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Latin@ Studies in Transnational Contexts: Reading, Writing, and Living Lives on/in the Margins

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It was a normal night out in Ankara: two foreigners trying to navigate a seemingly incomprehensible geography of streets and landmarks, restaurants and bars. At last we find a place where the waiter speaks enough English to understand our meager Turkish. Starving, we flip through page after page of the gigantic menu, until we both pause when we find a section labeled: *fajitalar*. Immediately, our minds were buzzing with ideas and questions. How did the word *fajita*, the name for a popular Mexican-American dish composed of grilled meats and vegetables, traditionally served on a sizzling platter with a side of tortillas, salsas, and guacamole, travel to Ankara, Turkey? Of course, the global reach of "Mexican" food is no surprise: in our travels, we've encountered various "translations" of Mexican food in places such as Italy, Germany, Cyprus, Romania and beyond. What struck us about this particular menu was the word: *fajitalar*. In naming this dish (here, and at other Turkish restaurants we subsequently discovered), the restaurants performed a fascinating interlingual act: the combination of the Mexican-American word "fajita" with the Turkish suffix for plurality (-lar or –ler). For us, *fajitalar* became a touchstone of the ways in which Latin@ cultures travel abroad. What fascinates us about these cultural migrations was how their circulatory, migratory patterns shift, change, and adapt both (or all) cultures, including their accompanying epistemologies, genres, and identities. We see evidence of these transnational mutual transformations in *fajitalar*: a word, not even originally Spanish or Mexican in origin, but produced out of the U.S.-Mexico border region in the 20th century, which traveled to Turkey and became a form of "Turklish" with the addition of the Turkish plural suffix. Thus, *fajitalar* are no longer "Mexican" or "Mexican-American," but form part of a complex interplay of cultures and languages, drawing on multiple historical and cultural trajectories from Spain, Mexico, the United States, and ultimately Turkey.

This was the inspiration for this special edition of the *Journal American Studies of Turkey*. Our "discovery" of *fajitalar* coincided with an increased attention to Latin@ studies in Turkey, particularly in the American Culture & Literature Departments at Bilkent University and Hacettepe Universities in Ankara, Turkey. We began to discuss how we could channel this energy into a project that would highlight work in Latin@ studies to scholars in Turkey and abroad. At the first annual Latino/a Studies Conference at John Jay College, part of the City University of New York system, we began to confer with Latin@ studies scholars worldwide. In conversations with colleagues at this conference, we confirmed that many other people identified a gap in the existing scholarship for Latin@ studies *outside of the North American academy* that addressed issues of transnationalism and what it means to do and live Latin@ studies transnationally. At this conference, we distributed the CFP that resulted in an unexpected number of submissions and has become the exceptional work included here in this Special Edition of JAST. Inspired by the response to our CFP, in the late spring of 2013, we organized a symposium at Bilkent University on Latin@ Studies Abroad, chaired by Christopher, and included Jennifer and the visiting Chicano scholar Santiago Vaquera-Vasquez as panelists. The conversations that arose from this panel solidified our desire to showcase a global collection of multi-genre investigations into the meaning of keywords such as "Latin@," "transnational," "American." We have been especially inspired by work that engages a transnational context, theorized broadly and creatively as work that explores what it means to read, write, teach, create, and live life on the margins of nation(s), of culture(s), of communities, and of our own selves.

These critical questions and issues represent the same critical dialogues currently dominating the fields of Latino/a studies, Ethnic studies, and American studies. In general, the past ten years (or more) have seen what has come to be known as the "transnational turn" in fields such as American studies. Latino/a studies, along with ethnic studies, African American studies, gender & sexuality studies, and other forms of scholarship from the margins, have challenged the disciplinary boundaries of traditional American studies by exposing its elitist privileging of the nation and certain master narratives while obscuring others. The emphasis on borders, diaspora, and extranational spaces in American studies has been articulated in different terms by different scholars, but, in general, it reflects a scholarship that looks beyond the borders of the nation state

to understand, as Shelley Fisher Fishkin said in her 2004 Presidential Address to the American Studies Association: "the ways in which ideas, people, culture, and capital have circulated and continue to circulate physically, and virtually, throughout the world, both in ways we might expect, and unpredictably" (21).[1] As a result of the inevitable encounters between multiple groups that occur as cultures encounter one another and themselves, Latin@ studies makes highly visible the ways in which colonial domination created categories of difference and the extent to which such categories are experienced today as subalternized identities. In this conversation, the nation-state alone is insufficient as the primary unit of analysis. The contributors to this edition argue, in different ways and through various forms, that that status of the nation (or, what it means to be "an American") is best excavated when contextualized within its global colonial past, present, and future.

What excited us as co-editors of this special edition is the range of contributions collected. In seeking work for this special edition, we specifically looked for submissions that explicitly probed the field imaginary of transnational Latin@ and American studies in interesting, creative, and productive ways. The result was an astonishing array of work, from traditional scholarly essays, to interviews, excerpts from student-written and performed plays, to experimental cross genre-work, and poetry. Norma Cantú's poetry opens this collection through poetic meditations on war, violence and trauma, not only between people, but also across borders. Writing from a Chicana borderlands context, her work extends transnationally to the current traumas, displacements experienced globally, and particularly in the larger Arab-Islamic world in which this special edition is being created at this moment. Cantú's poetry turns state violence into a powerful personal meditation on the psychological effects of trauma to the human soul. In opening with these poems, we not only recognize and show our respect to Cantú as an internationally acclaimed poet and teacher, but we also hope that readers will recognize what's *at stake* in this scholarship. Its reach is as global as it is personal and intimate. It is through the larger conversations of the growing awareness of our connections and disconnections as cultures, nations, and people that true consciousness-shifting can and will emerge.

1 Many American studies scholars have told and retold this history (and subsequent controversy). For a more in-depth discussion of "the transnational turn in American studies" see Adams, Desmond and Domínguez, Fishkin, Kaplan, and Porter.

Our collection continues with work by the renowned scholar, Sophia McClennen, who, through a critical engagement with the work of Ariel Dorfman, asks the basic question: Who can claim the right to the label "Latino"? And what does "Latino studies" actually mean? These questions are further excavated in Karen Wooley Martin's interview with the Argentinian-American writer, Carolina de Robertis, who also navigates issues of canonicity in her career. As a light-skinned, openly queer, bilingual woman of Latin American heritage, how does her work meet or challenge the expectations of Latina fiction in the United States? Both McClennen and Wooley Martin explore the meaning of Latin@ from innovative writers who are challenging conventions of genre, canonicity, and the direction of Latino/a studies as a field.

Contributions by Vincent Toro and Steven Alvarez use experimental poetry to comment on contemporary Latino/a poetics in a transnational context. Toro's "Décimarinas" and "iDécimas." Toro re-contextualizes Puerto Rican identity for the 21st century by asking, what it means to be a Caribbean or "Latin@" poet in a globalizing world? As part of this process, Toro interrogates the relationship between online/digital social status and bloodline, language, religion, and geography. What emerges from this poetic investigation is a postmodern collage of the Latin@ self that consciously uses a juxtaposition of styles, symbols, and methods. In particular, the author re-envisions the centuries-old poetic form of the decimal by juxtaposing it with images and vernacular of the technological age in order to re-tell the colonial history of Puerto Rico. Similarly, Steven Alvarez's "Transnational Translations: Five Poems From *Tonalamatl, dream notes*," uses personal life experiences and a (shifting) lyrical "I," recalling and positioning his work within the important identity-based Chicano/a poetics that established Chicano/a literature as a recognized genre of literary production. Alvarez explores the various possibilities of multilingual discourse, poetic and otherwise, from a Chican@ subject position. "Language hybridization in my work," he says, "situates my voice within a Latin@ Studies transnational network, theorized broadly and creatively." Alvarez conceptualizes "language and identity, conquest, labor, race, gender, social justice, bilingualism, literacy, educational opportunity, and the reproduction of social inequity" through "images, symbols, and echoes of language rhythms." These poems push the genre of Chicano poetics forward by: "reflecting the synergy that composes [his] imagined mythological roots with my twenty-first century hyphenated

American identity, splashed with Spanish adopting the rhythms of English, and English inheriting the multiculturalism of Latin America." Alvarez's poetry narrates transnational "border crossing both literally through [its] characters, but also figuratively across the limits of genres, forms, and languages."

Another form of experimental poetics, which also engages visual analysis, is the piece by Julia Bozer and Andres García Molina, *hola turquía*. Completed in 2013 during a trip to the Putumayo region in Colombia, Bozer and García Molina use poetry to frame original photographs taken from this Amazonian border region. The artists address the arbitrariness of border-tracing, both literally, in the everyday, but also as it is constructed in different kinds of discourse, including but not limited to the academic and the political. The photographs and poetry address sociopolitical issues in the Amazonian border region by drawing connections between geopolitical boundaries and the things that reinforce them — patriotism, nation and nationalism, languages, militarism — and the things that cross or defy national borders — neoliberal economic policies, colonialism, cultural imperialism, languages. They use this intersection to invoke other kinds of borders and boundaries also, including the boundaries of academic disciplines and various kinds of discourse. Bozer and García Molina engage border-making as it is rendered through photography and poetry to challenge the rigidity of what they refer to as the "logocratic nature of academic discourse." The authors portray the numerous ways in which troubling delimitations exist and can be dismantled through interdisciplinary work (e.g. definitions of genre, tracings of (inter) national borders, imaginations and otherings, etc.). The textual part of the project itself is multiple: the authors engage transnational Latin@ studies as a disciplinary intervention in their introduction and combine the theoretical lens of academic discourse with bilingual poetry. The poetry distills into imagery and emotion, the multilingual nature of transnational Latin@ studies, and the limits of monolingualism to capture the "messy, overlapping, and complex" nature of language, identities (persona, national, transnational) at literal and figurative borders.

Another exciting edition to our collection is Eric Wiley's excerpt from the work written, produced, and performed by his students, "Crawling with Monsters." The project itself (CWM) is a documentary stage play that focuses on the living conditions inside war-torn areas of northeastern Mexico, particularly as they affect children and their families. As Wiley

proves, the CWM project itself represents a transnational intervention in Latin@ studies: "CWM is a product of the Mexican diaspora working in conjunction with many other professional and social networks." The CWM project reframes the so-called "Mexican crisis" as an international and transnational crisis, demonstrating how American funding contributes to suffering in Mexico. The project counters the one-sided representations of the drug war by the Mexican government, and speaks back to the media blackouts in northeastern Mexico (enforced by the drug cartels). Working at the interstices of genre (academic essay, dramatic literature, and personal essays written by the student-performers) this piece's impressive scope and multidisciplinary/multi-genre nature powerfully excavate the questions posted by this journal's call. The personal testimonies that follow the excerpt from the play's script add a "real-life" dimension to the essay, while gathering emotional weight and intensity.

Another genre of scholarship this special edition includes is historical investigations by María Cristina Manzano-Munguía, María Eugenia D'Aubeterre Buznego and María Leticia Rivermar Pérez and Shoshannah Ganz. In their collaborative essay, "Being Chinese in Puebla:" Connecting Transnational Stories in Mexico," Manzano-Munguía, D'Aubeterre Buznego, and Rivermar Pérez use a case study (based on participant observation and open interviews) to engage with the existing scholarship on Chinese migration to Mexico; this is done firstly, to look at the historical discontinuities of crafting the identities of being *Chino(a)-Mexicano(a)* and secondly, to expand understandings of Chinese transnationalism and their shifting relations in Mexico by exploring one ¨Chino-Latino's" life history — specifically Don Federico Chilián's experiences in Puebla. Both scenarios illustrate the "pattern of transnational life" experienced by Federico Chilián. The authors piece together a compelling narrative of a transnational and biracial existence in early Mexico, drawing on interviews with the subject's descendants. Also working within an under-theorized field of Mexican and Mexican-American studies, Shoshannah Ganz's essay, "Border Crossings? Elizabeth Smart and Elizabeth Hay and Writing About Mexico," uses a comparative close reading of two female Canadian travel writers who travel to Mexico to compare the modernist/experimental prose writer Elizabeth Smart to a contemporary Canadian female travel writer,

Elizabeth Hay. This essay interrogates how both of these female writers use their border crossing experiences when entering Mexico to meditate on their own identities as women, writers, and Canadians. Another objective set out by the author is to triangulate and complicate a process of identification between the three North American countries (Canada, the United States, and Mexico) and to continue to trouble how U.S. hegemony intervenes in the perceptions (both internal and external) of Canada and Mexico. To what extent are Canada (and its writers) and Mexico similar and different due to their relationships, geographic and otherwise, with the United States? Finally, the author attempts to fill a gap in scholarly writing about Mexico from North American writers — a genre famously and historically dominated by U.S. writers. Ganz addresses a significant and very interesting gap in transnational scholarship on Mexico and de-centers the USA in comparative analysis.

Three submissions in this collection focus on women's writing from the Caribbean, reading canonical and non-canonical narratives in ways that highlight the transnational circuits and migrations that force readers to think differently about these texts. Lorna Perez, in "Organic Home Spaces: the Chambered Nautilus in Judith Ortiz Cofer's *Silent Dancing; a Partial Remembrance of a Puerto Rican Childhood*," uses Caribbean and postcolonial theories as her framework for re-situating this narrative "in light of the ebb and flow of Caribbean aesthetic and poetic practices," which make visible shifting and transnational spaces of negotiation. Katherine Lashley tackles Julia Alvarez's canonical dictatorship novel, *In the Time of the Butterflies* by focusing on the overlooked character of Dedé. In "Dedé as a Feminist in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*," Lashley argues that Dedé is just as much a feminist as her sisters who openly fought Trujillo's regime. Lashley´s close reading demonstrates how Dedé becomes the memory keeper of/for her sisters: providing both herself and her sisters with their own voices and spaces as an act of feminist agency. As theoretical frames for this essay, the author draws on work by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in order to theorize Dedé's agency (of voice and space). Her close reading offers a nuanced perspective on an overlooked character in a story that is most certainly a story of Latina transnationalisms.

Finally, Juanita Heredia reads two narratives by Dominican women writers: Angie Cruz's *Soledad* and Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water*

Saints. Heredia situates Dominican diasporic writers within a paradigm of African ancestry, specifically by looking at the historical relationship between the Dominican Republic and Haiti. This re-contextualizing of Dominican writers, she argues, acknowledges their "global multi-ethnic identity," which is imperative to her later readings of how gender and race "intervene in the representation of the Dominican diaspora in the United States through transnational migratory experiences." She reads the works of Angie Cruz and Nelly Rosario to highlight their stories of migration across US/Dominican borderlands and how these migrations affect family life. This work calls to mind the well-known (now canonical) Dominican writer Junot Díaz and his own writing on Dominican border crossings and family life in the Dominican diaspora. Heredia shifts attention away from Díaz's sometimes troubling masculinities to "suggest that Cruz and Rosario employ a matriarchal lineage to recuperate women's agency in their novels of the Dominican diaspora, *Soledad* and *Song of the Water Saints*, to offer an alternative perspective of transnational experiences. They develop female characters, be it in the Dominican countryside or in Latino urban spaces of New York City, that are often marginalized, exoticized, or forgotten in the official discourse of the history of Hispaniola."

The remaining two pieces tackle major issues of representation and identity when considering what Latin@ bodies do, how they are represented, where they end up and how they are treated. Rachel Combs-González, in "El Drag Guadalupista: Confronting Hegemony in Mexican and Chicana Feminist and Queer Performance," defines "El drag guadalupista [as] a concept that conveys the performance of drag via the image of La Virgen de Guadalupe." Combs-González notes how "an analysis of a virgin-whore complex present in contemporary Mexican and Chicano society will show how the visual representations of the Virgin created by the artists Alma López, Alex Donis, and Jim Ru challenge both the heterosexual hegemony within *Mexicanidad*, *Chicanidad*, and *Latinidad*, and the political and cultural power of the United States by means of representing, and re-presenting, the sexuality of La Virgen." She argues, "by resexualizing La Virgen, the artists discussed within this study perform drag on the image known, adored, and utilized by people living on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border. At the level of the study of heteronormativity, el drag guadalupista critiques heterosexual regimes, the binary societal structures of gender and sexual

identity, and exemplifies the possible failure of heterosexual hegemony. At the transnational level, el drag guadalupista critiques the regimes of the political hegemony of the United States."

Michael Garcia, in "Latino Liberty and the Meaning of Security: On Prison Nations and Liberal States," highlights that "the intricate connections between inequality, criminalization, mass incarceration, and minority social status are systemic and pervasive rather than isolated and incidental." These connections are not necessarily intuitive, so Garcia's work informs readers about how these sociopolitical forces and structures are revealed when they manifest themselves in the form of "bad institutions, institutions whose direct impact on human lives and civil society increases the visibility of these otherwise abstract systemic realities." Garcia's work goes further to specifically suggest that "the overrepresentation of Latinos in prison […] mirrors their marginalization in society as well as the systemic mechanisms that maintain it: the lower likelihood of access to good schools and employment opportunities; the higher likelihood of being targeted for discrimination or racially profiled by law enforcement." Garcia concludes that the challenge for a multicultural nation "is twofold: protecting members of ethnic groups from harmful discrimination by others; and addressing inequalities between ethnic groups that systemically undermine basic rights or political and socioeconomic inclusion."

What began as two foreigners contemplating the philosophical and rhetorical meaning of *fajitalar* and its connection the Americas has now evolved into the richness that is this special edition of *JAST*. Through our interactions with colleges in Ankara, İstanbul, Gaziantep, New York, Mexico, California, and Puerto Rico, we found ourselves, our work, and our teaching at its own metaphorical and literal crossroads. Being entrusted with the task of discussing issues of identity, representation, otherness, and authenticity in Latin@ studies motivated us to take a simple conversation over a meal of fajitas and transform it into a scholastic endeavor. We are proud of the work that our authors have contributed and we encourage others to use this special edition as a model to see what we all can do to expand the field imaginaries of our interconnected disciplines. Our work is far from done, but we hope that what we have contributed in this collection will encourage many different kinds of people studying issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and nationality to think differently about the transnational connections that already actively exist in their lives.

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