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Transnational Book Markets and Literary Reception in the Americas

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Abstract: In her paper "Transnational Book Markets and Literary Reception in the Americas," Molly Metherd argues that the most diffuse products of transnational cultural production in the Americas come from mass media productions packaged for transnational audiences -- i.e., Hollywood films, television shows, popular magazines, product advertisements -- and that tend to homogenize messages, promote stereotypes, and simplify complex issues. However, another effort to make sense of shifting relationships in the Americas is coming from a group of US-American and Spanish American literary figures. In their fiction, criticism, journalistic work, and public statements, such authors have been responding to the covalence of American cultures and interrogating mass media messages. Metherd examines the emergence of this transnational publishing industry which offers the institutional structure for authors to reach out to hemispheric audiences and its impact and relates the said situation to Chilean author Alberto Fuguet. She explores how, in order to accommodate these changing markets, English- and Spanish-language publishers have formed strategic partnerships and introduced new imprints often releasing works simultaneously in English and Spanish and promoting authors to a larger hemispheric readership through shelf placement, advertising and book tours.

Molly METHERD

Transnational Book Markets and Literary Reception in the Americas

In the last three decades, technological advances in telecommunications, ease of travel, and the flow of economic capital supported by free trade agreements have created a more fluid circulation of images, information, and cultural products throughout the Americas. The most diffuse products of this transnational cultural exchange come from mass media productions packaged for transnational audiences (i.e., Hollywood films, television shows, popular magazines, product advertisements) that tend to homogenize messages, promote stereotypes, and simplify complex issues. However another effort to make sense of shifting relationships in the Americas is coming from a group of US and Spanish American literary figures. In their fiction, criticism, journalistic work, and public statements, authors such as Carlos Fuentes, Julia Alvarez, Alberto Fuguet, Cristina Garcia, Rosario Ferre, Ariel Dorfman, and Isabel Allende have been responding to the covalence of American cultures and interrogating mass media messages. They publish novels that move freely between the United States and Spanish America, that have US and Spanish American characters, and that often incorporate multiple languages and cultural codes (see Fitz <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol4/iss2/6>). These authors' efforts to engage larger American audiences and to explore the questions of transnational identities have been helped along in the last decade by an emergent transnational publishing industry.

In order for there to have a real, timely, and extended dialogue between writers and readers in the United States and Latin America, there must be a network of transcultural relations in place, a shared space what Pierre Bourdieu terms a *champ* ("field") of social relations on which texts are produced and distributed. Literary production and reception, for example, take place organized by publishing houses, book distributors and booksellers, the academe, and the media (see, e.g., de Glas <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss4>; Tötösy de Zepetnek <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol1/iss3>; see also the framework of the contextual [systemic and empirical] approach to literature and culture, the intellectual trajectory of *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* this paper is published in). These forces determine readers' access to authors and construct meaning and value for texts. Publishers, in particular, manage publicity campaigns, sending their authors on national and international book tours, organizing television interviews and readings, and fighting for shelf space in major book-selling chains. In doing so, publishers create expectations and particular audiences for their works, which can lead to public valorization, for example, book reviews, inclusion in The *New York Times* Best Seller List, and consideration for literary prizes. While the publishing industry structures and regulates the literary field, their restrictions are both reflected and modified by the societal values and aesthetic choices of the players on that field, i.e., authors and readers.

Until recent, textual production and distribution was dictated by language and colonial history rather than by geographical proximity: the US book market was closely tied to Britain while the Spanish American market was connected to Spain; in the nineteenth century, few US authors were reading Spanish American authors; while Latin American authors were reading some US literature, they were often introduced to their US counterparts (e.g., Emerson, Hawthorne, Poe, Cooper, Whitman) through French journals and read not in the original English but in French, or twice removed, in Spanish translations from the French (see Rostegno; Santí). Even in the mid-twentieth century, there was only a limited exchange of literary texts and ideas between the United States and Latin America. This lack of inter-American reception was in large part owing to the access to texts. While a small group of scholars in the US and Latin America might have access to texts through university libraries and specialty book stores, the average reader would have to specially order foreign-language texts through bookstores in major cities, and these books were expensive and took time to obtain. When works were translated, there was often a time lag of three to five or even ten years. Thus, a reader living in south

Texas would find it easier to find the work of a British novelist at her local bookstore than a book by a Mexican writer living just across the border.

The old world / new world relationship altered somewhat in mid-century when World War II made it more difficult to import books from Europe to the Americas, so the publishing houses began to look to their U.S. counterparts for titles and more texts were translated (Rostegno 31-35). Another important shift in reception occurred in the 1960s with the Latin American Literary Boom and the academic attention and media frenzy that accompanied it. The rise of the Latin American Novel initiated many more translations of Spanish American texts into English. Despite these shifts, the industry continued to conceive of readers in the United States and Spanish America as two separate audiences. English- and Spanish-language publishing houses, and the national markets that they appeal to, have different operating procedures, or as Bourdieu would call them, rules of the game, that helped maintain the distinct fields of US and Latin American reception. For example, copyright, which authorize publishing houses to produce and distribute texts, is tied to language and to geographical region. Until recently, US publishers would purchase the copyright to a text in English. If the book was successful or deemed of longstanding cultural importance, the author and the agent might be able to sell the Spanish language rights to a publishing house in Spain or Latin America. These Spanish-language houses would then translate, publish, and distribute the works in Spanish-speaking countries. The translations would be released in three, five, or sometimes even ten years after the original publication of the work. Spanish language publishers would work in the same way, and the English language rights to their texts would be sold to houses in the US for translation and distribution. What was deemed marketable or valuable for one audience (i.e., linguistic group) did not necessarily seem so for another. Consequently there was a significant time lag between English and Spanish language releases and only a very limited number of works were selected for translation (on this, see, e.g., Hulet; Mead; Mudrovcic).

Spanish-language publishers and book importers also had different distribution practices that make their titles difficult to obtain in the United States. For example, they do not accept returns, so distributors and booksellers assume a financial risk when stocking Spanish-language titles. Importers also charge higher prices so Spanish-language books cost the consumer more. Consequently, Spanish-language titles have typically only been sold in university bookstores or on small shelves in the back corner of urban specialty bookstores. Because of the time lag between the original publication and the translation and the minimal and expensive offerings in US bookstores, many readers have not had regular access to texts from Spanish America in any language. This lack of access limited the possibilities for creative and intellectual exchange among writers and audiences in the Americas.

In the last decade, English- and Spanish-language publishing houses have responded to major shifts in population and literary taste. The 2000 US census shows that there are over 37 million Hispanics living in the US and the University of Georgia's Selig Center for Economic Growth estimates that in 2007 this group had a purchasing power of US$ 862 billion a year and projects that this number will rise to $1.2 trillion in 2012 (see Humphreys). Clearly, not all of these Hispanics are reading in Spanish: studies show that Hispanics buy 65% of their books in English and 35% in Spanish (see Rosen <http://www.criticasmagazine.com/article/CA65604.html>). Yet, the success of Mexican author Laura Esquivel's 1990 novel *Como agua para chocolate*, which sold over 150,000 copies in Spanish in the US in the first two years of publication (see Rinn 8), demonstrated to publishers the potential US market for Spanish-language texts. Consequently, these publishers are reaching out to Spanish-language audiences in the United States by forming strategic partnerships and introducing new imprints. Vintage now has *Vintage español* and Harper Collins has an imprint, Rayo, which publishes over seventy-five new titles a year in both English and Spanish versions. These newly emergent transnational institutions are reordering the literary marketplace. They are releasing works in English and in Spanish simultaneously, coordinating their release dates, marketing materials and book tours so that books are reaching audiences in the United States and Spanish America at nearly the same time and

determining shelf placement; it is not unusual to find works in English and Spanish side by side on the bookshelves and table displays of many chain bookstores in the US. Thus, they are providing the institutional structures for authors to speak to larger audiences. This data demonstrates that national audiences are no longer clearly defined by language. Nearly 200 publishers in the US and Puerto Rico now publish Spanish titles (see Kiser, "Spanish Language Publishing" 47). This does not include sales by houses such as Santillana Publishing USA, Grupo Editorial Planeta, or Fondo de Cultura Económica which import the bulk of their products for US distribution. The number of Spanish language titles available in the US has jumped from 5,000 in 2001 to over 80,000 in 2006 (see Kiser, "Courting the Spanish Reader" 24).

In a significant change in copyright trends, US publishers are keeping the US-Spanish language rights to their bestselling authors. In addition, US publishers are buying up both the US English- and Spanish-language rights to bestselling Latin American authors, publishing them together and planning marketing campaigns and book tours in two languages and in multiple countries. Spanish language publishers are also increasing distributions and shifting the market. The largest Spanish-language publisher, Planeta, is trying not to lose its bestselling authors to US publishers that offer English and Spanish editions. And thus they are releasing their own English-language line. Following the lead of major US publishing houses like Random House and Harper Collins, they are holding onto the US English-language rights of their own bestselling authors, publishing them simultaneously in English and Spanish and linking their publicity and release dates to try to reach the largest possible audiences. For example, Planeta held onto the US English-language rights to the recent work *Aznar: Ocho años de gobierno* by former Spanish prime minister, José María Aznar. And, beginning in 2005, Planeta plans to release 25 fiction and non-fiction titles in English every year with print runs of 20,000 or 30,000 (see Holt 8). This development allows English-language readers access to works with Spanish and Latin American topics. Publishers are reorganizing their structures to cross linguistic borders. Such industry shifts allow readers in English and in Spanish in the US and in Spanish America simultaneous access to a broader range of new releases. Booksellers, too, are reaching out to bilingual readers. In the US, major book chains such as Borders, Barnes & Noble, Ingram, and Baker and Taylor are expanding their Spanish language offerings. Both Amazon and Barnes & Noble have launched online Spanish-language web pages to allow customers to access their over five million Spanish-language texts more easily. The websites offer chat rooms, interviews with authors, and links to other relevant websites. Moreover, public and academic libraries are expanding their Spanish-language collections and working to hire bilingual librarians. So US readers have more access to books in both languages.

Although the new relationships in the publishing industry are making it easier for authors to engage readers, publishing houses are motivated primarily by a need to remain competitive and by generating greater profits. As leaders in the Americas sign free-trade agreements that allow corporations to streamline operations and reach larger markets, it is no surprise that publishing giants such as Bertelsmann's Random House and Alfaguara are overcoming language differences that have created borders in the publishing industry. The unintended consequence of such business decisions, however, is the opportunity for readers in the Americas for greater dialogue and shared experience. As long as publishing institutions remain solely national enterprises defined by language, hemispheric literary production is limited to an exchange between distinct cultural others. However, as these institutions respond to population shifts and the opening of markets, they become more transnational and they carve out discursive spaces within which an inter-American dialogue can take place.

Next, selected case studies help to illustrate these shifts in the literary marketplace. Although Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez's 1967 novel *Cien años de soledad* received almost immediate international attention and by the late 1960s the Latin American literary boom was a well documented literary phenomenon, Gregory Rabassa's much heralded translation did not appear until 1970, three years after the novel first appeared in Spanish. This was a very fast translation time for the period and the English-language release of García Márquez's earlier works soon followed. Today, transla-

tors are put to work on a text before the initial release of the work and many novels appear in English and in Spanish within months of one another. And publishers made an unprecedented move with the release of García Márquez's 1996 novel *Noticia de un sequestro*. The work was released in Edith Grossman's translation as *News of a Kidnapping* (1997) just a year after the Spanish-language publication; however, Penguin released this novel in Spanish in the US before the work was released in English. Penguin Ediciónes issued a 25,000 first copy Spanish-language printing for the US market and backed this with a $50,000 marketing campaign (see Lopez 16). Today, those Spanish language numbers have grown. In 2003, Knopf also released the original Spanish-language version of García Márquez's memoir *Vivir para contarla* with an initial 50,000 copy print run for the hardcover Spanish-language version for distribution in the US, followed by a paperback run of 75,000 books in Spanish for US readers (see Manners <http://www.criticasmagazine.com/article/CA330195.html>). These numbers demonstrate Knopf's large expectations for US Spanish-language readership. More recently, Knopf has re-released both Spanish and English language editions of García Márquez's novels *Cien Años de Soledad* (*One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Trans. Edith Grossman) and *El amor en los tiempos de cólera* (*Love in the Time of Cholera*, Trans. Edith Grossman) as they were selected as book club picks by the wildly popular Oprah Winfrey and in the case of *Love in the Time of Cholera*, made into a Hollywood film (2008). Clearly, the tremendous popularity of García Márquez's works in the US and worldwide, along with his Nobel Prize offered him a significant amount of authority as a literary figure and his publication and reception history is guided by his international recognition and best-seller status.

The publication and reception history of Chicana American author Sandra Cisneros offers another perspective. Contemporary Mexican and by extension Latin American readers have typically not been a large audience for works by US Latinos and Latinas. Until the 1990s, US Latinos were not translated regularly despite (or perhaps because of the fact that) their works explored the relationship between the US and Latin America and the hybrid experience of being a Latino in the US. Cisneros is perhaps the most well-known Chicana American author and her work *The House on Mango Street* (1989) has been one of the leading sellers for the Knopf paperback imprint Vintage. She was one of the first US Latino authors to be translated into Spanish and, yet, *The House on Mango Street* was not translated until 1994, six years after its initial publication. The Spanish-language version became one of the foundational works for Vintage's expansion into the Spanish-language market with *Vintage espanol*. Although *Mango Street* was translated by the well-known and widely respected Mexican author and journalist Elena Poniatowska, the work was not widely read in Latin America. Much has changed in 2003, when Vintage published Cisneros's new novel *Caramelo* with a much different marketing strategy. They released the work simultaneously in English and in Spanish with an initial printing of 100,000 books in English and 20,000 in Spanish. The novel has sold more than 13,000 hardcover editions in Spanish in the first year; these are large numbers, especially because Knopf has typically considered Cisneros a paperback bestseller). In September 2003 they released the paperback version of the novel with a run of 100,000 in English and 40,000 in Spanish. The publicity tour for the paperback release targeted Spanish-language readership of the US. What is also interesting about this release is that Random House sent Cisneros on publicity tours in Spanish-speaking countries including Mexico and Spain (see Manners <http://www.criticasmagazine.com/article/CA330195.html>).

The above brief case studies demonstrate the various ways in which the market for books in the Americas is changing. As publishing houses solidify into transnational institutions that are huge corporate conglomerates, however, the economic and political control over what we read is placed in the hands of fewer and fewer editors and their publishing houses. This leaves more space for censorship of texts, for they are they are less willing to take risks on new or less well-known authors. Many of the novels that are translated and released simultaneously are popular bestsellers that do little more than a mainstream Hollywood film or a television show would to discourage stereotypes and encourage notions of difference. At the same time, a number of authors are taking advantage of this shifting field to

redefine the problematic and largely misunderstood relationships between nations in the Americas. One writer who is taking advantage of these new modes of literary distribution and consumption and who negotiates the oppositional forces of corporate publishing and self-fashioning through the world wide web and the internet is the Chilean journalist and novelist Alberto Fuguet. Fuguet has had a truly transnational life. He was born in California of Chilean parents and he describes his early years, much like Mexican author Carlos Fuentes does, as that of a typical middle-class, US-American boy, interested in Hollywood movies and swim parties. His family moved to Chile when he was thirteen. Knowing close to nothing about Chilean culture and next to no Spanish, he was forced to make sense of this new world and new language on his own. He describes the experience as an exile in reverse. While Fuguet has published five novels, he became an international literary figure with the release in 1996 of the collection of stories, *McOndo*. In this volume of stories by South American writers, the editors -- Fuguet and fellow Chilean Sergio Gómez -- argued that "McOndo" was the voice of a new generation of Latin American writers. This new voice was urban, edgy, and laden with pop culture references and challenged the "quaint folkloric sensibility of Magical Realism" (Fuguet, "Magical Neoliberalism" 66). The authors in the collection are products of globalization who are "living in cities all over South America, hooked on cable TV (CNN en español), addicted to movies and connected to the Net, we are far away from the jalapeno-scented, siesta-happy atmosphere that permeates too much of the South American literary landscape" (Fuguet, "I Am Not a Magical Realist!" <http://www.salon.com/june97/magical970611.html>).

Fuguet's term McOndo, a combination of McDonalds, Macintosh, and Condo that takes on the homeland of Colonel Aureliano Buendia in García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, had all the political punch of a good one liner and, with the release party held in McDonalds in Santiago, made for good press and fodder for critics throughout Latin America and Spain. He was harshly criticized as a sell out to US-American imperialism, an upper-middle-class spoiled brat who is unconcerned with political problems and out of touch with the rural, indigenous roots of his country. He was named the bad-boy of South American literature, even, in true global style, the Eminem of Chile. Much of his literary work since *McOndo* deals with a new type of cultural *mestizaje*, a mixing not of the Spanish and the Indigenous peoples but, rather, a mixing on a global level. Fuguet does not depict so much the loss of cultural authenticity or the *angst* of an individual caught between two cultures, although that is present from time to time, but that of individuals interacting on a new globalized field of cultural interrelations. Rather than viewing cultural influence as moving from center to periphery, he sees influence and exchange working both ways. Fuguet takes up this idea again in 2000, in another short story collection he edited with Bolivian novelist Edmundo Paz Soldán entitled *Se habla español: Vóces Latinas en USA*. This collection made up of Latin Americans writing stories about the US in Spanish explores the diverse experiences of Latin Americans in the US and interrogates the notion of a US center and the Latin American as an exotic other. In the introduction, Fuguet and Paz Soldán explain that their goal is to overturn the typical trope of the North American lost, trapped or seduced somewhere in the wilds of Latin America. In this collection, they say, it is the Latin American who is lost, trapped, seduced, somewhere in the wilds of the exotic and dangerous United States.

Fuguet's most recent novel, *Las películas de mi vida*, is his clearest articulation of transnational experience yet. One of the novel's themes is earthquakes, the unpredictability and unstableness of family relationships, politics, and even of the ground beneath us, and faults and fissures that connect, in fragmented ways, the US and Chile. Another theme is the movies. On the plane between Santiago and Los Angles, seismologist Beltrán Soler meets a woman who is making a list of all the movies of her life, a kind of cinematic memoir. In Los Angeles, Beltrán becomes subsumed with memories of his childhood in California and begins to compose his own list of movies, written as an email to the woman he met on the plane. The movies become the organizing principle of the novel and the chapters move between the narrator's experience seeing a film and the connections to his life at the time. The first half of the novel takes place in Los Angeles and the second in Santiago. In the first part of the

novel, the author captures the details of a California childhood in the early 1970s. The protagonist Beltrán Soler's family lives on Babbitt Street, a *cul-de-sac* in Encino, in the San Fernando Valley, where everyone on the block was Jewish and they celebrated the Sabbath before the Brady Bunch came on (115). His grandparents drive a sky blue Mercury Cougar with an antenna "sporting a little ball with the '76 logo" (106) and his father delivers Wonder Bread for living. In elementary school, he carries an HR Puf'n'stuf lunchbox with Lipton onion soup in the thermos to school where Mark Spitz, the Olympic swimmer, was everyone's idol. Beltrán plays the banjo like Danny in one of the three Partridge Family cover bands in the neighborhood and listens to the Sunday night alternative, stoner program Dr. Demento, on 93 KHJ" (139). When he travels to Chile for a summer vacation that unexpectedly turns into a permanent stay, he sees initially the new Chilean landscape through Hollywood's eyes. He sees everything in black and white. He says that "Rather than a Third World country, the whole scene [at the airport] seemed like the opening of an old B-movie" (175). But as years pass, he loses his accent and becomes a Chilean adolescent. Although the films that Beltrán sees are from the US and initially they are reminders of his life in California, as Beltrán becomes more at home in Chile, he understands them in terms of his life and of his adolescent experiences. He and his grandfather have to leave the Cine Lido in Santiago before the movie *Earthquake* ends because Beltrán's grandfather was not used to Sensurround. The experience of the film was too close to the earthquake he experienced in *Valdívia* sixteen years earlier, and he fled the theater pale, weak, and trembling. The following year, seeing Jacqueline Bisset in *The Deep* initiates Beltrán's sexual awakening, while the 1979 film *Players*, which Beltrán sees in the Cine Providencia in Santiago, brings him to tears as it makes him confront his relationship with his father. He tells us that when watching this movie, "I realized that the movies that really speak to you are the ones that are really about yourself" (253). By 1979, when he sees *Players*, Beltrán has completely assimilated into Chilean culture. The movies he sees from the US speak not to his nostalgia for his former US self but, rather, to the daily realities of his Chilean adolescence.

What is more, the novel is transnational for it does not seem to be addressed to a single national audience. He writes *Las películas de mi vida* in Spanish; but while his Spanish is concise, it reads like a Spanish translation of English. In the novel, his narrator Beltrán makes almost no effort to explain details of his California childhood for his Spanish-language readers or to place the cultural references he makes in any comparative context. Some, like the 76 antenna ball and the Dr. Demento radio program, are so specific to time and place that they must leave some of his South American readers bewildered. Then, in the second half of the novel, when Beltrán is living in Santiago, he tells his readers that "A lot of people insist that *Star Wars* was the defining cinematic moment of their lives -- but … the cinematic event that everyone in South America wanted to be a part of was *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*" (242). Who are these "people" who loved *Star Wars* and are contrasted with South Americans? Who is the audience for a statement like this, written in Spanish? Similarly, the English translation of the novel does little to qualify Beltrán's references to specific places and cultural details of Santiago in the late 1970s. The result is that the author appears to be an insider in each location where both are home to him. There is no real cultural other. Perhaps there is no national or single linguistic audience for the novel, either. Rayo/HarperCollins published the work simultaneously in Spanish and in English and sent Fuguet on a publicity tour in both Latin America and the US. He promoted both versions of his novel at book fairs in the US, in South America, and Europe, and he reads from both the Spanish and English versions of his novel.

Fuguet also takes advantage of international venues to speak to larger audiences and to cultivate his public persona as an author. He contributes fiction, literary and cultural criticism, and film reviews to magazines in South America, the US, and Spain. His controversial text *McOndo* led to a feature article and his appearance on the cover of the 6 May 2002 issue of *Newsweek International* (see Margolis) and a feature piece in the *New York Times* (see LaPorte), and he maintains several blogs, e.g., <http://www.albertofuguet.blogspot.com> and a website <http://www.albertofuguet.cl> with links to

all of his literary, journalistic, and cinematic work. This public persona, in addition to his literary work, has contributed to his nomination for a number of international awards including being named one of the 50 Latin American leaders for the New Millenium by *Time International* in 1999. When Fuguet takes advantage of multiple publication forms, newspapers, journals, the web to speak to larger, and at times mass media audiences, some critics may wonder if Fuguet is selling out to US-American capitalism, marketing himself as a commodity and creating a corporate identity (see for example, Blanco <http://www.letras.s5.com/af081204.htm>; Campos <http://www.letras.s5.com/jc081204.htm>). While there is some truth here, we should not overlook the fact that such self-fashioning is also a way to acquire and maintain agency within the transnational publishing institution. With recognition and legitimacy from the publishing world, Fuguet and authors like him, can utilize the forces of international capital to disseminate their transnational messages.

In conclusion, readers between the US and Latin America have been divided, typically, by region, language, and geographical borders. Readers in the US and Latin America were viewed as separate audiences, consumers of different authors and different kinds of texts. Yet, the publishing industry, in response to market demands, has shifted institutional practices to make the same texts available to a wider and more diverse range of readers in the Americas. Simultaneous releases of English and Spanish language texts allow hemispheric audiences to be reading the same texts at the same time. This access alone, encourages reading across borders and across languages. As Bourdieu notes, "To publish is to make public, to make the unofficial the official" He argues that "Publication breaks censures" and "takes something hidden, secret, intimate or simply unspeakable … and speaking it from a position of authority recognized by everyone" (Reeser 672). Authors such as Fuguet are taking advantage of these shifts in audience and access in order to interrogate national narratives and reveal historical gaps. Their works can challenge the accepted symbolic order and push the boundaries of allowable discourse. This new transnational publishing industry provides a structural framework for inter-American reception of these works, authorizes these literary figures, imbues them with enough social capital in order to covey this heretical discourse to broader audiences.

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