

Cold War Seductions in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*

By Lauren Horst | July 6, 2022

Ama Ata Aidoo's 1977 novel *Our Sister Killjoy* is often remembered as a novel about the harrowing legacy of colonialism and, in the postcolonial moment, the perils of neocolonialism.^[1] The novel follows a young woman from Ghana, named Sissie, as she travels to Europe for the first time. As a protagonist, Sissie is almost singularly focused on the many ways in which colonialism has tightly bound "Africa" to "Europe," reshaping the continent's economic system, its governmental structures, its language, and even its culinary tastes around that (and those) of the colonizer. Sissie sees these colonial ties everywhere she goes and in every interaction she has. And yet, as this short article suggests, the world of the novel is also one shaped heavily by the Cold War.

That the novel is about both of these things — the Cold War, on the one hand, and (neo)colonialism, on the other — provides a rare opportunity to think through a set of questions at the heart of Monica Popescu's recent monograph, *At Penpoint*. In *At Penpoint*, Popescu uses the memorable image of a "developing substance... [l]ike a chemical treatment or heat applied to invisible ink" to describe the effects of reading African literature through the lens of the Cold War.^[2] Applying this "chemical treatment" to Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*, this article looks to reveal some of the literary strategies and techniques that Aidoo uses to write against the so-called "soft power" techniques so commonly employed throughout the Cold War. In particular, this article looks at how the novel uses the idea of seduction — romantic, ideological, and otherwise — to stage the relationship between the world's two superpowers at this time (the United States and the Soviet Union) and the non-aligned Third World that they each sought to influence and control. This article argues that the novel uses a retrospective narrative structure to disrupt and ultimately to undermine that process of seduction.

Our Sister Killjoy is what could generally be classified as a reversed *Heart of Darkness* narrative, whereby, as Yogita Goyal points out, "rather than Europeans or Americans going to Africa to find themselves, an African character travels to the heart of the West, only to find darkness there."^[3] Each of the four sections of the novel corresponds to a particular phase in Sissie's evolving relationship to Europe. In the novel's first section, titled "Into a Bad Dream," Sissie receives news that she has been selected (we don't know precisely by whom) to participate in an international youth exchange program (we don't know precisely which). In "The Plums" — the novel's longest section and the primary focus of this article — readers travel with Sissie to a small Bavarian town in Germany, where Sissie and her merry band of youth conscripts are working to plant trees at a local pine nursery. There, she quickly befriends a local housewife named Marija. The relationship sours, however, when Marija makes a sexual advance towards Sissie. Sissie forcefully and instinctively rejects Marija's advances, and leaves Bavaria soon after. In the novel's third section, titled "From Our Sister

Killjoy,” readers travel with Sissie to London, where she is shocked by the poverty of the immigrants she finds living there and disappointed in the African students and young professionals who choose to remain in Europe rather than returning home. In the novel’s final section, “A Love Letter,” Sissie takes her own advice, leaving the imperial center and flying back home to Ghana.

The novel’s investment in thinking through questions of colonialism and neocolonialism is evident in the fact that the novel sends its protagonist *not* to the new centers of power — that is, the Soviet Union and the United States — but to Germany and later to England. Sending Sissie to Europe, and to England in particular, enables the novel to grapple with the unique forms of dependence, exploitation, and affiliation that the metropole exerts on its colonial subjects — and, in this case, its formercolonial subjects. In the novel, these forms of dependence and exploitation revolve almost entirely around higher education, and around graduate and post-graduate study in particular, which the novel casts as the “Most merciless/ Most formalised/ Open,/ Thorough,/ Spy system of all time” (86). There is perhaps an argument to be made that Sissie’s, and by extension the novel’s, preoccupation with “brain drain” and, to reference Ngũgĩ, the colonizing and decolonizing of the mind is itself a discourse shaped by the logics of the Cold War. To reference Lyndon Johnson’s characterization of the Vietnam War as a “battle for hearts and minds,” it seems hardly a coincidence that two major themes and plotlines in *Our Sister Killjoy* revolve around hearts and minds — that is to say, around “brain drain” and the news of the world’s first heart transplants to emerge out of South Africa in the late 1960s. These references in Aidoo’s novel are a testament to the US-USSR rivalry that shaped international affairs at the time; in their efforts to prove themselves technologically superior, both the US and the Soviet Union sought to recruit top global talent — a process decried by the Third World as “brain drain.”

To represent this process of recruitment, *Our Sister Killjoy* uses more than references to heart transplants and spy systems; it also uses scenes of food consumption to represent the Third World’s unique positionality in the Cold War as the object of US and USSR seductions. Over the course of their stay in Bavaria, Sissie and the other campers are plied with copious, almost grotesque, amounts of food. Lunch for the campers includes nothing less than, “Fresh potatoes, German goulash, cheese, sauerkraut, fish in some form or other, other food items. And always, three different types of bread: white bread, black bread, rye bread. Tons of butter. Pots of jam” (33). Concludes the narrator: “Indeed, portions at each meal were heavy enough to keep a seven foot quarry worker on his feet for a month” (33). As its hyperbolic, over-the-top language suggests, this passage and others like it are about much more than food; rather, they represent the process by which Sissie and the other campers are to be swayed ideologically — trained, in this case, to fit into the economic system (consumer capitalism) of the so-called western Bloc.

This somewhat cynical take on these scenes of food consumption is shared even by the novel’s narrator. In fact, it is the novel’s narrator who points out that, “They [the campers] felt no need to worry over who should want them to be there eating. Why should they? Even if the world is rough, it’s still fine to get paid to have an orgasm... or isn’t it?” (35). Here, the sexual language serves to draw a clear parallel with Marija’s attempt to seduce Sissie sexually. It also reframes the international youth exchange program Sissie is participating in as a kind of elaborate seduction—the only difference being that, while Sissie eventually

rejects Marija right to her face, Sissie never comes to know who it is that wants her and the other campers to “be there eating.” This, naturally, makes resistance somewhat difficult, both for Sissie and for the readers observing the world through her eyes.

At one point in the novel, a curious Marija asks Sissie outright who it is that pays for all her travel. Sissie’s response is striking, if somewhat enigmatic: “There was a time,” she says, “when it was fashionable to be African. And it paid to be an African student. And if you were an African student with the wanderlust, you travelled” (59). Sissie’s response here evokes the enthusiasm for international higher education that swept the world in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This was a time when both the United States and the Soviet Union began to invest considerable resources in youth and student exchange programs. Notable examples include the Peoples’ Friendship University in Moscow, founded in 1960 and geared towards students from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. University programming included cultural events, excursions, and holidays intended to cultivate the students’ sympathy for the USSR and for Communism more generally. (As Aidoo was almost certainly aware, this sympathy was significantly strained when, in 1963, a Ghanaian student was found dead in Moscow under mysterious circumstances. In an act of protest, nearly 400 African students studying abroad in the USSR marched on Moscow’s Red Square.) Not one to be left behind, the United States also launched similar cultural and educational programs around this time including, for instance, “Operation Amigo,” a 1960s program bringing Latin American teenagers to American high schools, and the so-called “Kenyan Airlifts” started by Kenyan statesmen Tom Mboya and heavily supported by then-Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy.

Especially striking about the novel’s portrayal of this history is the way in which Sissie’s response to Marija’s question locates the reader at a point in time *after* this frenzy for international education has died down. Note, for instance, how Sissie, supposedly in the middle of a conversation with Marija, responds with the *past* tense: “there was a time when it was fashionable to be African” (emphasis added). Key to understanding this moment in the text is the novel’s retrospective narrator. This narrator, who ought not to be confused with the novel’s protagonist Sissie, offers a kind of constant running commentary on Sissie’s adventures abroad, commentary framed from the perspective of someone looking back on these experiences as if from a future moment in time. For example, in the food scene discussed earlier, in which the narrator observes that the campers “felt no need to worry over who should want them to be there eating” (35), the passage goes on to say: “Of course, later on when we have become/ Diplomats/ Visiting Professors/ Local experts in sensitive areas/ Or/ Some such hustlers,/ We would have lost even this small awareness, that in the first place, an invitation was sent” (35). The temporal scheme of this passage is convoluted and its two verbal constructions (“when we have become” and “we would have lost”) are fundamentally incompatible. The former, a variant of the future perfect, connotes certainty, while the latter, in the past conditional, connotes uncertainty — or what is sometimes called the “unreal past.” The point is that these retrospective interjections from the narrator are part of the novel’s overarching project: accounting for, coming to grips with — making visible — the often invisible “soft power” techniques of the Cold War.

This article began with the observation that *Our Sister Killjoy* is a novel about *both* (neo)colonialism *and* the Cold War. However, the twofold perspective that the novel offers (that of Sissie and the narrator) suggests something of a modification to that statement:

Sissie may see colonialism everywhere around her, but what the novel sees—and what it encourages its readers to see—are also the “soft power” techniques of the Cold War. By “soft power,” I mean those subtler forms of power — diplomatic, cultural, and economic — that are less immediately visible when compared to events such as the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Cuban missile crisis, and the protracted war in Vietnam. In contrast, the “soft” power techniques that *Sissie* resists and that *Our Sister Killjoy* critiques really only look like power in retrospect. Of course, the problem, as *Our Sister Killjoy* suggests, is that by the time *Sissie* (or any other similarly “seduced” subject) is looking back, she risks having already become such an integral part of that ideological system that it is difficult to entertain any meaningful critique of it anymore. *Our Sister Killjoy* attempts to correct for that problem. By locating its narrator at a point *beyond* the process of indoctrination that *Sissie* is undergoing, and by enabling that narrator to continually interrupt that process, *Our Sister Killjoy* is able to offer a critique of the Cold War without also reproducing its ideological frameworks.

[1] Aidoo, Ama Ata. *Our Sister Killjoy, or, Reflections from a Black-Eyed Squint*. London: Longman, 1994. All subsequent citations in parenthesis.

[2] Popescu, Monica. *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War*. A Theory in Forms Book. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020: 27.

[3] Goyal, Yogita. “Africa and the Black Atlantic.” *Research in African Literatures* 45, no. 3 (2014): xii. <https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafritelite.45.3.v>.

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