
VIVENCIAS: Reports from the Field

Latin@ studies abroad: Making the transnational international

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Open any menu in a restaurant in a large city in Turkey. You will find Turkish specialties, salads, pizzas and burgers – the usual array of restaurant food. But there is one section that you can find on every menu: *fajitalar*. *Fajitalar* was my first encounter with the migration of Latin@ culture to Turkey and its influence on Turkish culture. Fajita, the Spanish word for a dish of grilled meat and vegetables accompanied by tortillas and very popular in North American cuisine, became attached to the Turkish suffix for certain plural nouns: -lar. Thus, *fajitalar* as an interlingual combination of American Spanish and Turkish represents how global circulations of culture are not only unidirectional processes of importing cultural artifacts (such as food, music and clothing). Instead, *fajitalar* shows us how Latin@ culture also influences and changes the culture(s) it encounters globally. As a result of encounters such as these, I have come to see the limitations of the dominant theories of movement in Latin@ studies within the North American academy. In this essay, I reflect on my lived experience teaching Latin@ studies in Turkey to identify the challenges and opportunities of internationalizing Latin@ studies.

I argue that US-based Latin@ studies is often unaware of Latin@ studies being performed at international institutions, with the exception of well-known



universities in Spain, Mexico and South America. Few or poorly disseminated networks exist to connect instructors and students of Latin@ studies in North America with instructors and students internationally, particularly those that would connect North American scholars and students to centers of Latin@ studies research outside of Latin America or Spain. These gaps in the field ignore the positive and productive collaborations that could result from internationalizing Latin@ studies.

My own lived experience living in Turkey, where I teach Latin@ studies at one of Turkey's premier private research universities within the Department of American Culture and Literature, has changed how I understand and participate in Latin@ studies as a field. The response from most of my North American colleagues regarding teaching Latin@ studies in Turkey has been incredulity. I am constantly asked, "But can you really teach that there?" Or, "they have *that there?*" Intelligent, well-meaning people from North America's top-ranking universities continue to show ignorance and surprise that such programs exist or that anyone would willingly choose an internationally based career over a more traditional tenure-track position in a good North American university. Indeed, I had little to no understanding of American studies as a global field until I accepted a job in Turkey. Over time, I have become aware of the existence of American studies programs globally, particularly in the United Kingdom, Europe and Asia, where talented scholars are also working on the same key issues as their colleagues in North America.

Latin@ studies continues to gain interest, particularly in Europe, where changing urban demographics as the result of migration from Northern Africa, the Middle East and Asia are fundamentally altering the social, political and economic landscapes of countries such as France, Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands – all places with highly regarded programs in American studies. In response to the increasing numbers of ethnic minorities and rising ethnic-racial violence, American studies programs in these locations are using comparative studies in order to participate in emerging social battles. Many international scholars of American studies view US Latin@ studies and ethnic studies as case studies for how scholars can work at the nexus of theory and praxis in order to enact meaningful social change. And yet much of this work remains invisible to communities in North America. North Americans remain underrepresented at American studies symposia and conferences in Europe, Turkey and elsewhere. Panels, seminars, special editions of regional journals and conversations between scholars, students and community members in these places demonstrate the extent to which American studies, and Latin@ and ethnic studies in particular, have international presence, significance and relevance. For example, in Fall 2015, the *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* (JAST) released a special edition on Latin@ studies abroad, guest edited by Christopher Rivera (Essex County College) and myself (Reimer and Rivera 2015). The response to our CFP unearthed a sizable, growing community of international scholars working in

the field of Latin@ studies, eager to participate. And while the journal is widely circulated in Turkey and in Europe, it has little to no readership in North America. As Latin@ studies scholars, we need to do a better job of raising awareness about the work being done by our international colleagues and to support and contribute to those conversations to the best of our ability. Reducing Latin@ studies to an American hemispheric perspective not only limits us as a field, but may also prevent the development of new epistemologies.

Working in Latin@ studies outside of the American hemisphere can change the way we think, as scholars, teachers and activists. Despite the prejudices in the academy against pedagogy as a critical field of inquiry worthy of theorizing, my personal experiences have shown me how adapting my pedagogy to meet the challenges of working in an international, non-American context has changed the way that I think and theorize as a scholar.

In attempting to make Latin@ studies relevant to non-US students in Turkey, I have been challenged by the limited English language skills of my students (a challenge far greater and very different than working with ESL students in the United States), their general ignorance about US Latin@ communities (they aren't even familiar with stereotypes), and their unfamiliarity with the operations and intersections of race, gender, class and citizenship in a US context. As a result, I found myself reflecting: what happens to Latin@ studies when it's removed from its place of origin? This is a question that living the reality of a Latin@ studies scholar in an international context forced me to ask and that I may otherwise have never considered. Confronted with students whose grandfathers were *not* braceros, who've never seen a *plátano*, who'd never called or heard someone call someone a *spic* or a *wetback*, I found myself asking the same questions as my colleagues in North America: Can ANY of this actually make sense in Ankara, or anywhere else outside of the Americas? On the ground, I discovered that the answer is yes. However, it involves finding a delicate balance between honoring what remains site specific to Latin@ studies – the material realities of the US–Mexico border, for instance – while identifying sources of shared conflict between US Latin@ communities and Turkish students. The central role of family in everyday life, the importance of traditions as part of a communal identity, and patriarchy are examples of themes that my Turkish students find relevant to their lives and experiences, thus offering a more engaged and empathetic entry into their studies.

Most Turkish students have never heard the English word “patriarchy” before we study Latin@ writers. In discussing Sandra Cisneros's (1992) story, “Woman Hollering Creek,” I introduce the concept of patriarchy – a male-dominated system – and it is through this keyword that the students are able to find a source of shared conflict between Latin@s in the United States and their own culture in Turkey. Cleófilas, the protagonist of the story, resonates with the Turkish students, male and female. Turkish culture socializes girls and women to share the same expectations as Cleófilas. The students always relate this story to their



own lived experiences as Turks in a patriarchal culture. They tell stories from their families, people they know or news reports about the violence happening to women in Turkey, and compare and contrast the violence they know with the violence they are reading about. These reflections only emerge when the students are given space to reflect on personal experiences in the classroom, something that may not have happened in a US classroom, where we would likely have focused our critical thinking skills differently. In this case, empathy creates an opportunity to forge solidarity between Turks and Latin@s in the struggle against male-dominated systems globally.

However, reducing Latin@ studies to empathetic connections detracts from the complexity and specificity of the field. It's far more difficult to teach a text such as Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera* in an international classroom. Challenging even to US students, the text's hybrid mixture of languages and genres, and Anzaldúa's radical ideological position as a queer mestiza of the site-specific US–Mexico borderlands are thoroughly alien to my Turkish students. In order to guide the students through the experience of reading Anzaldúa, I had to develop a variety of pedagogical techniques that aim to practice in the classroom the kinds of alternative epistemologies and “mestiza consciousness” Anzaldúa theorizes in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. We make collages to model Anzaldúa's “picture thinking,” write our own *autohistoria teorías*, make lists of our multiple languages, learn Mexica history and cosmology, take meditation journeys and use yoga to change the way we think about learning spaces (i.e., classrooms).

These activities would surely be useful in a North American classroom and I plan to continue to use them whenever and wherever I teach Anzaldúa in the future. However, I would never have focused my pedagogical energy on developing these tools if I wasn't faced with students who, through no fault of their own, lacked the basic skills to culturally contextualize the material. In developing these pedagogical tools, I was inspired by Chela Sandoval's (2000) *Methodology of the Oppressed*, but driven by the necessity of my situation. I wasn't trying to force “mestiza consciousness” to translate – to find the Turkish equivalent, if one exists. Instead, I had to re-think how to make abstract, theoretical concepts based on entrenched ideologies of race, class, gender and sexuality that are particularly *American*, tangible to Turkish students. I wasn't looking for easy cultural identification, but a way for the students to experience how theorists like Anzaldúa can change the way we apprehend our world and ourselves, if we learn to make ourselves open to discomfort. By shifting the hierarchies embedded in the environment of the classroom and using classroom space in unexpected ways, the students experience a learning process that is not the top-down, strictly hierarchical and banking-method pedagogy they are used to in the highly regulated Turkish educational system (and Turkish society at large). Alternatively, they discover the value of their own personal lives, identities and stories as a legitimate form of knowledge, one of the core values of US Latin@ and ethnic studies.

These are only two small examples from many experiences in the Turkish academy that forced me to confront what I thought I knew about myself, about Latin@ studies, about teaching and about what it means to be a scholar of US ethnic studies in general. As I've learned to change how I teach Latin@ studies, I've changed how I think about Latin@ studies. Instead of a focus on the overly general use of "global" or "globalism" as a trendy adjective for Latin@ studies, I now argue for the more active process of "internationalizing" the field. As a verb, "internationalizing," emphasizes a *process* instead of an end *product*. Part of this process recognizes that Latin@ studies in an international context is mobile, multiple, complex and everyday (i.e., expressed through daily acts of culture, such as eating *fajitalar* with your friends).

US Latin@ studies has not yet fully theorized ideas that have been made clear to me through my own lived experience, and the experiences of other Latin@ studies scholars and writers whose lives and careers are also shaped by international connections and disconnections. Hemispheric American studies, which includes theoretically rich and productive work on areas such as comparing US Latin@ studies with the Global South or tracing the transnational histories of Latin@ communities, has opened the field of imaginary of US Latin@ studies. However, we can continue to expand and explore the relationship between the national and international. For example, internationalizing Latin@ studies shows us the many ways in which the traditional migration narrative is incomplete. In the traditional migration narrative, people move from the Global South to El Norte in order to pursue a better life, to reunite families or to escape persecution, war or other traumas. This important narrative has been the foundation of our work in Latin@ studies for decades. It has also been the foundation of harmful and racist stereotyping of Latin@s as undocumented and illegal im/migrants.

My Turkish students are not familiar with the racist stereotyping that marks Latin@s as "illegal." In order to demonstrate the power of this stereotype to my non-US students, I do a simple Google image search for the term "immigrant." I show them how the majority of images that this search produces depict the US–Mexico border and Latin@ people. This simple exercise reveals how race shapes categories of identity and how certain identities become raced. Influenced by this exercise, I later performed a similar search for myself: I typed "traveler" into the image search field. Unlike the term "immigrant," the images associated with "traveler" show intrepid individuals, bearing markers of whiteness and class privilege, standing on majestic peaks, waving from cruise ships or backpacking through European cityscapes. These searches raise questions: Who gets to move? Who doesn't? Under what kinds of conditions do different people move differently? These simple exercises demonstrate how movement has become associated with neoliberal ideas of freedom and democracy: movement represents freedom. Dominant narratives imply that Western, middle-class, light-skinned people enjoy the freedom to move at will, while marginalized peoples are trapped (immobile) or, if they move, they must be fleeing degradation and corruption,



or “seeking better lives.” These dominant narratives offer only two stories: one of freedom and one of oppression.

Recently, we have begun to account for alternate types of movement in Latin@ studies. We’ve discussed migrations from North to South: narratives of those who return to Latin America. We have even charted histories of non-Latin American communities who have made lives, communities and identities in Latin America and in Latin@ communities in North America (such as Chinese immigrants in Mexico). However, when we internationalize Latin@ studies and look for the spaces between and across “im/migrant” and “traveler,” we can more fully account for the many diverse ways Latin@s move, culture(s) move, stories move, studies move, and scholars, teachers and students move. Internationalizing theories of movement in Latin@ studies can help combat the racializing of categories of identity by broadening the idea of what movement means – who moves and why – and challenging the stereotype that Latin@s always move as im/migrants and always as illegal.

Take, for example, stories of people like the Chicano poet Javier O. Huerta (2012), who arrived to Texas as an undocumented child, naturalized as a US citizen in his twenties, and recently traveled to Ankara to talk to my students about undocumented literature. Or the Chicano writer-scholar Santiago Vaquera-Vásquez (2015), whose first book of short stories in English, *One Day I’ll Tell You the Things I’ve Seen*, follows the stories of border-crossing protagonists who travel from rural Northern California *barrios* to Spain, Central America, Germany, Tokyo and Turkey, sometimes in the course of one day. And Vaquera-Vásquez himself, whose mother was pregnant with him when she crossed the border without documents and who has subsequently lived in and taught in the United States, Spain, Ecuador and Turkey. These stories, and many others, exist between and across the dominant narratives of im/migrant and traveler. Nor are they fully captured by work in hemispheric American studies. Instead of im/migration or travel, internationalizing Latin@ studies acknowledges the more complicated concept of *movement*. When we shift our focus to critical theories of movement stories like Huerta’s and Vaquera-Vásquez’s become more visible.

The ultimate goal of reflecting critically on what challenges and opportunities arise from internationalizing Latin@ studies is to raise awareness around our own biases and privileges working within the US academy, and to challenge ourselves to think innovatively about how to make Latin@ studies relevant to a diverse (international) community in the ongoing struggle to decolonize ourselves from the wounds of colonialism, patriarchy, racism, sexism and heteronormativity.

Using Latin@ studies as an example, the call to extend transnationalism to internationalism has implications that extend beyond Latin@ studies specifically. The question, “What happens to Latin@ studies when it’s removed from the place it originated?” contributes to existing conversations about place, movement, race, culture, identity and esthetics in interdisciplinary studies by arguing for a more

nuanced study of how international mobility operates on different subjects in different ways in different places, while expanding our understanding of place and movement in the racial past, present and future of the Americas. This lens has particular resonances for interdisciplinary humanistic scholarship – the study of how subjects, cultures, ideas and forms of learning and knowing transact between varying local and global forces reveals not only how forces of domination and subordination can silence or destroy, but also illuminates sites of active resistance. These sites of resistance can offer opportunities for solidarity between groups of subalternized people by revealing shared struggles. They also invite people disunited by differences to simultaneously embrace the particularity of their experiences, identities and histories while coming together to effect positive social change. A more international approach to our scholarship has a unique and powerful opportunity to draw on the experiences that make the Americas unique in order to change the shape and direction of critical inquiry all over the world.

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