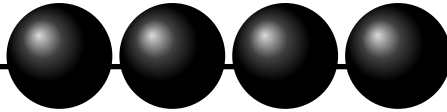


# Turnabouts and deadnames: shapeshifting trans\* and disabled vernaculars

Ren Loren Britton



So here I am  
in the hallway again. Chain motel. Nondescript corporate  
wallpaper  
of a beige patterned variety. Gender is the room  
I see myself walking into, is all the rooms, any room, the number,  
the key

Corresponding, and of course the whole  
world's in there. Of course if I want to talk to almost *anyone*  
I have to go in. Fuck!<sup>1</sup>

This is an aching archive—the one that contains all of our growing  
grief, all of our dispossessed longing for the bodies that were  
once among us and have gone over to the side that we will go  
to too. When I told you that I will probably haunt you, you made  
it about you, but it is about me. The opposite of dispossession

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<sup>1</sup> Ari Baniias, "At Any Given Moment," in *Troubling the Line: Trans and Genderqueer Poetry and Poetics*, eds. TC Tolbert and Trace Peterson (San Francisco: Nightboat Books, 2013), 61.

is not possession. It is not accumulation. It is unforgetting. It is mattering.<sup>2</sup>

Vernacular comes to matter in the dictionary within language and architecture. In language defined as “using a language or dialect native to a region or country rather than a literary, cultured, or foreign language,” and in architecture defined as “of, relating to, or being the common building style of a period or place.”<sup>3</sup> These definitions surface a relation to community (i.e. what people one comes from) and place (i.e. what relations are from that context). Reinventing material-discursive worlds that come to make the vernacular and actual conditions of possibility for trans\* and disabled life is the community of thought, practice, and life that this writing begins from. This means practicing “nothing about us without us” politics,<sup>45</sup> tying ideas of “liberation” to the liberation of all BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) trans\* women,<sup>6</sup> analysing power differences,<sup>7</sup> and upholding non-compliant politics as desirable.<sup>8</sup> Moving from a position spelled out by Disability Justice and following articulations from crip technoscience and trans\*feminism, this article seeks to centre the experiences of those most impacted. Disability Justice is a capacious paradigm that “value[s] our people as they are, for who they are, and understands that people have inherent worth outside of capitalist notions of productivity.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, “access[ibility is] a frictioned project requiring decolonization and racial justice.”<sup>10</sup> Access is the project within which trans\* and Disability Justice coalesce and this why I bring Disability Justice and trans\* theory together when thinking about trans\* vernacular practices.

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<sup>2</sup> Angie Morrill, Eve Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Collective, “Before Dispossession, or Surviving It,” *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies* 12, no. 1 (2016): 2.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vernacular>

<sup>4</sup> Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> The phrase “nothing about us without us” has been used by diverse social movements globally. It has been used widely in the Disability Justice community and communities addressing intersections of Disability Justice and other forms of oppression.

<sup>6</sup> Emi Koyama, “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” in *Catching A Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Cyd Cipolla, Kristina Gupta, David Rubin, and Angela Willey, *Queer Feminist Science Studies: A Reader*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Sins Invalid, *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our People*. (Sins Invalid, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch. 2019. “Crip Technoscience Manifesto,” *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 5, no. 1 (April 2019): 1–34.

Meanings of place, infrastructure, and community in this article swivel into each other through two intersecting and intersectional<sup>11</sup> sites where vernacular languages come to matter specifically: What does it mean to create conditions of flourishing for trans\* and disabled lives in technoscience?<sup>12</sup>

Following vernacular-as-in–deadname and vernacular-as-in–what-did-you-say, this article focuses on trans\*gender deadnames as a praxis of misfitting that matters and responds directly to the problematics of linguistic and actual erasure. Readers will follow a trail through Jara Rocha’s theory of “kingdom dysphoria,” Willow Hayward’s web plugin Deadname Remover, and Danielle Braithwaite-Shirley’s project *the BlackTransArchive*. These examples open pathways through reconfiguring trans\* deadnames and consider how colloquial language when brought next to systems can be elided (omitted or joined) and looped back in to make openings, frictions, and other trails again and again.... and... again... again....and again, and again, and... ..

## Living with (the) dead(names): naming edges

DEADNAME as defined by the Digital Transgender Archive is: “A name that an individual no longer uses or identifies with. Deadnaming is the use or revealing of a person’s deadname without their consent, often with harmful intentions.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 1, 1989: 139–68.

<sup>12</sup> Trans\* as in trans\*gender studies, accounts for the fact that gender as it is experienced is more varied than can be accounted for by binary ideologies. See: Sandy Stone, “The ‘Empire’ Strikes Back: A Post-Transsexual Manifesto,” 1987, first presented at “Other Voices, Other Worlds: Questioning Gender and Ethnicity,” Santa Cruz, CA, 1988; Koyama, “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” 2003; Susan Stryker (ed.), *The Transgender Studies Reader*, (London: Routledge, 2006).

The asterisk is taken to signify an opening of trans\*gender to a greater range of meanings. Avery Tompkins, “Asterisk,” *Transgender Studies Quarterly (TSQ)* 1, no. 1–2 (May 2014): 26–27.

Technoscience is defined as the co-production of science, technology, and political life. See: Sheila Jasanoff, *States of Knowledge: The co-production of science and social order* (London: Routledge, 2004); Michelle Murphy, *Seizing the Means of Reproduction: Entanglements of Feminism, Health, and Technoscience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>13</sup> “Glossary,” *Digital Transgender Archive*, 2021, <https://www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net/learn/glossary>. Accessed November 16, 2021.

Recently I changed my name again. With my first name change I shifted my name from something femme-legible in one context into a more gender-not-normal (as Hannah Gadsby would call it<sup>14</sup>) way of being called. For the past five years, that name held despite movements because it felt like a quick fix, just enough of a differentiation from my original dead-name, a kind of living with the old in a trick of reformulated spelling. For a while this second name was fixed into a sign for me but over time that sign hasn't lasted.<sup>15</sup> My second name hasn't held me through a move to a different language and geography. These significations didn't hold in a new environment. Over time, I realised I never got to really choose a "new name" because of this spelling trick. I went with what began to feel like an easy adaption, making it more convenient on other people, as though this slightly different formulation of my name would give me enough space. I have realised it didn't.

In her article "Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept," Rosemarie Garland-Thompson writes, "Every body is in perpetual transformation not only in itself but also in its location within a constantly shifting environment. [...] The material particularity of encounter determines both meaning and outcome."<sup>16</sup> The meaning and outcome of my name in my new context, what people *here* call me, and the kinds of playfulness that I could allow myself with my name have shifted and become more porous since my move. In this way my name and naming as a practice has come to define an edge of transformation. My current name in transformation is Ren and thank you for reading – it's a pleasure to meet you. In my experience my name has acted as more of an interface that has continued to need updates, maintenance, and care. As my gender, presentation, and context have reshaped, I'm reminded of Ruth Wilson Gilmore's assertion that "edges are also interfaces."<sup>17</sup> Accumulating deadnames as a trans\* person and interacting with bureaucratic systems and digital interfaces that presume name-stability is proving to be a sometimes funny, sometimes painful, and always confronting experience.

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<sup>14</sup> Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*, comedy performance, Netflix, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> cf. Cyrus Grace Dunham, "A Year Without A Name," *The New Yorker*, August 12, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/08/19/a-year-without-a-name>. Accessed November 16, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Misfits: A feminist materialist disability concept," *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (2011): 591–609.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

# Vernacular deadnaming and fixed categories

When unfolding what vernacular language means in relation to deadnaming, I'm thinking about how language is a very quotidian<sup>18</sup> necessity, which becomes violent when filtered through numerous bureaucratic institutional forms. Through my processual transformation, my deadnames haunt me through the bureaucratic forms, (bank, identity, digitised, etc.) cards, (COVID-19, academic, etc.) certificates, and (email, telephone, etc.) digital trails.

These bureaucratic interfaces of my everyday life inescapably produce multiple examples of what researcher Jara Rocha calls “kingdom dysphoria,” defined as “the harm caused on all living and non-living entities as a result of the assignment of fixed categories, taxonomies, species and kingdoms.”<sup>19</sup> Kingdom dysphoria captiously considers the harm caused through binary sex assignment as well as the ways in which that binary sex assignment is carried through the interfaces which presume fixity. The labour that sustains this fixity is immense. Labour that is practiced through the labour of bureaucratic processes themselves, and through the labour of institutional practices that require time, and the labour of the people who require consistence across contracts, banking information, and email signatures. The immense labour it takes to produce a legible singular identity across contexts. This labour, spent on seamlessness of individual identities across systems directly limits the legibility of trans\* experience, which to be clear cannot and should not be contained, and quite literally labours towards checking boxes rather than towards breaking them. Through multiple bureaucratic interfaces where stability is assumed, in-putting a name is to fit it and fix it as though it is permanent. The process of fitting or fixing it to input another name then becomes nearly impossible, for example with visa registrations, health insurance documents, banking forms, or signing a lease or sublet agreement for housing. The bureaucratic check boxes of everyday living do not account for one name,

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<sup>18</sup> Referencing Tina Camp's incredible work *Listening to Images* while thinking about the quotidian is an effort to say that the quotidian is not only about what happens everyday, but further understanding this everydayness as “a practice honed by the dispossessed in the struggle to create possibility within the constraints of everyday life.” Tina Camp, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 4. So to think of quotidian, vernacular trans\* language in this sense is also to consider how to remake this language with less violence and more flourishing possible.

<sup>19</sup> Jara Rocha, 2021 “Kingdom Dysphoria,” *Biofriction*, Hangar. July 22, 2021. Available at: <http://jararocha.blogspot.com/2021/07/kingdom-dysphoria-biofriction.html>. Accessed 16 November, 2021.

and then another. The imagination stops quite quickly in considering what contextual naming might mean when met with digitised, bureaucratized systems. Instead deadnames haunt spreadsheets: a plethora of quietly waiting rectangles labeled with categories fixed within spreadsheets set up to be *once* populated and therefore made absolutely concrete.<sup>20</sup>

## Deadname Remover

Responding to the structurally violent impossibility of fluid fields, the Deadname Remover is a Google Chrome web extension which aims to automatically remove and replace deadnames.<sup>21</sup> This may seem at first to be a trans\*-community-vernacular-tool that would enact some level of protection for trans\* people living with deadnames online, but I have found that it seems to move too fast as this accessibility plugin plugs in new names and re-writes without hesitation. Echoing what Garland-Thompson calls “the relational component and the fragility of fitting” as it shakily erases relational history through its work.<sup>22</sup> One user from the reviews, Evan Rigel, giving Deadname Remover only one star, writes, “worked too well. FAR too well. I was sending a very important email to my doctor and it was changing the text of the email. Everytime I wrote my deadname (which I am registered under) the extension changed it.” They continue, “what if... “what if I hadn’t realized it had ‘corrected’ my name? this extension almost outed me, which

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<sup>20</sup> As researcher Katta Spiel has pointed out in relation to the inclusion of non-binary or trans\* people into data sets: databases themselves are increasingly aware of binary gender bias in data sets. Even with this being known, still most research tends to ignore how gender is assigned depending on assumed race via bias seeping into technologies of so called “gender recognition.” It is still often the case that data sets are developed with material coming from white people in the case of automated gender recognition. Spiel writes, referencing Os Keys, that all of these approaches for “gender recognition” are actually unfit to identify gender. Automated systems perform as though it is possible to look from the outside and determine someone’s gender rather than understanding gender as a self-determined contextual and interpersonal negotiation. Framing gender as though it is possible to “see” what someone’s gender *is* further erases or does not detect non-binary people, which in turn produces more exclusion in the case of gendered databases. This is to say that even when gender is made “concrete” within data sets the violence for trans\* people is not the only oppressive horizon. See: Katta Spiel, “‘Why are they all obsessed with Gender?’ — (Non)binary Navigations through Techno-logical Infrastructures,” *Proceedings of the Designing Interactive Systems Conference 2021*, (June 2021): 478–494; Os Keys, Josephine Hoy, and Margaret Drouhard, “Human-Computer Insurrection: Notes on an Anarchist HCI,” paper presented at CHI May 2019, Glasgow.

<sup>21</sup> <https://github.com/WillHayCode/Deadname-Remover>. There is also a version of Deadname Remover that works with Firefox.

<sup>22</sup> Garland-Thomson, “Misfits”

is DANGEROUS”<sup>23</sup> For Rigel and others (myself included), the problematics of removing deadnames across all contexts produces disappearances that paradoxically could render unwanted visibility. Further, that communications from so many trans\* people become filtered through this plugin begs the worry: What happens when it glitches? And, why is it that the reproduction of fixity, the reproduction of history with the same name and reproduction of present with the same name, is the direction that trans\* people seem to want? Why is reproducing fixed-ness seemingly the only mode of safety when it comes to gendered embodiment?<sup>24</sup> In order to turn on the Deadname Remover, a user must click a miniature trans\* flag. This kind of leaning into trans\* identity to subsequently remove it – you literally click on the trans\*gender flag to erase one’s own trans\* history – produces the idea of a stable past where gender-name-congruency is enabled and simultaneously lets the possibilities and difficulties of vernacular complication become sadly erased.

There must be a plurality of ways of living as trans\*, intersex, and disabled. Epistemic, practiced, and embodied plurality for trans\*, intersex, and disabled people is a reality and without acknowledging this we have nothing to gain, only to lose. However, the alignment of an identity category (represented by the trans\*gender flag) tied to fantasies of “removal” like the Deadname Remover proposes to create a kind of fitting into a rectangular spreadsheet logic that must be resisted. Beginning instead from the political standpoint of misfitting, Garland-Thompson claims that “whereas the benefit of fitting is material and visual anonymity, the cost of fitting is perhaps complacency about social justice and a desensitising to material experience.”<sup>25</sup> To use the Deadname Remover then becomes a way to distance trans\* individuals from the importance of anti-assimilationist praxis<sup>26</sup> and at its worst will further disappear us from each other.

Additionally, the privacy practices of Deadname Remover seem not secure enough (as though being Google wasn’t enough): the plugin openly

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<sup>23</sup> Evan Rigel, Deadname Remover User Reviews, Google Chrome webstore, September 28, 2020, <https://chrome.google.com/webstore/detail/deadname-%09remover/cceilgm nkeijahkehfcgfaleepihfbcag?hl=en-GB>. Accessed November 16, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> As is evident with so many trans\* and intersex artists, activists, and academics, fixity and gendered embodiment can be a site of extreme damage. Challenging this paradigm is the current (October 15, 2021–February 14, 2022) exhibition at the Schwules Museum in Berlin Germany, *Mercury Rising – Inter\* Hermstory[ies] Now and Then*, which focuses on the universes and utopias that intersex people have joyfully self-determined.

<sup>25</sup> Garland-Thomson, “Misfits”

<sup>26</sup> Like the ones that Aimi Hamraie, Kelly Fritsch, and Sins Invalid have put forth. Disability justice in their view, points to the “the non-compliant, anti-assimilationist position that disability is a desirable part of the world.” Aimi Hamraie and Kelly Fritsch, “Crip Technoscience Manifesto.”

states that it collects “personally identifiable information” such as name, address, email address, age, or identification number. In the article “Hacking the Cis-tem,” Marie Hicks researches the experiences of trans\* individuals and communities who fought to become legible within the UK welfare bureaucratic infrastructure. Hicks recalls how, “the struggle for trans rights in the mainframe era forms a type of prehistory of algorithmic bias: a clear example of how systems were designed and programmed to accommodate certain people and to deny the existence of others.”<sup>27</sup> With its insecure privacy practices, Deadname Remover runs the risk of re-inscribing the existing algorithmic biases against trans\* people that are proven to already be well written into databases. Deadname Remover gives little hope that to have such extensive information collected by Google would be a good thing – do we really want *Google* to know the deadnames and current names of all of our trans\* kin?

Reading Jules Gill-Peterson on deadnames, she writes, “Trans-inclusion into the terms of the dominant system is not good enough.”<sup>28</sup> Refusing inclusion and refusing techno-fixes leads me to dreaming about what a haunting-of-deadnames could mean. What about deadnames that follow you around because you want them to, what kind of socio-technical environments would need to be set up so that to be haunted would be desirable, welcome, interesting?

## *the BlackTransArchive*

*the BlackTransArchive* is an artwork and archive by Danielle Braithwaite Shirley that “stores and centres Black trans people to preserve our experiences our thoughts our feelings our lives.”<sup>29</sup> When entering the online archive the first page begins with a black screen moving through a digital field that resembles a road, purple text reads: *WE ARE HERE BECAUSE OF THOSE THAT ARE NOT, WELCOME TO THE PRO BLACK PRO TRANS ARCHIVE, THIS INTERACTIVE ARCHIVE WAS MADE TO STORE AND CENTRE BLACK TRANS PEOPLE....* Based on your identity, different pathways are visible and accessible in the online PRO BLACK PRO TRANS ARCHIVE. Options are: 1. “I Identify as Black and Trans”; 2.

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<sup>27</sup> Marie Hicks, “Hacking the Cis-tem,” *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 41, no. 1 (Jan–March 2019): 20–33.

<sup>28</sup> Jules Gill-Peterson, “My Undead Name,” *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, October 5, 2020, <https://legacywomenwriters.org/2020/10/05/my-undead-name>. Accessed November 16, 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Danielle Braithwaite-Shirley, *BlackTransArchive* project page on artist’s website, 2020 <https://www.daniellebraithwaiteshirley.com/blacktransarchive-com>. Accessed November 18, 2021.



“I Identify as Trans”; or 3. “I identify as cis.” In my case, I selected option 2 and navigated through the experience as a white trans\* person. After navigating through the archive for some time, my path lead me to the “dead name burial site.” After arriving to the burial site a character asked me, “You may have a dead name following you, would you like me to bury it for you?” After choosing the option, “Yes, bury my dead name I need it to let go of me,” the screen reads with a message: “Dead name removed, it won’t haunt you anymore.”

I have been thinking a lot about this removal, and thankful for having this option in the context of the really generous *BlackTransArchive*. Conceptualising naming practices as those that need updates, maintenance, and care and then burying a name in the dead name burial site felt like a welcome relief and act of care towards the weight of carrying multiplicity in a context that actively disciplines this. My experience of being deadnamed has become so ubiquitous: every time I travel, open my bank account, check the post box, or apply for anything my name and its permutations unravel. In my access rider<sup>30</sup> I explain that one name is for paying me, one name is for referring to me anywhere public, and now my new name is still spreading yet not incorporated into the doc. Whether I like it or not, I am haunted by my deadnames. While sometimes I luxuriously describe it as a choice to have multiple names following me around, to be honest, if I could change my name easily, I already would have. This haunting is a haunting that is also mattering<sup>31</sup> and it shapes my, and my trans\* friends, interactions with systems, and with practices of vernacular language.

In the zine *Sex Time Machine for Touching the Trancestors* by Julian Carter, there is a description of how trans\* people might age. Chapter three, “Between Before & After (For Jordan)” begins: “It’s odd how queer generations work; one of my housemates is ten years younger than me but he transitioned seven years ago so I’m the baby.”<sup>32</sup> It carries on to discuss kinds of temporal pleating that disrupt predictable generational sequences and practices of naming. In this perspective, trans\* time<sup>33</sup> produces its own stability created through care, relationality, and invention rather than control. Perhaps a trans\* vernacular language that could enact open-ended

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<sup>30</sup> Access Riders are documents that outline disability and trans\* access needs so that institutions can meet these needs and ensure equal access to work. See for example Access Docs for Artists, a resource made by Leah Clements, Alice Hattrick, and Lizzy Rose, <https://www.accessdocsforartists.com/what-is-an-access-doc>

<sup>31</sup> Morrill, Tuck and the Super Futures Haunt Collective, “Before Dispossession, or Surviving It”

<sup>32</sup> Julian Carter, *Sex Time Machine for Touching the Trancestors*, Zine, San Francisco, 1991–2017.

<sup>33</sup> Reese Simpkins, “Trans\*feminist Intersections.” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1–2 (2016): 228–234.

and non-coercive ways would mean to come back to these ongoingnesses of trans\* life again.... and again..... and again... and... again... we would come back to more space for living with ongoingness and and and transformation and again... and again change. and again change. More dead-names haunting us with humour rather than with humiliation.