GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Introduction: South-South Constellations, Latin America and Africa

By Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra | March 29, 2025

In 2023, the Latin American Studies Association (LASA)—the world's largest professional association of individuals and institutions dedicated to the study of Latin America—held its first conference in and about Latin America's relationship with the African continent, "África y América Latina: Diálogos y conexiones" (Africa and Latin America: Dialogues and Connections), or simply LASA/África. Hosted at the University of Ghana (Accra) and organized by an international team of scholars, the conference highlighted the long-intertwined histories of the two regions as well as the shared challenges they face in the present and future.[1] If the congress was the first event of its kind since the founding of LASA in 1966, it also pointed back to another important historical conjuncture of the 1960s: the intensification of Latin American and African relations in the wake of decolonization. These relations formed part of a larger turn toward South-South solidarities conditioned by the geopolitical context of the cold war—conversations, debates, and movements that were vital precursors for the Global South as both a concept and project today.

Recent decades have seen the flourishing of a wide range of South-South comparative research and exchange, often under the heading of Global South studies. In this sense, the LASA/África congress built on established momentum, providing a new forum for exchange among the rich networks of scholars working between or across Latin America and Africa. These are scholars scattered across a variety of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences whose comparative orientation has not always been legible under the segmentary logic that governs field specialization and area studies in particular. They are, moreover, just one part of that larger constellation of scholars engaged in South-South comparative work across the many regions that comprise the Global South. This work, as has been noted elsewhere, has often strained against institutional frameworks, unfolding at the interstices of established fields (see Armillas-Tiseyra and Mahler 2021; Hassan 2013 and 2017). But things are changing, as institutions begin to acknowledge and make more room for the scholarship. Within LASA, for instance, the 2023 congress was one piece of a longer-term effort on the part of this particular professional association to turn attention to Latin America's relationship with other regions of the Global South.[2]

Taking LASA/África 2023 as an opportunity to reflect on the intersections of Latin American and African studies, we organized a roundtable that would tackle the histories, challenges, and possible futures of comparative work between Latin America and Africa. Titled "Sures/Souths/Suls/Suds: Tracking Latin America-Africa Exchanges from the Twentieth Century to the Present," the roundtable brought together a multilingual group of scholars working at varying intersections across the southern Atlantic. In the early stages of planning, we were interested in the tensions that have for decades obscured the rich history of intellectual and cultural encounters between artists and intellectuals in Africa and the

Americas—whether rooted in the history of Black internationalism, anticolonialism, Cold War cultural- or geo-politics, Third World solidarities, or other networks—as well as recent examples of exchange that might point in new directions. Principally, we aimed to highlight the many and differing ways in which our colleagues conceived of comparative work between Latin America and Africa.

To that end, we chose the open-ended device of the questionnaire, putting together a series of questions organized around the topic clusters "histories," "methods," and "futures," from which roundtable participants could select a few questions as the starting point for their remarks. The questionnaire, as a genre strongly associated with avant-garde aesthetic and political movements of the early twentieth century from across the globe, is fundamentally different from the other genre strongly associated with this period, the manifesto. While the manifesto aims to be cohesive, declarative, and even prescriptive, the questionnaire is less determinate, open to multiple and differing perspectives, and provides a way for communities to conceptualize themselves relationally (see Cole 2018). This is what we were after in the roundtable we organized for LASA/África. The rich conversation begun in November 2023 became the basis for this dossier, with new interlocutors invited to take part via their own responses to the questionnaire.

The essays included in this dossier attest to the wide range of perspectives, intellectual formations, and critical orientations of scholars working comparatively across Latin America and Africa – discernible from the first in our differing uses of the descriptions "Latin America-Africa," "Latin-Africa," or "Africa-Latin America."[3] Each respondent's engagement with the questionnaire and ensuing reflections are inevitably shaped by their particular disciplinary formation (area studies, literary and cultural studies, history, comparative literature, postcolonial studies, and so on) and the institutional location in which they work, understood as both a matter of department as well as geographic location. Given these differences, the instances of convergence are all the more exciting. Our hope is that the essays gathered here will serve as a starting point not only for further discussion of comparative work between Latin America and Africa but for conversations about South-South comparison more broadly.

The Essays

Given the invitation to self-reflection that cuts across so many of the questions in the "Sures/Souths/Suls/Suds" questionnaire, it is fitting that almost all respondents structured their responses around a meditation on their individual (personal as much as intellectual) trajectories. In the first instance, this impulse gave rise to essays that provide some historical perspective on comparative work between Latin America and Africa. Here, Mary Louise Pratt tracks the development of the competing paradigms that emerged in the cold war period and transformed toward the turn of the present century, as the background against which her work on projects such as *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) unfolded. Stefan Helgesson traces his own trajectory across southern Africa to Brazil, via the Lusophone axis, illuminating how the coincidences that shape the trajectory of our lives can inform our work as scholars. And Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra turns toward questions of field genealogy, looking back to earlier examples of scholars doing comparative work between Latin American and African literatures as part of a necessary history of the field, which remains to be fully written.

In the second instance, respondents' personal reflections illuminate the many different disciplinary registers on which Latin America-Africa comparison might draw. Trained as a historian of the Atlantic world in Spain, Jean-Arsène Yao highlights the importance of the large body of scholarship on the history and legacies of transatlantic slavery for Latin America-Africa studies today. Drawing on the experience of first encountering Senegalese reinterpretations of classic Cuban songs, Estefanía Bournot argues for the importance of looking beyond the "lettered city" to the myriad forms of popular culture in which the legacies of the long history of exchange between the two regions can be found. Leila Gómez, meanwhile, turns attention to feminist thought and philosophy, tracking conversations about the coloniality of gender back and forth across the Atlantic.

In the third instance, respondent's accounts of their own trajectories crystallize a series of reflections on questions of method. Here, Gilbert Shang Ndi argues for models of relational research that go beyond the immediate material connections between the two continents (e.g. a focus on Afro-descendant communities in Latin America) but are nonetheless firmly grounded in interaction with and respect for the communities studied; a commitment that includes disseminating work to a wider audience. Sarah Quesada, proposes site-reading while wandering as a methodology that serves to illuminate origin stories of South-South interactions that cannot always be archived in or transmitted by written form, thereby filling the epistemic gaps produced when sources are not reliable or available. In conversation with Quesada is Sophie Esch, whose image of "wandering" proposes a methodological *errantry* – a concept drawn from the work of Édouard Glissant – necessarily supplemented by humility as guiding principles for South-South scholarship. Like Esch, Lanie Millar also turns to the work of Glissant, arguing against the disciplinary imperative to "master" or "dominate" one's subject. Instead, Millar – like many in this dossier – opt for an ethics of humility open to collaboration, acknowledging our dependence on the expertise of others. The aim of this dossier is thus a similar one: to propose working in and with a community, regardless of physical or geographical distance. The future for South-South comparative work across Latin America, Africa, and beyond is exciting and our hope is that this dossier will help to facilitate its unfolding.

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[1] For more information on LASA/África 2023, see: https://africa.lasaweb.org/en/.

[2] In 2022, LASA held a virtual LASA/Asia conference titled “Rethinking Trans-Pacific Ties: Asia and Latin America” (https://asia.lasaweb.org/en/). Building on the momentum of these conferences, the association now has sections dedicated to “Asia and the Americas” and “Africa and the Americas,” the latter co-chaired by Mara Viveros Vigoya (Universidad Nacional de Colombia) and Joanna Boampong (University of Ghana). While, as of writing, there is not an equivalent section dedicated to Latin America and the Middle East in LASA, its quarterly newsletter, *LASA Forum* regularly features material on the relationship between the two regions, including a dossier (“Debates”) on Latin America and the Middle East (47.1; 2016).

[3] For a definition of “Latin-Africa” as a concept, see Quesada (2022, 2024).

About the Authors

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