

The Tropicality of Being

Inter-textual Readings of African and Latin American Literatures

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Outline

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Introduction

- Rarity of comparative studies on African/Latin American Literatures despite historical connections
- Lack of dialogue between these two spaces well beyond the literary field
- Historical novels as responses to archives of 'knowledge' generated during explorations and colonial histories in the tropics

Research Questions

- How do the creative inscriptions of tropical tropes/imageries in the novels respond to colonial histories, reigning political dispensations and existentialist questions?
- What forms of relationship can be established between “tropical” textualities that emerge from Africa and Latin America?
- In what ways do the authors use tropical imagery/imagination to question the bases of Western modernity and conceive alternative visions?

Authors

- Mario Vargas Llosa (Peru), (1936 -)
- Jean In Koli Bofane (Congo-DRC), (1956 -)
- Gabriel Garcia Marquez (Colombia), (1927-2014)
- Sony Labou Tansi (Republic of Congo), (1947-1995)

Theoretical Bases

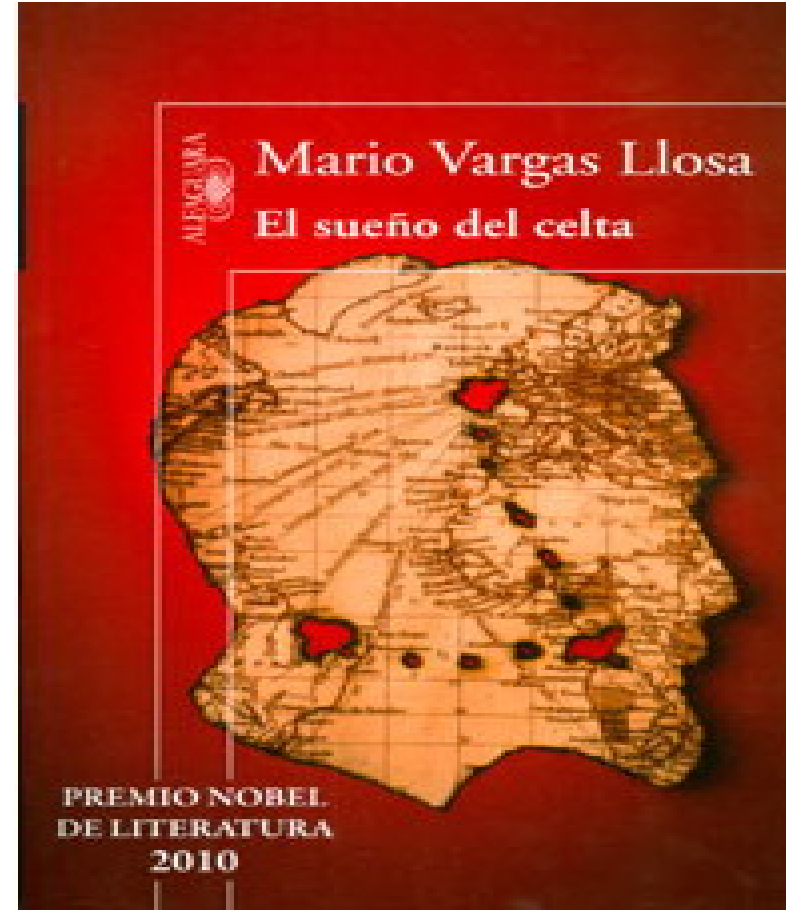
- Coloniality of being (Walter Mignolo, Anibal Quijano, Maldonado-Torres)
“They are the subjects who are formed by today’s colonial wound, the dominant conception of life in which a growing sector of humanity becomes commodities (like slaves in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) or, in the worst possible conditions, expendable lives” (Mignolo 2005: 97/98)
- On scarcity and excess (Julio Ortega)
“...a subject who is the victim of this very abundance now converted into scarcity and lack (29)...such works bear a peculiar tension. They begin from the rhetorical formulations of the garden and desert in the traditions that include the locus amenus and regions of hell. These belong to popular millenarian culture with its topoi of fertility and plague, banquet and famine” (2006:10)

Henry Morton Stanley: on tropical resources

“I felt as though a witness of the creation of a new world, anxious that it should be a masterpiece to be hailed as the home of new nations. Glorious in vegetation, unequalled in its tropical verdure, remarkable for its variety of herb and leaf, generous in its promise of unbounded fruitfulness, beautiful in its budding bloom, the land went softly gliding by our eyes, mile after mile, until a thousand miles had been counted” (*My African Travels* 1886:26)

“In every cordial-faced aborigine whom I meet, I see a promise of assistance to me in the redemption of himself from the state of unproductiveness in which he at present lives. I look upon him with much of the same regard that an agriculturalist views his strong-limbed child; he is a future recruit to the ranks of the soldier-labourers. The Congo basin, could I have but enough of his class would become a vast productive garden” (*The Congo and the Founding of its Free State* 1885: 93-4)

Mario Vargas Llosa /The Dream of the Celt (2010)



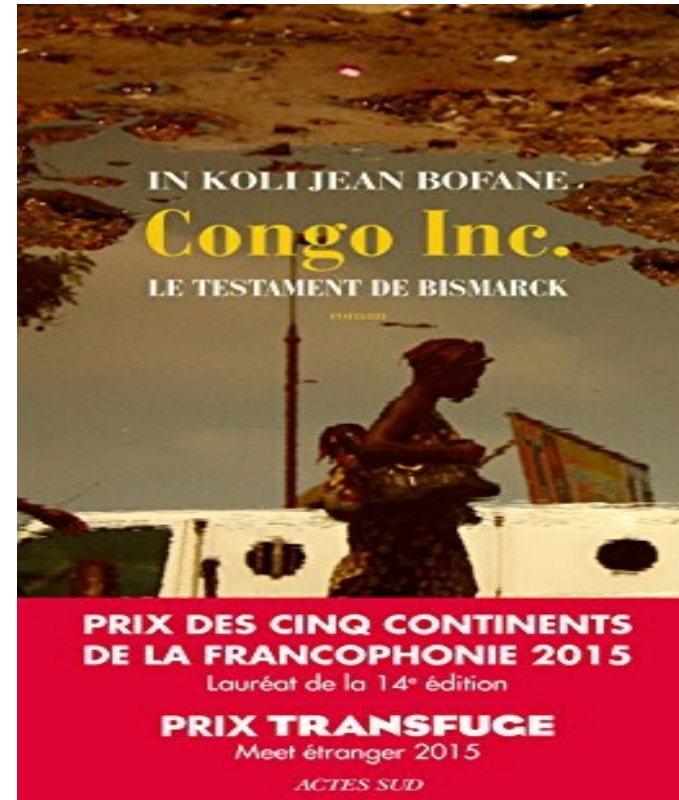
Colonial rubber and expendable lives

- “Roger Casement often said to himself that if there was a single word at the root of all the horrible things happening here, that word was greed. Greed for the black gold found in abundance in the Congolese jungles, to the misfortune of their people. That wealth was the curse that had befallen those unfortunates, and if things continued in the same way, it would cause them to disappear from the face of the earth. He reached this conclusion during those three months and ten days: if the rubber was not consumed first, the Congolese would be the ones consumed by the system that was annihilating them by the hundred and thousands.”(61)

Putumayo (Peru-Colombia)

- “Memory was not deceiving him. In his mind, was the human effervescence, the flocks of children, women, tattooed men, with their filed incisors, necklaces of teeth, at times spears and masks, who had once surrounded, examined and touched him. How was it possible that they had ceased to exist in so short a time? Some villages had been wiped out, in others the population had been reduced by half, by two-thirds, even by 90 per cent.” (55)

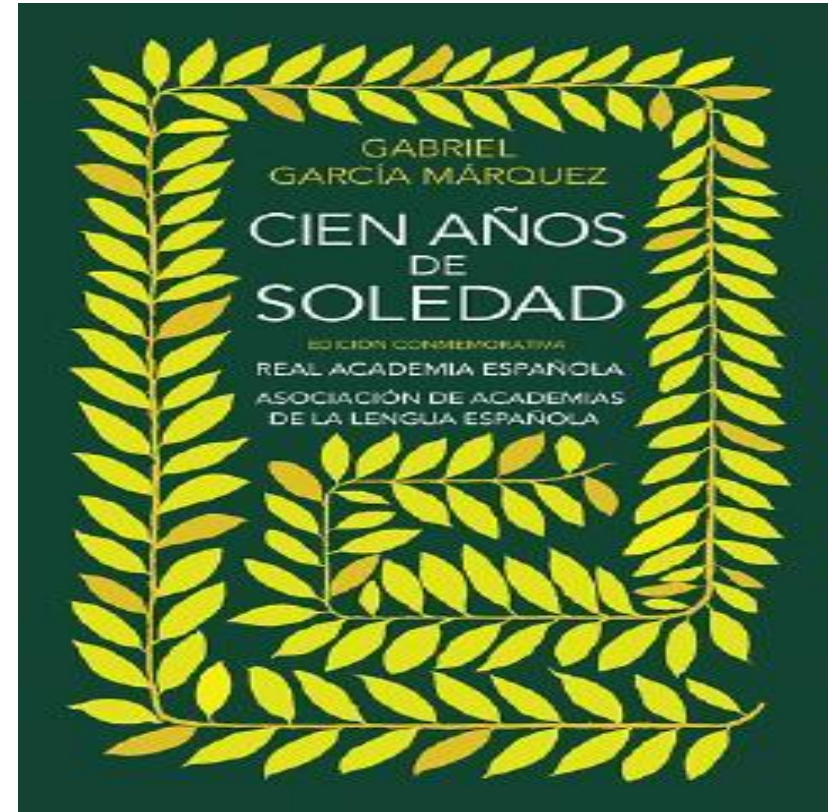
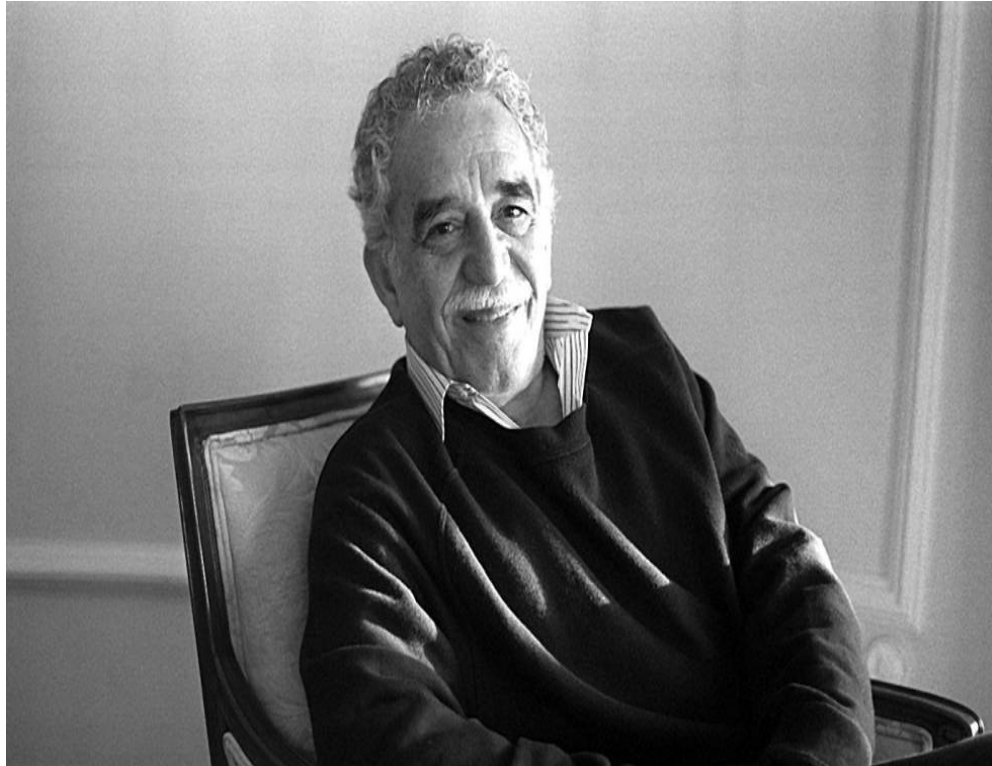
In Koli Bofane/Congo Inc. The Testament of Bismarck(2014)



Congo and Globalisation

- “This part of the Congo had turned into a lawless zone where human flesh was cut into pieces like meat in a slaughterhouse and where gunpowder had the last say. Those who were born there came to understand that their farms, their homes, their wives were all at the mercy of the new conquerors and the multinational companies in the high-tech and mines industries.” (80)
- “But that is not the way in which the young Ekonda thought of globalisation. People could not be dumped to such a point. They will always end up wanting revenge.” (288)

Gabriel Garcia Marquez/One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967)



Macondo

- Several hours must have passed since the massacre because the corpses had the same temperature as plaster in autumn and the same consistency of petrified foam that it had, and those who had put them in the car had had time to pile them up in the same way in which they transported bunches of bananas. Trying to flee from the nightmare, José Arcadio Segundo dragged himself from one car to another in the direction in which the train was heading, and in the flashes of light that broke through the wooden slats as they went through sleeping towns he saw the man corpses, woman corpses, child corpses who would be thrown into the sea like rejected bananas. (One Hundred Years, 312)

Sony Labou Tansi/Life and a Half (1979)



Moando

- “... this neighbourhood had always had the bad reputation of belonging to the Kha tribe. It was well-known that the Kha didn't care much for the Providential Guide. The army had to kill two birds with one stone: tanks had no trouble getting through the rammed human earth in Moando. A few days after the tanks rolled in, Moando had become a neighbourhood for dogs and flies. There was nothing left to pick up because the tanks came through in the wee hours of the morning, transforming the inhabitants into inhuman mud.” (Life and a Half, 30)

Tropical forest

- Tropical forest serves as the constant counterpoise to the discourse of civility and modernity that characterizes life in the cities and the state. The forest subverts man's pretention to modernity and reconnects him with the vital forces of nature, positing a re-imagination of progress and development.

Forest/modernity

- “What are they?”

“Countries. Territories.”

“The earth has no name except forest.”

“Here, yes. But back there, they’ve run borders right in between people’s legs.”

“Borders?”

“Limits. To separate. Things have to be separate, get it?” (Life and a Half, 66)

- As if to make fun of ourselves, we now began using words like “French Congo”, “Belgian Congo”, “Portuguese Angola”. (*Anti-People*, 115)

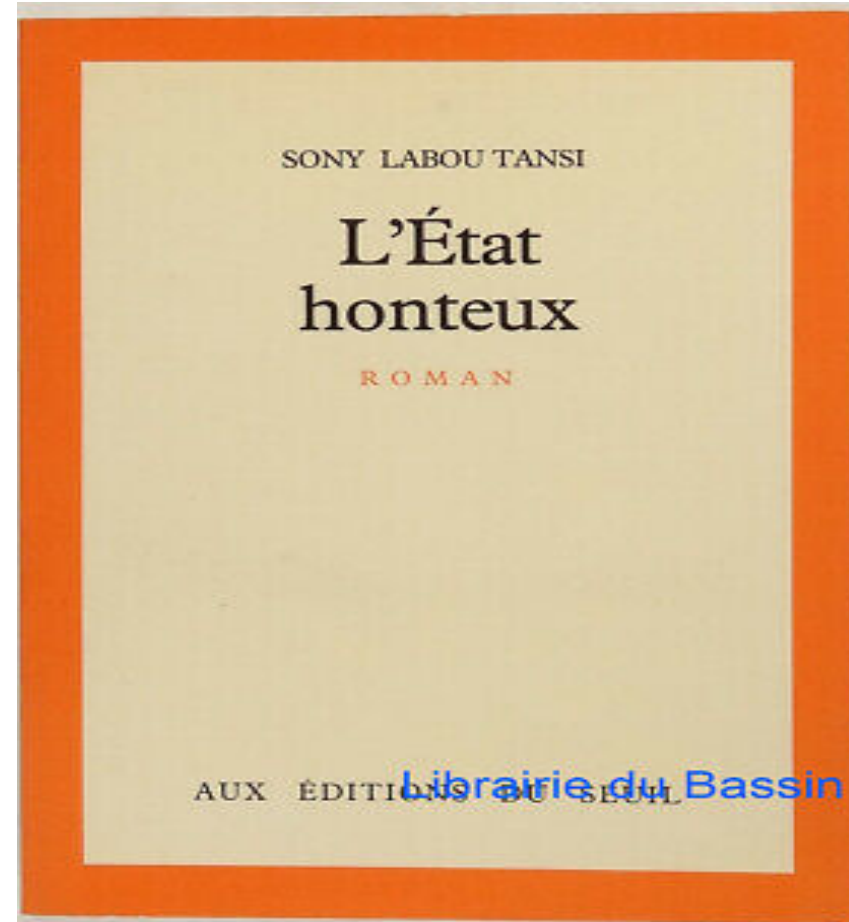
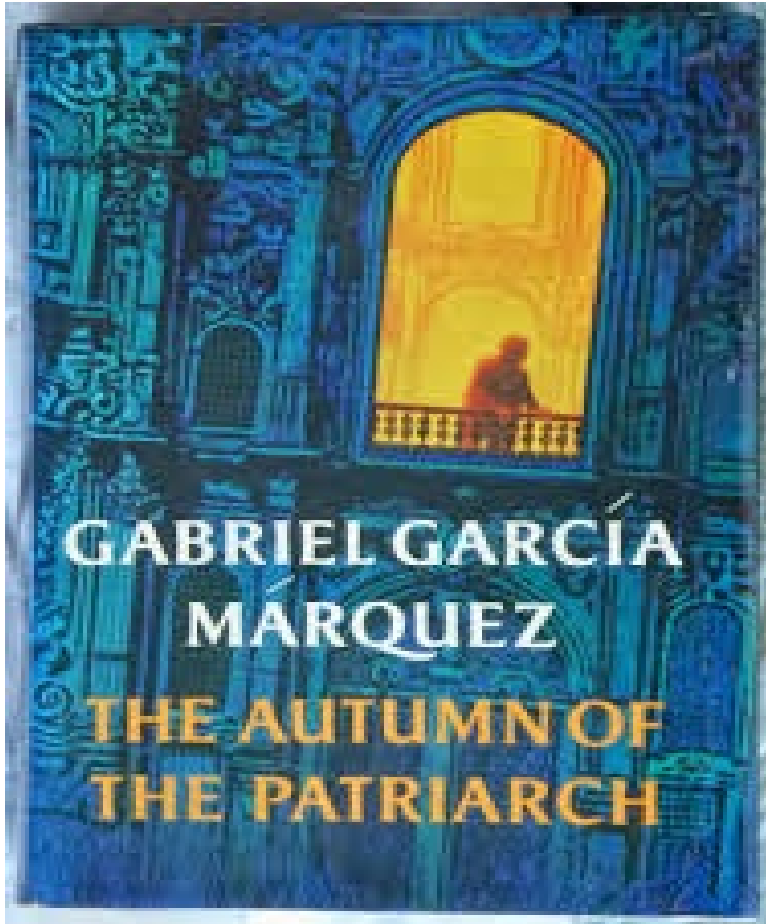
“state of nature” and “State of law/order”

“The state of nature is neither anterior nor exterior to our contemporary human existence. It is not therefore to be relegated to the dark night of mythical time nor to be considered as a methodical concept that provides a contrastive backdrop necessary for the understanding of the human condition as we see it. It is a constant possibility that can befall mankind at any moment and in any place” (Boulaga 2009: 33)

Tropicality and the Dictatorship Novel

- Tropics as space where reality and fiction become indistinct and where language of excess is the norm.
 - The tropical and unrestrained libidinal urge of the potentate
- “Your odor, your odor’ groaned the Guide, as he sprawled across Chaïdana’s unconquered body. His tropicalities almost responded, but then Martial’s ghostly upper body filled his eyes and he fired eight cartridges before resuming his eternal pose of begging.” (Life and a Half, 39)

The Autumn of the Patriarch(1975)/The Shameful State(1981)



Tropicality and magical realism

- “So they took away the Caribbean in April, Ambassador Ewing’s nautical engineers carried it off in numbered pieces to plant it far away from the hurricanes in the blood-red dawns of Arizona, they took it away with everything it had inside general sir, with the reflection of our cities, our timid drowned people, our demented dragons...” (The Autumn of the Patriarch, 208)
- The physical transfer of territory is symbolic of neo-colonial political economy of exploitation where the resources of the tropics benefit the economy of the Euro-American (and now Chinese) powers more than they respond to the needs of the Third World masses.

The Solitude of the Tropical Subject

“He fell. Blood. We have all seen blood, but not this kind of blood. The bullets tore open his back. What an exercise... It makes me think of the day I visited a slaughterhouse in California. What a horror. From that time, I vowed never to eat meat again in my life... But I think this kind of death condemns humanity to resurrection. For, if there is no resurrection, creation is a crime” (Shameful State, 118).

- Tropical reality consists of a fundamental paradox: the frequency of bacchanals by state officials as subjects located at the margins of the society gnash their teeth in hunger and misery.
- Solitude: the contradictory variation of tropicality between conviviality and solitude is a common feature in the novel of these authors.

Tropicality and the creative imagination

- Garcia Marquez: unfathomable historic realities account for the magical realist imagination:

“A reality not of paper, but one that lives within us and determines each instant of our countless deaths, and that nourishes a source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty... Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude.” (Mellen 2000:123)

Tropical plague

- The plague is a complex metaphor that captures the discursive configuration of tropical reality across colonial and postcolonial landscapes. While in the colonial mindset plagues are part of the natural hazards of tropical life, dictatorship novels employ plagues and storms as tropes of the human costs of colonial and postcolonial regimes of violence.

Garcia Marquez: In Defence of Life

- “In spite of this, to oppression, plundering and abandonment, we respond with life. Neither floods nor plagues, famines nor cataclysms, nor even the eternal wars of century upon century, have been able to subdue the persistent advantage of life over death” (In Joan Mellen 2000:124)

Narration as an anti-authoritarian gesture

- “Here, stories sprout like mushrooms, imitating the luxuriance of the jungle and widening the spectrum of our otherwise narrow existence. All our stories and gossips constitute an attempt to free us from the geometry marked out for us by a moribund reality in which we are hemmed by material bareness and the deflowering of our conscience. Spiritual misery is the worse of all miseries” (Eyes of the Volcano, 143).

Conclusion

- Authors from tropical societies use their marginal positions to interrogate national political dispensations as well as dominant global hegemonies
- The works expound decolonial perspectives aimed at restituting the centrality of a shared humanity
- They employ the tropical setting, not only as a background feature but as an element that participates in the construction of the aesthetic and ideological bases of the texts
- Tropicality is not static, it is given meaning depending on the context of usage, making it gain complex and multiple metaphorical significations within the same text of each author
- Beyond inter-textuality, the tropical fraternity in the literary field can be considered as that of 'creative influence' between African/Latin American authors

Thank You