



## Book Review

**The Nameplate: Jewelry, Culture and Identity.** BY MARCEL ROSA-SALAS AND ISABEL ATTYAH FLOWER. New York: Clarkson Potter. 2023. Pp. 256 (Hardback). \$30.00. ISBN 13: 9780593235294.

*Marianne? Mary Ann? Mary Anne? Marian?* Glamorous liberation figure of France? Virtuous farm girl? *Anne-with-an-E* like the girl of Green Gables and several English queens? Romantic medieval heroine?

As a *Mary Ann*, I desperately envied that final “e” and was keenly attuned to how the different visual representations of my name yielded such a variety of connotations. In their book *The Nameplate: Jewelry, Culture and Identity*, Marcel Rosa-Salas and Isabel Attyah Flower also investigate the visual domain of naming. The book is an engaging, insightful, colorful, and personal exploration of how first names are instantiated as items of decoration and display in the form of nameplate jewelry, particularly in Black and Hispanic American communities.

For some, the term “nameplate” may at first evoke a mundane and monochromatic office accessory. That’s certainly how it appears in a simple Google image search. The same is true for an Amazon search of available “nameplates”. Notably, almost none of the nameplates pictured in these searches contain names associated with non-White, non-Anglo ethnic populations (the single exception is the South Asian name *Jain* in the Google image search). Thus, they are monochromatic “socially” as well as “literally”.

The approach of Rosa-Salas and Flower is completely different. In fact, the disjunction between their work and the internet search results is a striking example of what Safiya Noble terms “algorithmic oppression” (2023) in her discussion of racist biases in Artificial Intelligence.

Rosa-Salas and Flower focus on the far more interesting and beautiful phenomenon of the nameplate as a piece of jewelry and element of personal expression primarily in the Black and Hispanic communities of the

[ans-names.pitt.edu](http://ans-names.pitt.edu)

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

Vol. 72 No. 2, Summer 2024

DOI 10.5195/names.2024.2643



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United States. As they define it, a nameplate is “a style of jewelry in which names, or other significant words, are sculpted from precious and base metals and worn as necklaces, earrings, rings, belt buckles, and bracelets” (9). The two authors bring together their personal backgrounds with their academic expertise in communication and cultural anthropology.

The book begins with a short historical overview of name-bearing jewelry, noting that “adornment in the form of language is as old as writing itself” (9). Mesopotamian cylinder seals and ancient Egyptian royal cartouches and signet rings are outstanding examples. The authors then note that in recent decades nameplates have become particularly emblematic of hip hop culture. They begin their exploration of nameplates among the vendors of Fulton Mall, Brooklyn, “one of the world’s foremost meccas for Hip Hop fashion” (9). When doing so, they are told by some jewelers that nameplates “did not have a history” (10), a depressing echo of older claims about Africa as a continent (Trevor-Roper 1965).

The remainder of the book decisively refutes this claim. As the authors state, they “use photography and first-person storytelling to produce a collective and visual tribute to this style” (15) while also claiming its place in history. Over a period of several years, they hosted live events across the United States and invited online submissions from the public regarding nameplates. Participants were photographed with theirs, or submitted photographs online, and wrote their reflections on notecards or in online comments. The results are a fascinating variety of personal stories and observations which highlight the cultural importance of the nameplate for both individuals and communities in the 20th- and 21st-century US. The book is lavishly illustrated, with closeups and photo collages of thousands of examples of nameplates. All shine and swoop across the page, with elaborate fonts that are a far cry from the unadorned sans-serif fonts used in the office nameplates.

The fifty-page section of “nameplate stories” constitutes the core of the book. These tell the “stories of how people got their pieces, the relevance of the word(s) or name(s) emblazoned on them, and their significance” (54). Recurring themes and motifs include memories of the family members who gave them; special occasions on which they were bought, given, or inherited; associations with special community places such as neighborhoods, malls, and other gathering places; and the use of the names of romantic partners or in memory of family members, rather than the wearer’s own. These stories have particular resonance for the Black community, with its racialized history of name rejection and name adoption (Abel et al. 2019). As names, frequently pejorative, were historically often imposed by enslavers, the act of choosing a name, whether privately or publicly, gains additional significance. It is presumably no accident that according to the nameplate stories, nameplate-giving is often ceremonial and associated with milestones like first communion, graduation, and coming-of-age moments in general.

In addition to the nameplate stories and the scholarly introduction, this book includes short essays on nameplate production and creation, typography, the geographical and cultural context of nameplates in New York City, and an exploration of name-plate themed art exhibitions and other creative work incorporating them. Overall, the book is a beautiful resource, as well as a celebration of popular culture, primarily in the communities of people of color. It will educate some and bring back beautiful memories for others. In its visual and personal appeal, and its bite-sized portraits of humanity and urban life, as well as its conciseness and emotional power, it is reminiscent of the viral internet series (and subsequent bestselling book) *Humans of New York* (Stanton 2013)—but with a more scholarly touch. It certainly deserves the same renown and popular success. For readers craving more—or wishing to contribute to the project—the authors’ Instagram page devoted to this project continues to be updated (Rosa-Salas & Attayah Flower 2024).

## References

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**Mary Ann Walter**

*University of the Virgin Islands, USA*