

Naming Conventions and the Perception of Selfhood: A Cross-cultural Reflection on Women's Surnames in the Anglosphere vs. the Hispanic Model

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The naming convention in English-speaking countries (e.g., USA and UK), and several others in the Western culture, where women traditionally have adopted their husbands' surnames, is compared with the naming convention in Spain and Latin America, where women do not relinquish their maiden surnames. From a cross-cultural perspective spanning over three centuries, from Madame de Staël and Virginia Woolf to Hillary Clinton, this essay renders instances of women who took on the surname of their spouse upon marriage. It appears that even nowadays many women, including feminists, choose to comply with this patriarchal habit. Entanglements arising upon divorce or remarriage, such as traceability and perception of selfhood, especially for women with academic and professional profiles, are discussed here. Samples collected from life and literature across a fairly representative cultural range and diverse moments in history help to reach conclusions and come up with a consistent argument. Winds of change seem to be blowing with Vice President Kamala Harris, whose case is mentioned at the end of this essay. To circumvent the confusion for individuals and families (especially "blended" ones) that could result in the discrimination between males and females, on the one hand, and on the other hand, between married and unmarried women, the Spanish naming convention is proposed as a perfect compromise. This consists in every person bearing two surnames from birth and for good: one of each parent. Thus, women would keep their name(s), and along with them their perception of their self and their social and professional identity.

Keywords: naming conventions, surnames, cross-cultural approach, women, feminism, career, literature, politics, Spain and Latin America, USA and UK, Europe

At an international conference in Atlanta, GA¹, most of the enrolled females were featured with one surname in the program; a dwindling minority had two surnames, a few of which were hyphenated. Several had a capital initial letter in the middle, though this was also the case for some of the men. Inquiring into their backgrounds, in many instances, the women with *one* surname, all high-profile academics, faculty, or Ph.D. candidates and quite a few of them forthright feminists, had taken on the surnames of their husbands. As to those closer to retirement, the heavy weight of tradition could be admitted as an argument, but what was the

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¹ Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Studies (INCS) Conference on Mobilities, hosted by the Georgia Institute of Technology, in April 2015.

case of the younger ones? In the wake of the 1969 women's liberation movement, many US females graduating from college had kept their surnames, yet since the 1980's this trend seems to have reverted.

Rebecca Winter², for example, is a scholar who has made a name for herself. But her name is not really *her* name: It is her husband's; moreover, it is her *ex* husband's, and from what could be gathered, now in little esteem. She has been divorced for a while, but currently cannot afford (academically speaking) to *get rid* of or *doff* that surname and recover her maiden name. So far, her entire scientific production goes under the name of Rebecca Winter and it would be a major hassle to change that back into Rebecca Summer. She promises herself to start the procedures once she has obtained tenure. And what if she got married once again? What about all those women who go through more than one marriage?

A further case is that of Joan Anim-Addo. A Grenadian-born poet, playwright, and publisher, she is professor of Caribbean Literature and Culture at Goldsmiths, University of London. Asked about her hyphenated surname, she recognized it was her former husband's. Prof. Anim-Addo, who has a special focus on (black) women's writing and gender issues, could have recovered her maiden name upon divorcing. However, she chose not to, and states with a smile: "My name didn't say very much to me".³

As Claire Culleton (1994) explained, "Naming conventions, like the rest of language, have been shaped to meet the interests of society, and in patriarchal societies the shapers have been men (...) Naming is most obviously tied to the issues of paternity" (p. 74). Indeed, in the nineteenth century patriarchal society of the Western mainly Anglo Saxon context⁴, it was a matter of fact for a woman to take on her husband's surname, which would count as the *family* name. Not only was it the law, but it was accepted as *natural* law. Moreover, was it taken for granted that a woman would depend on her husband and support him in his career? Divorce was considered a social disgrace and something completely exceptional.⁵ So, why should a woman care about a name of her own?

Nevertheless, there are several famous exceptions to that assumption. Not *all* women depended on their husband. Some did engage in a professional career, often as writers. Some lived separate lives or even got divorced. Yet, in most cases, each of these women had taken on her husband's surname. Moreover, often they would continue with these surnames after legally separating. Here are some examples:

The name Anne Louise Germaine Necker might not ring a bell at once. The daughter of Jacques Necker, finance minister under Louis XVI of France, and of Suzanne Curchod, hostess of one of the most popular salons of Paris, has become famous as Madame de Staël (1766-1817). Mademoiselle Necker, who had been a brilliant child and was educated following the principles of Rousseau, wrote bestselling novels and produced highly influential literary criticism, and later chaired a prominent literary salon herself in Paris and her exile, imposed by Napoleon, in Coppet. At the age of 20 years, she went into a marriage of convenience with the Swedish diplomat Baron Erik Magnus Staël von Holstein, from whom she formally separated and then

² The name has been changed for this essay.

³ When attending an international conference in Oviedo, Spain, in 2017. Both name and case are real, and cited with her permission.

⁴ In the Americas: the US and Canada, in Europe the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Scandinavian countries, but also in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Eastern European countries, and some more.

⁵ One of these exceptions was the splitting up, albeit not formal divorce, of Constance Wilde, née Lloyd, when "the storm broke" on the family in 1895. After her husband Oscar Wilde's conviction of the charge of "gross indecency" and imprisonment, Constance changed her and her son's last name to dissociate them from his scandal. The boys, aged nine and ten, were sent abroad and informed that they must forget the name of Wilde since the family would henceforth be known as "Holland", http://www.mr-oscar-wilde.de/about/h/holland_v.htm (accessed 26 July 2019).

widowed when she was 36 years old. Yet she kept his surname and his title to her death (Fairweather, 2005).⁶

Until quite recently, the name Maria Salomea Skłodowska meant little to the public. So little that in a test to access the Spanish diplomatic service many candidates failed to associate it with the person. It is under the name “Marie Curie” (1867-1934), that the Polish born physicist and chemist has become famous. She conducted groundbreaking research on radioactivity and discovered Radium and Polonium (named thus after her home country). Twice was she awarded the Nobel Prize, once shared with her husband, also a famous physicist, the Frenchman Pierre Curie, whose surname she had taken. Currently, the European Union and the Polish authorities are striving to recover her maiden name for her, which is how we come across constructions, such as Marie Skłodowska-Curie, or inversely, Curie-Skłodowska, hyphenated or not.

Casting a glance at the Mendelssohn-Schlegel clan, the philosophers Karl Friedrich von Schlegel and Moses Mendelssohn were, as a matter of fact, known by their names, from birth to death, and forever after. But confusion arises with the females in the families: Moses’ daughter was born in 1764 as Brendel Mendelssohn, then changed her first name to Dorothea (a respectable decision of her own). When she married the banker Simon Veit, she turned into Dorothea Veit and had two sons (one of whom became the renowned painter Philipp Veit). When Dorothea Veit, née Mendelssohn, left her husband to join and subsequently marry Karl Friedrich von Schlegel, she turned into Dorothea von Schlegel. How shall this important figure in German Romanticism be looked up? Occasionally, she may be found under “Dorothea Veit Schlegel”. For some time now a centrally located square in Berlin is named after her thus: “Dorothea-Schlegel-Platz”, underneath the legend: “Writer, Translator. Née 1764, died 1839”.⁷ No trace remains whatsoever of the Brendel Mendelssohn as she was born.

Inquiring into another outstanding female character, Helmina von Chézy (1783-1856), who is said to have been the mistress of the French-German writer and naturalist Adelbert von Chamisso, one discovers that she made use of three different surnames along her life. A German source states, abbreviated: “geb. (= née) von Klencke, gesch. (= divorced) Hastfer”. In 1799, Miss Helmina von Klencke married the aristocratic Gustav von Hastfer and divorced him a year later. In 1806, she married Antoine Léonard von Chézy, had two sons with him, and separated from him in 1810, though never divorcing. Under her third surname, which is her second husband’s, she became known as a poet and playwright.

Crossing the channel to Great Britain, there is a noteworthy exception to that social rule of the age. Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) will be remembered by her very own name, a name she had made herself as the author of seminal works for feminism. Thanks to God(win) and Imlay, the latter of whom she never married, the former only when she was pregnant with her second daughter (and when most of her work had already been produced), she kept her surname most of her life. Thus she stands out as a coherent example of putting into practice what she preached. Notwithstanding, her tombstone at Old Saint Pancras Churchyard in London makes a concession to her *in extremis* husband, and reads, “Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, Author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: Born 27 April 1759: Died 10 September 1797”.

Confusion increases when it comes to the British Romantics. In the Lake District in Cumberland, it may strike one as odd to see William Wordsworth’s tombstone in Grasmere featuring *three* women with whom he

⁶ Her cousin by marriage, Albertine Necker de Saussure, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Albertine-Adrienne-Necker-de-Saussure>, did something similar: she took her husband’s name, also Jacques Necker [the minister’s nephew], and kept her family’s.

⁷ “Dorothea-Schlegel-Platz”, “Schriftstellerin, Übersetzerin, geb. 1764, gest. 1839”.

shares his final abode: Sarah Hutchinson, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Wordsworth. Upon inquiring into their lives (futile, though, to get to the roots of that conundrum), one learns that Dorothy was William's *dear sister* (who did not marry and thus preserved her surname), Mary his *beloved wife* (née Mary Hutchinson), and Sarah, the sister of the latter, and later, as wife of S.T. Coleridge, Sarah Coleridge.⁸

The confusion augments dramatically when it comes to the next generation of the Romantics, including Mary Wollstonecraft's daughter, who moreover was given her same first name, Mary. The mother had died ten days after giving birth to her and William Godwin's daughter. The teenager Mary eloped with Percy Bysshe Shelley, who at that time was married (and thus another woman already carried his surname). Only later, when widowed (his wife Harriet having committed suicide) could he marry and thus bestow his surname on Mary. In line with the proposal that comes along with this essay, i.e., to adopt two surnames from birth, one of each parent, as is the custom in Spain, she would have been called Mary *Godwin Wollstonecraft* and never changed. Yet the author of the great novel *Frankenstein* (1818) has entered the annals as Mary *Shelley*. When looking up her biography, occasionally one comes across entries, such as: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, née Godwin; 30 August 1797-1 February 1851, or Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin.

The Irish writer Maria Edgeworth (1768-1849) remained unmarried (probably due to her father's progressive paternalism⁹), and thus never had to change her name. In time she became most renowned and took part in philosophical and pedagogical circles, championing the education of children from a very early stage.¹⁰ Her selfhood would have been more distinct, as the suggestion goes in this essay, had she added her mother's surname and been called Maria *Edgeworth Elers*,¹¹ also to distinguish her from her numerous siblings from different mothers.

In the novel by Elizabeth Gilbert, *The Signature of All Things* (2013), the protagonist is Alma Whittaker, a secluded botanist specialized in the study of mosses, with a name of her own. At the age of 48 years, she marries a man younger and far less scholarly than herself. Yet she adopts his surname. On occasion of the dinner following an uneventful wedding day, "it felt like any other evening, except that she was now Mrs. Ambrose Pike"¹² (Gilbert, 2013, p. 267). Next morning, at the breakfast table, Alma's father, Henry Whittaker, and Ambrose Pike, her husband, jest about a man who changed his nationality to that of his spouse's. By that logic, and as his deceased wife was Dutch, Henry (who is English by birth and American by residence) concludes, "I am a bloody Dutchman". This comment triggers another in his new son-in-law: "'And I am a Whittaker!' Ambrose added, still laughing" (Gilbert, 2013, p. 270). Shortly afterwards, when the marriage falls into pieces due to the husband's asexuality, Alma reflects:

What was she, she further wondered? She was a married virgin who had shared a chaste bed with her exquisite young husband for scarcely more than a month. Could she even call herself a wife? She did not believe so. She could not bring herself to be referred to any longer as "Mrs. Pike." The name was a cruel joke, and she barked at anyone who dared use it. She was still Alma Whittaker, and always had been Alma Whittaker. (Gilbert, 2013, p. 288)

⁸ Several works shed light on the women around the mainstream British Romantics, such as, Jones (2000). Amongst others, it provides a helpful set of family trees.

⁹ Richard Edgeworth, an enlightened landowner, well-known author, and inventor, focused on educational theorising. Father and daughter developed a close partnership: Maria would become her father's competent assistant, committed to managing the family estate at Edgeworthstown in Ireland, and to educating her father's extended family, comprising 22 children, born from his four consecutive wives. Maria's literary production was conceived, in the first place, to earn her father's admiration and recognition.

¹⁰ For more information, see, e.g.: Edgeworth & Edgeworth (2009/1798); Nash (2006); Asenjo (2014).

¹¹ Maria was the second child and eldest daughter of Richard Lovell Edgeworth and his first wife, Anna Maria Elers (who died young).

¹² Here, as in many other cases, the wife runs under both her husband's first name and surname.

Consequently she retrieves her maiden name and, as far as possible, pretends never to have been married.

Names and surnames can be a “cruel joke”, indeed. This is what Lemuel Gulliver Jr., or “Klemo”, senses in the science-fiction novel written by Esmé Dodderidge, *The New Gulliver, or, The Adventures of Lemuel Gulliver Jr in Capovolta* (1979/1988). The work is conceived as a sparkling satire on the patriarchic system by consistently inverting the roles and customs practiced by men and women. Lemuel Gulliver Jr., a descendant of Swift’s character, finds himself in a strange land where women are the dominant sex. After marrying a local girl, Vrailbran (who, as a matter of fact, is the breadwinner), he wishes to escape domestic drudgery by engaging in an occupation, however lowly, outside the household. When applying for a job he goes through a for him debasing experience: not only has his first name “Lemuel” been changed into “Klemo”, but

It was with some trepidation that I presented myself at the company’s offices the next morning. (...) A pleasant and courteous young man (...) ushered me into an office where a kindly middle-aged woman was waiting.

She opened by addressing me under Vrailbran’s [*his Capovoltan wife’s*] family name, which was that of her mother. This so surprised me that I thought for a moment that there had been some mistake—but, then, with a shock I realized that my identity in this community was now that of Bran’s [*i.e. Vrailbran’s*] husband. Of course, I had known this in a way, but no stranger had had occasion to address me since my marriage, and I was known to all our friends and acquaintances as Klemo, since none of them could manage anything nearer than that to Lemuel—and Gulliver was an even more unlikely sounding name from their point of view. This I had never minded, but now I felt quite resentful to be no longer officially Lemuel Gulliver, in however corrupt and complicated a version, but, to translate it in our terms: “Klemo-Vrailbran-Zenhild’s husband” (Zenhild is the best transcription I can give of Brans’s mother’s name). This was no time or place to protest, however, and I simply acknowledged that I was the person so described. (Dodderidge, 1979/1988, pp. 52-53)

The customary adoption of the spouse’s surname, when it is inverted, and bestowed on *him*, a *man* (Gulliver Jr.), is perceived more than as hilarious, as outright humiliating.

On the contrary, for women it might be a source of pride and self-assertion. When the protagonist of Louise Erdrich’s novel *Love Medicine*, Marie Kapshaw meets a former tutor, a nun, she is addressed thus by her: “So you’ve come up in the world”, she mocked (...) “Or your husband has, it sounds like, not you, Marie Lazarre”. “Marie Kapshaw”, I said. “He is what he is because I made him” (Erdrich, 1994, p. 154).

When browsing through the shelves in a vintage bookshop in Athens, GA, on the spine of a volume, I spotted the name “Browning”, expecting it to be *Robert* Browning. Yet it turned out to be a work by his wife, *Elizabeth* Browning. The editors did not even bother to include her maiden name, Barrett, though she has become widely known as Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), and her literary work is as acknowledged as her husband’s. Yet she herself seemed to make a point of her status and of taking on her spouse’s surname, as Virginia Woolf ironizes in her work *Flush*, in a scene that depicts Elizabeth’s transformation from the perspective of her dog:

“Robert”, “my husband”—if Flush had changed, so had Miss Barrett. It was not merely that she called herself Mrs. Browning now; that she flashed the gold ring on her hand in the sun, she was changed, as much as Flush was changed. Flush heard her say “Robert”, “my husband” fifty times a day, and always with a ring of pride that made his hackles rise and his heart jump. But it was not her language only that had changed. She was a different person altogether. (Woolf, 2009, p. 75)

Jane Austen (1775-1817), who is celebrated under her very own name as she remained unmarried, inspired Virginia Woolf’s seminal essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1928). Paradoxically, the woman who advocated for

women's independence claiming a space for themselves to start with, relinquished something as valuable as her own surname, Stephen, and has become famous under that of her husband, Leonard Woolf.

The preceding examples imply that husbands took their wives' literary activity as a matter of fact, or even socially benefited from it. Since wives carried their husbands' surnames, if the former became renowned, strictly speaking these men could be considered impostors—albeit involuntary ones. Yet not all of them were proud of their wives' *hobby horse*. Here is an instance of a husband who dreaded his name being associated with his wife's writing, especially when the critiques were unfavorable. Back to the European continent, now to Vienna in the later nineteenth century, with Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach (1830-1916), née: Dubský. While unmarried, the Moravian born Austrian Hungarian playwright, novelist, short-story writer, and essayist ran under Baroness Dubský von Třebomyslice. After her marriage, and when her earlier works earned negative criticism, including attacks on her person, she was not the only one affected. Her husband Moritz von Ebner-Eschenbach was about to forbid her to continue writing for the stage since it implied putting the *family* name in jeopardy¹³ making his acceptance of her role as a writer contingent on a favorable presence of the name Ebner-Eschenbach in the press. He would probably have been more insouciant about his wife's passion and might have taken it less personally had she continued to be called Marie Dubský. In her letters, she admits to being grateful that her husband granted her the *favor* to write.

This brings to mind the case of the Spanish historian María Teresa Álvarez García, whose husband Sabino Fernández Campo (whose surname she does *not* bear, as will be explained hereafter), was the secretary of the Spanish King Juan Carlos I¹⁴. One of Álvarez's works, *Charles's V last passion*, is dedicated thus: "To my husband, who did not oppose my writing this book" (Álvarez, 1999, p. 7).¹⁵

Some women seem to make a point of collecting famous husbands' surnames. Such was the case of the Viennese Alma Mahler Gropius Werfel (1879-1964), née Schindler, who successively married three outstanding men: the composer Gustav Mahler, the architect Walter Gropius, and the novelist Franz Werfel, adding and keeping their surnames as in a string of beads on a necklace. A similar example is that of the English born and later in life US-American citizen Pamela Beryl Digby (1920-1997), better known as Pamela Churchill Harriman. The daughter-in-law of Winston Churchill and mother of his grandson Winston, in between had become the fifth Mrs. Hayward (to the Broadway producer Leland Hayward), though at some point she decided to drop that surname. "Churchill" certainly sounded more distinguished, and "Harriman" more affluent. In 1993, Bill Clinton appointed her US ambassador to France, where she died after a stroke at the Paris *Ritz* swimming pool.

In many other countries, even beyond the Western tradition, women take on their husbands' surnames. In diverse languages, the title of a woman already gives (or used to give) a clue to their marital status, such as "Miss" (unmarried) vs. "Mistress" (married)¹⁶, "Señorita" vs. "Señora" in Spanish, "Fräulein" vs. "Frau" in German, or "Mademoiselle" vs. "Madame" in French. Furthermore, in some cultures, women's marital status is revealed in the suffix of their surname. This is the case in the Slavonic countries, e.g., in Russia and the Czech

¹³ Thanks for this anecdote go to Petra Watzke (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), as referred in her paper "A difficult Birth: Marie von Ebner-Eschenbach's Novella *Lotti die Uhrmacherin* and the Configuration of her Authorship", at the aforementioned INCS 2015 conference in Atlanta.

¹⁴ Sabino Fernández Campo (1918, Oviedo-2009, Madrid) secretary of the Spanish Royal Household (Casa Real Española) between 1977 and 1993.

¹⁵ Original in Spanish: "A Sabino, mi marido, que no me impidió escribir esta historia".

¹⁶ In the last decades, "Ms." has become the title of respect. Unlike "Miss" or "Mrs.", it does not indicate a woman's marital status. Moreover, it seems a suitable equivalent of "Mister", a title for both unmarried and married men.

Republic. In Lithuania, too, specific masculine and feminine suffixes exist. While a masculine surname usually ends in *-as*, *-ys* or *-is*, and never changes (e.g., *Bimbirys*), the feminine ends in *-ienė* (or rarely *-uvienė*) for married or widowed women (e.g., *Bimbirienė*); and *-aitė*, *-utė*, *-iūtė* or *-ytė* for unmarried ones (e.g., *Bimbirytė*). Which poses a genuine problem should a Lithuanian woman marry a Mr. Smith from the US: would Gabija *Bimbirytė* then have to be called Mrs. *Smithienė*?

In some other countries and regions, however, women do keep their surnames unchanged. Such is the case in many African cultures, as in the tribal system in Somalia, where women continue to count as members of their own tribe for the rest of their lives. Hence they do not transfer their loyalty when getting married, nor do they adopt their husbands' surnames (Barnes & Boddy, 1996). In certain areas of India and Indonesia, too, the surname is handed down in a matrilineal way. This used to be likewise the custom among many native American tribes.

However, there is no need to wander that far in time, space, and cultures. On the European continent, there is a country with an almost gender neutral and entirely sensible way of dealing with this matter, and this is Spain. To start with, all Spaniards have *two* surnames. The first of them traditionally¹⁷ represents the first surname of the father, and the second of them the first surname of the mother. This can be exemplified at the case of Carmen.¹⁸ Her father is called Javier *Fuente Armendariz*, and her mother *Manuela Gómez Fernández*. Thus, it follows that Carmen will bear the following two surnames: *Carmen Fuente Gómez*. Always, during her whole life, no matter whether she gets married or not, or whether she marries once, twice or umpteen times. The same as her brother: *Nicolás Fuente Gómez*.

Father: Javier <i>Fuente Armendariz</i>	Mother: <i>Manuela Gómez Fernández</i>
Daughter: <i>Carmen Fuente Gómez</i>	

If Carmen has a daughter, *Lucía*, with her first husband, *Víctor Pujals Llano*, this girl will be called *Lucía Pujals Fuente*. As can be seen, Carmen's first surname is carried into the next generation. Should she divorce her husband and remarry, her own surnames will remain untouched. Should she have a son with her second husband, *Fernando Vega Ortiz*, that son—*Jorge*—would carry the surnames *Vega Fuente*. Thus one can tell that these siblings share the same mother, while they have different fathers. As a matter of fact, identity is rather an individual than a family issue.¹⁹

Father (first husband): <i>Víctor Pujals Llano</i> Father (second husband): <i>Fernando Vega Ortiz</i>	Mother: <i>Carmen Fuente Gómez</i>
Daughter (with first husband): <i>Lucía Pujals Fuente</i> Son (with second husband): <i>Jorge Vega Fuente</i>	

This used to be the tradition and the law until the year 2000, when the option arose to give the mother's surname to a newborn in the first place, yet only upon written request and with the approval of the authorities. Since 2017, this option is unrestricted, and couples are free to choose either the father's or the mother's

¹⁷ Since the Spanish civil registry was established in 1870 and started on 1, January 1871.

¹⁸ The example is made up.

¹⁹ Portugal has the same custom, though with the surnames inverted: It is the mother's surname that comes first in writing, and then the father's. Still, it is the father's (though in the second place) which counts more and by which people are addressed.

surname in the first place for all their common offspring. In case of non-agreement, it is the administrator at the registrar's office who decides. Nonetheless, two surnames continue to be legally compulsory, and during the person's whole life.

Very rarely, however, an adult decides to change the order of his or her two surnames in Spain. This is the case of a colleague who started out on his academic career as Arturo García Aguirre.²⁰ Some years ago, he switched his two surnames and since then goes under Arturo Aguirre García. Why? Not that he supports the feminist cause giving preference to his mother's surname. The motivation is entirely pragmatic: Firstly, "Aguirre" is a less frequent and more distinguished surname than the quite common "García" (equivalent to "Jones"). Secondly, studies have suggested that appearing in the upper part of the alphabetical list may contribute to enhance one's career, especially in the academic context.²¹

In most of the other European countries mentioned, the name laws have become more flexible in the last decades; yet as a rule a "family name" must be chosen. It is a *choice*, indeed, though tradition and social constraints constitute strongly influential factors, therefore overwhelmingly the husband's surname is uppermost. The "family name" seems to persist as a major argument for many even progressive minded women. When offspring is involved, it makes them take on their husband's surname. It is often alleged that it creates confusion if the child has a different surname than the mother; even that it might *traumatize* the child. However, this can hardly be deemed a persuasive argument in modern so-called "blended" or "reconstituted" families with members from quite manifold backgrounds. A "trauma" might rather arise from witnessing parents with the same *family name* fighting each other, as e.g., in the classic movie *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979)²². In line with the Spanish convention, this film would have to be titled *Kramer vs. Stern* (which is the maiden name of Joanna Kramer), or: *Stern vs. Kramer*.

A glance at couples both of whom are established authors, both sides of the Atlantic, and how they deal with the issue, might be telling. The US-American writer Siri Hustvedt was granted the prestigious *Princess of Asturias Award* for Literature in 2019, Spain's major official prize for Letters (together with the *Premio Cervantes* award), amongst other reasons for "employing a feminist perspective" and addressing "a variety of the facets that sketch a convulsive, disconcerting present". It must be acknowledged that Hustvedt is consistent with her beliefs since she has kept her own surname. It is more, she seems to make a point of not adopting her famous husband's, Paul Auster's, surname. In Spain, at least two examples of famous writing couples come to mind: Elvira Lindo and Antonio Muñoz Molina, on the one hand, and Almudena Grandes Hernández and Luis García Montero, on the other. Since changing surnames when getting married is not an option for a Spanish woman, neither Lindo nor Grandes have to make a point of not being the wives of their respective husband-writers.

Studies (e.g., Hoffnung, 2006) have shown that women who are older at marriage, those who have more feminist attitudes, higher career commitment, and those who do not see the need of a "family" name (and do not mind being called something different than their offspring or their husbands) choose to keep their surnames. In the last years that number has risen significantly.

²⁰ Name altered for this essay.

²¹ E.g., "Having a surname with an initial letter towards the end of the alphabet is regarded by some as a disadvantage; Larry Adler's grandfather, born Zelakovitch, changed his surname 'after growing tired of being at the end of every queue'" (Chambers, 2001, pp. 1460-1461).

²² *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979), film written and directed by Robert Benton, based on Avery Corman's novel. Starring: Dustin Hoffman, Meryl Streep, Jane Alexander and Justin Henry.

A few decades ago, this appears not to have been an issue at all, not even for pioneers in the field of feminist studies, as Hannah Gavron (1936-1965). In her seminal sociological study on women and work, *The Captive Wife: Conflicts of Housebound Mothers*, published in 1966 (a few months after her tragic suicide, leaving behind three young children), she addresses all kinds of real and potentially conflictive issues for young housewives, many of whom had been working before marriage. Yet the fact that all the young wives and mothers she interviewed for her thesis wear the surname of the husband is nowhere even hinted at. Moreover, Hannah herself had given up, as a matter of fact, her maiden name Fyvel upon marrying Robert Gavron.

In the context of this debate it can be considered a real boon and an utterly progressive custom that women in Spain don't change their surnames at any point in their lives. Moreover, it is a convenient one: Not only is their selfhood preserved, but they remain traceable (as in the professional and social media).

Besides, it does circumvent the official discrimination between single and married women. The traditional distinction between *Señora* (Mistress, Mrs.) and *Señorita* (Miss, literally: little woman) has gradually fallen into disuse in Spain, and all women are addressed formally as *Señora*, unless in elementary teaching where *Señorita* still holds some ground but is being progressively substituted by *Profesora*. In Germany, the equivalent distinction between *Frau* (woman or mistress) and *Fräulein* (also a diminutive: little woman, the same as in French *Mademoiselle* vs. *Madame*) was officially abandoned years ago, and one is expected to address all females over 16 as *Frau*. Yet a slightly more subtle mechanism has sneaked into German custom to differentiate between a married and an unmarried woman: frequently the former carries a compounded or hyphenated surname. This may also lead to sometimes exhilarating combinations and lengths. Thus in the comic novel *Ein Mann für jede Tonart* the popular German author Hera Lind writes full of irony: "The midwife was called Rheingarten-Schlotterkamp, which meant that she was a married working woman. How good for her" (Lind, 1993, p. 270).²³ Since some German surnames consist of nouns, some of which are *per se* compounded, adding another surname (possibly also compounded) may result in a string of four or more words, as in this example.²⁴

As suggested, a major inconvenience is that a change of name implies a change of the perception of one's selfhood—socially and individually, and impedes traceability. Supposing a young woman starts out her career as Ms. Brown, upon marrying M. Evans, she becomes Ms. Brown-Evans, Ms. Evans-Brown, or just plain Ms. Evans. After divorcing and remarrying, e.g., M. Wilson, she could choose to adopt the name Ms. Wilson, or add it to the string: Ms. Evans-Brown-Wilson. From this, it follows that it constitutes a true challenge to trace former classmates.

Nothing like this would happen in Spain, where, as explained, two surnames are the rule. Until a couple of decades ago, however, some individuals wore just *one* surname, which singled them out. This was because their mothers were *unmarried*, and thus the fathers' surname was not available. Nowadays, this is no longer an issue since there is the possibility of bestowing the two surnames of the mother on a fatherless child. An example from literature may help to illustrate this. In the novel *Heretics* by the Cuban author Leonardo Padura, the "mulato" (sic) born out of wedlock in the 1950's in Cuba, Ricardo, now an adult, discloses to his until then unknown cousin, Elias Kaminsky, how he had come to share his surname:

²³ Original in German: "Die Hebamme hieß Rheingarten-Schlotterkamp und war demnach eine verheiratete berufstätige Frau. Wie schön für sie". Hera Lind's works have been widely acclaimed in Germany and some turned into movies. They are similar in style to Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones*.

²⁴ E.g., Rheingarten-Schlotterkamp, Rhein-Garten (two words compounded) meaning: garden of the Rhine.

My mom and I were very lucky to meet your uncle and your father on that plot. Especially, of course, your uncle, who started a relationship with my mother, and gave her something she hadn't known before: respect. (...) As the years went by, my mother and Joseph even got married, and I ceased being named Ricardo Sotolongo, being what in those days was called a *love child*, and came to wear two surnames, the proper way: Kaminsky Sotolongo. (Padura, 2013, p. 186)²⁵

Being badged as an illegitimate child remains a matter of concern for some, as this dialogue in a contemporary novel by Maggie O'Farrell reveals:

And here she is again, Ted's mother, sitting on the sofa she'd complained about, waiting for the baby to wake up so she can "have a hold".

"Vilkuna?" she is saying, as if it's a swearword. "He'll be a Vilkuna? You're not going to give your son his proper name?"

Ted adjusts the angle of his mug, keeping his eyes on the rug under his feet. "There's no reason why a child should have his father's name instead of—"

No reason? No reason? There's every reason in the world. People are going to think he's a ... that he's illegitimate, that he's—

(O'Farrell, 2010, pp. 102-105)

Further complications may arise when one surname or even both of a Spanish citizen is double, either hyphenated or joined by a "y" (an "and"). For example: Agustín García-Currás Sánchez y Jove. This is frequently the case in aristocratic circles. The late Duchess of Alba, who died in 2014, is a prime example: Her surnames add up to nine words, and she possessed 17 given names, some of them aggregated, though she had become a celebrity under "Cayetana": *María del Rosario Cayetana Paloma Alfonsa Victoria Eugenia Fernanda Teresa Francisca de Paula Lourdes Antonia Josefa Fausta Rita Castor Dorotea Santa Esperanza*. Here ends the string of the Duchess of Alba's given names; now to her compounded surnames (prepositions, connectors, and hyphens included): *Fitz-James Stuart y de Silva Falcó y Gurtubay*. Her first husband, who left her a young widow, was called Luis Martínez de Irujo y Artázcoz. Now one may puzzle over the surnames their six children are carrying. The Duchess married two more times, while she never changed her surnames.

In many countries of Latin America, as in Spain, at birth girls were and still are registered in the first place with the surname of the father, in the second that of the mother; in some, as in Argentina, generally just with one—the father's. Formerly, roughly until the 1970's, upon marriage, women in most countries of Latin America would drop their second surname (that of their mother) and aggregate their husbands, preceded by the preposition "de" ("of"). Not only would this make their marital status plain, but also to *whom* they were married²⁶ (or, to whom they *belonged*). When widowed, they would fit in: "viuda de" (widow of); and when remarrying, they would drop the first husband's surname to adopt the new spouse's surname with the "de". However, they always kept their own first surname in the first place, never relinquishing it. An example thereof is the widow of the former president of Argentina, Néstor Kirchner. Cristina Fernández,²⁷ later also elected president of the country, is sometimes referred to as Cristina Fernández *de* Kirchner.

²⁵ Original in Spanish: "Mi mamá y yo tuvimos mucha suerte de encontrarnos en el solar con tu tío y tu padre. Sobre todo, claro, con tu tío, que empezó una relación con mi madre en la que él le dio algo que ella nunca había conocido: le dio respeto. (...) Con los años, incluso mi madre y Joseph se casaron, y yo dejé de llamarme Ricardo Sotolongo, de ser lo que en esa época se llamaba un hijo natural, para tener dos apellidos, como debía ser: Kaminsky Sotolongo".

²⁶ This is the point those who stick to this custom would seek to make, though it is no longer a legal requirement.

²⁷ In some countries of Latin America, e.g., in Argentina as mentioned, people tend to wear one surname, though frequently two given names, e.g. the soccer player Diego Armando Maradona.

Nowadays, as a mere and dwindling social convention, this aggregate does not appear any longer in legal documents.²⁸

It might be interesting to explore how female migrants from Latin American countries have been dealing with the naming issue when getting married in the US and Europe, whether they tend to adopt the custom of the country they live in, or whether they continue with their own. Often they drop their surname seemingly in a desire to assimilate, but as often not. For example, the famous Chilean writer Isabel Allende, for many years now a US citizen and married for the second time in her country of residence, has never changed her surname. The acclaimed Nicaraguan novelist and poet Gioconda Belli (born in 1948, since 1990 living in both Managua and Los Angeles), has been married three times. Her third husband (since 1987) is a North-American citizen. As a matter of fact, Gioconda Belli has never swapped her surname.

Rosa Valdés Pantoja, a Mexican who lives in Luxembourg, did not feel like giving up her surname when she got married to a Luxembourgian citizen in the 1980's. Thus her husband, M. Besch, agreed to incorporate his wife's surname in the then compulsory family name, and the couple were to be called Besch-Valdés. However, their three children merely received their father's surname, Besch. The couple have been divorced since, and both have recuperated their respective original family names.

A most original yet utterly arguable approach toward a compromise is to create hybrid names. A precedent was set by Emma Bloomberg, the eldest daughter of former New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. As *The New York Times* reported:

When Ms. Bloomberg (...) gave birth this spring, she and her husband, Chris Frissora, combined their surnames into a portmanteau. Their daughter, Zelda Violet Frissberg, was born at 9:06 p.m. on March 22 [2015] in New York City, weighing 7 pounds 13 ounces. Ms. Bloomberg, 36, and her husband, 35, married in 2005, and their daughter's surname—Frissora plus Bloomberg equals Frissberg—is a term used by friends to describe them as a couple. The name is to represent that Zelda is a combination of her parents, according to a spokesman for Mr. Bloomberg. (M.M. Grynbaum)

Further on M. David Patrick Columbia, a long-time chronicler of Manhattan society is quoted:

“It's become more fashionable for women from families of great fortune to keep their maiden names, and even sometime give them to their children,” Mr. Columbia said by telephone. The Frissberg name, he added, is “a play on the same idea”. (*NYT*, July 7, 2015, p. A16)

Whether this is a bright idea, remains a matter of debate. Combining parts of each parents' surname might, amongst other reasons, efface their identity and will make tracing utterly impracticable.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, an American activist who serves as the US Representative for New York's 14th congressional district and a member of the Democratic Party, is the youngest woman ever to enter the United States Congress. Born in New York City in 1989 from parents with a Puerto Rican migratory background, she wears one surname from each parent, according to the Hispanic custom, yet she hyphenates them. So do many other Hispanic persons, both female and male, not merely to keep both of them but also to avoid confusion, e.g., in their ID card, since the first surname could be taken as a middle name, and the second as the “proper” surname.

Whether rich and famous or not, in principle for Hispanic or Spanish women it feels strange to be asked to give up their surname/s, and when they do so, there must be an authoritative reason.

Melinda Gates, according to *Forbes'* the third most powerful woman in the world, is a US-American

²⁸ In a not so remote past this was sometimes, too, the case in Spain, especially among the aristocracy and upper classes.

philanthropist and the author of *The Moment of Lift: How Empowering Women Changes the World* (2019), “an inspirational look at the need to empower women to make changes in the world”, according to *The Washington Post*. Since 2000, she is the co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, together with her husband Bill Gates. Empowering other women after giving up her own surname²⁹ must strike as a paradox in the context of the debate suggested in this article.

The above reference to a former president’s wife who has become a president herself takes us back to the United States. In a 2015 TV interview, Lynda Johnson Robb (daughter of Lyndon B. Johnson and wife of former governor of Virginia Charles S. Robb), explained that she had opted for keeping her maiden name and juxtaposing her husband’s. This might be a start, not merely for daughters of famous fathers. But then again, why add the *husband’s* surname? Chelsea Clinton, ex president Bill Clinton’s daughter, has kept her surname, too, without aggregating her husband’s. Moreover it has been passed on to her daughter, who carries the father’s surname in the second place: Charlotte Clinton Mezvinsky. According to the Spanish tradition, her daughter would be named Charlotte Mezvinsky Clinton, and Chelsea herself would always wear the surnames Clinton Rodham.

While women take on their husbands’ surnames or tend to make compromises and choices, with men it is impossible to tell by the surname if they are married or not, let alone to whom.³⁰ Just think of Bill Rodham, né Clinton, or Bill Clinton Rodham, Bill Rodham-Clinton. Derisory as it might sound, however people do not frown when it comes to Hillary. Had she won the presidential election in 2016, the former candidate to the presidency of the United States, albeit a declared feminist, would have run as the first female president of the US under her husband’s surname. This is what her official webpage implied in the first place, as the title of the web still does today (2020). When clicking on it in 2015, however, under the then opening sentence “Everyday Americans need a champion. I want to be that champion”, her signature was: “Hillary Rodham Clinton”.³¹ In between, and significantly in the months before the 2016 poll, “Rodham” was dropped, possibly because keeping it made her sound too much of a radical feminist in the eyes of some of the more traditional voters she needed to address. Afterwards her web page again featured: “Hillary Rodham Clinton”. In the Spanish naming legislation, she would forever be Hillary Rodham Howell, since her father is Hugh E. Rodham and her mother Dorothy Howell.

Winds of change seem to be blowing, with Kamala D. (Devi) Harris, first female vice president of the United States of America, sworn in on January 20, 2021. Since 2014, she has been married to lawyer Doug Emhoff, yet never adopted his surname but kept her own. Kamala’s father is the Jamaican-American economist Donald J. Harris. Her mother, the late Indian-American biologist Shyamala Gopalan, who raised and inspired Kamala (together with another daughter) after her divorce, and who played a major role in Kamala’s life, does not feature in her daughter’s name. According to the proposal that comes along with this essay, it would be Kamala Harris Gopalan.

In conclusion, the Spanish-Hispanic naming convention turns out a perfect compromise. It is most consistent with feminist values because it helps women to remain traceable in history and in the social media. Furthermore, it preserves the mother’s first surname, at least in the next generation. Moreover, the issues of divorce, remarriage, “blended” families, and related matters are most effectively mastered, since no one needs

²⁹ Her maiden name is “French”, but it seldom turns up anywhere.

³⁰ At least in the countries in the Anglo Saxon tradition, including the United States of America.

³¹ The web, first accessed in July 2015, has undergone several changes in its content and design, as has Hillary’s surname.

to alter their names at any point, and thus the inward and outward perception of their identities remains unstirred.³²

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³² Let me conclude with a personal note and explain how I, a German born citizen, came by two surnames. My birth name is Lioba Simon, which I have been happy with (the stress in both words is on the "I", pronounced as a long [I:]). I even managed to keep it after my marriage to a Spaniard, which took place in Germany (I made a point of it because at that time divorce was not yet legalized in Spain, and, though young and in love, I was no fool). However in my ID I had to take on my then husband's surname. Moreover, as a Spaniard he had two of them. Thus I ended up with a string of three, since there was no way to explain to the German clerk that my mother-in-law's maiden name was of little consequence to me. Yet I hardly ever used them and just signed with plain "Simon". But then, when I had to adopt the Spanish citizenship (since at that time there was no way to make a university career as a foreigner—it still is complicated today, but that is another issue) according to the Spanish law I had to dig out my mother's maiden name: Schuhmacher. Which she herself had dropped when marrying my father (as of then she has gone under "Frau Simon"). I have since divorced, remarried, divorced, and never changed names. Only for a literary contest did I take on a pseudonym, and occasionally the abridged version "Lio Schumer". In the international academic context the surnames are sometimes hyphenated, typically when there is a slot for merely one.