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"Onomastic Emphasis" in Julia Álvarez's *Saving the World*

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In her 2007 novel, *Saving the World*, Julia Álvarez uses alternating chapters to narrate both a modern tale and a corresponding historical saga. She employs nomenclature emphatically on multiple levels in the work in order to make the theme of identity central to the narrative. This study will examine the connection between name and character in Álavarez's novel. At the same time, it will also analyze the link between that connection and the various onomastic elements that serve to unite and even blend the two parallel stories.

KEYWORDS Julia Álvarez, Literary names, Dominican Republic, *Saving the World*, Historical fiction, Smallpox expedition, Women's literature

Ellen C. Mayock asserts that there is "onomastic emphasis" in the works of Julia Álvarez, Sandra Cisneros and Esmeralda Santiago (1998: 229). This emphasis highlights the problematic of bicultural identity according to Mayock, a theme which has been central to much of Álvarez's fiction and poetry including her first novel, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991). And yet, as she explains with reference to the aforementioned Álvarez novel, the issues also happen to be larger and more universal with fictional voices contemplating "i.e. who am I? how have I been named? and why?" (1998: 229). An "onomastic emphasis" also exists in Álvarez's most recent adult fiction novel, *Saving the World* (2007), and functions to draw attention to the relationship between characters' names in the novel and the answers to the questions Mayock poses as well as the symbiotic link between the two parallel stories and chronological moments that make up the novel.

Both Kathryn Bartholomew and Wendolyn Y. Bell note that characters' names in literature have long given "clues" about "their personalities, attributes, and places in the general scheme of things" (Bartholomew, 1993: 83). Bartholomew employs this assumption in her discussion of Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus* (1982) while Bell analyzes Spanish literature more generally and states with reference to Benito Pérez Galdós that nomenclature "serves three overlapping purposes: to individualize, to harmonize with character, and to complement the character's function in the plot"

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(1974: 75). Álvarez uses names similarly in her latest novel, as we shall we. She also draws on nomenclature to underscore connections among the characters and parallel story lines in her narrative. The representative association between name and role or identity in the novel reflects the symbiotic relationship between the modern-day fictional story and the nineteenth-century historical tale that Álvarez weaves together in order to create *Saving the World*. The later inspires the first, in more ways than one.

In *A Short Note from the Author* at the end of *Saving the World* Álvarez reveals that the work "sprouted" from a footnote (2007: 371). A footnote she encountered while researching the history of the Dominican Republic for another writing project. The note mentioned Dr Francisco Xavier Balmis and the Royal Spanish Smallpox Expedition of the early nineteenth century. This information provides the "seed" for one of the two parallel stories of which the novel is composed. The expedition, also known as the Royal Expedition of the Vaccine, was undertaken with twenty-two live carriers attempting to bring a smallpox vaccine to the New World from Spain.

Dr Balmis introduces himself in the novel as "honorary doctor to the royal chambers, surgeon consultant for the armies" and "director of the royal philanthropic expedition of the vaccine" as well as agent of the "good king Carlos IV" (Álvarez, 2007: 32–33). The doctor's personal names, Francisco Xavier, bring to mind the famous Spanish Jesuit missionary, St Francis Xavier, from the sixteenth century. St Francis, according to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, is known for his extensive travels, ministering to the sick and "incomparable apostolic zeal" (Astrain, 1909). The passionate physician is convinced he is on a holy mission, to be sure. Álvarez's Dr Balmis explains "This expedition will bring salvation to millions who would otherwise perish from the smallpox . . ." (2007: 33). His surname is related to the Latin *balsamum*, most likely of Oriental origin, as noted in Patricia Hanks' and Flavia Hodges' work on surnames. Furthermore, the same root is connected to both French and English "metonymic occupational" names derived from the Old French *balme* "ointment" (Hanks and Hodges, 1988: 29). The vaccine, as Dr Balmis explains, will soothe the suffering of many, a healing balm. The name of Álvarez's character reveals that his identity is inextricably linked to his role as traveler and healer.

The live carriers on Dr Balmis' expedition were in fact orphans, and a nun served as their guardian. This nun is really the focus of the historical saga in Álvarez's novel. Isabel Sendales y Gómez is also an accomplice of sorts to the doctor as she is the reason the orphans are allowed to act as carriers in the first place, helping him secure permission to transport and infect the boys from the benefactress of the orphanage. Isabel herself lost her family to an Old World smallpox epidemic and covers her own scarred survivor's face with a veil. One of Isabel's surnames can be connected to her face-covering. *Sendales* looks like the English *Sendall*, which Hanks and Hodges suggest comes from the "Greek *sindσn*" which has "shroud" as one possible meaning (1988: 484). Isabel dons her veil to hide her scars, but also because she is in mourning for her relatives. She knows the relief a vaccine will bring to many, and yet her motives are not entirely altruistic. She has become disillusioned as of late with her existence at the orphanage. In her mid-thirties she wonders what more there might be to life and if she can ever attain it. The trip would provide her the chance to explore an identity outside of the orphanage and beyond her veil.

The possible multiplicity in her identity and motivations is reflected by the fact that from her first meeting with Dr Balmis her name is changed or incorrectly pronounced/repeated in her introductory encounters with new characters in the narration: "... he gave me a slight inclination of his head. 'Doña Isabel Sendales de Gómez?' Y Gómez, I thought, but did not correct him" (Álvarez, 2007: 32). *Gómez* is a popular surname "of Old Spanish origin, a patronymic form of the surname from the personal name 'Gomo,' which is itself a pet form of 'Gomesano,' composed of Old Spanish elements meaning 'man, path'" (www.surnamedb.com). Similarly, the Spanish word *senda* means "path." Isabel Sendales y Gómez is the means by which Dr Balmis obtains permission to use the boys as carriers. She also leads her orphan boys and the smallpox vaccine on the path to the New World; but moreover, she serves as an escape for the modern-day female protagonist in the other story in *Saving the World*.

Later in the novel, Isabel herself remarks that she has been named many times over during her journey with the boys and vaccine: "'This is the guardian angel of the little carriers of the vaccine,' Don Andrés Bello was saying with a bow, 'Doña Isabel López Gandarillas.' Another name for me! By the time the expedition was over, I would have been so many Isabels!" (Álvarez, 2007: 250). *Isabel*, as Alfred J. Kolatch observes, is "a variant form of Elisabeth" and is "from the Hebrew, meaning 'God's oath'" (1980: 384, 355). *López* is another common Spanish surname whose derivation is unclear (Hanks and Hodges, 1988: 332). *Gandarillas* may be related to the English *Gander* which is a "metonymic occupational name for a keeper of geese" and derived from Middle and Old English words for a male goose, *gander* (Hanks and Hodges, 1988: 203). Interestingly enough, the Spanish word *gandalla* refers to a vagabond or hobo. So, Isabel as the rectoress of the orphanage is under an oath from God to protect and care for its inhabitants. Likewise, once on the ship she must tend her flock, as it were, and care for the group of smallpox carriers. Ultimately, she is also a vagabond wandering from port to port with the expedition. Her surnames change with her primary role in the novel in relation to the other characters. Furthermore, the fact that Isabel's name goes through various transformations signals the possibility that her own identity may also have different incarnations in the novel and she does evolve, eventually shedding her veil and becoming a healer or medicine woman in Mexico.

But Isabel's is not the story with which the novel opens. *Saving the World* begins in contemporary Vermont with Alma Huebner. Alma is a frustrated Dominican-American writer, fifty years old and living comfortably with her husband, Richard, who is employed by a humanitarian agency, Help International or HI. Richard is preparing to direct a project in the Dominican Republic connected to a clinic testing a new AIDS vaccine. The association with Dr Balmis in the other narrative is obvious. Both men are traveling in order to cure illnesses, illnesses that are epidemic for the populations in the foreign destinations. The historical figure journeys from the Old to New World and Richard from the First to the Third World. Both male characters are closely linked to the female protagonists in their respective stories. Unfortunately, the saintly connotation of Balmis' given names is replaced by a much more materialistic reference in the contemporary narrative. *Richard* is derived from "the Old High German Richart, meaning 'powerful, rich ruler'" (Kolatch, 1980: 229). The surname *Huebner* is also of German origin. The capitalistic implications of his first name result

in serious consequences for Alma's husband and the HI project later in the novel. The "onomastic emphasis" here conveys the message that saving the world is not the same enterprise it was in Balmis' century, and yet in both instances the names Álvarez chooses call to mind the religious and economic implications of international and intercultural projects regardless of the historical moment.

Alma has actually never started the family saga novel which her literary agent believes to be near completion. Instead she has gotten interested in a little known historical event, the transport of the smallpox vaccine to the New World. Alma has been seeing a psychiatrist as of late in her small town because "she felt as if a whirling darkness were descending on her, like dirty water going down a drain or that flock of birds in the film by Hitchcock" (Álvarez, 2007: 1). Adding to Alma's mental dis-ease, she gets a mysterious call in the first chapter of the novel from a supposed former girlfriend of Richard's who claims to have AIDS. The threat of physical illness now compounds her mental anxiety. The modern protagonist's dis-ease is in part career related as well: "Alma's disenchantment with the book-biz world has been growing over the years: the marketing strategies, the glamour shots; the prepub creation of buzz . . ." (Álvarez, 2007: 19). The final event that produces a total weariness with this aspect of her life is simultaneously a metaphor for her literary self: "It had come about because of her name, that ridiculous name Alma adopted years back out of frustration and hurt at her family's censorship" (Álvarez, 2007: 19–20). In order to write and not shame or endanger her family who had escaped to America from a dictatorship in the Dominican Republic, she had agreed not to use "their" name and adopted a pseudonym.

A pen name, of course, but also a false name; and thus a false identity for herself. "She began to dislike her whole persona, to believe that writing under her pseudonym was actually bad luck. FULANA DE TAL IS DEAD, she titled the email..." (Álvarez, 2007: 22). And with this act of un-naming, Alma rejects an identity as unauthentic, and later a writing project just as counterfeit. As the narrator notes in the novel, "Spanish speakers would understand that Fulana de Tal wasn't a real name" (Álvarez, 2007: 20). An expression that can mean "Miss/Mrs. So and so" or "Jane Doe," *Fulana de Tal* may also be interpreted pejoratively as "tart" or "slut," quite the contrast to Álvarez's other protagonist, the nun Isabel, who bears the name of one of Spain's most famous queens. Alma's non-literary identity seems to suffer the consequences of both the negative professional attention that Fulana de Tal receives because she claims to be a nobody with a culturally specific non-name and story as well as the possibility of the harmful physical results of the lifestyle generally associated with her pseudonym's sexual connotation (the sinister phone call from her husband's alleged ex-girlfriend).

Both female protagonists experience to some degree or another not just physical illness in their life, disease, but also dis-ease about their life. The "onomastic emphasis" produced by the fluctuating names of Isabel and Alma signifies this unease which is also reflective of the challenge of bicultural identity embodied in Alma and Álvarez herself. Mayock notes with regards to the author's work: "multiple selves stem from manifold culture locations" (1998: 223). Alma's interest in the vaccine expedition mirrors the author's own inspiration for the novel. The interplay of English, German, Spanish, and other types of names draws attention to the multiple social and ethnic

sites Mayock discerns as having power in Álvarez's writing more broadly as well as in this novel specifically.

Alma's sections of the novel are narrated in third person while Isabel's chapters employ a first-person perspective. The use of these points of view lends empowerment to Isabel as she chooses her destiny, while it seems as if Alma is caught up in the post-modern dilemma of events that more or less happen to her. Isabel Sendales y Gómez makes and directs her own path, she clearly sees her *senda*. Ultimately, Alma finds inspiration in Isabel's story as she learns more about the expedition's journey and her own life unfolds simultaneously with Isabel's adventure. Alma's depression and later sorrow over a tragedy involving Richard are alleviated by Isabel's courage and trail-blazing: "Who cares if her story took place a long time ago, if it is half made up, if history wants control of the facts? History can keep the facts. But Alma mustn't lose faith. Isabel's story is keeping the knowledge of something alive in Alma, belief in a saving grace" (Álvarez, 2007: 232). Mentioning Isabel's name just prior to the fragment cited, the narrator calls on the notion of "a helpful invocation" as Alma ponders "Who to call?" in a moment of doubt and fear (Álvarez, 2007: 232). Isabel is the answer and the narrator explains that the name and the story with which it is identified in Alma's mind are apart from history and the facts. They are protection against precisely those two entities as such and the dangers presented by those realities (dictatorship in her homeland's past and the danger there now for Richard). Isabel's name and story are faith, grace, hope, a cure for Alma's mounting dis-ease as she confronts tragedy and loss on two fronts, long-distance distress coming to her from Vermont with a dangerous situation involving a neighbor and in person in the Dominican Republic with Richard now being held hostage at the AIDS clinic.

Isabel, true to her surnames *Sendales y Gómez*, is a path to faith and grace for Alma, which is ironic because Alma's own name reveals what she lacks, a sort of reverse "onomastic emphasis":

> "In the months to come, Alma will catch herself at this game of trying to dodge her grief, to lose it, to diminish it. But nothing works, except for minutes at a time, when she leaves herself behind and joins Isabel as she recrosses the wide Pacific, returning with her boys to Mexico after two years away, her health compromised, her faith diminishing. Maybe it is a trick, but who cares, it works, this story that becomes Alma's lifeline, this thread of hope she picks up in a dark time. Something important in that story, which can't be left behind." (Álvarez, 2007: 327)

Alma is the Spanish word for "soul" or "spirit." Both are essential elements for discussing salvation in the Christian context. We have already seen references to a saint and the obvious religious connotation of the novel's title points to Catholic undertones and the notion of salvation. In her analysis of Allende's *La casa de los espíritus*, Bartholomew explains with an endnote that "Roman Catholic doctrine, including the lives of the saints, is part of the general intellectual framework of Latin Americans, whatever their individual beliefs" (1993: 85). The soul or spirit is both the essence of what a name ultimately expresses and central to the concepts of faith and grace.

Karen Castellucci Cox describes silence as a malady that has affected female characters in Álvarez's fiction: "Álvarez addresses the absence of a spiritual realm in

the lives of her characters, women who suffer from various maladies for which Western medicine has no adequate cure" (2001: 134). Isabel survives smallpox only to be trapped behind her veil, but she overcomes even this ailment as she starts to determine her destiny during the Royal Expedition. Likewise, in the moment it seems Alma should be the most disconsolate, after Richard's accidental death during the hostage situation at the AIDS clinic, she realizes "... she has been infected with a sorrow that will leave her scarred and changed. But she is also carrying a living story inside her, an antibody to the destruction she has seen, an intuition, like the poet said, which must survive beyond her grief" (Álvarez, 2007: 326). Has Alma made peace with her own *alma*? Isabel, the nun, has become a path to the spiritual for Alma, a way to transcend the sorrow of her situation.

By the end of the novel, both Alma and Isabel come to understand the "symbiotic relationship between word and the world," as Catharine E. Wall calls it (2003: 125). In her analysis of Álvarez's poem "Bilingual Sestina" Wall explains that the author is "highly conscious" of this connection and it is this understanding that allows Álvarez to play with words and reality in both Spanish and English in the poem. Interestingly enough, Wall specifically discusses the use of the Spanish word *nombres*: "its nominal and verbal variants in English and Spanish ('names,' 'name,' '*nombre*,' and 'numbering')" (2003: 136). The same concept, that is to say the word and world relationship or the act of enumeration and naming, translates significantly to the novel in terms of connecting the names of the protagonists in particular to the notion of their life story and connection to each other as we have seen.

After Alma confirms that Richard has been killed, she returns to the spot where she had last seen him alive:

> "She finds her way out to the back patio where hours ago ... Gently, she pulls herself back from that edge. She has to outlive these terrible moments, step by hopeless step. She cannot let loss have the last word. Was it Richard who said, in one of his rare moments of grand philosophizing, or could it be Alma read it in one of those photocopied articles Tera loves to send her, annoyingly highlighted and commented upon in the margins: something about how you can't live entirely for your own time, how you have to imagine a story bigger than your own story, than the sum of your parts?" (Álvarez, 2007: 328)

Near the conclusion of the novel after Alma's husband has died and the previous scene, the director of the smallpox expedition, Dr Balmis, also leaves the project. Isabel is in the Philippines at this point and meets a native servant woman. The woman comes to Isabel's room on the evening of the director's departure and introduces herself. She is named Kaluluwa: "Behind me, she smiled in the mirror. There was anticipation in her eyes. And then I remembered the story we had been told about natives exchanging names as a sign of friendship" (Álvarez, 2007: 316). The servant's name means "soul" in Tagalog, according to the novel, and after their exchange Isabel likewise carries that name (Álvarez, 2007: 316). Isabel and Alma have become one through Álvarez's "onomastic emphasis" in the novel. They are bigger than their own story and the sum of their parts, the two stories and protagonists depend on one another as the names reveal.

History and story have effectively merged in Álvarez's narrative. By using names to emphasize parallels in the two stories and the overlapping lives centuries apart, the

author has created two narratives with obvious similarities like female protagonists, elements of disease, and the theme of travel. At the same time, Álvarez has written a cohesive novel that employs nomenclature in a traditional fashion as "emblematic of characters' leading qualities or conflicts" while simultaneously using characters' names not to draw distinctions between them; but rather, to connect them with each other, and with the layers of history and fiction in the novel (Bartholomew, 1993: 83).

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