

REVIEW ESSAY

Emerging Canons, Unfolding
Ethnicities: The Future of U.S.
Latino/a Literary Theory

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A Companion to US Latino Literatures

Edited by Carlota Caufield and Darién J. Davis
Rochester, NY: Tameis, 2007
248 pages; \$95.00 [cloth]

*The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence
of Post-Sixties Literature*

By Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez
New York: Palgrave Mcmillan, 2007
216 pages; \$74.95 [cloth]

*On Latinidad: U.S. Latino Literature
and the Construction of Ethnicity*

By Marta Caminero-Santangelo
Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007
336 pages; \$59.95 [cloth]

Imagining a U.S. Latino/a Future

U.S. Latino/a Literary Theory, I have argued elsewhere (Perez and Di Iorio Sandín 2007), is stretching the social boundaries of what it means not only to be Latino/a, but American. One of the most rooted expressions of a cultural presence or signifier of belonging is the creation of a literary tradition. The three texts examined in this review—*The Latino/a Canon and the Emergence of Post-Sixties Literature* by Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez; *On Latinidad: U.S. Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity* by Marta Caminero-Santangelo; and *A Companion to U.S. Latino Literatures* edited by Carlota Caulfield and Darien J. Davis¹—testify to a U.S. Latino/a accumulation of texts that have chronicled an undeniable presence, growing in force and significance with each decade of the 20th and 21st centuries. As the word tradition suggests, U.S. Latino/a literature has carved out and transmitted, from one generation to another, from one ethnicity to another, from one region to another, from one language to another, a remarkable body of work reshaping from within the contours of American identity. It is important to understand this phenomenon from within, rather than from the outside, since mainstream narratives often attempt to depict the social location of U.S. Latino/as, for as the literary production documents, U.S. Latino/as have invented new modes of imagining the American experience. A literary tradition or the canon, as Dalleo and Machado Sáez put it, is established from alternative forms of insider knowledge. Herein lies the paradox of U.S. Latino/a identity: on the one hand, it is constituted as always already alien, while conversely, its massive social and literary presence firmly place it as an eth(n)ical reminder of the limits and possibilities of American democracy. It is important to even take this a step further and argue that the very potential of an American democracy is, in many ways, dependent on its Latino/a future.

The three books examined in this review understand the significance U.S. Latino/a literature plays in rendering a narrative of this future. *The Latino/a Canon*, for instance, recognizes that “Latino/a literature stands at a crossroads, a moment of consolidation and institutionalization for a field that has historically thought of itself as marginal and oppositional” (p. 1). This tension between imminent “institutionalization” and continual “opposition” is the creative energy, a U.S. Latino/a aesthetics, which threatens to reform the nation’s traditions. At the crossroads stands a “Latino/a literature,” amassed over the last hundred years, narrating the experiences, insights, and projections of an integral portion of America’s population. For Dalleo and Machado Sáez, while a post-Sixties Latino/a literature has been given entry into the marketplace, it has entered without falling prey to the apolitical and assimilative pressures that often come with such an invitation. The dynamic tension that emerges in U.S. Latino literature between the promise of a market acceptance and an eth(n)ical resistance to social assimilation marks the opening and possibility of democratic life.

If Dalleo and Machado Sáez approach U.S. Latino literature in a comprehensive sense, Marta Caminero-Santangelo examines the varying ethnicities that constitute U.S. Latino/a identity. Interestingly, as Caminero-Santangelo points out, U.S. Latino/a identity often obfuscates the extent to which each group closely identifies with their culture of origin. She explains, “If a sense of peoplehood is deployed largely through symbols, it is striking that the most prominent symbols in the arsenal of U.S. Latino history have so often been nationally specific, rather than panethnic, in nature” (p. 6). Yet she concedes that “the most significant predictor of whether someone was likely to choose a panethnic label was whether she or he was a first-, second-, or third-generation immigrant” (p. 29). Her examination of U.S. Latino literature negotiates

these two ethnic locations moving from the “nationally specific” to a “panethnic” label. This range causes a certain indentificatory confusion or contradiction, fodder for a U.S. Latino fiction equipped to explore the political implications of this socially inborn antinomy. Caminero-Santangelo’s text warns of the dangers in our facile use of the term Latino, while keeping it intact and understanding the changing nature of how we name and identify. The question here is, What is the future of this appellation? Is it tied to the future of U.S. Latino/as as a new and still developing ethnic formation?

Interestingly, the final book of this review, *A Companion to U.S. Latino Literatures*, embraces the “diversity” reflected in the term and its literary output (p. 1). For Carlota Caulfield and Darien Davis, the editors of this anthology, U.S. Latino/a artists have established a new aesthetic, while serving as social commentators on “ethical issues.” “Latina and Latino poets, dramatists, novelists, short story writers, essayists, and filmmakers have been instrumental in the articulation of Latino aesthetic and ethical issues in the U.S. They have played roles as cultural interlocutors, interpreters, and recorders of their own cultural past as well as the real or imagined past of the countries that many have left behind” (p. 2). However, Caulfield and Davis also understand that the imagined community built by U.S. Latino/a writers remains “fragmented regionally, economically, racially, and socially” (p. 4). In such a complex reordering of identity, it is the literature that maps our communities and explicates our futures. U.S. Latino/a literature has a dual responsibility: on the one hand, it details the specificity of identity; on the other, it imagines a future identity that is still under negotiation. That future, as these three theoretical texts outline, is ineluctably dependent on a literary tradition.

Canons, Markets, and Negative Capacities

In *The Latino/a Canon*, co-written by Raphael Dalleo and Elena Machado Sáez, an important temporal break is established that distinguishes between a pre- and post-Sixties U.S. Latino/a literature. Post-Sixties here means a body of writing that emerges after the Civil Rights generation and whose literary emphasis changes from an openly contestatory stance, challenging and rejecting mainstream market mores, to a more upwardly mobile sensibility, which forges a “new relationship to politics” (p. 2). The mistake or misreading committed by too many critics, according to *The Latino/a Canon*, is to analyze contemporary Latino/a literature in apolitical terms, making them amenable to the mainstream and thus marketable, or viewing them as facile translations of a U.S. Latino/a experience, offering stories desirous for social assimilation. Dalleo and Machado Sáez counter this critical tendency, arguing that while these texts do find, in unprecedented ways, access to the market place and thus accrue a mainstream readership, they nonetheless imagine new modes of addressing political and social questions. As the authors explain: “The goal of this book is to distinguish our position from each of these groups by arguing that rather than retreating from politics, or substituting what Nancy Fraser calls a ‘politics of recognition’ for a ‘politics of redistribution,’ recent Latino/a literature imagines creative ways to rethink the relationship between a politics of social justice and market popularity—a combination that the critical reception denies by either rejecting one of these elements or articulating them as binary oppositions” (p. 3). It is not, Dalleo and Machado Sáez argue, that these post-Sixties writers “turn away” from the political responsibilities established by civil rights authors, but instead “renew that political tradition” by imaginatively

addressing their place in a changing “American” landscape. This reformulation, significantly, turns a creative eye to “future horizons” taking into eth(n)ical account the “market’s centrality” (p. 7).

The book is composed of five wide-ranging chapters examining the works of Pedro Pietri, Nicholasa Mohr, Piri Thomas, Junot Diaz, Angie Cruz, Cristina Garcia, and Julia Alvarez. Each chapter builds on the thematic issue of post-Sixties writers and their contemporary engagement with politics, specifically the imaginative relationship to nostalgia, upward mobility, consumer citizenship, and postcolonial historical narratives. The power of the text comes in what Edouard Glissant, in another context, has called the piling up effect. *The Latino/a Canon* constructs its argument through increments, effectively building a theoretical case and political vocabulary that illustrates the stages of narrative change in U.S. Latino/a literature—from Pedro Pietri to Julia Alvarez—over the last thirty years. While each chapter is lucidly written and intelligently argued, two in particular stand out: chapter one, entitled “Periodizing Latino/a Literature through Pedro Pietri’s Nuyorican Cityscapes”; and chapter three, “Movin’ On Up and Out: Lowercase Latino/a Realism in the Work of Junot Diaz and Angie Cruz.” For Dalleo and Machado Sáez, Pietri’s work bridges both the civil rights era and the post-Sixties generation, moving between these sensibilities, reflecting a poetic responsive to the divergent political demands of the two periods. In chapter three, Dalleo and Machado Sáez explore the work of Diaz and Cruz, specifically finding in their fiction an important challenge to a narrative staple in U.S. Latino/a fiction, namely realism. The silence and opacity inherent in their work dislodges the traditional expectation that realism will function as a window into U.S. Latino/a life, with the author as a native informant. It is these two theoretically rich chapters that I want to briefly analyze here.

“Periodizing Latino/a Literature through Pedro Pietri’s Nuyorican Cityscapes” attempts to juxtapose Pietri’s and U.S. Latino/a literature’s break from an anticolonial Civil Rights poetics to a forward-looking postcolonial version. This chapter looks at two exemplary poems in Pietri’s oeuvre: “Puerto Rican Obituary,” written in 1973, at the height of the Young Lords movement; and his 1993 poem “El Spanglish National Anthem.” Dalleo and Machado Sáez argue for a literary “periodizing” based on this temporal (post-sixties) and political (anticolonial/postcolonial) split with some effectiveness. The emphasis on social death of the first poem is countered, in the subsequent poem, by a more complex look at community, commercialism, and language. The difference, according to Dalleo and Machado Sáez, is that the anticolonial offers a messianic vision with a rigidly defined understanding of the present moment, which, if followed correctly, will lead to a Utopia and an enlightened self-consciousness. Conversely, the second poem and period offer the process of political struggle as ends in themselves. As they argue, “The realism is a much less attractive offer than anticolonialism’s promise that a better world is inevitable; it is hard to organize a politics around the idea that we may never reach a point where we can stop and look around and declare that our vision of utopia has been made a reality. But this is what ‘El Spanglish National Anthem’ asks of us: continued belief, hope, and faith, no matter how impossible the dream of freedom may now appear” (p. 42). Thus, a series of binaries are set up marking a theoretical line in the sand: utopia versus process; anticolonialism versus postcolonialism; social death versus critical assimilation. The power and problem of this argument lies, ultimately, in its neatness. It is important to caution here that while this periodizing is instructive, it also has theoretical dangers. For instance, is U.S. Latino/a literature

so precisely split between an anticolonial and postcolonial period? *The Latino/a Canon*, in an attempt to solidify the distinctions between these two periods overstates, at times, their differences. The picture becomes more complex when one thinks of U.S. Latino/a literature not only in terms of periods, but also genealogies, or other cultural concerns like race or gender. Is not Junot Diaz's *Drown*, for example, more compatible in its politics and sensibility to Pedro Pietri's early work or to Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets*? Similarly, despite the periodic break, doesn't the work of Nicholasa Mohr and Loida Maritza Perez remind us of Pietri and Thomas?

The validity and tension of their argument is dramatically displayed in their provocative essay "Movin' On Up and Out: Lowercase Latino/a Realism in the Works of Junot Diaz and Angie Cruz." I want to focus on their reading of Diaz, which inadvertently bypasses the enormous similarities between Pietri's early work and Diaz's book of short stories, *Drown*. Dalleo and Machado Sáez differentiate Diaz's work from so-called anticolonial fiction by introducing the trope of opacity as part of a new political vocabulary. They argue, "As Diaz himself points out, the politics that interests him is a politics of oblique critique, one that pushes the community toward a potentially painful recognition of its limits and potential" (p. 78). Isn't this, to some extent, a movement toward the very self-consciousness that Dalleo and Machado Sáez criticize in Pietri's early work? Interestingly, the authors recognize the significant points of contact and attempt to gently pull them apart. Their argument hinges on the discontinuities of community, collective attachment, and belonging. Thus Diaz's "work departs from" an anticolonial "trajectory by refusing to specify any alternative locus of belonging, shattering the idealization of the barrio as a potential space for reconnection" (p. 78).

What Dalleo and Machado Sáez miss is the power of the negative, in a philosophical sense, to act as fodder for Latino/a fiction. An attention to the negative—death, poverty, violence, cursing, bilingualism, etc.—it seems to me, binds the work of Diaz and Pietri. Their genius lies in their ability to transfigure these elements into an artistic language that, as Walter Benjamin has put it, creates a "profane illumination." It is precisely this use of the negative as productive material that gives Latino/a literature extra-visionary capacities, producing a new kind of double consciousness. As comedian George Lopez put it in his HBO special *America's Mexican*: "Negativity drives the culture: Latinos are driven by negativity." The negative, in this sense, is a dynamic element, which generates narrative and artistic responses. It is a creative drive that emerges, almost inexplicably, from the marginalization of U.S. Latino/a existence. Thus, in the negative lies the "potential space for reconnection," for specifying through narration an important social-historical viewpoint and "locus of belonging" without falling prey to idealizations. *Drown's* epigraph, a quote by Gustavo Perez-Firmat, illustrates Diaz's awareness of this potential inscribed in the Negative, acknowledging that even as he does not belong to English (neither its language nor community), "I belong nowhere else."² This "nowhere" is where the anticolonial and postcolonial meet, calling attention to a cultural caesura from which emanates new artistic and political visions. In the work of Diaz and Pietri, anticolonial and postcolonial sensibilities are woven together, reminding their readers of a past still present and a Latino/a future sparked by a critical negativity, which accept entry into the market on their own terms.

In the end *The Latino/a Canon* critically sharpens our relationship to Latino/a literature through time, through its thematic breaks, and its ambivalent association to the market. Its considerable accomplishment is to reframe contemporary

Latino/a writing within the purview of the market as an antagonistic supplement: one that seemingly plays by the rules, but, in fact creates an aftereffect, a tension and imbalance sparked by its critical presence. While its line of reasoning depends on a set of binaries that is at times too neatly framed, it does so with a complexity and force of argument that compels the reader to reassess his own understanding of U.S. Latino/a literature. Specifically, *The Latino/a Canon* makes us rethink how U.S. Latino/a writers have not simply been consumed by the market, but how their entry has reconfigured, from within, its eth(n)ical boundaries. This hermeneutic insight is the mark of a forward-looking and transformative criticism.

Borders of Identity: The Shifting Lines of U.S. Latino/a Ethnicity

As *The Latino/a Canon* cautions the postcolonial reader to understand contemporary Latino/a writing in more radical terms, similarly Marta Caminero-Santangelo's *On Latinidad: U.S. Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity* reconsiders the prevailing vocabulary of ethnicity, exhorting us to examine the tension between panethnic labels and more specified Latino/a identities. The book is broken into three adjoining parts, tracing the trajectory of ethnicity from its racial, originary, and panethnic dimensions as depicted by Latino/a authors. Part one, entitled "Race and Ethnicity," consists of two chapters on Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me Ultima* and Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets*, respectively. These founding figures, according to Carminero-Santangelo, attempt to "understand an ethnic identity racially" and in so doing "illustrate the disparate ways in which Latino writers of different ethnic groups (Chicano vs. Puerto Rican) have imagined collective group identities based in part on suppressed racial identities" (p. 33). Part two, "Complicating the Origins," examines the work of Dominican author Julia Alvarez, and Cuban writers Cristina Garcia and Achy Obejas. For Caminero-Santangelo these authors "challenge dominant narratives about ethnic identity and its connection to the nation of origin, rendering that 'nation' itself panethnic and/or transnational" (p. 33). Yet "strangely absent" from these texts are notions of "panethnic Latino/a identity"; instead, we are presented with "transnational and transracial identities in other forms" (p. 34). Finally, part three "Difference and the Possibilities of Panethnicity," directly confronts the issue at the heart of this study, namely, the panethnic Latino construct addressed by Latino/a authors, "and the ways they negotiate differences among groups of diverse national origin that get elided under that category." Analyzing the work of Ana Castillo, in chapter five; Cristina Garcia, Achy Obejas, Margarita Engle, Elias Miguel Munoz, Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, and Ana Menendez in chapter six; and Demetria Martinez in chapter seven, Caminero-Santangelo reconfirms the premise of the text, detailing the incommensurate tension between specified Latino/a groups and an umbrella Latino moniker which threatens to efface the differences that lie within. The potential of panethnicity for Caminero-Santangelo is not found in an essential sameness, but best developed in solidarity, agency building, and strategic political alliances.

For Caminero-Santangelo then, U.S. Latino/as insistently identify as Puerto Rican, Mexican-American, Cuban, Dominican, among others, and this need for a specified identification, she argues, is displayed in the literature itself. The literary production of U.S. Latino/as, for the most part, focuses on the narratives of the author's group, charting the experiential journey from point of origin to new land; or detailing the life of a Latino/a subject born in the United States, whose identity is split between cultural allegiances. The perseverance of these Cuban, Puerto Rican, Mexican,

Dominican specificities, suggests an ineluctable difference between the groups, (marked by music, food, language intonations) which makes Latino/a a necessary yet misfitting identity signifier. As Caminero-Santangelo explains, “In this project, however, I am more interested in looking at the boundaries of ethnicity: how they are narratively drawn; how they have fluctuated; who in terms of race, national origin, citizenship (United States versus country of origin) gets included and who gets excluded; and the like” (p. 31). As her well-constructed argument builds and intensifies, citing countless prominent studies on ethnicity, and analyzing more than half a dozen literary narratives, the question persists: why does the panethnic designation “Latino” hold? How does a name carry multiple identifications? What is a Latino politics of naming?

I will look at two exemplary essays: chapter two, “Puerto Rican Negro’: Defining Race in Piri Thomas’ *Down These Mean Streets*”; and chapter six “Dirty Girls, German Shepherds, and Puerto Rican Independentistas: ‘The Latino Imaginary’ and the Case of Cuba.” In the “Puerto Rican Negro” Caminero-Santangelo focuses on the degree to which Thomas’s narrative “does not register Mexican Americans” in “his reimagined sense of self,” even as it acknowledges the “overlap” between Puerto Ricans and African Americans” (p. 53). What this “silence” purportedly suggests is a lack of binding “force” for the panethnic concept of “Hispanic” or “Latino” identity in Thomas’ text, despite its concern “with transracial imagined communities” (p. 53). In *Down These Mean Streets* race and ethnicity become tightly enmeshed within the novelistic convention of the *bildungsroman*, allowing Piri to recognize “that his Puerto Rican heritage offers him no escape clause from” his racial identity (p. 65). But this recognition begs the question, Why are race and ethnicity permitted an elasticity, which Caminero-Santangelo is reluctant to grant the panethnic term Latino? Is not every identity, as evinced in Thomas’ ontological dilemma, structured by difference? Doesn’t the term Latino, like the word Black, suggest a diasporic subject in the process of being reformulated in a new sociohistorical context? The problem, in many ways, is the Latino subject is still under construction, its fragments yet settled in. This is the brilliance of Thomas’s text—in large part missed by Caminero-Santangelo’s analysis: it reveals an agonistic Latino identity in its emergent stages; a subject in the “American” landscape foretold by Thomas who was, and may still be, yet to come. In this sense, the visibly pronounced fissures that characterize Latino identity do not constitute evidence against panethnic bonds, as Caminero-Santangelo argues, but the conditions under which a panethnic Latino identity will merge. The Americas, after all, are typified by precisely these kinds of panethnic identities.

In an attempt to soften the borders between ethnicity and panethnicity, chapter six, following Juan Flores, turns to the concept of a Latino imaginary. Examining various Cuban writers, Caminero-Santangelo, deftly explores the relationship between the Cuban American particular and the Latino whole. As she points out, “The Cuban exile community in the United States has, needless to say, posed an interesting problem for this construction of Latino ethnicity” (p. 163). She further suggests Cuban Americans occupy an exilic status for many Latino/a intellectuals, “separate” from other Latinos because of political affiliation and their alienated relationship to the homeland. After a series of short, incisive readings, a panethnic identity never quite finds a comfort zone for Caminero-Santangelo. Instead, we are left with her reading of Juani, in Achy Obejas’s debut novel *Memory Mambo* (1996), and the telling image of her severed body, which, comes to represent,

for Caminero-Santangelo, the violent potential of a Latino collective or imaginary: “The rending of any illusion of coherent Latino identity is graphically mirrored in the image of a body’s brutal dismemberment. Even leftist politics, it turns out, cannot guarantee a collective identity; the ethnic ‘body’ is left irreconcilably torn” (p. 186). Is not, however, this torn body precisely the resolution? What makes a collective Latino imaginary possible? It is interesting to think of Derek Walcott’s symbolic vase of Caribbean history and poetics. He argues that the work of the Antillean poet, like an archeologist, is to restore the fragments of the past into a New World identity. “Antillean art is this restoration of our shattered histories, our shards of vocabulary, our archipelago becoming a synonym for pieces broken off from the original continent” (Walcott 1998: 69). Walcott’s broken vase provides a New World concept of identity in which the diasporic pieces have assembled anew, fitting awkwardly together, with gaps, protuberances, and deformations. Yet, despite the cracks, a new world identity emerges out of the cultural/historic/ political incongruities creating genuine subject formations. In light of this diasporic precedent, a panethnic identity, like creole Caribbean identity, is not only a viable political option, but, as it congeals with time, the very future of U.S.-Latino identity.

Interestingly, Caminero-Santangelo reaches a similar point in the text’s conclusion. She states: “If we can imagine not a single monolithic *Latinidad* which must continually make a case for overarching commonalities among all the groups—a case which inevitably fails—but, rather, multiple *latinidades*, which reach across national lines but need not account in some comprehensive way for all, then the notion of panethnicity does indeed begin to make more sense, as one form of identity—among several—with which we can engage” (p. 215). In the end, *On Latinidad* pushes against the “homogenizing tendencies” (p. 219) of the panethnic “Latino,” not to delegitimize it, but to make sure its complex histories are not overlooked. The term Latino must signify, according to Caminero-Santangelo, a “commitment” “to the historical and present differences among Latinos” while also developing a deep “solidarity” (p. 219). Perhaps Caminero-Santangelo’s argument, powerful and relevant as it is, could have gone one step further, beyond political “solidarity” to an imagined future where U.S. Latinos, rooted in shared “American” traditions from Hip Hop to Hollywood, comic books to basketball, spoken word poetry to political struggles, see themselves as an ethnic formation linked to the specificities of their past and compelled by the cultural demands of their new inherited locations. Like the other multiethnic groups, the Whites, Blacks, and Jews before them, Latinos must carve out an interconnected identity, which expands their political interests, strengthens their social presence, and feeds their creative capacities. In this sense, *On Latinidad* is a timely text exhorting us to understand the links of our specific pasts. If the study is at times too cautious, it is, we understand, out of a concern for analytic detail and depth on which a Latino future depends.

Latino Pluralities: Literary Developments—Reading U.S. Latino/a Literature

In *U.S. Latino Literatures* the emphasis shifts from Caminero-Santangelo’s concern with the elision of specific ethnicities by an all-encompassing “Latino” appellation, to the diverse literary output, which for Caufield and Davis signifies a rich, multilayered tradition. As they point out, in the 2000 census “almost 30 percent claimed heritage or ancestry from one or more Latin American countries, or Spain” (p. 1). Thus, Latinos in the U.S. are intermixing in significant numbers, producing literatures that account for ethnic pasts, while imagining new forms of identity. Increasingly, for critics like Alvina

Quintana, the term “Latino” forces us to understand and conceptualize our identity in culturally hybrid terms (Quintana 2003: 3–4). What is the “role” of the Latino/a writer, according to Caufield and Davis? How does the Latino/a writer narrate, imagine, and define identity in this new context? They argue, “It is important to remember that how we define ‘Latino’ remains in flux. Hybridization occurs on multiple levels that complicate the desire to group.... ‘Latino’ cultural texts do not only represent organic expressions of a given people; they also negotiate their position within the prevailing cultural landscape through a host of differences and similarities with other cultural texts” (p. 2). The Latino/a writer then, carries a critical burden extending from the aesthetic to the ethical, creating the cultural thresholds through which an identity relocates itself “within the prevailing landscape,” remembering its pasts, and assembling a future in “hybridization.”

U.S. Latino Literatures is composed of twelve scholarly essays. This compilation is remarkably diverse, exploring texts from Puerto Rican to Brazilian-American literature; Afro-Cuban to U.S. Argentine writers; and works by Dominican, Chicano, and Central American authors. As Caufield and Davis explain, this text attempts to “assemble an inclusive spectrum of voices of the U.S. Latin American Diaspora that we hope will provide windows into the rich and complex writings of Latinos” (p. 3). I have argued elsewhere that U.S. Latino/a Literary Theory has lagged behind the prodigious production of U.S. Latino/a fiction (Perez and Di Iorio Sandin 2007). Yet Caufield and Davis are part of a new wave of theorists, providing a “companion” to a rich literature, which is reconfiguring the social, political, and ontological landscape of the United States, teaching U.S. Latino/a diasporas to read and live again. The practice of reading critically is a central concern, not just for the scholarly community, but for the “non-specialist readers” (p. 3) this text aims to introduce to U.S. Latino/a literature. This is not to say these essays lack rigor; rather, the emphasis here is to ensure that everyday readers approach U.S. Latino/a literature with an attention to the thematic plurality and depth offered by the fiction. Interpretation, the essays in this text illustrate, creates a critical sensitivity to the details of U.S. Latino/a imaginative life.

One interesting example is Patricia Montilla’s exceptional essay “The Island as Mainland and the Revolving Door Motif: Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature of the United States.” Examining the work of multiple authors, including Victor Hernandez Cruz, Tato Laviera, Carmen de Monteflores, Nicholasa Mohr, Judith Ortiz Cofer, and Esmeralda Santiago, Montilla analyzes the depiction of Puerto Rico in mainland literature, that is, how the U.S. Latino writers imaginatively project back, what they preserve and remember, and why this exercise is necessary for the establishment of a future. Montilla also reflects on the trope of the “revolving door,” a literal and figurative push and pull that results in a diasporic populace constituted by “diverse realities” (p. 6). Interestingly, these writers, as Montilla points out, avoid a simple idealistic depiction of the island—as is prevalent in many exoticizing tourists guides—instead, they fuse a complex bicultural vision, interrogating colonial, patriarchal, class, race, and sexual themes, adding, in the process, a new dimension to American letters. As Montilla argues, “Amid this diversity, however, these texts are united in their embodiment of Puerto Rico, as writers continue to find inspiration in the island. Whether its serves as a medium to create a fictionalized or lost paradise, to produce experimental art, to manifest a state of being, or depict an economically or socially stifling locus, Puerto Rico, and its topography and culture, continue to nourish this growing corpus of American Literature” (p. 65). This phenomenon is

reduplicated by other Latino/a ethnicities, as they too look back to their countries of origin in order to look forward in the United States, “suggesting a more kaleidoscopic, expansive literature will evolve” (p. 65). Forging and reshaping a future are the consequences of these imaginative efforts: a dialectical back and forth where geographies of identity find expression in the courageous forays of U.S. Latino/a writers. There is, with the emergence of a “kaleidoscopic” U.S. Latino/a Literature, another consequence; namely, the development of a reader, a U.S. Latino/a subject attentive to the complex realities that make up their social, historical, and cultural identities. It is to this reader that the future belongs.

Reading the Future of U.S. Latino/a Theory

In the end, the texts reviewed in this article offer a hermeneutics, interpretive tools that allow us to understand the substance of our realities in more expansive terms. Whether it is the process of political struggle evident in U.S. Latino/a writers despite their growing acceptance by the market; or the careful attention paid to the individual ethnicities that make up overarching notions of *Latinidad*; or the rich plurality of texts forming a new Latino/a literary tradition: what these texts, from different hermeneutic viewpoints, provide is a varied map that exhorts U.S. Latino/as to turn to literature, to the experience of reading for a deeper understanding of their identities. What is at stake, these texts imply, is the future of reading itself, not just as an act of simple pleasure, but as a condition of historical involvement. In this sense, U.S. Latino/as are compelled by the practice of reading to forge a social presence through the interpretative weight of their visions, ideas, and traditions. U.S. Latino/a Literary Theory charts and conveys the commitment of our response. Ultimately, to apprehend the future is to read for it; inserting, through the force of knowledge, U.S. Latino/a desires into history’s undefined contours. This is the responsibility of theory: to make sure we understand that in U.S. Latino/a Literature lie the seeds of a prospective subject. A future reader. A Latino/a future.

NOTES

¹ I will abbreviate the title of each text for the remainder of the review to *The Latino/a Canon*, *On Latinidad*, and *U.S. Latino Literatures*. Moreover, a page number will follow quotations from each text.

² See epigraph to Diaz’s *Drown*.

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