Transcript for Introductory Episode
SPEAKERS
Joe Aguilar, John Galante

+++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++
INTRODUCTION

John Galante
Hi, I’m John Galante, I’m a historian of Latin America who specializes in migration and relations between South America and southern Europe. I also teach history and global studies at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, otherwise known as WPI.

Joe Aguilar
And I’m Joe Aguilar, a fiction writer. I specialize in speculative fiction and Chicano literature. I also teach creative writing and literature at WPI.

John Galante
And you are listening to Crossing Fronteras.

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John Galante
Welcome, everyone to the first episode of the Crossing Fronteras podcast. We are super excited to be here today to provide an outline of the content in this series on innovative scholarship and creative output focused on Latin America and the Caribbean.

So a little bit on my background, I'm a historian by training. I've been teaching at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, otherwise known as WPI, for eight years. And I co-direct the Latin American and Caribbean studies program for which we've developed classes hosted events, built a robust research profile among our faculty collaborators, and a whole lot more. Before I got my PhD, I was a journalist in New York and I worked for a time in Mexico City. I also attended the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University, focusing on Latin America, and I also worked as an energy markets consultant as the lead analyst covering the region. One of the things I enjoyed about this project was how I could pull all of those experiences into these conversations.

Joe Aguilar
So were so thrilled to be here. I'm Joe Aguilar, a fiction writer, author of the book Half Out Where. I've taught at WPI for five years where I specialize in speculative fiction and Chicano literature. I also edit the literary magazine Hex Literary, which publishes fantasy and science fiction.

John Galante
So the idea for this podcast emerged from a scholarly symposium that we hosted at WPI. It was hosted by the Latin American and Caribbean studies program in spring of 2020. The day after that symposium, we had a really interesting sort of workshop, debrief session, where participants who had presented
works in progress the day before, and received feedback on them from colleagues from around New England, got together to kind of reflect on what happened the day before. And we talked about broader themes that came up and connections among different works, that people were working on during the workshop.

We also thought, well, what can we do with this now? What can we do next? And we thought about, you know, some of the typical things that might come out of a scholarly symposium like that. We thought about publishing a special issue of a scholarly journal, we talked about a collected volume, that we could sort of maybe publish with an academic press, things that are quite common, right, in academia.

But we also wondered whether that was the best medium to do so, whether we wanted to really take on a project like that, you know, that some people had done before, or that some people were kind of nervous to sort of commit to in a sense. And this idea for the podcast came out of that discussion, like what if we were able to sort of recreate, in some sense, the scholarly workshop, but for a recording and for a potentially an audience that may not just reach other scholars, but could reach, you know, a wider audience.

So this project definitely evolved from there. Ultimately, we decided not to have sort of short episodes that focus just on a single piece of writing a book or a journal article, like a scholarly symposium might. But to try to also capture scholarly profiles, scholarly trajectories, creative pursuits that different authors and creatives might have, and the origins and inspirations behind the scholarship and the creative works. So we thought we could you know, in conversation, talk about people's backgrounds, talk about larger questions that extend from their work, and also ask them questions about other interests that they might have, about their professional careers, about what they think about certain topics, you know, that are very topical, in a sense, and to have open conversations sometimes, to think out loud, even. And I think, ultimately, we were able to do that. And I'm really proud of kind of the way that the series developed along those lines.

So I also didn't feel like I could do this alone, right? The other participants in the symposium were interested in the idea, but not so much kind of engaging in the project, just because you know, of the time it might take, and that sort of thing. So I ended up thinking of who might I do this with, my colleague, Joe Aguilar, who I knew quite well socially, professionally. You know, I found him curious and thoughtful and a good conversationalist. We met and we I told him the idea and he, you know, was willing to sign on.

And we put together I think, a great list of participants, which in the end, really makes this project and this podcast shine. It's not just those people who participated in the symposium. There's some who participated. There's others who we kind of talked to later. And I think we have a really great group of participants here. It's a diverse group in terms of interests, in terms of background, a group doing really innovative work, a set of people who are also I think, really kind and curious and reflective and thoughtful and interested in their work, but also interested in the world and how it works. They are academics but they are much more than that. And I think that really comes through in the podcast.
I hope that the listener can appreciate that and the insights, both individual and collective, that are kind of situated in this series.

Joe Aguilar
So after John and I had finalized the list, we decided it would be wise to meet with each of our subjects beforehand to talk through the format of the podcast, get a sense of their current and future research projects and see what they’d like to talk about during their interview, which scholarship of theirs we should read ahead of time.

And then as a bonus, we got to sample parts of New England I'd never been to before. For example, before our meeting with Macarena Gómez Barris, we strolled around the Brown campus in Providence on the very first day of spring, while students were throwing frisbees on the lawn. Javier Puente introduced us to Peruvian Taste in Charlestown, which is utterly delicious. It was a chance for me to practice Spanish which to my disappointment was rusty enough for me that the server responded to me in English when I tried to check out. Ginetta Candelario met us for coffee and drinks at a small, crunchy, charming coffee shop in Northampton where I'd never been before. Ramón Rivera took us to Plant City in Providence, this multi-level multi restaurant vegan experience, kind of needs to be seen to be understood.

And there I really sensed the excitement around the podcast itself as we were eating vegan pizza and listening to Ramón explain his incredible globe-spanning documentary project inspired by his childhood love of astronomy. I think that was the moment where things felt like they were taking shape to me.

The diversity of food, regions, and conversations gave me a sense of mounting excitement for the podcast itself. And it seemed also just good to be out in New England after two years of being indoors with the pandemic. It seemed as though everyone we talked with, we were able to connect to on some level. Everyone we've met with agreed to be on the podcast. People seemed so eager, generous, encouraging about the project. It was wonderful to connect scholarship to the scholar, and it seemed to foreshadow really good things for the studio experience itself.

It wasn't without setbacks, of course, I'm a very nervous individual and especially nervous driver, and this required a lot of driving. On the way back from Providence my tire blew out on the highway 15 minutes from Worcester. I found myself stranded on this narrow strip of median in an area AAA wouldn't serve us for some reason. I was very hungry. I called the police. While night was falling cars were zooming by. One thing this podcast taught me as the only thing I like less than driving in New England is driving in Los Angeles.

But we had some wonderful, really incredible resources through WPI that have helped so much. I'm so grateful for the support of WPI, especially the Global Labs. I'd like to thank Steve McCauley, Varun Bhat, and Sam Ollari, in particular, who were instrumental in guiding us through the process.

John Galante
Yeah so another thing I think you're highlighting Joe here is that we needed to work out some serious logistics. We had this idea for this podcast, we thought we had a good sense of what we might be able
to do. But it required a lot of logistics and planning to kind of make this happen, which was no small feat. And thanks, Joe, for all the time we spent traveling and to these places to to meet and get to know our eventual guests. I think it's it was such an important part of the process. And I knew it would be helpful. But I didn't know how critical it would be. Especially once we arrived to the studio, we felt like we knew them to a certain degree. But we also talked to them during those initial meetings about what they were interested in getting out of the project, what they wanted to talk about, that wasn't just related to their work. And it colored, I think in important ways, in really useful ways, interesting ways, the conversations and brought more diversity into those conversations.

We also needed a recording studio, and we talked a lot about what different options we we have. But I live in Somerville, Massachusetts and sometimes I walk to the train to get to Worcester where I work, and I had walked past the PRX Podcast Studio a number of times on my way to the train and my kids play at a playground that's right next door. And I just basically said, Oh I'm gonna look into what this podcast thing is all about, and have learned so much and gained so much from from our interactions with it. It's in Allston, Massachusetts, which is a neighborhood of Boston, just across the Charles River from Cambridge. Great studio. They have engineers there. This woman Magdiela Matta was super-helpful in terms of arranging things and supporting us in the studio, among others who were participating from the PRX Studio during during our recordings.

So we did have to pay for the studio, which meant that we needed to raise money. And fortunately, we had a grant, the Latin American and Caribbean Studies program at WPI had a grant in place already from the US Department of Education, the Undergraduate International Studies and Foreign Language program at the US Department of Education. And we were able to request that some of that money be moved to support this podcast project. And that was critical, not only for reserving studio time, but also for ultimately hiring an editor and a producer, Jill Ruby, who has been amazing and has really worked to kind of transform these recording sessions into the episodes that you're gonna hear.

Joe Aguilar
So talking a bit about the conceptualization of the name for our podcast. Based on our diverse and interdisciplinary guest lineup, we wanted a name that itself crossed borders linguistically, and suggested the different crafts and areas our interviewees engage in. Scholars we talked to had such varied and different interests and areas of expertise. They're truly interdisciplinary thinkers.

I remember Ginetta Candelario saying, I'm a closet historian and she edits the interdisciplinary journal Meridians. In her own words, “Feminist knowledge production always has included art, creative writing, performing arts, visual arts, etc.” Then, Javier Puente does ethnography as does Carmen Jarrín, and then I'm thinking of Macarena Gómez-Barris and her scholarship, she's also an accomplished creative writer. Then there's Ramón Rivera who studied philosophy as an undergrad, and that heavily influenced the direction of his own filmmaking. Eden Medina works in STS where people use methods from the Humanities and Social Sciences to study science and technology.

John Galante
And then there's Carlos Odria, he studied classical guitar in his youth but he's also deeply influenced by heavy metal, later discovered jazz when he was studying in Florida, where there was a huge influence
of Brazilian musicians. And you can hear this diversity in his music. You'll hear his music throughout each episode. Here's one that captures the exploration, the contemplative movement, the thinking-out-loud that our guests so generously offered to us.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

And here's another one that I think highlights our guests' creativity, innovation, and improvisation in their interdisciplinary work.

MUSICAL INTERLUDE

John and I ourselves are interdisciplinary scholars. I write in other genres besides fiction writing. I teach literature. My own recent memoir project involves a degree of ethnography. So all of those things together seem to suggest a podcast name that captured this interdisciplinary nature.

John Galante
Yeah, I agree, Joe, I mean, that that Crossing Fronteras theme, and we conceived it before we did any of the interviews, essentially, we had met some of our participants at the time, but we hadn't recorded anything yet. But I do think it really ended up working in in interesting ways, as you're mentioning, to demonstrate the degree to which border crossing is so critical in Latin American and Caribbean Studies in so many different ways.

One theme that that emerged for me was these innovative thinkers and the way that they were addressing power and inequality, advocacy, resistance, sometimes across boundaries, not just boundaries in terms of geographic boundaries, although many of them are transnational scholars also, but how they're moving past traditional categories, traditional identities, traditional types of solidarities in their thinking.

Like you said, I was also really struck by some comments made by Ginetta Candelario about gender and race in the Dominican Republic, as she sort of took us through early feminist experiences in that country, in the 19th century, but then traced an interesting line between those experiences and some of the leading advocates of Dominican feminism in the mid-20th century during the dictatorial regime of Rafael Trujillo. But interestingly, the conversation it didn't stop there. We were able to extend from those experiences to discussions of Dominican feminism and its connections to US-Dominican relations, right, and we broached questions about intersectionality by considering gender and race simultaneously, in transnational perspective. We were even able to get her insights on the term Latinx and related terms that are debated and sometimes contested in the present.

Which makes me also think about our conversation with Javier Puente, who had very strong opinions and a really fascinating perspective on identity politics in the United States today, and how it impacts and how it sometimes limits, in fact, open debate and discourse in academia and in other places and environments in the United States. And we built that discussion from a conversation about his historical work on indigenous and rural communities in the Central Sierra region of Peru and some of his more recent work that is extending from that project as he continues his scholarly trajectory.
Scholarly trajectory was definitely one of the things that I was sort of floored by during these conversations. One of the most fascinating was that Carmen Jarrín, whose interests have moved from work on plastic surgery and notions of public health and nationalism in Brazil, to studies of trans and travesti advocacy, the politics of gender affirmation and trans mobilization in the context of right-wing nationalism in Brazil, and onward and onward from there. And we were able to consider Carmen’s work in transnational perspective again.

And, you know, Carmen is an anthropologist, Javier is a trained historian, Ginetta is a sociologist by training yet their work was so fundamentally connected to each other. It was driven by similar notions, again, of solidarity and mobilization, and resistance and creativity and joy. It's really fascinating just to think about those three conversations in relation to one another.

Joe Aguilar
Another theme I saw coming forward was water and the fluidity of water. It felt like a strong theme uniting the work, especially of Ramón Rivera, Carlos Odria, and Kouichi Hagimoto. For each of those three scholars the idea of home itself was fluid. Migration is a part of their identity as individuals and as scholars. For example, Koichi, a native of Japan, studied Spanish and literature in the United States. And his scholarship later came into focus around Japanese writers living in Latin American countries and writing about that experience. Carlos is originally from Peru while Ramón is from Puerto Rico, although he also studied film in Paris.

The way water physically moves and enables movement is also important for these three scholars, geographically, thematically, and metaphorically. For example, Koichi his most recent research revolves around Transpacific Studies that is the traffic of culture across the ocean between Asian countries and South America. Carlos Odria’s beautiful music which we’ve woven like a river through our podcast itself. Carlos says about the way water moves, “fluidity translates into being healthy,” which connects to his own readings on Daoism. Ramón Rivera’s films are also places of fluidity, shifting between time period and location. One moment you’re following a Peruvian fisherman, who is now navigating by GPS instead of the traditional navigation by stars, memory, history, the movement of tides and wind. And then the next moment you’re watching an interview with a Quechua-speaking filmmaker working 11,000 feet above sea level, but you never feel lost. There’s a unity of vision that guides you through that you can trust.

All three of these scholars are explorers and innovators themselves drawing from diverse disciplines and sources to make something new. Koichi uses the term Transpacific modernity in reference to his research on how Japan helped shape the Argentinian vision in the early 20th century. Carlos takes just as much inspiration from classical guitar studies as he does from his love of heavy metal. While Ramon’s latest project uses Puerto Rican government films to collage together a film that's also an essay.

John Galante
Yeah, totally Joe. I really enjoyed and learned a ton from these conversations. And one of the things that that I drew out of several conversations was the degree to which ideas and scholarship and
creative work is being built around notions and positionalities of the Global South, even when thinking just about Latin America. These engagements with modernity, with knowledge creation, with innovation, and just general perspectives and perceptions that emerge in Global South thinking.

There were historical trajectories too that really surprised me that extended back to Aarti Madan’s considerations of connections during the late-19th century and early-20th centuries between Argentina and South Asia, with Indian culture and spiritual forms, even during the period of the British Raj. Her discoveries about how elites in Argentina who so often had Western-centric points of view, we’re looking for alternative connections and inspirations and ideas about humanity across borders, especially in the wake of the horrors of World War One. And how Indian culture, and Indian spirituality and practices like yoga could have influences on intellectual leaders in Argentina. That Transpacific perspective, which we hear so much about today has a much earlier history. Things like South-South relations, it feels so important to know more about the historical origins of some of those connections.

And that dovetails with the conversation we had with Macarena Gómez-Barris, who has been a leader in thinking about perspectives and knowledge creation and critiques of global capitalism and resistance to extractive industries in Latin America, and its indigenous communities especially, from the perspective of the Global South. But it was also so interesting to talk with Macarena about how her thinking and creative scholarship and advocacy has expanded to include considerations of rights of nature and non-human subjects in developing ideas around alternative knowledge systems, and ways of knowing and being, again, in opposition to standard notions of modernity.

Meanwhile, in a different conversation, we talked with Eden Medina about technology and modernity, as perceived by the government of Salvador Allende in 1970s Chile. And while Eden is a scholar of Science and Technology Studies and the History of Science and Technology, it was so fascinating to hear her take on technological adoption and innovation through adaptation in places like Chile during that time, where resources were scarce and there was this innovative national development project happening in relation to Allende’s efforts to construct a Chilean path to socialism through democratic means. Eden had so much to say that I think is so important to understanding science and technology today. And also she talked a lot about how she brought her work to the classroom at MIT in such interesting ways.

Joe Aguilar
In addition to their scholarship, everyone we interviewed is also a teacher. We see this podcast as a pedagogical tool. Listeners can learn from it, as we did, and if you are a teacher, we also encourage you to share it with your students. This podcast provides a window into conversations happening in teaching and learning right now.

We really hope you enjoy Crossing Fronteras.

+++++MUSICAL INTERLUDE+++++
CREDITS

John Galante
You’ve been listening to Crossing Fronteras. I’m your co-host John Galante, a historian of Latin American and an Associate Professor at Worcester Polytechnic Institute as well as the creator and executive producer of the podcast series.

Joe Aguilar
And I’m your co-host Joe Aguilar, a fiction writer and an Assistant Professor at WPI, and an executive producer of the podcast series.

John Galante
This show surveys the unique ecosystem of contemporary scholarship and art being generated by scholars and creatives in New England who are working in Latin American and Caribbean Studies.

Joe Aguilar
Our series producer is Jill Ruby. Original music for our series was written, performed, and recorded by Carlos Odria. This podcast was recorded at PRX Podcast Garage in Boston, Massachusetts, with the help of Magdiela Matta. Additional support came from a fellowship provided by the Global Labs at WPI, with special assistance from Steve McCauley, Varun Bhat, and Sam Ollari.

John Galante
The creation of the podcast was also facilitated by WPI’s Humanities & Arts Department. Funding was provided by an Undergraduate International Studies and Foreign Language grant from the US Department of Education.

We want to thank all of the people and institutions that helped us in this process.