

Ilan Stavans and Adál Maldonado. *I Love My Selfie*.
Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 136 pp. ISBN
9780822363491.

Reviewed by
Hugo Ríos-Cordero
Miami University

This inescapable duty to observe oneself: if someone else is observing me,
naturally I have to observe myself too; if none observe me, I have to observe myself all
the closer.
Franz Kafka

Everywhere one looks today there are samples of the cult of the self: from the overinflated celebrity pantheon and social media platforms to the Twitter Diplomacy of the current President of the USA. Probably the most visible example of this contemporary wave of narcissism is the selfie, currently accepted and defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media.” And yet, there might be some redeeming qualities for this phenomenon if it is set up within the proper historical and philosophical framework.

Ilan Stavans and Adál in the book *I Love My Selfie* have launched an exploration of the selfie through the juxtaposition of a carefully chosen body of self-reflexive auto-portraits by the Puerto Rican artist Adál with the sharp critique and incisive commentary provided by Mexican-American writer, Ilan Stavans. The slim book is divided into three parts. The first and third part consist of Stavans charting the history, conceptualization, and progress of the idea of the self in art while the middle part consist of 50 photographs where Adál performs a parodic dismantling of the photographic self-portrait.

In the first part, consisting of four chapters, Stavans attempts to contextualize the idea of the selfie by first questioning his own idea of the self. In Chapter one, Stavans, through a series of false starts, wrestles with the concept of selfie, which he eventually and partially defines as “a business card for an emotionally attuned world” (4). Chapter two, titled “The Plight of Narcissus” delves into a more in-depth understanding of the selfie by introducing for the first time the figure of his counterpart Adál Maldonado. Approaching the work of Adál made Stavans question his understanding of the photographic self-portrait and the selfie blurring the boundaries

between senseless and crass pop commercialism and the serious interrogation of philosophical boundaries of the self and cultural identities as they are performed and questioned by the Nuyorican artist. “Decisive Moments,” the third chapter recurs to a careful framing of the selfie within a tradition that ranges from the explorations of the self in essay form by Montaigne to the conceptualization of history as seen for example in the National Portrait Gallery in London. Stavans then deliciously rambles through a brief disquisition of the history of mirrors, glasses and telescopes as fascinating (as well as dangerous) extensions of the self. Part One ends with the chapter titled “Out of Focus.” In the first part of this chapter he explores the different manifestations of Self Portrait including a controversial statement on Frida Kahlo whom he claims “usurps the spotlight reserved to her husband. Diego Rivera, always perceived as the better artist” (28). He also explores the famous *National Geographic* portrait of Gula, the Afghan girl published in 1984 and wonders how would she had taken the photo if it were a selfie. This exercise allows Stavans to use a fictional selfie to question the nature of identity, colonialism and gender representations. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to tracing the career of Adál from his earliest steps collaborating with the poet Pedro Pietri in New York during the 1970s through his hybrid postulations of Spanglish and Science Fiction questioning through self-reflexive parody his identity as a Puerto Rican / Nuyorican / Colonial subject.

The middle section of the book is composed of 50 photographs, most of them black and white, crafted between 1988 and 2014 in which Adál’s fictional character, the man in the suit, takes center stage. Adál took all the photographs where he appears dressed in a black and white tuxedo usually wearing a hat and posing in clever positions suggesting echoes of the paintings of Salvador Dalí and Rene Magritte translated into photography. Stavans mentions that Adál does not consider his earlier photos selfies since for him, “to be a selfie, it needs to be taken with a cell phone or on a laptop” (119). Nevertheless, the collection of photographs perfectly blends with Stavans meditation on the boundaries of the self and the Colonial condition of Puerto Rican subjects.

In part three, Stavans retakes his disquisition on the nature of the self, revisiting some of his earlier points and expanding on the subject by delving on the nature of the different linguistic roots of the word “self” as well as the Talmudic concept of selfishness and how this may or may not connect with the more communal nature of certain cultures that lack a precise term to delineate the self. Chapter 6, “Rembrandt’s Instamatic” traces the genealogy of the selfie through the history of modern portraits from the work of Rembrandt, Velazquez, Van Gogh and Magritte and connects it with the photographic self-portraits of Mapplethorpe and Mendieta. Stavans combines fragments of his own life with the advent of portable Kodak cameras, in order to comment on the rising democratization of the means of photographic reproduction. In the penultimate chapter, Stavans narrates the encounter and collaboration between himself and Adál in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Adál elaborates on his techniques (props,

self-timer, lighting) and acknowledges the influence of German Expressionism in his art that he defines as “Tropic Noir.” Stavans closes the book with a chapter called “And then come Darkness” that expands on the relationship of photography and the self by introducing a new variant: Death. Stavans like Roland Barthes on *Camera Lucida* connects the photographed self (and Cinema by extension) to the sublime crossroads between memory and of loss. Carefully preserved instants that attempt to maintain the semblance of a unity of self that perhaps was never there in the first place, the selfie and its dark cousin the “felfie” or fake selfie, are just another cultural strategy to delay death.

Stavans and Adál authored a book that manages to partake on the both discourses that it unpacks. On the one hand it is a serious examination of the philosophical issues related to the construction of the self, identity and the politics of the subaltern but on the other hand, it is also an entertaining rumination through anecdote, parody and irreverence simultaneously careful and elegantly constructed. It treats its subject with the sweetness and light that it deserves; occasionally serious, often parodic, Stavans/Adál force the entry of the contemporary art form into the high art canon by use of crafty juxtapositions as well as philosophical and semantic hammering. Finally, the selfie, the obvious symptom of a narcissistic culture born on the last stages of late capitalism ends up becoming a glimmer of hope with a lineage as ancient and dignified as some kingdoms. Or as Stavans puts it, “what is a selfie if not a flash of carefully choreographed radiance in which the “I” is at the center stage while all else recedes into the background as if in shadows” (126). To these shadows we return since the self and the selfie are only a flickering light between the long eternal darkness of birth and death.