

Names & Naming—Identity, Self-Determination, Power

Well just look at all the other Musas in this dive, one by one, and imagine—as I do—how they could have survived a shot fired in bright sunlight or how they managed never to cross paths with that writer of yours or, in a word, how they’ve managed to not be dead yet.

— The Meursault Investigation, *Kamel Daoud (translated by John Cullen)*

The question is not whether Lincoln [in the Gettysburg Address] truly meant “government of the people” but what our country has, throughout its history, taken the political term “people” to actually mean. . . . Thus America’s problem is not its betrayal of “government of the people,” but the means by which “the people” acquired their names.

— Between the World and Me, *Ta-Nehisi Coates*

By Steven A. Burr

Until recently I was the unfortunate possessor of a shamefully deficient capacity to remember the names of people I had just met. The beginning of each semester would find me—a teacher—poring over class photo rosters, attempting to memorize each student’s name, only to find that, once in the room, my fear of misremembering, and thus perhaps hurting someone, would reduce me to vague and ambiguous means of address. Soon enough, I fell into the habit of rarely addressing people by name.

I don’t believe my shortcoming reflected a lack of interest in others, nor solipsism. My memory was seized by a fear of misnaming and of failing to properly acknowledge each student for who she or he is. And you might say that my problem was profoundly reframed by a series of events that helped me to better understand my home city of Baltimore. On April 19, 2015, Freddie Carlos Gray, Jr., was killed while in the custody of Baltimore police officers. Gray’s death brought to the surface tensions that had been simmering for years

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between law enforcement and citizens of the city. Unable to abide another unjust death, a series of protests ensued, constituting what would be called “the Baltimore unrest.”

If I may borrow a phrase from Immanuel Kant, these protests “interrupted my dogmatic slumber.” For years, I have identified myself as an educator, scholar, and writer living in Baltimore City; now, my self-identification prominently includes *citizen of Baltimore*. Shortly after the Baltimore unrest had begun, I joined the street engagement unit of the largest anti-violence movement in the city. As I grew closer with the other members in the group, and as we met more and more people throughout the city each week, I committed myself to noting and remembering the name that each individual used to identify himself or herself—Mu, Osa, Pop, Buddha, Man Man, Jules, David. Each is a real person actively engaged in the struggle to protect or attain some personal human dignity, for himself or herself, and for brothers, sisters, and neighbors, and for all the unnamed in Baltimore.

Meeting these people, talking with them and relating to them, is ultimately what helped me to recognize why remembering individuals’ names matters so much. Whereas my struggle with names in the classroom had largely been about fear of embarrassing myself or a student, I now understood the more fundamental issue at stake: remembering and using an individual’s name is a powerfully explicit way of saying “I see, *and respect*, who *you* are and how *you* define your identity.” In the end, what seems on the surface to be a simple matter of recollection turns out to be a much deeper question of individual identity and the personal power that allows for its creation.

What identity can exist without a name? In his novella *Meursault, contra-enquête* (*The Meursault Investigation*), Algerian novelist and journalist Kamel Daoud raises this question through a confrontation with Albert Camus’s novel *L’Étranger* (*The Stranger*). Harun, the brother of the Arab killed by Meursault in Camus’s work and the narrator of Daoud’s fiction, laments not merely the actions of Meursault that led to his brother’s death, but also the failure of Camus to name his brother, thus condemning the murdered man to perpetual anonymity. In the context of Harun’s account, the failure to name his brother (Harun eventually reveals his name to be Musa) robbed Harun and his mother of proper recognition in Algiers as the surviving kin of a murdered man. In some sense, their own identities were forced to remain incomplete, as their loss stood unrecognized by those around them. Of more direct import, however, is how Camus’s not naming the dead Arab effects readers’ ideas of this character.

As Daoud’s Harun contends, by failing to name Musa, Camus has intimated that, whereas philosophical questions regarding murder and the Absurd are of great importance, the man himself, the Arab whom Meursault murdered, is of no consequence. A name, if not an essential component of a person’s identity, is at least an essential signifier of the existence of that identity and thus is a crucial element of personhood, both in life and in death. Or, as Harun concludes, “It is as important to give a dead man a name as it is to name a newborn

infant.” Ultimately, if a man is not named, he is not a man at all; he is an object without an identity.¹

From this perspective, it is only a small step to the conclusion that, as an object without an identity, Meursault’s “Arab” can be subjected to myriad projections and behaviors to which Harun’s brother “Musa” could not be subjected. The recognition of the identity of “the other” necessitates the attendant realization that the other is not merely an object but a person. Further, by virtue of having personhood, the other is *fundamentally* like me, at least in some respects. This trajectory should be understood as a constitutive process of empathy and thus a founding principle of human society. Without recognition of the identity of the other, there can be no grounds for relation, understanding, or compassion between individuals. This is not to say that, had Musa been given a name, Meursault would not have shot him once and then four times more, but, had Musa’s name been given, it would have been far more difficult for Meursault, as well as for Camus’s readers, to view the victim as a philosophical concept rather than as a man, a brother, and a son, and to avoid realizing the pain and injustice of that loss.

As a *person*, with an individual *identity*, Musa compels reflection on what it means to be human and what it means when a fellow human suffers. Likewise, when we privileged citizens of Baltimore, who are largely insulated from the desperation and violence that has come to define our city, are forced to acknowledge the *person*-victims of today’s, yesterday’s, last week’s violence, we can no longer remain immune from the pain that ensues. Our position of safety and security, in part a product of unearned opportunity and ‘just’ treatment from an unjust system, is no longer insulated by the misguided conception of the victims as objects. If we as outsiders fail to properly identify them, to recognize and explicitly admit who they are—both the victims and the perpetrators—then we fail to see the problem as a human problem being acted out among human beings, and we become complicit in any failure to address the entire tragedy. We must say their names—and not the names that have been given, such as ‘dealer,’ ‘hustler,’ ‘thug,’ but their actual names. The way in which they have thought of, identified, and defined *themselves*.

In stark contrast to the recognition and respect involved in using another’s preferred name lies the action of assigning a name or label of our own choosing to another person. We are asserting power over that person (or thing) that we are naming. We are categorizing, limiting, or removing the authority of the individual to self-identify, to self-

¹ This is not to suggest that Camus’s failure to name the Arab in *L’Étranger* was an accident or should somehow be taken as an indication of his personal conviction that the Arab should have been placed in a position of subjugation. Rather, as a reviewer of this essay pointed out, and as I too believe, Camus’s un-naming of the Arab was likely no accident. Perhaps the fact that no name is given to the Arab should be taken as an indirect effect of the Absurdist position as Meursault lives it; if there is no meaningful difference in the death of one’s mother versus the death of one’s neighbor’s dog, then what meaning could possibly be gained or lost by noting the name of one who has died?

define. What's more, this effect is not always implicit; at times, the act of naming is an explicit declaration of power, deciding who or what holds value and worth. In his book-length essay *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates proposes that misuse of the authority to name is an attempt to legitimize the differences that those in power wish to establish as meaningful. "The process of naming 'the people' has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy." To assign a name, particularly when that name emphasizes difference, is to highlight that difference as something that matters in the determination of "good" and "bad."

Friedrich Nietzsche, in his *Zur Genealogie der Moral (On the Genealogy of Morals)*, made the same point in his analysis of the origins of contemporary conceptions of morality. Nietzsche points out that the notions of "good" and "bad" arose from a specific dynamic of power, as those in power ultimately created the distinctions between good (equated with what those in power value) and bad (all that fails to meet the standard of that which those who are "good" value). According to this conception, those who hold power look inside of themselves to determine the good (according to their own values), then characterize that which is outside of and unlike themselves as bad. The "good" do this to emphasize the distinction between themselves and those who are "bad," but also as a means to direct the behavior of those who are "bad" and thus maintain their own power. To name is thus to become an arbiter of value, to exercise undeserved power with devastating effects on those named, those whose power to define themselves has been taken away.

Lamenting his place in the centuries-long tale of black subjugation to unjust power, Coates concludes: "I saw that what divided me from the world was not anything intrinsic to us [blacks] but the actual injury done by people intent on naming us, intent on believing that what they have named us matters more than anything we could ever actually do." The power to name thus not only represents the imposition of an identity; it is also an imposition of the conditions within which that unchosen identity is to be lived.

In his immensely important work *Les damnés de la terre (The Wretched of the Earth)*, Frantz Fanon describes the conditions and consequences of colonialism, noting that "for a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity." Written more than fifty years ago, these words have added relevance now as the guiding ideologies of colonialism still damage cities, neighborhoods, where "difference" is held to be a normative determinant of value.² Though there are few assets which merit the place of fundamental importance occupied by "land" in Fanon's account, in cities like Baltimore one such possibility is the name.

² When viewed from outside of the place and the perspective of any community, it can be easy to judge, to evaluate, and to adjudicate based solely on the perspective or values held by those outside; consequentially, it can be equally easy to assume power to determine what is wrong, what needs to change, how the problems of the community can be fixed. Though not as explicitly destructive as the aspects of colonialism which Fanon described, this may rightfully stand as an example of a contemporary "colonialism of values."

The colonized in Fanon's account had a great deal to lose to the colonizers—their independence and their livelihood, both of which were inexorably tied to their autonomous possession of the land. In contrast, the “colonized” in a city like Baltimore often have little, by way of property, that so defines and legitimizes their position as autonomous and independent—except for the way in which they have defined and identified themselves for themselves and for others. Their names—or the possibility of their names—is sometimes all they have to call their own. Kamel Daoud similarly alludes to the importance of the autonomy to name and the consequences when it is taken away:

Strange, isn't it? For centuries, the settler increases his fortune, giving names to whatever he appropriates and taking [names] away from whatever makes him uncomfortable. If he calls my brother “the Arab,” it's so he can kill him the way one kills time, by strolling around aimlessly.

The power to name, when exercised by the individual for oneself, is the power to create and define oneself *freely* and with *intentionality*. When misappropriated and misused, the power to name exercised over others condemns them to identities they have not chosen and that may not therefore appropriately represent who they have been, are, or will be. And yet this power can define the conditions under which those who are named live and die.

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