

Editorial

Introduction: To Be—Named: Across Borders

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Introduction: To Be—Named: Across Borders

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Names are a key dimension to our identity and a daily marker of how we personify our relationships with the world. They are what we call ourselves; they determine how we live, move through our lives, and navigate the geographical, physical, and ideological borders that shape us. They are also how we are inscribed, documented, classified, and recorded by others. They carry ancestral lineages and traces of a mother tongue or heritage language no longer spoken, a language imposed by institutions, or one being reclaimed, as well as cultural knowledge and traditions. As a result, our names embody how we trace ourselves through our known family lines, how we are traced within our communities, as well as how we are marked, tracked, and followed by the state or government. In this frame, names are also data: they must fit registries, passports, forms, databases, and technical standards that decide what scripts, diacritics, and forms are legible to institutions. Ultimately, they are highly personal, and at the same time, they bridge our intimate social worlds with the highly complex and political ones. How is it, then, that we do not fully contend with what it means *to be named*—as well as *re-named*—as we cross these various borders?

This interdisciplinary special issue is devoted to understanding the cultural politics of personal names via individual narratives. We are especially interested in how names travel across geographical, temporal, cultural, gendered, sexed, and linguistic borders, and how the people with these names understand these changes that take place during travel, transition, or processes of translation. The contributors to this special issue interrogate the origins and trajectories of their personal names, asking how these intersect with their as well as other peoples' languages and cultures. We also consider the (un)translatability and adoption of names across different contexts, and we are also interested in the loss of names and in consequences of the separation between a person and their name. This fragmentation or fissure between meaning and moniker also asks us to speak to where there is violence associated with the forced changing of names. Together as a series of individual narratives, these essays reflect on scalar shifts, from the local to the national to the global.

This special issue also seeks to develop personal narratives as a methodology about phases involved in the externalization, mediation, and remediation processes described by the authors that reveal how each individual navigates these multiple contexts and scales, and how this develops concepts of self within, across, or in resistance to the complex mesh of multiple boundaries and realms of cultural meanings. Building on work done by Carole Hough (2016), the contributors show that focusing on our own names and how we are named opens new personal perspectives on matters such as globalization, minoritization, and unequal relations of power within

and between communities and countries as well as issues around minority empowerment. Specifically, the warping force of borders comes into view as we interrogate the untranslatability of names (Cassin, 2014) as both that which cannot be translated from one language, historical period, or cultural-geographic context into another, particularly in a multicultural/multilingual environment, and that which has to keep being translated. A crucial insight brought to light is the tension between the 'personality' of our names and our own history of living with them on the one hand, and, on the other, the world's treatment of our names, which we cannot fully control.

As such, we approach a personal name not as a single, stable object but as a constellation of forms and practices: what is heard, pronounced, written, transliterated, remembered, chosen, inherited, and officially registered. These forms do not always coincide. Their misalignment reveals how intimate identity is mediated by families, communities, states, and technical infrastructures—and how people resist, negotiate, or reclaim the authority to name themselves. Ultimately, these essays form a combined narrative about the poetics of addressing individuals' navigation of complex compound realms and identities that are created as people cross borders and come to understand the multiplicities their subsequent identities present. The agencies they address here are also about individuals' assertions of the meanings of their names—whether they are chosen by the individuals themselves or by others—and how they must situate and resituate these within an era during which the daily politics they encounter are often about the politics of language—either the formal structures or vernacular systems that reveal forms of resistance and questions about who has control over this. And how individuals choose or reclaim names; communities authorize, contest, and remember them; institutions register, normalize, or refuse them. Naming thus connects everyday practice with corpus, status, and prestige planning.

Lastly, when it comes to personal names, the many borders we cross—geographic, political, linguistic, cultural, temporal, gendered, sexed—are negotiations or confrontations that lay bare what we enter into as well as leave behind—they are the interface between us and the world around us. These crossings also call for dialogue between onomastics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, legal studies, literary studies, and critical autoethnography.

Personal narratives and the cultural politics of names

This special issue, 'To Be—Named: Across Borders,' brings together a diverse series of scholars, offering cross-disciplinary ways to comprehend names and naming as well as to *hear* the world anew through narratives from people speaking about their own cultural naming practices. The subject of names and naming has until now been fragmented among separate disciplines, yet in this special issue, we provide an exploration of names and naming from scholars around the world in anthropology, linguistics, cultural studies, history, world and comparative literature, and poetry.

From this cultural and disciplinary breadth, we build upon prior work such as Gabriele vom Bruck and Barbara Bodenhorn (2006), studies about names written by anthropologists working in cultures other than their own, as well as *The Oxford Handbook on Names and Naming* (Hough, 2016), which, while global, is focused on methodologies specific to onomastics. While anthropologists have had a long standing interest in naming practices and place names (Basso, 1996; Cogos, Roué & Roturier 2017; Cruikshank, 1990; Eades, 2016; Goodenough, 1965; Hercus, Kostanski & Clark, n.d.; Koch and Hercus, 2009; Morphy et al., 2020; Thornton 1997; Waterman, 1922), these have largely been studies conducted by outside experts, with a few exceptions, such as *Critical Toponymies: The Contested Politics of Place Naming* (Berg, Lawrence & Vuolteenaho, 2009), which focuses on place names.

To address the growing discussions about the politics of language regarding identity, we explore the relationships between cultural identity politics, knowledge systems, and power, attempting to start new conversations by exploring naming practices via the method of personal narratives (Collins, 2019). We also examine this by considering intersectional dynamics between different knowledge systems—including disciplinary boundaries. The combination of these critical concepts and methods enable us to look at both experiential aspects that contribute to developing the foundation for the next level of theories for understanding cultural politics and the social justice concepts that are the most visible identity-structuring devices of our time.

Language policies also increasingly concern and reflect power relations between minorities and dominant polities, a phenomenon particularly evident in the language policies of nation-states (Alia, 2009; Walkowiak, 2011). More broadly, the right to use, retain, change, or reclaim a personal name is addressed across overlapping human-rights regimes (May, 2015; Skutnabb-Kangas, Philipson & Rannut, 1995). Article 11(1) of the Council of Europe's Framework Convention protects the use and official recognition of surnames and first names in a minority language. Article 11 of the Central European Initiative 1994 Instrument for the Protection of Minority Rights states:

"Any person belonging to a national minority shall have the right to use his or her surname and first names in his or her language and the right to official acceptance and registration of such surname and names" (cit. in: Predan, 2004, 23–28).

Articles 7 and 8 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child protect the right to a name and the preservation of identity. Yet formal recognition does not guarantee practical access: implementation depends on domestic law, administrative practice, technical systems, and the awareness of both officials and rights-holders.

The larger *To Be—Named* interdisciplinary project on the cultural politics of identity, of which this issue's editors are a part, is made up of an edited volume *Naming and Being: Knowledges, Identities and Cultural Politics* (Isaac et al., 2026), this special issue, a website, and an international travelling exhibition.¹ Where possible, *To Be—Named* includes contributions

in a variety of languages, in the hope of establishing an international research nexus that connects scholars beyond the Anglophone-dominated world and provides a multilingual and culturally diverse platform through which a wide range of scholarship and perspectives on the politics of language and identity can be convened, exchanged, and transformed. This approach is also based on how our origins lie in a partnership between the EU-funded CoLing project—a multinational multi-institutional program focused on endangered language revitalization²; ‘Recovering Voices’—a similar program at the National Museum for Natural History at the Smithsonian Institution³; and a partnership with the Experimental Humanities Collaborative Network centered at Bard College, which links university hubs around the world.⁴

We use the narration of personal narratives to enable scholars to speak in the first person as knowledgeable experts highlighting the issues that are seen to matter most and be most impactful on the ground (cf. Eichsteller and Davis, 2022). Personal narratives not only directly address and consider issues of power, but ‘speak’ to them. They show how the power and effect of names unfold at multiple intersecting scales. Exploring how language politics order this wider world through naming enables this issue’s contributors to speak to how they build relationships with the(ir) world(s), their communities, as well as wider intersecting worlds/languages. By placing an emphasis on creative approaches, we were also able to develop a vibrant new window on the possibilities of interdisciplinary work at an international scale. This collection of essays shows how thinking about identity/language/being is dramatically enriched through the usage of personal narratives.

We also see these personal narratives as providing perspectives that can trouble and develop meaningful insights into how language, identity politics, and decolonizing methodologies have played out in different contexts: not just as theoretical concepts but as lived experiences. Colonializing and decolonizing are not viewed here as monolithic concepts that emerge only from Western positionalities. One concern of academic scholarship today is reaching a broad and diverse audience and bringing different disciplines into conversation with each other. Accordingly, academic research must grapple with how to be relevant to this wider audience. Part of this task is confronting the colonial and racist histories that underpin disciplinary foundations and that continue to influence how scholarship is produced. Emerging from this is the need to include different voices and, even more importantly, to consider how to listen and take seriously different backgrounds and experiences. In this context, we use decolonization as a situated and contested term. The histories gathered here also require us to distinguish colonial rule from minoritization, assimilation, nationalization, and other regimes of linguistic hierarchy, while remaining alert to the academic appropriation of decolonial vocabulary.

This special issue aims to use stories as studies of the politics of names and naming and as a method for listening via inviting and engaging different forms of expertise. These narratives are powerful not only because they are critically engaging but also because they are affectively compelling. This diversity of experiences enables us to explore the power of *our own*

voice to contribute to the necessary growing scholarship of minority voices speaking issues important to their own communities and working towards research and representational sovereignty.

Personal names crossing borders

Taking personal names as their catalyst, these essays are all rooted in the immediacy and efficacy of personal narratives. These narratives prompt us to ask: what are the stories, histories, structures, and expectations that we can orate and analyze through our own names? Potent as they are as storytelling devices, these essays also reveal how the cultural politics of names are *experienced* by individuals, and how people navigate social, governmental, national, and international contexts as well as the crossing of borders between these. We consider how the everyday cultural politics of belonging are enacted through the (mis)pronunciation of names: in other words, the everyday violence of constantly having one's name stumbled over, distorted, or casually dismissed as too difficult to pronounce speaks to intersections of culture and practice that are often overlooked, but which shape the politics of identity and being in the world. The dynamics of whose name is widely known, and whose is not, are not matters of chance, but structurally produced (in)visibilities.

The first essay in this issue, by **Riley Rogerson**, speaks to the processes and boundaries crossed or navigated as they go through the process of selecting their own names based on their conceptualization of their identities and genders. Rogerson's essay, 'Ill-fitting clothes: Names as gifts and what we do with them,' uses their personal experiences to talk about their perspectives as an agender individual navigating a world dominated by a binary understanding of sex and gender. They discuss how names bestowed at birth reflect familial and cultural legacies and expectation, asking what it means, 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. They also consider the consequences of when people assume things about others because of their names and their perceived positionalities. Rogerson also considers individual and national legacies such as colonialism by grappling with the difference between, on the one hand, their family name and their first and middle names and, on the other hand, the socially created spaces and privileges that the author has today that allows them to define their names.

Similarly, in their essay 'On choosing and refusing names: Gender in transition in America,' **Celia Emmelhainz and Laura Emmelhainz** directly place the reader into an ongoing dialogue between two narrators: a father, who is transitioning to a female identity, and her daughter, who is navigating this process with her parent, as well her own decision to keep her family name and not to take on her husband's. Their dialogue unfolds via a series of personal narratives taking place over multiple years and places, revealing

both an overlapping and a multiplicity of different scales encountered by the individual through familial and community relationships formed and transformed while people traverse social norms and boundaries that define or redefine gender norms in their society(ies). Significant to their co-created narrative is the insight given into how agents of the state, such as government officers responsible for official name changes, find ways to translate or apply legal protocols for personal identity transformations that are often not fully supported by the law.

Seeking both a sense of belonging and acceptance while traversing familial, gendered, cultural, and geographic boundaries is at the heart of **Joey Chin's** essay 'A situational timeline of the names I go by.' In this, Chin navigates the complexity of the multicultural societies of Singapore and Hong Kong as she crosses back and forth between 'traditional,' cosmopolitan, and globalized Chinese cultures. Through a timeline based on the Chinese calendar, she documents how the changes in the names she is given or chooses for herself reveal details of her coming of age, of her learning about gender norms in Chinese families, of globalization introducing new cultural values and possible identities to youth in Singapore, and, lastly, of her accepting her cosmopolitan identity in Greece. Here, the translation of her Chinese name into Greek reveals how, on seeing her name transcending these borders through shared common values, she finds meaningful relationships about shared understandings within this complex global landscape and, therefore, a means for self-acceptance.

Maria Bucur, in her essay 'What's in a name? Maşa—Maşi—Maşenca—Maşencuţa—Doina—Doiniţa—Bucur—Deckard—Maria—Măriuca,' writes about how she has answered to ten different names over her lifetime, with each iteration linked to the transnational nature of her family, who moved from Russia to Bucharest, and later on to the United States. Bucur's narrative discusses her understanding of the Cold War as a migrant from a communist country and her journey to establish what she wanted to be called. Her personal narrative also speaks to the transformation of gender norms and agency since the 1970s, with a focus on the politics of ethno-nationalism, migration, and Cold War polarization. Maria's case may serve as paradigmatic examples of the fundamental role that minority language rights play—or rather, should play—in the holistic cultural development of both individuals and entire minority communities, encompassing awareness, access to, and progress in the recognition of these rights. The minority language policy in communist Romania, particularly concerning Hungarian in Transylvania, was widely recognized as one of the most salient instances of disregarding and/or violating these rights. After all, it was precisely the deprivation of language rights of minorities in Romania that constituted the nucleus of one of the bloodiest episodes during the transition of former Soviet bloc states towards democratic state structures based on respect for human rights.

Tomasz Wicherkiewicz's essay, 'Adopted by a nickname,' is an autoethnographic account of a sociolinguistics researcher advocating for

endangered languages. It delves into individual and social naming practices, focusing on a Central-European male's life story within the context of language policy, linguistic rights of minorities, and ethnopolitical shifts in Poland and Europe. It intertwines the Wymysorys microlanguage's nickname tradition with the author's adoption into its community after decades of research and advocacy. Additionally, it explores Polish naming traditions, highlighting epistemic violence against minorities and the symbolic dominance of Polish in linguistic landscapes.

In his essay 'Naming errors: Globalization and its mispronunciations,' **Jesse van Amelsvoort** also reflects on the origins of his 'Dutch' name(s): his parents' decision to give him a first name that could travel and be comprehensible abroad. In their efforts to find a name that is both Biblical, non-Biblical, and internationally passable, van Amelsvoort's parents turned to a man who sought the Democratic nomination for the position of President of the United States in the year van Amelsvoort was born: Jesse Jackson. His name, therefore, intersects with the Netherlands' obsession with and close observation of the United States and the globalization that brings distant and culturally distinct spaces closer together. Van Amelsvoort's essay navigates this intersection of intercultural phonology and orthography, illustrating the semantic pitfalls occasionally concealed behind the diverse pronunciations of names spelled with identical or similar orthographies across different languages.

Katherine Whatley's essay 'Naming music: Music and sound across cultures' considers what happens when musical traditions collide. 'What do you lose,' Whatley asks, 'when you name something in a way that is legible across borders, and what do you gain?' In a follow-up to an earlier exploration of her own name across traditions and cultures (Whatley, 2025), in this essay she looks at *koto*, a horizontal Japanese harp, and its spectrality between Japan and the West. Considering musical notation as naming and a cultural praxis, Whatley ultimately considers composition as a question and a form of codeswitching.

This special issue ends with two shorter pieces. In their review of the French novelist Constance Debré's novel *Nom* (translated into English as *Name*), **Jesse van Amelsvoort and Joja Bos** reflect on the weight of families and names, and to what extent it is possible to escape the pull of the familial past. Lastly, *The February Journal's* co-founding editors **Katerina Suverina and Andrei Zavadski** conclude with a brief afterword, in which they tell the story of the journal's name and their considerations in choosing it.

Reflections on the em dash in 'To Be—Named'

The *To Be—Named* project chose its title as a means to fully contend and grapple with the relationship between existence both *prior to* and *after* the act of naming. We share here our thoughts behind the title, and that the em dash (—) between 'To Be' and 'Named' emphasizes two contradictory

concepts: firstly, the concept of being in the world, and secondly, our perception of the relationships between 'being' and 'language.' One's being exists prior to the act of naming, and the em dash is used to highlight that these two concepts of 'being' and 'naming' should not be viewed as co-determinants. At the same time, we also understand and communicate about our world *through* language and naming. This relationship is also expressed in 'To Be—Named' with the em dash—in this instance, representing both the structural and conceptual link and, in the case of this series of essays, not only the interval between being and language, but the borders between different realms of meaning.

1. See the project's website: <https://to-be-named.org/> and the related international travelling exhibition: <https://to-be-named.org/exhibition/> (accessed on 31 August 2026).
2. See the project's website: <https://coling.al.uw.edu.pl/about-us/> (accessed on 31 August 2026).
3. The 'Recovering Voices' program: <https://naturalhistory.si.edu/research/anthropology/programs/recovering-voices> (accessed on 31 August 2026).
4. Experimental Humanities Collaborative Network: <https://eh.bard.edu/ehcn/> (accessed on 31 August 2026).

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