

Reflexive essay

Ill-Fitting Clothes: Names as Gifts and What We Do with Them

Riley Rogerson

Independent researcher, Silver Spring, Maryland

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Ill-Fitting Clothes: Names as Gifts and What We Do with Them

Riley Rogerson

Names are most often bestowed upon us in advance of or shortly after our birth, reflecting familial and cultural legacies and expectation as well as the tastes of those doing the naming. But sometimes the gift of a name is something that feels tight at the seams, restrictive in how it is prescriptive and out of line with one's sense of self and subsequent experiences. What does it mean, then, to reject that gift and choose your own name, your own highly personal identifying marker, while you navigate the expectations of yourself and others? What do people assume about our names because of our perceived positionalities, and likewise, what do people assume about us personally based on our names? I chose my first name at age fifteen and settled on my middle name at twenty-one, casting aside the ill-fitting and restrictive clothes of my birth name to reflect myself as an agender individual navigating a world dominated by binary understandings of sex and gender. In this essay, I take apart the names I chose for myself, and the names others choose to call me, and reflect on the power held in naming and being named.

Keywords: gender, name, non-binary, queer, transgender

I remember agonizing over choosing my name for months. It ate away at my thoughts of Algebra II, swiped my attention away from whatever passages we were reading at school in English. I was so deeply afraid of getting it 'wrong.' 'Alex' and 'Skyler' were strong contenders for a time, popular amongst others who also rejected the gender binary and its gendered names. I consulted friends for help in a Skype group chat full of trans and gender nonconforming teens like me and eventually settled on Riley (not before agonizing over the spelling, too). I did not give much attention to what my name 'meant.' What it meant to me was what I needed a new name to be as gender-free as it could get. I felt a compulsion to escape the gender that had been prescribed to me. To escape assumptions during roll call and before anyone would even meet me. I needed a chance to establish myself ahead of how a name might further define my gender.

While Erving Goffman (1959) does not specifically touch on the sociolinguistic act of changing one's name—with or without consideration of queer culture—he does address identity as performance and other ways in which we tailor ourselves with the intention of performing how we want to be perceived and understood by outside observers. We commonly strive to put forward a persona that we see as representing a deeper self that is often overlooked by strangers in surface-level public interactions. Names

are just one of Goffman's carriers or signs—vehicles that are designed to convey crucial information about ourselves that we wish others to implicitly understand. While the full extent of how we perform ourselves can only be implied, with interpretation ultimately left to the recipient of this information and environmental storytelling, for transgender and gender nonconforming individuals, a personal name is especially critical in the influencing of outsider perceptions.

My friends, who endured months of my contemplations and trying on names like clothes in a dressing room, agreed that Riley fit like a new outfit tailored to my form. I always wonder what it means for a name to 'fit' from the perspective of others. I am still unsure of why 'Riley' worked and 'Alex,' among others, did not. What mattered the most during that tumultuous time was that I finally had a name that felt appropriate for me, and I have been Riley ever since to everyone except my parents. My parents know I am Riley and they even call me by it when my birth name fails to catch my attention, as a last resort. Yet they insist on still referring to me with the rejected gift. I have learned to deal with it; I am used to hearing it exclusively in my parents' voices, whereas I have stopped recognizing it as my own from anyone else's mouth.

Choosing new identity: Gender and creation

I did not do any research into the meaning behind the name Riley. When I was a stressed teenager still unpacking what it meant for myself to be nonbinary, I was focused so much more on outward presentation that internal meaning did not have a place in my headspace. I have since then learned that, originating as a surname, Riley is of English origin and means 'rye clearing.' My first reaction upon learning this was a twinge of disappointment: I had the opportunity to choose my own name with its own meaning—and I went with something about grain? But there is something beautiful about that, too. Rye, one of the earliest grains cultivated by early civilizations in the Levant, used to make flour and, among other things, bread. Bread in all its forms is one of the few universal consistencies of humanity: to break bread is to bond over a shared meal, to put conflicts behind us and choose to come together in mutual understanding instead. It is to partake in the beauty of creation, to take what you are given and turn it into something else for the fulfillment of yourself, others, and the bonds we share. It is turning rye into bread and me into my most authentic self.

Creation and construction have been associated with gender and expression, the mechanics of which have been explored perhaps most notably by Simone de Beauvoir. Of womanhood, for example, Beauvoir (1952 [1949], 267) famously states that 'one is not born a woman, but rather, becomes one.' Under this interpretation of gender, it is not something inherent to an individual, but a choice made. Though, as Judith Butler (1990) suggests, it is not a choice made without cultural compulsion. Gender, according to this

line of thinking, is a personal construction, commonly (but not exclusively) built with tools handed to us by societies that emphasize a prescriptive binary identity and positionality.

Attempting to nail down a universal interpretation of how individuals perceive the gender of others, themselves, and the relationality between them is, ultimately, something so deeply personal, regardless of how an individual may or may not have chosen to use the gender-constructing tools provided by cultural standards. Analyses such as Beauvoir's and Butler's are helpful in providing frameworks for understanding how some may approach and understand their relationship with gender. But existing concurrently are people who knew they were transgender since they were small children and felt it as something innate. Others might have felt a marked internal change one day, and there are also others who made an active choice to live differently. For some, their relationship with gender and how they express it has been turbulent, and with others for whom it was set in stone in one way or another, there is no perfect, ultimate explanation for it all.

But within these myriad experiences with gender and expression, a personal name is something often tied deeply to these expressions of one's internal relationship with gender and how their gender relates to the life they lead with other people, in whatever capacities and scenarios that may be. It is a means of owning the self, another aspect of controlling one's personal identity narrative. A choice of name is, regardless of gender and gender expression, taking part in the act of creating oneself, whether or not the creator feels their work is being done from scratch or as an extension of who they were before.

There is, however, only so much control any individual can have over how others will perceive them, and the conclusions strangers will draw about them on sight. Spelling is a funny thing and reveals the assumptions strangers make when verbally presented with a name like Riley—or Reilly, or Rylie, or Rylee, or Ryley, or Ryleigh, or Raile—all of which are spellings I have seen written on my drink orders and typed up on receipts at cafés. It is those 'Ry' spellings that induce frustrated sighs and a pit in my stomach, as it is evident that, when given a gender-neutral name, the individual chose to assign to me a more feminine spelling because of how they perceive my appearance. No barista would ever default to Rylie for someone presenting as more traditionally masculine. They all sound the same spoken aloud, but even a name as neutral as [r̥āil̥i] becomes gendered in how strangers assign its spellings to me. For all the beauty I can give it, the perceptions and assumptions of others still subvert my intentions.

My middle name given at birth is one that has been casually passed down through my mother's family. It is her name, it is her father's middle name, and it goes back further and further. It used to be a neutral, primarily masculine name but has since changed its gendered connotations. I may very well have kept it, if it kept its gender-neutral standing in common perception. But I did not. Not without a hearty dose of guilt. If changing my first name was like donating a poorly fitted jacket, then changing the middle

name felt more akin to tossing out a generations-old, gilded bracelet, worn with love by those who came before me but painfully pinching my skin. I only started working on changing it several years later. Middle names were not something that came up in conversation much. As a teenager, so long as I could introduce myself comfortably, I was golden. But it was about time to have a middle initial again and partake in the second round of agonizing over what to be called.

I wanted something that felt equally neutral, a name that would 'fit' the same way I am told Riley does. Unsurprisingly, I cycled through many potential names before I was able to settle on Morgan. This cycling was much more personal: writing out my potential full names on paper, whispering them aloud to myself. It did not require the same public trial periods that my first name did, but it did require personal trials nonetheless. Morgan is a traditionally male name in its origin language of Welsh but is considered broadly unisex in the English-speaking world. Its origins contain meaning along the lines of 'sea defender,' 'sea protector,' and sometimes 'sea born.' To carry the meaning of 'sea defender,' however, could be seen as exclusively masculine, while 'sea-born' feminine and loosely associated with magic in Irish and Arthurian mythology. Regardless, my middle name comes from the ocean, and it seems one cannot totally escape the traditional gender binary when it comes to these translations. That said, Morgan did the exact job I needed it to do.

I was extraordinarily lucky to be surrounded by other transgender and gender nonconforming peers while we were figuring things out together. One of my friends, Draven, I have known for roughly a decade now, and, like me, he was assigned a gender at birth that he ultimately did not align with. He first changed his name and pronouns a couple years after we met. He went by Opal for a while, neutral but arguably more feminine, leaning in line with his presentation. The name reflected his passion for crystal and gem collecting, as he wanted his passions reflected in his personal identifier. Opal was a private meaning turned into public, external expression, so it took on a much bigger role in his selection of first name than it did for mine.

As his gender identity and presentation changed over time, he changed his name to Draco, a name born from an appreciation for the constellation as well as the vast and intimidating beauty of the sky above. Modern cultural associations with the name caught him off guard, however, and his choice to change again to Draven originated from his exhaustion with Harry Potter jokes and references. Draven is a reference to the comic book series *The Crow* and the vigilante Eric Draven. The name is audibly similar to Draco but also harkens back to Draven's goth identity and the sense of empowerment derived from sharing a name with a character who takes action to avenge his dignity, the dignity of others, and his community. Draven's many names he chose for himself have reflected so many parts of his identity and how he has shaped himself over time.

While our approaches to our names have been different, I can see the thread that ties them together. The profound power of choice, change, creation, innate understandings of self and how the self evolves. In *Something*

That May Shock and Discredit You, Daniel Mallory Ortberg (2023, 111) stated that, 'as my friend Julian puts it, only half winkingly: "God blessed me by making me transsexual for the same reason God made wheat but not bread and fruit but not wine, so that humanity might share in the act of creation."' This has come to resonate with me: in how I relate myself to others and my positionality via the change of my personal name. People create and recreate themselves in so many ways, over and over again, as they evolve. Grain into bread, fruit into wine—an inchoate me into a more fully realized self.

Most of my friends do not even remember, or have ever encountered, my dead name. If they hear it from my family, they have described it as 'in one ear and out the other.' Most do not pry when I say I do not use my legal name outside of strictly legal purposes and have nothing in particular to say on the matter. The issue arises when some people believe that 'discovering' my 'real name' is some sort of personal achievement they might potentially hold over me and gloat about, as though I attempted to deceive them, but they saw through it—and calling me by my dead name is a power play that attempts to setting the record 'straight.' Why is what I choose to name myself a trick to be seen through by others? Why is this act of creation and transformation perceived as a malicious deception, in which others center themselves over the issue of *my* name? What exactly is this sense of entitlement some have to the name of another?

Would it be easier if gender were removed entirely from names, or would that diminish the power that comes with active personal naming choices? I do not have the answer, as someone who feels as though I experience gender from the outside looking in. I grew up seeming to fail in performing my assigned gender at birth, or at least that was what my peers led me to believe in their demands of me and how I could act and present to be accepted. Whether it was girls insisting that hyper-femininity be effortlessly mastered, to the boys who grew frustrated with me in group play sessions for not knowing how to 'act like a girl' nor quite be 'one of the boys,' I have always felt a profound disconnect between myself and the very concept of gender performance.

I do not think there really is an answer. There are plenty of people who exist outside the gender binary with traditionally gendered names, rejecting the notion that a name's gendered legacy holds meaning for them personally, and for whom it is a non-issue. There are many others who use gendered names as a means of affirmation to themselves and to others. And then there are people like me, sick to death of identity being as gendered as it is and desiring an escape from being gendered. What these different approaches come down to is that names inherently come with power. As they are commonly understood, they are an assignment of identity far beyond the short collection of sounds as personal identifiers. They reflect positionality intended to leave impressions of our deeper selves, of our roots (be they familial, personal, a mix of both, or something else entirely).

When willingly, proudly changed by their original owner, names are undeniably an assertion of the power of controlling one's own identity and

an expression of how a person is navigating their worlds. As Christele Fraïssé (2020) shows in her study of self-naming and hetero-naming strategies, names operate as social representations: they are assigned, reclaimed, or reconfigured in ways that inscribe power relations and collective memory. A gendered name, then, is not simply a personal identifier but a positional marker that places someone within broader cultural logics of gender, belonging, and recognition. To be hetero-named—assigned a gendered name through familial or institutional authority—is to be positioned in relation to existing hierarchies and expectations. To self-name, by contrast, is to reclaim or redirect that positionality, whether through reappropriation, rejection, or the invention of alternatives. This dynamic highlights why names carry more than just sound; they are sites where individual agency and social structures intersect, where choices about gendered or non-gendered naming become negotiations of power, identity, and the terms on which one is seen.

Questioning our legacies from names

I must acknowledge my positionality here as well.

I am white, descended from colonizers dating back to the early beginnings of what would become Virginia. My family on both sides has been in the United States for hundreds of years. The ability previous generations had in recording detailed familial lineages is also a privilege I acknowledge having when learning about those who carried my parents' names before me. We came to what would become the United States and actively contributed to genocide, slavery, and the establishment of structures that seek to maintain white supremacy.

I have no strong desire to feel attached to a familial legacy or to find deeper meaning in my name, be it my dead name or my actual name. The only meaning I sought to reflect in my name was a sense of removal from the gender binary with names common in the dominant culture and understood widely as existing neutrally. I never felt as though my name *needed* to signify something beyond my gender, or that my name represented a distinct marginality of which I could exert my power. I never needed to meaningfully control my nicknames because there is no historical trend of the dominant culture needing to simplify or Anglicize my name to fit into white mouths.

But I have known people who take a different approach to power held within their names. I have had friends refuse nicknames out of honor for the relative they were named after, and I have had friends lament that their names did not feel 'in line' with their cultural heritage, feeling instead Anglicized and specifically Americanized. I have witnessed exasperation from people who refuse nicknames or other simplifications because they feel it diminishes the cultural meaning behind their names, a cultural meaning marginalized in so many ways that refusing a nickname is a way to take some of that power back. I have had the privilege to think of diminutive nicknames

as purely cute expressions of familiarity and affinity. I had never thought about the legacy of my birth name until it was time for a change. The power I intentionally wield with my name is restricted to gender expression and a refusal to label myself with names socially understood to be ascribed to one gender over another in the English-speaking world.

I find myself wishing that names were more commonly viewed as gifts that can be accepted or denied, to be done with as the recipient wishes, than as life-long assignments that often try to lock you into sex and gender categories. The rejection of a gift can sting on the side of the giver, certainly, but no more than it does to try to force yourself into something so poorly fitting in its prescription of self and experience. Some changes and transformations are simply necessary to thrive. I deserve to thrive. Everyone who has undergone a name change for one reason or another deserves to thrive under that new name, to be called how they see fit.

There is therefore a form of multilayered power carried in personal names—both first and last names. Generations of family history can be traced back through a surname. My family have had the privilege of not *having* to change our surname to protect ourselves in a society structured against us and the privilege of knowing the detailed roots of our past that many others have been denied. I chose to change my first and middle names to reflect a part of myself that I felt was buried by the assignment of gender through a name, and I have no intention of discarding my last name and taking another simply because I am expected to by those who project onto me their gendered expectations. Though my experience with the power found in names still manifests distinctly differently from the power that others find in names, it is the different ways names hold power in differing contexts and the different ways in which this power can be wielded by the named that makes the multiplicity of meanings so rich, beautiful, and powerful.

With the power that can be wielded by the named also comes power granted by harmful social structures, power that seeks to strip names deemed 'different.' Power that Anglicizes names born not of English origins and assigns diminutives that white mouths can better parse out with less effort, as though non-English names are not deserving of the extra work to simply get it right. Where I feel comfort in diminutive nicknames, others feel as though the simplification aims to remove the contextual power behind the full name. Neither needs to be more right or wrong than the other. Concentrated effort is needed to centralize the power in names to within the named rather than continuing to use names, naming practices, and expectations thrust upon the named in ways that bring harm to those who choose to fully own their names, be it through embracing familial legacy and origins or through assigning oneself a name which "fits" better and more accurately reflects the many facets of the self.

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Author's bio

Riley Rogerson received their M.A. from George Washington University in museum anthropology with an emphasis on repatriation in 2022 and their B.A. in sociocultural anthropology and French history from the University of North Florida in 2019. Riley has lived in the Washington, D.C., metro area in the United States since 2019 and currently resides in Silver Spring, Maryland, with their husband, two cats, and a dog.

Address: 821 Bonifant St, Silver Spring MD 20910
E-mail: rrogerson1827@outlook.com
ORCID: 0009-0001-1224-151X