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Oppression, Resistance, and Empowerment: The Power Dynamics of Naming and Un-naming in African American Literature, 1794 to 2019

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Oppression, Resistance, and Empowerment: The Power Dynamics of Naming and *Un*-naming in
African American Literature, 1794 to 2019

by

Melissa “Maggie” Romigh

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
with a concentration in Literature
Department of English
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and experience. I feel blessed to have found such an amazing mentor in the Department of English at the University of South Florida.

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Abstract

Oppression, Resistance, and Empowerment: The Power Dynamics of Naming and Un-naming in African American Literature, 1794 to 2019 researches and discusses the way African American authors both discuss naming and un-naming in their works and the way they use naming in their works to illustrate the dynamics of power in relationships—racial, familial, gender-related, work-related, etc. Chapter 1 focuses on the earliest forms of African American literature, memoirs in particular, also known as “slave narratives.” In their memoirs, many of those men and women who were formerly enslaved wrote about having their names taken from them and replaced with names chosen by slave masters. They also wrote about the ways those who were formerly enslaved sometimes rebelled against the names given to them and, after they achieved freedom, used names to reclaim their power and sense of autonomy. Chapters 2 (poetry), 3 (plays), and 4 (prose) discuss the ways post-slavery African American authors write about naming and un-naming or use naming to illustrate power imbalances in relationships, not only racial, but familial and gendered relationships as well. These authors write about naming that is empowering, as in a father seeking spiritual guidance to gift to a child a name that will root the child in family and guide the child in life, or disempowering, as in an oppressor un-naming, renaming, or using demeaning names to exert power over the oppressed. In African American literature, naming as a tool for oppression is most evident in deliberate white supremacist attempts to demean Black people, but patriarchal oppression and control by Black men over women and children is also illustrated in African American literature, even, sometimes, in those names that appear to be loving nicknames. This dissertation employs an onomastic lens to explore the way the authors of

slave narratives illustrate the history of un-naming, which is rooted in slavery, and it explicates the various ways African American authors since the Civil War use naming in their works to illustrate both the balance and the imbalance of power in relationships with white people, in relationships within families, in gender relationships, in parent/child relationships, and in relational issues related to economic status in Black communities.

Introduction

Swimming in a Sea of Racism

darling,
you feel heavy
because you are
too full of truth

open your mouth more.
let the truth exist
somewhere other than
inside your body.

Della Hicks-Wilson

First and foremost, in this introduction, I include autobiographic information related to myself and to the focus of this dissertation in order to address any possible misunderstandings about misappropriation of cultural material. In a 2019 keynote address at Loyola Marymount University's Center for Service and Action, Dr. Stefan Bradley titled his talk, "I need an accomplice, not an ally" (qtd. in Yamamoto 5). According to Yamamoto, Bradley pointed out the distinction between an "ally," one who sympathizes with the struggles of Black people and will help when it is convenient, and an "accomplice," one who will "risk everything" to stand with Black people in their struggles for equality and equity (qtd. in Yamamoto 5). I include autobiographical information in this introduction to position myself as ally who is working toward becoming an accomplice, as I write about African American literature and African American lives. I also include autobiographical information in this introduction because own experiences have shaped my ideas about naming, about white supremacy, about African American literature in general, and about the focus of my work specifically. My introduction,

therefore, takes an autocritographical approach as conceptualized by self-proclaimed feminist and African American writer Michael Awkward. Awkward, who employs “autocritography” as a methodological approach in his text *Scenes of Instruction, A Memoir*, says,

[autocritography is] a self-reflexive, self-consciously academic act that foregrounds aspects of the genre typically dissolved into authors’ always strategic self-portraits. Autocritography, in other words, is an account of individual, social, and institutional conditions that help to produce a scholar and, hence, his or her professional concerns. Although the intensity of investigation of any of these conditions may vary widely, their self-consciously interactive presence distinguishes autocritography from other forms of autobiographical recall (24).

What follows is an account of the individual and social constructs that helped to shape me as a scholar and sparked the curiosity that led me to discover the area of scholarly interest explored in this dissertation.

A Witness to Racial Injustice: My Path to Critical Consciousness

I write about African American literature because, as an older Southern white lesbian of working-class roots, I have been a witness to racial injustice, and I feel heavy with the truth of what I have witnessed during my lifetime. This is why I must “open [my] mouth” as Della Hicks-Wilson exhorts her readers to do.

I was born in the tiny farming town of Omega, Georgia, and grew up in Brunswick, Georgia, a town that gained national attention in 2020 when two white men were caught on video, as they chased down and murdered Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man who was jogging. For two months those white men were not arrested, and they were only arrested after the video went

viral and people began to express outrage at this injustice. Brunswick was my home from the time I was a toddler until I was seventeen years old.

My father was a peanut sharecropper in Omega when I was born, but he moved our family to Brunswick when I was six months old, to take a job as a laborer in a chemical factory. Before my birth, my father had achieved a ninth-grade education, my mother an eighth-grade education. In Brunswick, my family was labeled by upper-class Southern whites as “poor white trash” because of my family members’ lack of education and because of our low-income status. In my family, casual racism and bigotry were passed on to me before I was taught my ABCs. My parents’ racism was not spiked with hatred but with pity for and fear of Black people. My father and my stepmother truly believed that Black people were inferior to white people, both mentally and ethically.

Two experiences, early in my life, “woke” me and made me begin to question the ingrained racism of my family and my community. I want to talk about the second event first, which was listening, in my classroom at my segregated elementary school, to a speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., when I was nine years old. My parents had taught me that Black people were not as smart and capable as white people, but, listening to Dr. King, it was immediately clear to me that he was smarter than any adult I knew, far smarter than my white parents, smarter than my white teachers, even smarter than our white preacher. For me, that knowledge knocked down the last shaky foundations of racism and prejudice. But the first moment of my awakening was even more powerful, and I have carried it like a stone in my heart, with horror, with shame, with sadness, and with anger, for almost sixty years.

When I was seven years old, I was on a rare excursion downtown with my dad, walking along a sidewalk. An old Black man approached my dad with his hand extended, but, when he

opened his mouth, only a horrible jumble of guttural noises came out. My dad ignored the man and kept walking. I looked up at my dad and said, “Daddy, what’s wrong with that old colored man?” Without breaking stride, my dad said, “He doesn’t have a tongue.” Puzzled, I asked, “What happened to his tongue?” In the same tone he would have used to say the man fell and skinned his knee, my dad said, “The Ku Klux Klan caught him talking to a white woman, so they cut out his tongue.”

My dad kept walking, while I stood stunned, eyes wide and mouth agape, in the middle of the sidewalk, unable to express the roiling emotions that overwhelmed my small body and heart in that moment. I was shocked; I was horrified; I was ashamed; I was angry. I wanted to go back and save that old Black man; I wanted to hammer my white father with my small white fists for the nonchalant tone in which he delivered this inconceivable story. It was in that moment that I was awakened to the ugly sea of white supremacy that I swam in, that we all swim in, every day, but that I had never noticed before.

After that awakening experience, I saw my community with open eyes; I paid attention to interactions between white people and Black people. I saw the discrimination and humiliation and even violence Black people faced every day, and I was ashamed of my family and my white community. I made a decision to speak out about racism whenever I could, and, though I received quite a few beatings from my dad and my stepmother when I tried to tell them how wrong they were to disrespect Black people, I continued to speak up. I knew I had to speak up, to voice the horrors of racism that the old Black man could no longer articulate. In my own small way, I have always worked to overcome racism and injustice, and today I still feel the need to raise my voice, as an ally to that tongue-less old Black man who could not even say his own name.

My Journey and Naming

I first became interested in the link between power and naming in African American literature when I was a junior at Eckerd College taking a Southern Literature class and reading Maya Angelou's autobiographical fiction, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In that text, Angelou specifically discusses the significance of naming for African Americans when she writes: "Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being 'called out of his name.' It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots and spooks" (91). But Angelou also subtly illustrates a link between power and naming in that text, as every person in her story calls her childhood self by a different name.

Looking back, it seems now that I didn't simply choose the topic of naming; I feel like the topic chose me. I am sensitive to issues of naming because of my own experiences being named and renamed. In fact, I did not know my own legal name until I was five years old. As a toddler, I was called "Lisa." On the first day of kindergarten, the teacher asked each student to raise his or her hand when she called our names. When she said "Lisa," I raised my hand. But the teacher said to me, "No, sweetie. Your name isn't Lisa. Your name is Melissa." I had never heard that name, but I thought it was pretty, so I shyly said, "Okay." All day I answered to the name "Melissa," enjoying it more every time I heard it. That afternoon, I went home and told my dad and my stepmother that my name was "Melissa." They explained, "Yes, that's your real name, but we don't pronounce it "Melissa," we pronounce it "Me-lisa," so we shortened it to "Lisa." I thought "Melissa" was much prettier, so, with all the dignity of a five-year-old, I insisted that my name was not "Me-lisa" or "Lisa" anymore. I wanted to be called "Melissa." My parents ignored my request and continued to call me "Lisa." However, at school I was "Melissa."

My little sister began to talk when I was about nine years old, and she could not say “Melissa” or “Lisa.” She called me Lee-Lee, and the entire family soon picked up that nickname. So by the time I was ten, I had been called “Lisa,” “Me-lisa,” “Melissa,” and “Lee-Lee.” Over the years, friends gave me other nicknames, including Missy, Mel, Melli, and Candy (because my initials were M. M.). Additionally, when I was seventeen years old and a first-year college student, I published a few sexually explicit poems in the community college literary magazine. Since I knew my parents would read the magazine because I was the editor, I used the ironic pen name “Virginia” for the sexual poems and my own name for my other poems. In my childhood and early adulthood, my identity seemed as flexible as my name; I performed one identity for my parents, another for my teachers, still another with my friends, another as a writer of poetry, each identity having its own name.

When I was thirty and had finally settled into my own skin and my own sense of self, a friend said to me, “Your name doesn’t suit you.” Puzzled, I asked, “What do you mean?” She said, “Melissa is such a prissy name, and you’re such a down-to-earth person.” I laughed, and responded somewhat sarcastically, “Okay. What do you think my name should be?” She cocked her head to the side, peered at me quizzically, and then replied, “Maggie.” When I heard the name, it felt like slipping my hand into a custom-fitted glove. I said, “I love that! You can call me Maggie if you want to.” Over the years, every time another friend heard someone call me “Maggie,” that friend would say something about how the name suited me, and then he or she would begin to call me “Maggie” as well. The snowball effective soon lead to most of my friends calling me “Maggie,” and, when I went to work in a public library where another employee was named “Melissa,” “Maggie” became the name I was called at work as well. Ultimately, “Maggie” is the name I chose for myself. It is the name I use when I publish, when I teach, when

I meet new people. Even my mother, who chose the name “Melissa” from a book, not knowing its correct pronunciation until many years later, now calls me “Maggie.” I use my legal name only when it is required. And when people refuse to use the name “Maggie,” I feel that they are slighting me, ignoring something that is important to me. My very identity is tied up with the name “Maggie.”

“The Significance of Naming”: My Study of African American Literature

All this personal history makes me sensitive to issues of both racism and naming, so when I first read Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, when I was a forty-year-old junior at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, I recognized immediately that the author was making a point about naming in her text. For a class assignment, I wrote an essay called, “The Significance of Naming in Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*,” which focused on the importance of naming in the text, both as Angelou directly discusses it in the text and as it applies to her more subtle references to those people who named and un-named her throughout her life. On my essay, Dr. Jan Adkins wrote, “This is graduate level work!” Reading that, I found myself considering, for the first time, the possibility of going beyond a B.A., taking my studies further. Without the writing of that paper, I would never have dreamed that I, as the daughter of an uneducated sharecropper/factory worker father, as the daughter of an uneducated mother who abandoned me when I was only three years old, could achieve such a thing as a graduate degree. Much later, as a sixty-year-old college instructor with an M.A. degree, I came back to the topic of naming in African American literature when I was teaching a composition class and searching for a topic to use to model for my students, so I could show them how to conduct research and how to write a literature research paper.

Quickly, I discovered that the topic of naming in African American literature was deep and wide and rich and infinitely intriguing, so I kept researching and writing about the topic long after that semester ended. The more instances of naming as a trope in African American literature that I found, the more fascinated I became. After I had written thirty-eight pages of text and presented a paper at a conference on the subject, I realized, first, that the link between power and naming is almost ubiquitous in African American literature and, second, that not many scholars have written about naming in African American literature.

In my research, I have found only seven scholars who directly discuss the significance of naming in African American literature. Debra Walker King is the only African American I have found who has written about the topic. King wrote *Deep Talk: Reading African-American Literary Names*, and she has explored this topic the most deeply of all scholars who have addressed the subject. Kimberly W. Benston discusses naming in the poetry of four African American writers and in the classic novels *Black Boy* and *Invisible Man* in two published articles. Ruth Rosenburg, Sima Farshid, Elizabeth T. Hayes, Sigrid King, and Jim Neighbors have written a single article each on the topic, and they discuss naming in relation to either one or two specific texts in those articles. It finally dawned on me one day that if I kept researching naming in African American literature, I was going to end up writing a book, and that was when I knew I needed help. This series of discoveries led me to the decision to return to graduate school to pursue naming in African American literature as the topic of my doctoral research and dissertation.

When I took my first class in African American Literature at the University of South Florida, with Black male professor, Gary L. Lemons, I knew I had found my mentor. I also discovered in his class the methodology called “autocritography.” Autocritography has given me

ways to ground my research in my experience and has allowed me to find my voice in writing about African American authors who use naming to illustrate how they and their characters rebel against un-naming, find empowerment in self-naming, and use naming to undermine white cultural hegemony and systematic racism.

During the past three years, mostly years of the Trump administration, as I've been working on my dissertation, the power of naming has been reinforced for me as I've witnessed and supported the Black Lives Matter movement. After every death of a Black person at the hands of the police, protestors carry signs "Say Her Name," or "Say His Name." In memes on social media, the call echoes, "Say Their Names." In speech after speech during the Commitment March on Washington, on August 28, 2020, grieving Black families, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, spoke into the microphone, "Say his name," or "Say her name." Al Sharpton introduced each speaker by exhorting the crowd to "Say their names," or "Call their names." And the crowd roared the names of the dead, those people who were killed by police who had no reason to act with such violence, such brutality. The repetition of those names continues to empower the Black Lives Matter protestors, reminding them of the hundreds of Black people who have been senselessly killed. The repetition of those powerful names reminds me that white people have, throughout history, tried to reduce Black people to namelessness. To claim their humanity, Black people must claim their own names and endow those names with power. Since African American literature so powerfully reflects the lives of Black people, both real and imagined, my research uses the lens of onomastics to discover the powerful significance of names and naming in literature written by African American authors.

Chapter One

**Naming to be Free: Writing and Naming as Tools of Self-Liberation
for Africans and Americans of African Descent who Escaped Slavery
in the United States**

From their earliest existence in the United States of America, Africans brought to the U.S. as slaves, as well as descendants of those African slaves, had to fight for autonomy in a world ruled by white supremacists and Euro-centric patriarchal colonizers. Those African Americans who escaped slavery used two tools to liberate themselves: writing and naming. Literacy and the ability to reason and to express ideas in written form were considered to be proof of intelligence for African slaves and former slaves, and the ability to write well became a powerful tool used in the argument that Black people were equal to white people in intelligence. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay point out in “Talking Books,” the introduction to *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, “African American slaves, remarkably, sought to write themselves out of slavery by mastering the Anglo-American belletristic tradition” (xxvii-xxviii). Gates and McKay further argue, “the Anglo-African literary tradition was created two centuries ago in order to demonstrate that persons of African descent possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature” (xxviii). The powerful memoirs created by former slaves of African descent who had attained freedom offer ample evidence of the wit and intelligence of their authors.

The second tool used by formerly enslaved African and African American memoirists in their exposure of the evils of slavery, which is often discussed in those texts written by freed slaves, is naming. Naming became an empowering tool of the formerly enslaved in the recovery of their liberty and personal autonomy after escaping the bonds of slavery, and the authors of slave narratives often document the way un-naming and naming were used while they were enslaved and once they were free. In Chapter 1 of this dissertation I will make four inter-related claims: 1) that white supremacists used the Bible to justify enslaving Black people, 2) that enslaved and formerly enslaved Black people used writing to overcome those vile justifications, 3) that white supremacists used un-naming and naming in their attempts to de-humanize the Africans and African Americans they had enslaved, and 4) that formerly enslaved Africans and African Americans used naming as a source of empowerment as they reclaimed their full humanity.

While other scholars, including Ruth Rosenburg, Kimberly W. Benston, Mary Kemp Davis, Sima Farshid, Elizabeth T. Hayes, Debra Walker King, Sigrid King, and Jim Neighbors, have written about naming in contemporary African American literature, this chapter attempts to lay the foundation for a deeper exploration of naming in African American literature by reviewing examples of the first form of African American literature, slave narratives, and explicating those works to understand the way slaves who had found their way to freedom wrote about being un-named and renamed when they were enslaved and how they wrote about their choices in renaming themselves once they were no longer enslaved.

White Supremacy and Christianity as Tools to Justify Slavery

From the time people of European descent first brought Africans in chains to the shores of the continental states of America, the argument that holding slaves was an acceptable practice

rested on the foundational idea that Black people were not “human” in the same way as white people. Lisa Lowe asserts, “Colonial administrators, traders, and company agents cast captive Africans as inhuman chattel, as enslaveable property” (8). Lowe further says, “The correspondence of colonial administrators, slave traders, and company agents are replete with statements that affirmed their rights to own and trade human beings, designated as chattel and cargo, without reckoning with the system of enslavement that depended on violence, violation, and dehumanization” (11). The naming of African people as “chattel” and “cargo” led white people to the justification that Africans were not human, so enslaving them was not morally wrong. Tiffany Lethabo King argues that Christian Humanism gave early European explorers a basis for white supremacy, allowing them to demean the natives of the lands they explored. She writes, “From the end of the fifteenth century into the sixteenth century when Christian explorers traveled, Africans and Amerindian peoples were turned into the human others called Negroes and Indians” (16). King also says, “This form of conquistador humanism and its view of the Native and Black Other. . . produced and sustained a genocidal violence and brutal system of enslavement that relegated [Africans and other Indigenous people] to the bottom ranks of the human order” (King 16).

The othering of the people of Africa was related to skin color but was justified by naming them “Negroes” and calling them “savages” because they were not Christians. These acts of un-naming allowed slave traders to feel righteous in buying or capturing African men, women, and children as if they were animals, then selling them to white people who would use them for labor, again, as if they were animals. Lowe points out that the “treaties and correspondence collected in the Colonial Office papers repeatedly represent lands in the Americas and West Indies as [not possessed by Christian people] and refer to ‘Indians’ or ‘native’ peoples as

‘infidels’ and ‘Savages’” (9). In the same way as in enslaving them, slave holders used the idea of Africans and their descendants as “savages” as a salient point in the argument that Black people did not deserve freedom and, in essence, *needed* to be enslaved in order to become “civilized” by introduction to Western Eurocentric culture and then “saved” through inculcation into Christianity. As Lowe points out, “myths about the ‘capacity for liberty’ and narratives about the need for ‘civilization’ serve[d] to subjugate enslaved, indigenous, and colonized peoples (8). So the myth that Africans needed to be “saved” gave white people a justification for enslaving them. Ironically, once enslaved people had been Christianized, slave owners continued to use Christianity as a tool to inculcate in the enslaved the idea that slavery was what God intended for them. W. E. B. Du Bois points out, “nothing suited [the] condition [of the abjectly downtrodden slave] better than the doctrines of passive submission embodied in the newly learned Christianity. Slave masters early realized this and cheerfully aided religious propaganda within certain bounds” (120). Slave masters encouraged their slaves to convert to Christianity because Christianity offered tools slave masters could use to maintain submissive attitudes in slaves and allowed slave owners to mitigate any guilt caused by dealing in the slave trade. Howard Thurman, in his text, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, shares a story about his grandmother who had been born and raised a slave and who never learned to read. Thurman says his grandmother asked him read to her from the Bible several times a week and asked for particular passages or books of the Bible that she favored, but she never let him read to her from any of the epistles of Paul. Thurman once asked her why she never wanted to hear any of the books of Paul, and he records her response:

“During the days of slavery,” she said, “the master’s minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Old man McGhee was so mean that he would not let

a Negro minister preach to his slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. At least three or four times a year he used as a text: 'Slaves, be obedient to them that are your masters . . . , as unto Christ.' Then he would go on to show how it was God's will that we were slaves and how, if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my Maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible." (30-31)

Thurman's story illustrates how slave owners twisted the precepts of Christianity, especially the books of Paul, to make them helpful tools to maintain submissive attitudes in their slaves. Slave owners, as Thurman argues, too often gave in to "the sin of pride and arrogance that has tended to vitiate the missionary impulse [of Christians] and to make of it an instrument of self-righteousness on the one hand and racial superiority on the other" (12-13). Thurman offers a strong argument that slave traders and slave owners used the Bible to justify owning slaves. Joy DeGruy, a social scientist and professor, supports this assessment. In a documentary film called "*OWN Spotlight: Invisible Portraits*," DeGruy states, "the institution of the church was complicit with slavery" (qtd. in Egbuonu), and she points out that the author of the hymn "Amazing Grace" was himself a slave trader who believed Black people did not have souls (qtd. in Egbuonu).

While slave owners used Christianity to quell rebellion among slaves, took advantage of the forced labor of the enslaved, and provided the bare minimum of food, clothing, and shelter for those slaves, slaveholders became unimaginably wealthy, and they used their wealth to further support the system of slavery. As Frederick Douglass wrote:

The holders of twenty hundred million dollars' worth of property in human chattels procured the means of influencing press, pulpit, and politician, and through these instrumentalities they belittled our virtues and magnified our vices,

and have made us odious in the eyes of the world. Slavery had the power at one time to make and unmake Presidents, to construe the law, dictate the policy, set the fashion in national manners and customs, interpret the Bible, and control the church; and, naturally enough, the old masters set themselves up as much too high as they set the manhood of the negro too low. Out of the depths of slavery has come this prejudice and this color line. (573)

Using their wealth to buy influence, slaveholders soon held the reins of power in the church. Christianity, the church, and the pulpit became tools to keep enslaved people both compliant and accepting of their fate. Frederick Douglass expounds on this idea in his second memoir *My Bondage and My Freedom* when he writes:

We had been taught from the pulpit at St. Michael's, the duty of obedience to our masters; to recognize God as the author of our enslavement; to regard running away as an offence, alike against God and man; to deem our enslavement a beneficial arrangement; to esteem our condition, in this country, a paradise to that from which we had been snatched from Africa; to consider our hard hands and dark color as God's mark of displeasure, and as pointing us out as the proper subjects of slavery; that the relationship of master and slave was one of reciprocal benefits. (275)

As Douglass points out, slave masters systematically employed Eurocentric ideas of Christianity to maintain white supremacist patriarchy as the foundation of colonialism in the Western hemisphere. Thus, the enslaved Africans and their descendants were required “to recognize God as the author of [their] enslavement” but simultaneously as their white savior and to feel thankful for the “benefits” afforded to them by their white masters.

Reading and Writing as Life-Saving Tools / Creating Narratives of Self-Empowerment and Liberation

Another argument used to justify slavery was that all white people, regardless of their country of origin, had some form of writing as part of their culture, while none of the tribal peoples who had been enslaved and brought to the states had created any form of writing. Several respected philosophers presented this argument including David Hume (213) and Immanuel Kant (58-59). In the European, Christian, hegemonic, patriarchal society that was built on slave labor, the argument that Africans did not have a system of writing continued to be used as an acceptable justification for slavery. Ironically, in several slave-owning states, “Slave Codes” were enacted that made it illegal to teach a slave to read or write, so slavery could not possibly offer that path to full human status that slaveholders initially argued it would (Middleton). In 1740, South Carolina enacted the first Slave Code that made it illegal to teach a slave to read. Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia followed South Carolina’s lead and enacted similar laws (Cornelius 173; Rasmussen 202). Rasmussen argues:

The 1740 legislation may have targeted slave literacy because written materials, like the Spanish *cédula* [which stated that the King of Spain would grant freedom to slaves who escaped to Florida], could foment unrest among the colony’s slaves only if some of them were literate. Those who were able to read such materials could spread the word to those who could not read. The circulation of antislavery materials among slaves was not the only “inconvenience” caused by slave literacy, however, since slaves who could write might also produce false “free” passes and manumission papers. (202)

The laws passed in many states to forbid slaves to learn to read or write (Middleton), make it evident that slaveholders knew that the ability to read would make enslaved people more inalcitrant to their enslavement. In fact, one of Frederick Douglass's slave masters made this argument when his wife, who had never owned slaves before her marriage, began to teach young "Freddy" to read (Douglass *My Bondage and My Freedom* 145). Douglass recounts the conversation:

Mr. Auld promptly forbade the continuance of her instruction; telling her, in the first place, that thing itself was unlawful; that it was also unsafe, and would only lead to mischief. To use his own words, further, he said . . . "if you teach [him] how to read the bible, there will be no keeping him;" "it would forever unfit him for the duties of a slave;" "as to himself, learning would do him no good, but probably, a great deal of harm—making him disconsolate and unhappy." "If you learn him now to read, he'll want to know how to write; and this accomplished, he'll be running away with himself." (Douglass, *My Bondage*, 146)

Douglass points out that the moment of overhearing this conversation was the moment he realized that reading and writing were tools he needed if he were ever to become a free man. He writes, "'Very well' thought I; 'knowledge unfits a child to be a slave,'" and that strengthened his desire to learn (*My Bondage*, 146-147). Douglass continues, "In learning to read, therefore, I am not sure that I do not owe quite as much to the opposition of my master, as to the kindly assistance of my amiable mistress" (*My Bondage*, 147). Here, it is evident, both the slaveholder and the enslaved recognize the value of reading and writing as a tool necessary for human actualization. As Douglass concludes, "education and slavery are incompatible with each other" (*My Bondage*, 154). Douglass further points out that enslaved Africans and their descendants

who could read soon began to recognize the lies about Christianity that they are fed, reconsider the injustices of slavery, and then fight or run for their freedom. Also the ability to read and write offered slaves safer alternatives for communicating with those who would help them in their bid for freedom.

Much later in life, in a letter to his friend James M'Cune Smith, Frederick Douglass discusses why he was considering writing his memoir, despite his aversion to writing or speaking to the public because he believed there was the possibility that it would make him "liable to the imputation of seeking personal notoriety, for its own sake" (qtd. in Introduction, *My Bondage*, vi). To clarify his reasons for considering writing his memoir, Douglass wrote:

[T]here are special reasons why I should write my own biography, in preference to employing another to do it. Not only is slavery on trial, but unfortunately, the enslaved people are also on trial. It is alleged, that they are, naturally, inferior; that they are *so low* in the scale of humanity, and so utterly stupid, that they are unconscious of their wrong, and do not apprehend their rights. (qtd. in Introduction, *My Bondage*, vii)

Douglass recognized the arguments used to keep Black people enslaved and, like many other former slaves, he chose to write his memoir to offer evidence that people of African descent were indeed intelligent enough to use the pen as a tool and had the ability to write and publish their life stories. Douglass may also have chosen to write his story to encourage white people to become allies to Black people and to encourage Black people who felt there was no chance of freedom for them. Douglass, himself, eventually wrote three versions of his life story. His original short memoir *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, published in 1845, was followed ten years later by the much longer narrative *My Bondage and*

My Freedom. A third autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, was published in 1881, and it covered personal narrative events during and after the Civil War.

Because the ability to read and write, especially the ability to produce literature, was so closely tied to Eurocentric historical concepts of what a full human being was (Godwyn 13), the first works of African American literature were, as Douglass indicated, by very definition, political protests. The very act of writing and producing works of literature by African Americans became active, discursive protests against the injustice of slavery, against laws that labeled Black people as less than human. Formerly enslaved African Americans who wrote about their enslavement in memoirs (noted as “slave narratives”) were in fact saying: Look, I am a human being, too. I deserve to be free. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. wrote in his introduction to *The Classic Slave Narratives* (2021), Black men and women “were as eager to testify to their intellectual capacities as they were to testify to against the evils of slavery” (x). Douglass’s reasoning for writing his memoir represents a testament to that need to prove that African Americans who had been enslaved were, in fact, intelligent human beings and that African Americans should not be held in slavery.

Furthermore, as further testament to their own humanity, several formerly enslaved authors chose to add “Written by Himself” or “Written by Herself” to the titles of their narratives. As Rafia Zafar writes:

Announcing oneself as author was revolutionary. . . . when Henry Bibb and William Wells Brown subtitled their narratives “Written by Himself,” they were deliberately breaking southern law and literary custom alike, for a black man, much less a slave—who was juridically speaking not a man but a thing—was not supposed to be able to write. Jarena Lee, similarly, titling her text “Written by

Herself,” represented a further impossibility—a black, *female* preacher-author.”

(69)

By announcing in the title of their narratives that the formerly enslaved author wrote the memoir without the aid of a white person, those Black authors were proclaiming themselves as equally intelligent and erudite as published white authors. Writing therefore offered Black people who had been formerly enslaved a powerful tool for protesting a system that treated Black people as less than human, for using their own voices to undermine the pro-slavery argument.

The Link between Naming and the Power of the Slaveholder

Frederick Douglass writes, “Slavery in the United States is the granting of that power by which one man exercises and enforces a right of property in the body and soul of another. The condition of a slave is simply that of the brute beast. He is a piece of property” (“Appendix,” *My Bondage* 408). One of the powers of ownership was the power to name their slaves, and when slave owners gave their “property” new names, they were taking possession of those enslaved Black people and exerting dominion over those Black slaves.

There is intrinsic power in having the authority to name a thing or a person or a group of people that is part of Judeo-Christian culture as it is expressed in both the Jewish Torah and the Christian Bible; when God gives man “dominion” over the animals and that dominion gives Adam authority to name those creatures (Genesis 2:19-20). The authority to name is therefore linked to dominion. The rights of property ownership gave slaveholders the right to use Black people for unpaid labor as well as to buy and sell those who were enslaved. But the rights of property ownership also gave slaveowners the power to name, un-name and to rename the enslaved Africans and their descendants (just as they might name a mule or an ox). The rights of naming therefore became intrinsically linked to the power of the slaveowner.

Because the link between names and power has its roots in slavery in the U.S. and in Europe, the authors of many slave narratives explore those moments of un-naming and renaming in their memoirs. In “The Slave Narrative in American Literature,” Mason Lowance, Jr. writes, “As in all autobiographies the primary characteristic or theme of the slave narrative is that of self-definition” (676). How much more difficult was it then for an African person, who had been enslaved, to define himself or herself if the very essence of identity, the name, had been stripped away from the writer? Slaves who were born in the U.S. and given names that they were allowed to keep throughout their lifetime may not have experienced this anguish as often as those slaves who were kidnapped and renamed or sold and then renamed, but the slave master always held the power of un-naming or renaming his or her slaves.

Un-naming and renaming of enslaved African descendants was common in all slaveholding communities. However, because of African spiritual and familial ceremonial naming practices, for the African slaves first brought to the U.S., those slaves who had been kidnapped and ripped from their homes in Africa, un-naming and renaming not only showed the power of ownership, it tore out the very roots that connected the enslaved to their homeland. Obiagiele Lake argues, “Europeans deemed African religious, social and political organizations as inferior to European varieties” (261), so naturally white Europeans found the names of African tribal peoples and the names of enslaved Africans to be inferior as well. Europeans first “un-named” African people as a whole by refusing to recognize the various designations Africans used to refer to themselves in their separate kingdoms, tribes, and political societies. Then Europeans further “un-named” individuals when they forced enslaved Africans to give up personal and family names rich in history and cultural significance and to thereafter answer to names assigned as randomly as people today assign names to farm animals and pets. For the

people of Africa, whose sense of personal, familial, and tribal identities were tied to their names, the loss of their personal and familial names during enslavement was devastating. Abdulganiy Olatunji, Moshood Issah, Yusuf Noah, A. Y. Muhammed, and Abdul-Rasheed Sulaiman write:

In African societies, great importance is attached to names, because in general, the belief system of African people is often anchored in a name given to an individual which determines his or her personhood and character . . . the meaning attached to name plays a significant role in the definition of human self, since it is believed that a given name does not only serve as a social identity, but it also influences several aspects of human living. Thus, names are expected to influence, mold and shape the character and personality of its bearer. (73)

Emmanuel Mmaduabuchukwu Osuala confirms this African view of naming in his article “Igbo Personal Names as a Cultural Tool for Identity and Development in Nigeria,” which argues that “Igbo personal names are not simple labels used as baggage tags for mere identification purposes but have high culture content according to the owners’ belief” (500). Osuala’s research traces individual names to decode the meaning of those names. Osuala’s findings indicate that “Igbo personal names are not mere utterances, they are connotative, communicative, synonymous, and hyponymous. These names should attract respect from all since they are socio-semantically analyzable and rich in culture especially their service as an identity and contributions to the development of the nation” (514). Osuala’s research indicates that Igbo names “are not ordinary labels but do many things in the world of linguistics” (514). The loss of such a name, rich in history and culture, would greatly add to the dehumanization of individuals ripped from their ancestral homes and sold into slavery. The un-naming and renaming of an African slave thus becomes a vital step in dehumanizing the individual and breaking the spirit of the enslaved.

Un-naming and Renaming as Recorded in Slave Narratives

The first autobiography written by an African who had been formerly enslaved, *A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw: An African Prince, Written by Himself*, which was first published in 1770, is an account of Gronniosaw's voluntary exodus from Africa, his later enslavement, his religious journey, and the troubles that plagued him throughout his life. Though Gronniosaw's memoir was the first, many slave narratives followed, autobiographies written by those who formerly had been enslaved.

The first slave narrative found to specifically mention the loss of a personal name is also one of the earliest published slave narratives. It was published in London in 1794 and written by a kidnapped African, Olaudah Equiano, who was born in a province called Eboe, part of the kingdom of Benin in Africa (Equiano 32). According to his own account, Equiano was kidnapped in Africa in 1745 and brought, in a slave ship, to Virginia (Equiano 47-62). Though Equiano soon left the Americas and spent most of his life on ships, as a slave, he was brought first to Virginia and later spent time in several other U.S. cities, including Philadelphia, Savannah, and Charleston. Equiano, working as a seaman, eventually earned enough money to buy his freedom, and he continued to work as a seaman. However, as Lowe states, "the achievement of Equiano's 'freedom' was ever tenuous; kidnapped, traded, and captured, he is transferred from one owner to another; once his manumission is purchased, his life as a freed man is continuously threatened by the possibility of forcible abduction and reenslavement" (49).

Equiano writes in his narrative about the way he was stripped of his name and renamed in every situation in which he found himself. Of his time in Virginia, Equiano writes, "In this place I was called Jacob; but on board the African [S]now [the slave ship], I was called Michael" (Equiano 62). During this time, Equiano had not learned English and could not understand the

language used by the white men who had captured and enslaved him. He did not argue about the changing of his name because he did not yet realize what he was being called was, in fact, “a name” in the English language. However, after Equiano was bought by the white captain of the ship, *Industrious Bee*, things changed. Equiano writes:

While I was on board this ship, my captain and master called me *Gustavus Vassa* [after a Scandinavian chief]. I at that time began to understand him a little and refused to be called so, and told him as well as I could that I would be called Jacob, but he said I should not, and still called me Gustavus, and when I refused to answer to my new name, which I at first did, it gained me many a cut; so at length I submitted, and by which I have been known ever since. (Equiano 63)

It is worth noting that, though Equiano was known as “Gustavus Vassa” for much of his life and was baptized by that name, Equiano gave primacy to another name, his birth name, “Olaudah Equiano,” when he published his memoir, which is titled: *The Interesting Narrative or the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. By giving primacy to his given name rather than the name given to him by those who enslaved him, Olaudah Equiano reclaims the freedom and autonomy stolen from him by slave traders.

White slave owners frequently stripped away names that connected enslaved Africans to their homelands, to their families, and to the very roots of their own identity. Some of the Africans who were abducted were from rich and powerful families, while some were sold into slavery by their own people because of family debts or personal animosities (Andah and Akpobasa 3-14; Bekale 101; Lovejoy 55-78). But whatever the self that had been built up since childhood, the white slaveholder used un-naming and renaming to destroy it, in an attempt to assert the authority of ownership. In his article, “Carolina Slave Names: An Index to

Acculturation,” John C. Inscoe writes that, despite un-naming and renaming by white slaveholders, many names of African origin continued to show up in listings of slaves, names like “Quash,” “Cudjo,” “Cuffee,” “Sukey,” “Tillah,” and “Rinah” (533). Inscoe states, “The most obvious question in regard to these pure and obvious African names is how certain slaves managed to retain them, or rather, why slaveowners allowed them to do so” (533). Inscoe posits that some slaves pretended not to remember the new names assigned to them or were so slow to respond to the new names that the slaveowners finally gave up and called them by their African names. Inscoe suggests that there was a “type of slave [that was] . . . most likely [determined] to keep his native name,” and that clues for the resistance to new names can be found in advertisements for runaway slaves, for example, “TWO NEW NEGRO YOUNG FELLOWS: one of them . . . calls himself GOLAGA, the name given him here is ABEL; the other a black fellow . . . calls himself ABBROM, the name given him here BENNET” (qtd. in Inscoe 533). Inscoe argues that enslaved people who resisted acculturation through naming were more likely to run away. He says those enslaved Africans, and sometimes Americans of African descent, who were most likely to retain their African names “stubbornly resisted in whatever way they could efforts to enslave them and assign them new identities” (Inscoe 533). This resistance to un-naming and renaming emphasizes that, for many African slaves, the very essence of personal identity was often intertwined with the names given to them at birth.

Laura Álvarez López argues that names offer evidence of how individuals are viewed in a given society and how individuals want to be perceived within their society (López 159). In many cultures, names and naming practices “offer important insights into the patterns of social and cultural organization of communities and can be a key to understanding broader cultural changes” (al-Zumor and Qasem 15). In the same way that cultural meaning is found in naming

practices in African societies, significance is found in the naming practices of slaveholders and slaveholder societies. Black people who were born into slavery were often named by the white slaveholders of their mothers, though, occasionally, a female slave was allowed to choose her own child's name. However, even those names given by mothers tied the children to their slave identities, especially when the last name given was the name of the slave owner, which was most often the case.

When Harriet A. Jacobs published her memoir *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in 1861, she used a pseudonym, "Linda Brent," for herself in the publication, to protect herself from slavecatchers who had pursued her since her escape from slavery. Jacobs also changed the names of most of the people mentioned in her memoir, including her former slave masters, so those true names could not lead slavecatchers to realize that "Linda Brent" was, in fact, Harriet A. Jacobs (Hendrick and Hendrick v).

The first sentence of Chapter 1 of Harriet Jacobs' memoir reads, "I was born a slave, but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away" (1). Because her father, a slave, was allowed to hire himself out as a carpenter with the "condition of paying his mistress two hundred dollars a year" (1), young Harriet lived a life that seemed to be that of the child of a free person of color. Jacobs writes, "I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise" (1). Jacobs learned that she was a slave after the death of her father. Jacobs first mistress was kind and treated Harriet and her brother well (2-3). Jacobs writes, "I was told that my home was now to be with my mistress; and I found it a happy one. No toilsome or disagreeable duties were imposed on me. My mistress was so kind to me that I was always glad to do her bidding, and proud to labor for her as much as my young years would permit" (2). But when Jacobs' mistress died, Jacobs and her brother were bequeathed to her mistress's five-year-

old niece, and the child's father took on the role of slave master. This was when Jacobs and her brother William begin to have a deeper understanding of their positions as slaves.

Jacobs' brother William seemed to intuitively understand the link between power and naming. Jacobs writes, "My brother William, now twelve years old, had the same aversion to the word master that he had when he was an urchin of seven years" (11). The cruel nature of Harriet and William's new slaveholders may have added to William's abhorrence of the term "master." Jacobs writes of her new master, "[H]e told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in *every* thing, that I was nothing but a slave whose will must and should be surrendered to his" (12). Jacobs' new mistress hated her and called her "the little imp" (13). Both master and mistress used naming to enforce their power over Jacobs and her brother. By calling her "slave" and "imp" they took away her humanity, her individuality and imposed their will upon the child.

When Jacobs was older, she fell in love with a free Black man and sought permission to marry him, but Jacobs' slave master was lustful and wanted her for himself. He asked her, "Do you love this nigger?" (28). Her master was indignant that she would prefer a "free nigger" to himself (29). Jacobs was forbidden to see the man again, and as a slave she must obey the command of her master. But Jacobs continued to refuse the sexual advances of her slave master, even after he offered to build a house for her. Eventually, to avoid her master, Jacobs, with "deliberate calculation" (40) chose a "white, unmarried gentleman," had an affair with him and became pregnant (41). Of the child's birth and first year of life, Jacobs writes poignantly:

It was a sad thought that I had no name to give my child. His father . . . was not unwilling that he [the child] should bear his [the father's] name, but he [the child] had no legal claim to it [his father's name]; and if I had bestowed it upon him my

master would have regarded it as a new crime, a new piece of insolence, and would, perhaps, revenge it on the boy. O, the serpent of Slavery has many and poisonous fangs! (47)

Jacobs' words acknowledge that the power and right to give a surname to her child has been stripped from her as an enslaved woman. To name her child (to choose to give her child the surname of his father) would be an act of subversion against the entire system of slavery, and Jacobs, as an enslaved woman, knows that the consequences of claiming that power to name would put both herself and her son into danger.

After the birth of Jacobs' second child, Jacobs again bemoans the fact that she cannot give her child the surname of its father. She writes, "Always it gave me a pang that my children had no lawful claim to a name. Their father offered his; but, if I had wished to accept the offer, I dared not while my master lived" (59). The issue of the child's name is resolved when the baby is presented for christening, a christening that had to be done secretly while Jacobs' master was out of town. Jacobs writes:

When my baby was about to be christened, the former mistress of my father stepped up to me, and [sic] proposed to give it her Christian name. To this I added the surname of my father, who had himself no legal right to it; for my grandfather on the paternal side was a white gentleman. What tangled skeins are the genealogies of slavery! I loved my father; but it mortified me to be obliged to bestow his name on my children. (60)

Jacobs' sense of morality, her sense of right and wrong, caused her to be embarrassed that she was not married to the father of her children like her parents were legally married when their children were born. To not be able to claim the legal name of her children's father for

herself and her children diminished them all in her eyes. Without the legal right to marry the white man who fathered her children, Jacobs also lost the legal right to claim his name for her children. The legal system that allowed and supported slavery, denied Jacobs the parental power associated with naming her own children. This loss of power to name haunts Jacobs so much that she brings it up twice in her memoir, as she writes about the birth of each of her two children.

In his memoir, *A True Tale of Slavery*, Harriet Jacobs' brother, John S. Jacobs, writes, "slaves seldom or ever have more than one name; their surname is most generally that of their first master" (182), but, in other slave narratives, formerly enslaved authors recount the way their surnames were changed every time they were sold to a new master. Whichever the case, the surname of an enslaved person was almost always that of the enslaved individual's master, not the enslaved's own name. It is, therefore, easy to understand why most enslaved people who gained freedom quickly discarded the surname of the former slaveholder and sometimes their own given name as well. Booker T. Washington proclaims, "it was far from proper for [freed slaves] to bear the surname of their former owners, and a great many of them took other surnames" (23). Formerly enslaved Africans and Americans of African descent, after gaining freedom, often claimed their personal identities by renaming themselves or by accepting new names gifted to them. For example, Frederick Douglass is one of the best known of slave narrative authors, but the name recorded in history was not the name given to him at birth. As Lynn A. Casmier-Paz states:

"Frederick Douglass" is an invented, recent identity whose signature seeks to evidence the death of the fugitive and the emergence of a free man. The **name** "Frederick Douglass" is a creation that merges his given **name**—the **name** given

him by his mother—with another **name**, which is likewise “given” to him by someone else. (220)

In his first memoir, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, published in 1845, Douglass writes that his given name (at birth) was Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey (95). Douglass writes that he had “dispensed with the two middle names long before I left Maryland [where he was born] so I was generally known by the name of ‘Frederick Bailey’” (95-96). In order to escape slavery and to avoid being found and recaptured, Douglass needed to also discard the name Bailey, which was the last name of his enslaved mother, because slavecatchers would be looking for someone named Frederick Bailey. Douglass describes how he was given a forged pass with the name surname “Stanley,” and that pass, along with his forged identity, carried him into free territory (96). Douglass later chose the name “Frederick Johnson,” but when he moved to Bedford, New York, there were so many Johnsons that he felt a lack of individual identity. An abolitionist friend, Nathan Johnson, suggested the name “Douglass,” and a new identity was forged, an identity that allowed Douglass to remain free (96). As Casmier-Paz states, “The fugitive who still uses his **slave name** can be found, kidnapped, and returned to slavery” (220), so one of the most important reasons for changing a slave name was to avoid discovery by slavecatchers.

Avoiding capture and return to slavery was indeed an important reason former slaves changed their names, but there were other reasons as well. The very act of casting off slave names and claiming self-selected new names gave former slaves a strong sense of new identity and possibility, an ability to leave behind the shame of slavery and begin afresh with names that were linked to freedom and empowerment. The claiming of a name was a claiming of self, a reclaiming of personal agency. In the narratives of both Frederick Douglass and William Wells

Brown, a fugitive slave who later became a conductor on the Underground Railroad, “the moment when freedom is finally felt to be irrevocably coincides precisely with a ceremonious exchange of slave surname for an agnomen designating a literally liberated self” (Benston 3). That “moment when freedom is finally felt” also coincided with the claiming of a new name for Sojourner Truth, who fled slavery to become an itinerate preacher, a social reformer pursuing women’s rights, and an activist in the anti-slavery movement.

Though Sojourner Truth is reputed to have been a powerful orator, preaching and speaking out against slavery and the subjugation of women, she never learned to read or write, so her narrative was dictated to Olive Gilbert. However, Gilbert’s name does not appear on the text as the author; Sojourner Truth is listed as the author. Born into slavery in 1797, Sojourner Truth was given the name “Isabella Baumfree,” and she was owned by a white Dutch family who later sold her to another white man, John Neeley, who beat her because she did not speak the English language and therefore did not respond to the commands he gave her in English. She was sold several more times before she came to be the property of John Dumont who called her “Bell” (Kaufman iii-iv). Dumont’s estate was in New York, and, in 1826, New York passed a bill that would, the following year, emancipate those who were enslaved. After her slaveholder reneged on a promise to free her early, Isabella took her child and fled. Isabella went to a Dutch couple named Van Wagener who believed slavery was immoral. When her slave master arrived to take her back, the Van Wageners paid for a year of her service to prevent her master from taking Isabella from their home. Gilbert writes, “from them she derived the name of Van Wagener; he being her last master in the eye of the law, and a slave’s surname is ever the same as his master” (qtd. in Truth 21). However, after a religious awakening, Isabella informed her landlady that “her name was no longer Isabella, but SOJOURNER” (Truth 58). Sojourner Truth claimed both her

freedom and her strength by claiming a new name and becoming an itinerant preacher and an anti-slavery activist. Later, she “sued for the return of her son Peter, who had been sold in slavery across state lines,” which was a violation of New York State law (Kaufman iv). Truth, therefore, became the first Black person to successfully win a lawsuit in the U.S.

The statement “a slave’s surname is ever the same as his master” is echoed by Solomon Northup, whose slave narrative, *12 Years a Slave*, was made into a film in 2013. In his memoir, Northup writes that he was born a free black child but was kidnapped and illegally sold into slavery by a white man named Burch, a man who severely beat Northrup with “a paddle and a cat-o’-ninetails” when Northrup tried to tell Burch that he was a free man, not an escaped slave. After being sold from one white slave owner to another, Northrup writes, “a slave’s name changes with his change of master” (86). The change Northrup writes about is a change of last name only. However, whenever he was sold, Northrup experienced changes of his given name as well; Northrup was renamed several times during his enslavement. The first name change for Northrup came soon after he was kidnapped. To hide the fact that they had kidnapped a free Black man, the white kidnapers sold him under the name of a black slave who was known to have escaped from Georgia. When a white slave trader, Theophilus Freeman, came on board the slave ship to take consignment of the slaves, he called the roll of names of the captured slaves, and a slave named Platt did not answer the roll. Freeman confronted Northrup, “Your name is Platt—you answer my description. Why don’t you come forward?” When Northrup informed Freeman that Platt was not his name and that he had never been called Platt, Freeman grew angry and replied, “Well, I will learn you your name . . . and so you won’t forget it either” (Northrup 47). In this instance, Freeman used the threat of violence to force Northrup to accept another change of his name. But this example also shows how randomly slave names could be changed,

without any warning to the person who was being unnamed and renamed. Northrup voices this when he says, “On the vessel, I had gone of the name of “Steward,” and this was the first time I had ever been designated as Platt” (47). Within a very short time of false enslavement, Northrup had lost his own name “Solomon,” had been called “Steward” for the duration of the ship voyage into Southern territory, and had then been renamed “Platt” by the slave trader who claimed him from the ship.

Slave traders also used un-naming to undermine Northrup’s manhood and adult status. The slave master, who came to choose slaves from among the captives held on the ship, asked the group of Black men if they “would like to live with him, and would be good boys” if he bought them (54). The naming of adult Black men as “boys” was common in slaveholding territories and, indeed, in Southern communities even until after the Civil Rights era. To call a Black adult male “boy” was to deny his status as a grown man. Likewise, adult Black females were called “girls” or “gals,” an incidence of un-naming that denied full adult status to enslaved Black women and their descendants. Other terms of denigration used for Northrup during his enslavement included: “nigger” (61, 66), and “Ford’s Platt,” a reference to William Ford, Northrup’s slave master (66), and “a good nigger” (82). Later, when Northrup was sold to a new slaveholder, his name was changed from “Platt Ford” to “Platt Tibeats.” Northrup then became known as “Tibeats’ boy” (105). When Northrup is sold again, to Edwin Epps, his name is changed yet again to “Platt Epps” (155).

Northrup writes that he kept his true name and history secret from all slaveholders and from his fellow enslaved because of the “terrible lesson Burch taught me, impressed indelibly upon my mind the danger and uselessness of asserting I was a freeman” (200). Northrup can reclaim his true name only after he finds a white man willing to forward a letter to an attorney in

his home state of New York, an attorney who then comes to rescue Northrup by proving that he had been born a free Black man. However, the secret of his true name almost cost Northrup his chance for freedom. When the attorney Northrup writes to comes to South to find him, the attorney is searching for “Solomon Northrup,” not “Platt Epps.” The attorney is only able to track Northrup through the white man who sent the letter for him. With his return to freedom, Northrup is able to reclaim his true name and his true place as a free Black man. While, Northrup, as a freeman, reclaimed his true name and his true identity, the discarding of the slave name and the claiming of a new name allows many formerly enslaved to create a new, free identity. That “simultaneous naming and un-naming” (Benston 667) gave former slaves a new sense of identity, an ability to shed the shame of slavery and begin self-identification with a name of their own choosing.

Another groundbreaking slave narrative that engages the issue of naming is William W. Brown’s memoir *The Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*, which was first published in 1848. In his memoir, Brown begins by writing that he was born in Lexington, Kentucky, and that “the [white] man who stole me as soon as I was born” recorded the births of all the enslaved he claimed as his own. Brown’s original name was “William,” but when his slave master’s family adopted their nephew “William Moore,” they changed Brown’s name to “Sandford,” though he was ten years or more older than the family’s infant nephew. Brown writes:

When this boy was brought to Dr. Young, his name being William, the same as mine, my mother was ordered to change mine to something else. This, at the time, I thought to be one of the most cruel acts that could be committed upon my rights; and I received several very severe whippings for telling people my name was

William, after orders were given to change it. Though young, I was old enough to place a high appreciation upon my name. It was decided, however, to call me “Sandford,” and this name I was known by, not only upon my master’s plantation, but up to the time that I made my escape. I was sold under the name of Sandford.” (43)

After escaping from slavery, Brown says, “I resolved upon adopting my old name of William and let Sandford go by the board, for I always hated it. Not because there was anything peculiar in the name; but because it had been forced upon me” (43). Brown also refused the surname of his former master. Brown writes, “I was not only hunting for my liberty, but also hunting for a name” (43). He found his surname when he was in desperate need of help after his escape and a kind Quaker family bought him into their home. Wells Brown, the Quaker host, “inquired what my name was besides William. I told him I had no other name” (46). Brown asked his new Quaker friend to give him a name. Wells Brown at first wanted to rename William “Wells Brown” after himself, but William said, “I am not willing to lose my name of William. As it was taken from me once against my will, I am not willing to part with it upon any terms (46-47). Wells Brown therefore called the escaped slave “William Brown” and that is the name Brown kept for himself. By reclaiming his given name and accepting a new surname, William Brown claims his self as a free man.

In his seminal article “I Yam What I Yam: Naming and Unnaming in Afro-American Literature,” Kimberly W. Benston writes that “at the origins” of African American literature in “the slave narrative tradition . . . we find most explicitly the need to resituate or displace the literal master/father by a literal act of unnaming” (Benston 3). For enslaved Africans and descendants of Africans who found their way to freedom—through purchase of themselves,

through escape, or through the gift of freedom from a white person who either abhorred slavery or loved the enslaved—shedding the implied chains linked to a slave name was often as necessary as shedding the literal chains of the slave. Both the names and the chains were irrevocably stained with the experiences of bondage. For a person who had been formerly enslaved, finding, claiming, or reclaiming a name was a necessary step in constructing a new identity as a free Black human being.

Chapter Two

Exposing Injustice, Claiming Freedom

The Power of Naming in African American Poetry

Just as slave narratives often addressed the injustices of slavery and white supremacy, many poems written by Africans who came to be enslaved in the U.S., as well as by the descendants of those enslaved Africans, addressed the horrors of slavery and the injustices frequented upon Black people. However, other poems written by African Americans, both enslaved and freed, extolled the saving grace of Christianity brought to them because of slavery. As Arnold Rampersad points out so well in his Introduction to *The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry*, there is no one subject of poetry or one voice in poetry written by African Americans. While some Black^{2.1} poets decried slavery, other Black poets wrote about the blessings of a Eurocentric education and a Christian upbringing and credited those blessings to the institution of slavery. While some Black poets wrote about the ways Christianity was used to subjugate and control Black people, other Black poets extolled Christian beliefs. While some Black poets wrote with yearning for the lost African continent, other Black poets felt a sense of shame in what they felt to be the ignorance and savagery of the people on the African continent. While some Black poets headed North, seeking to escape white supremacy in the South, other Black poets in the North wrote with longing of their lost homes in the South. While some Black poets wrote about the love and joy found in family, other Black poets described the horrors of a difficult childhood or their fear of raising a child in a country that continued to express disdain

for Black people. While some Black poets embraced non-violent protest, other Black poets argued for violent revolution against white oppression. While some Black poets emulated the language, rhythms, and rhymes of the great English poets, other Black poets expressed their powerful thoughts and emotions in the vernacular of their homes and Black communities (Rampersad *xix-xxix*). The subject matter of poetry written by African American poets varies almost as widely as the unique voice of each poet. But, like slave narratives, the earliest published poetry of enslaved Black people in the U.S. was always used to express and argue for the intelligence and humanity of Black people. This chapter will explore the obstacles the first published Black poet overcame to get her poetry in print in 1771, the way Black poets write about un-naming in their work to expose the imposed injustices of white supremacy, and the way Black poets use naming in their work to resist racism and to reclaim freedom and empower themselves and others in their communities.

Racism and White Supremacy in the Publishing World

Because most enslaved Black people were not afforded a formal education, very few Black people in the U.S. before emancipation could read or write. But Black poets or singers existed long before the first works of Black people began to appear in print. James Weldon Johnson paid tribute to those poets/singers in his poem “O Black and Unknown Bards.” Johnson writes, “O black slave singers, gone, forgot, unfamed, / You – you alone, of all the long, long line / Of those who’ve sung untaught, unknown, unnamed, / Have stretched out upward, seeking the divine” (Lines 37-40). The voices of those unnamed enslaved Black people were heard only infrequently by white people, usually in work songs, songs sung by enslaved people working in the fields. When Black poets first began to put their words on paper, few publishers were willing to believe that a slave could author the poems that were brought to their publishing houses.

Phillis Wheatley was the first Black poet to find a publisher willing to print her work, but it was not an easy task.

Wheatley was born in West Africa and brought to the U.S. in a slave ship around 1761, when she was about eight years old. Wheatley was given the name Phillis by John Wheatley, a white man, who bought her as a gift for his wife, and Phillis's last name became that of her slave master. Wheatley's original African name is, sadly, lost to history. Unlike most slave masters, John Wheatley gave Phillis a classical education, and she became a devout Christian. Much of Wheatley's poetry reflects her faith, her gratitude for her education, and her belief that slavery gave her opportunities she would not have had in her homeland.^{2.2} Wheatley's book of poetry, published in 1773, is titled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral. By Phillis Wheatley, Negro Servant to Mr. John Wheatley of Boston* (Gates and McKay xxxii, and Rampersad xxv).

According to Gates and McKay, when Phillis Wheatley, a young Black slave girl, brought her book of poems to a white publisher, the publisher did not believe she was capable of writing such poetry. To discover how much of the work was her own, the publisher brought together a committee of skeptical learned white men to question Wheatley, to determine if she was actually the author of her own poems. Before the publisher would agree to put her poems into print, that group of august male citizens (which included John Hancock and John Erving among others) was required to write a letter stating that they had examined the young Black girl thoroughly and believed Phillis Wheatley did write the poems herself. The publisher only committed Wheatley's poems to print, after that committee of white men was convinced she was, indeed, the author of the poems (Gates and McKay xxxii).

Because the fact that a young Black slave girl could write and publish a book of poems gave lie to the assumption that Black people were not intelligent enough to create any form of literature, white supremacists began to voice a new argument against the humanity of Black people, which was that any poetry written by a Black person could not really be good poetry and, therefore, could not be considered in the same category as poetry written by white people, particularly white men. Thomas Jefferson wrote of Wheatley's poems:

Misery is often the parent of the most affecting touches in poetry. Among the blacks is misery enough, God knows, but not poetry. Love is the peculiar oestrum of the poet. Their [Black people's] love is ardent, but it kindles the senses only, not the imagination. Religion, indeed, has produced a Phillis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet. The compositions published under her name are below the dignity of criticism (qtd. in Gates and McKay *xxxi*).

Even with the evidence of Wheatley's ability in front of him, Jefferson's racial prejudice blinded him and allowed him to deny her the august title she had earned: poet. This is the first instance in print of a Black poet, who had been un-named when she was first enslaved, being again un-named as a poet, being denied the well-deserved title of poet because of deeply ingrained white supremacy. But this would not be the last time Black authors were denigrated in such a way. Men of European descent had long argued that Africans were not capable of creating "formal literature" and that this was an indication of their lower-than-human status (Gates and McKay *xxxii*). To admit that people of African descent were capable of writing poetry and other forms of literature required the admission that they were equal to white people and should, therefore, not be enslaved.

Because of slavery and the issues of racism and white supremacy that continued long after slaves were declared to be free, through the Jim Crow era, and past the Civil Rights era, the act of putting words to paper was, and continues to be, a political act for African American writers. James Weldon Johnson, in his 1922 preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, argued that the very nature and purpose of African American literature was to present evidence of the intellectual capacity of black people in order to create support for their struggle to attain civil rights in the U.S. Johnson states, “A people may become great through many means, but there is only one measure by which its greatness is recognized and acknowledged. The final measure of the greatness of all peoples is the amount and standard of the literature and art they have produced” (Johnson). However, because education was a privilege withheld from Black people for centuries, first in laws that legally prohibited teaching slaves to read or write and later in Jim Crow laws and imposed economic hardships related to race that led to inferior and/or limited formal educational opportunities for Black people, the literature of African American writers did not begin to really flourish until the 20th century, and recognition for that literature was slow to follow. In fact, as Gates and McKay point out in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, two centuries passed between the publication of Phillis Wheatley’s first book of poems and the award of the Nobel Prize for literature to Toni Morrison in 1993, near the end of the 20th century (xxxiii).

Exposing and Confronting Un-Naming

African American literature is diverse in genre, theme, and style, but much of African American literature, despite the diversity of its flowering, is deeply rooted in the difficult history of slavery and oppression as experienced by Black people in the U.S. Poetry is a genre ideal for addressing issues of identity, oppression, and resistance to racism. Moreover, because naming is

often used to express those issues, the link between naming and power is explicated in many poems written by African Americans. As Kimberly W. Benston argues, “The practice of naming in Afro-American literature reflects similar tensions (between self and community, intuition and influence, self-reliance and history)” (Benston 5).

One of the first expressions of the slave owners’ power was the act of un-naming of Africans brought to the U.S. and forced into slavery, leaving a dark echo in African American culture; thus, over the centuries, un-naming has been and continues to be addressed in African American poetry. Quincy Troupe, an African American poet, editor, journalist, and professor emeritus at the University of California in San Diego, who was born in 1939, wrote a poem honoring his grandmother in which he expressed the way the dark history of slavery and racism continued to affect her and her family. In “Old Black Ladies Standing on Bus Stop Corner #2,” Troupe writes:

because the beauty of your heroic life
grown lovely in twisted swamps
grown lovely in a loveless land . . .
of concrete blood & bones & death
of death & sweat chained to breath
didn’t matter dark proud flower
who stood tall scrubbed by cold
& rain & heat & age carrying
the foreign name given your grandfather—
who swayed body high
twisting & turning in the breeze
like billie’s “strange fruit”— (Lines 43-56).

Here Troupe refers to the “foreign name” imposed on his grandmother’s grandfather when he was brought to the U.S. as a slave, his lynching remembered but his name forever lost and unknown to his descendants. Troupe’s poem alludes to a song about lynching, “Strange Fruit,” written and performed by African American artist Billie Holiday. In three brief lines, the poem relays the tragic lynching of this ancestor at the hands of white supremacists with a lack of

sentimentality that enforces the harsh realities of Black life in a white supremacist society, while it reminds the reader of the lost names of Troupe's enslaved African ancestors.

Troupe also wrote a poem dedicated to his father, who was a professional baseball player. In "Poem for my Father," Troupe again addresses the lost name and lost history of his family.

Troupe writes:

& you there, father, regal as african obeah man
sculpted out of wood, from a sacred tree of no name no place origin
thick roots branching down into cherokee & someplace else lost
way back in africa (Lines 13-16).

Troupe's poem mourns the lost name, the lost home, the lost connection to his father's African roots, exposes the injustices imposed on his ancestors who were torn from those African roots, un-named, and then forced into slavery in the U.S.

Christopher Gilbert's poem, "African Sculpture," like Troupe's poem, refers both to a sculpture of an African or Africans and to the loss of the names of those African ancestors, who should have been remembered and honored. Gilbert, who was a poet, practicing psychologist, and winner of the Walt Whitman prize, says that he wrote the poem "African Sculpture" "[a]fter looking at figures from the Baluba tribe at the DeCordova Museum" (epigraph to "African Sculpture"). While it is impossible to know exactly which sculpture Gilbert was writing about, it is clear that the African sculpture moved Gilbert emotionally, as he writes, "my arms reach out to touch their darkest names. / I seem to be remembering something" (Lines 18-19) . . . "It might be . . . an old language rising up in the throat of / wings" (Lines 21-22). The sculpture seems to evoke for Gilbert a lost African past and creates a longing in the poet for the lost "darkest names" of the African ancestors depicted in the sculpture.

Among the numerous poets who have written about the un-naming of enslaved Africans is Gwendolyn Brooks, who won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950 and was the first African

American writer to win a Pulitzer Prize. Brooks confronts the issue of un-naming in the poem “Winnie,” a long poem broken into sections defined with Roman numerals and subtitles. In section II, subtitled “Song of Winnie,” Brooks writes, “Hey Shabaka. / Donald and Dorothy and William and Mary. / Angela, Juan, Zimunya, Kimosha. / Soleiman, Onyango and Aku and Omar. / Rebecca. / Black Americans, you wear all the names of the world! / Not a one of you ex-Afrika Blacks out there has his or her Real Name” (Lines 1-9). Here Brooks confronts the reality that all of the Black people who were brought out of Africa and forced into slavery were stripped of their identity, stripped of their names. As Brooks points out, even those African Americans born into freedom and named by their parents have lost the roots of those ancestral African family names and now carry given names and surnames that no longer connect back through the generations to their ancient ancestors.

Not all African American poets reject the European names imposed on their ancestors and passed down through the generations. In fact, some Black poets embrace their European names and the names of their family members. In one of his poems, published first in his 1968 volume *Poems from Prison*, Etheridge Knight expresses his longing for family as an incarcerated Black man. In “The Idea of Ancestry,” Etheridge Knight writes, “I have the same name as 1 grandfather, 3 cousins, 3 nephews, / and 1 uncle (Lines 14-15). In this poem, the listing of those who share Knight’s name seems to be part of a celebration of the family the incarcerated narrator can no longer physically be a part of. The remembering and sharing of his own name, passed down through the generations, keeps Knight grounded and rooted in his family, despite his incarceration.

Lucille Clifton also celebrates her own given name. In “the lost baby poem,” Clifton writes about the loss of an unborn child and about her own birth and her own name. In the part of

the poem that addresses her own birth, Clifton writes, “light / on my mother’s tongue / breaks through her soft / extravagant hip / in life. / Lucille / she calls the light, which was the name of the grandmother / who waited by the crossroads / in virginia / and shot the whiteman off his horse, / killing the killer of sons. / light breaks from her life / to her lives . . . / mine already is / an afrikan name (Lines 21-37). “Lucille” is a French name that means “light,” which explains the phrase “Lucille / she calls the light.” In this poem, Clifton claims the French name that was her grandmother’s name. She claims the name, that others would consider to be a European name, as “afrikan,” adopting her French name as a Black name. The adoption of her name as an African name empowers Clifton, drawing her closer to her African ancestors.

Beyond the taking away of African names and the imposition of European names, one of the acts of un-naming most often explicated in African American literature is the use of demeaning names by white people in their attempts to dehumanize and oppress Black people. Among those demeaning names, the one most frequently used as a tool of white supremacist oppression is both heinous and controversial. As Benston points out, “‘Nigger’ is a mechanism of control by contraction; it subsumes the complexities of human experience into a tractable sign while manifesting an essential inability to *see* (to grasp, to apprehend) the signified” (Benston 5). The use of this word is the penultimate form of un-naming. It takes away both the individuality and the humanity of the one signified by the term. The word is used so frequently by white supremacist adults that they teach their children, not only the word, but how to use it as a weapon against Black children, and this is exemplified in the poetry of Countee Cullen, when he writes about an early childhood experience. Arnold Rampersad argues, “the historical reality surrounding the [B]lack child typically makes that child a more compelling, freighted subject” (xxii). Cullen’s poetic snapshot of a moment when he was un-named by this term is, indeed, such

a “compelling, freighted subject,” even more so because of the seemingly lighthearted tone of the first stanza of the poem. In “Incident,” Cullen illustrates ingrained racism and its effects on those who are un-named by racists:

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keeping looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was not a whit bigger.
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me “Nigger.”

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That’s all that I remember. (Cullen Lines 1-12)

Because the term “nigger” is intentionally used to demean or denigrate an individual, the first time a child is called by this term makes a lasting impression, and Countee Cullen never forgot the sting of that moment. Though the eight-year-old Cullen had eight months of supposedly exciting experiences in Baltimore, the moment of being called “nigger” made a stronger impression than any of the other experiences; perhaps the incident was so negative in its impact that it completely wiped out the positive experiences of the trip and thus the positive memories.

Poet and professor, Cornelius Eady, writes of a similar experience and the aftershocks of such un-naming, though he was not a child when the incident occurred. In his poem, “Song,” Eady writes, “*Nigger-Lover* is a song, spat out / Of an open car window / At dusk” (Lines 1-3). Referencing a time spent living in Lynchburg, VA, Eady writes, “the / First time in / Five years we’ve / Heard it. We / Almost made it, / Amazed this hasn’t / Happened before. It / Was the end of / Our going away party (Lines 5-13). Eady repeats for emphasis, “The end of our / Going

away party. Almost, / Almost, almost got out / Scot-free, almost / Didn't have / To hear it" (Lines 25-30). Eady never repeats the offensive term, but the echoes of it and the pain of it can be heard in his repetition of the phrase "Going away party" and in the repetition of the words, "We / Almost, almost, / Almost / Got away (Lines 40-43).

To call a Black person "out of their name" is for a white person to use an insulting name or to not honor the names Black people have chosen for themselves. Maya Angelou unpacks the history behind this phrase in her autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Angelou writes, "Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being 'called out of his name.' It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots and spooks" (Angelou 91). Sterling A. Brown also alludes to this phrase, "call a person out of his name," in his poem "Old Lem." Brown writes that old Lem said, "Whippersnapper clerks / Call us out of our name / We got to say mister / To spindling boys" (Lines 11-14). "Whippersnapper" is a Southern term for a young person, someone who is not an adult, someone who lacks maturity. The narrator of the poem "Old Lem" is an old Black man working in the cotton fields, carrying cotton to the commissary. The young white males working there must be called "mister" by the old Black man. And those young males call Old Lem out of his name, either using derogatory names or refusing to call Old Lem by his name. The disrespect of white male to Black male, of young man to old man is exemplified in this poem, when the young white clerks "Call us out of our name" (Line 12). Calling a Black person out of his or her name is a form of disrespect commonly used by white supremacists and still doing psychic damage in the 21st century.

In “A Reconsideration of the Blackbird,” Thylia Moss, poet and teacher, takes some of the negative names used by white supremacists to denigrate Black people and deconstructs them. Moss writes, “Let’s call him *Jim Crow*. / Let’s call him *Nigger* and see if he rises / faster than when we say *abracadabra*. / *Guess who’s coming to dinner!* / Score ten points if you said blackbird” (Lines 1-5). In her poem, Moss plays with references to blackbirds five times directly and several other times with references to children’s rhymes, ending the poem with three problems and three solutions. Moss writes, “Problem: What would we do with 13 little black tongues? / Solution: Give them away. Hold them for ransom. Make belts. / Little nooses for little necks. / Problem: The little nooses fit only fingers. / Solution: Get married. / Problem: No one’s in love with the blackbirds. / Solution: Paint them all white, call them visions, everyone will want / one” (Lines 18-25). Here Moss exposes white supremacy “No one’s in love with the blackbirds / . . . Paint them all white . . . everyone will want / one” (Lines 23-25), showing that only the color “black” and the name “black” make the blackbird the subject of hate instead of something to be desired. Moss implies that the hated blackbird would be loved if only it were white.

Empowerment through Naming

Some African American poets use their work to reclaim offensive terms of un-naming, taking white supremacists’ terms and making them their own, much like feminists today have reclaimed the offensive word “bitch.” Black poets often reclaim terms that are offensive coming out of a white person’s mouth and make those words empowering by including them in lists of more self-affirming names. Lamont B. Steptoe, poet, photographer, and publisher, who was born in 1949, did exactly this in his poem “A Hambone Gospel,” which uses Black vernacular to celebrate the strength of Black people. Steptoe writes:

we niggers
and nobles
knights and queens
we dancers
and jazzers
singers and saints
prophets and haints
we
a hambone people (55).

By claiming the offensive acronym “nigger,” alongside the empowering terms “nobles” and “knights and queens,” Steptoe, in essence, lifts the word “nigger” from derogatory to praiseworthy. Steptoe’s embracing of the offensive term “nigger” takes the sting out of a word usually intended to act like a poisoned dart.

In her poem “Our Grandmothers,” Maya Angelou both exposes the toxic un-naming of Black women by white supremacists and misogynists, while she employs the power dynamics of positive naming to empower Black women. Angelou exposes to the light a devastating list of derogatory names used as rhetorical violence to diminish the humanity of Black women throughout history’s darkest eras. Angelou writes:

She heard the names,
swirling ribbons in the wind of history:
nigger, nigger bitch, heifer,
mammy, property, creature, ape, baboon,
whore, hot tail, thing, it. (Angelou Lines 44-48)

In Angelou’s poem, the list of racial slurs focuses specifically on terms used by white people to un-name and denigrate African American women. Patricia Hill Collins argues that white supremacists have used such terms, and others, in order to objectify black women as the “other” (58-69), an example of the way intersectionality works, with both the “Black” and the “female” parts of identity making Black women subject to discrimination. Use of such a derogatory name marks the signified as “other,” as not white/not male, therefore not deserving of respect.

According to Trudier Harris, other terms used to objectify black women include: “Matriarch, Emasculator and Hot Momma. Sometimes, Sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy, and Girl . . . Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient, and Inner City Consumer” (qtd. in Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 67). These terms were, and sometimes still are, employed as rhetorical tools to objectify and un-name black women in order to deny their humanity. But Angelou refuses and resists such un-naming by white people and uses empowering naming to signify the strength and beauty of Black women. Angelou dismantles the racist signifiers she recites earlier in the poem by renaming all Black women with the names of powerful Black female legends. Angelou writes:

These momma faces, lemon-yellow, plum-purple,
honey brown, have grimaced and twisted
down a pyramid of years.
She is Sheba and Sojourner,
Harriet and Zora,
Mary Bethune and Angela,
Annie to Zenobia. (Angelou “Our Grandmothers” Lines 88-94)

In these lines, Angelou alludes to the biblical story of Queen of Sheba who brought gifts to King Solomon (1 Kings 10). Angelou also alludes to Sojourner Truth, a former slave who renamed herself and began a powerful orator, arguing against the injustices of slavery; to Harriet Tubman, a former slave who became a conductor on the Underground Railroad; to Zora Neale Hurston, who was a famous author of novels about Black life; to Mary Bethune, an educator and activist who founded the National Council for Negro Women; to Angela Davis, an educator, a Civil Rights activist, and founding member of the Committees of Correspondence for Democracy and Socialism; to Annie Malone, the first Black woman millionaire; to Septimia Zenobia, a third-century warrior queen of the Palmyrene Empire in Syria. Angelou invokes the names of biblical and historical Black female heroes to make the statement that all Black women have the strength

and beauty of those grandmothers, those role models, who have come before them. By renaming Black women with the empowering, recognizable names of powerful Black women who have come before them, Angelou uses the power of naming to instill in Black women the strength of their heroic ancestors. By describing those women in shades of color from “lemon-yellow” to “plum-purple,” Angelou makes it clear that all Black women are included in this lineage of strength and beauty, whether they are purely of African descent or have mixed ancestry.

The use of a such a list of empowering names is also found in the work of Marilyn Nelson Waniek, poet, professor, chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and winner of the Frost Award. Waniek uses such a list in her poem “Porter,” which is a tribute to the Tuskegee Airmen, the Black pilots (and their support crews) who fought in World War II. Waniek writes, “Tuskegee Airmen, uncles of my childhood, how shall I live & work / to match your goodness? Can I do more than murmur name upon name, / as the daughter / of a thousand proud fathers? / Jefferson. / Wilson. / Sparks. / Toliver. / Woodward. / Mitchell. / Price. / Lacy. / Straker. / Smith. / Washington. / Meriweather. / White (Lines 37-57).^{2,3} Waniek’s listing of the names, one after another, each its own sentence, each standing alone on a line, feels like an incantation, a prayer. The names of those heroes become a source of empowerment in and of themselves to the African Americans who take pride in those Tuskegee Airmen.

Though many words, when used by a white person, are extremely offensive, the poet Amiri Baraka, whose given name at birth was Everett LeRoi Jones, often reclaims the word “nigger” in his poetry as an ironic form of radical resistance to white supremacy. For example, in the poem “Numbers, Letters,” which was written before he changed his name the second time, Baraka writes, “I’m Everett LeRoi Jones, 30 yrs old. / A black nigger in the universe. A long breath singer, / would be dancer, strong from years of fantasy / and study” (Lines 29-32). Here

Baraka uses the term “nigger” as a simple part of his identity, and there is no negative or positive connotation in the way the term is used. But Baraka also uses the term in a positive way in the poem “leroy.” He writes:

I wanted to know my mother when she sat
looking sad across the campus in the late 20's
into the future of the soul, there were black angels
straining above her head, carrying life from our ancestors,
and knowledge, and the strong nigger feeling. (Lines 1-5)

Here, because the term, which is usually considered a slur, follows “carrying life from our ancestors, / and knowledge,” the phrase “strong nigger feeling” evokes a positive energy coming from Black ancestors. Baraka reclaims the word “nigger,” extracting the sting of prejudice and inserting an ample measure of pride.

Baraka’s choice to change his own name may have been an attempt to empower himself and assert authority over his own life, since it is clear from the context of Baraka’s body of work that he has a deep understanding of the importance of naming. In many of his poems and plays, Baraka uses the names of historical, popular, and political figures to evoke ideas and emotions. The poem that most exemplifies Baraka’s understanding of the power of naming is “Understanding Readiness,” which uses the word “name” four times. The poem asks, “How do we know who we are” (Line 1); How do we know who are our friends and who are our enemies (Line 8), and How do we know who can lead? (Line 12). The answer to the question is: “By Their suffering in our name, the jailings, the beatings, and / torture, only by the way our enemies describe them” (Lines 16-17). The poem goes on to ask, “Can we name those who are our heroes?” (Line 22) and later declares, “We know if we call his name he will come” (Line 33). The poem ends with this stanza that uses a list of names to evoke power:

And what is this Brother’s name?
Organizer, Black Panther, Lowndes County, SNCC, Black Power!

Black United Front, Pan Africa, Nkrumahist, Scientific Socialist,
Ready for the Revolution, Undying Love For The People, All
African Peoples' Revolutionary Party, Stokely Carmichael, Kwame
Toure, Comrade, Warrior, Ideologue, Thinker, Revolutionary,
Leader, Hero, My Man, Brother! Our Dear Brother!! (Lines 46-52)

Baraka honors one Black hero personally when he evokes the names “Stokely Carmichael” and “Kwame Toure,” which is the chosen name of the man born as “Stokely Carmichael.” Toure was a leader in the Black Power movement that Baraka also names in these lines. Baraka evokes several organizations, linked to Kwame Toure, that fought for the rights of Black people, as well as the titles of strong workers and heroes (“Comrade, Warrior, Ideologue, Thinker, Hero, My Man, Brother”). These titles “name” the “Brother” who is a leader in the Black community, thus further empowering Black leaders. Baraka names Toure as “Brother” to underscore the power of the term “Brothers.”

Like the poems of Angelou and Waniek discussed previously, Baraka’s poem “In the Tradition” evokes the magic of powerful historical figures by calling out the names of Black heroes who continue to empower African Americans. Baraka lists the names of famous Black abolitionists alongside the names of well-known jazz singers. Baraka writes:

Tradition
of Douglas
of David Walker
Garnett
Turner
Tubman
of ragers yeh
ragers

(of Kings, & Counts, & Dukes
of Satchelmouths & SunRa’s
of Bessies & Billies & Sassys
& Ma’s

(Baraka Lines 44-55)

Lines 45 through 49, evoke the names of famous abolitionists Frederick Douglass, David Walker, Henry Highland Garnett, Nathaniel “Nat” Turner, and Harriet Tubman. Lines 52 through 55 evoke the names of famous jazz musicians Riley B. King (guitarist better known as B. B. King), Joseph Nathan Oliver (cornet player and band leader better known as King Oliver), William James Basie (pianist and band leader better known as Count Basie), Edward Kennedy Ellington (pianist better known as Duke Ellington), George Duke (pianist), Louis Armstrong (trumpeter and vocalist sometimes called Satchelmouth or Satchmo), Le Sony’r Ra (pianist and poet best known as Sun Ra, whose birth name was Herman Poole Blount), Bessie Smith (vocalist), Billie Holiday (vocalist), Sarah Vaughn (vocalist sometimes called “Sassy”), and Gertrude Rainey (vocalist best known as Ma Rainey). Baraka lists African American activists and musicians together to demonstrate that the tradition of Black people in the U.S. is not tied solely to the dreadful history of slavery but has a rich culture as well.

Baraka continues to name African American activists, authors, a musician, and a college professor, all historical figures with the name Brown: “Brown Welles / & Brown Sterling / & Brown Clifford / of H Rap & H Box” (Lines 60-63).^{2.4} Baraka’s poem names, “DuBois / Baby Dodds & Lovie / Austin, Sojourner . . . Buddy Bolden” (Lines 74-76), “Langston” (Line 101), and “Little Richard Wrights” (Lines 106).^{2.5}

Baraka writes, “we are afro-americans, african americans” (Line 120) referring to the august figures he has previously named in the poem. But Baraka goes on to name well-known Black people from other countries. He writes, “in a casual gesture, if its talk you want, we can say / Cesaire, Damas, Depestre, . . . Guillen / You want Shaka, Askia, . . . Nzinga, you want us to drop Cleopatra on you or Hannibal / . . . / I aint even mentioned Troussaint or Dessaline / or Robeson or Ngugi (Lines 128-138).^{2.6} Baraka’s poem goes on to list the names of Black

sculptors, painters, composers, and architects displaying with pride the list of historical Black figures that are rarely mentioned when white people teach history. In a poem that spans nine full pages, Baraka offers a list of powerful Black individuals from throughout history, and that list of names blasts wide open the white supremacist stereotype of the uneducated slave who holds no power. By calling the names of powerful Black individuals, Baraka empowers his Black readers while repudiating negative stereotypes held by many white readers. Baraka's message is clear: "once again, / in the tradition / in the african american / tradition / open us / yet bind us / let all that is positive / find / us / we go into the future / carrying a world / of blackness" (Baraka Lines 293-303).

Baraka, no doubt, uses names and naming to great effect in his poetry, but Benston argues, "No [B]lack poet . . . has so integrated his poetic vision with the naming process as has Jay Wright" (9). For example, in one slim volume, *The Selected Poems of Jay Wright*, Wright mentions names or naming over twenty times. In some poems, there is one only one brief line that refers to names or naming. For example, in the poem "An Invitation to Madison County," Wright talks about his apprehension regarding a trip to the South and his surprise when "No one has asked me to move over / for a small parade of pale women, / or called me nigger, or asked me where I'm from" (Lines 21-23). In other poems, Wright's allusions to naming indicate the power behind names, like the line: "Astonished / by the magic of my own name, / I name your scars, the angry cuts stitched and hidden from yourself . . . Those others now know my name" ("Twenty-two Tremblings of the Postulate" Stanza 22, Lines 5-14).

Taken together the many references to names and naming make it clear that Wright understands the link between power and names. One of the best examples of this can be found in Wright's poem, "Family Reunion," in which Wright illustrates the way names are used to situate

people with a family. Wright writes, "You have always had the gift / . . . of calling your own name, and having it belled / back in tongues, being changed and harmonized / until it is one name and all names" (Lines 27-38). This reference seems to address the way shared family names (which is also mentioned in Etheridge Knight's poem "The Idea of Ancestry") create a harmonic echo chamber that strengthens each member of the family while it also strengthens the ties between family members. In the poem "The Eye of God, The Soul's First Vision," Wright's words underscore the link between naming and ownership when he addresses the unidentified recipient of the poem, "I return to you, / to name, / to own, / to be possessed and named myself (Lines 35-38). Here Wright clearly indicates the link between naming and power. The one who names can claim ownership; the one who is named is possessed by the namer. If names are both given and received, as Wright exemplifies in this poem, there is a balance of power within the two people within the relationship.

In "from *Bolero: Five Poems*," Wright's first choice for his submission to *Callaloo*, poem "5," stanza (i) begins,

All names are invocations, or curses.
One must imagine the fictive event that leads to
He-Who-Shoots-Porcupines-By-Night,
or Andrew Golightly, or Theodore, or Sally.
In the breath of stars, names rain upon us;
we seem never to be worthy.
Or, having learned the trick of being worthy,
we seem never to be prepared for the rein of names. (Lines 1-8)

Wright's poem not only recognizes the power implicit in the act of naming (invocation or curse), but he expresses the weight of responsibility names press upon the named ("we seem never to be worthy"). For the named who struggle to be worthy of their names, Wright points out "the rein of names," the controlling power of names, like the reins on a horse. The poem continues to evoke the power of names in the lines that describe a child in the womb: "they lay in mothers' cave

hollow wombs, speechless, eyeless, days away from the lyrics of light and a naming” (Lines 14-16). The choice to use “a naming” to express birth, indicates again Wright’s understanding that the act of naming itself is an expression of the recognition of a child as human. This moment of naming therefore is as important as the birth itself.

Wright begins the second stanza of poem “5” with the line “Each flowered place requires a name that fits” (Line 1), and the stanza ends with the lines “These are memory’s accoutrements, reason to have searched / a flowered place with a name that fits, / where love’s every echo is a child’s loss” (Lines 22-24). The stanza suggested that such flowered places are places of mourning, where dead children have been buried and their mothers come to weep. Wright’s stanza is an argument that such places deserve to be beautiful and to have beautiful names. Stanza *iii* of poem “5” begins with the line “All names are false” (Line 1). There is now a consistent pattern in that each stanza of poem “5” begins by discussing names. Stanza *iii* seems to indicate the loss of a child, since it ends “I have carried your name on velvet, / knowing you are free, having never suffered / the heartache of patience that love and naming / that this divided world of our requires” (Lines 16-19). The idea of naming then runs through the poem from the naming of a child at birth, though the naming of beautiful places of mourning, to the carrying of the dead child’s name “on velvet,” indicating the care with which the name is still surrounded. The glorious power to name the child has been ripped away by death, but the echo of the child’s name lingers.

In poem “25,” also included in “from *Bolero: Five Poems*,” Wright again adds allusions to naming in his poem. Though the poem is quite abstract and allusive, not easily parsed, there are three clear references to naming in the poem. In lines 20-21, Wright says, “I carried, in a goat hide pouch, / the secret day of my naming.” In lines 22-25, Wright says, “So prophesy, without

my consent, / followed me, and took me in hand. / I grew rich under the Gaulish peat / and Celtic chamois that buffed my Roman name.” In lines 34-36, Wright says, “No one, in the high airs of a deserted village, / chose to remember me, / or the nasal explosion of my name.” Though the density of the poem allows for multiple interpretations, it is clear that names and naming are important to the Jay Wright, and he evokes naming throughout his work.

Some African American authors use naming in quite subtle ways. One example of this can be seen in Anne Spencer’s poem “At the Carnival.” The opening lines of the poem read: “Gay little Girl-of-the-Diving-Tank, / I desire a name for you, / Nice, as a right glove fits” (948). Here a name is needed in order for the narrator to lay some claim to a girl described as a “darling of spirit and form” (948). Without having a name for the girl, the narrator has no claim to the girl she says she needs (949). Spencer indicates that a name, either given or learned, offers some form of personal access to the person who knows the name.

Michael S. Harper uses naming in his poetry to create that kind of personal access to writers who have inspired him. Harper evokes the names of two African American women writers in his poem “Alice.” Harper writes that the poem is “for Alice Walker,” and the poem describes Walker standing “waist-high in snakes, beating the weeds” as she searches for the grave of Zora Neale Hurston (Harper 7). Harper addresses the poem to Walker and says that Hurston “speaks / from her sunken chamber to call / you to her side, she calls / you her distant cousin, her sister” (7). The final stanza of Harper’s poem reads:

And for this I say your name, Alice,
my grandmother’s name, your name,
conjured in snake-infested field
where Zora Neale welcomes you home,
and where I speak from now
on higher ground for her risen
black marker where you have written
your name in hers, and in mine. (Harper 8)

The poem evokes the power Walker draws from Hurston's voice and the power Harper draws from Walker's voice, a cycle of building strength, finding an echo of communion from one writer to another, a rite of passage that draws magic from the power of each author's name.

Claiming Power Through Re-Naming One's Black Self

Many African Americans over the years, like many freed slaves, have discarded the names given to them at birth and chosen their own names, including many African American writers discussed in this dissertation: Maya Angelou (nee Marguerite Annie Johnson), Toni Cade Bambara (nee Miltonia Merkin Cade), bell hooks (nee Gloria Jean Watkins), Toni Morrison (nee Chloe Ardelia Wofford), Amiri Baraka (nee Leroy Jones), and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, better known as Malcolm X (nee Malcolm Little).

Poet Robert Hayden, who was the first African American poet to hold the position of Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (a post now known as U.S. Poet Laureate), takes his reader on a journey through the name changes of El-Shabazz, in his poem "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X)." Hayden divides the poem into four sections, labeled with Roman numerals, in which he writes about the four phases of El-Shabazz's life. In section I, Hayden writes, "As Home Boy, as Dee-troit Red, / he fled is his name, became the quarry of / his own obsessed pursuit (I, Lines 5-7). Here Hayden recounts the nicknames by which El-Shabazz was known in his youth. In section II, Hayden writes, "he saw himself / floodlit and eloquent; / yet how could he, 'Satan' in The Hole, guess what the waking dream foretold?" (Lines 3-6). Here Hayden imagines the self-reflection of El-Shabazz in prison, confronting the diabolic name his jailers used to demonize him. In section III, Hayden writes, "He X'd his name, became his people's anger" (Lines 2-4). This line refers to Malcolm Little's dropping of the last name "Little," which had been imposed on his ancestors by former slave masters and his claiming of

the last name “X” to indicate the loss of his ancestral name. In *Deep Talk: Reading African-American Literary Names*, Debra Walker King writes that “X” was “a symbol of a lost family name . . . a marker signifying . . . virtual namelessness” (48). Thus El-Shabazz’s rejection of the name “Little” was an act of resistance to the white supremacist slaveholders who used un-naming and renaming to indicate ownership of his ancestors.

The way Hayden makes a verb out of El-Shabazz’s rejection of this last name “Little” and embrace of the “X” lets the reader feel the power of that rejection. In section IV, Hayden writes, “He fell upon his face before / Allah the raceless in whose Blazing Oneness all / were one. He rose renewed renamed, became / much more than there was time for him to be” (Lines 12-15). Hayden recognizes and points out the personal growth that accompanies each of the names El-Shabazz was called and how those names affected him. When Malcolm Little fled the street names given to him, when he refused his last name “Little” as an act of rebellion, when he confronted the name given to him by white supremacists who felt threatened by his power, and when he converted to Islam, El-Shabazz was throwing off a confining caricature of himself and embracing a truer version of himself. Hayden recognizes this in section IV when he introduces that final renaming with the lines, “But first, the ebb of pilgrimage / toward revelation, hejira to / his final metamorphosis” (Lines 8-10). Hayden makes clear that the act of un-naming and renaming is a vital part of El-Shabazz’s personal growth and metamorphosis, each name personifying a stronger version of El-Shabazz.

In a similar way, poet, essayist, and playwright Elizabeth Alexander, who has taught at both Yale and Columbia University, writes about Muhammad Ali’s renaming in the opening of her poem, “Narrative Ali, a Poem in Twelve Rounds.” In Round 1, Alexander’s narrator says, “Cassius / Marcellus Clay, / Muhammad Ali; / you can say / my name in any / language, any /

continent: Ali (Lines 5-11). Here Alexander's lines indicate the wide renown of Ali, but, in Round 12, she also points out the racism that Ali faced, when the narrator says, "They said I didn't love my country, / called me a race-hater, called me out / of my name, / . . . shot at me, / hexed me, cursed me" (Lines 2-8). Ali was called out of his name when white people refused to accept his chosen name (Muhammad Ali) and when they un-named him by using racist pejoratives instead of his chosen name. However, the narrator of the poem reclaims his power in the final lines of the poem, when he says, "*come and take me* / 'The People's Champ,' / myself, / Muhammad" (Round 12, Lines 11-14). The narrator of Alexander's poem, Muhammad Ali, claims his personal power by assertively claiming his new name.

Gwendolyn Brooks addresses the importance for Black people of the act of choosing and embracing one's name in her poem "Children Coming Home," a poem that is actually a group of short poems, each sub-titled with the name of a child: Tinsel Marie, Jamal, Novelle, and many others. The short poem sub-titled "Kojo," begins with the statement "I am a Black" (Line 1) and continues: "According to my Teachers, / I am now an African-American. / They call me out of my name. / BLACK is an open umbrella. / I am Black and a Black forever. / I am one of The Blacks" (Lines 2-7). Among people of African descent, the appropriate term for the "open umbrella" name has been debated, with little to no consensus ever fully achieved. Brooks, however, makes clear that the narrator "Kojo" does not want to be called "African-American." Kojo empowers himself by naming himself "Black." But Kojo also finds empowerment in his given name. Kojo, as narrator, says, "I am Kojo. In West Afrika Kojo / means Unconquerable. My parents / named me the seventh day from my birth / in Black spirit, Black faith, Black communion. / I am Kojo. I am A Black. / And I Capitalize my name. / Do not call me out of my name" (Lines 21-27). In Brooks' poem, the narrator Kojo proudly claims both his personal name

and a name for his people “Black.” Kojo empowers himself with his chosen names and makes it clear that to not accept and use his chosen names is to insult and dishonor him. Kojo warns, “Do not call me out of my name” (Line 27). In this poem, Brooks clearly indicates the importance of naming to African Americans.

Haki Madhubuti also writes about claiming the encompassing term “Black.” Madhubuti was born Don Luther Lee but adopted his Swahili name after a trip to Africa. Madhubuti stated in a 2006 interview that he believed “a new African name would help [him] in arriving at a final definition of self” (qtd. in “Haki R. Madhubuti”). Madhubuti’s poem about the empowerment in the signifier “Black” is found in his poem “Gwendolyn Brooks.” The poem is an ode to the impact Gwendolyn Brooks has on African American poets and readers of poetry. The poem reflects that in his early life, Madhubuti had often heard Brooks labeled as “a fine negro poet” (Line 9), “a credit to the negro race” (Line 11), “a pure negro writer” (Line 13). Madhubuti transitions to a later time period in his life with the phrase, “into the sixties / a word was born BLACK / & with black came poets” (Lines 20-22). Madhubuti goes on to describe what those Black poets brought into existence with fifteen lines in which the word “black” is used fifty-four times (Lines 23-37). Madhubuti continues, “and everywhere the / lady ‘negro poet’ / appeared the poets were there. / they listened and questioned / & went home feeling uncomfortable / unsound & sound together / they read / re-read / wrote & re-wrote / & came back the next time to tell the / lady ‘negro poet’ / how beautiful she was / is & how she had helped them (Lines 38-46). The poem ends with a note of revelation when Madhubuti writes, “the poets walked & as space filled the vacuum between them & the / lady ‘negro poet’ / u could hear one of the blackpoets say: ‘bro, they been calling that sister by the wrong name”” (Lines 49-52). Here the poets realize that the term “negro poet” did not do justice to Gwendolyn Brooks,

that the name detracted from the power of her poetry, from her own personal power. The poets of the poem realize that Gwendolyn Brooks is a “blackpoet” like they are, that she should be called a more empowering name: Black poet.

In this chapter, my goal was to demonstrate the link between naming and power in creative Black self-expression through poetry. Of course, the number of African American poets who use naming in their work or emphasize the power of naming in their works is not limited to those discussed in this chapter. I chose for discussion here those Black female and male poets who most exemplify my study of the power of naming, un-naming, and radically re-naming as found in the complexity of the creative, liberating self-expression created by Black poets, and I have shown in my analysis of these poets works that the power of naming shows up both in minor and major ways throughout the body of work created by African American poets. The African American poets’ works that I analyzed through the lens of naming exemplify the life-transforming history of Black poetic resistance to white supremacy. In the Introduction to *Every Shut Eye Ain’t Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans Since 1945*, Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton write, “Literature can be thought of as a study in comparative humanity—something . . . poets do daily—as a prism, in both directions, of art and what’s going on in society” (4). Here Harper and Walton point out that writers and poets often reflect in their work a condensed or an expanded version the reality of their existence, past and present, sometimes shining a light into dark places, sometimes simply shining. The poems discussed in this chapter shine a light on the way un-naming and renaming have been used to denigrate and demean Black people and the way Black people have resisted by claiming the positive power of naming to empower themselves and free themselves from the bonds of white supremacy.

Notes

^{2.1} The poets discussed in this chapter are both Africans, those brought to the U.S. and enslaved against their will, and African Americans, the descendants of those enslaved Africans who were born in the U.S., as well as those few free men of African descent who came willingly to the U.S. and their descendants. When writing about both enslaved Africans and African Americans, both enslaved and free, I choose to use the more encompassing term “Black” to avoid having to repetitively underscore the difference between them.

^{2.2} It is doubtful that Wheatley’s poems would have been published if they had not extolled the benefits of slavery.

^{2.3} It is impossible to positively identify all of Tuskegee Airmen referred to by the names Waniek lists in her poem. It is probable that she refers to Lieutenant Colonel Reuben Sparks, Retired Airforce Colonel Richard Toliver and 2nd Lieutenant Hezekiah Lacy, but there are four Tuskegee Airmen with the last name Jefferson, four with the last name Wilson, three with the last name Mitchell, two with the last name Price, fourteen with the last name Smith, four with the last name Washington, two with the last name Merriweather, twelve with the last name White, and hundreds of others not listed in Waniek’s poem. Most of the men with the last names listed in the poem were either Flight Officers or 2nd Lieutenants (“Tuskegee Airmen Pilot Listing”).

^{2.4} “Brown Welles” refers to William Wells Brown an escaped slave who became an abolitionist lecturer, a novelist, and the first published African American playwright. “Brown Sterling” is Sterling Allen Brown, a poet and literary critic who taught at Howard University in the 1920s and 1930s. “Brown Clifford” is Clifford Benjamin Brown, a renowned jazz trumpeter who tragically died young in a car accident. “H Rap” is to Jamil Abdullah Al-min, a memoirist and civil rights activist, who was born Hubert Gerald Brown but was better known as H Rap. “H Box” is Henry Box Brown who escaped slavery and became an abolitionist speaker.

^{2.5} Here Baraka refers to W. E. B. Du Bois who was an activist, sociologist, professor, and prolific writer. Du Bois was also the first African American to receive a Ph. D. from Harvard University. “Baby Dodds” is Warren “Baby” Dodds who was one of the best jazz drummers of the pre-big band era. “Lovie” is Lovie Austin, a jazz singer who born Cora Calhoun. “Sojourner” refers to Sojourner Truth, who was born Isabella Baumfree, but renamed herself after she escaped slavery. Truth became an abolitionist, a women’s rights activist, and the first African American to win a court case against a white man when she sued for the return of her son who had been illegally sold to a Southern plantation owner. “Buddy Bolden” is Charles Joseph Bolden, a jazz cornetist, better known as “Buddy,” who was a key figure in the development of New Orleans style ragtime, which later came to be known as jazz. “Langston” is Langston Hughes, activist, poet, novelist, and playwright who was considered the leader of the Harlem Renaissance. The reference to “Little Richard Wrights” is not clear, but Baraka could be referring to Richard Wright, son of a sharecropper, who, despite having only a ninth-grade

education, published his first short story at age sixteen and went on to become a prolific and respected author.

^{2.6} “Cesaire” refers to Aimé Fernand David Césaire, a French Martinican poet, playwright, and politician. “Damas” refers to Léon-Gontran Damas, a French poet who was the first Black author to write about the effects of colonization on the colonized and to write about internalized racism. “Depestre” is René Depestre, a Haitian poet and communist activist. “Guillen” may refer to Nicolás Cristóbal Guillén Batista, Cuban journalist, political activist, and National Poet of Cuba who was better known as “Nicolás Guillén.” “Shaka” is Shaka kaSenzangakhona, better known as Shaka Zulu who was the King of the Zulu Kingdom from 1816 to 1828. “Askia” refers to Askia Muhammad I, who was born Muhammad Ture sylla or Muhammed Touré sylla and later called Askia or Askia the Great, was a military commander, a political reformer, and emperor of the Songhai Empire in the late 15th century. “Nzinga” is Nzingha Mbande who ruled for thirty-seven years as Queen of the 17th Century Ambundu Kingdoms of Ndongo and Matamba in the present-day region of Angola. “Cleopatra” refers to Queen Cleopatra VII Philopator, the last ruler of the Ptolemaic Kingdom of Egypt before it became of province of the Roman Empire. “Hannibal” is the Carthaginian general and statesman who is widely considered one of the greatest military commanders in human history. Most white readers are not aware that anthropological and archaeological research has shown that Cleopatra and Hannibal were both Black.

Chapter Three

The Universal and the Specific: Naming as a Multi-Faceted Trope in the Works of African American Playwrights

According to the African American Registry, in 1903, Jesse A. Shipp became the first African American author to have a play performed on Broadway. Shipp's play, *In Dahomey: A Negro Musical Comedy*, was a satire of the nineteenth century back-to African movement, had an all-Black cast, and included music and lyrics written by African American artists (African American Registry). The first play written by a Black woman to be staged in a Broadway theater came fifty-six years later, when in 1959, Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* became a Broadway hit (Perkins 1). However, most people forget that Black women and men were writing plays long before Shipp's humorous play or Hansberry's award-winning play came to Broadway.

Because of various laws and unwritten restrictions, Black people were not allowed to perform on Broadway or on other white owned stages in the U.S. until the 1900's, which led to many early African American scripts for stage plays having been lost or forgotten. However, in *Afro-American Drama, 1850-1975*, Geneviève E. Fabre explores the roots of African American drama, and Fabre's extensive research shows that plays and playwrights were plentiful in Black communities, and those plays written by African Americans were performed in Black theatres for Black audiences. Theatres such as the New Orleans Little Theatre Guild, the Harlem Suitcase, the Rose McClendon Players, the Negro Playwright Company, and the American Negro Theatre offered havens for the performance of plays written by African American

playwrights (Fabre 251-253). Sterling Brown also points out that many African American authors, who are better known for their poetry, fiction, or essays, wrote plays that are not as well-known as their other works, including Countee Cullen and Arna Bontemps (*One Way to Heaven*), Langston Hughes (*Mulatto*), Zora Neale Hurston (*Great Day*), and Jean Toomer (*Balo*) (121-122).

Though many of the early scripts written by African American authors have been lost, Kathy A. Perkins offers a rich collection of plays written by African American women with her publication of a rich collection in *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays Before 1950*, before Lorraine Hansberry's play made history. In the Introduction to her text, Perkins writes that in the 1920's white male playwrights "attempted to capture the black experience through dramatic works" (Perkins 4). However, she says, the "dominant image of the black character was that of a singing, dancing, shiftless, oversexed, and carefree individual" (Perkins 4), and "African American playwrights have been trying to overcome this obstacle since 1917" (Adell xiii). Unfortunately, it was not until the work of Black dramatists began to be produced on Broadway and in other white playhouses that authentic Black characters began to be seen by white people. Black playwrights wrote about the rich and complex experiences of their own lives, while they also wrote from personal experience about the impact of white supremacy on the lives of Black people, including the significance of naming. In this chapter, I focus specifically on some of the various ways Black playwrights use naming in their work, and I argue that the authors discussed here use naming to create allegorical, Biblical, and mythological allusions, to critique other Black folk in their communities, to allude to the works of other authors, to depict the universality of the plight of Black women, to point out white supremacist

attempts to un-name or rename Black people, and to exemplify the attempts of Black characters to empower themselves.

Playing with Names: Allegory and Universalism in Ruth Gaines-Shelton's *The Church Fight*

Many African American authors have written about African American churches and the foibles of their parishioners, including Hallie Quinn Brown who wrote *A Dramatization of the Rev. P. A. Nichol's Trouble in Turkey Trot Church* in 1917, which was privately printed but never produced (Yellin and Bond 24). However, plays about the church were rarely produced on the stage. In the *African American Scenebook*, editors Kathryn Ervin and Ethel Pitts Walker included an Introduction to Ruth Gaines-Shelton's *The Church Fight*, in which they state that Shelton's 1925 "allegorical script represented a comedic portrayal of an institution and situation rarely seen on the stage" (3).^{3.1} The institution Ervin and Pitts Walker refer to is, as the title of the play indicates, the church, and the allegorical nature of the script is exemplified in the playful way Gaines-Shelton names her characters. Those names are also one of the things that help to make the play both funny and universal.

Gaines-Shelton sets her play in the home of Sister Sapphira. Sister Sapphira is hosting a meeting of church members, most of whom want to oust their current pastor, Parson Procrastinator. As the meeting continues, Parson Procrastinator arrives and faces down the committee, challenging each of them to say why he or she wants to get rid of him. While the audience does not see the actions upon which Parson Procrastinator's name is based, they do see actions from every other character that exemplify the appropriateness of each of the characters' names: Brother Ananias, Brother Investigator, Brother Judas, Sister Instigator, Sister Meddler, Sister Experience, Sister Take-It-Back, and Sister Two-Face.

The names “Sister Sapphira” and “Brother Ananias” are taken from Acts 5 of the Christian Bible. In Acts 5, the story is told of Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, who have sold their property to donate to the church because the followers of Jesus were encouraged to hold property in common in order to make funds available to aid the needy. However, Ananias and Sapphira conspire to hide the price of the sale of their property and to keep part of the profits for themselves, while making their fellow church members believe they donated the entire amount of the sale. Ananias gives money to the Apostle Peter, along with the lie about the sales price of the home. When Peter asks Ananias why he is lying to the Holy Spirit, Ananias drops dead. Sapphira later comes into the room and, when Peter asks about the sale price, she tells the same lie. Sapphira also drops dead on the spot. While Gaines-Shelton’s characters do not drop dead, as Ananias and Sapphira do in Acts 5, the names she gives them clearly implies they are liars. As characters who have been labeled as liars, these two become universal characters, since there are liars in every church as well as in every other organization or gathering of humans.

Another character in *The Church Fight* whose name has biblical origins is “Brother Judas.” In all four of the gospels of the New Testament, Judas is shown to betray Jesus by kissing him on the cheek, and the name Judas has thus become synonymous with betrayal. In Gaines-Shelton’s play, Brother Judas agrees with his fellow church members about ousting Parson Procrastinator. Brother Judas says, “He’s a pretty crooked sort of fellow. Of course, I wouldn’t like for him to know I squealed on him” (5). When Parson Procrastinator shows up at the meeting, he says, “Why here’s my old friend who will die by me I know. Ain’t that so Brother Judas?” And Brother Judas responds, “Oh yes, Parson, you can always depend on me” (6). Brother Judas betrays both the Parson and the group of church members with whom he conspires, thereby living up to the name Gaines-Shelton bestows upon him.

In the script, Brother Investigator and Sister Investigator live up to their names as well. These are the only two characters who do not put forth vague accusations against the pastor. When others argue for the removal of the pastor, Brother Investigator says that they must have “sufficient evidence and proof that he has broken the law, or lived unrighteously” (4). After numerous vague accusations are put forth by the church members, even though Sister Investigator really wants to get rid of the pastor, she says, “I ain’t yet had sufficient evidence to ask Parson Procrastinator to go” (5). By asking for evidence to support allegations against the pastor, Brother Investigator and Sister Investigator earn the names given to them by the playwright.

Each of Gaines-Shelton’s other female characters also live up, or rather down to, their names. In the dialogue, Sister Experience’s name is shown to be apt when she says, “Sisters, you all had better listen to me; you know I’ve been in one church fight . . . no church fight can be built on a lie” (5). Despite Sister Experience’s arguments, Sister Instigator and Sister Meddler don’t care about lies; they want the pastor out by any means. Sister Instigator says, “I tell you, we just must get rid of this man. . . . If he don’t go, this Church is going to destruction and ruin” (5), but she wants factual evidence. Sister Meddler is willing to lie; she says, “Couldn’t we make up some kind of charge agin him?” (4).

Sister Take-It-Back and Sister Two-Face have similar positions; both want to oust the minister, but as soon as the pastor shows up at the meeting, they recant their earlier statements. For example, Sister Take-It-Back says to her fellow church members, “I started out to move Brother Procrastinator and I don’t expect to stop until he’s gone” (5). But when Parson Procrastinator is actually there in person, Sister Take-It-Back says, “It wasn’t me, Brother Procrastinator, I’ve never seen nothing wrong out of you” (7). In a similar fashion, Sister Two-

Face sits quietly through the meeting, nodding her head as others argue to remove the pastor, but when he arrives on the scene, she says, “Parson Procrastinator, you do look so fine since you came back from Conference, and we is all just crazy about you” (7). Almost all the characters of Gaines-Shelton’s script back-pedal as fast as they can when they are confronted with the preacher, and that back-pedaling is what makes the play a biting satire that is universal in its appeal.

In the “Introduction” to *Black Feminist Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950*, Kathy A. Perkins writes that Ruth Gaines-Shelton’s play *The Church Fight* “hilariously reveals some of the familiar characters prevalent in the Black church” (13), and it is clear that Gaines-Shelton uses names to describe the negative traits of each character on the stage and writes dialogue that exhibits the characteristics implied by their names; this makes the play both allegorical and humorous. But the play goes beyond showing characters typically found in Black churches. According to Ervin and Pitts Walker, the play’s original cast was multi-ethnic, which emphasizes the universality of the script, which satirizes the foibles of many church communities (3). The play is universal because people of every race and ethnicity who have been involved with any kind of church for long can identify with Gaines-Shelton’s characters and recognize individuals from their own lives on whom the characters could have been based.

Wearing a Badge of Shame: Using Names to Depict the Universality of Woman-Shaming in Suzan-Lori Parks’ *The Red Letter Plays*

While most contemporary African American playwrights have moved away from using allegorical names, Suzan-Lori Parks uses allegorical names and allusion in her plays. In the two plays published together in 2001 in *The Red Letter Plays*, Suzan-Lori Parks writes about two Black women who have been shamed and ostracized within their communities, one who has

borne five children by five different fathers and one who has become an abortionist as her only option to avoid prison herself while she attempts to earn enough money to get one of her children out of prison. Parks uses two devices to underscore the universality of the plight of her protagonists. First, by naming both characters Hester and including the letter A prominently in each play, she ties the two women to Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*, in which the protagonist Hester Prynne bears a child out of wedlock and is publicly shamed in her Puritan community, being forced to wear a large red "A" on her bosom at all times when she is in public. Second, Parks does not give most of the characters in the two plays specific names; instead she employs allegory to create a sense of universalism, calling the characters by terms that indicate their work or their position in life, such as Butcher or Welfare Lady. These two literary devices link Parks' protagonists to all women who have been shamed throughout history and continue to be shamed today.

Parks' play *In the Blood*, opens with people from the community yelling at Parks' Black protagonist, Hester, loudly and publicly shaming her for having five children but not having a husband. During the long tirade, the people yell, "SHE KNOWS SHE'S A NO COUNT / SHIFTLESS / HOPELESS / BAD NEWS / BURDEN TO SOCIETY / HUSSY / SLUT" (Prologue). Hester lives under a bridge with her five children, and, in an early scene under the bridge, the word "SLUT" is "scrawled on a wall" (Scene 1). When Hester, who cannot read, asks her oldest son, Jabber, what the word says he tells her he does not understand it. He says, "They wrote it in yr practice place" (Scene 1). Jabber is attempting to teach Hester how to read and write, but the only letter she has learned is the letter "A," and the wall is where she practices, writing the letter over and over, with, as the stage notes state, "great difficulty" (Scene 1). This

repetition of the letter “A,” along with Hester’s name continues to remind the reader of *The Scarlet Letter*.

The Hester of *In the Blood* adores her children. She calls them “My 5 treasures. My 5 joys” (Scene 1). She tells them wonderful stories about how beautiful their Black fathers were, naming the fathers as “Smarts,” “Toughguy,” “Wild,” “Looker,” and “Honeychild” (Scene 1), names that obviously relate to the looks or personality of each child’s father. But Hester lies to her children as well, telling them that she married their fathers and that their fathers were five brothers who went off to war and died (Scene 1). Hester’s children in the play are named “Jabber,” “Bully,” “Trouble,” “Beauty,” and “Baby” (Scene 1), which again are names related either to the looks or personality of each child. The use of descriptors instead of names for the fathers and for the five children makes them universal. Every woman, who identifies as a mother, while reading the script or watching the play, will be able to identify the words used in place of the fathers’ names with men they have known in their own lives, and they can identify the words used in place of the children’s names with characteristics their own children possess.

The list of other characters in *In the Blood* includes: “Amiga Gringa,” “The Welfare Lady,” “Chilli,” “The Doctor,” and “Reverend D.” (a reference to Hawthorne’s character Reverend Dimmesdale who fathers Hester’s child). As the action continues, the reader learns that, though Hester continues to strive to be virtuous and to find a way out of poverty, each of these characters has in some way contributed to Hester’s fall from grace; each of them has sinned with her. Two of the male characters, “Chilli” and “Reverend D” have fathered two of her children. But these characters see themselves as better than Hester. They look down on her, distance themselves from her, promise her help, but never deliver, and they continue to take advantage of Hester and her desperate situation.

Unlike the Reverend Dimmesdale, in Hawthorne's novel, who is destroyed by the guilt he carries, "Reverend D" and the other characters who contribute to Hester's shame carry no guilt. As the play progresses, Hester approaches each of them asking for help and they each refuse her. Hester grows hungrier as she gives all her food to her children; she grows more desperate, and she becomes unraveled when Chilli, the father of her first child, and the Reverend D., the father of another child, both reject her and refuse to acknowledge or care for their children. In one scene, Hester, herself, denies the children are hers when she is hoping Chilli will marry her (Scene 7). When Jabber acts out in anger toward his mother and taunts her with the word "SLUT" that was written on the wall under the bridge, Hester loses control completely and kills Jabber (Scene 8). The play ends with Hester being led to jail, after being "spayed" while the members of the community yell and scream at her, again publicly shaming her (Scene 9). Parks' play *In the Blood* condemns the many people who actively take part in putting women in positions of shame but do not accept any of the responsibility or blame for such shame, naming those complicit and guilty characters with titles that allow the reader to relate to the universality of their characteristics.

In *Fucking A*, Parks again names her protagonist Hester. This Hester, as described by Parks at the beginning of Part One, Scene 1, "wears a simple dress with an oddly cut-out square just above her left breast. There we can see the large "A" deeply branded into her skin." The "A" branded on Parks' Hester is again evocative of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, in which Hester Prynne is required to wear a scarlet "A" on her chest. However, in *Fucking A*, the "A" stands for "Abortionist," a role Hester has accepted instead of incarceration when her son was caught stealing and was sent to prison. In *Fucking A*, one other character, besides Hester, has a name: Canary Mary. Canary Mary, Hester's friend, is having an affair with "The Mayor," and Canary

Mary gives Hester extra money, as Hester is trying to save up to pay fines placed on her son in prison, fees that continue to grow and grow, dashing Hester's hopes of ever saving enough money to pay the fee required for her to visit and have a long-desired picnic with her son.

Other characters in *Fucking A* include: "The Mayor," "The First Lady," "Butcher," "Monster," "Freedom Fund Lady," "Scribe," "First Hunter," "Second Hunter," "Third Hunter," "Jailbait," "Guard," "Waiting Woman #1," "Waiting Woman #2," and "Three Freshly Freed Prisoners." Like the characters in *In the Blood*, these characters have no names, only allegorical titles that describe their position in life or position in the action of the play. Again, by naming her protagonist "Hester" and by not naming other characters, Parks creates a feeling of universality within her play. The scenes could be playing out anywhere, and, in almost any location, many people could fill these roles.

In *Fucking A*, Parks' Hester is publicly shamed for her work as an abortionist, despite the fact that the role was forced upon her when her son was accused of stealing food and the government gave her only two choices: become an abortionist or go to prison. Since Hester needs to make money to try to free her child from prison, she chooses the option that allows her freedom to work and earn money. Irony plays a strong role in this play, as The First Lady, who reported Hester's son, Boy, for stealing and caused him to be sent to jail, ends up having an affair with him when he escapes from prison, after her husband The Mayor threatens to divorce her because she cannot conceive. Hester, who does not know about the affair or even that her son has escaped, thinks the child The First Lady is carrying is the offspring of The Mayor. Hester conspires to have The First Lady brought to her, then, in an act of vengeance for her son, aborts the child, the child of her son, who would have inherited all the money and power of the Mayor if the child had lived.

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Hill Collins writes about the intersectionality of black and female identities which leads to racist and sexism stereotypes of Black women, based on the kinds of shameful roles that are often thrust upon women, specifically Black women. Like Parks' characters, the roles Hill Collins discusses are characterized by titles that make them universal. Hill Collins writes, "Portraying African-American women as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas has been essential to the political economy of domination fostering Black women's oppression. . . . Challenging these controlling images has long been a core theme in Black feminist thought" (67). Parks does challenge such "controlling images" in her *Red Letter Plays*. She humanizes her two Black female characters who have been forced into stereotypical roles, while removing names to dehumanize the characters who have contributed to the women's situations and who continue to keep them locked into a position of oppression. Parks particularly attacks the stereotype of "the Black welfare mother" in the play *In the Blood*. The Black welfare mother of Parks' play is not "content to sit around and collect welfare, shunning work," as she has been stereotyped by white supremacists (Hill Collins 77). Hester is a welfare mother, but she continues to try to find work, even when she has no idea how to do the work; for example, when she tries to take up sewing to earn money but cannot even thread the needle. Parks takes the negative images of Black women a step further when she makes the protagonist of *Fucking A* an abortionist. But Parks shows this Hester as a woman forced into a horrible situation who continues to work to try to save money, so she can get her son released from prison or at least get an opportunity to visit with him.

In these two plays, Parks makes a strong statement about the way American society imposes impossible choices on Black women who are trying to support and protect themselves

and their children, then shames those same women for the choices they make. Parks makes her statement universal by connecting her protagonists with Hester Prynne in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and by giving her supporting characters allegorical titles rather than names. She humanizes her black female protagonists while making other characters more universal.

The Un-naming of Black Men in Tanya Barfield's *Blue Door*

In her 2006 one-act play, *Blue Door*, Tanya Barfield uses naming and un-naming to illustrate the exertion of white supremacist control. Barfield's play relates the stories of four generations of black men. In a ghost story reminiscent of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the play unfolds as the great-grandfather, Simon; the grandfather, Jesse; and the brother, Rex; all of whom are dead, visit the protagonist, Lewis, who is experiencing a crisis of values in mid-life. As each visiting spirit shares his stories, they explore the racial injustices they have faced in their lives.

The significance of naming is first seen in the play when the former slave, Simon, who is telling stories about working as a child in the home of the plantation owner with his mother, says, "Sometimes be called useless boy, good-for-nothin pickininy, darkie, lil nigger, dumb nigger and 'get-over-here-boy!' I start to think, don't I got no right name a'tall? Out from the big house, I say, 'Momma, what my name be?'" (14). The child Simon has been un-named and renamed so often as a slave, that he literally is not sure what his name is, and he must ask his mother for this information. The child's slave mother reassures him that he does have a proper name and tells him his name is "Simon."

In another scene in which Barfield exemplifies the significance of names, Simon tells the story of two back-to-back days. In one of those days, Simon's mother was taken away to be sold at auction and he, himself, was beaten into unconsciousness when he fought to stop the slave

traders from taking his mother. Ironically, the day before she was taken, Simon's mother helped him choose the name for his first son, so when he came to consciousness the day after his beating and learned that the slave traders also took his pregnant wife, Simon says, "I walk down to the river and I keep walkin and I walk like a man that got no name . . ." (16). The juxtaposition of the choosing of his son's name with the line, "I walk like a man that got no name" emphasizes the importance of names as identity and self-possession. The ability to choose a name for his son gave Simon joy, but, for Simon, having no name equates to having no identity, no freedom, no reason to live.

The way white people use names to exert white supremacist control is indicated in the play when Simon's son, Jesse, who becomes the grandfather of Lewis, tells a story about looking for work in 1890. When Jesse is looking for work, he stumbles upon a small church, and he hears the preacher saying, "Come all ye down-trodden, heavy laden! Come one, come all! . . . In God's house, every sinner finds his home!" (23). Assuming the small run-down church is a "black folks church" and assuming the preacher means what his words say, Jesse enters the church (23). But when the white preacher ends his sermon, he stomps up to Jesse and says, "Ain't no niggers allowed in this church, boy" (23).

Here the pastor un-names Jesse twice, once by using the derogatory term "niggers" and second by calling Jesse, who is a grown man, "boy." The term "boy," along with the terms "girl" and "gal," were used throughout the years of slavery and for a century after, by white supremacists who used the term to deny full adult status to Black men and women. In fact, these terms were commonly used in my own hometown during my childhood, even by young white teenagers when they were addressing Black grandmothers and grandfathers. In *Blue Door*, the use of the term "boy" both un-names and un-mans Jesse.

Jesse attempts to reclaim his identity and his manhood when he responds to the preacher by saying, “My name’s Jesse, not boy, and I didn’t see no sign fo’ whites only, sir. While Jesse shows his displeasure at the term “boy,” and claims personal power by asserting his name, Jesse ignores the term “niggers,” which was used ubiquitously at the time in which this scene from the play is set. Jesse, who is hungry, talks the preacher into paying him with a meal in exchange for creating a “For Whites Only” sign for the church (23-24). Jesse writes the warning on a piece of paper, then creeps back into the church and lies on a pew to take a nap. The preacher wakes Jesse, waving the sign in his face and calling him “trespasser.” Ironically, Jesse is sentenced to “Thirteen years hard labor!” for violating the “whites only” warning that he himself wrote (24). After telling the story, Jesse sings a song that repeats the following lines four times: “Got sent to the prison yard / When the Lord forgot my name.” Here Barfield again points to the significance of names. The forgetting of the singer’s name implies that the Lord has forgotten or is ignoring the person in need. To acknowledge an individual, to show care for an individual, even God must know that person’s name.

In Barfield’s *Blue Door*, Jesse’s grandson, Lewis, is a successful college professor of mathematics, but Lewis suffers from what W. E. B. Du Bois says, in *The Souls of Black Folks*, that Black people often experience, which he calls “double consciousness.” Du Bois describes “double consciousness” as a “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois, 9). The “eyes of others” that Lewis sees himself through are the eyes of his white colleagues at the university and their wives. As the Lewis’s brother Rex says, “White people, that’s your audience. . . . You got a bunch of white people sittin up in your head being your audience. You liven under a White Gaze” (11).

This sense of double consciousness makes Lewis hyper-conscious of his otherness in the university as a Black man, and this eventually leads Lewis to a melt-down, which occurs in a class he is teaching. During a lecture on mathematics, one of Lewis's students responds by asking "Heidegger?" Lewis mishears the student, thinking the student has said "House Nigger," a term Lewis interprets as the student saying that Lewis has "Uncle Tommed" his way to his prestigious position at the university. Responding with outrage, Lewis turns on the Black student shouting, "Do you think—if you were to open one goddamn book in your entire life—that you would be acting white? Maybe you should act white because you're pathetic, stupid, nothing—an ignorant nigger!" (25-26). Lewis's internalized racism has put him in the position of un-naming another Black man, and, when the student appropriately complains, Lewis's department chair puts Lewis on leave.

The double consciousness that Du Bois posits and that Barfield's character Lewis exemplifies is common for Black people. Hill Collins underscores this when she mentions the way double consciousness especially affects Black women; she says the need to become "watchers" in order to survive in an oppressive culture "generates a dual consciousness in African-American women" (91). Double consciousness, the experience of dual consciousness, may be common in any group of people who have been "othered." It is a survival mechanism adopted by those attempting to fit into white supremacist, patriarchal, hegemonic culture.

In Barfield's play, *Blue Door*, the ghosts who visit Lewis act as therapists, helping Lewis to reintegrate his divided consciousness, helping him overcome the psychological damage of internalized racism, teaching him about his own Black history, challenging him regarding his denial of his Black heritage, and helping him to reconnect with his Black self, so Lewis can learn to love himself in his own Black skin. Though Lewis's visitors are not wholly successful, they do

get Lewis to take the first step toward healing, by painting the door blue, just as each of his ancestors had traditionally done in the past, just as the ghost Simon says his enslaved mother admonished him to do the day before she was to be sold, “Paint the do’way blue. Keep d’good spirits in. Keep d’ghost out. . . . Paint dis do’ blue. Da day keep yuh soul-family watch over yuh” (16). By painting the door blue, Lewis is opening a door to his past, to the beliefs and customs of his Black ancestors, inviting them to be a part of his life and to imploring them to watch over him.

Water and Fire / Names as Allusions to African Mythology in Angela Jackson’s *Shango Diaspora*

When Sid Smith reviewed a production of Angela Jackson’s play *Shango Diaspora: An African-American Myth of Womanhood and Love*, which was first produced in New York in 1982, he wrote, “Eta Creative Arts Foundation on the South Side is offering an unusual mixture of modern sentiment and African tradition in ‘Shango Diaspora,’ a parable about love, with song and dance.” Smith goes on to describe the protagonist of the play as “a kind of Every Woman, or Every Young Girl, a virginal ‘water girl’ who is both tribal and urban at once” (Smith), while he describes the title character Shango as “a kind of theatrical king, a living male symbol frequently described in the metaphorical terms of fire imagery” (Smith). Smith also calls the play a “parable,” though the title clearly labels the play as a “myth.” Smith seems to have overlooked the words “Shango” and “myth” in the title, which are clues that the play may be more than it seems on the surface. Further clues are found in some of the names and descriptions in the list of characters, which are found at the beginning of the printed version of the play, descriptions which are always printed in any playbill. The three characters that offer clues are: Watergirl (Ms. Waters); Yemoja/Mother, who is described in the list of characters, “*YEMOJA is a god*”; and

most importantly in the title character, listed as Shango/Fire and described as, “*A Black, lean, Yoruba god of thunder*” (Jackson 331). By neglecting to pay attention to the names and descriptions of these characters, Smith skimmed the surface of the play without diving deeper into its mythological depths.

In her 1997 book *Making the Gods in New York: The Yoruba Religion in the African American Community*, which was originally her dissertation, Mary Cuthrell Curry writes that *Santeria*, also known as the Yoruba Religion, entered the U.S. during the Civil Rights era (4), and is now “a quietly thriving religion that is growing in its influence over the cultural life of New York, finding expression in music, in the dance, in painting and sculpture” (3). Curry failed to mention drama, but evidence suggests Yoruban mythology is also influencing theatre and playwriting in New York, and Jackson’s play is but one example of this.

According to Leda M. Belt, in Yoruban mythology, Shango, Jackson’s title character, is an orisha, a god who was once a man but was deified after his death. Shango is the god of thunder, lightning, and fire (Belt 18). Though Yoruban mythology began in the tribe of Yoruba in west Africa, Yoruban gods continue to be worshiped by people of African descent across the diaspora, hence the title of the play, *Shango Diaspora*. Patricia Canson writes, “Yemonja, also spelled Yemoja or Yemaja, is a Yoruban deity celebrated as the giver of life and as the metaphysical mother of all orisha (deities) within the Yoruba spiritual pantheon” (n.p.). With the names “Shango” and “Yemoja,” Jackson makes it clear that her play is drawing on Yoruban mythology and should be read in that context. The play is not about a naïve girl “playing with fire” as an uninformed reading might suggest. The play is drawing on ancient tales of gods, so readers need to understand that Shango and Yemoja are powerful and ancient gods.

In *Shango Diaspora*, the protagonist, Watergirl, is at first seen as a young girl filled with longing for the unattainable and dangerous older male, Shango. She visits him twice, being burned by his touch on the first visit (Act I, Scene 1) and being consumed by his fire when they have sex during her second visit (I, 3), and in both encounters, Shango calls her “little girl.” She leaves him, feeling burned up, and her bed at home smokes. On the advice of three mysterious women who invoke magic in her home, Watergirl goes on a journey to find her own orisha, her deity. When she comes wearily to a pool, three women in white surround her. Watergirl says “I just want to find the WaterMother” and she sleeps (II, 4). The women in white surround her whispering a chant, “Oba. Water. Oya. Water. Oshun. Water. Omi” (II, 4). In Yoruban mythology, Oba, Oya, and Oshun are the three wives of Shango, who are also orisha (Belt 19). In the Yoruban language, “Omi” means water, and Omi is also a Yoruban orisha. When Watergirl awakes, she meets with the goddess Yemoja, who teaches her and helps her understand that, though Shango is an adult, he is still acting like a child (II, 4).

When, in Act III, Watergirl leaves Yemoja and travels on to meet Shango for the third time, her name has been changed. She is now called “Ms. Waters,” a name that indicates she has transitioned from girlhood to womanhood. She is no longer a child and she has grown to love herself. Ms. Waters says, “I love me. I am about love. I ain’t all giving, either. I want some receiving. I have traveled in the name of love, to find love to beget love” (III, 2). Ms. Waters has discovered self-worth. When Shango and Ms. Waters meet, Ms. Waters has the upper hand in the encounter; she is no longer the naïve girl who can be toyed with. She says, “I am the Fire Eater. Nourish me. . . . I claim you Flamboyant Flame, Fastidious Diety. Now I am the Fire Eater” (III, 4). As they continue to flirt, Shango asks, “By the way. What’s your name, woman?” (III, 4). Here Shango acknowledges Ms. Waters as a woman, an adult, something he has not done before,

and he asks her name. Ms. Waters answers, “Omi. Omi Oya Oba Oshun. Ms. Waters for short” (III, 4). Ms. Waters calls herself by the Yoruban word for water, and by the names of the three wives of the Shango of Yoruban mythology. Act III ends with the wedding of Ms. Waters and Shango, and, during the ceremony she says to him, “Three wives I come to you. Three wise. My lord he comes like the lightning. My love he is the thunder king” (III, 4), and the last line of the play is Ms. Waters speaking to Shango, “Three wives of love are singing to you. Three women singing as one” (III, 4). Ms. Waters thus becomes more powerful than Shango, as she encompasses three orisha, while he is one. The water she embodies tames the fire in him, making him less dangerous. He can no longer burn her, but she has power over him. As one wedding guest says, “I hope she don’t put him out when she get tired of his high jinks,” while another guest responds, “Water can be dangerous” (III, 4).

Considering the date of the first staging of Jackson’s play (1982), the new name the lead character, Water Girl, claims (Ms. Waters), and the power Jackson imparts to Ms. Waters, it seems evident that Jackson was also influenced by the second wave of feminism, which peaked at about the same time, and she gives her character the honorific “Ms.” Then, by evoking the names of Yoruban deities in *Shango Diaspora*, Jackson takes the play that Sid Simon called “a parable” into a new realm, into the realm of African-American feminism and Yoruban mythology, and from that realm she offers a story of female empowerment.

Mythology and Identity in the Plays of Tarell Alvin McCraney

In her MFA dissertation, Julia Marie Mirro Oberg, states that the use of Yoruban mythology and mythological themes are especially common in plays written by Black women in the 1960s and 1970s, but those themes continue to show up in plays written in the time period she explores in her work, 1980 to 1999 (Mirro Oberg 3). Mirro Oberg argues that Yoruban

mythological themes can be found in the works of Black female playwrights such as Ntozake Shange, Cheryl L. West, Pearl Cleage, Aishah Rahman, Suzan Lori-Parks, and others (7). However, references to Yoruban mythology can also be found in plays written by African American men. One example is Tarell Alvin McCraney, who has written and published many plays in which his characters' names derive from Yoruban cosmology.

In an interview with E. Alex Jung, when Jung mentioned the names McCraney chose for his characters, McCraney responded:

I was actually really thrilled and quite honored that someone looked so deeply into the choosing of the names. And I think that people just don't anymore.

Shakespeare spent a lot of time using mythological characters and archetypes and stereotypes in order to explode them. And to look at how we use myth and legend in everyday life to tell our origin stories and to tell who we are. So a lot of my work is based in that. Like *The Brother/Sister Plays*, people are like, "The names are weird." And I'm like, "Well, they're Yoruba gods, so ..." To me, it's the same thing — it's about finding out why our ancestors used these origin stories and these myths to talk about their everyday life; it's probably because they were dealing with the same thing. (qtd. in Jung n. p.)

The Brother/Sister Plays, published in 2010, is a collection of three plays, all set in San Pere, Louisiana, which tell interrelated stories that include many of the same characters, characters whose names are drawn from Yoruban mythology, including Oya, Shango, and Yemoja, the three main characters of Jackson's *Shango Diaspora*. In the first of McCraney's three plays, *In the Red and Brown Water*, a neighbor boy, Elegba, repeatedly dreams of Oya floating in red and brown water, tying Oya to water symbolically. Oya and Shango are

irresistibly drawn to each other, but the relationship falls apart, and Oya turns to another suitor, Ogun Size, after Shango joins the army. (Act I, Scene 3). Ogun, in Yoruban cosmology, is the god of iron and war (“Yoruba Religious System”). When Shango returns to town, Aunt Elegua says to Oya, “Your Fire is back! Girl you better go get melted down!” Oya responds, “Shhh! Aunt Ele, I’m with Ogun.” Aunt Elegua says, “Yeah but he don’t walk near you and / Your temperature change. I have seen you. / I know what you’re like under Ogun Size. But it ain’t nothing like lightning / From Shango, eh?” (II, 2). The references here to fire, heat, and lightning make it clear that McCraney’s character Shango is related to Shango, the Yoruban god of fire and lightning. When Oya despairs because she is infertile, after Shango fathers a child with another woman (Shun), Oya cuts off her ear, which Shango had often caressed, and she offers it to him as a gift (III, 3).

In the second play in the trilogy, *The Brothers Size*, the title characters are Ogun Size and Oshoosi Size. In Yoruban cosmology, Oshoosi is the hunter, the provider of food, and he is associated with wealth. Ironically, in Act I, Scene 1, Oshoosi is out of work and is on parole, as his older brother Ogun tries to motivate him to get out of bed and come work in the auto repair shop with him. In one brief scene, the brothers discuss their mother’s death (III, 5); her name is Yemoja, the same Yoruban mother goddess that Jackson uses in her play. In Act I, Scene 3, in the auto shop, when the brothers have a conversation about women it becomes clear that *The Brothers Size* takes up where *In the Red and Brown Water* left off, when Ogun alludes to Oya’s desperate act to win Shango back, but Oya and Shango do not appear in this play. The play centers around Oshoosi’s attempt to reintegrate into society after his release from prison, but Oshoosi gets into trouble when he sneezes while driving and loses control of the car. When police search the car they find a bag of drugs put there by Oshoosi’s best friend, Elegbra.

Fittingly, in Yoruban mythology, Elegbra is the trickster god who creates chaos and complications for people (“Yoruba Religious System”). Elegbra creates enough chaos that Ogun gives his truck to Oshoosi and tells him to run away to Mexico to avoid the police who are searching for him. Ogun says to his brother, “Just go. / Go find you. / When you meet him, / Ask him if he remember me. / Ask him. / Ask (III, 6).

The third play in the trio is called *Marcus; Or the Secret of Sweet*. The characters Ogun Size, Oshoosi Size, Elegua, Shun, and others seen in the other two plays are featured in this play, as well as Osha, the child of Shango and Shun, Marcus Eshu, the son of Elegba and Oba. Marcus opens with seventeen-year-old Marcus reluctant to attend a funeral procession for Shango who was the father of his best friend, Osha. In the play, Marcus reacts negatively when someone asks if he is “sweet,” a euphemism used in the play for “gay,” and Shaunta Iyun tells Marcus that homophobia was “Passed down from slavery. / Say the slave owners get pissed if they find / Out slaves go gay love. / That means less children, less slaves . . . less” (I, 2). Marcus is having a repeating dream, like his father who dreamed of Oya floating in red and brown waters, and he is wrestling with his sexual identity. While he wants to know more about his father, Elegba, Marcus’s mother, does not want to talk about Elegba, so Marcus begins to question others about his father, wanting to know if his father was “sweet.” Marcus learns that his father had a special male friend, and Marcus finally admits to himself that is he “sweet.”

In the three plays found in the collection *Brother/Sister Plays*, McCraney uses names from Yoruban mythology to tie his characters to Africa and to divorce them from the legacy of slavery, to set them in a world that does not have that shadow of slavery hanging over it.

McCraney’s characters are empowered by the names they carry, names once given to Yoruban

gods, names that imbue those characters with elemental power, names that link them back to the homeland of Africa.

McCraney also wrote the script for his autobiographical play, *In the Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, while he was a student at the Yale School of Drama (2005-2007). Though the script was never produced on the stage like other plays McCraney wrote, it was later adapted and made into the film *Moonlight*, which opened in theaters in 2016. McCraney's play is broken into three acts, each of which follows the life of the protagonist Chiron through a phase of his life, and each act is labeled by the name the protagonist uses at that stage of his life.

Act I of *Moonlight* is titled "Little." The play is set in Miami, and, as the title implies, the protagonist is young and powerless. He is chased and beaten by other boys, when he meets Juan, a drug dealer who becomes a friend and a father-figure to the child. When Juan introduces the child to his partner Teresa, the child says, "My name Chiron. But people call me Little." Teresa responds, "I'm gon' call you by your name" (I, 9). Refusing the nickname "Little," which lessens Chiron's status, marking him as unimportant, Teresa gives Chiron full human status by using his name. But Chiron's peers, who frequently target him for abuse, continue to call Chiron "Little." Only one boy in his school, Kevin, treats Chiron kindly, and Kevin calls Chiron by his given name.

Act II of *Moonlight* is titled "Chiron." In Greek mythology, Chiron is a centaur who is unlike other centaurs. While centaurs are known to be fierce and violent; Chiron is gentle, wise, and kind, a physician, and teacher of the sons of many Greek heroes (Hamilton 291). In his interview with Jung, McCraney said, "The notion of a wounded healer was really important to me, the story of how Chiron takes Zeus's unwanted children and raises them in this other place. He's also an herbalist, he deals in medicine. Those things were very connected to the story I was

trying to tell” (qtd. in Jung n.p.). McCraney’s choice of names suggests that the protagonist of *Moonlight* is a wiser, kinder, character than the other characters in the play.

In Act II, Chiron is sixteen years old. The bullies who harass him still call him “Little,” emphasizing it when they want to harass him. However, Chiron no longer accepts the name and pushes back when he is called “Little.” Chiron claims his own name, while he is claiming his own identity as a homosexual. When Chiron visits the home of Juan and Teresa, Teresa calls him “Little” when she’s trying to find out what’s bothering him. Chiron responds, “Don’t call me that,” and Teresa asks, “You *grown* now?” It is clear, however, that the character Teresa understands the importance of claiming one’s name. Referring to his rejection of the name “Little,” she says to Chiron, “I’m just messin’ with you boy. / And you right, that ain’t no name / for you no more. That ain’t you. / But if you wanna be somethin’ / different, you gotta earn it, you / gotta make your name true, / understand?” (II). Teresa is pushing Chiron to both claim and earn his own name, to fill his name with his own power.

Chiron’s classmate, Kevin, continues to treat Chiron kindly, and, in their interactions, Kevin sometimes calls Chiron “Black.” When Chiron questions Kevin about calling him “Black,” Kevin responds, “Black? That’s my nickname for you. / You don’t like it?” Chiron shrugs and seems to accept the name. He does not respond with rejection as he does when people call him “Little.” After Chiron and Kevin have a sexual encounter on the beach, Kevin gives Chiron a ride home. Chiron thanks him for the ride, and Kevin says, “No problem, Black. See you around,” (II) and Chiron smiles, which is something rarely seen in the script. The smile indicates that Chiron enjoys the new name as well as his new identity as a homosexual. Their friendship is damaged, however, when one of the school bullies, Terrell, dares Kevin to hit Chiron and a group of bullies gather to incite a fight. Feeling pressured by the bullies, Kevin hits

Chiron, knocking him to the ground, then urging him to stay down, but Chiron rises, staring defiantly at Kevin. Terrell then hits Chiron, and the whole band of boys jump in to beat up Chiron. Act II ends with a scene in which Chiron, in the classroom, picks up a chair and slams it onto the head of Terrell, and Chiron is led out of the school in handcuffs.

Act III is labeled “Black.” In Act III, Chiron is grown, somewhere in his 20s, a tough guy with gold front teeth (“fronts”). He has his own apartment in Atlanta and a fancy car with a vanity plate that says “BLACK.” It is clear Chiron has claimed the nickname “Black,” given to him by Kevin, and he has created a new persona for himself as a powerful and feared drug dealer. When Black receives an unexpected phone call from Kevin and then drives to Miami to see Kevin, Kevin is surprised by Black’s look and demeanor. Kevin asks, “Who is you, man? . . . You? Them fronts? That car? Who is you, Chiron?” Black responds, “Tried to forget all those times. The good... ..the bad. . . . When we got to Atlanta . . . I started over. Built myself from the ground up. Built myself hard” (III). Black has worked to create a hard persona for himself, a persona that will keep him from being the target of bullies. In the process, he has become a different person, and part of that new person is the name “Black.” When Black admits to Kevin that no other man, no other person has ever touched him, Kevin and Black come together to make love. “Black” releases the hard shell he had built around himself; he releases the name “Black,” and he becomes “Chiron” again, becomes his true self, as the two men rediscover themselves in each other’s arms. Chiron has grown from “Little” to “Chiron,” created a false shell for himself as “Black,” and come home to the man he loves as “Chiron.”

Tarell Alvin McCraney’s work makes it clear that he understands the link between power and naming, as he names his characters to give them power and he allows his characters to

change and choose names that suit them best during each phase of their lives. Both McCraney, as a playwright, and McCraney's characters use names that project the true nature of the character.

Because of the history of naming in the lives of African Americans, African American writers are extremely conscious of the power related to names and naming. bell hooks, whose given name is Gloria Watkins, writes:

Naming is a serious process. It has been of crucial concern for many individuals within oppressed groups who struggle for self-recovery, for self-determination. . . . naming is a source of empowerment, an important gesture in the process of creation. A primacy is given to naming as a gesture that deeply shapes and influences the social construction of a self. (166)

Throughout history, African Americans have chosen to rename themselves, just as bell hooks and Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison have done, for other reasons: to claim new identities, to honor others, to reconnect with their African roots, to resist hegemonic white culture, all of which are efforts aimed at self-empowerment. In the plays discussed in this chapter, there is an underlying trope of naming and its significance in the work of the playwrights. Just as naming is of "crucial concern" for Black people, giving names to characters is also "an important gesture in the process of [the] creation" of those characters for African American authors. The African American playwrights discussed in this chapter use names in multi-faceted ways in their works, and these playwrights have consciously chosen naming to help the reader/viewer to identify with their characters.

In *Deep Talk: Reading African American Literary Names*, Debra Walker King writes: "Black naming practices are acts of resistance against ancestral loss and spiritual death. . . . One way of understanding naming in black culture is by reading its play of resistance in African-

American literature” (41). In this chapter, I have attempted to read the “play of resistance” created with the names of characters in the plays of Suzan-Lori Parks, Ruth Gaines-Shelton, Angela Jackson, and Tarell Alvin McCraney. While the “play of resistance” is not clearly evident in Gaines-Shelton’s *The Church Fight*, that play of resistance can be found in the works of the other playwrights discussed herein, including allusions to the works of other authors, allusions to ancestral myths of Africa and Greece, exemplification of and resistance to patriarchal control and shaming of Black women, exemplification of and resistance to white supremacist attempts to un-name Black people, exemplification of and resistance to homophobia, and exemplification of acts of Black empowerment through naming.

Note

^{3.1} Though portrayal of dysfunction within church congregations may have been rarely seen “on the stage,” Pauline E. Hopkins included scenes dealing with competitive “church ladies” in her novel *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South*, published in 1900 (143-65, 183-88).

Chapter Four

Identity and Resistance

Naming and its Link to Agency in African American Fiction and Memoirs

In her essay “Saving the Life that is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artists’ Life,” Alice Walker writes, “black writers seem always involved in a moral and/or physical struggle, the result of which is expected to be some kind of larger freedom. Perhaps that is because our literary tradition is based on the slave narratives, where escape for the body and freedom for the soul went together” (12). Out of that Black literary tradition rooted in slave narratives, African American writers continue to struggle against the white supremacist tool of un-naming, which has been used to establish dominance and to keep Black people shackled to a past that limits their freedom and their ability to access the endless possibilities open to white people. In the past two centuries, titles of respect that were commonly used for white people, such as Mr., Mrs., and Miss, were almost always denied to Black people. Racist white people called adult and even elderly Black men and women “boy” or “girl” or “gal.”^{4.1} By denying those free Black people titles of respect, white people effectively denied Black men and women the full rights and respect due to adults. White supremacists used un-naming and naming as tools of dominance, long after the days of slavery ended, even during and after the Civil Rights era. For centuries, racist white people have deliberately taunted Black people with offensive, demeaning names as a means of continually reinforcing concepts of white supremacy and reminding Black people of their subjugated positions within a white supremacist hierarchical society.

Houston A. Baker writes, “The simple English word *name* has an awesome significance for black American culture that it can never possess for another culture; the quest for being and identity that begins in a nameless and uncertain void exerts a pressure on the word *name* that can be understood only when one understands black American culture” (120). Because of the powerful link between naming and identity, a sense of the importance of naming for African Americans continued past Emancipation, past the Jim Crow era, past the 1960s, and into the following decades, and the significance of naming continues to be reflected in even the most contemporary African American literature.

In *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: American’s Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*, Joy DuGruy writes about the way titles of respect were never used when white supremacists addressed Black people and the way Black people used naming to resist white supremacy. DuGruy says, “They were never addressed as ladies and gentlemen, Sir, Ma’am, Mister, Miss, or Mrs., so they conferred their own designation of respect. They addressed one another as Big Mama, Big Daddy, Madea, Sister or Brother to convey honor” (145). DuGruy’s comment suggests that Black people have reacted to onomastic disrespect by employing naming strategies to combat the psychological damage of un-naming on their identities. Because those titles of respect are part of Black tradition, those titles can also be found, voiced by literary characters, in many works of fiction and memoir written by African Americans. In fact, the significance of names and naming, with their inevitable link to power or powerlessness, imbues much of African American literature.

Since names and naming have historically been used to subjugate Black people, it is understandable that African Americans would use names and naming practices to reclaim their personal and cultural identity and that African American authors would exemplify in their works

both the struggles and the victory in such struggles. The significance of naming and its link to power can be explored in many works by African American authors, including Sherley Ann Williams's *Dessa Rose*, and Ernest Gaines *A Gathering of Old Men*, which are not discussed here, since they are thoroughly explicated in Debra Walker King's *Deep Talk: Reading African-American Literary Names*. Even the titles of some of the most well-known works by African American authors reflect a focus on the significance of names, for example: *Black Boy* by Richard Wright, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, and *Nobody Knows My Name* and *No Name in the Street*, both by James Baldwin. The number of short stories, novels, and memoirs that could be discussed in this context would take far more space than this dissertation allows, so, in this chapter, I explore the works of African American literature that offer some of the best examples of the various ways un-naming, renaming, and naming are used in African American prose: to shine a light into the darkness of white supremacy and exemplify ways to resist it; to express the pain of the un-named; to demonstrate imbalance in male/female relationships; to express mystery and supernatural power; and to celebrate the liberation of those who have the ability to reclaim a name, voice their own name, or empower themselves with a new name.

Resisting Un-naming in Post Modern Slave Narratives and Beyond

When African American writers place their characters in the past, specifically in times of slavery, naming and un-naming often become important tropes in their texts. In his 1976 novel, *Roots*, Alex Haley explores the power of an individual's name through his central character Kunta Kinte, who is born in Africa but is kidnapped and torn away from his family, chained in the bowels of a slave ship, and sold to slaveholders in the United States of America. In the opening pages of his novel, Haley emphasizes the importance of names by describing the birth of Kunta Kinte and his father's intense seven-day quest to find the appropriate name for his

firstborn son. Haley writes, “he believed a child would develop seven of the characteristics of whomever or whatever he was named for” (2-3). Haley describes Kinte’s naming ceremony and writes that Kunta Kinte is “named for a noble ancestor” (6). This makes the un-naming and renaming of Kunta Kinte, by the white slaveholder who buys him, even more abhorrent. The first time Kunta Kinte is called by the name “Toby,” which was assigned to him by his white master, Kunta Kinte becomes angry and blurts out his African name (255). Kunta Kinte knows that to surrender his African name is to surrender his identity as a proud member of his lost family, his lost tribe, his lost continent.

Throughout *Roots*, Haley reemphasizes the importance of naming. The protagonist, Kunta Kinte, refuses to give up his name even when other enslaved Black people around him have adopted the names given to them by the white men who have enslaved them. In one chapter, Kunta Kinte rages that slaveholders “even took our names away” (385), and Kinte reacts with outrage when the master of the plantation asks his slave Toby (Kunta Kinte) to name his newly born son “Tom,” which is the white master’s name (520). Kunta Kinte’s name and his life story become treasures passed down to his children and his grandchildren because they are proud of their ancestor’s African roots and his ability, despite all the horrors of slavery, to maintain his name and thus maintain his African identity.

In contrast, some African American authors write about characters who withhold their true names from slave owners or employers. For example, in *Daughters of the Dust*, Julie Dash’s character Amelia is an African American college student studying anthropology who goes to Dawtuh Island in South Carolina, where her family came from, to study the people there, many of whom are relatives. In one of the stories Amelia collects, a resident of the island, Eli Peazant, tells the story of an enslaved man, Kojo, who is a distant relative. Peazant begins his story:

Dey call he de captive wit many names. Him have many name from de time when him first stole from he village. Everybody own he give he a new name. Nobody care what he name is an nobody ast. Dey think he nuttin, he nobody till he belong to dem. An him no tell he name cause he no wan he name fouled by dey mouths (Dust 166).

Only after Kojo has killed his owners and many Spanish soldiers does he stand, covered in their blood, and reclaim his name. “Him call out to dem, ‘My name is . . . Kojo!’” (168). Kojo’s ability to reclaim autonomy in his life is linked to reclaiming his name.

In *The Temple of my Familiar*, Alice Walker’s character Zedé also withholds her true name. As she tells of her experience working as a maid in a hacienda. Zedé says, “They called me Consuelo, Connie, for short. Do this, Connie. Do that, Connie. No, I never gave them my right name, either. I told them it was Chaquita. Like the banana, the gringa said, laughing to her husband. Like the banana! Still when guests were there she called me Consuelo, because she liked the sound of herself saying it” (78-79). Here Zedé allows her employer to rename her, and she withholds her true name to protect her core identity; “I was not a dumb Indian maidslave, . . . I was not Consuelo” (80). Along with withholding her name, Zedé also hides the fact that she is an educated “university-trained” person who speaks Spanish, allowing her employer to believe she cannot understand their language (78-80). This also gives Zedé power, since she learns much by listening in to conversations her employers think she cannot understand.

Ta-nehisi Coates, in his 2019 novel *The Water Dancer*, like Alex Haley, explores the power relationship linked to the names of slaves. In one chapter, a former slave Otha is talking to Mary, who has only recently escaped from her slave master with her young son in tow. Mary asks the name of the small boy playing in the room. Mary responds, “Octavius . . . Don’t ask me

why, I ain't name him. Ol massa decided that like he decided everything else" (Coates 201). Mary's bitterness about the naming of her son is apparent. In the slave/master relationship, she held no power, not even the power to name her own son.

In another chapter from Coates' novel, the protagonist, Hiram, is talking to a former slave, and he asks, "George, how'd it feel when you walked off Master Howell's place for the first time?" (Coates 58). George responds, "Like a man" and continues to extoll the pleasures of freedom. He says, "I now rise when I want and I sleep when it is my will. My name is Parks because I said so. I pulled the name from nothing—conjured it as a gift to my son. It got no meaning except this—I chose it. Its meaning is in the doing. Do you get me, Hiram?" (Coates 59). Because he is free, George does not have to accept a name given to him by a white master. He can now rename himself; he can choose a name for himself. The power to name himself empowers George Parks as a free man and passing on his new surname empowers his children and grandchildren.

When Hiram has himself escaped from slavery and is working with a group of former slaves on the Underground Railroad, Hiram must "take up a new identity" and he is "furnished with papers" by conductors on the Underground Railroad (Coates). He says, "My name stayed the same with one addition—the surname Walker." Ironically, even though he has escaped from his slave master, Hiram is not given the agency to choose his own name. The Underground operatives "thought no man could author his own life," so they created his identity, giving him an occupation, a story about how he came to be a free man, and a new surname. Though he was freed from his former master, Hiram does not have the freedom that George had, to choose his own name. With these three scenes, Coates emphasizes the link between power and naming.

In Toni Morrison's post-modern slave narrative *Beloved*, names, and how they are given, play an important role as well. Sethe grows up as a slave on a plantation ironically named Sweet Home, which, of course, is not a sweet home for the enslaved people who live there. When Sethe, nine months pregnant, escapes from slavery, she gives birth to a baby girl in the woods with the help of a young white girl named Denver, who has escaped from indentured servitude. Sethe hides her own name and gives the girl a false name "Lu" because Sethe does not trust the white woman (Morrison 78-79). After she helps deliver the baby, Denver asks Sethe if she will tell her daughter who helped bring the child into the world (Morrison 84). Sethe names her baby daughter Denver to retain the memory of the young white woman who could have turned her in to slave trackers but, instead, chose to help an escaped slave. Sethe chooses a name for her child that will honor the young white woman who helped deliver the child. The child's name then has meaning and history.

When Sethe runs away from the plantation, she heads to the place where her husband's mother, Baby Suggs, is waiting for her. Baby Suggs has abandoned the name, Jenny Whitlow, given to her by her owners, instead choosing to use the name her husband gave her in love "Baby" and the last name claimed by the man she loved "Suggs" (Morrison 130-131). Though others argue with her, that "Baby Suggs" is not an appropriate name for a free woman, Baby Suggs holds on to the name that her deceased husband gave to her. Here, in Morrison's work, is an example of a chosen name or a given name becoming part of an identity so inextricably that it is more important to Baby Suggs than any legal name.

After Sethe finds Baby Suggs and makes a new home for herself and her children, Sethe's former owner and a professional slavecatcher show up to retrieve Sethe and her children. When Sethe sees them arrive, she takes her four children into a shed and attempts to kill them

with a knife to prevent them from being forced back into slavery. Three of the children recover from their wounds, but one daughter dies, a daughter who is never named in the novel (Morrison 125-127). After this child is buried, Sethe wants to have a headstone carved with the words of the preacher's graveside service, which began, "Dearly Beloved" (13), but Sethe has no money. The engraver agrees to put one word on the stone in exchange for sex with Sethe. Sethe chooses the word "Beloved," which is then carved on the stone (12), and the reader never knows the child's given name. Debra Walker King writes:

Unnaming occurs when a name phrase, name, or nickname replaces the original designator, forcing it from the text entirely, when an epithet, or another pejorative name, functions as the primary signifier for a character; or when a sense of namelessness, nullification, or loss of historicity dominates either a name's deep talk or a character's subject position within a text. (92)

When the word "Beloved" becomes the signifier for the dead child, she is un-named, and that un-naming keeps the child from being at rest in her grave. Years later, Sethe and her daughter Denver are haunted by a young woman who claims her name is "Beloved." The young woman shows her own obsession with her name when she seduces Sethe's lover, Paul D., and says to him, "I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name. . . . You have to touch me. On the inside part. And you have to call me my name. . . . Call me my name. . . . Please call it. I'll go if you call it" (Morrison 111). But she does not go when Paul D. says, "Beloved." She moves nearer, and when Paul D. "reached the inside part he was saying, 'Red heart. Red heart,' over and over again" (Morrison 111). Perhaps the ghostly young woman is hoping Paul D. will say her given name, the name that was lost when she was murdered and buried. After the angry and destructive ghost is finally banished, Morrison writes, "Everybody knew what she was

called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed" (227). Here Morrison's plaintive lines express the link between name and identity. The ghost's return is an act of resistance against being un-named by the headstone that calls her "Beloved" but does not name her, and the slain daughter seeks to reclaim her identity from the mother who killed her.

The exploration of un-naming, however, is not limited to postmodern slave narratives. Black characters in fiction written by African American writers are often seen as resisting acts of un-naming. Sometimes only one line of text shows this; sometimes pages of texts are devoted to these acts of resistance. One example of a single line of text indicating resistance to un-naming can be seen in Gloria Naylor's novel *Bailey's Café*. Naylor describes the sad and difficult life of her character, Sadie, who is married to a drunk, Daniel. Daniel speaks only one or two sentences a day, and as Sadie remembers some of the sentences this taciturn man speaks over their twenty-five years together, Naylor writes that he says, "My name ain't *nigger*" (53). Though Daniel speaks rarely, the sentences Sadie remembers help her piece together a picture of the man who her husband was before he became so downtrodden. This one sentence shows Sadie that, before he was broken, her husband had been a Black man with pride, who would not allow himself to be un-named and disrespected.

Another example of resistance to un-naming can be found in Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*. In a scene in the chapter labeled "Mattie Michael," the title character, Mattie, is in the yard feeding chickens when a man calls to her, "Hey, gal." Mattie ignores him, and he calls again, "I say, hey, gal." Mattie responds without looking at him, "I heard you the first time Butch Fuller, but I got a name, you know" (Naylor *The Women* 8). Here Mattie resists being un-

named by Butch, refusing to respond to him the first time he un-names her, then correcting him when he un-names her again. Mattie resists Butch's act of un-naming, and she insists she be correctly addressed before she will acknowledge him and speak with him.

In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's title character is not un-named by others. He has been un-named because he suffers from amnesia, thus leading to namelessness. When he is asked his name, the protagonist responds with terror: "A tremor shook me . . . I realized that I no longer knew my own name . . . I tried again, plunging into the blackness of my own mind" (Ellison 239). The protagonist is confused and terrified because he cannot locate the seat of his identity; he cannot remember his own name. Jim Neighbors states, "The attempt by Invisible Man to remember a name forgotten triggers the instability of an identity crisis" (233). Since names are so linked to the core of identity, the protagonist's loss of his own name creates a void at the locus of his identity. He is lost in "the blackness of [his] own mind."

Kimberly W. Benston posits that the protagonist of *Invisible Man* is "black literature's most memorable cipher of the nameless—yet the ambiguities he learns to confront . . . arise from the comedy of his vain desire to achieve an empowering name. At every turn in his story he seeks identity" (6), resisting his un-naming. Though doctors attempt to spark his memory, the protagonist "lay fretting over [his] identity" (Ellison 242), and he says, "When I discover who I am, I'll be free" (Ellison 243). The protagonist links his namelessness to a lack of freedom. But even after the protagonist is given his name (given to him but never to the reader), he does not find the kind of stability he seeks. The name the protagonist is given has no connection to his memory of himself, so that name has no connection to his own identity. In his essay "Hidden Names and Complex Fate," Ralph Ellison writes about the influence of his own given name on his identity, and he emphasizes the link between names and identity when he writes, "we must

first come into possession of our own names. For it is through names that we first place ourselves in the world. Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own” (243). The protagonist in the *Invisible Man* “come[s] into possession” of his own name when he is told his name, but he cannot make the name his own. Therefore, the name is meaningless in his search for identity and he cannot “place [himself] in the world.”

Renaming and Self-Naming in African American Literature

On the opposite extreme from *Invisible Man*'s character who cannot remember his own name, are characters in other African American fiction who are called by many names. In many novels and short stories written by African American authors, characters accept various names assigned by others until they reach a point when self-naming becomes a necessity to establish limits on personal space or personal identity. For example, in the short story “Gorilla, my Love” published in a collection of short stories by the same name, Toni Cade Bambara's opening lines are, “That was the year Hunca Bubba changed his name. Not a change up, but a change back, since Jefferson Winson Vale was the name in the first place” (1). In those first few lines and throughout the story, Bambara demonstrates the onomastic fluidity of African American communities, how some nicknames come into being, how commonly they are used in African American communities, and how the nickname is sometimes rejected in favor of the given name and *vice versa*. However, Bambara also shows the fluidity of identity created through such naming.

In “Gorilla, my Love,” the protagonist and narrator of the short story is a child named Hazel, who is called Hazel only when people are really serious. Otherwise, they shower her with nicknames. Hazel talks about riding in the truck with her grandfather. ““Which way, Scout,’ . . . Not that Scout's my name. Just the name Granddaddy call whoever sittin in the navigator seat”

(18). Later Hazel says, “Like my Mama say in one of them situations when I won’t back down, Okay Badbird, you right. Not that Badbird my name, just what she say when she tired arguing and know I’m right. And Aunt Jo . . . she say, You absolutely right Miss Muffin, which also ain’t my real name but the name she gave me one time when I got some medicine shot in my behind and wouldn’t get up off her pillows for nothin” (22-23). Hazel is also called “Peaches” by her uncle, and she objects to the nickname only when she is upset that he is going to be married. As he attempts to soothe her, he renames her again and calls her “Precious.” Hazel adapts to her various nicknames with skilled fluidity because they do not threaten her identity; they enhance her identity.

In Bambara’s next story in the same collection, “Raymond’s Run,” Hazel is again named and renamed by many people. In this story, the narrator first introduces herself as Squeaky and says she got the name because she is a little girl with a squeaky voice. Despite her size, Squeaky is a fighter.^{4.2} Squeaky participates in track meets and is so fast she says, the “big kids call me Mercury cause I’m the swiftest thing in the neighborhood” (25). As she is preparing for a race, Hazel calls herself “Miss Quicksilver” to give herself even more self-confidence (28). When the child signs up for a race, the adult in charge, Mr. Pearson, calls her Squeaky, a name she has called herself and has accepted gladly from others, but Bambara’s feisty character responds, “Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker, I correct him” (30). In this scene, the child, who quite willingly accepts the fluidity in identity created when she is called Scout, Badbird, Miss Muffin, Peaches, Precious, Squeaky, and Mercury by people she loves, draws the line with someone who is not a part of her family or her own community uses one of her nicknames, and she insists that this man call her by her legal name. Hazel creates a distance between herself and Mr. Pearson,

and she claims her dignity and importance as an individual by insisting on the use of her full legal name.

Renaming and nicknames are common in African American communities, and they are used often by African American writers as well, to show love and tenderness, as when Mattie is called “Butt” (short for “Butter”) by her father in Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* (20-21). Nicknames can identify a characteristic of an individual, as when Mattie calls her friend Etta “Tut,” a nickname she earned as a toddler, when someone commented that she was “strutting around here like a bantam. You think she’d be the wife of King Tut” (Naylor *The Women* 59). Nicknames are also used to shorten an unwieldy or too formal name, as when a neighbor describes what Bernice, in Naylor’s *Mama Day*, names her child, “Charles Somebody Harrison Somebody-else Duvall” (161), and the family members call the child “Chick” because “[t]hat’s what he looked like, toddling around: little pecan head sitting on a scrawny neck, two bright buttons for eyes, and a feathery mess of hair . . . Who could remember all that other mess she tied onto the child?” (161). Toni Morrison says nicknames are intimate names that spring from “yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses” (Morrison *Song of Solomon* 330). However, because of the level of intimacy implied, nicknames are sometimes reserved for the closest of friends, family members, and lovers. Just as Hazel corrects the official who tries to call her by one of her nicknames, many African American characters, in fiction written by African American authors, reserve the use of nicknames for those in their most immediate circles, using their given names with strangers.

Naming and Self-Naming as a Repudiation of Name Losses in Slavery

As demonstrated time and time again in and beyond the history of slavery in the U.S., another form of renaming is self-naming. As a reaction to systematic un-naming within a racist

society, there has been an noted rise in the importance of naming for African Americans beginning in the 1960s, when many Black people began to rename themselves, discarding the names that were given to them at birth and either claiming names historically rooted in Africa or creating original names that shared the sounds and rhythms of African names. Debra Walker King argues “Black naming practices are acts of resistance against ancestral loss and spiritual death. . . . blacks give their children unique names, African names, or create names using historical memories and hopes as sources that call forth the untainted cosmic forces of resistance” (41). African American naming practices, renaming, and/or self-naming are often used in the same way in African American literature, to indicate an awakening of pride in African ancestry.

In her short story, “Everyday Use,” which is set in the late 1960s or early 1970s, Alice Walker writes about a small impoverished Black family, a mother and her two daughters. After being away at college, the older daughter comes home, to her mother’s sharecropper’s cabin, bringing her boyfriend for a visit. The young woman’s given name is Dee, but when she comes home, the newly politicized college student declares that “Dee” is dead, and she asks her family to call her “Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo” (1558). Wangero has renamed herself in an attempt to claim her African heritage and to express her pride as a free Black woman. Wangero states that she “couldn’t bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress” her (1558). Wangero’s mother does not understand this. Mama explains that her daughter was named after her aunt who was named after her grandmother, so the name “Dee” has a family history, a history Dee should be proud of. Wangero, however, seems to feel empowered by her connection to the Black Power movement, and her new name gives her a sense of deeper connection to pre-slavery roots, even though she has lost all connection to her original African tribal nation. Giving

herself a new African name allows Wagero to disassociate herself from the roots of slavery and empower herself as a descendent of the free people of Africa.

A similar family struggle over naming is seen in “Kiswana Browne,” a chapter of Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place*. The titular character of the chapter is a young woman who has renamed herself, choosing an African name that empowers her. Kiswana is surprised by an unannounced visit from her mother who knocks on the door, calling out “Melanie, Melanie, are you there?” While Kiwana is walking toward the door, she thinks “She’s starting before she even gets in here. She knows that’s not my name anymore” (Naylor, *The Women* 78). Kiswana passive-aggressively reminds her mother of her chosen name by saying, “You know, I thought I heard a knock, but I figured it was for the people next door, since no one hardly ever calls me Melanie” (78). Naylor makes it clear that Kiwana’s name is an ongoing source of conflict between herself and her mother when she writes, “This long string of questions [from Kiswana’s mother] told Kiswana that her mother had no intention of beginning her visit with another argument about her new African name” (Naylor 78).

Like Mama and Wagero in Walker’s “Everyday Use,” Kiswana and her mother, Mrs. Browne, have larger issues of cultural difference, issues regarding how to express Black pride, but those issues are exemplified in Kiswana’s choice to leave behind her given name, “Melanie.” Kiwana’s mother, like Wagero’s Mama, argues that the name “Melanie” is a family name. She says, “It broke my heart when you changed your name. I gave you my grandmother’s name, a woman who bore nine children and educated them all, who held off six white men with a shotgun when they tried to drag one of her sons to jail for ‘not knowing his place.’ Yet you need to reach into an African dictionary to find a name to make you proud” (Naylor, *The Women*, 86). Though Kiswana’s mother believes she had given her daughter a name that would empower her,

Kiswana, herself, felt the need to reach back further, into the roots of Africa, to find a name to empower herself. Kiswana, makes a “social and political statement” (King, Debra Walker 55) when she reached beyond the American past that she feels is tainted by slavery to find her roots and her pride in Africa.

Even in the most current African American fiction, naming is still linked to power, sometimes in an ironic way. Sheree L. Greer’s novel *A Return to Arms*, published in 2016, takes her readers into the heart of the Black Lives Matter movement. Among a group of young activists, when greeting each other, the male members of the group address their female counterparts as “Queens,” a renaming that implies respect, but the attitudes of the male characters using this form of address are anything but respectful. For example, in one scene Kanaan tells a woman to stay in the car while he talks to Folami and Toya, then he smacks Toya’s hand down when she starts to wave at the woman in the car (33). Kanaan also uses patronizing language to dismiss the ideas that Toya and Folami come up with for the Black Lives Matter movement. At one point Kanaan calls their video project “cute” (31), and he says, “There’s some key components missing from your position on this media shit,” even though they have come up with a strong idea and he knows little about it (34-35). With his continual patriarchal scorn, Kanaan’s use of the salutation “Queens” becomes ironic.

In one of the most interesting name choices in Greer’s novel, a Black Lives Matter activist comes into town and begins to divide the group of local activists by talking about how feminists and gays are destroying the African American community. This character has renamed himself “Supreme Self” (Greer 150-161), and the name reflects the inflated sense of self-importance the character exhibits and foreshadows the problems he will cause in the community.

In Greer's novel, other characters also claim their personal identities not with their legal names but with their chosen names. Several characters in *A Return to Arms* have renamed themselves, choosing names other than their birth names, and when people do not use those chosen names, the characters lose face. For example, in a particularly powerful scene in which four young black activists, Toya, Folami, Fishbone, and Kanaan, are returning from a Black Lives Matter rally, they are pulled over by a white police officer, and the driver, known to his friends as Kanaan, must produce his driver's license. When the police officer reads the license aloud, the character's birth name is revealed to be Kevin Reynolds (Greer 117-118). Kevin Reynolds has chosen the name "Kanaan" as a name that gives himself a sense of power and pride in his African heritage, but when the officer reveals his given name, Kevin is placed in a position of powerlessness while the officer taunts the terrified driver. By losing his empowering African name, Kevin is unmasked and unmanned before his friends. But this same character, Kanaan, has previously shown disrespect for a female activist by refusing to use her chosen name. The character's given name is LaToya, but she has renamed herself and prefers to be called "Toya," a name that she feels is true to her own idea of herself. Kanaan uses the name "LaToya" simply to taunt Toya and emphasize his power over her (Greer 30-31). Choosing one's own name creates a sense of power over one's own self. In Greer's novel, renaming oneself is a source of empowerment but having that chosen name ignored is a form of un-naming that gives power to the person who has refused to acknowledge the chosen name, and this un-naming subjugates the person whose chosen name is ignored.

Naming to Resist White Hegemonic Culture

The un-naming of African Americans has a long history, a history that needs to be resisted. In her article "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Toni Morrison argues that, for

African American authors, “the work must be political. It must have that as its thrust. . . . you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time (497). Morrison makes *Song of Solomon* political, in that it, perhaps more than any other African American novel, illustrates the power of names. The epigraph of the novel offers the first clues that names will be significant: “The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names.” Following this epigraph, Morrison offers her readers a novel full of people with unusual names, names that implicitly rebel against white supremacist onomastic culture. One of the major characters in Morrison’s novel is named Macon Dead Jr. Macon Dead Jr.’s father had been given the name “Macon Dead” when the U.S. government freed Southern slaves and a drunken Yankee soldier wrote the slave’s place of birth in the spot for his first name and his response when asked about his father in the place designated for the last name. The newly freed slave passively accepts the name, perhaps out of habit because he had always been named by white people, perhaps thinking it was better than his slave name. That “literal slip of the pen handed to his father on a piece of paper” is then handed down father to son for three generations as each Macon Dead passes the name onto his eldest son (Morrison 18).

The first Macon Dead begins a family tradition of using a “blind selection of names from the Bible” (18) to name each newborn in the family, other than the first-born male, who continued to inherit that “slip of the pen.” This family tradition results in a daughter named Pilate (who wears, in a small box fashioned into an earring, the slip of paper on which her father, who could not read, copied her name from the Bible), and two granddaughters named Magdalene and First Corinthians. Macon Dead III is given his father and grandfather’s name, but he also receives the nickname “Milkman” after his mother is caught still nursing him when he is old

enough for his legs to almost touch the floor as he sits in her lap; it is a nickname he hates at first but later learns to embrace.

Macon Dead Jr. also hates his name, and he thinks “the giving of names in his family was always surrounded by monumental foolishness” (15). He daydreams of an ancestor, “some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cane stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name” (17-18). Milkman Dead hates the family surname, yet when he finally meets his aunt Pilate and she says, “Ain’t but three Deads alive,” Milkman blurts out, “I’m a Dead! My Mother’s a Dead! My sisters. You and him ain’t the only ones!’ Even while he was screaming [Milkman] wondered why he was suddenly so defensive—so possessive about his name” (38). Milkman hates his family name until he feels un-named by his aunt, then he behaves “as though having the name was a matter of deep personal pride” (38). Milkman also hates his nickname until he becomes friends with a young man called “Guitar.” Milkman thinks “in Guitar’s mouth it sounded clever, grown up” (38). A name that had been given in derision and was a source of shame becomes a name Milkman wears with pride once he claims it as his own.

Later, when Guitar becomes involved in a clandestine group trying to balance the scales of justice by killing a white person every time a Black person is killed by white people, Milkman meets Guitar’s comrade, who has renamed himself “X.” When Milkman derides the name, Guitar says, “I don’t give a damn about names” (160). Milkman responds, “You miss his point. His point is to let white people know you don’t accept your slave name” (160). Milkman understands the point X is making because Milkman has had to live with a surname he hates after his grandfather, giving up his own name, accepted a name that was handed to him by a

drunken soldier incorrectly filling out a form (53-54). Milkman, like his father, longs for a name that carries meaning and dignity.

In this novel, Morrison continuously reinforces the importance of names and the power of those who have authority to give names. As Sima Farshid writes, “Morrison makes her protagonist unearth the history of his family and hence the myths of African slaves of the South to comprehend his true identity” (229). Milkman discovers that an old children’s song about “Sugarman” is actually about his ancestor, a slave named Solomon, and he learns that the places his ancestors lived have been named after those ancestors. Milkman finds his roots through family names that had been hidden by historic practices of un-naming, renaming, and self-naming. Milkman also learns about the first Macon Dead’s wife: “‘Sing. Her name was Sing,’” . . . and he asks, ‘Sing Dead? Where’d she get a name like that?’ ‘Where’d you get a name like yours? White people name Negroes like race horses’” (243). Here Morrison emphasizes the lack of agency many African American slaves had in the choice of their names, and she points out that white people had no respect for the Black people they had the power to un-name, name, or re-name. The naming of enslaved Black people was often careless and cruel.

Near the end of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison reemphasizes the power of names when Milkman has discovered the history of his grandfather and his wife Sing and the importance of their names. In a lyrical train of consciousness, Milkman reflects on naming:

He read the road signs with interest now, wondering what lay beneath the names. . . . How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country. Under the recorded names were other names, just as ‘Macon Dead,’ recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning. No wonder

Pilate put hers in her ear. When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do. . . . He closed his eyes and thought of the black men in Shalimar, Roanoke, Petersburg, Newport News, Danville, in the Blood Bank, on Darling Street in the pool halls, the barbershops. Their names. Names they got from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness. Macon Dead, Sing Byrd, Crowell Byrd, Pilate, Reba, Hagar, Magdalene, First Corinthians, Milkman, Guitar, Railroad Tommy, Hospital Tommy, Empire State (he just stood and swayed), Small Boy, Sweet, Circe, Moon, Nero, Humpty-Dumpty, Blue Boy, Scandinavia, Quack-Quack, Jericho, Spoonbread, Ice Man, Dough Belly, Rocky River, Gray Eye, Cock-a-Doodle-Do, Cool Breeze, Muddy Waters, Pinetop, Jelly Roll, Fats, Lead-belly, Bo Diddley, Cat-Iron, Peg-Leg, Son, Shortstuff, Smoky Babe, Funny Papa, Bukka, Pink, Bull Moose, B.B., T-Bone, Black Ace, Lemon, Washboard, Gatemouth, Cleanhead, Tampa Red, Juke Boy, Shine, Staggerlee, Jim the Devil, Fuck-up, and *Dat Nigger*. (329-330)

Milkman has come to understand that naming has power, and he appreciates that power.

In her essay, “And the Children May Know Their Names: Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*,” Ruth Rosenberg explores the novel through an onomastic lens. She says there are three classes of names in *Song of Solomon*: 1) slave names; 2) “post-Civil-War rural southern names . . . [which] the protagonist’s best friend categorizes . . . as ‘nigger’ names”; and 3) names “imposed . . . by white officials” (198). Rosenberg argues that the names Macon Dead considers in Morrison’s lyrical listing of names are “not names to live up to, but names to be lived down . . . caricatures which stress some prominent feature . . . dehumanizing . . . their low self esteem is

reflected in their nomenclature” (Rosenberg 204-205). But Morrison writes, “Names that bore witness” (330). I would argue that, since it is clear that Milkman finds beauty in this list of names, Morrison does not intend these names to be “dehumanizing” for her characters.

Throughout the novel, Morrison has deliberately chosen names for her characters that defy white cultural guidelines for naming. Sima Farshid supports this interpretation when she writes that Morrison’s “*Song of Solomon* incites African-Americans to nurture the cultural heritage of their African Ancestors to resist the harmful effects of dominant discourse” (329). Milkman discovers the great power embedded in the gifted names, the renaming, of the men of his community who resist white hegemonic cultural onomastic expectations.

Naming to Exemplify Power Imbalances in Male/Female Relationships

Black women in the U.S. have often experienced what Sigrid King calls “double dispossession” (685). They are dispossessed of power by racist white people and further dispossessed of power by Black men. Zora Neale Hurston in her novel *Their Eyes were Watching God*, creates a character, Janie, who manages to claim her own identity, redefine herself, and attain self-actualization, “despite a society which wants to deny her power because she is a black woman” (King, Sigrid 685). Hurston illustrates the protagonist’s self-actualization through the names she leaves behind and rebels against as well as the names she accepts with joy.

When Hurston first introduces the protagonist of *Their Eyes were Watching God*, the narrator simply calls her “a woman” or “she.” When the protagonist enters the town, the women sitting on their porches discuss her with envy and with judgment, while the men of the town notice and sexualize her shapely body (Hurston 2). In their gossip, the residents of the small town discuss her past and her present, but they never call her by name. On the third page of the

novel, a neighbor finally calls the woman by the name “Janie Starks,” but the reader later discovers that the name is incorrect because Janie has remarried. The idea of a name as something important is emphasized later, when Janie is speaking to her friend Pheoby. Janie says, “so long as they get a name to gnaw on they don’t care whose it is, and what about, ‘specially if they can make it sound like evil” (Hurston 6). As Janie and Pheoby reunite, Janie tells Pheoby the story of her life and what has brought her back to the small town of Eatonville. While Janie talks about her childhood, she says, “Dey all useter call me Alphabet ‘cause so many people had done named me different names” (Hurston 9). Even at a young age Janie has experienced the power of naming.^{4.44} Janie is raised by her grandmother who is the caretaker for the four grandchildren of her white employer, and those white children call Janie’s grandmother “Nanny.” “Nanny” is also the only name Janie knows for her grandmother, so the title of the grandmother’s job becomes her name, replaces her name, even for her own grandchild. Janie’s grandmother’s very identity has been suppressed by a title used as a name, a name given to her by her white employers.

Janie’s full legal name, Janie Mae Crawford, is officially changed the first time when her grandmother forces her to wed against her will and she becomes Janie Mae Killicks. Janie calls her husband “Mist’ Killicks,” a name that denotes his position of power over her, while her husband renames her “LilBit,” a name that reflects her powerlessness in the relationship. In his article “Names, Identity, and Self,” Kenneth L. Dion states, “Names . . . serve as a symbolic representation of the selves we present to others” (254). So the nickname Janie’s husband uses for her signifies her position in their home as something small and unimportant.

In *Wouldn’t Take Nothing for my Journey Now*, Maya Angelou talks about the effect of feminine naming practices when she writes that a woman “must resist considering herself a

lesser version of her male counterpart. She is not a sculptress, poetess, authoress, Jewess, Negress . . . A rose by any other name may smell as sweet, but a woman called by a devaluing name will only be weakened by the misnomer” (Angelou 6-7). Because her husband uses a nickname that symbolically takes away Janie’s adult status, that nickname represents Janie’s lesser status in the relationship, and Janie’s acceptance of the name indicates that she does not value herself.

Huston describes Janie’s status in the relationship as it sinks lower and lower until one day her husband decides Janie should work in the field with the mule, plowing his land. While waiting for her husband to return from buying a mule, Janie meets Joe Starks who charms her and calls her “a pretty baby doll” (Hurstun 29) and says she should not be behind a plow. Janie and Joe continue to meet and flirt until he convinces her to run off with him. Joe says, “You ain’t never knowed what it was to be treated lak a lady” (Hurstun 29). By naming Janie as “a lady,” Joe woos and offers her a better life. Soon Janie Mae Killicks becomes Janie Mae Starks. However, though Joe offers to raise Janie up, the nicknames he uses for her, “lil girl-chile” and “pretty doll baby” are names that continue to deny her adult status and equality in their relationship. As Sigrid King says, the names Joe uses for Janie are “limiting and subjugating” (688).

Janie’s new husband, Joe, is an ambitious man, and he manages to get himself named Mayor of the small town where he and Janie settle after they are married. The townspeople then give Janie a new name, “Mrs. Mayor,” but the name denies her personal identity and only relates to her relationship to her husband and his position of power in the town. The title brings Janie no sense of power because Joe keeps her at home playing “wife.” Indeed, the name “Mrs. Mayor” makes Janie uneasy. She says, “Hope it soon gets over” (Hurstun 46). Though Joe originally

saved Janie from the hard work of plowing fields, he eventually begins to take advantage of her. He forces her to work in his store, and Janie begins to chafe against this servitude. When Joe slaps Janie because he is not happy with the dinner she prepares for him, Janie's image of Joe is "shattered" (Hurstons 72). Later, when Joe's health begins to fail and he is looking older than his age, Joe demeans Janie by talking about how old she is getting (though she is only thirty-five). When Joe uses his naming power to call her "uh ole woman, nearly forty," Janie stands up for herself and verbally retaliates, embarrassing Joe in front of his friends (Hurstons 79). In response to this embarrassment, Joe drives Janie out of his store and out of his life. As Joe becomes more ill, he tells his friends that Janie has been poisoning him. Janie says to Pheoby, "Tuh think Ah been wid [Joe] twenty yeahs and Ah just now got tuh bear de name uh poisonin' him! It's about to kill me" (Hurstons 83). By naming Janie as a poisoner, Joe breaks the final ties of affection that bound Janie to him.

After Joe's death, Janie is given a new name by the townspeople, "widow of Joe Stark" (Hurstons 93). The name indicates that she is a relatively wealthy woman, since she inherited Joe's store. But Janie's identity is still tied up with Joe's, since no one calls her by her own name. In her new-found freedom, Janie finds joy and liberation, and she seeks to claim her own power and identity. Janie dismisses the men of the town who woo her for her wealth. Janie says, "This freedom feeling was fine" (Hurstons 90). Janie is content to be without a man until she meets Tea Cake. Sigrid King argues that when Janie meets Tea Cake:

his relationship to naming foreshadow[s] the kind of relationship they will share.

Whereas Joe Stark's first words were to name himself ("Joe Starks was the name"), Tea Cake's first words call Janie by name, "Good evenin', Mis' Starks." Janie tells him that he has "all the advantage 'cause Ah don't know yo' name,"

but Tea Cake does not view his own name as important. “People wouldn’t know me lak dey would you,” he tells her. . . . Tea Cake does not name to gain power; he names to explore the true nature of a thing (King, Sigrid 692).

From the beginning, the balance of power in Janie’s relationship to Tea Cake is different from those she had with her first two husbands, and that difference in the balance of power is reflected in their names. She is “Mis’ Starks”; he is simply “Tea Cake,” a name that reflects the sweetness of his character. With Tea Cake, Janie also discovers that language can be fun. She says, “So in the beginnin’ new thoughts had tuh be thought and new words said. . . . He done taught me de maiden language all over” (Hurston 115). But the townspeople are not ready to let Janie claim a new identity; they are incensed: “Tea Cake and Mrs. Mayor Starks!” (Hurston 110). They think Tea Cake is too young for Janie, too poor for her, too unimportant for the “widow of Joe Starks.” But Tea Cake’s positive naming of Janie brings her joy and a sense of agency. As Sigrid King says, Janie finds that “naming no longer holds the limiting power” (692) it had in her first two marriages. When Janie and Tea Cake marry, Janie claims her final surname in the novel. Because Janie has claimed this name by choice, she maintains equality in her relationship with Tea Cake. By claiming a new name with love and joy, Janie claims her own power. As bell hooks states in *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work*, “Defined and named by others in childhood, Alphabet (as Janie was called then) cannot know or name herself. Ultimately her triumph in womanhood is that she acquires the ability to name and define her reality” (187). The power to name herself gives Janie power over herself and her own life.

In *The Women of Brewster Place*, Gloria Naylor’s male characters also use naming to keep women in their place, particularly lesbians who threatened the patriarchy by their very existence. In the chapter title “The Two,” a pair of women, Teresa and Lorraine, who are sharing

an apartment at Brewster Place, are discovered to be lesbians after an unguarded moment of tenderness on the stairway when one of them trips and almost falls (Naylor 130). When the rumor that the two women are lovers begins to spread, the men of Brewster Place begin to treat the two women differently. As the rumors become more virulent, so does the rhetoric. When the rhetoric and hatred finally spews over, un-naming is used to “other” the young lesbians. It begins with C. C. Baker, the acknowledged leader of a pack of young men, who is “greatly disturbed by the thought of a Lorraine. He knew of only one way to deal with women other than his mother” (Naylor 161). C. C. Baker yells to a young heterosexual woman who is talking to Lorraine, “Hey, Swana better watch it talk’in to the dyke—she might try to grab a tit!” (Naylor 162). C. C. then turns and directs his vitriol at Lorraine herself, using terms such as “lesbo” and “bitch” (162). C. C. feels impotent in the presence of a woman he cannot deal with in a sexual manner, so he resorts to un-naming her. C. C.’s friends try to pull him away saying, “She ain’t nothing but a woman” (162). Here the young men use the word “woman” as a derogatory term; by adding “nothing but” before “woman,” they imply that women are lesser than men, nothing to be concerned about. The phrase is another way that the young men un-name Lorraine.

As Lorraine is struggling with the negative view of herself that the young men project with their un-naming, Lorraine’s lover, Teresa, tries to help Lorraine accept herself, the names she is being called, and, by extension, their relationship. Teresa embraces the names that others use in a negative way, saying, “we’re just a couple of dykes,” but Lorraine refuses this view of herself. Lorraine persists, saying, “Lorraine, . . . you’re a lesbian—do you understand that word?—a butch, a dyke, a lesbo, all those things that kid was shouting. . . . so why don’t you accept it?” (Naylor 165). Lorraine seems happy in her life with Teresa and embraces herself as a woman who loves another woman, but she cannot accept the words that have been used to un-

name her. Lorraine doesn't want to be "othered" or be named as something different. She just wants to be Lorraine.

Lorraine's story ends tragically as C. C. Baker and his friends ambush her, gang-rape her, and beat her almost to death, all while continuing to un-name her, calling her "dyke" and "cunt" (169-171). The young men, who "continually surnamed each other Man" (Naylor 161), have un-named Lorraine so often that they have dehumanized her in their own eyes. They no longer see her as a human being, which gives them liberty to treat her as something less than human. This horrific event breaks down Lorraine's link to her own humanity, and she ends up bashing in the head of the one man who had been kind to her (Naylor *Brewster's Place* 172-173).

Invoking History and Mystery with Naming

Gloria Naylor takes the power of naming a step further in her novel *Mama Day*, as she uses names to evoke familiarity, family history, and mysterious forces. The title character says, "I'm Mama Day to some, Miss Miranda to others" as she introduces herself to her grandniece's husband. But Mama Day has a third name, one only used by her younger sister, "Little Mama." This name indicates that Miranda acted in the place of their mother who died young, giving her sister the mothering she needed.

The three main female characters in *Mama Day*, Miranda (Mama) Day, her sister Abigail Day, and Abigail's granddaughter Ophelia (Cocoa) Day, around whom the story is woven are descendants of a mysterious African woman who was legally a slave, but who managed to persuade her former master to give to her and her seven sons an island off the Atlantic coastline, just opposite the Georgia/South Carolina border, an island which, in Cocoa's day, is populated entirely by descendants of Black slaves. This mysterious female ancestor is named by the omniscient narrator as Sapphira, but none of the characters know the woman's name. As the

narrator says, “the *name* Sapphira Wade is never breathed out of a single mouth in Willow Springs” (4).

Mama Day is a healer and wielder of supernatural power, a woman who knows what is happening before she is told, and who has the power to punish those who would harm anyone in her family. Mama Day uses her powers to search for the name of her ancestor, a name that she feels would help her to heal her niece. “She’s staring at the name and trying to guess. Sarah, Sabrina, Sally, Sadie, Sadonna —what? . . . a missing key to an unknown door . . . the door to help Baby Girl. She thinks Samantha, Sarena, Salinda — them old fashioned names. Sandra Bell? Sapphron? . . . All Willow Springs knows that this woman was nobody’s slave. But what was her name?” (Naylor 280). Despite her mysterious powers, Mama Day never discovers that name, but she does meet Sapphira in her dreams: “she falls asleep, murmuring the names of women. And in her dreams she finally meets Sapphira (Naylor 280).

Mama Day’s mysterious powers are never directly explained in the novel, but they demonstrated and implied throughout the novel, such as when she helps a desperate young woman become pregnant, when she uses her mysterious power to heal her grandniece, and when she draws lightning down to strike twice and destroy the house of the woman who poisoned her grandniece (Naylor 269-273). In the same way that Mama Day’s powers are implied throughout the novel, the power and mystery of names is also implied rather than directly discussed. For example, Naylor writes:

Miranda thinks, and I begged Abigail not to name her first baby Peace. She didn’t live long enough to get a crib name. . . . At least Abigail had the presence of mind to give Grace’s baby a proper crib name. Miranda would have done it herself and had fixed it in her mind to crib name her No—this was one girl they would *not* let

get away. But it had to be the mama's mama . . . she was *the* baby girl. They dropped the 'the' when they were sure she was gonna stay, and after Ophelia got to be five years old, she refused to answer to Baby Girl, thinking it meant just that. So they gave her the pet name Cocoa. 'It'll put color on her somewhere,' Miranda had said. (Naylor *Mama Day* 39-40)

Peace was an aunt of Miranda and Abigail, an aunt who had died tragically. It is implied that Miranda believes the name Peace would also doom Abigail's daughter, and she is proven to be right. Miranda's thoughts here also imply that there are two names given to each child, their given name and a "crib name," which is never explained but seems to be a familiar name, given by the maternal grandmother, that has power to hold a child in life, to keep a child from dying young.^{4.5} This is different from a "pet name" that is a nickname given in love, based on a characteristic of the child or adding some needed characteristic to the child, as the name Cocoa is used to bring "color" to an African American child with skin lighter than that of most inhabitants of the island.

Debra Walker King asserts, "Enslaved blacks shared secret names, particularly surnames, among themselves but rarely shared them with white masters or their representatives. To do so would be to endanger their physical bodies as well as their spirits" (45). King's assertion seems to underscore the link between those private names used by African American slaves and spiritual power or energy. In the same way, the crib names referred to in *Mama Day* indicate that the "mama's mama," the official namer must tap into some mysterious force that creates a bond with the child, a bond that holds the child in the land of the living. Miranda and Abigail find power in Ophelia's crib name, but they have regrets regarding her given name, the name her 'mother gave her. Miranda says, "She's a grown woman and her name is Ophelia. We don't like

to think on it, but that's her name. Not Baby Girl, not Cocoa—Ophelia.” And Abigail replies, “I regret the day she got it” (Naylor *Mama Day* 116). Though the sisters never say why they regret Ophelia's name, it is clear that it holds some negative import, some negative energy that they would like to ignore. Ophelia is called by her crib name, “Baby Girl,” and by her pet name, “Cocoa,” by both Miranda and Abigail throughout the novel. Only once does Miranda call Ophelia by her given name, and Ophelia reacts with surprise, “What did you call me?” Miranda responds, “Don't stand there with your mouth gaping open. I called you by your name,” and Ophelia says, “But in my entire life, you've never used that name” (150). Miranda may not have used the name during most of Ophelia's life, but she reminds Ophelia, “That ain't true. The day you dropped into my hands, I first used it. Your mama said, ‘Call her Ophelia.’ And that's what we did. Called you that for a whole week to fix it in place. So you've heard me say it before, but you don't remember” (150). The use of the given name for a full week seems to be ritualistic, creating a bond between the child and the name.

Perhaps Miranda and Abigail are averse to the name Ophelia because of its allusion to Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, a young woman who goes mad and drowns. This reference is apt for Naylor's Ophelia who begins a descent into madness, having horrific hallucinations, after she is poisoned and cursed by a jealous woman. However, Naylor's Ophelia does not drown; she is pulled back from the brink of madness by the sacrificial death of her husband and the mysterious healing ceremonies Mama Day creates. Like many of the other references within *Mama Day*, the “Ophelia” reference remains a bit mysterious, as it is never explained to the reader.

Naylor also emphasizes the power and importance of names with her minor characters within *Mama Day* as well. For example, Ophelia's love interest, who becomes her husband, tells

the story of how he got his name. In a story which is almost the antithesis of Ophelia's naming, which was serious and full of love, George's name lacks any link to family and lacks any link to power. George's fifteen-year-old mother abandoned him on a pier before she drowned herself. As a three-month-old baby, he is then brought to a shelter where he lives until he is eighteen. In the shelter, he is given the first name "George," and his last name "Andrews" comes from the name of the shelter, which was named after a benefactor (Naylor 131). George tells this story to Ophelia before he asks her to marry him (131), but he later regrets telling her when he is asked by a resident of the island if his mother gave him a "crib name" (201). George feels that the lack of a crib name exemplifies the lack of love and caring for himself as an abandoned child.

Unlike, George's surname, which has no connection to his family, Ophelia's last name goes back for generations. In *Mama Day*, George narrates a description of the cemetery where many generations of Ophelia's family are buried, "I was entering the oddest graveyard I had ever seen. The tombstones—some were granite, some limestone—were of varying heights with no dates and only one name. You [Ophelia] explained that they were all Days so there was no need for a surname. But what, as in your case, if a woman married? You live a Day and you die a Day [Ophelia says]" (Naylor 218). Ophelia's family name goes back for seven generations, and their surname ties them to the mysterious "great, great, grand, Mother," the former slave Sapphira who was gifted the island by the man who tried and failed to be her master (218). The Day family name holds power, and the residents of the island honor that power which has its nexus in Miranda, who is called Mama Day.

Another example of naming's link to power in the characters in *Mama Day* is a local con man, who sells fake cures. He changes his name to present himself as someone with supernatural

powers akin to that which Mama Day really holds. He calls himself Dr. Buzzard, and the local people accept that name. But Mama Day challenges the chosen name when she says:

There ain't but one Dr. Buzzard, and he ain't you. That man is up in Beaufort County, South Carolina, and he's *real*. You may fool these folks in Willow Springs, but ain't nobody here older than me, and I remember when your name was Rainbow Simpson. You can change that all you want, but you can't change the fact that you ain't nothing but an out-and-out bootlegger and con man. (Naylor 51).

Though Rainbow Simpson has renamed himself in an attempt to gain a reputation as holding spiritual power, Mama Day confronts this façade and unmasks his ruse, using a powerful name to claim power he doesn't have. In *Mama Day*, Naylor uses naming to indicate intimate family relationships, but her uses of naming are sometimes mysterious and always indicative of power and agency.

Naming as a Trope in Autobiographical Writing

The significance of naming is also evident in autobiographical writing by African American authors, and this is most powerfully illustrated in Maya Angelou's memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Throughout the childhood years recounted in the text, the author is called by many names, and, because Angelou emphasizes in her memoir the significance of the names used in addressing others, it is clear that there is significance as well in the names used to address the child Marguerite Ann Johnson (Angelou's childhood name).

Angelou illustrates the importance of naming when she says of her grandmother, whom she calls Momma, "Wasn't she the only Negro woman in Stamps referred to once as Mrs.?" (Angelou 39). Angelou describes how a judge had asked for the store owner, Mrs. Henderson, to

be subpoenaed. When Mrs. Henderson arrived at the courthouse and it became apparent that Ms. Henderson was a Black woman, the people in the courtroom laughed. Angelou writes, “The judge had really made a gaffe calling a Negro woman Mrs. . . . The whites tickled their funny bones with the incident for a long time, and the Negroes thought it proved the worth and majesty of my grandmother” (Angelou 39). By giving Angelou’s grandmother the title “Mrs.,” the judge inadvertently gives her a higher status in a community where titles were denied to Black people and where white people only addressed Black women by their first names.

Angelou again reinforces the importance of naming when she introduces Mrs. Bertha Flowers to the story. Angelou writes:

Momma had a strange relationship with her [Mrs. Flowers]. . . . she spoke to Momma in that soft yet carrying voice, “Good day, Mrs. Henderson.” Momma responded with “How you, Sister Flowers?”

Mrs. Flowers didn’t belong to our church, nor was she Momma’s familiar. Why on earth did she insist on calling her Sister Flowers? Shame made me want to hide my face. Mrs. Flowers deserved better than to be called Sister. (Angelou 78)

Here, Angelou illustrates a few of the various titles Black women gave to each other relative to their status within the black community. The title “Sister” indicates equal status and respect. But the title “Mrs.” is reserved for those with higher status in the community. Clearly, the child, Marguerite, feels that her teacher deserved the title Mrs., in recognition of her status as an educator in the community.

With these two passages, Angelou makes it clear that naming is important and certain names are appropriate or inappropriate according to the social relationship between the people

involved. This would suggest that the many names by which Angelou herself is called as a child can be seen as significant, especially since she is called by a different name by almost every person in the book and especially since most of these names come to her from family members who are important in her life.

Maya Angelou's given name was Marguerite Ann Johnson, and her closest relationship was with her brother Bailey Johnson, Jr. Angelou recounts in her memoir how it was her brother who gave her the nickname "My": "After Bailey learned definitely that I was his sister, he refused to call me Marguerite, but rather addressed me each time as "Mya Sister," and . . . the need for brevity had shortened the appellation to "My" (Angelou 39). When their mother put Marguerite and her brother, Bailey, on a train headed to Stamps, Arkansas, at the ages of three and four years old, they wore tags on their wrists which gave their names and the address of the person to whom they were being sent—their grandmother, Mrs. Annie Henderson. Though they wore tags with their names, their fellow travelers did not address them by name but called them "the poor little motherless darlings" (Angelou 4). In Angelou's text, this is the first renaming of the children by others.

After the children arrive in Stamps, they live with their grandmother "Momma" and her son, Uncle Willie. Momma never calls Marguerite by name but always addresses her as "Sister." "Sister, go inside. . . . Go wash your face, Sister. . . . "Sister, that's right pretty" (Angelou 24 - 27). Uncle Willie also addresses Marguerite as Sister. "Go on out and pl-play, Sister" (Angelou 10). The name "Sister" also reinforces the term "my sister" that Bailey uses in addressing or speaking of Marguerite. Marguerite is therefore identified only as Bailey's sister or just as Sister. This re-naming of Marguerite by her family members takes away her individuality and personal identity. It is an indication that Marguerite lacks agency.

Marguerite's father also addresses her in a manner that reinforces the view that Marguerite is not an individual. When Bailey Johnson Sr. comes to Stamps, he addresses Marguerite in the third person, using a new nickname, "Daddy's baby." He asks, "Is Daddy's baby going to fly away?" (Angelou, 46). Later he asks, "Does Daddy's baby want to go to California with Daddy?" (Angelou 46). And during their car trip to St. Louis, he asks, "Are you comfortable back there, Daddy's baby?" (Angelou 47). When Marguerite indicates that she does not want to go to her mother's home, her father asks, "You mean Daddy's baby doesn't want to go to St. Louis to see her mother?" (Angelou 48). Marguerite's father speaks to her only in questions and does not see her in relation to Bailey Junior as do other members of the family. Bailey Senior sees Marguerite only in relation to himself. The nickname "Daddy's baby," like the nickname "Sister," fails to recognize the individual identity of Marguerite Johnson.

When Marguerite and Bailey Junior arrive in St. Louis and are left in the care of their mother, they receive a new appellation from the friends of their mother. The new nickname, "Bibbie's darling babies," (Angelou 54) reinforces the view that Marguerite is a relation or a possession rather than an individual. In this instance, the children are seen only in relation to their mother. Marguerite is first called by a diminutive of her own name when she is left, by her father, in St. Louis with her mother. Marguerite's mother's family and her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman call Marguerite by the name "Ritie": "Ritie, don't worry 'cause you ain't pretty" (Angelou 56). "Just stay right there, Ritie, I ain't gonna hurt you" (Angelou 60). In using the diminutive "Ritie," the family expresses their familiarity with and affection for Marguerite, but they also express the idea that Marguerite is small, young, and unimportant.

Marguerite is only named in a way that grants her importance as an individual by persons outside of her family circle. The first person to see Marguerite as an individual and to call her by

her full name is Mrs. Bertha Flowers, and it is clear from Marguerite's reaction that she feels the impact of that respectful naming. Angelou writes, "Momma said, 'Sister Flowers, I'll send Bailey up to your house with these things.' . . . 'Thank you, Mrs. Henderson. I'd prefer Marguerite though.' My name was beautiful when she said it" (Angelou 80). Here Marguerite finds pleasure in the sound of her own name.

When Marguerite is carrying the groceries and following Mrs. Flowers to her home, Mrs. Flowers again calls Marguerite by name. "'Come and walk along with me, Marguerite.' I couldn't have refused even if I wanted to. She pronounced my name so nicely" (Angelou 81). With the magic of Marguerite's own name, Mrs. Flowers is able to obtain a brief response from Marguerite who had been mute for most of her childhood, a reaction to sexual abuse. Marguerite succumbs to the spell of her own name without truly understanding the reason for her capitulation. "I was liked, and what a difference it made. I was respected not as Mrs. Henderson's grandchild or Bailey's sister but for just being Marguerite Johnson" (Angelou 85). Here Marguerite recognizes that as the first time anyone had seen her as an individual, and she expresses her joy.

For the first time Marguerite has begun to experience herself as an individual, and her name becomes important to her. When Marguerite goes to work for a white woman, Mrs. Viola Cullinan, Mrs. Cullinan and Miss Glory, the Black cook, call Marguerite by still another name; they call her Margaret. This is an Anglicized version of the name Marguerite, but Marguerite seems content to bear it. However, when Mrs. Cullinan tries to change her name completely, Marguerite rebels:

Then one evening Miss Glory told me to serve the ladies on the porch. . . . one of the women asked, "What's your name, girl?" . . . Mrs. Cullinan said, "She doesn't talk much. Her name's Margaret."

"Is she dumb?"

"No. As I understand it, she can talk when she wants to but she's usually quiet as a little mouse. Aren't you, Margaret?"

. . . Poor thing . . . couldn't even pronounce my name correctly.

"She's a sweet thing, though."

"Well, that may be, but the name's too long. . . . I'd call her Mary

I fumed into the kitchen. That horrible woman would never have the chance to call me Mary because if I was starving I'd never work for her. . . .

The very next day, she called me by the wrong name. . . . "Mary?"

Miss Glory asked, "Who?"

Miss Cullinan sagging a little, knew and I knew. "I want Mary to go down to Mrs. Randall's"

Miss Glory's face was a wonder to see. "You mean Margaret, ma'am. Her name's Margaret."

"That's too long. She's Mary from now on." (Angelou 90-91)

In this scene, Mrs. Cullinan attempts to take possession of Marguerite by un-naming and renaming her. Mrs. Cullinan assumes that she has power over the young Black girl working in her home and can call her by any name she chooses. Angelou strongly reinforces the power that springs from naming when she writes:

Every person I knew had a hellish horror of being “called out of his name.” It was a dangerous practice to call a Negro anything that could be loosely construed as insulting because of the centuries of their having been called niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots and spooks.

Miss Glory . . . said, “Don’t mind, don’t pay that no mind. . . . My name used to be Hallelujah. That’s what Ma named me, but my mistress give me ‘Glory,’ and it stuck. I likes it better too.”

For a few seconds it was a tossup over whether I would laugh (imagine being named Hallelujah) or cry (imagine letting some white woman rename you for her convenience). My anger saved me from either outburst. I had to quit the job, but the problem was going to be how to do it. (Angelou 91-92)

Marguerite finds a way to leave the service of the woman who does not know her name, by dropping and breaking three pieces of Mrs. Cullinan’s prized Virginia dishes, and that act makes Mrs. Cullinan realize the mistake she has made in attempting to rename Marguerite:

Mrs. Cullinan cried louder, “That clumsy nigger. Clumsy little black nigger.”

“Who did it, Viola? Was it Mary? Who did it?”

. . . “Her name’s Margaret, goddamn it, her name’s Margaret!” And she threw a wedge of the broken plate at me. . . .

Mrs. Cullinan was right about one thing. My name wasn’t Mary.

(Angelou 93)

Here, even Mrs. Cullinan clearly realizes that the broken china is a result of misnaming Marguerite, and even though she does not know Marguerite’s true name, Mrs. Cullinan has

learned that the child's name is not Mary and that she has no power over Marguerite. Marguerite, though still a child, claims her own identity and therefore reclaims her personal agency by refusing to let her white employer rename her.

As she grows older, Marguerite becomes proud of her name, and though her family continues to call her "My" or "Sister" or "Ritie," Marguerite seems to blossom with the use of her name. When Marguerite goes on vacation and meets her father's fiancé, she introduces herself, "Hello. My name is Marguerite" (Angelou 193), proudly claiming her own identity. Later she gives herself courage with the use of her own name: "Idiots and lunatics drove cars, why not the brilliant Marguerite Johnson?" (Angelou 201). While driving she says, "It was me, Marguerite, against the elemental opposition" (Angelou 202). The use of her own name empowers Marguerite to accomplish something she has never done before.

When Marguerite has almost successfully driven her drunken father out of Mexico but has had a minor accident at the border guard station, her father awakens and assesses the situation. It is at this point that Bailey Senior begins to address Marguerite by her given name for the first time, and he uses her given name throughout the rest of the text. When Marguerite claims her own name and asserts her own identity, others begin to recognize her individuality and respect her, and they begin to use her given name rather than the various nicknames that indicated her lack of agency.

The final name given to Marguerite in Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is given by the same person who gave her the first, her brother, Bailey Junior. After Marguerite returns from her trip to visit her father and from a month-long stay living in a dump with other young people, Bailey Junior drops the appellation "My," which designated Marguerite as his sister, and begins calling Marguerite the name "Maya." Bailey has reached an impasse with his

mother and has decided to move out of the house. He says to Marguerite, “Maya if you want to leave now, come on. I’ll take care of you” (Angelou 221). Later, as he’s packing, he says, “Maya, you can have my books” (Angelou 221).

Though Bailey Junior continues to call his sister Maya throughout the rest of the memoir, Marguerite’s mother is still calling her “Ritie.” “Sit down, Ritie. Pass me another cigarette” (Angelou, 235). The young woman is only called Marguerite if something serious is happening. For example, in a scene in which Marguerite had approached her mother about a health issue, her mother responds, “Where on your vagina, Marguerite?” and Angelou says:

Uh-huh. It was bad all right. Not “Ritie” or “Maya” or “Baby.”

“Marguerite.”

“Ritie, go get me that big *Webster’s* and then bring me a bottle of beer.”

Suddenly, it wasn’t all that serious. I was “Ritie” again, and she just asked for beer. (Angelou 235)

Marguerite’s inner dialogue indicates that she understands the implications of the various nicknames her mother uses, and she knows that “Marguerite” is reserved for serious or difficult conversations. When her mother returns to the familiar “Ritie,” Marguerite knows that the health issue is not serious and her mother is no longer worried.

In the final scene, on the last page of the book, after Marguerite has given birth and is a young mother herself, Marguerite’s mother finally drops the diminutive “Ritie,” calling her daughter by the name “Maya.” The child, Marguerite Johnson, has undergone the transition from “My” to “Sister” to “Ritie” to “Marguerite” to “Maya.” Angelou explicates naming in her own life story, and, in doing so, emphasizes the link between her various names and her child/adult status in her family relationships.

As demonstrated in the interpretive onomastic analyses of the texts discussed in this chapter, naming is an important trope in African American literature, and this chapter focuses on the critical significance of “naming,” “un-naming,” “renaming,” and “self-naming” in African American fiction and memoir. The African American herstory and history of naming and un-naming, rooted in the evil of slavery, are inevitably linked to personal and political power, and naming continues as an important trope in literature written by African American authors. Sigrid King argues, the “namer has the power; the named is powerless” (684). Black people throughout history lost power when they were un-named and renamed at the whim of their white oppressors, but African American authors have reclaimed the power to name, and they use naming in their prose works to exemplify injustice and subjugation, to indicate imbalances in power in relationships, to add allusions to supernatural power, and to resist the racial injustices of white supremacist, patriarchal, hegemonic onomastic expectations. It is clear that *naming* is a critical source of self-empowerment and survival for Black people—across differences of gender, sexuality, generation, and class—and that many African American writers claim agency and empowerment for themselves and for other Black people through the various uses of *naming* in their written works.

Notes

^{4.1}Toni Morrison illustrates this in her novel *Sula*. When Helene, who lives in an all Black community, accidentally boards a train car designated for whites only. As she is heading South to visit her dying grandmother, Helene is accosted by a white conductor who asks, “What you think you doin’, gal?” Helene thinks, “So soon. So soon. She hadn’t even begun the trip back. Back to her grandmother’s house in the city . . . and already she had been called ‘gal’” (20).

^{4.2} Squeaky says, “I would much rather knock you down and take my chances” (14).

^{4.3} Malcolm X said, “As long as you allow them to call you what they wish you don’t know who you really are. You can’t lay claim to any name, any home, any destiny that will identify you as something you should become: a brother among brothers” (X 14).

^{4.4} Sigrid King says, “Janie makes it clear that naming was used as a limiting or prescribing force by people around her and that, at a young age, she adopted their views of naming as her own” (686).

^{4.5} Julie Dust refers to something similar in *Daughters of the Dust*, which she calls a “basket name”: “Your basket name is the other name they give you when you a baby . . . My basket name be ‘Lil Bet’” (9).

Conclusion

The Power of Naming in History and Culture

In “Cultural Hierarchy and the Renaming of African People,” Obiagle Lake asserts, “Before the enslavement and diasporization of Africans into the western hemisphere, Africans referred to themselves by hundreds of different names” (261). In the Americas, however, Caucasian (white) people of European ancestry ignored the hundreds of tribal names and lumped together all people of African descent, calling them “negroes” and “blacks,” terms which, as Lake says “stripped the slaves of their cultural identity and family ties” (261). The more respectable names assigned to people of African descent include: “negros,” “colored,” “blacks,” “Moors,” “Ethiopians,” “Afros,” and “Africans”; while some of the more derogatory terms include “niggers, jigs, dinges, blackbirds, crows, boots and spooks” as noted in the previous quote from Angelou’s memoir (91). The names imposed upon Africans and their descendants have shifted over time. The terms Caucasian people have used to name Black people have often underscored efforts to demean and subjugate African Americans. What people of African descent have decided to call themselves has shifted over time as well. As times change, each generation has argued about what name they determine to use for themselves: “Colored, Negro, Afro-American, African-American, or Black,” and there has never been a complete consensus. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. wrote in his 1969 Yale application, “My grandfather was colored, my father was a negro, and I am black” (qtd. in Kaplan and Bernays 70), which underscores the shifting ideas Black people have had about how to name themselves as a people.

In 1988, when Jesse Jackson and the leaders of seventy-five groups representing Black people in America met at Chicago's Hyatt Regency and called a press conference to announce that the members of their race preferred to be called "African-Americans," they were recognizing the loss of tribal identities and expressing that the Black people living in the U.S. (as represented by these seventy-five African American leaders) wanted to be connected by ethnic identity instead of by racial identity. This choice of names was significant, and it underscored the idea that names are more than just labels; they are strongly tied to identity. Those Black leaders were not only claiming a name for themselves as a group, they were rejecting those names that had been assigned to them by white people throughout history.

Ben L. Martin argues that names "are more than just tags; they can convey powerful imagery. So naming—proposing, imposing, and accepting names can be a political exercise" (Martin 83). By choosing a name for themselves, that group of African American leaders was exercising political muscles, claiming the right to identify themselves. The most important part of the announcement was the recognition of *choice* because most names historically assigned to African Americans were not names they chose. They were names imposed on people of African descent by the white people who had kidnapped and enslaved their ancestors. Over and over again, European imperialists fought against giving Black people civil rights equal to those of white people and struggled to keep Black people separated and subjugated in a white supremacist hierarchal society. As Debra Walker King says in *Deep Talk: Reading African-American Literary Names*, each of the names used to define Black people "represents attempts to define the being or essential nature of a people from within a structure of meaning and deep-level communication that is itself shaped by the systematic exclusion of that people" (47). By choosing a name for themselves, the group of Black leaders who came together in 1988 was

reclaiming power that had been taken from their ancestors by white supremacist captors and oppressors. They were claiming their cultural and political right to self-identify as a people.

Juri Lotman says, “No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural language” (qtd. in Mphande 105). Historically, when slave owners ignored the given names of newly captured Africans and insisted on renaming those captives they considered to be their property, they were using language to take possession of Black men, women, children. Thus un-naming and renaming were active acts of subjugation. As Elizabeth T. Hayes argues, “To name is also to claim dominion: naming children, slaves, domestic animals, or real estate is an announcement of figurative, if not literal ownership of the named” (669). Like most people give a new name to a domestic or working animal, white slave owners felt they had the right to name the African and African American people they had enslaved.

Language is powerful. It is shaped by the way people look at the world, and the way people look at the world shapes their language. Nowhere is this more evident than in the naming process, whether it being the naming of a place, a people, or a single individual. When white people of European descent were enslaving the people of African descent, language and naming were used to subjugate Black people and to erase their human identity. In her thesis, “African Names and Naming Practices: The Impact Slavery and European Domination had on the African Psyche, Identity and Protest,” Liseli A. Fitzpatrick points out the various ways Europeans used language to “suppress and erase African identity” in enslaved people (ii). The language used by slave traders and slave owners reflected the extreme contempt in which those white people held Black people. That contempt was evident in the way slaveowners treated the names of the people they claimed as property, erasing the names of both tribal groups and individuals, effectively un-

naming them, then arrogantly renaming those groups and individuals without thought or care for the erasure of their identity.

Lupenga Mphande argues that there was a “widely held belief among whites that slaves had neither history nor culture, and that they could have no legal right to a name” (107). Mphande says that white supremacist attitudes “reduced slaves to namelessness, and thus made them available for name re-assignment by their owners” (107). Throughout the history of slavery, slave owners not only un-named captured African people, they renamed those enslaved people, often using cruel, derogatory, and demeaning names as tools to break down the dignity and identity of those enslaved peoples. As Fitzpatrick argues, “slaveowners assigned new names to the Africans or even left them nameless, as a way of subjugating and committing them to perpetual servitude” (ii). Slave owners sometimes relished the irony of giving the Black people they had enslaved names that were taken from mythological gods and heroes, like “Zeus” or “Hercules,” to further emphasize the lack of agency of the Black slaves bearing such regal names while serving their white masters. Not only were slaves deprived of their own names and assigned new names by their masters, those names were often changed several times throughout the slaves’ lives, on the whim of a white owner or a white child, or after slaves were sold to new owners (Fitzpatrick 46). Sometimes slaves were called simply “wench” or “buck” or “boy” or “girl” or “gal,” reducing those enslaved people to namelessness. Without names, those enslaved people were stripped of their humanity, their individuality, and their dignity, treated as little more than animals.

The denigration of Black people as a whole and the destruction of the individual through the un-naming and the branding of that person as a slave through renaming was a subjugating reality for most slaves. It is therefore not surprising that the Africans and African Americans who

experienced being claimed like domestic animals would continue to be negatively impacted by that experience throughout their lives and throughout the lives of future generations.

Unfortunately, such acts of un-naming did not end with legal emancipation. They continued up to and beyond the Civil Rights protests of the 1960s, especially in the Deep South, which I witnessed myself while growing up in Georgia. Because of this historical reality, the psychic scar of generations of un-naming continues to affect the self-liberating consciousness of African Americans.

Sigrid King argues, “Naming has always been an important issue” for African Americans “because of its link to the exercise of power. From their earliest experiences in America, [African Americans] have been made aware that those who name also control, and those who are named are subjugated” (King, Sigrid 683). Slave owners’ acts of un-naming, naming, and re-naming were acts of dominance, acts that exerted power over the un-named. Given the history of slavery and the powerlessness of those slaves whose very names were stolen from them, it becomes evident why names and naming are important in African American culture and are sometimes still linked to a sense of power or powerlessness. Debra Walker King argues, “Black naming practices are acts of resistance against ancestral loss and spiritual death. This is one reason why names and naming are so important to African Americans. It is why many blacks give their children unique names, African names, or create names using their historical memories and hopes as sources that call forth the untainted cosmic forces of resistance” (41). By resisting the racist naming of African Americans rooted in the history of white hegemonic culture, Black people are actively pushing back against the history of un-naming and the loss of African identity. They are empowering themselves and their children through naming they creatively conceptualize.

Names and naming are a significant trope in African American literature, whether the author is writing about the historical reality of slavery or writing about a character who is trying to claim power by renaming himself or herself. As Debra Walker King says, “In the literature of black writers, we read the story of people who struggle against a legacy of un-naming and learn of their victory over its effects” (41). King’s point is that in African American literature, when characters claim their own names or rename themselves, they are reclaiming their lives, reclaiming their own identities in a political way that can only be fully understood in the historical and sociological context of slavery.

My exploration and explication of the power of naming in African American literature in this dissertation is rooted in my personal experience with the various names that have been used to define me in my childhood and beyond; in my childhood (and adult) experiences witnessing the un-naming and humiliation of Black people by white supremacists; in my on-going awakening to Black subjugation in the U.S.; in my growing understanding of the link between power and naming in African American literature as it is discussed by other scholars, particularly Debra Walker King; and in my own deep reading of the texts I have explored and explicated in this dissertation.

Because of my deeper understanding of the significance of naming in African American literature and culture, I want to echo and amplify the ubiquitous call of the Black Lives Matter movement: “Say their names.” Like Morrison’s character Milkman mused on the names of the people in his community after he had become awakened to the power of names (*Song of Solomon* 329-330), I muse upon the names of hundreds of Black people whose lives have been cut short by police violence.

The article, “Say Their Name,” published on a Gonzaga University’s website gives what they say is an incomplete list of the African Americans who, between January 2010 and June 12, 2020, were killed by police or who died while in police custody because of neglect or lack of response to requests for medical help. Say their names:

Aaron Campbell, Steven Eugene Washington, Danroy “DJ” Henry Jr., Derrick Jones, Reginald Doucet, Raheim Brown, Jr., Derek Williams, Kenneth Harding Jr., Alonzo Ashley Jr., Kenneth Chamberlain Sr., Ramarley Graham, Manual Levi Loggins Jr., Raymond Luther Allen Jr., Dante’ Lamar Price, Nehemiah Lazar Dillard, Wendell James Allen, Jersey K. Green, Shereese Francis, Reikia Boyd, Kendrec McDade, Ervin Lee Jefferson, III, Tamon Robinson, Sharmel T. Edwards, Shantel Davis, Alesia Thomas, Chavis Carter, Reynaldo Cuevas, Noel Palanco, Malissa Williams, Timothy Russell, Darnisha Diana Harris, Shelly Marie Frey, Johnnie Kamahi Warren, Jamaal Moore Sr., Kayla Moore, Kimani “KiKi” Gray, Clinton R. Allen, Kyam Livingston, Larry Eugene Jackson Jr., Carlos Alcis, Jonathan Ferrell, Barrington “BJ” Williams, Miriam Iris Carey, Andy Lopez, Jordan Baker, McKenzie J. Cochran, Yvette Smith, Gabriella Monique Nevarez, Victor White III, Tyree Woodson, Dontre Hamilton, Eric Garner, John Crawford III, Michael Brown Jr., Ezell Ford, Dante Parker, Tanisha N. Anderson, Akai Kareem Gurley, Tamir Rice, Romain Brisbon, Jerame C. Reid, Natasha McKenna, Janisha Fonville, Tony Terrell Robinson, Jr., Meagan Hockaday, Mya Shawatza Hall, Phillip Gregory White, Eric Courtney Harris, Walter Lamar Scott, Freddie Carlos Gray Jr., Brendon K. Glenn, Sandra Bland, Samuel Vincent DuBose, India Kager, Jeremy “Bam Bam” McDole, Jamar

O'Neal Clark, Quintonio LeGrier, Bettie "Betty Boo" Jones, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Joseph Curtis Mann, Korryn Gaines, Terrence LeDell Sterling, Terence Crutcher, Alfred Olango, Deborah Danner, Chad Robertson, Jordan Edwards, Charleena Chavon Lyles, Aaron Bailey, Stephon Alonzo Clark, Saheed Vassell, Antwon Rose Jr., Botham Shem Jean, Chinedu Okobi, Charles "Chop" Roundtree Jr., Emantic "EJ" Fitzgerald Bradford Jr., Atatiana Koquice Jefferson, Manuel "Mannie" Elijah Ellis, Breonna Taylor, Michael Brent Charles Ramos, Dreasjon "Sean" Reed, George Perry Floyd, Aaron Bailey, Javier Ambler, Sterling Lapree Higgins, Elijah McClain, John Elliot Neville, Aiyana Mo'Nay Stanley-Jones, Tony McDade, Carlos Carson. ("Say Their Name")

Additionally, according to Khaleda Rahaman, 229 Black people have been killed by police in the U.S. since George Floyd was asphyxiated by a white police officer on May 25, 2020, while bystanders filmed his death. Rahaman's list includes five people whose names were withheld by police, but the recorded names of those Black people are:

Tony McDade aka Natosha McDade, Modesto "Marrero Desto" Reyes, Momodou Lamin Sisay, Derrick Thompson, David McAtee, Tyquarn Graves, Kamal Flowers, Lewis Ruffin Jr., Phillip Jackson, Michael Blu Thomas, Rayshard Brooks, Cane Van Pelt, Donald Ward, Brandon Gardner, Terron Jammal Boone, Derrick Canada, Skyleur Toung, Robert D'Lon Harris, Rasheed Mathew Moorman, Aloysius Larue Keaton, Kevin O. Ruffin, Ky Johnson, William Wade Burgess III, Joseph W. Denton, Paul Williams, Malik Canty, Erroll Johnson, Richard Lewis Price, Hakim Littleton, Vincent Demario Truitt, Aaron Anthony Hudson, Darius Washington, Vincent Harris, Jeremy Southern, Chester Jenkins,

David Earl Brooks Jr., Darrien Walker, Ashton Broussard, Amir Johnson, Julian Edward Roosevelt Lewis, Salaythis Melvin, Jonathan Jefferson, Rafael Jevon Minniefield, Kendrell Antron Watkins, Anthony McClain, Adrian Jason Roberts, Trayford Pellerin, Damian Lamar Daniels, Julius Paye Kehyei, Michael Anthony Harris, Robert Earl Jackson, Dijon Kizzee, Deon Kay, Steven D. Smith, Major Carvel Baldwin, Steve Gilbert, Jonathan Darsaw, Robert Coleman, Darrell Wayne Zemault Sr., Charles Eric Moses Jr., Dearian Bell, Patches Vojon Holmes Jr., Kurt Andras Reinhold, Willie Shropshire Jr., DeMarco Riley, Jonathan Price, Stanley Cochran, Tyran Dent, Anthony Jones, Kevin Carr, Dana Mitchell Young Jr., Fred Williams III, Akbar Muhammad Eaddy, Dominique Mulkey, Marcellis Stinnette, Rodney Arnez Barnes, Gregory Jackson, Mark Matthew Bender, Ennice "Lil Rocc" Ross Jr., Jakerion Shmond Jackson, Walter Wallace Jr., Maurice Parker, Kevin Peterson Jr., Justin Reed, Michael Wright, Reginald Alexander Jr., Frederick Cox Jr., Rodney Eubanks, Vusumuzi Kunene, Brandon Milburn, Tracey Leon McKinney, Angelo "AJ" Crooms, Sincere Peirce, Arthur Keith, Shane K. Jones, Shawn Lequin Braddy, Jason Brice, Kenneth Jones, Rodney Applewhite, Terrell Smith, Rondell Goppy, Ellis Frye Jr., Cory Donell Truxillo, Mickee McArthur, Udofia Ekom-Abasi, James David Hawley, Kevin Fox, Dominique Harris, Maurice Jackson, Andre K. Sterling, Casey Christopher Goodson Jr., Kwamaine O'Neal, Mark Brewer, Donald Edwin Saunders, Thomas Reeder III, Joseph R. Crawford, Joshua Feast, Charles E. Jones, Bennie Edwards, Jeremy Daniels, Johnny Bolton, Larry Taylor, Andre Maurice Hill, Isaac Frazier, Sheikh Mustafa Davis, Shamar Ogman, Marquavious Rashod Parks, Larry

Hamm, Helen Jones, Jason Cooper, Jaquan Haynes, Shyheed Robert Boyd, Dolal Idd, Carl Dorsey III, La Garion Smith, Tre-Kedrian Tyquan White, Vincent Belmonte, Shawn McCoy, Robert "Lil Rob" Howard, Jason Nightengale, Matthew Oxendine, Patrick Warren Sr., Lymond Maurice Moses, Kershawn Geiger, Reginald Johnson, Zonterious Johnson, Christopher Harris, Eusi Malik Kater Jr., Tyree Kajawn Rogers, Randy Miller, Roger D. Hipskind, Karl Walker, Marvon Payton Jr., Jenoah Donald, Dontae Green, Treyh Webster, Christopher Hagans, Andrew Hogan, Dustin Demaurean Powell, Gregory Taylor, Jordan Walton, Brandon Wimberly, Daverion Kinard, Arnell States, Benjamin Tyson, Donald Francis Hairston, Chandra Moore, Andrew Teague, Howayne Gale, Tyshon Jones, Tyrell Wilson, Nika Nicole Holbert, Christopher Ruffin, Daryl Lenard Jordan, Kevin L. Duncan, Frankie Jennings, Travon Chadwell, Malcolm D. Johnson, Donovan W. Lynch, Matthew Blaylock, Michael Leon Hughes, Willie Roy Allen, DeShawn Latiwon Tatum, Noah R. Green, Diwone Wallace, Gabriel Casso, Desmon Montez Ray, Dominique Williams, James Lionel Johnson, James Alexander, Raheem Reeder, DeShund Tanner, Faustin Guetigo, Daunte Wright, Miles Jackson, Mathew Zadok Williams, Anthony Thompson Jr., Pier Alexander Shelton, Lindani Myeni, Innes Lee Jr., Roderick Inge, Larry Jenkins, Dequan Cortez Glenn, Doward Sylleen Baker, Ma'Khia Bryant, Andrew Brown, Michael Lee McClure, Marvin Veiga, Hanad Abidaziz, Terrance Maurice Parker, Eric Derrell Smith, La'Mello Parker, Latoya Denis James, Ashton Pinkee, Adonis Traughber, Kalon Horton, Lance Lowe, Tyrone Penny, Darion M. Lafayette, and Kortnee Lashon Warren. (Rahaman)

Unfortunately, the list of names will not end here. Daily, in the U.S., African Americans face the threat of escalating violence from police officers who should be trying to deescalate any potentially violent situation. These hundreds of names represent thousands of Black people killed since police organizations were first formed, and they will be joined by hundreds more in the future, until white supremacy has been rooted out of police departments across the nation. This is why the Black Lives Matter movement uses the hashtag #SayTheirNames. Because my research has led me to understand the empowerment of self-naming aligned with anti-racism and because I want to honor the African Americans who have lost their lives because of racial prejudice in the ranks of police across the U.S., I say their names.

As a dedicated scholar in the field of African American literature, I maintain my status also as an anti-racist ally for Black people since my first awakening to the dehumanizing effects of white supremacy when I was a child. My study of naming in African American literature has awakened in me an even deeper understanding of the depths of racism and a need to acknowledge the ongoing struggle that African Americans continue to face. In each of the chapters that compose this dissertation, I researched and analyzed the historical struggle Black writers confronted to reclaim their African ancestry. In doing so, I join them as they use their writing to resist the damaging effects of naming and un-naming in the history of racism and white supremacy in the U.S.

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