GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Introduction: Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War

By Kerry Bystrom | July 6, 2022

"Postcolonial studies and Cold War scholarship treat contemporaneous cultural phenomena, yet they have seldom crossed paths."[1] This astute observation forms the starting point for Monica Popescu's recent monograph, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* (2020). The book proceeds to show just how interwoven the processes of decolonization and the Cold War were in 20th-century Africa. Carefully stepping around binary categorizations and employing the postcolonial and Cold War studies lenses to African literary history as well as to specific African texts, Popescu documents the entangled imprint of these two phenomena. She tracks how African writers and intellectuals both fell prey to and shaped wider Cold War cultural politics — internalizing, navigating, confronting, rejecting, and refashioning colonial legacies and the imperialisms of the US and the USSR, defined as "diachronically overlapping and synchronically interweaving forms of (neo)colonial domination" (13).

Through supple readings and reflections on disciplinary developments, the book underscores the centrality of a dual lens methodology not only for African but also for wider Global South contexts. Doing so, it makes a strong case for attending to and widening the circle of scholarship which takes this approach. More than once in the book, Popescu poses the Cold War lens of analysis as a kind of "chemical treatment" or developing solution which helps that which has been in Global South literature all the time suddenly appear. In a sense, her book is itself a kind of developing solution. It creates space to see and recognize actors and archives, questions and absences, and a range of recent and emerging scholarship addressing them.

This roundtable, following from a seminar held at the 2021 Annual Conference of the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA) on the same theme, brings into constellation a set of short essays that take up and push further — in more or less explicit ways — the key questions and methodologies at stake in Popescu's book. *At Penpoint* highlights a number of ways of reading and historicizing African literature in light of Cold War contexts: Popescu lays out the dichotomy of modernism and realism, and how "Cold War superpowers claimed these modes of writing as part of their aesthetic systems" (67); she details instances of literary revolution and resistance, reading deeper nuance where postcolonial scholarship would miss "the relation between cultural forms of resistance to imperialism and the Cold War" (3). Popescu provides a template for (re)reading the conjunction of temporality and affect in literature — "affective temporal structures," she terms it — in order to reveal concealed or emergent local/global sociopolitical frameworks. Finally, she challenges the singular foci of both postcolonial and Cold War studies on their singular antagonists. In her words, "the study of Cold War literary production needs to orchestrate different perspectives in order to attend simultaneously to direct forms of

imposition, structural forms of influence, and the sometimes small, and other times comprehensive, networks writers were able to create in order to disrupt established geopolitical configurations" (33). The essays that follow engage these themes and reading practices. They also bring out a number of perspectives which do not always rise to centrality in *At Penpoint* but are crucial to understanding the historical and literary textures of the Cold War/decolonization period and remain with us.

Conversation at the ACLA seminar turned to methodology: Sangeeta Ray, thinking on the nuance between the categorizations of *international*, *transnational*, *global,* and *world* literatures, deemed Popescu's intervention "a different practice of world literature." In the essays that follow, contributors examine scholarly arrangements and read closely individual texts under the rubric of this "different practice." This roundtable provides perspectives on method and comparativism (including archives, levels of analysis, even the transformation of empire and the guises of imperialism during the decolonization/Cold War years), on the inclusions and exclusions of our scholarly fields (how do we classify subcategories of postcolonial studies, and how might we recalibrate area studies to more fully understand our objects of analysis), on questions of genre and form (specifically modernism and realism as related to global markets and politics — which is specifically to say, to *oil* — shaped by Cold War era geopoltitics). Several of the essays that follow take Popescu's directive to "revisit African texts through a Cold War lens to see how they directly or obliquely mark the presence of overlapping imperialisms" (15). Rereading instances of literary resistance or dissent — what Popescu terms "literary renderings of imagined futures and the genealogy of ideas of revolution" (26) — these essays consider "competing imperialisms" (11) represented by the US, USSR, and elsewhere. They ask: what does it mean to reread African literary history (and the history of ideas and literary theory in the wider global South) through the lens of the Cold War? How do we capture the workings on and in culture of the intertwined and overlapping modes of imperialism at play during the Cold War? Other essays in this roundtable are concerned with sources, archives, and categorizations. They ask: what works and archives need renewed attention when linking the Cold War and postcolonial studies and what new works and archives can be brought to light? What forms of knowledge has the Cold War and its aftermath enabled or blocked?

The Essays

This collection begins with petroleum: **Beth Holt's "Oil Sensoria"** springboards from Amitav Ghosh's "petrofiction," and expands to ask, what actors, networks, and complexes were producing the literary archetypes of the cultural Cold War? Holt's piece powerfully shows a need to bring the carbon economy and public-private partnerships into the picture. The author argues that the focus on US/CIA support of cultural production obscures the role of the oil industry in building and circulating the Modernist paradigm prized by one side of the Cold War—obscuring, as Holt puts it, how "oil makes novels and poetry." The essay ends by asking what literature produced by another kind of economy, one more renewable and in tune with people and the planet, might be. **Mathias Iroro Orhero's** contribution, **"Artistic Commitment and Minority Resistance: Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint* and Niger Delta Poetry,"** pits "oil multinationals" against the poets of the Niger Delta. Following Popescu's reading of Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, Orhero demonstrates how a generation of minority poets starting in the late 1970s navigated and repurposed the categories of committed

literature available during the Cold War (modernism v. realism), creating a "hybrid realist mode that draws from indigenous aesthetic forms" to confront the oil industry as well as the nation-state. The essay asks, what does "committed" writing look like (in terms of genre, style, and form), and what levels of analysis does responsible scholarship need to attend to (local, regional, national, continental, international, transnational)?

Carolyn Ownbey's contribution, **"Against Empire: Reading Anticoloniality across Cold War Divides,"** similarly picks up a reading practice modeled in *At Penpoint*. Employing a comparative method, Ownbey delineates unexpected alignments between dissidents on either side of the Iron Curtain: Václav Havel and Mongane Wally Serote. The essay asks, how can we get beyond a simplified vision of the West as the prime imperial power and instead read across the imperialism of the West and the USSR, bringing them together in a kind of counterpoint? How to uncover their confluences and cross-cutting modes of operation, as well as shared visions of resistance? **Lauren Horst's "Cold War Seductions in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*,"** likewise draws a picture of layered imperialisms. Horst explores Ama Ata Aidoo's 1977 novel,a text usually read as a reflection on European (neo)colonialism, as at once a reflection on the forms of "soft power" deployed by the superpowers during the Cold War to persuade members of the "Third World" to embrace one or the other alignment. In Aidoo's novel, Horst reveals, the divergent perspectives of protagonist (laser-focused on the ills of colonialism) and narration (providing a wider scope of geopolitics and Cold War configurations) exist in productive tension. Bringing a spotlight onto these sometimes-overlooked practices of persuasion or "seduction" of Third World individuals, she also raises the important questions of how to come to a critical consciousness of such power plays and how to determine who ultimately is paying the bill.

Turning focus to Asia, the final two essays included in this roundtable consider transnational movements and their implications for how we might rethink postcolonial taxonomies. **Mingqing Yuan's** contribution, **"Kofi Awoonor and China: Travels of Afro-Asian Poetry in the Early 1960s,"** expands the archive and an overwhelming scholarly focus on key conferences and journals to understand how connections between writers were made across First, Second, and Third worlds. Tracing the travels of Ghanian poet Kofi Awoonor (aka George Awoonor Williams) and his poetic works (via publication and via oral performance/recitation), Yuan demonstrates that "literary exchanges and knowledge sharing through Afro-Asian solidarity left traces in one way or another on all involved actors." Finally, **Jini Kim Watson's "Thinking Through the Other Cold War: Transpacific and Inter-Asia Approaches,"** asks what happens when we shift the methodological questions and observations about disciplinary formation and knowledge production Popescu raises to different regions — in this case Southeast and East Asia. Suggesting that analysis of the regions has focused more on the Cold War than on imperialism, Watson maps different ways an analysis of the "*postcolonial* Cold War" is developing in and opening up East and Southeast Asian studies. Triangulating three separate approaches, Watson shows how they grapple with the outlines of an imperial power exercised from the US and not Europe, even while rejecting the continuing hegemony of US theory and posing Southeast and East Asian sites as producers of knowledge.

These six essays use Popescu's text as a launching pad, exploring new ways of reading and categorizing texts and thinking through literary and cultural studies since mid-century more

generally. It is difficult to overstate the stakes of reframing postcolonial and Cold War studies in our present historical moment. As scholars and as consumers of culture, we have been underserved by preexisting notions of Global South, postcolonial, and Cold War cultural modes and formations. We conclude, then, with the provocative questions Popescu raises at the end of her monograph:

The Cold War ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and so did its cultural impact. This is what we used to assume. Yet what if the knowledge paradigms specific to the global conflict linger on, shaping the intellectual instruments we use to explain literary phenomena today? What if the impact of the two world-systems persists beyond the demise of one of the superpowers, manifesting it-self in the triumph of neoliberal capitalism and the preservation of the West's cultural and aesthetic structures? What if the ways we understand literature today — the canons inscribed in anthologies, the prizes bestowed, the forms of criticism preferred — are at least in part shaped by the remnants of the Cold War? (186)

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[1] Popescu, Monica. 2020. *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War.* Duke University Press: 2. All subsequent citations in parenthesis.

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How to Cite

Bystrom, Kerry. July 6, 2022. "Introduction: Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War." *Global South Studies*. Accessed date.