

REVIEW ESSAY

Cold War Decolonization

Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War*. Duke University Press, 2020.

Jini Kim Watson, *Cold War Reckonings: Authoritarianism and the Genres of Decolonization*. Fordham University Press, 2021.

Literary culture after 1945 took shape in a context where a handful of colonial empires were replaced by (at present count) nearly two hundred sovereign nation-states whose domestic politics, foreign policy, and cultural life were profoundly shaped by their relationship to the Cold War superpowers. One of the striking features of the historiography of this post-1945 world is that its two most salient themes—the Cold War, and decolonization—have so often been treated in isolation from each other. Postcolonialism and Cold War studies have, as Monica Popescu tells us, followed “separate, largely non-intersecting paths” (6). Yet even a superficial summary of the key geopolitical developments of the postwar period suggests that the Cold War and decolonization are not just interconnected, but mutually determining. When you take into account the decolonizing world, in some places afflicted by devastating proxy wars in this period, it must be said (it has often been said) that the Cold War was cruelly misnamed. This dual history has shaped our political language. A term like *the West*, as it is used in academic debates as well as in political, journalistic, and policymaking fields, developed its particular set of associations by contrast with the communist Eastern bloc on the one hand and with the (post)colonial global south on the other. Yet these two versions of the non-Western don’t always line up: although anticolonial movements often sought to align themselves with the international communist movement, many proudly independent postcolonial nation-states were explicitly anti-communist (like the neoliberal regimes in Singapore and South Korea). Other postcolonies grappled with the Soviet Union or the People’s Republic of China as a colonial power.

Of course, not every work of scholarship can be about everything, and through specialism we arrive at new knowledge. It would not be very constructive to say of each new book on decolonization, Why isn’t there more about the Cold War?, or vice versa. Both topics are global in scale and each comes with a formidable scholarly literature. At least potentially, they demand of the scholar very different kinds of linguistic competence. So there are difficulties and risks involved in suggesting that these fields could (in the short term) be synthesised, even if, in some hypothetical sense, they ought to be. Such a totalizing project is beyond the scope of any single book. Still, these two excellent monographs, by Monica Popescu and Jini Kim Watson, open up new perspectives on their fields,

make connected arguments that help us to see decolonization and the Cold War as deeply interconnected, and in the process suggestively redescribe the literary politics of the period. Each of these books foregrounds a different region, with Watson's *Cold War reckonings* focusing on East and Southeast Asia, and Popescu's *At Penpoint* covering Africa.

Popescu's book is divided into two substantive parts: "African Literary History and the Cold War," which maps the intellectual and institutional contexts of postwar African literature, and "Reading Through a Cold War Lens," which provides contextualized close readings of key texts in African literature, situating them in relation to Cold War debates. The first part is particularly original and revealing. Here, Popescu shows how the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) (whose cultural activities have been described in detail in Cold War studies)¹ extended its influence into African literary networks and institutions. The CCF profoundly shaped that great flowering of African literature we might now think of as the "African literary pantheon" (47), funding the influential journals *Black Orpheus* (Nigeria) and *Transition* (Uganda), as well as Mbari Publishers (also Nigeria), which together promoted a broadly modernist aesthetic program and helped to launch the literary careers of John Pepper Clark, Abiola Irele, Alex La Guma, Es'kia Mphahlele, Demas Nwoko, Christopher Okigbo, and Wole Soyinka. On the other hand, in a parallel counter-operation, the Soviet Union sought to promote its own interests through the activities of the Afro-Asian Writers' Association (AAWA), which held its first conference in Tashkent (then in Soviet Uzbekistan) in 1958 and founded its own journal, *Lotus: Afro-Asian Writings*, in 1968. *Lotus* gave financial and other support to the continent's left-wing writers and promoted politically committed, realist writing.² The Lotus Prize was awarded to Chinua Achebe, Alex LaGuma, Agostinho Neto, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Ousmane Sembène. Although Rossen Djagalov, Hala Helim, and Duncan Yoon have published important work on the AAWA, Popescu feels that this organisation has not so far been given sufficient scholarly attention, and her account does much to underline its considerable scope and influence. Although the funding streams that Popescu lays bare here were sharply polarized along Cold War lines, the cultural field is messier and more complicated, with significant areas of overlap, as well as instances of deliberate depoliticization or expressions of artistic autonomy. The most telling illustrations of the complexity

¹ See in particular Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists: Art, Literature, and American Cultural Diplomacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); Andrew Rubin, *Archives of Authority: Empire, Culture and the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); and Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: New Press, 2013).

² Scholars of Cold War decolonization have often encouraged us to be less dismissive of "socialist realism"—so readily disparaged as a naive literary form that simply parrots the clichés of communist commitment—as it appeared in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Ulka Anjaria's *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel* is an invaluable example that focuses on India: "Realism in the colony is highly metatextual, founded on variegated textual fields and constituted not by ideological certainties but by contradictions, conflicts, and profound ambivalence as to the nature of the 'real' world being represented, and the novel's ability to represent it." Ulka Anjaria, *Realism in the Twentieth-Century Indian Novel: Colonial Difference and Literary Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 5.

of this cultural conjuncture are those writers (such as Alex LaGuma) who benefited from the patronage of both sides.

As scholars of Cold War culture have found, to establish a political funding source for any given cultural activity is far from being the end of the interpretive road. Exposing a pattern of state patronage that promoted the aesthetic of Western modernism, or of socialist realism, does not supply the final meanings: instead, it raises more questions. Mapping the scholarly field, Popescu cites Andrew N. Rubin's *Archives of Authority: Empire, Culture, and the Cold War* (Princeton University Press, 2012) at one end of a spectrum, as exemplary of a tendency to see strong determining relationships between Cold War patterns of patronage, aesthetic form, and political alignment. Echoing Frances Stonor Saunders's arguments, Rubin sees the CCF's involvement in promoting African modernism as fundamentally compromising for the writers who benefited from it (with Wole Soyinka being the most prominent example). "The self-reflexive, self-aggrandizing, and self-serving activities of the CCF saturated and subsequently shaped the limits of a whole generation of postcolonial Anglophone writing in Africa," Rubin wrote.³ This reading of African modernism as a pro-Western sellout is not merely a post-hoc critical interpretation: writers were aware at the time that the "modernism versus realism" binary belonged to the Cold War. In one of the most iconic disputes in African literary studies (the so-called *Transition* debate, brilliantly contextualized here by Popescu), Soyinka was lambasted for his Western-facing modernism by Chinweizu, Jemie, and Madubuike, the three Nigerian critics accusing him of a "deracinating" subservience to Western aesthetic protocols and recommending that writers decolonize their minds by drawing on exclusively African influences. Soyinka—who as Popescu rightly points out did also have a "deep investment in certain forms of African culture" (77) that his critics selectively ignored—in turn accused them of "Neo-Tarzanism."

If Rubin and Stonor Saunders see a strong determining relationship between political funding and aesthetic form, on the other end of this spectrum are critics such as Simon Gikandi and Peter Kalliney (the latter's recent *The Aesthetic Cold War: Decolonization and Global Literature* (Princeton University Press, 2022) offers a significant further contribution to the project of bringing Cold War studies together with the histories of decolonization). In this perspective, as Popescu summarizes, "Modernism enabled authorial autonomy and speaking truth to power" (86). African modernism might have been funded and supported in various ways by the CCF and other pro-West organizations, but its aesthetic orientation enabled powerfully anticolonial and autonomous literary expressions. Popescu is at pains not to underplay the extraordinary reach of both US and Soviet cultural policy in shaping African literature, but she wisely stresses the need to "grasp the full significance of the aesthetic and ideological choices made by African writers, their resistance or acquiescence to the polarization of the world, and their contributions to the global discourses informing the latter

³ Andrew N. Rubin, *Archives of Authority: Empire, Culture, and the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 59.

half of the twentieth century” (7, my emphasis). Thinking through the role of choice seems crucial here if we want to understand African writers as active agents who shaped their own cultural agendas and not merely as pawns in a cultural Cold War whose main actors were superpower states. Popescu’s wide-ranging analysis gives us the tools to do that.

Popescu argues that Kalliney and Gikandi are right to point to the possibilities of literary autonomy, despite the influence of the CCF and the AAWA, then. But she also suggests that such autonomous expressions became more difficult as the Cold War period went on:

By the end of the 1960s, modernism and realism were no longer simple aesthetic modes African writers could deploy in their writings. They had become cogs in the superpowers’ ideological machineries, and writers who sided with one or the other implicitly expressed sympathy for the aesthetic systems promoted within the West or the Eastern Bloc. (71)

When Popescu turns, in part 2, “Reading Through a Cold War Lens,” to an approach driven by close reading, this is necessarily framed by the ossifying ideological positions whose historical construction is described in part 1. The close readings—of classics by Ousmane Sembène and Ayi Kwei Armah as well as later texts by Pepetela, Nadine Gordimer, Ondjaki, and Niq Mhlongo—are never less than illuminating and they will be invaluable to scholars and students of African literature. But it is part 1 that does the most to develop our broader understanding of the interaction (in the cultural sphere) between the Cold War and decolonization. It is essential reading.

Watson’s book has much in common with Popescu’s, though its different geographical coordinates demand a different set of emphases. The evidence that the two Cold War superpowers were directly strategically funding postcolonial literature to further their geopolitical agendas is less clearcut in the East Asian context. Watson’s exceptionally thought-provoking chapter on PEN International, which analyzes five Asian Writers’ Conferences organized by PEN in different Asian cities from 1962 to 1981, is a case in point. There is no question that PEN—an organization that campaigned for liberal free speech and against the persecution of writers—was, broadly speaking, US-aligned in the Cold War period. It was a “target of the CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom” and “tended to highlight dissident writers of the Soviet bloc ... and Third World authoritarian states” (33). But compared with the CCF (a CIA front that was very directly implicated in funding specific writers and publishing projects in the decolonizing world) PEN was an unruly club that was not under the control of any state—as a “target” for CIA penetration, it was part of the contested cultural ground and not simply a front organization. Watson warns against “collapsing PEN with the ruses of the CCF” (34), implicitly pushing back (like Popescu) against the uncompromising analysis of a Rubin or a Stonor Saunders. Like Popescu, Kalliney, and Gikandi, Watson is interested in forms of literary and critical autonomy that found expression *within* aligned organisational structures: “We cannot assume that the writers, critics, and scholars that attended [PEN]’s international meetings were simply supporters of U.S. efforts in the Cold

War,” she argues (34). Overtly Marxist critiques of US cultural hegemony were aired at Asian PEN congresses in this period, as Watson shows.

But it is worth asking (as Watson does) what the conference as a genre implies by the hospitable manner in which it welcomes in different voices and perspectives that seem at odds with its guiding ideology. Perhaps the conference legitimates discursive liberalism, but not as an abstract body of ideas—more than that—as the basic format in which political, aesthetic, and ethical arguments are necessarily contested? As she unfolds her account of the PEN conferences, Watson’s emphasis on the “genres of decolonisation” (as her subtitle puts it) comes to the fore. Most memorably, she analyzes the resolutions of those conferences—which attempt to synthesize messy and contradictory debates—as a “distinct subgenre” (52) of Cold War decolonization. She wants us to consider the status of these resolutions as “speech acts,” each with a distinctive “structure, addressee and appeal” (55). Techniques of textual and rhetorical analysis honed in literary studies serve here to generate original historical insight. “The genre of the conference resolution,” Watson argues, “hews to a vision of a world composed of formally equal and sovereign nation-states” (56). It is this analysis that enables Watson to link these PEN conferences to the Bandung project rather than exclusively to the CCF and US geopolitical interests. The conferences must be seen as artifacts *both* “of a newly independent Asia forged against its former colonial identities” and “of a region grappling with the new political-economic restructuring of Cold War worldmaking” (58).

The specificities of East Asian decolonization lead Watson to focus on the question of authoritarianism. The figure of the dissident writer, speaking truth to power in the context of a totalitarian regime, is one of the most familiar tropes of Cold War literature, embodied in a writer like Solzhenitsyn and traditionally politically aligned with the anti-communist, Western “free world.” But in colonial and postcolonial contexts the trope becomes politically complicated. Watson examines three Solzhenitsyn-type dissident writers from Indonesia (Pramoedya Ananta Toer), South Korea (Kim Chi-ha, whose poem *Five Bandits* inspired Ngũgĩ’s *Devil on the Cross*), and the Philippines (Ninotchka Rosca). Watson asks what is at stake when “the Second and Third Worlds are collapsed in an assumed shared condition of tyranny, despite obvious variations in the political orientations of those regimes (communist, socialist, capitalist, pro-West, non-aligned, and so on)” (60). This critical rethinking of authoritarianism (in the postcolonies and the former colonial metropolises alike) has important contemporary resonances, as Watson points out in her conclusion. The economic successes of developmental “Asian Tiger” economies has helped former colonial powers to celebrate decolonization as a successful “exit narrative”⁴ which has enabled neoliberal hegemony. But the frequently anti-democratic and authoritarian politics of those states are not easily assimilated into a narrative of an expanding Westernized “free world” characterized by the extension of human rights, freedom of speech, and other liberal freedoms. Watson’s final three

⁴ Here Watson cites Christopher J. Lee, “Between a Moment and an Era: The Origins and Afterlives of Bandung,” in *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives*, ed. Christopher J. Lee (Athens, OH: Centre for International Studies, Ohio University, 2010), 19.

chapters explore literary and cultural texts from 1997 to 2017, in a nominally post–Cold War period, showing that we continue to inhabit the Cold War decolonizing conjuncture. Her chosen texts—from Sonny Liew’s graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* to Joshua Oppenheimer’s documentary film *The Act of Killing* and Hwang Sök-yōng’s novel *The Old Garden*—in various ways address the failures of decolonization in repressive and exploitative postcolonial state formations, as well as touching on the possibilities of yet unrealized “futures past” (like Popescu, Watson is a keen reader of Reinhart Koselleck).

As these examples perhaps already suggest, *Cold War Reckonings* proposes a more active role for literary and cultural texts than is implied by the methodology and organization of Popescu’s *At Penpoint*. Indeed, it “argues for the ability of imaginative texts to dislodge a number of conceptual certainties: of authoritarianism ‘there’ and freedom ‘here’; of the assumed temporal boundaries of colonial/postcolonial and Cold War/post–Cold War; and the notions of repressive state control versus economic liberalism” (10). As always with such claims, I’m left to wonder about the precise mechanism by which “imaginative texts” are supposed to have this effect. After all, there they are, already in the world, being consumed, and yet the “conceptual certainties” largely persist, by Watson’s own account. Perhaps *Cold War Reckonings* (albeit with its largely academic readership) is a necessary intermediary? But in that case, it’s Watson’s fine scholarship that is doing the dislodging. It must be acknowledged that it feels as if there is more at stake in the close readings here as compared with Popescu’s book and that these textual analyses are more integral to the argument Watson makes: her recommendation is not so much to reread the postcolonial literary canon “through a Cold War lens” in order to understand it in new way; it is to allow those texts to enable a rethinking of the available historical categories.

These books are highly ambitious, complex, well-argued, and often extremely revealing. The total integration of Cold War studies with postcolonial studies is likely to remain an incomplete project, and we shouldn’t waste too much time lamenting the fact. There is, however, no doubt that the areas of contact that Popescu and Watson investigate in these excellent books have already served to invigorate both fields, and there is a great deal more to be done.

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doi:10.1017/pli.2022.29