In a Word

One could almost say that when an old man or an old woman dies in the Hispanic world, a whole library dies with that person.
— CARLOS FUENTES

The Whiteman's names are no good. They don't give pictures to your mind.
— ANONYMOUS APACHE

CHRISTOS DILEAKOS, Deadman's Island, from "Sites and Place Names (Boke Volske)" 1991-94, color photograph beneath etched glass. (Collection of the Art Gallery of North York, Toronto.) At the age of eleven, soon after immigrating to Canada from Greece, Dileakos first became interested in the Indian grave-yard on Deadman's Island (skwtsa in Squamish) in Vancouver Harbor, having heard about it from a storyteller at the public library. Early accounts described the dead lying in carved coffins and canoes, or in tree burials; by 1911, the island had been logged to desolation, "shivering in its nakedness, a monument to materialism, vandalism and stupidity, cleverness and illegality," according to the local paper. In Dileakos's "Sites and Place Names" series, the panoramic images seem to stretch between times, between Native and non-Native memories. Sometimes the result is poetic, as in a picture of a wooded landscape in Saskatoon called Wanaskewinik, or "Forgotten place"; sometimes the layered complexity of inhabitation is more ironic, as in an image of a suburban Vancouver road overwritten with its archeological contents: "ground slate points, trout, salmon..."
Every place name is a story, an outcropping of the shared tales that form the bedrock of community. Untold land is unknown land. The places most valued by Americans in the early nineteenth century were those evoking myth or legend, and most of the newly American landscape, supposedly bereft of human history, was perceived as inferior to that of Europe, where every hillock told someone a story. Sarah Josepha Hale, writing in 1855, bemoaned “the barrenness, the vacancy, painfully felt by the traveller of taste and sentiment, [arising] from the want of intellectual and poetic associations with the scenery he beholds. Genius has not consecrated our mountains, making them high places from which the mind may see the horizon...they are nothing but high piles of earth and rocks, covered with blighted fires and fens; the song has not named our streams.” The landscape, in other words, was not yet acculturated to Euro-Americans, who were blind to the storied Native landmarks already in place. As Jan Zika Grover puts it, the unstoried was as yet unassimilable. Naming is, with mapping and photography, the way we image (and imagine) communal history and identity. Yet surprisingly little detailed attention has been paid to the local origins of American place names and what they have to say about specific histories of place.

Vancouver artist Christos Dikeakos is the only visual artist I know who has studied place names in depth. In his series “Sites and Place Names,” the original indigenous names are etched on glass over photographs of modern sites, continuing an interrogation of home and community begun in 1968, when Dikeakos began to decipher and demystify changing urban reality with unassuming black-and-white photographs. Informed by conversations with Plains Cree scholar Stan Cuthand and Native Salish elders, Dikeakos brings back the so-called “pre”-history of western Canada, “piecing together” Native and non-Native histories while critiquing the dominant Canadian art genre of landscape painting. He believes that “historical imaginings” can help us locate ourselves in the present and notes the authority of naming, as well as the lack of public monuments celebrating the relationship of Native people to the land. Patricia Herringer says that Dikeakos “asks us to look at Vancouver in a new way, seeing what was in what is or appears to be...the past is represented by the word, the present by the image.”

This linguistic relationship does not easily cross cultural borders. Native people cautioned Dikeakos that “the world is not mutually translatable,” that unbridgeable abysses were created not by their “unwillingness to communicate,” but by cultural autonomy.

Indigenous names tended to locate resources for common good—pointing out the place where a healing herb grows or the water is bad or to say what happened there. There are parallels with the aboriginal people of Australia who sing their places into being as they pass through them. For us, names on maps play a similar role—a lazier, more detached way of reading the land in sequence. Euro-American names tend to be less about what is there than what it looks like or who was there. They are used as grassroots affirmations, as bids for posterity, and as proof of ownership, a means of control from the top. “The name lays claim to the...