

The Namelessness of Lives: What's Not in a Name?

Written by Cai Wilkinson

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CAI WILKINSON, AUG 8 2019

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I first encountered Muriel Rukeyser's 1968 poem (see below) in July 2015, when the inimitable Joan Nestle read it to conclude the 'living bibliography' that she presented as part of a panel discussion held at Hares and Hyenas, 'Melbourne's queer and alternative bookshop, cafe and performance space'^[1], provocatively entitled 'What is Queer History Good For?'.^[2] The event had been lively, thought-provoking, entertaining, uplifting, and spirited. Queer history had been revived, redeemed; its relevance once more revealed and reaffirmed. And yet as the event drew to a close, I became increasingly conscious of an aching, yearning wistfulness that was accompanied by an anxious sense of loss. Part of this was undoubtedly simply the fact that I had enjoyed the discussion, the camaraderie, the sense of *feeling* engendered by queerness and its common points of reference temporarily being the norm, rather than the exception. Part of it was the unavoidable return to the outside world and its chilly rain-lashed streets, to be followed by a resumption of the more mundane but no less necessary preoccupations of everyday life. But part of it was a visceral sense that something significant had occurred in hearing Rukeyser's poem, even if I did not yet quite know what it was.

I lived in the first century of world wars.
Most mornings I would be more or less insane.
The newspapers would arrive with their careless stories,
The news would pour out of various devices
Interrupted by attempts to sell products to the unseen.
I would call my friends on other devices;
They would be more or less mad for similar reasons.
Slowly I would get pen and paper,
Make my poems for others unseen and unborn.
In the day I would be reminded of those men and women
Brave, setting up signals across vast distances,
Considering a nameless way of living, of almost unimagined values.
As the lights darkened, as the lights of night brightened,
We would try to imagine them, try to find each other,
To construct peace, to make love, to reconcile
Waking with sleeping, ourselves with each other.
To reach the limits of ourselves, to reach beyond ourselves,
To let go the means, to wake.

I lived in the first century of these wars.

Muriel Rukeyser, 1913–1980

Over the next few weeks, that *something* gradually took form. My knowledge of being had shifted; a previously unarticulated and shapeless thought had found form and, with it, voice: *What would a nameless life be like?* The possibility was as daunting as it was fascinating. Just thinking about it caused a response that was far more felt than

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thought: a lightening of one's shoulders; a loosening of one's chest and suddenly, almost painfully, being able to breathe deeply for the first time in I-don't-know-when. I felt exhilaration that overwhelmed my mind and swelled my heart, but then bitter grief that choked up my throat and strangled my voice. *This is what could be, but isn't.* The immediate sweet-sourness abated, but tantalising traces remained, an essence to be revisited and savoured anew each time: contemplating the notion of namelessness was freeing, providing momentary relief from the friction of ill-fitting words and potential permission to stop trying to explain oneself to a world that insistently demands we claim names and labels even as it then uses them as simplistic synecdoches to deny the wonderful and troubling complexity and contradiction of our existence and experience. *If you're x, then you're like this. If you're y, then this is who you are. You said you were z. You can't be this and that!*

To experience such a powerful feeling of relief from the idea of not having (or not having to have) a name for one's way of living seems an uncomfortable contradiction to the discourses and debates I know from the LGBTIQ+ communities of which I've been part for the past twenty years or so.^[3] Acknowledging one's non-heterosexuality and/or gender non-conformity and breaking out of the proverbial closet is supposed to be liberating. We're told that being honest not just with ourselves but with others about our queerness is how we – and others – become able to live authentically and love whole-heartedly. Bravely. *Be yourself! It's hard to be happy when you have to lie about who you are.*^[4]

And there is something freeing, even empowering, about explicitly naming the non-normativity of one's desires and the realities of one's existence. *I'm lesbian. I'm gay. I'm bisexual. I'm queer. I'm transgender. I'm genderqueer. I'm asexual.* It's a speech act that has the power to challenge assumptions about gender and of heterosexuality, asserting the fundamental liveability of one's queer life even in the face of flat-out denials. *There's no gay men in Chechnya!* [5] *Bisexuals don't really exist! You're born female; you can't become it!* In voicing ourselves, we loosen norms of straightness and insist that our existence is acknowledged, even if it is not always intelligible to others (Scheman 2011). It is a claiming, a challenge, a cathartic statement: *This is who I am.*

But how to describe that *This*? When? Where? For whom?

So, who am I? To borrow a quip from comedian Hannah Gadsby's recent viral hit *Nanette*^[6], more than anything, I'm Tired. I'm tired of the confusion that names cause and the reactions they provoke. I'm tired of having to manage my names in order to bridge the gaps between me and people's expectations and assumptions. I'm tired of being told that *This* cannot be me, because the term woman, female, lesbian, transgender, even queer, is for people who are like *That*. I'm tired of the way that names never quite fit, causing friction on skin, soul, and sensibility. The ways in which they're so often used to divide, police, and blame, to (re)create hierarchies of (not) *real*, (not) *enough*. *How gay/queer/trans are you really? Can you prove it?*

Even in supposedly friendly territories, names continue to constrain and contain us under dense and resinous weights of stigma, history, and multiplying normativities (hetero-, homo-, trans-) as we all anxiously jostle for position and recognition in a body politic that remains ambivalent about our existence, let alone our presence. *I've got nothing against gays, but why do they have to flaunt their sexuality in public? Act normal and you'll be treated normally! There's no such thing as transgender! If you want to know your gender, look in your pants! Genderqueer? Non-binary?! Lefty gender ideology confusing children and perverting the natural order!*

Such weariness of the politics of naming is not, however, to suggest that the absence of names, even if it were possible, would necessarily improve our situation. Rather, it is a call to pause and reflect. As we move further into the second century of global wars, including the ongoing 'Queer Wars' that continue to claim lives and polarise domestically and internationally (Altman and Symons 2016), how do and how don't names work? To turn Juliet's question around, what *isn't* in a name? What are the politics of how we name ourselves as sexual/ised beings and gendered bodies with (or without) desires for intimacy of various kinds? How do names mean and matter? Can we – even 'consider a nameless way of living' as something more than a fleeting moment of utopian escapism?

Giving Names

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It's a girl! It's a boy! The first name we're assigned is most often not our individual personal name, but a gender. Gender naming marks us, even before birth: once identified as girls, babies risk falling victim to gendercide, adding to the world's estimated 126 million 'missing women' who 'would be alive in the absence of sex discrimination' (Bongaarts and Guilmo 2015, 242, 246). Those babies whose bodies cannot be easily interpreted as *male* or *female*, meanwhile, risk being surgically 'corrected' to fit restrictive binary categories to be deemed 'normal', with little regard for future identity or pleasure (Amnesty International 2017; Human Rights Watch 2017). Once a gender-name has been assigned, it might not be destiny, but it can certainly shape it, providing an initial stage direction for how we are supposed to perform our innately gendered lives. *Girls like dolls, boys like cars; girls are polite and gentle, boys are forthright and bold; girls are small and delicate, boys are big and strong. Girls become mothers, wives, carers; boys become fathers, husbands, providers.*

This first name hints at future roles embedded in a third name, one left unspoken until it is no longer possible to maintain the assumption of sexual innocence: *heterosexual*. Or, to use its less formal appellation, *straight*. By which we mean sexual desires that are orientated towards persons of the "opposite" sex. This newly uttered name reinforces our gender-names and the supposed complementarity of red-blooded manly men and virtuously womanly women (which is, after all, *only natural*), providing instruction on how to configure intimacy the way society intended. After all, *it's Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve!*

Of course, the names that society bestows on us at birth by default do not always fit us. We may know it, but the socio-political world around us makes sure we feel it, too. At worst, we are literally named and shamed with spiteful epithets designed to stigmatise and silence: *Fag. Homo. Lesbo. Dyke. Queer. Tranny*. At best, *people like you* are unnamed and all but invisible, their rare appearances in popular culture frequently marked by stereotypes, salaciousness and invasively personal questions. *When did you know you were different? How do you have sex? Have you had the operation?* Even when not marked with malice or well-intentioned but misplaced curiosity, the neo-names utilised cautiously and clinically to try to describe us continue to mark us as *other*, as *not-normal* in how we experience our bodies and our desires. *Homosexual. Transgender. Gender variant. Gender non-conforming. Non-binary. Asexual*. Their aspirational neutrality cannot belie the burden of original names that are uniformly given, nor the damage that they too often cause to bodies, souls, and minds in their reductive normativity.

Claiming Names

Mom, Dad: I need to tell you something... Faced with the chafing of our given names, we may decide to claim a name that better describes our experience of our sexuality and gender. The concept of 'coming out' is at the heart of the modern Western LGBT rights movement. Leaving the closet to live openly as an LGBTIQ person is portrayed as an imperative step towards personal and political liberation and wellbeing (see for example Cheves 2016; Hewlett and Sumberg 2011; Juster et al. 2013; Legate, Ryan and Weinstein 2012). While the imagery of the closet focuses our attention of the physicality and spatiality of the act^[7], coming out is as much about being spoken as it is about being seen. Homosexuality is now, to update Lord Alfred Douglas' infamous phrase, the love that dares to speak its name.^[8] Indeed, it all but insists upon it: given that appearances, mannerisms or behaviours are not a reliable indication of how someone will describe their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, it is only in naming our queerness and disclosing it to others that we fully come into being. *Oh! I've never met a gay person before! No, you have; you just didn't know it...*

The logic of 'I speak, therefore I am' implies that to be nameless is to not exist. Regardless of one's reasons for being there, the closet consigns one to societal invisibility and unknowability, thereby restricting one's ability to live one's truth as a full member of society. As Gabrielle Bellot (2017) argued in response to news in late 2017 that the US Centers for Disease Control had issued advice to avoid certain words like 'transgender' in funding applications, if you 'erase this essential language, you also erase us'. Denial becomes possible, plausible. *We'd heard tales of people like you, but we didn't really believe you existed*. From a socio-political perspective, identities cannot survive without public performance, and re/claiming the names that describe aspects of ourselves which fundamentally shape our everyday interactions in simultaneously profound and banal ways is a vital part of this. Being 'out and proud' about one's sexuality and/or gender identity is thus both a personal and political imperative: to be openly LGBTIQ+ is to exist, to be known, to pledge allegiance to the apparently radical idea that one's embodied reality is valid. *Yes, we*

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exist. No, we won't apologise for existing.

But names are not only our own. Names are knowledge claims that do not only describe *who* someone is individually, but also *how* they are in the world. Names for one's queerness are the result of tectonic clashes between societal norms and individual selfhood. Formed under great pressure, often violently, the names we use to describe the configurations of our gender identity and sexuality are far more than labels that can be easily attached and removed. Rather, they are transformative, taking the malleable carbon of one's self-knowledge and lived experience and crystallising it into precious diamond-like identities with notionally clean edges, transparent content, and hard, fixed forms: *I'm lesbian. I'm gay. I'm bisexual. I'm queer. I'm transgender. I'm genderqueer. I'm asexual.* These claimed names become hard-won badges of honour and protective talismans that affirm being, confirm identity, combat stigma and restore worth. They are worn with pride: in recognition of personal survival, in solidarity with other queers, in memory of those whose lives were unlived. *We're here, we're queer, get used to it!*

Changing Names

Who are you really? What's your real name? The core implication of such questions is that everyone has a 'true' name that reveals a fundamental essence – not just who someone is, but also how they are. Names are at constant risk of coagulating into definition. How things are here and now is ahistoricised, the past is deleted, the future disavowed. *You as we know you* becomes the standard for how things always were, how they will be and, most dangerously how they *should* be. And names should not be changed! A claimed name may (eventually) be tolerated, but only insofar as it is a correction to reveal the 'real' you, which is fixed and essential. Further attempts at change are met with greater resistance, seen as signs of indecisiveness, inauthenticity or self-indulgent attempts to redefine 'reality' (whatever that may be...).

Yet both names and pronouns do change, often in direct defiance of *should*, *what-ifs* and warnings about slippery slopes. It doesn't happen easily. Great expenditures of time, energy, and emotion are needed to overcome the inertia of existing names and nurture new ones that may be ill-equipped to deal with the harsh climate of the binary-obsessed hetero-homonormative world. Particular exertions are required to dislodge given gender-names and claim one that better fits oneself. Our institutions, invested in upholding the existing gender order, would rather pathologise and punish those who express discontent with their gender assigned at birth rather than seriously consider just how 'normal' a binary conceptualisation of gender really isn't. *I'm all for people expressing themselves, but if a man can claim to be a woman, then what next? It's a slippery slope...* For those who persist and are able to pay the price (and, often, endure the consequent poverty), a new gender-name may eventually be acquired: *transwoman* or *transman*, certainly; maybe even just *man* or *woman* for the more gender-conforming. Sometimes *non-binary* or *genderqueer*, if our systems can cope with it.

Even as our names change, however, they continue to function like maps, flattening and enclosing us. An inevitable reduction has to occur when we put life into words. The changes of name we use to describe our experiences navigating collective grounds become signposts, guiding our interactions and journeys. *Go straight! You are now leaving the hetero-zone. Here be queers. Proceed with caution! Transphobia ahead for the next 10 years and a steep learning gradient with hairpin bends.* The ever-morphing topography of souls and bodies is rendered flat, fixed, readable in the moment. *This, and only this, is who I am/you are here and now.* But these names are meaningful in only abstract, academic, bloodless, emotionless terms. The names we use, these deceptive/ly simple categorisations, obscure the complexity, instability and mess of bodies, loves and lusts. We can keep changing the names we use, time and again, infinitely, but can any name capture a life as it has been lived?

Undoing Names

Perhaps, then, we should not seek to find new names for sexuality and gender identity, but rather get rid of them altogether? Some seem to think so, from the small but growing number of parents raising 'theybies' and trying to keep the dictates of gender-names at bay (Compton 2018; Hanna 2018; Ritschel 2018) to scholars exploring what a post-gender future might look like (Nicholas 2014). It's a case of 'no name, no problem', surely?

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Novelist Ursula Le Guin explores this idea in her 1985 short story, *She Unnames Them*. The tale recounts how creatures respond to a proposal 'to give their names back to the people to whom, as they put it, they belonged'. While the majority of wild and domestic animals 'accepted namelessness with the perfect indifference with which they had so long accepted and ignored their names', others such as dogs and parrots maintained 'that their names were important to them, and flatly refused to part with them'. However, as they come to appreciate the politics of unnamings, their perceptions shift:

But as soon as they understood that the issue was precisely one of individual choice, and that anybody who wanted to be called Rover, or Froufrou, or Polly, or even Birdie in the personal sense, was perfectly free to do so, not one of them had the least objection to parting with the lower case (or as regards German creatures, uppercase) generic appellations 'poodle', 'parrot', 'dog', or 'bird', and all the Linnaean qualifiers that had trailed along behind them for two hundred years like tin cans tied to a tail.

Once unnamed, the creatures go about their being much as before. For Le Guin's narrator, however, the effect was a visceral awareness, 'somewhat more powerful than I had anticipated', of what names do:

None were now left to unname, and yet how close I felt to them where I saw one of them swim or fly or trot or crawl across my way or over my skin, or stalk me in the night, or go along beside me for a while in the day. They seemed far closer than when their names had stood between myself and them like a clear barrier: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one same fear. And the attraction that many of us felt, the desire to feel or rub or caress one another's scales or skin or feathers or fur, taste one another's blood or flesh, keep one another warm – that attraction was now all one with the fear, and the hunter could not be told from the hunted, nor the eater from the food.

Names, the speaker has realised, create not just order, but structures and hierarchies of power, needs and desires. Names are indicative of place and value, with those better positioned able to assign or outright impose their preferred names – and meanings – on others. *Gay? Pervert! Bisexual? Just greedy! Transgender? Man dressed as a woman! Non-binary? There's no such thing – just look in your pants and you'll know what you really are!*

Despite the loudly-proclaimed progress towards LGBT equality with declarations that 'love is love', to be queer is to know the weight of your name and the cost of your otherness. The pride and power felt in moments of declaration quickly give way to the awareness that there are always unavoidable consequences – sometimes positive, sometimes negative, sometimes fatal – to naming oneself or being named by others. Once voiced, names change reality in ways both tangible and ineffable. Whether voiced proudly, cautiously, casually or fearfully, for the first time or the thousandth (for coming out is an infinite series of moments), naming the orientation of our erotic desires or the (non)-alignment of our gendered bodies with society's tick-box M/F options constitutes an 'altering reality for the self and altering reality for others' (Chirrey 2003, 25). More than anything, attempts at rejecting names heighten our awareness of their power. *Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can really hurt me.*

Namelessness or Naming-less

What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet

- Shakespeare, W. *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene II

Shakespeare's Juliet was wrong. Just as our personal names shape perceptions and potentially our choice of profession (Konnikova 2013), the labels that we use to describe our gendered selves and desires smell radically different to different people across time and place. Take *queer*, for example: for many under the LGBTIQ+ umbrella, it has been reclaimed and rehabilitated, its uneasy and fractious polysemy now celebrated for its apparent inclusivity in comparison to the alleged divisiveness of lengthy and lengthening initialisations (Rauch 2019). For others, however, it remains a painful slur that is traumatic rather than liberating, exclusionary rather than inclusive, alienating rather than welcoming (Peron 2016), or a word that is too closely tied to English to have any local

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resonance or use, other than as a password for access to transnational networks of “global gays” that continue to be dominated by white Europeans and North Americans (Altman 1997). As a name, it is at best a rose with sharp thorns that has just as much capacity to wound as to delight – a fact underscored by the bittersweet recognition that, if there is a common queer experience, then it is that of marginalisation due to one’s non-heterosexuality and/or gender non-conformity (Ryan 2016).

Yet while renouncing names may feel like an attractive panacea against the burdens that they impose (and oh how strongly I felt it and wanted the relief of namelessness in that first moment of thought), more sober consideration suggests that such hope is misplaced: upon trying to take her leave from Adam, Le Guin’s newly nameless protagonist becomes aware of the consequences of unnamings:

In fact, I had only just then realised how hard it would have been to explain myself. I could not chatter away as I used to, taking it all for granted. My words must be as slow, as new, as single, as the steps I took going down the path away from the house between the dark-branched, tall dancers motionless against the winter shining.

Yet renaming, however temporary, is all but unavoidable, if only by dint of practicality and the dependence of communication on common understandings. My final proposal, therefore, is not that we should try to become nameless. Rather, we must cultivate a sensibility and practice of *naming-less* in relation to sexuality and gender that recognises the incompleteness, the transience and the imperfection of names and the political work that names do, hardening around us unbidden and binding our bodies fast with societal norms and borders of all kinds. For, while we cannot escape names and the political baggage with which they travel, lessening the hold of existing names on our lives is a vital step towards creating space for unnamed lives to exist, thereby providing ways out of the current impasse over identity-based rights claims that depend on fixed, binary categories (Altman and Symons 2016, 132–158). With gender and sexuality serving as key battle lines in the second century of these wars, this is one time when less really could be more.

Notes

[1] <https://www.hares-hyenas.com.au/>

[2] <http://joannestle2.blogspot.com/2015/07/what-is-queer-history-good-for-public.html>

[3] More accurately: LGB, then LGBT, then LBT, then LGBTQ, then LGBTQA, then LGBTIQ+.

[4] <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/dec/02/the-closet-is-a-terrible-place>

[5] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/07/15/ramzan-kadyrov-says-there-are-no-gay-men-in-chechnya-and-if-there-are-any-they-should-move-to-canada>

[6] <https://www.netflix.com/au/title/80233611>

[7] See Keith Haring’s 1988 National Coming Out Day illustration, for example, in which the figure seems to dance out of the dark into the bright lights, the door flung open <http://www.haring.com/!art-work/national-coming-out-day#.W5DfwoutT-k>.

[8] The original line, “I am the love that dare not speak its name”, is the final line of Douglas’s 1894 poem, “Two Loves”. The phrase is often incorrectly attributed to Oscar Wilde, Douglas’s lover, since Wilde was cross-examined about the meaning of the poem while on trial for indecency and sodomy in 1895. While Wilde successfully argued that the poem was about platonic love (he was acquitted), it was (and still is) widely understood as a euphemism for homosexual love.

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