GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

On Sites in South-South Methodologies

By Sarah M. Quesada | March 29, 2025

- **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?

Accessing South-South literary histories requires more than multilingual fluency. Beyond reading practices that engage a fictional text with a colonial treaty, I have turned to reading the interactions of my interlocutors within historically charged spaces, or *sites of memory*. What I will suggest in this brief reflection is that reading texts, archives, and sites together—even if scattered across an Atlantic continuum—can tell stories that unfold beyond the frameworks we are accustomed to. For me, what I will term a "Latin-African" history was only accessible through a series of reading practices and translations that combined the historical, fictional, and spatial. This means that oftentimes my African interlocutors informed readings of some of the most startling moments in Latinx-American fiction, that, on their own, one might just find puzzling. I begin with a short anecdote to illustrate this point.

In 2012, I was researching West African recognition of the Americas along UNESCO's Slave Route in Senegal and Benin for what would become my first book, *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature* (2022). While in Dakar, I stayed with my host, "Madame Diallo" and we discussed the site of memory at Gorée island during a power outage.[1] She mentioned that "Africans from the Americas that come to Gorée are saddened by the site," and something about her countenance, perfectly perceptible over the candlelight, communicated that it troubled her, too. She continued, "it is so sad," and she looked away pensively, remaining quiet for most of our meal together. Diallo's comment about a historical site whose history was detachedly traced in the archive expressed a fleeting moment of affectual relation not properly fulfilled. Diallo's brief moment of South-South recognition, however, is mirrored in connections not always explicitly named in Latinx fiction. For example, the site of Gorée in Senegal pervades Cuban American Achy Obejas's novel *Ruins* (2009), but what might the site mean in that novel beyond its mere signification as a site of memory in the former plantocracy of Cuba? After my fieldwork in Senegal, it occurred to me that perhaps the novel's use of Gorée stood as a textual memorial that intended to recognize Senegal with more particularity than a mere synecdoche. As a site of departure for enslaved peoples to Cuba, Gorée in the novel problematized the easy ways Cubans and Cuban Americans resort to essentialized myths about blackness that deny productive engagement with Africa in its particularity. Subtle though Diallo's or Obejas's utterances may be, these instances in both oral and textual narrative about sites of memory brought me into a Latin-African history previously unknown to me.

An even more startling history of South-South interaction is found in Gabriel García Márquez. While the site of Gorée was not evoked, his gaze fell on enslaved peoples departing from this region. In his novella, *Crónica de una muerte anunciada* (1981; *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, 1983), the enslaved departed from Senegal never quite arrived to the coast of New Granada or what is today Colombia. Instead, García Márquez memorialized their untimely death, as they drowned in a shipwreck. The quote that has haunted me for over a decade is:"Santiago Nasser pointed to an intermittent light at sea and told us that it was the soul in torment of a slave ship that had sunk with a cargo of blacks from Senegal across from the main harbor mouth at Cartagena de Indias" (2003, 67). It is a subtle but arresting moment that only discloses the tip of the iceberg. The utterance is a historical device which leads to a shipwreck in the French archive shown below (Figure 1).



Figure 1: "Nouveau plan de Cartagène [Colombie] avec les dernières attaques des forts par l'Amiral Vernon" (1741). Archives Nationales, Paris, France.

As I argued in my book, cartographic documents shed light on Cartagena's naval history, gazing back at Gorée because slaves that departed from the neighboring port perished in the wake of the ship. A flickering presence in García Márquez's short novel cements Cartagena as a site that gazes back at Senegal because these perished souls—the Senegalese named "*ánimas*" or souls—bestowed the Bay of Souls with its current name.

In this process, spaces of memory placed next to fiction decipher the seemingly odd references to Senegal in García Márquez's oeuvre and in turn, revealed a historical continuity

between the Cuban Revolution and African decolonization. Raquel Ribeiro (2014) and Lanie Millar (2012) were among the first to illuminate the extent to which García Márquez was involved in reconstituting the memory of Cuba's intervention in Angolan independence. In other words, García Márquez's Bay of Souls in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* might have just been a synecdoche of Cuba's daring campaign in Africa: the tip of the iceberg unfolding a Latin-African history during the Cold War. This history includes Ernesto "Che" Guevara's failed mission in the francophone Congo, Cuba's intervention in Guinea allied with leader Ahmed Sekou Touré, and the successful defeat of apartheid South African and Portuguese forces in Angola in 1975. Placing physical sites and textual narratives alongside each other revealed flickering moments of transatlantic alliance that ushered us into these lesser-known dimensions of García Márquez's work and his equally obscured essays "Operación Carlota" ("Operation Carlota," 2000) "Angola, un año después: Una nación en la escuela primaria" (Angola, One Year Later: A Nation in Primary School, 2000), and "Los meses de tinieblas—El Che en el Congo" (Months of Darkness—Che in the Congo, 2000)—most of which have yet to be translated into English. In placing the Bay of Souls and Gorée together, colonial archives of Latin-African engagement unfolded into the Cold war era.

For works from the twentieth century, the South-South research process involves putting together narratives, archives, and sites that are perhaps even more scattered than the ones I collected of the colonial period. But by so doing, we find that Latin America and Latinx writers joined forces with African writers during the Cold War era to produce a multilingual literature in support of African decolonization. And here, crucial sites inspired this multilingual exchange: conventions like Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization in Cairo (AAPSO, 1958), the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade (NAM, 1961), and the Tricontinental conference in Havana (1966). These conventions either brought together African and Latin American leaders or produced a platform from which to consider their unity. In 1965, Léopold Senghor remarked that "Afro-Asianism," as Christopher J. Lee has discussed, "should be extended to Latin America" (qtd. in Lee 2019, xix). At these gatherings, Global South intellectuals and leaders alike reflected on "non-alignment" or how to shape a Third World coalition that was cultural, political, and even economic as an alternative to living under the aegis of white imperialism.[2] These platforms went on to cement the popularity of Third World leaders as well. One of NAM's masterminds and Egypt's first prime minister, Gamal Abdel Nasser became a model for decolonization when he nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 and hosted AAPSO in 1957. He posed such a threat to the West, such that the *New York Times* dubbed Fidel Castro the "Caribbean Nasser" in the wake of the Cuban revolution ("From Our Own Correspondent," 1959).

Attentive to leaders and coalitional sites they built, Latinx-American intellectuals began producing textual narratives in support of African sovereignty. In the U.S., Ghana's first prime minister Kwame Nkrumah inspired Puerto Rican medic Ana Livia Cordero, whose writing describes how she worked alongside him.[3] García Márquez, for his part, brought visibility to and lionized names like Agostinho Neto, Patrice Lumumba, and Sekou Touré (2000). As calls for Nelson Mandela's release from life imprisonment entered a fevered pitch, Argentine writer Julio Cortázar participated in the *Art contre/against Apartheid: Les Artistes du monde contre l'apartheid / Artists of the World Against Apartheid* art collective in 1983. It turned into an edited collection that included work by Brazilian writer Jorge Amado and Cuban artist Wifredo Lam. US Nuyorican poet Sandra María Esteves later contributed two poems to the version

published by the United Nations, *Art Against Apartheid*, which included a foreword by Alice Walker (1986). This Latin-African literary corpus contains representative names in World Literature, but the nuanced research process that is required to bring their political efforts into focus renders this dimension of their work invisible.

Finally, the Latin-African research process for the twenty-first century reveals an African reciprocity to the Latin American gaze toward Africa. It is as if Madame Diallo's flickers of American recognition so many years ago become cemented into lasting moments in contemporary African novels set in Latin America. Some of these African novels still address the era of the slave trade reaching out to the Americas: Congolese *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* (2018) by the Congolese Wilfried N'Sondé, or *La Saison de l'ombre* (2013), by the Cameroonian Léonora Miano's, are just two examples. Others unfold a Latin-African history taking place either during the global sixties or thereafter. Most recently, Mohamed Mbougar Sarr's *La Plus secrete memoire des hommes* (2012; *The Most Sacred Memory of Men,* 2021), winner of the Prix Goncourt, links the 1960s revolts in Senegal to the violent revolution of the *Cordobazo* in Argentina. Meanwhile, Senegalese Boubacar Boris Diop's Neustadt award-winning novel, *Murambi, le livre des ossements* (2000; *Murambi, The Book of Bones*, 2006) offers a brief sighting of Che Guevara during the 1994 Rwanda genocide of novel's setting (2006, 29). The mention of the Argentine revolutionary is fleeting but conjures the failed Cuban revolution in the Congo described so painfully in Guevara's posthumous memoir *Pasajes de la Guerra Revolucionaria: Congo* (2009). The Togolese writer Sami Tchak's *Hermina* (2003)—a lesser-known novel still untranslated into English or Spanish—on the other hand, reflects on the afterlives of the Cuban Revolution in a novel set in the 1990s. Here, the failures of the Latin American left are overwhelming. Because the island has fallen into an irreparable and sinister femicide, it renders the novel almost unreadable.

As many of these Latin-African works have yet to be translated into languages other than their original, it still stands that a linguistic fluency is paramount to accessing this South-South literary history. However, the frameworks of disciplines that still silo Latin American and African studies remain regardless of a scholars' linguistic capabilities. Marrying reading practices that adapt sites and archives to fiction might not undo conventions that govern African and Latin American literary studies, but they do broaden accessibility to sources that strengthen evidence of South-South engagement. The brief summary above suggests that the archives, oral histories, and sites over and across the Atlantic unfold literary histories previously elided. Indeed, as Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, Mary Louise Pratt, and Stefan Helgesson discuss in this dossier, this South-South connection has a long history of disciplinary engagement. Such a genealogy points to a south-south history requiring more than just *translation*. Even with the advent of new translation technologies or tools that Artificial Intelligence might provide in the twenty-first century, South-South study at once requires a broader framework and models one as we move forward in recovering complex pasts. This is because the research process, like the documentation of Latin-Africa connections, was always already a process of translation and continual cross-cultural negotiation.

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[1] I use this pseudonym to protect the privacy of the interviewee.

[2] For a capacious definition of the “Third World,” see Prashad 2007.

[3] See the Digital collection at the Harvard Radcliff Institute. https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/schlesinger-library/collections/ana-livia-cordero.

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