

Reflexive essay

On Choosing and Refusing Names: Gender in Transition in America

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On Choosing and Refusing Names: Gender in Transition in America

Celia Emmelhainz & Laura Emmelhainz

In this dialogue, a father and a daughter consider gender and personal names in the United States, including the choices we make when crossing borders—in Laura's case, when changing her name during a gender transition, and in Celia's case, in refusing to change her name during the gender-inflected transition of marriage. The authors situate their memories and interpretations within the literature on personal name changes; the reader will find that their conversations move back and forth in time over a space of fifty years.

Keywords: crossing borders, deadnaming, father and daughter, gender, marital names, personal names, transition

A new name

Celia, 2023, Washington, D.C.

As I walk home after a happy hour in Washington, D.C., I get a call from my father, who tells me she has just bought a new car and is driving it home on the country roads of Ohio. She texts me a photo of her new driver's license, which reads 'Laura Rand'ee Emmelhainz.'

I pause in the middle of a Pennsylvania Avenue crosswalk to look at it.

'Congratulations!'

'It's easy to change your name,' Dad tells me, 'It's \$125 and a set of papers.'

The hard part, she says, is reintroducing yourself to everyone who knew you and changing your name with institutions: driver's license, bank accounts, and car registration.

My father, Laura, tells me she filed for a name change the morning after her mother had died, and she now serves as executor for her mother's estate—under two names. Official documents suggest she is both Laura and Randy, yet not fully either. Each official to whom she brings her new name does not know what to do with it. They call the manager, but the manager does not know how to change a man's—I mean a woman's—name, either.

A few months later, I check in with Dad to see how things are going.

'At the social security office,' she says, 'a woman who was divorced told me she didn't like having her ex-partner's name. I'm like, *change it!* And she's like, *you can do that?* I told her it's easy. But people have this perception that they can't.'

Laura explains that she went to her state's title department to have the owner's name changed on her car. 'They said I have to sell it to myself for \$1 plus a \$30 fee, and it would be registered as a transfer between two different people. So, I asked about a woman who changes her name at marriage and was told that she also has to transfer her own house to herself as a new owner.'

'You'd think a database could hold alternate names,' I say, 'or a stable ID number.'

'We don't use social security numbers for property, we use names,' Dad says.¹

'So, a new name really *is* a new person,' I reflect.

The legal scholar Elizabeth Emens (2007, 765) says that 'desk-clerk law' is what happens when front-line workers have to interpret the rules for us; they both open and foreclose options in sometimes arbitrary and inaccurate ways. These clerks are typically focused on our official names, which, as the anthropologist Jennifer Dickinson (2007, 118) suggests, enable the authority of the government over our lives, while unofficial names connect us to others through 'shared experiences, knowledge and frames of reference.' In the United States of America, name laws are written by each of fifty states, not the federal government (MacClintock, 2010, 291), and each state has an interest in personal names, both for tracking and identifying people and for connecting names to other identifiers (MacClintock, 2010, 295, 298). To track people, we need both 'continuity and fixedness' (Dickinson, 2007, 122); hence, specific rules around formal name changes.

Yet even after a name change, electronic records can take a while to catch up. Laura still gets emails at work saying, 'This email needs to be passed on to Randy and to Laura.'

She smiles: 'They think I'm two different people!'

An ill-fitting name

Randy, 1970s, Ohio

I never liked the name I was assigned at birth: 'Randall Lee Emmelhainz.' 'Randy' and 'Randall' always felt like two different names to me. I was mocked for my name when I was young. It was too unusual or too feminine. And I never really got a good explanation of why my parents chose the name. At times, they mentioned some vague reference to a distant connection.

I did, from a young age, play with the idea of 'Randi' but worried that it would result in a huge rejection from those around me. Next, I tried 'Rand,' but that did not quite fit. And later, I became aware of the unfortunate meaning of the word 'randy' in British culture. My son's ice-skating coach was married to a British woman, and when I introduced myself with 'Hi, I'm Randy,' she made a snappy remark, 'I don't need to know that much about you!'

'So, your birth name wasn't well received in either culture,' Celia comments, 'and it led you to look for a new name.'

My experiences are not unusual. The Portuguese anthropologist João de Pina-Cabral (2010, 301) reflects: 'People may be called by names which they do not agree to, names which they do not recognize, or names which they do not appreciate.' The linguist Emilia Aldrin (2016) similarly notes that name-givers, name-carriers, and name-users may have different experiences of a particular name. Yet most of us keep the legal names we were given, even if they are embarrassing, 'outdated or unwieldy, or fail to reflect who we are' (Emens, 2007, 769).

Changing names is common in many cultures. People may change their names or the names of their children to protect against illness or spirits (Burt, 2009). We change names to assert our power (Alia, 2007, 10), for ethnic revival (Chala and Gutama, 2019), or to make visible a change in our internal identity (Emmelhainz, 2012). We use names to show group affiliation or for professional purposes (MacClintock, 2010, 278). We try on new personas by adopting pen names (Falk, 1975, 649), usernames, trail names in hiking, or nicknames when crossing social groups. And, of course, we may also adopt new names at marriage or divorce, during christening or other religious ceremonies, or when shifting gender identities.

From Randy to Laura

Randy, 2023, Ohio

I first played with 'Laura' as a name over a decade ago but did not use it much at first. At the time, I believed the name had a genealogical memory. I thought it was the first or middle name of my ancestor Charlotta Fischer, who had herself crossed borders when immigrating from Alsace, a contested region on the French-German border, to a new life in the midwestern United States. I am not sure that it was ever formally her name, but when shifting my name away from 'Randy,' I was attracted to 'Laura' as a way to anchor myself in my heritage and to honor my existing relationships while also expressing myself. The name also made me think of Laura Ingalls Wilder, someone I saw as a courageous character.²

After playing with 'Randalee' and other variants, I chose the middle name 'Rand'ee,' as a way to both shorten and take ownership of my birth name, 'Randall Lee.' Perhaps there was rebelliousness in adding the apostrophe. I kept my first and middle name in another form, to make the name mine, to pay homage to my parents, and to make it easier for loved ones that I knew would struggle. When you come to a name change, I believe you have to make choices: the road has a fork in it. You balance what you want to move towards while also expressing commitment to the places and relationships that matter to you.

Although I made these decisions independently, when my daughter and I started looking at the literature, we found that I had followed a decision-making route that others had also taken. The anthropologist Pablo Matoes (2014, 91) explains that someone who gives a new name often bestows

the name in multiple steps, first developing a mental pool of available and appropriate names, then narrowing that pool to a shortlist, and afterwards bestowing one final choice from that list. A name might be desirable for its spelling, sound, pronunciation, aesthetics, commonness, ease of recall, social perception, and 'gender distinctiveness' (Matoes, 2014, 86)—all things I considered without thinking consciously about them.

My daughter points out that many things besides gender went into my choice of a new name. In the United States, we often think of ourselves socially as 'I'm American,' or 'I'm middle-class.' But I have also realized that I am a middle-class American from a family that made sacrifices to be upwardly mobile. My heritage is from a Germanic, agricultural past. I come from a small slice of my country—and I tend to connect to people from that same culture.

As I changed my first name, I also took a new gender, but the other identity markers in my name, like class, ethnicity, or age, stayed the same. In Peru, the queer studies scholar Ernesto Cuba (2024) notes that trans women may shift the gender of an existing name, adopt the names of loved ones or celebrities, or, like me, rename themselves multiple times if the first name does not fit. Those who cross genders may look to heritage and even invite family to participate in their renaming (Obasi et al., 2019; VanderSchans, 2015).

Shifting a birth name but not losing its roots lets people maintain a connection to something that is 'still part of who they are,' and this lets us show respect for loved ones who are attached to the prior name (VanderSchans, 2015, 17). People seeking to shift social perception may choose a clearly gendered name that does not stick out, for both ease of passing and to avoid ambiguity (VanderSchans, 2015).

My own name journey from 'Randy' to 'Laura' was a process. At first, I saw myself as non-binary. My wife encouraged me to pick a gender-neutral name that would leave my options open. I went through long lists, but the gender-neutral name 'Shiloh' was the only one I liked: it means 'peaceful place,' and that is something I wanted. But I was also thinking hard about this ongoing debate on sex and gender, and how we parse the two. I felt that most people are more comfortable with binary dynamics, culturally and biologically. Being non-binary felt confusing to me. I started by insisting that names and pronouns were not a big deal, but then I started to feel good using a female name and pronouns. I still appreciate that 'Shiloh' references the peace I am pursuing, but I passed over it, even as a choice for a middle name.

For me, changing my name legally was a rite of passage that I chose so as not to 'go back.' I learned the term 'gender euphoria' through a book study at my church, and it was like a light flipped on. The author Austin Hartke (2018, 144) defines gender euphoria as 'the contentment, authenticity, and joy that you feel when you get to be yourself.' And that resonated for me.

On name flexibility

Celia, 1990s, Ohio

My religious parents planned to name me for Biblical characters, but when my great-grandmother died, they switched approaches. They named me Celia, for a maternal ancestor, and Marie, for my father's grandmother.

As a child, I borrowed stacks of name books, hoping to understand the 'meanings' of names. But even though meanings are listed in mass-market paperbacks or on baby-name websites, meaning is not typically how Americans choose names. My childhood friends were often named after religious role models ('Rachel,' 'Bethany'), the natural world ('Amber,' 'Autumn'), or names popular at the time ('Jessica,' 'Jennifer'). American culture places a high priority on names with a clear gender identity (VanderSchans, 2015, 2). Our bodies lead us to be given gendered names, which then teach us what is expected of us (Pilcher, 2017, 812). But it is not always this way. In parts of Inuit society, ensouled names are passed down within families, in an inheritance that can easily cross gender lines (Alia, 2017, 24–29).

Unlike my father, I always felt that my name fit. 'Celia' identifies me as female. People complement it, note its rarity, and find it pleasing to the ear. It matches my appearance yet is ethnically ambiguous: an interviewer asks if I am Celia ([ˈsiliə], like 'see') or Celia ([ˈseliə] like 'say'), hoping to hire a fellow Latina. My white manager complains he cannot remember that I am [ˈsiliə] when his hairdresser is [ˈseliə]; after all, the names are spelled the same! And so, I respond with a smile to 'Celia' and 'Cecilia'—and even to mishearings like 'Julia,' 'Amelia,' and 'Delia.'

As we cross borders, our names shift (Isasi et al., 2018). I allow my name to morph when I step across a boundary, as an offering to make life easier for those I live among. Among Russians I am Sveta, and among Kazakhs Saule—both middle-class, if old-fashioned, female names. On fieldwork in Mongolia, I am Sabizgul, a nod to my red hair ('carrot') and my gender ('flower'). That's a 'joke name,' used to make the stranger familiar, and to make people laugh. I am comfortable with this flexibility: I am confident in my identity and my relationships as I slip in and out of social contexts.

On name refusal, or Not crossing over

Celia, 2010s, Maine

And yet it is different with my last name. While first names mark us as individuals, surnames mark social ties, family, and ancestral connections (Finch, 2008; Mateos, 2014). When I returned from Kazakhstan in 2014, I took a faculty job in rural Maine, where I met the man I would later marry. An estimated 90% of American women take their husband's name at marriage, but I was among those most likely to keep my surname: older, educated, and with a professional identity tied to my existing name (Brooks, 2013, 274–275). I also loved that 'Emmelhainz' is unusual, ethnically marked, and connects

me to a small group of living relatives across the United States, Germany, Mexico, and Australia.

Yet I was approaching a moment where people in my culture face a choice. Part of the threshold some women cross at marriage is taking a husband's name, and with that, joining a new family—and it is rare for men to be asked to do the same. As with so many other choices, we make our choices in the context of what others are willing to do: if men would rather not take a wife's names or give her name to their children, a woman who wants to be linguistically connected to her spouse and offspring has few options (Emens, 2007, 764).

Despite this, some women refuse to cross over. Such refusal is also a way of choosing and echoes Xing Xu's (2020) account of pushing back at the 'assimilationist assumption' that she would adopt a name from the local culture when studying abroad. Similarly, women who refuse to change surnames at marriage, and men who do, both 'redo' concepts of gender (Pilcher, 2017, 817). Still, it is rare for American men to modify a name at marriage; those who do often are looking for a more interesting name, are eager to support a wife's career, like being socially provocative, or have reasons to move away from their birth name (Emmelhainz, 2016).

As a woman marrying into a rural, religious family, it was assumed I would change my name. Yet as we talked of marriage, I let Joe know that I planned to keep my surname and invited him to adopt mine. He laughed and declined—a mutual *name refusal*.

When we were married and then introduced by our small-town pastor as 'Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Claudel and Celia Emmelhainz,' both families were surprised. My new sister-in-law still gave me a painting of a pair of Maine loons, which read 'The Claudels.' I was invited to a family photoshoot with a large wooden carving that read 'Claudel'—except I was the lone non-Claudel. While the name was beautiful, and I love the family that gave it to my husband, it was not mine.

'We live between what we choose and what we are given,' Dad comments. 'Most of the time, names are given to you. Celia, you got to be a rebel when you said, "I'm not changing my name to Claudel." You asserted resistance.'

I nod. 'But it was a binary choice: most women change their names, and a few resist by keeping their birth name, but few do anything else, like merging names. And you need your husband to agree. So, we were still following a social script.'

'Usually,' Dad reflects on her own life, 'the person giving the name makes a decision for you. God said to Abram: "You will be Abraham." He didn't hand Abram a book full of names and say, "Pick a new name!" But when you change your name for gender reasons, you choose something that affects your community, and everyone around you is asked to adapt.'

Living between names and roles

Laura, 2024, Ohio

A year into the new name, I find that my sense of self is not fully altered. When I wake up and think about myself, I am not quite Laura, yet no longer Randy. Recently, I stood up in church to lead announcements. And afterwards, I had a moment of panic: I couldn't remember, did I call myself 'Laura' or 'Randy'? I think about the patriarch Abram changing his name to 'Abraham': how did his brain deal with this? How long did he think about himself in two names?

Most people around me are supportive, but some struggle with my new name. For people I have just met, it is easier: only one name and set of pronouns to learn. But for those who have known me a long time, or have strong gender beliefs, it is harder. If your world is compartmentalized, and you only keep deep relationships with people of a similar worldview, perhaps it is easier for you to transition. But if you try to hold relationships with people across boundaries, it can be more challenging. Perhaps names are always a function of one's community. The government wants one name on the record, but your various communities have opinions. And how easy it to change your name depends on how people relate to you.

'It's easy for me to affirm classmates who transitioned,' my daughter nods, 'because nothing had to transition for *me*. But for you as my father, in relationship to my mother, it's harder. It's entangled with the history of gender in our family, and with our evangelical norms, in which you worked while mother stayed home. And I care about a dozen people who all have different feelings about the name change.'

Family ties

Celia, 2024, Washington, D.C.

My father's transition has been challenging for my mother. As a conservative woman in a rural community, she pushes back at the sudden change in her spouse: 'I married *Randy*!' she says. She is attached not only to the person she has known for four decades, but also to a lifetime of memories and experiences tied to his name.

And my Dad's new name creates challenges for my Mom's own gendered identity.

'I'm baffled about how to introduce him,' she tells me. 'If I say 'Laura,' they ask if we're friends. If I say 'Emmelhainz,' they want to know how we're related. If I say, "This is my former husband, Laura," it blows his cover. But if I just go with the new name... I don't want *my* identity to be interpreted the wrong way. I've played with all sorts of things, but nothing feels fully respectful to both him and me,' as a woman who wants her 'straight' identity to be visible in public, alongside her female spouse.

On deadnaming and name flexibility

Laura, 2024, Ohio

When we think about referring to someone by using their prior name, or 'deadname,' I think the question is why? If it is a deliberate ignoring of a new name, that is often an insult. As Robin Kimmerer (2003, 12) notes when she talks about mosses and the natural world, '[I]t is a sign of respect to call a being by its name, and a sign of disrespect to ignore it.' Deliberately distorting names has been called 'onomastic maltreatment' (Morant and Martin, 2013). Humans express ourselves in both speech and silence, so name avoidance and name taboos express power relations (Alia, 2007, 9), and I suspect the social fight in our country over deadnaming and over names on passports is a fight over who has the power to name whom.

In the U.S. state of Ohio, you have the choice of changing your name and gender on your birth record as well as on your identity documents, but I declined to change my name on my birth certificate. That was deliberate. Maybe that is the archivist or genealogist in my mind. I thought: I was named Randall *at that time*. It did not feel right to change it—when the change did not happen back then.

The other place I am still exploring is in the forms of address or kinship terms that my family use for me. Several children refer to me as 'my Dad, Laura'; one daughter has played with the Elvish term 'Adar,' for 'father.' Some nieces and nephews refer to me as *Uncle Laura*, in a play on gender and family relationships. But terms of address are more complicated in my marriage because my wife strongly identifies as straight and does not feel comfortable being misidentified as queer. All terms of address for me have implications for how she is perceived: am I her partner? Her spouse? The person formerly known as husband? We have yet to find a simple term to suggest that I am female, she is female, we are a committed couple, and she is straight.

Our names, ourselves

Laura, 2024, Ohio

In her reflection on mosses, Robin Kimmerer (2012, 3) reflects not just on how we name other beings, but on how 'The names we give ourselves are a powerful form of self-determination, of declaring ourselves sovereign territory.' We use scientific names for mosses, but she also asks: '[W]hat do they call themselves?' (Kimmerer, 2012, 3). The choices we make around names and gender are also acts of self-possession (Emens, 2007, 774), balanced with the needs of those around us for connection, continuity, and predictability.

With my new name 'Laura,' some people ask if I am running away from who I was. But I think that smarter questions would be: are you changing your name as a way of fleeing from something you are trying to leave behind? Or can you make peace with your past and choose a new name in response to who you are becoming?

My faith still strongly shapes how I see the world. I think of how Jesus said he did not come to destroy the rules, but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). I believe that I am not moving into a new name to eliminate who I was, but to complete it. Changing my name feels like a commitment to a new beginning and to exploring a deeper understanding of what it means for me to be a human not just with a gender—but a gender that *fits*. Right now, my new name is more of a statement of hope and promise than something yet accomplished.

1. A social security number, or SSN, is a unique identifier assigned to citizens and residents of the United States to track their retirement benefits. It is also used to track individuals in databases, alongside a name and date of birth, for employment, taxation, education, and other purposes.
2. Laura Ingalls Wilder was a noted American author of autobiographical children's novels set in rural 19th century settler communities, most notably *Little House in the Big Woods* (1932). She was recognized by a broader audience due to a television series called *Little House on the Prairie*, which ran from 1974 to 1983 and was revived in 2026 on American Netflix.

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