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## Problems of Identity with the Usurp of Slaves' Names

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### **Abstract**

This article focuses on the way slaves are named in antebellum period of America, with examples from select slave narratives. Various stake holders are involved and their motives played a pivotal role in giving names to new born slave children or in changing the names of grown up slaves. Slave traders, plantation masters, slave kidnappers, slave parents particularly slave mothers and others involved in naming the slaves. Assigning names or changing the names by others than the slave parents had deep impact on the slaves. It is like taking away the

identity of the slaves by force and thereby giving new identities. Early slaves or the first generation of slaves brought from the African continent had names of African origin. Later the plantation masters named their slaves with the names of Greek and Latin origin, particularly with the names of pagan gods and names of Roman army generals. Later biblical names are given to slaves as the Bible is introduced to them. Slaves had to go through a traumatic experience when their names are changed after they grew up. This paper shows how and why the slaves name changed in American slavery and its impact on slaves.

**Keywords:** American Slavery; Antebellum Era; Slave Names; Greek and Latin; Forcing New Names; New Identities.

Slave traders involved in transatlantic slave traders gave new names from their own culture to slaves before selling them in American slave markets. Many slaves not only accepted the names forced on them but passed them to next generation of slaves. Slaves did not know the meaning of the names or the intention of their masters who gave the names. If slave parents had choice to name their children, they preferred the names of their elders, whose names were mostly of African origin. This was done intentionally to hold on to their African identity. Cheryl Ann Cody observes that:

*As parents selected names for their children, they may have reflected religious convictions, cultural antecedents, or contemporary heroes and events. Shifting in naming*

*practices may indicate changes in the value and world view of slaves. Second, the rules a society uses in the selection and transmission of family names indicate the value the parent or the individual selecting the name attached to the preservation of ties to the namesake. (Heuman 300)*

At few places slave parents particularly the slave mothers had freedom to choose a name for their child but there are many incidents where the mothers were not given such choice. Their masters would forcefully take the opportunity to name their slave's child. Names of geographical places were also used to name the slaves. John c. Inscoe observes this in his article:

*Geographical names are also conspicuous among slaves may have originated from an African tradition of including a child's place of birth as part of his name.... Such was also most likely the case with slaves named Richmond, Williamsburg, Albemarle, Currituck James, Pasquotank Rose, and America. Several African names, such as Congo, Barbary, and Africa itself, may also have indicated a slave's birthplace or that of an ancestor. (Inscoe 537)*

Slave masters or the plantation owners used their whims and fancies while picking a name for their slave's child. To show their knowledge on Greek and Latin literature they named their slaves with the names of pagan gods and roman army generals. Names like Cicero, Brutus, Venus, Nero, Calypso, August, Cassius, Plato, Caesar etc, were given to slaves. They gave their slaves such names as an ironical insult on African Americans. Sometimes the slave masters are proud in drawing similarities between southern society and the Graeco-Roman civilizations, particularly their unchecked power over slaves and the very institution of slavery.

Most of the slave holders have an aversion towards their own names, if they come across slaves having the same names as that of theirs. In such cases the slave masters immediately changed the name of the slave by force. This shows the racist feelings getting rotted among the white population from the very beginning of slavery in America. This led to the traumatic mental pain and identity crisis among slaves as their name keeps changing many times in their life. Only a few lucky slaves would carry their names given by their parents to the grave in peace.

Many things inspired mothers while naming their children, like pure African names to remember their African heritage, birth on important days, place of birth, the child's temperance at the time of birth, name of the ships arrived at the port on the day of the child's birth, biblical names, etc. Cheryll Ann Cody reasons that:

*The selection of an African "day-name," for example, would give a child a name used solely by the blacks in the community and would serve also a reminder of an African past. Sharing a kin name was a useful device to connect children with their past and place them in the history of their families and communities. (Heuman 307-308)*

While selecting biblical names slaves always paid attention to pick names. Cheryll Ann Cody observes that, "In selecting biblical names for children, the slaves avoided some names, especially those figures who exhibited deep flaws of character or appearance". (Heuman 322) The slave narratives give evidences and examples on how slave names keep changing at different stages in slaves' life.

Solomon Northup in his narrative *Twelve Years A Slave* mentions about the way slave kidnappers gave new names to the free African Americans who were kidnapped. Mr. Burch sends his human chattel on a ship to his business partner in slave trade Mr. Theophilus based in New Orleans city. As soon as the ship reaches New Orleans, Mr. Theophilus Freeman, the partner of Mr. Burch, comes onto the ship with a piece of paper. He calls out the names of Mr. Burch slaves. He calls for a slave by name Platt and cannot find one with that name. He then calls for Lethe, Harry and other slaves all of them step forward. He then enquires about Platt with the captain who has no idea. Mr. Theophilus Freeman pointing to Solomon, asks the captain who shipped him. The captain answers that it is Mr. Burch.

Mr. Theophilus Freeman forces the name Platt on Solomon on the direction of Mr. Burch. Solomon says Platt is not his name and to that Mr. Theophilus Freeman warns Solomon that he is going to teach him to remember Platt as his name so that he will never forget it again. So, it can be noticed here that slave traders and slaveholders change the names of the slaves as per their will and for their own safety as well. Solomon gets a new name 'Platt' after three decades of his birth. Similarly Mrs. Eliza is also given a new name. Solomon and Eliza are sold under the names given by Mr. Burch, I.e., Platt and Dradey respectively.

Solomon Northup is then sold with his new name 'Platt' to a plantation owner by name Mr. Ford. He ponders about the prospects of his escape and reaches his family. He even thinks to open up himself and share his history with his new master Mr. Ford who is very kind towards his slaves. But Solomon Northup worries that he will be sold further the South, "I would be disposed of as the thief disposed of his stolen horse, if any right to freedom was even whispered." (Solomon 36) It is a peculiar situation for him that he cannot share his original name and identity to any one because it may do him more harm than good. He lives with his new identity for the next twelve years in slavery, with an untold traumatic existence.

At the end of his narrative Solomon Northup meets a kind white carpenter by name Mr. Bass. He tells Solomon Northup that he is tired of slavery and wants to get back to Canada his native place, "If I can succeed in getting you away from here, it will be a good act that I shall like to think of all my life. And I shall succeed, Platt; I'm bound to do it." (Solomon 106) Mr. Bass helps by writing and posting letters to Solomon Northup friends living in New York State. These letters reach his family and they approach Henry B. Northup for help to bring back Solomon Northup back.

Henry B. Northup with permission from the Governor of New York State is asked to go to New Orleans first, but he travels up the red River. On 1 January 1853, he gets down at Marksville and goes straight to the court. There he

meets a gentleman with legal distinction by name John P. Waddill and briefs him. Mr. Waddill offers his services to trace out Solomon Northup. Mr. Waddill asks his African American boy Tom about the whereabouts of a slave by name Solomon Northup. Tom who has many acquaintances around cannot be of any help. As Solomon Northup is known as Platt in slavery, hence they could not trace him.

To that Mr. Waddill tells Henry B. Northup that they too have an eccentric person by name Mr. Bass, a carpenter who is a staunch abolitionist, who is good at arguments but harmless. They immediately search for Mr. Bass and come to know that he is at the landing to travel. Young Waddill and Henry B. Northup hurry to meet Mr. Bass, who is about to leave the place for two weeks. There Henry B. Northup requests Mr. Bass for a private conversation. First Mr. Bass does not agree that he wrote the letter, but after assurance, Mr. Bass opens up and speaks:

*I have done nothing to be ashamed of. I am the man who wrote the letter. If you have come to rescue Solomon Northup, I am glad to see you. I last saw him Christmas, a week ago today. He is a slave of Edwin Epps, a planter on Bayou Boeuf, near Holmesville, he is not known as Solomon Northup; he is called Platt. (Solomon 112)*

Mr. Bass confession solves the mystery and Solomon Northup is liberated.

In William Wells Brown's narrative '*Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive Slave*', his name is taken away and given a new name which he does not like. William Moore, the

nephew of William's master, is taken into the family at a young age. William is the original name of William Wells Brown, and the name is changed to Stanford just because the name 'William' is also part of the name of his master's nephew. It creates a psychological unrest to William Wells Brown but as a slave he is helpless. He had to live as long as he is in slavery with a new name. Slaves are asked to change their names when they are similar to that of their masters. In slavery, slaves are never given freedom to have an identity of their own. Slaveholders have the final say in everything that pertains to their slaves.

In his second attempt to escape to the Free States, William inches closer to freedom; his thoughts occupy much about his future. He ponders about the job that he is going to take. He wants to change his name back to 'William' which his mother gave him than 'Stanford'. He does not like the name Stanford, which is forced upon him. He is sold under the name Stanford many times in slavery. He thinks it will be prudent for him to change his name to 'William'. While walking, he talks to himself and to get used to his original name. It shows how disturbed the slaves are to cope up with new identities given to them by force.

William falls very sick on his way to his freedom; he is saved by an old man by name Wells Brown. The old man Wells Brown asks William whether he has another name besides William. To this, William says, he does not have another name. To this, the old man advises William that he is free and so he shall have two names. William asks the



old man to give a name to him for treating a runaway slave so well. The old man says the following words, "If I name thee, I shall call thee Wells William, after myself." (Brown 46)

William is happy but is not willing to give up his original name William, which once is snatched from him. Now that liberty is within his reach, he wants to assert regarding his name William. To this, the old man Wells Brown agrees and says, "Then, I will call thee William Wells Brown." (Brown 47) Rodriguez comments on William that:

*Assuming the status of a free person, William took his benefactor's name and was thereafter known as William Wells William. Later he dedicated the first edition of his narrative to Wells Brown. (Rodriguez 208)*

Now William agrees and takes his name as William Wells Brown given to him, by his first white friend. He also receives some money from the family that gave him second life when he was seriously ill.

There are few instances where the runaway slaves change their names to conceal their identity till they reached safer places. Frederick Douglass in his narrative, '*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: an American Slave*', says that his mother Harriet Bailey named him 'Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey'. Her parents Isaac and Betsey Bailey are slaves. Frederick did not know much about his father.

Frederick while escaping from Baltimore, he took the name Frederick Stanley to cover up his identity. After his escape Frederick again changes his name to Frederick Johnson. Initially, after marriage, Frederick and Anna went

to New Bedford. In New Bedford, they were treated well by Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Johnson. Frederick came across many people with the name 'Johnson' there and Frederick felt the need to change his name again. Frederick requested Mr. Johnson to suggest a new name. Frederick wanted to retain his first name 'Frederick'. Here Frederick tried to retain a sense of identity by holding onto the title 'Frederick'. Mr. Johnson suggested the name 'Douglass' to him. From then onwards, till Frederick's death, he was known as Frederick Douglass.

Over a period of time certain names came to be known as slave names. Most of these names are of Greek and Latin origin which were given to slaves with an ironical insult by their masters. Even in twentieth century voice is raised against such names. The best example would be one of the world's best boxers Muhammad Ali. His original; name was 'Cassius Clay' which he did like and calls it a slave name:

*Cassius Clay is a name that white people gave to my slave master. Now that I am free, that I don't belong anymore to anyone, that I'm not a slave anymore, I gave back their white name, and I chose a beautiful African one.  
(Muhammad web)*

The debate on the names given by the white masters to their slaves in antebellum period will continue. Further study will help in knowing the intentions of the white masters on one side and the psychological impact on slaves on the other side.

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