The Power of a Name

Abstract

This research project, The Power of a Name, is focused on the cultural dissonance felt by people of color through the anglicization of their names in American institutions. It stems from the observation that there has been a history of American colonization of marginalized people's identities for centuries that has enforced the assimilation and acculturalization of these groups. This project aims to look at this aspect of colonization and research the history of renaming oppressed groups in the United States to show the progress that led to the more contemporary anglicization of immigrant children's names in public schools. This resulted in an exploration of how historical and contemporary renaming has influenced national identity, and self-perception in multilingual school- and college- aged individuals through the study of Critical Race and Postcolonial theorists and interviews with UWEC multicultural students.

I.   Introduction

The colonization of a body has always been a product of the colonization of a land and this results in the forceful assimilation and acculturation of a people. Many of our institutions have been set up to enforce American ideologies and perpetrate them upon marginalized people and one can observe how the structures created during colonialism still exist in the infrastructures of today's society. This project primarily focuses on how the changing of a marginalized person's name to an anglicized version or pronunciation is part of this larger system of colonization. Historically, this form of colonization has claimed the identities of marginalized people by stripping them of the cultural significance of their names as well as imposing new ideals of identity. By understanding how the naming of enslaved people or the renaming of American Indians has set up systems of disidentification, we may begin to tie these structures to critical race theory as well as how these systems affect us today. My project aims to show how the anglicization of one's name is a product of colonization that has historically destabilized marginalized people's identities and this destabilization continues to be perpetuated by institutions today.

II. Theorists and Terms

Jose Esteban Munoz introduces the idea for "performing disidentifications" as a way to subvert these colonial institutions (Munoz 25). He argues that much of identity is performative and from this comes the idea of disidentifying which he describes as "apolitical sidestepping, trying to avoid the trap of assimilating or adhering to different separatist or nationalist ideologies" (18). A person's identity is individualistic and the idea of disidentification is a mode of survival to escape the systems that "reduce identities to lowest-common-denominator terms" and that the performance of disidentification exists "at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit" (6). Munoz points to the performance of these intersections as a way to counter the colonial pressure to assimilate by affirming one's existence in multiple cultures.

Munoz continues by introducing terms like "differential consciousness," and "hybrid lives" which he uses to identify the multiplicity of selves in a performance (6, 31). The first of the two terms identifies the "fractured and split" identities that many cultural scholars note, and which one can see in the "racial confusion" of Native American children in boarding schools (31). This concept is one which Chela Sandoval chose to describe the Chicana's experience in a world that where they are multiply oppressed as a woman of color across multiple cultures. It is the idea of moving fluidly through cultures by knowing when to emphasize and de-emphasize aspects of one's identity to fit within the constraints of one's current surroundings. The idea of "hybridity" is Munoz's response to Sandoval as it offers a more holistic approach to the individual in that it does not ask for one performance to be heightened above others but instead to perform as one and capture the multiplicity of identities.

Much of Munoz's antiassimilationist rhetoric is drawn from work by Gloria Anzaldua who further explores the fluidity, ambiguity and ambivalence of cultural identity. Unlike Sandoval, Anzaldua portrays "differential consciousness" or as she calls it "dual identity" as a consequence of "not acculturating" and its presence is a force that people of color must resist as it results in internalized conflict between the selves (Anzaldua 85). There is "the stress of cultural ambiguity" that goes with

ethnocentric ideology, that one must choose which identity to perform to cater to the majority's preference in any given situation and that there is a sort of sacrifice that people of color must make to be fully accepted. She goes on to argue that there needs to be a "tolerance for ambiguity" and people must become comfortable with their "pluralistic mode" of existence (101). Anzaldua and Munoz both reject this idea of sacrificing the self, although they understand its importance in survival, they argue that to dismantle the systems within our institutions, one must be allowed to express their multiplicities of identity.

Munoz and Anzaldua do differ slightly, in that Munoz believes language is a part of cultural performance while Anzaldua affirms that "ethnic identity is twin to linguistic identity" and that you cannot separate a language or culture from an individual (Anzaldua 81). That is, a language is more than performance, it is the foundation on which one builds their identity. Anzaldua's Chicano Spanish is a language that defines her, and her multiple identities and she positions it as a cultural anchor that ties her to what it means to be Chicana. She acknowledges the violence of stripping one of their language and how the creations of patios and pidgin languages creates "a homeland" for those who have migrated (77). Anzaldua sees language as an uncontrollable aspect of one's identity, and not as something that should be performed or sacrificed regardless of the circumstance, stating, "until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate… and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me my tongue will be illegitimate" (81). In this statement, Anzaldua introduces code-switching and its role in identity and how it represents the multiplicity of self in the way one speaks. This point is especially important when one considers the historical implications of stripping a culture by banning the use of a people's language, and with that usually comes the anglicization of their names. While identity theory did not reach mainstream academia until the mid-twentieth century, America's history built the frameworks that would destabilize minority group identities from it's very foundation.

    III. Historical Context

One event that began the creation of these frameworks is the naming of African slaves in American and British colonies. Research revealed the dehumanizing forms of naming that slaveholders in Jamaica used to strip slaves of not only their culture but also their individuality. Common practices included "clustered naming" wherein groups of people who were similar in value, age, or ability were given names from the same "pool" such as days of the week, months, or characters in a play or novel (Williamson 120). Occasionally, these "classical" names, that is those derived from plays and novels, were used "as a kind of in-group joke" where it was "common practice with the colonists to give ridiculous names… to their slaves" (122). This exertion of power through perceived intellectual superiority further heightened the dehumanization of enslaved people and turned their own name into a point of mockery.

Additionally, there were forms of naming at the time that were more subtle in their approach to alienating enslaved people from their culture. In some cases, slaves were given "hypocoristic (pet or diminutive) versions of English names," a practice which infantilizes and condescends their identity (Williamson 117). This practice perpetuates the idea that people of color are lesser versions of their colonizers and by giving them these diminutive forms of English names it forces their identity within this subservient role. Furthermore, renaming of slaves became common practice and was even seen as "routine" and yet was still considered "an act of appropriation analogous with branding" (119). The culture of indifference to this act further ingrained it into the society and after some time "both slaves and owners came to see African names primarily as signifying slave status rather than a source of pride" effectively removing enslaved people's ties to their cultural identity as well as the ability to even claim a cultural identity at all (118). Slavery as an institution shaped the way enslaved people perceived themselves and the process of naming stripped them of their culture and their individuality.

Another institution that influenced the acculturation of a marginalized group is the creation of Native American boarding schools in the United States and Canada. These schools, first founded by Colonel Richard Pratt who believed the way to help the Native people was to "kill the Indian, leave the

man" and "the intent of the western educational system was to purposefully eliminate the cultural identity of American Indian people" by using several methods to systematically strip students of their culture, including giving them new, English names (Smith 57). These methods of acculturation created "racial confusion for Indian students" and greatly influenced how they saw themselves as well as those in their community. Additionally, there was a "constant conflict between what white educators taught and what was taught in the home culture" creating a rift in the student's perception of themselves (59). Students were told that "everything Indian was viewed as negative" and this created major rifts in their connections back home (59). Tribal communities were greatly affected as the boarding schools took away the children's ties to their family, language, and identity.

One of the main tactics that the boarding school system used to cut Native children's cultural ties was to strip them of their "cultural anchors" which included banning their language and changing their names (61). American educators understood that "Native culture resides in the Native language" and the banning of the students' languages in the schools resulted in the loss of many indigenous languages and with that, the loss of their cultures (61). This greatly affected the tribal communities as many children returned from these schools having practically forgotten their native language. Additionally, the enforcement of an English only school led to the forceful renaming of the students "because their Indian names were difficult for teachers to pronounce" (63). Not only was this a culturally insensitive practice since "in many tribes, the names given to individuals are viewed as sacred and given by the creator" but it was also dehumanizing in the way it was conducted. In several cases "school officials would have students stand in a line and give them names according to the alphabet," showing the children that a name given to them at random is more important than the name given to them at birth simply because it is English rather than in their native language (63). This treatment resulted in decades of inherited trauma and continued disregard for Native culture and language.

Over time, name changes still happened for marginalized groups in America but the way they happened changed shape. Whereas before, name changes were forced upon people, the industrial boom in

the early 20th century gave 'incentive' to change to more English/Christian names. These name changes among Jewish and Italian immigrants during this time "need not imply assimilation" but it did show a sort of self-monitoring that developed in the immigrant consciousness over time (Watkins & London 172). During this time, it might have been expected that people would change their names "in order to avoid economic discrimination or to gain economic advantage" but if that were the only influence, one might expect records to show more Italian and Jewish men changing their names when, in fact, the change came more rapidly for women (173). Language change usually happens more quickly among women, but tradition also played a large role in slowing name changes for men, family names were usually passed down from the father's side, whereas women's names became a form of "verbal jewelry," that is, they were more likely to be chosen for aesthetic preference (173). This fact reveals what names were seen as 'beautiful' for those who came to America and how perceptions of names changed for immigrants as they were socialized into American culture. Traditional Jewish and Italian names were no longer seen as 'beautiful' names for second-generation immigrant women, but this did not mean that immigrant families were quick to abandon traditional names.

It was not uncommon in the early 20th century for immigrant children to have two names, their traditional name and their American name. In an interview with a first-generation Italian immigrant (born in 1905), she recalls calling her sister Lucy at home but knowing that it was a stand in for the traditional Italian name, Lucia (Watkins & London 176). This was one way that immigrants subtly refused to fully assimilate and protect one aspect of their culture, even if it was not the name they were called at home, it was the name that was put down on paper. This also lines up with the idea that immigrants' names were changed upon arrival to Ellis Island which is not entirely the case. Many new immigrants may have chosen to change their names upon arriving, a practice that is still available through the naturalization process today, giving their chosen anglicized name but still going by their given names at home while others did the opposite. Having two names as the norm among these groups also created a sense of a new shared identity, one that was not from their original home but also one that was different from their new

surroundings, it helped to create a separate immigrant identity. This use of alternate names would become a prominent tool for many immigrants and lines up with Munoz's ideas of disidentification as well as Anzaldua's focus on the importance of code-switching for immigrant communities.

 IV. Contemporary Context

  Code-switching is the mingling of two or more languages in a multilingual person's speech and is often seen as "an in-group device, typically restricted to those who share the same expectations and rules for interpretation" (Benson 310). Because of its use among marginalized groups, code-switching is often stigmatized and discouraged, especially within academic institutions (311). This concept is important to note in this study because as one's name comes from their native language, the correct pronunciation of it in an English-speaking context may be seen as code-switching. Anzaldua herself recalls an instance wherein she was reprimanded by a white teacher when she attempted to tell her how to pronounce her name (Anzaldua 75). The stigma surrounding code-switching may offer a possible reason for why the anglicization of names continues today and this stigma against code-switching further perpetuates the acculturation of marginalized groups.

  These restrictions on code-switching and multilingualism have long existed within academic institutions, as seen in the United States' boarding schools, and continue to be propagated through schools and pedagogy, resulting in children growing with internalized negative perceptions of their identity. The mispronunciation of marginalized student's names has led to "anxiety and even resentment" toward their identity and culture (Kholi 442). Many learn to anglicize their own name early in their academic careers and this change further destabilizes the child from their cultural identity. This is often the result of students internalizing the microaggressions that they face surrounding their name and language and is offered as an easier alternative for their white peers. Students are taught that they must forfeit this aspect of their identity to fit within the larger populous and it commonly results in Sandoval's 'differential consciousness' rather than Munoz and Anzaldua's idea of an ambiguous, fluid, and unified self. Although institutions are making the push to be more inclusive to students of diverse backgrounds with pedagogy

moving to support multilingual learning and code-switching in academic settings, the student's own name is regularly forgotten.

After interviewing college aged students at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, a predominately white institution, one sees how the history of assimilation has impacted marginalized identities. Interviewing these students meant speaking to individuals who were raised within the Western education system and their responses reflect how this system impacted their view on their names as well as the way the expressed their cultures. In total, I interviewed five students from four different ethnicities: Hmong, Native American (HoChunk), Mexican, and Nigerian (Yoruba and Hausa/Funali). Of these five, two were second generation immigrants and two were first generation. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and an hour, during which I asked a series of questions, at first centering on the individual's name, then gradually expanding the scope to address their perception of their own identity within the context of their surroundings. From the interviews, major connections were drawn between historical as well as theoretical contexts and, while the group was fairly diverse, many of their responses reflected similar ideas surrounding identity.

One concept that emerged from these interviews was the idea of names as "a rhetorical device" as one participant put it, similar to Jose Munoz's disidentification and Chela Sandoval's differential consciousness, students chose when to emphasize and de-emphasize parts of their identity through their names as a mode of survival. Of the participants, three had anglicized nicknames that they used to substitute their given name. Two of these cases were of students who had two names, an American name and a traditional one, the other was a simplified version of their given name. All three of these students had a variety of criteria that dictated which name they used depending on the context, who they were speaking to, and what outcome they were looking to achieve. The single criterion that had the most influence on how they introduced themselves was of course whether or not they were talking to someone from their in-group. All students noted that even if they were speaking to person of color, they would still default to their American name unless they person was from their specific ethnic group. When asked if it

was out of concern for their safety, one student responded with "I can't change the way I look, I can just change the way my name sounds... It's not safety, it's just trying to be approachable" while another said "no, the only thing I'm saving is myself from hearing [my name] butchered." Both these comments make the same point though, although through different perspectives, these students did feel a pressure to make their names easier to pronounce for an English speaker.

All students were asked if they tried to make their names "easier to pronounce" --the question was intentionally left vague about what this phrase meant but all took it to mean more anglicized—and all students could recall an instance where they did do so. One commented "I just wish my name was prettier, a name that was easy to say like [my nickname]" revealing how their understanding of what constituted a 'pretty' name was one that was easy to pronounce in English. These themes of approachability and acceptance continued to come up throughout the interviews, showing how participants formed their perceptions of their culture and language within the colonial constructs of the dominant culture. When asked what might happen if they introduced themselves by their traditional name, one student, who was born in the U.S., laughed before saying "I used to but then I'd get these looks... like I was from a different planet" and this was enough to influence how one saw their name as foreign or different even if they knew nothing besides American life.

Of the five, two went by their given names, although both noted that their names were not too difficult to pronounce in English which made it easier for them. This did not leave them exempt from the anxieties that the other participants expressed, one noting how her name, although easy to pronounce, is very traditionally Muslim which concerned her family when she chose to study in the U.S. The other commented on how this created a different kind of anxiety, that he might not come off as "Mexican *enough*" because his name appeared Americanized saying, "unless you asked or you knew already, you wouldn't know I'm named after a *bachata* singer" expressing how there was a need to validate his place within his own culture. These two examples show Anzaldua's point of the borderland, or the liminal space of existence for marginalized cultures in America. It is the idea that one can appear as close to the

dominant group as possible and still be excluded for what one expresses of their home culture while simultaneously being excluded from their home culture for what they express of the dominant group.

Another point that influenced which name the participants used came down to respect. One noted that at cultural ceremonies, his name connected him to an extended family with a long oral tradition within his community so when he used his traditional name, it carried more weight. Another commented on how she "felt respected" when someone spoke to her through her traditional name saying "if they're Yoruba too, it makes me feel close to them, if they're not, it makes me feel like they at least care but it can also be too intimate." This reflects how one's name can connect them not just to their culture but to those around them and can also function as a barrier, a way to keep outsiders away from their culture. When asked if they have ever encountered a situation where a person wanted to know their preferred name, participants noted that it does happen but even then, their answer varies depending on the person. Explaining what she meant by "too intimate" the participant said, "I don't know, you can just tell they want to know because they just want to know, not because they want to say it." Another participant had a similar sentiment saying, "sometimes kids would just ask me to say things in Hmong... it made me not want to speak it around them" the main connection between the two and the way it impacted the way they would introduce themselves came down to respect. Both participants acknowledged that in these instances they were being exoticized rather than being approached with genuine respect for their names, languages, and cultures.

Finally, the point that this entire project boils down to is that of intentionally unpacking ethnocentric ideas of language and culture. Throughout the conversations with participants, it was evident that most of these students were never asked to talk about their names before, many had not considered their reasons for choosing one name over the other or why they changed its pronunciation in the first place until these interviews. That is because it has become so normalized, over centuries of forceful assimilation, colonization, and acculturation, for marginalized groups to cater to the white, English-speaking populations at the cost of their own identities. This sacrifice has led to further colonization of the

self and resulted in an acculturalization of how people interact with one another. My participants were people that I saw every day, but these interviews did not only give me insight into their names, it taught me about each individual's culture and experience, information that I would have never learned if I did not simply start by asking how to say their names. One participant noted "it's nobody's fault if someone can't say my name, that's fine, but they could at least try" which closely mirrors Anzaldua's words in *Borderlands'* introduction where she affirms her mixture of languages, asking "to be met halfway" (Anzaldua 20). Understanding the historical implications of name changes in America reveals how deeply entrenched ethnocentric ideals are in today's culture and to begin dismantling these structures we have to start by unpacking the ways we contribute to them and making the intentional choice to give others the respect of learning their names.

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