GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Comparison Against Mastery

By Lanie Millar | March 29, 2025

- **Histories:** Were you to write a (pre-?) history of the field, what are the names and texts it would include?
- **Methods:** What does the research process (identifying materials, fieldwork, archival research, and dealing with lack of access to materials, etc.) look like in the context of building connections between Africa and Latin America?
- **Futures:** What is (or could be) the relationship of scholarship on Latin America-Africa to other possible South-South comparisons?

While literary and cultural comparisons bridging Latin America and Africa have only relatively recently found institutional space, sites of encounter and discussion among African and Latin American artists and intellectuals have a much longer history. Throughout the twentieth century, artists and intellectuals met, wrote to and about each other, and theorized points of connection and differences among their experiences, histories, and artistic expressions. My brief comments will use this history to think about the following prompts the editors of this conversation have suggested: a pre-history of the field of Latin American-African comparison and the research process (identifying materials, fieldwork, archival research, and dealing with lack of access to materials, etc.) in the context of building connections between Africa and Latin America, which lead to a suggestion regarding the relationship of scholarship on Latin America-Africa to other possible South-South comparisons.

A pre-history for our field would have to look to the series of congresses and meetings that took place over the course of the twentieth century, beginning with the meetings of the Pan-African Congresses of the early twentieth century, and continuing with the series of meetings with which most scholars working in these areas are already familiar: the Black Artists and Writers' conferences in Paris (1956) and Rome (1959), the Cultural Congress of Havana (1968), and the Négritude and Latin America conference in Dakar (1974), among others. It is through these meetings that we can trace the discourses through which Latin American and African experiences and cultural expressions begin to be read together: discourses of pan-African identity, Négritude, tricontinentalism, and third-world internationalism, which lead into concepts of the Black Atlantic, Global South Atlantic, and Global South. In many cases, these are the discourses on which contemporary scholars have built our own comparative projects. What is evident from such a prehistory is that the politics and the ethics of an African-Latin American comparative axis are anti- and decolonial. This is obvious enough so as to perhaps not need articulating, but it is worth signaling, as it helps to both organize and open our field to different grounds for comparison as well as opening it to genealogies that see the Atlantic routes in increasingly complex ways.

A clear articulation of racial solidarity between Africa and the African diaspora in the Americas is evident, for example, in meetings from the first half of the twentieth century, as well as accompanying political and artistic programs focused on political independence and the rehabilitation of Black cultural expressions. Aimé Césaire's address to the 1956 Paris Congress, for example, speaks against an understanding of the units of analysis of culture as solely national or unified by language, arguing that the solidarity that links the participants is both "horizontal… created by the colonial or semicolonial or paracolonial situation that has been imposed on us from without" as well as "vertical," a historical solidarity in the expansion of cultures throughout the world that originate in African cultures (2010, 129-30). Frantz Fanon's addresses at both the 1956 Paris and 1959 Rome conferences foreground the national liberation question as foundational to cultural production—controversially, as scholars such as Christopher Bonner (2019) and David Macey (2001) have noted—that becomes a central focus of subsequent meetings. Contributions to the Cultural Congress of Havana in 1968 also take this tack: Haitian poet René Depestre's call for decolonization through revolution (2015, 125) as the key to a new culture echoes Angolan intellectual Mário Pinto de Andrade's claim that "a new literature rises from the fire of combat" (2024, 47). This new literature is already evident, according to both authors, in the revolutionary Cuba of the 1960s.

The discussions carried out at these conferences reveal the ways that intellectuals who engaged with each other at such meetings thought about the intersections between Latin American and African cultural and political questions. Their conversations thus allow us to trace subsequent scholarship that examines Latin American and African cultural expression in more expansive ways. The varied delegations in attendance at these conferences (including participants from still-colonized areas of the globe as well as Europe, the United States, and Latin America) and the contributions of speakers to these conferences make it clear that questions of colonization and underdevelopment as well as issues of racial solidarity were dynamic topics of debate—and disagreement—from a wide variety of perspectives and political situations. This expansive participation reveals that congress attendees saw these questions as relevant for diverse communities from across geographies and languages. A broad understanding of the intersections between cultural and political decolonization, racial solidarity, and revolutionary praxis drawn from these congresses thus allows us to conceive of comparison as expanding outward from the two primary axes that have defined comparison in the Atlantic world: the routes of European conquest (the Europe-Africa or Europe-Americas axes) and the route of the Middle Passage (the Africa-Americas axis), defined by permanent displacement and the profound bodily and epistemological violence of enslavement. In the context of the twentieth-century congresses, new routes of comparison thus become legible: the influence of Black writers and artists from the Americas on African cultural development, for example; the cross-pollination among Latin American and North American poets, as well as points of tension and resistance that emerge from these networks of communication.

When we map comparison in this way, a zig-zagging movement across the Atlantic and around the continents, islands, and seas that comprise the African and Latin American regions becomes visible. That is, we can find routes of comparison that expand beyond conceptualizing African cultures as originary and tracing how they are subsequently adapted in the diaspora. Similarly, we can read understandings of political decolonization as

encompassing thinkers and areas beyond just those on the African continent and/ or under direct colonial occupation. Such a reconfiguration leads us to contemporary scholarship in historically-based studies around particular encounters, events, and engagements: Estefanía Bournot's work (2022) on Latinité, Pan-Africanism and Négritude, Sarah Quesada's book (2022) on African roots in key figures in contemporary Caribbean and Latinx literatures, or my own book (2019) on Cuban and Angolan narrative during and after the Cold War. These are studies that move in multiple directions across and around the Atlantic. We can also trace important works of what might be considered asynchronous or asymmetrical comparison, such as Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra's book (2019) on the dictator novel from the nineteenth-century classic *Facundo* (1845)by Argentine Domingo Faustino Sarmiento to Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006),and Stefan Helgesson's recent study (2022) of the co-constitution of decolonization and critical literary practice in Brazil, Senegal, South Africa, and Eastern Africa.

This leads me to the second question I will address, which are the challenges of the research process: materials, archives, and fieldwork. As any critic undertaking comparative work rooted in the Global South will confirm, building an archive in places with histories of enslavement and colonial occupation can be difficult, as the structural legacies of these phenomena create barriers. These barriers might take the form of the particularities of institutional development and limited access, the uneven conservation of material artifacts, and the limited access of writers in parts of Latin America and Africa to publication and circulation, especially outside their home regions. For example, while writing my book *Forms of Disappointment: Cuban and Angolan Narrative After the Cold War* (2019), it was extraordinarily difficult to access the films and newsreels that formed some of the earliest and most important artifacts of feelings of solidarity and disappointment that Cubans and Angolans shared while Cuba was involved in the Angolan war (1976-1991). I was not able to find archives in Cuba or Angola that provided public access to the films I knew about, or as a result discover additional ones that surely do or did exist. This situation might stem from the precarious states of preservation of materials, or because institutions lacked the infrastructure to be able to make them available to researchers. I was able to view some films in disperse libraries in the U.S., on (sometimes ephemeral) websites, or through the generosity of individuals such as Cuban director Emilio Óscar Alcalde, who sent me a copy of his undistributed film *El encanto del regreso* (1991), which allowed me to write briefly about this important film in my book. Like other researchers of African-Latin American comparison, I had to start with a premise of *incompleteness*, building a study out of the artifacts I could find and access while knowing there were many others that remained unknown or unavailable.

In parallel to the structural barriers to archival and textual materials, the question of what languages the producers of the texts and cultural objects we study use, who has access to those languages in places that conserve colonial languages, and what cultural manifestations take place in what in Lusophone Africa—one of the sites of my own research—are termed "national languages" (*línguas nacionais*),presents another challenge. This phenomenon was also a central concern of the intellectuals who circulated as part of the twentieth-century meetings I have outlined above, as well as the topic of a significant body of postcolonial theory and criticism by theorists such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Taban Lo Liyong, and Henry Owuor-Anyumba, as well as such figures as Lydia Cabrera and Gilberto Freyre.[1] I would also add that it comprises an ongoing challenge to the institutional

legibility of Latin America-Africa comparison, and South-South comparison more generally.

Many or most scholars working at the intersections of Africa and Latin America work in multiple languages. I don't think it would be too sweeping to say that regardless of how many languages we publish or research in, however, most or all of us are also working alongside languages and linguistic traditions that we do not have access to as well as with materials that have persisted in incomplete or partial states of preservation or access. The necessity for travel (and funding to support that travel), language maintenance and cultural familiarity, and an ethics of collaboration with interlocutors often located at far remove from each other require humility from scholars dedicated to these projects. Alongside humility in terms of our own individual abilities and capacities, these factors make plain that all such comparative scholarship is collaborative: we depend on the expertise and insights of many other scholars, artists, librarians, and archivists with different access; the sharing of primary and secondary materials; and the outright generosity of others we encounter while carrying out our research. We thus are constantly placed in situations where we must acknowledge our *non-mastery*, or incomplete mastery, of the materials we write about, as well as of areas adjacent to or outside of our scholarly training that are always part of Africa-Latin America comparison.

Rather than a colonial presumption to "*dominar*"—the verb in Spanish and Portuguese that means both "to dominate" and "to master"—the languages, traditions, and cultural objects of our study, I think these factors demand from scholars working in our fields the recognition of what Édouard Glissant has called opacity, which in turn requires of us an ethical gesture of humility and generosity in the face of interlocutors and materials that must always remain partially or completely inaccessible to us. In her work on a range of key twentieth-century anti-colonial thinkers and writers, Juliette Singh has theorized the implicit and explicit violence that accompanies "mastery" when understood as requiring full submission of the object or entity that is *mastered*. For Singh, mastery requires "splitting" the object or entity—or splitting from it—to establish boundaries between the master and the mastered, and thus its complete "subordination," in a process that extends over time, making the master and his mastery of the other seem permanent (2018, 12-14). The violence inherent to mastery, as Singh theorizes it, is antithetical to the spirit of the anti-colonial and decolonial politics that animate the trajectory of Africa-Latin American comparison that I have traced above, and that forms the core of much—or most—of such contemporary scholarship as well.

My argument is not that scholars should eschew pursuing serious linguistic competence, immersive cultural and textual familiarity, or expansive exposure to the networks of texts, objects, and people that comprise our areas of focus. Rather, it is that any such pursuit be conscious of its own limitations and contingencies. A scholarly position "against mastery," for comparatists working in Latin America and Africa, therefore, can also be a strength in serving as a model for other modes of South-South comparison: a research practice that responds to the points of resistance and opacity between sites of comparison. A conscious recognition of our *lack* of mastery in carrying out our scholarship in turn requires us to be open to revision and collaboration and to acknowledge our dependence on the expertise of many others, and thus should reflect the decolonial ethics that originate and make possible the composition of this field.

References

Andrade, Mário Pinto de. 2024 [1968]. “Culture and Armed Struggle.” *The Revolution Will Be a Poetic Act: African Culture and Decolonization*, edited by Lanie Millar, translated by Lanie Millar and Fabienne Moore, 44–49. New York: Polity Books.

Armillas-Tiseyra, Magalí. 2019. *The Dictator Novel. Writers and Politics in the Global South*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.

Bonner, Christopher. 2019. “Alioune Diop and the Cultural Politics of Negritude: Reading the First Congress of Black Writers and Artists, 1956.” *Research in African Literatures* 50, no. 2: 1–18.

Bournot, Estefanía. 2022. “‘A Feeling of Belonging’ – América Latina en los festivales panafricanos (1966-1977).” In *Geografías Caleidoscópicas: América Latina y sus imaginarios intercontinentales*, edited by Ineke Phaf-Rheinberger, Koichi Hagimoto, 75–96. Madrid: Iberoamericana Vervuert.

—. 2022. “*Négritude et Amérique Latine*: From the Black South Atlantic to the Third World.” *Comparative Literature Studies* 59, no. 1: 77-93.

Césaire, Aimé. 2010 [1956]. “Culture and Colonization,” translated by Brent Hayes Edwards. *Social Text*, 28, no. 2 : 127–44.

Depestre, René. 2015 [1968]. “The Winding Course of Negritude.” In *Souffles-Anfas: A Critical Anthology from the Moroccan Journal of Culture and Politics*, edited by Olivia C. Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio, translated by Laura Reeck, 120-125. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Fanon, Frantz. 1959. “Fondement réciproque de la culture nationale et des luttes de libération.” *Présence Africaine*, no. 24/25: 82–89.

—. 1956. “Racisme et culture.” *Présence Africaine*, no. 8/10: 122–31.

Glissant, Édouard. 1997 [1990]. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Helgesson, Stefan. 2022. *Decolonisations of Literature. Critical Practice in Africa and Brazil after 1945*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Macey, David. 2001. *Frantz Fanon: A Biography*. New York: Picador.

Millar, Lanie. 2019. *Forms of Disappointment. Cuban and Angolan Narrative After the Cold War*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Quesada, Sarah M. 2022. *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Singh, Julietta. 2018. *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglements*. Durhamm, NC: Duke University Press.

[1] Key texts in this vast bibliography include anticolonial writings such as Léopold Sédar Senghor's *Liberté V: Le Dialogue des cultures* (1993); Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Taban Lo Liyong, and Henry Owuor-Anyumba's "On the Abolition of the English Department" (1968), as well as studies of African linguistic roots in Caribbean and Brazilian language and cultural expression such as Lydia Cabrara's *La lengua sagrada de los Ñáñigos* (1988) or Gilberto Freyre's *Casa-grande e senzala* (1933), a pro-colonial text that nonetheless documented important evidence of African cultural transmission to Brazil.

About the Authors

Lanie Millar is Associate Professor of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Oregon, where she teaches and researches about Caribbean and Luso-Afro-Brazilian literatures and cultures. She is the author of *Forms of Disappointment. Cuban and Angolan Narrative After the Cold War* (SUNY Press, 2019), which argues that late 20th and early 21st century Cuban and Angolan novels enact a poetics of disappointment: narrative techniques which constitute a new formal and affective relationship to the histories of revolution shared across the South Atlantic. She is the editor and co-translator with Fabienne Moore of the volume *The Revolution Will Be a Poetic Act: African Culture and Decolonization* (Polity, 2024), essays by Angolan intellectual Mário Pinto de Andrade (1928-1990) on African liberation, national development, and Black cultural vindication. Her current research focuses on the intersection of race, gender, and empire especially in contemporary cultural texts about African empires in Angola, Brazil, and Mozambique.

How to Cite

Millar, Lanie. March 29, 2025. "Comparison Against Mastery." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.