GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Unfinished Business: On the Histories (and Futures) of Latin America-Africa Comparison

By Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra | 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)?
- **Histories:** Were you to write a (pre-?) history of the field, what are the names and texts it would include?
- **Futures:** What do you see as key debates in and/or challenges for the field going forward?

The present outlook for scholarship that thinks across Latin America and Africa is very exciting. The inaugural LASA/Africa congress in November 2023 is just one indication of institutional recognition for the recent wave of scholarship — often under the heading of frameworks such as Global South studies, Cold War studies, or Afro-Latinx studies, and much of it by scholars included in this dossier — that offers a wide range of models for comparative work between the two regions. The landscape feels very different than when I began my graduate studies in comparative literature almost two decades ago, going in search of examples of how Latin America and Africa might be brought together under the aegis of a discipline whose trajectories still largely ran North-South. This is not to discount the very real challenges that still exist. In U.S. academe, the context in which I was trained and work (although conditions are at least analogous elsewhere), one significant impediment remains that of institutional disciplinary organization, which under the rubric of area studies separates Latin America from Africa as distinct regions of scholarly expertise. Even under the aegis of comparative literature, where many have worked hard to loosen the Eurocentric thinking that long bound the discipline, South-South comparison is often stymied by hiring practices that mirror the organizing logics of area studies and the so-called national literatures.

Such impediments notwithstanding, there are and have long been spaces where comparative work between Latin America and Africa was able to take root. These include Spanish departments which, organized into varying assemblages of “Spanish and Portuguese,” “Spanish, French, and Portuguese,” or “Romance Languages,” have provided an institutional home for scholars working across the southern Atlantic and Caribbean. African and Africana studies programs and departments have also been fertile ground for thinking about the legacies of exchange between the two continents, particularly those rooted in the forced movement of people from the African continent to the Americas. Scholars trained or working at historically Black institutions (HBCUs) in Latin American or Caribbean studies, too, laid the foundations for Afro-Hispanic and, more recently, Afro-Latinx studies.[1] These frameworks are not just precursors; they continue to vitally inform the comparative study of Latin

America and Africa.

Yet the institutional locations described above also often put scholars who were building connections between the study of Latin America and of Africa at a remove from the foremost critical paradigm for thinking about the cultures and histories of imperialism in the later decades in the twentieth century: postcolonial studies, which in the U.S. was predominantly housed in English departments. The study of African literature (where separated from African studies as area studies) was largely subsumed into postcolonial studies, while Latin America remained on the margins of that critical paradigm. One notable exception to this estrangement between Latin American and postcolonial studies was Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), which, drawing on postcolonial studies, looked to the intertwined histories of European imperialism in Latin America and Africa as a means for linking the two continents together. Here, attention to the wide range of material histories of connection provided the grounds for the articulation of broader conceptual linkages. In one favorite example, Pratt notes that when the British invaded both the Río de la Plata and the Cape of Good Hope in 1806, some of the same officers were used in both places (2008, 11-12; 1992, 10). And, later, Pratt's reading of J.M. Coetzee's study of the rhetoric of white settler narratives in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988) informs her analysis of South American intellectuals' selection and adaptation of European perspectives and frameworks in the decades following independence. An early encounter with *Imperial Eyes* in graduate school laid the foundations for my formation as a scholar, and I have been lucky to have Mary as a teacher and interlocutor in the many years since.

But fields are never made of singular examples, and the work of mapping the larger and global history of Latin America-Africa comparison remains unfinished. I have in mind here the sometimes scattered, forestalled, or simply overlooked projects by a range of scholars that nevertheless informed the present dynamism of the field and which, in turn, offer instructive indications for its possible futures. Without attention to this history, scholarship at this comparative juncture risks remaining stuck in an appeal to novelty as its motivating gesture. One of the principal problems with this rhetorical move, however, is that it risks — whether intentionally or not — discounting the work of its predecessors and contributes to the on-going marginalization of scholars working across the southern Atlantic. The latter statement is a provocation, of course, and I cannot properly undertake the kind of synthetic study I have in mind in the scope of this essay. I offer my remarks, instead, as a starting point, drawing on the experience of putting together material for my first book, *The Dictator Novel: Writers and Politics in the Global South* (2019).

In beginning my research for that project, I was repeatedly struck by the fact that I was hardly the first to explore comparative connections between literary and critical traditions in Latin America and Africa. Writers themselves, of course, were a crucial point of connection; this was particularly true of writers from the African continent, who read and thought carefully about the work of their Latin American counterparts, as I discuss in *The Dictator Novel*. But scholars, too, had long been thinking about analogous histories of dictatorship on the two continents as the grounds for comparison between Latin America and Africa. Even where their efforts were forestalled, they left behind crucial cues for the directions my own work might take. I will name here two examples of scholars whose work offers distinct models

for thinking comparatively between Latin America and Africa: Josaphat Bekunuru Kubayanda (1944-1991) and Edna Aizenberg (1945-2018). Both were active in the same period that Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* took shape, although neither is as well known — at least outside of their areas of specialization — today. My encounters with Kubayanda and Aizenberg's work not only affirmed the viability of a project comparing literary responses to dictatorship in Latin America and Africa, each offered glimpses of the much wider critical landscape in which such a project might take shape. To highlight their contribution is to claim each as a precursor for Latin America-Africa comparison today, as well as an act of remembrance for two scholars who are no longer with us.

Josaphat Bekunuru Kubayanda primarily was a scholar of Latin American and Caribbean literatures. Originally from Ghana, he became the first chair of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the Ohio State University (OSU) and also served an associate editor at *Research in African Literatures* (Bjornson and Irele 1992).[2] Rooted in attention to the African diaspora in the Americas, Kubayanda's work emphasizes the continuities between literary production in Latin America, the Caribbean, and, particularly toward the end of his career, on the African continent. Over the course of a decade, Kubayanda published a variety of articles and essays on Latin American and Caribbean literatures, highlighting the influence of traditions from the African continent in Latin America and the Caribbean, framing this work as part of a necessary move away from "Pan-European," "Euro-American," or "unilinear" systems of analysis (1984 [2002], 113; 1990, xii; 1989, 35; see also 1986 and 1987). Kubayanda 's contributions included the book *The Poet's Africa: Africanness in the Poetry of Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire* (1990), as well as a study of literature and dictatorship in progress at the time of his death. While the latter project never saw publication, it did yield a special issue of *Research in African Literatures* on "Dictatorship and Oppression," edited and introduced by Kubayanda (1990), as well as the posthumously published essay "Unfinished Business: Dictatorial Literature of Post-Independence Latin America and Africa" (1997).[3] Working as much with the disjunctures as the analogies between post-independence histories of dictatorship on the two continents, "Unfinished Business"—from which I have borrowed my own title—offers a systematic articulation of the bases for comparison of literary responses to dictatorship. My own work on the topic would not have been possible without the foundations laid by Kubayanda, and his work remains a model for the analysis of the relationship between literature and material historical conditions.

Edna Aizenberg, meanwhile, was a specialist in Latin American Jewish studies and Jorge Luis Borges. Originally from Argentina, she was a professor of Hispanic Studies at Marymount Manhattan College (MMC) for many years.[4] However, Aizenberg was also interested and dedicated time to the study of post-independence African literatures, finding suggestive analogies with Latin American writing. Over the course of a decade, she published a wide range of articles and chapters in this vein in venues such as the Nigerian journal *Okike* (1986 [1984]), *Research in African Literatures* (1990), and *PMLA* (1992), as well as the volume *Approaches to Teaching Achebe's Things Fall Apart* (1991). In an essay on Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), she offers a thorough account of what Mariano Siskind would later call the "material travels" of magical realism as a narrative aesthetic (Aizenberg 1995; Siskind 2014). Aizenberg also reviewed several books for *Research in African Literatures*, including Kubayanda's *The Poet's Africa* (Aizenberg 1992a), and served as editor for a special issue of that journal on "New Voices in African Literature" (1995). Read together, this body of

work offers a more abstract model of comparison. Rooted in attention to the same historical linkages between Latin America and Africa that inform Pratt and Kubayanda's work, Aizenberg's analyses privileged the critic's ability to identify morphological similarity or thematic analogy between works produced in distinct political, cultural, and historical contexts. Moving away from immediate questions of continuity, Aizenberg's work explored how ideas developed in the analysis of literature from one region of the world might shape analysis of that from another.

Obituaries for Aizenberg make little mention of her interest in African literatures. An announcement of her passing posted by MMC, for instance, notes that Aizenberg invited Chinua Achebe (then at the nearby Bard College) to speak at the campus in the 1990s but offers no further explanation.[5] Having encountered some of her publications, I became fully aware of the scope of Aizenberg's work in Latin America-Africa comparison by chance. Having completed planned research in the Gabriel García Márquez collection in the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, I began browsing the archives of *Research in African Literatures*. Here, I found correspondence between Aizenberg and the journal's long-time editor, Bernth Lindfors, an exchange that began following Aizenberg's participation in a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar on "Major African Authors" taught by Lindfors in 1985 (see 1984 [1986], 24 n1). In the years following that summer seminar, Lindfors offered Aizenberg lists of suggested readings, critical references, and contact information for possible interlocutors. It was through Lindfors that Aizenberg placed the essay in *Okike*; he solicited her contribution to *Approaches to Teaching Achebe's Things Fall Apart*; and, already in 1985, Lindfors encouraged Aizenberg to develop her interest in Latin America-Africa comparison into a book.[6] The biographical note accompanying the essay published in *PMLA* identifies the piece as part of a forthcoming volume titled *Postcolonial Subversions: The Novel in Latin America and Africa* (Aizenberg 1992, 1235). Much like Kubayanda's book on literature and dictatorship in Latin America and Africa, however, this project does not appear to have come to fruition. For the remainder of her career, Aizenberg (re-)turned her attention to Latin American literature, producing several important volumes in that field.

From this distance, and given the available materials, it is impossible to ascertain why Aizenberg's project on Latin America and Africa might have been abandoned. By this point in her career, Aizenberg had tenure — indeed, Lindfors wrote a letter of support for her tenure case, as mentioned in their correspondence — and, one assumes, the institutional leeway to explore new dimensions in her research.[7] I would like to imagine that the book *could* have been written, but I cannot know why it was not. Rather than speculate, I will say that the work that Aizenberg did leave behind speaks to the value of individual curiosity in the life of a scholar, to the willingness to depart from one's "certified" field, and, particularly in this case, to the value of interpersonal networks as counter to the gravitational force of area distinctions. All are important lessons for the future of Latin America-Africa comparison.

I have given here only a cursory account of Kubayanda and Aizenberg and their work; each a representative sample of the much wider network of precursors for comparative work between Latin American and Africa today. Their examples affirm that scholarship in this vein has long been possible, despite the institutional challenges outlined above. There is much to be learned from their examples, not only in terms of how those institutional challenges might be negotiated, but also by looking to the intersecting conversations that fed such work and

might serve to continue the conversation going forward. With that in mind, I close by repeating an earlier proposition: a crucial task for Latin America-Africa comparison going forward is to recover and compile these piecemeal histories, to make these pasts findable, both as an account of the formation of the field and as possible maps for the future. We are hardly pioneers, and that is a good thing.

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the staff at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, whose work is vital to preserving the histories to which I refer. In the process of writing this essay, they made available scans of the correspondence between Aizenberg and Lindfors, allowing me to cross-check (and correct) my original research notes.

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[1] A case in point is the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, founded at the Afro-Hispanic Institute at Howard University in 1982 under the editorship of Stanley A. Cyrus. The journal later moved to the University of Missouri, where it was housed between Black Studies and Romance

Languages. It is now based at Vanderbilt University, in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and the Bishop Joseph Johnson Black Cultural Center. For more information on the journal and the ways in which it has shaped the field, see its twentieth anniversary special issue, which features a selection of key pieces published in the journal in its first two decades (Luis, ed. 2002).

[2] Having earlier studied Romance literatures at the University of London, Westfield College, Kubayanda submitted the dissertation "Nicolás Guillén and Aimé Césaire: A 'Universalist' Approach to the Poetics of Africanness in Latin America and the Caribbean, 1929-1961" for his doctoral degree at Washington University in St. Louis in 1981. Today, there is at OSU a research fellowship named in his honor: https://sppo.osu.edu/graduate/research-and-study-abroad-funding.

[3] An obituary for Kubayanda published in *Research in African Literatures* described the manuscript, titled *Literature and Dictatorship in Latin America and Africa*, as being under contract with the University of Missouri Press, while the posthumous essay stated it was with Howard University Press (Bjornson and Irele 1992; Kubayanda 1997). Although the project was assigned an International Standard Book Number (ISBN 9780882582016), it does not seem to have made it to print.

[4] Like Kubayanda, Aizenberg received her Ph.D. in 1981, in her case from Columbia University with the dissertation "Religious Ideas/Eternal Metaphors: The Jewish Presence in Borges." There is also a research fellowship named in her honor, the Edna Aizenberg Award from the Latin American Jewish Studies Association: https://lajsa.org/edna-aizenberg-research-award/.

[5] See: https://www.mmm.edu/live/news/2662-in-memoriam-dr-edna-aizenberg-emeritus-professor.

[6] Aizenberg to Lindfors, 1 September 1985. Folder: "Aizenberg, Edna," Box 1, Series I. General Correspondence, ca. 1968-1988. Research in African Literatures Records, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

[7] For discussion of Lindfors's letter in support of Aizenberg's tenure case, see Aizenberg to Lindfors, 17 September 1987; Aizenberg to Lindfors, 12 October 1987; Lindfors to Aizenberg, 28 October 1987; Aizenberg to Lindfors, 27 October 1987. Research in African Literatures Records, Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

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