

A species by any other name would sound as sweet

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... if we wise people make eminent fools of ourselves on any particular occasion, we must endure the legitimate conclusion that we carry a few grains of folly to our ounce of wisdom.

George Eliot – Adam Bede

When I began my graduate research in biology, my older sister would tease me: “So, little David, how long will it be before they name a species of pond scum after you?” “It’s already happened”, I’d joke. “Come to the lab and I’ll give you some hands-on experience with the alga *Chlamydomonas smithii*”, which is in fact a real species. But my sister had a point. Scientists—and biologists in particular—have a long history of naming things after themselves. In my small department alone, there are at least two professors with taxa named after them. My friend and colleague André Lachance, for example, has an entire genus of yeast bearing his surname (*Lachancea*), which includes some species you’ve likely consumed as they are used in the production of beer and wine.

Of course, taxa have also been named after movie stars (*Agra katewinsletea*; carabid beetle), pop stars (*Aleiodes gaga*; parasitoid wasp), politicians (*Etheostoma obama*; ray-finned fish), business leaders (*Eristalis gatesi*; flower fly), sports icons (*Liolaemus messii*; iguana), comedians (*Carcinonemertes conanobrienti*; ribbon worm), and much more. When I was a post-doc, my lab mate Eric James discovered a new microbe within the hindgut of a termite and called it *Cthulhu macrofasciculumque* after sci-fi writer H. P. Lovecraft’s mythical creature Cthulhu (pronounced kuh-THOO-loo). The new name struck a chord and was

covered by news media worldwide (Smith & James, 2013), giving this little-known microbe 15 min of fame. Eric was even invited to be a keynote speaker at an H. P. Lovecraft festival, which we all laughed about in the lab.

However, in the current political and societal landscape, the names of things are no laughing matter. My son’s primary school, for instance, is called Ryerson but is currently being renamed because of Egerton Ryerson’s (1803–1882) contributions to the atrocious Canadian Residential School System. Ryerson University in Toronto is also undergoing a name change, as is one of the oldest streets in that city, Dundas Street, named after Henry Dundas, a Scottish politician associated with the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

All around the world, people are re-evaluating the names of public and private infrastructure. As I’m writing this, a major news headline is that the Sackler name is to be wiped from seven exhibition spaces at The Metropolitan Museum in New York because of the family’s link to OxyContin and the opioid crisis. It is noteworthy that various institutes at many major universities still bear the Sackler name—for instance, The Sackler Institute for Developmental Psychology at Columbia University.

So, what of all the biological taxa named after individuals with skeletons in their closets? Look up H. P. Lovecraft’s racial attitudes, including the name of his cat, and the nomenclature *C. macrofasciculumque* may not sound so sweet. Ronnie Wood, the famous guitarist from the Rolling Stones, has been no stranger to sexual assault allegations, but that hasn’t stopped biologists from naming a stonefly after him (*Electroneuria ronwoodi*). Writer J. K. Rowling

has been a major target of cancel culture recently but still has an eponymously named species of sea snail (*Gibberula rowlingae*).

I’m no political scientist, but something tells me that the beetle named after former US president George W. Bush (*Agathidium bushi*) may leave a bad flavor in some people’s mouths. Same goes for the species named after Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, and Narendra Modi. If your politics are more left leaning, you’ll be happy to know that Che Guevara’s name has reached the genus level (*Cheguevaria*)—take that Bush!

It may seem ironically fitting that there is a subspecies of rabbit named after Playboy founder Hugh Hefner (*Sylvilagus palustris hefneri*), but undoubtedly some must find this distasteful and inappropriate. And surely, all would agree that it is disgusting to have a beetle named after Adolf Hitler (*Anophthalmus hitleri*). Apparently, attempts were made to rename it after World War II, but these efforts were rejected because the name was in accordance with the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature. Can you imagine being a Jewish student tasked with studying this species for your PhD?

I’m certainly not advocating that we rename every taxon with a patronym from someone who has a less than favorable past. Such an endeavor would be impractical and could arguably cause more damage than good to the scientific process as many of these names have been used for decades. But maybe we should stop the practice of naming new taxa after people, no matter how virtuous those people appear to be. Every human is fallible, and what is deemed noble today might be considered ignoble tomorrow. I’m certainly not the first to

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suggest this (Shiffman, 2019) but, given the rise of wokeism, it's a topic that is only going to become more significant and divisive in the coming years. In fact, it's likely only because most of the public don't interact with biological nomenclature in their day-to-day lives that these issues haven't come to the forefront more often.

All of this has been on my mind of late because one of my favorite algae—a species that I've spent hundreds of hours writing and thinking about—was recently given a formal scientific name. The taxon I'm referring to is commonly known as *Chlamydomonas* sp. UWO241, a unicellular, Antarctic green alga. This past fall it was officially named *Chlamydomonas priscuii* (Stahl-Rommel *et al.*, 2022) in honor of John Priscu, the researcher who originally isolated it. I've never met him, but from everything I've read and heard, he is an amazing scientist and admirable person who has made praiseworthy contributions to the field of polar biology. And to the best of my knowledge, he did not know that his patronym was going to be given to this alga.

Nevertheless, biological nomenclature can influence the way people perceive a specific taxon or group of taxa. The change

of my beloved Antarctic alga from UWO241 to *C. priscuii* means that every time I write its name, I now see John Priscu's Wikipedia photo in my mind. In other words, I think of the scientist before the species.

Over the Christmas Holidays, I reread Apsley Cherry-Garrard's memoir *The Worst Journey in the World*, describing Robert F. Scott's ill-fated *Terra Nova* expedition to the South Pole (1910–1913). The book reminded me of the many similarities between great explorers and great scientists, including their habit of naming things after important individuals. Glance at a map of Antarctica and it's not hard to conclude that most of its designated landmarks are a tribute to white male European explorers or white European royalty. Similar things can be said about many eponymous taxa. Perhaps these names are well earned and well deserved, and the tradition should continue but in a more diverse and equitable manner. Or perhaps we should just stop naming places, buildings, landmarks, and taxa after human beings of any stripe.

Now and then my sister still teases me about being a biologist: "I'm still waiting on

that species name, Dr. Dork". Well, I hope she is waiting for a long time and that no one is cruel enough to name a poor, unsuspecting taxon after yours truly.

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