SOCIAL AND HEALTH SCIENCES

The Politics and Art of Naming and Re-presenting Identity in the COVID-19 Pandemic

Thirusha Naidu[1]

Department of Behavioural Medicine, School of Nursing and Public Health, College of Health Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal

ABSTRACT

The body has long been considered a site of oppression. The pandemic has highlighted this once again as disadvantaged people and those from racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately affected by COVID-19. I argue that language, and specifically naming, is used as a tool to constantly redefine the Other, keeping them in a constantly undefined identity state. This constant redefining perpetually delays any imperative for the oppressor to correct structural oppression, as the oppressed remain unknown. Simultaneously, the oppressed are blamed for their own disadvantages, further detracting from the process of addressing structural disparities. Using language and naming to constantly redefine and re-present marginalised identities as undefined has been a less recognised tool of oppression. This represents a kind of suffocation of identity. Conversely, activists have used language, often the very language that has been used to oppress in artistic forms to protest oppression and suffocation of identity. Artistic forms of protest through language are political and have persisted in the face of structural violence.

Keywords*:* Identity; ethnic minority; black lives matter; arts in health; poetry

[1] Please direct all correspondence to: Thirusha Naidu Department of Behavioural Medicine, School of Nursing and Public Health, College of Health Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal; Email: naidut10@ukzn.ac.za

COMBAT BREATHING…

By Thirusha Naidu

What is the price of a breath?
When the air charged
With the unprecedented use of The Word
'Unprecedented'

Race for a vaccine?
What we need
is a vaccine for Race.
That is a virus that never stopped.
Replicating.

Breathing is for granted.
The air just there.
"Our protest is our breath"
Who has the riot?
Who the protest?
Flip the bird!
The Revolution is being televised
in black and white.

In an era of respiratory politics
"the individual's breathing is
An observed breathing
Combat breathing"
Suffocate until you learn
Need is Black and Aid is White.

Floyd begged in futility
for the privilege of AIR.
Jordon would have gasped too.
Were he not tall, Black and talented.
Like Bantu[2] said before,
"Black man you're on your own"

At the Art Gallery of Ontario, in June 2019, I looked across from one gargantuan exhibition space to another and I saw what I thought I had come there to see. Totem poles. Trotting across the slick floors towards the three-metre high structures, I felt my breath quicken. As I drew closer, I noticed the headdresses and ceremonial masks. Authentic. North American. Indigenous. Ancient. Sacred. Defiled.

[2] Steven Bantu Biko – South African Black Consciousness leader killed by Apartheid police.

They were made of deconstructed and repurposed Nike Air Jordan sneakers. In a simultaneous flipping of the mind and senses I had encountered the work of Indigenous Canadian artist Brian Jungen. Hundreds and hundreds of red, black and white Nike Air Jordan sneakers re-fashioned into totem poles, head dresses, masks and, at a distance, undiscernible from 'the real thing'. My two young sons, future dark-skinned men from a dark-skinned mother, looked to me for some insight into why Jungen would do such a reprehensible thing to perfectly good shoes. I explained that he was telling a story, an old story. His story? Their story? He was telling tales about sports fields being modern battlefields, about men (women still hold less value) being bought and sold for their talent, about people taking pride in manufactured and marketed icons as replacements for their ancestral treasures and collective souls. Jungen, I said, was telling how constantly replaceable merchandise had become a substitute for timeless traditional icons and how stable economy is now a substitute for stable identity. Through his sculptures, Jungen revealed that the dominants appropriated what was most precious to those they wanted to dominate and repurposed it as a means of control. Big words for small boys.

COVID-19 LANGUAGE – NAMING THE 'OTHER' AS COMPLICIT IN THEIR EXPIRATION

Nine months later, COVID-19 descended on the planet and the ground shook beneath our feet. Everything that seemed to matter before had to be abandoned for the common purpose of our survival as a species. At least until we came to learn that the virus did not affect us all equally. At the start, it seemed that the affluent global travellers and modern city dwellers were more susceptible. The poor and marginalised breathed premature sighs of relief. It was to be their last carefree breath as, soon, the virus found its way to the most vulnerable, following the infamous, well-travelled highways of the social determinants of race and poverty. People in black and ethnic minority communities in the global North were disproportionately assailed by the virus. These communities are suffering higher infection and death rates, prompting focused research into the issue (Naidu, 2020).

I use the terms "black" and "ethnic minorities" with a prickly disquiet, wincing at the thought that I am complicit in the tacit but insidious violent politics of naming to control. Words that denote people, places, events, actions and things are essential components in the linguistic portfolio of a culture. Names, and their meanings, comprise the systems that compose and shape our perspectives, understandings and imaginings of the world. Consequently, they extend beyond simple representation

of reality, alluding to value-laden semantics that sanction and reproduce power. Approved names are rooted in wider political narratives, hence names, and the authority to name, are fundamentally political, based on the power relations they reference and the discourses and social performances they enable and impede (Lynch, 2016; Peteet, 2005).

The occupation of country or territory is necessarily the occupation of the bodies of its people and the stifling of their way of life to 'combat breathing' (Fanon, 1961). Fifty years later, Fanon's words resound prophetically within the COVID-19 pandemic where the virus is characterised by suffocation from the inside out. In seemingly unnerving co-incidence, smothering, structural and racial oppression that asphyxiates from the outside in, blustered into consciousness, driven by the Black Lives Matter movement. This human health crisis that was COVID-19 laid bare the racialised dynamics of health, economics and race which had, up to then, remained hidden in plain sight (Clark & Hurd, 2020; Devakumar, Shannon, Bhopal, & Abubakar, 2020; Dyer, 2020; Holmes et al., 2020; Pan et al., 2020). In the emergence of race and ethnicity issues in the COVID-19 pandemic, I learned for the first time of the acronym, BAME (Black, Asian or Mixed Ethnicity), used predominantly in the United Kingdom. In the United States the equivalent term appears to be BIPOC (Black, Indigenous or People of Colour). Usually in close visual or auditory proximity are the terms *overcrowding*, *poverty*, *transgenerational families* and *immigrants*.

Who gets to do the naming and who is named highlights the structural violence inherent in having the power to rename the oppressed and to blame them for their suffering? The bodies of the marginalised or rejected Other has long been the site of battles – to be sacrificed, experimented and contested in the process of domination. The bodies of black people used in slavery as commodities, the bodies of Jewish people used in the Holocaust for heinous medical experiments, the murder of hundreds of anti-apartheid activists during South Africa's apartheid and the unchecked murder of Indigenous women in North America. At each turn, the artful renaming of the Other makes it appear that oppressors have just recently come to realise that such an oppressed group exists. The process of constantly renaming and redefining the oppressed takes attention away from the work of redressing structural disparities. For as long as those in power are still attempting to determine who people are, they cannot listen to or directly address the concerns of the oppressed. People of African descent have gone from being 'Negro' to being 'Black' to being 'African-American', and then back to Black during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indigenous people in North America have been 'Indian', 'Native American' and 'Indigenous', despite having their own legitimate ancestral names. It would appear that each new renaming holds with it the promise of an ever-elusive respect, equality and access to resources which never quite materialises. At

the same time, there is a constant social subtext of disparaging and derogatory naming which evolves at the same pace and seems to reflect the underlying processes that prevent dismantling of oppressive structures.

The COVID-19 pandemic has converged on the age-old racism pandemic that inflicts the greatest risk on the racialised Other. Within health and healthcare, this has been inherent in the structural racism whereby marginalised people continue to be underrepresented globally in research and health-related professions. This is especially apparent in the global North where disparate infection rates between whites and ethnic minorities have been evident. Epigenetic and transgenerational susceptibility to disease is carried in the bodies of the oppressed and transmitted to their descendants. Research in the field of epigenetics has demonstrated that ethnic and racial groups who have been historically traumatised and oppressed have a higher susceptibility to mental and physical illnesses. This inherited vulnerability impacts on immunity (Sanz, Randolph, & Barreiro, 2018). Recent evidence indicates that whilst humans have always been a globally migrant species, forced displacements (slavery, indenture, forced migration etc.) under traumatic and violent conditions greatly hamper the ability of people to survive in their new environments. While data on ethnicity and COVID-19 in the published literature is limited, grey literature points to marginalised and ethnic minority individuals being at increased risk and having poorer clinical outcomes than white individuals (Pan et al., 2020). The presentation of race and ethnicity as purely social constructs which may be sanitised via the process of renaming becomes abhorrent when race and ethnicity is recognised as imposed on the body, situated in bodies by oppressors and experienced and suffered in the body of the oppressed.

My ‘too-sensitive’ ‘paranoid’ self hears the implicit othering and blaming of the affected for their circumstances and conditions and recognises this as *la facultad*, the faculty to capture the depth of the soul, the self. A version of myself which breaks the habitual modes of seeing reality and the patterns of consciousness, which do not reside in reason but in the body (Anzaldúa, 2012). Similarly, this sensitivity or paranoia was recognised by Fanon as the oppressed always having to be on the alert, because the many symbols of the colonial world can never be fully recognised so the oppressed can never be sure whether the frontier has been transgressed. Anzaldúa and Fanon’s borderlands people are caught in the paradox of being born in a space where they are not recognised as legitimate, or where they are categorised as different. This relegated, marginalised, subjugated, amorphous body is susceptible to social, historical and biological viral invasion. In these terms the ‘outsider’, ‘marginalised’, ‘non’ identity is underlying (Fanon, 1952). This oppression stifles the building of

identity such that the oppressed is forced to build identity in relation or opposition to the oppressor and is inevitably judged as the 'Other', less than and culpable for their own oppression, illness, poverty, exploitation and even death (Fanon, 1952; Pinter, 2005; Reny & Barreto, 2020). Try as you might, you cannot be white.

How will I define my own identity in respect of my own needs, wants and aspirations in the world and those who are similar to me? I have been Indian in South Africa and South African in India, black during some periods of Apartheid and brown in others – never white. In North America I learned for the first time that I was South Asian – not just Asian. Another name to 'place' me in the world of Others. For my information, a woman on a Greek island once insisted I was 'West Indian'… When will the time come when I am no longer seen as a 'non' in need of a label? I take cold comfort in that I am not and have never been alone in my wondering. Anzaldúa writes on realising the power to speak in multiple voices, "I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue…" (Anzaldúa, 2012, p. 81). All this naming and renaming is in service of maintaining the current structures of racial dominance and power. These names label the 'Other'. We see easily, how what is missing literally and by implication in these labels are the names 'white', 'Western' or 'Northern' 'male', 'powerful', 'pure race' and 'healthy'.

EXHALING – APPROPRIATING LANGUAGE AS ARTFUL PROTEST

In Fanon's view, the occupied territories of land and body reflect dominant groups' ideals to control the breathing of the dominated, to the point of suffocation (Fanon, 1961). The dominated must concede to breathing air apportioned at the whim of the dominant, or expire, the dominant's intention being to control, utterly. This is operationalised by replacing and obscuring all semblance of local identity with the structures, systems and icons of the dominant invader. Resistance to invasion may take different forms but the reference point, when the intention is structural dominance, is often shackled to the power and positionality of the dominant group. While 'combat breathing' can refer to suppression of breath, as in Fanon's estimation, it also describes a controlled, mindful, conscious breathing-to-survive under the threat of annihilation. Artists, writers and poets sublimate oppression through their works, demonstrating resistance that turns the oppressors' methods against them. The power in this is seemingly passive resistance is that resistance is subverted and hidden in plain sight. Art as resistance can perform unassumingly in aesthetic spaces, biding time until the social world erupts to a point where seeing what artists' messages are is inevitable and even essential. Art tunes into the coming zeitgeist

and breathes it into awareness. The structural discrimination COVID-19 has brought into sharp focus what has long been reflected in the works of artists who express the dynamics of oppression in word and form.

RECLAIMING NAMING AS POLITICAL ACTION

Through language, poetry can use both form and meaning powerful enough to create a political space. American poet Toni Morrison (Tahsincan, 2020, np) writes

> *Most of the good poetry is also political, you can feel the heartbeat; its about some situation that concerns human being under duress. It's suggesting a solution or just acknowledging [that the situation] exists. Art does that.*

It is perhaps synchronous then, rather than co-incidental, that many poets have been politicians. Chilean poet and politician, Pablo Neruda (1971, np), writes that *"Political poetry is more profoundly emotional than any other".* This is also evident in the words of Indian poet laureate and politician and civil disobedience activist, Sarojini Naidu, "*I am not ready to die because it takes infinitely higher courage to live."* The message that if one is not heard in the spaces of power one has to speak in a different way is evident in the poetry of poets and gender and anti-racist activists, Gloria Anzaldua, Audre Lorde and Toni Morrison. All realised, outside of their actions as social activists and academics, that using language differently, in ways that disrupt and confuse, as poets do, calls attention to what matters, more finely and persistently, at times, than overt activism does.

This intersection of art as a means of protest action in the context of social oppression and suppression of oppressed peoples' identity is that art speaks the truth to power. Art speaks our truth when it resonates with how we see the world and ourselves. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted once again that the historical socio-politics of race and discrimination is not only an invasion of space, place and identity, but an invasion of the body that can quite literally become life threatening. This invasion is apparently legitimised within the structures that uphold it, simultaneously othering and blaming the renamed and surreptitiously solidifying the place and the power of the dominant. Artists such and Brian Jungen and poets and writers such as Pablo Neruda, Toni Morrison, Gloria Anzaldúa, as well as countless others who are writing now and have yet to be heard, disrupt and trouble the foundations of these structures, dismantling and reconstructing them in ways that reveal how they oppress.

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