

Literature and Politics During the Cold War

At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War

By Monica Popescu. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020. Pp. 272. \$26.95, paperback (ISBN: 978-1-4780-0940-5).

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Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* accomplishes what the best scholarship does by illuminating what has been right before our eyes but obscured by our own blinders, ideological or otherwise. Her account resituates Africa at the center of postcolonial studies and reveals the Cold War to be, among other things, a struggle of competing imperialisms. Popescu succinctly captures the stakes of her intervention: 'It is only the Cold War lens that does away with the relative marginalization of Africa in postcolonial studies and presents a more comprehensive account of twentieth-century forms of imperialism' (16). One of the signal achievements of the work is that it trains our focus on the 'penumbras' the Cold War cast on postcolonial studies, which emerged at a time in the 1970s and 1980s when 'depoliticized versions of poststructuralism' and a consensus regarding 'apolitical' knowledge production were ascendant in the West.

One of the book's most generative aspects is its capacity for thinking on both sides of the Cold War divide. The book is divided into two parts. Part One provides a history of African literature that tells the story of the secret funding of journals and conferences and the division between modernism and realism that were part and parcel of the cultural Cold War. Part Two employs a Cold War lens to offer astute critical readings of seminal African literary texts such as Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* and Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and to analyze literary representations of the decidedly 'hot' Cold War conflict in Angola. The book's insistence on thinking through the connection between cultural production and geopolitical power should prove particularly engaging for scholars working in African history and culture and the Cold War.

While its subtitle declares the book's concern to be with African literature, the African diaspora has an unmarked presence in it. Alongside the Africans Amílcar Cabral and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, the book credits Frantz Fanon and Walter Rodney, both of whom were, strictly speaking, Caribbean, as having made radical contributions to the analysis of imperialism and cultural colonialism and to the decolonization of leftist tools of analysis. Rather than a form of oversight or error, this statement recognizes the significance of their intellectual contributions, which were intimately connected to their engagement in political struggle on the African continent. Significantly, it was in their work and that of fellow Caribbean intellectuals such as Aimé Césaire and C. L. R. James that, as early as the 1950s and 1960s, the contours of the Cold War were revealed as a truly global conflict. The strategic importance of the Caribbean to American imperialism in the Western Hemisphere undoubtedly facilitated this understanding of the conflict's global contours.

Although they are in some sense the progenitors of today's postcolonial scholars, African and Caribbean anticolonial intellectuals and their important contributions, Popescu avers, have not been accorded their proper significance in and to the field. As evidence, she points readers to *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, a text that has 'shepherded numerous students and young scholars into the field' and that characterizes the work of these anticolonial thinkers as 'ideologically

regimented' and circumscribed to specific national contexts (9).¹ Perhaps this implicit dismissal of anticolonial intellectuals stems from their beyond-scholarly approach to the problems of the world, which was not primarily literary or limited to textual questions. James developed his political theory through involvement in workers' struggle in Detroit's manufacturing sector, Fanon continued his work in psychiatry as a militant in Algeria's Front de Libération Nationale, while Césaire had a long political career representing Martinique in the French National Assembly and serving as the mayor of Fort-de-France.

At Penpoint suggests that postcolonial studies' connections to a 'depoliticized' poststructuralist theory might have both facilitated its entrance into the US academy via English departments and contributed to the marginalization of African studies within the field. A compelling thesis, it also reveals one of the book's own blind spots: the inattention to the racial politics of knowledge production, particularly in the West. At that moment in the late 1970s and 1980s when postcolonial studies was gaining currency in centrally located English departments, 'African' writers like Fanon, Ngugi, Rodney, and Cabral were being taught on what the writer David Bradley describes as the 'nether edges of campus,' where Black Studies departments and cultural centers were to be found.² It would be interesting to know if those associated with postcolonial studies today supported the student and community struggles that created Black Studies departments and centers on the campuses where they were working. The important work that Popescu has done in *At Penpoint* opens the space for such a reconsideration of the history of African literary and postcolonial studies.

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Public Pleasure and Authoritarian Politics

The Revolution's Echoes: Music, Politics, and Pleasure in Guinea

By Nomi Dave. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 208. \$27.50, paperback (ISBN: 978-0-226-65463-8); \$82.50, hardcover (ISBN: 978-0-226-65446-1).

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Scholars and writers have long framed African popular music as a medium that openly critiques and combats patterns of marginalization, especially in contexts marked by political oppression. It is assumed to be no accident that some of Africa's most well-known popular musicians are those who vocalize the complaints of silenced, disadvantaged people. Their popularity stems from their willingness to confront state authorities and demand change, or so conventional thinking holds. In *The Revolution's Echoes: Music, Politics, and Pleasure in Guinea*, Nomi Dave grapples with a much different phenomenon: cases in which musicians support the powers that be and contribute to the aesthetics of authoritarianism. Eager to understand how audiences can find a song with a 'bad' message 'good', Dave interrogates how Conakry-based musicians generate public pleasure

¹B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies* (London, 1988).

²D. Bradley, 'Black and American, 1982', *Esquire*, May 1982, 69.