

Introduction to AMSJ Blog Essays "What's in a Name?"

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Since August of last year, *Dialogues: Blog of the American Studies Journal* has published original short-form essays that comment on culture, politics, academia, archives, technology, and much more. Several pieces speak to this specific moment via one of our themed series: On Teaching, On Writing, Protest Poetics, and Artist Scholar. Contributions have come from educators, researchers, librarians, archivists, artists, practitioners of digital humanities and social sciences, and community activists; each presenting historically specific yet expansive dialogues informed by the multi-pronged issues that continue to be central to American studies. As part of AMSJ's 2023 summer issue, the Editors are happy to include three blog essays reflecting the theme of the power of naming and identity.

Naming is an important practice in the African American community and in African American Studies. As a people denied the right to name oneself during enslavement, the personal freedom of identifying oneself and one's family was an incredible statement of the power of self-assertion. Naming practices in the Black community changed again during the 1960s as a mechanism of asserting connections, genealogy, and memory links to Africa and African culture. The arrival of Black Studies concretized Black epistemological practices of naming into a discipline in which naming played a pivotal role in asserting counter narratives, outlining historical experiences, and defining the ways and means by which to understand the Black experience.

As a Black studies scholar, naming is one of the most important practices in the Black community, and it's quickly recognized when seen through the experiences and eyes of other vulnerable communities. These three essays from the *American Studies Journal Blog* are varied perspectives on the act of naming: naming as a contentious power struggle over memorialized public spaces; naming as an assertion of identity within information sciences; and a bodacious critique of academia's formulaic script in the name of a community and a people.

Adrienne Chudzinski writes in "Confronting Uncomfortable History: Emmett Till and Contested Memorials on the American Landscape," that the remaining historical structure connected to Emmett Till's lynching is left in a deliberate state of decay. Emmett Till, a 14-year-old boy, was murdered in Money Mississippi by Roy Bryant. His killing was precipitated by an incident in the Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market, in which Bryant's wife wrongly accused Till of harassment. Till's lynching is widely argued to be a key precipitator of the American civil rights movement. However, this major historical edifice is in a state of decay due to conflict between heritage groups who wish to name the location as the source for Till's death, and its owners who refuse to acknowledge the building and instead received funds to preserve the next door "old-timey" gas station. Chudzinski argues that the fight is not just about two buildings, but naming the things we hold valuable among our nation's memorial landscape.

Martin Gonzalez struggles not with the naming of sites, but with academia's ambivalence to scholars who write in the name of their community. "'Let Knowledge Serve the City': *Restrictions Apply" argues that the university focus on the journal as the appropriate mechanism for scholarly endeavors, negatively impacts both his scholarship and his obligations to serve the community. Working in and writing about community spaces requires a different approach to scholarly writing, which the university struggles to comprehend. Gonzalez argues that not all intellectual production finds expression in peer-reviewed mediums. Most importantly, universities must avoid extraction from vulnerable communities that serve its purposes but not the people themselves. It is crucial to create academic works which allow the people we study to also participate and see themselves in the work we produce.

Margaret Breidenbaugh contends that the act of naming the library subject is an act of power. Libraries depend on catalog terminology to define objects, ideas, events, and peoples. However, queer communities struggle with the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), and its tendency to construct and name based on bias and anachronistic definitions. Breidenbaugh chronicles efforts to reorient categorization systems by activist librarians, in order to facilitate shared power between the library and queer communities to ensure that queer people can name themselves. The larger argument in "Queering the Library: Naming the

Subject Is an Act of Power,” is that queer librarians must challenge the LCSH system to ensure respectful representation of queer people. Collaboration is a necessary component to transform library catalogs into appropriate reflections of queer identity.

In sum, Chudzinski insists we struggle with a contentious of memorialization in an atmosphere where a community refuses to name a national shame. Or, does property possession endow the owner with the rights to bury the history? Gonzalez debates the dualism that drives scholars to question: must they serve the expectations of the university or the needs of his community? He persuasively argues, in the name of his community, against academic value systems and structures which hinder their accessibility and comprehension. Finally, Breidenbaugh posits that long held systems of categorization can to determine and define the subject. Instead, the subject, queer communities, must define and name their own identities.

These three pieces ask us to think deeply about our intellectual assumptions and embedded presumptions about space, scholarly responsibilities, and identification and identity. In multiple ways, these authors have challenged us to ask ourselves, what’s in a name?

And they answer,
the power to speak truth—about one’s space, one’s community, and
one’s self.

