GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Southern African Roads to Latin America

By Stefan Helgesson | 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 are the core competencies and methodologies of Latin America-Africa scholarship?
- **Methods:** What is the role of languages (and translation) in your work, particularly when it comes to working in languages not of European origin?
- **Futures**: What recent scholarship on Latin America-Africa are you most excited by?
- **Futures:** What is (or could be) the relationship of scholarship on Latin America-Africa to other possible South-South comparisons?

To the extent that my work straddles Africa and Latin America, it has always been with Africa as my point of departure. This has strictly personal reasons: Swedish though I may be, I grew up in apartheid South Africa and post-revolutionary Mozambique. Much of my professional orientation as a literary scholar has been shaped by that early bond with the south of the continent. The combination of South Africa *and* Mozambique prefigures, moreover, the comparative conjunction of Africa and Latin America. As I have noted in my work, the distance between those neighboring African countries can be surprisingly great. Besides economic differences and divergent political histories, there is the unavoidable fact of the divide between two formerly colonial languages—English and Portuguese. Portuguese in Mozambique opens the door to a distinctly different set of geo-cultural coordinates compared to South African English. Therefore, contrary to geographical common sense, if you move 500 kilometers east from Johannesburg to Maputo, you will have travelled much closer to Latin America. Imraan Coovadia is one of the few South African writers to have understood this. In his delightful novel, *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* (2012), we encounter a parallel universe where Portuguese is the most prestigious global language, and the highest form of cultural expression is “transport poetry”—the unrivaled center of which is Brazil. Set in Cape Town, the novel constructs in this way a Global South cosmopolitan vision where Mozambique has pride of place as a portal to an alternative cultural world. As one of the Capetonians says about the Mozambican student Antonia: “You should ask her about the difference between here [Cape Town] and Mozambique, how we could be on different continents as far as languages is concerned” (72). Coovadia, along with the J. M. Coetzee of *Summertime* (2009), is a South African exception, however. By contrast, Mozambican writers tend to be well aware of the differences between these two linguistic worlds and what they imply in terms of transnational connections. An amusing example is João Paulo Borges Coelho’s *Hinyambaan* (2007), which lampoons the arrogance and ignorance of South Africans visiting Mozambique.

Language, then, has been my point of entry to Latin America. My first ambitious comparative endeavor, *Transnationalism in Southern African Literature* (2009), juxtaposed literary cultures of South Africa (Johannesburg), Mozambique (Maputo), and Angola (Luanda). When working my way through the archives of literary journals and other publications in Maputo and Luanda, it became clear that Brazil—and also Cuba—had been an essential point of orientation for Lusophone African literature in the 1950s and 1960s. Castro Soromenho, the Angolan novelist, spent many years in Brazil. Dissident white Mozambicans such as the film-maker Ruy Guerra emigrated to Brazil. For the great Angolan intellectual Mário Pinto de Andrade, the Iberian Atlantic was a self-evident frame of reference. Brazil loomed ever larger in my own thinking, and it would eventually become necessary for me to take the leap into that cultural realm. My Brazilian turn was also nurtured by my friendship with the Brazilian philosopher Marcia Sá Cavalcante Schuback, who resides in Stockholm. It was her crazy and glorious idea that we translate João Guimarães Rosa's *Primeiras estórias* (1962) into Swedish. Impossible, of course—but there is a published book, *Förberättelser* (2018), that documents our failure quite enjoyably.

Hence, it was a series of happy accidents rather than a pre-defined intellectual agenda that led me across the South Atlantic and, through my work on the *Transnationalism* book, to my encounter with Antonio Candido and Roberto Schwarz. This was a completely overdetermined "discovery." Not only would it have been hard to miss those two once I engaged with Brazil, but the way they grappled with the problem of literary form and social determination immediately resonated with me. Similar problems had been dealt with in South Africa, but it wasn't until the 1980s that South African critics began to respond to it with the same sophistication as Candido had done already in the 1950s and 1960s. Thanks to the São Paulo intellectuals, in other words, I found a vocabulary for my own reading of Southern African literature—misplaced ideas!—that I hadn't found in Anglophone African criticism.

As with any long-term relationship, however, my understanding of the Brazilian context evolved. It became clear to me that mainstream literary culture in Brazil had been relentlessly Eurocentric in its orientation, even when it sought to vindicate the Brazilian literary field. Disturbingly, Black writers in Brazil long struggled even to be noticed. Race works in different and subtle ways in Brazil (compared to South Africa) that I cannot claim to have fully understood, but what I have seen has alerted me to the prevalence of an anti-Black racism that seldom speaks its name. I continue to hold Candido and Schwarz in high regard, but these days I understand how they themselves were shaped by the peculiar Brazilian racial paradigm which combines exclusionary hierarchization—there are few Black scholars at the University of São Paulo, for example—with nominal conviviality. This realization registers to some extent in my work of intellectual history, *Decolonisations of Literature: Critical Practice in Africa and Brazil after 1945* (2022), where I provide an account of the São Paulo "school" of criticism. Through my comparative optic, it became clear that it is not just African literary criticism that can learn from Brazil, but equally the other way around. In fact, I am profoundly grateful for my own anchorage (with all its limitations) in the rich and diverse intellectual traditions of Africa, which I think can be an essential resource for urgent thinking in Latin America today. On my latest visit to Brazil in August 2023, it also became clear to me that these traditions are increasingly being picked up by (mainly) Black writers.

On that note, I must of course acknowledge the pioneering work on African literature done by

several Brazilian scholars such as Carmen Lucia Tindó Secco, Benjamin Abdala Júnior, Rita Chaves, and others. Coming from the other side of the Atlantic, the Nigerian Niyi Afolabi was also one of the first scholars to explore the African-diasporic dimensions of Brazilian literature, especially in relation to the Yoruba heritage. Today, if we follow the reasoning in a recent article by Nazir Ahmed Can and Issaka Maïnassara Bano (2023), Brazil—partly thanks to a law passed in 2002 stipulating that schools in Brazil must teach African history and culture—can be described as a center for the transnational reception of African literature. The Brazilian public sphere's relationship with Africa has, in other words, evolved significantly since the 1960s and 1970s, the formative decades of the São Paulo school.

This brings me, then, to the question of what the Africa-Latin America axis can contribute to South-South comparisons more generally. In the Cold War decades, there was a general sense of "tricontinental" solidarity that found expression in various congresses across the world and contributed to the shaping of aspects of African and Latin American literature. We know much more about this today, thanks to work by Lanie Millar (2019), Monica Popescu (2020), Kerry Bystrom (2018), Sarah Quesada (2022), and others. And still there are many hidden histories to discover. In the immediate post-revolution years in Mozambique, Maputo attracted a large number of ideologically driven activists and "solidarity workers" (the word in Mozambique was *cooperantes*), quite a few of them from Latin America. I have always been aware of this Latin American presence, if vaguely, based on personal memory of those years, but I'm fascinated to see that it has begun to enter the historiography of the region. Desirée de Lemos Azevedo's thesis (2011) on the Brazilian *cooperantes* was path-breaking in that respect, and a recent article by Mario Ayala and Ricardo Pérez Haristoy (2023) focuses on the Chileans and Argentinians—themselves exiles from right-wing dictatorships— who traveled to Mozambique shortly after 1975 to assist in constructing the newly independent nation. The reverse side to this connection is of course the ties that neighboring apartheid South Africa nurtured with the regimes in Argentina and Chile at that time. One of the rare South African literary attempts to account for that aspect of South-South relations is Mark Behr's *The Smell of Apples* (1995), where a Pinochet-like Chilean general called "Mr. Smith" looms large. J. M. Coetzee's *Summertime* (2009), again, has traces of apartheid-era Latin American connections as well.

Hence, there are certain points in time at which the African-Latin American ties become tighter and denser, presenting singular cases to be added to the broader canvas of South-South relations. If we scale up and think both in terms of deep time and large-scale comparisons, Isabel Hofmeyr has been instrumental in shaping a comparative view from an oceanic perspective—of the Black Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, to be precise. Making the crucial point that trans-oceanic relations on the Indian Ocean had a much longer and more diversified history than the Atlantic, Hofmeyr's "The Black Atlantic Meets the Indian Ocean" (2007) enabled a new comparative perspective. In the context of that oceanic turn, I think Africa-Latin America studies has a distinct contribution to make. Following up on Bystrom and Slaughter's seminal volume *The Global South Atlantic* (2018), this oceanic angle will continue to recalibrate the conception of the Black Atlantic and decenter a U.S. American conceptual hegemony. But one would do well to approach Latin America also from the other ocean, the Pacific, to study how histories entangle across the seaboards. Traces of the infamous treaties of Tordesillas and Zaragoza can be found across the southern hemisphere: Portuguese is spoken in East Timor, for example, and there remain memories of Spanish colonialism in the

Philippines.[1] In brief, it seems that Africa-Latin America comparison promises to contribute to a revised sense of globality.

But what about method? The skills required to cultivate that alternative sense can be summed up in three words: language, language, and language. And then the rest should follow! I'm simplifying, of course, but the more of a multilingual sensibility scholars develop—including languages originating in the African continent—the more it becomes possible to do justice to the diversity of these histories. I say this as someone whose linguistic range is lamentably narrow, but even from within my limitations, working across languages has alerted me to all the other challenges that come with the concatenation of conflicted histories. Different languages imply different methods and an expansion of what counts as the "archive." Oral history, reading against the grain, cross-cutting fragmented and contradictory archival material: all of this comes into the picture. I could only wish for a second life that allowed me time to follow all these different trails.

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[1] The Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) and the Treaty of Zaragoza (1529) were agreements between the kings of Spain and Portugal—with Papal approval—to divide the globe along two meridians, with one half "belonging" to Portugal, and the other half "belonging" to Spain. This explains, broadly, the current borders of Brazil, for example.

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How to Cite

Helgesson, Stefan. March 29, 2025. "Southern African Roads to Latin America." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.