GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Ruminations on Pre-History

By Mary Louise Pratt | 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?
- **Histories:** What do you see as having been key debates and/or challenges for the field, historically?
- **Histories:** Were you to write a (pre-) history of the field, what are the names and texts it would include?

In 1999, on the hinge of the millennium, I was invited to South Africa to give some lectures at Cape Town and Rhodes universities. I presented the research I had been lecturing on that year in Brazil, Peru, and Mexico. It was a summary and discussion of the critical retheorizing of modernity that Latin American cultural theorists had been carrying out in the 1990s. My title was something like "Postcoloniality, Modernity, and the Case of the Stolen Kidney: Thoughts on Mobility and Globality." The stolen kidney referred to a story that for me indexed the emergence of a globalized North-South and South-South imaginary under neoliberalism. In different permutations this story had been circulating literally all over the planet in the 1990s. In most variants, it involves a male traveler somewhere in the Global South who out of a chance encounter, often with a seductive woman, wakes up in a hotel bed somewhere and finds his body has been cut open and one of his kidneys removed to be sold for export to a wealthy but sick client in the North. I had been fascinated by the mobility of this story, the globality of its reach, and the way it metonymized late capitalism's ruthless extractive energies.

My South African interlocutors were not terribly interested in my thoughts on mobility and globalization in this story nor the already familiar stolen kidneys. They were, however, face more interested in my account of Latin America's vibrant, revisionist debates on modernity. They wanted to know more about Beatriz Sarlo's concept of peripheral modernity (Argentina 1988); Nestor García Canclini's theory of "hybrid cultures" where people "enter and leave modernity" (Mexico 1992); Enrique Dussel's critique of modernity as an "ethnocentric fallacy" (Argentina 1992); Roberto Schwarz's analysis of "ideas out of place" (Brazil 1992); Silviano Santiago's vindication of the "entre-lugar," or "the space between" (Brazil 1996); Fernando Calderón's concept of "tiempos mixtos," or "mixed temporalities" (Bolivia 1988), Guillermo Nugent's theory of "contramodernidad," or "countermodernity" (Peru 1992), and the string of dissatisfied adjectivizations of Latin American modernity as partial, truncated, fragmented, incomplete, insufficient, even inexistent. They too were grappling with the fact that any equation of modernity with decolonization was a self-serving imperial and colonialist myth.

Moreover, people wanted to read my sources. It was heartbreaking for us all to face the fact that they were inaccessible, in large part because they were written in Spanish and Portuguese, and also because, even at the turn of the millennium, it was as difficult to acquire an Argentinian book in Cape Town as to acquire a South African book in Buenos Aires. (You couldn't even get an Argentinian book in Peru, unless some traveler brought it in their suitcase, as visiting lecturers like me were called on to do all the time.) To travel, pages had to pass through the metropole. But it wasn't all just language and logistics.There was no marketplace of ideas where thought from Latin America and thought from South Africa met or sought each other out. My visit did not result in a collection of key essays from the Latin American modernity debates, translated to English and published in SouthAfrica, perhaps as a special issue of a journal or maybe a book. It needed to happen, but it didn't, and maybe it couldn't.

Cold War geopolitics after World War II gave us the concept of the Third World, a term that linked many ex-colonial nation states together both in the minds of First World power brokers and in those nations' own imaginings of a shared struggle against a common capitalist oppressor. National liberation fronts formed everywhere to carry this struggle forward. Imperial languages—French,English, Portuguese—fostered continental and transatlantic solidarities amongst the likes of Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Walter Rodney, Kwame Nkrumah, Samir Amin, and Amílcar Cabral. In First World universities, however, Cold War geopolitics gave rise to Area Studies, a disciplinary project that disaggregated the Third World into strategic geographical regions (Latin America, Africa, East Asia, the Middle East) for which area specialists were needed. In the U.S., the Peace Corps was founded to incubate area specialists and language experts, with a pipeline into the Foreign Service and the CIA. The U.S. State Department made the country's first massive investment in foreign language training, benefiting many literary scholars—including myself. In universities, there was no Third World institutional or intellectual space. Latin America, Africa, East Asia, the Middle East, and South Asia came to inhabit separate centers, departments, programs.The event that motivated this dossier–the 2023 LASA/Africa gathering in Ghana—would have made no sense in the Area Studies paradigm.

It would have made sense, however, to the competing paradigm: the Marxist-based schools of anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist thought that gave rise in the 1960s and 70s to dependency theory, world systems theory, the critique of development and underdevelopment. Here, thinkers did work and speak across continents and borders. Area studies scholars were reading these materials too. Even in literary studies, where I worked, books like Samir Amin's *Unequal Development* (1973; English 1976), Immanuel Wallerstein's *Modern World System* (1974), Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), Andre Gunder Frank's *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (1969), Kwame Nkrumah's *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* (1967), and Fernando Enrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto's *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (1970), were required—and thrilling—reading. This literature tied the world, and the Third World, together in the historical experience of capitalism and Euro-imperialism, and in the shared struggle against it. The Cuban Revolution happened in 1959 and fifteen African nations gained independence the following year. Like my peers, I was aligned with that struggle. Though economics departments in the U.S. purged Marxist scholars during the 1950s and 60s, Marxist reading groups devoured their work in other spaces.While this literature is no longer required reading

for today's Global South scholars, that 1970s grappling with the idea of global capitalism established and defended the frame in which their work took place.

The regionalized, officially sanctioned Area Studies paradigm was strategic for Cold War geopolitics, but it became counterproductive for the homogenizing ambitions of multinational capitalism that arose toward the end of the century. Neoliberalism sought to impose free trade and extractivist operations that would perform in pretty much the same way everywhere. In the 1980s, the transnational became a key analytical parameter. Big research funders like the Social Sciences Research Council (SSRC) in the U.S. began backing away from Area Studies in favor of transoceanic and transnational research agendas, as anthropology and sociology developed methodologies for the multi-sited research projects that came into fashion, That shift away from the national also nourished the Global South paradigm, which upheld the anti-colonial, Marxist orientation that gave rise to it. The communications revolution—the Internet, the pdf, machine translation, the emergence of English as an academic lingua franca—also changed everything. Pages could travel from just about anywhere to anywhere. Those developments also made the LASA/Africa gathering thinkable and possible. At the same time, the libraries, the research funding, the doctoral fellowships, the travel grants, and international book publishing remains concentrated in Europe and the U.S.

The late 1980s shift to the transnational, the transoceanic, and the multicultural was the context in which *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), a book I completed in 1991, was conceived. At the university where I taught, a new undergraduate International Relations program offered grants for developing courses that went beyond an area focus to study relations between and among nations and regions.They specified comparative studies but specifically relational ones. My colleague Rina Benmayor and I, both trained as comparative literature scholars, saw this as an opportunity to bring a humanistic component into a program centered on political economy. We proposed a course on travel literature that would study westerners writing about their travels in non-Western places, and the larger geohistorical relationships their travels and writings articulated. It was an opportunity for the two of us to teach a course that conjugated aesthetics and close reading with geopolitics, anti-imperialism, cultural materialism, and the critique of capitalism.

This travel literature course was the most exciting teaching either of us had ever done. We started with Marco Polo's *Travels* (ca. 1300) and ended with Joan Didion's *Salvador* (1983). We read Columbus and the *National Geographic*. We also had new methods to draw on. Raymond Williams's *Keywords* (1976) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977) had been breakthrough books for us, demonstrating new modes of cultural analysis. Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses* (1966; *The Order of Things*, 1970), *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969; The Archaeology of Knowledge, 1972), *L'Ordre du discours* (1971, included in the English translation of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1972), and Surveiller et punir (1975; *Discipline and Punish*, 1977) enabled the study of discourse as something far more than just language, and of institutions as discourse machines. And in 1978, along came Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which used Foucault's breakthroughs to study Euro-imperialism's discursive apparatuses in writings by westerners about the non-western world: Close reading with geopolitics built right in. Without quite knowing it, we were living the birth of cultural studies. But it was also in researching the syllabus that I discovered that an alumnus had donated a

huge collection of travel books—all signed with his name—to my university's library, and my book project was born. It was not guided by existing scholarship: for on travel writing there was none and the genre had not been an object of scholarly study. New methodologies made the collector's corpus fascinating, legible, and significant in ways that now seemed, at least to me, obvious.

Imperial Eyes combined a North-South with a South-South architecture. It studied Europeans traveling in both Africa and South America; its two geographical axes were those of Euro-imperialism itself. There was no Global South paradigm in 1991, and neither I nor the publishers knew whether there would be a readership for such a book. That readership emerged and grew over the 1990s, and it ended up being geographically diverse and long-lasting. The book was re-edited in 2007, and has been translated into Polish, Korean, and Chinese, as well as Spanish and Portuguese.

This trajectory for *Imperial Eyes* provokes ruminations also on the impasses between postcolonial and Latin American studies. For (Latin)Americanists, the concept of a Global South is fractured by the chronological asynchrony between European colonization of theAmericas, which took place between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, and that of Africa and Asia, which took place in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the Americas, political independence came in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, while in Africa and Asia it was a mid-twentieth century phenomenon. Colonial rule in the Americas lasted three centuries; in most of Africa, some decades. For Americanists, the truncated timeframe of postcolonial analysis and its dramatic exclusion of the Americas were deeply frustrating and seemed imperial in themselves. Even more consequential, surely, has been the linguistic aporia: Spanish was not needed to study Africa (or Asia) and postcolonial scholars did not learn it, but it is essential to studying the Americas. Fluency in English was not necessary for scholars in Latin America until the twenty-first century, but it was essential to postcolonial work. South-South scholarship often requires unusual combinations of linguistic competencies (made possible by globally mobile international graduate students who arrive at their Ph.D. programs with skills in several languages already), and at the same time Global English is a condition of its possibility. So is cyberspace.

As we learn to think planetarily, a much older and deeper fracture becomes relevant: the separation some 200 million years ago between the Afroeurasian land mass and the landmass known as the Americas. Animal and plant life as well as human societies evolved separately in these two gigantic geographies. Human movement connection took place within them but not to any significant degree between them until from the time humans arrived in the Americas twenty-five or thirty thousand years ago, and the European invasion just over 500 years ago. We do not yet know what to make of these distinct ecological and civilizational histories. They underlie the centrality of the concept of Indigeneity in the American imaginary, and its relative lack of purchase in the African one. What scholarly challenges inhabit this contrast, and what can it reveal? When I compare the powerful ecological and geographical imaginations at work in the Kenyan Okwiri Oduor's *Things They Lost* (2022) and the Mexican Valeria Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* (*Desierto Sonoro*, 2019), and their shared theme of child abandonment, I am ever more curious to see what knowledge-makers and artists on the Africa-Latin-America axis will discover at this uncanny *coyuntura* (conjunction) of unpredictability, urgency, and creativity that is our planetary

predicament.

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