

The Impact of Fellowships on Individuals, Their Institutions, and Their Communities

Two to Tango: Franco-Latino and Franco-Maghrebi Queer Transnationalism

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Even before starting grammar school in my small hometown in the Mexican state of Michoacán, I learned like all of the children around me that Cinco de Mayo is a patriotic day to celebrate the defeat in 1862 of the Napoleonic army by Mexican troops. Years later, as an undergraduate, I studied abroad at l'Université Lumière Lyon II in France to take advantage of its comprehensive program in Latin American studies, which allowed me to study this holiday—as well as events throughout history—from a French perspective. While a doctoral candidate in French and Francophone Studies at UCLA, I again spent an academic year in France. During that stay, I taught for the University of California Study Center in Paris, while benefitting from a research fellowship that gave me the privileged status of a visiting student scholar (*pensionnaire étranger*) at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure. Situated on rue d'Ulm, at the heart of the Latin Quarter and only a few short steps from the Pantheon, this elite school dedicated to preparing future university professors offered me an ideal context to explore the significance of the cultural and literary exchanges between France and Latin America. Above and beyond the advantages of taking up residence at this institution dedicated to interdisciplinary research, my stay in Paris was transformative because it placed me at the center of a network of cultural and intellectual exchanges that extend well beyond the borders of metropolitan France, throughout the French- and Spanish-speaking worlds.

The Latin American presence in France is evident in music and dance, food and restaurants, cinema and theater, the fine

arts, and literature. Latin American music has long been present in Paris, with concerts held in venues ranging from small cafés to world-renowned concert halls like the Olympia. As for dancing, La Peña, not far from the École Normale, is entirely dedicated to salsa; however, the longest tradition uniting Latin music and dance in Paris is the Argentinean tango. First played in the City of Light's most sophisticated salons at the turn of the twentieth century, it has now gained widespread popularity. For instance, the Paris-Banlieue-Tango Festival (Paris-Suburb-Tango) is held throughout the French capital and its suburbs every fall. Those who work up an appetite can then enjoy Latin American cuisine, which is booming throughout the city: El Sol y La Luna, La Pachanga, O'Mexico, and Poco Loco are just a few of its many Latin restaurants. All of Latin America's aromas mix together at their tables, where specialties range from Cuban, Peruvian, Colombian, and Argentinean dishes to Mexican tequilas, Dominican and Puerto Rican rums, or Chilean piscos and wines. Not to be overlooked, Latin American film and theater are visible at festivals in Cannes, Paris, Toulouse, and Avignon, while fine arts from the region occupy the walls of all of its major museums, which have shown exhibits by Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, Julio Silva, Pablo Reinoso, Juan Carlos Langlois, and Fernando Botero.

However, the most documented Latin American presence in Paris remains literature. As noted by Sylvia Molloy in *La diffusion de la littérature hispanoaméricaine en France au XXe siècle* (1972) and Jason Weiss in *The Lights of Home: A Century of Latin American*

Writers in Paris (2003), Latin American intellectuals were key figures of the Parisian literary scene throughout the twentieth century. Rubén Darío (Nicaragua, 1867–1916), Vicente Huidobro (Chile, 1893–1948), Pablo Neruda (Chile, 1904–1973), Alejo Carpentier (Cuba, 1904–1980), Jorge Luis Borges (Argentina, 1899–1986), Julio Cortázar (Argentina, 1914–1984), Severo Sarduy (Cuba, 1937–1993), Octavio Paz (Mexico, 1914–1998), Carlos Fuentes (Mexico, 1928–2012), Gabriel García Márquez (Colombia, b. 1927), and Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru, b. 1936) are among the numerous Latin American writers who established relationships with their French counterparts. In many cases, these authors are associated with the classical portrait of the Latin American male who expresses himself through machismo. Indeed, it is worth noting that these men of letters are far better known in France than their female peers, making Latin American literary production abroad a male-dominated pursuit.

Although other Latin American influences in France prove more open to women, gender plays a crucial role in the perceived identity of the region. Since Latin Americans are just as fascinated by the French as the French are fascinated by Latin Americans, my research proposes a new perspective on Frenchness as it has been historically conceived through colonial stereotypes. By crossing transcultural spaces, the Transcultural Queer discovers new modes of social engagement and finds ways to create transverse dialogues inclusive of racial, cultural, and sexual specificities. Corresponding to the “semiotic zones of contact” that Yuri Lotman identifies in

Universe of the Mind (1990), these transnational spaces are uniquely qualified to reconceptualize Frenchness and French influence as defined in local cultures around the globe. Thanks to discussions with my peers at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, I recognized viable parallels not only between the Maghreb and Latin America as places of origin for migratory movements, but also between France and the United States as host nations for first- and second-generation immigrant youth. As a queer who migrated from Mexico to the United States, I occupy a native informant role akin to those in Francophone narratives by Moroccan writers like Rachid O. and Abdellah Taïa. Their frequent references to their birthplaces—combined with my experiences learning firsthand about immigrant youth in Paris—led to the epiphany that I should bring together North Africa and Latin America in my research.

Comparing these two regions in the global South enabled me to develop comparisons between “marginal” spaces that hold vastly different cultural ties to France. In this regard, my research responds to Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, who argue in *Minor Transnationalism* (2005, 7) for the need to examine “creative interventions that networks of minoritized cultures produce within and across national boundaries.” My dissertation, “Queering Transcultural Encounters in Latin American and Francophone Contexts: Space, Identity, and Frenchness,” ultimately deployed postcolonial theories of identity in relation to Moroccan as well as French and Argentinean subjects. As places of work or pleasure, French spaces in the works that I studied become the locus of meetings between locals and foreigners whereby they negotiate new transcultural relationships. Of course, such interactions occur against the backdrop of a long

history of colonial fantasies and inequalities that haunt the colonizer as well as the colonized. Famously outlined by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), the complexities of the Self-Other relationship between Europeans and Arabs were notably illustrated in queer fiction by André Gide’s novel *L’immoraliste* (1902), set in Algeria. For better or for worse, I argue, Latin American and North African cultures have both come to reverse the gaze of the colonizer and to view Frenchness itself as queer. In this process, many characters in Spanish- and French-language narratives overcome the dominant paradigm of the formerly colonized subject who acts as a transnational object in the European culture.

While it has long been acknowledged that France customarily thought of North Africa as a queer space permitting promiscuity, it has less often been noted that Latin America looks to France for the same purpose, or that Frenchness has likewise come to represent an imagined queer space enabling sexual explorations in North Africa today. This comparison across linguistic borders thus moves beyond the traditional colonizer-colonized relationship to ask a broader question: to what extent do transnational encounters facilitate or challenge sexual agency in postcolonial societies where Frenchness alternately represents a corrupting influence or a liberating ideal?

In the Latin American context, the French-inspired *garçonnière* serves as a private space for homosexual permissiveness. In works such as José González Castillo’s *Los invertidos* (1914) or Alfonso Hernández-Catá’s *El ángel de Sodoma* (1928), the Transnational Queer is defined in contrast to the “type” of individuals accepted, or not accepted, by the nationalist agenda. While González Castillo turns the French

cultural space of the *garçonnière* in Buenos Aires into a “homosexual brothel,” Hernández-Catá uses the French capital itself as the center for sexual “degeneracy.” The nationalist impetus of these narratives uses the exclusion of the Other to prohibit marginalized sexualities, making the main characters Lotmanian boundary figures who experience inclusion and exclusion simultaneously. Given this status, they are pushed from the periphery of national culture, expelled out of the Ibero-American matrix, and obliged to take refuge in the French space. In fact, both narratives conceal the main characters’ homosexual desires until they find themselves in such a French refuge. As Emilio Bejel suggests in *Gay Cuban Nation* (2001, 4), the homosexual body participates by “exclusion” in “defining the nation to which it does not belong.” In these narratives, the homosexual subject is not only excluded from national culture but also specifically rejected into French culture.

In contrast, the Maghreb characterizes the *terrace de café* as the public sphere, where the cross-cultural encounter with the French Other in commercial interactions (tourism, prostitution, global media) leads to masculine transformation. Initially, Frenchness tends to reinforce the traditional dynamics of unequal exchange. In *Queer Nations: Marginal Sexualities in the Maghreb* (2000), Jarrod Hayes argues that this power structure reflects how European male tourists may conform to normativity at home while engaging in “homosex in the Orient,” where they may escape from jeopardizing “their heterosexual privilege” (30). Yet, young North Africans in narratives like Mohamed Choukri’s *Le pain nu* (1980) and Rachid O’s *L’enfant ébloui* (1995), *Chocolat chaud* (1998), and *Ce qui reste* (2003) manage to maneuver around Frenchness in order to

develop queer agency, positively transforming the largely homophobic spaces that they must navigate as sexual subjects.

In essence, my research proposes a type of parallelism: Orientalism for the French corresponds to Frenchness for the Latin American imaginary, and each demands that the Transnational Queer create unique forms of agency. My ongoing projects continue to analyze how exile from the sexual repression of a home culture pushes the Transnational Queer to search for sexual fulfillment abroad. Unfortunately, due to the lingering effects of colonial paradigms, such experiences tend to fall prey to exploitation and racial bias still today. However, my approach seeks to highlight the ways in which local youth may move beyond the colonizer's homoerotic gaze to pursue self-realizing subject formation, whether their transcultural homoerotic encounters occur at home or abroad. Through literary and intercultural creativity, these figures surmount the social conditions involved in sexual tourism to forge new sites of resistance to global economic power structures. Although Frenchness may still act here as a fantasized construct to defeat (or love only from a distance), intellectuals, writers, artists, and innumerable Latin Americans continue to dream of visiting Paris . . . since, after all, it takes two to tango.

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