

## **Symbolism**

An International Annual of Critical Aesthetics

# Symbolism

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An International Annual of Critical Aesthetics

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# Symbolism



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## Foreword from the Editors

This volume's special focus turns its attention towards symbolic forms in the cultural and literary practices of Latino/a Central and North America. The cultural traces to be discovered follow, in the main, two complementary directions – from East to West, i.e., from Europe to the Americas, and from South to North, i.e., from Central to North America. Their imaginaries are shown to be impacted by migration, transculturalism and competing concepts of national identity. As corresponding editors Patricia M. García and John M. González, both based at the University of Texas in Austin, announce in their introduction to this volume, their three-fold purpose in this collection of essays is

- to highlight current methodological approaches to Latina/o literature,
- to introduce established and emerging Latina/o writers to European audiences, and
- to facilitate trans-American and trans-Atlantic discussion of migrations, transcultural and transnational.

These goals are realized in the following three sections of the volume. In the first section, on the critical aesthetics of migration and trans-migration, Maritza Cárdenas, Jennifer Harford Vargas and David Vázquez examine fictional works for their representations of symbolic actions along the border between the US and Mexico. The following section shifts the focus to translation, transculturation and trans-Atlantic movement, as in the essay by Marion Rohrleitner, who discusses the function of stereotypes in texts 'travelling' from Latina/o culture into German. Elda María Román offers a detailed analysis of Junot Díaz's short stories with a focus on their negotiation of social mobility and variations of the American Dream, whereas Julie Avril Minich considers social conflicts along the American-Mexican border in Oscar Casares's short stories. Gendered identities in the fiction of Almudena Grandes and Roberta Fernández are scrutinized by Isabel Durán Giménez-Rico for strategies of othering.

The third section breaks new ground for *Symbolism* in offering readers interviews with practitioners working in the field that constitutes the subject of the first two sections. In conversation with Daniel Schreiner, Alejandro Morales, whose impact on the development of magical realism as a literary form has been considerable, offers commentary on his use of narrative strategies. For Reyna Grande, the main concern in her interview with Patricia M. García is the narrative 'I'; and Daniel José Older discusses, with Ylce Irizarry, the combination of writing, composition and musical performance.

As always, the Special Focus section is complemented by a General Section offering interdisciplinary explorations of symbolic practices. In the first of this year's three essays, Brett Shanley considers German typography before 1919 with an innovative take on the symbolic use of Fraktur. Inbar Kaminsky's fruitful approach to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* takes inspiration from recent literary criticism on the body and posthumanism, whereas Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz convincingly analyzes forms and functions of space and time in recent fictional representations of British war memorials. The volume is rounded off by reviews of recent works of criticism offering new perspectives on symbolic practices in literature and theory.

The editors express their gratitude to all contributors and to the editorial team at De Gruyter, above all to Stella Diedrich and Olena Gainulina. It is with great pleasure that we welcome Marlena Tronicke (University of Münster) as the new assistant editor of *Symbolism*, and we thank her for her meticulous work in bringing this volume to light. Further thanks go to Chris Wahlig for her competent handling of the formatting and indexing process as well as Laura Schmitz-Justen for formatting assistance.

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**Special Focus: Latina/o Literature at the  
Crossroads:  
The Trans-American and the Trans-Atlantic in  
Critical Dialogue**

Corresponding editors:  
Patricia M. García and John Morán González



Patricia Marie García / John Morán González

## **Introduction:**

# **Latina/o Literature at the Crossroads: The Trans-American and the Trans-Atlantic in Critical Dialogue**

The first seedlings of thought for this special issue of *Symbolism* were planted in June 2015 while we were guest professors at the University of Augsburg in Germany. We had greatly looked forward to the experience of teaching in a new environment where neither of us knew the language or customs, much less had a sense of how what we taught – Latina/o literature – would resonate in a radically different context from our accustomed one at the University of Texas at Austin. Our predecessors there had worked to ensure that our field of study would be central to the field of U.S. literary studies, but we had no expectations of legibility within a European milieu. Wondering if we would have enough enrollment to conduct our courses, we asked ourselves, “Of what relevance might university students in Augsburg, or European-based scholars, deem Latina/o literature, with its roots that extended throughout the Americas but not so much across the Atlantic?”

As experience has often demonstrated, initial assumptions do not survive intact very long. Our students in Augsburg may not have been familiar with the specific manifestations of Latina/o literature but were nevertheless intimately familiar with its underlying dynamics of migration, transculturation, and nationalism. The general question of the unequal relationship between the global North and the global South had also been playing out in a European context for the past half-century, just as it had in the Americas. Macroeconomic arrangements that privileged the North had caused intense economic insecurity in the South, prompting mass migrations of people northward in search of a better life. Political instabilities and crises compounded the situation as Southern governments continued policies that benefited local elites while cutting social safety nets in neoliberalist fashion. Northern governments faced mounting domestic pressure to curtail or stop the influx of migrant workers, increasingly viewed in nativist terms as parasitic drains upon the state and as inassimilable foreigners who threatened the linguistic and cultural integrity of the nation. While refusing the dangers of reductivism inherent in homology, the discussions that ensued in our classes productively examined Latina/o literature by drawing upon parallels with the literature produced by migrant communities in Europe,

such as the Turkish or Syrian “Ausländer” in Germany, or the Algerian or Moroccan French in France.

But even the successful outcome of the courses did not prepare us, or our students for that matter, for what occurred shortly after we returned to the United States in mid-July. Chaotic scenes of the refugee crisis of late summer 2015 that engulfed Europe suggested that the dynamics of displacement that we had examined were not simply operational, as they had been for decades, but had moved into a new and even more intense phase. In the Americas, such a crisis had occurred the year before, as over 132,000 people, a large percentage of them unaccompanied children, fleeing violence-racked Central American nations had taxed the U.S. government’s ability to process and adjudicate refugee claims, leading to charges of human rights abuses in federal detention centers.<sup>1</sup> In Europe, over one million refugees arrived during 2015, straining European Union member relations and resources and sparking a nativist, anti-migrant backlash that is still playing itself out.<sup>2</sup> These events were neither isolated nor confined to the borderlands of the United States and Latin America, or to those of European Union member states, African nations, and Middle Eastern countries. Even as these events were unfolding, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees announced that the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had reached its highest level since records of this kind had been kept: 65.3 million, half of them children.<sup>3</sup> Even as we write this introduction in early 2017, the hard-line anti-immigrant and economic policies of U.S. President Donald Trump promise more turmoil domestically and internationally.

For over five hundred years, Latina/o literature has been chronicling the displacement and migration of indigenous, Afro-descent, and mestizo (mixed indigenous and European descent) people within what social theorist Anibal Quijano has termed the coloniality of power in the Americas.<sup>4</sup> While largely stemming from Hispanophone colonial contexts, the movement of people and ideas from South to North has also included Lusophone, Francophone, indigenous, and

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1 David Nakamura, “Flow of Central Americans to U.S. surging, expected to exceed 2014 numbers,” *Washington Post* (September 22, 2016): <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/flow-of-central-americans-to-us-surging-expected-to-exceed-2014-numbers/2016/09/22/ee127578-80da-11e6-8327-f141a7beb626\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.8f86f9b04445](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/flow-of-central-americans-to-us-surging-expected-to-exceed-2014-numbers/2016/09/22/ee127578-80da-11e6-8327-f141a7beb626_story.html?utm_term=.8f86f9b04445)> [accessed February 1, 2017].

2 “Migrant crisis. Migration to Europe explained in seven charts,” BBC.com (March 4, 2016): <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>> [accessed February 1, 2017].

3 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Global forced displacement hits record high,” (June 20, 2016): <<http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2016/6/5763b65a4/global-forced-displacement-hits-record-high.html>> [accessed February 1, 2017].

4 For an outline of this concept, see Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1.3 (2000): 533–580.

other transculturated creole flows, especially since the late eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> While the trans-Atlantic aspect of these flows were explicit during the European colonial rule that raggedly stretched across the nineteenth century throughout the Americas, these became less prominent as the United States assumed hegemony over the Western Hemisphere by the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, the trans-Atlantic flow from South to North continues today as migrants from the Central American Northern Triangle nations of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras increasingly turn to Spain and other European Union nations as crossing the U.S.-Mexican border has become ever-more expensive and dangerous. The following essays analyze this complex intersectionality of the trans-American and the trans-Atlantic as it is not only enacted at the level of migration, but also in the ways that literary scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have examined how Latina/o literature bears its traces in shaping representational knowledge about its dynamics.

In this vein, this special-focus issue of *Symbolism* has a three-fold purpose: to highlight current methodological approaches and thematic concerns of leading U.S.– and European-based scholars in Latina/o literary studies; to introduce established and emerging Latina/o writers to a European audience; and to suggest ways that Latina/o literature may facilitate a trans-American, yet also trans-Atlantic, discussion of migration, transculturation, and nationalism. The issue is presented in three sections.

**Section 1**, “Trans-American Subjectivities: The Critical Aesthetics of Migration and Trans-Migration,” consists of three essays that explicitly examine the cultural dynamics of South to North migration. Maritza Cardenas’s “A Central American Wound: Remapping the U.S. Borderlands in Oscar Martinez’s *The Beast*” centers upon the Central American transmigrant experience of *la Bestia* – the name given to the perilous experience of riding the railroad from the southern border of Mexico to the southern border of the United States – as a key discursive site for the trans-American construction of a Central American collective identity. Rather than reaffirming a national identity either of the country of origin or the country of destination (the United States), Cardenas argues that the trauma of this South-North passage, and the memory of it, fundamentally structures the identifications mobilized by Central Americans in the United States in ways that not only prohibit a simple narrative of migrant assimilation but also complicate the borderlands theorizations of Chicana/o scholars.

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5 See the essays in the *The Cambridge History of Latina/o American Literature*, eds. John Morán González and Laura Lomas, forthcoming from Cambridge University Press in 2018.

Likewise, Jennifer Hartford Vargas's "The Undocumented Subjects of *el Hueco*: Theorizing a Colombian Metaphor for Migration" analyzes the trope of *el hueco*, or "hole," as the dominant metaphor for unauthorized Colombian migration to the United States. Moving away from the borderlands theorization of the border as a singular geopolitically located experience, *el hueco* instead names the entire process of what Hartford Vargas, following Mae Ngai, outlines as the process of becoming an "impossible subject" of nationalism, whether in Colombia or the United States. Casting *el hueco* as a conceptual hole, or gap, in nationalism that undocumented Colombians never exit, Hartford Vargas, like Cardenas, provides useful correctives to Chicano/a borderlands theorizations that still take for granted the migrant subject's inhabitation of at least one nationalism where the migrant is still a legitimate national subject. Rather, as Cardenas and Hartford Vargas demonstrate, undocumented migrants from Latin America nations other than Mexico experience themselves as unauthorized in multiple nations, greatly changing the conceptual basis of subject formation.

David Vasquez's "Toxicity and the Politics of Narration: Imagining Social and Environmental Justice in Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper*" takes up the question of the relationship of Mexican migrants to the United States to issues of environmental racism and social justice. Plascencia's high postmodernist aesthetics brings a treatment of South to North migration that allows the depict of Latinas/os as not simply victims of environmental racism (although that they are) but also a perpetrators of environmental harm. While the issue of scale remains relevant, as the migrants turned agricultural laborers could scarcely match the environmental destruction wrought by corporations, nonetheless Vasquez calls for a full accounting of responsibility by all parties in degrading the environment.

The four essays of **Section II**, "Interstices: Translation, Transculturation, and the Trans-Atlantic," delve into the complexities of Latina/o life in the interstices of language and culture, particularly as these are manifested in processes of translation and transculturation. Marion Rohrleitner's "Latina/o Literature Goes German" examines the former issue in the context of the translation of English-language Latina/o literature for the literary market in German-reading Europe. Using three recent translations of Latina/o novels, Rohrleitner revisits the long-standing questions of translation, such as how can meaning be conveyed across different linguistic and cultural contexts and what formal strategies can the translator employ to achieve a resemblance of fidelity to the original. Rohrleitner argues that Barbara Schaden's translation Ana Menéndez's *Loving Che* and Eva Kemper's translation Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* replicates German stereotypes about Latin American exoticism and Cold War hypermasculinity in the former case and, in the latter, problematically



domesticates the Dominican American experience for a German readership. Rather than acknowledge the complexities of these Latina/o novels, these translations perpetuate misconceptions that hinder a more nuanced understanding of these matters that the novels themselves conveys. For Rohrleitner, Friederike Meltendorf's translation of Daniel Alarcón's *Lost City Radio* is successful as it captures the laconic sense of the original at the syntactical level rather than opting for the flowery language often used for the translation of Latin American boom novelists.

Turning us to questions of transculturation, Elda María Román outlines how the fiction of Junot Díaz imaginatively rewrites the narrative of the "American Dream." Tracing the economic and social rise of Yunior, Díaz's main narrator in the short story collections *Drown* and *This is How You Lose Her* and the novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Román argues that his individual upward mobility is not predicated upon the loss of communal relationships, languages, and histories, as the dominant version of "Americanization" would have it. Rather, Díaz's narrative strategies instead highlight precisely the otherwise invisible historical and structural conditions that do not allow immigrants, people of color, and other marginalized groups to fully occupy the position of individual economic actor central to the American Dream ideology. In this sense, Díaz's decolonial imaginary acknowledges the allure of the American Dream for Latina/o immigrants while criticizing its individualist limitations.

For Julie Minich, Latina/o literature provides an analytically useful window into experiential aspects of social life often only considered through public policy and sociological discourses, particularly that of inequalities of mental health care. In "'The Emotional Residue of an Unnatural Boundary': *Brownsville* and the Borders of Mental Health," Minich examines three short stories from Oscar Casares's debut collection *Brownsville* from within a disability studies framework. Set in the Texas-Mexico border town of the same name, the stories highlight the differently racialized and gendered aspects of mental health as experienced by Mexican Americans.<sup>6</sup> In "Chango," the question of how depression registers not only an individual health concerns but also as a sensitive register of structural disparities that disproportionately affects those marginalized from dominant discourses of social productivity. In "Charro," Minich explores how border modernity manifests itself in the subjectivities of those so colonized through an ever-present daily stress. As the last story of the collection, "Mrs. Perez" changes the

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<sup>6</sup> In addition to being Oscar Casares's hometown, Brownsville, Texas, also happens to be mine. Our sincere thanks to Heide Ziegler and Hubert Zapf for making our stay in Augsburg possible. — JMG

focus from the social conditions productive of mental illness among border residents to that of how mental well-being may be produced despite those structural limitations.

Isabel Durán Giménez-Rico's "Between Molds and Models: Female Identities in Almudena Grandes and Roberta Fernández" explicitly foregrounds a feminist trans-Atlantic methodology in its comparison of life writing texts published during the 1990s by the *madrileña* Grandes and the *tejana* Fernández. Both Grandes's *Modelos de Mujer* [Models of Women] (1996) and Fernández's *Intaglio: A Novel in Six Stories* (1990) narrate, from multiple perspectives, the everyday lives of Spanish and Mexican American women, respectively, as they navigate the gendered expectations and restrictions placed upon them. Despite the differences in cultural contexts, both critically examine the social "molds" that shape female subjectivities and the "models" of female agency available to the women characters. Depicting women's concerns as more collective than individualistic, Grandes and Fernández employ, according to Durán, a "strategy of the other" to explore the circumstances of a woman's life relationally through the lives of other women. For Durán, the strategy of comparing the life writing of two otherwise disparate authors situated across the Atlantic from each other helps illuminate the commonalities that unite their experiences as women.

**Section III**, "Writing the Borderlands of Culture: Interviews with Latina/o Authors," is comprised of interviews with three Latina/o writers, one of long standing (Alejandro Morales) and two whose works have recently become more familiar in literary circles (Daniel José Older and Reyna Grande). This section provides literary introductions, as it were, to *Symbolism's* readership of Latina/o writers whose work may be less known than that of luminaries such as Julia Alvarez, Ana Castillo, Sandra Cisneros, Judith Ortiz Cofer, Junot Díaz, María Irene Fornés, Cristina García, Juan Felipe Herrera, Oscar Hijuelos, Rolando Hinojosa-Smith, Tato Laviera, Cherríe Moraga, Pedro Peitri, Esmeralda Santiago, Carmen Tafolla, and Helena Maria Viramontes.

Alejandro Morales is the veteran of this trio, with fiction extending back to the 1975 novel *Caras viejas y vino nuevo* (published 1981 in English translation as *Old Faces and New Wine*). While usually grouped with Latina/o authors of the 1960s and 1970s who wrote in a social realist mode, Morales's novels span the range from realism to speculative fiction. While *The Brick People* (1988) is largely in the former mode, *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) moves decisively into the latter mode of science fiction that has become a hallmark of many emergent Latina/o writers.

Reyna Grande's emergence as a writer is emblematic of the Mexican and Central American migrations into the United States of recent decades, and particularly of undocumented migration and its emotional consequences. While the

adjustment to life in the United States has always been difficult for migrants of any origin, Grande chronicles the consequences for undocumented Mexican migrants in her novel *Across a Hundred Mountains* (2006) and in her memoir *The Distance Between Us* (2012). Focusing upon the specific issues that Latinas face in the process of translation and transculturation in the making of their subjectivities, especially in her novel *Dancing with Butterflies* (2009), Grande provides a critical window into questions of relationships between parents and children, men and women, and friends across generations.

While Reyna Grande works in the time-honored modes of memoir and realism, David José Older represents a significant trend with younger authors to work in the idiom of speculative fiction, or what literary scholar Ramón Saldivar has termed “speculative realism.”<sup>7</sup> Perhaps best generally known as the mode of narration in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, speculative realism takes up the always-deferred U.S. idea of a “post-racial” society – a concept whose idealism was already exhausted by the end of President Barack Obama’s first term – and displaces the developmental temporality of realism with speculative fiction’s polytemporal, nonlinear refusal of a teleology of racial resolution. Even as post-realism fades as a historical possibility, the current ascendancy of a renewed white supremacist nationalism in the United States ensures speculative realism will continue to flourish among the younger generations of Latina/o writers for whom this mode of narration better describes their social being. Older’s novels, such as those in *The Shadowshaper* series (2015–2017) and *Bone Street Rumba* series (2015–2017), as well as the short story collection *Salsa Nocturna* (2012) all fully embody this aesthetic.

The works of Reyna Grande and Daniel José Older represent but a fraction of emergent Latina/o literary authors in the twenty-first century, whose ranks include novelists (Oscar Casares, Jennine Capó Crucet, Angie Cruz, Felicia Lemus, Miguel Muñoz, Achy Obejas, Salvador Plascencia, Ernesto Quiñonez, Benjamin Alire Sáenz, Justin Torres), poets (Richard Blanco, Rafael Campo, Eduardo Corral, Willie Perdomo, Emmy Perez), and playwrights (Nilo Cruz, Lin-Manuel Miranda, José Rivera). Taken together, the essays and interviews in this special focus issue of *Symbolism* suggest that Latina/o literature has much to say to literary scholars across Europe and the Americas in terms of aesthetic responses and imaginative alternatives to the crisis of neoliberalism as it plays itself out across the global North and South. Increasingly desperate migrations, resurgent nativist nationalisms, and the heatedly disputed processes of transcul-

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7 See Ramón Saldivar, “The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative,” *Narrative* 21.1 (2013): 1–18.

turation, already contentious even during the best of times, are symptomatic of this crisis. Trumpism in the United States, Le Pen in France, Alternative für Deutschland in Germany, Orbán in Hungary, and Brexit in the United Kingdom play upon fears of immigrant foreigners who threaten the very meaning of national identity, whether in terms of language, race, religion, economics, culture or “national security” writ large. Placing Latina/o trans-Americanity in conversation with the trans-Atlantic begins to illuminate the global dimensions of contemporary literary aesthetics in context while providing the utopian resources to imagine otherwise.

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## **I Trans-American Subjectivities: The Critical Aesthetics of Migration and Trans-Migration**



Maritza Cárdenas

## **A Central American Wound: Remapping the U.S. Borderlands in Oscar Martinez's *The Beast***

*La Bestia/The Beast – the colloquial name given to cargo trains that run throughout Mexico which are utilized by migrants – has become an iconic image linked with Central American migration to the United States. This essay examines one of the most prominent texts to utilize The Beast as trope for Central American transmigration, Oscar Martinez's non-fictional narrative The Beast: Riding The Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail (2013). In it Martinez posits The Beast as instrumental in the formation of a Central American disembodied wound – the notion that individuals from the geopolitical space of the isthmus are viewed as sharing a similar collective traumatic experience as transmigrants in Mexico. In addition, by calling attention to the experience of Central American undocumented transmigrants, illuminating how they are victims of a migrant trail that encompasses multiple borders, The Beast also extends the physical and symbolic jurisdictions of the borderlands by focusing on how border violence and death are not geographically limited to the doorstep of the Global North. In viewing the border from a transnational framework – The Beast thus poignantly underscores the ways in which contemporary sociopolitical conditions such as U.S. and Mexican immigration initiatives require U.S. Latina/o studies to view texts produced beyond the U.S. political spaces as integral to its broader corpus. It also exposes limitations present within contemporary articulations of the border within this field, which often fail to account for the experiences and trauma that occur outside a southern U.S. and northern Mexico geopolitical terrain.*

Migrants from everywhere  
Entrenched among the rail ties.  
Far away from where they come,  
Farther away from where they go.

Waiting for earth's shaking  
And the wheels' screeching.  
Behind the mountains  
The menacing snake appears,  
Her scales are made out of iron  
Her womb of iron as well,

They call her The Beast from the South  
This wretched train of death,

With the devil in the boiler  
Whistles, roars, twists and turns.

– “La Bestia”<sup>1</sup>

In the spring of 2014, radio stations throughout Central America were inundated with requests to play a catchy *cumbia* song, titled “La Bestia,” which references the colloquial name given to the freight trains migrants utilize to cross from southern to northern Mexico. This *cumbia* is the latest articulation of a broader discourse that renders *La Bestia*/The Beast as metonymic with Central American transmigrant experiences. Documentaries such as Rebecca Camissa’s *Which Way Home* (2009)<sup>2</sup>; Pedro Ulterera’s *La Bestia/The Beast* (2011)<sup>3</sup>; fictional films like Cary Fukunaga’s *Sin Nombre* (2009)<sup>4</sup>; songs such as Kinto Sol’s “La Bestia” (2013),<sup>5</sup> and creative works like Marissa Chibas’s dramatic play *Shelter* (2016),<sup>6</sup> have all included the figure of The Beast in their accounts of Central American transmigration through Mexico. However, unlike these other texts, the Beast *cumbia* was produced and commissioned by none other than the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol (CBP). As part of the CBP’s million-dollar “Dangers Awareness Campaign,”<sup>7</sup> the song was specifically created and designed to deter Central American migration to the United States.<sup>8</sup> Both in its content and context of production, the song “La Bestia” elucidates not only how this figure has become the symbol *par excellence* of Central American transmigration, but also how the U.S. government increasingly sees its own borders as extending beyond the U.S.-Mexico geopolitical divide. The aim of the song, after all, is to prevent Central Amer-

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1 Eddie Ganz, “La Bestia,” *U.S. Customs and Border Patrol* (Elevation, 2014). CD.

2 *Which Way Home*, directed by Rebecca Camissa [2009] (USA: Reason Pictures, 2011). DVD.

3 *La Bestia/The Beast*, directed by Pedro Ulterera [2010] (USA: Venevision, 2011). DVD.

4 *Sin Nombre*, directed by Cary Fukunaga [2009] (USA: Universal Studios, 2009). DVD.

5 Kinto Sol, “La Bestia,” *Tumba Del Alma* (Virus Enterprises LLC, 2013). CD.

6 *Shelter*, by Marissa Chibas, directed by Martin Acosta (CalARTS Center for New Performance: Los Angeles, April 2016).

7 Caitlin Dickson, “The Government is Using Subliminal Songs to Scare Immigrants,” *The Daily Beast* (December 07, 2014): <<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/07/12/how-the-government-is-using-subliminal-songs-to-scare-central-american-immigrants.html>> [accessed June 27, 2016]. This is not the first time the CBP has become involved in the music-making business. In 2004, they distributed a five-song cd of “migra corridos” to radio stations throughout Mexico in order to discourage Mexican immigration as part of their “No More Crosses” campaign. Such textual productions suggest that in this post-9/11 era, reinforcing the material border is insufficient as new tactics of deterrence are being wielded in the realm of the symbolic.

8 “CBP Addressed Humanitarian Challenges of Unaccompanied Child Migrants,” *U.S. Customs and Border Protection*, <<https://www.cbp.gov/border-security/humanitarian-challenges>> [accessed June 27, 2016].



ican immigrants not just from arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border but also from traversing Mexico (where The Beast resides), suggesting that the U.S. state views Mexican territory as part of its jurisdiction and central to its border surveillance, detention, and deportation regime.<sup>9</sup>

These two thematic concerns – The Beast as metaphor for Central American migration and The Beast as a site for remapping the U.S. borderlands – are pointedly illustrated in Oscar Martinez’s non-fictional narrative *The Beast: Riding The Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail* (2013). In its literary structure (comprised of fourteen vignettes of other people’s memories) and as part of a larger discursive framework about Central American transmigration, *The Beast* is instrumental in constructing a Central American disembodied wound<sup>10</sup> – the notion that individuals from the geopolitical space of the isthmus are viewed as sharing a similar collective traumatic experience as transmigrants in Mexico. Collective trauma and memory, as noted by the work of Central American scholars, has proven to be a vital source for the formation of a diasporic Central American identity.<sup>11</sup> By providing images and stories about shared experiences, cultural narratives by Central Americans can become sites of social practice that enable the development of a transnational imaginary – an “imaginary social space consisting in transnational communities of shared fates”<sup>12</sup> – which in turn provides the grounds for a collective identity. However, to date, most of

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9 See Todd Miller, “Mexico: The US Border Patrol’s Newest Hire,” *America Aljazeera*, <<http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/10/mexico-us-borderpatrolsecurityimmigrants.html>> [accessed June 27, 2016].

10 Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996): 189. Silverman uses the metaphor “disembodied wound” to discuss how certain narratives encourage their audiences to “remember, what might best be characterized as others people’s memories,” adding that “if to remember is to provide the disembodied wound with a psychic residence, then to remember other people’s memories is to be wounded by their wounds.”

11 Arturo Arias and Claudia Milian, “US Central Americans: Representations, Agency and Communities,” *Latino Studies* 11.2 (2013): 131–149; Ana Patricia Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2009); Yajaira M Padilla, “The Central American Transnational Imaginary: Defining the Transnational and Gendered Contours of Central American Immigrant Experience,” *Latino Studies* 11.2 (2013): 150–166. These scholars have all explored how trauma resulting from the civil wars of the 1970s and 1980s were formative in constructing a Central American identity in the diaspora.

12 Yajaira Padilla, “The Central American Transnational Imaginary: Defining the Transnational and Gendered Contours of Central American Immigrant Experience,” *Latino Studies* 11.2 (2013): 150–166, 153–154. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/lst.2013.2>. <<http://ezproxy.library.arizona.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1399352710?accountid=8360>> [accessed September 18, 2013]. Padilla also notes how increasingly crossings through Mexico are becoming important social spaces for this “Central American Transnational Imaginary.”

the discussion has focused on how the traumas derived from the Central American civil wars (1979–1992) or immigrant life in the United States have become the central vehicles for this assertion of shared fates among this group. In addition to these war related traumas, the trope of *The Beast* in contemporary cultural production signifies the ways in which the archive of Central American collective memory is expanding due to a very distinct form of transmigrant experience.

Although one might want to locate Martínez's *The Beast* as a Latin American rather than U.S. Latina/o text on account of its setting (Mexico) and topic (transmigration), confining this work to just one location forestalls a fuller analysis. U.S. Latina/o studies and contemporary transnational cultural productions like *The Beast* cannot be reduced to a monotopographical paradigm, especially when Mexico has always resisted traditional cartographies (belonging to the Global South but categorically located on the continent of North America).<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as a pivotal metaphor for migration across multiple borders, the trope of *The Beast* exposes the limitations present within contemporary articulations of the border within U.S. Latina/o studies, which often fail to account for the experiences and trauma that occur outside a southern U.S. and northern Mexico geopolitical terrain. *The Beast* therefore signals a shift within the paradigm of U.S. Latina/o border studies and should be read as belonging to an emergent corpus of transnational texts that focus on the "border as the landscape of death."<sup>14</sup> This grouping includes fictional and nonfictional works such as John Annerino's *Dead in Their Tracks: Crossing America's Desert Borderlands* (1999)<sup>15</sup>; Ruben Martínez's *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (2001)<sup>16</sup>; Luis Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* (2004)<sup>17</sup>; Jorge Ramos and Kristina Cordero's *Dying to*

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13 José David Saldívar, *Trans-Americanity: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico* (Durham: Duke UP, 2012): xv. Saldívar persuasively asserts this view stating, "US Latino/a studies cannot be reduced to a single, monotopical paradigm."

14 Marta Caminero-Santangelo, "The Lost Ones: Post-gatekeeper border fictions and the construction of Cultural Trauma," *Latino Studies* (2010): 304–327; Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper: The Rise of the "illegal Alien" and the Making of the U.S.-Mexico Boundary* (New York: Routledge, 2002). Both scholars have utilized the term "border as the landscape of death" to refer to a corpus of texts that narrate U.S. border crossings as a site of epistemic and physical violence.

15 John Annerino, *Dead in Their Tracks: Crossing America's Desert Borderlands* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1999).

16 Rubén Martínez, *Crossing Over: A Mexican Family on the Migrant Trail* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

17 Luis Alberto Urrea, *The Devil's Highway: A True Story* (New York: Little, Brown, 2004).

*Cross: The Worst Immigrant Tragedy in American History* (2005)<sup>18</sup>; and Sonia Nazario's *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite With his Mother* (2007),<sup>19</sup> to name a few. With some minor exceptions, these works mostly focus on the U.S.-Mexico Southwest borderlands of California, Arizona, and Texas and on undocumented Mexican immigrants. In contrast, *The Beast* calls attention to the experience of Central American undocumented transmigrants, and renders them as victims of not *one* border but of a migrant trail that encompasses multiple borders, beginning from the border separating Guatemala and Mexico and extending north to the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, with most of its narrative content focusing on the central Mexican passage.

Subsequently, *The Beast* is not only a discursive site that constructs a disembodied wound (cultural trauma) for Central Americans, but also a text that functions as a *punctum*,<sup>20</sup> an optic displacement that enables one to look beyond the frame of the "given to-be-seen toward what lies outside."<sup>21</sup> Incorporating this critical hermeneutic of looking beyond the "given-to be seen," Martinez's depiction of Mexico is one that frames it as a heterotopia, a shadowy counterpart to the U.S.-Mexico border. As such, Martinez's work provides an alternative cognitive mapping of what and who belongs within the material and symbolic space of the borderlands, as well as highlights the way the United States and Mexico, two nation-states often viewed as antagonists by dominant U.S. media representations, collude to force transmigrants into a state of indelible precarity along the migrant trail.

## Constructing Central American cultural trauma

Trauma, both at the personal level and as a collective phenomenon is not ontologically based, rather it is a discursive construction that requires critical representational strategies. For Jeffery Alexander, cultural trauma occurs via a signifying process that requires three features: (1) narrating a painful event or disclosing a horrible social condition; (2) linking this source of pain with a par-

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<sup>18</sup> Jorge Ramos and Kristina Cordero. *Dying to Cross: The Worst Immigrant Tragedy in American History* (New York: Rayo, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Sonia Nazario, *Enrique's Journey: The Story of a Boy's Dangerous Odyssey to Reunite With his Mother* (New York: Random House, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981): 42. Barthes describes the *punctum* as anything whose "mere presence changes my reading" and has a "power of expansion."

<sup>21</sup> Silverman, *Thresholds*, 182.

ticular group; and (3) attributing responsibility to an antagonist.<sup>22</sup> These representational elements abound in narratives that utilize the trope of The Beast as they depict the transmigrant experience as traumatic and violent, particularly for Central Americans. In Cary Fukunaga's film *Sin Nombre*, for instance, all the main characters are from the isthmus, and they all experience violence such as murder, rape, or death.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, in songs devoted to The Beast, death is either looming (as evidenced in the one commissioned by the CBP), or in the case of the Latina/o hip-hop song "La Bestia" by Kinto Sol, the speaker witnesses death firsthand as he sees his friend fall off the train. Kinto Sol's song, like *Sin Nombre*, also establishes the notion that transmigrants are synonymous with people from Central America, stating, "We are from El Salvador, others come from Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua."<sup>24</sup> Indeed it is rare to find in these aforementioned texts examples of transmigrants who are not from the isthmus.

In tandem with these cultural narratives, which position this trope as metonymic for Central American collective trauma, Martínez's *The Beast* chronicles the never-ending violence sustained by Central American transmigrants throughout Mexico. Often this text underscores the ways in which these two categories – Central American and cultural trauma – are constitutive of one another and share overlapping features. The category of Central American, like trauma, is also not an ontologically grounded term; it therefore requires its own signifying practices to assert the notion that individuals from various parts of the isthmus share common attributes and/or experiences. To this end, *The Beast*, as specific narrative and generalized discourse, proves pivotal in cementing the belief that Central Americans literally and figuratively share the same sociocultural and traumatic conditions. When Martínez's narrator canvasses the scene of the migrant trail and cargo trains, all he can see are Central Americans: "The roofs of the train cars are where the undocumented Central Americans ride."<sup>25</sup> At other moments, the narrator describes how the transmigrant experience is delimited to peoples from the isthmus stating, "Eduardo and I pick our spot on top of the car with a group of Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, Guatemalans, and Hondurans" (*TB*, 51). In fact, *The Beast* asserts that the transmigrant experience itself

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22 Jeffrey Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, eds. Jeffrey Alexander, Ron Eyerman, Bernard Giesen, Neil Smelser and Piotr Sztompka (Berkeley: U of California P, 2004): 1–30, 11, 13.

23 Fukunaga, *Sin Nombre*, DVD.

24 Kinto Sol, "La Bestia," CD. Translation mine.

25 Oscar Martínez, *The Beast: Riding the rails and dodging narcos on the migrant trail*. (London: Verso, 2013): 49. Further references in the text, abbreviated as "*TB*."

enables the production of Central Americanness. In his descriptions, Martinez reveals how the train journey acts as a form of crucible – a baptism by fire – where individuals lose their identities and become unified by the experience of riding the rails: “The effect of riding the rails is always the same. On top of a train there aren’t journalists and migrants, there are only people hanging on [...] The roof of the cars is the floor for all and those who fall, fall the same way” (*TB*, 20). The Beast is described as an egalitarian space where class distinctions dissipate, as there are no differences between privileged journalists and migrants, since the roof is the floor “for all,” and where everyone dies the same way. The experience of The Beast – one that renders all of its riders physically vulnerable to its dangers – acts as a binding force for transmigrants conjoined by the fact that they have to undergo the same perils.

This notion that individuals from the isthmus are forged into “Central Americans” by the experience of crossing Mexico is constant throughout the narrative in which, despite their respective national backgrounds, individuals are constantly positioned as belonging to a larger Central American phenomenon. Multiple narrative techniques provide the reader quantitative information pertaining exclusively to Central American transmigrants, while Martinez repeatedly situates his interviewees as partaking in a broader Central American practice, as evidenced in his discussion about three Salvadoran brothers: “They packed their bags and started north, joining the pilgrimage of upchucked Central Americans. They dove into that stream of escapees. Those fleeing poverty, those fleeing death” (*TB*, 19). Here, this small family unit is framed as participating in a broader cultural process, a Central American “pilgrimage” initiated by poverty and violence, a point dramatized by the parallelism in the syntax: “Those fleeing poverty, those fleeing death.”

At other moments, the narrative invokes these factors for migration (poverty and violence) to deconstruct gender, class, and political binaries. Martinez explains that “poverty and death touches them all: the young and the old, the men and the women, the gangsters and the cops” and further adds that he remembers “the nearly identical reactions of a Honduran policeman and a Guatemalan gangster: I had to escape. That’s what they both told me, both of them emphasizing the *had*” (*TB*, 20 original emphasis). Martinez’s syntax here accentuates the communal nature of this transmigrant experience. The parallelism in the phrases “young and old” and “men and women” illuminates how these subjects share the same level of precariousness despite their seemingly oppositional subjectivities. Similarly, the repetition and visual emphasis in the phrase “I had” accentuates the redundant nature and the inescapability of the situation, since subjects from all walks of life will be doomed to repeat and endure the same circumstances and shared fates along the migrant trail. In juxtaposing two social

antagonists, a “Guatemalan gangster” and a “Honduran police officer,” who differ both in their national origins and occupations, the narrative also demonstrates how these tensions fade as these subjects become entwined by the same driving impetus to leave Central America (death threats and violence) as well as the dangers they experience along the migrant trail.

If such examples evince how an individual from the isthmus becomes Central American via the transmigrant experience, it also persuasively asserts how the migrant trail does not simply produce personal trauma but a collective one. The trauma Central Americans as a collectivity endure is inherently connected with their journey on the Mexican migrant trail. In recounting testimonies and anecdotes from his interviewees, like Paola, who “saw firsthand that something bad happens to nearly every migrant here” (*TB*, 29), Martínez’s narrative stresses how trauma is endemic to crossing Mexico. This point is punctuated by the narrator who reveals how “For the past decade [...] The stories of husbands, sons, and daughters watching women suffer abuses have been commonplace” (*TB*, 30). To emphasize this horrific normalcy, the narrator states “Few think about the trauma endured by thousands of Central American women who have been raped here” (*TB*, 43). In one of his more poignant reflections, Martínez makes an explicit connection to how the transmigrant experience is a form of cultural trauma for Central Americans, noting, “The suffering that migrants endure on the trail doesn’t heal quickly. Migrants don’t just die, they’re not just maimed or shot or hacked to death. The scars of their journey don’t only mark their bodies, they run deeper than that” (*TB*, 43). Martínez’s language indexes the way cultural trauma functions as a wound inscribed not only on the exterior of migrants’ flesh but also upon their psyches. The bodily wound in this context obtains a psychic permanence, one that he remarks is not reserved for an individual but should be viewed as a form of social suffering for these particular transmigrants who endure this journey through Mexico.

Without question, trauma is a dominant thematic element in this work. It is not only operative in the aforementioned declarations about how migrants endure trauma, and anecdotes that describe traumatic events, but also in the narration itself, which suggests that the narrator has experienced “vicarious trauma,” a second hand trauma which occurs by watching others suffer traumatic events.<sup>26</sup> This structure of trauma is displayed in Martínez’s recounting of receiving news of the death of one of his interviewees:

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26 Ann Kaplan, “Trauma studies moving forward: Interdisciplinary perspectives,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 27.2 (2013): 53–65, 54.

Just today I learned that a boy named José lost his head under that train. José was the youngest of three Salvadorans I traveled with two months ago. We skirted highways and ducked from authorities as we ventured through another of the high-traffic points along the migrant trail, La Arrocera. His decapitation, I'm told, was a clean cut (*TB*, 4).

This passage is noteworthy not for what it reveals, but more for what it cannot represent. There is clearly so much more to this anecdote of José's untimely passing and yet Martínez provides us with such an abrupt and succinct description. For instance, the fact that the narrator describes the decapitation as "a clean cut" infers that the witness to this tragedy saw more than is being disclosed by the narrator; that she or he must have seen the accident, and must have been able to interpret the decapitation as a "clean cut." This characterization conveys the sense that whoever inspected the severed head had some experience viewing other mutilated bodies to make this assessment, suggesting that the witness to this event has already been a victim of trauma. Moreover, it is particularly odd that this narration of bearing witness to the destruction of a child's life, a "boy" as the narrator describes him is so devoid of emotions. Especially since Martínez makes it a point to inform readers that they spent some significant time together on the migrant trail, precisely the space that Martínez continuously asserts has become an important vehicle of fraternity among transmigrants. This lack of emotional resonance and details about José becomes magnified by the fact that, at other moments of representation in the text, the narrator has the capacity to describe and remember in vivid detail the most mundane features of his interviewees and traveling companions. He remembers the sounds of their voices, the colors of their skin and hair (*TB*, 70), their "cheap rubber soled sandals" (*TB*, 14), but as for José, readers are left with nothing.

This overt textual manifestation of absence and silence at the level of representation embodies how the language of trauma functions, one that showcases how trauma enables the "impossibility to narrate the event itself."<sup>27</sup> Narratives that are structured by trauma often exclude "language that might be considered literary" and are distinguished by the mark of absence, by the ways in which "language omits more than it reveals."<sup>28</sup> We see these features in Martínez's text and particularly in the retelling of José's death, which is so void of details, depth, and emotional affect. Its narration is halted by this structure of trauma that illuminates the gaps and chasms that occur when confronted with trauma. *The Beast*, then, suggests that no one can evade the experience of trauma while

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Bernard-Donals and Richard Glejzer, "Between Witness and Testimony: Survivor Narratives and the Shoah," *College Literature* 27.2 (2000): 1–20, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard-Donals and Glejzer, "Between Witness," 3.



on the migrant trail, not the narrator nor Martinez himself. Despite not having witnessed the traumatic event firsthand, the narrator shows signs of vicarious trauma in his representation that exposes how he is affected by the trauma of others. By depicting mostly Central Americans as those who traverse the migrant trail, and through its assertion that everyone who enters this particular space endures a form of trauma, *The Beast* persuasively constructs the notion that Central Americans undergo a form of cultural trauma via the transmigrant experience.

## A wound in the borderlands: *The Beast* as heterotopia

In the foreword of the translated English version of *The Beast*, author Francisco Goldman concludes by saying “it reads like a series of pilgrims’ tales about their journey through hell. (Even calling it hell feels like an understatement)” (*TB*, xviii). Goldman raises an important point, Martinez’s portraiture of the landscape and the physical and psychic trauma that occur on that soil leave the impression that the text’s setting is an other-worldly place. If it were set in the future, then *The Beast* might be labeled a dystopian narrative; since its backdrop is a “real” referent, and its time period is the contemporary moment, perhaps a more productive way of conceiving his literary cartographic rendering of Mexico is to view it as a heterotopia.

Heterotopias are both real and imagined sites that are produced via displacement from other spaces. According to Michel Foucault, heterotopias are “counter sites” where other spaces that can be found within culture can be “contested and inverted.”<sup>29</sup> A critical function of heterotopias is that they operate like mirrors a place where “I discover my absence from the place where I am.”<sup>30</sup> A heterotopic site is therefore linked with sight; counter intuitively, one uses this space to see one’s absence from a “real” space. Described in this way, heterotopias make visible the invisible. They are also imbued with disruptive capabilities for their ability to destroy the syntax that forces “words and things” to “hold together.”<sup>31</sup> Heterotopias are those moments in discourse that can stop the chain of signification, or the ability to hold “words and things” together.

As a textual illustration of real physical landscapes, *The Beast* can be seen as a counter-site that functions as a mirror for non-Mexican undocumented immigrants, allowing them to see their absence from the U.S.-Mexico borderlands.

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<sup>29</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22–27, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 24.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1970): xviii.