The Function of a Name

by Rebecca Kizner

In *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains,* Thomas Laqueur states that "naming marks the entry into not biological, but into human life." Until given a name, a baby is merely human offspring with no "status of personhood" (Laqueur 367). Throughout life, a person's name represents their entrance, and continued standing, in society by providing recognition of their existence as an individual within the collective. In death, names remain a representation of the deceased by assigning a pseudo-personhood to the body they left behind and by creating a space in the social sphere for their memory. The loss of a name on the other hand is a fundamental loss of the identity of the dead, a denial of existence. Without a name, a person is lost to the unfathomable magnitude of "the dead." It is the preservation of the names of the dead that answers the question "who are the dead?", validating the deceased's presence in society as a name and preserving their existence in history both as an individual and as part of a group. In this sense, a collection of names as a memorialization for the dead is vital to their continued identity and a testament to the fact that "to become nameless…is a profound and deep kind of death: mortality in flesh and in memory" (Laqueur 373). In memorial settings, names serve to both return humanity to the dead and to carry on their memory within society, recognizing their life and death in equal measure. Consequently, names can be used to return lost identities, serve to reconstruct history, and to represent the deceased within society.

In Laqueur's words, the Holocaust was "the world's limit case of erasure" (Laqueur 432), destroying the lives of nearly six million European Jews. In remembrance of the Shoah[1],

[1] The Hebrew name for the Holocaust, it is derived from a biblical work meaning 'destruction' and refers specifically to the systematic persecution and elimination of European Jews, rather than the Nazi's atrocities as a whole.

memorials have been constructed around the world, commemorating the dead in a variety of ways, from simply lighting six memorial candles, to a more intimate process of collecting the names and narratives of the deceased for a permanent memorial. Laqueur focuses on the case of *French Children of the Holocaust*, a book compiled by Serge Klarsfeld containing the names and narratives of some 11,400 French children deported and killed (Laqueur 436). Rather than state the simple facts of name, birth date, and deportation date, the book contains "letters, lists, ancillary details of apprehension, transport, and arrival at camps," with accompanying photographs of each victim. Names by nature denote personhood, confirming their status as a member of society. Thus, in compiling these names the book seeks to affirm their death, saying "here are the children who are dead, this is proof that they were once alive," and paying tribute to those lives cut short.

By telling their stories, however, the name is informed by its circumstance. The inclusion of a picture evokes a deeper sense that while a name represents a person, there is more to an individual than their existence as a human. It is confronting to be met with a long list of murdered children, each name referring to both life and death, but it is even more so to be met with the faces that remind the reader that they are not just people, but children. The combination of pictures and names becomes a poignant reminder that not only individuals were lost, but the future of a people. In telling their stories, the author seeks to provide a narrative for those who are unable to tell their stories, as "stories… can help fill depth gaps in a way that numbers and statistics cannot. One person's well described life and death can sometimes move us more than the mere mention of thousands of deaths can" (Danticat 40). By including a picture of each child, the book captures a visual narrative depicting a moment in a life cut short, preserving that moment and forming a physical space where that moment is a memorialization of their lives. "If

the photographs and names are signs of the dead, the list and chronology explain how they came to be that way" (Laqueur 443). This book in essence uses names to not only declare who is dead, but to vividly depict the violence and anguish endured by these children through the contrast of their lives in the stories and pictures, and their deaths in the presence of their names on the list.

In a chapter of his book titled "The Age of Necronominalism," Laqueur examines *French Children of the Holocaust* , another historical compilation of those otherwise disappeared, children destined to be unknown to the world, exterminated without a trace like many of the holocaust victims. Like the immense database at Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Center, where nearly three million names have been collected and archived, *French Children of the Holocaust* provides a historical review, forcing these deaths to be concrete in history and thus prohibiting the denial of their identities. In this way, their names also represent a kind of final resting place, as these children left nothing behind. Without a funeral, grave, or collected ashes, their names serve as placeholders for the unfound bodies. As Laqueur states, "The utter disappearance of these dead was intentional and naming them has become a hopeless and heroic act of recovery, of reincorporation of these dead into the narrative and into life, a restitution of identity, a funeral of sorts even if the disappeared body is never found or has been rendered unfindable" (433). Thus, the names and narrative inscribed in this book are a testimony to the children's lives as unlived, creating a permanent resting place that forces the reader to reconcile their life with their death.

While a memorial for the dead can take many forms, building a memorial of any kind requires knowledge of who is dead. Without a description, idea of the victims, or names, there is no memory to entomb, and therefore no way to memorialize the victims other than as victims of a tragedy. In Francisco Cantu's "Clearly Marked Ghosts," the author discusses a Humane

Borders map of the southern US-Mexico border, where deceased migrants were represented on the map as a sole red dot. Each dot, identical in size, shape and appearance, differed only in location on the map. In an attempt to understand and internalize its weight, the author "struggle[d] to find language that could acknowledge the dissociative nature of the map and recognize, at the same time, the reality of the plotted deaths, the individual and cumulative weight of each red dot" (Cantu 3). The map itself, screaming "Danger!" at others wishing to cross the border, represents both the extinguishing of lives and their purpose as a ghostly deterrent, solidifying their presence not only as individuals lost to their quest, but as a collective presence looming over all who attempt the journey (Cantu).

As a monument to the people who lost their lives, the dots lack all individuality, removing the humanity of an identifiable place of death, replacing it with the reality of the greater issue: the number of dots on the map. Without names there is an inherent redirection from "here are people who died" to the larger issue of, "see[ing] those who have died crossing the desert in the same way that policy makers and law enforcement agents might see them, the way they are seen by militiamen and human traffickers--each indistinguishable form the next" (Cantu 11). Despite the fact that each migrant had family, a life, hopes and dreams, this memorial conveys nothing of their life. Rather, by memorializing these people as dots on a map, attention is drawn to the implication of the dots, the circumstances in which they died. Without their names, no one migrant is different from any other. This eliminates their identity, and removes their memory from a place in society to the mystery of obscurity.

While the original map does not include names, there is an online version that allows the user to interact with the dots, showing information like name, place of birth, date of death, and so on, provided the information was available (Humane Borders, Map of Migrant Mortality). As

much as the hard copy map with red dots alone deprived the dead of their narrative, this alternative form partially grants it back. In addition, it carves a space online for the migrants, otherwise confined to the authority's narrative through a warning map. However, like the man whom Cantu stumbled upon on Indian Route 23 (Cantu 8), the individual's presence is only remembered by those who knew the person. For one looking at the map, there is no indication of tragedy, only empirical knowledge of a person ceasing to exist, a stark disassociation between the reality of death and the existence of the potentially nameless, faceless red dots. Where known, their name and place of death represent the totality of the person, for the unknown, the marking of a location is the only indication of life. Without a name and a place, the dead have no history, no future, and no representation in society. Thus, "more important than mapping the deaths of border crossers is preserving the names of those who have died and finding the right ways of holding them in our minds" (Cantu 12). It is therefore the preservation of humanity with a name and a place, and recognition of a life and death that ultimately forces us not to forget, and to keep their existence alive.

Like the database at Yad Vashem and the Humane Borders website, there are many memorials residing in wholly digital spaces. Through social media, the 21st century has seen the rise of mass communication where large events are publicized, and mass deaths can be memorialized from all corners of the world, giving them a more accessible and public presence. One such example is an online memorial to the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, called *My Sandy Hook Family*. On the front page of the site, the names of the children are written in a calligraphic hand, spaced to form a heart. On many of the names is a link to a page with information about each child—a picture, birthday, and a description of their likes, dislikes, and personality. Some, however, have no link, and are simply a name on the wall. The

use of names evokes the idea of a traditional headstone, basic identification with a distinct design. The idea of "[n]aming the dead—more generally, building an monument that bears an epitaph—grows out of the feeling that there is 'some part of our nature that is imperishable'" (Laqueur 372). Unlike the previous examples, however, this memorial is auxiliary to the family's tradition, and this is inevitably not the only place where the children are remembered. Thus, this memorial serves to create a space for the masses to see. It conveys the sense that while these people are dead, their deaths represent something larger, something that should not be forgotten and should not be repeated.

In his definition of names, Laqueur defines three interpretations of a name—one with "no connotations . . . only a denotation," a "mnemonic that . . . tells a story of the departed dead," and a name that "refer[s] to that person in all places and times, presumably forever into death" (369). In each definition here, a name carries a person's identity, a testament to their existence within the bounds of society. The first memorial, *French Children of the Holocaust*, uses names, pictures, and narratives to memorialize the dead (Laqueur 438-9). The second lacks names, rather using indistinguishable symbols, while the last one uses names to "offer an opportunity to communicate with our families and honor our loved ones" (*My Sandy Hook Family*, "About Page"). Each definition of a name represents an aspect of the names of the dead in these memorials. In its most basic form, a name is a tool used to refer to a person, both in the person's presence and among others, solidifying a placeholder for that person in society. After death, this name retains its purpose, serving as a label for memories of the deceased and as a reference to their life. The vast majority of collected Holocaust names, *French Children of the Holocaust,* and the Humane Borders Map all use names to denote the dead, but the Sandy Hook memorial and *French Children* additionally use their names to tell a story. Every memorial, however, uses

names to preserve the memory of the dead, an attempt to preserve their placeholder, the remainder of their existence "forever into death." Thus, names can be seen as a central part of memorializing the dead, preserving the deceased's first and last possession--their calling card. In life and in death, names serve the same purpose, to establish one's place in society. As put by Laqueur, "The claims of the names of the dead are parallel to the claims of the names of the living"--to be a part of the social sphere, creating history, and having a meaningful life (445-6).

The names of the dead, ultimately, serve to represent the deceased within society. Whether by assigning a name the task of memorialization, or by confirming the existence of their lives, whether for a political or personal purpose, or for a collective or individual memorial, names are an effort to never forget, and to preserve the people who can no longer preserve themselves. On this Laqueur states, "Naming… is an act of redeeming the… past" (432), providing the family left behind and society itself with a testament to the person's existence. Therefore, names, as a human construct, define the idea of memorial as the ability to specify the people or groups that should be remembered. This both forces us to see that each and every person, now dead, led a life and that their humanity and their influence in life does not end with death.

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