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TOPONYMY, TAXONOMY AND PLACE

Explicating the French concepts of *presqu'île* and *péninsule*

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ABSTRACT: This article discusses the concepts of and differences between the French terms *presqu'île* (almost island) and *péninsule* (peninsula) and their toponymic uses. The discussion raises a number of questions including how and why particular places are named *presqu'île* or *péninsule*. We will first focus on examples located in the French Southern and Antarctic Lands and then in mainland France. These two case study areas are complementary. The first example, the Kerguelen Islands in the Southern Indian Ocean, has been the site of a recent attempt to normalise place-naming for the purpose of asserting sovereignty. The second one, the Cotentin, is a part of Normandy, whose long history of human inhabitation has provided several layers of toponymy. Finally we refer to the use of the term *presqu'île* in the context of urban riverfront revitalisation. In the latter usage, cities try to promote their locations by using the image of the peninsular 'almost island'. The reflections presented in the article show the complexity involved in naming and interpreting locations as either peninsulas or 'almost islands'.

KEYWORDS: Peninsula, *péninsule*, *presqu'île*, almost island, toponymy, Kerguelen Islands, Cotentin

Introduction: the relevance of defining the fields of *péninsule* and *presqu'île*

The word *presqu'île* is peculiar to the French language. In other Latin languages - like in Spanish (*península*) and Italian (*penisola*) - as well as in English, derivants of the Latin term *paeninsula* are used to denote a piece of land surrounded by water on three sides and connected to a mainland. While the term derives from the Latin terms *paene* 'almost' and *insula*, 'island', this sense is not foregrounded in current usage (given Latin's decline as an intelligible language). This is not the case with regard to the French term *presqu'île*, also used to refer to such areas, deriving as it does from two (currently used) terms *presque* ('almost') and *île* ('island'). The linguistic overlap between the two terms was attested to in the famous *Encyclopédie* compiled by Diderot and D'Alembert and published in the 18th Century (1751-1772), where *presqu'île* (or *presqu'isle)* is defined as the same as *peninsula*. In some Scandinavian languages however, like Danish, the word for *peninsula* is *halvø* (*halvö* in Swedish, *halvoy* in Norwegian, *hálvoggj* in Faeroese), a term that combines *ø* ('island') and *halv* ('half'). This is the similar in German with *halbinseln. Presqu'île* and *halvø* are close in sense and their meaning is clear for native language speakers, as it is a

combination of two common words. However, in Scandinavian and German languages the term has the same sense as peninsula in English, referring to anything from a small piece of land to a part of a continent stretching into the sea. In Danish, for example, Helgenæs[1] in Djursland is classified as a *halvø* but also the Arabic peninsula (*den arabiske halvø*).

Our aim is to go beyond the taxonomy of landscape and our study examines the geopolitical and cultural dimensions of naming and describing space. On one hand, the state tends to normalise the use of terms through taxonomy and toponymy, an exercise that is related to the ability to normalise space through maps and thereby attempt to to control it in order to produce a *territory*. This process is relatively recent and is associated with the rise of nation-states, which are concerned with border delimitations and mapping to assert their legitimacy. On the other hand, place-naming shows the flexibility of local cultures, where the toponymy results from different cultures through history and which define the landscape through their own categories, thus producing a *place*[2]. In order to explore this idea we focus on different examples from two French speaking areas: the Kerguelen Islands, which has been recently colonised, and the Cotentin, which shows a strong local identity constructed through a long history. Finally, we refer to *presqu'îles* in rivers and harbours, showing recent attempts by local governments to promote particular spaces by associating them with islands.

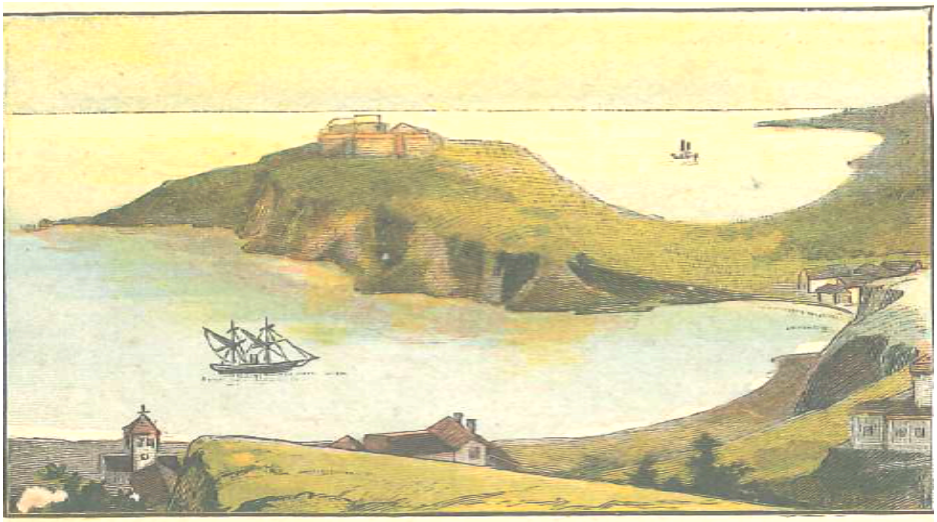

FIG. 12. — Presqu'île ou péninsule.

[1] In this place name, the word *næs* refers to a promontory or *presqu'île* similar to that in the name of Nez de Jobourg in Normandy (as discussed latter in the article).

[2] We refer to two different concepts in geography, *territory*, which mainly refers to power and control of a space from the State) (Agnew, 2003) and *place,* which refers to the culture and the experience of space by individuals and a population (Tuan, 1977). The two dimensions can be combined in a dialectical way to analyse situations.

Figure 1 – a representation of a *presqu'île* or *péninsule* in a French schoolbook. (Source: Poncin, c1910: 4)

I. The use of *péninsule* and *presqu'île*: the limits of a taxonomic approach

To support our discussion, we first refer to a section of a schoolbook from the early 20th Century that was used by millions of French children to learn the basics of geography. The first part is dedicated to defining the main terms used in physical geography, beginning with words related to the sea. Despite the fact the book's objective is very normative, the notions of *presqu'île* and *péninsule* are rendered as interchangeable (cf Figure 1). In fact, the maps from the book show and describe similar areas with different terms: the *presqu'île* ranges from a small area like that pictured below (which aims to represent the notion) to a subcontinent, ie India). Some areas are listed under category of *presqu'île* but are named as *péninsules*, including the péninsule ibérique (the Iberian peninsula), péninsule italique (the Italian peninsula), and the péninsule scandinave (the Scandinavian peninsula).

Another example of this uncertain definition is apparent with regard to Greece, identified as presqu'île héllénique in the text but as péninsule hellénique on the map (1910: 38-39). However, it is possible to distinguish a hierarchy of size in that a péninsule is bigger than a presqu'île. A presqu'île seems to be seen from the sea while a péninsule seems to be perceived from a continental viewpoint. Péninsule refers to a mainland area stretching into the sea, such as la péninsule coréenne (the Korean peninsula), la péninsule ibérique (the Iberian peninsula) and la péninsule de Kola (the Kola peninsula). But in common language use it is unusual to attach the word *péninsule* to the place name as such. There are many examples where the place name refers to a region or large area: Crimée (Crimea), Basse Californie (Baja California), Kamchatka and Bretagne (Brittany). French speakers usually say Gaspésie (Quebec) rather than péninsule de Gaspésie and say Floride (Florida) rather than péninsule de Floride. However, in the past, such usage seems to have been more flexible. Florida, for instance, is named and represented in early French maps of North America as a *presqu'île* (Figure 2) but the name Florida encompassed a large area, which could even include part of the Louisiana territory, which was named in the late 17th Century by the French. It may be possible that the shift from presqu'île de Floride to Floride is related to political changes in North America. Florida came to refer to a smaller area, a territory, and latter a state, which today corresponds to a large extent (except the 'panhandle', on the Western part) with a topographical entity.

In North America, the *Inventaire toponymique du Québec* defines the *péninsule* as "an extension of the continental body into the sea" and a *presqu'île* as "land almost surrounded by sea [but] linked to the neighbouring shore" (Commission toponymique du Québec, nd - authors' translations). Some topographic categories have been used directly as place names that can be termed *toponymes génériques* (generic place names) (Morissonneau, 2008). This place-naming is related to the colonisation. Many places have been named with reference to distinctive topographical features. *Presqu'île* is quite common as a place name in areas colonised by the French in North America, for example Presqu'ile Provincial park in Ontario (without the *accent circonflexe*), Presqu'isle in Maine, USA, where the course of the river Arostook makes a peninsula (*isle* is the old form of spelling *île* in French), and Lac de la Presqu'île in northern Québec ('Peninsula Lake' – rather than la

Presqu'île du Lac [Lake Peninsula]). By contrast, in France, the term *presqu'île* is never used without referring to another place name, often a town or a village (ie presqu'île de Giens – in the Southeast of France – or presqu'île de Crozon, in Brittany), except in the case of cities, as will be discussed later in the article.

Figure 2 – French map of Florida from 1780 with *presqu'île* designations.[3]

[3] *Carte réduite des côtes et de l'intérieur de la presqu'île de la Floride, avec le détroit de cette presqu'île et le canal de Bahama. Dressée au Dépôt général des cartes, plans, et journaux de la marine, d'après*

In the context outlined above, size thresholds are not the most significant factor in determining the designation of an area as either a *presqu'île* or *péninsule*. Relational significance is a more crucial aspect and can be hierarchical in that a *presqu'île* can be defined in relation to smaller or bigger topographical entities. Two examples in different parts of the Francophone world exemplify this, the Kerguelen Islands in the southern Indian Ocean and the Cotentin Peninsula in north-western France.

II. The Kerguelen Islands: a laboratory in distinguishing *presqu'île* and *péninsule*

The Kerguelen Islands (with an aggregated land area of 7052 km^2) are an archipelago located in the Indian Ocean at 49°21′ South and 70°13′ East and are administered as part of *Terres Australes et Antarctiques Françaises* (*TAAF*) (the French Southern and Antarctic Lands). The only settlement is Port-Aux-Français, a research station created in 1949. Due to their recent occupation, these uninhabited islands can be considered as a laboratory for place nomenclature with particular regard to the hierarchy of *presqu'île/péninsule.* Since their discovery in 1772 by the French sailor Yves Trémarec de Kerguelen, who did not acknowledge the insularity of the land and named it France Australe ('Southern France'), the islands have been explored by several expeditions. The coast of Kerguelen's main island - Grande Terre - is characterised by many fjords, peninsulas and smaller, fringing islands. Following their discovery, the islands were used for seal and whale hunting, mainly carried out by Americans and later by an Anglo-Norwegian company. After a period of uncertain sovereignty, the French asserted their control after the First World War. Inspired by the example of the British colonisation of the Falkland Islands, attempts were made to develop settlements in 1913 and 1927 orientated to sheep farming, undertaken by a company from Le Havre, but these both failed (Raoulx, 1993).

Despite the fact that there has been no permanent settlement, the archipelago's toponymic history is quite complex. Many places have been renamed several times by seafarers, scientific expeditions and seal hunters (Delepine, 1973). The best-known expeditions were the ones conducted in 1913 by Captain Rallier du Baty, who was a major contributor to mapping the coastline (du Baty, 1922; Loranchet, 1922) and by Egard Aubert de la Rüe, a geologist and geographer specialising in islands, in 1928 and 1930. But it was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s that the official toponymy was extended and normalised after a systematic mapping of the islands was carried out by the Institut Géographique National (IGN) to produce the 1:100 000 reference map *(*Commission territoriale de toponymie, 1973). Due to the complex shape of the coast, the Commission decided to name the space according to size criteria. As it can be seen on the map (Figure 3), the term *péninsule* is used to refer to the largest pieces of land, even when, due to their relatively small size, they would probably been considered as *presqu'îles* elsewhere.

The main island is referred as the mainland (Grande Terre) and is presented as something of a 'micro continent' upon which *péninsules* and *presqu'îles* can be designated:

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différentes cartes combinées. Pour le service des vaisseaux du roi (map) Paris : Dépôt général de la Marine, 1780. Online at: www.loc.gov/ressource/g3930.ar162100 - accessed May 15th 2015.

> *Finally, taking into account the extreme indented coastline of the Kerguelen Islands, the commission decided to give the name* péninsules *to the shapes that would have been called* presqu'îles *in other places and the name* gulfs *to indentations that would have been simply considered as bays – such as the case of* Péninsule Courbet *and the* Golfe du Morbihan. (Commission de toponymie, 1973: 4 - authors' translation)

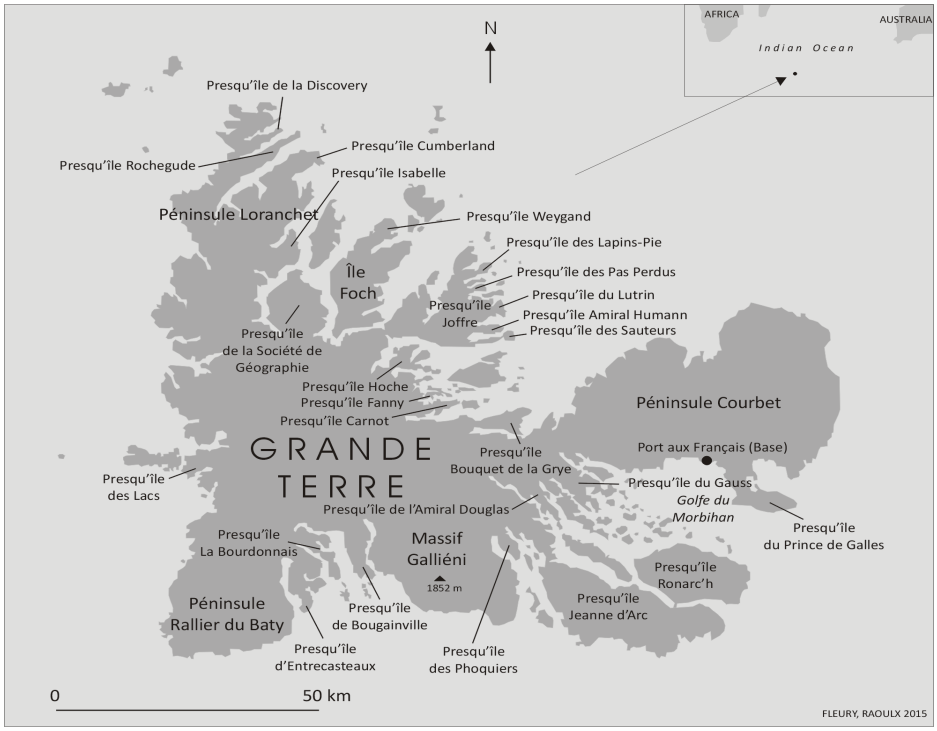


Figure 3 - The Kerguelen Islands and designation of *presqu'îles* and *péninsules* (derived from Institut Géographique National map [undated])

The word *péninsule* is used for larger land areas (with few exceptions like Presqu'île Jeanne d'Arc, in the south-east, where the isthmus is very narrow – see Figure 3). In fact, size, shape and hierarchy combine to qualify a space as a *presqu'île*. The Presqu'île Jeanne d'Arc is not a *péninsule* because of the very narrow and flat neck of land linking it to Grande Terre (measuring about half a kilometre across), which used to be a place to haul boats from one side to the other[4]. The Presqu'île Jeanne d'Arc was originally named Péninsule Joffre by Rallier du Baty during his 1913 expedition (Rallier du Baty, 1922). The change of designation reveals both the complexity of place-naming and the geopolitical issues

[4] In fact, this isthmus is called the Halage des Swains (a translation of Swain's Haulover, a name given to it by seal hunters in the 19th Century).

involved. In 1915 the name Joffre (referring to Marshal Joffre, considered as one of the main figures in the Allied victory during the World War I) was given by the Service Hydrographique de la Marine, the French naval hydrographic service, to another *presqu'île* on the northern shore that had been previously named the Bismarck Halbinsel (Bismarck peninsula) by the German Gazelle scientific expedition in 1874. During the First World War the French started to rename the region's toponymic features, rejecting many German names. This resulted in two places in different locations using the name Jeanne d'Arc: Port Jeanne-d'Arc, on the south-eastern coast, where a whaling factory was established in 1909 that operated for few years (the very French place name was chosen by the Anglo-Norwegian company that opened the factory, presumably in an attempt to please the French authorities) and the Presqu'île Jeanne d'Arc in the north. In order to avoid this mismatch, the Commission switched the names of the two *presqu'îles*. The former Presqu'île Joffre in the South became the Presqu'île Jeanne d'Arc and the former Presqu'île Jeanne d'Arc in the North became the Presqu'île Joffre, as it is today (Figure 3).

Figure 4 - Presqu'île Ronarc'h and the Mont du Pouce (744 m.) at sunset, Kerguelen Islands. (photo: B. Raoulx, 1986.)

At the second level, the word *presqu'île* was chosen to categorise pieces of land stretching from a *péninsule* on Grande Terre, or even from another *presqu'île*, into the sea. Thus, the presqu'île Joffre includes five other named *presqu'îles*. The second largest island, île Foch, in the northern part of the archipelago, is the only other space with a *presqu'île* (presqu'île Weygand). Many spaces do not have a place name (ie a number of places on the Western coast) but could be also named as *presqu'îles*. Others are named according to the topography – usually mountains - rather than using the term *presqu'île*. For example, the area once known Péninsule Galliéni is now officially called Massif Galliéni (the highest point of the archipelago at 1852 meters) (cf. Figure 3), in reference to the topography. In the

case of Kerguelen Islands, the word *presqu'île* or *péninsule* is part of the full place name and cannot be used without the anthroponym attached to it (ie Courbet, Rallier du Baty, Loranchet).

Moving the discussion back to the French mainland, the example of Cotentin, in western Normandy, provides further insights into defining a *presqu'île*.

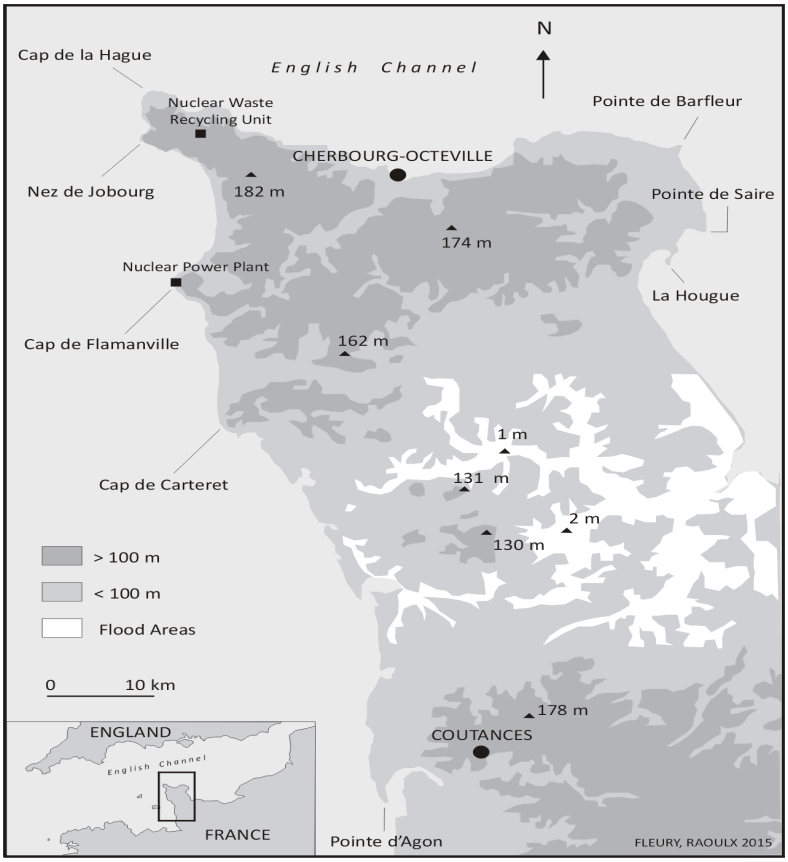
The example of Cotentin: a rich variety of names for coastal indentations

The Cotentin (a name that derives from the town of Coutances) is an isolated area of land in northwestern France (Figure 6) that is generally characterised as a *presqu'île* by its inhabitants. Located on Cotentin's northern coast, the main city, Cherbourg, has long been a strategic harbour for the French Navy. In recent decades the Cotentin has come to be commonly referred to as a *presqu'île du nucléaire* ('nuclear peninsula') on account of the location of two nuclear facilities in the area (the waste recycling unit at La Hague, operated by the Areva company since 1960, and the Flamanville nuclear power plant, established in 1983, which is currently due to be extended).

Figure 5 - Aerial picture of La Hague: in the foreground, the Cap de la Hague, in the background, the Nez de Jobourg. At the rear, on the left side, the nuclear waste recycling plant operated by Areva. (Photo: Francis Cormon.

The Cotentin is connected to the rest of Normandy at its southern end by an area of low marshland that is often flooded in winter. This landscape was strategically utilised in 1944, during World War II, when the German army disrupted the marsh drainage system, effectively cutting off the Cotentin from the mainland in an attempt to prevent American

forces from advancing from their landing places.[5] The Cotentin is also significant for the many different names given to small pieces of land projecting into the sea, including *cap*, *pointe*, *nez* or *La Hougue*. The variety of names identified above reveals the history of the Cotentin. *Cap* and *pointe* are part of a common French nomenclature but the appellations *nez* and *La Hougue* derive from the Scandinavian presence in Normandy during the Middle Ages. (*Nez* is a Norse term that has been rendered as *ness* in Great-Britain, for example, Tarbat Ness in Scotland, and *-næs* or *-nes* is also present in many Scandinavian place names today.) The Nez de Jobourg is the best known example but others can be found along the coast of the Norman mainland and in the Channel Islands (as in the case of Grosnez in Jersey) (Lepelley, 2002). A fourth type is exemplified by La Hougue, a place name that derives from the Norse *haugr* (elevation). It is probably a former islet connected to the mainland by a tombolo (bar) and is not considered as a *presqu'île* by the local inhabitants[6].



[5] As a result, many American parachutists drowned during the D Day invasion in June 1944.

[6] A change of the topography doesn't mean a change of name. For example, in Brittany, the île Tudy became connected to the Mainland in the mid-19th Century but has kept its island name.

Figure 6 - Map of the Cotentin peninsula.

The Cotentin has also been promoted as a tourist destination by the slogan *Presque une île* ('Almost an island'). The latter term underlines the extent to which the image of an island is nowadays considered as an efficient hook in destination marketing. Such allusive references to islands are even more obvious in producing new urban spaces, as in the case of the riverfront projects discussed in the following section.

River and harbour *presqu'îles*

The word *presqu'île* is often used along riverbanks, such as on the Seine River between Rouen and Le Havre, in Normandy. Here the river meanders and the spaces in these turns are often identified as *presqu'îles.*[7] But *presqu'île* is also a place name found in the cities, such as la Presqu'île at the confluence of Rhône and Saône rivers in the city of Lyon. *Presqu'île* is also a place name often found in industrial harbours, either referring to islands artificially connected to the riverbank or else areas of riverbank excavated to open docks. However, due to changes in port trade and activity many of these now comprise vacant areas located close to urban centres. In North America and Europe many formerly industrial riverfronts have been redeveloped and have become the sites of ambitious urban revitalisation projects.

In France, in particular, the so-called *presqu'îles* are becoming part of new urban districts integrated into the downtown cores. In this context, the term *presqu'iles* - conveying the image of (almost) islands – has become a particular type of place name and contributes to promoting new vision of cities. In Rouen, on the industrial left bank of the Seine river, for example, the Presqu'île Rollet (a former island connected to the riverbank in 1900) (Figure 7) has been renamed La Presqu'île, removing the former name's previous association with industry:

> *Symbolic of the reconquest of the left bank and representing the first stage towards the Flaubert Eco-Neighbourhood, the Presqu'île comprises a magnificent site dedicated to walking, leisure and relaxation. A space that will be even more appealing with the summer coming… Inaugurated in 2013, the Presqu'île, formerly known as the Presqu'île Rollet or 'Coal island' offers 15 hectares for walking and leisure activities along the river.* (CREA, 2013 – authors' translation)[8]

[7] The tradition of boat traffic across the river has hindered the development of bridges and today there are only three bridges connecting the two banks between Rouen and Le Havre, the most recent one being the Pont de Normandie, near Le Havre, which opened in 1995. The first bridge to link the two banks, the Pont de Tancarville, was completed in 1959. Some ferries operate across the river in different places. The inhabitants consider the water as a border - *de l'autre côté de l'eau* ('on the other side of the water') is a traditional expression used by the local residents to refer to the opposite bank.

[8] See Jastrzebska (2014) for illustrations and overview.

Figure 7 – Rouen, Normandy: Visualisation of Presqu'île park site (left of image). (Source: Atelier Jacqueline Osty and Associates.)

In the city of Caen, the *presqu'île industrialo-portuaire* ('industrial harbour peninsula') was created in 1857 as a consequence of the completion of the city's canal system. Running parallel to the Orne river, it provided easy access to Caen harbour, which is located 13 km from the seashore.[9] The activity in these docks declined during the early-mid 20th Century and the relocation of infrastructure further down the canal and on the seashore from the 1960s on, together with the closure of the steel factory in 1993, have left vacant areas ('brownfields'). The current revitalisation project aims to create a new neighbourhood. It has similarities with Rouen's redevelopment and the *presqu'île* désignation functions as a place-name of its own. As in Rouen, the rhetoric of an (almost) island is used to promote the city.

Conclusion

Even where there is a difference in size, the nature of the distinction between *presqu'île* and *péninsule* is far from evident. The discussions in this article allow us to observe that

[9] It is strictly speaking, a long island stretching from Caen to the coast, but the inhabitants of Caen see it as a *presqu'île*. Furthermore, two short canals between the river and the main canal have recently been built to prevent flooding; one of them is located in Caen, where the revitalisation project is taking place.

uses of the terms *presqu'île* and *péninsule* exemplify the difference between a normative approach - the attempt by scientists and officials to describe and order the landscape for constructing a nomenclature - and the 'sense of place' as it is experienced by groups living in a location. Our discussion first referred to two case studies, the Kerguelen Islands and the Cotentin. These show the opposition between two models of toponymy. The Kerguelen Islands have been occupied recently and discontinuously. Our case study of these islands reflects the ability of the state to impose a norm in place-naming through mapping and shows how, in turn, the place-naming strengthens territorial control. This *ex nihilo* toponymic construction is interesting for revealing ideological and geopolitical issues. By contrast, place-naming on the Cotentin results from the long and flexible construction of toponymy by different cultures and societies across history, the space effectively being a palimpsest. In this case, the sense of *presqu'îléité* ('presqu'îleness') combines historical depth and a cultural relation to the landscape (perception of the sea and relative isolation, in the French context). The third example - the riverfronts - shows how the *presqu'île* place name is an artefact for promoting particular identities for areas of cities, built on the appeal of an island and its adjacent waters. In this case, the *presqu'île* is a sort of oxymoron: within the city, accessible, but associated with the sea and with the *rêverie* of being on an island.

The notion of *presqu'île* is thus far more complex than the *péninsule*. The latter term refers primarily to a standard nomenclature, despite the lack of clear definition, and the term does not have the allusive richness of *presqu'île.* The sense of place can be expressed through the notion of *presqu'île* - a smaller space strongly attached to the water - but not through the *péninsule* (the sense of place referring to other categories of spatial perception and culture). This dimension stresses the differences between small and big islands. The smaller the island is the more 'island' it appears (*îleité* in French – 'islandness'). Similarly, the *presqu'île* is more a *presqu'île* when it is smaller (*presqu'îléité*). In any case, both *péninsules* and *presqu'îles* show how place-naming and taxonomy can be a significant dimension of the relation to space; and the issues involved encompass both geopolitical dimensions and more sensitive cultural dimensions.

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