

ILAN STAVANS'S *ON BORROWED WORDS*, JEWISH-LATINO/A  
WRITING AND TRANSNATIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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The article examines Ilan Stavans's *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* (2002) in the light of transnational approaches to American literature and to Latino writing in particular. As a transnational autobiography that not only reflects and comments on experiences in different nations, *On Borrowed Words* is intertextually linked to different literary traditions of American writing. Stavans's memoirs trace a journey from growing up in a Jewish family and neighborhood in Mexico City to life as a scholar of Latin American Literature at Amherst College. The memoirs use a multilingual textuality in order to express the simultaneity of being at home in different nations, communities and cultures of the Americas and of the globe. The essay places Stavans's memoirs at the crossroads of these traditions: American autobiography, Chicano/a literature and Jewish-American writing.

Keywords: Ethnicity; Autobiography; Latino/a Writing; Chicano/a Literature; Jewish-American Literature; Transnational American Studies

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ON BORROWED WORDS, DE ILAN STAVANS, LA LITERATURA JUDEO-LATINA  
Y LA AUTOBIOGRAFÍA TRANSNACIONAL

*Este artículo examina la obra de Ilan Stavans On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language (2002) desde el prisma de la literatura transnacional estadounidense, en general, y de escritores latinos, en particular. Como autobiografía transnacional que no se limita a reflejar y comentar experiencias en diferentes naciones, On Borrowed Words engarza intertextualmente con distintas tradiciones literarias de los Estados Unidos. Las memorias de Stavans llevan al lector de viaje desde la infancia del autor en el seno de una familia judía establecida en Ciudad de México hasta la vida académica desarrollada en Amherst College como profesor de literatura latinoamericana. Las memorias emplean una textualidad multilingüe con el fin de expresar la simultaneidad de sentirse en casa en diferentes naciones, comunidades y culturas de las Américas y del globo. Las memorias de Stavans se sitúan en este ensayo en un cruce de caminos donde convergen las siguientes tradiciones: la autobiografía estadounidense, la literatura chicana y la tradición literaria judeoestadounidense.*

*Palabras clave: Etnicidad; autobiografía, escritores latinos; literatura chicana; literatura judeo-estadounidense; estudios transnacionales estadounidenses*

## 1. Introduction

In the past two decades, scholars in American literary and cultural studies such as Kaplan and Pease (1993), Pease (1994) and Rowe (2000, 2002) have emphasized the necessity of transnational approaches to American history and literatures in order to, firstly, overcome the residues of American exceptionalism and, secondly, become aware of American specificities in a comparative framework.<sup>1</sup> In addition to these revisionist aims, a transnational approach to American writing opens up new perspectives on the history of immigration and immigrant literature. The more recent transnational explorations of the literary and cultural history of the Americas are aligned with other discourses of pan-identities that have resulted from the history of colonialism and globalization (e.g. Atlantic history, transnational migrant communities, border theory and diaspora studies) brought forward by such authors as Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), Stuart Hall (1990), Paul Gilroy (1993) and Joseph R. Roach (1996). In the United States, Latino/a Studies as an academic field and intellectual discourse has been influential in the formation of transnational approaches to American writing. For example, Cuban-American critic and performance artist Coco Fusco's self-reflective 'Pan-Latino performances' are exemplary for the diasporic and postmodern turn of Cuban culture's contributions to a hemispheric notion of American Studies (see Fusco 1995). From a Mexican-American perspective, José David Saldívar (1997) speaks of a distinctly Pan-American consciousness among Latinos in the USA ('Pan-Latino consciousness').

The following sections will investigate Latino writing from a perspective that not only focuses on inter-American border crossings, but also highlights the international and crosscultural entanglements of US-Latino writing beyond the Americas. In view of the debate on transnational approaches to American literary history and the particular contributions of Latino/a writers, I read Ilan Stavans's *On Borrowed Words: A Memoir of Language* (2002) as transnational autobiographical writing that not only reflects and comments on experiences in different nations but is also intertextually linked to different literary traditions of American writing. The memoirs use a multilingual textuality in order to express the simultaneity of being at home in different nations, communities and cultures of the Americas and of the globe.

Stavans's memoirs trace a journey from growing up in a Jewish family and neighborhood in Mexico City to a life as a scholar of Latin American Literature at Amherst College in Western Massachusetts. Stavans was born in Mexico in 1961 into a Jewish-Mexican family. He came to the USA as a young adult to study at Columbia

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<sup>1</sup> Keywords here are what Pease (1994) refers to as *Post-national* and *post-Americanist* narratives. John Carlos Rowe writes about the implications of "new regionalisms" (2002: 59) that cross national borders, for example, Southern California's relation to Asia and Mexico, the southeastern United States' relation to the *Black Atlantic*, and Miami's relation to Cuba, Haiti and Latin America. In this context he speaks of the "western hemisphere" (2002: 53) as a conceptual model for looking at such transnational communities in the Americas. In general the New American Studies, according to Rowe, asserts that local conditions should be studied in a "larger understanding of the United States in the comparative contexts" (2002: 60) of western hemispheric and global studies.

University and later started teaching Latin American and Latino Culture at Amherst College. In recent years Stavans has become known as author of an extraordinary number of publications in two academic fields and literary discourses: US-Latino/a Literatures and Yiddish writing. Among his many scholarly publications are *The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture and Identity in America* (1995a) and *Spanglish: The Making of a New American Language* (2003a). He edited *Growing Up Latino: Memoirs and Stories* (Augenbraum and Stavans 1993), *The Oxford Book of Jewish Stories* (1998), *The Scroll and the Cross: 1000 Years of Jewish-Hispanic Literature* (2003b), and is editor of a series of Jewish writing from Latin America published by the University of New Mexico Press. In addition, Stavans has also written two books of short stories: *The One-Handed Pianist and Other Stories* (1996) and *The Disappearance* (2006).

*On Borrowed Words*, the prolific author's memoirs – at the time of its publication Stavans was just forty years old – could simply be dismissed as a pretentious employment of the genre for self-promoting purposes. However, reading them in the context of transnational autobiography appears particularly promising as it not only underscores the diversity within the community of Latinos in the US but, even more, illustrates a contemporary literary positioning 'in-between' and 'beyond' national frames of identification. In fact, the exceptional character of the depicted immigrant experience seems to legitimize the memoirs of this middle-aged man. The reader learns about immigrant experiences that are usually seen as part of diverse, not overlapping, histories: Mexican immigration to the US on the one hand and Jewish immigration to the US on the other. The reader is confronted with a multiethnic and multilingual voice. At times the narrative is culturally coded (e.g. moving from 'Mexican' to 'Jewish' to 'American' to 'intellectual') when it comes to such very different topics as Jewish New Yorkers and Zionism, or Mexican *malinchismo*, mariachi music and Jorge Negrete. At other points, the narrative, true to the conventions of autobiography, is highly personal and presents information concerning intimate personal conflicts and family matters. Seen in terms of literary traditions, the memoirs tender an account of individual experiences framed in terms of the American immigrant autobiography tradition. Within this generic frame, Stavans's memoirs are intertextually linked to the history of two subgenres: Chicano/a autobiography and Jewish-American immigrant autobiography.

The narrative voice affords insights into occurrences that do not match with the common categories of ethnic identities and distinctions in America. Although written and marketed within the paradigm of ethnic writing through its use of cultural codes, *On Borrowed Words* offers a textual contact zone that performs transculturation in Fernando Ortiz's (1995) sense of a reciprocal exchange across cultural boundary lines. Although the narrative portrays Stavans's migration from Mexico to the US, the author's cultural identification is concurrently presented as multiple, mixed, in constant transformation as well as holding on to distinct and singular roots. The fact that throughout the memoirs the narrative voice and the patterns of identification remain situated simultaneously at different national locales adds a transnational quality to this immigration narrative. The transnationalism of the memoirs consists of the simultaneity of living in different worlds and of writing from the perspective of these

different nations, cultures, traditions and languages: the Mexican, the Jewish, the American, the intellectual, the middle-class academic.

## 2. Historical Genealogies: Immigration and Jewish-Latino Writing

As an autobiographical narrative, *On Borrowed Words* spans the second half of the twentieth century, the period covering the author's life up to that point. However, Stavans's Jewishness, Mexicanness and Americanness, as well as his family history, link the memoirs with a much older history of Jewish and Hispanic life in the US. In American literature, the transatlantic and inter-American history of Sephardic Jews was most prominently taken up by the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in his nineteenth-century poem 'The Jewish Cemetery at Newport', considered the most famous literary reference to colonial Jewish American history. The fourth stanza reads as follows:

The very names recorded here are strange,  
Of foreign accent, and of different climes;  
Alvares and Rivera interchange  
With Abraham and Jacob of old times. (1988: 361)

The lyrical *I* speaks of a *foreign accent* that had once found its way to New England. In this stanza, the names on the tombstones are perceived as traces of a combination of Iberian and Judaic tongues. From the poet's nineteenth-century perspective, the tombstones lead back to the first Jewish migration to North America. The tombstones' inscriptions are an aide-mémoire that this migration consisted mainly of Sephardic Jews who had left the Iberian peninsula in the late fifteenth century. It is a reminder that this migration was not only trans-Atlantic but also inter-American. The first Jews came from the Caribbean to New Amsterdam in 1654. Many, as Longfellow's lyrical *I* observes, had Spanish names and spoke Spanish.<sup>2</sup> The cemetery and the synagogue (built in 1763) to which Longfellow refers are remnants of one of the first Jewish communities in colonial British America.

When Longfellow visited the Jewish Cemetery at Newport, Ashkenasic Jews from Central and Eastern Europe had already arrived in the United States and outnumbered the Sephardic Jews. In fact, as early as 1730 Jews of Central European origin were more numerous in British North America than were Iberian Jews (cf. Sachar 1992: 9-37). By the late nineteenth century, Sephardic traditions had been completely marginalized by Russian- and Yiddish-speaking Jewish cultures. The two aspects of Longfellow's *foreign*

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<sup>2</sup> In his diary Longfellow writes that he found Hebrew and Portuguese inscriptions on the tombstones (cf. Nina Baym 2003: 671). For Longfellow the cemetery is merely a reminder of "dead nations" (1988: 363) that once, briefly, set foot on American soil. In the 1850s no Sephardic community existed anymore in Newport, once a major center of the very small Jewish life in colonial British America. Longfellow wrote the poem decades before the onset of Jewish mass immigration from Eastern Europe to America. For the history of Jewish migration to colonial British North America and Jewish American history of the nineteenth century, see Howard M. Sachar (1992) and Jabob Rader Marcus (1970, 2004: 116-26).

*accent*, the Iberian and the Judaic, have since split and are usually viewed as belonging to two different experiences of immigration and of becoming American: that of Latin Americans and that of Jews from Europe. In the United States, although Hebrew and Yiddish have gained recognition in the cultural and literary productions that followed the Yiddish-speaking mass immigration of the late nineteenth century, Spanish and Portuguese have, in general terms, always been regarded as the language of Catholic migrants from the Iberian peninsula, Latin America and the Caribbean.

More recently, however, quite a few autobiographical texts have been published that, from a late twentieth-century perspective, take up elements from these different histories of migration: autobiographical writing by Jewish authors from hispanophone Latin America and the Caribbean. For example, Rosario Morales and Aurora Levins Morales, a mother and daughter originally from Puerto Rico, coauthored *Getting Home Alive* (1986), a collection that includes autobiography, poetry and fiction with an explicit feminist twist. Levins Morales' *Medicine Stories: History, Culture and the Politics of Integrity* (1998), a collection of autobiographical essays, poetry and engaged, anti-racist and feminist historiography of Puerto Rico, contains many passages on Jewish Puerto Ricans and their history. Marjorie Agosín's *A Cross and a Star: Memoirs of a Jewish Girl in Chile* (1995) interweaves her childhood memories with the history of the Holocaust and the fate of family members.<sup>3</sup> The anthropologist Ruth Behar, who grew up in a Jewish family from Cuba, produced and directed an autobiographical TV documentary, *Adio Kerida* (2002), and published interviews and poetry that focus on her Cuban-Jewish-American identity.<sup>4</sup> And Ariel Dorfman, the émigré intellectual from Chile, best known to a broader public for his play *Death and the Maiden* (1992), published an autobiography, *Heading South, Looking North*, in 1998. This autobiographical American Jewish-Latino/a writing is located in at least four major literary traditions of (ethnic) writing in the USA: Latino/a literature, Jewish American literature, immigrant literature and the American autobiography.

Some of the authors of contemporary Jewish-Latino autobiography and fiction in the US position themselves and their writing in the traditions of Latino/a literatures that have flourished in the last fifty years in the United States. *Mexican American*, *Chicano/a*, *Cuban-American* and *Nuyorican* are the major identity markers in this literary production. To emphasize the common ground of these literatures, the terms *Latino* and *Latina* have increasingly come into use. The intimate relation of Spanish and intertextuality to Latin American literature are characteristics of much Latino/a writing in the USA. Jewish-Latino writing is part of this literary tradition, but it also sheds light

<sup>3</sup> More recently Agosín published *Always from Somewhere Else: A Memoir of My Chilean Jewish Father* (1998), *Uncertain Travelers: Conversations with Jewish Women Immigrants to America* (1999) and *The Alphabet in My Hands: A Writing Life* (2000), which make her the most prominent Jewish-Latina literary and intellectual voice in the United States. See also Stavans (2003a: 296-97).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, her autobiographical ethnographic essay 'Writing in My Father's Name: A Diary of Translated Woman's First Year' (1995), her ethnography and memoir *The Vulnerable Observer* (1996), particularly chapter 5, and Behar (2003). Agosín (1999: 194-208) contains an interview with Ruth Behar.

on less discussed and underrepresented aspects of inter-American as well as transatlantic literary history.

*On Borrowed Words* articulates a particular transnational literacy that challenges the binary oppositions that often pervade ethnic writing. Although the distinction between the Jewish world and that of the goyim is a marker throughout the text, additional identifications split and shift seemingly homogeneous national, cultural and ethnic categories. Multilingualism plays a major role in this kind of literary expression. Multilingualism here is understood both literally, as the employment of different languages, and metaphorically, employing diverse forms of identity constructions that are anchored in different literary and cultural traditions. The autobiographical writing, in a variety of ways, negotiates multilingualism as part of the history of family migration and of authorial world-making. We find multilayered references to ‘minority positions’, historical narratives and identity markers. In Stavans’s memoirs multilingualism functions as a strategic device within the discourses of ethnic and national identity construction. While the text often addresses questions of national identity, it avoids definite positionings. In this sense, the narrator exposes the reader to a textual contact zone of multiple cultural differences.

While the memoirs are written in English, other languages (Yiddish, Spanish and Hebrew) are incorporated via quotes from other literary texts, in remembered and imagined dialogues and in the form of singular words or terms. In addition, Polish and Russian are characterized as languages of origin. The memoirs are divided into six chapters, each of which addresses certain issues that are significant to, and representative of, particular moments in the author’s narrated life. In each chapter language is somehow connected to a relative, a friend, or to the country of residence of the author at the time of the narrated event. The author brings the reader with him on his journeys from Mexico to Israel, to Spain, Cuba and the US. Here, the genre of travel writing becomes an explicit search for identity. While this search does not reach an end, it does at least find a stopping point in the description of the public ceremony in which Stavans adopts American citizenship. In the fifth chapter, titled ‘Amerika, America’, Stavans touches upon topics such as his reciting the Pledge of Allegiance (to the United States) and giving up his Mexican passport.

Stavans’s style and structure borrow from, take up, appropriate, comment on and rewrite other ethnically marked traditions of American autobiographical writing. In the following, I will first introduce the function of Yiddish, then I will discuss the text’s relation to three autobiographies that are pertinent references for illustrating the literary transnationalism imagined and performed by Stavans’s memoirs.

### 3. Yiddish in Latino Writing

While in the Jewish-Latino autobiographical texts mentioned earlier – as in most contemporary Jewish American literature (cf. Hana Wirth-Nesher 2003) – Yiddish serves mainly as an ethnic marker, reminiscent of earlier generations, in Stavans’s memoirs the reader encounters a contemporary author who speaks Yiddish and finds longer sentences and quotes in Yiddish. Most of these quotes are references to authors

of the late twentieth century. In addition to such references, however, the use of Yiddish acquires a central symbolic function in the narrative's complex discussion of identity. In fact, one of the most important characteristics that thematically sets Stavans's text apart from other anglophone Jewish-Latino autobiographical writing is his description of the Yiddish-speaking community in Mexico City. The narrative uses the biographies and idiosyncrasies of individual family members to broach such culturally specific topics as the Yiddish theatre, in which Stavans's father acted and directed, the Jewish School (2002: 81), the Eastern European background of his grandparents, his own intellectual inclinations, as well as more distant topics such as Sephardic history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (2002: 74). The autobiographical narrator stresses how his family and the Jewish community in Mexico – after Brazil and Argentina the third largest in Latin America – were split in their affiliations:

Bela [the grandmother] kept her children close to her. She trained them to be first Jewish and then Mexican, and exhorted them to embrace Spanish as their mother tongue but keep Yiddish as “the Jewish – i.e., intimate – language.” As was common, they met Gentiles only in the neighborhood, for kids were sent to Jewish schools and after-school programs. This separation created in them – and in their entire generation – an ambivalent sense of identity. What made them Mexican? And how did they distinguish themselves from other Jews? This duality was, and still is, much more accentuated among Mexican Jews than in their counterparts in the United States, and I daresay, even in Brazil and Argentina. Yiddish, among Ashkenazim, was the umbilical cord with Europe, and was never fully cut. Spanish made them native citizens with full civil rights, but mixed marriages were few, and contact with Catholics and other immigrants was minimal. In short, it was an insular mentality. (2002: 79-80)

Almost halfway through *On Borrowed Words*, in the ‘Amerika, America’ chapter that describes a longer search for national and cultural identification and the desire to acquire American citizenship, Stavans quotes, from memory, the words of one of his former teachers in Mexico City. This scene, I want to suggest, functions as a key moment in the narrative. It contains a leitmotif of the memoirs: searching for images and languages for expressing concepts of home and belonging. The narrator's voice, in the rendition of direct speech, switches to Yiddish: “*Mexique is ver ich choib myn shtibele. Es is shoin main cheim*” (2002: 187). The reader of the predominantly English text here is confronted with a transcribed Yiddish (which the narrator leaves untranslated). In the direct speech the teacher justifies his life in Mexico when claiming: “Mexico is where I have my small room. By now it is my home” [my translation]. The Yiddish sentences express an emotional attachment to Mexico.

The Yiddish sentences, in the simplest understanding, remind the American reader that Yiddish-speaking populations migrated not only to the United States but also to Mexico and many other countries in the Western hemisphere and established Yiddish-speaking communities in the urban centers of Latin America. However, it is interesting that it is precisely – and paradoxically – the language originating in Central and Eastern Europe, a language comprising Hebrew, German and Slavic influences, and written in Hebrew letters, that is used to articulate the feeling of being ‘at home’ in the predominantly Spanish-speaking, predominantly Catholic country that is culturally marked by another, very different cultural and linguistic mix: *mestizaje*, i.e., the mixture

of indigenous and Spanish elements in the Mexican people, culture and nation. Mestizaje, however, is not addressed explicitly in the memoirs. But the conceptual frame of this Mexican and Latin American cultural characteristic is transferred to Stavans's specific Jewish-Latino-American experiences. By employing code-switching the narrative performs the specific mixture (*mestizaje*) of Stavans's family. When read in the context of various syncretisms of the Old and the New World, the teacher's words provide a textual moment of linguistic, symbolic and cultural intersections, crossings and disseminations. The description of the encounter contains a multitude of histories, allusion to migratory movements, conflicts and contacts in which different regions and nations are involved: Mexico, Central Europe, Israel and the US.

Analogous to James Clifford's (1997) exploration of the central status of mobility in the construction of culture and cultural identity, the teacher's words and his function in the narrative illustrate how cultural identity consists not only of rootedness in traditions but just as much in exchanges of cultural practices and knowledges. As Clifford puts it, cultural identity emerges within a dynamic of "roots" and "routes", an interplay between being attached to inherited customs and – at the same time – being attracted by transformation, an interchange between embeddedness and mobility. In contrast to "roots"-oriented notions of culture, Clifford stresses that "practices of displacement" should be seen as "constitutive of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension" (1997: 3). In this sense, Stavans's narrative shows identities as being constructed in reference to the history of not just one culture and nation but many. Thus the code-switching in Stavans's narration – exemplified in the rendering of the encounter with his former teacher – illustrates and symbolically negotiates the effects of displacement. This depiction of migratory and diasporic identity should not be misunderstood as a naïve celebration of cultural mobility or nomadic subjects. Rather, the code-switching carries very different implications, such as nostalgia, pain, sadness, joy and humor, being, in fact, strategic or erudite. Hana Wirth-Nesher (2003) outlines similar uses of Yiddish and Hebrew in Jewish American literature, from the early twentieth century up to contemporary post-Holocaust poetics. What sets Stavans's Jewish-Latino writing apart, however, seems to be the additional use of Spanish and the symbolic meaning the linguistic triangular relation of Yiddish, Spanish and English acquires in his immigration narrative.<sup>5</sup> Stavans's multilingualism expresses both the joy and grief of life in the diaspora, as well as that of the feelings engendered by the act of migration and of being 'rooted' in different nations.

The teacher's words, untranslated, interrupt the English narrative flow. This creates a disruption in the communication between the non-Yiddish-speaking reader and the narrator/author. The teacher's Yiddish sentences are an ambivalent statement, expressing the feeling of being 'at home' (*heim*) while, at the same time, when considering the broader context, expressing the feeling of 'homelessness'. The Yiddish in Stavans's English narrative fulfills a similar and related function. It establishes an exclusive textual space, indicating ambivalence toward, or uncertainty about, the acquired tongue, English – after all, Stavans only acquired fluency in English

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<sup>5</sup> An excellent illustration in this context is Stavans's novella '*Morirse está en hebreo*', included in his collection *The Disappearance* (2006).



postadolescence, when he came to the United States to study in New York City. In the narrative Yiddish expresses a refusal of 'English only'-textuality. The code-switching of the text, between English, Yiddish, Spanish and Hebrew symbolically imagines and establishes a 'multilingual home' while, at the same time, speaking of histories and memories of 'homelessness', and therefore creating a multilingual textuality.

Thus, in terms of multilingualism and immigration Stavans's memoirs are a success story. The memoirs take up characteristics of the American autobiography, which in the tradition established by Benjamin Franklin is structured as a success story, displaying the US as the land of personal freedom and opportunity. Stavans's memoirs in many respects structurally correspond to this pattern (successful career as a scholar and author; religious, cultural and intellectual freedom). However, by providing a space for Stavans's multilingualism and transnational identification, *On Borrowed Words* constitutes a breach with the conventions of the American autobiography and with the concept of assimilation.

In the narrative, Stavans, himself having grown up as second generation Mexican Jew in Mexico City, uses the quote by his former teacher for illustrating his own struggle with *aliyah*, the migration of diaspora Jews to Israel. The teacher's words are introduced at a moment when Stavans is discussing the question of "[n]ormality, *normalidad*" for Mexican Jews: "Where do I fit in modern Mexico? Is there a way to link my Hebraic ancestry to my day-to-day life?" (2002: 186). The teacher, only sporadically 'a fervent Zionist', tries to convince Stavans to give up living in the diaspora. When Stavans, as he remembers the scene, asks why the teacher did not himself move to Israel, the above quoted sentences are the response. When reading the Yiddish words embedded in the English narrative, it becomes obvious that Stavans employs Yiddish in order to distance himself from the Mexican-Jewish community of his youth and from his family, both of whom he describes as leading artificial lives, largely excluded from, and themselves disinterested in, the broader Mexican society:

I asked him [the teacher] why he hadn't made *aliyah*. His answer was sheer evasion, of the sort most Mexican Jews indulged in daily. "*Mexique is ver ich choib myn shtibele. Es is shoin main cheim,*" he announced. "I'm an adult, fully settled, with a job. But you, Ilan, are still a young man. Your life is ahead of you. Individual decisions are easier to make when no one else's life is in question. (2002: 187)

The Yiddish here is used, from the narrator's perspective, to illustrate the "[daily] sheer evasion" practiced by Mexican Jews. The statement, as Stavans indicates, a common Mexican-Jewish reference to 'home' in the diaspora, has a rather sentimental tone to it. It functions as an expression of longing for 'home': in this conversation with Stavans, from an ideological and religious standpoint, the teacher locates home in Israel; however, in his Yiddish words – as it is implied, the more intimate and private language – he locates 'home' – "*shtibele*" ('small room') – in Mexico. Even though he lives in modest circumstances in Mexico, even if this Mexican home is always threatened by anti-Semitism and exclusion from Mexican society, and even if its enjoyment is always accompanied by a persistent feeling of insecurity as a minority subject in a predominately Catholic society, this small room – a substitute for the 'real home' to

which he wants to send Stavans – seems to suffice. And this ‘home’ is embraced by the implied familiarity and tenderness of the Yiddish words.

However, the use of Yiddish at this juncture in Stavans’s narrative, serving a function comparable to the teacher’s statements, can be read as an expression of nostalgia. While dissociating himself from his community of origin, the narrator at the same time embraces this Mexican-Jewish community and his own past. Quoting teachers, relatives and other Yiddish speakers, and also presenting himself as one, Stavans makes use of a language that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the period during which Stavans received his primary education in Mexico City, was only spoken by a rather small community; a result of the destruction of Eastern European Jewry in the Holocaust. Ongoing assimilation among Ashkenasim in the Americas turned Yiddish into what has been referred to as a *dying language*, and is thus used as a language of origins. Hence, similar to much of contemporary Jewish American literature, as Wirth-Nesher writes, Yiddish is interwoven in texts “as a memorial to the dead” (2003: 119). This is particularly the case when considering the ‘The Rise and Fall of Yiddish’, the chapter about his grandmother, Bela Stavchansky. The chapter introduces Stavans’s own upbringing and language acquisition and his intimate relation to both Yiddish and Spanish. Both languages are shown as being ‘his own’ and at the same time ‘not his own’. References to these two ‘mother tongues’ are embedded in an English narrative that highlights Stavans’s ‘coming to’ the English language. English is repeatedly described as being *most* ‘his own’ because it is a consciously acquired and chosen language. Considering the correlation between the topics of migration and language use in *On Borrowed Words*, the memoirs can be read as responding to the Mexican teacher’s Yiddish: With Stavans’s migration, Spanish and Yiddish, as well as Mexican culture and Judaism, were transported beyond the Mexico-USA border *al otro lado* (‘to the other side’), and they are shown as ‘living on’ in the new American *heim* (‘home’).

#### 4. Chicano/a Autobiography, Jewish Autobiography, American Autobiography

In light of his many publications on Mexican American literature,<sup>6</sup> Stavans is extremely knowledgeable about the different positions that Chicano/a authors have taken concerning the question of assimilation. In the last few decades, two of these authors, Cherríe Moraga and Richard Rodríguez, have articulated two very opposite opinions. In each case, language plays a pivotal role in the literary identity construction. Like other minority literatures, Mexican American writing, whether fiction or nonfiction, introduces the motif of searching for – as Moraga puts it – *your own* language. While Moraga longs for the Spanish mother tongue that she did not learn to speak as a child growing up in a family keen on assimilating, Rodríguez embraces the English language as ‘his own’ after having been raised and educated in this tongue.

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<sup>6</sup> Among them is a book-length study of the life and work of Chicano writer Oscar Zeta Acosta (Stavans 1995b).

Stavans's experience of becoming an American citizen differs from that of both Moraga and Rodríguez, who were each born to Mexican parents.<sup>7</sup> Stavans immigrated on his own, not as a Mexican seeking work in the low-wage sector, but as a middle-class Mexican, and he is very open about this rather uncharacteristic immigration experience and way of becoming American:

My emigration was carefully planned. I was not a bracero, a wet-back running away from poverty, whose swim across the Río Grande was the chance of a better future, filled with that magical American word "opportunity." My admiration for the wetbacks is enormous. Could I have undergone a similar adventure? I doubt it. I was a spoiled middle-class, educated child. I always had a shower, a bowl of soup, handsome clothes to wear. My move was motivated by freedom: I wanted to live in a land of free speech, where words and arguments mattered; a place where my Jewishness was valued; I wanted to have inexhaustible, labyrinthine libraries around me, where I could get lost. (2002: 22)

In this kind of 'middle-class' immigrant autobiography, multilingualism acquires a different meaning than in the influential Mexican American autobiographies by Moraga and Rodríguez.

In Moraga's *Loving in the War Years: Lo Que Nunca Pasó por sus Labios* (1983) we find romanticized references to Mexico and the Spanish language, references that are fully entrenched in identity politics: "In returning to the love of my race, I must return to the fact that not only has the mother been taken from me, but the tongue, her mother tongue. I want the language, feel my tongue rise to the occasion of feeling at home, in common. I know this language in my bones...and then it escapes me ... '¡You don't belong. Quitate!'" (1983: 141).

Richard Rodríguez's *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodríguez* (1982) occupies a position polar opposite to that of *Loving in the War Years* when it comes to questions of identity politics, bilingualism and the symbolic significance of Spanish. On the first pages we find an embracing of Anglo-America in an affirmative tone: "I write this book as a middle-class American man. Assimilated" (1982: 3). And, in a passage that has become quite well-known, Rodríguez goes on: "Consider me, if you choose, a comic victim of two cultures. This is my situation: writing these pages, surrounded in the room I am in by volumes of Montaigne and Shakespeare and Lawrence. They are mine now" (1982: 5).

The middle-class background and the interest in Old World literary and intellectual history obviously positions Stavans closer to Rodríguez than to Moraga. Stavans's description of his first impressions of New York assumes a similar literary and educated tone: "From the first moment I stepped out into New York, it appeared to me like a huge book, a novel-in-progress perhaps, filled with anecdotes, with a multilingual poetry impossible to repress" (2002: 11).

It is not surprising that Stavans and Rodríguez, as we learn in *On Borrowed Words*, know each other and have had longer conversations on matters of being American and on assimilation, to which almost the entire last chapter, 'The Lettered Man', is devoted (247-59). However, when it comes to language, Stavans's memoirs go *d'accord* neither

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<sup>7</sup> Although Moraga's father was not Mexican, cf. Moraga (1983).

with Moraga nor Rodríguez. On the one hand, the intimate, emotionally bound relation to Spanish as the language of his childhood seems in fact to come closer to Moraga's longing for her 'lost' mother tongue. On the other hand, English is represented as an acquired language, free from any family connection, in which, similar to the country where he learned to speak it, the narrator feels very much at home. Stavans takes up both forms of Mexican American autobiography, the roots-oriented Chicana autobiography (Moraga) and the assimilationist autobiography (Rodríguez), and intertwines them in a new way by highlighting the significance of Yiddish in his life. Stavans 'triangularizes' the binary logic of the language policy usually dictated for the Chicano/a autobiography.

Apart from the Latino/a autobiography, Stavans establishes links to the history of the American immigrant autobiography, particularly the Jewish American autobiography. In the 'Amerika, America' chapter the narrator approaches the US through the long tradition of Jewish American writing. Here we find sentences, images and references that resonate with any reader familiar with American literary history: e.g. "What does it mean to be an American?" (2002: 184), and "I came in search of the Garden of Eden" (2002: 185). Another biblical reference, 'the Promised Land', is employed for describing the intellectual and political phases in Stavans's earlier life: it is first mentioned as a reference to Israel (2002: 190), then, when describing his temporary period of Marxist activism, to Mexico (2002: 209), and finally to the USA and its intellectual and literary tradition (2002: 221). Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912), the most famous autobiography of a Jewish immigrant from Eastern Europe to the USA in the early twentieth century, is introduced as a topic in the conversation with Richard Rodríguez in the final chapter of the memoirs (2002: 253). On the first pages of *The Promised Land*, Antin goes so far as to claim that her life in America feels completely detached from her earlier life in the Old World: "I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over. Is it not time to write my life's story? I am just as much out of the way as if I were dead, for I am absolutely other than the person whose story I have to tell" (2001: 3).

She then recounts the hardship, discrimination and persecution she experienced in Russia during her childhood. She presents her autobiography, contrary to the assumed memory work of the genre, as a lesson in forgetting. For the author herself, writing and transmitting knowledge of the past is supposed to help draw a terminal line between her American life and the Old World past. Thus writing is presented as both an attempt to forget and a tool to enable forgetting: "I can never forget, for I bear the scars. But I want to forget – sometimes I long to forget. I think I have thoroughly assimilated my past – I have done its bidding – I want now to be of to-day. It is painful to be consciously of two worlds" (2001: 6).

While there are numerous parallels between Antin's and Stavans's embrace of America as the promised land of freedom, Stavans seems to be less pessimistic about his 'split identity'. Writing almost ninety years later, Stavans – as a 'white' middle-class Mexican American – offers a perspective on the United States and on American culture in which alternatives for 'making yourself' exist next to each other, and even within one person: the mixing of different cultures and languages, simultaneously living in

different worlds and holding on to ethnic traditions. These options, although part of 'split identities' and often painful, are shown as opening up a new freedom and new opportunities.<sup>8</sup>

### 5. Conclusion: Transnational Autobiography

Stavans's memoirs seem to accept, even to embrace the in-betweenness, the undecided status, the continuous flow: "I am married and have two children, all American. Though I remain loyal to Spanish and to a lesser extent to Yiddish, I have switched to English. Which of these languages is truly my own? I no longer know" (2002: 32).

His transcultural and transnational self, the simultaneity of home and homelessness in three languages, find different ways of expression in the narrative, through either descriptive modes, metaphoric language or the structure of sentences and paragraphs. The close attachment to the languages and cultures of his upbringing, Yiddish and Spanish, Jewish and Mexican culture, is particularly stressed in the sections dealing with his grandmother: "She has lost her hearing, so Abremele [Stavans's uncle] must shout on the phone for her to understand – 'What? I don't understand' – and he tries again, but she doesn't register. 'Zog es mir in Yiddish?' – 'Switch to Yiddish?' – she suggests, for Yiddish is *der mame-loshen*, the language of stomach and soul. It is also the language of the dead" (2002: 49).

Tellingly, it is his grandmother's imagined direct speech in the narrative that puts Stavans's three languages most effectively side by side: "Abremele, *zug mir, main liebe kind*: ¿Y qué con Ilán? Has he written back?" (2002: 49).<sup>9</sup> The English in this direct speech, however, is Stavans's addition, his translation of the grandmother's spoken words. This translation seems most significant, as it symbolically expresses the 'cultural work' of the entire memoirs. He translates and transports the experience of his ancestors and of his own Mexican American 'becoming' into the discourses of American autobiography, the Chicano autobiography and the Jewish immigrant autobiography. The narrator writes about his grandmother's Yiddish and Spanish, and he does so in English, just as he writes about his family's Eastern European roots and their Mexican life in parameters set by the conventions of the American autobiography:

Her Spanish is pidgin all right – broken, ungrammatical – but it is hers all the same: it has style, it has pathos, it has power. It is the tongue of an immigrant – embryonic, wobbly, in constant mutation. It came to her at age nineteen, when, alone, scared to death, she crossed the Atlantic and settled in Mexico. She appropriated the language so that I, thirty years later, could make it my own. ... for Bela is a natural polyglot: besides Yiddish, she was fluent in Polish and Russian, and with time she learned a broken English and a bit of Hebrew as well – six languages, including Spanish. She was born in 1909, in Nowe

<sup>8</sup> These options come close to what sociologist Mary Waters (1990) terms the "ethnic options" of those who pass as 'white' in the USA. However, the persistence of life in different languages and cultures differentiates Stavans from most of those assimilated 'white' Americans of European descent whom Waters interviewed.

<sup>9</sup> The transcribed Yiddish means: 'Abremele, tell me, my dear child'; the Spanish: 'And what about Ilan?' [my translation].

Brodno, now a suburb of Warsaw. When she emigrated to Mexico in 1929, she made a conscious decision never to use Polish and Russian again. (2002: 52)

The narrator foregrounds the grandmother's paradoxical identifications: similar to Mary Antin's early twentieth-century positioning, she steadfastly abandons elements of her former Old World identity (Polish and Russian); at the same time, however, unlike Antin's embracing of assimilation, Stavchansky refuses to fully enter the New World. From Stavans's perspective, his grandmother – as well as the rest of his family and the entire Jewish community of Mexico – is less characterized by 'being' European than by a persistent denial of 'becoming' American (in the hemispheric sense): "At the heart of her rebirth across the Atlantic was a negation: Thou shall not be American. Whatever it was, I cannot avoid describing it as *ain tzufal, un accidente*: the enigma of arrival as an accident of fate" (2002: 71, emphasis in original).

Stavans's memoirs, however, seem to perform what his grandmother had to face all her life but refused to accept: 'Amerika, America' and the Mexican culture of *mestizaje*: "She disembarked from the *Sparndam* [the ship that took her over the Atlantic ocean] and was exposed, for the first time, to a different type of *muzhik*: the *mestizo*" (2002: 72).

*On Borrowed Words* mixes different conventions of autobiographical writing and transforms them into a transnational format in which traditional national and cultural identifications and categories of narrative framing are shifted, questioned and transcended. The category of the transnational is explored and imagined in contemporary terms of identification beyond national borders, citizenship laws and literary customs. The transnational is also examined and envisioned in light of the history of immigration, which links the narrator's voice back to the seventeenth-century Sephardic migration to colonial North America, the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Jewish immigration from Central and Eastern Europe to the US, and the Chicano/a history of more recent decades. In Stavans's transnational autobiographical writing, the past, the present and the future are shown in terms of a complex mobility – either enforced or chosen of one's own free will – that challenges self-contained national patterns of identification.

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