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Rachael Peckham

Marshall University, peckham@marshall.edu

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Identity Anxiety and the Power and Problem of Naming in African American and Jewish American Literature

*We were deprived first of our community, then . . . of our
names.*

—Elie Wiesel, “A Special Presentation:
Oprah and Elie Wiesel at the Auschwitz
Death Camp”

*tell me your names
tell me your bashful names
and i will testify*

—Lucille Clifton, “at the cemetery,
walnut grove plantation, south carolina,
1989”

Occasionally while I’m writing, I will experience a truly fortuitous moment, “a happening” that moves beyond mere coincidence and into the realm of what Freud calls *the uncanny*. Tonight, I turned on the television and before the pixels could even form an image, a soft incantation filled the room: *We speak your names / We speak your names / We speak your names*. For a second the chant had the ring and tone of a mythical, cloud-parting message from above—but just as quickly, the televised picture appeared and it was not God at all, but Oprah Winfrey delivering the words (an implication I suspect she wouldn’t mind; she is, after all, a pop-cultural goddess, the deity of daytime talk). Nonetheless, the repeated words—lines from Pearl Cleage’s poem, “We Speak Your Names”¹—are intended to have an awesome effect on the listener; they evoke what Debra Walker King calls the power “to perform magic, to call forth an entity or influence a way of being in the world.” In her book, *Deep Talk: Reading African-American*

Literary Names, King writes, “The magic of naming speaks into being the resistant and constantly re-creative power of onomastic deep talk” (King 3).

Putting aside King’s notion of “deep talk” for a moment, this power to call things into *being* is an idea we often witness in sacred texts (John’s gospel starts, *In the beginning was the Word . . .*) as well as in certain theoretical treatises (in particular, Heidegger’s argument that “Language speaks [us]”). As language names, it creates. But the reverse is also true: names are language. That is, *name* can be either a noun or a verb—two parts of language that determine a subject *or* an object; the one performing the action *or* the one being acted upon, respectively. Said another way, “Language—that fundamental act of organizing the mind’s encounter with an experienced world—is propelled by a rhythm of naming: it is the means by which the mind takes possession of the named, at once fixing the named as irreversibly Other” (Benston 3).

This is all heady talk for the simple groundwork I want to lay regarding the *power* of names and naming. And where there is power, there is potential for problems—specifically, in the ways identity gets played out, especially “cultural identity” in post-slavery and post-Holocaust writing and the intercultural contact that marks these histories. In such narratives, names function as sites of identity anxiety, as they are never fixed, but rather in constant tension with the authors’ and/or the characters’ fraught experiences. Thus, names not only have power—they have “re-creative power,” as King suggests, that speaks to an ever-changing identity, or “condition of the spirit” (3).

This argument finds its footing in scholarship such as Stuart Hall’s “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in which he writes of “identity as a ‘production’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted *within*, not outside, representation” (392, emphasis mine). Hall sees this representation-within as a position from which “we all write and speak,” reminding us that “what we say is always in ‘context,’ *positioned . . .* [in] a particular time and place and a culture which is specific.” But this positioning is not a stationary one; rather, cultural identity is in motion along two axes, as he sees it: first, along the *vector of similarity* (e.g., a collective consciousness, as in, “the black experience”); and secondly, *the vector of difference* (those “ruptures and discontinuities” that determine “the Carribean’s ‘uniqueness’”), making names both individual and collective (395). Both axes, then, are needed to fully frame my own exploration (yet another fraught word) of the representation of names in

African American and Jewish American literature, with special consideration of how the authors' and/or characters' acts of naming, un-naming, and re-naming all signal a *fluid* cultural and racial identity, "subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (392).²

I apply this argument namely to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*; Ralph Ellison's personal essay, "Hidden Name and Complex Fate"; and Bernard Malamud's short story, "The Lady of the Lake"—keeping in mind that each genre brings its own set of concerns to the discussion. Presumably, fiction writers yield a certain license in deciding their characters' names, while nonfiction writers are held to an ethical expectation that what they write is "true"—whatever that means to a *particular time and place and a culture*. Already plenty of counter-examples come to mind; for one, there are times when anonymity trumps fact, as when nonfiction writers seek to protect the identities of those they (re)name, and does so by acknowledging that such a change has been made, either parenthetically or in a footnote. But for the sake of this discussion, I'll leave it at this, echoing Hall once more: while the names in fiction are seemingly the author's construction, they too exist "*within*, not outside, representation" (392); they too signify a positioning of identity—an identity no less unstable than the author's own, who harnesses the power, and thereby the problem, to name.

In my opinion, the writer's purposeful picking of a name warrants an even more purposeful study of it. "We should not, for a moment," Hall warns, "underestimate or neglect the importance of the act of imaginative rediscovery. . . ." Indeed, naming is arguably the most important speech act that writers perform in the re-imagining of identity, on account of the troubled relationship naming bears to meaning-making, even—perhaps, *especially*—when experience, named or otherwise, defies all attempts at meaning-making (as is often the critique of art *after Auschwitz*). Such "re-tellings," Hall suggests, "offer a way of imposing an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation, which is the history of all enforced diasporas" (392) and forms the "context" for the African American and Jewish American literature discussed here.³ This context is fraught with contradiction, staked on "the broken rubric of our past" (395)—the precarious location for these two groups' struggle to know themselves within nomenclatures that are at odds with this very goal.

The Variable “X”

Perhaps the most accessible exercise of naming’s “re-creative power” is in Malcolm X’s decision to change his surname from “Little” to the stark variable “X,” as explained in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* through the speech of Elijah Muhammed:

Your slavemaster, he brought you over here, and of your past everything was destroyed. Today, you do not even know your true language. What tribe are you from? You would not recognize your tribe’s name if you heard it. You don’t know nothing about your true culture. You don’t even know your family’s real name. You are wearing a *white man’s* name! (*Autobiography* 258)

In order to protest the erasure of his African ancestors’ names in their abduction and enslavement, Malcolm quickly adopts and practices the ideas of Elijah Muhammed by shedding the “*white man’s* name” and substituting it with “X”—as did thousands of Black Muslims during this movement. In re-naming himself as “X,” Malcolm engages in his own act of erasure, *x*-ing out his oppressor’s name (whom he collectively calls the “white devils”) in retaliation for their erasure of his ancestors’ names. Malcolm explains, “For me, my ‘X’ replaced the white slavemaster name of ‘Little’ which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears. . . . We would keep this ‘X’ until God Himself returned and gave us a Holy Name from His own mouth” (*Autobiography* 203). In this way, “X” unnames what Hall categorizes as the *Presence Europeenne*⁴ located in cultural identity—that presence which narrates “the black subject” as exotic, dark, mysterious, hyper-sexual, violent, and all of the “Other” codifications by which colonial representation expropriates the raced body. So it is that “X” also marks the spot—the body—as a site of African history, loss, erasure.

In the meantime, this “X” has become a loaded cultural character—what Robert Elliot Fox calls “the X-factor,” which now adorns “hats and other paraphernalia” (17). This literal wearing of a divorced letter proves that “X” has the emblematic power, Fox argues, to “[mark] the unknown (‘it’s a black thing—you wouldn’t understand’) at the same time it proclaims an identity: we are the X-men, blues people, the children of Malcolm” (17). I’m struck by the suggestion in this line that Malcolm has

not only managed to evoke his lost lineage with “X,” but to create a new following, a generation bred out of this protest: *the children of Malcolm*.

What Malcolm—and earlier, Elijah Muhammed—does not acknowledge, however, is the near-impossibility of finding out “[his] family’s real name,” centuries after their enslavement. (To do so would require, presumably, extensive research and travel to his ancestors’ African villages, if they even exist anymore.) So Malcolm is indeed right to propose that only “God Himself” could solve what Fox calls “an algebraic problem” of which X is “the unknown variable” (17). It’s an equation Malcolm never solves—or if he does, not by way of his ancestral name; he becomes, instead, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz after his pilgrimage to Mecca. Perhaps this final re-naming does not represent X’s failure, but rather, the *instability* of identity. “I have been always a man who tries to face facts,” he says, “and to accept the reality of life as new experience and new knowledge unfolds it. I have always kept an open mind, which is necessary to the flexibility . . . with every form of intelligent search for truth” (*Autobiography* 347).

While “flexibility” carries a somewhat complicit tone, I believe what Malcolm intuits in this word-choice is the struggle of the Named to constantly negotiate “the reality of life” (to Hall, “the continuous ‘play’ of history”) with an already-unstable identity. I hear in his admission not merely the “acceptance” of these experiences, but the “intelligent” use of them in the production of his own identity. Re-naming is a proactive part of this evolution of “becoming,”⁵ as we see at the end of the autobiography, when the greatest personal “truth” this search reveals is *change*—in his psychology, his philosophy, and in the final paragraphs’ predictions (*just watch and see if I’m not right. . .*)⁶ Indeed, the man we read at the book’s end is not merely an older and wiser version of the Malcolm we meet in Chapter One, though he acknowledges such. More so, the autobiography charts Malcolm’s constant movement towards *something*—towards an identity he re-positions for himself and continues to project into the future. He thinks aloud about entering law school, learning Chinese and Arabic, “which [he] think[s] is going to be the most powerful spiritual language of the future” (*Autobiography* 387). He bears his thinking on the page for all to see—no one reads Malcolm better than Malcolm—because, most of all, he wants to contribute to the world of thought and to have that thought be respected (388). Indeed, this is a person who knows who he is, who he has been—and more importantly, who he is becoming.

But he contradicts himself all throughout the book, complain some readers. (And certainly, there are times when Malcolm implicates himself: “To my own shame, when I say all of this I’m talking first of all about myself . . .” [57].) I hear in these readers’ complaints the belief that identity is stable and steadfast, even as it is tested. Malcolm X’s autobiography speaks a different story, as he admits to Haley, “I’m man enough to tell you that I can’t put my finger on exactly what my philosophy is now, but I’m flexible” (436). Malcolm X’s shifting identity becomes a vehicle for the reader’s awareness of what it means to be open to ideas; for, to think of identity as fixed or static entraps us in cycles that don’t recognize a need for change.

As Alex Haley explains in the autobiography’s epilogue, Malcolm remained faithful to his experiences and was honest about his ambivalent feelings toward figures like Cassius Clay, Elijah Muhammed, and the Nation of Islam in general. Several times Haley worries that Malcolm will revise his story on account of his “bitter” feelings (419)—and in fact, Malcolm almost revises some sections. A bit of a power struggle ensues between Narrator and Writer. “Whose book is this?” he challenges Haley, implicitly *naming* himself as the owner of the narrative, with the power to trump Haley’s role as the writer (*Autobiography* 421). But Haley wields the power to coax personal memory from Malcolm X, and ultimately wins the battle to preserve those uncensored memories (in this case, “his Black Muslim days”) exactly as Malcolm X narrated them to him. It is Haley, then, who helps us to know “El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, who had been called Malcolm X; who had been called Malcolm Little; who had been called ‘Big Red’ and ‘Satan’ and ‘Homeboy’ and other names—who had been buried as a Moslem” (463). It seems fitting that Haley performs this chronological roll-call at the book’s end, not as a checking-off of names but rather, a calling forth, a beckoning of Malcolm X’s spirit inhabited in *all* of his names, inhabiting all of his experiences.

The “Mysterious ‘W’”

“Not all of us, actually only a few, seek to deal with our names in this manner,” writes Ralph W. Ellison, offering a different perspective from that of Black Muslims like Malcolm X. “We take what we have and make of them what we can” (Ellison 149). In his essay, “Hidden Name and

Complex Fate,” Ellison incites the name of *Hemingway* “in order to establish a perspective, a set of assumptions from which [he] may speak.” It may seem initially problematic that Ellison needs this comparative standard in order to begin talking about his own personal experiences as a writer living in the United States. The troubling implication such a comparison invites is that Ellison’s identity is indeterminate without the white, popular writer that Hemingway represents—a man Ellison calls “the master, the culture hero” (145). What does it mean for Ellison’s experiences to be bound by a “set of assumptions from which [he] may speak,” and what exactly are these assumptions?

For Ellison, these assumptions concern the “relationship between suffering and art” (Ellison 146). There is a certain expectation, he points out, for a writer of a minority background to deal with “racial hardship” in his art (145). Ellison right away acknowledges “the validity” of writing about these struggles, but resists being shackled by them. An all-American writer like Hemingway, in contrast, is in no way expected to deal with race; in fact, he can even set his writing abroad, beyond the borders of America, if he chooses.⁷ Prefacing his interview with Ralph Ellison, John O’Brien writes on this point, “Hemingway went to foreign and distant forms of rituals of violence rather than choosing those of America. Ellison interprets this as the effort of the American writer to turn from social to personal concerns as the drama of his fiction” (222). If this is the case for the “master, our cultural hero,” then the writer of racial minority should also be allowed to name his “personal concerns”—and not be expected to speak for the entire community by way of social commentary. Rather, Ellison seeks to explore the meaning of his individual experiences, which are collectively “shared” anyway, he argues: “What Negro can escape them?” (Ellison 146) We do not have a choice in our racial makeup, Ellison reminds us, “but we *do* become writers out of an act of will, out of an act of choice. . . . And what happens thereafter causes all those experiences which occurred before we began to function as writers to take on a special quality of uniqueness” (146)—just as Hemingway models for us.

Ellison’s defense of the personal experience is also an argument for keeping individual surnames (as opposed to assuming a collective “X”), and “mak[ing] of them what we can” (Ellison 149). That does not mean his identity isn’t concerned with his African ancestors and the erasure of their names—“the chasm of historical denial,” he calls it—but that a name should not have more power over identity than the *self* does: “For we ourselves are

our *true* names, not their epithets! So let us, I say, Make Up Our Faces and Our Minds!” (149) It’s a powerful statement of self-determinism in the wake of a system whose “definitions belong to the definers not the defined,” to quote the character, Schoolteacher, in Toni Morrison’s historical novel, *Beloved*. Schoolteacher, charged with management of the plantation, “Sweet Home,” commits multiple acts of violence against the enslaved men and Sethe, not all of which are physical; in a lesson taught to his (white) students, Schoolteacher renames and reclassifies the slaves according to their “animal characteristics.” Set against this scene, Ellison’s loud prescription (*Make Up Our Faces and Our Minds!*) reverberates across a historical milieu and a language system with its violent baggage in tote. Like so many of the characters and authors discussed here, he too resists this violence through acts of self-definition, which he wrestles from the shackles of his given name while simultaneously choosing to keep it.

We might consider, then, the *Presence Americaine* within Ellison’s position. Returning to Hall and the paradigm of presences, this third “ambiguous” presence (which Hall also terms the “‘New World’” presence—America, *Terra Incognita*) signifies a facet of cultural identity that recognizes the need for assimilation, not for the sake of blending-in (i.e. the metaphorical melting pot), but for “heterogeneity and diversity” (Hall 395). Ellison kept his name, but he subverted its power to essentialize his identity; rather, he’s able to reign in this power and make it work (“make of them what we can”) to a new effect, “liv[ing] with and through, not despite, difference,” Hall explains, “by *hybridity*” (395). Given the complicated relationship Ellison has to his own name (his father named him after Ralph Waldo Emerson), it seems understandable that Ellison should feel caught between the past and the present, between the individual and the community. To simply *x* his name out would be to deny his father’s connection to him (“and his [father’s] love for reading” spoken through his name); instead, he abbreviates his middle name to read, simply, “W.,” both asserting himself apart from Emerson, while recognizing the name’s strong psychic power in evoking a life and love of writing. Ellison’s ambivalence, then, seems located in the site of this initial, which Ellison calls “the mysterious ‘W’” (153). According to Benston,

This minor gesture of unnamings was Ellison’s private act of naming—and its essentially ceremonial and symbolic nature, its turning from both literal and literary (“remote”) paternities, could not utterly liberate him from the impinging “fusions of

blood”: “I could suppress the name of my namesake out of respect for the achievements of its original bearer but I cannot escape the obligation to achieve some of the things he asked of the American writer.” (Ellison, qtd. in Benston 6)

The “Cheiropolidi” and Double-Consciousness

I have sought a common denominator in both Ellison and Malcolm X’s treatment of their names, but make no mistake, “W” is not to Ellison as “X” is to Malcolm. Ellison does not wish to *change* his name, but to “charge” it with personal meaning: *Make of [it] what [you] can* (149). X-ing it out will not solve the problem, he seems to argue, echoing a similar attitude as W.E.B. Du Bois displayed regarding the label “Negro.”

In 1928, Du Bois replied to a young man named Roland Barton “who wrote a brief letter expressing his support of efforts within the black American community aimed at eradicating the term Negro,” Gina Philogène explains in *From Black to African American: A New Social Representation* (76). Du Bois’ response to Barton deserves quoting at length, for his message does not discount the power of naming—as some of Du Bois’ critics seem to imply—but rather, the futility of a name-change to yield results that only real action could; in other words, re-naming is no substitute for action. Du Bois writes,

Suppose now we could change name. Suppose we arose tomorrow morning and lo! Instead of being “Negroes,” all the world called us “Cheiropolidi”—Do you really think this would make a vast and momentous difference to you and to me? Would the Negro problem be suddenly and eternally settled? Would you be any less ashamed of being descended from a black man, or would your schoolmates feel any less superior to you? The feeling of inferiority is in you, not in any name. The name merely evokes what is already there . . . a Negro by any other name will be just as black and just as white; just as ashamed of himself and just as shamed by others, as today. It is not the name—it’s the Thing that counts. (qtd. in Philogène 76)

Many have answered Du Bois’ response by attacking him for “miss[ing] the point,” as Obiagele Lake claims in *Blue Veins and Kinky Hair: Naming and Color Consciousness in African America*. Lake’s retort is that the objective behind re-naming is not “to render [African Americans] less despicable to

European Americans,” but to restore “group cohesion and collective consciousness” (8). That is, the name change is not aimed at revising how others see African Americans, but how African Americans see themselves. But are the two viewpoints so easily distinguished? The point Lake misses, in turn, is Du Bois’ idea of “double consciousness”—“this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eye of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 496). In other words, African Americans have always known how whites see them. Indeed, this dual awareness, this fraught identity, remains a tension that is suggested by the label “African American” itself, at the heart of which still lingers the question, *Can you be an African American and an American at the same time?* Du Bois reasons that “the American Negro” does not wish to “Africanize America” any more than he wants to “bleach” Africa, arguing that both cultures have something to teach the other; “He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows” (Du Bois 496). In fact, not only did Du Bois *not* want to “bleach” Africa, he supported the independence of African nations from colonial control and the unification of all black African descendants vis à vis the philosophy of *Pan-Africanism*, which he helped to form. Du Bois endorsed the philosophy “as a defense against what he called the ‘logic of the modern colonial system’ that fueled the global aims of European imperialism,” explains Ross Posnock in “How it Feels to Be a Problem: Du Bois, Fanon, and the ‘Impossible Life’ of the Black Intellectual” (328). (Posnock names Du Bois a student of Hegel, among others, for his “romantic racialism.”) The point here is that Du Bois considers “African American” to be Pan-Africanist in its politics, for its utterance invokes both the Continent (*African*) and its Diaspora (*American*). But can language—an already-shaky ground where meaning slips and slides and is always *deferred*⁸—withstand the weight of such a bridge? At what point does the structure collapse? With this rift in mind, I move on to the fictional characters of Bernard Malamud’s short story, “The Lady of the Lake.”

The Universal Jew

The “X-Factor” and the power to re-name and reclaim identity are at the forefront of this discussion, but what about re-naming as it is used to *hide*

racial identity? That is, what happens when naming becomes an act *not* of protest, but of assimilation, as it does in Malamud's "The Lady of the Lake"? Here, renaming is an act of *passing*. According to Sophia Lehmann, in her essay, "In Search of a Mother Tongue," the effort to assimilate is often counter-productive, as "it tends to exacerbate rather than alleviate the sense of marginality for which it was supposed to be the cure" (103). What Lehmann calls "marginality" might, in fact, be closer to *liminality*, in that re/un/naming suspends the person between two identities in order to "pass" between them, signaling a state of *becoming* while at the same time "being" neither. "The Lady of the Lake" is a rich example of this "paradox," as Lehmann calls it.⁹ In this story, the main character changes his name from Henry Levin—a recognizable Jewish surname—to Henry R. Freeman in order to blend in and shed the "limitations" his Jewish identity imposes on him. The name *Freeman* signifies this liberation for Henry; he wants so badly to be a "free man," free of his past, free of memories that represent an unnamed pain in the story. Because this pain goes unqualified, it thus becomes universal: it is every Jew's pain in the face of anti-Semitism. Malamud knows that this strife needs no explanation; it is enough to say that Henry is "tired of the past," because the reader presumably knows what this past represents for Henry and all Jews living in a post-Holocaust era. With this new name, and a new beginning in a new place, Henry believes his hopes and dreams have a better chance of being realized.

As a counter-point, not every Jew felt compelled to re-name; in fact, many held onto their names as an act of defiance against anti-Semitism. Whether to pass or to protest, to fit in or to flex, both are postures of power wielded in a name. That said, however, the *ability* to pass is of greater concern here—especially to the person of color denied that license—and stands to be "troubled" more than the decision to stand behind a Jewish name.

Returning to Malamud's story, the question of whether or not one can truly be "free from the past" is implicitly answered at the end. (Malamud's stories are known for having a "moral-to-the-story" quality—it is no different with "Lady of the Lake.") Initially, Henry argues to himself that "a memory was only a memory—you could forget, not change it" (Malamud 109). If names are imbued with memory—and much of the scholarship utilized in this paper suggests so, as well as in Morrison's *Beloved*—then un-naming is not only a kind of cultural forgetting (as opposed to [re]naming as a site of *re-memory*, as *Beloved* proposes), but also a form of

historical rewriting, inscribing history with new identity and inscribing identity with new history/-ies. This attitude poses a sharp contrast to those adopted by Malcolm X, who changes his name in order to remember what was forgotten, cleaving a lost past with a future—as well as to Ralph W. Ellison, who keeps his name but reifies its meaning. (*We are our names . . .*). Henry, on the other hand, sheds his name like one would a heavy, wet garment. And he can do so in his mind because “he did not look Jewish, could pass as not—had. So without batting an eyelash, he said [to the girl], no, he wasn’t [Jewish]” (Malamud 100).

Henry therefore hides behind his newly constructed identity. Of course, the story’s greatest irony is that this re-naming is the real “limitation” to Henry’s freedom, as it keeps him from being with the woman he falls in love with: Isabella della Seta, a Jew herself, though Henry doesn’t find out until it’s too late. His renounced identity secures him the lonely status he sought to change in the first place. All that he has left at the end, significantly, is Isabella’s name: “Still calling her name, Freeman embraced only moonlit stone” (Malamud 114). “Moonlit stone” is an apt description, for moonlight is intangible—like Isabella—yet pervasive, all-encompassing. The reader knows that Isabella’s name will continue to follow him, haunt him; she will become one more “memory” he will try to “forget,” unsuccessfully. In this way, she is a statue, memorialized in his mind like “stone,” a dead weight that suggests, in the end, that Henry is not “free” at all; he runs directly into himself and the identity he worked so hard to “forget.”

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that hiding one’s Jewish identity was necessary for survival during the Nazi occupation. Indeed, hiding/passing is at the other end of this discussion on the re-positioning possibilities in renaming. There is no greater stake in renaming than mere survival, when “forgetting and isolation, the circumstances which both the Nazis and the colonizers tried to enforce,” Lehmann adds, “become self-imposed” (102). This was true also for fifteenth-century Jews who feigned conversion to the Christian church in order to escape persecution, as Michelle Cliff recalls in *The Land of Look Behind*. “It was never a question of passing,” Cliff writes. “It was a question of hiding. . . . I would be whatever figure these foreign imaginations cared for me to be. It would be so simple to let others fill in for me” (qtd. in Lehmann 102).¹⁰ The distinction between *passing* and *hiding* is duly noted. The first connotes a choice; the second, a condition for existence. Even hiding was no guarantee

for survival with the risk of being recognized and “called out,” so to speak. In this context, it is hard to imagine a greater anxiety posited in naming and *being* named (albeit a different instability from that which we’ve considered so far, of identity as a production, a *becoming*).

Is it no wonder, then, that a denial of naming is exactly what makes naming a radical speech act in both post-Holocaust and post-Slavery literature, in which bearing witness and remembering—running themes in both genres—are the most powerful possibilities language imparts? (Typing the keywords “bearing witness” into Amazon.com’s search engine will immediately yield two results that demonstrate this point: Henry Louis Gates’ anthology, *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*, and Hazel Rochman’s collection, *Bearing Witness: Stories of the Holocaust*.) Malamud’s character, Isabella, is both a witness and a mouthpiece for this message, as she bears the mark of oppression—the numbered tattoo, yet another erasure of names not unlike the one slavery committed. After revealing her true identity to Henry, she says, “The past is meaningful to me. I treasure what I suffered for” (Malamud 114). It is indeed a powerful declaration of identity, but it could be said that she, too, tries escaping her past—or at least circumventing it in her desire to realize her dream of going to America—in her appropriation of the name “del Dongo” and the aristocracy it represents. Here again, remembering and/or forgetting the past is inextricably linked to this idea of naming and re-naming. “My name is not del Dongo,” she confesses. “It is Isabella della Seta” (112). Ultimately, Isabella’s history trumps her dreams for the future, as she cannot perpetuate the fraud any longer.

Bearing witness and the notion of collective memory, as Eric Sundquist takes up in *Strangers in the Land*, poses an interesting “paradox” (just as Lehmann would call assimilation). Quoting Gerald Early, Sundquist reminds us that collective memory can be a *double bind* as much as it can be a bond: “African Americans are ‘bound by the prison of self-consciousness about the meaning of their once having been African, while realizing that they can never be African again’” (265, emphasis mine). Sundquist places Early’s quotation alongside a discussion of William Melvin Kelley’s essay, “The Ivy League Negro,” which argues that unlike other immigrant groups, it’s problematic for African Americans to be united by a collective memory (“of African identity”) because such a “consciousness” is dependent upon slavery to help form it. This, Sundquist says, is “the paradox” (265).

Putting this argument aside and returning to Du Bois' ideas for a moment, the problems of double consciousness—the strife of being both American and Jewish—is resolved for Henry in his suppressing the latter identity and naming himself solely “American.” But Henry remains anxious and always aware of this strife, nonetheless; he is constantly wondering what others think of him, how they see him: “He was embarrassedly aware of the boy and Ernesto . . . openly staring at him” (Malamud 104); “He swam awkwardly, hating the picture he must make in her eyes” (108). Fueling this self-consciousness, of course, is the fear of being recognized; “the worry that troubled him the most was the lie he had told her, that he wasn't a Jew” (109). Henry remains paranoid whereas the others discussed up until this point—Malcolm X, Ellison, even Isabella—are working towards a realization and revelation of identity, despite its instability. They inhabit and “own” their identities, while Henry *disowns* his—and yet seems at the mercy of it; he hopes desperately that a change of name and place will turn his experiences in life around.

In fresh territory and a foreign language, Henry makes a poor guide for himself—to the sights, to Isabella's front door, to the meaning of his own thoughts and identity. He can't even make a simple phone call without worrying first “if the maid or somebody answered the phone first, [in which case] he would have a ridiculous time identifying himself; so he settled for sending her a note” (Malamud 102). Time and again, language and naming fail Henry. He tries desperately to imagine how Isabella sees him—and how that might change if she were to see him as a Jew. In the process, he couldn't be more wrong about her—though on some level, he seems to *see* and recognize her Jewish identity, with her “long and thin” nose, and “in her eyes a hidden hunger, or memory thereof” (100). But because Henry so often has trouble putting into words what it is he is feeling—“Just why, he couldn't exactly tell, but he could tell yes, had seen in her eyes” (101)—he cannot name what it is he recognizes about Isabella. He constantly fumbles for the right words to name his feelings; language fails him (a prominent theme in post-Holocaust literature). So it seems that along with the identity he's suppressed, he's lost the ability to identify others.

Conclusion: The Shift to Listen

Identity, then, comes closest to being known through shared experience than it does in an individual name. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Malamud's stories exemplify a literature that gives us access to these experiences, and thus continue to be an important means to understanding identity. Following Malcolm's lead, my own "flexible" thinking on "X" now is that it functions more as a *verb* than proper noun—not as an *x*-ing out, but in a scoring together (in this case, Jews and blacks). As Fox reminds us, the letter itself is a crossing, "the intersection of the material and the spiritual," and I would add, of the past and the present (17). This idea of crossing—not of crossing out, but cross-stitching—is perhaps the reconciliation the shifting name seeks for both of these ethnic groups.

"Language is a place of struggle," says Adam McKible in "These Are the Facts of the Darky's History." As the characters and figures mentioned here wrestle with their names, they also wrestle with the context in which they have been spoken. Choosing other names or choosing to remain with these names thus becomes a conscious act of defining one's personal identity within the context of the overarching cultural, racial identities—what bell hooks calls "the Oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves—to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew" (qtd. in McKible 223).

So many *r*- words have surfaced in my research for this paper—namely, resistance and reconciliation. I do not know if any reconciliation for Jews and African Americans came out of (re)naming; I only know that there is still important work to be done with this discussion, and that we must enter the conversation ready to listen as much as we speak. This truth became increasingly known to me during the writing of this paper, when comically, I would periodically turn on the television and hear Oprah addressing the very concerns I was writing about. I listened as those women honored at Oprah's "Legends Ball" were named one by one, and found myself getting emotional at the sound of their names. A day or two later, I would tune in to *Oprah*, only to find her walking around Auschwitz with Elie Wiesel, arm in arm, who periodically leaned in and whispered, "Oprah . . . you cannot imagine. Oprah. There are no words. . . ."

Sometimes what we hear the loudest is silence—which is not a shutting-down of conversation, but a paradoxical reverberation of all that cannot be said. Experience of this magnitude defies language, Wiesel implies. Nonetheless, we grasp for words; we try to *name* experience—a

struggle located in the very name, *Yahweh*, which means “*namelessness*, or *that which cannot be named*” (Benston 4). Indeed, “we must keep in mind the roots of the phenomenon here termed ‘unnaming’ . . . lie deep within Greek and Hebraic traditions,” Benston reminds us. “The refusal to be named invokes the power of the Sublime, [and is] a transcendent impulse to undo all categories . . .” (4).

But naming can be a productive power, too, as I said early on—it’s “a creative direction of the life force” (10). That is, in naming we create. And so we must be very careful in how we wield this power, literature teaches us, so that naming doesn’t become destructive. And perhaps most of all, in our “intelligent search[es] for truth” (*Autobiography* 347), in our quests to re-name and re-create ourselves, to revise ethnic labels and rid ourselves of racial epithets, we must not get lost amidst those changes, sacrificing the very identities our names seek.

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Notes

- ¹ The poem was written for the special occasion of Oprah's *Legends Weekend*, a "once in a lifetime" event on May 13-15, 2005 that honored the achievements of African-American women—the "Legends"—whose ranks include Anna Deavere Smith and Maya Angelou. (Oprah also has a separate category for "Young'uns" whose talent she also honored—mostly that of actresses and singers.) That Oprah both recognizes *and* harnesses the power to "name" these women, as performed by Cleage's poem, is of added interest to the scope of this paper.
- ² Another consideration of this topic is the problematic power of ethnic labels and racial epithets—further locations of anxiety, I argue, for both the named *and* the one doing the naming. By this I mean racial epithets (such as "Darky") that contain deep-seated anxiety regarding whiteness and its own unstable superiority, as argued by Gwendolyn Audrey Foster in "Performing Whiteness."
- ³ It should be noted that Hall is using "the diaspora experience" *metaphorically* to mean those "identities which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference," as opposed to the literal meaning (of "scattered tribes whose identity can only be secured in relation to some sacred homeland"), which Hall finds imperialistic and hegemonic (235).
- ⁴ A schema Hall borrows from Aimee Cesaire and Leopold Senghor in which three *presences* within the diasporic identity are pulled apart and discussed at length: the *repressed* Presence Africaine, the *ambivalent* Presence Europeenne, and the

ambiguous Presence Americain—connecting each one to erasure, appropriation, and assimilation, respectively. I include Hall's adjectives to give the reader a quick sense of how he's using them in "rethinking" cultural identity.

- ⁵ *Becoming* is to Hall what *Being* is to Heidegger. The word carries considerable importance to his central argument that cultural identity is a production, a perpetual process "of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past," he states (395).
- ⁶ Unfortunately, his predictions also prove true; he's assassinated for his "role" in social change and soon thereafter maligned by the white press as "a symbol of 'hatred'" (*Autobiography* 389).
- ⁷ Analogously, consider the difference in these two clauses: *To tell a writer that he must write* versus *to tell a writer what he must write*. The difference is subtle—one consonant—but it changes the meaning significantly. The first grants Hemingway the simple freedom to write. The second, however, holds Ellison to the rubric of writing about race, implicating the creed, *the personal is the political*.
- ⁸ Even Hall looks to Derrida on this point: "Where, then, does Identity come in to this infinite postponement of meaning?" he asks. Hall answers his question with an important distinction: *Postponement* does not imply an absence or impossibility of meaning—which would threaten his own ideas on "positioning and repositioning" identity in order to arrive at new meaning—but rather, "meaning continues to unfold" so that it's possible, even necessary, to keep rethinking meaning in all its "excess or supplement[s]." The problem, then, is that there's *too much* meaning; "there is always something 'left over'" (395).
- ⁹ Lehmann notes, too, that "The Lady of the Lake" is a re-naming of the popular Arthurian legend. Malamud posits Judaism in the English literary canon, changing the legend in a way that "creates the mythic Lady of the Lake as a contemporary Jew," writes Lehmann. "In doing so, [Malamud emphasizes] the contrast between Arthur, who proudly comes into his identity as he is given the Excalibur by the Lady of the Lake, and Levin, who is left empty-handed and alone" (Lehmann 113).
- ¹⁰ As a side-interest, contemporary nonfiction has seen a rise in fabricated Holocaust memoirs—such as *Fragments*, written by Bruno Grosjean Dossekker (a.k.a Benjamin Wilkomirski), who assumes the identity of a Jewish man remembering his internment in the concentration camps when he was a child. *Fragments*, found to be fraudulent after its release in 1995, became the subject of Stefan Maechler's 2001 book, *The Wilkomirski Affair: A Study in Biographical Truth* and continues to raise questions about our strong reception of Holocaust literature—and our equally, if not stronger, reaction towards appropriations of personal and collective history/-ies. The latter tendency forms a troubling tangent to the cited theories here on "re-thinking" or "re-positioning" cultural identity, and especially to that of *collective consciousness*.