

B

There is a lot of talk about “cancel culture” these

days. For instance, we are told that Dr Seuss recently got cancelled because his name was not mentioned during some minor speech by the US president. However, what the omission – and the brouhaha that followed – have achieved is to bring Dr Seuss to the attention of a wider audience than he might have had before the so-called cancellation.

In fact, it is a key feature of cancel culture that “to cancel” someone increases their notoriety. As a rule, their name and (mis)deeds gain more publicity; and whether there is such a thing as bad publicity continues to be an open question.

Contrast contemporary “cancel culture” with deeply entrenched long-standing cultural practices that systematically erase some people from the collective memory.

Because it is International Women’s Day, this blog post is dedicated to cancelled women.

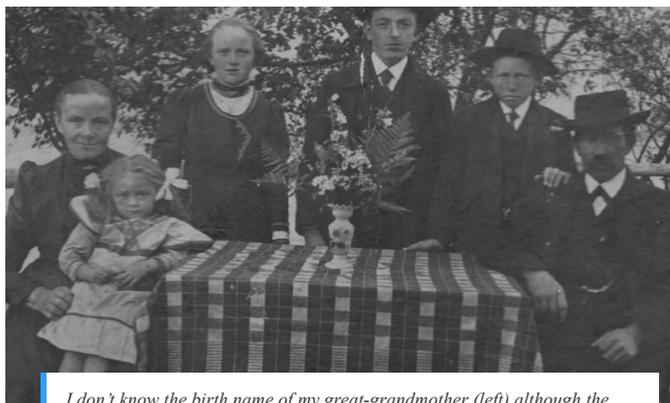
What was the maiden name of your great-grandmother?

Do you know the birth names of your four great grandmothers? Chances are that you do not. In most European societies, women have traditionally taken their husband’s name on marriage. Many still do. Even in societies where women do not change their name when they marry, the father’s family name is usually bestowed on the children.

As a result, many people in western societies can trace their paternal ancestries back a couple of generations – simply through the surname. By contrast, maternal lines are quickly forgotten.

Only few people even know the birth names of their great-grandmothers.

Consider how incredibly strange the absence of that knowledge is! We share an eights of our DNA with each of these four women. If you are a woman yourself, your mitochondrial DNA, which is transferred unaltered from mother to daughter, is 100% identical to one of these four women. So, biologically, great-grandmothers are incredibly close. Yet, few of us stop to consider why we know next to nothing about these women and why even their birth names elude us.



I don't know the birth name of my great-grandmother (left) although the mitochondrial DNA in my body is 100% identical to hers (ca. 1914)

Naming practices are a form of entrenched cancel culture that erase women from the genealogical record.

Did you know that James Douglas left something in your lady parts?

Let me restate the previous section: few women know the names of the mothers with who they share an identical mitochondrial DNA for more than two generations back.

While you grieve for those cancelled women, consider this: in medical terminology, one of your lady parts carries the name of a Scottish man from the 18th century.

There is a cavity between the uterus and the bowel, which is commonly referred to as “Pouch of Douglas” in English. And the term has been adopted into most other languages. In Arabic, it is called “radabat dughlas”, in French “cul-de-sac de Douglas”, in German “Douglas-Raum”, in Japanese “dagurasu”, in Polish “zatoka douglasa”, or “fondo de saco de Douglas” in Spanish.

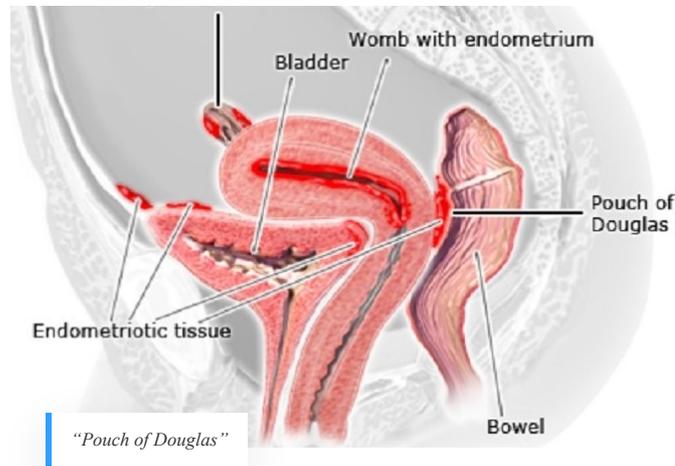
How did this name come about? [Medicinenet.com](https://www.medicinenet.com) has the answer: “the Scottish anatomist James Douglas (1675-1742) [...] explored this region of the female body and left his name attached to at least 3 other structural features in the area.”

I feel enraged and grossed out no matter how often I read this explanation.

Douglas certainly made sure he would not get cancelled easily.

Maybe that was because he was part of a generation of men who cancelled a whole class of women and their knowledge: midwives.

Douglas worked at a time when the practice of medicine started to become a scientific discipline. In the process, medicine expanded its remit. Beyond diseases, pregnancy and childbirth also came under its purview. Douglas is usually hailed as one of the first anatomists to specialize in female reproductive organs.



That is only true, of course, if you discount any knowledge not derived through the scientific process. Midwives had had solid knowledge of female anatomy and the processes of pregnancy and childbirth for centuries.

Today, practitioners supporting women through pregnancy and childbirth come in two classes: midwives at the lower end of the professional hierarchy and gynecologists and obstetricians at the upper end. Most of the former are women, most of the latter are men.

So, after our cancelled mothers, let's remember our cancelled midwives.

Women even get cancelled in favor of a necktie

Before you consider writing in that women have long stopped accepting their collective cancellation and that things are different today, do not bother. I am well aware that we have come a long way. I am also well aware that we still have a long way to go.

The cancellation of women in matters big and small is a deeply entrenched and ongoing aspect of our culture. I am reminded of that daily by a set of coasters I have in my house. I received these as a gift in 2019.

The set of six coasters celebrate famous Croatians: there is Ivan Vučetić, Faust Vrančić, Eduard Slavoljub Penkala, Ruđer Bošković, and Nikola Tesla.

That is five men (that the concept of nationality did not really apply during their lifetime and that their status as "Croatian" may be debatable is a matter for another time).



Coaster set of famous Croatians

Coasters customarily come in sets of six. Who do you think got the sixth slot?

Cvijeta Zuzorić maybe, who ran an influential Renaissance salon and wrote poetry in three languages? Or Paula Preradović, the composer of the Austrian national anthem? Or Savka Dabčević-Kučar, who in the 1960s became one of the world's first female prime ministers?

Well, no – after five famous Croatian men, the sixth slot went to the famous Croatian necktie.

So, there you have it – even in this day and age, the achievements of women get cancelled in favor of some random object of men's clothing.

Remembering cancelled women

My elegy for cancelled women could go on and on, and some other time I will write about the cancelled women of linguistics.

Today, just remember this: cultural processes do not rest on individual occurrences but on systematic patterns.

We certainly live in a cancel culture – but not because Dr Seuss did not get mentioned in a speech. We live in a cancel culture because whole groups of people are systematically erased from the historical record, from common knowledge, and from our societal consciousness.

Related Content

- [Female academics and shamans face the same glass ceiling](#)
- [Why are there so few notable academic women?](#)
- [Why do female academics publish less than their male peers?](#)
- [Where does academic authority come from?](#)
- [Strange academic women](#)
- [What would you do?](#)

Tags: [Gender](#) [Mentoring](#) [Names](#)

Previous Post

Hazara Academic Awards Night



Next Post

Designing and using a bilingual writer corpus



Related Posts



Next Gen Literacies Research reflections

How I became an Applied Linguist with a China focus



Jeffrey Gil
April 11, 2022



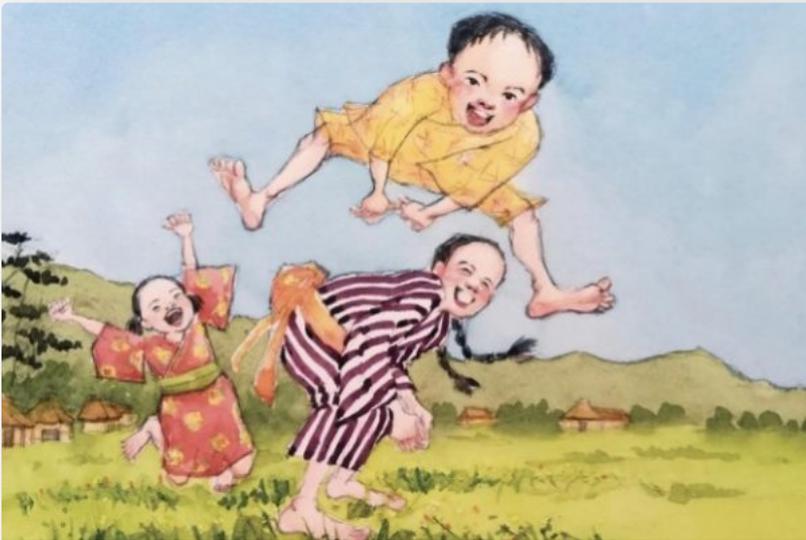


Next Gen Literacies Research reflections

Publishing is an insiders game



Ingrid Piller
December 10, 2021



Next Gen Literacies Research reflections

Language on the Move Reading Challenge 2022



Language on the Move
November 30, 2021



Author

Ingrid Piller

Dr Ingrid Piller, FAHA, is Distinguished Professor of Applied Linguistics at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Her research expertise is in bilingual education, intercultural communication, language learning, and multilingualism in the context of migration and globalization.