

Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War*, Duke University Press, 2020, ISBN 9781478012153, 272 p.

Review by Maria CHIOREAN  
Faculty of Letters and Arts, Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu  
Sibiu, Romania  
chiorean.r.maria@gmail.com

Ever since the end of WWII, postcolonial studies have been driven by an ethical goal: to investigate and delegitimize hegemonic practices and discourses, uncovering the exploitation, instrumentalization and othering of the periphery by the center of the world-system, especially in the context of imperialism and colonialism. To do so, the discipline has become markedly self-reflexive and has undergone significant internal mutations: from anticolonial writing championed by authors from Africa and the Caribbean (Fanon, C.L.R. James, Césaire) and the academic method of poststructuralist discourse analysis (Said, Spivak, Bhabha) to more recent attempts to reconcile Marxist critique with the deconstruction of grand cultural narratives. But perhaps the most significant development of the last two decades has been the interdisciplinary turn of postcolonial studies, which created lines of dialogue between literary research, sociology, psychology, geocriticism and geopolitics. Ultimately, it was this shift that led to the exploration of certain disciplinary blind spots, most notably the intersections and tensions between different forms of domination (both imperial and (neo)colonial), as seen in recent research by Laura Doyle, Shu-mei Shih, Manuela Boatcă and Anca Parvulescu.

This is also where Monica Popescu's latest book comes in. *At Penpoint* addresses one of the least-known and most underresearched aspects of African decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century, namely the impact of the Cold War on the evolution of African literatures, literary theory and criticism. Popescu shows that, rather than using a simplistic framework in which colonialism and postcolonialism are two discrete, successive periods, we should look at the history of the continent and its diverse literatures as shaped by multiple, even overlapping forms of domination: colonization by Western powers before World War II; competing American and Soviet imperialisms during the Cold War; and, finally, the pressure exerted by Western neoliberal regimes and emerging economic powers like China and Russia after the

collapse of the Iron Curtain. Thus, *At Penpoint* departs from the traditional understanding of postcolonialism, that is, the exclusive study of Western domination and its reliance on capitalism and globalization; instead, it discusses the extremely complicated geopolitical landscape of the Cold War and the ways in which the cultural narratives promoted by the two superpowers involved in the conflict – the USA and the USSR – decisively determined the trajectories of African intellectuals and the outcomes of decolonization.

The first part of the book focuses on the emergence of African literary studies. Putting great emphasis on the historical context, Popescu sets out to answer questions such as: What led to the development of a literary meta discourse between the 1950s and 1980s? How were its circulation and reception affected by the Cold War? What were the ideological stances of the most important African intellectuals? And how did their political leanings interact with the decolonial project? Among the critical debates that dominated this period, the most prominent had to do with the contradictory understandings of literature, literariness and the social role of the writer put forward in the West and in the Eastern Bloc: the ideal of aesthetic autonomy vs. socially engaged art; a fundamentally independent literary field vs. literature as a revolutionary tool; the writer as an unaffiliated aesthetic innovator vs. the writer as an activist, responsible citizen or political ideologue. Crucially, Popescu looks at the various forms of allegiance or resistance to these narratives, the various strategies of self-representation, the multiple theoretical identities articulated by African writers in response to the international cultural programs run by the USSR and the USA. Consequently, her well-documented survey of these theoretical positionings effectively accomplishes one of the main purposes of postcolonial critique: to disprove the cliché of a homogenous Africa (or a homogenous African literature), while also decentring and decolonizing the production of abstract thought, political theory and aesthetic models.

In Chapter I, Popescu discusses at length the ways in which the two superpowers of the Cold War targeted African intellectuals and writers in an attempt to expand their ideological grasps and spheres of influence. To do so, they resorted to very concrete cultural policies, such as publication programs, training schemes abroad and financial support for literary journals and conferences. On the one hand, Popescu investigates the more obvious Soviet agenda. She devotes a significant portion of her book to an institution located east of the Iron Curtain, namely the AAWA (The Afro-Asian

Writers' Association), arguing that it was one of the hubs around which Cold War tensions manifested and became legible. Not only did the history of the AAWA reflect the competition between capitalism and socialism, but it was also one of the fronts of the Sino-Soviet conflict, with writers allying themselves either with the USSR or with China and causing the 1966 split of the association. Popescu's research delves into the journals published by both factions, in order to show how an anti-imperial vocabulary was being used not only against the USA but also against so-called "Soviet revisionism". On the other hand, the author also considers the more covert operations conducted by Western governments, with the involvement of prominent institutions like the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an American anticommunist organization which financed, among others, the African magazines *Transition* and *Black Orpheus*. She points out that all these attempts to sway the writers of the so-called "Third World" to one side or the other generated a series of very particular subject positions and perspectives regarding the political function of the author, without which we cannot fully comprehend either the decolonization movement and the political subtext of African literary works or the attitudes of African thinkers towards geopolitical events and processes unfolding today.

Chapter II discusses another well-known dichotomy: modernism as a bastion of Western aesthetics vs. socialist realism, born in the Eastern Bloc and often accused of being anachronistic and unoriginal. Popescu addresses "the mythologies of realism and modernism" as they were imagined and reinforced by the superpowers during the Cold War and reveals the ideological reasons for the absolute distinction between the two currents. In doing so, she also reimages the map of world literature, arguing that this polarization led to the creation of two "aesthetic world-systems" which obscured and excluded entire corpuses, since they could not be explained away as parts of or aspirers to the modernist or the socialist realist canon. Therefore, this ample theoretical discussion engages with various concepts of world literature, including the leftist critique put forward by the Warwick Research Collective (WReC), according to which, far from representing an independent realm, world literature is constantly determined and altered by the capitalist world-system. Popescu proposes that we review these debates through the lens of the Cold War, comparing the capitalist development of world literature with its Soviet counterpart, accomplished by the end of WWI and best represented by Gorky's *Vsemirnaia Literatura* Press. All the while, the author also focuses on the venues of the theoretical debates under consideration

and on the emergence of literary capitals such as Kampala, Dakar, Nairobi or Johannesburg, which ended up competing with the traditional literary metropolises (Paris, London, New York and Moscow). The result is a new, polycentric network of world literature based on alternative canons and on marginal writers negotiating their own political and aesthetic creeds, drawing on or rejecting the two dominant ideologies of their time.

The second part of the book investigates the representations of the Cold War in the works of African writers, discussing themes such as the imagined futures of African nations and communities, the birth of revolutionary ideas, social movements including strikes, insurrections and armed combat. The main question has to do with how these revolutionary imaginaries absorbed and then went beyond Marxist thought, which leads Popescu to an in-depth discussion of the most important theories of revolution proposed by African authors: Fanon, Steve Biko, A. Cabral. In other words, *At Penpoint* revisits the anticolonial literature of the 50s and 60s, which was left behind by the more “sophisticated” and apolitical critics of the 60s and 70s but which can do justice to the imbrications of Cold War politics and decolonization. The work of these African theorists ultimately exemplifies the local metabolization of Marxist critique and can provide a constructive answer to the accusations according to which Marxism itself was too Eurocentric or indebted to the Western philosophical tradition to serve the decolonial project.

Finally, in the same section, Popescu takes a different approach when studying the depiction of the war in Angola in a remarkable number of narratives. More specifically, she discusses the formal mutations pertaining to this theme, from literature written by former conscripts to contemporary magical realism; she analyzes the contribution of each of these formal choices to the understanding of such a major historical event, while also placing them in the broader context of global changes in genre. Thus, Popescu’s methodology is impressively diverse. In part, it derives from historicism, presenting the emergent African literatures of the decolonial age from a global perspective, in which their birth was marked by the Cold War and its ideological struggles. Contextualization is essential not only because it can help dispel the critical myths which have been reinforcing the colonial discourse for decades but also because it calls into question the theoretical assumptions, concepts and networks employed to describe world literature in the contemporary academe. What is more, Popescu uses thematic and formal analysis, as well as genre theory in order to showcase and explain

“the watermark left by the Iron Curtain in fiction, essays, and memoirs penned by intellectuals from the former colonies” (2). Because, as she convincingly argues, the forms, genres and aesthetic solutions imagined by many African writers constituted their response to the political landscape – their political options, their wariness to align themselves with either superpower, their engagement or detachment, beliefs or skepticism.

With this overview in mind, we can safely conclude that among the merits of Popescu’s book is the relativization of the binarism which defined the Cold War, carried out through the close inspection of the forms of cultural and economic imperialism generated by the two sides in the twentieth century. As opposed to the traditional narrative in which the USSR and the USA were radical enemies, with incompatible doctrines and understandings of everything from freedom to justice, Popescu’s research reveals that the colonial agenda might actually be seen as a common denominator. In her words, the superpowers of the Cold War were “historical and geopolitical configurations that claimed to be radically different yet mirrored and reverse-mirrored each other” (vii). Hence the careful examination of how countries, regions and literatures in Africa, as well as their struggle for emancipation were shaped by a conflict supposedly taking place elsewhere. Popescu looks at the direct and material impact of the Cold War: containment policies, the economic influence exerted by the USA or the Soviet Union, military coups, puppet regimes etc. The Cold War actually encompassed the whole world, not only the Northern Hemisphere, and when it interfered with the development of peripheral countries, it often clashed with local decolonial projects. At the same time, Popescu pays attention to the discursive war happening in Africa between the same two superpowers, whose rigid conceptions of literature and its social function were yet another colonial mechanism to denounce and resist. Analysing the two utopias – the capitalist one vs. the socialist one – she demonstrates that their similarities came from their reliance on absolute ideals sourced from the Enlightenment (reason, progress, civilization), that is, on a Eurocentric model of knowledge production and valorisation.

In fact, it should be noted that Popescu is aware of and explicitly addresses the situatedness of theoretical thought, along with the insidiousness of hegemonic literary theory. On the one hand, quoting Soyinka, she proves that scholarship on African literature and writers was deeply impacted by Cold War narratives – either pro-Western or Marxist. On the other hand, she highlights the fact that, more generally, all

of our conceptual tools – from overarching notions such as world literature, Third World or Global South literature and postcolonialism to more particular ones such as the national allegory, protest poetry, resistance literature, prison memoirs – have been determined by the Cold War climate. Put differently, we can only discuss the connection between the Cold War and decolonization from within the intellectual matrix engendered by Western and Soviet forms of domination.

However, an equally interesting avenue of inquiry has to do with the *agency* of African intellectuals and writers, which Popescu insists on throughout the book and which helps us view the relationship between decolonization and the Cold War as a two-way street: the Third World (known today as the Global South) was indeed affected by the cultural policies of the superpowers, but it also impacted their trajectories and their narratives: “both taking and giving to this global discourse” (4). In this sense, Popescu proves that one of the most potent strategies of talking back to power was inter-peripheral solidarity: by establishing systems of cultural production and circulation that bypassed the authority of hegemonic literary capitals, both old (Paris, London) and new (Moscow, New York), the African writers of the Cold War period restructured a network that had been markedly Eurocentric for centuries. They were not simply seeking a place at the table in a preexistent system or hierarchy; instead, they were actively trying to change the coordinates of the system, at a time when Western literary theory was still operating with the center-periphery model. This also explains the book’s title: Popescu borrows Ngũgĩ’s phrase, “writing at penpoint”, to describe a revolution in which literary cultures on the margins of the World Republic of Letters rebel against the rules, values and evolutionary patterns of the literary metropolises, indicating that the decolonization of aesthetic canons was happening with a sense of urgency, much like political emancipation.

Ultimately, the connection between decolonization and the Cold War is not just a scholarly issue, a gap that needs to be addressed or a previously ignored historical phenomenon. Rather, it informs and feeds into today’s political and ideological tensions. To give but an example, the reluctance of West African intellectuals to position themselves against the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine might be baffling to Western commentators, who expect Eastern Europe and Africa to be natural allies against imperialism. Nonetheless, as shown by Lukasz Stanek in a recent article for *Africa is a Country*, the African perspective is infinitely more complicated, in that many West Africans see the war in Ukraine as a consequence of the Cold War and

NATO's expansionist tendencies. Not to mention their awareness that the colour line is manifesting very differently in Eastern Europe and Africa, with refugees being welcome in Poland or denied entry based solely on their race. Indeed, there are important similarities between the colonization of African territories and the Russian domination of Eastern Europe. But in her book, Popescu manages to show that it was precisely the participation of African nations in both decolonization *and* the Cold War that complicated these parallels. Thus, she reveals the extremely intricate relationship between different kinds of imperialism and (neo)colonialism, with the added factor of racialization impacting all the geopolitical relations of the last few centuries.

In her conclusion, Popescu wonders: "what if the knowledge paradigms specific to the global conflict linger on, shaping the intellectual instruments we use to explain literary phenomena today?" (186) What if our conception of the nature of literariness, literary production, circulation and value has been decisively altered by the two competing aesthetic regimes of the last century and requires constant unlearning, in the spirit of decolonial philosophy? With this mission in mind, the author gives a well-documented and conceptually rigorous account of the Cold War and its afterlives in African literature, drawing lessons about theoretical decentring, alternative regimes of literary valorisation and local forms of resistance to economic and cultural domination. Not only does she wrestle with some of the most difficult issues in post and decolonial theory, providing pertinent answers and promising solutions, but her research should also be seen as a stepping stone to a better understanding of literary decolonization after WWII.