
Original Article

Reconquista: Ilan Stavans and multiculturalist Latino/a discourse

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Abstract Ilan Stavans constructs a multiculturalist framework for understanding the US Latino/a experience. By reading *The Hispanic Condition* (1995) alongside Stavans' discussions of the Latino/a literary canon in the introductions to his anthologies, *New World* (1997) and *Lengua Fresca* (Augenbraum and Stavans, 2006), and his articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, I argue that this multiculturalist approach is based on an equation of culture with language. Through this linguistic formulation of Latinidad with the Spanish language as its defining facet, Stavans privileges a colonialist rendering of Latino/a history, tracing the ancestral lineage of Latino/as in terms of solely Western European culture. By valorizing Spanish colonization, Stavans glosses over sites of violence in order to highlight a linguistic inheritance and formulates US Latino/a identity in opposition to American indigenous cultures. Uncovering the way in which Ilan Stavans positions the indigenous as Other in his multiculturalist approach to Latinidad is essential to understanding the colonialist and conservative underpinnings of how Stavans structures the Latino/a literary canon. I will consequently address how Latino/a Studies critics have wrestled with Stavans' influence on the field and the ways in which Stavans' vision of US Latino/a Studies resembles or reflects its institutional orientation and disciplinary locations.

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Introduction

A variety of historical movements have shaped the development of US Latino/a Studies in the academy, from the different waves of immigration, to the Cold



War, to the Civil Rights movements, to globalization. Each has left an indelible mark on the field, particularly on the institutional spaces that house US Latino/a Studies. My goal in this article is to provide an analysis of multiculturalist discourse as one particular approach to Latinidad that has recently emerged in the field, by contextualizing its effect on the institutionalization of US Latino/a Studies within the academy. By multiculturalist, I am referring to a valorization of hybridity and alterity that is evident in a variety of disciplines,¹ but which takes on a specifically linguistic formulation within Latino/a Studies. The idea that language allows US Latinidad to pose a radical challenge to notions of American cultural purity can be a progressive project, as in the example of Debra Castillo's work. However, multiculturalist ideas about language can be employed towards conservative ends if such an approach towards alterity is not self-critical. For this reason, my article will primarily focus on Ilan Stavans, and in so doing, reflect on the conceptual risks implicit in equating language with progressive politics when formulating Latinidad. Many critics situate Ilan Stavans as an outsider to Latino/a Studies, and in fact Stavans likes to frame himself as an anomaly within the field in order to assert his authority to speak about it. I go against both grains of the discourse on Stavans, produced by critics and himself, to discuss how his theorizations of Latinidad are part of a broader trend within academic discourse. By making the logic underlying Stavans' approach visible and placing it within a historical context of disciplinary shifts, I aim to highlight the challenges we face as critics when formulating multiple Latinidades.

1 For example, Puri critiques the valorization of hybridity within Postcolonial Studies (2004).

Linguistic Alterity and the Multiculturalist Approach

I find it useful to begin with Debra A. Castillo's *Redreaming America* (2005) in order to discuss how a multiculturalist project can be productive within US Latino/a Studies while also highlighting some of the ambivalent formulations regarding its institutionalization. Castillo usefully analyzes where US Latino/a Studies is located in the academy in relation to linguistic and disciplinary boundaries. She provides an insightful critique of the globalizing function of language in English departments as a form of "academic colonization" wherein such departments are "taking on and fiercely guarding the rights to all literatures written in all languages of the world, ... taught in translation of course" (191). This colonial impulse is not the domain of any one language, but the historical context of globalization and primacy of English within that system is clearly shaping the way in which literary studies is located in the academy. Castillo asks the valuable question, "what would US literature look like if we included literature from the United States in languages other than English" (14)? By pointing to the growing Latino/a population in the United States, she



2 Lazo (2005) models a hemispheric lens and advocates for transnational models of literary study that move beyond national boundaries.

3 Writing or speaking in English is often not a matter of preference, even for bilingual Latino/as. Language skills can vary according to educational and sociological background, as well as location (for example, personal versus public, familial language versus academic discourse).

rightly calls for a reconfiguration of the national literature,² arguing that, “US literature in both Spanish and English needs resituation in a hemispheric context” (194).

Castillo (*ibid.*) also calls for a “parallel shift” in Spanish departments via such “North-South dialogues” (4) that would contest the notion of a hemispheric canon: “what would Latin American literature look like if we understood the United States to be a Latin American country and took seriously the work by US Latino/as” (14)? Such a reconceptualization mirrors the challenge Castillo directs to English departments, in that she is asking for Latin American Studies to redefine the boundaries of Latin America by incorporating writing by US Latino/as. In employing a linguistic politics to progressive ends, challenging the entrenchment of US literary canons and providing constructive questions about the hierarchies of power between English and Spanish departments, Castillo’s argument about the relationship of US Latino/a writers to language also suggestively positions Ilan Stavans as representative of this kind of linguistic politics. Castillo frames her project in terms of broadening the definition of Latino/a cultural production to include “US-based Latino writers from the many cultures and generations of *latinidad*” (4) and therefore focuses specifically on “first-generation new Latino/as who choose to write in Spanish” because they are “a particularly understudied group of authors” (13). These new immigrant Latino/a writers are placed in opposition to “the more established second-plus-generation cohort, who often choose to write in English and whose literary and theoretical work has been more assimilated into the US academy” (13–14). Since language is rendered here as a choice by Castillo, writing in English is by extension framed in terms of cultural allegiance.³ In so doing, she positions resident Latino/as as choosing assimilation into the US mainstream, and their academic popularity and use of English is an implied mark of their inauthenticity as Latino/a subjects. So while Castillo valorizes the Spanish language as contestatory and oppositional in new Latino/a texts, English is aligned with a conservative politics. The logic implied by this binary of old versus new generations frames English-language cultural production by Latino/as as a cultural betrayal of their “original” linguistic identity.

Castillo’s conceptualization of this linguistic betrayal using Juan Gonzalez’ (2000) term “safari approach” (xvii) is where the tension of identity politics is most evident. Her argument about English-dominant US Latino/a writers is ruptured by Ilan Stavans’ symbolic value and in turn, reveals how the tie of language to politics can potentially ghettoize English-speaking Latino/as within US Latino/a studies. Castillo (2005) cites Juan Gonzalez to critique this old generation of US Latino/a writers for “explaining their stories and their cultures solely within a US context” (8); but, when taken within the context of Gonzalez’s argument, it becomes clear that he uses this concept somewhat differently. When Gonzalez (*ibid.*) uses the phrase “safari approach,” he refers to US Latino/a authors who write about Latino/a experience as “experts who



have not lived it” (xvii), and in that category, he squarely places Stavans’ *The Hispanic Condition* (1995). It is here in the figure of Stavans that a dissonance becomes visible, for while Gonzalez is framing Stavans as using a safari approach and acting as “the guide and interpreter” for “an Anglo audience” (xvii), Castillo by contrast favorably cites Stavans as an example of the new Latino/a writers “rejecting as stale the localized modalities of the Latin Boom, and finding inspiration in the US/international popular culture” (10). In this example of academic discourse in US Latino/a Studies, I see the figure of Stavans functioning as central imaginative site from which to understand the tension between divergent approaches to Latinidad. This rupture also reveals how linguistic definitions of Latinidad can become delocalized and abstracted in the process of articulating a progressive and inclusive politics. Neither Spanish nor English, nor any language for that matter, is necessarily suggestive of a progressive or conservative politics; the political implications of language use are highly situational. As a result, analyses of Latinidad in relation to language need to be contextualized, looking at the localities of nation, class, race, gender, and sexuality wherein language is employed. Acknowledging specificities can allow for the concurrent acknowledgement of multiple and contradictory Latinidades. Otherwise, our definitions of Latinidad, despite operating with a different set of intellectual goals from Stavans, may fall into the same restrictive pitfalls of identity politics as those within his work.

My close reading of Castillo’s (2005) work is an effort to respond to her challenge to change “ways of thinking in the academic sites where authority is vested in particular disciplinary and departmental divisions of labor” and to amplify the “ongoing discussion that has too often been muted partly because it is lost in the halls between English and Spanish departments” (194). In opening my article with her book, I situate Castillo’s theorization as a productive point of departure for engendering interdisciplinary dialogue, not only because I value her project of challenging linguistic canons, but also because her writing embodies this sense of ambivalence about Latinidad and language. I therefore see the rupture that citing Ilan Stavans creates, the tension between the different meanings his figure symbolizes for Castillo versus Gonzalez, as productive place from which to analyze with greater depth the implications of a multiculturalist approach that sees language as engendering a progressive politics for Latinidad.

The Most Visible Symptom: Ilan Stavans

Because of his visibility,⁴ Ilan Stavans is a useful figure by which to understand the function of multiculturalist discourse as a trend within US Latino/a Studies. Although Stavans is sometimes disavowed by the field, this literary and cultural studies critic articulates and positions himself as a public intellectual able to speak for and even embody US Latino/a Studies through his numerous

4 Quantifying Stavans’ scholarship gives a sense of his visibility in



academia. Between 1993 and 2008, Stavans published 20 book-length works, of which two are coauthored and one is a collection of interviews. He has edited 23 books, as well as published at least eight essays with the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and over 40 journal articles since 1987. Stavans' extensive scholarship output along with his self-marketing may explain why he has been able to find support for his publishing projects; however, one cannot ignore the possibility that his scholarship also holds some appeal for his reading audience, regardless, or because of, its problematics.

5 Stavans' authority within the field is evident when Mendieta (2003) includes Stavans in his list of "Latino intellectuals in the United States, who may qualify as cosmopolitan and postcolonial intellectuals" (220).

6 Stavans indicates in an interview with a *New York Times* blog (Garner,

anthologies, PBS show, interviews with major Latino/a writers as well as his seminal work published in 1995, *The Hispanic Condition*. Alternately labeled "the czar of Latino literature" by the *New York Times* (Richardson, 1999, 13) and the "Skip Gates of Latino studies" by the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Heller, 1998, A17), Stavans has without a doubt authorized himself as *the* Latino/a Studies critic, although mainly *outside* of the academic discipline of US Latino/a Studies.⁵ His ascendancy in regards to shaping the canon of US Latino/a literature has been solidified by his role as editor of the long awaited *Norton Anthology of Latino Literature*.⁶ However, despite his very public presence, few scholarly assessments have been written about his relationship to the development of US Latino/a Studies as a field and the logic underlying his formulation of Latino/a identity. I am particularly concerned with this academic gap relating to Stavans and his work because I sense that it also renders invisible how he functions as a symbol for certain problematic notions of US Latinidad within the field. In other words, Stavans is not an anomaly but rather, one model of the conceptual frameworks that circulate in scholarly criticism.⁷ In particular, I want to call attention to the conservative colonialist logic operating within the language-based definitions of Latinidad used by Stavans, definitions that are representative of a broader trend of analysis that has been institutionalized in the field. By using the term colonialist, I refer to how Stavans celebrates the Spanish language as a tool of colonialism inherited from Spain. Stavans' unequivocally celebrates Spanish colonialism and, by defining the Spanish language as inherited exclusively from Spain, equates Latinidad's alterity with the power of European imperial conquest. In so doing, he does not acknowledge how Spanish in the Americas has its roots in a diverse set of cultures, for example, African diaspora and indigenous cultures. Rather, Stavans establishes a colonialist and one-dimensional approach to the development of the Spanish language in the New World, emphasizing only the purity of its Eurocentric roots, as if it has not been transformed and accented by Other languages and experiences. That colonialist approach to language allows Stavans to figure US Latino/as as deriving solely from a European bloodline and functioning as another set of conquistadors in the Americas. Analyzing the logic informing Stavans' theorizations will hopefully generate some productive questions about the place and function of US Latino/a Studies in the academy at large.

I begin by discussing how *The Hispanic Condition* constructs what I describe as a multiculturalist framework for understanding the US Latino/a experience that places Latinidad in opposition to indigenous identity. By reading the fifth chapter of *The Hispanic Condition*, "Sanavabiche," alongside Stavans' discussions of the Latino/a literary canon in the introductions to his anthologies, *New World: Young Latino Writers* (1997) and *Lengua Fresca: Latinos Writing on the Edge* (Augenbraum and Stavans, 2006), and his articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled, "The Quest for a Latino Literary Tradition"



(2000) and “A Literary Critic’s Journey to the Culture at Large” (2002), I aim to show how his theoretical approach to Latinidad has informed his ideas on canon-formation. I consequently examine how critics of Latino/a Studies have addressed Stavans’ influence, depicting Stavans as an anomaly *within* Latino/a Studies and yet, also as an outsider to the field. As a result, these critiques do not delve into Stavans’ shaping of the discipline. Further, I argue that the premises used by scholars to dismiss Stavans’ authority actually serve to reinscribe it. I conclude my article by reflecting on the ways in which Stavans’ understanding of US Latino/a Studies resembles the institutional orientation of the field and its disciplinary locations.

Rooting the Tongue Outside of History

Conceptually speaking, Stavans employs a multiculturalist approach that is premised upon the equation of culture with language.⁸ My use of the term “multiculturalist” (in opposition to multicultural) is derived from Stavans who introduces this approach as a theoretical trend in US Latino/a Studies at the close of his chapter, “Sanavabiche.” Stavans (1995) uses the term to reference those who “argue that our racial reality today is unlike that of any period in the past, that Eurocentrism will be replaced by a truly global culture, and that bilingualism should be welcomed insofar as it helps the assimilation process” (180). I find it useful to appropriate Stavans’ concept precisely because it is itself an appropriation: Stavans uses it to reference the idea of multiculturalism while at the same time differentiating and distancing his vision from this social project and its Civil Rights origins. I consequently use “multiculturalist” to denote the co-opting of multiculturalism, what David Palumbo-Liu (1995) refers to in *The Ethnic Canon: Histories, Institutions, and Interventions* as domesticated difference (5). Stavans’ approach is evidence of a critical trend that employs language and progressive concepts of social justice, and, owing to decontextualization, these concepts can potentially serve very different political purposes. Stavans’ reconquista of multiculturalism, adopting multicultural diversity to signify as linguistic diversity, is therefore part of a broader trend of “liberal accommodation” that Palumbo-Liu identifies within both Ethnic Studies and literary studies (9). This interdisciplinary trend generates narratives of “social harmonizing” by decontextualizing ethnic groups and their cultural production from material and historical realities (12).

Reading Stavans’ work as part of a broader development of multiculturalist approaches provides a context for analyzing how a linguistic definition of multiculturalism can engender a colonialist reading of US Latino/a identity and history. The equation of multiculturalism with multilingualism is particularly evident at the opening of the chapter “Sanavabiche,” where Stavans (1995) moves from race to language in asking the question: “Racial miscegenation but

2008) that the book will meet his standard of colonial linguistic lineage since “the anthology goes from the colonial period to the present.”

7 Caminero-Santangelo (2007) alludes to Stavans’ influence on the discipline of US Latino/a Studies by labeling another critic as “in many ways a direct descendant of Stavans’ *The Hispanic Condition*” (221).

8 I am not the first to employ this term to describe Stavans and his scholarship. Christian (2005), for example, cites him as the “multiculturalist Ilán [sic] Stavans” (45).



also verbal. Will tomorrow's spelling of the United States, in Spanish, be los yunaited estates?" (153). In blurring the line between race and language, Stavans reconfigures the effect of diversity on US nationalism in specifically linguistic terms. He limits social change to the realm of language, a transformation of spelling or pronunciation and this modification is not taking place in mainstream English but rather, in Spanish. This conceptual move involves what I consider a colonialist approach; Stavans, I suggest, is not actually constructing a culturally hybrid Latino/a subject, but rather seeks to trace the linguistic and, by extension, cultural purity of European roots through the "mother tongue, Spanish" (Stavans, 1995, xiii). By positively valorizing Spanish colonization through language, Stavans glosses over sites of violence in order to highlight this linguistic inheritance and formulate Latino/a identity in opposition to American indigenous cultures.⁹ Uncovering the way in which he represents the indigenous as Other in his multiculturalist approach to Latinidad, specifically through the figures of Christopher Columbus, La Malinche, and the Quechua, is essential to understanding the colonialist underpinnings of how Stavans structures the Latino/a literary canon as well. Looking closely at how indigenous peoples are erased in *this* history of Las Américas, or rendered in terms of a negative relationship to the global market, exposes the racial politics informing Stavans' theorization of US Latino/a culture and literature.

In defining "Spanish as the unifying force" of Latinidad (Stavans, 1995, 152) and arguing that the rise of bilingual education programs accorded "Hispanic culture a legitimate academic status" (155), Stavans equates language with culture, and culture with language. This closed definition means that bilingual education and its institutionalization can be depicted by Stavans as a symbol of an already achieved social and political equality on the part of the US Latino/a population, without taking into account that such academic programs do not necessarily translate into or reflect a national de-marginalization of US Latino/as. Stavans' celebratory rendering of bilingual education's political potential is reductive, especially when one contemplates the complex function and reception of bilingual programs. His interest lies not in the actual practice of bilingual education, such as public policies and classroom practices, but in asserting his own brand of abstract bilingualism. In downplaying all other facets of culture, Stavans' primarily linguistic formulation of US Latino/a identity avoids an in-depth analysis of the uneven power dynamics of institutionalization – of how the complexities of class, race, nation, or sexuality might fragment his vision of Latino/a culture. Having cited Spanish as the *primary* marker of US Latino/a identity,¹⁰ Stavans then also equates multilingualism with multiculturalism, adopting the language of equal rights and anti-colonial struggles to narrate "a cultural war in which Hispanics are soldiers in the battle to change America from within, to reinvent its inner core" (ibid, 11). For Stavans, linguistic diversity will initiate a utopic future where equality means assimilation into a new hybrid culture. Absent from this multiculturalist utopia is any

9 In the chapter, "Sanavabiche," Stavans notes, "Today the United States lives partially en español. Why sacrifice the benefits of a mistake? Latinos feel close to their roots through language, and Spanish is slowly becoming ubiquitous" (169). These linguistic roots frame Latino/as as an extension of Spanish (language) colonization in Las Américas.

10 This linguistic formulation is problematic since there are US Latino/as who do not speak Spanish, and the



discussion of the economic, political, or material realities facing the US Latino/a population – rather these are subsumed in order to privilege language as the great equalizer. These linguistic politics are articulated via a language of progressivism and positivism that veils the conservative logic of Stavans' overall project. Stavans' appropriation of hybridity and multicultural politics is particularly evident when he describes what he sees as "a refreshingly modern concept [that] has emerged before American eyes – to live in the hyphen, to inhabit the borderland" (ibid, 4). This valorization of diversity is limited, to the extent that it is only applied to the realm of language, leading Stavans to declare, "what was applauded in the multicultural age is a life happily lost and found in Spanglish" (ibid, 10). This linguistic multiculturalism is "historically enlightening" for Stavans and therefore part of his conceptual project in Latino/a Studies centers upon narrating a history that fits the parameters of a linguistically demarcated Latino/a subject (ibid, 4).

Stavans' tendency to decontextualize US Latino/a history even as he narrates its trajectory is a point of concern for many other critics. Juan Flores (2000) notes that Stavans is "notably selective in his conception of the Latino canon and the conditions of its formation" (173), while Louis Mendoza (2001) and Paul Allatson (2006) have also concentrated on the gaps within Stavans' historical narrative of the Latino/a population in the United States. My own argument regarding the depiction of the indigenous body in Stavans is an outgrowth of Mendoza's (2001) assertion that Stavans "purposely ignores and obfuscates the brutal complexities of US Latino history and culture" (80). My intent is very much to uncover and analyze the *function* of these historical silences. Allatson similarly draws attention to the strategic gaps in Stavans' history while specifically addressing the treatment of indigenous culture within that history. In analyzing *Latino USA: A Cartoon History* (2000), Allatson (2006) also sees Stavans "discounting all claims to modern-world status of indigenous Americans" to the extent that "the defeat and demise of Native peoples can be attributed to the inherent ... lacks of conquered indigenous peoples" (26). In other words, indigeneity is inscribed as endemically anti-modern. I am indebted to Allatson's analysis of the indigenous as well as the larger body of critical work on Stavans; my interest lies in building upon the foundation of criticism on Stavans to demonstrate that his erasure of the indigenous body is key to his formulation of US Latino/a identity. Since Allatson (ibid.) suggests that correcting the "notable indigenous absence" of La Malinche in the cartoon history "might have helped to push against the Euro-frame," especially since she is the "subject of feminist revisions by numerous Mexican and Chicana writers," I'd like to look in-depth at the representation of such indigenous presences when they *do* appear in Stavans' writing and consider how they are employed in order to sustain restrictive definitions of Latinidad (26). By performing a close reading of his most well-known text, *The Hispanic Condition*, and how it continues to shape Stavans as a public intellectual, my

opposition of English and Spanish ignores the reality that Latino/a populations incorporate other languages, like those of other US minorities or immigrants. Sánchez (1992–1996) analyzes alternate sites of linguistic contact for US Latino/as.



goal is to render visible the colonialist framework organizing Stavans' broader theorization of Latino/a identity – in particular, his concern with tracing a pure bloodline from the US Latino/a to Spain via his Latino/a language, Spanglish.

The Indigenous as Latinidad's Other

In order to chart a multiculturalist future in *The Hispanic Condition*, Stavans must also map out a past that seamlessly produces a Latino/a subject exclusively circumscribed by language. The origins of this subject are represented in the figures of Christopher Columbus and La Malinche. Columbus is described as “the first American and already with a linguistic handicap” (Stavans, 1995, 163). In order to position him as a bilingual “first American,” Stavans must decontextualize Columbus.¹¹ This one descriptive phrase consequently has several effects: first and foremost it erases the pre-Columbian indigenous population of the Americas by negating their subjectivity as “first Americans.” This phrase consequently disassociates indigenous identity from American identity. Second, it reimagines Columbus as an immigrant subject, decontextualized from his colonialist imperative and instead defined by his multilingualism. Third, it links Americanness with linguistic struggle through the now whitewashed version of Columbus. Stavans' description of what he terms the contemporary “reconquista” of the United States is then dependent upon framing Latino/as as the true inheritors of this colonial legacy: “yesterday's victim and tomorrow's conquistadors” (ibid, 5). This formulation of Latino/as as conquistadors implies also an erasure of many Other cultural inheritances, whether of blackness as Juan Flores (2000) and William Luis (1997) point out, or of an indigenous legacy.¹² Stavans is more interested in how “when the Spanish conquistadors first came to the New World they shared something only the biblical Adam had: the naming of things” (1995, 167).¹³ The articulation of European colonialism as possessing the sole capacity or power to name clearly ignores the historical reality of the many Other cultures that possess this same linguistic ability and contest the linguistic dominance of European culture. However, an erasure of such realities is necessary in order for Stavans to construct an untainted linguistic bloodline from the old conquistadors to the new. This erasure makes it possible for Stavans to make the remarkable claim that “social diversity was not ... an issue” in 1787 when the US Constitution was drawn up (1995, 155). Clearly, to consider the histories of slavery, indigenous genocide, and immigration would contest the cultural and linguistic inheritance that Stavans wishes to assert. Principally, these contexts would rupture his narrative about the United States being a homogenous nation until Latino/as arrive in the late twentieth century to hybridize American culture. With Columbus as the model American, the contemporary Latino/a “conquest” serves as evidence of a link to a European and American colonizing project. In

11 I'm grateful to Sobeira Latorre for pointing out that Bruce-Novoa (1993) similarly frames the conquistador subject when he writes about Cabeza de Vaca as the “first” Chicano. Bruce-Novoa's example underscores how multiculturalist formulations of Latinidad can potentially inscribe a colonialist lineage for Latinidad. Stavans (2000a) reiterates the representation of Cabeza de Vaca, a conquistador and slaveowner, as the “first” Latino.

12 Flores (2000, 176) discusses the “vantage point of those who need not worry about being taken for Blacks or ghetto-dwellers,” while



effect, the new multilingualism that Stavans describes is idealistically aligning Latinidad with Eurocentric empire as its only foundational culture.

La Malinche, a key indigenous persona that Allatson sees missing from Stavans' *Latino USA* graphic novel, appears in *The Hispanic Condition* as another prop in the foundational fiction of conquest for Stavans. Stavans represents La Malinche as "the conquistador's mistress; an Aztec traitress; and, more than anything else, a translator and an interpreter" (1995, 157). The relevance of this indigenous figure is her linguistic function, overshadowing or annulling her indigeneity. Stavans asserts that she belongs among a set of gifts obtained by Cortés: "Motecuhzoma II gave [him] gifts of gold and other precious objects, [and] he offered ... twenty slave girls, among whom was La Malinche" (ibid, 157). Avoiding a discussion of the power relations between slave and master, Stavans continues to frame La Malinche as object rather than subject, a symbol of "love and language" (ibid, 157). She is a tool for the conquistador: "through her, Cortés discovered his enemy's real power and strategy" (ibid, 157). La Malinche allows Stavans to explore the idea of linguistic betrayal while reinforcing the association of linguistic power with colonial power. As a result, La Malinche herself is not represented by Stavans as a potential model for Latinidad. Rather, having fulfilled her linguistic function, she fades into the background of this colonialist *history* and Cortés, the conquistador, emerges as the model Latino. For Stavans, La Malinche is merely a "memorable ghost story" (ibid, 148) whose origins lie only "at the dawn of Hispanic-American history" (ibid, 157). This conception of La Malinche as a ghost from the past is quite apt, bearing in mind how indigenous Others haunt Stavans' theorizations of Latinidad, always at the margins of that hybrid modernity from which they are absented. Framing La Malinche in such a way also enables Stavans to ignore the large body of work by Latina feminist critics, who have sought to recover and revise the symbolism of this indigenous female figure in order to frame her as culturally relevant to contemporary Chicana subjectivity (cf. Anzaldúa, 1987; Alarcón, 1989; Gaspar de Alba, 2005).

La Malinche's disconnection from Stavans' multiculturalist future is primarily owing to her indigeneity. Stavans' description of the modern Quechua population in *The Hispanic Condition* is reflective of the binary that he sets up between indigenous identity and modernity. In order to give an example of the disadvantages of not being a Latino/a subject, that is, of not possessing two colonial languages, English and Spanish, Stavans looks to the Quechua-speaking people, who he describes as "isolated in the northern Peruvian jungle, alienated from Western civilization" (1995, 165). In particular, he imagines what it would be like to "play a Beatles song for Quechuas," assuming that the music would sound so "inharmonious [and] incoherent" that "the Quechuas might run away terrified after hearing the first sounds" (ibid, 165). If for Stavans, "to translate is to adapt" (ibid, 165), then here he turns to the Quechua as an example of those who cannot understand the wonder of the Beatles, who

Luis (1997, 282) takes Stavans to task for "omitting mention of the significant numbers of Africans and Asians who reside in the Caribbean and South America."

- 13 Latin American Boom writers, who play an important role in *The Hispanic Condition*, deployed this Adam naming myth in order to position themselves as the first generation of Latin American writers. Historically, of course, there were Latin American writers who came before them. Cf. Sommer (1991, especially "Part I: Irresistible Romance") for a discussion of the Boom's dismissal of its pre-texts. Stavans takes the Boom's relationship to its precursors as a model for his own relationship to other Latino/a Studies critics, whom he also does not acknowledge in order to position himself as the "first" Latino critic.



14 In our coauthored book (2007), Dalleo and I analyze how Stavans constructs Latino/a identity as a product for mainstream consumption. Cf. chapter 4 (107–132).

15 García Canclini (1993, vii) cites this “picture [of] sentimentally natural communities by capitalist development” as a “market strategy” that ignores how popular culture is “the product of the assimilation of dominant ideologies and the contradictions of oppressed classes.” Stavans could be understood as employing a capitalist logic in reading indigeneity, alongside that of his colonialist framework.

16 Arguedas (1957) attests to the fact that the Quechua speak a variety of dialects. There is a large body of analysis on the indigenismo

cannot translate and as a result remain isolated from European modernity. In fact, they are disconnected not just from a European bloodline of modernity, but also from the market of popular culture, and for Stavans that is the other important defining facet of Latino/a identity: a marketable identity for mass consumption.¹⁴ This, then, is Stavans’ final judgment on indigenous culture and why it is incompatible with his notion of Latinidad: to be indigenous is to also be untranslatable and unmarketable. In tracing a US Latino/a lineage, Stavans rejects indigenous culture in citing the Quechua, figuring such cultures as outside of colonial linguistic influence and outside of a global market.¹⁵ At the same time, Stavans must reference and restrict indigenous identity in such a way because it serves as the negative double, the Other to Stavans’ multiculturalist and colonialist formulation of a Latino/a subject. As with the figure of La Malinche, Stavans’ formulation of the Quechua is presented in what appears to be an intellectual vacuum. The rich discourses of feminist criticism and indigenista theory¹⁶ must be erased in order for Stavans to posit indigenous identity as linguistically static and anti-modern.

Apolitical Anthologies and a Colonialist Literary Lineage

I move now to discussing how the representation of the indigenous in Stavans’ early work, *The Hispanic Condition*, serves as a context for understanding his later publication projects, specifically his anthologies of US Latino/a literature. In his *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, “The Quest for a Latino Literary Tradition” (2000), Stavans calls for US Latino/a Studies to revisit Matthew “Arnold’s type of disinterested criticism” (B13 +, Para 27) while also stating his preference for incorporating “authors who have chosen to switch languages” in his anthologies (B13 +, Para 19). It is via this appeal for “disinterested criticism” that Stavans positions himself as a representative of the objectivity involved in such criticism, noting that his own formulation of Latinidad is apolitical in its focus, isolating only the unifying quality of multilingualism. This same linguistic logic is reiterated in the introduction to the *Lengua Fresca* anthology (Augenbraum and Stavans, 2006), where Stavans praises the title for “captur[ing] the verbal hoopla I’ve been so obsessed about” (xvii) and proposes to his coeditor that they “shape a volume in which the language used by Latino/as – Spanglish, in all its potentials, the *lingua franca* – serves as the true protagonist” (xiv). The interest in making language the defining facet of the anthologies is also tied to a concern with incorporating texts that have “less of an ideological bent” (xvi). The association of an exclusively linguistic construction of Latinidad with an apolitical approach to literature, however, is disingenuous considering the broader context of a colonialist methodology informing Stavans’ work. With a celebratory reading of empire’s history in Las



Américas, Stavans is far from disinterested in his theorization of US Latino/a culture and anthologizing of Latino/a literature.

Investment in a multiculturalist politics of identity leads Stavans to also employ a conservative lens in formulating the US Latino/a literary canon. A colonialist framework is particularly evident in the title of his 1997 anthology, *New World: Young Latino Writers*. In the introduction to this anthology, Stavans asserts that the “very first novel by a Latino written in English was Felipe Alfau’s amazing *Locos: A Comedy of Gestures*,” published in 1936 (1997, 2). Stavans also reveals that his categorization of this novel “often makes critics uncomfortable, if anything because it was written by a Spaniard, who traditionally was seen in Latin America and by Hispanics in the United States as an aggressor” (ibid, 2).¹⁷ He goes on to explain that the resistance to Alfau’s inclusion in the US Latino/a canon may also be motivated by the fact that the author was “a fervent conservative, pro-Franco during the Spanish Civil War and an acknowledged Republican in US politics” (ibid, 2). Stavans’ response to such criticism is to frame the objections as ideologically driven, that they ignore the foundational role that Alfau played as “the very first to switch languages successfully” (ibid, 2). At the same time, Stavans frames his own motives for selecting Alfau as apolitical, asserting that, “no matter what ideological viewpoint one professes, [Alfau] stands as a titanic innovator and a door opener” (ibid, 2). Within the context of how the indigenous Other functions in Stavans’ multiculturalist theory, I hope that it is evident that the canonization of a fascist Spaniard as founding father of US Latino/a literature is part of the seamless colonialist legacy that Stavans wishes to construct and which requires him to ignore such writers as María Amparo Ruiz de Burton (1885), among others,¹⁸ who would complicate this European literary bloodline.

Indeed, Alfau as a European model not only reinforces the colonial roots that Stavans endeavors to establish as the sole foundation of Latino/a identity, but also exposes the conservative politics informing his theorizations under the guise of an apolitical approach. The references to Matthew Arnold, Shakespeare and Cervantes throughout Stavans’ work are a reflection of his commitment to elite colonial cultures and literatures. The anthology projects by Stavans can be thus understood as multiculturalist projects, deploying purportedly progressive and/or apolitical discourse while advocating a colonialist linguistic politics.¹⁹ Reading how the indigenous body operates within Stavans’ theorization of Latino/a identity provides us with an important context for the anthologies of US Latino/a literature edited by Stavans. That indigenous counter-model for *Latinidad* continues to be present even in the introduction to the *New World* anthology, an indigeneity Stavans aligns with “some thinkers vociferously opposed [to] the idea of a unified Latino history, claiming that Hispanics were not, and would never be, a single throng” (1997, 4). Defending the “harmonious” logic of his own position, Stavans argues for a “less tribal

movement and its definition of indigenous identity; see Rama (1981) and Moreiras (2001).

17 Luis (1997, 284) addresses the literary model of Alfau by contesting the categorization of immigrant Spaniard writers as Latino/as. Allatson (2006) also remarks on how Stavans’ use of Alfau to expand the concept of *Latinidad* enables him to make other “identificatory anachronisms,” like labeling Cabeza de Vaca as a Latino (31).

18 William Carlos Williams, Arturo Alfonso Schomburg and Américo Paredes produced major works in English before Alfau. Stavans’ choice of the “novel in English” clearly limits his Latino/a literary lineage in terms of genre and excludes these



foundational writers.

19 *The Lengua Fresca* anthology (Augenbraum and Stavans, 2006) embodies the various thematic strains of Stavans' theoretical work. In keeping with his self-authorization strategy, Stavans includes his translation, "Don Quijote en Spanglish," as well as comic strips by Lalo Lopez Alcaraz, the artist who illustrated Stavans' *Latino USA* (2000). Bilingualism also organizes the text with stories written completely in Spanglish (Giannina Braschi), fiction that contains untranslated Spanish (Oscar Casares), or work originally in Spanish presented alongside the translation (song by Lila Downs). Stavans' interest in linking language with the market leads to the inclusion of popular culture and music, with lyrics by the Hip Hop Hoodies and a Spanglish food

future," one which presumably cannot be defined by those "thinkers" who do not articulate the same utopic modernity as Stavans. The "New World discovering itself anew" is thus the dominion of Stavans alone, a "mythmaker of the future" (ibid, 8). While he mentions "Others (like myself)," it is clear that Stavans assigns himself the status of Other, of the marginalized, *in order* to render alternative voices of critique as marginal and invisible within US Latino/a Studies, in much the same way that he erases the indigenous body in his history of Latinidad (ibid, 8).

Critical Conversations and the Dismissal of Ilan Stavans

My move to link *The Hispanic Condition* to Stavans' public role in anthologizing Latino/a literature consequently serves to expand upon the arguments of the few critics who critique his work in-depth: Paul Allatson, Juan Flores, William Luis and Louis Mendoza. My interest in calling attention to these critics stems from a desire to reintegrate and highlight the dynamic conversation that *does* exist within US Latino/a Studies and to force a dialogue that Stavans intentionally abjects from his own writing, as when he refuses to name other critics.²⁰ Mapping out the critical conversation surrounding Stavans also permits us to review the analyses already applied to his work and on what terms these critics argue for the critique of Stavans' theories. Instead of addressing the content of Stavans' approach, the criticism all too often relies on a dismissal of Stavans' persona, which, as I will show, only serves to reinforce his own sense of marginality and otherness. My hope is that shifting the focus onto the colonialist underpinnings of Stavans' writings will resituate him within the field and show that he is not the anomalous, exceptional figure he imagines himself to be.

Stavans' persona is described in somewhat contradictory ways: as an anomaly within the field and an outsider to the field. The singularity of Stavans as a critic is usually argued on the basis of his popularity as a public figure. For example, Louis Mendoza references the "unprecedented notoriety" of Stavans "as one of the most public US Latino intellectuals of his time" (Mendoza, 2001, 79) and Juan Flores (2000) refers to Stavans as "the critic who has been the most intent on configuring a Latino literary canon in the 1990s" and who "has become the most frequent commentator on the subject" (172). By focusing on discrediting Stavans' authority as a too-popular or too-productive critic, the majority of the critiques of Stavans do not address how Stavans' work is an outgrowth of fundamentally problematic conceptions of Latinidad that are present within US Latino/a Studies. This is principally because critics frame Stavans as the exception to the broader disciplinary trends in US Latino/a Studies. By asserting Stavans' agency—that his prominence is derived solely from the way he locates himself—critics cannot discuss how Stavans is authorized or



constitutive of the critical conversations taking place in the field of US Latino/a Studies. For example, Paul Allatson (2006) confirms Flores' representation of Stavans' "intent" by stating that "Stavans has positioned himself at the forefront of US Latino Studies" (22). Certainly, Stavans' personal narrative of ascendancy is in many ways unavoidable; however, by limiting such arguments to substantiating how Stavans is a mere performer and not representative of Latinidad, these critiques overlook the possibility that Stavans is symbolic of a broader disciplinary approach to Latinidad. For this reason, I find Frances Negrón-Muntaner's labeling of Stavans as a "Mexican philologist" in *Boricua Pop* (2004) incredibly apropos. Her comment serves to link this critical trend of representing Stavans as an anomaly to the other critical tactic that references Stavans as both a biographical and disciplinary outsider.

The scholarly discourse consequently frames Stavans as an outsider to US Latino/a Studies by also focusing on Stavans' biography in order to critique his work. For example, in his book *From Bomba to Hip Hop* (2000), Juan Flores calls attention to the upper class background of Stavans as a context for his critique of "the privileging of privilege" that Stavans performs in canonizing immigrant Latino/a literature (175). By citing the fact that he "arrived from his native Mexico as late as 1985," Flores frames Stavans as an immigrant and a non-native interloper in US Latino/a Studies (172). In his essay, "On Buffaloes, Body Snatching, and Bandidismo," Louis Mendoza (2001) reiterates that Stavans was "born in a secluded upper middle-class Jewish enclave of Mexico City in 1961" and completed his doctoral studies at an Ivy League institution, "Columbia University, where he received his PhD in Spanish in the early 1990s" (79).²¹ Following this biographical description of Ilan Stavans, Mendoza mentions that many in the field of Latino/a Studies see Stavans as an "ambitious outsider who has managed to present himself as an authentic spokesperson for cultures and experiences he knows only from a distance" (*ibid.*, 79–80). The biographical analysis of Stavans consequently hinges on undermining his claim to authenticity by pointing to the context of his adult immigration experience. Of course, this type of critique is limited in scope because the question of Latinidad itself is fraught with these same issues of geography, the line between residency and belonging.²² Questions regarding the relationship between identity politics and scholarship show how the biographical critiques of Stavans are not successful or fruitful because they remain locked in a battle over who is the authentic critical voice for US Latino/a Studies. This sort of academic power struggle overlooks the issue of *how* Ilan Stavans authorizes his analyses.

Undoubtedly, the focus on Stavans' persona is in many ways encouraged by Stavans himself. Both Allatson and Luis point to the ways in which Stavans inserts himself and his autobiography into his theoretical work on US Latino/as. In his essay, "Ilan Stavans' *Latino USA: A Cartoon History* (of a Cosmopolitan Intellectual)" (2006), Allatson notes that the text is "committed to elucidating the author's own personal history" (21) by incorporating

menu from the Parrot Club, a restaurant in the touristic section of San Juan, Puerto Rico.

20 In the 2001 foreword to the second edition of *The Hispanic Condition*, Stavans mentions his critics anonymously, referring to "a few people [who] felt offended by my portrait of Latinos" (xi). In the *New World* anthology's introduction (1997), Stavans acknowledges that some critics disagree with his labeling of Alfau as a foundational Latino writer, but also neglects to name these scholars.

21 Luis (1997, 289) generously addresses how Jewish culture shapes Stavans. Luis states that "it is Stavans' Jewishness, I believe, that allows him to identify with the oppressed Latino communities." Here, Luis articulates the alliances possible between Jewish and Latino/a populations. At



the same time, such a statement can situate the terms of Jewish and Latino/a as mutually exclusive.

Formulating US Latino/a identity in opposition to Jewish culture, for example, would potentially exclude Jewish Cuban-American writers like Ruth Behar and Achy Obejas from the US Latino/a literary canon.

22 See Flores' (2000) chapter, "Life off the Hyphen," for his theorization of resident versus immigrant Latino/a identities.

23 Allatson (2006, 34) analyzes various scenes in the *Latino USA* comic book where Stavans inserts himself as a historical figure into key moments of the Chicano movement and anti-Vietnam struggles.

"endorsements of Stavans' own publishing backlist" and having Stavans appear "in the text as its dominant icon [...] and an active participant in Latino history" (22).²³ William Luis (1997) also "wonders if Stavans' search for Latino identity *is* autobiographical, allowing him to read literary history from his own perspective so that he can insert himself into the process he is describing" (288, emphasis added). The autobiographical identification with Latinidad comes at a cost, excluding Other points of experience because Stavans "differentiates himself from other minorities such as blacks and Asians" and therefore constructs US Latino/a identity in opposition to blackness and Asian ethnicity (ibid, 282). While Luis sees this tendency towards self-insertion as a natural byproduct of authorial inspiration, similar to how Gustavo Pérez-Firmat integrates autobiography into his theoretical writings, Allatson ascribes a more (c)overt function to the autobiographical elements. For Allatson (2006), Stavans is in essence authenticating himself *as* a Latino subject, not only with the authority to comment on the Latino/a experience but also as the *only* referent, the *only* critic through which to understand that experience. The structure of "Stavans' appropriation of Latino history and discourse [is such] that there is no 'Latino' without Stavans as, and at, its authorizing center" (22). In effect, Stavans situates himself as an anomalous subjectivity that precisely because of his unique subject position possesses the best voice for articulating Latinidad. If self-authorization is the motive behind the autobiographical elements in his work, it seems all the more unproductive to follow Stavans' lead and critique his conceptualization of US Latino/a identity by citing those same biographical elements. For example, in the 2002 article, "A Literary Critic's Journey to the Culture at Large" from the *Chronicle for Higher Education*, Stavans asserts that he "learned to be a critic, and pondered what a critic does, as a Mexican immigrant in the United States" (B9). Since Stavans frames himself as an outsider owing to his immigrant identity, employing that biographical experience to dismiss Stavans as an outsider to the field of US Latino/a Studies confirms Stavans' self-definition as authentically marginal and, by extension, reinscribes his authority to conceptualize his own marginality as making him central to the field. After all, the biographical factors that academics cite to de-authenticate Stavans are identical to those that Stavans uses to define himself as a paradigm for Latinidad: "That is, Stavans' story – he was born and lived in Mexico City until moving to the USA in 1985 at the age of 24, where he went on to complete a doctorate at Columbia University – functions implicitly as the exemplary model of becoming and being Latino" (Allatson, 2006, 33). Stavans does recognize that he has "spent the last decade reinventing [him]self," effecting a transformation that meant "ceas[ing] to be a Latin American" and "becom[ing] a Latino" (B9). Dismissing Stavans by locating him as marginal to the field or an anomaly within it, essentially accepts the terms of discussion that Stavans sets up to assert his authenticity. As a result, this kind of self-enclosed critical conversation about authenticity is destined to repeat or reinforce



Stavans' desire to make his own identity the foundation of US Latino/a Studies as a field.

Apart from the question of *who* Ilan Stavans is, US Latino/a Studies theorists also pose important points of critique when addressing actual analyses that Stavans produces and the manner in which he substantiates his arguments. For example, Marta Caminero-Santangelo (2007) labels Stavans as "perhaps one of the most problematic recent commentators on the 'Hispanic' peoples in the United States" (221). Scholars specifically express concerns about the disciplinary focus that Stavans takes on as too broad and sacrificing the national particularities which are encompassed by his pan-ethnic theorizations: "unfortunately what is gained through this potentially welcome framework of cultural kinship and solidarity is lost in the need for specificity and more rigorous differentiation among the varied group perspectives" (Flores, 2000, 173). Critics are also concerned with the rationale underlying certain choices in terminology, for example, William Luis sees an assimilationist logic at work in the way Stavans distinguishes between the terms "Latino" and "Hispanic" (282–283).²⁴ The question of discipline arises for Louis Mendoza (2001) as well, who seeks to "illustrate the non-scholarly approach that Stavans assume[s]" in a book on Oscar Zeta Acosta (84). Stavans' exploration of Chicano identity through Acosta has drawbacks because of the *means* that Stavans employs:

Stavans does not provide sources for his references to Acosta criticism or other quotes he uses within his essay. Indeed, three of the five footnotes in the entire book are citations to Stavans's own work, and of the other two, one is an incomplete reference to the 1990 census and the last is an explication of Acosta's thinly veiled allusions to historical figures. (84)

Mendoza's concerns regarding Stavans' "undertheorized scholarship" (84), which are corroborated by other scholars such as Eliot Weinberger (1994),²⁵ also bring up the matter of authenticity, this time in relation to Stavans' authority as an academic. The critics therefore take issue with Stavans' conceptualizations of Latinidad as well as the way his work rejects engagement with the existing disciplinary discourse within US Latino/a Studies. Stavans' refusal to see himself in dialogue with the past and present critical conversation within Latino/a Studies gives credence to Allatson's analysis of how Stavans establishes himself as the sole center of US Latino/a discourse in his writing.²⁶

In reviewing how US Latino/a critics of Stavans have separately analyzed certain aspects of his persona and work, I hope that my article has reinforced the ways in which his conceptualizations of hybridity, language, and Eurocentrism are integrally linked. While these major critics at times reinforce the terms by which Stavans authenticates himself, all of these academic assessments function as valuable counternarratives to the public success story that Ilan

24 Luis (1997, 283) notes that Stavans defines Latino/as as US citizens, and Hispanics as populations outside the borders of the United States, while at the same time claiming that Latino/as are also Hispanics. Luis sees this equation as "problematic" because "it is difficult to fathom that a recent immigrant changes his identity immediately upon arrival."

25 Weinberger (1994, 125) exemplifies the critiques made regarding the quality of Stavans' scholarship, but from the specific perspective of



Latin American Studies. Like Mendoza, Weinberger reads Stavans as “covertly pitching himself” in his scholarship. Weinberger also identifies flaws of decontextualization and “factual misinformation [and] deliberate omissions” within Stavans’ writing on Octavio Paz (120–121).

- 26 Stavans avoids aligning himself with the broader intellectual community of Latino/a Studies in the *New York Times* blog interview. Stavans misinterprets the question about “whose books are generally shelved next to yours in bookstores”, answering instead about the books in his “personal library” (Garner, 2008). The personal narrative about Stavans’ home library becomes a way to distance himself from bookstores’ public space. This autobiographical tendency within Stavans’ work serves to circumscribe himself as the sole embodiment of

Stavans promotes and that is endorsed by the public sphere. By highlighting how the conceptual strategies that Stavans employs in formulating *Latinidad* are emblematic of the disciplinary trends within US Latino/a Studies, I am attempting to circumnavigate the impasse these scholars encounter. The next necessary analytical step towards accomplishing this is confronting the conceptual contradiction at the center of this critical discussion: how can one can speak about the symbolism of a scholar who is branded by critics, *and* at the same time labels himself, as an outsider *within* US Latino/a Studies? My answer is to discuss Stavans as symptomatic of critical trends in US Latino Studies rather than a source of negative influence or infiltration. Paul Allatson (2006) helpfully summarizes some of the major disciplinary accomplishments claimed by Stavans, stating that his

status is exemplified by Stavans’s stewardship of the first course in Spanglish offered by a U.S. university (Amherst, in 2000), and by a prolific publishing record, including ... numerous anthologies, that has helped to establish Latino Studies in the academy, and to spread the word about the latinization of the U.S.A. outside that country’s campuses, and, indeed, the country itself. (22)

On the one hand, this list of accomplishments must be scrutinized carefully since it is in part produced by Stavans’ own self-marketing as a groundbreaking academic. For example, the construction of Stavans as the first professor to teach a class in Spanglish is questionable, especially when one thinks of the multiple disciplinary sites where such conversations are possible and where surely Spanglish has been employed long before 2000: Women’s Studies, Ethnic Studies, African American Studies, Language, and Literature departments. Also, many classrooms have engaged in Spanglish without necessarily having administrative legitimization, so the earliest example of a course in Spanglish cannot be attributed to Stavans simply because he has formalized such a class at his own institution.

On the other hand, if we find the scholarship of Stavans problematic, then an open conversation about how Stavans is merely the most visible representative of a broader trend is necessary and fruitful. For instance, how can we see his ideas about *Latinidad* playing out in academic institutional structures or in terms of the publishing market? How is his role as editor of anthologies and series like “The Ilan Stavans Library of Latino Civilization” from Greenwood Press, an outgrowth of particular formations and practices of US Latino/a Studies? My goal is to continue the conversation already evident in the field about Stavans and expand it to a dialogue about his model of Latino/a Studies, while also keeping in mind the potential risk of reinforcing Stavans’ mythic construction of his academic significance. In thinking through how Stavans privileges language in his multiculturalist and colonialist formulations of



Latino/a identity, we can discuss to what extent this linguistic framework circulates. For example, analyzing what role these approaches play in the anthologizing of US Latino/a literature as well as in the development of US Latino/a Studies as a field of study within the academy. In other words, how is Stavans' work indicative of a general shift in the location and institutionalization of Latino/a Studies as an academic discipline?

US Latino/a
Studies as a field.

Contextualizing Stavans within Broader Disciplinary Shifts

It is therefore important to also consider the disciplinary context out of which Stavans emerged in order to trace the broader implications of the Eurocentric colonial inheritance he seeks to establish as the primary foundation of US Latino/a identity. Stavans himself (2002) notes that his immigration to the US and emergence as a scholar coincided with a particular historical context: "my move north of the border at a time when multiculturalism has been in vogue and debates rage on bilingual education, affirmative action, and the shaping of the Western canon has sharpened my views" (B9). For that reason, I'd like to close this article by meditating upon the disciplinary shifts that opened up a certain discursive space that Ilan Stavans was perhaps one of the first to explore and therefore embodies one type of approach to the field of US Latino/a Studies. Although the biographical trajectory of Stavans' academic career has been well noted by critics, Stavans' shift from Latin American Studies to US Latino/a Studies has not been previously linked to a larger historical and disciplinary context. In the Fall 2007 Newsletter of LASA, Gilberto Arriaza and Roberto Rivera make the argument that the Latin American Studies Association is uniquely situated to take a leadership position in analyzing the growth of the US Latino/a population. This article, "Angels Dancing on the Head of A Pin?," is published following the 2007 LASA Convention in Montreal, a conference dedicated to the theme of a "Post-Washington Consensus" and that reflected upon the formation of Latin American Studies as a field. The two key moments of this disciplinary narrative include the National Defense Education Act of 1958, which viewed such studies as an integral part of winning the Cold War, as well as the 1980s Washington Consensus that encouraged neoliberal and capitalist models of development for "Third World" countries. The call to analyze a "post" is an acknowledgement not only of the end of the Cold War period but also a need to redefine the goals of Latin American Studies – the shift towards US Latino/a Studies is then conceived as an attempt to resolve a disciplinary crisis. However, this desire for a new disciplinary vision, one that sees the "phenomenal growth of the Latino(a) population in the United States [as] worth examining," must also be contextualized (Arriaza and Rivera, 2007, 29). Arriaza and Rivera mention that during the 1990s, "a nativist inspired backlash against the increasing presence of Latinos" emerged (ibid, 29). What



can be implied then is that while the public sphere within the United States during the 1970s and 1980s sought to address a perceived communist threat *outside* of US borders, the post-Cold War public sphere is shaped by concerns about growing populations *within* its borders. If Latin American Studies as a discipline was shaped by numerous and perhaps contradictory forces, I would argue that we should also think about the ways in which multiple contestatory histories have also played a role in the institutionalization of US Latino/a Studies. While the contexts of civil rights and the market have been addressed within Latino/a Studies, the new role that Latin American Studies is seeking to play in Latino/a Studies must be analyzed further.²⁷

27 Dávila (2001) analyzes how commercial discourse has shaped US Latino/a subjectivity as well as the intersection between the civil rights movement and Hispanic marketing. Aparicio ties the emergence of Latino/a Studies in the academy to civil rights struggles in a 2003 interview with Juan Zevallos Aguilar.

Not coincidentally, Stavans' own academic trajectory is symptomatic of this shift in disciplinary boundaries. Stavans completed his PhD at Columbia University in 1990 – a date that could be considered as marking the end of the Cold War – and his dissertation took Mexican detective novels as its subject. Five years later, Stavans published *The Hispanic Condition*, cementing his status as “the czar of Latino literature” (Richardson, 1999, 13). I would argue that Stavans' successful insertion into US Latino/a Studies is part of the larger disciplinary reorientation taking place within Latin American Studies. I am not suggesting that Stavans must also be emblematic of the disciplinary approach that Latin American Studies employs to address its intersections with the field of US Latino/a Studies; in fact, he represents only one of many methodologies possible for understanding these intersections. However, analyzing Stavans' own neoliberal investment in US Latino/a Studies and the organizing logic he employs should hopefully encourage us to view such disciplinary shifts with some caution. Stavans represents one emerging path of Latin American Studies, and neoliberalism is a useful context by which to reconcile Ilan Stavans' “apolitical” equation of multiculturalism with linguistic difference as part of a Eurocentric colonialist orientation. In other words, his advocacy of multiculturalism in terms of consumption, rather than social justice, reflects an interest in the privatization of multiculturalism as a collective asset or global product, decontextualized from a specific context or locale. His multiculturalist valorization of consumption then correlates with neoliberalism's focus on free market capitalism and economic freedom as primary to, or engendering, political freedom. Stavans' outlining of a Eurocentric colonialist lineage for the US Latino/a subject reveals that his multiculturalist approach is indeed political. Here I concur with Flores' assertion that Stavans' academic training has shaped his theorization of Latinidad: “his professional training in Spanish and Latin American literatures allows him to range widely – though often diffusely – over the ‘Hispanic’ literary landscape in the widest sense” (Flores, 2000, 172–173). In particular, we should be more attuned to the extent to which exclusively language-based definitions of Latinidad marginalize Other aspects of the US Latino/a experience, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. Stavans' articulation of the common linguistic inheritance by which to forge a



transnational link between Latino/as and Latin Americans is based upon the privileging of Spanish colonialism as a utopian site of cultural origin, glossing over the violence perpetrated by colonization upon Other bodies, for example, the indigenous body. By positioning Stavans as symptomatic of one trend in Latin American Studies, rather than simply a discursive anomaly, we can be more conscious and self-critical of how our work can overlap with his problematic approach to theorizing Latinidad.

As for the disciplinary homes of US Latino/a Studies, the established historical narrative about the emergence of such programs is that the Civil Rights struggles brought many of the Ethnic Studies departments to fruition through grassroots activism at the academic level, with public universities serving as the first battlegrounds for the integration of previously marginal area studies. Frances Aparicio (2003) concisely describes this process by explaining that, "Latino Studies developed as an academic field in the late 1960s and early 1970s and was triggered by the battles fought by minorities in the United States who sought to defend their civil rights" (3–4). Since these movements "demanded programs that would reflect their history and culture in academic settings," the consequence was Chicano Studies departments in the Southwest and West coast, Puerto Rican Studies in the Northeast (ibid, 4). The precursors to a pan-ethnic formulation of US Latino/a Studies were these localized struggles of particular Latino/a groups, which produced interdisciplinary fields of study that were for the most part heavily geared towards the social sciences because of the fact that this institutionalization occurred as part of "a larger framework of labor battles" (ibid, 4). In his essay, "Moving From the Margins to Where? Three Decades of Latino/a Studies," Pedro Cabán (2003) describes different types of institutional positioning derived from a broad shift from marginalized enclaves to transgressive units within the university to the absorption of the field into departments such as American Studies. While Cabán does note that these three levels of academic incorporation all continue to coexist, his analysis seems to concur with Frances Aparicio's (2003) description of how the "cultural nationalism of the Chicano and Nuyorican movements has transformed itself ... into what we call Latino Studies" (4).

In the progression towards absorption, Ilan Stavans has been a central representative of this approach as both an emphatic supporter and purveyor of pan-ethnic Latino/a Studies, playing a significant role in the development of literary studies as a US Latino/a Studies field. Literature departments, especially those constituted by language categories such as English and Spanish, face structural challenges in dealing with the transnational orientation of such a field and as a result, the linguistic parameters of literary canons are used to imply or invoke political, cultural, and national boundaries on Latinidad. For example, one basic restriction implied by departmental categorization is that literature taught in an English department is written in English and that taught in



a Spanish department is written in Spanish. While some members of both disciplines have sought to destabilize the assumptions upon which they were established by challenging these boundaries, literary analyses and classroom practices can potentially reinforce those entrenched disciplinary values. The disciplinary formation of US Latino/a literature, regardless of its departmental home, renders it uniquely susceptible to the model of Latinidad that Stavans represents, in particular, that of his totalizing equation of language with cultural politics. More specifically, Ilan Stavans' multiculturalist and linguistic definition of Latinidad has reinforced the celebratory logic that a particular language, which in the case of Stavans is Spanglish or Spanish, is always already progressive. Highlighting the Eurocentric colonialist logic underlying these theorizations of Latinidad shows that progressive linguistic politics can potentially veil a conservative cultural politics. That is not to say that other sites for US Latino/a Studies, such as interdisciplinary studies departments like Ethnic Studies or American Studies, don't come with their own set of challenges. Scholars like David Palumbo-Liu (1995) and John Carlos Rowe (2000) discuss how various disciplinary locations often operate on a nationalistic and ghettoizing logic in regards to multicultural histories and literatures. And certainly, many positive consequences have emerged from teaching US Latino/a literature within English and Spanish departments, for example, contesting entrenched notions of linguistic purity as well as encouraging the recognition of the transnational cultural production that is often marginalized within the discipline. Progressive US Latino/a critics have also delineated language as a productive facet of Latinidad; Juan Flores and George Yúdice (1993), for example, have noted that "language, then, is the necessary terrain on which Latinos negotiate value and attempt to reshape the institutions through which it is distributed" (204). Nevertheless, a qualifier follows this statement: "this is not to say that Latino identity is reduced to its linguistic dimensions" (ibid, 204). With the context of the public narrative and work of Ilan Stavans serving as a cautionary note, it is this qualifying statement that I want us to interrogate more closely.

Expanding the Dialogue and Building Academic Communities

In closing, I'd like to return to Debra A. Castillo's (2005) idea of "ongoing discussions" to discuss another interdisciplinary dialogue that is productive and "muted" or ignored by Stavans: that between Latino/a Studies and other US Ethnic fields of study, such as African American Studies. For example, in thinking about the market popularity of Stavans, Michael Eric Dyson's chapter, "It's Not What You Know, It's How You Show It: Black Public Intellectuals" from *Race Rules* (1996), provides a useful and relevant analysis of the vetting



process for such public figures. One of the problems that Dyson also alludes to as a contextual factor is that of the fruitless infighting within the field between public intellectuals. Certainly, few critics in US Latino/a Studies have gained the kind of recognition that scholars such as Houston Baker, Jr., Henry Louis Gates, bell hooks and Cornell West have acquired in the broader public sphere. While mainstream status doesn't seem to be as much of a concern or challenge, it is perhaps equally important to continue developing a standard of critical generosity within US Latino/a Studies in order to encourage a fruitful community-based discourse within the field. By critical generosity, I do not mean a pass on problematic theorizations of Latinidad, but rather a mode of critical engagement that assumes as a given that all of us who are engaged in such scholarly work are working towards a common goal. Ilan Stavans is symbolic of one approach within the field, that is a point we must acknowledge, but only in tandem with an attention to those critics who Stavans may not be willing to recognize, those who have also played a role in the development of US Latino/a Studies: Rudolfo Anaya, Gloria Anzaldúa, Suzanne Oboler, and Silvio Torres-Saillant, to name a few (in addition to those already referenced in the course of this article). Precisely because Stavans has chosen to avoid the dynamic work of US Latino/a Studies critics, we must make sure to acknowledge in our own research and writing those who have paved the way and are part of the current conversation, as a means of imagining a more productive horizon for future dialogue.

Only a genuinely interdisciplinary discussion about US Latino/a Studies can fully address the difficulties encountered in conceptualizing US Latino/a identity. This article is the product of the rich debate created by the 2008 "Nuestra América in the United States?: A US Latino/a Studies Conference" at the University of Kansas, coordinated by Marta Caminero-Santangelo. Unlike other major fields that are supported by organizations like the Caribbean Studies, Latin American Studies or Modern Language Associations, there is currently no annual conference or academic association primarily dedicated to US Latino/a Studies. In part, the historical lack of an established intellectual forum for US Latino/a Studies has created a vacuum, an academic gap, wherein one scholar, such as Stavans, can be understood by the public sphere to speak for an entire academic field. Obviously, the marginalization of US Latino/a Studies within Latin American Studies and within American Studies has also contributed to this gap. A new vision of US Latino/a Studies as a field unto itself can yield productive projects such as an annual conference, but additional modes of instantiating an intellectual community are possible via publishing and the Internet. Numerous academic journals are already playing a vital role in the development of US Latino/a Studies, inscribing a truly interdisciplinary scholarly community premised on dialogue. Online resources can also serve as an alternative public sphere wherein the field can develop a presence through a collective project of defining and refining US Latino/a



28 El Puerto Rican Embassy, one model of this type of online project, can be found at <http://www.elpuertoricanembassy.org/>.

Studies.²⁸ These kinds of activist engagements within US Latino/a Studies will reformulate the horizons of the field and also engender a discussion of intellectual inheritances. By interrogating the phenomenon of Ilan Stavans as a public intellectual, Latino/a Studies can work through the discursive problematics that he represents, in particular, the theorization of hybridity and bilingualism. Engaging with Stavans and forcing a debate that his work avoids is the most effective means of countering his reconquista of US Latino/a Studies. Rather than ceding the public sphere to a colonialist vision of multiculturalist Latino/a discourse, a US Latino/a Studies collective can productively analyze disciplinary shifts and develop complex counternarratives on Latino/a subjectivity, culture and history.

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