GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Africa and Latin America, Transmodern Dialogues: Beyond the Lettered City

By Estefanía Bournot | 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 having been key debates in and/or challenges for the field, historically?

Silenced Histories of Resonant Connections

When I was in the final stages of my PhD, I received a vinyl record containing Senegalese music from the 1970s that opened a whole new world for me. It was a carefully curated compilation, which had been recently released by a record label that had taken on the task of recovering analogue recordings from the musical archives across the African continent. On that record, I was surprised to find some classic Caribbean salsa tunes infused with the distinctive sounds of rhythmic electric guitars and enigmatic vocals in a slightly distorted Spanish. Initially, I struggled to place this transfusion of codes. Yet it swiftly piqued my curiosity: why were Senegalese bands of the 1970s interpreting Cuban songs such as “El carretero,” “Guajira ven,” and “Esta China”? How did Cuban music become emblematic of an era in West Africa? In short, how was this sonic connection between two seemingly disconnected regions established? Prior to the widespread globalization of media and the internet, this cultural bond remained far from obvious.

Despite having dedicated years to studying the literature and intellectual history of Latin America, I found myself oblivious to this aspect of a cultural history linking Africa and Latin America centuries after the abolition of the slave trade. In the literature programs I attended in both Latin America and Europe, the cultural contributions of Afro-descendant communities were completely absent from the curriculum. I suspect this exclusion persists in most Spanish-speaking countries, despite the pervasive presence of Black diasporic culture across the Americas. The music that unexpectedly came into my possession illuminated the blind spots within this field—or multiple fields—whose narratives predominantly revolved around “hybrid” and “mestizo” identity constructs, as well as around the complex and dominating relationship with the colonial metropolis. Moreover, the salsa rhythms played in West Africa revealed other avenues of cultural circulation, in which affects, imaginaries, and even political projects were shaped—all of which fell outside the purview of a discipline that is still deeply colonial in its methodologies and scope.

Music was the catalyst that ignited my interest in researching the Pan-African festivals of the 1960s and 1970s. These included The First World Festival of Negro Arts (FESMAN 1966), the First Pan-African Festival of Algiers (PANAF 1969), Zaïre 1974, or the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 1977). These festivals showcased the talents of Latin American artists such as Gilberto Gil, Elizabeth Cardoso, Celia Cruz, and Fania All Stars band, who performed in cities such as Kinshasa, Algiers, Lagos, and Dakar against the backdrop of post-independence fervor and the emergence of authoritarian regimes.

Amidst Cold War tensions, African diasporic connections were revitalized through cultural diplomacy between Third World countries. This exchange served, in some cases, as a means to align the emergent African nations to the geopolitical expectations of neocolonial powers. In other cases, it functioned as state-directed strategies for solidifying alliances of solidarity in the common struggle against imperialism. Regarding the latter, music emerged as one of the most powerful channels through which alternative global imaginaries circulated and popular resistance manifested.

My first approach to African cultures was therefore not through the "lettered city" (meaning printed textual culture, which was only reserved for a certain elite) but rather through *popular culture*. Festivals, conferences, radio, music clubs: all of these constituted an archive of ephemeral and most often informal encounters that revealed Atlantic undercurrents that went unnoticed in history books. Coming from literary and philological studies, this new topic of study represented for me a challenge and an opportunity to learn from other disciplines. Gradually, I began to alternate readings from the fields of anthropology, history, art, and ethnomusicology. Key works that helped me understand the weight of music as a connecting thread between Africa and Latin America at this point included Richard M. Shain's *Roots in Reverse* (2018), Errol Montes Pizarro's *Más ramas que raíces* (2018), Marissa Moorman's *Intonations* (2008), Bob White's "Congolese Rumba and other cosmopolitanisms" (2002), as well as David Murphy's edited collection on *The First World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar 1966* (2016). These studies underscore the importance of understanding cultural exchanges beyond the traditional focus on elite culture—and written texts—emphasizing dynamic exchanges of popular culture and informal interactions that have shaped historical and contemporary ties across the Atlantic.

(Re)Framing the Atlantic

Driven by a desire to delve deeper into these parallel developments and imaginaries alternate to European modernity, I embarked on my current large-scale research project "Forgotten Routes across the Atlantic," funded by the Austrian Academy of Sciences. As I was researching the historical contexts that gave rise to musical and intellectual collaborations between African and Latin American artists, I came to realize how much of decolonial theory, which pervades contemporary scholarship on the Global South today, can be traced back to the Third Worldist networks of the 1960s and 1970s. This was the period following the Bandung Conference, which marked a key moment for the decentralization of cultural flows. During this era, the very epistemic foundations for the study of history and culture were vigorously challenged.

From the era of decolonization in Asia and Africa, numerous intellectual projects emerged worldwide with an emancipatory spirit that aimed at breaking away from Western-European

hegemony and the narrow patterns it imposed, not only in political terms but also in the cultural and philosophical realms. An emerging body of scholarship has been recently revisiting many of these projects, which sought to forge alternative pathways to knowledge production and exchange. This resurgence underscores the continued relevance of these "transperipheral" routes in contemporary discourse.

For me, personally, the contributions of scholars of cultural studies and art history have been particularly influential in framing my own subject of study. Notable works include Anne Garland Mahler's groundbreaking book on the Tricontinental movement (2018); Christopher J. Lee's edited collection on Bandung (2010); Hakim Adi's history of Pan-Africanism (2018); Okwui Enwezor's history of African liberation movements; Kerry Bystrom, Monica Popescu, and Katherine Zien's edited volume on the cultural Cold War, and Stefan Helgesson's *Decolonisations of Literature: Critical Practice in Africa and Brazil after 1945* (2022). All of these titles are great at providing an overall frame for South-South entanglements and engaging with major critical topics of world literature and Global South networks. Yet, I would also like to acknowledge the at times less visible work of scholars and thinkers from the Global South who have developed exciting research paths connecting Africa and Latin America in different realms and historical periods, including Maria Elena Oliva's work on the entanglements between Latin American Indigenist movements and negritude (2014); the fascinating studies of Leda Maria Martins on African oral traditions in Brazil (2021); Washington Santos Nascimento's multiple engagements with South-Atlantic cultural transfers (2018); and art historian Sabrina Moura's work on artistic exchanges between Senegal and Brazil (2015). These studies illuminate some of the intricate intersections of art, literature, religion, and politics, across the Atlantic.

Challenges: Looking Forward and Beyond the Lettered City

The exploration of music as a conduit for transatlantic connections reveals not only the neglected ties between African and Latin American cultures but also the epistemological challenges of studying such links within the confines of traditional academic frameworks. I think it is necessary to interrogate the broader debates and methodological patterns that have shaped the field of South-South cultural studies. How do these transatlantic entanglements disrupt the Eurocentric paradigms that have dominated both the study of history and cultural production? What methodologies can help us excavate and amplify the voices and practices excluded from the "lettered city" and conventional archives?

To address these questions, I turn to Enrique Dussel's notion of "transmodernity," which provides a critical framework for exploring how intercultural dialogues challenge the hierarchies embedded in European modernity. Dussel's work highlights how spaces of popular culture—music, festivals, food, and folklore—serve as powerful sites of resistance and creativity, offering a counterpoint to the dominance of the "lettered city" and the written word. For me, this perspective has been transformative in thinking through the methodological demands of studying ephemeral, informal, and non-elite cultural exchanges, such as those embodied in Pan-African festivals or the transcultural dialogues embedded in African and Latin American music.

In his essay titled "Transmodernity and Interculturality: An Interpretation from the Perspective of Philosophy of Liberation," published in 2005, Dussel highlights two critical

historical currents that shaped a new interpretive paradigm. Firstly, Dussel identifies the emergence of dependency theory as pivotal to comprehending the material and economic asymmetries between core cultures and their peripheries, which had endured colonial oppression (see Frank 1998.) The second current is that of the philosophy of liberation, which Dussel himself contributed to creating and which was highly influential in the 1970s. Interestingly, this movement originated in Africa, as Dussel himself explains: "in 1974, we initiated an intercontinental 'South-South dialogue' between thinkers from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, with our first meeting held in Dar-es-Salaam (Tanzania) in 1976. These encounters provided us with a new and immediate panorama of the great cultures of humanity" (2012, 33). Such transregional encounters are crucial knots in the history of South-South engagements. What I have found in my research is that conferences and festivals provide invaluable material to examinate transcultural dialogues beyond national borders and center-periphery paradigms, which have largely defined critical understanding of the relation between colonizer and colonized under a particular understanding of modernity. That is why Dussel defines these kinds of dialogues "transmodern," because they are contemporary to and yet different from European/Western modernity.

My introduction to Dussel's notion of transmodernity came through the work of Ignacio López Calvo on South-to-South intercultural dialogues between the Luso-Hispanic World and "the Orient" (2012), which was ground-breaking in mapping transpacific and East-West entanglements and networking scholars operating on the fringes of the European core of cultural studies. López-Calvo, drawing on Dussel, emphasizes that transperipheral dialogues should be conceived as "border thinking," not only between the peripheries of the European core of modernity but also within each national, postcolonial culture. As Dussel explains, "This intercultural dialogue is neither only nor principally a dialogue between cultural apologists that attempt to demonstrate to others the virtues and values of their own culture. It is, above all, a dialogue between a culture's critical innovators" (2012, 48). This role of "critical innovators" in Latin America was largely played by Black artists and intellectuals who challenged white and mestizo hegemony.

Dussel's work also directs our attention to the asymmetries and hierarchies that exist within each national culture, which often replicate the colonial paradigms of core and periphery. This results in certain forms of artistic expression not being recognized as "culture," as well as in certain subjects not being perceived as cultural producers. This explains, for instance, the fact that the impact of African-rooted thought remains marginal in the study of Latin American cultures, just as the transatlantic trajectories that have shaped the work of important Latin American intellectuals and artists including Beatriz Nascimento, Miguel Ángel Asturias, João Cabral de Melo Neto, and Manuel Zapata Olivella remain in the shadows. I believe it is essential to reevaluate and bring these influences to light in order to fully understand the richness and complexity of cultural interactions in the Atlantic context. In my research on cultural diplomacy in the South Atlantic, I have found that the dialogue between Afro-Latin American and African artists and intellectuals was crucial in the processes of Pan-African subjectivation, as well as in the consolidation of political-cultural projects on both sides of the ocean (Bournot 2022).

Dussel's conception of intercultural dialogue is deeply intertwined with his exploration of cultural liberation, emphasizing popular culture as the enduring expression of the

oppressed—those who remain “exterior” to the homogenizing effects of Western modernity. He identifies this “exteriority” as a space of resistance and creativity, preserved in the cultural moments dismissed by colonial and neocolonial powers: folklore, music, dress, festivals, and the memory of collective struggles. As he explains, “This sector is oppressed in the state system, but maintains its alterity, difference, and freedom” (2012, 36). This insight brings to the forefront a key challenge in Latin America-Africa dialogues: the urgent need to understand cultural production beyond what Angel Rama termed “the lettered city” (1983), which privileges written texts and elite intellectual traditions while marginalizing oral, performative, and popular cultural practices.

To unlock the full potential of this dialogue, we must not only transgress national and linguistic borders but also dismantle the authority of the written word as the primary medium of cultural legitimacy. This requires robust support for Trans-Atlantic field research, interdisciplinary collaboration, and in-person exchanges that create space for voices and practices historically relegated to the margins. These initiatives must confront and dismantle the lingering cultural hierarchies of European modernity, which continue to frame our understanding of intellectual and artistic production. Ultimately, the goal is not simply to recover silenced voices but to amplify their transformative power, allowing them to reshape the epistemic foundations of the field. Only then can the forgotten melodies and untold stories that once nurtured spaces of transmodern imagination resonate anew, challenging us to envision a radically inclusive and decolonized cultural horizon.

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