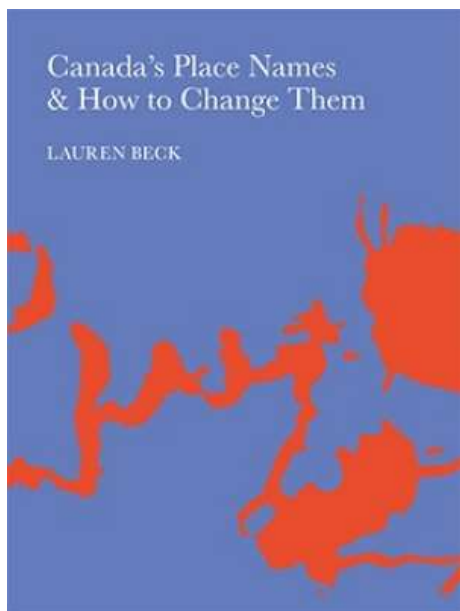


Canada's Place Names and How to Change Them, By Lauren Beck

Reviewed by Karen Jensen, Concordia University Library

Review



Beck, Lauren. *Canada's Place Names and How to Change Them*. Montreal, QC: Concordia University Press, 2022. 251p. \$34.95 CDN/US. ISBN 978-1988111391.

This thorough, timely book serves as a valuable contribution to the field of toponymy. According to the publisher, it is “The first book to demonstrate how inadequately place names and visual emblems represent the presence of women, people of colour, and people living with disabilities.” As examples throughout the text show, changing names that are offensive has been an ongoing effort since at least the 1980s, but has been gathering steam in recent years with the publication of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission report in 2015. The author, Lauren Beck, specializes in the visual culture of the early-modern Atlantic world, with interests in text-and-image relations, historical cartography, and marginalized voices. She holds the

Canada Research Chair in Intercultural Encounter and is Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies at Mount Allison University.

The first chapter, “Knowing in Place,” introduces the complexity of Indigenous names. I found the discussion of the Tl’azt’en (Dakelhne) name Chuzghun for a lake near Prince George, British Columbia, to be a particularly evocative description of how one Indigenous group named a place. Beck goes on to describe how many Indigenous place names can be read visually, often as seen while one experiences the landscape and narrates its story. The next chapter, “A Brief History of Settler-Colonial Naming Practices in Canada,” provides an overview of how place naming developed in North America and Canada. Canada’s place names were mostly created by explorers, missionaries, traders, and corporations. Beck notes that “Naming in this sense reinforced the doctrine of discovery and a related epistemological frame called ‘firsting,’” tied to the goal of possessing territory and legitimizing claims of ownership.

“Gender and Canada’s Place Names” highlights more specific forms of toponymy, such as hagiotoponyms commemorating saints, as opposed to eonyms used in Indigenous place names. As Beck points out, “There are also considerably more hagiotoponyms in central and eastern Canada than in the west, which reflects not just who determined these names but when. Most of western Canada’s names were assigned by nineteenth- and twentieth-century settlers rather than by earlier missionaries.” She also mentions the proportion of places named for female saints in Quebec (20%). A more equal distribution may evolve as places honouring male saints are renamed; this is likely to be aided by the amalgamation of villages. Further in the gender chapter, Beck mentions somatonymy, describing place names inspired by parts of the human body. North American men in the trades during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries bestowed names that today are deemed offensive or refer to women. Beck discusses names including the term

squaw. While this word is familiar to many, not everyone is aware of either its derogatory nature or the campaigns over the years to erase it.

“Indigenous Names in a Settler-Colonial Context” describes the problems with settlers using Indigenous words in names. We learn that official names for First Nations reserves are not necessarily the names used by community members. Finally, Beck notes that Indigenous peoples themselves may have made the decision to use settler terms in place names. However, whether correcting inaccurate names based on Indigenous words or completely re-naming settler names, there is an opportunity, as Beck notes: “The use of Indigenous names fosters a climate in which reconciliation or a form of restitution can be made on the part of settler states.”

“Marginalized Groups and Canada’s Place Names” discusses European minorities, Asian minorities, Black minorities, people living with disabilities, and names created for outsiders (tourists). While discussing changing names that include outdated terms for Black people, Beck describes how efforts to rename Negro Point to Seaview Point in 1995 drew public outrage as this would have erased Black presence and white negligence in the Halifax region. Residents of Negro Point chose to keep this name rather than change it partly to “reaffirm marginalized presence rather than hide away the harmful behaviour of white namers.”

The preceding chapters lead to the central issue: “How to Discuss and Change Names.” This chapter includes recent case studies, some illustrating the process of de-commemoration. For example, Beck points to the 2022 name change of Ryerson University to Toronto Metropolitan University in response to the 2017 student-led campaign due to Egerton Ryerson’s involvement in the Indian Residential School System. One obstacle was thought to be the expense of re-branding that goes along with a name change and the possibility of alienating donors. The latter concern was also a factor in McGill University’s initial decision not to rename its sports team, the Redmen; alumni valued a sense of tradition. Nevertheless, students were calling for change as early as 1992, and it finally happened in 2020, three years after they organized a new campaign. Beck believes that the racism stays in plain sight by keeping red, a signifier of Indigenous race, in the new name Redbirds. This chapter reiterates the importance of ensuring community input and warns that changing names can be a gradual process. Throughout the book, Beck aptly demonstrates that how potential name changes are discussed may be the most important part of the process.

Beck closes by recommending places adopt two or more official names or join settler and Indigenous names with hyphens, preferring chronological order whenever possible (hybrid naming). Finally, she emphasizes the need for research to justify name changes. Even if a name change is unsuccessful, there is value in documenting existing names to clarify their origins and support future efforts. This interesting book is suitable for both public and academic libraries.

[Image from: <https://www.concordia.ca/press/placenames.html>]