

## Literary Onomastics Studies

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Volume 12

Article 6

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1985

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### Repository Citation

Finke, Wayne H. (1985) "Jose Lopez Heredia's Milagro en el Bronx y Otros Cuentos: An Onomastic Approximation," *Literary Onomastics Studies*: Vol. 12 , Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/los/vol12/iss1/6>

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JOSE LOPEZ HEREDIA'S MILAGRO EN EL BRONX  
Y OTROS CUENTOS: AN ONOMASTIC APPROXIMATION

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José López Heredia is a contemporary Hispanic writer of Puerto Rican ancestry residing in New York who has devoted his creative endeavor to the narrative in particular. Like any of a number of other migrants/immigrants, he has pursued a career in higher education, yet at the same time has dedicated considerable labors to composing short stories that have garnered for him literary prizes in Puerto Rico, for example, the Circle of Iberoamerican Writers and Poets Prize in 1976. These short stories, like his two novels in preparation, The Rebel and A Kiss Before Dying, represent the transmutation of the author's own life experiences in three worlds: his youth spent in Puerto Rico, the homeland of his ancestors; his years of study in Europe, at the Sorbonne in Paris; and his many years in the "Newyorkino" community of Hispanics in the Bronx.

López Heredia's recently published collection, Miracle in the Bronx and Other Stories, is the first volume of what will comprise a series of narratives that have undergone a long period of artistic gestation.<sup>1</sup> The protagonists in this first collection all represent

Hispanic migrants from Puerto Rico who have abandoned their grim reality of an impoverished island existence in order to seek the land of promise, specifically the fabled megalopolis of New York. What results from the pilgrimage of these souls whose hardships have been patiently endured in the quest for a "new life" is not the discovery of a long-sought prosperity and peace of mind, but rather the confrontation with a bleak reality even more severe than that of their island homeland. Existence becomes a veritable survival of the fittest on its most basic, animalistic level. In a demi-world populated by drug addicts, petty criminals and prostitutes, the individual is soon forced to adopt a defensive, even offensive attitude towards that base humanity against which he is pitted in daily struggle.

Living for the most part in the squalor of the South Bronx, these characters, confronted by both an unaccustomed coldness of climate and a frigid indifference from their fellow men, often retreat into a reverie world of nostalgia for their previous life in Puerto Rico. Youthful episodes are recalled, long-gone friends and family members are evoked, and a yearning--telluric in nature--for the land itself is manifested in repeated flashbacks.

Character naming in these short stories reveals a conscious tendency of the author to assign both forenames and surnames in light of features or characteristics exhibited by these personages.<sup>2</sup> There is a deliberate care exercised in determining the name, quite often after the author has already penned the plot development, so that nomination results as a consequence of the way in which the character has been molded and revealed to the reader.

A difficulty faced by any writer in Spanish is the system of nomenclature dictated by Christian, Catholic tradition. Since people are customarily assigned their names according to the saint's day on which they are born, and in many countries adherence to traditional forms is decreed by law, naming practices are stricter than in the United States and hence one does not find in the Spanish speaking world such a rich gamut of names as in English. Another significant difference lies in the number of syllables a name contains, for in Spanish monosyllabic forms are quite rare (except examples like Juan, Luis), and most anthroponyms feature two, three or four syllables.<sup>3</sup>

We can perceive the originality in names in these short stories by determining the degree to which the anthroponyms assigned diverge from typical Hispanic

naming patterns and by indicating the deeper connotative meaning found in some common Christian names. From the list of names found in these narratives, one can observe that in general the names assigned to characters are not the most common; conspicuously absent are forms like María, Pedro, José and Felipe. Rather, what prevail are forms of a more Classical nature, as can be seen in the following examples:

Astrogildo Mendes - the Democratic congressman in Miracle in the Bronx, whose forename recalls the Latin form for star and encapsulates the idea of material grasping for power.

Honorario and Liberario - the protagonist's uncles in Moment of Truth.

Talia ("flowering" or "exuberant" in Greek) - the voluptuous ex-girl friend of the protagonist in The Adventurer.

Eusebia ("the pious one" in Greek) - the honest taxi driver who transports two criminal types to Brooklyn.

Other common Hispanic names are often imbued with additional meaning by López Heredia and tend to reflect some salient aspect of the character:

Primitivo, the cruel protagonist in The Retiree who, not wanting a child, shoves his wife down a

flight of stairs to induce a miscarriage.

Jesusa, his wife, a meek, patient, suffering woman  
Inocencio, his good-natured, simple nephew  
Mestre (deriving from the word for "master"),  
the Messianic figure murdered by a drug addict in  
Miracle in the Bronx.

Doña Olisca, the wife in The Good Shepherd, whose  
name is related to the verb olisquear - to sniff out  
and well chosen for her obsession with gossip.

Doña Donosa (rooted in the verb "donar"-to donate),  
the philanthropic widow who shares her fortune.

Tomasino Benevoix, her second husband, a baritone  
whose surname means literally "good voice" in  
French and Italian roots.

Filibustero Banca, her third husband, a stingy,  
crooked banker, whose forename can be related to  
the noun "embustero" - a cheat, deceiver.

Two names reflect the traditional Hispanic custom  
of accumulation of surnames to an extreme, as well as  
indicating aspects of their possessors' natures:

Severo Palacios de la Victoria de Río Revuelta,  
the austere, tyrannical father of the protagonist  
in Moment of Truth who commits uxoricide.

Reverend Reynalto Pascual de la Florida, the

crooked churchman, whose forename translates "king on high" and whose surname relates to the celebration of Easter and the idea of resurrection, in The Good Shepherd.

Non-Hispanic names are found in a few cases and reflect the melting pot notion of New York's multinational populace:

Mme. Grossein (in The Retiree), the boutique shop owner possessing an awe-inspiring set of mammary appendages, whose name derives from French "big breast." Mrs. Wyszinsky, a neighbor of the protagonist in The Visitor, whose name was chosen from the phone book by the author to give the idea of a Central European immigrant.

Miss Divine, in Made for Each Other, the protagonist's teacher back in Puerto Rico, who is ecstatic, divinely illuminated as she extols the superiority of American culture.

Robert T. White, the dishwasher in the same story, who legally changes his name to Roberto Tadeo Blanco in order to qualify for welfare as a minority member.

In this semi-world of Southern Bronx street-wise individuals, proper names become erased as nicknames

are substituted in light of qualities others discern in the character's behaviour or physical features:

Bigote de Gato (literally "cat's moustache"), a petty thief who demonstrates great agility in escaping via fire escapes, and who wears a whitish moustache.

Apache and Comanche, petty crooks who adopt native American Indian names.

Taino, one of the delinquents in The Taxi Driver whose name recalls the indigenous Indians of Puerto Rico.

El Chino, in The Gypsy, a slanted-eyed fellow who befriends the protagonist.

Tequila, a drug addict named for his favorite liquid refreshment.

Chota Macho, the addict and murderer of Mestre; his name is rooted in the verb "machucar" - to crush.

As a result of colloquial usage given names often appear in apocopated forms:

Gustita, the maid in Miracle in the Bronx, from Augusta, and with the diminutive suffix.

Mamá Tina, the protagonist's mother in The Retiree, from Ernestina.



Bento, the youthful protagonist of The Moment of Truth, from Benedicto.

Pepín, the medicine man, from Pepe, the nickname for José, with the diminutive suffix.

Goyo, a neighbor in Created for Each Other, from Gregorio.

There is a decided preference in the narrative of López Heredia for animals, dogs in particular, that provide more loyal friendship than the unsavory individuals marauding through the streets of the Bronx. In the story Created for Each Other the reader discovers how Bigote de Gato offers the protagonist a young pup, similar to the dog appearing on the label of RCA Victor records. The protagonist Sandino baptizes the animal with the name of Impy, in English, because of her lively spirit. Yet there is a play on words and to his Spanish speaking friends the character explains that the name derives from the first two syllables of the adjective impossible on account of her nature, an impossible little devil getting into everything.<sup>4</sup>

If one proceeds to classify the seventy-four names of characters (and animal pets), the following four categories emerge:

- 1) Traditional Christian names: 36 (48%)

2) Nicknames:	24	(32%)
3) Created original names:	5	(6.7%)
4) Non-Hispanic names:	9	(8%)

This diagram indicates statistically the preponderance of traditional naming patterns based on hagiographical or historical figures, although they are selected so as to encapsulate or reflect some trait of the character. The fact that thirty-two percent of the names mentioned corresponds to nicknames is significant, for they mirror the popular, familiar levels of communication in this educationally inferior stratum of the New York populace. Created original names are few, but these possess a ring of authenticity and lend an additional degree of onomastical color to the specific environment. Lastly, non-Hispanic names derive from two languages mainly, English, because of the New York setting, and French, in light of the author's experience in that nation.

The narrative world depicted in these short stories of López Heredia constitutes the interwoven planes of recollections of life in Puerto Rico and the present-day circumstance of urban New York City. The characters peopling these tales are immigrants/migrants whose vicissitudes, dreams and despair are presented in a vivid manner through street language in dialogue,

rich, though at times excessive description, and a sympathetic viewpoint on the part of the author. Names are an important ingredient in these narrations and transcend the mere function of identifying individuals. Like the personages they represent, they too are artistic creations of López Heredia that add another dimensionality to the characters by conveying onomastically traits of these individuals or at times even summing up in an anthroponym the essence, or multiple partial features of a person. Like the city in which the action and events take place, these names too ring of diversity and the multi-nationality of New York's Bronx environment. It is this New York "experience" which has altered no doubt traditional Hispanic naming patterns from Puerto Rico, as reflected in these short stories.

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## NOTES

1. José López Heredia, Milagro en el Bronx y otros cuentos. New York: Las Américas Publishing Co., 1984.
2. The author has indicated in conversations his interest in, and influence from the novels of Charles Dickens. On Dickens' naming of characters see Kelsie B. Harder, "Charles Dickens Names His Characters," Names, 7 (1959), 35-42; and his article, "Dickens and His Lists of Names," Names, 30 (1982), 33-41.
3. See Francisca Arana de Love, Nombres propios españoles. Barcelona: Vosgos, 1982. This fine study, written in Spanish, comprises two sections. The first examines the origins of Spanish names (Biblical, Greek, Latin, Celtic, Germanic, etc.); the second presents a list of more than 1,500 names currently in use, along with their origin, history and meaning. There has been surprisingly little work done on naming practices in Puerto Rico and on Spanglish names. See J. L. Dillard, "Spanglish Store Names in Puerto Rico," Names, 12 (1964), 98-102; and "Spanglish Store Names Again," Names, 14 (1966), 178-180.
4. This animal is the literary memorialization of

López Heredia's own pet dog Impy, recently deceased after years of blindness. In his The Visitor the author also eternalizes the name of his brother, Miguel Angel López Heredia, a well-known Puerto Rican journalist.

