Literator - Journal of Literary Criticism, Comparative Linguistics and Literary Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2219-8237, (Print) 0258-2279

'Called out of their names': Naming as documentary procedure

Author:
Wisam Abughosh Chaleila[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of English, Faculty of Humanities, Al-Qasemi Academic College, Baqa Algharbia-Haifa, Israel

Corresponding author:
Wisam Chaleila,
wchaleil@qsm.ac.il

Dates:
Received: 18 Mar. 2026
Accepted: 03 Sept. 2026
Published: 13 Oct. 2026

How to cite this article:
Chaleila, W.A., 2026, '"Called out of their names": Naming as documentary procedure', *Literator* 47(1), a2283. https://doi.org/10.4102/lit.v47i1.2283

Copyright:
© 2026. The Author. Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Read online:
Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Imposed naming, un-naming, misnaming and renaming are central instruments that structure and reproduce racial domination. Focusing on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, this article reads both novels as archives in which enslaved people enter narrative and record only as partial traces, reduced to initials, diminutives, role-labels or an owner's name, thereby disrupting kinship ties and genealogical continuity through ordinary modes of reference and enumeration. Naming and its variants thus function as a documentary procedure: a quotidian classificatory logic whose categories stabilise identity in institutional form and codify persons as property. Departing from readings that tend to treat naming primarily as metaphor or as an index of character psychology, the analysis draws on onomastics, literary theory and historically grounded scholarship on enslaved-naming practices to show how both novels portray naming as a site of agency and counter-archival record-making. This article examines struggles over identity and memory waged at the level of naming itself, in which epistemic control is naturalised and resistance assumes legible form.

Contribution: This article shows how fiction can represent naming as a documentary procedure by which slavery produces legibility, property relations and archival traceability, and it investigates counter-naming as a fragile mode of memory, kinship, identity and resistance.

Keywords: onomastics; memory; neo-slave narrative; identity; kinship; counter-archive; women writers; resistance.

Introduction

As black women writers, Toni Morrison and Octavia Butler demonstrate how racialised and gendered subjects are named, renamed, misnamed or abridged in everyday speech and official record-keeping and how such acts fracture kinship by substituting ownership and status for relation. Both novels are significant not only because they are emblematic late-20th century works of retrospective slavery fiction often grouped under the rubric of the neo-slave narrative but also because their formal techniques unveil how slavery and its afterlives produce legibility. They advance an onomastic argument about how persons are named, recorded, indexed and made administrable, and articulate counter-practices such as inscription, self-renaming, correction and genealogical reconstruction. Moving across temporal frames using speculative strategies such as haunting in Morrison and time travel in Butler, both authors link slavery's protocols of designation to later U.S. systems of recognition and exclusion, depicting how seemingly minor conventions of address help decide who may appear as a person and who is processed as property.

Published after the major judicial victories associated with the Civil Rights era, *Kindred* (2004) and *Beloved* (2006) return to slavery from within a moment newly attentive to the administrative procedures, records, classifications and ordinary conventions of reference that had long sustained racial hierarchy. The afterlives of these procedures are evident well beyond the novels, particularly in contemporary research on commemorative naming and in onomastic activism, both of which form part of coordinated efforts to challenge and reform naming conventions that sustain erasure and injustice. In this respect, scholars and activists question and defy traditions that erase Indigenous ties to land and limit the public memorial presence of people of mixed race and women, and they scrutinise public toponyms that honour racist figures or perpetuate racial harm (Alderman, Inwood & Stack 2024:2; Mansfield & Lambrinou 2021:38). As they structure social worlds by distributing visibility and determining whose histories are publicly legible, names are far from neutral identifiers.

The archive of slavery makes this violence exceptionally blatant. Enslaved people were often recorded by using imposed substitutes, descriptors and abbreviated designations that overwrote

kinship and personhood in the act of inscription. Geneva Smitherman's (1994:75) account of being 'called out of one's name' provides a powerful idiom for this process: the phrase refers to the insult of assigning a derogatory label or imputing criminality, but in relation to slavery's documentary regimes, it also denotes a longer history in which racial classification was naturalised in mundane modes of address. Scholarship on black language and raciolinguistics shows that naming, misnaming and imposed renaming are exercises of social power over public recognition. Smitherman's work on colonial white usage that collapsed 'slaves', 'niggers' and 'negroes' into near-synonymous categories demonstrates how racial designation and legal condition were fused in Anglo-American systems of classification (Smitherman 1977:35–36). Charles DeBose (2005:14) maintains that naming and address are questions of communal recognition: shifts among labels such as mixed race, negro, black, Afro-American and African American chronicle continuing conflict over how black people are publicly identified. His discussion of 'status planning' concerns deliberate efforts to shape the public standing and institutional legitimacy of competing group labels, revealing a gap between official nomenclature and vernacular self-understanding DeBose (2005:75). Mary Bucholtz (2016:274-276) likewise illustrates how ordinary-seeming acts of identification can normalise inequality even as they leave limited room for refusal and self-definition.

Other research on slavery has shown that naming is a complex and uneven field whose meanings depend both on the agent of naming and on the archive's capacity for preservation. Handler and Jacoby (1996:685, 688–692) argue that names listed in plantation inventories, slave lists, advertisements and legal documents can disclose kin networks, lineage, adaptation, resistance and creolisation, but their evidentiary force depends on who selected the name and under what conditions. Inscoe likewise suggests that although plantation documentation often obscures authorship, enslaved parents in the Carolinas frequently named their children themselves, preserving and adapting African onomastic traditions despite archival distortion (1983:529–547).

Yet archival recovery is conditioned by the terms governing how enslaved people were recorded in the first place. Jennifer Morgan (2018:4, 9) shows that enslaved women often entered colonial documents through relational descriptors, 'a negro woman belonging to […]', that withheld singular identity despite the mobilisation of maternal status under *partus sequitur ventrem*, the rule by which a child inherited the mother's condition and thus became inheritable property. Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (2015:26–33) study of archival silences explains why such absences are structural rather than accidental: power governs nearly every stage of archival formation, from source production and archival assembly to the later retrieval of archival materials and the narratability of history. Naming is therefore inseparable from administrative legibility, helping determine whether persons are recorded as kin, subjects, property or little more than an archival remainder.

Although this scholarship has shown that naming is deeply implicated in domination, less attention has been paid to how neo-slave narratives approach naming as a recurring instrument of domination under slavery. *Beloved* and *Kindred* make this function especially discernible: un-naming, truncation, imposed surnames, possessive formulations, kinship substitutions and other administrable conventions of reference displace affiliation from the enslaved family onto the enslaver's line. Their counter-practices, including correction, self-naming, inscription and genealogical reconstruction turn names into fragile sites of memory and survival. This article therefore examines personal names, kin terms, role-labels and related modes of reference as documentary acts by which domination and resistance become legible.

Un-naming, misnaming and self-naming

The novels convert this historical struggle over naming and classification into conflicts over recognition. *Kindred* makes the connection explicit in its title: kinship depends on names that can be remembered, transmitted and followed across generations, but plantation power repeatedly tries to overwrite those relations. *Beloved* likewise asks what remains when personal and familial names have been fractured, reduced or displaced. In both works, naming determines whether a person can be recognised through kinship and memory or absorbed into the categories of property administration.

Recent work on slavery's archives describes naming as an administrative shorthand for 'remembrance, connections, relationships, and identities' (Hawthorne et al. 2025:1). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988:102, 306) account of epistemic violence clarifies the stakes: dominant discourse can render subaltern subjects knowable only on terms that foreclose self-representation. In *Beloved* and *Kindred*, imposed designations shrink people to sanctioned roles, whereas counter-naming and narration contest who has authority to define a life and preserve its relations.

Such tensions reappear in the novels' name-scenes, in which the master's renaming emerges as an initial act of domination: 'In every slave society one of the first acts of the master has been to change the name of his new slave' (Patterson 1985:55). *Kindred* follows Dana Franklin, a black writer living in California in 1976, who is repeatedly transported to an antebellum Maryland plantation when the life of her white ancestor, Rufus Weylin, is endangered. Dana must preserve Rufus long enough for her own family line to exist despite the plantation's attempts to classify her according to the racial categories of slavery. Her movement between 20th century California and 19th-century Maryland therefore places two incompatible systems of recognition in direct contact. On the plantation, Dana's education, marriage and

modern legal identity do not prevent white characters from treating her as an enslaved black woman. The repeated address 'girl' is not merely insulting; it fixes her within a racialised hierarchy that makes possession and coercion appear socially intelligible.

Rufus's treatment of Alice Greenwood further exposes the power to define relationships in language. Alice, a free black woman when Dana first encounters her, becomes increasingly vulnerable to Rufus's attempts to control both her body and the terms on which her relationships are defined. Dana, meanwhile, retains the name Dana Franklin, but the continuity of her name does not secure continuity of status. Butler thus distinguishes self-identification from institutional recognition: Dana knows who she is, yet the plantation order repeatedly assigns her a position that overrides that knowledge. Saidiya Hartman's (2008:3) account of archival 'terrible utterances', including invoices, account books and death records, illuminates the documentary environment surrounding this process. The records speak in place of the enslaved, document commodification, and participate in what Hartman (1997:19) elsewhere calls the 'fungibility' of enslaved people, their conversion into interchangeable units of value. Butler's naming passages dramatise the same conversion at the level of ordinary address.

Beloved develops a related structure of seriality and instrumental naming. Morrison's novel, set after the Civil War, follows Sethe, an escaped enslaved woman living at 124 Bluestone Road with her daughter Denver while the household is haunted by the daughter Sethe killed rather than allow her to be returned to slavery. The novel reconstructs slavery through fragmented memory, haunting and communal remembrance, making unstable names part of its account of historical survival. Paul D's appended initial recalls inventory conventions by distinguishing him from other enslaved men at Sweet Home, who share the name Paul. Sixo's designation similarly resembles enumeration, aligning personal identification with the plantation's procedures of counting and measurement. Stamp Paid's chosen name declares a debt settled and repudiates the old accounting of slavery. Baby Suggs acquires the designation 'holy' through communal recognition after freedom, relocating authority from plantation classification to the black community that acknowledges her preaching and care. The examples establish competing systems of naming: one classifies people for administration; the other preserves relation, memory and communal standing.

The distinction is clear in the novel's numerical and relational naming forms. Sixo's name reads like a number and has been interpreted as signifying 'Six Zero' (Lyles-Scott 2008:25), exposing the proximity between plantation naming and reductive arithmetic. His beloved, however, is remembered as the 'Thirty-Mile Woman', a designation that encodes attachment through the distance Sixo travels to see her. The first compresses identity into countability; the second preserves a relationship by encoding remembered effort and place. Morrison develops another counter-archival form in Sethe's 'Beloved' headstone, in which a single sacred word stands against the lists, measurements and prices that otherwise regulate enslaved life. Butler develops a related but distinct strategy in Dana's family Bible, in which names are reconnected genealogically. Keeping these examples distinct shows how each novel responds to archival rupture: Morrison turns inscription and communal remembrance against enumeration, whereas Butler uses genealogical reconstruction to re-establish kin relations that plantation hierarchy has obscured. Alice's declaration, 'I'm Alice […] Alice Jackson now' (2003:119), similarly constitutes a fragile claim to kinship and personhood against Rufus's imposed terms of affiliation. Captivity's "grammar" stresses that slavery reorganizes the standards of kinship and subjectivity themselves, so that the enslaved are recast as positions and roles that displace conventional tokens of personhood (Spillers 1987, 65–81).

Behind the name

In *Kindred*, character names operate as indices of identity and historical position rather than as arbitrary labels. Butler's onomastic choices place characters within racialised hierarchies that traverse past and present, presenting naming as a political system that can fix social meaning from above yet also preserve memory and resistance. Biblical allusion intensifies these politics of naming and memory because the novel's genealogical episodes engage scriptural genealogy as a means of tracing lineage under slavery. Drawing on biblical overtones that link naming and dominion, slaveholding power operated through a claimed right to "name, un-name and to rename" enslaved people: an assertion of possession that treated persons as ownable objects and made identity subject to a master's discretionary control (Romigh 2021:20). Un-naming, in this account is a refusal to recognize African self-designations and the forced substitution of personal and kin names "rich in history and cultural significance" with imposed replacements, a process Romigh frames as severing cultural and genealogical attachment (Romigh 2021:21). At the same time, the archive registers the incompleteness of this erasure. Instances in which documents record a plantation name alongside a self-asserted name, such as a captive who "calls himself" one name while "the name given him here is" another, show how un-naming and renaming depended on coercion and remained unstable with respect to address, even when the written record privileged the imposed identifier (Romigh 2021:25).

Dana's name carries associations that align with her narrative role as writer and witness. In Persian, the name means 'wise' or 'learned' (The University of Texas at Austin 2026). In a resonant biblical context, 'Dana' is a feminine form of Dan or Daniel (Hanks, Hardcastle & Hodges 2006, s.v. 'Dana'). The semantic field accords with Dana's position as the figure who survives slavery's machinery and makes it intelligible through observation and narration: 'Edana […] Most people call me Dana' (Butler 2004:31). Butler's time travel sharpens the point by forcing one person to move between incompatible

naming systems, so that Dana's insistence on her name, literacy and narration functions as a survival technique that secures continuity amid violent temporal dislocations. The accumulated meanings sharpen the irony of her name: associations with wisdom, judgement and succession accompany a figure whose status the plantation repeatedly attempts to redefine.

On another level, these meanings also reinforce Dana's function as author and ethical judge, as she is compelled to navigate and narrate moral decisions under coercion. Additional naming traditions further expand the name's connotative range. 'Dana' recalls the mythological Celtic goddess Danu, linked to fertility (Emick 2017:31), and is interpreted elsewhere as 'bold' or 'daring', with historical connotations of succession and inheritance (Arthur 1857:111). The resonances underpin the novel's ancestral urgency, because Dana's involuntary returns are structured around safeguarding lineage under slavery. Such meanings can thus be refigured genealogically: Dana inherits not a throne but a burdened lineage, becoming a successor to survival rather than to property or rule. Her ability to carry her full name while moving through the antebellum South can therefore be viewed as a quiet refusal of the system's tendency to compress identity into a single usable label. Her surname, Franklin, enhances this paradox by summoning civic ideals of freedom and their canonical figures, yet her returns disclose the violence those ideals have historically accommodated. Kevin Franklin's stable full-name form accentuates the asymmetry: his nominal security persists in spaces where Dana's personhood is constantly shadowed by the archive of slavery.

Rufus's name, in turn, condenses the proximity of desire and coercion within the plantation order. His name originates in Latin usage, meaning 'red-haired', a Roman cognomen originally denoting physical traits (Arthur 1857:12). In the novel, the name is less significant for symbolic interiority than for how Rufus Weylin embodies the hereditary transmission of property and coercive authority under slavery. Butler's narrative renders that 'redness' metaphorically overdetermined, accruing overtones of blood and volatility that track Rufus Weylin's oscillation between dependency and brutality. More importantly, 'Weylin' is best conceived as a planter-name: inheritable and property-linked within a planter order that disrupts enslaved kinship. Butler further delineates how enslaved characters are socially recognisable by truncated or controlled naming. The denial of surnames for characters such as Sarah, Nigel and Carrie is not incidental; it reveals a system designed to nullify legal personhood and sabotage historical continuity. More specifically, the disparity between full-name white personhood and the largely first-name-only circulation of these enslaved figures exposes how the archive differentially distributes legibility and familial continuity.

The novel also brings into relief the gap between nominal meanings and lived realities under slavery. The name 'Alice' derives from the Old High German Adalhaidis associated with 'noble' meanings, yet it comes to mark a life of coercion and exploitation (Ellison 1992:6). Her surname, Greenwood, similarly evokes rootedness and 'natural' belonging despite slavery's treatment of her life as detachable property. Likewise, the name 'Nigel' has its roots in the Gaelic Niall and is glossed as 'champion' or 'passionate', standing in stark contrast to his subjugated position on the plantation (Evans 1996:80). The names clustered around domestic and field labour reiterate the same pattern of classificatory violence: Sarah's coerced endurance as cook, Carrie's strategic silence and Luke's sale on Weylin's whim dramatise how legibility is tethered to use rather than to personhood. Even where a fuller name appears, it proves to be structurally precarious: Isaac Jackson's named husbandhood cannot secure Alice against Rufus's claims, and the name becomes a trace that the plantation can override by violence and pursuit. With regard to everyday discipline and sexual domination, figures such as Tess, Sam James and Liza reveal the plantation's power to convert interpersonal contact into punishable offences and to turn survival calculations into moralised 'betrayal'. Rufus's sale of Sam, meanwhile, makes a family name detachable from the family it ought to guarantee. The classificatory order also governs Joe and Jude: from birth, children are inserted into a status order in which identity is already inheritably constrained. Such disjunctions suggest one of the novel's central critiques: subjugation and resistance are inscribed in language, and the promise a name seems to confer is continually revoked by the social order that controls recognition.

Kin-centred naming addresses this dilemma by reasserting maternal authority where it is structurally subordinated. Alice's naming of her child 'Hagar' places designation within a system designed to subordinate lineage to ownership (Butler 2004:119). The name 'Hagar' bears a measured resonance with the Hagar of Genesis, an enslaved Egyptian woman banished after her reproductive capacity is commandeered (Gn 16; 21). (Butler 2004:28) activates this resonance when the name appears as a genealogical entry: 'Grandmother Hagar. Hagar Weylin, born in 1831. Hers was the first name listed'. The moment casts naming as both record and assertion: a matrilineal claim that prevails even where personhood is otherwise subordinated to property regimes. Hagar Weylin's placement at the head of the list turns genealogy into a curated counter-archive, carrying continuity across a sequence of names that slavery continually attempts to break and that the narrative repeatedly reasserts.

Morrison's *Beloved* extends similar dynamics by turning naming into a fraught arena of archival praxis. Sethe's name deepens the novel's onomastic analysis by portraying designation itself as an instrument of subjection. As a variant of Seth, Sethe carries the Hebrew sense of the 'appointed' or 'placed' and, in the Genesis lineage, the 'substituted' child born in the wake of loss; this semantic field aligns with the novel's recurrent concern with replacement, inheritance and the violent management of kin continuity. One might also hear an echo of the Egyptian deity Set, often associated with violence and disorder, although this resonance is more suggestive than etymological. Such associations heighten the

atmosphere in which her maternal decisions unfold, where domestic space is continually threatened by upheaval and return. Sethe's unstable designation becomes legible in her fragmentary recollection of origin, where 'Carolina maybe? or was it Louisiana?' collapses birthplace into uncertainty, leaving place-names unable to anchor identity.

Place-names participate in this broader regime of domination. They show how bureaucracy can displace naming altogether: '124' diminishes a home to a number, and its opening characterisation, '124 was spiteful' (Butler 2004:2), turns the address itself into a carrier of psychic history. Similarly, 'Sweet Home' serves as an ironic misnomer that disguises plantation terror behind the vocabulary of comfort and domestic safety, making possession sound like belonging, although the plantation name absorbs enslaved people into its signifying order. The euphemism does more than misdescribe the place: it shifts identification away from kin names and histories towards possession. Denver's question, 'How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can't stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stayed' (Butler 2004:26), pries apart the plantation's comforting vocabulary and its lived reality. Elsewhere, Sethe's mother is not named but 'pointed out' among 'many backs', and Sethe waits for 'this particular back' to turn. Recognition is thus mediated by deixis and bodily fragments rather than kin naming. Even the antelope that Sethe cannot picture materialises as a remainder of pre–Sweet Home memory without a stable referent, an 'invention held on to' when the names of things, people and places have been structurally severed. The passage shows how slavery dismantles the conditions that allow names to attach to persons and origins, substituting guessing and enumeration for lineage. Sethe's own name, with its associations of appointment and substitution, thus comes to signal the precariousness of personhood under regimes that treat designation as ownership.

Conversely, communal acts of naming and remembrance often function as anti-hegemonic archives, restoring specificity and kin recognition where institutional records erase them. In *Beloved*, the most concentrated instance of such archival naming is the headstone itself: 'those ten minutes […] longer than life' (Butler 2004:6) buy only the single word 'Beloved'. The handmade inscription makes remembrance inseparable from the market constraint and bodily violation that govern what can be remembered and mourned. It is a memorial wrested from an order that prices black life as exchangeable matter. Even the title *Beloved* marks the instability of reference. In Sethe's recollection of the funeral passage, 'Dearly Beloved' is heard as though it names the dead rather than the gathered living, underscoring how meaning changes with context, speaker and the circumstances that authorise an utterance. The name 'Beloved' thus persists as a haunted residue: a condensation of loss and unresolved claims that resists fixed reference and functions within 124 not as a label but as a force that reshapes relations. Moreover, the return of the dead child recalls Lazarus (Jn 11.43–44), yet 'resurrection' revives suppressed history rather than divine grace. Sethe's infanticide invokes the binding of Isaac (Gn 22.6), but Morrison overturns the reprieve: there is no angel to stay her hand, only enduring grief.

Within this pattern of designation, the Garners' titled surname exemplifies how 'benevolence' can be a managerial style of subjection that depends on the right to name. The Bodwins' abolitionist 'message' and 'friendship' are likewise unsettled by the domestic iconography of servitude ('a painted boy kneeling on a pedestal. Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words "At Yo Service"') and by philanthropic experimentation that reproduces hierarchy in softened form. Indeed, the novel's internal person-names intensify this indictment of clerical reduction: the naming of Paul A and Paul F reduces individuality to an alphabetical suffix, and Sixo collapses identity into counting, aligning personal designation with the regimes of measurement and inventory that convert lives into controllable units. At the same time, counter-naming and communal address emerge as modes of memory-work: Lady Jones's honorific embodies dignified recognition and communal esteem. In this regard, naming and un-naming reveal that slavery dominates not only by chains and laws but also by lexical regimes that govern recognition and normalise coercion; counter-naming and narration perform memory-work against archival and cultural forces of erasure.

Archival capture and counter-naming

Archival scholarship highlights the documentary arrangements that make this domination durable, emphasising that archives are not neutral repositories but spaces structured by collection and interpretation under unequal relations of power. Diana Paton (2019:155) notes the systematic absence of sources written by enslaved people or from their perspective, and Marisa J. Fuentes (2016:144) shows how enslaved black women were often made recognisable in fragmentary and dehumanising documentation rather than in records of personhood or lineage. *Beloved* and *Kindred* respond to precisely this problem. Morrison reconstructs lives through memory, haunting and communal testimony where official documentation fails; Butler makes Dana's genealogical reconstruction depend on reconnecting names that slavery has separated. In both novels, narrative does not erase archival silence but exposes its production and works against its terms.

Federal census and mortality records for the District of Columbia show how slavery's documentary systems arranged the enslaved people by owner and identified them by age, sex, colour and status markers rather than by personal name, although mortality schedules sometimes restored names unevenly (National Archive 2013) Quantification likewise treated enslaved people as measurable assets (Rosenthal 2019:156). *Kindred* gives this documentary problem a narrative form in Dana's family record. Hagar's position as the first name in Dana's genealogical record

precedes Dana's journeys, which recover the relationships behind that entry. Alice's movement among Greenwood, Jackson and Weylin likewise shows how archival naming can redirect kinship through entitlement. Dana's reconstruction reverses that movement by reconnecting names along maternal lines and through narrated experience.

Ethical theory clarifies why these naming acts are consequential. Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that identity develops through personal autonomy and socially available 'scripts', and Pierre Bourdieu describes naming as 'symbolic power', capable of assigning a 'social essence' when an authorised speaker secures collective recognition (Appiah 2005:22, 172; Bourdieu 1991:105–106, 153). *Kindred* and *Beloved* dramatise those claims in specific acts of naming. Alice's naming of Hagar preserves maternal lineage inside a system that converts descent into a property relation; Sethe's inscription of 'Beloved' creates a memorial where official records offer none; Dana's genealogy reconnects names severed from kinship. These examples clarify why imposed naming can diminish autonomy and why counter-naming is fragile: its force depends on whether a community, record or reader acknowledges the claim.

Michel Foucault's account of discourse further demonstrates how naming acquires authority from historically situated institutions and authorised speaking positions (1978:100–101, 2002:38–39, 80–81, 127). *Beloved* turns that problem into form. On the Georgia chain gang, Paul D and the other prisoners 'garble' words in song so that they can voice grief and longing without becoming intelligible to overseers (Butler 2004:210). Sethe's mother, by contrast, survives in memory only as 'Ma'am', a generic address that permits reference but withholds singularity. In each scene, control over meaning is itself a form of power: speech can preserve relation when it evades surveillance; authorised naming can reduce a person to a role.

Dual names and encrypted continuity

Historical naming strategies reveal a comparable split between official and communal recognition. By the 19th century, Jamaican Akan day-names such as Quashy and Cuffey had acquired pejorative meanings in white usage, although African-derived names persisted within enslaved communities (Handler & Jacoby 1996:702). A name could therefore be racialised by dominant speech or the archive and yet retain kinship and mnemonic value elsewhere. That split helps explain why the novels treat naming as a contested relation among speaker, community and record, not as a stable label.

Runaway notices make the distinction especially evident. Formulations such as 'answers to the name of Katy' and 'says his name is James' recorded names useful to owners and officials, and the wording itself distinguishes command from self-assertion (Handler & Jacoby 1996:693). Plantation records in the South Carolina Low Country show a related tension: administrators sought distinct labels for traceability, whereas enslaved families reused kin names across generations, forcing record keepers to add modifiers such as 'Big', 'Little', birthplace, occupation, colour and age (Cody 1987:573, 575). Parish records likewise preserve dual entries such as 'James Clarke was also called Mingo', evidence that official and communal naming could coexist without being identical (Burton 1999:710, 724).

Beloved translates this historical division into its fictional world. Baby Suggs survives in black communal address through a name sustained by preaching, kin and neighbourhood memory rather than by plantation authority. Stamp Paid converts the language of debt into a self-chosen designation that repudiates the enslaver's moral accounting, whereas the Thirty-Mile Woman survives in memory through Sixo's attachment and travel, without an official surname. Each case preserves a relationship or social history that bureaucratic inscription would obscure.

At the extreme of un-naming, Sethe's mother lingers in memory as 'Ma'am', a label that permits reference but withholds singularity, leaving an occluded African name and language to survive only as a remainder. Morrison reprises this pattern of address when Sethe stands among 'cooing women' each called 'Ma'am'. As earlier scenes in *Beloved* suggest, slavery often mediates recognition by partial, impersonal or generic modes of address instead of stable kin naming. The novel's onomastic politics thus draw on this historical repertoire. Stamp Paid's self-renaming clarifies what is at issue: after coercion forces him to surrender his wife to an enslaver's son as payment for an alleged 'debt', he takes the name Stamp Paid to declare his account settled, refusing the moral reasoning of obligation by which slavery legitimates sexual and economic extraction. He will never again 'owe' anyone anything (Butler 2004:350). The new name can be understood as a precarious claim to autonomy, one that seizes moral and linguistic ground in a system in which names are imposed as tools of domination and carries the injury into public reference, marking how slavery's economic regime penetrates intimate life. *Kindred* stages a related form of erasure by replacement rather than blankness: Alice Greenwood's reappearance as Alice Jackson indicates how coercive domestic arrangements can overwrite an existing identity with a planter-aligned surname.

Post-emancipation naming challenges the assumption that black social identity must remain bound to relations of ownership. Enslaved and freed people maintained surnames that did not necessarily coincide with an owner's name, and post-war naming often followed intergenerational principles that favoured ancestral or earlier family lines (Gutman 1977:230–231). Renaming could also take aspirational names such as 'Freeman' or 'Liberty', or preserve names of personal and familial significance (Alexander 2023:53). This history sharpens the significance of Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs: self-chosen or community-sustained names do more than replace an owner's label; they recast social identity around memory, autonomy and affiliation.

The politics of naming extend beyond the 19th century, and current studies indicate that names continue to function as racial cues in access to employment, schooling and everyday dignity. Under white supremacy, even the label 'black' could function as a way of calling someone 'outa they name', a history underlying later struggles to reclaim 'black' as a chosen collective designation rather than an imposed stigma (Smitherman 1994:12). Although the present study centres the naming of enslaved black people and its afterlives, the effects of these naming practices are evident in the contemporary U.S. labour market. Research on hiring, including audit and correspondence studies and later syntheses, shows that otherwise comparable applicants can receive different call-back rates when their names are read as African American, confirming that a name can carry material consequences in institutional evaluation (Bertrand & Mullainathan 2004:992–993; Quillian et al. 2017:10870).

Other studies suggest that some applicants respond by adjusting name presentation on résumés (using initials, shortened forms or alternate name variants) in an effort to manage anticipated discrimination (Kang et al. 2016:470–472). In education, research on racial microaggressions links regular mispronunciation and imposed nicknaming to protocols that discipline belonging and credibility, whereas public-facing initiatives treat learning and using students' names as a minimal condition of respect (Kohli & Solórzano 2012:441–442; Santa Clara County Office of Education 2018). Scholarship on paid domestic labour also documents how employer address can default to possessive or role-based reference; for example, the phrase 'my cleaning girl' invokes a rhetoric of familiarity that can coexist with marked inequality (Moras 2013:252). The cases reveal the ongoing relevance of the novels' onomastic patterns: subjection can take hold in routine conventions of reference, but counter-naming offers a mode of resistance to that routinisation.

Conclusion

Considering these scholarly conversations alongside an analysis of *Beloved* and *Kindred* leads to the conclusion that naming is not merely descriptive; it is a political and documentary operation that negotiates memory and identity and reproduces social categories within institutions and print culture. Morrison and Butler reveal imposed naming, un-naming, misnaming and renaming as acts that regulate who may appear as kin, subject, property or historical remnant. Their counter-practices, including self-naming, correction, inscription, communal address and genealogical reconstruction, do not simply restore identities that slavery has removed. They expose the institutional conditions that make identities recognisable in the first place. The framework also situates naming as a broader form of social power. Gendered titles, classed modes of address, colonial place-names and institutional naming conventions distribute authority by determining which identities receive public legitimacy and which are subordinate. The specific violence of racialised naming under slavery therefore belongs to a wider politics of classification without losing its historical specificity.

Contemporary cultural texts and screen media present related anxieties about racial legibility and social perception. *Dear White People*, for instance, satirises the institutional habits that manage and police racial recognition, whereas *The Hate U Give* (Tillman 2028) foregrounds the pressure to move between differently racialised linguistic environments. Contemporary studies of hiring discrimination, educational misnaming and commemorative naming likewise show that names continue to carry material consequences in institutional evaluation and public memory. *Beloved* and *Kindred* give this continuing problem historical depth. Morrison and Butler show how slavery's violence entered the ordinary language used to classify persons, how names could determine inheritance, kinship, legal standing and historical visibility, and how narrative could contest those reductions. Naming, in these novels, is a struggle over whose relationships are acknowledged and whose memories survive institutional forgetting.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author, Wisam Abughosh Chaleila, declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

CRediT authorship contribution

Wisam Abughosh Chaleila: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee at Al-Qasemi College (No. REC032026-1061).

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. They do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

Alderman, D.H., Inwood, J. & Stack, K., 2024, 'Taking a longer historical view of America's renaming moment: The role of Black onomastic activism within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)', *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11(1), 704. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03182-3

Alexander, G.S., 2023, 'Name takings', *Northwestern Journal of Law & Social Policy* 19(1), 40–75, viewed 16 March 2026, from https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4641327.

Appiah, K.A., 2005, *The ethics of identity*, Princeton University Press Los Angeles, CA.

Arthur, W., 1857, *An etymological dictionary of family and Christian names: With an essay on their derivation and import*, Sheldon, Blakeman & Co, New York.

Bertrand, M. & Mullainathan, S., 2004, 'Are Emily and Greg more employable than Lakisha and Jamal? A field experiment on labor market discrimination', *American Economic Review* 94(4), 991–1013. https://doi.org/10.1257/0002828042002561

Bourdieu, P., 1991, *Language and symbolic power*, J.B. Thompson (ed.), transl. G. Raymond & M. Adamson, Harvard University Press.

Bucholtz, M., 2016, 'On being called out of one's name: Indexical bleaching as a technique of deracialization', in H.S. Alim, J.R. Rickford & A.F. Ball (eds.), *Raciolinguistics: How language shapes our ideas about race*, pp. 273–290, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Burton, R.D.E., 1999, 'Names and naming in Afro-Caribbean cultures', *NWIG: New West Indian Guide/Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 73(1–2), 35–58, viewed 12 March 2026, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/41849959.

Butler, O.E., 2004, *Kindred*, Beacon Press, Boston.

Cody, C.A., 1987, 'There was no "Absalom" on the ball plantations: Slave-naming practices in the South Carolina low country, 1720–1865', *The American Historical Review* 92(3), 563–596. https://doi.org/10.2307/1869910

Dear White People, 2014, Directed by J. Simien, Lionsgate/Roadside Attractions, Los Angeles, CA.

DeBose, C., 2005, *The sociology of African American language: A language planning perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

Ellison, C.G., 1992, *Our Ellison kinfolk*, C.G. Ellison, Anderson, SC.

Emick, J., 2017, *The book of Celtic myths: From the mystic might of the Celtic warriors to the magic of the Fey folk, the storied history and folklore of Ireland, Scotland, Brittany, and Wales*, Adams Media, Avon, MA.

Evans, C.K., 1996, *Unusual & most popular baby names*, Consumer Guide/Publications International, Lincolnwood, IL.

Foucault, M., 1978, *The history of sexuality, volume I: An introduction*, transl. R. H'urley, Pantheon Books, New York.

Foucault, M., 2002, *The archaeology of knowledge*, transl. A.M. Sheridan Smith, Routledge, London.

Fuentes, M.J., 2016, *Dispossessed lives: Enslaved women, violence, and the archive*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

Gutman, H.G., 1977, *The black family in slavery and freedom, 1750–1925*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, New York.

Handler, J.S. & Jacoby, J., 1996, 'Slave names and naming in Barbados, 1650–1830', *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53(4), 685–728. https://doi.org/10.2307/2947140

Hanks, P., Hardcastle, K. & Hodges, F., 2006, *A dictionary of first names*, 2nd edn., Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Hartman, S., 1997, *Scenes of subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Hartman, S., 2008, 'Venus in two acts', *Small Axe* 12(2), 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1

Hawthorne, W., Roberts, R., Seck, F. & Wall, R., 2025, 'Introduction: The politics and ethics of naming the names of enslaved people in digital humanities projects', *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 19(1), 1–14, viewed 14 March 2026, from https://digitalhumanities.org.

Inscoe, J.C., 1983, 'Carolina slave names: An index to acculturation', *The Journal of Southern History* 49(4), 527–554. https://doi.org/10.2307/2208675

Kang, S.K., DeCelles, K.A., Tilcsik, A. & Jun, S., 2016, 'Whitened résumés: Race and self-presentation in the labor market', *Administrative Science Quarterly* 61(3), 469–502. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839216639577

Kohli, R. & Solórzano, D.G., 2012, 'Teachers, please learn our names!: Racial microagressions and the K-12 classroom', *Race Ethnicity and Education* 15(4), 441–462. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2012.674026

Lyles-Scott, C., 2008, 'A slave by any other name: Names and identity in Toni Morrison's beloved', *Names: A Journal of Onomastics* 56(1), 23–28. https://doi.org/10.1179/175622708X282910

Mansfield, K.C. & Lambrinou, M., 2021, '"This is not who we are": Students leading for anti-racist policy changes in Alexandria City Public Schools, Virginia', *Educational Policy* 36(1), 19–56. https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048211059214

Moras, A., 2013, 'The role of maternalism in contemporary paid domestic work', *Sociology Mind* 3(3), 248–256. https://doi.org/10.4236/sm.2013.33033

Morgan, J.L., 2018, '*Partus sequitur ventrem*: Law, race, and reproduction in colonial slavery', *Small Axe* 22(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1215/07990537-4378888

Morrison, T., 2006, *Beloved*, introduction by A.S. Byatt, Everyman's Library, London, New York.

National Archives, 2013, *Federal census records for the District of Columbia relating to slavery, 1800–1860*, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

Paton, D., 2019, 'Mary Williamson's letter, or, seeing women and sisters in the archives of Atlantic slavery', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 29, 153–179, viewed from https://www.jstor.org/stable/26862208.

Patterson, O., 1985, *Slavery and social death: A comparative study*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Quillian, L., Pager, D., Hexel, O. & Midtbøen, A.H., 2017, 'Meta-analysis of field experiments shows no change in racial discrimination in hiring over time', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 114(41), 10870–10875. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1706255114

Romigh, M. 'Maggie', 2021, 'Oppression, resistance, and empowerment: The power dynamics of naming and un-naming in African American literature, 1794 to 2019', Master's thesis, University of South Florida, viewed 14 March 2026, from https://usf.edu.

Rosenthal, C., 2019, *Accounting for slavery: Masters and management*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Santa Clara County Office of Education, 2018, *What is Your Name Story*? 03 December, viewed 16 March 2026, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AqyR9Ke8Ebg&t=16s

Smitherman, G., 1977, *Talkin and testifyin: The language of Black America*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

Smitherman, G., 1994, *Black talk: Words and phrases from the hood to the Amen corner*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

Spillers, H.J., 1987, 'Mama's baby, Papa's maybe: An American grammar book', *Diacritics* 17(2), 65–81. https://doi.org/10.2307/464747

Spivak, G.C., 1988, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*, pp. 271–313, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, IL.

Tillman Jr, G., 2018, *The Hat U Give,* Twientieth Century Fox, Temple Hill Entertainment, Los Angeles.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2026, 'Grammar & Resources: Abstractions', *Persion Online*, viewed 16 March 2026, from https://sites.la.utexas.edu/persian_online_resources/adjectives/abstraction-of-substantives/.

Trouillot, M.-R., 2015, *Silencing the past: Power and the production of history*, Beacon Press, Boston.