

Conference Report: Latin America – Northern Africa – Spain. Cultural, Intellectual and Literary Translations

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From July 6 to 7 2017 the International Symposium *América Latina – África del Norte – España. Traslaciones culturales, intelectuales y literarias* organised by Stephanie Fleischmann, PhD, and Ana Nenadović, M.A. M.A., brought together literary scholars and historians from Latin America, Northern Africa, Europe and the US at the Institute for Latin American Studies, Freie Universität Berlin. The conference was dedicated to the research on cultural entanglements between Latin America and Northern Africa from the perspectives of Literary Studies and Global as well as Intellectual History, embracing two main thematic fields:

The symposium focused, on the one hand, on historic encounters of actors and cultural translations between these two regions, taking a particular interest in the circulation of (anti-) colonial and (anti-)imperialist ideas, imaginaries and discourses. Special consideration was given to Spain as a common reference point of colonial history, comprising the period from the end of the Spanish “Reconquista”, in which the final expulsion of Muslim culture from Spain concurred with the beginning of the colonization of the “New World”, to the fall of the Spanish empire in Latin America, coinciding with the commence of the Spanish colonial endeavour in Northern Africa.

On the other hand, the symposium was dedicated to the study of literature as a privileged locus of cultural auto-reflection and translation, aiming to explore the symbolic figures and aesthetic programs circulating between Northern Africa and Latin America, as well as the imagined geographies that framed and were transformed by the cultural, literary and intellectual encounters. In this sense, several papers concentrated on the (trans)formation of cultural imaginaries of space such as “Occident/Orient”, “Third World” or the (Pan-)National in the historical processes of relation and creation of differences and similarities between the two regions.

The conference was opened by the keynote “De los *Viajes* de Sarmiento a la recepción de la Guerra del Rif: la emergencia de un imaginario intelectual prototercermundista en América Latina” given by Martín Bergel from the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina. In his talk, Bergel explored the representations of Northern Africa, specifically in Argentinian literature and press, depicting a general change in its political and cultural meanings from Sarmiento’s negatively connoted Orientalist imaginary to the aftermaths of World War I, when, as Bergel argued, Northern Africa started to become an important point of reference for an emerging *Third-Worldism*.

Abdellatif Limami from the University of Rabat, Morocco, traced the influences of Latin American literature in literary texts written by Moroccan authors in Spanish in his presentation titled “Creadores marroquíes en lengua española en diálogo con la literatura hispánica”, focusing especially on the literary constructions and deconstructions of voice, address and intimacy in the shifting meanings and functions of the “you”.

Monika Walter from the Technical University Berlin, Germany, re-discovered the triangle Northern Africa – Spain – Latin America by elaborating on the unwritten history of the *moriscos* in the Caribbean (“¿Diálogo imaginario entre Occidente y Oriente? Un morisco cervantino en Puerto Rico”). Following the historic figure of a crypto-Muslim on his route from Spain to Puerto Rico, she pointed out the conflicting social and cultural transferences between the Spanish-Arab-Muslim world of the *moriscos* and the emerging colonial societies in Latin America.

The first day ended with a talk dedicated to the special role of Northern Africa in the Orientalist imaginary of Argentine intellectuals (“El imaginario y la realidad del Norte de África en la elaboración del discurso orientalista argentino, s.XIX y XX”): Axel Gasquet from the University Blaise Pascal, Clermont-Ferrand, France, explored the multifaceted meanings of references to the Maghreb and the Middle East in the formation of the Argentinian civilization project and its political configurations in the transforming contexts of the 19th to the 20th century.

Michael Goebel from the Institute for Latin American Studies and the Department of History, Freie Universität Berlin, Germany, initiated the symposium’s second day with his presentation “Latin America and the Arab World in the Twentieth-Century Anti-Imperialist Imaginary”. Through the lenses of intellectual history, he explored the interrelations between the anti-imperialist struggles in Latin America and Northern Africa during the first half of the 20th century, arguing that the Latin American anti-imperialists’ attraction to the Arab world emerged, partly, as a result of a shared regionalist pan-national imagination.

The following presentation, “La reciprocidad del colonialismo en África y América como tópico en la literatura y el debate intelectual en España durante el primer tercio del siglo XX” given by Christian von Tschilschke from the University of Siegen, Germany, focused on the triangle Spain – Latin America – Northern Africa from the Spanish perspective: It explored the palimpsest structures in a large history of intellectual discourses on the Spanish colonial compromise in Africa and America, in which the mythologies of the Reconquista, the Conquest of America and the imaginaries of the neo-colonial enterprises in Morocco, as well as the colonial ‘disasters’ in Cuba and Annual interference in an echo chamber of repetitions, reflections and translations.

Following on from the topic of the interconnections between Latin America and Northern Africa in relation to Spanish colonialism, the next speakers analysed the cultural translations and transferences between Morocco and Latin America in the literary discourses and historical scenes of the (anti-) colonial wars, in particular the Rif War:

Stephanie Fleischmann from the Institute for Latin American Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, did so by critically analyzing the autobiographical writings of the Spanish-Cuban officer Alberto Bayo and pursuing his path from the Rif War through the Spanish Civil War to the Cuban Revolution. In her talk entitled “Cuba – Marruecos – Cuba: ‘intimidades’ transculturales, imitaciones y translaciones en las ‘guerras asimétricas’“, she explored the culture of masculinity and the imaginations of transcultural soldier communities, passing from the imperialist frame of the Spanish mercenary troops in Morocco to the anti-imperialist frame of the guerrilla fighters of the 26th of July Movement.

Elmar Schmidt from the University Bonn, Germany, traced the references to Latin American colonial history in the memory of the Rif War, as negotiated in contemporary Spanish and Moroccan literatures (“‘Al igual que pasó en América, la continuación de la ruina de España’: las referencias al pasado colonial en la literatura contemporánea española y marroquí sobre la Guerra del Rif”). He was able to convey how these texts strategically link the Moroccan colonial past to the Latin American in order to delegitimize the Spanish ‘civilization project’ in Northern Africa.

In the next panel, anti-imperialist thoughts emerged once more as a significant link between the two regions. Ana Nenadović from the Institute for Latin American Studies, Freie Universität Berlin, concentrated in her talk (“La Revolución Cubana - ¿hasta la victoria siempre? Reflexiones literarias y musicales en América Latina y Argelia”) on non-scholarly decolonial thought centred around the Cuban Revolution and the Algerian War. She pointed out how references to these uprisings reappear in the form of emblematic slogans and symbols

in Latin American and Algerian rap music and literature of the 21st century, creating, thus, new subjectivities of resistance.

In her talk “Latin American and Arabic Literature: García Márquez’s *La aventura de Miguel Littin* in Egypt”, Tahia Abdel Nasser from the American University in Cairo, Egypt, depicted the ongoing impact of Latin American cultural iconography and the “boom” novels on Arab Literature, focusing particularly on two recent Egyptian literary texts: Sonallah Ibrahim’s *Warda*, a story about an Arab revolutionary in Oman in the late 1960s inspired by Che Guevara, and Mohamed Makhzangi’s *Memories of a Meltdown: an Egyptian Between Moscow and Chernobyl*, which adopts the experimental form of García Márquez’ literary reportages.

The conference closed with two talks linked by the topic of cosmopolitanism in the literary relations between Latin America and Northern Africa: Monika Raič from the University Innsbruck, Austria, explored Roberto Arlt’s ‘orientalist’ texts written in Spain (“Roberto Arlt cosmopolita. Entre Argentina, España y el ‘Oriente’”), focusing on the problematics of aesthetic tradition, universal ideas of belonging and world literary enunciations from the ‘margins’, as well as their relation to the moving image at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the final talk of the symposium (“Sobre la inexistencia de África: entre la justicia cosmopolita e instrumentalización global”), Mariano Siskind from Harvard University, USA, analysed invocations of sub-Saharan Africa in contemporary literary texts from Latin America. Those texts, he argued, represent both regions as spatializations of a deficit of justice, pointing towards the impossibility and the failure of discourses of cosmopolitanism and universal emancipation as a horizon of political and aesthetic practice.

The panels were chaired by Susanne Klengel (Freie Universität Berlin), Vinicius de Carvalho (King’s College London), Juliane Tauchnitz (University Leipzig), Alexandra Ortiz Wallner (Humboldt University Berlin) and the organisers.

The symposium’s premise was to uncover the rich and multifaceted connections between two Southern regions, which are often not perceived to be linked in any way. Simultaneously, it aimed to break up the bi-dimensionality of “South-South” relations, visualising significant linkages to Spain - a political and cultural entity which played an important role in both regions’ colonial history, alternating its own positioning in the imaginary geographies of North and South, Orient and Occident.

Although throughout the symposium scholars pinpointed Orientalism as a constant in the shaping of cultural relations between Latin America and Northern Africa, they

demonstrated how its meanings and valuations were fundamentally modified in specific regional and national contexts as well as political and cultural discourses in Latin America. From a long-term historical perspective, Northern Africa ceased to function as a negatively connoted Other – in the sense of an image created by European Orientalism - in order to become an outstanding point of reference in an imaginary of political emancipation.

Throughout the papers, the political dimension of the intellectual and literary connections between Northern Africa and Latin America materialized, particularly through references to the (anti-)colonial wars, e.g. the Algerian and the Rif War, as well as through the circulation of political models of anti-imperialism and nationalist movements and their iconic figures (like Abd-El-Krim or Che Guevara). Beyond the orientalist logics of cultural difference between a “East” and “West”, these entanglements involved the ‘discovery’ of geopolitical similarities and the formation of imagined communities of different kinds - as *proto Third-Worldism* (Martín Bergel), Pan-Nationalism (Michael Goebel) or the *Tricontinental* (Ana Nenadović), thus creating a continuity from colonial to present times. For Latin American writers, Northern Africa remains a reference point with an immediate political significance, while Northern African writers continue engaging in dialogues with Latin American literatures, especially in regard to the aesthetic dimensions of an imaginary of cultural and political emancipation.