“What’s my name?” Toward a Generative Anthroponomastics

Matthew Schneider

Department of English
High Point University
High Point NC 27262
mschneid@highpoint.edu

On the afternoon of February 19, 1964, five of the most famous men who have ever lived met for the first and only time. On that day, the Beatles—in the second week of their first visit to the United States—dropped by the Miami training gym of heavyweight boxing contender Cassius Clay, who was in the final stages of preparations for his title challenge of champion Sonny Liston later that month. The Beatles were at the outset of their conquest of the world’s popular culture, which would be complete by the end of the decade. And Clay was about to stun the sports world in two ways: first by defeating Liston—an 8-1 favorite—in a seventh-round technical knock out; and then, only days after that, by announcing that he had joined the Nation of Islam, rejected his given name of Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr., and would henceforth be known as Muhammad Ali.

One knows one has reached the zenith of celebrity in the modern world when only one name is sufficient to identify you: Napoleon, Caesar, Garbo; John, Paul, George, Ringo, and Ali. By the time of his retirement from boxing in the early 1980s, it was virtually forgotten that Muhammad Ali had come into the world as Cassius Clay. The title of Michael Mann’s 2001 film biography of the fighter is *Ali*,*tout court*; and this three-letter adopted surname now evokes not only the boxer who could “float like a butterfly and sting like a bee,” but the turbulent mix of fame, race relations, and bloodsport in mid twentieth-century America. The story of how Cassius Clay became Muhammad Ali also illustrates the almost magical significance that proper names possess and retain in our era, despite the emergence of a variety of linguistically-based philosophies that view names as arbitrary signifiers, incapable of capturing or communicating the *spirit* or essence of the people to whom they are attached. Names are viewed, in other words, in mutually contradictory ways: a name can either carry, as it did for Ali, the freight of one’s unique identity, or it can be seen as contingent, accidental, fundamentally meaningless. Generative anthropology can help to illuminate both why this dichotomy exists, as well as why proper names—despite widespread, *postmodern,* skepticism about the ontological status of

the sign—retain a connection with essential identity strong enough to make people fight to be called what they want to be called. In applying the heuristics and insights of generative anthropology to this issue, I hope to open up a potential subfield of GA (one that happily preserves the familiar abbreviation): generative anthroponomastics, or the study of proper names from an originary point of view.

Onomastics is the study of names; anthroponomastics the study of human names. Conventional anthroponomastics approaches its subject ethnographically, cataloguing the ways in which naming systems originate and evolve as indices of both individuality and membership in a larger social group, like a tribe or family. Generative anthroponomastics, by contrast, takes a more philosophically analytic approach, examining the originary significance of names, and therefore touching necessarily on the frequent conflation of one's name with one's unique or spiritual identity. The meeting of the Beatles and Clay/Ali presents a vivid contrast between two modes of celebrity naming. The Beatles came to be known as John, Paul, George, and Ringo through the most basic process of contemporary fame, in which snowballing celebrity ends up producing something like an immediate, interpersonal familiarity with the famous figure. This familiarity makes one name—either a first name or a surname—sufficient to ensure precise identification. Celebrities like these keep their own names, but come to be christened with shortened monikers in the public sphere through the mimetic force of sheer repetition. Celebrity naming can also, of course, be highly deliberate and strategic: this is the logic of the stage name, a calculated attempt to achieve or cement fame by substituting a more striking or euphonious name for one's given name: thus Archibald Leach became Cary Grant, and Frances Ethel Gumm was rechristened Judy Garland. Ali's name change, by contrast, belongs to neither of these categories: as Cassius Clay, he was already famous, and changing his name incorporated a religious dimension absent from the show biz motivations of entertainers like the Beatles, Grant, and Garland. Ali's case, therefore, better illustrates the problematics of naming, and the originary reasons why names—even in the age of manufactured celebrity—hold on to their originary identification with the bearer's individual essence.

For a variety of reasons, Cassius Clay's desire to rename himself initially met with widespread public resistance. His name was manifestly important to him—he literally fought to be called Muhammad Ali; so, both to him and to his detractors, his name was not merely an arbitrary label. Ali can be said to have rejected, therefore, what I will call the nominalist conception of proper names, as famously expressed by Shakespeare's Juliet in her balcony soliloquy:

> O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?
> * * * * * * *

> ‘Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
> Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
> What’s Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,
> Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
> Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
> What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
> By any other name would smell as sweet. . .
> (*Romeo and Juliet,* II, ii, 36, 40-46)

The benefit of the nominalist conception lies in its offer of maximal freedom of self-determination. If a name is just a convenient, outward badge, not essentially connected to one’s true self, then that self is free to shift its identity virtually at will. The opposite view—which I will call anthroponomastic realism—is that names are deeply significant, as indicated by the common Judeo-Christian practice of changing one’s name in the immediate aftermath of a spiritual conversion. Thus Abram and Sarai become Abraham and Sarah after sealing the covenant with God (Genesis 17:3-15); Jacob becomes Israel after wrestling with the angel (Genesis 32:28); Saul becomes Paul after encountering Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). The harder Cassius Clay fought to be called Muhammad Ali, the more public resistance galvanized against his wishes; Clay’s struggle to get the world to call him by his adopted name thus illustrates the almost necessary connection between religion and anthroponomastic realism. But why should it be so? Why does the anthroponomastic realist require that a change of heart be manifested in a change of name? Why in religious life are names so *significant*?

GA is particularly well-suited to answer these questions, because GA ties an individual name’s significance to the source of all significance—the name-of-God that emerges as the first signifier in the originary scene. Since proper names derive from the first word, they retain much of that first word’s power. The story of how Cassius Clay became simply Ali illustrates with particular clarity the contrast between the realist and nominalist conceptions of names, and opens up a deeper understanding of why personal names are still so routinely believed to reflect one’s true identity. That story begins in 1959, when 17-year-old Cassius traveled from his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky to Chicago for a Golden Gloves boxing tournament. In Chicago he met Black Muslims, and began to explore the doctrine of the Nation of Islam; his aunt remembers him returning from Chicago with a record album of Elijah Muhammad’s sermons. Over the next five years, Clay’s involvement with the Nation of Islam deepened, but the young fighter stopped short of openly declaring his allegiance to the sect out of fear that association with what was regarded as a hate group would harm his budding career. Public suspicion that Clay was a Black Muslim steadily grew, however, particularly in the run-up to the first

fight with Liston, when Malcolm X turned up at Clay's Miami training camp. In the ring immediately after defeating Liston, the new champion hinted at his true religious convictions by shouting, "I talk to God every day—the real God!" A few days after the fight, Clay announced his membership in the Nation of Islam, and on March 6, Elijah Muhammad went on the radio to say that because the name Cassius Clay lacked a "divine meaning," the new champion would be given an Islamic name. "'Muhammad Ali' is what I will give to him, as long as he believes in Allah and follows me" (Remnick 213).

It was unusual for new Black Muslims to receive a full-blown Islamic name; most were simply given the letter X as a place-holder (like Malcolm X) until, in keeping with NOI doctrine, the member's original name was restored. But Clay's enthusiastic adoption of his new name—Muhammad, he giddily told a reporter on March 13, meant "he was worthy to be praised" and Ali meant "most high"—was met with suspicion and derision by much of his immediate family and the sporting press. "The fight racket, since its rotten beginnings, has been the red-light district of sports. But this is the first time it has been turned into an instrument of hate," wrote veteran *New York Post* sports columnist Jimmy Cannon (Remnick 209). Cassius Clay, Sr. told reporters that his son had been "conned" by the Nation of Islam, and that to adopt a new name at the height of his fame was both insulting and financially unwise. "I'm not changing no name," the elder Clay said. "If he wants to do it, fine. But not me. In fact, I'm gonna make good use of the name Cassius Clay. I'm gonna make money out of my own name. I'll capitalize on it" (Remnick 209).

Floyd Patterson, whom Ali met in a title defense on November 22, 1965, pointedly refused to use his opponent's new name, and called the Black Muslims "a menace." Infuriated, Ali drew out a fight he could have easily won at any time to 12 rounds in order—many asserted—to prolong Patterson's punishment. The controversy over the new name reached its zenith, however, before a February 1967 title defense against Ernie Terrell. In a pre-fight interview between the two fighters and Howard Cosell, Terrell referred to his opponent as "Cassius Clay," prompting Ali to interrupt, "Why do you want to say Cassius Clay when Howard Cosell and everybody else is calling me Muhammad Ali—why do you go to be the one of all people who's colored to keep saying Cassius Clay? . . . Why don't you call me my name, man?" "Well, what's your name?" Terrell asked. "You told me your name was Cassius Clay a few years ago." "I never told you my name was Cassius Clay," shouted Ali. "My name is Muhammad Ali, and you will announce it right there in the center of the ring after the fight, if you don't do it now. . . . You actin' just like an old Uncle Tom! Another Floyd Patterson! I'm gonna punish you!" As Terrell advanced menacingly, Ali repeated the taunt two more times. In the fight, Ali—who was shorter, but, as usual, much faster than his opponent—made good on his promise to punish Terrell, easily scoring with lightning-fast left jabs, and punctuating his blows with repeated shouts

of “What’s my name, Uncle Tom?” before winning a unanimous 15-round decision.

What’s my name, Uncle Tom? This rhetorical question, underscored by punches to Terrell’s jaw, presents the anthroponomastic realist’s answer to the nominalist’s naïve faith that names are nothing more than arbitrary labels. From its beginnings, the Nation of Islam had made the deep significance of names a central doctrine. New members were stripped of their “slave” surnames, as Mattias Gardell has written, in order to ritually repudiate the “remnant of slavery” American Blacks carry in those names, and to symbolize the new Nation of Islam member’s “mental emancipation” (54) from the legacies of racism and oppression. Indeed, Ali identifies the Nation of Islam’s teaching on names as the starting point of his own spiritual conversion. As he tells it,

> The first time I felt truly spiritual in my life was when I walked into the Muslim temple in Miami. A man named Brother John was speaking, and the first words I heard him say were, “Why are we called Negroes? It’s the white man’s way of taking away our identity. . . We don’t even have our names.” And I said to myself, “What’s he talking about; I got my name.” But I kept listening, and he explained, “If Mr. Chang is coming, you know he’s a Chinaman. If Mr. Goldberg is coming, you know he’s a Jew. Mr. O’Reilly is an Irishman. Rolling Thunder and Silver Moon are Indians. But if someone says here comes Mr. Jones or Mr. Washington, you don’t know what’s coming. We were named after our white slavemasters.” . . . And I said to myself, “Cassius Marcellus Clay. He was a Kentucky white man, who owned my great-great-granddaddy and named my great-granddaddy after him. And then my granddaddy got named, and then my daddy, and then me.” (Hauser 89-90)

Ali is mostly right here—his forebears probably got their name from a slaveowning member of the distinguished Kentucky family that produced celebrated statesman Henry Clay—but his interpretation of the significance of his own name doesn’t capture its intended meaning. Early in his professional career Clay had liked what David Remnick has called the grand “history and euphony” of his given name; in Rome for the 1960 Olympics, he had invited reporters to consider how his name “makes you think of the Colosseum and those Roman gladiators. Cassius Marcellus Clay. Say it to yourself. It’s a beautiful name” (Remnick 213). Ali’s paternal grandfather, Herman Clay, had given this noble name to his son—Ali’s father—in order to honor the memory of Cassius Marcellus Clay (1810-1903), a wealthy Louisville aristocrat who also happened to be enough of an abolitionist that he was seriously considered as Abraham Lincoln’s running mate in 1860. Ali’s father, Cassius Marcellus Clay, Sr., in turn, passed this name onto his son, presumably in the same spirit in which it had been bestowed on him: as an assertion of racial pride and as a repudiation of the family’s slave roots. The name that Ali rejected was

therefore already a post-slavery name, meant to grant its bearer the kind of genuine identity that the Nation of Islam promised by substituting the letter X for the "slave name,' or, in the case of Ali, giving the follower an entirely new name. But underlying the act of both naming and renaming Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr. was an identical ontological presumption: the anthroponomastic realist's conviction that proper names arise from and reflect essential being.

But where does this presumption come from? Answering this question requires us to turn to generative anthropology's account of the origin of the capacity for signification itself, and speculate a little on the originary meaning of proper names. GA posits that the primary linguistic form was the ostensive, the repetition of "an instinctual gesture toward an object of potential appropriation" (*The Origin of Language* 75). The first ostensives were "intentional acts of signification which call attention to the presence, in principle verifiable, of their referent" (76). The repetition of the sign in the absence of its referent produces the imperative, the next stage in linguistic evolution. A proper name, Gans observed in *Science and Faith,* can be either ostensive or imperative, as its vocative use demonstrates: we can say "John, it's you" (ostensive) or "John, come here" (imperative). Whether used as an ostensive or imperative, though, the first linguistic sign was a name: the name-of-God which the inaccessible center acquires as a result of the originary event. Proper names echo the original act of naming, and therefore retain a share of the sacred power attributed to the scenic center. Seen in this light, both Ali's given and assumed names are ostensive/imperatives, differing only in the referent of the gestural sign. Cassius Marcellus Clay invokes the intrepid, but white abolitionist and proud Kentucky native son; Muhammad Ali invokes the founder of Islam, who—according to Nation of Islam doctrine—was the (black) prophet of the one true (black) God. This explains why Ali felt he needed to pummel and taunt Ernie Terrell: in refusing to address him by his "divine" name, Terrell was preventing him from partaking in the full share of divine enjoyment to which Ali felt his Islamic name entitled him. To the anthroponomastic realist, names feel closer to one's real being because their ostensive/imperative immediacy is foregrounded by the dominant role religious ritual and thinking play in that person's life. In other words, the realist grants proper names greater significance because his life is lived, as it were, closer to the origin, when signification carried greater life-or-death importance than in less mimetically fraught—and potentially violent—iterations of the originary scene.

This accounts for the realist's conviction that his name reflects his true identity. What of the nominalist's position? How can GA account for those who, like Ali's trainer Angelo Dundee, ask not "What's my name?" but "What's in a name?" In fact, this is exactly what Dundee did say when asked for reaction to his fighter's name change. "To me he's still the same individual, same guy," said Dundee. "Actually, I didn't know what Muslim was, really, because I thought it was a piece of cloth"

(Remnick 209). Dundee's easygoing nominalist philosophy is the result of the final stage of linguistic evolution: the development of the declarative sentence. The ostensive and imperative grant the proto-human community a rudimentary means of representation. But the power of critical self-reflection and the sort of self-conscious ethical deliberation required to question the ontological status of signs and their referents is enabled by, and comes after, the development of the declarative sentence. This linguistic capacity encounters and alters the originary name-of-God in the Mosaic revelation, an event which Gans examines in depth in *Science and Faith*. Before Moses encounters the burning bush on Mt. Horeb, God was known by name. "Naming God," Gans writes, "is the sense of the originary signifying act directed towards the central object. This gesture is *ostensive;* it designates its referent by showing it. To name God outside the communal scene is to give the name an *imperative* sense by summoning him to appear in order to reconstitute this scene." But when the burning bush offers a declarative sentence, not just a name, in answer to Moses' question about whose name he is to invoke in order to free the enslaved Israelites, a new way of conceiving of God, not as the Other present in the communal scene (like a boxing ring), but as an affirmation "of the imaginary scene as a prerequisite not only of linguistic communication, but above all of human relations" comes into being. The God who gives not a single word but the sentence "I am who I am" when asked for his name evacuates the originary scene of its primal specificity, reconstituting the scene as a locus for imaginative freedom rather than mere ritual repetition. In answer to Moses' question of "What's your name?" the burning bush answers, in effect, "What's in a name?", and by doing so (in Gans's words)

> guarantees man's freedom to engage in thought beyond the ideological bounds of hierarchical society, a freedom that the prophets would later reaffirm against the very social order that the Exodus had made possible. God's sentence teaches Moses that at the center of the communal scene, where the old hierarchical society still preserved the memory of an originary figure, there must exist only a free place. Far from being an interpretation of the name YHVH, the sentence *ehyeh asher ehyeh* reveals by its very syntactical construction the irrelevance of all divine names. This is the summit of the Mosaic revelation. (*Science and Faith* 63-64).

At the core of the anthroponomastic realist's view, then, lies a conception of the scene of representation—and, by extension, human interaction—as oriented toward the ritualized, sacred center, with proper names deriving their power to manifest essential identity from their status as repetitions of the originary name-of-God. It should not surprise us that a boxer like Ali would be led to such a view, for boxing, like all sports, is a ritualized and mediated form of primal combat. The world of boxing therefore gravitates toward more primitive conceptions of human

interaction, and reflects a time and state of mind closer to that of the emergent human. Perhaps this is why both boxers and other sports celebrities acquire alliterative nicknames—modernity's versions of the ancient heroic epithets—so easily and naturally. Before he was Muhammad Ali, Cassius Clay was the Louisville Lip; Joe Louis was the Brown Bomber; Jack Dempsey was the Manassa Mauler. (The sense of the scene as ritually defined and closed may also help explain why George Foreman named all of his five sons George!) By contrast, anthroponomastic nominalists see the scene of representation as defined by the free play of imagination, and so feel less bound to see names as determinative of being. Anthroponomastic realists and nominalists stand at the opposite ends of what Gans describes, in *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* 372, as the difference between religious and philosophic ways of seeing and being in the world. "For words to be understood as shared *ideas* rather than ritual gestures," Gans writes, "language must be cut off from the ostensive activities of ritual." This is precisely what anthroponomastic nominalism does when confronted with the ritual question of "What's my name?" Answering that question with a question introduces a metaphysical element into what was once, presumably, a ritually bound performance, and for which, in the boxing ring, there is only one right answer, and the wrong answer earns you the sure and just reward of a clenched left fist to the head. GA shows us what's both gained and lost between the two poles of anthroponomastic nominalism and realism. Believing that names do not reflect true being opens up selfhood, makes the personal transformation a matter of will and determination rather than a negotiation between what you think you are and what the community will allow you to be. The price of this freedom, though, is the loss of fame, as a moving target is notoriously difficult to hit. On the other hand, hewing, as Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali did, to a conception of names as ineluctably intertwined with essential being can secure you a lasting place in the roll of honor, especially if you are allowed, even encouraged, as he was, to visit upper cuts and right crosses on those who do not acknowledge your self-conception. As they do in so many other realms of human activity, the twin desires for liberty and security come inevitably into conflict in the gap between one's name and one's identity.

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