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“It’s Nonexistent”: Haunting in Trans Youth Narratives about Naming

Julia Sinclair-Palm

I mean for a lot of people a name is not a big deal. But to me, I know for sure that when my name was changed and people started calling me Tye that was a huge deal. And it meant some . . . it just meant more than a name. It was like more like respect. They respected me enough to respect that I wanted to be called Tye and that’s what I prefer. The pronouns I was used to. The name was the first thing.

—Tye¹

Often, choosing a name is one of the first ways trans² youth begin to assume a different gender from the one they were assigned at birth. Trans youths’ negotiation of naming is particularly complex as they juggle family affinities and independence as well as trying on new identities and building relationships with peers. To explore how the names they receive, refuse, and choose can expose the challenges trans youths face when narrating their identity formation, I turn to their narratives regarding their renaming themselves. Stories about the process of choosing a name reveal how trans youth negotiate their relationship with their birth name and their emerging sense of identity.

In this paper I ask: What do birth names and chosen names tell us about the work of narrating an origin story? How do birth names haunt stories trans youth tell about the self? How do trans youth make sense of their birth name, and how can schools support trans youth in their naming process?

Current research about trans youth relies on discourses that position them as always at risk (Rasmussen, 2006; Russell, 2005). And indeed, young trans people tell stories about their mental health issues, their lack of parental and family support (which is often correlated with their psychosocial issues and can be a contributing factor to homelessness), and their experiences of violence and discrimination at school (which is often described as being a contributing cause of trans youth dropping out of school) (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Taylor & Peter, 2011).

1 Participants had the option of choosing the name(s) that would be used to refer to them in the project.

2 I use the term “trans” through my paper as a way to acknowledge, describe, and “encompass all manifestations of transness” (Cromwell, 2001, p. 263; see also Noble, 2006), including, but not limited to, transgender, transsexual, gender queer, and “diverse gender variant practices” (Aizura, 2006, p. 291). I also recognize that although I am attempting to be inclusive, gender expressions and identities are culturally specific and that some people do not use the term trans and in fact disavow it (Namaste, 2000; Valentine, 2007).

While it is important to recognize the challenges trans youth face, discourses that position them as always at risk set up a limited framework for understanding their lives and the stories they can tell about their experiences (Driver, 2008; Rasmussen, 2006). Research about young trans people needs to explore the ways they are using language to render themselves intelligible and how they are resisting victim narratives through the naming and un-naming of who they are or want to become.

A new direction within research about trans youth attempts to think differently about them by positioning them as neither at risk nor as resilient, instead focusing on understanding the ways in which trans youth negotiate their identity and development within various social contexts (Driver, 2008). Furthermore, this research considers the ways that individual characteristics influence how young trans people engage with and experience their social world. I include my research within this new paradigm in trans youth literature, which recognizes the importance of continuing to examine the risks and challenges faced by trans youth in addition to the ways these youth are resilient and thriving. It explores the complex ways young people construct an understanding of their identities and experiences, the social contexts in which they are engaged, and the varied ways that context matters in the development of trans youth.

In this paper, I draw upon a qualitative study in which I spoke with young trans people about their experiences of naming and their narrative self-constructions in order to argue for a more complex understanding of trans youths' experiences in school and to question how schools can better support and accommodate trans students. Although there has been progress in the creation of safe spaces and the inclusion of trans students in schools (Taylor et al., 2015), many institutions continue to use gender as an administrative category and complicate trans youths' ability to determine their gender identity and to name who they are at school.

I begin with a description of the methods and methodology I used in this project. Next, I draw on Gordon's (2008) concept of haunting to examine the relationship between trans youths' birth names and the presence of those names as ghostly figures in the lives of young trans people. I bring Gordon's discussion to my analysis of a story from one trans youth named Tye about his experiences at school. Gordon's concept of the ghost presents an opportunity to think about how trans youth like Tye experience the erasure of their birth name as a death as well as about the traces old names leave in their lives.

Studying Trans Youths' Naming Practices

The purpose of the study was to solicit rich, nuanced stories about renaming from trans youth to get a sense of how identity is negotiated and shifts over time. As part of the study, I interviewed 10 young trans people on two separate occasions, using an in-depth semistructured framework. The first and second interviews typically took place a month apart. Interviewing participants twice allowed for a detailed investigation into the narrative practices and complexities trans youth face when choosing a name and offered participants a chance to tell multiple and contradicting stories about themselves (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

In-depth interviews invite participants to select details of their life and to reflect, bring order to, and develop a narrative about their lived experience and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 2006). These interviews allowed me to explore how trans youth navigate their naming process at school and how they narrate the role of their birth name in their story of who they are.

Participants in my study were between the ages of 15 and 25 and self-identified as falling along a spectrum of trans experiences.³ They were recruited in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) through existing contacts in LGBT centers and by using snowball sampling to find more participants (Bertaux, 1981). In addition to speaking directly about the project with service providers and youth, I handed out a small flyer describing it that included my contact information.

Four participants were 25 years old, and the other six were 20 years old or younger, spread equally across the range of 15 to 20 years of age. Five participants identified as biracial or mixed race, two identified as Caucasian, one identified as Italian, one identified as Lebanese, and one identified as Albanian. Five participants were assigned female at birth, and five were assigned male at birth.

For each of the two interviews, participants were given the option of meeting in a location that was most comfortable for them. Eight interviews were held in private rooms at a large university, four were conducted over Skype, and eight took place at a restaurant or café. Interviews lasted from one to two hours and were audio recorded and then transcribed. I conducted the interviews between March 2014 and December 2014. Each participant chose a pseudonym in the first interview or agreed to let me use their name(s) in my data analysis and writing.

³ This age range allowed me to capture some of the diverse relationships youth have to their sense of home and family. I use this age range to define youth because those years are a time of transition between childhood and adulthood when young people are negotiating the push out into the world and the pull back into the home. They are gaining a sense of self and constructing narratives about themselves that both tie them to their family and separate them from it.

The data analysis is informed by Regales's (2008) work with trans youth. She cautions researchers working with that population that a great concern of trans youth is that they may be "misrepresented or 'cut' into smaller 'pieces' to prove an academic point, since forcible fragmentation and invisibility in mainstream society confronts and frustrates them" (Regales, 2008, p. 88). Doing justice to a narrative also involves recognizing the complexity of each individual life and the unique ways people navigate social situations. Trans youth are entitled to what Gordon (2008) calls "a complex personhood," which "is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning" (p. 5).

Gordon (2008) critiques the tendency in social science research to equate persons with social markers; in research about trans youth, this means not defining them only by their gender transition, age, or high rates of discrimination and suicide ideation. Gordon demands that we notice, in our reading and research practices, the complicated relationship that individuals have both to the particularities of their lives and to the social categories we use to make sense of the world. I turn now to explore how Gordon's concept of haunting offers a way to think about the presence of Tye's birth name at school.

The Ghostly Figure of the Birth Name

In her book *Ghostly Matters*, Gordon (2008) begins with the seemingly simple statement that "life is complicated" (p. 3). She argues that it is "perhaps the most important statement of our time" (p. 3) and needs to be taken more seriously, but that it is often overlooked and that social analysis has been weakened by generalizations. She addresses two dimensions in this theoretical statement: the complexity of power relations and the idea of complex personhood.

In her discussion of power relations, Gordon (2008) uses the concept of haunting to describe the ways oppressive and abusive systems of power continue to make themselves present and their impacts felt in everyday life. For her, haunting "raises specters" and "is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known" (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). She cites capitalism and racism as representations of two forms of oppressive and abusive systems of power, but argues that those terms do not fully convey the inequalities that permeate social relations. Haunting draws attention to the ways that racism is not always seen at face value; haunting shows the banalities of everyday racism and the complicated ways racism leaves its traces.

Haunting ghostly figures point to what is missing and appear when “the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view” (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). The ghost is important because of both its presence and what it represents, which “is usually a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken. From a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope” (Gordon, 2008, p. 63).

I use Gordon’s (2008) concept of the ghost to think about birth names. Trans youth often describe their birth name(s) as only part of their past, and yet those names often arise in their life in unanticipated and unwelcome ways. Originating in the trans community, the term “deadnaming” describes calling a trans person by their birth name after they have adopted a new name. The act of deadnaming has the effect of “outing,” or making public, a trans person’s identity. Deadnaming is sometimes accidental, as when a friend or family member is still adjusting to a trans person’s new name and unintentionally calls them by their birth name. However, there are also many times when trans people are addressed by their birth name as a way to aggressively dismiss and reject their gender identity and new name.

The loss and lingering presence of birth names takes on a ghostly figure in the lives of trans youth. Gordon (2008) frames her understanding of the ghost as one that is not invisible; rather, it “has a real presence and demands its due, your attention” (p. xvi). If one’s birth name is a ghost demanding our attention, what does it want? How should we attend to it? Gordon suggests that one should listen to the ghost because “the ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (Gordon, 2008, p. 8).

Gordon’s (2008) concept of ghosts provides an opportunity to explore how trans youth negotiate their identity and relationship to their birth name. Trans people often speak about the death of their old name and the birth of their new self through their renaming process, suggesting that these names cannot exist simultaneously. However, birth names remain a part of the history of the trans person, haunting them in unanticipated contexts and moments. For trans youth like Tye, school is one of the sites in which their birth name often remains present in their lives.

Tye’s Graduation Story

I interviewed Tye on a warm day in October. We met in a private room at the university he attends, after exchanging emails back and forth about scheduling and his interest in the study. I brought lunch for us and we ate while I asked him questions about his name and his experiences as a young trans

person. Tye came to the first interview with a lot of excitement and positive energy. He wore glasses with square silver frames that looked a little big on his boyish face, had a small mustache, and did not wear sideburns. His hair stood straight up on his head, and as he spoke he combed his hand through it. Tye is half Trinidadian and half French Canadian and was 18 years old at the time of the interview.

Tye said that he has always known he was trans and that it had been hard for him to come out to his family. He described how at first it was really weird for his dad to call him Tye, but that now “he doesn’t have to think about it.” A couple years ago, when he knew he wanted to change his name from Tiffany (birth name) to Tye (chosen name), he brought it up to his mom and, Tye told me, “she was like no, absolutely not, that’s insane!” After some time, Tye’s mom “came around” and now “she’s really supportive.” In fact, she even helped him fill out the forms to legally change his name.

In ninth grade, Tye had not yet legally changed his name; his birth name was the only name on record at the school, although he was using the name Tye with his friends and family. He explained how “on attendance and stuff that was a huge thing for me because I did not want people, teachers, to call out Tiffany.” Tye went to his guidance counselor, who is “amazing and gay” and “really involved in LGBT youth and stuff.” Tye described how his guidance counselor was a really great advocate for him at school:

He sent a note out every year, at the beginning of the year saying to the teachers you know could you please use the male pronouns with Tye. I think he did change it on the attendance to Tye, but it was just considered a preferred name. So it wasn’t legal, so when I got, for example, like on my report card or whatever it would say Tiffany.

Tye and his guidance counselor recognized the limits of the school policies and found ways to help him navigate his name in the classroom and with teachers. Tye believed that once he changed his name legally, his chosen name would be respected throughout the school and his birth name would cease to represent who he was there. He changed his name legally in his last year of high school and described that although he brought the formal documents of his legal name change to his school’s administration, he continued to be referred to by his birth name at school, rather than by his new legal name. This came to a head at his high school graduation.

Tye explained that at his school’s graduation ceremony, students are given a piece of paper on which their full name is printed. As they approach the stage, they hand their piece of paper to someone who

then reads the name aloud as the students walk across the stage. Tye stood in line waiting with all his other classmates when he was given his slip of paper. It read “Tiffany (Tye) Thomas.” Tye described his reaction to seeing the name that was written on the slip:

I’m like okay, this is ridiculous, I’m like, technically Tiffany is nonexistent. Like this is not a person. Like come on, how do you screw that up? I was so pissed and I took someone’s pen and I had to search for a pen first of all because no one had one and I scratched out Tiffany.

Tye insisted that the person named Tiffany does not exist, yet there are traces of her that he cannot escape and forms of structural violence that keep Tiffany attached to him. This structural violence takes shape in the systematic ways Tye’s school denies his name change and fails to replace his birth name with his new name. Because structural violence is embedded in the political and economic organization of our social world, it can be subtle and sometimes invisible, and yet is violent in the way it injures and disadvantages individuals. The misrecognition of Tye’s name is an example of one of the ways trans students experience harassment and violence at school because of their gender identity and expression (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Taylor & Peter, 2011). The moments when Tye’s status as a trans person is made public and he is not recognized by his new name demonstrate some of the ways social structures and norms about gender harm Tye or create a potentially dangerous situation for him.

The existence and ghostly figure of names gain traction because they represent the ways oppressive and abusive systems of power are at work in everyday life. Although Tye legally changed his name, his birth name continues to exist and demand a presence; this persistence is the way the ghost makes itself known. Tye may wish Tiffany were dead, but he does not have control over how this name haunts him. For Tye, the name Tiffany reminds him of the disconnection and alienation he has to his birth name and to the gender identity he was assigned at birth. Although the name Tiffany is not itself abusive or oppressive, the school’s persistent use of that name might cause injury to Tye and represents oppressive and abusive systems of power by misgendering him. Despite feeling betrayed and misunderstood by the school, in telling stories about how his teachers and guidance counselor have advocated for him, Tye simultaneously describes ways that some in the school community support his gender identity and name.

Tye worries about getting in trouble for scratching out the name Tiffany at graduation. His behavior is an act of rebellion, reflecting resistance or resilience. But what might that act mean for Tye? He

might hope that because he has scratched out the name, Tiffany will die or become nonexistent, which raises the question: Are ghosts scratched-out people? Tye's birth name leaves a trace of who he was, and it remains on the paper despite now being illegible. The visibility and invisibility of his birth name hint at its ghostly presence. Tiffany remains a ghost in Tye's story of himself, leaving traces of herself throughout his life and asking for a new relation with him.

Tye's story raises questions about names: What does it mean for a name to exist? And how do names represent who we are or were? Gordon's (2008) concept of haunting offers a way to consider the recognition and representation of Tye's birth name in his life story. For many trans people, birth names can be emotionally triggering, and the presence of their birth name challenges their new name and identity. This conflict of representation and recognition is complex for trans youth. If birth names are part of the self, what would it look like to provide a space for trans youth to work through their relationship to that self? How do trans youth mourn their old name and their past self?

The distance Tye creates between himself and the name Tiffany divides his old self from his new self, but the space between these two people and two names remains unspeakable, unknown, and tenuous. Tye was unable to describe his relationship to his birth name, except to say that he wished it did not exist. Tye's birth name appears as a conflict for him and the school; by pointing to the gender oppression and abusive systems of power affecting the lives of trans youth, it represents the haunting Gordon (2008) describes. For Tye, being called Tiffany is traumatic, and the repetition of being misnamed and misgendered exposes the presence of ghostly figures.

The way Tye's name is written by the school at graduation reads like a math formula: Tiffany (Tye) Thomas. The school recognizes Tye's preferred name but resists the erasure of his birth name. The presence of Tye's birth name speaks to the complex ways it represents part of Tye's life and high school career. Graduation is a ceremony to celebrate and recognize the hard work students have completed, and Tye's years in high school include a period of his life when he was addressed by the name Tiffany. The inclusion of his birth name may speak to the school's desire to recognize its relationship to the student named Tiffany.

Trans people insist that it is important to use their chosen name, not their birth name, in referring to their past. For example, although the name Tiffany represented for many the person who would become Tye, the name Tye should be used to describe him during his high school career. Tye did not become who he is because he transitioned; he transitioned because he already was that person.

So far I have been discussing how Tye's birth name haunts him, but I also want to consider how, by being bracketed in a strange way, the name Tye haunts his birth name and his past self. The story of Tiffany will always be haunted by Tye and by who she would become. And maybe he was always also a part of her, as she is now a part of him. Brackets are used as a punctuation device to insert explanatory material or to indicate where a passage was omitted from the original material by someone other than the original author. At graduation, the name Tye was left out of his "original" name by someone other than himself. The slip of paper, given to him by others, becomes part of the story of who Tye is. If the "original" name was Tiffany (Tye) Thomas, who authored it? This question points to the complex ways stories about the self are always narrated in relation to others and how one's ghosts move through stories about the self.

The Traces of Trans Youth

Reading Tye's birth name as a ghost may represent a "loss" or "a path not taken" (Gordon, 2008, p. 63–64), but I want to conclude by thinking about what it represents as a social figure. Trans youth have diverse, complex, and changing relationships to their birth names. The ghost of Tye's birth name—or the presence of Tiffany—may want a more complex relationship to Tye's history. But I also recognize that the school's refusal to recognize Tye by his legal and chosen name makes way for the ghost.

The school is not hospitable to Tye's new name and does not know how to attend to his birth name. The ghostly presence of his birth name draws attention to the norms of the school and to conflicting stories about how to represent and name trans youth. The presence of the ghost and what it represents as a social figure is influenced by oppressive systems of power that narrate Tye's name and identity. In this way, the ghost that haunts Tye may not be his, but instead a ghost haunting the school.

The social figure of Tiffany secures the stability of gender norms and challenges the existence and presence of trans youth at the school. Tye's name and intelligibility is disavowed, and the structural violence of the school haunts trans youth like Tye. This insight suggests schools need to look closer at their ghosts and the stories they tell about trans youth in order to gain a more complex understanding of the meaning of names and trans youths' experiences at school. The oppressive systems of power perpetuated by the school limit the ways young people imagine and understand gender and sexuality.

Tye was denied recognition and support at school, and his story demonstrates the conflicts birth names present for trans youth and schools. The administrators at Tye's school might argue that the

name Tiffany is a part of the story and record of who Tye was there. His story demonstrates the way names are an important part of the stories we tell about who we are and of the stories others tell about us. Schools need to attend to the ghostly figures that haunt trans students and recognize the unique, complex, and emotional relationship trans students have with their birth names and chosen names. Schools also need to take more seriously the work of supporting trans youth in their process of choosing a new name as well as the work of considering the abusive systems of power that shape the intelligibility and lives of young trans people.

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