

Created Names

By Sarah Hautzinger --

A small but significant number of interviewees shared stories of creating new, single family names. Most spoke of this as a strategy for a woman to not be erased through marriage and child-naming, while also permitting nuclear families to enjoy a shared, “family name.” Approaches included 1) creating new names through amalgamation; 2) creating new names out of whole cloth. This essay does not address hyphenated names or two, unhyphenated names (refer to essays by those names).

The Lucards, for example, were one of four cases we recorded where a couple created an amalgamated new name at marriage and gave it to their children. Andrea Lucard told us,

When my now husband and I were planning to get married, one of the items of discussion around our marriage was about what we were going to do around our last names. And I had a fairly strong feeling at the time of two things: the first was that we had decided we wanted to have children if that were possible in our marriage. And I had decided that I wanted my children to have the same last name as I did. And that was very much based out of a feeling that I was going to bear them within my body for a nine plus months and I was going to nurse them, and I wanted my relationship with them to be visible with respect to our names. And at the same time was uncomfortable with changing my name to my husband's. That it felt to me like it was too easy to subsume my identity within his, and then the identity within whatever children we might have into the identity with his family.

They polled friends at their wedding, and explored numerous options. In the end, they combined her natal name, “Lucas,” and his, “Howard,” into the amalgam, “Lucard.” She thinks the family enjoys a “Lucard family identity,” often taking the form of joking self-deprecation: “[W]e'll say ‘You know, we're late, because we're the Lucards,’ or ‘The house is messy because we're the Lucards.’” A few inconveniences persist: Malcolm Lucard, especially, still has to carry documentation about his unusual name change fourteen years after marrying. And when their son Ulysses was doing a genealogy project for school recently, he was initially distressed at not being able to find any record of the Lucards.

Andrea stressed that a man changing his name at marriage entails much more difficulty, and personal and symbolic costs, than a woman doing so. Malcolm had been a working journalist for over a decade, so changing his name professionally involved significant sacrifice. Changing names at marriage required a high, and typically *explicitly* feminist commitment, from male partners. Ironically, Andrea says that when people see that she and her husband share a last name they assume she took his, rendering invisible their preeminently feminist option for those who don't know their story.

A similar case was that of Joseph Loyaconobustos, whose parents combined both, whole last names into one, “quite a bit longer than those common last names” surname. Joseph believes the choice was “more ideological than aesthetic,” referring to his mother’s feminism, but finds the length “a minor inconvenience compared to what I think is a great aspect of consolation -- between both my parents and in a larger spectrum, between female and male solidarity within the marriage structure.”

An additional example of amalgamation reported by one interviewee involved a Turkish-descended man, Negri, and a woman whose name was Vanderbeak; they named their children VanNegreak.

Luke and Megan Terra’s name, which both took at marriage and gave to their two children, was created from whole cloth. Both identify as feminists, and Megan taking Luke’s name “felt inappropriate,” Luke told interviewer Sophia Carmen. At the same time, “Her family name didn't feel like the right choice, so we were talking about what other kind of options we had, like combined or hyphenated names, but those all didn't feel right for us.” Then they landed upon the idea of creating a new name, and “That felt perfect. We felt like, as we were getting married and starting a family, that our name signified the creation of our new family.”

How did they go about deciding on the new name?

We asked friends for advice, we thought of lots of different name possibilities, and actually it was kind of tricky because names often hold signifiers of cultural background or family history, and we didn't want to take on an identity that wasn't ours. So we were trying to pick a name that was neutral enough that we didn't feel false, but also one that had meaning that was significant and meaningful to us. I think it was my wife who suggested Terra, and as soon as that came into the picture, it was done. It was exactly what we wanted. For us, the meaning of the word felt perfect, it means 'earth' 'soil' and all of that, it seemed like a really appropriate way to ground a family. It didn't feel like it held any overt cultural implications that we would feel false adopting, and it's not a very common name, so it seemed like the perfect name for us.

The sole down side to their mostly satisfying solution regarded lost content and meaning. “The only sadness I have is that family is really important to me,” Luke said,

and the generations that I came from are important, and last names are the primary way that that's signified. When our kids had projects at school about where your name comes from and where your family is from, it's fun for them but it's also something that doesn't have the kind of connection that a lot of other folks have. So it's not a decision without consequence. But, if a woman takes a man's name when they get married, it's not like that is without consequence either. All the options have repercussions. The awkward moments we were going to have in life were far more preferable to the notion of her becoming part of my family and only that, that one-directionality.

A final variation on the “created name” theme regarded people who had not legally created a name, but used one in practice as a way of mitigating the awkwardness of dual or hyphenated names. The Ferguson Hautzinger family, for example had discussed creating an amalgam name, but found the options unappealing. “Hautguson? Fergzinger?” Sarah Hautzinger told interviewer

Daphnee Chabal. "I actually do it when I sign gift cards or anything; I sign it 'Fergzingers' because it's sort of cute and funny, and it is a *short*, 'family name' -- but it is a ridiculous name, too!"

Though interviewee Gail Murphy-Geiss opted, along with her husband, to hyphenate at marriage, she also spoke about the growing receptivity to creating new names in American culture.

The thing is that naming used to be -- I think across the globe -- a way to identify yourself with this lineage with all these people. And as Americans have moved away from that association. What's more important to us, I think, is who we become, not where we came from. So honestly, the choice we didn't choose, the one of 'Let's pick a word that's meaningful to use,' or 'Let's create a family with a name that's meaningful to us, I think that might work really well. And you can still be related; it's not to say that your kinship bonds are not important to you, but the naming through the ages, that may be a thing of the past. Not soon, but... We're not looking back anymore we're looking forward.

Interestingly, in a research group discussion, the one European in our class spoke much more passionately about the need to preserve the actual content of lineage names than her North American counterparts. We believe the openness, albeit still in a minority, to newly created names might correspond strongly to the relatively shallow roots of American culture itself, as well as the enthusiasm for change, innovation, and in the case of patriarchal "patronymics," reform.

As a final note, one medical doctor who expressed interest in the project commented that we no longer need passed-down names to keep track of our histories: "We have genes!" she said.

But, as another interviewee, Kenzie Mulligan-Buckmiller pointed out, "No one knows your DNA!" Kenzie and her twin sister, Mia, agreed about the difficulty of passing on their six-syllable, hyphenated name to future children, but disagreed about what to do about it. Kenzie imagined creating a new name with her partner, while Mia despaired the confusion and loss of history involved in this emergent practice. Her solution? Probably, she said, she would consider taking her future husband's name, insisting it had nothing to do with "losing her identity" or "being subjugated." Several other people who hyphenated or used two last names with a space spoke of regretting it (i.e. Jennifer Wolfe-Smith); one young interviewee with two, non-hyphenated last names looked forward with certainty to creating a new name, but had not thought through when she would do so: soon, at union or marriage, or upon naming children?

In the end, while there appear to be no simple, transparently "feminist" solutions to the naming quandary, those pioneers who created new names express high satisfaction with their choices.