



WORKSHOP



Onomastic Layering: Sedimentation and erasure of toponyms in the Arabian Peninsula's urban centers Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi, May 31st, 2020

Pre-Islamic poetry mythically suggested the fleeting nature of spaces and places through its topos of “weeping over the ruins” depicting a poet evoking the beloved’s campsite, the traces of which fade away like an old tattoo on the back of the hand, swept by headwinds or tailwinds, uncovering or erasing the permanence of that place.

Modern cities of the Arabian Peninsula are also woven by these opposing winds: both our persistent use of names for the places in those cities and the ways that new onomastic layers come to overwrite them.

In an effort to assert national narratives and identities, the modern countries of the region repeatedly, and paradoxically, rename neighborhood, streets, squares, waterfronts, uprooting the very same history that is under construction. Meanwhile, popular memory, however endangered by successive waves of newcomers it may be, persists in its older designations, some of them tracing back to the first years of the modern expansion.

If the big cities of the Gulf region work hard at being “temporary cities” (Yasser Elsheshtawy), enforcing a politically-driven provisionality enabling authorities to minimize our human attachment to space and prevent residents, both local and foreign, from taking root, isn’t the persistent transmission of names one of the tactics developed by residents to resist impermanence and claim a “right to the city”¹?

1. See STADNICKI Roman, “Le capitalisme perché» (crossed recension of Elshehstawy 2019 and Molotch&Ponzini, 2019), *La vie des idées* 10-10-2019 (laviedesidees.fr).



How many cities in the region have an informally named Shari' al-Tahliya (Desalination Street), whereas its official name is that of a prince or member of the ruling family, and the plant had been relocated decades ago? Why is downtown Abu Dhabi's main artery still called Electra Street, in spite of its official unused name? How do taxi drivers, coming from the Indian subcontinent or Africa, learn this unofficial toponymy still used by their customers? Why do Dubai metro stations keep changing names, at the risk of misleading travelers?

Moreover, what does it mean for urban planning authorities to name places ? How are pre-existent places re-named and how are new names chosen and invented for new urbanistic creations? Which ideological, political and aesthetic messages can be spotted in the demiurgic and performative act of naming the non-existent and renaming the obsolete?

This transdisciplinary workshop aims at examining these questions from different perspectives: sociology, anthropology, urban planning, human geography, history and linguistics.

Proposals should be sent before March 15 to
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