GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

More than Ships that Crossed at Night: Africa-Latin America in Relational Research

By Gilbert Shang Ndi | March 29, 2025

- **Histories:** What is the scholarship that has most informed or enriched your own approach to the study of Latin America and Africa (Latin America-Africa)?
- **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?

One of the works that I consider particularly influential for a relational reading (Mignolo 2010) of Latin American-African literature is Julio Ortega's *Transatlantic Translations: Dialogues in Latin American Literature* (2006), which offers insightful interpretations of the tense unity between excess and scarcity as the underlying paradox of the African/Latin American condition: "abundance and scarcity mutually interpolate each other, contrasting with each other, as two ways of seeing and interpreting, of translating and evaluating. For Inca Garcilaso [de la Vega], it is clear that loss of meaning, that horizon of lack where native reality is dissolved, must be confronted by its reconstruction" (2006, 13). This text provides in-depth analysis of how this paradoxical reality manifests in narrative/metaphorical framework, character construction, spatial representation, and expressive traits of Latin American (but also, to a great extent, African) literature. In other words, through the politics and poetics of scarcity and excess, Ortega translates Immanuel Wallerstein's notion of world-systems into narrative frames that allow the critic to combine formalistic interpretation of texts with an inscription of the Global South into the world economy. Though most of Ortega's textual analyses focus on Latin American classics such as Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955), Inca Garcilaso de la Vega's *Cartas reales* (1609), Gabriel García Márquez's *Del amor y otros demonios* (1994; *Of Love and Other Demons,* 1996), etc., the main thrust of his arguments can be related to postcolonial African novels such as the Cameroonian Mongo Beti's *Ville Cruelle* (1953), in which the Indigenous people become beggars in their own land while the colonial authorities exploit the fauna for export. In Jean In Koli Bofane's *Congo Inc.* (2014), meanwhile, the Congo is represented as the topos where such a paradox plays out with tragic consequences in a territory that is amongst the poorest in Africa while its rich subsoil is coveted by regional as well as global powers.

Ortega's method also indirectly provides a critique of magical realism as simply aesthetic effect and rather frames it within an imaginary of abundance/scarcity that is borne out of colonial power relations and a re-imagination of lost tropical Eden as a result of colonial exploitation. As such, Ortega's scarcity/excess paradigm constitutes the literary transcription

of a world-system economy where Africa and Latin America have been the major aggregate losers. On the literary plane, this materializes in creative works that represent the subjects of the Global South as being victims of abundance—as I argued in my book, *Memories of Violence in Peru and the Congo: Writing on the Brink* (2022)—and entangled inextricably in a web of economic interests that threaten their agency and capacity to fashion a dignified existence from their natural resources. This perspective is at the very basis of the concept of the "coltan novel," which I analyze in an article of the same name (2022), underlining the irreconcilable co-existence of vitality and the imminence of death at the very core of the tropicality of being.

A second work which I also consider immensely important in shaping my approach to literary production along the Latin America-Africa axis is Adam Lifshey's *Specters of Conquest: Indigenous Absence in Transatlantic Literature* (2010). Lifshey foregrounds the primacy of haunting absence as the premise of any reading of postcolonial literatures. In a manner redolent of Pierre Macherey's assertion that the "text says what it does not say" (1978, 256), Lifshey considers textual production from Latin America and Africa as traces that point to silenced histories, obliterated worldviews, and bodies that even history cannot bury. Postcolonial settings are ghosted spaces of exterminated life, for they are constructed on trails of bodies that have not been accounted for and have not been given proper entombment. Lifshey holds that: "Not all ghosts, even when they gesture of parallel crimes and justice unmet, appear in the same way and form […] their ghosts haunt his colonizing project" (2010, 88). Approached from a spatial perspective, the idea of specters of absence can be applied to the Atlantic, which represents an interrogatory sign of Black memories and an abysmal caesura that African/Afro-diasporic narratives from both sides of the Atlantic attempt to decipher. While the genocidal agenda that accounts for the historical exclusion of Indigenous peoples in most Latin American societies is well documented, the legacies of colonialism in Africa are still being unraveled by younger generations that continue to wrestle with traces of Indigenous knowledge destroyed through colonial policies or displaced to foreign (European) centers of hegemonic knowledge.

In engaging in South-South comparisons, one needs to demonstrate an awareness of the shortcomings of Europe's encounters with the world, whose ruins are still visible. This has several implications for the research process. Firstly, I think that to sample research resources in these two continents in view of a relational analysis, field trips to both spaces are indispensable. This is because most of the texts that end up gaining notoriety are usually those produced either by the respective diasporas or by local authors that have been validated by European or Northern American literary networks. The over-reliance on the diasporic works (partly because those are most likely to be translated) overlooks invaluable but less publicized works produced by Indigenous or otherwise marginalized authors who do not enjoy the same mobility and exposure, but whose works might provide more nuanced representations of these societies.

Secondly, African researchers engaged in Latin American research often limit themselves to the analysis of African connections with Latin American Afro-descendant communities. I think they should look beyond the Afro-descendant frame, given that there exist interesting paradigms of comparability, such as those which embrace Indigenous Andean communities, and provide a more complex and enriching spectrum based on entangled colonialities and

their underlying power imaginaries, as argued by Crawford Young (1994). Thirdly, there should be an attempt to identify concepts or non-western forms of conceptualizing in the researched communities or analyzed texts, such that South-South comparison would not lead to the impression of a wild chase for raw materials to be exported and processed by the American- and Europe-based scholars using Western tools of analysis to make meaning of tropical chaos.

Finally, there should never be any expectation of broadly transparent comparable objects of study. Thus, I would rather consider theoretical concepts that look for minimal commensurability (Melas 2007) and *Ansatzpunkt* ["point of attachment"] (Auerbach 1969), favoring a non-conclusive and relational approach to networks and nodes of South-South critical connections. These visions on comparability are what perhaps undergird Mignolo's (2010) leaning towards a relational approach and not necessarily on readily available or neatly defined vectorial lines of equivalence. This approach recognizes the temporal disparities regarding colonial encounters in Africa and Latin America, while at the same time unravelling possible intertextualities and coincidences that might enable subjects from these two spaces to forge intelligible idioms and build alliances in their existential struggles for epistemic freedom and dignity. As Mario Vargas Llosa shows in *El sueño del celta* (2010; *The Dream of the Celt*, 2012), Africa and Latin America constitute intersecting collateral sites of Euro-American imperialism that dismantle the false premises of transcultural encounters on a global scale.

The question of audience of Latin America-Africa comparative work is not very different from the crisis of audience that bedevils academic knowledge in general and literary criticism in particular. Such scholarship ends up circulating amongst peers, with very limited engagement with the public. I think collaborative research and participatory action research permit more equitable stakes in knowledge production and dissemination. To an extent, research on the Global South is still papered along the lines of Benjamin Disraeli's statement (as an opening epigraph in Said's *Orientalism*) that, for the Western intellectual, the "East is a career." What is true for the East, might also be true of a greater part of the South. Most often, researchers imbued with this mentality engage or collaborate with organic intellectuals from these communities as local informants and not as research partners. This perception and practice need to change so that the two categories (both the Western/Global North scholar and the organic intellectuals) are seen as co-producers of knowledge in ever-evolving and intersecting epistemological landscapes.

There should also be more creative ways of disseminating research through interviews and podcasts, which bring academic knowledge into a trans-disciplinary dialogue with activists, educators, artists, political actors, etc., in spaces beyond the ivory tower, such as public libraries, book fairs, etc. The exigencies of academic institutions condition most researchers to publish exclusively in academic journals. The rigor and painstaking procedures of academic publication have their own merits and have contributed significantly to connecting Global South communities. However, academic publications are not necessarily devoid of the workings of power relations and ideological proclivities. Thus, in addition to rigorous academic publication, I would argue for a more democratic and community-oriented commitment of researchers engaged in South-South studies, both in designing research projects and in the dissemination of research results. This approach acknowledges alternative

methods of theory-building and transdisciplinary dialogues. I have been involved in such initiatives based on participatory action with colleagues from Brazil, Germany, Mozambique, and Colombia, some of the results of which can be accessed through the YouTube channel of Djumbaila-America Latina Africa. In doing research in Africa and Latin America, one has to be aware of problematic antecedents regarding the relations that these two spaces have had with each other and with the world. Thus, research does not need to turn the knife in the wound, epistemically speaking, in spaces where inclusion has often been a veneer for subordination and piecemeal exclusion or even elimination. On the contrary, research should carry an ethical and reflexive edge that contributes to establishing new forms of relationalities that build trust and respect.

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How to Cite

Ndi, Gilbert Shang. March 29, 2025. "More than Ships that Crossed at Night: Africa-Latin America in Relational Research." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.