Names that Matter: A Transfeminist Reading of Names in Plato's *Cratylus*

In May of 2022, trans-exclusionary twitter user, Paul Cliff (@PaulCliffcouk), wrote:

> I have a student who is refusing to acknowledge and be acknowledged by her legal name. She is insisting that everyone use a name she's just made up. I believe words matters [sic], so I'm refusing to indulge (…)

Cliff's statement, since deleted following a backlash, received little over 700 likes. While we cannot be sure whether the student's desire to go by a different name is because they are trans, Cliff's language is nevertheless acutely characteristic of 'Gender Critical' rhetoric.[1] In response to the tweet, Katy Montgomerie coined a new phrase which is perfectly adapted to the dogmatic absurdity of trans-exclusionary logic: 'Biological names'. Of course, names are never biological in a literal sense, but how can names assigned at, or even before, birth, be more natural than later adopted ones? Names often hold a generative function within gender transition: J. de Leon points out that trans peoples' gender 'transition[s] often begin[] in language' (625). In this essay, I offer a reading of *Cratylus,* Plato's dialogue on the origin of language and the relationship of linguistic signs to the world, which critiques the notion of linguistic naturalness within the nexus of considerations posed by trans name changes. I then adopt the notion of intertextuality to read the narrative potential of a trans character's name in Torrey Peters's novel, *Detransition, Baby* (2021). My argument maintains that trans rights cannot be considered separately from feminist ones. Even in Cliff's example, the gender differential between the male pedagogical figure and female-perceived student, as well as his fetishisation of masculinist legislative origins highlight how heteropatriarchal discourses are routinely weaponised within trans-exclusionary rhetoric.[2]

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[1] The self-descriptor adopted by trans-exclusionary activists.

[2] Due to space constraints, this essay will primarily focus on the naming experiences of trans women, though its argument may prove applicable elsewhere.

Cratylus begins with Socrates joining an argument between two Athenian men: Cratylus and Hermogenes. As the latter summarises, Cratylus believes that names:

> are natural and not conventional—not a portion of the human voice which men agree to use—but that there is a truth or correctness in them (422)

The dialogue develops from this initial disagreement wherein Cratylus argues for the natural appropriateness of names to their objects' essences, while Hermogenes puts forth a conventionalist theory in which names are based upon 'convention and habit of users' (422). To modern readers, Cratylus's position may seem ridiculous, but it shares the fundamental assumptions of Cliff's tweet in its use of linguistic prescriptivism to elevate the threat of taxonomic instability. To Cratylus, names must be, in some sense, 'biological'. The structuring nature/convention dichotomy represents a wider epistemological issue in that it conditions our ability not only to define cultural entities, such as 'man', 'woman' or 'name' but also the ways in which those categories are linguistically circumscribed.

The text of *Cratylus* is animated by the 'ambiguity' of the ancient Greek word for name, 'όνομα' (Gold, 223), which 'equally embraces general nouns' as well as names for places and people (Robinson, 'Theory', 221). This ambiguity has, unfortunately, obscured the centrality of the usual sense of the word (in English), which is continually emphasised by the dialogue's formal reliance upon linguistic markers (i.e. 'SOCRATES : ', 'HERMOGENES :' etc.) to distinguish its opposing viewpoints. Cliff's anxiety is built into the formal logic of the dialogue: the form requires stable markers to both prevent *internal* contradiction and consolidate philosophical positions around coherent subjects. More than simply 'teaching and distinguishing', for Cratylus names function as an ideological prop that reify his own identity and reality:

> Whereupon I ask him whether his own name of Cratylus is a true name or not, and he answers yes. And Socrates? Yes. (422)

For the dialogue to function, Cratylus's name can only ever be 'natural'. This self-reflexive line demonstrates the fundamental paradox of the dialogue: the form's reliance upon the stability and correctness of its participants' names. *Cratylus* continually occludes the contested status of its personal names.

When Socrates asks 'what do we do when we name?' he defines names as 'instrument[s] of teaching and of distinguishing natures' and, in so doing, obfuscates a multitude of considerations opened by his initial interrogative (426). While I mean not to neatly conflate the function of names with gender, they share a function as performances of identity. When we performatively reiterate a name we verbally construct and consolidate and a person's identity by attributing a stable signifier to a changing subject. Many first names are gendered, and when we use them we also confirm a subject's status within a gender. At the same time, personal names are arguably antagonistic to 'identity politics' in their attempts to identify individuals *within* cultural groupings. Socrates's definition of names assumes that there is a stable, coherent 'nature' (by which he means something like 'essence', though the 'natural' connotation is significant) to which a name refers— an understanding of historically contingent taxonomies which queer theory has substantively critiqued (See Sedgwick). Our ability to apply names, such as 'trans', to wider identity groups is necessarily double-edged: while they can help articulate our lived experiences they can simultaneously constrict the queer, subversive potential of the 'unnamable' (Halberstam, 4).

Cratylus stands out among Plato's dialogues for a number of reasons. David Sedley calls it 'among' the most 'enigmatic and frustrating' of Plato's works, owing to the long central section in which Socrates 'develops a massive series of far-fetched etymologies'— origin stories of words, which seek to naturalise the language (Sedley, 140). As a result, the dialogue's mid-section is frequently deemed an 'embarrassment' (Ibid) and 'eccentric' (Bestor, 306), perhaps most obviously

because, as a whole, it ‘deviates’ from the rest of Plato’s corpus (Anagnostopoulos, ‘Two Theories’ 691). Not only is *Cratylus* a deviant, queer, text but so too is it open to a trans reading. To Susan Stryker, transgender studies

> enables a critique of the conditions that cause transgender phenomena to stand out in the first place, and that allow gender normativity to disappear into the unanalysed, ambient background. (“(De)Subjugated Knowledge”, 3)

To recover gendered conditions from ambience is to ask why our language is more constitutive, rather than descriptive of, reality. It is to ask why we are so invested in upholding the primacy of Plato’s ‘forms’, which are described in *Parmenides* as:

> [T]here exist *certain forms,* of which these other things come to partake and so to be called after their names; (925)

Here Plato constructs a narrative in which a name signals an entity’s engagement with an ontologically prior ‘form’ which provides a stable epistemological foundation. This model conceals its dependence upon stable linguistic categories by reifying them as pre-linguistic entities. Transness threatens the ‘forms' by exposing the mutability of those categories, the artificiality of ‘nature’. ‘Trans’ implies a distance and a movement, the bridging of a gap, but so too a denaturalisation of that gap.

NATURALISING INSTRUMENTS

In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler highlights the 'efforts to denaturalise sexuality and gender' as a central tenet of queer theory (93). They treat naturalness as a rhetorical instrument that can be conferred upon people, acts and objects to suggest their inevitability or correctness (1). Arguments for the naturalness of names, the idea that a name is 'a natural revelation of the essence of that thing', can be 'deeply attractive', as Richard Robinson, discussing *Cratylus*, points out ('Criticism' 325). For one, it implies that we, as users of language, are fundamentally 'reasonable' (Ibid, 330). Appeals to 'nature' have historically been weaponised to silence and marginalise minority groups: feminist Laurie Penny describes how such rhetoric arises 'whenever there is anxiety to stop the world from changing' (15). The antonym 'unnatural' is strategically conferred upon homosexual sex and 'abortion' while, inversely:

> rape is natural (…) Discrimination against queer women, poor women, black women, fat women, ugly women, trans women (…) is natural. (15)

The ongoing moral panic regarding the rights of trans people has led a resurgence in 'naturalness' metaphors. Anti-trans philosopher Kathleen Stock, playing into this reactionary discourse, transmutes the 'natural' to a dichotomy of 'endogenous and artificial parts of a sexed body' (74). Stock, who defends the misgendering of trans people, (but presumably not the mis-naming?), uses a dichotomy that conveniently maps onto the central linguistic conflict of *Cratylus* wherein Cratylus could be said to argue for the 'endogenous' and Hermogenes the 'artificial' (10). Such a logic is indicative of a wider linguistic prescriptivism which calls for an atavistic return to the belief that 'words matters'— an argument founded upon the false premise that the opposing side believes that words, in fact, do not matter, despite their very real decision to adopt a different name.

Feminists have demonstrated that what we call natural and inevitable is often tacitly

patriarchal (See Firestone, Harraway). *Cratylus* is deeply masculinist: like Cliff, Socrates attributes the natural origin of names to 'legislation' wherein the (male dominated) law courts occupy the supreme position as prime namers. Similarly, Socrates and Hermogenes's ability to speak, and be heard across the centuries is afforded precisely because of the continual masculine attestations of their names: a woman's name never speaks directly in any of Plato's dialogues (Cavarero, 93). As Butler writes, names function as

> a social pact based on the Law of the Father, a patrilineal organisation that implies that it is *patronymic* names that endure over time, as nominal zones of phallic control. (*Bodies That Matter,* 153)

For women, 'propriety is achieved through having a changeable [sur]name'— a transferrable identity relative to both male presence and the heterosexual assumption (Ibid). This changeability is not only intrinsic to the subjugation of women and femininity but also to 'transmisogyny'. Transfeminist Julia Serano, who coined the term, claims that

> perhaps no form of gendered expression is considered more artificial and more suspect than (…) transgender expressions of femininity. (5)

While there is a cultural distinction between first and second names, the trope of linguistic changeability as 'feminine' remains. Name changes are coded as a hyper-feminine act which mirrors the trope of introducing trans women characters in film and television 'putting on make-up' or getting dressed to stress their artificial, and thus 'unnatural' status… an asymmetry which undoubtably affects trans men and women differently (Serano, 15). In *Cratylus*, the fact that Hermogenes's theory accommodates names changes ('the new name is as correct as the old' 422), is conceptualised by Socrates as a world in which names 'fluctuat[e] according to our fancy' (425). In English translation, the florid alliteration mirrors the societal presentation of femininity and

transness as artificial, emotional and weak in contrast to the masculine law of naturalness in which names are 'independent and maintain their own essence' and thus suitable for legislative support (Ibid). For *Cratylus* as a whole, this moment is crucial: Socrates deploys perhaps the most linguistically extravagant lines in the dialogue to defend both the Platonic doctrine of the forms, and the dialogue's formal dependence upon stable nominal categories.

The taxonomic frustration Plato contends with is perhaps best symbolised in his image of the 'extraordinary births' which can disrupt preconceived linguistic categories (431). Socrates uses the hypothetical example in which 'contrary to nature', a 'horse' gave birth to:

> a calf, then I should not call that a foal but a calf; nor do I call any inhuman birth a man, but only a natural birth. (Ibid)

Clearly Socrates believes that 'words matters' and thus must exclude unnatural births. Yet, cannot these 'extraordinary births' be taken as the perfect metaphor for the disruption which trans people pose within such a linguistic system? Some 'births' frustrate the naming system by replacing their parentally-assigned names, thus subverting the Law of the Father.

INTERTEXTUAL NAMES AND DETRANSITION, BABY

The new names of trans people are chosen subject to a multitude of considerations including family wishes, the desire to keep the same initials or to have a gender-neutral name (Steinmetz). At first glance, the mimetic theory for naming offered by Socrates in response to Hermogenes provides a useful model for trans naming conventions. If to Socrates, 'a name is a vocal imitation', to be truly mimetic, they should represent how we feel and act now, not how are parents did before we were born (458). To change one's name to fit one's gender is a retroactive, inverted mimesis, constructing the referent in and through the representation. Yet, because Socrates mystifies the act of mimesis

into the distant, patriarchal past, he comes to doubt the utility of names in reaching the truth at all. He imagines how 'he who first gave names' must have done so 'according to his conception of the things which they signified' which, necessarily, could have been 'erroneous' (470). Thus Socrates exposes the subjectivity that taints the masculine origin ('he') of his own naming-myth, leading him to abandon names in favour of 'the things themselves' (473). The 'fluctuating' 'fancy' (which, within Plato's patriarchal framework signals femininity), encroaches upon the very narrative that seeks to eliminate it.

De Leon's model (see Introduction) reverses Plato's to reconfigure the name change as an inciting incident for identity construction in which the new signifier constructs a linguistic futurity capacious enough to 'better accommodate our selves' (625). The 'accommodation' metaphor benefits from its non-teleology (we shift between multiple accommodations throughout our lives), opening it to more subtle understandings of linguistic identification. To demonstrate some of this complexity, I turn to Torrey Peters's *Detransition, Baby*, a novel about motherhood and trans life which contains a fascinating example of the intertextual, narrative potential of trans names. One of the novel's central characters is Ames, the ex-lover of the protagonist, Reese, who dated as trans women, only for Ames's life as a woman to end abruptly following a violent attack by Reese's male lover. For much of the novel, Ames lives as a man (having detransitioned) and straddles 'the contradiction that he's trans' while living as a man under a male name (97). His name serves as a palimpsestic representation of his gendered life which attests to his character's narrative incoherence. Peters's novel is structured through a series of flashbacks—in which Ames goes by she/her pronouns and the name 'Amy'— leading up to the birth of Ames's girlfriend's baby. As readers, we assume that Ames has simply reverted to his original name. Yet, notably late in the novel, Peters reveals that prior to transition his name was not Ames but 'James':

> "Her name the first time was James. Then Amy. Now Ames. She didn't change back to her original name." (223)

Peters's staccato sentences and syntactic compression signal the unsure provisionality of the moniker. Narrative contradiction remains fundamental to Ames's character, both in Peters's use of pronouns and in the gender of his names. This speech, made by Iris, who knew Ames as 'Amy', clarifies Ames's history to Ames's new girlfriend Katrina, who has only known him as 'Ames'. While the novel favours the most recent name, Iris continues to use 'Amy', in disbelief of Ames's detransition. The clashing of perspectives between different characters who have known Ames during different periods of his life dramatises the relativism of Hermogenes's position. Within de Leon's 'accommodation' metaphor, Ames is nominally nomadic, reluctant to abandon his life as 'Amy', yet unable to revert to 'James'.

Both Iris, who knows Ames only as 'Amy', and Katrina, who knows him only as 'Ames', could ascribe naturalness to their respective linguistic tokens. Yet, if Ames has a 'biological name' it would, surely, be 'James'. Peters's narrative uses the fragment, 'Ames', which is, importantly, the pluralised form of 'name' without the 'n'. Iris later explains, 'the way she picked her names is so psychologically indiscreet': his name resists the teleology of a reversion to 'James' while uneasily signalling an impossible desire to be 'Amy' again (223).

In this way, *Detransition Baby* attends to an idea in Sandy Stone's 'Post-transsexual Manifesto', a seminal essay which deconstructs the tradition of memoirs by trans women such as Christine Jorgensen and Jan Morris. She critiques how these narratives suggest that trans people, upon the moment of gender reassignment surgery (then the narrative marker of a 'sex change') 'go from being unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women' (Stone, 225). They allow, 'no territory between' the genders and thus consolidate them as utterly distinct. This leaves an aporia which reifies the gender binary as separated by an, if crossable, unintelligible, prelinguistic gulf (Ibid). In the face of this, Stone envisions a future in which we can contend with

‘the *intertextual* possibilities of the transsexual body’ (231). In Peters’s novel, Ames’s name is literally intertextual, shifting between ‘male’ and ‘female’ (in past and present) and is consequently ‘indiscrete’: a crossing and a construction of identity in and through time. By including experiential narratives of identification, such an approach shows greater sensitivity to the identifications of trans names than Paul B. Preciado’s suggestion that we take two names from ‘traditionally male’ and ‘traditionally female’ registers in his *Countersexual Manifesto* (32).

While Socrates’s doctrine of the forms conflicts with such depictions of transness, scholars have nevertheless located a progressive potential in *Cratylus*. Rachel Barney’s interpretation has distinctly trans-inclusive possibilities in its claim that Plato only ‘reject[s]’ Hermogenes’s argument because ‘it is perniciously uncritical of our established naming practices’ (146). Hermogenes’s conventionalism allows for an initial ‘act of baptism’ which ‘establishes a norm for subsequent use’ but which is ‘only authoritative until the next’ because ‘a change of name is a new baptism and establishes a new norm’ (150). In dispersing authority over time, rather than fetishising the ‘origins’ of language, Barney’s interpretation recognises the agency of subjects to name themselves, rather than valorising the original namer.

To end by way of an anecdote, in May of 2022, I attended a book signing for *Detransition, Baby*. Its author, Torrey Peters, asked me a question: ‘who should I make it out to?’. I asked her not to make it out to anybody, making the overall exchange a little awkward (I’m between names). To decide, it seemed, would erase the intertextual potential of the name. The exchange left me in an aporia much like Socrates’s doubt for the efficacy of names at the end of *Cratylus.* Yet this is the irony fundamental to the dialogue: to believe that names ‘matter’ does not necessitate a top-down linguistic prescriptivism. In fact, names tend to matter a great deal more not only when they shift in their meanings, but when their transformations denaturalise the hard-and-fast distinctions that language has turned into an illusory, and ultimately exclusionary territory.

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