

RESPONSE TO MAGALÍ ARMILLAS TISEYRA'S
"DISTANT LANDS AND CLIMES:
LATIN AMERICAN CRITICISM, WORLD LITERATURE,
AND OTHER AXES FOR COMPARISON"

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Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra's "Distant Lands and Climes: Latin American Criticism, World Literature, and Other Axes for Comparison" engages in a discussion of the relationship between Latin American literature—mainly its writers—and what has come to be understood as "World Literature" over the last twenty-five years.¹ While the author focuses on recent debates, she also examines critical texts that address a much broader historical span of literary production, in order to demonstrate that Latin American intellectuals have long maintained connections with "distant land and climes" well before the emergence of world literature as an academic field.

To deepen her critique of the Global North literary theory and criticism (Casanova, Moretti, Damrosch, among others) regarding Latin American writers, and their "*rentrée*" into world literature, Armillas-Tiseyra brings into conversation Mariano Siskind's *Cosmopolitan Desires*, Héctor Hoyos's *Beyond Bolaño*, and Ignacio Sánchez-Prado's, *Strategic Occidentalism*. These critics argue that Latin American literature has been flattened and reduced by the Global North in order to conform to its canon and expectations. Among other issues, they draw attention to a much broader corpus of Latin American writers—historical and contemporary—who engage with global themes, aesthetics, and politics, beyond the frequently selected Boom authors and Bolaño. Their critiques point to processes of conflation and de-contextualization in literary production, as well as the systematic disregard for Latin American criticism and specific cultural traditions.

Armillas-Tiseyra then proposes what she sees as the most promising and productive future of Latin American literature in relation to world literature: South-South readings and relations. In this framework, "Latin America" becomes less bound by geography or the disciplinary imperatives of area studies—designed and imposed by Global North institutions—and more open to understanding itself through its relationship with other Souths. As precedent for such conceptual reconfiguration, she cites the work of Anne Garland Mahler, Lannie Millar, Sarah Quesada, Wail S. Hassan, among others.

The purpose of this response is to highlight and expand upon two subterranean lines of inquiry touched upon by Armillas-Tiseyra, that, in my view, constitute pressing issues for South-South intellectual engagement in its effort to overcome the metropolitan hegemonies of the Global North. The first concerns national literature and its corresponding “national” language; the second addresses anti-colonial and postcolonial alliances within South-South exchanges. At the core of both issues lies the colonial matrix of power.

World literature does not dismantle national borders as fully as it often claims to do insofar as mechanisms of selection govern which texts pass through the grid of the world literature market and into our higher ed curricula. These mechanisms frequently reinforce expectations of national homogeneity. Historically, the imposition of a homogenous national language—Spanish or Portuguese—suppressed the multiplicity of Indigenous and African languages as well as variants interacting, at different hierarchical levels, within territories shaped by colonial relations. Armillas-Tiseyra gestures toward this problem when she writes: “A more significant challenge, at least at the conceptual level, is the fact that attention to the reception and uses of Latin American writing elsewhere often has the undesirable effect of yet again centering writers, moments, and aesthetics that the field has worked hard to displace from functioning as default representatives of Latin American literature in the world-literary sphere.”² Although Latin American cultural studies have indeed made efforts to decenter national languages, much remains to be done to avoid suppressing the true multiplicity obscured by national labels and marginalized in both national and international circulation. Texts are often required to be “understandable” according to national linguistics standards—written to be easily translated, readily consumable by global readership. Within this framework, world literature risks becoming yet another form of linguistic colonialism.

That is why, for example, several Quechua poets—many of them living in the diaspora—refuse to self-translate their work or to publish bilingual editions in Quechua and Spanish. Their reasoning is that, because Spanish is the language of alphabetization even for Quechua speakers, readers tend to default to the Spanish version, even when they are fluent in both languages. This “translation effect” thus becomes one of the principal risks of world literatures in both the market and academia. Olivia Reginaldo, a Quechua poet living in France, writes: “Reading only the translation implies a marginalization of the minority language. In this way, the intention of giving visibility to Quechua through translation can, paradoxically, reinforce the subordination of the indigenous language.”³ A similar problem can be posed in relation to English and the other European languages that are relatively marginalized in the global literary economy.

Like other poets, Reginaldo follows Pablo Landeo’s call in “*Qayakuy / Ilamado / Runasimi qillqaqmasiykuna qayakuy*” [Call to my brothers and sis-

ters that speak and write in Quechua].⁴ In this text, poet Landeo advocates for *mana tawnayuc qillqa* [“writing without crutches”], where the “crutches” refer to the translation into the colonial language. As Alison Krögel observes, “the goal of this tactic is to make the invisible visible, the unthinkable thinkable, and the absent present.”⁵ These Quechua poets are not alone, as Indigenous scholars and artists in other parts of the world have similarly asked their readers to approach their work with decolonizing methodologies that appreciate texts in their language of creation.⁶

Unfortunately, it increasingly appears that working across fields, languages, and areas can only be conducted in European languages, often under the assumption that there is either cultural equivalence among such languages and fields, or that differences are nationally and ethnically distinct—what Emily Apter defines as commercialized “identities.”⁷ In this regard, Armillas-Tiseyra acknowledges the challenges of working within institutions that “increasingly materially manifest . . . the restriction (if not disappearance) of available resources for building the necessary knowledge—that is, knowledge of languages, literary, and critical traditions.”⁸ This situation is evident in the significant budget cuts to language departments in higher education, not to mention the scarce support for the teaching of Indigenous and non-European languages. Our own work developing the University of Colorado, Boulder’s Quechua program as well as collective work developing Indigenous curriculum and library collections attests to a commitment to forging new paths for the teaching and learning of Indigenous languages within higher education.⁹

For Armillas-Tiseyra, South-South dialogue and reading practices can contribute to the vitality and expansion of Latin American literature along paths other than those dictated by metropolitan centers. Once again, the question of the translatability—and the filtering effect of national languages—emerges as a central concern, particularly given that the growing field of Global South Studies has underscored the long and sustained histories of anti-colonial resistance to Global North imperatives.

Anne Garland Mahler—one of the scholars cited by Armilla-Tiseyra—demonstrates in *A Wide Net of Solidarity: Antiracism and Anti-Imperialism from the Americas to the Globe* (2025) the existence of sustained transnational and anti-imperial networks, from the *Liga Antimperialista de las Américas* (1925) to contemporary alliances.¹⁰ These networks encompass intellectual, artistic and activist practices, particularly in relation to Black and Indigenous struggles and immigrant rights. Similarly, the work of Lannie Millar, Sarah Quesada, Estefanía Bournot, and other scholars mentioned by Armillas-Tiseyra highlights such struggles in the foundational moments of South-South exchanges. Bournot, for example, examines the influence of the *Négritude et Amérique latine* Symposium held in Dakar in 1974, including the inaugural speech by Léopold Sédar Senghor. In this context, “Négritude, a philosoph-

ical-poetic branch of Pan-Africanism seeking to reaffirm the values of Black culture in response to the discredit inherited from the colonial system, would be the starting point for rethinking the links between Africa and its diasporas, in addition to addressing the long-eluded racial issue in Latin American countries.”¹¹ Furthermore, Bournot traces the impact of the Dakar symposium in the Americas, recalling the Cali symposium in 1977 and Manuel Zapata Olivella’s autobiography, in which he recounts how Senegal made him aware of the “common destiny of Africans and Latin Americans united in a centuries-old struggle of freedom.”¹² In Dakar, Zapata Olivella heard the history of Africa’s dismembering told “in the many languages spoken by my brothers.”¹³ For Zapata Olivella, it was necessary to create an *agora* for Black peoples “whatever the languages of colonization.”¹⁴

The South-South *agora* thus emerges as a space of anti-colonial resistance, both historically and in the present. This is what ultimately distinguishes the South-South literary axis from world literature: its insistence on understanding knowledge and language as interwoven—albeit in different degrees and historical moments—within the colonial matrix of power. Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s decision to stop writing in English and write instead in his mother tongue, Gĩkũyũ, was grounded in what he identified to be “the real aim of colonialism:” “to control the people’s wealth: what they produce, how they produced it, and how it was distributed; to control, in other words, the entire realm of the language of real life.”¹⁵ For him, “the domination of people’s language by the languages of the colonizing nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonized.”¹⁶

I recognize that this response does not offer a concrete solution to the question of the “*rentrée*” of Latin American literature into the field of World Literature. However, I share Armillas-Tiseyra’s conviction that a South-South dialogue already possesses a history of more productive and expansive exchanges of ideas and practices. I would emphasize that, within this exchange, questions of linguistic and epistemic hierarchies, translations and mistranslation, and the untranslatable must remain at the center of the discussion.

NOTES

¹ Magalí Armillas-Tiseyra, “Distant Lands and Climes: Latin American Criticism, World Literature, and Other Axes for Comparison,” *FORMA* 4.1 (2025): 99-120.

² Armillas-Tiseyra, 113.

³ “Leer solo la traducción implica un desplazamiento de la lengua minoritaria. De este modo, la intención de visibilizar el quechua mediante la traducción puede, paradójicamente, reforzar la subordinación de la lengua originaria.” Olivia Reginaldo, “Asimetría lingüística, escritura monolingüe y la cuestión de la (auto)traducción en la literatura quechua contemporánea,” *Yo Es Otro* 2 (2025), <https://yoesotro.com/asimetria-linguistica-escritura-monolingue-y-la-cuestion-de-la-autotraduccion-en-la-literatura-quechua-contemporanea-olivia-reginaldo/>.

⁴ Pablo Landeo, “Escritura quechua sin muletas, diez años después de la insurgencia,” *SYNTAGMAS* (Revista Del Departamento Académico De Lingüística – Unsaac) 2.1 (2023): pp. 27–42.

⁵ “la meta de esta táctica es hacer visible lo invisible, pensable lo impensable, presente lo ausente.” Alison Krögel, *Musuq Illa: poética del harawi en runasimi (2000-2020)* (Lima: Pakarina Ediciones, 2021), p. 74.

⁶ See Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999) and Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

⁷ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 2.

⁸ Armillas-Tiseyra, 113.

⁹ Javier Muñoz-Díaz, Kathia Ibacache, and Leila Gómez, *Indigenous Materials in Libraries and the Curriculum Latin American and Latinx Sources* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2024).

¹⁰ Anne Garland Mahler, *A Wide Net of Solidarity: Antiracism and Anti-Imperialism from the Americas to the Globe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2025).

¹¹ Estefanía Bournot, “Négritude et Amérique Latine: from the Black South Atlantic to the Third World.” *CLS: Comparative Literature Studies* 59.1 (2022): 78.

¹² Bournot, 85.

¹³ “en las múltiples lenguas que hablaban mis hermanos.” Zapata Olivella in Bournot, 85.

¹⁴ “cualesquiera que fuesen los idiomas colonizadores.” Zapata Olivella in Bournot, 85.

¹⁵ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing Language and Other Revolutionary Ideas* (New York: Allen Lane, 2025), p. 16.

¹⁶ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 16.