

## INTRODUCTION

*Textual Memorials of a Latin-African Literature*

The word “Africa” conjured “blurry images of wild animals, danger, and the end of the world,” to the dismay of the Afro-Puerto Rican protagonist of Dahlma Llanos-Figueroa’s novel *Daughters of the Stone* (2009). When Carisa announces her intentions to visit Nigeria, this protagonist reports that her neighbors responded with images of a “wild man swinging from tree to tree,” “the jungle, cannibalism,” and “people who didn’t have enough to eat” (318). Throughout the intergenerational novel, Carisa’s ancestors have dealt with variegated expressions of anti-Africanness in contexts ranging from early twentieth-century Puerto Rico to the 1970s New York in which Carisa comes of age, while the novel causally connects structural racism to racist discourses originating in Africa. Seeking to correct these tired tropes at their source, Carisa follows a heritage trail “to find a way back to older stories” in which her ancestor Fela was kidnapped on the banks of the Niger river in 1880 and forced into bondage on a Puerto Rican plantation. Becoming a site-reader of “the land where Fela was finally laid to rest” (92), Carisa retraces her steps: she seeks to “go back there and look for the river and walk through old villages and stand under the moon” (319). The novel anticipates Africa’s UNESCO Slave Route, a project in which former slave trade sites were rehabilitated for heritage tourism. When Carisa “walks a path that is clearly marked” (323) as her Afro-Puerto Rican author Llanos-Figueroa did in Senegal during the advent of the Slave Route, the novel projects the physical memorials of this trail onto the page as a *textual memorial*. A gesture I term “visiting text while reading sites,” this physical-turned-textual memorial in literature is an original feature of the novel – one that rehabilitates Carisa’s evident “Latin-African” heritage, joining her US Latina and African identities despite the centuries-long excision of this transatlantic connection.

Llanos-Figueroa’s novel exemplifies a geopolitical shift at the center of *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*. This book performs a shift in transatlantic studies by privileging the African archive,

2 Textual Memorials of a Latin-African Literature

ignored until now, in some of the most globally influential literary writers of Latin American descent of the last fifty years. What Llanos-Figueroa has in common with recognized post-1970s authors, from Gabriel García Márquez to Rudolfo Anaya or Achy Obejas, is that their works involve *textual* memorials of the African slave trade that evoke the Slave Route initiative promoted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). But this gesture toward a re-cartography of the Atlantic through a Latin American–Africa axis, or what I term a “Latin–Africa,” remains largely absent from Black Atlantic or South–South frameworks and, perhaps most strangely, from World Literature critique itself. I call this absence strange because these writers’ “worldly” attentiveness to sites of African memory should not be unusual. After all, in the 1970s and 1980s, the Cold War shifted from the Americas to the African continent, as the Iberian colonization of Africa gave way to one of the most long-lasting decolonization movements in history, involving anti-apartheid struggles that in turn ignited resistance to racial violence and capitalist globalization across the Global South and even among US Latinx activists, as the historical works of George Mariscal and Lorena Oropeza have shown. Most pertinently, an ensuing neoliberal era witnessed African nation-states promoting heritage tourism of the UNESCO Slave Route, initiated through a partnership between Haiti and Benin in 1992 to recover from bankruptcy after decades of civil unrest in Africa. Using storytelling to narrate the slave trade and its aftereffects in Africa, the Slave Route recounts such tales along trails that lead pilgrims such as Carisa to former ports of diasporic departure. Thus, in the literary exegesis that preoccupies *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*, the texts I have selected embed textual memorials of the Slave Route for the same purposes as the physical memorials themselves: to revisit the African point of view of the Slave Trade’s aftereffects, from the colonial, to the imperial, decolonial and neoliberal eras. Yet, such textual memorials have gone undetected in part because an African-centric historiography has gone largely unexamined in the disciplines that study these authors. The textual memorials in these narratives contest this invisibility by using sites to revisit anti-African discourses that were produced in Africa *before* crossing over and plaguing the imaginaries of peoples of Latin American descent.

As I argue in *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*, the praxis I term “visiting text while reading sites” provides a route along which a reader revisits sites of memory that recall a lost Latin–Africa. It is a feature in all of the narratives discussed here that enables the reader, as a “text-visitor,” to interrogate crystalized colonial discourses about an

*Textual Memorials of a Latin-African Literature*

3

imagined “Africa” in order to uproot said narratives in the present. The example of *Daughters of the Stone* interests me precisely because it features a praxis that intertwines textual narrative with Slave Route memorialization as a means to rehabilitate a Latin-Africa over the original spaces of anti-African discourses in colonial Atlantic treatises. Walking a heritage trail leading to Fela’s resting place, Carisa terms this trail “the places of memory” and uses them as coordinates that locate the moment when African narratives became disconnected from her Afrolatina identity. The term recalls French historian Pierre Nora’s celebrated “lieux de mémoire” or sites of memory that have “barely survived in a historical age.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed the history contained in this site wills Carisa to its source “before it was all gone” (315). But while Nora’s profoundly Gallocentric nationalism underscoring the concept of lieux de mémoire does not encompass France’s imperialist enterprise – such as the French involvement in the slave trade – Carisa’s places of memory do the opposite. Not only does Carisa textually memorialize stories told along routes that now constitute heritage tourism by walking such trails back to the historically charged site of Fela’s kidnapping. The pilgrimage-made-text transcribes these imperial sites into fiction. In other words, Llanos Figueroa’s sites of memory serve as conduits that, to borrow from Michel de Certeau, create a walking text in which we can imagine a “visitor” to the text returning to colonial or imperial fictions told over specific sites. This praxis of visiting text while reading sites enables the text-visitor to reexamine colonial discourses in which certain pronouncements about an imagined “Africa” not only crystalized into the sites of memory the reader walks upon – the very lieu de mémoire Nora celebrates – but were also reproduced, centuries later, by Carisa’s neighbors. Discursively, Llanos-Figueroa’s novel not only reveals a severed relation to Africa, but also reorients it through this textual memorial of a Latin-African connection by narrating Africa in its particularities. The oral African traditions the protagonist Carisa has inherited – “the stories of a time lost to flesh and bones” – have been transcribed as text in the novel but also “go back to the beginning” (315) in Africa. Most importantly, chiseled into her story is the “stone” of the novel’s title, which revisits an archive produced *in* and *about* Africa.

Another key feature of *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature* is its consideration of African sources as epistemological sites that probe the ways in which an identification with Africa is overlooked at best or snubbed at worst in the formation of Latin American, US Latinx, and Caribbean identities. In the novel at hand, Carisa’s *mandinga*

4 Textual Memorials of a Latin-African Literature

“stone,” guarded by five generations of women going all the way back to Fela, helps Carisa find a precise location of origin. As part of the Atlantic archive, Carisa’s talisman originated in the Niger valley and was usually fitted into an “embroidered” “pouch” constituted of “old threads and bits of fabric” (68, 209). The stone recalls what were termed “Bolsas de mandinga” in eighteenth-century “Guinea” and “Mina” or Elmina, Ghana (Sweet *Recreating* 180–1), along the Niger river and on the West African coast respectively – that is, the place where Fela was captured and the place where she was put on a slave ship. Widely used across the Atlantic World, these *bolsas* consisted of “a cloth or leather” pouch and could contain roots or powders used for ritualistic healing. In the novel, the talisman also seems to “heal” each one of Fela’s descendants from the pains of her time.<sup>2</sup> In Carisa’s case, the stone heals her memory, enabling her to “remember” a past that took place in Africa as the novel itself becomes a memorial stone. But she must defend these memories from racist pressures to forsake her African heritage. The Eurocentric society in which she finds herself places Carisa’s stories outside the “Age of Reason,” in the same way that colonial agents treated African traditions as fantastical. From her grade-school teacher critiquing Carisa’s myth of origin as “just plain superstition” (253) to her creative writing professors dismissing her African-based writing because it has “no place in belles lettres” (269), these incidents paint a painful picture of the rejection of anything “African.” Carisa is forced to steep herself in “Western Thought” and only then “consider whether [she has] anything of worth to add to that exalted company” (269–70). Tellingly, the phrasing used to represent Carisa’s stories as “clichéd ghosts and goblins” echoes that of the colonial African archive. After all, African religious praxis was subjected to a colonial gaze that understood healing mechanisms as witchcraft. As Achille Mbembe states, African traditions had to overcome the burden of colonial writings that depicted them as “charms, spells, and prodigies” within “an enchanted and mysterious universe” (*Postcolony* 4). The mandinga stone thus not only locates Llanos-Figueroa’s novel in a Latin-African borderland, but also harks back to the African point of excision. Unsurprisingly, the rejection of a Latin-Africa represented in Llanos-Figueroa’s textual memorial has significant implications for the global reach of Latinx literature. The African sources that illustrate the varied ways in which African traditions (and by extension, the othering of peoples of African extraction in terms of race) figure in Llanos-Figueroa’s text are folded into the underside of modernity in Latinx literary studies – and to a lesser extent, Latin American literary

*Textual Memorials of a Latin-African Literature*

5

critique – which neglects the truly transatlantic cosmopolitanism of Llanos-Figueroa’s text.

While the Latin-African construct of Llanos-Figueroa’s novel shatters readings that circumscribe it to local, regional, monolingual, or US contexts and overlook the novelist’s cosmopolitan engagement with Africa, this transatlantic axis itself does not reduce her invisibility on the world stage. Llanos-Figueroa’s work does not feature in any World Literature anthology and her novel was dropped by its original publisher, thus stymying its circulation. In fact, the paradigm of obscurity enveloping novels such as Llanos-Figueroa’s indirectly drives the aims of this book – not because the present book engages with the politics of canonicity in World Literature, but rather because Llanos-Figueroa’s exclusion reflects the fact that a Latin-African axis is absent from criticism of World Literature and from Latinx and Latin American literature, even though this axis profoundly shapes the works of some of the most lauded authors of modern times. I engage the Latin-African axis in canonical works as a way of opening the door to lesser-known global voices who share this framework with canonical authors. I do so not to suggest that these lesser-known voices cannot, on their own terms, dismantle Eurocentric or imperialistic structures of knowledge or create their own epistemologies. Rather, reading this Latin-African axis in the work of canonical writers revisits an always present but erased African spatiotemporality while undoing the Eurocentric understandings of their work that rendered it canonical in the first place. This first step is required before the canon of World Literature can be questioned and reconfigured.

*The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature* unearths buried African influences in five of the most recognized Latinx and Caribbean writers of World Literature through their texts’ active engagement in African historiography. This book examines Junot Díaz’s short story “Monstro” (2012) and essay “Apocalypse: What Disasters Reveal” (2011), Achy Obejas’s novel *Ruins* (2009), Gabriel García Márquez’s journalism of the 1970s and 1980s about Angola and the US as well as *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* (1981), Tomás Rivera’s poem “Searching at Leal Middle School” (1975), and Rudolfo Anaya’s bildungsroman *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972). This selection of post-1970s Latinx and Latin American texts memorializes African memory and reorients traditional transatlantic studies. This book addresses the disavowal or distortion of the African subject, not only in terms of race but also with regard to historical constructions of identity. That is, the narratives examined here defiantly stretch the limits of a protean “Latin” identity, one that cannot be confined to specific parts

6 Textual Memorials of a Latin-African Literature

of the Americas. These narratives and the Atlantic borderlands they construct geographically set the plot in an American continent or islands directly linked to the African continent or at times within the African continent itself. The invisibility of this Latin-African axis, however, is not exclusive to World Literature frameworks, but also characterizes approaches in American and Latin American studies, where a “transatlantic” focus, when present, largely evades Africa in favor of Western Europe. Rather than seeking to contest such occidentalisms, this book excavates a reconfigured transatlantic from the texts themselves. From Chicano writer Rivera’s conjuring of imperialist Henry Stanley’s Congo, to Cuban-American Obejas’s exhumation of colonial slavery in Nigeria and Dominican-American Díaz’s resurrection of zombies from their cradle in Benin, these canonical writers exhibit the symptoms of an African haunting projected textually into a Latin-African Atlantic setting. Drawing from multilingual archives about West and Central Africa and fieldwork at Slave Route sites, I elucidate how the legacies of Belgian, French, Iberian, and British colonialism, and, later, US imperialism have reproduced, *in Africa*, antiblack discourses that stymie African historiographical inclusion in literature. Central to this premise is that these virulent ontological decrees over the course of centuries weigh on these writers as they both question and enact discourses that render Africa *fearful*, *commodify* it, *obliterate* its history, or *distort* it – the four paradigms that constitute the chapters of this book. But as African sites become embedded in narratives, they function as specific spatiotemporal markers of African history that may also be revisited; mainly the era of the transatlantic slave trade in West and Central Africa, but also the “scramble for Africa” in nineteenth-century Congo, decolonizing wars involving Angola and South Africa, and the neoliberal era in which heritage sites in Nigeria, Senegal, and Benin proliferated. Bridging what Édouard Glissant terms a “relational” history of Latin America, the Caribbean, the US, and West and Central Africa, I develop in this book a new form of transatlantic study and rehabilitate a submerged Latin-African literary heritage in World Literature.

### Latin-Africa in World Literature

*The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature* maps the neglected Latin-African vector in the works of lauded Latinx and Caribbean writers and thereby reconfigures the critical frameworks for studying World Literature in transatlantic and Global South contexts. For all the authors

examined here, this book unearths their works' discrete connections to Africa and unfolds them into a re-cartography of the Atlantic. I show that even if a Latin-American-African connection is discreet, the systematic location of this axis within such foundational writers constitutes a significant border space that should inform critical approaches, even though the diverse fields that study these authors – from South-South theory to Latin American studies, Latinx studies, and World Literature – have largely missed their connections to the African continent. First, in the configurations of South-South theory and transnational Black studies, Afrolatinos are critically absent despite the fact that they are members of the Global South living in the Global North. Second, in other Global South formulations such as US multiethnic or Latin American literature, Chicanos Rivera and Anaya and Colombian García Márquez are often read in homogenous ways – the former as representatives of ethnic Chicano expression having little to do with the Caribbean, and the latter as a representative of magical realism par excellence.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, none of them are usually read as identifying with Africa, despite the fact that they are both from regions with a plantocratic history. But reading Latinx, Caribbean, and Latin American literature comparatively and globally challenges ethnic and provincializing expectations about these authors, in whose works significant traces of a Latin-African axis are perceptible. For Rivera and Anaya, a Latin-Africa connects them to Caribbean epistemologies outside the ethnic expectations of Chicanidad, while for García Márquez, a focus on his Caribbean traces places emphasis on the African-centric legibility of his work, challenging a regionalist or essentialist perception of them that World Literature markets to a global reading public. Crucially, the Latin-African axis that this book unearths both underscores the inherent cosmopolitanism of these examples of World Literature and challenges World Literature's eurocentrism.

Since Johann Wolfgang Goethe coined the term *Weltliteratur*, World Literature has been conceptually occidentalist. Although, as Emily Apter explains, the field evolved into “a hosting ground to literary postcolonialism” in 1991 (1), it decidedly made a comeback in comparative literature with Pascale Casanova's path-breaking *Le république mondiale des lettres* (*The World Republic of Letters*, 1998), despite allegations that it preserved imperialist bias. Casanova's work and David Damrosch's *What Is World Literature?* (2003), among others, consolidated the field by either imagining literary works as circulating from a prominent center – such as Paris – or by casting translation and reception as key functions of globalized literary output. To deprovincialize its canon, however, World Literature

8 Textual Memorials of a Latin-African Literature

has been rethought through connections to specific nation-states. Wai Chee Dimock, for instance, has positioned US American literature in a “wordly” apparatus not only to dislodge the insular notion of American studies but also to denaturalize global approaches to American literature itself – akin to what Ignacio Sánchez Prado or Eduardo Coutinho have done for Mexican and Brazilian literatures, respectively.<sup>4</sup> National literatures in this way defy their own political delimitations by stretching their cosmopolitan engagements, expanding paradigms of study in World Literature rather than defaulting to a homogeneous literary aesthetics. But as Apter and Sánchez Prado have both noted, these national or ethnically centered approaches still consolidate a niche-driven market that essentializes ethnic identities for a global system (2; “Hijos” 15–17) – a dynamic to which Latinx literature falls prey in terms of its odd essentialization.

Established in the 1960s, Latinx literature enters the world literary fray, first, as significantly underrepresented and essentialized, despite the promise of its initial global reception.<sup>5</sup> In Latin America, Elena Poniatowska’s translation of Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* in 1994 signified a clear turn toward a two-way transnational study of Latinx literature in the Latin American academy, also signaled by international conferences such as those of the Tepoztlán Institute and the Latin American Studies Association (LASA).<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile in Europe in the 1980s, the rise of border studies as a response to the impact of globalization and migration generated interest first in Chicano and then Latinx literature; in 1998, the Society for Multi-Ethnic Studies: Europe and the Americas (MESEA) was established and a polyphony of symposiums hosted all over the continent.<sup>7</sup> Renowned Africanist scholar Ato Quayson’s tracing of US Latinx connections with Accra’s salsa scene in Ghana or Elena Nakaznaya’s survey of Trans-Baikal interest in US border writing, especially that of Anaya’s *A Chicano in China* (1986), exemplify the impact of Latinx intersections across the globe. Of the Chicano and Latinx authors that feature here, Anaya and certainly Díaz are favorites of World Literature. While Anaya is the most anthologized Mexican-American author in World Literature globally, contrastingly fellow Quinto Sol prize-winning contemporary Rivera is usually marketed mostly in Latin America, where the edition of his work translated by Gustavo Buenrostro and Julio Ramos is prominent.<sup>8</sup> For his part, Díaz – a *New York Times* bestselling author whose work is canonized in Latin American and American literature anthologies alike – is a Latinx exemplar of World Literature. Not only has his work been translated into languages from Korean to Hungarian, but his short stories



and scathing critical essays also circulate widely in *The New Yorker* and *The Boston Review*, and his accolades include the Pulitzer, Guggenheim, and McArthur Genius prizes. Featuring in outlets such as *World Literature Today*, Obejas's work has not only met transnational reception, but she also enters World Literature as a translator herself. After her translation work in the anthology *Havana Noir*, she translated Díaz's bildungsroman into a vernacular Antillean Spanish to much praise, which then set the stage for the inverse translation of the work of Cuban and Dominican writers – such as Ena Lucía Portela or Rita Indiana – for an Anglophone market.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the fact that World Literature remains a domain largely defined by its cross-cultural boundaries and critiques of literary systems of power, this field's marketing of Latinx writing has paradoxically played a role in essentializing Latinx literary output. For example, Anaya's work has been enthusiastically received in Europe and translated into Italian, Portuguese, and German, but this reception has pegged him as an "ethnic" and "magical realist" writer, likening him to García Márquez and exemplifying a trend that Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman term hegemonic "tropicalization" (8). In fact, Elena Machado Sáez and Raphael Dalleo bemoan how critics have categorized post-sixties Latinx literature as apolitical in general and applied a "universality" to Díaz's work or nativist approach to Obejas, in particular (2–4). More recently, Ralph Rodríguez has called for an undoing of the identity politics that hold Latinx or Chicano works hostage to ethnic descriptors. Despite this transformational work, World Literature's descriptors tend to exoticize Latinx works if we consider the characterizations of Cisneros's *Caramelo, or Puro Cuento* as "the bible of Chicano culture" in Spain (*El País* 2003) or Díaz's *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* marketed as "Gabriel García Márquez on speed" in Germany (*Die Zeit* 2009). Some of these exoticizations have to do with the fact that ethnicity-based ways of reading these texts in the subfields concerned with them are later magnified in World Literature's approaches to them. For instance, Anaya and Rivera are often read as representatives of a Southwestern ethnography delimited by the US border. Anaya's revered folklorism is what World Literature emphasizes despite the fact that recent studies have engaged with the cosmopolitan implications of his work.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Rivera, as John Alba Cutler has stated, racial essentialism is usually ascribed to his canonical . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra* (1971), despite the fact that it "represents something other than the narrow nationalism" that has been associated with its literary award, the *Quinto Sol* (71). Similarly, the Latin-African axis in the work of Díaz or Obejas is overlooked in favor of nationalistic or even US-centric

approaches to hemispheric “Dominicanidad” or “Cubanidad,” even if, as Lyn Di Iorio and Marisel Moreno have pointed in the case of Díaz, there is an ambivalence in his work toward a notion of “latinidad” (“The Latino Scapegoat”) or even “Dominicanness” (“Debunking Myths”). This is not to say that transnational studies relating US Latinx writers to Afro-Caribbean ones have not been groundbreaking in their own right. Rather my point is that World Literature seems to ignore the transnational dimensions of Latinx criticism, opting instead for homogenizing ethnic readings that occlude the weighty claims of these transnational cosmopolitanisms.

While reading these canonical voices through the lens of Latin-African memorialization challenges the sociohistorical expectations and essentialization of Latinx letters within World Literature, an occidentalist approach to Latinx writing in turn renders this Latin-African vector invisible. Africa often remains an “imaginary” or teleological point of origin in transatlantic studies rather than a relevant archive probed historically, critically, and politically in scholarship on representative Latinx writers and even one of Latin America’s most lauded authors. Colombian Nobel laureate García Márquez travelled to West and Central Africa during the Cuban-led decolonization program. In the 1970s, he published Angolan chronicles, the most detailed at the time, bolstering Cuba’s Black international campaign before its failure as Ronald Reagan rose to power and sought to crush any socialist uprising in the Global South. But Latin American literary criticism and the field of World Literature mostly ignore the Latin-African political trajectory of one of the most influential writers in the world in the latter half of the twentieth century. Paradoxically, a tendency to read the Nobel laureate transatlantically disregards Africa, despite the fact that his journalism evinces his stark Angolan preoccupations during the height of the Cold War.

But García Márquez features in this book, which focuses largely on writers considered part of a Latinx tradition, because the Latin-African axis I unearth here has implications for the conceptualization of Latinx literary history and categorization itself. The writers in this study all embed a critical Latin-African connection in their work; indeed, all link their plots, which are set in Latin America, the Caribbean, or in the US Southwest, to Africa. García Márquez’s Angolan experience, moreover, connects to a spatiotemporal marker crucial to the geopolitics of US Latinx studies. His Angolan journalism was spurred by the Cuban exodus to the US that he witnessed in New York and wrote about while employed by the renowned socialist Cuban press, *Prensa Latina*. Later, the Cuban-Angolan crucible of the 1970s that García Márquez guardedly praised becomes a site of retrospective disappointment in Achy Obejas’s novel *Ruins*, set during