“From Mascara To Elkader: Emir Abdelkader between (De)Territorialization and (De)Commemoration”

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Elkader, Iowa, was named in 1844 by Timothy Davis after the Algerian revolutionary leader Emir Abdelkader. Davis was a fervent admirer of Abdelkader’s resistance to French colonialism between 1832 and 1847. By choosing this toponym, he inscribed an idiosyncratic view of history onto the local geography, introducing a version of far-flung resistance to colonial power into the American public sphere which, in turn, served as a symbolic ingredient of local and national identity. This toponym, which was triggered by the great American interest in the Emir’s exploits, reflects the national mood of the post-independence era. The Algerian Emir would never have anticipated that he would leave the imprint of his existence on the topography of America. As a case of positive deterritorialization, the naming contributed to the globalization of the Emir’s resistance, compressing distance and diminishing social and cultural constraints.

Against a more complex historical backdrop, the late Mayor Ed Olson, a disciple of Davis, inaugurated the Sister City Project binding together Elkader and Mascara, the birth place of the Emir. Until his death in 2009, he continued to promulgate his philosophy of “peace through people” and his firm belief that “when people cross borders in friendship, armies don’t follow.” Elkader became “a contact zone” testifying to the elasticity of borders. Yet, the post-9/11 atmosphere restructured Elkader’s function of “small town diplomacy.” The name has turned into what Michel de Certeau calls a “strange toponomy” with a “foreign logic,” offering but a “suspended meaning.” In this paper I examine the cognitive dislocation involved in the transfer of the toponym from Algerian history to American geography. I also attempt to explore the “after-life” of the toponym within the destinies of (De)territorialization and (De)commemoration.