8 Another critique of Whorf made by Pinker (2007:50) 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.” 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). Pinker 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 linguistic differences. Linguistic anthropologists like Whorf have tended to favor translations that highlighted linguistic differences (see Sherzer 1998; Leavitt 2006, 2015). Whorf wants to remind his readers that Apache *is not* English. Pinker wants to comfort his readers by suggesting that Apache is merely English in disguise. 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 (see, for an engaging examination of this topic, Handman 2015). There are no neutral translations. That Pinker pretends there are, speaks 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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