When the Old Names Fail Us
Poetry Craft & Criticism

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Synopsis: Language evolves. Words both gain and lose power with social movements, cultural expectations, and personal transformation. Sometimes vocabulary evades inspiring a search for expression to hold all our meanings. In this panel, four poets will consider the role of poetry in the process of naming and renaming as personal, social, and cultural evolution demands shifts in how we speak about ourselves and contemporary themes.

Value: Over the past few decades Americans have experienced an eruption of new labels and categories for gender identities, race, historical narratives, etc. The old names simply don't work anymore as we seek more equitable and just identifiers and language. Poets are often on the cusp of these political moves, using metaphor and creating whole new words to relay the truth of an experience or likeness. This panel will explore that grappling and editing, from the personal to larger social contexts.

Agenda: Panelists will introduce themselves; then, each poet will read one of their own poems, a poem that best represents how they have used poetry to "name" or "rename." Each will reference the personal, social, or cultural context for their poem and how old words or the absence of words motivated a search for new language and identities. Audience will be given an opportunity to consider craft options for discovering names and ask questions of the panelists.
INTRODUCTION

I think that, to start this, I’m supposed to quote someone famous—someone who has shared a profound idea on poetry or identity. But I couldn’t think of anyone to quote, and my need to quote someone merely amplifies my impulse to be situated in a context, which is some of what this panel is about!

Instead, in writing this introduction, I decided to stop and google thumbprints to answer the question: how unique is my thumbprint? Several sites proliferated my feed. I clicked on one by the University of Baltimore in Maryland and was led to an article titled “How did I get my unique set of fingerprints?”! “Your fingerprints began to form before you were born,” it reads, “… and by the time a fetus is 17 weeks old – about halfway through a pregnancy – its fingerprints are set.”

These fingerprints, that form halfway through individual gestation, are quite remarkable. While they are informed by genetics, no two set of fingerprints are ever alike. Their patterns are encoded in the layers of my skin so that, even if my skin is injured and I get a scar, their unique pattern will return. Forensic scientists and law enforcement can use these prints as a sure identifier in case my identity is lost, or they need to apprehend me. There’s no proof that fingerprints do anything more than serve as identifiers, the article says. There is no proof that they aid grip or touch.

In other words, what we have, encoded in our skin, is a secret inscription that speaks you.

This, friends and writers, is what I thought about when drafting an introduction to a panel concerned with naming; because, for me, a poem—and the reason I love the poem—has to do with its power to trouble my impulse toward a label and situate myself (or someone else) too squarely within a specific context. When I sit down to write a poem, the very act of doing so scolds me away from pinning anyone or anything down to a single notion of their whole humanity. Like a fingerprint, it demands my humility. It whispers secret inscription and reminds me I will never grasp, in all my searching and naming, what that inscription is speaking or what it means. It’s just there. I carry it with me. You carry it with you. We carry these mysteries with us.

Thus, language evolves and inspires evolutions. We are all, writers and speechmakers, attempting to fashion precise terminology and communication around identities and ideas. And all we have are a fixed number of linguistic characters to do this. With a desire to be understood within contexts that feel most closely related to our ideal selves, we use them to label identities: transgender, Catholic, black, differently abled, Haitian, veteran, lesbian, Republican, pro-choice, artist. We each, in choosing labels for ourselves, are attempting to situate ourselves within groups of others who accept the same identifiers because their experiences in the world feel most closely related to our own.

I can’t judge whether this is a good or bad impulse. It simply is our impulse and, likely, always will be. But as social and political movements move (as they always have and always will), those who share histories must grapple with the ways that these identifiers create a multitude of helps and hindrances. In gathering groups of like-minded individuals, these identifiers also run the risk of pinning us down to a certain subset of ideas about what it means to be Hispanic, neurodivergent, Hindu, working-class, and straight; and every intelligent person in this room (all of you) knows that not one of us fits perfectly into these fixed orbits.

1 https://umbc.edu/stories/how-did-i-get-my-own-unique-set-of-fingerprints/
So, perhaps, rather than giving in to frustrations over the ways that these labels evolve over time—an easy thing to do—as humans attempt to name and rename their understanding of self, and rather than becoming exhausted with linguistic change, we should simply recognize that we do this work because we have a healthy impulse to be known wholly, more fully, than the last set of identifiers allowed. Labels will always change. The ones that frustrated us today will be gone tomorrow. Their ebb and flow are necessary. If stopped, the stagnant energy becomes stigma, and stigma becomes somebody's nightmare or death.

So, we must keep doing this work and, in the interest of the fingerprint, each of us on this panel today are going to relish the value of the poem, specifically, as a social and cultural medium that aids these language movements while also superseding the labels they create. For me, the poem constantly reimagines individual or group identities and what those identities means beyond fixed sets of ideas. It forces all of us out of narrow lanes and tiny boxes. It says, “sure, I’m Asian, but here’s the complicated truth about what that really means for me.” Or “yes, I’m a mom, but don’t get any specific notions about what this suggests I’m made of. “And, “of course, I belong to a world of people who live their lives in a wheelchair, but I’m not my wheelchair. Here’s my poem. This is what I mean.”

I love the poem because it can do this. I wish the poem were more celebrated in our culture precisely because it can do this. We are a nation that loves its label and all the science of choosing those labels and wedding them to political agendas. But, as poets, we can do better. We have the tool. We have the poem. We have the fingerprint. We may not know what it’s all about, but we do know that no one can assign us a group of people with the same fingerprint.

Matt, Maya Lynn, and Octavio, are here with me today to celebrate single poems and how those poems helped each name something in relation to identity, as well as to defy what one might think that identity says about a specific people group or about each of us.
PANELISTS & INDIVIDUAL TOPICS

**Kimberly Ann Priest**, “Missing Labels: Hidden Disability & the Poem as Question Mark”

Kimberly Ann Priest is the author of *Slaughter the One Bird* as well as three chapbooks, with books forthcoming from Texas Review Press & Unsolicited Press. An assistant professor at Michigan State University, her work has appeared in *Beloit Poetry Journal, Copper Nickel,* and *Birmingham Poetry Review*. Find her work at kimberlyannpriest.com.

**Maya Williams**, “The Extension of Gender Identity”

Maya Williams (ey/they/she) is currently the seventh poet laureate of Portland, ME. Eir debut poetry collection *Judas & Suicide* (Game Over Books) is a New England Book Award finalist. They also have a second poetry collection, *Refused a Second Date* (Harbor Editions). Find her work at mayawilliamspoet.com.

**Matt Miller**, “Whatsoever Adam Named Every Living Thing: Challenging Gendered, Colonial, and Anthropomorphic Naming in Our Work”


**Lynn Melnick** “I Was the Human: On Documenting Sex Work”

Lynn Melnick is the author of the memoir, *I've Had to Think Up a Way to Survive: On Trauma, Persistence,* and *Dolly Parton* (2022), as well as three poetry collections, *Refusenik* (2022), *Landscape with Sex and Violence* (2017), and *If I Should Say I Have Hope* (2012).

**Octavio Quintanilla**, “Beyond Words: Translanguaging, Vispo, & the Limitations of Linguistic Experience”

Octavio Quintanilla is the founder of the literary festival VersoFrontera & publisher of Alabrava Press. His poetry collection, *The Book of Wounded Sparrows,* is forthcoming from Texas Review Press. He teaches Literature and CW at Our Lady of the Lake University. IG: @writeroctavioquintanilla
Each panelist will use approximately ten minutes to do the following:

1. Read a single poem of their own and share how this poem served as an act of naming, allowing them to situate self within a specific social context/identity while also pushing past the margins or boundaries of that context.

2. Share their experience within this social context and/or with this identifier and how poetry has facilitated personal narrative or growth.

3. Ask the audience one question in relation to what they have shared that helps the audience members reflect on a similar issue of naming in their own lives.

4. Provide a short craft opportunity (in print) in relation to the poem and the question. (This is something audience members can do on their own in their own time).

There will be a final Q&A after all panelists have presented.