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Marcia D. Yarmus

John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY

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JOHN STEINBECK'S HISPANIC ONOMASTIC INTERESTS
IN THE LOG FROM THE SEA OF CORTEZ AND EAST OF EDEN

Marcia D. Yarmus

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

The City University of New York

John Steinbeck was a North American author of German, New England, and Irish ancestry who spoke Spanish and who had a continuous interest in the Hispanic heritage of his native California. This interest is manifested in his use of Hispanic linguistic elements. These elements can be divided into four categories: Hispanic vocabulary, Hispanic dialogue, the proper names of Hispanic characters and Hispanic Toponymy (Geographic Nomenclature). The latter category, that is Hispanic Toponymy, is the subject of this study. For the sake of brevity we will leave the discussion of the names of his Hispanic characters for another paper.

Geography has been a visible assimilator of past civilizations. The state of California received during its Spanish-Mexican Colonial period an extremely rich legacy of place-names and traditions. Once under Spanish, later Mexican rule, and now part of the United States, California cannot escape its roots and early Hispanic background. Even a cursory glance at a map of California will immediately confirm the numerous Hispanic place-names, most particularly, in the central and southern parts of the state. A non-Spanish (Hispanic) name applied to a river, town, mountain, county seat or other geographical

landmark is a rarity.¹

It is perhaps this very factor which inspired John Steinbeck to create the Spanish town of San Juan de la Cruz in his novel The Wayward Bus,² published in 1947. In point of fact, this town does not actually exist in California. Interestingly, San Juan de la Cruz was a famed mystical writer and poet of seventeenth-century Spain. It is only in those regions of California beyond the limits of early Spanish or Mexican penetration that exclusively English-derived nomenclature is encountered.

Steinbeck demonstrated his Hispanic onomastic interests in two works: East of Eden and Sea of Cortez, published in 1941. The narrative portion, republished ten years later in 1951 and called The Log From the Sea of Cortez,³ is the story of a six-week marine biology expedition which he and his friend Ed Ricketts undertook in March and April 1940 along the Pacific Ocean coast of Lower California and in the Gulf of California.

Steinbeck's interest in the origins of Hispanic place-names led him to probe the very meaning of California itself and to agree with Clavigero's definition. In 1786, Don Francisco Javier Clavigero, a Jesuit monk, completed (in Italian) a history of [Lower] California which was published posthumously three years later in Venice.⁴ In The Log From the Sea of Cortez Steinbeck refers to and quotes extensively from the 1937 Stanford University Press edition of the Clavigero work which was translated from the Italian by Sara E. Lake and edited with detailed footnotes by A.A. Gray.⁵

In his discussion of the meaning of California, Steinbeck quotes Clavigero as follows:

'The name, California,...was applied to a single port in the beginning, but later it was extended to mean all the Peninsula. Some geographers have even taken the liberty of comprising under this denomination New Mexico, the country of the Apaches, and other regions very remote from the true California and which have nothing to do with it.' (Log, p. 52)⁶

"Clavigero says of its naming" and Steinbeck quotes him:

'The origin of this name is not known, but it is believed that the conqueror, Cortés, who pretended to have some knowledge of Latin, named the harbor, where he put in, "Callida fornax" because of the great heat which he felt there; and that either he himself or some one of the many persons who accompanied him formed the name California from these two words. If this conjecture be not true, it is at least credible.' (Log, p. 52)⁷

Steinbeck's comments on these latter words are interesting:

"We like Clavigero for these last words. He was a careful man. The observations set down in his history of Baja California are surprisingly correct, and if not all true, they are at least all credible. He always gives one his choice. Perhaps his Jesuit training is never more evident than in this. 'If you believe this,' he says in effect, 'perhaps you are not right, but at least you are not a fool!'"

(Log, p. 52). Lake and Gray include a footnote to Clavigero's remark about credibility which Steinbeck found interesting enough to quote: "The famous corsair, Drake, called California "New Albion" in honor of his native land. Father Scherer, a German Jesuit, and M. de Fer, a French geographer, used the name "Carolina Island" to designate California, which name began to be used in the time of Charles II, King of Spain, when that Peninsula was considered an island, but these and other names were soon forgotten and that given it by the conqueror, Cortés, prevailed'" (Log, pp. 52-53).⁸

Steinbeck quotes a second footnote by Lake and Gray: "'We shall add the opinion of the learned, ex-Jesuit, Don José Campoi, on the etymology of the name, "California," or "Californias" as others say. This Father [that is, Campoi] believes that the said name is composed of the Spanish word "Cala" which means a small cove of the sea, and the Latin word 'fornix' which means an arch; because there is a small cove at the cape of San Lucas on the western side of which there overhangs a rock pierced in such a way that in the upper part of that great opening is seen an arch formed so perfectly that it appears made by human skill. Therefore Cortés, noticing the cove and arch, and understanding Latin, probably gave to that port the name "California" or Cala-y-fornix, speaking half Spanish and half Latin'" (Log, p. 53).⁹

Steinbeck continues quoting Lake and Gray who say: "'To these conjectures we could add a third one, composed of both, by saying that the name is derived from Cala, as Campoi thinks, and fornax, as

the author [Clavigero] believes, because of the cove, and the heat which Cortés felt there, and that the latter might have called that place Cala, y fornax'" (Log, p. 53).¹⁰

Steinbeck, speaking both for himself and Ed Ricketts, concludes his discussion as follows:

Our feeling about this, and all the erudite discussion of the origin of this and other names, is that none of these is true. Names attach themselves to places and stick or fall away....More likely a name emerges almost automatically from a place as well as from a man and the relationship between name and thing is very close.

(Log, p. 53)

With regard to geographic naming, Steinbeck believes that "it seems almost as though the place contributed something to its own name 'The place draws the name.'" "It doesn't matter," he continues, "what California means; what does matter is that with all the names bestowed upon this place, 'California' has seemed right to those who have seen it. And the meaningless word 'California' has completely routed all the 'New Albions' and 'Carolinas' from the scene" (Log, pp, 54-55).¹¹

The name Amortajada Bay, into which the expedition sailed, is depicted by Steinbeck in terms of its true meaning. He calls it "shrouded and quiet" (Log, p. 152). His knowledge of the meaning of Puerto Escondido is expressed in the words the "Hidden Harbor" (Log, p. 156), a direct translation. As Steinbeck's marine biology

trip through the Gulf of California continues, he mentions many of the stopovers and often probes the significance of their names. He discusses Puerto Refugio, the "fine harbor" of Guardian Angel Island [which] "indicates by its name that many ships have clung to it in storms and have found safety there" (Log, p. 224). Clavigero had called the island both "Ángel de la Guardia" and "Ángel Custodio." Although Steinbeck translates the island's name as Guardian Angel Island, he prefers Clavigero's second name for it (Log, p. 224). It was, by the way, the largest island on the coast of Lower California, forty miles long and ten miles wide, but noted for its large number of rattlesnakes, it reflects quite an ironic twist to its name of Guardian Angel.¹²

Steinbeck continues his probing into the significance of the Hispanic names of his native California in his novel East of Eden,¹³ published in 1952. After relating the history of his native Salinas Valley, he points out that "[w]hen the Spaniards came they had to give everything they saw a name. This is the first duty of any explorer--a duty and a privilege. You must name a thing before you can note it on your hand-drawn map" (EE, p. 7). Steinbeck acknowledges the variety of reasons why the Spaniards selected particular names and he proceeds to enumerate them. Since they were a religious people and the Franciscan friars were after all responsible to a great extent for the work of founding the California missions and since the priests who accompanied the soldiers "kept the records and drew the maps" (EE, p. 7), it was natural that they

should first choose as place-names--the names of saints and religious holidays. There were indeed many saints, but, as Steinbeck says, "they are not inexhaustible" and, as a result, there were numerous "repetitions in the first namings" (EE, p. 7). As examples he cites "San Miguel, St. Michael, San Ardo, San Bernardo, San Benito, San Lorenzo, San Carlos, San Francisquito" (EE, p. 7). In Steinbeck's own works there appear many localities bearing saints' names (and they are frequently repeated throughout his novels): San Francisco, San Francisquito (its diminutive form), Santa Lucia, Santa Cruz, San José, San Joaquin, San Ysidro [sic], etc. Steinbeck also cites and utilizes names commemorating holidays which were celebrated by the explorers "at stopping places" (EE, p. 7), and among these we find --"Natividad, the Nativity; Nacimiento [sic], the Birth [as Steinbeck himself translates it, but actually the holy crèche]; Soledad, the Solitude" (EE, p. 7); and, of course, his reference to the Virgin herself, Nuestra Señora, our Lady. The latter, in actuality the Jolon Valley, is the setting of his third novel To A God Unknown, published in 1933.

Steinbeck gives a lengthy explanation (which can be divided into four sections) of the derivations of many Hispanic place-names. Firstly, they were derived from the mood of the expedition at the time, and for this he cites: "Buena Esperanza [sic], good hope; Buena Vista because the view was beautiful; and Chualar because it was pretty" (EE, p. 7). Steinbeck is either inaccurate here or he is thinking of Chula Vista which means beautiful view. Chualar is actually the site where white pigweeds grow.¹⁴ Secondly, from the

description of the particular areas, the following place-names emerged: "Paso de los Robles because of the oak trees; Los Laureles for the laurels; Tularcitos because of the reeds in the swamp; and Salinas [Steinbeck's own birthplace and site of much of the action in East of Eden] for the alkali which was white as salt" (EE, p. 7). Thirdly, places, according to Steinbeck, were also named for the "animals and birds seen" in the region, such as "Cabilanes"¹⁵ for the hawks which flew in those mountains; Topo for the mole; [and] Los Gatos for the wild cats" (EE, p. 7). Fourthly, suggestions for names also came from "the nature of the place itself," such as "Tassajara,"¹⁶ a cup and saucer; Laguna Seca, a dry lake; ...[and] Paraiso because it was like Heaven" (EE, p. 7). He also cites "Corral de Tierra for a fence of earth" (EE, p. 7). In Steinbeck's second novel The Pastures of Heaven (1932), the author vividly depicts this actual valley of Corral de Tierra, but the setting for the work is called by the title in contrast "Las Pasturas del Cielo," for that was the impression created upon its discoverer.¹⁷ Steinbeck's utilization of Hispanic place-names in his own works illustrates his keen awareness of their significance. Rarely does he use an American name when a Spanish one will better fit his purpose. His short story "The Murder," found in the collection The Long Valley (1938), is set in Cañon del Castillo, a canyon where "a tremendous stone castle"¹⁸ stands; and "Johnny Bear," of that same collection, is set in Loma, "built, as its name implies, on a low round hill that rises like an island out of the flat mouth of the Salinas Valley."¹⁹

In his discussion of the naming of places, Steinbeck further adds that the "Americans had a greater tendency to name places for people than had the Spanish. After the valleys were settled the names of places refer more to things which happened there" (EE, p. 8). To Steinbeck, of course, these "are the most fascinating of all names because each name suggests a story that has been forgotten" (EE, p. 8). Examples he cites are "Bolsa Nueva, a new purse; Morocojo, a lame Moor" (EE, p. 8); and he expressed curiosity as to who the latter was and how he had gotten there. Other names he mentions are "Wild Horse Canyon and Mustang Grade and Shirt Tail Canyon" (EE, p. 8). Steinbeck concludes his discussion of place-names as follows: "The names of places carry a charge of the people who named them, reverent or irreverent, descriptive, either poetic or disparaging. You can name anything San Lorenzo, but Shirt Tail Canyon or the Lame Moor is something quite different" (EE, p. 8).

John Steinbeck, as our study has attempted to show, demonstrated an enormous curiosity about the origins and meanings of Hispanic place-names, particularly those of his native California. For the sake of brevity, we limited our study of his Hispanic onomastic interests to The Log From the Sea of Cortez and East of Eden.

Steinbeck's concluding statement regarding place-names (as previously quoted) is, in reality, a challenge to the onomastician to delve into the history of many a curious name. Let us continue our work in literary onomastics by taking up his challenge.

Marcia D. Yarmus

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

The City University of New York

NOTES

¹ For further study of California place-names, see: René Coulet du Gard's Dictionary of Spanish Place Names of the Northwest Coast of America, Vol. I: California (Newark, Delaware: Editions des Deux Mondes, 1983) and Barbara and Rudy Marinacci's California's Spanish Place-Names: What They Are and How They Got Here (San Rafael, California: Presidio Press, 1980).

² John Steinbeck, The Wayward Bus (New York: Viking Press, 1947).

³ John Steinbeck, The Log From the Sea of Cortez (New York: Viking Press, 1951) and hereafter incorporated into the text and abbreviated as Log.

⁴ Francisco Javier Clavigero, The History of [Lower] California, trans. Sara E. Lake, ed. A.A. Gray (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1937; rpt. Riverside, California: Manessier Publishing Co., 1971).

⁵ I have cited Steinbeck's quotations from Clavigero as they appear in the Log, but I shall refer (in the ensuing footnotes) to the pages of the Clavigero edition from which he actually took his references.

⁶ Clavigero, p. 16. The word peninsula is not capitalized by Clavigero.

⁷ Clavigero, pp. 16-17. The term California is in quotation marks in Clavigero's rendering.

⁸ Clavigero, p. 17. In their footnote, the word Peninsula is not capitalized by Lake and Gray either.

⁹ Clavigero, p. 17. In their footnote, "half Spanish and half Latin" are hyphenated; "the cove" is rendered "that cove"; and the Spanish word "cala" is not capitalized.

¹⁰ Clavigero, p. 17. This is the final Lake and Gray footnote which Steinbeck quoted.

¹¹ See Coulet du Gard, p. 15, for his rendering of the many possible origins of the name California. One outstanding and widely accepted view is that the name came from the fifth book of Garci Ordóñez de Montalvo's chivalry novel, Amadís de Gaula, published in early 16th-century Spain, separately entitled Las Sergas de Esplandian. It was Edward Everett Hale who in April 1862 apparently "solved the origin of the name to everyone's satisfaction" (Coulet du Gard, p. 15) when he "happened upon Montalvo's novella, shifting the search then to linguistics, to how he happened to contrive the name" (see Marinacci, p. 28). In a footnote, Lake and Gray refer their readers to Charles E. Chapman's A History of California: The Spanish Period, Chapter VI for what they call "a scholarly discussion of the origin of the name 'California'" (p. 16). They include several other references as well.

¹² See Lake and Gray footnote 22 in Clavigero, p. 20 for their description of Ángel Custodio Island. Steinbeck describes the coast of Guardian Angel Island as "long, snake-like ... forty-two miles long,

ten miles wide in some places, waterless and uninhabited ... [and] said to be crawling with rattlesnakes and iguanas" (Log, p. 224). He makes no mention, however, that the channel through which the expedition passed with Guardian Angel Island on the right (and Puerto Refugio on the upper end of Guardian Angel Island) was known as Canal de las Ballenas, Channel of the whales. When the expedition passes down the western coast of Tiburon (Shark Island), Steinbeck refers to Clavigero's description of its inhabitants, the Seri Indians (Log, pp. 232-233; Clavigero, pp. 217-218).

¹³ John Steinbeck, East of Eden (New York: Bantam Books, 1977). Hereafter incorporated into the text and abbreviated as EE.

¹⁴ See Coulet de Gard, p. 22, who defines Chualar as "Spanish for the site where the chual (white pigweed) grow."

¹⁵ The Spanish word for "hawk" is actually "gavilán," but misspellings such as this are quite frequent in California Spanish place-names.

¹⁶ According to Coulet du Gard, p. 111, Tassajara is "a corruption of the Spanish 'Tasajera' (a place where meat is cut in strips and hung in the sun to cure). The origin of the naming is because the mixed population of Spanish-speaking and Anglo-Saxons used to dry their beef in the sun in this small locality." Marinacci also relates Tassajara to Tasajera, "the place where beef jerky was made on a rancho" (p. 165). Steinbeck was obviously thinking of the Spanish word "taza" which means "cup." "Jarra," however, actually

means "pitcher" or "jug."

¹⁷ See John Steinbeck Pastures of Heaven (New York: Bantam Books, 1952), pp. 2-3.

¹⁸ John Steinbeck, "The Murder" in The Long Valley (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1945), p. 171.

¹⁹ "Johnny Bear" in The Long Valley, p. 145.