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Unforgettable: The Lives and Passing of Three US American Onomastic Icons

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Through its sheer volume, the US baby-boom generation brought with it many profound, changes in the US American society. However, the dynamism of this generation cannot be explained solely by its numerical magnitude. The individuals who emerged as the cultural leaders of this generation also demanded widespread systemic changes to the world they had inherited. Rather than meekly conforming to the pre-established norms of a power elite, they demanded revolutionary changes to the pre-existing hierarchies that had systematically disenfranchised women and people of color both at home and abroad. One of the primary tools of this counter-culture was names and naming. This article examines the onomastic legacies of three recently deceased leaders of this protest generation. As will be shown here, their struggle for personal, professional, individual, and social independence continues to serve as an unforgettable role model for today's generation and beyond.

KEYWORDS autonymy, Black arts movement, politics, obituary, non-violent protest, controversy, baby-boomers.

The year 2016 began with the prophetic loss of one of the world's beloved music legends: the beautiful, indominable, utterly unforgettable, Ms Natalie Maria Cole. Born in the same year that "Mona Lisa" won the Oscar for Best Song of the Year, Ms Cole was the heiress to the jazz dynasty built by her father and namesake, Nathaniel Adams Coles, or as the world would come to know him, the late, great, "Nat King Cole."[1] The songstress's birthname was no accident. As she described in her personal memoirs, when her mother Maria became pregnant, her father was convinced that the child would be a boy. In anticipation, it was decided early on that this first-born son would carry on the name "Nathaniel." When the child turned out to be a daughter, the Coles did what so many parents of that generation did. They gave their daughter the female version of their previously selected male name: the name *Nathaniel* became *Natalie*. That name-giving was emblematic of the struggle the recording artist would wage throughout her life. In her personal life, her name was a constant reminder of her parents' disappointment in her birth gender.[2] In her professional life, she battled against being referred to as "the

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daughter of Nat King Cole" — a professional reduction that was embodied by the moniker *Natalie Queen Cole*, a nickname bestowed upon her by jazz-club owners who insisted she should sing like her father (The UK Sunday Express 2016). After years of perseverance, Natalie was able to step out of her father's shadow and make an international name for herself as an award-winning artist in her own right. Over the course of her four-decade career, she sold over 30 million albums (10 of which went gold) and won nine Grammy Awards. In the winter of 2015, she was forced to cancel several of her concert dates after a recurrence of Hepatitis C. On December 31, 2015, the news broke that the recording star had died of congestive heart failure. That death was a sad harbinger of things to come.

As the British *Express* newspaper reported, 2016 has been "the worst year ever for celebrity deaths" (Sykes 2016). There are some who claim that the number of star deaths only seems to be so high because of the internet and social media, which update fans 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Based on this theory, it is not so much that more VIPs are dying: we simply are more aware of when they do. There are others, however, who say that this year has indeed been extraordinary for star deaths. For example, BBC obituary editor Nick Serpell described 2016 as being truly "phenomenal" for the number of notables who have died. According to BBC statistics, 2016 has seen an almost fivefold increase in the number of celebrity deaths in comparison with the same period of time in 2012. Although this increase may seem almost supernatural, the probable reason behind it may be less spectacular: namely, many of the stars who have passed away this year were members of the infamous baby-boom generation. The surge in star deaths we are witnessing now is in all likelihood a simple matter of arithmetic. The large number of babies born between the 1940s and 1960s has been matched by the avalanche of deaths more than six decades later. Looking back, many of the leaders of this illustrious group were also trendsetters in their chosen professions. Through their creative, non-traditional, and often controversial name choices, they also became significant onomastic role models. An excellent case in point is political activist, Olympic Gold medalist, United Nations Messenger of Peace, and boxing legend, Muhammad Ali.[3]

Born on January 17, 1942 in Louisville, Kentucky, Ali's birthname was *Cassius Marcellus Clay* VI.[4] His namesake was the great Kentucky abolitionist who served in the Lincoln administration and became one of the first White plantation holders in the "Bluegrass State" to free his slaves. At the age of 22, a day after his spectacular victory over Charles "Sonny" Liston, the Black pugilist announced that he was changing his name to "Cassius X." As he explained in a sports interview given in February 1964, he rejected the surname "Clay" because, like his role model "Malcolm X,"[5] he considered it to be a "slave name."[6] A month later, he announced that he had converted to Islam and he would now be known by his new name *Muhammad Ali*. With that declaration, Ali became one of many prominent African-Americans who chose to publicly mark their political and spiritual awakening by rejecting their birthname. Just a few examples include the former NAACP President Frizzel Gray who became *Kweisi Mfume*; the playwright Everett LeRoi Jones who took on the name *Imamu Amiri Baraka*; the P.E.N. award-winning poet, dramatist, and columnist, Sonia Sanchez, whose birthname was *Wilsonia Benita Driver*; journalist Jill Lord who adopted the name *Itabari Neri*; and playwright-poet Paulette L. Williams who became *Ntozake Shange*.

In the case of Muhammad Ali it would take many years before the US media stopped referring to him as Cassius Clay. Many reporters staunchly refused to use his chosen name, scoffing that the athlete's decision was either a question of folly or publicity (*The Courier Journal* 2016). Even the most cynical of observers came to realize just how serious Ali's transformation was, when he flatly refused to serve in the Vietnam War. The boxer was subsequently hounded as a coward and a traitor. Indignant, Ali retorted: "I ain't got no trouble with them Viet cong […] *They* never call me 'Nigger!' *They* never lynch me; never put no *dogs* on me; never robbed me of my nationality!" (Johnson 2016). Nothing, he declared, would ever compel him to serve in the Vietnam War.[7] In response to exercising his right to be a conscientious objector, Ali was criminally convicted, fined $10,000, sentenced to 5 years' imprisonment, stripped of his boxing titles, denied his passport, and barred from entering a boxing ring. It would take 3.5 years of legal battling until Ali, like so many times before, emerged victorious. After a US Supreme Court ruling, Ali had his titles reinstated and his boxing ban reversed. Thereafter, Ali returned to the ring and fought what many journalists, sports historians, and fans agree were some of the most spectacular matches in boxing history. In a series of legendary matches crowned with unforgettable names like "The Thrilla in Manilla" (1975), "The Fight of the Century," and "The Rumble in the Jungle" (1974), Ali's ability to float like a butterfly and sting like a bee proved time and time again that there was no fighter born like the great Muhammad Ali. In the early 1980s, Ali hung up his gloves and ended nearly three decades as a professional boxer. On June 3, 2016, he lost his final battle to Parkinson's. The "King of Kings" was buried in his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky.

The year 2016 saw the death of another African-American who made onomastic history: the artist formerly known as "Prince." Born Prince Rogers Nelson on June 7, 1958 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the American musician, singer, and song-writer underwent his first public name change when he officially dropped his middle and last name. As Prince would later reveal in interviews with music journalists, the decision to go exclusively by his first name was to distinguish himself musically and emotionally from his abusive father and namesake who was also the leader of the jazz group, "The Prince Rogers Band." In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Prince exploded upon the world of R&B, dance, funk, electronic, and pop music with scintillating hits such as "Controversy," "Little Red Corvette," and "1999." The success did not end there. In 1984, the release of the now classic album "Purple Rain" (PR) earned the artist two Grammy awards, the Brit Award for best soundtrack, and an Oscar for the PR movie. Several other internationally acclaimed hit albums followed and, in 2004, at the young age of 49, he was officially inducted into the coveted US American Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. This critical success was accompanied by an increasingly acrimonious battle with Warner Bros which owned and controlled the master tapes of his musical compositions. In protest, the artist began performing onstage with the word "slave" scrawled across his cheek. In a 1996 interview with "Rolling Stone" the musician explained: "When you stop a man from dreaming, he becomes a slave." And then in an elegant wordplay, he continued: "If you don't own your masters, your master owns you." Forced to accept that Warner Bros was the legal owner of the brand named "Prince," the artist publicly made his second onomastic declaration of independence. He would now go by an intentionally unpronounceable glyphic name: o(+>. In 1996, after his contract with Warner Bros finally came to an end, he released a triple album which he aptly named: "Emancipation."

The musician's name change caused an uproar. Many in the mainstream media completely rejected the artist's new moniker as ridiculous, obtuse, and pretentious, preferring instead to bestow upon him their own, often derogatory, names (e.g. "Symbol," "Squiggle," and "TAFKAP"[8]) (Baumgold 2016). Other observers, however, recognized the historical significance of this name change. By creating and promoting this new name, he elegantly and powerfully highlighted the right to retain more creative control over their own name/brand name (Forde 2015).[9] This political activism was honored in 2005 by the NAACP which made him the third artist in the Association's 107-year history to receive the Vanguard Award for increasing the collective "understanding and awareness of racial and social issues" (NAACP 2016).[10] On April 21, 2016, the music world was stunned to hear that the musician had been found lifeless in the elevator of his Minneapolis mansion/music studio, Paisley Park. Two days later, his ashes were interred in an urn bearing his autonym: ⊙(+>.

The naming histories of the three celebrities profiled here poignantly reflect the intense personal, political, social, and spiritual battles fought by many members of the baby-boom generation. Each one in their own way demonstrated the power and importance of names and naming to effect positive and personal social change. Just recently, for example, social activists across the US have initiated an innovative protest. Instead of offering their own personal names to baristas in local coffee shops, they have been giving the name of their political organization: "Black Lives Matter." Cooperative coffee-house employees have then yelled out the slogan in public (Peterson 2016). This non-violent demonstration would no doubt have pleased all three of the above icons, each of whom understood and harnessed the transformative power of names and naming. As 2016 draws to a close, there is some comfort in knowing that the incredible lives, accomplishments, and naming histories of these and other leaders of the baby-boom generation will continue to educate and inspire.

Notes

1. In her autobiography, Natalie Cole explains that her father decided to drop the word-final "s" in his surname once he entered show business (Cole 2000). For more on Ms Cole's struggle to establish her own name as an artist, see: Cole (2010).
2. "Parental gender disappointment" or "PGA" has been shown to have long-term negative effects on children's psycho-social development (Aske, Hale, Engels, Raaijmakers, and Meeus 2004; McAdams, Dewell, and Holman 2011; Stattin and Klackenberg-Larsson 1991).
3. In the 1960 Summer Olympics in Rome, the then 18-year-old Ali won the gold medal in boxing. When he returned home to a segregated Louisville, KY, he was barred from entering a local restaurant, with the owner proudly proclaiming: "We don't serve niggers!" Disgusted and humiliated, the champion threw his medal into the Ohio River in protest. Four decades later, Ali was chosen to carry the Olympic torch at the Opening Ceremony of the 1996 Summer Games in Atlanta, Georgia. The Olympic Committee awarded Ali a replacement medal. For an interview with Ali's brother on this event, see: Smithsonian Channel (2016).
4. For footage of Muhammad Ali discussing the origin of his birthname, see the *New York Times* documentary (Johnson 2016). Interestingly, Ali never formally applied to have his name officially changed. When asked why, he explained that he refused to ask permission to use his chosen name. Technically speaking, however, at the time, an official name change would also have been unnecessary. In the 1960s, a citizen could simply assume a new name. For more, see: Peter (2016).
5. The political activist also went through several name changes over the course of his life. Born "Malcolm Little," he changed his name to "Malcolm X" to draw attention to the fact that African-Americans had been forced in the US to surrender their original names for those forced upon them by slave owners. Later in his life, he replaced the name *Malcolm X* with *El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz* to reflect his Muslim faith. For more, see: http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/

boxing/2016/07/11/muhammad-ali-name-change-cassius-clay/86956544/

6. His exact words were the following: "Cassius Clay is a slave name. I didn't choose it, and I didn't want it. I am Muhammad Ali, a free name, and I insist people use it when speaking to me and of me" (BBC Sports 2016). Many years later, in his memoirs, he reflected: "Changing my name was one of the most important things that happened to me in my life. It freed me from the indignity done to my family by slavemasters who took away our family name and gave my ancestors the master's name, like they weren't human beings — only property" (Ali and Ali 2004, 61).

7. In 1967, following his arrest for resisting the draft, Ali issued the following statement: "I strongly object to the fact that so many newspapers have given the American public and the world the impression that I have only two alternatives in taking this stand: either I go to the jail or to the Army. There is another alternative and that alternative is justice" (NAACP Legal Defense Fund 2016). For more on Ali's political and spiritual transformation, see: Morris (2016).

8. The acronym was based on the full phrase "the Artist formerly known as Prince," see: http://www.esquire.com/entertainment/music/a44218/prince-1995-esquire-gentleman/

9. Also waging a similar battle at the time was UK singer George Michael who also fought vehemently against his contract with Sony records, a deal which the singer descried as "professional slavery" (Forde 2015).

10. The two other award recipients were Stanley Kramer and Steven Spielberg.

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