

BOOK REVIEW

Peter J. Kalliney, *The Aesthetic Cold War: Decolonization and Global Literature*.
Princeton University Press, 2022, 336 pp.

In *The Aesthetic Cold War: Decolonization and Global Literature*, Peter J. Kalliney studies how the emergence of postcolonial literature is inextricably and constitutively linked to the global cold war. The book tracks the efforts of the two rival superpowers to court, influence, and surveil writers of the decolonizing world through cultural diplomacy programs and the secret police. Such state ambitions to extend the political and ideological warfare into the literary realm—what Kalliney terms “the aesthetic cold war”—would have far-reaching consequences for the emergence, circulation, reception, and aesthetic evolution of postcolonial literature. In other words, the cold war offered more than a coincidental backdrop to the age of decolonization; it determined the very material conditions for its imaginative representation. But the strength and achievement of Kalliney’s project lay in their ability to subvert expectations of omnipotence in such state involvement. Instead, it tends to the ways in which late colonial and early postcolonial writers resisted the ideological binary and negotiated for cultural and artistic autonomy through an ethics of “aesthetic nonalignment.”

Kalliney’s primary method in this revisionist literary history is archival. The text stages its interventions through a rigorous engagement with diverse archival materials: personal and organizational correspondence, declassified intelligence files, patron memos, among others. To these historical artifacts Kalliney brings the shrewd eye of the literary scholar: the FBI dossier on C. L. R. James receives the same level of meticulous close reading that is afforded to James’s historiography and experimental literary criticism. In fact, the close readings carry the text, revealing how the project’s chief concern is not necessarily the motivations and achievements of these political institutions but their effects on the literary works.

The book has three parts. The first part includes a concise introduction and a lengthy chapter that traces the intellectual history and aesthetic debates of the period. This latter chapter begins with Achebe’s famous essay “Africa and Her Writers” to situate the reader in how anticolonial writers of the period were thinking about and debating the appropriate relationship between art and politics. During this period many anticolonial intellectuals founded cultural and literary institutions that advocated for “nonaligned” and “nonpartisan” politics on the grounds of intellectual and aesthetic autonomy. As Kalliney demonstrates such commitment to nonpartisan politics enabled anticolonial

writers and editors to advance cultural independence by fostering community and credibility beyond the metropole.

The three chapters in part 2 take up cultural diplomacy programs. Chapter 3 focuses on the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF), a transnational organization that supported writers and intellectuals of the decolonizing world. Though active in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, the CCF was most successful in sub-Saharan Africa, where it funded avant-garde magazines (like *Black Orpheus* and *Transition*), radio programs, and conferences (including the famous Makerere Conference of 1962) until it was revealed that the CIA had been bankrolling the entire organization since its inception. Students of the period know this episode. Kalliney's project, however, destabilizes its usual framing by revealing the relative weakness of the CIA, whose efforts to maintain the secrecy of its involvement meant they could not make explicit demands on the intellectuals they supported. "This form of indirect patronage," writes Kalliney, "afforded a generation of African writers more rather than less latitude, both politically and aesthetically" (57). This seems to also be true for Soviet-led cultural diplomacy programs whose patronage was not secret but who were no more successful influencers than their American adversaries.

Kalliney offers enough archival evidence and nuanced literary interpretations to win over any skeptic. And yet, the book falls short of explicating the consequences, aesthetic or otherwise, of outsized partisan foreign support for African arts and letters. That is, how do we reckon not just with what such financial interventions ideologically encouraged or aesthetically engendered, but what it materially made possible? There is a brief mention of how almost all the magazines and cultural centers under study shuttered as the cold war waned. Here is a place where the power imbalance tips the other way, leaving the publishing and circulation of African literature vulnerable to the imperialist whims of self-interested foreign parties.

Chapter 4 turns to the Soviet-backed activities, chronicling the rise and fall of the Afro-Asian Writers Association, which housed the prominent anticolonial transnational multilingual magazine, *Lotus*. Through the life and career of Alex La Guma, the reader gets a glimpse of the ideological and aesthetic allure of the Soviet Union for an African intellectual: "a place where intellectual exchange across national boundaries happens without metropolitan domination" (116). More than evincing the delicate negotiations between aesthetic autonomy and state interests, the pages of *Lotus* attest to the deep internationalist spirit of the anticolonial struggle for national culture.

The last section examines more overt methods of state influence, assessing the effects of surveillance, detention, and deportations on postcolonial literary works. Here, Kalliney combs through decades-long intelligence files as well as diaries and autobiographies on prominent anticolonial intellectuals, including Doris Lessing, C. L. R. James, and Claudia Jones, where the author performs a kind of a literary forensics. Chapter 6, for instance, shuttles between archival documents on MI5's treatment of Lessing and a formalist reading of her late experimental fiction in an effort to draw a paradoxical link between the corrosive restrictions Lessing faced and the creative ingenuity she exhibited. Tracking the function of surveillance in Lessing's *Children of Violence* quintet, Kalliney

demonstrates how Lessing formally responds to state surveillance in her speculative fiction, thematizing postapocalyptic futures where human survivance depends on heightened communication and psychological agility that reappropriate networks of surveillance.

Kalliney contends that major literary debates of the twentieth century, such as the contentious language debates of the 1960s, arguments on the role of art in politics, questions of authenticity in minoritized literature, even the development of human rights discourse were wrought in the nervous politics of the cold war. As a result, his book joins an exciting list of recent titles, including the works of Bhakti Shringarpure, Arne Westad, Monica Popescu, among others, all of whom excavate the cold war's generative and ongoing impact on the production, circulation, and institutionalization of world literature.

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