

Naming and the Corporation

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AT A RECENT DISSERTATION defence, my colleague who was chairing the exam introduced each committee member by name, reading from the program prepared by the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. “Mary?” she said, looking quizzically at me. “I’ve never thought of you that way.” As Dr. Lim says, “To name is to acknowledge personhood,” and my colleague picked up on the discrepancy immediately.

My situation is not Dr. Lim’s. My ancestors were Irish Famine survivors, and, like many Catholic kids of my gender growing up in Quebec, I was given a traditional pro forma first name, the invidious “Mary” designed to invoke the Virgin Mary’s protection. Still common where Romance languages prevail, pro forma first names “Maria” and “Jesus” are seldom used as “call names” and designate membership in a cultural and religious context that I left long ago. I have never published under this name nor, as my colleague realized, have I ever used this name in a professional (or personal) context other than those requiring a full “legal” name like a passport. “Who else has to explain their name?” asks Dr. Lim. Well, I do, but not for the reasons she gives, and those reasons constitute an important difference.

Dr. Lim is right that white privilege, the English language, and the Roman alphabet are among the markers that have protected me from her experience ordering her business cards and her family’s experience with Canadian immigration. In fact, my business card is, like my publications, one place where my name is as I wish it to be. Although my ancestors survived passage in the hold of a Famine ship in 1850, escaping Ireland and making their way to the piece of stolen Algonquin land that they’d been given to “homestead,” I haven’t shared their experience as “shanty Irish” fit for Susanna Moodie’s contempt, nor have I any memory of the language they brought with them or the haunted history of six centuries of colonization. Like my diasporic history, my name – whether the “legal” version or the name I’ve always used – passes largely unnoticed outside the university at which I work. What Dr. Lim and I have in common in terms of naming is the corporate academic environment and the

particular ways in which gender, race, and possibly academic discipline intersect in a climate characterized by a toothless form of “diversity.”

Commodification is the corporation and our names are no less commodified than is any other institutional “asset.” Sadly, diversity without traction is another one of those assets. The institution assumes the right to brand each asset. Thus, without a fight, Dr. Lim’s brand, like mine, may only appear in the Roman alphabet according to the institution’s branding strategy. What that means is different for each of us. In spite of the fact that I’ve never used my “legal” name when publishing or posting course syllabi or interacting with colleagues and students, the institution decrees *de facto* that my “legal” name will prevail. Ownership of assets is the corporation’s prerogative, and the digital universe serves its needs well. However, before digital standardization was achieved, my preferred name was uncontested, and for many years my “legal” name appeared only on paycheques and T4s. The transformation of the university into a corporation is made visible in this way among many others. Now it seems that, like the university’s other “visual assets,” my name is “executed on the brand,” as one UBC website puts it. The “brand” supersedes each person’s decision about how her or his own name appears for institutional citation. Like the statistics that the institution substitutes for careful understanding and evaluation of teaching, the brand subsumes the person, redeploying her or him on a grid of property titles.

What’s in a name? As Dr. Lim says, a “given name” is “part of who you are” and how you choose to represent your professional identity, including which version of your “legal” name you choose for such purposes. But without respect for difference, there can be no real respect for “personhood” or acknowledgment of human dignity. Bridging these two different stories, histories, and experiences is the corporate university’s strategic lack of interest in “acknowledging personhood” beyond its own monied visage.