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To Be—Named: Across Borders

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Editorial

Introduction: To Be—Named: Across Borders

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Introduction: To Be—Named: Across Borders

Jesse van Amelsvoort, Gwyneira Isaac & Tomasz Wicherkiewicz

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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Reflexive essay

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

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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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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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Reflexive essay

A Situational Timeline of the Names I Go By

Joey Chin

Artist and writer, Birmingham

This item has been published in Issue 07 'To Be—Named: Across Borders,' edited by Jesse van Amelsvoort, Gwyneira Isaac, and Tomasz Wicherkiewicz.

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A Situational Timeline of the Names I Go By

Joey Chin

This reflexive essay traces the changing meanings attached to names across childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Through a personal and chronological account, it examines how names can carry assumptions about gender, family, culture, identity, and belonging. Moving across different linguistic and cultural contexts, the essay reflects on experiences of being named, renamed, misnamed, and addressed through different versions of the self.

Keywords: Hong Kong, names, personal names, childhood, adolescence, identity, adulthood, autofiction

Before birth | Year of the Tiger

My parents had a variety of considerations for an English name for me:

- *Priscilla* seems difficult to learn and to spell
- The front desk receptionist has an interesting name, Joey, and it seems pretty enough
- It begins with J, is four letters long, just like my sister's

I often wondered what qualifying factors mattered more. Trends? The ease of spelling, for them and me? Or was the lack of creativity due to convenience and sheer laziness?

Birth | Year of the Tiger

I am given the name 'Chén Língmín' | 'Chin Ling Min,' 'Joey'

Chinese lessons | 1993–1998

I have lost count of how many Lings I know. Ling, Lingling, somethingLing (Peiling) or Lingsomething (me)—it is the same with Chinese female personalities on TV.

As soon as I learned to read, I noticed the difference in how the characters in my name, 'Chen' and 'Ling,' were written. With such common characters, it was not hard to find another person's name to match against these. Surely it was not a cause for alarm and only as grave as the difference between 'Jo' and 'Joe.'

Early into the school year when I was 8, my Chinese teacher took a look at my workbook and said: 'Why is your name in traditional Chinese?' It might have been asked with curiosity, even tenderness, because that was the sort of teacher he was: a portly middle-aged man with delicate penmanship and an almost girlish laughter.

I was shy and embarrassed without even understanding his question. He had used the word 'traditional.' That must mean old-fashioned. On top of that, what did 'traditional Chinese' even mean? I remembered the countless times my father had told us with an overbearing air of superiority, often much to my mother's annoyance, 'Your grandfather was born in China.' That seemed like a possible answer. I could have said it—but it would have been without my father's conviction.

Later, to be safe, I would change how my name was written. With these updated characters, I would surely be cool and hip, at least like everyone else.

I was so used to the simplified characters of my name that before examinations, I needed to remind myself to pen my name in the same script I was registered with.

Birth | Year of the Goat

Example of a binary opposition I: I had not known what being a girl or what being another daughter for my parents meant until the day my brother was born. Then I understood that my being in the family was not defined by whoever I had become in the eight long years of my life, but by existing in relation to my brother—more specifically, my parents' son.

Example of binary opposition II: Who both my brother and I could become after his birth would be continuously negotiated, shaped, and changed by his arrival.

Hong Kong | 1997

Hong Kong is an aggressive and dizzying chaos of frenetic lights, sound, traffic, and people who walk and speak, and then disappear into the next scene of another cinematic alley all too quickly.

I decide Hong Kong is not a fun destination for a family holiday, but it is evidently different for adults—my parents, who are happy to drag us from one market of wares in shouting colors to another market of shouting vendors.

To withdraw from this spinning city, I wanted to return into myself with a storybook, but I don't have one. Instead, the only book in the hotel room is what my father has bought for my mother at the airport. It has a red cover with Chinese icons and a distinctive wawa in the middle, and, of course, he has bought it so my mother will gain more knowledge about China. And, of course, she is not interested.

The book, *China Wakes*, is thick, the words are small, but they are not complex. I can read them, know what they mean, but, even when I piece them together, I barely understand what the book is about.

The is now missing, but I found out later that it was *China Wakes: The Struggle for the Soul of a Rising Power* written in 1994 by husband-wife authors, Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn.

I was unaware of its sociopolitical commentary, naturally, and it mattered little because, as a first interesting thing for me, there is an image of a happy young boy with a plastic bag. The caption says he is Tibetan and is seeing a plastic bag for the first time. There are pages after pages on Tiananmen, Taiwan, Japan, Nanjing, the Beijing Olympics. I skip all that, including paragraphs with words like 'vagina,' 'breasts,' and 'gouged eyes,' looking for a section I can understand.

When I finally do—because it is so hard to find—it is a paragraph on how girls born to families without sons are given variations of names to mean 'bring a brother'—like *laidi* or *zhaodi*.

I am aghast at how direct these names are. A boy word in a girl's name? They are so literal that they sound ugly, like names out of a Saturday morning cartoon, and cannot be real.

Tigress | 2002–2007

I don't know what my mother can't stand more: my teenage hell-raising behavior, my hell-raising behavior that she suspects stems from a lousy Chinese name, or maybe just me.

Sometimes, she suggests it could well be my father's fault. My name was likely agreed upon after a suggestion by some half-baked literomancer or a subpar professional he had consulted at my birth.

Cosmology plays a significant role in Chinese naming practices. The tiger symbolizes strength, bravery, independence, and pride—all desirable for a boy, but parents with a daughter under the same Chinese zodiac had to be careful.

My mother is worried about me being wild, headstrong, cunning: the worst traits in a tiger extrapolated onto a woman. She would cite it as a reason for my undesirable behavior: body piercings, smoking, dalliances with the opposite sex, quick retorts, and a short temper. In that case, surely half the population of teenage girls would be a tiger. She would say of my darling, 'Because you are a tigress,' as if my zodiac sign explained everything, 'you don't know death.' (In Hokkien, 'tigress' also means 'bold' or 'audacious.') The 'Ling' in my name comprises the character for 'mountain.' It even looks like one, a mountain range with the peak in the middle and a base at the bottom. That is the cause of our difficult relationship and all the problems with me. It was unfathomable that a tiger, clearly wild and on the loose, should have a mountain to escape to, to roam free.

Like explorers who view nature as something to be conquered, my mother saw that a tiger should be tamed.

In a typical school year, my performance in the Chinese language would start off as passable, even above average, with the energy and promise of a new beginning. Soon, the fervor would lose its shine and wear off with lethargy, returning to its actual standards: poor. By midyear, I would have barely scraped through.

Descending from mediocrity to failure, the name 'Lingmin' was tagged to lack of hard work, laziness, and an inability to apply myself.

Even with more time labored into writing, memorizing, and summoning the characters from books and newspapers to identify themselves to me, the feedback more or less was the same: urgent attention needed, room for improvement, potential to do better.

My name 'Lingming' in this context felt threatening because it was sometimes followed by a call to my parents: my mother's Chinese was hopeless, but the severity and shame in a teacher's complaint she felt and understood perfectly. And that embarrassment, she was able to report to my father and, to put it mildly, nothing pleasant came out of that.

'Lingmin, Lingmin, Lingmin!'

A name that started in the registrar, lived and ended in the years of Chinese lessons.

Chinese lessons II | n.d.

A classmate decided to give me another Chinese name. For the rest of the year, I was *Zu'er Chen Lingmin* to her because she thought it would funny or to translate Joey into Chinese.

Party I | n.d.

A guy jested once: 'Is your surname Tribbiani?' I had never watched F.R.I.E.N.D.S, and, naturally, the pop culture reference was lost on me. Although after that, I wondered about the famous sitcom's impact on the name Joey, and if it was considered a male moniker.

GAP Girl | 2006/2007

I was looking for a part-time job during my school holidays when a GAP opened nearby. I applied as a retail assistant and quickly got it.

My friends were already working after school in clothing stores like Topshop and Giordano. It was a popular causal job for teenagers, with easy tasks, decent hourly rates, flexible hours, and convenient locations around town. After school, one could start the shift on Friday afternoon, finish by 10 pm, grab something to eat, and head off to a club or a bar. Wake up at midday on Saturday, stumble to work at 4 pm, and repeat.

My new workplace had a specific image to uphold, which we adhered to in accordance with the guidelines set by a fashionable and intimidating visual merchandiser.

'Branding,' she called it.

Only popular wholesome American music played over the store's speakers, so the Placebo and Muse CDs that I and another Brit-rock fan brought to the store were in vain. Most people who worked there were young. Such as students like me, guys waiting to enlist into the army, and fresh graduates still looking for something more permanent.

We all wore slouchy cotton T-shirts that said 'GAP SINGAPORE.' A heavy magnetic nametag was attached to the left side of our uniform—the sort that came with a pacemaker warning—which caused the thin shirt to sag with weight.

Expectedly, mine read 'Joey.'

Unexpectedly, so did the nametags of three others.

All guys in fact: spunky, goofy, good looking. Maybe it had to do with the namesake. They weren't friends before but bonded like they were part of a fraternity called Joey. They tried to pick the same shifts, headed out together for their breaks with one another whenever possible, as they 'went up for air,' which is what they called smoking.

There was never any confusion between me and the others. I was Girl Joey, and the rest—they were left to sort it out amongst themselves. Over the announcement system, they would be identified with the initial of their surname. 'Will Joey L. come to the counter, please.'

The workforce | 2007

Referred to as:

- Zoe (!)
- *Miss Joey*—as a surname pronounced *Jwuy*
- *Mr Joey*—as a given name
- *Joye*
- *Joe/Jo*
- *Joyce/Joys*
- *Joy*

Oh, joy!

Party II | 2008

'Surely Joey can't be your real name. We call my brother Joey but it's actually Joseph,' someone remarked skeptically. Not the politest thing to say upon meeting a person for the first time, even if it was just at a party.

His lack of social graces I cast aside very quickly because, for the first time, I worried about the abbreviation, the truncation of my name, its veracity. And in turn, *me*.

Reading Perimmons (1986) | 2011

Before taking serious notice of the hyphen in the Chinese-American poet Li-Young Lee's name, I was confused about which was his surname and which was his given name, its order held both oral and aural possibilities for me (like Ang Lee and Lee Ang).

In *Persimmons*, collected in *Rose* (Lee, 1986, p17), he writes:

'In sixth grade Mrs. Walker
slapped the back of my head
and made me stand in the corner
for not knowing the difference between *persimmon* and *precision*.
How to choose

persimmons. This is precision.'

To be sure, I looked for his Chinese name, 'Li Liyang,' and found the alliteration so mellifluous that I could never forget it again. In that order, now, this is precision.

Singapore/Hong Kong | Year of the Snake

My boyfriend is bringing me for the first time to meet his parents. We have just ushered in the Year of the Snake. Chinese New Year is over, so this visit isn't that serious, but *serious enough*.

They are from Malaysia but moved to Singapore when the postcolonial difference did not matter. They speak Mandarin, some Malay, and understand English, although this is not what they converse in.

'This is Lingmin,' is how he introduces me in Mandarin.

My surprise surpasses nervousness. He had never referred to me as Lingmin before, and no one had used that name outside of Chinese class.

There is a sense of dissociation: it is erotic and exotic coming out of his lips, but at the same time far removed. It is like listening to a public announcement calling out for a lost child that is not yours.

I watch his mother look at me from head to toe. Her expression does not say anything. She could be surprised, even pleased, or already critical. I could not tell.

Later, I will find out what it means, but for now, it is this: her firstborn, her only son standing with me at the border of her living room before the kitchen where she is, repeating, 'Lingmin.'

The sopping humidity in Hong Kong, where I am, working towards an MFA in poetry, has an unkind way of withering anything in its path.

It softens crisps, punctures gassy drinks, clings to cigarettes, sags the hair, and saps one's energy. Even more unbearable are post-lunch lectures or writing workshops: it can be soggy from a heavy meal and the weather. Sometimes, people leave the class in tears. A classmate once cried, 'If there is no value in the work, let's not pretend there is any.'

But there are worse things than tears: it turns out that my boyfriend has been cheating on me in my absence.

Shaming needs no privacy, so when I confront him in front of his family, his mother tells me informatively, 'Oh, *her*. But Lingmin, they're just friends. She came over for dinner and that's it.' He had brought her home and introduced her, too, by her Chinese name. I am awestruck at this orchestra of collusion. So amazed am I that I want to give a rousing applause.

The creative writing I am working on has nothing on my rage or the absurdity of the situation. There are no words that can ameliorate or describe how thick I am with viciousness. My own violence scares me.

At that point, I have little consideration of karmic consequences. I only know how deeply interested I am in hurting him or causing irrevocable havoc in his life.

But I don't know how.

Instead, I gather all the breath in my lungs, whatever that is left in my mouth sour and dry with anger, and spit at him.

Of course I don't know how.

The tigress in me is as real as a metaphor.

I truly think the worst of him, of his mother, who thinks the world of him, so to hell with them and to hell with his simpering *Lingmin! Lingmin! Lingmin*-calling family.

It is the first time I have ever thought of my own name as being sullied. Did I give rise to that? It is a word I need to reclaim, to remove from his house, outside of the situation of Chinese lessons, and to make it my own, even if it is only in words.

Year of the Tiger (2019) | 2015

‘齡’: *evasive like the note of a wind-chime,
sky-hearted tigress eloping to the mountain
in your name, you come and go as you wish.*

She watched me evolve into the birth of name
and zodiac spirit, scaling the luring sierra,
lost me mid-circuit in wildlife,
then saw me reach the summit where among the welcome
of *lings* in mountain chimes, I roared to reply.¹

Watching *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World 2* (1989) | 2021

The three installments of the Hong Kong comedy, *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World*, were released between 1987 and 1992 on cable television, but now they have made their way to Netflix. It stars the late comedian Feifei. She plays the role of a housewife and a mother to three daughters of various ages: a young working adult, a teenager, and a primary school-going girl.

Old films on Netflix always seem *more*—like themselves but better: the colors look like they have been dressed through an Instagram filter, the audio is sharper, and the subtitles, be it in English or Chinese, more grammatically accurate. Watching it again, I noticed what I hadn't before, and that was how the daughters were addressed by family, neighbors, and—amongst themselves—as sisters.

The moving images of these episodes reify what I only read about in *China Wakes* as a child: girls whose names, formal or informal, mean 'bring a brother.' Watching these sassy, clever, and witty female characters referred to by their parents' aspirations for a son, I remember what I thought as a 12-year-old (now 34-year-old).

It is the peculiar cruelty of names, and the quiet insistence of cultural expectations that follows them.



Figure 1. A still from the movie 富貴逼人 (It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World, 1989), showing a subtitle that says 'Daidi is playing cool.' © All rights reserved.



Figure 2. A still from the movie 富貴逼人 (It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World, 1989), showing a subtitle that says 'Laidi is looking more and more pretty.' © All rights reserved.



Figure 1. A still from the movie 富貴逼人 (It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World, 1989), showing a subtitle that says 'Zhaodi, where's the iron?' © All rights reserved.

Tinos, Greece | 2021

The message from my partner's mother came a few minutes after I woke up and was still in bed with the fog of sleep in my eyes. It is a short one and in Greek—nothing surprising, as that is what she texts me in occasionally.

The exact message went like this: 'Καλημέρα! Στην εκκλησια μη πάτε με σορτς, ειδικα η Χ.'

My understanding went as far as 'Good morning! In church do not wear _____, _____.'

Still sluggish from another late night of Greek summer dinners, coupled with plenty of room for improvement of the language, I did not get the last four words, including 'X.'

Maybe it was X, short for 'kiss,' the way my friends sign off in an email or text, although I know that the Greek 'X' is not same as the English 'X'. I was doubtful of the indexical kiss, judging by how this particular 'X' had a feminine article tagged to it.

I rubbed my eyes before copying the text into Google Translate. The results were: 'Good morning! In church do not wear shorts, especially X.'

Of course, 'σορτς' is simply 'shorts,' similar to how it is pronounced in English. How could I not have known? And 'ειδικα' means 'especially.' Good. A new word with practical purposes. The mystery almost solved.

But 'X'?

Ah. Of course.

'X' was me.

Have you ever picked up a call and, not expecting that person to call (or before the years of Caller ID), not been able to make out the voice that in reality belonged to someone you know?

Or perhaps you did not recognize the familiar face of a friend who coincidentally lived on the same street as you—simply because you weren't looking for her.

That is the closest analogy I can find for the strange familiarity I felt when reading my partner's mother's text. That surprise which comes after detachment in a scenario of familiarity.

A few things all at once.

Firstly, the intended recipient of the message was likely to be my partner. A gentle reminder for us to dress respectfully for church, perhaps even more so for me, a foreign woman whose backpack staples in the summer were mostly shorts and tank tops.

Secondly, I had forgotten about how his mother uses initials in text messages. 'R' (P) for him, 'Y' (Γ) for his dad, and so on. And 'X' for 'Xapá,' me.

My partner's parents speak perfect English, having completed their PhDs and lived in the United Kingdom for almost two decades. They have no problem pronouncing my name, but even in Greek, they chose to use not 'Joey' but 'Xapá' (pronounced 'Hara'), which means 'Joy.'

At the end of the day, perhaps it is Joy that prevails.

Something in which I have started to believe since I became Xapá.

1. This is an excerpt from a poem previously published in *New Landscapes Anthology* (Burdon and Khaymaz, 2019). The *Ling* character used in the original poem is not supported by standard computer fonts, so the version displayed here is technically inaccurate.

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Author's bio

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Reflexive essay

**What's in a Name? Maşa—Maşi—Maşenca—
Maşencuţa—Doina—Doiniţa—Bucur—
Deckard—Maria—Măriuca**

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What's in a Name? Maşa—Maşi—Maşenca— Maşencuţa—Doina—Doiniţa—Bucur— Deckard—Maria—Măriuca

Maria Bucur

In this essay, I reflect on how the names by which I have been called have been shaped by, and in turn have shaped, my life. As a child of a Russian mother and a Romanian father, and later a migrant to the United States, the names I have been called and used to identify myself have placed me both inside and outside the cultural norms around me. My reflections focus on both the accommodation of and resistance to such norms.

Keywords: migration, nationalism, Romania, Russia, United States

I have changed names during my life more often than most people. My birth certificate identifies me as Maria Bucur. I was given my first name in memory of my maternal grandmother from Russia, who passed away when my mother was 15. I never met her and never felt close to that legacy, for there were not any images or stories about her at home. She was a void I was filling, without knowing exactly what that meant. Later in life, I also learned that I was supposed to be a boy (somehow, my parents were sure I would come out that way), and I know my name was supposed to be Serghei (or Serioja in the diminutive).¹ I never heard reference to Sergiu, the Romanian version of Serghei, as an option for that male version of me. One way or another, I was going to be born with a name that might make sense in my native Romanian but was imagined in its Russian format. It is possible that Maria was an afterthought: when I came out with female parts, rather than as my parents' first preference.

My parents have never used my first name to call me or to talk about me with anyone. From the beginning, I was simply Maşa. Or Maşi. Or Maşenca. Or Maşencuţa, Romanianized versions of the Russian diminutive. With a Russian mom and a Romanian dad, who chose to speak to each other mostly in Russian while living in Romania, this was probably a pragmatic choice: taking an adult name and turning it into a cute diminutive, as Maşa is a term of endearment in Russian, used with most girls named Maria. In Romania, as well as Russia, kids are generally not called by their full birth name, but some diminutive version of it. My brother, Alexandru in his birth certificate, has always been Saşa, though he at least was born in Russia and lived there the first three years of his life. But I was born in Bucharest/Bucureşti I and grew up among all Romanian speakers, save for my parents, both of whom worked full time while I was an infant, so they were not around most of my waking hours.

My paternal grandmother and my aunt Florica, who had largely raised me until I started school, called me Mași as well; after all, that is the name to which I answered. I am not sure why they never took to the Romanian diminutive: Măriuca. But they also made sure I was baptized with an unmistakably untranslatable Romanian girl name: Doina. They were born deep in Transylvania and grew up among Hungarian speakers, at a time when Romanianization was replacing Magyarization. Though no longer an ethno-linguistic minority, they still held on to the anxiety of losing their 'authentic' identity through the linguistic manipulation of names. Before 1918, many Romanian names had been Magyarized, such as from Ioan to Janos, or from Lupu to Farkas. The name 'Doina' could not be manipulated in the same way. Of course, at the time of my birth (1968), Magyarization was not a real possibility. The opposite was happening to Hungarian speakers born in Romanian-controlled Transylvania.

Taking the step to baptize a child with a different name than her Christian birth one was not uncommon, but it was certainly also a form of defying the atheist state in which we lived, and many urban dwellers did not go through this ritual. But not my paternal grandmother. She was a fearful believer and wanted to make sure I would not end up in hell, an unbaptized heathen. She took me to Oradea, the city of her childhood, as a toddler; there, I was brought to the Orthodox Cathedral to be baptized. My cousin Doina was my godmother, and I was given that name. My earliest memory is the feeling of drowning in the water in which I was dunk and the shiny objects that surrounded me when I finally came up for air, screaming at the top of my lungs.

Family members from Transylvania began to call me Doinița (the diminutive for Doina). Once I started school, my teachers decided I would be Doina. As a result, I was called Doina or Doinița by everybody at school. I cannot recall how exactly this came to be, but it had something to do with the Russian connotations of Mașa. I grew up in a Russophobe society. In the Romanian imaginary of the 1970s, in which I was raised, Russia was an evil imperial power that forced Romania into communism. The Russians were the 'big brother' who had occupied Romania in 1944, never returned Romania's gold after World War I, and were preventing Romania from being the fully European country it deserved to be. The Russians were the bad guys in every game we played in the backyard. Though my dad had to learn Russian in school in the 1950s, by the mid 1970s, when I started to go to school, the pendulum had swung very far in the other direction, towards a barely veiled anti-Russian attitude on the part of educators and cultural producers. We still loved Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky's music and Nikita Mikhalkov's movies. But not your average Russian and not the Russians as a people.

Romanians tended not to trust Russians, and I was announcing my Russian heritage every time I introduced myself: 'Hello, my name is Mașa.' After I did that at school, my teacher, looking into the catalogue that listed all the pupils in my class, noticed my middle name, Doina. I think she said something like 'But you have such a beautiful name, Doina! I will call you

Doina.' This 'but' placed me in the category of outsider-insider. If I insisted on being called Maşa, I would place myself outside the circle of trust and 'authentic' Romanianness articulated throughout the nationalist curriculum in elementary school. I would invite questions like 'Where are you from?' and would have to justify my place in the classroom not as a hard-working kid, but as an interloper with questionable loyalties. As a seven-year-old, I was not up for the challenge. So, Doina and then Doiniţa stuck. I spent the next ten years with two names and two personas: at school, Doiniţa, a clean, unproblematic Romanian name and presumably identity; at home, Maşi, with the parents who communicated in Russian and with family friends who knew me as just that, a 'mutt kid.' Birthday parties with children from school were always challenging, my parents referring to me as Maşi, the confused guests unsure of who that was while addressing me as Doiniţa.

When we moved to the United States in 1985, I dropped Doina. Because it was a baptismal name, it was not in my passport. And the diphthong... Well, try to pronounce this name in any English-speaking way of pronouncing this juxtaposition of letters! I went back to Masha. This time, even though I arrived from a communist country during the Cold War, the association between this name and my Russian background seemed less ominous and more exotic. My name was rare in the neighborhoods where I spent my first few years in the States: Bridgeport and Monroe, Connecticut. There was (and still is) the occasional 'Oh, like in *The Brady Bunch*!' (Marcia Brady was a character on this U.S. sitcom popular from the late 1960s into the 1980s; 'Marcia, Marcia, Marcia!' was her sister Jan's famous exasperated line). But often, people took stock of the pronunciation ('No r!') and relished in repeating my name several times. I did become a target of anti-Russian attitudes as well, but nothing worse than the anti-Romanian ones I still occasionally encounter. In high school, I was told more than once to 'go back to my country,' something that many a migrant has heard over their lives in the United States. I was already used to such insults. I had heard them in my childhood. Still, it hurt as much in America as it had back in Romania. But my skin had thickened, and my response was to become an educator, rather than remain an outsider.

My last names, Bucur and Deckard, have their own stories of separation, acculturation, and integration. Bucur is both a noun and a verb. The myth of Bucharest's name ('Bucur-eşti' means 'you are Bucur') is connected to the shepherd Bucur who settled there. How someone transhumant by the nature of their work becomes the originator of a city is a mystery to me. Whatever the origins of Romania's capital, the proper name at its root is very common among both given names and surnames in Romania. There are many 'Maria Bucurs' in the country, as a quick Google search can show.

In my case, however, it is also a very new family name. My paternal grandfather was born Alexandru Ştefan but took the name Alexandru Bucur when he moved from his little village to Bucureşti. He was fleeing and wanted to start his life with a clean slate. On my paternal grandmother's side, the family was 'Fitero,' an indication of Italian links a few generations back. She

also left her village and family name behind in the late 1930s, when she moved to București, and eventually married Alexandru.

In the transition from Romania to the United States, however, the spelling of my last name has been a constant reminder of my alterity. Maria can be from many places. And Bucur... Well, how do you even say that? When pronouncing it correctly to someone unfamiliar with phonetic spelling, I often see my name written down as Booker, Bucar, Boocour, or some other incorrect version. In dealing with this form of misrecognition, lazy imagination, or linguistic provincialism, whatever we want to call it, I have moved from frustration to humor. The 'Where are you from?' still hits me as a form of integrative speech, where difference and alterity are seen to be produced by sources outside of the cultural 'core.' Everyone is from somewhere, but not everyone is asked that question just about every time they introduce themselves. I now sometimes just say that I am from the forest, which is where I live and where I have spent most time in the past half century.

Like many women around the world, I had to contemplate the question of my surname again when I got married. I had become an unapologetic feminist by then as well as a published author. I saw no reason for my name to change on the cover of any future book, just because I had changed my marital status. But I also loved my future mother- and father-in-law as family, and I thought that taking on their last name would be a way to express my feelings for my new kin. I decided to hyphenate my name, becoming Maria Bucur-Deckard in legal documents. While there are thousands if not more Maria Bucurs, and while there may be quite a few Maria Deckards, I am quite sure that I am still the only Maria Bucur-Deckard on this planet.

Being in a category of one confers some privileges: I can be easily found on social media, for instance. But the hyphen, that darn hyphen, has been a different story. At some point, you eventually find out that many services, institutions, and companies do not consider hyphens as an actual symbol, so your name might become Bucurdeckard. Try pronouncing that without tripping over your tongue! Flying with a passport that has a hyphenated name presents extra hurdles, since some security systems are apparently unable to comprehend the hyphen. Some people give up and just call me Maria Deckard, especially in the United States, trying to avoid the pesky 'Bucur.' I have given up cataloguing all the ways in which my full legal name has been perceived or processed, in the case of on-line forms, as a problem that cannot be solved or has to be simplified, rather than as a straightforward name.

After we moved to the United States, Masha became and still is the name I think of when I am asked to introduce myself in most unofficial social settings. When I met my future, U.S.-born, husband, I introduced myself as Masha, and he thought that was my birth name, rather than a version of Maria. After we had moved in together, I once caught him answering the phone and stating that 'nobody by the name of Maria lives here.' I had to produce my driver's license for him to think I was not pulling his leg. When I go to a party and meet new people, I am still Masha.

But once I started publishing, people came to know me by my given name. At conferences and in official correspondence I became Maria. When I got hired as a university professor, colleagues started addressing me by my given name, and I came to see Maria as part of my professional persona, even more than the title 'Dr.' preceding it. Early in my time at Indiana University, a senior distinguished historian, who viewed himself as a kind mentor, observed that 'Masha is such a peasant name, you shouldn't use it!' I do not believe that he thought of himself as patronizing in making this statement. But I never forgot those words and never felt comfortable calling him out. Thirty years later, I still hesitate to let colleagues know that I go by Masha among friends—until I feel like we are moving from work mates to friends. It is not that I am afraid of being thought of as 'peasant.' In fact, I have remained affectively close to my peasant roots (both of my Romanian grandparents grew up in the countryside, and I used to spend summers in their native villages). But I did not want my name devalued, thought of as essentially part of some kind of lesser category of people. Equally importantly, I did not think that such people deserved to be my friends and thus could call me Masha.

Context is just purely local sometimes. 'Deckard' is one of the most common last names in the city where I ended up living for over 30 years: Bloomington, Indiana. That I ended up working in the city in which my husband was born is a pure coincidence. That I took his last name as part of my hyphenated homage to my in-laws was fortuitous, since I got married before I knew I would live in Bloomington. But that name has given me some 'street credit' in my adopted hometown. People sometimes ask what branch of the Deckards I am part of. There is a Deckard cemetery close to Bloomington. One colleague in the history department told me early on that I was part of 'local royalty.' Bill had a sense of humor, so I took this as a joke, but it is true that this last name somehow softened the perception of me as 'other' on the part of teachers and other parents the first time I met them when I took my kids to school or other organized events.

I arrived at the name 'Măriuca' relatively late in life. I had been in the United States for almost fifteen years, and, around the turn of the twenty-first century, life brought to me my soul sister, Mihaela. When we first met, she did not know me as anything other than my official, professional name. She had no clue about my complicated Russian background, my middle name, or any version of what others called me. When we first met, I went with the standard 'My name is Maria Bucur.' She said that the name 'Maria' fit me, and for the first time I felt like that name was mine, not a mask I was putting on ('And now I will be playing professor!'). And as we came to know each other better, she started to call me by the endearing 'Măriuca.' She still does, and it always makes me feel like I am a duckling sitting close to her mama, enveloped by a fluffy nest of care and love. In my mind, it smells of pine trees and wildflowers when I hear that version of my name. Măriuca takes me back home, back to my childhood, even though nobody called me that back then.

Who has power over naming and rendering names meaningful? How does this affect our experience in the world?

Growing up during the Cold War inside a communist country run like a police state generated for those living in that environment a relationship of duplicity between the intimate and the public. What we said at home was not what we would necessarily repeat in public, to protect ourselves from misperception and punishment (Kligman, 1998). Trust in state institutions was not part of our experience. Naming was a way in which my parents and paternal grandmother chose to articulate forms of protection for me: *Doina* in public, *Maşa* at home. Institutions like the church, the school, and the city hall, where names were recorded and then articulated by government employees (be they doctors, teachers, or priests), had power over the public perception and ordering of individuals into categories of citizens, to be aligned with the nationalist flavor of the day.

But we were not powerless as individuals. While Czesław Miłosz's (1953) 'ketman' describes this duplicity between public and intimate speak as a form of compliance, I know that for me it was both survival and oppositional self-making. Even as I put on *Doina* as an armor that could protect me from xenophobia, I also tested those around me. I never let myself be defined by those exclusionary perceptions. I questioned nationalism and its affective grip on the minds and hearts of my teachers and other authority figures. I developed a critical mind, not a captive one. Looking back, I do not resent that experience, and I do not resent that name. They are part of my journey of becoming a human. By the same token, the nationalism that flows in Romanian public discourse today is one of the reasons I would not want to live again in that country. I can put up with it a few months out of the year, but only because I know I can find refuge from it somewhere else. Sadly, it is a refuge that, these days, I need to curate more and more in my adopted country.

My father's fateful choice to escape from Romania and come to the United States as a political refugee has shaped a lot of my context as an adult. As a well-educated white woman, I have had to go through fewer hoops than many other migrants to America. But as someone who came from a communist country during the Cold War, I faced specific legal and cultural obstacles made evident every time I introduced myself. Keeping Romanian citizenship while living abroad before 1989 meant a complete lack of protection from the Romanian state and diminished protection from the United States. Gaining U.S. citizenship was entangled with showing that we were not communist agents and deserved to be integrated in this country. The suspicion that I lacked loyalty for my host country preceded any kind of proof I could show; in some cases, this continued long after I had become a U.S. citizen. Even as I dropped my accent to blend in, even as I stopped using *Masha* in professional settings, even as I married and had children. For years, I carried my U.S. passport with me everywhere. My husband used to make fun of me. But in the last year he has started to understand me more. I

think migrants understand this kind of anxiety more intimately: it never quite goes away.

Since I had not let structures and public nationalist discourse define me in Romania, I would not let them define me in the United States either. I became a historian because I wanted to voice the perspective of vulnerability and marginalization in analyses of the past and our becoming. I became a university professor, so I could challenge those discourses and the U.S. perspective on the Cold War for future generations of young people growing up in this country.

Still, the only measurable power I have had over others' names has been in naming my two children. Music was our paramount framework for thinking about cultural connotations and tradition when we started dreaming of their names: the tradition of song-writing in the U.S. context and the tradition of music-making in my own family (my husband is a jazz drummer, and I play the violin and bass). I toyed for a minute with the idea of having a Sergey, blending an ironic fulfillment of my parents' desires for me as a boy with my own love for Sergey Eisenstein's films (I wanted to be a filmmaker for a while). Danny, my husband, and I settled on Dylan for our first child and Elvin for our second. There were other musical names on the short list; but with Bob Dylan playing in our town on the day my firstborn was supposed to come out into the world, naming him Dylan felt like fate. And with the passing of giant jazz drummer Elvin Jones just months prior to my second boy's birth, we wanted to honor his spirit through our little one. Today both boys are musicians. And they both have a bit of my Romanian past in them. Dylan's middle name is Daniel, his father's name and a name that my Romanian grandmother could be sure to pronounce without difficulty. Elvin is also Codru ('forest' in Romanian)—the boy from the forest where we spend most of our waking hours and where he was made.

In my 58 years on this planet, I have come to believe that small measures of breaking with some traditions and creating others in our daily practice is the most we can control in the world. How others see us, name us, misrepresent and label us is both meaningful and up for negotiation. How we see ourselves cannot be just a function of social norms and political processes. And whether our personal self remains somewhat submerged in the interstices of our intimate existence, or whether it manages to be seen by others, this cannot be the true measure of our lived experience. Because each of us owns our personal story. When I look in the mirror, I do not call myself by any name. I just see myself.

1. Throughout the text I spell the names the way they are spelled in the country in which I was living at that time—Romania and subsequently the United States.

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Reflexive essay

Adopted by a Nickname

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Adopted by a Nickname

Tomasz Stanisław Bogdan Wicherkiewicz

This reflexive autoethnographic essay traces a life through given names, surnames, name days, confirmation names, and community nicknames. It situates one Central European biography within the language politics of postwar Poland, examining Catholic naming practices, the marginalization of non-Polish and non-Catholic histories, and the symbolic dominance of Polish in the country's linguistic landscape. Family surnames open onto Polish, Kashubian, German, and Jewish histories, while the author's research connects personal naming with language documentation, policy, and minority-language advocacy. The final section turns to Wymysiöeryś, the severely endangered language of Wilamowice. There, a traditional kin nickname came to mark a long relationship with speakers and new speakers, and a form of adoption into the community after decades of research and advocacy. The essay argues that names are not merely labels: they carry religious authority, family memory, ethnic ambiguity, political pressure, and possibilities for belonging. Together, these episodes form an anthroponomastic curriculum of a life spent among minoritized language communities.

Keywords: anthroponymy, autoethnography, Kashubian, language revitalization, minority languages, nicknames, Wymysiöeryś

*To my parents and to my adoptive community
of Wymysöjyn in Wilamowice*

Names before biography

My parents died when I was twenty-one (my father, Stefan) and twenty-six (my mother, Maria). At those ages, a parentless child is no longer called an orphan. Yet a sense of being left alone with my family name accompanied much of my early adult life, especially because I had no siblings.

My names—both Christian¹ and family names—have never been indifferent to me. I enjoyed my unusually long anthroponym even before I knew the term *anthroponymy*. For many years, I believed I was the world's only Tomasz Wicherkiewicz. Its six-plus-thirteen letters made it unusual and sometimes awkward: it did not fit many forms or the narrow columns of petty bureaucracy in communist and postcommunist Poland. Even the first messengers of capitalism stumbled over it. My first payment card allowed only thirteen characters for the cardholder's name—the exact length of 'Wicherkiewicz.' Years later, when a taxi driver in the United States saw it, he joked that he might call me 'Mr. Alphabet.' Long names did not frighten

my family. My mother used both her maiden and married surnames, Maria Przymus-Wicherkiewicz, while my father often used both his first and middle names, Stefan Wiktor Wicherkiewicz. I therefore sometimes introduced myself as Tomasz Stanisław Bogdan Wicherkiewicz—an admittedly elaborate form that I use here as an author for the first time.² According to family lore, 'Tomasz' honored the patron saint of the church where my grandmother prayed for my birth; 'Stanisław' and 'Bogdan' commemorated my grandfathers: my maternal grandfather, Stanisław, a Home Army officer killed in the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, and my paternal grandfather, Bogdan, an ophthalmologist who died in 1924.

Catholic names and their discontents

Until recently, Polish Catholic custom often favored name days over birthdays. Birthdays were said to be 'for children,' while a person's annual celebration was assigned by the Catholic calendar to the feast of a canonized or beatified saint. Children, of course, could celebrate both. Only as an adult did I learn that name-day celebrations were neither uniform across Poland nor equally important to all ethnic and religious communities. Masurians, Kashubs, Silesians from the German-Polish borderlands, and Polish Lutherans did not all adopt the custom to the same degree; Eastern Orthodox Christians observed name days differently and according to another calendar of saints. My ignorance—common within the Polish majority—reflected a powerful image of Polish society as ethnically homogeneous, centralized, monolingual, and Roman Catholic. The desire to fill that cognitive void helped direct my attention toward religious, ethnic, national,³ and linguistic minorities. The name-day tradition was so strong that the officially atheist communist authorities promoted a secularized version of it. Popular calendars expanded to include non-canonical variants of saints' names, literary names without Catholic references, and names built from Slavic stems.

Church authorities also changed calendars and feast days, so why could I not? When several saints had the same name, each with a different feast day, a person usually celebrated their name day on the first feast day for a saint with that name after their birthday. There were at least five Saint Thomases.⁴ The feast nearest my July birthday was that of Thomas the Apostle. As a child, however, I disliked his nickname, 'Doubting Thomas,' and the story of placing a finger in Jesus's wounds.⁵ I did not yet understand metaphor; the image repelled me, and 'doubting' sounded wholly negative. Once I started school, I chose the scholar Thomas Aquinas instead. I was delighted that an entire tradition—Thomism—bore my patron's name, although later I understood that scholarship itself proceeded through disciplined doubt. By choosing Thomas Aquinas as my patron saint, I gained a new feast day, the 7th of March, until the Church moved it to the 28th of January. I now seldom observe name days, but this story shows how deeply ecclesiastical regulation can enter an individual life and its social relationships.

My Christian-name story does not end there. Young Catholics, usually between fourteen and seventeen, undergo confirmation, a religious ceremony in which they formally affirm their Catholic faith and become more fully involved in the life of the Church. In Poland, a Catholic person being confirmed customarily adopts another name and thus another patron saint. My confirmation followed soon after the canonization of Maximilian Maria Kolbe, so I chose 'Maksymilian' as my fourth given name.

Maximilian Maria Kolbe (1894–1941) was a Polish Franciscan friar who volunteered to die in place of another prisoner at Auschwitz. Before the war, he had founded a monastery, operated an amateur radio station, and led religious organizations and mass-circulation publications. The historical record is more complicated than the heroic account I knew as a teenager: publications issued under his leadership included antisemitic material, although he also censured some of it (Westminster Abbey, n.d.). As I came to understand and care more deeply about Poland's Jewish heritage, I found it increasingly difficult to accept that nominal patronage without questioning it.

Surnames across Polish, Kashubian, and German histories

Beyond my Christian names lie my surnames. Family history connects me not only to Wicherkiewicz, my paternal line, but also to Sławski, [von] Piechowski, and Przymus through other parental lines. Two of these names especially stimulated my ethnolinguistic curiosity.

'Wicherkiewicz' contains the Polish stem *wicher*, 'a strong gale,' and the diminutive marker *-k-* yielding a comic image of a small but complete gale.⁶ The ending *-ewicz* reflects an East Slavic patronymic pattern associated with surnames in the eastern borderlands, although the earliest documented members of my family lived at the western edge of Polish ethnic territory. The recorded line begins only in the nineteenth century, with my great-grandfather. His siblings included a medical professor, Bolesław Wicherkiewicz, who was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1904, as well as a biologist, an entrepreneur in the Dutch East Indies, and a linguist who wrote a widely used conversational Polish grammar for German speakers (Nobel Prize Outreach AB, n.d.). The gap between this documented prominence and the family name's short record makes me wonder—without claiming evidence—whether an earlier non-Polish name was Polonized.

Surname formation in Central Europe was often political. In 1787, Emperor Joseph II required Jews in the Habsburg lands to adopt hereditary German surnames; Prussian authorities followed with related measures. Naming officials sometimes imposed insulting or absurd forms. Jan Stanisław Bystron (1927, 129) describes this bureaucratic violence in his study of Polish surnames. Could 'Wicherkiewicz' have emerged through such a process? I do not know, and the uncertainty matters as much as the hypothesis.

More is known about '[von] Piechowski.' The surname is associated with Kashubian petty nobility in what is now Polish Pomerania and derives

from the village of Piechowice. Its structure joins *Piech-*, an Old Polish or Kashubian form related to the name Peter, with the toponymic suffix *-(ow)ski*. The German 'von' is the most politically charged element: a patrilineal marker of nobility used by many men in the family until the First or Second World War. The combination of German 'von' and Slavic 'Piechowski' condenses the history of Kashubian identity. Twentieth-century national narratives often demanded an unambiguous declaration—Polish or German—and left little room for transitional, local, or layered identities. The mixed name could therefore seem too German to some Poles and too Polish to some Germans, much as the Kashubs themselves did. After the Second World War, the 'von' was erased and prohibited.

Kashubia formed the northwestern periphery of the Slavic world and a long-standing contact zone with German-speaking populations. Kashubian has consequently been classified both as a Polish dialect and as a distinct Slavic language. That sociolinguistic and political question occupied much of my career. In 2011, Cezary Obracht-Prondzyński and I edited *The Kashubs: Past and Present*, to which I contributed a chapter on language policy and Kashubian sociolinguistics (Obracht-Prondzyński & Wicherkiewicz, 2011; Wicherkiewicz, 2011).

From minority studies to language advocacy

The late 1980s brought profound changes to my part of Europe and to my own life. Poland was moving toward a more democratic and pluralist political order, while I was seeking my place within it. People I met and choices I made turned a long-standing interest in minorities into an academic path. Minority studies then had few institutional footholds in Poland, where the historical and continuing presence of minorities was widely ignored. European integration gradually introduced new accounts of diversity and multilingualism, including the languages described as minority, minoritized, regional, endangered, autochthonous, or lesser used.

The organized Kashubian movement gained momentum as other marginalized communities sought recognition in the new Polish public sphere. The Act on National and Ethnic Minorities and on the Regional Language, adopted in January 2005, recognized Kashubian as Poland's regional language. Even if younger activists now regard that status as too limited, it transformed the language's public position. I was an ardent supporter and may have been the first to propose the Polish legal term corresponding to the German 'Regionalsprache' for Kashubian.⁷ Meanwhile, my von Piechowski identity grew stronger because the name itself embodied Kashubia's uncertain balance between German and Polish state-language identities. The 2005 Act opened public domains for Kashubian, including education and the official linguistic landscape. Kashubian place names appeared on road signs, and some Kashubs began to use Kashubian forms of their personal names. The ancestral village of the von Piechowski family acquired the additional official

name 'Piechóce,' while some relatives adopted 'Piechowski' or restored the prefix 'von' in public use.

Kashubia was becoming visibly Kashubian. In 2019, the Association of Kashubian Language Teachers awarded me the *Ryngraf Witosława* prize for contributions to Kashubian. The ceremony took place in Stężycza municipality, where my great-great-grandfather Michał von Piechowski was born. The family story had circled back.

Adopted through Wymysiöeryś

The title of this onomastic curriculum refers to my most valued nickname: 'Tiöma-füm-Fliöra-Fliöra,' granted to me in Wilamowice by friends who speak Wymysiöeryś, in accordance with their anthroponymic tradition.

Wilamowice is a small town in southern Poland and an exceptional linguistic enclave. Known as *Wymysoü* in Wymysiöeryś, it was probably founded around 1300 by Middle High German-speaking colonists and long formed part of the *Bielitz-Bialaer Sprachinsel*. During the long nineteenth century, the town developed a local identity within the multilingual Habsburg Empire and through intensive contact with Polish-speaking neighbors. German, Polish, and distinct local identities were later claimed or imposed; other origin stories pointed to Holland, Flanders, Friesland, England, or Scotland (Wicherkiewicz et al., 2018).

I had known little of this before the winter of 1989, when I first visited Wilamowice while preparing my first academic paper. I was a linguistics master's student at the University of Poznań and had been invited to present with my supervisor, Professor Alfred F. Majewicz, at the Fourth International Conference on Minority Languages in Leeuwarden/Ljouwert. Soon after stepping from a cold, rattling bus in Wilamowice and asking who might know the town's dialect and the history of its medieval settlers, I entered the warm home of the retired teacher Helena Bilczewska. She served tomato soup to me and then showed me the manuscripts collected by her late husband. Among them was a draft of what appeared to be the longest known literary work in Wymysiöeryś.⁸ That discovery became a decisive point in my work with minority languages. I expanded my research on Wilamowice, its culture, language, community, and literature. A study of the manuscript became my doctoral thesis and later *The Making of a Language: The Case of the Idiom of Wilamowice, Southern Poland* (Wicherkiewicz, 2003). Fieldwork and studies in historical Germanic linguistics, dialectology, language contact, and ethnolinguistics also led me to the manuscript's author, Florian Biesik.

Biesik was born in the mid-nineteenth century and later became a senior Austro-Hungarian railway official. Influenced by Dante Alighieri and living far from Wilamowice in the Adriatic port of Trieste, he created a literature in his microlanguage. He wrote under the pen name 'Fliöra-Fliöra,'⁹ also his Wilamowicean kin nickname, and sent poems home. Heinrich Anders (1933), a German dialectologist who worked at my University of Poznań between the

wars, published some of them. The rest receded from view amid the violence and dislocation of the Second World War.

After the war, persecution, language bans, cultural abandonment, and assimilation devastated a tradition that had endured for centuries. Democratization after 1989 weakened those pressures. In 2000, however, I still wrote with misplaced certainty:

'The Wilamowiceans are only now starting to be proud of their tradition and distinctiveness. Unfortunately, they can no longer be proud of their ethnolect, since, after 750 years of existence, this smallest <...> minority language in Poland faces imminent extinction, which will inevitably accompany the death of its last speakers (probably within some 10 years)' (Wicherkiewicz, 2000, p. 554).

I believed that I had at least documented the language and its community, including the distinctive system of kin nicknames (Zieniukowa & Wicherkiewicz, 1997). These forms combine Germanic and Slavic lexemes and morphemes within a complex sociolinguistic system. They identify individuals both inside and outside a small, historically endogamous community in which given names and surnames recur frequently. How shortsighted I was. I should have remembered Joshua A. Fishman's (1981) *Never Say Die!: A Thousand Years of Yiddish in Jewish Life and Letters*. I also did not know that Tymoteusz Król had been born in Wilamowice in 1993. His parents hired a nanny who spoke mainly Wymysiöeryś to him. He became a gifted native speaker, community linguist, and visionary language revitalizer. As a teenager, he standardized orthography, collected and classified folk dress, wrote and taught. Coming across my pessimistic prediction, he decided to prove it wrong.

Król's Wymysiöeryś nickname, 'Tiöma Fum Döktör,' and his role as a bridge between older native speakers and new speakers have since been documented in articles, books, and films. Revitalization now includes young speakers, theater, teaching, documentation, and digital projects (Olko et al., 2016; Wicherkiewicz et al., 2018). The nickname generator *Däj noma* ('Your Name') was created to help Wilamowiceans recover or construct traditional forms, many of which are now used in social-media profiles (Stowarzyszenie Pracownia Etnograficzna, 2016).

Wymysiöeryś remains severely endangered, spoken by no more older native speakers, but a growing group of new speakers. The community has pursued legal recognition for more than a decade. Parliament adopted an amendment recognizing it as a regional language in 2025, but the President of Poland vetoed the measure on the 16th of October 2025 (Office of the President of the Republic of Poland, 2025). The setback does not erase the language's cultural renewal, nor the community's continuing work for recognition.

According to Król and other new speakers, my 1989 discovery and the later publication and promotion of Biesik's work helped interrupt the narrative of inevitable language death. Twenty-five years after that first visit, I was given the nickname 'Tiöma-füm-Fliöra-Fliöra.' In 2015, the municipality of Wilamowice granted me honorary citizenship. I have since felt adopted by a community that I first researched and later learned to act with. Two years

later, on International Mother Language Day, I watched young Wymysiöeryś speakers perform a familiar scene in the theater *Ufa fisa*: a student entered a retired teacher's house, received a bowl of hot tomato soup, and was shown a manuscript in Wymysiöeryś. The performance then followed Biesik's Dantean *Ôf jer Weß* ('In the Next World').

Am I not a fortunate linguist of many names?

Are names not among our most capable guides through the cultures, histories, and curricula of individuals and communities?

1. I use the phrase 'Christian name' deliberately because the name-giving practices discussed here are explicitly grounded in Polish Catholic life.
2. The three given names are used together as an authorial name for the first time in this essay. The Polish pronunciation is [ˈtomasz staˈnislaf ˈbogdan vixɛrˈkɛvifʂ].
3. In the Polish law on minorities, national minorities are those with a kin state (e.g., Germans in Poland), while ethnic ones those without (e.g., the Roma).
4. Thomas the Apostle (first century); Thomas Becket, also known as Thomas of Canterbury and Thomas the Martyr (twelfth century); Thomas Aquinas (thirteenth century); Thomas à Kempis (fifteenth century); and Thomas More (fifteenth–sixteenth centuries).
5. The Gospel of John recounts Thomas's refusal to believe in the Resurrection without seeing and touching Jesus's wounds, followed by his confession of faith (King James Bible, 1611/1769, John 20:24–29).
6. My childhood nicknames included 'Wicherek,' a diminutive form, and 'Tajfun' (typhoon); both (could be) used abusively.
7. During a research stay at Bielefeld University, I followed German debates about the status of Low German as a Regionalsprache. That discussion informed my proposal to Polish legislators.
8. Wymysiöeryś is pronounced [vimiˈsøːrɪɕ].
9. The spelling 'Flïöra-Flïöra' follows current Wymysiöeryś orthography; Biesik wrote the name as 'Flora-Flora.'

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Profesor Ewie Rzetelskiej-Feleszko [Onomastics and dialectology: Works dedicated to Professor Ewa Rzetelska-Feleszko] (pp. 307–316).
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Reflexive essay

Naming Errors: Globalization and Its Mispronunciations

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Naming Errors: Globalization and Its Mispronunciations

Jesse van Amelsvoort

Starting from a visit with his father to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., this essay unpacks after whom Jesse van Amelsvoort was named and how his name changes when crossing borders. The past of the author's name has been influenced by bureaucratic mistakes, while its present is marked by a very specific understanding of what names are internationally intelligible. Thus, the essay reflects on naming practices in times of globalization and growing multilingualism and transnationalism.

Keywords: globalization, Jesse Jackson, multilingualism, naming, Netherlands, onomastics

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As part of its narrative from slavery to Barack Obama, the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., depicts Jesse Jackson's presidential run as an important moment of political emancipation. When I visited the museum with my father in October 2019, he pointed at a photo of Jackson and said: 'Je weet dat je naar hem vernoemd bent, hè?' ['You know you are named after him, right?']. I did not know that. The first version of this essay was written in response to gaining that knowledge.

This is an 'onomastic autobiography' (Nicolaisen, 1999), but also an essay about globalization and its mispronunciations. What happens when a name crosses geographic and linguistic borders? More specifically, what borders are created in this border-crossing? Can names ever be truly cosmopolitan?

1

When I order a cup of tea in a coffee shop in the United States, I occasionally find an 'i' squeezed into my first name on the cup, sitting (un)comfortably between the 's' and the 'e.' Already when the barista is writing 'my' name on a cup, I see confusion on their face: isn't that a woman's name? The barista is not wrong. In that spelling, yes, it probably would more likely be a woman's name, but when it comes to the spelling of my name that is legally correct, they are incorrect. This is the United States, however, not the Netherlands, where I am from. There, 'Jesse' skews male, but it is also rather gender neutral—or rather, gender unspecific.

In the Netherlands, when I give my name to the bike repair shop owner or the volunteer who has charmed me into giving them money, the 'l' in my last name becomes an 'r' and the 'v' an 'f.' I do not have to see it written down. The flash of confusion on their faces when hearing me say 'Jesse van Amelsvoort' tells me enough: what did he say, how do I write this down?

My first name can be misspelt 'Jessie.' My last name can be misspelt 'Van Amersfoort,' 'Van Amelsfoort,' or whatever variation people think they hear. Amersfoort is a well-known city in the Netherlands after all.

As any good student of semiotics knows, signs are, ultimately, arbitrary (Chandler, 2002, pp. 22–28; Saussure, 1959, p. 67). Conventions, mere agreements. A chair is only a chair because we say it is. Yet even if language is nothing more than a bunch of letters that we say have meaning, it is this specific arrangement of those specific letters that matters; it is to a particular word that we attach ourselves.

Names, however, like every other sign, do matter in the end.

My name can be spelled in all kinds of ways. Except it should not. It is Jesse van Amelsvoort. If you want to be precise (and what academic would prefer not to?), it is Jesse Daniël van Amelsvoort. But my full name is a formalistic, legal matter, with little bearing on how I live my life from day to day. If this is an essay on how a name is always at once both linguistic and cultural, it should be noted that 'Daniël,' too, causes problems and anxiety. In Dutch, the diaeresis—tréma—on the 'e' suggests that the vowels should be read separately. Two sounds, not one: it is [da:nijel], not [da:ni:l]. Machines do not always catch this sign, or cannot process it, and so at airports, for instance, I always think: what if they make a fuss because the information on my ticket does not completely adhere to what is written in my passport? What if they keep me from traveling?

But they—airline and airport staff following rules and procedures—do not care, not enough. Maybe they don't even notice. Maybe there is some room for naming errors.

2

Jesse Jackson had run for President of the United States in 1988, and there was speculation he would run again in 1992. Ultimately, he declined to do so. But if he had agreed, he might have been able to oust George H. W. Bush from office, ending twelve years of Republican rule that had started with Ronald Reagan in 1981. In the process, he could have become the first Black President of the United States of America. But it would take until 2008 for Americans to elect their first—and, so far, only—Black president. In spring 1992, the Democratic primary electorate was charmed by Bill Clinton, and in November that year, enough people in the entire country were, too. Clinton assumed the highest political office in the United States in January 1993, reunited Fleetwood Mac, and became the nation's 'first Black president': as

Toni Morrison put it with supreme irony for *The New Yorker*, Clinton displayed 'almost every trope of blackness' (Morrison, 1998).

Also in 1992, thousands of kilometers away, my mother was pregnant with me. My parents could not be happier about this pregnancy, even if it brought some of the usual physical discomforts. It also brought another discomfort: they could not agree on the unborn baby's name, let alone the philosophy behind it. My mother, although not religious, perhaps even anti-religious, wanted a biblical name. (I recall an instance when she shouted at the TV, where the news was reporting on a visit of Pope John Paul II to one place or another: 'Murderer! AIDS! Condoms!' She has always denied this happened.) My father, just as much an atheist as his partner, wanted a non-biblical name. The result: an impasse.

The solution to this Dutch domestic problem came from the United States: from Jesse Jackson—or, perhaps more appropriately, from Jackson's parents, when they decided to name their son 'Jesse.'

Jesse, biblically: the father of David, the grandfather of Solomon, and the beginning of the tree of Jesse, which would ultimately culminate in Jesus, the Holy Son. Also known as Yishai—or, in Dutch, Isai. (Very few people I have spoken to in my life know this. Had I been raised in a Christian environment, it would probably have resonated more. But there was not a single brain cell in my parents' minds that has seriously considered raising me that way. 'Murderer!')

Jesse, non-biblically: a name from Fryslân, a province in the northern Netherlands, with an unknown meaning. (Not many people outside the Dutch province of Fryslân know that Jesse is a Frisian name. If they do, they ask if I am from there. The answer is no.)

When their son was born, on a cloudy autumn day in 1992, my parents called him Jesse. Both of them had their wishes satisfied.

3

In fact, the challenge of finding a suitable name for their son was even bigger than I have led you to believe. On top of their diverging preferences mentioned above, my parents had a third, shared wish. Their child would have a name that she or he could travel with without much difficulty. Concretely, this meant they needed to find a name both biblical and non-biblical that would not carry unfortunate connotations in English. Elsewhere, I have written about the contemporary presence of the English language in the Netherlands (van Amelsvoort, 2023): my parents' concerns show its longer lineage and pervasiveness. What I did not write about in that paper, I write about here: how the globalization—or Americanization—of Dutch culture also affects naming practices, a line of inquiry refracted through my own name.

Because of the ubiquity of English in the Netherlands and the need my parents felt for my name to be intelligible internationally (i.e., in English), several names were immediately scrapped from consideration. Dick

and Joke, acceptable Dutch names (the latter is pronounced with a short o and a soft e, [ˈjo:kə]), would be a recipe for international disaster, even if the former is in English a colloquial version of Richard: can you imagine the response when they are encountered together? (And yes, I have once met a Dutch couple with these names.) In a bar in Washington, D.C., I met a Dutch woman called Feline, with an ending that in Dutch is a similarly short e, which in its written form, I realized, is a similarly unfortunate name in English. Nothing cat-like about her. The name of a dear friend, Ties, would similarly confuse the reader accustomed to the English language.

This concern of intelligibility was not abstract, by the way: it was a lived reality of sorts for my father.

Hi, he could say to a Brit, an American, a New Zealander, I'm Goof. I'm crazy, too, they could respond.

So, in America he was Geoff. Except he wasn't. He was, and is, Goof, a combination of letters containing both the guttural Dutch 'g' [ɣ] and the drawn-out 'o' [o:]. What works in Dutch, does not have to work in English—despite these languages' close proximity.

Jesse could travel. But not, I have found out, without a little story—a joke, yes, a Joke, I should perhaps say, that is perfectly acceptable in the Netherlands, but borders on the racially insensitive in the United States. (Maybe it does, too, in the Netherlands, but the people there do not care so much—definitely not enough.)

The setting: I am introduced to someone I haven't met before.

James, they say, or Margaret, Bobby, Clarissa.

Jesse, I say.

Pardon? Excuse me?

Oh, eh, well, [dʒesi] in English. But the Dutch pronunciation is [jesɛ]. It's a little bit like... Okay, so there's this problematic joke I can only really tell white people. White men, actually. My name is like 'Yes, sir,' but without the 'r.' Although, and this is the joke, I also listen to 'Yes, sir.'

Nobody ever laughs. (Except I do.)

Nobody ever laughs, and most people look a little bit non-plussed after hearing my explanation.

The English way is fine, I have learned to say. If people get to know me better, I prefer [jesɛ], but you are fine. Meaning: we don't know each other, nor will we, apparently, move beyond that stage.

Another version has recently presented itself: a Spanish me, with the soft 'j' becoming a hard 'g.' As the Spanish language continues to grow in the United States and the American public sphere, will it move beyond the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987)? The growing influence of Spanish-language pop music suggests as much. A question for the future: what will happen to English amid the new *mestiza* that the growing Spanish-speaking population of the United States makes ever so strongly present?

4

Increasingly, I am interested in the almost unarticulated assumption that for a Dutch person's name to be able to travel across borders without too much friction (Tsing, 2005), the name has to present well in English. Here is a small country, wrapped around a delta of rivers coming from France through Belgium and from Switzerland through Germany, a continental European country, that is, investing itself so heavily in what happens across the North Sea and across the Atlantic Ocean. These naming practices speak to what we could call a globalization of the mind: a process that is not just about finances and economics, nor about the films one watches and the books one reads, but about an orientation, an indication of importance so ingrained that it changes how we name our children.

Gayatri Spivak (2012) has suggested that globalization is 'achieved by the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere' (p. 484). It is the creation out of many social worlds one flat, open space that is then called 'global' (Spivak, 2003; Orsini, 2023), although in many important domains of life—certainly in the Netherlands—this thing called 'the global' actually implies Americanization. The point, for me, is not to say that national Dutch specificities are erased in this process, for in its monolithic character such a statement is ultimately too simple. My sense is that my parent's thinking about the understandability of names through the English language brings out something more subtle and amorphous in Dutch culture. It signals a shift in which certain names will be used more frequently and others less. It is a *change* within Dutch culture—not its wholesale replacement by a vaguely Anglo-Saxon amalgam.¹ Elsewhere (van Amelsvoort, 2023), I have argued that this is a more truthful and accurate perspective to understand the rise and workings of the English language in the Netherlands. In this case, my name is not always pronounced in the way Brits and the Americans would pronounce it. Although it easily can be pronounced this way, the Dutch pronunciation and context remain crucial.

5

The first explanation I remember receiving from my family about my last name speaks about a small river known as the Amel, which is somewhere in Wallonia, the French-speaking part of Belgium. 'Voort' in this story is a point in the river where the water is not as deep: one can cross it without having to swim. In the Netherlands, you can also see this construction in Coevorden, a small city apparently founded close to a place where cows crossed a river, and internationally in Oxford—which similarly refers to cattle. 'Amelsvoort' has little to do with cattle, at least not explicitly, denoting a low point in the stream, a place where the river is traversable, a connection between its two banks.

I was not necessarily happy with this explanation, but neither was I unhappy. It meant there had not been an administrative error that somehow

changed my name, which is what I had thought before: somehow, Amersfoort had become Amelsvoort. Instead, there was some migration involved. My father's family is from the south of the Netherlands, and Wallonia is in Belgium; none of this mattered, of course, three or four hundred years ago, but today it amounted to something.

Not that I knew what exactly it amounted to.

Then, at some point, the explanation changed back to what I had thought before. There was still migration, but a different sort. The Belgian river explanation was ditched, and the administrative error(s) re-entered: our family was, in fact, from Amersfoort and, at some point, mostly migrated south (via Rotterdam) to where my aunts, uncles, and cousins still live. Now, my last name indicated I was not 'van'—from—rural flyover country, but from a city in the middle of the country.

Although in the time the name took its final shape, there were no airplanes: therefore, semantically speaking, 'flyover country' did not exist.

Then the explanation changed again. The administrative error and the city were ditched, and the river returned. But as we know from the ancient Greeks that everything flows and that one can never step in the same river twice, this time the body of water was not located in Belgium, but near 's-Hertogenbosch: the fancy but old-fashioned name of Den Bosch, the capital city of the province in which my father's side of the family live. Much closer to home: my aunts, uncles, and cousins in fact live about ten kilometres away from it.

It is probably possible to check which of these explanations is the correct: one of my uncles investigated our family's genealogy some years ago. Perhaps there might, in fact, be a surprise fourth explanation that is altogether different again. Part of me, however, does not want to put in the effort of looking this up. Each of the stories mentioned is interesting, for different reasons, and at the same time neither of them explains why my name means to me what it means.

6

The main character in Olga Tokarczuk's 2009 novel *Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych* (translated into English by Antonia Lloyd-Jones as *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*) hates the names we are given. 'What a lack of imagination it is to have official first names and surnames,' she says. 'No one ever remembers them, they're so divorced from the Person, and so banal that they don't remind us of them at all' (Tokarczuk, 2020, p. 28). Her neighbors are called Big Foot, and Oddball, generic words capitalized to underscore that they only apply to one person in the world. I do not hate my name, far from it, but Tokarczuk's heroine points to the arbitrariness of names and our attachment to them.

When I was reading Tokarczuk's novel, my thoughts were pulled in another direction. Her narrator is called Janina Duszejko, she lives close

to the Polish-Czech border south of Wrocław. Wrocław is the Polish name. Apple Weather only gives the old, German name: Breslau. An unexpected place to find imperial remnants—‘postcolonial remains,’ as Robert JC Young (2012) puts it. An initiative was launched some time ago to change Czech naming customs, giving women the freedom to deviate from the habit of changing their name by adding an ‘a’ at the end as soon as they are married (Hutt, 2021). It reminds me of the Icelandic tradition whereby children’s last name indicates usually their father’s, and sometimes their mother’s, first name. All of this came to me while looking at the Danish Queen Margrethe II’s Wikipedia page, where I somehow ended up when I went online after watching *The Crown*’s third season. In the first season, Prince Philip had to confront his disappointment that his children would not carry his name—his adopted name, Mountbatten—as the surname ‘Windsor’ had been set as the British royal family’s name in 1917. Because of this, there will never be dynastic change in the United Kingdom.

All very political, and all very interesting, but let us not forget the much more subtle erasure taking place in my own surname. I talk about Van Amelsvoort, but my mother was a Buikema, and her mother a Keizer, while my paternal grandmother was named Van der Meijden. These names disappear in me, even if most of my dominant personality traits originate in these families.

7

Friends from the United States who grew up in white Christian contexts take pride in their surnames. I assume they embody a wider American tendency. They cherish their surnames as a sign of where in Europe they and their family came from, as symbols that carry a sense of history that people in the US seem to crave. I guess this makes sense: after all, one of the pillars on which their country is built is the murder of almost its entire Indigenous population, with those who remain mostly living in reservations sometimes hundreds of miles removed from their ancestral lands. Words as ‘Manhattan’ and ‘Wichita’ survive in this country only because they have been colonized by the English language, stripped of their native origins. If there is one thing the United States, this ‘country of immigrants,’ proves, it is that we cannot live without roots.

These names can be British, German, or Swedish—or ‘used’ to be, I feel compelled to say as a citizen of a country where history is palpable and present everywhere. Their origins are British, German, Swedish. Except for the English language, they do not speak the languages from which these names originated. Yet it is the feeling that matters, right? A name is an identity; a name can be read; a name can influence one’s life. A name has a history, carrying in it all other names it has usurped. It is why we refer to saying our name as saying *who we are*. Not what—who. Out of the many things I am, I am perhaps most of all my name—with all the errors it accumulates as it continues to cross borders.

0

'Jesse' was meant to enable me—or my name at least, to the extent these are not the same—to easily cross borders in a globalizing world. Yet its cultural and linguistic specificities, rooted in the Dutch language, create new ones. The pronunciation and spelling of names marks insiders and outsiders; on top of those moments when Dutch people misspell my name come the instances where foreigners appropriate 'Jesse' to fit their own ways of speaking. This is perhaps how it is bound to go: names as a continuous marking and remarking of identities, feelings of belonging, and practices of inclusion and exclusion. They are bound to generate errors and mispronunciations; is that where their cosmopolitanism can be found? And to what extent is this all just not a sign of Dutch transnationalism? As an editor of this journal noted, my parents most certainly knew how 'Jesse Jackson' was pronounced and how this differed from the Dutch 'Jesse'—so, is my name not inherently double, transnational, and traveling? Back across the borders, after all.

1. As yearly numbers on the most popular names for new-born babies show, this speculation is largely correct. Many of the most frequently assigned names are Dutch names that function without complication in an English-language context. See SVB (2024).

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Reflexive essay

Naming Music: Music and Sound Across Cultures

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Naming Music: Music and Sound across Cultures

Katherine G.T. Whatley

What do you lose and what do you gain when you name something in a way that is legible across borders? This essay explores naming within the context of music and sound, arguing that to name sounds is to notate and make legible music. This essay's author is a scholar as well as a *koto* (Japanese horizontal harp) musician, and the text examines the ways in which non-Western music, specifically Japanese *koto* traditions, are influenced by the Western notions of notation and cultural prestige, and ultimately standardization. Improvisation is positioned as a counter to this standardization as a performance practice that navigates the 'unbridgeable chasm' between history, the present and future, as well as named and unnamed sounds, and Japanese and Western music. Utilizing Christopher Small's concept of 'musicking' to understand music as an active verb rather than a static noun, the essay advocates for the conceptual expansion of music to incorporate non-human soundscapes and animal acoustic cultures. In examining the disappearing regional dialect used in the folk music of Gujō, in central Japan, the author analyzes how naming is both standardizing and indispensable for preserving and reinvigorating local musics. Ultimately, by weaving together personal narrative, transcultural performance studies and critical theory, this essay calls for strategic incorporation of both legibility and illegibility, named and unnamed music, proposing that a composition can function not as a definitive statement, but as an ongoing question.

Keywords: composition, globalization, improvisation, Japanese Music, *koto*, notation, music, music theory, transnational

Introduction: What does it mean to name music?

What do you lose when you name something in a way that is legible across borders, and what do you gain? Across cultures, we describe and organize sounds—whether it be written down as notation, or transmitted orally, or created spontaneously in improvisation—and this is how we transmit, create, and perform music. This notation (or lack thereof) could also be described as naming music. A name makes legible, grants identity, but it also creates a boundary and sets parameters, and this essay examines how we name—notate—music and to what end.

I am a researcher and musician, always straddling performance, theory, and research. I play the *koto*, a horizontal Japanese harp, which originally came to Japan from the continent more than a thousand years ago and is related to other stringed instruments across Asia. I am traditionally trained, but I also create my own compositions and play improvised music. Scholar, Musician, *Koto* Player, Composer. These are some of the names that

make up who I appear to the world around me and signal my outsider or insider status. I too am named, and that makes me legible, but those names do not represent all the parts that make up who I am.

Previously, in an article published in *Migrating Minds* (Volume 3, Issue 1), I explored the history of my own name, Katherine, and how it connects me to my grandmother, whom I am named after (Whatley, 2005). I examined how Jewish naming rituals serve to reflect multilingual, transnational diasporic history, ultimately arguing for a revival of prewar Jewish cosmopolitanism. In this text, I explore transnational naming of music and sound. I analyze how sonic naming practices are connected to transnational power structures, and explore the ways in which we might utilize names to expand our understanding of music, across borders and even beyond the human.

Specter of the West

As a player of *koto*, I always have to work in tandem with, and in relation to, Western musical influence. The very concept of Japanese traditional music exists only in reference to the West, to the Other, and what is considered by both scholars and Japanese citizens to be traditional music changed significantly in the Meiji period (1868–1912) (Wade, 2014, 19). Yet so-called traditional Japanese music is often used as merely a signifier of a historic, unchanging premodern world, as opposed to the modern ever-changing historically specific Western music. I have previously explored in detail the concept of ‘traditional’ Japanese music, especially in contrast with contemporary avant-garde and improvised musics from Japan (Whatley, 2024). Building on that framework, I explore how I as a musician playing a historically rooted, specific to Japan, often-thought-of-as ‘traditional’ instrument can fruitfully navigate the complex web of names that make up Japanese music in the twenty-first century.¹

Particularly in Japan, Western classical music retains a certain aura of prestige and modernity. Starting in the nineteenth century, Western classical music was also used to support Japan’s entry in the modern world order, and later to support the control of its colonies (Everett & Lau, 2004, xvi; Hosokawa, 1998). Even today, school children learn to read Western five-staff notation and not Japanese notation. The Western classical orchestra is featured heavily on the national television broadcaster (NHK), and there is an outsize prestige of the figures of conductor and composer, bolstered up by the success of a number of Japan-born conductors and composers in the postwar era.

Torū Takemitsu, one such acclaimed post-war composer known for incorporating Japanese instruments and motifs, writes of the unease and fruitfulness of exploring Japanese music in the modern era.

‘I live in today’s society, with the same life-style as Westerners, and daily am in touch with political, economic, social, and artistic events in the world... Shortly after the war, I studied Western music; after ten years I discovered Japanese traditional music, which confused me. At the same time I was charmed

by its beauty. However, I was not able to plunge into it uncritically, perhaps because of my study and knowledge of Western music, but also because I live in modern times. I have been trying not to view Japan as an absolute but as a duality, otherwise the tradition does not come alive but remains a meaningless antique. When I composed for *shakuhachi* and *biwa* it was an unavoidable education for me. I was experiencing a European revolution and a Japanese tradition' (Takemitsu, 1995, 67).

Takemitsu cannot uncritically engage with Japanese music, as he is both modern and influenced by the Western music that makes up his education. Yet he takes this as a starting point, seeking to view Japan itself as part of a duality with the West, not-unchanging or absolute but dynamic and changing.

Likewise, I must consider how to go about naming music in the twenty-first century for the *koto* especially without reinscribing notions of unchanging 'tradition' nor watering down the historical modes of playing so much that they lose specificity and sound merely Western. The goal must be to work in tandem with legibility and lack thereof, expanding the breadth of our listening ability, and the parameters of what we consider music, while hopefully not losing too much along the way by naming everything.

The politics of notation

To notate is to name. In music, there are a variety of ways to notate music, the most popular by far being Western, five-staff notation.² It is a useful tool, because it is a semi-universal notation style, known by people all around the world. It can apply to almost any instrument (with the addition of symbols to describe instrument-specific techniques).

In contrast, in Japanese music, each instrument has its own notation, designed to suit the exact needs of the instrument, bound up in its own history and canon. Musicians typically cannot read the notation of other instruments. In contrast, anyone in an orchestra can read their fellow performers' parts.

Koto notation is easy to read, clear, and can at times be very precise. The logic of the notation is different from five-staff notation in the sense that once the scale for a piece determined and the strings are tuned, each note is represented by the string number, and players do not need to remember the notes that make up the scale in order to play the piece. This means that there is one less intellectual step necessary to read and perform the notes on the stage. *Koto* notation also has a variety of tools to describe pitch bending, vibrato and other techniques distinctive to the instrument.

Furthermore, it is only recently that *koto* pieces have started to be completely notated. Much Japanese music was memorized through vocal mnemonics, known as *shōfu* (唱譜) or *shōga* (唱歌), as well as from watching your teacher's performance and learning (Adriaansz, 1973, 41). Traditional repertoire often includes a vocal part sung by the same performer, and even today, most of the vocal part is not notated but taught directly from teacher

to student. The notation for the vocal part typically includes only lyrics and some of the main notes, without any of the embellishments such as vibrato commonly used in accompaniment singing for *koto*. Learning from a *koto* teacher has shown me that there are a lot of nuances that can be taught through copying and oral transmission, which can disappear when everything is written down and scores become standardized.

This means, of course, that someone cannot pick up a piece of *koto* music and just play it, in a way that they could for most scores using Western five-staff notation. In Japanese traditional arts of all kinds, schools (*ryūha* 流派) and heads of schools (*iemoto* 家元) have significant power, and that hierarchy must be navigated in all art forms (Yamada, 2017). It is not easy for people to begin playing *koto* music, and over time this leads to less players and a conservative, ossified atmosphere designed to preserve the canon at the sacrifice of bringing in new students and players. When things are not named clearly and made legible, they remain hidden, and it easier for things to become hierarchical, hidden, private. In addition, the use of a score that only *koto* players can read results in anyone outside of the *koto* tradition being unable to read any *koto* music. *Koto* music, and Japanese traditional music more broadly, might therefore be destined to become less legible over time, both within Japan and abroad.

The prestige of the Western score

It might seem, therefore, that utilizing Western five-staff notation would be a clear answer to this problem. To name is to make legible, and naming sounds in a manner than is understood by many is a clear solution to a problem of a lack of legibility. One of the problems, however, lies in the loss of specificity. Takemitsu writes about the standardization and convenience of tuning in Western music, and therefore the loss of subtlety and regional sounds (Takemitsu, 1995, 61). Similarly, using five-staff notation might lead to a lack of subtlety and specificity of the sound of *koto* music.

In addition, another problem lies in the historical origins of five-staff notation. Western classical music has long been upheld as a (or even the) peak of cultural production, particularly in Japan. Five-staff notation is also totalizing and flattening in its own way, assuming somehow that the Western model is the best universal approach. This assumes that the Western model can be universalized but other regional approaches cannot. However, it also provides a way to have conversations across the world, making music approachable by a wide range of performers playing different genres and instruments.

I am not against the orchestra, the composer, the conductor. I simply believe that naming music primarily using Western centric notions has limited the possibility of our ears, and of musical production. Why does writing music down, in a specific and certain way, without the possibility of improvisation as it exists across so many different worlds and times, make it

somehow more elevated than the music of the rest of the world? Why is a certain kind of control, with a specific White history, privileged?

Just as the orchestra is elevated, so too should the whole host of all the world's music also be elevated. Furthermore, beautiful sounds that are unnamed, uncomposed, but organized orally should also be elevated. The current notion of naming music is therefore limited. In my work, I seek to take these limitations as a starting point and think expansively about notation and naming beyond tired binaries like improvised versus notated, West versus East.

Unnamed: Freedom of improvisation

While the score represents the pinnacle of artistic control and prestige and legible, named music, improvisation provides one antidote to this focus on control, and genius. Though improvisation exists across musics, especially in non-Western and non-modern musics, the current genre of improvisation (if it can be called a genre) arose primarily out of free jazz. Free jazz arose out of mid-twentieth-century black American vernacular music, primarily jazz, and extends the traditional improvised solos in jazz to primarily or wholly improvised pieces (Lewis, 2008, xii–xiii).³ Its origins are political, and the genre focused on creating a new black avant-garde music different from the white prestige of the concert hall.

This willingness to embrace a lack of control—a humbleness—is one of the reasons I became interested in improvisation as both a philosophy and within my music. Allow me to quote at length Fred Moten on improvisation:

'Improvisation is located at a seemingly unbridgeable chasm between feeling and reflection, disarmament and preparation, speech and writing. Improvisation—as the word's linguistic roots indicate—is usually understood as speech without foresight. But improvisation, in whatever possible excess of representation that inheres in whatever probable deviance of form, always also operates as a kind of foreshadowing, if not prophetic, description ... Improvisation is already an improvisation of improvisation: through the oppositions implicit in the etymology, through the proscriptive and differential temporality of those oppositions; on the one hand, anarchic and ungrounded, opening a critique of traditions and Tradition, and on the other hand, no simple and naive, unplanned and nonhistorically driven, inscription; on the one hand, the very essence of the visionary, the spirit of the new, an organizational planning of and in free association that transforms the material, and on the other hand, manifest in and as the material' (Moten, 2003, 63–64).

Moten describes improvisation as always in reference to tradition while always working beyond the tradition, thus renegotiating the rules which have already been named. It is not a mere free for all, nor is it reinscribing sounds of the past. It operates between both oppositions. Another way to describe this is that improvisation takes place at the 'seemingly unbridgeable chasm' between named and unnamed sounds. Improvisation, therefore, is in the space between written down, named music, and the freedom of past, present, and future sounds. It is music that refuses to be fully named.

Using strikingly similar language, the free jazz saxophone player Akira Sakata speaks of the connection between Japanese and Western music: 'There's a big river between Western and Japanese music that can't be crossed. Except, sometimes by Japanese musicians' (BBC, 2019). As a musician, I am interested in exploring the confluence of the seemingly uncrossable river, and the 'seemingly unbridgeable chasm' between Japanese music, Western music, traditional music, and music that refuses to be fully named.

Musicking beyond the human

It is that refusal which is threatened by current technology. In a world of AI-composed Spotify music that people listen to mindlessly, it is more important than ever to realize that music is not mere organized sound in some endless synthetic loop. AI, in contrast to improvisation, is only ever made up of fully named sounds (metadata).

Music is connection: between people, between animals, between us and the world around. In his now canonical book, *Musicking*, Christopher Small (1998, 9) argues that music is a verb, an action. It is something that takes place in a location, with people doing certain things. It includes the small talk behind the stage, by the audience, the food, the sound. Or, extending Small's conceit, musicking is also the performance of the two birds singing to each other looking for a mate.

It may, therefore, be time to extend our notions of music beyond the human.⁴ Bird sounds, frog cries, even the sound of the wind in the trees. Whales have musical culture they transmit across huge distances and teach each other over migrations across the world (Allen et al., 2022). These are sounds that poets of old have written about in a variety of cultures over time. These are organized sounds that are pleasant or sometimes even have meaning. Is their music any less important than ours? If humans are in the business of naming sounds, organizing them into music, we need to change our parameters for naming sound, for composing, organizing, and sharing music, so that it includes the grand sum total musics of the earth.⁵

I am certainly not the first person to hold such a view, and for some readers, the argument that we need to expand our understanding of music and sound might seem obvious. However, it is only recently that hierarchical understandings of sound have begun to be called in question. Previously, nineteenth-century Western ideals of a pure or absolute music, removed from emotionality or everyday life, were held up as the peak of musical production (Bonds, 2014). This philosophical perspective was, often, based around formalism (Young, 2014). Of course, this music was always notated, by the composer who was a genius, almost always male, and played in a concert hall, with a tyrannical conductor. Though many have called into question that ideal, we are still stuck with those historical artifacts, and those male-, human-, and Western-centric perspectives. We therefore need to expand the ways that we name music.

What's in a dialect?

However, to expand how we name music, to make legible musics both human- and animal-made, also comes with downsides. This double-edged sword became apparent to me when I started to learn traditional folk music of the Gujō region, in Gifu, central Japan. The area has many festivals, and the basis of all the music is a solo singer, with background singers, with or without backing of *shamisen*, flute, and percussion. There are some notated pieces, but many of the performers grew up learning the songs at the festivals themselves and have no need for anything other than some lyric sheets, if that. The lyrics are based around local history, mostly in the local dialect. These days, only those in their eighties or older speak the dialect, with younger people sprinkling a few words within standard (meaning Tokyo) Japanese forced onto people across Japan starting towards the end of the nineteenth century.

What will happen when the last person who speaks the dialect daily dies? It will be within the next fifteen or so years. Of course, I and others can learn to sing the songs, but this is from the perspective of an outsider—someone who comes from afar. Even those who grew up hearing the local songs access the dialect as outsiders themselves, as merely lyrics. By notating and recording, we can name these local songs and make them legible to the broader world, and to later generations. However, this problem is occurring in a world of standardization, where objects, music, ideas are named and made legible across countries, and borders. Ultimately, one of the main objectives of naming is standardization.

Named/unnamed *koto* music

Improvisation represents one possible path forward between naming (which comes with both legibility and standardization), and the unnamed, the local, the specific, the unknowable. The 'seemingly unbridgeable chasm' between named and unnamed sounds is not so unbridgeable after all.

My music straddles multiple genres: traditional *koto* music, named in a specific composition style, accessible only to practitioners; compositions influenced by the canon of twentieth-century (Western) new music, named within a specific avant-garde lineage; and improvisation, which may or may not be named but is always in reference to named genres, lineages, and sounds.

By combining Western five staff as well as *koto* notation, improvisation, local Gujō or *koto* repertoire, my work seeks to be both legible and accessible to a wide range of listeners as well as to call into question the very fact that the legibility is necessary or required. I know I cannot access Japanese music as someone could in the past: a local, a native. I always access these pieces as an outsider, listening to them through my Western inflected ears. But I take this as a positive starting point, to use that perspective as

an outsider/insider to try to broaden the horizon of what counts as named music.

Some of my recent work with the pianist Alexander Dubovoy (which can be accessed within this essay), does exactly that. Together, we combined jazz, improvisation, and Gujō folk songs to create music that seeks to name that which has thus far not been named while also allowing space for some music that cannot be named. By leaving space for new interpretations of old sounds (through improvisation as well as by performing the traditional pieces in a new context), our music may, just a little, bridge that ‘unbridgeable chasm’ or the uncrossable river.

Conclusion: An ending question

Someone recently said to me that a composition can take the position of a question—and not a statement. Meaning: it can be part of a conversation and therefore pose a question, not assume that it can give all the answers, as many compositions have in the past. This essay, then, has been an exploration of the question I started with: what do you lose when you name something in a way that is legible across borders, and what do you gain? One answer to this question is choosing not to name all music, allowing some of it to remain illegible beyond specific contexts. It may also be about a strategic changing of names based on the context, a kind of codeswitching as required for different situations. Of course, ultimately, this is an unanswerable question. A kind of question to which someone can devote their life. And I hope to do so, whether it be in my music or in my writing, or any number of other unnamable things that make up my life.

1. Throughout this article, I therefore use the terms ‘Japanese music’ and ‘traditional Japanese music’ as merely a shorthand to contrast with Western classical or Western-influenced popular vernacular music. However, I use them critically and with awareness of their limits.
2. There are some exceptions, like jazz chordal progression charts.
3. Here, I am choosing to highlight the history of the black avant-garde and improvisation, though the specific histories of the interconnected genres of free jazz, experimental music, improvisation, and avant-garde music are beyond the scope of this article. For more, see Lewis & Piekut, 2016; Monson, 1996; Nyman, 1999.
4. Now that we are in climate collapse, scholars have begun to consider the agency of the non-human actant. See for example, Haraway, 2008; Latour, 2014.
5. See Bernie Krause’s (2013) work on natural soundscapes as an example.



An [improvisation](#) based on ‘Yoitosorya,’ a traditional piece from the Haiden Odori festival, Gifu Prefecture, Japan. Performed by Alexander Dubovoy (piano) and Katherine Whatley (koto and voice) at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, January 2026. @ All rights reserved, used with permission.

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Book review

**Debré, C. (2025). Name (H. James, trans.).
Profile Books. ISBN: 9781800819870**

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Joja Bos
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Jesse van Amelsvoort & Joja Bos

Jesse van Amelsvoort (JvA):

Nom, published in French in 2022 translated into English as *Name* three years later, is the third novel in an autobiographical trilogy by the French writer and former lawyer Constance Debré. In the first two parts, *Playboy* (2018, also spelled *Play Boy* in the French edition; English translation 2024) and *Love Me Tender* (2020, English translation 2023), the main character—an autofictional ‘I’ who resembles Debré—chronicled the discovery of her lesbianism and the subsequent end of her marriage. She starts to move from one temporary apartment to another, fleetingly takes up lovers, and discards the material possessions that she now considers are holding her down. She rids herself of her old life, while a new one has not yet taken form. It is a radically queer gesture, through which Debré aims to unshackle herself from the bourgeois, patriarchal life she led up to that point.

In *Name*, Debré takes this process further by interrogating what her last name means. There are passing references in *Playboy* and *Love Me Tender* to the weight of her father’s, as well as her mother’s, last name and the expectations that come with it. The name ‘Debré,’ it is suggested, is about as aristocratic as one can be in post-revolutionary France. Indeed, her grandfather served as Prime Minister under President Charles de Gaulle and drafted the Constitution of the current Fifth Republic. A quick Wikipedia search confirms the presence of more politicians in the family, as well as painters, prominent scientists, and a rabbi—her great-great-grandfather Simon Debré. Due to France’s patrilineal naming customs, establishing her mother’s family’s pedigree is less easy, yet in *Name*, Debré writes about them as well: her mother was born in a château with ‘a marble bust of an ancestral baron’ in the entrance hall, while her grandfather was an MP, ‘a government minister even’ (11). ‘Aristocracy makes you crazy,’ the narrator concludes (12).

Debré suggests a parallel between ridding herself of the furniture, the books, and other material possessions, as well as familial connections, earlier in the trilogy, and the reckoning with her name and its symbolic meanings in *Nom*. She cannot discard her last name the same way she threw out her books, but she can try to reconfigure its meanings. Joja, I would like to think about this parallel a bit more with you.

After the first references to her family’s historical importance, the narrator later continues:

‘In my family there are no factory workers, no farmers, no maids, no schoolteachers, no shopkeepers, no low-level civil servants, and also no convicts, whores, fags, murderers, no strangers, no refugees, no immigrants. In my family there are government ministers (under de Gaulle, Pétain, Giscard, Pompidou, Napoleon III, Louis XV, etc.), deputies (under each government), counts, barons, a duchess, two famous

painters, a railway-station architect, a winner of the Prix de Rome, some rabbis, pastors, medical-school professors, diplomats, members of the Jockey Club and of the Académie Française' (33).

If we are our name, and if we are our family, then this is who Debré is. An old family, an imperial family, a morally wrong family; a Christian family, a Jewish family; and above all: a political family. By embracing her lesbianism, however, Debré turns one of the negatives—'In my family there are no'—into a positive: 'In my family there is at least one "fag."' This special issue of *The February Journal* asks what it means to be named and what happens when our names cross a border. It seems to me that Debré, or her narrator, grapples with exactly that question. Perhaps *Nom* itself constitutes a border-crossing, staging a confrontation with a legacy, a tradition, and an inheritance that the queer protagonist rejects.

Joja Bos (JB):

Although I appreciate your framing of *Nom*, Jesse, and the book is particularly generative for thinking about 'naming,' both as a concept and a potential queer gesture, I must confess that I approach Debré's book(s) from a position of hesitation and with a certain unease. Perhaps before we discuss the family name of Debré, we need to delve into the naming of homosexuality—the term she uses for herself throughout the books—and the practices she describes as such. Because my main doubt throughout the books was the question that returned to me: is this 'queer,' or is this just a provocative and 'radical' (for the heterosexual order) description of homosexual practices, where we find patriarchal and heteronormative ideas behind a homosexual façade?

And yes, I already hear the question: who am I, or anyone for that matter, to decide whether something or someone is 'queer,' especially if this is not a term the author uses for herself? Perhaps the question is not the queerness of a subject per se, but queerness as a gesture: a movement that disrupts but can also reproduce normative arrangements. Think Lauren Berlant (2022, 16): 'To queer something doesn't mean just to stick an antinormative needle into it, but to open up a vein to unpredicted and nonsovereign infusions.' I think in some ways Debré is convincingly doing this: take, for example, how, in *Love Me Tender*, she describes her relationship to motherhood, and how, for her, there is no essentialist love between a mother and child:

'I don't see why the love between a mother and son should be any different from other kinds of love. Why we shouldn't be allowed to stop loving each other. Why we shouldn't be allowed to break up. I don't see why we shouldn't stop giving a shit, once and for all, about love, or so-called love, love in all its forms, even that one. I don't see why we absolutely have to love each other, in families or elsewhere, and why we have to go on about it in the whole time, to ourselves to each other' (Debré, 2023, 7).

In this quote, Debré is clearly taking an unpredicted turn, a non-sovereign perspective on the relationship between a mother and a son, often taken for-granted as a natural order, interrogating how we are supposed to relate to

our biological family subjects. It seems like a radical gesture, a queer gesture maybe, in Berlant's conceptualization.

But then, throughout the books, these attempts to break with normative family relationality and her broader 'freedom' project (no house, no belongings, except some clothes and her swimming pool pass) are repeatedly infused with what I would call an ontological determinism of the body that are dipped in normative (or might I say misogynist?) ideas like this:

'A woman's body is made to be touched and tasted, a woman is made to be fucked. Breasts are made for hands to feel, an ass is made to be pressed up against, a cunt is made for a face to go down on, to breathe in the scent, to slip in the tongue, the fingers, to suck and to taste, that fucking sweet taste. No man can compete with that' (Debré, 2024, 91).

Here, the body is not opened to 'unpredicted and nonsovereign infusions,' but rather fixed into a set of functions and desires, constituting what a woman is or is supposed to be; a sexual object reduced to its availability to and consumability by another, articulated through a deeply ingrained logic of desire that closely echoes patriarchal formations. In this sense, the rejection of familial inheritance does not necessarily entail a break with inheritance as such; rather, it seems to reappear elsewhere, disciplined in the body and in the structuring of desire. As a reader, I find myself pulled back into that familiar script: a body rendered as an object—as a surface for pleasure—articulated through a logic of desire that echoes patriarchal formations. Even in its homosexual articulation, this trope risks reproducing a structure in which the body is defined through what it is for, an object for another's sexual desire, rather than a subject in itself (did de Beauvoir not already critique this dynamic in 1949?).

If, as you suggest, *Nom* stages a form of border-crossing in relation to name and inheritance, I find myself wondering to what extent this crossing is sustained elsewhere. That is, whether a break with familial and nominal structures is accompanied by a reconfiguration of the body and of desire—or whether, at that level, more familiar logics persist. It is precisely this tension that makes me hesitant. This is the uneasiness throughout the books that I keep returning to: whether these moments constitute queer gestures, or rather a form of radicalized, provoking normativity that remains structured by the very logics that queer gestures seek to reconfigure—forms of violence that feel, to me at least, all too familiar within queer experience.

JvA:

You write about Debré's rejection of her familial inheritance and end by saying that her refusal to break through society's heteronormativity feels all too familiar to you. I am struck by these two words, 'familial' and 'familiar'—by how closely they resemble each other while at the same time pointing in different directions. I wonder if we need to think through them more to untangle the questions we are wrestling with. The familial: that which we all

get from our family, and that of which Debré tries to rid herself. Against that, beyond that, the familiar: societal structures that are forms of violences, 'all too familiar within queer experience.'

Do these books show, on the one hand, Debré's successful attempts to undo the traces of her family in her life, which culminate in her attack on her family name? ('Successful,' if we do not want to make too much of the fact that the only traceable names are her paternal and maternal grandfathers. That is, if we accept the invisibility of her female ancestors, those whose names and families have disappeared in the mists of history.) And does it show, on the other hand, her failure to reject social norms around identity, gender, and behavior? In these novels, Debré takes much more issue with the source of her family name than—as you, to my mind, correctly suggest, Joja—with the names available to identify herself as homosexual.

I am mindful that I think of these novels as somehow building on each other, each new volume extending the reach of interrogation. *Nom* begins in a very different place than *Love Me Tender*, which began elsewhere than *Playboy*. As if these books are teleologically building towards a grand indictment of... well, I do not know what exactly. At the same time, to refer to them as a trilogy suggests closure that prevents such an indictment, which is perhaps queer in nature. I suppose these reading strategies oppose each other, but I mean to lay bare my interpretation that Debré interrogated progressively more who she is, and that maybe a critique will follow of the names we give to the loves that do not dare to speak their names.

Or, alternatively, the familiarity of the social is where this literary project meets its end: not queer, merely performatively radical. There is a sense in which these novels seem especially interested in shocking, in being loudly queer—'queer' as in 'not-heterosexual,' 'not sexually romantic'—that is, in drawing up the façade that makes you uncomfortable.

I suppose the resistance to the inheritance of names is bordered as well by the paratextual information around this trilogy. *Nom* is printed next to 'Constance Debré' on the book's cover: she has not renounced her father's name and has not adopted another one. Surely this is difficult, legally speaking, and commercially there is something to be said for not changing an author's name either—but still: what does it mean to interrogate the weight of a name's past as a queer subject? Can those meanings be configured—also for an audience who did not know them to begin with—without the name being renounced fully and completely?

JB:

Your focus on the paratextual and on the similarity of signifiers strikes me as particularly productive, Jesse. It becomes a semiological question—with a queer undertone—of how to make sense of the relation between the signifier and the signified in these books: of the familiar—familial, and the extent to which they might overlap. Is a familial inheritance something that

is maybe inherently linked to the logics of the societal structures of violence?
This also reminded me of a statement by Debré in *Name*:

'I would have written the same book with any other parents. With any other childhood. With any other name. I would still have the same things to say. That you have to escape. From wherever, however. Escape. Get further and further away' (126).

I find this passage useful here, as it seems to radicalize the desire to escape not only familial inheritance, but the conditions of belonging more broadly. At the same time, even as Debré imagines such an exit from naming and inheritance, the text reasserts the impossibility of a complete break. In that sense, I agree with your suggestion that the continued presence of 'Debré' complicates any narrative of renunciation while also foregrounding the relative invisibility of her maternal line.

Yet I find myself wondering whether this reasoning can also be interpreted as something akin to what you earlier called 'performatively radical': as a mode in which refusal becomes legible through its own staging, through its capacity to shock or to displace expectations. I keep returning to the question of naming here. From queer theory's poststructuralist investments in performativity, subjection, and the epistemologies of sexual naming, to antisocial accounts of refusal and anti-relationality, naming has remained a crucial topic: one through which subjects become legible but are also fixed, disciplined, and constrained. It is precisely this tension that I keep returning to in my reading of Debré; it is this tension that continues to produce a kind of frustration in me, for it does not resolve into a stable position or a teleological reading.

JvA:

Joja, you are right in drawing attention to naming in a broader sense when it comes to queerness and queer theory. The very word we use, 'queer,' has a history in which its pejorative meaning has in recent decades been superseded by an embracing counter-gesture. Its direct predecessor, 'homosexuality,' if you allow me this framing, is not even a century and a half old; coined in 1869 in a Prussian legal context, 'Homosexualität' combines no less than four distinct earlier meanings (Halperin, 2000). One of these is same-sex desire. At the same time, political radicalism is not necessarily a component of how we usually define homosexuality—but it is of queerness. I started our exchange by calling Debré queer but have warmed up to, or even have been convinced by, your reluctance to do so. So let us say that *Nom* and the two books before it are clearly gay/lesbian—that is our critical act of fixing or disciplining what these novels are or do. (And, importantly, what they do *not* do.)

And so, we return to the politics of naming. It matters how we name things: calling Debré and her literary project queer or gay/lesbian does not create the same-sex desire she evokes—these terms are, after all, in fact spurred by it—but it does influence how we perceive those desires and how

we value them. From this perspective, *Nom* shows there are limitations to what we can renounce: how difficult it is to fully take a step back from one's family and inheritance. I suppose there is some stability in that reading. But I would like to ask you to return once more to your frustrations, to the tensions you feel when reading Debré. What is it that you would want from this novel?

JB:

Jesse, thank you for naming these tensions existing between naming, renouncing, and the desires that accompany them. Returning to your final question, I think my frustrations with Debré are indeed bound up with these questions of naming and, implicit in your response, its link to relationality. In a way, the novel reminded me of the debates around the anti-social thesis in queer theory, particularly because Debré's refusal of familial and social bonds raises the question of whether refusal itself can ever escape relation. Debré seems to make a move similar to Lee Edelman or Leo Bersani: one of rejection, negativity, and refusal to relate to what is clearly experienced as a failing social world. Yet what I find myself wanting from this novel is precisely a refusal of that refusal—not in the sense of restoring optimism or a naïve sense of hope, but in the sense of insisting that even refusal remains relational. As Teagan Bradway (2024, 2) reminds us, '[n]o one does queerness alone.' In that sense, I think you are right in pointing out that a homosexual subject does not necessarily produce a queer subject (or relationality) and vice versa; what is important is how relations are made, refused, or reconfigured through those positions, and that this matters. So, no, Debré would not have written the same book with a different family.

If I return to your question—what I want from this novel—it is perhaps a way of holding onto relationality even within withdrawal: a way of thinking queerness not as an exit from relation, but as a disturbance of how relation is structured, named, and withheld. The equivalent of complete renunciation—of family, naming, or social attachment—risks, for me, becoming a kind of dead end, precisely because it imagines a position outside relation rather than a transformation of it.

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Reflexive essay

Afterword: On *The February Journal's* Name

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Afterword: On *The February Journal's* Name

Katerina Suverina & Andrei Zavadski

‘Февраль. Достать чернил и плакать!
Писать о феврале навзрыд,
Пока грохочущая слякоть
Весною черною горит.’

‘February. Take ink and weep,
write February as you’re sobbing,
while black Spring burns deep
through the slush and throbbing.’

Boris Pasternak, *February*, 1912
(trans. A. S. Kline)

In February 2022, *The Garage Journal: Studies in Art, Museums & Culture*, of which the two of us were editors, was preparing an issue on the notion of sanctuary. Work was going well, and we were aiming to publish the issue in spring. But this did not come to pass. On February 24, the Russian Federation (RF)¹ launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Almost immediately after the start of the war, the RF authorities introduced military censorship in the country—and we realized that our journal, based at the Garage Museum in Moscow, could publish neither an anti-war statement nor many of the contributions to the upcoming issue. We stopped the work and started to think about how, if at all, the journal could exist in the new context. As the RF authorities were introducing increasingly punitive legislation, most of the academic writing in *The Garage Journal* became outlawed. As a result, the Garage Museum decided to shut down the journal’s website.

For years, the humanities in the RF had been promoting the idea that academia should occupy an apolitical position. This, some of our colleagues openly stated, was the only way to be able to do research; in reality it was a comfortable position that allowed scholars to avoid dealing with or even to adapt to the spread of ultraconservative autocratic power. This was never our intention. From the very first days of *The Garage Journal's* existence, we paid a lot of attention to queer and gender studies, feminist agendas, inclusion and discrimination—topics that, in the pre-war RF, were time and again politicized. When the RF started its full-scale war against Ukraine, we began a conversation with the museum management on closing *The Garage Journal*: we did not want to compromise our academic integrity by adapting to the new political conditions. The conversation turned out to be long but culminated in the museum transferring the rights to the journal’s archive and platform to its editorial team. In parallel to this conversation, from February 2022 to February 2023, we were working on *de facto* two issues:

the unfinished one, on the notion of sanctuary, and a new one, on silent resistance. The former was supposed to have been published in *The Garage Journal*; the latter was conceived for a new journal, yet to be born.

During this time, we realized that February was not only a month when our life as we knew it had come to an end; it was also a bifurcation point that made us think about and settle on a way forward. Using the platform of the previous journal, we decided to launch a new one: in a different place, with a different scope, and with different aims.

In February 2023, *The February Journal* was born in Berlin.²

Today, in the fall of 2026, the war is still going on, causing more destruction than ever. Academic life in the RF is almost destroyed by the continuing censorship, repression, and exile. Over the past three years, *The February Journal* has been working to advance a variety of decentering, queer, feminist, decolonial, and autotheoretical approaches, and, in doing so, has sought to address urgent cultural, social, and political questions. All this time, the journal's name has been and continues to be of utmost importance to its work, emphasizing the caesura of the war on a daily basis.

This special issue on names and naming, edited by Jesse van Amelsvoort, Gwyneira Isaac, and Tomasz Wicherkiewicz, does not deal with the war in Ukraine and the process of widespread decolonial rethinking of names that this war has intensified. But the fact that it has been brought by its editors to our journal seems symbolically laden. *The February Journal's* name is part of its origin story and its routine. February 2022 was a February that changed everything, and saying the journal's name has become our everyday practice of sobbing over the atrocities in Ukraine and resisting far-right ideologies by doing what academics should do: thinking, writing, and spreading knowledge.

1. We choose to refer to the country as the 'Russian Federation' and 'RF' here in order to avoid the trail of colonial and other connotations that the name 'Russia' has accumulated over centuries.
2. Issue 01–02 of *The February Journal* 'On behalf of silence, seeking sanctuary,' edited by Shura Dogadaeva (Katerina Suverina) and Andrei Zavadski: <https://thefebuaryjournal.org/index.php/tfj/issue/view/5> (accessed on 14 September 2026).

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