

Naming and its Relationship to Power in African American Literature

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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

Why is this white woman writing about African American literature? What right does she have to appropriate this material? Black readers who Google my name and see my old white face may ask this question, so I need to address it. Perhaps I have no a right, as a white woman, to write about African American literature, but I write about it because I have a been a witness to injustice, and I feel heavy with the truth of what I have witnessed during my life.

I grew up in South Georgia, and my family could only be labeled “poor white trash.” Prejudice and bigotry were taught to me along with my ABCs. But two experiences early in my life woke me and made me begin to question the ingrained prejudice of my family and my community. I want to talk about the second event first, which was listening, in my classroom at my segregated 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 Dr. King was smarter than any adult I knew, far smarter than my parents, smarter than my teachers, even smarter than our preacher. For me, that knowledge knocked down the last shaky foundations of prejudice. But the first moment of my waking 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 over fifty 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 by dad with his hand extended, but, when he opened his mouth, only a horrible jumble of grunting noises came out. My dad ignored him 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 me in that moment. I was shocked; I was horrified; I was ashamed; I was angry. I wanted to go back and save that black man; I wanted to hammer my father with my small fists for the nonchalant tone in which he delivered this inconceivable story. I woke to an ugly world I had not noticed before.

After that moment, I had open eyes; I paid attention to interactions between white people and black people. I saw the discrimination and humiliation they faced every day, and I was ashamed of my white family. I made a decision to speak out about prejudice whenever I could, and, though I received quite a few beatings from my dad and my step-mother when I tried to tell them how wrong they were to disrespect black people, I had to speak up. I had to be a voice for that old black man who could not speak up for himself. In my own small way, I have always worked to overcome prejudice and injustice, and today I still feel the need to be a voice for that man who could not even say his own name.

## Background

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 expressing that they 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 tags; they can convey powerful imagery. So naming—proposing, imposing, and accepting names can be a political exercise" (Martin 83). As Jackson said, "To be called African-Americans has cultural integrity. It puts us in our proper historical context" (qtd. in Martin 83). But the choosing of the name was the most important part of this announcement because many of the names applied to Americans of color were not names they chose; they were names imposed on them as a group by the white people who had kidnapped and enslaved their ancestors, fought against giving them equal civil rights, and fought to keep them "in their place." By choosing a name for themselves, this group of black leaders was reclaiming power that had been taken from them by their oppressors, "reasserting themselves and reaffirming their humanity in a hostile world" (Mphande 104).

As 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). 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. Liseli Fitzpatrick says, "language is the main conduit that transports cultural expression and marks one's identity" (2). But, when people of European descent were enslaving the people of African descent, language was used to "suppress and erase African identity—since names not only aid in the construction of identity,

but also concretize a people's collective memory" (Fitzpatrick ii). The language of the slave owners reflected the contempt in which white people held people of color. That contempt was nowhere more evident than in the "widely held belief among whites that slaves had neither history nor culture, and that they could not have legal right to a name . . . . This attitude reduced slaves to namelessness, and thus made them available for name re-assignment by their owners" (Mphande 107). The slave owners "assigned new names to the Africans or even left them nameless, as a way of subjugating and committing them to perpetual servitude" (Fitzpatrick ii). Not only were slaves deprived of their own names and assigned new names by their masters, sometimes those names were changed several times throughout the slaves' lives as they were sold to new owners (Fitzpatrick 46). Many of the new names assigned to the slaves were derogatory and demeaning. Sometimes slaves were called simply "wench" or "buck" or "boy" or "girl." Long after the days of slavery had ended, people of color were still being called "boy" or "girl" by their employers or even by strangers on the street. By denying black people titles of respect like Mrs. or Mr., white people also denied them the full rights and respect due to adults. As Joy Leary writes in her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome: American's Legacy of Enduring Injury and Healing*, African Americans have used various strategies to combat the verbal attacks on their identities. She says,

. . . respect has always been an essential part of African and African American culture . . . . During slavery Africans were not given titles of respect by whites. They were never addressed as "ladies" or "gentlemen," "Sir or Ma'am", "Mister" or "Miss" or "Mrs.," so they conferred their own designations of respect. They addressed one another as "Big Mama," and "Big Daddy," "Ma-dea," "Sister" or "Brother" to convey honor. (qtd. in Fitzpatrick 53-54)

This system of conveying honor with these titles continued long past the days of slavery and is still reflected in the fiction and autobiographical fiction of African American writers today, and can be seen in many literary works by African Americans. But the importance of names and naming, with their inevitable link to power or powerlessness, pervades African American literature. Sigrid King, in her article “Naming and Power in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes were Watching God*,” says, “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 683). King argues that “naming is tied to racial as well as individual identity” and that the “concern with naming . . . is evident in black literature from the earliest slave narratives to more contemporary works” (683-684). Even the titles of well-known works by African American authors reflect a focus on the importance of names: *Black Boy*, *Invisible Man*, and *Nobody Knows My Name* (King 684). In his essay “Hidden Names and Complex Fate,” Ralph Ellison stressed the importance of names; he wrote, “our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own” (qtd. in King 684). And King argues that “[t]aking possession of one’s own name and thus claiming sovereignty over one’s self is an act of power” (684). When slave owners gave their “property” new names, they were taking possession. In African American fiction, 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 a historical context. As King argues, the “namer has the power; the named is powerless” (684).

### **The Power of Unnaming and Naming in Slave Narratives**

The link between names and power has its roots in slavery, so, of course, it is explored in many of the earliest slave narratives. Given the history of slavery and the powerlessness of those slaves whose very names were stolen from them, it is not surprising that names and naming are important in African American culture and are related to a sense of power or powerlessness; nor is it surprising that names and naming should become a significant trope in African American literature. Since names were used to “suppress and erase African identity” (Fitzpatrick ii), it only makes sense that African Americans would use names and naming practices to reclaim their personal and cultural identity. 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 for former slaves than for the typical writer of autobiography, to define himself or herself if the very essence of identity, the name, had been stripped away from the writer? This was especially painful for slaves who had been ripped from their homes in Africa. In his narrative, Olaudah Equiano discusses the way he was stripped of his name and renamed in every situation in which he found himself:

In this place I was called Jacob; but on board the African Snow [the slave ship], I was called Michael . . . . 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)

Slave owners stripped away names that connected the enslaved 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. But whatever the self that had been built up since childhood, the slave master destroyed it in an attempt to assert the authority of ownership.

The people who were born into slavery were often named by the owners of their mothers, but, occasionally, a slave was allowed to choose her own child's. But even those names, especially when the last name was the name of the slave owner, tied the children to their slave identity. Sometimes slaves claimed their personal identities by renaming themselves after they were free or accepting new names gifted to them. For example, Frederick Douglass is one of the most well-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). Douglass' given name (at birth) was Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. However, Douglas says that he had "dispensed with the two middle names long before I left slavery" (qtd. in Casmier-Paz 220). But in order to escape slavery he needed to also discard the name Bailey, which was the last name of his slave mother. Douglass describes how he was given a forged pass with the name Stanley, and that pass, along with his forged identity, carried him into free territory. 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 suggested the name Douglass, and a new identity was forged, an identity that allowed



Douglass to remain free (qtd. in Casmier-Paz 220). 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 one reason former slaves changed their names, but there were other reasons as well. In the narratives of both Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown, “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). Booker T. Washington also discussed African American renaming; he says, “it was far from proper for them to bear the surname of their former owners, and a great many of them took other surnames” (qtd. in Benston, 3). That “simultaneous naming and unnamings” (Benston 3) gave former slaves a new sense of identity, an ability to shed the shame of slavery and begin fresh with a name of their own choosing. As 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).

### **Naming and Identity in Post-Modern Slave Narratives**

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). The destruction of the individual through unnamings and the branding as a slave through renaming was a reality for most slaves, and the horror of that has stayed in the psyche of African Americans for generations, so it is not surprising that the individuals who experienced being claimed like a domestic animal would continue to be negatively impacted by that experience

throughout their lives. But Benson says, “The concern with naming in Afro-American literature reaches a new intensity with the rise of “black consciousness” in the 1960s, and he went on to discuss how naming and unnamings are addressed in the poetry of African American poets Michael Harper, Alice Walker, and Jay Wright (p. 9). But that concern with naming did not end in the 1960s. It continued into the 1970s and can still be seen in the most contemporary African American literature.

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 slave owners in 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 the naming ceremony and writes that Kunta Kinte is “named for a noble ancestor” (6). This makes the renaming of Kunta Kinte by the man who buys him even more abhorrent. The first time Kunta Kinte is called by his slave name “Toby,” he becomes angry and blurts “Kunta Kinte!” (255). He knows that to surrender his name is to surrender his identity as a proud member of his family and his tribe.

Throughout *Roots*, Haley reemphasizes the importance of naming. He shows Kunta Kinte refusing to give up his name, even when other slaves around him have adopted the names given to them by their “owners.” There are moments when Kunta Kinte rages that slave owners “even took our names away” (385) and reacts with outrage when the master of the plantation asks Toby (Kunta Kinte) to name his new son “Tom,” which is the master’s name (520). Kunta Kinte’s life story becomes a treasure passed down to his children and his grandchildren because

they are proud of his African roots and his ability to maintain his name and thus his African identity, despite all the horrors of slavery.

In Toni Morrison's Post-Modern slave narrative *Beloved*, names, and how they are given, play an important role as well. Sethe grows up on a plantation ironically named Sweet Home, which, of course, is not a sweet home. 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 who has escaped from indentured servitude. Sethe gives the girl a false name "Lu" at first because she does not trust her. After she helps deliver the baby, the young woman tells Sethe, "She's never gonna know who I am. You gonna tell her? Who brought her into this here world? . . . You better tell her. You hear. Say Miss Amy Denver. Of Boston" (78). And Sethe names her baby daughter Denver to retain the memory of the aid she received from the young woman who could have turned her in to the trackers trying to recapture her. When Sethe escapes, she heads to freedom, where her husband's mother, Baby Suggs, is waiting for her. Baby Suggs has abandoned her given name, Jenny Whitlow, choosing to use the name her husband gave her:

"Why you call him Suggs, then? His bill of sale says Whitlow too, just like yours."

"Suggs is my name, sir. From my husband. He didn't call me Jenny."

"What he call you?"

"Baby."

"Well, said Mr. Garner, going pink again, if I was you I'd stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs. Baby Suggs ain't no name for a freed Negro."

Maybe not, she thought, but Baby Suggs was all she had left of the "husband" she claimed.

Here 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 her original, legal name.

After Sethe finds Baby Suggs and makes a new home for herself and her children, Sethe's former owner and a slavecatcher show up to retrieve Sethe and her children. Sethe takes her four children into a shed and attempts to kill them with a knife all to prevent them from being forced back into slavery. Three of the children recover from their wounds, but one daughter dies (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. She chooses the word "Beloved," which is then carved on the stone (12), and the child's name is never given. Years later, Sethe and her daughter Denver are haunted by a young woman who claims her name is "Beloved." 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. Being unnamed by the headstone that calls her beloved but does not name her, the ghost is seeking to reclaim her identity from the mother who killed her.

### **Names and Identity / Self-Naming as a Way to Establish Personal Power**

Other African American writers have written about the link between names and identity. The most powerful novel of this type is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. When the main character is asked "What is your name?," he responds with terror:

A tremor shook me; it was as though he had suddenly given a name to, had organized the vagueness that drifted through my head, and I was overcome with swift shame. I realized that I no longer knew my own name . . . I tried again, plunging into the blackness of my own mind. (239)

Jim Neighbors says, “The attempt by Invisible Man to remember a name forgotten triggers the instability of an identity crisis” (233). The Invisible Man is confused and cannot locate the seat of his own identity because he cannot remember his own name. Though doctors attempt to spark his memory, he “lay fretting over [his] identity” (242); he says, “When I discover who I am, I’ll be free” (243). But even after the Invisible Man is given his name (given to him but never to the reader), he does not find the kind of stability he seeks. Neighbors argues that there is “a juxtaposition of the desire for a stable identity and, even after his name is given, [he continues to suffer from] the instability of a continuing identity confusion” (233-234). Kimberly Benston says that the central character 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).

On the opposite extreme of a character who cannot remember his own name, are characters who are called by many names. In some African American fiction, characters accept various names assigned by others until they reach a point when self-naming becomes a way to establish limits on personal space or personal identity. 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. Which was news to me cause he’s been Hunca Bubba my whole lifetime, since I couldn’t manage Uncle to save my life.” In those

first few lines and throughout the story, Bambara demonstrates how nicknames sometimes come into being and how commonly they are used in the African American community. But Bambara also shows the fluidity of identity created through naming. Bambara writes about a child named Hazel, who is only called Hazel only when people are 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. Which is usually me” (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 called Peaches by her uncle, and she objects to the nickname only because she is upset that he is going to be married, and, as he soothes her, he renames her again and calls her Precious.

In Bambara’s next story in the same text, “Raymond’s Run,” Hazel is again named and renamed by many people. In this story she 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 says she “would much rather knock you down and take [her] chances” (25). Squeaky also 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 herself” (28). When the child signs up for a race, the adult in charge, Mr. Pearson, calls her Squeaky, a name she had accepted gladly from others. “Hazel Elizabeth Deborah Parker, I correct him and tell him to write it down on his board” (30). Here the child, who quite willingly accepts the fluidity in identity created when she is called Scout, Badbird, Miss Muffin, Peaches,

Precious, Squeaky, Mercury by people she loves, draws the line with someone who is not a part of her family or own community and insists that he call her by her full legal name. She claims her dignity and importance through her name.

In her short story, "Everyday Use," Alice Walker writes about a small impoverished black family, a mother and her two daughters. The older daughter comes home with her boyfriend for a visit after being away at college. The young woman's given name is Dee, but when she comes home, she declares that Dee is dead, and she asks her family to call her "Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo" (1558). Dee claims that she "couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress" her (1558). She has renamed herself in an attempt to reclaim her African heritage. Wangero's mother, however, does not understand this. She explains that Dee was named after Dee's aunt who was named after Dee's grandmother. But Wangero has been empowered by the Black Power movement, and her name gives her a sense of deeper connection to pre-slavery roots.

Even in the most current African American fiction, naming is still linked to power, sometimes in an ironic way. And sometimes characters claim their personal identities not with their legal names but with their chosen names. 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 name that implies respect, but the attitudes of the male characters using this form of address are anything but respectful, so the salutation becomes ironic. In one of the most interesting name choices in Greer's novel, an outside Black Lives Matter activist comes into town and begins to divide the group by talking about how feminists and gays are destroying the African American community. This character calls 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.

But names are also used in Greer’s novel to show personal power in less obvious ways. Several characters in *A Return to Arms* have chosen names other than their birth names, and when people do not use those chosen names, the character loses 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 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). It is obvious that Kevin Reynolds has chosen a name that gives himself a sense of power and pride in his African heritage. When the officer reveals his given name, Kanaan is in a position of powerlessness as the officer taunts the terrified driver, and 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. Her given name is LaToya, but she prefers to be called Toya, a name that she feels is true to her own idea of her self. Kanaan uses the name LaToya simply to taunt her 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, having that chosen name ignored is a form of unnamings that gives power to the person who has refused to acknowledge the chosen name.

### **Nicknames, Given Names, and Family Names**

In Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, the opening inscription of the novel offers the first clues that names are important: “The fathers may soar / And the children may know their



names.” Following this inscription, Morrison offers her readers a novel full of people with unusual names. One of the major characters is named Macon Dead. His father had been given the name accidentally when the U. S. government freed the slaves and a drunken Yankee soldier wrote the man’s place of birth in the spot for his first name and the man’s response when asked about his father in the place reserved for the last name. Then that “literal slip of the pen handed to his father on a piece of paper” is handed down father to son for three generations.

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. This results in a daughter named Pilate Dead (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 grandchildren named Magdalene (called Lena) and First Corinthians. The third Macon Dead 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 when he sits in her lap.

The second Macon Dead hates his name, and he thinks “the giving of names in his family was always surrounded by monumental foolishness” (15). He daydreams of some 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 also hates his name, 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 given name until he feels unnamed by his aunt, then he behaves “as though having the name was a matter of deep personal pride, as though she had tried

to expel him from a very special group, in which he not only belonged but had exclusive rights (38-39). Milkman also hates his nickname until he becomes friends with a young man named 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 claims with pride.

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 whites, 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 in 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 because his grandfather gave up his given name and accepted a name that was handed to him by a drunken soldier incorrectly filling out a form (53-54).

Morrison reinforces the importance of names and the power of those who give names when Milkman is learning about the first Macon Dead’s wife. “‘Sing. Her name was Sing.’ ‘Sing? 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). And near the end of the novel, Morrison makes the link between naming and power even more plain when Milkman has discovered the history of his grandfather and his wife Sing and the importance of their names:

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 his 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)

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman discovers that an old children's song about "Sugarman" is actually about his ancestor Solomon, and he learns that the places his ancestors lived are named after those ancestors. He finds his roots through family names that had been hidden, while he also discovers the great power of the gifted nicknames of the men of his community.

### **Names Used to Establish Power and Powerlessness in Relationships**

Black women have often experienced what King calls "double dispossession" (685). They are dispossessed of power by 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 and define herself, “despite a society which wants to deny her power because she is a black woman . . . . As Janie develops in the novel, she experiences the oppressive power of those who name her” (King 685).

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, with judgment, “What she doin coming back here in dem overalls? Can’t she find no dress to put on? . . . What dat ole forty year ole ‘oman doin’ wid her hair swingin’ down her back lak some young gal?” (Hurston 2). The men of the town notice “her firm buttocks like she had grapefruits in her hip pockets, the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt” (Hurston 2). 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. As 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). As Janie begins to talk about her childhood, she says, “Dey all useter call me Alphabet ‘cause so many people had done named me different names” (Hurston 9), so even at a young age Janie has experienced the power of naming. Janie is raised by her grandmother who is the caretaker for the four grandchildren of her white

employer, and the grandchildren call Janie's grandmother "Nanny," and that is the only name Janie knows for her grandmother; the title of the grandmother's job becomes her name, replaces her name, even for her own grandchild.

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. Janie's status in the relationship 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" (Hurstons 29) and says she should not be behind a plow. She 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 and Ah wants to be de one tuh show you" (Hurstons 29). By naming Janie as a lady, Joe woos and offers her a better life. Soon Janie Mae Killicks becomes Janie Mae Starks, but though Joe offers to raise Janie up, he puts her down with what King calls "limiting and subjugating names" (688); he calls her "lil girl-chile" and "pretty doll baby."

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. Janie then has a new name, "Mrs. Mayor," but the name only relates to her relationship to her husband, and it brings her no sense of power because Joe keeps her at home playing "wife." The name makes Janie uneasy. She says, "Hope it soon gets over" (Hurstons 46), but Joe claims he is just getting started.

Though Joe originally saved Janie from hard work, he eventually begins to take advantage of her. He makes her work in his store, and Janie begins to chafe against her

servitude. But Hurston writes that Joe “wanted her submission and he’d keep on fighting until he felt he had it” (71). When Joe slaps Janie because “the bread didn’t rise, and the fish wasn’t quite done at the bone, and the rice was scorched,” Janie’s image of Joe is “shattered” (Hurston 72). 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 he uses his naming power to call her “uh ole woman, nearly forty,” Janie stands up for herself and embarrasses Joe in front of his friends by saying “When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (Hurston 79), so Joe drives her out of his store. As Joe becomes more ill, he attempts once more to rename Janie, by accusing Janie of 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” (Hurston 83).

After Joe’s death, Janie is given a new name by the townspeople, “widow of Joe Stark” (Hurston 93). The name indicates that she is a relatively wealthy woman, since she now owns Joe’s store, but Janie’s identity is tied up with Joe’s, and she “imagines her own creation” (King 692). In her new freedom, Janie finds joy and liberation. She dismisses the men of the town who woo her for her wealth. Janie says, “This freedom feeling was fine” (Hurston 90).

As King argues, 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 692).

From the beginning, 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 Mrs. Starks; he is simply Teacake, a name that reflects the sweetness of his character. With Teacake, Janie also discovers that language can be fun. She says, “So in the beginnin’ new thoughts had tuh be thought and new words said. After Ah got used tuh dat, we gits ‘long jus’ fine. 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 her, too poor for her, too unimportant for the “widow of Joe Starks.” But Tea Cake’s positive naming of Janie brings her joy, and King says she finds that “naming no longer holds the limiting power” (692) it had in her first two marriages. When Janie and Tea Cake marry, her “name change does not bring about a relationship of unequal power” (King 692). Janie has claimed her third name by choice and in joy, and the choice gives her equal power in her relationship with Tea Cake, and Janie and Tea Cake’s experience true love. By claiming a new name, Janie claims her own power.

The significance of naming is seen even more powerfully in Maya Angelou’s autobiographical novel *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Throughout the childhood years recounted in the novel, the author is called by many names, and, because Angelou emphasizes the significance of the names used in addressing others, it is clear that there is significance to the names used to address the child Marguerite Ann Johnson, which is Angelou’s childhood name.

Angelou, as an author, indicates 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 it happened; she says:

The judge asked that Mrs. Henderson be subpoenaed, and when Momma arrived and said that she was Mrs. Henderson, the judge, the bailiff and other whites in the audience laughed. The judge had really made a gaffe calling a Negro woman Mrs., but then he was from Pine Bluff and couldn’t have been expected to know that a woman who owned a store in that village would also turn out to be colored. 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)

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]. Most often when she passed on the road in front of the store, 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)

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 was 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 came to her from family members who were important in her life.

Maya Angelou's given name was Marguerite Ann Johnson, and her closest relationship was with her brother Bailey Johnson, Jr. In *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Angelou recounts how it was her brother who gave her the nickname "My":

They reminisced over Bailey's teaching me to walk when he was less than three. Displeased at my stumbling motions, he was supposed to have said, "This is *my* sister. I have to teach her to walk." They also told my how I got the name "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." In Angelou's book, this is the first naming 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" (Angelou 24). "Go wash your face, Sister" (Angelou 26). "Sister, that's right pretty" (Angelou 27). Uncle Willie also addresses Marguerite as Sister. "Go on out and pl-play,

Sister” (Angelou 10). This 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. Their naming of her takes away her individuality and personal identity.

Marguerite’s father also addresses her in a manner that reinforces the view that Marguerite is not an individual but is seen only in relation to someone else. When Bailey Johnson Sr. comes to Stamps, he calls Marguerite by a new nickname: “Is Daddy’s baby going to fly away?” (Angelou, 46). 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 seems not to see her in relation to Bailey Junior as do other members of the family. Bailey Senior sees Marguerite only in relation to himself. Again her new name 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. This 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). “Grandmother Baxter said, ‘Ritie and Junior, you didn’t hear a thing’” (Angelou 72).

*The American Heritage College Dictionary* defines diminutive as: *adj.* 1. Extremely small in size; tiny. 2. *Gram.* Of or being a suffix that indicates smallness, youth, familiarity, affection, or contempt.—*n.* 1. A diminutive suffix, word, or name. 2. A very small person or thing” (“diminutive”). 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 granted 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 naming. Angelou writes:

Momma said, “Sister Flowers, I’ll send Bailey up to your house with these things.”

She smiled that slow dragging smile, “Thank you, Mrs. Henderson. I’d prefer Marguerite though.” My name was beautiful when she said it. “I’ve been meaning to talk to her, anyway.” (Angelou 80)

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. Or more correctly, she spoke each word with such clarity that I was certain a foreigner who didn’t understand English could have understood her” (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. Marguerite succumbs to the spell without even understanding the reason for her capitulation. But she does recognize that as the first time anyone had seen her as an individual, and she expresses her joy: "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).

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, and Marguerite seems content to bear it. But 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.

After I set the tray down and turned toward the kitchen, one of the women asked, "What's your name, girl?" It was the speckled-faced one. 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?"

I smiled at her. Poor thing. No organs and 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 never bother myself. I’d call her Mary if I was you.

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. I decided I wouldn’t pee on her if her heart was on fire . . .

The very next day, she called me by the wrong name. Miss Glory and I were washing up the lunch dishes when Mrs. Cullinan came to the doorway, “Mary?”

Miss Glory asked, “Who?”

Miss Cullinan sagging a little, knew and I knew. “I want Mary to go down to Mrs. Randall’s and take her some soup. She’s not been feeling well for a few days.”

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. Heat the soup from last night and put it in the china tureen and, Mary, I want you to carry it carefully” (Angelou 90-91).

Here Mrs. Cullinan attempts to take possession of Marguerite by unnamings 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.

In the very next sentence, Angelou reinforces the significance of naming in her book 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 had a fleeting second of feeling sorry for me. Then as she handed me the hot tureen she said, “Don’t mind, don’t pay that no mind. . . . You know, I’ve been working for her for twenty years. . . . Twenty years. I wasn’t much older than you. 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. Momma wouldn’t allow me to quit for just any reason. (Angelou 91-92)

Marguerite finds a way to leave the service of the woman who would be her “mistress,” the woman who does not know her name, by dropping and breaking three pieces of Mrs. Cullinan’s prized Virginia dishes. Angelou describes Mrs. Cullinan’s reaction:

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

Old speckled-face leaned down and asked, “Who did it, Viola? Was it Mary? Who did it?”

Everything was happening so fast I can’t remember whether her action preceded her words, but I know that Mrs. Cullinan said, “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 seems to realize 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 has become proud of her name, and though her family still continues to call her "My" or "Sister" or "Ritie," Marguerite seems to blossom with the use of her name. Louise, the girl who becomes her first true friend, calls her by name: "What you doing sitting here all by yourself, Marguerite?" (Angelou 118). 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: "I was superbly intelligent and good physical coordination. Of course, I could drive. 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. As I twisted the steering wheel and forced the accelerator to the floor I was controlling Mexico" (Angelou 202).

When Marguerite has almost successfully driven her drunk father out of Mexico, but has had an 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 full name for the first time: "An accident, huh? Er, who was a fault? You, Marguerite? Errer was it you?" (Angelou 205).

After Marguerite admits that the accident was her fault, Bailey Senior begins to respect Marguerite's opinions. When he argues with his fiancé, he says, "You're a pretentious little

bitch, aren't you? That's what Marguerite called you, and she's right" (Angelou 207). When Marguerite claims her own name and finds her own identity, others recognize her individuality and respect her.

The final name given to Marguerite 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 by 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). After he has moved out, Bailey Junior says to Marguerite, "Maya, you know, it's better this way . . . I mean, I'm a man, and I have to be on my own" (Angelou 222).

Though Bailey Junior continues to call his sister Maya throughout the rest of the novel, Marguerite's mother is still calling her "Ritie": "Sit down, Ritie. Pass me another cigarette" (Angelou, 235). She 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)



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" and calls her daughter by another name. Angelou writes:

My shoulder was shaken gently. Mother whispered, "Maya, wake up. But don't move."

I knew immediately that the awakening had to do with the baby. I tensed. "I'm awake."

She turned the light on and said, "Look at the baby. My fears were so powerful I couldn't move to look at the center of the bed. She said again, "Look at the baby." I didn't hear sadness in her voice, and that helped me to break the bonds of terror. The baby was no longer in the center of the bed. At first, I thought he had moved. But after closer investigation I found that I was lying on my stomach with my arm bent at a right angle. Under the tent of the blanket, which was poled by my elbow and forearm, the baby slept touching my side.

Mother whispered, "See, you don't have to think about doing the right thing. If you're for the right thing, then you do it without thinking."

She turned out the light and I patted my son's body lightly and went back to sleep. (Angelou 246).

In this scene, Marguerite's mother has given Marguerite adult status by dropping the diminutive "Ritie" and calling her by the name "Maya," which was given to her by her brother. The child, Marguerite Johnson, has undergone the transition from "My" to "Sister" to "Ritie" to "Marguerite" to "Maya." And she has become an intelligent, confident, trustworthy adult in the

process. Like a transformed creature emerging from its cocoon, she can no longer be called a caterpillar. She is now a butterfly and must be named as such.

Throughout the history evoked in the chapters of *I Know Why the Cage Bird Sings*, Angelou drops, without interpretation, the many names that were given to her as a child. But when she discusses the importance her grandmother gains by being called “Mrs.” and when she shows her dismay that her grandmother calls Mrs. Flowers “Sister,” Angelou is giving her readers a key to the importance of naming. And when Angelou says, “Every person I knew has a hellish horror of being ‘called out of his name,’” (91) she is underscoring the importance of naming and the power inherent in the giving and taking away of names. Because of this, there can be no doubt that the names that Marguerite Johnson was called, was given, answered to, rebelled against, and grew to love were names that impacted and shaped her image of herself throughout her life. Angelou’s text highlights the significance of naming, especially in the African American community, and there can be no doubt that the naming trope found in this text is intentional. Angelou fictionalizes her own life story, and, in doing so, emphasizes the idea that names are “more than just tags; they can convey powerful imagery” (Martin 83). Angelou’s life becomes the perfect example for King’s argument that “[t]aking possession of one’s own name and thus claiming sovereignty over one’s self is an act of power” (684).

The number of authors and the list of their works that could be discussed in the context of naming and powerful would fill a book, and research on this topic is ongoing. It is clear that the unnamings and namings that began with slavery (and their links to power and powerlessness) still impact the psyches of African American writers, and this trope in African American literature offers rich veins for further exploration.

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