

# The Names in Me

*Mateo Acuña*

If I had been born a cisgender boy, I would have been named Walter, after my father and grandfather. My cousin once removed, cousin twice removed, and my father's cousin twice removed are also named Walter. It had always been peculiar to me that the whitest white name, and often the moniker of movie villains—something you notice when half of your relatives have it—was a family name for a bunch of brown Peruvians.

I asked my grandfather from the other side of the equator, using the modern wonders of WhatsApp and Google Translate, where the family name came from. According to him, the name came from my great-grandfather, Alberto, who worked at a German company as a naval mechanic. While he was there, he became friends with a German man named Walter. He liked the name and gave it to his son, who then gave it to his son. Others in the family liked and passed the name down to their children.

The name Walter roughly translates to “ruler of the army.”<sup>1</sup> Its meaning is close to that of the name that was given to me instead, a Germanic name derived from the Old High German title Alberich, meaning “elf ruler.”<sup>2</sup> I liked the meaning of my given name once I knew what it was, due to my fascination with folklore and mythology, but I hated the sound of it ever since I was young enough to form my own opinion about it. And I hated how frequently my full name was butchered—my first often conflated with another girl's name, my last mispronounced due to the tilde it contains.

---

1 <https://www.ancestry.com/name-origin?surname=walter>

2 <https://www.behindthename.com/name/alberich>

In college, when I was ready to come out as transgender, I knew I wanted a new first name. I looked up transmasculine names, nonbinary names, Latino names, mythological names—but however cool they were, none of them felt like me. I began to question if I would find a name that suited me at all.

One day, I sat down with my mother in her living room and asked if she had ever picked out a boy name for me, because no way was I naming myself after the founder of Disney, or a slimy husband taking credit for his wife's paintings, or a chemistry teacher turned meth cook. But my mother hadn't had any boy names in mind for me. After a few minutes of internet research, she said of my transmasculine younger brother, "If we had thought Grey was a boy, we would have named him Mateo."

"Mateo," I said, trying out how it felt in my mouth. I liked the "Ma" at the beginning, like the sound of a kiss, the sizzle of the "T" in the middle, and the warm "O" at the end. The name sounded peaceful and harmonious. "I like that. I want to go by Mateo."

As I used the name Mateo more, I questioned my decision. Growing up lightly toasted with an Anglo-Saxon name, classmates would ask, "What's your ethnicity?" or "What are you?" By choosing Mateo, I was giving the public an answer I didn't owe them. But then I realized that my choice had nothing to do with others' perceptions of me, but my perception of myself. Mateo encapsulates my Latino heritage as the first born American citizen of a Peruvian immigrant, but is also a name no one else in my family has.

Had I been born in Peru, it would have been incredibly difficult to come out and transition. Transgender men in Lima reported "a lack of awareness and information among medical providers, avoidance of healthcare due to discrimination and maltreatment, an absence of public services for medical gender

affirmation (hormones, surgeries), and unmet mental health needs... violence, stigma, and intersecting forms of oppression were described as limiting social and legal recognition of trans identity.”<sup>3</sup>

Because my father settled in Western Washington to receive support from his great uncle, who moved there to marry a Mormon missionary, I can thank Mormonism for my access to trans-affirming healthcare, and my father for giving me some part of the elusive American dream: the power for me to choose my own name.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8328288/>