GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Errantry as Method in South-South Scholarship

By Sophie Esch | March 29, 2025

- **Methods:** What are the core competencies and methodologies of Latin America-Africa scholarship?
- **Futures:** What is (or could be) the relationship of scholarship on Latin America-Africa to other possible South-South comparisons?

l'errant, qui n'est plus le voyageur ni le découvreur ni le conquérant, cherche à connaitre la totalité du monde et sait déjà qu'il ne l'accomplira jamais–et qu'en cela réside la beauté menacée du monde
Glissant

When pondering the question of core competencies and methodologies of scholarship on Latin America-Africa, I find myself returning to a recent classic in Afro-Caribbean thought: *Poétique de la relation* (1990; *Poetics of Relation*, 1997) by the Martinican Édouard Glissant (1928-2011). His poetics of relation "in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" offers a vision for a capacious comparative-relational methodology (1997, 11). As someone who has come to the field of transregional South-South comparisons as a Latin Americanist—that is: as someone who was not trained as an Africanist or a comparatist—I am particularly drawn to Glissant's notion of "errantry" *(l'errance*). I hope it will also speak to others looking to expand the gaze, scope, or connectivity of their scholarship, especially in regards to South-South cultural flows, entanglements, and resonances. In what follows, I parse out some of the relevant principles of Glissant's poetics of relation for research that links Africa and Latin America: errantry and humility; rhizomes over roots; and collaborative multilingualism.

Errantry and Humility

In academia, knowledge tends to operate in neatly marked and contained boxes: compartmentalized and departmentalized. As such, comprehensiveness, coverage, and "mastery" of one's specialty or subfield are usually paramount (e.g. the comprehensive exams of most literature graduate programs in the US). Glissant's proposal of "errantry" espouses an entirely different approach. In the aphoristic lyricism that characterizes his writing, he declares that "one who is errant (who is no longer traveler, discoverer, or conqueror) strives to know the totality of the world yet already knows he will never accomplish this—and knows that is precisely where the threatened beauty of the world

resides" (1997, 20). It is a powerful sentiment whose many layers are worth unpacking.

Errantry stands for "wandering" and expansiveness. In terms of scholarship, it entails moving beyond one's "area" and one's "language(s)" and to roam with curiosity and without a clear, preconceived path. In *Poétique de la relation*, Glissant rejects ideas of totality and argues instead for the "right to opacity" of cultures, societies, beings, and texts (1997, 189). Thus, errantry is an attitude that is not about "revealing" or "explaining" a culture but rather "a way of living the unity-diversity of the world" (1997, 79). In Glissant, errantry is fundamentally a non-colonial gesture in contrast to knight errantry, which was often highly colonial in nature (think the crusading knights in the Levant or the second sons of noblemen trying to make riches as *hidalgos* in the Americas). Rather than knighthood, we ought to think about errantry in relation to the "Wanderjahre" or "Walz," the still existing European guild tradition in which craftspeople, after finishing their apprenticeship, go on several journeying years to learn additional skills. This also fits well with the "craftsman attitude" any scholar should have as they go about their research and writing—indeed, *their* craft (Jensen 2017).

Errantry is also about intellectual humility and letting go of the notion of mastery (see Singh 2018). Once errant, the expert or the scholar turns into a wanderer. Rather than a teacher, they become a student, an apprentice, a journeywoman. For many scholars, engaging in Latin American-African studies will entail having to acquire and hone new skills, since most will have come up through a disciplinary path and thus not have equal training in both "areas." Latin American literature (Spanish & Portuguese) and Caribbean literature (French, Spanish, or English) are mostly taught separately from African literature (usually in English or French) and comparative literature has traditionally favored North-North or North-South over South-South comparisons (even for those few who might have studied in a more progressive and more open-minded literature department, blind spots and gaps in knowledge will, undoubtedly, remain). For academics trained to master their little box, venturing beyond one's intellectual foundation can be daunting. One needs to have what in my mother tongue is called, "Mut zur Lücke," which can be loosely translated as "daring to have gaps in knowledge." Such an admission requires humility in approach and attitude (see also Lanie Millar's reflection on this topic in this volume). Coming from the Latin *errare*, errantry contains both the notion "to wander" and "to err." It allows for making and (admitting) mistakes and gaps in knowledge. Many academics do not like to admit such gaps, but such humility is necessary for straying outside the bounds of their discipline. By advocating "Mut zur Lücke," I am not championing ignorance or dilettantism. In fact, this academic pursuit happens with the aforementioned "craftsman attitude" in mind: slow, deliberate, and building upon skills already acquired.

In recent years, I have been an errant scholar, and it has been a time of learning and growth, in equal measures exhilarating and unsettling. As so often in one's intellectual development, it was a course that made such an impression on me that, in the long-term, it shifted my focus. In 2011, I took a graduate seminar on Luso-African literature and read Mozambican, Angolan, and Cabo Verdean fiction for the first time. Throughout the class, I was painfully aware of my lack of specialized knowledge in African literature and history: when you have such specialized knowledge in one area, you are more aware of all that you do not know about another one (a class with Afro-Portuguese scholar and performance artist Grada Kilomba in Berlin in the 2000s also had driven that point home). Yet there were also moments

in the texts that felt familiar or that I could (at least partially) understand from a Latin Americanist perspective—as Glissant puts it, “What best emerges from Relation is what one senses” (1997, 174). Inspired by all the resonances I sensed between these literatures, in 2012, Luso-Africanist Ana Catarina Teixeira and I co-organized a seminar on postwar and postrevolutionary literature in Luso-Africa, Central America, and the Caribbean at the annual meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA). But then, as often happens, I had to turn my attention to my dissertation and to mastering my little box and subfields: Latin American, and especially Mexican and Central American literature. Any wanderings in Luso-African literature would have to wait until I published my first book in 2018. But ever since, I have spent a lot of time wandering and learning: improving language skills, reading (a lot), traveling to several African countries, and finding interlocutors across the world willing to teach me and engage my questions (many of whom are contributors to this dossier).

I want to be clear that my highlighting errantry as method is not a case against area studies. Curiosity about Luso-African literature made me want to do comparative work, but I approached the task of acquiring new skills with the sensitivity of someone in area studies. Area studies have fallen out of favor in recent years, but I still believe in their relevance: their emphasis on deep immersion in the languages, cultures, politics, and histories of a specific region are a necessary corrective to claims of supposed universalism. Area studies, especially in the USA, are tainted by their history of working—knowingly or obliviously—at the service of US imperial and capitalist interests during the twentieth century (especially but not only during the Cold War). But such area studies always existed in confluence and divergence with a regional studies critical of these interests, informed by autochthonous regional thought, aimed at liberation, and acting in solidarity: in short a *latinoamericanismo* in the leftist tradition. For me, this how area studies presented themselves when I was studying *Lateinamerikanistik* in Berlin in the early 2000s: a mix of autochthonous Latin American thought and cultural production, especially from the 1960s and 1970s (dependency theory, liberation theology, the aesthetics of the Boom, transculturation, etc.) combined with more recent readings in postcolonial, poststructuralist, feminist theory, and writings on hybridity and transnationalism.

Rhizomes over Roots

A key element in Glissant’s thinking is that he favors the rhizome over the root. He prefers rhizomatic “‘expansion’ over ‘depth’” (1997, 77). His conception of identity is relational rather than essentialist. As such he is also critical of the Négritude movement, Aimé Césaire, and any notion of a rooted identity or a return to Africa and African roots, in which Africa often appears as a “a mirage, retained in a simplified representation” (1997, 58). Glissant begins *Poétique de la Relation* with the transatlantic slave trade: the ship and the middle passage. But he thinks of the middle passage more as a rupture (“the abyss”) and is skeptical of any notion of an unbroken link between contemporary Africans and the descendants of slaves in the Americas. Instead, Glissant was more interested in cultural mixing and espoused *antillanité* and *créolisation* as key concepts. Glissant had his gaze firmly set on the Caribbean and Latin America, and less so on Africa. Nonetheless, methodologically, his ideas about the poetics of relation work well for any type of scholarship interested in South-South comparisons/relationalities. Evidence of this can be found in Shu-

Mei Shih's influential work. A US-based comparatist, Asianist, and former ACLA president (2021-2022), Shih developed concepts such as "comparison as relation" and "minor transnationalism" on the basis of Glissant's thought (Rabke 2017; Shih 2013 and 2015). Scholars in Caribbean, hemispheric American, and transatlantic comparative studies have also long relied on Glissant (Ette 2016; Müller/Ueckmann 2013; Quesada 2022; Russ 2010).

Even though Glissant is averse to the root, his own thought has clear roots (or at least a fertile soil from which the rhizome expands) in Caribbean, Latin American, and French thought. Informed by the French tradition, Glissant prefers the Deleuzian rhizome over the root, and by the Latin American tradition, he channels the region's baroque sensibility and its expansiveness. He reflects on "le tout-monde" via creolization and the baroque. This means he develops a universal method from the specific position and insight the Caribbean and Latin America provides. Herein lies the beauty of Glissant's errant method: its intellectual rootedness in several traditions yet its world-wide gaze and applicability, even if Glissant himself might not agree with this characterization regarding its rootedness.

Collaborative Multilingualism

Without multilingualism, there is no poetics of relation. Glissant repeatedly stresses the need to resist "the totalitarianism of any monolingual intent" (1997, 19) and renounces "an arrogant, monolingual separateness" in favor of participating "in worldwide entanglement" (1997, 118). That any scholarship wanting to engage both Africa and Latin America would need to be multilingual is self-evident but bears repeating. Africa and Latin America are multilingual continents or regions. At the same time as it advocates multilingualism, Glissant's poetics of relation prepare the scholar for the impossibility of the task (hundreds of languages are spoken in Africa and Latin America), of achieving totality. Glissant points to the always incomplete nature and project of a truly comparative world literature: it can only always be the quest, as apprehension of the totality of the world and its literatures never achieved—but therein lies the "beauty of this world."

In "Conjectures on World Literature," an early articulation of the principle of "distant" reading, Franco Moretti (2000) declared that "Reading 'more' seems hardly to be the solution" (55). But what if it is, in a way? What if therein lies the beauty of the work and the journey, rather than staying within the safe zone of parochialism, monolingualism, and Eurocentrism? There remains, of course, the question of how to go about the need for multilingual research since one's ability to learn languages and read a region's literature are finite. Artificial intelligence will surely change things and put distant reading and big data back on the table, but the future that I wish for is one firmly built around human interpersonal relations. When wondering about the future of South-South work, I can only think of it in collaborative terms: working across languages, pooling resources and knowledge, co-authoring manuscripts, and wandering together (contrary to a knight-errant's lonesome endeavors). Embracing errantry and letting go of "mastery" stresses the need for companions, *compañeras,* to share the road and the load. So, what do I hope for? An errant, expansive, multilingual, and collaborative scholarship that relishes in the beauty of the unknowability of the entire world and that continues to wander. This is how we can approach the challenge and beauty of South-South work: going both wide and deep.

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About the Authors

Sophie Esch is Associate Professor of Latin American Literature and Culture and the Director of the new Center of Latin American and Latinx Studies at Rice University in Houston. She received her Ph.D. in Spanish & Portuguese from Tulane University and her Magister in Latin American literature, political science, and North American studies from the Free University of Berlin. She writes and researches the intersection of literature, politics, war, and the environment in the Non-Anglophone Global South. Mexican and Central American literatures and cultures are her primary sites of inquiry. From a transatlantic comparative perspective, literature from Portuguese-speaking Africa constitute a growing secondary field of inquiry. Esch is the author of the award-winning book *Modernity at Gunpoint. Firearms, Politics, and Culture in Mexico and Central America* (2018) and the editor of *Central American Literatures*

as World Literature (2023). She is currently writing her second book about multispecies narratives of revolution and war in African and Latin American literature.

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