GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Against Empire: Reading Anticoloniality across Cold War Divides

By Carolyn Ownbey | July 6, 2022

Analyzing African literature through a Cold War lens nuances both objects of study, adding layers of complexity to an already overwrought sociopolitical landscape in Africa, and complicating the presumed clear-cut ideological (and often geographical) Cold War binary. Modeling such a theoretical approach, Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint* provides a framework for understanding the legacies of the Cold War in postcolonial studies — including its watermark on current methodologies and modalities of thinking.[1] Postcolonial studies, Popescu contends, has been reduced to "a field concerned with forms of Western domination as they evolved in tandem with the capitalist system" (13). Counter to this, Popescu advocates for "a redefinition of postcolonial studies," which "should instead address diachronically overlapping and synchronically interweaving forms of (neo)colonial domination" (13). Reading from both sides of the Cold War binary and acknowledging the structural overlaps of oppressive regimes helps us to understand both contexts more fully. In this essay I hope to gesture towards what we can learn from this kind of reading in our own time. This essay focuses on two writers, one from each side of the divide: an anti-Communist Czech dissident, playwright/philosopher/politician Václav Havel, and South African communist, activist/poet/cultural worker Mongane Wally Serote.

I activate Popescu's approach through a comparative reading. As Popescu notes, "with its uncomfortable position in relation to Western capitalism and Soviet communism, South Africa becomes a privileged site for exploring Cold War contradictions" (156). I contend that Czechoslovakia, especially following the 1968 Soviet invasion, provides a similarly ripe context for the exploration of imperialism, censorship, and resistance during the Cold War. What are the alignments and confluences that we can discover in these two writers despite their opposing positions? What overlaps can be drawn from concurrent imperialisms, and what anti-imperial strategies might suit both contexts? Reading modes of literature developed for local conditions in a radically global context, I use Popescu's framework to parse commonality between ideological poles. In short, I ask: what can reading these two writers and their contexts *together* teach us?

Havel and Serote were diametrically opposed in many ways, obviously in relation to Communism — Serote was a committed Communist party member even beyond the end of the Cold War; Havel falls squarely on the anti-Communist side of things — but perhaps most relevant here is their conflicting orientations toward the uses of literature for political ends, or at least how they *articulated* their views on the subject. Havel witnessed the dangers of art coopted by the state for political purposes, and so, like his compatriot Milan Kundera, developed a theory of anti-political writing. Conversely, Serote wanted to weaponize culture for political ends — specifically to wield against the ostensibly capitalist apartheid government. What my essay I hope will demonstrate is that these two figures, specifically as

cultural workers resisting repressive colonial regimes, have a lot more in common than this description might suggest.

Havel's Anti-Soviet Alignment

Havel's Cold War era writing career can be conceived in roughly three periods: writing primarily for the stage leading up to the Prague Spring in 1968; formulating an anti-totalitarian philosophy and literary approach in the years following the Soviet invasion and leading to his imprisonment in 1979; and writing as and after having been a political prisoner in the late-1970s and 1980s. Havel became perhaps most famous during the second of these, for his involvement in "Charter 77," a title which refers both to an internationally circulated human rights document, as well as to the collective of its signatories.[2] Havel was a primary author of the document and one of the movement's original spokesmen. In Tom Stoppard's words, Havel and his fellow Chartists were "calling upon the Czech government to abide by its own laws"; in Kundera's more provocative rendering, "since the constitution guarantees the freedom of speech, [the Chartists] naively draw all the consequences. They conduct themselves as if words really mean what they are supposed to mean."[3] Havel's short imprisonment in 1977, which prefigured a longer stint in jail beginning in 1979, did not dissuade him, at least not for long. In 1978, Havel penned "The Power of the Powerless," an essay which circulated among his peers and finally appeared as the centerpiece of a larger collection of anti-totalitarian essays. "Charter 77" and "The Power of the Powerless" together represent the milestones of Havel's post-1968, pre-incarceration approach to the Czech problem.

Charter 77 was a citizens' initiative that aimed to call the Czech government to account. While freedom of speech, freedom from fear, and other fundamental human rights were on the books in Czechoslovakia, they were not guaranteed in practice. Citing the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights — both signed and reaffirmed by the Czech government in 1968 and 1975 — the Charter's signatories issued "an urgent reminder of the many fundamental human rights that, regrettably, exist in our country only on paper."[4] Calling for transparency and adherence to legality, "Charter 77" takes aim at what Havel calls the post-totalitarian system.[5] The Czech government's public rebuke of the Chartists for dereliction of duty to the Socialist state is plainly a call for conformity. Conversely, Charter 77 explicitly represents plurality and diversity: "Charter 77 is a free and informal and open association of people of various convictions, religions and professions."[6] Totalitarian and post-totalitarian systems require isolated, obedient, non-critical or non-thinking citizens. Charter 77, on the other hand, represents a different kind of citizenship — one that, Havel thought, had the potential to take on and even take down a totalitarian regime. The Chartists advocate for a citizenry that is engaged, critical, and perhaps most of all, responsible: "every individual bears a share of responsibility for the general conditions in the country, and therefore also for compliance with the enacted pacts."[7] Reframing the concepts of compliance and citizenship while claiming the authority to enforce the human rights covenants to which Czechoslovakia was party, Charter 77 issues a direct challenge to the post-1968 regime.

In "The Power of the Powerless," Havel expands the Charter's reformulation of responsible citizenship in the face of post-totalitarianism. "Between the aims of the post-totalitarian system and the aims of life there is a yawning abyss," he argues: "while life, in its essence,

moves towards plurality, diversity, independent self-constitution and self-organization, in short, towards the fulfilment of its own freedom, the post-totalitarian system demands conformity, uniformity, and discipline."[8] His insistence upon plurality is the hallmark of anti-totalitarianism, and for Havel cultural forms—everything from theatre to philosophical writing — are the most effective way to achieve such plurality. When, during the first days of Soviet occupation in 1968, Havel issued international radio broadcasts, "he did not call for the intervention of NATO or the American troops deployed a few kilometres to the west, but summoned his colleagues and friends, writers and critics… to protest the abomination. It was a strange phalanx to mobilize in the face of an armoured military operation, but Havel had his reasons, citing the role played by writers and intellectuals during the Prague Spring."[9] Havel believes in the power of culture to bring systemic change. Soviet suppression of dissenting writers bolstered Havel's belief, rather than stifled it. Havel's plays and political writings in the decades leading up to the Velvet Revolution upheld his commitment to anti-totalitarian politics and his faith in the power of cultural forms in pursuing them.

Serote's Anti-Apartheid Activism

South Africa's participation in international politics was fraught from the early postwar years. The National Party government, or the apartheid regime, came into power in 1948. The same year, South Africa's delegates to the United Nations abstained from the vote on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In the following decades, South Africa lost its seat at the UN, was excluded from the Olympic Games, withdrew from the Commonwealth, and became subject to international scrutiny and human rights inquiries. Following the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960, Amnesty International sent observers to political trials in South Africa. Much of this history invites comparison with the Soviet regime during the same period, but South Africa publicly aligned itself with the West by endorsing capitalism over communism. The Suppression of Communism Act came into effect in South Africa in 1950, with the ostensible purpose of banning the South African Communist Party and other communist-affiliated organizations. In practice, the Act served as a convenient pretext for the suppression of anti-apartheid resistance.

At the same time as it was losing its official place at the UN, the South African government was vying for a permanent seat at the International Atomic Energy Agency. Performing anti-communism publicly was part and parcel of the government's strategy: Western capitalist countries would be more likely to invest in South African manufacturing and to turn a blind eye to human rights violations if South Africa appeared on their side of the Cold War. Additionally, violent, government-sanctioned anti-communism was in many ways a ruse to enforce apartheid.[10]

As a cultural worker and activist, Serote has a dual commitment to literary innovation and revolutionary politics. Writing as a Black South African man who lived much of his life in exile, Serote's writings reflect his radical political subjectivity. Among his literary works, Serote is perhaps best known for his poetry. For the purposes of this essay, I want to touch just briefly on this to give a sense of the tenor of much of his apartheid-era poetry, before transitioning to a brief discussion of one of his post-apartheid novels, *Gods of our Time*, where I see one of the clearest articulations of his anti-apartheid politics manifest.

In the poetry collection *Behold Mama, Flowers*, published in 1978, Serote's poetic anti-

apartheid activism hits hard. Early in the title poem, Serote's speaker asks:

> how can i forgive
>
> when phaladi trembled in the street
> his heart pouring blood out like an angry fountain
> and his scream tore the night, fighting with death
> death, which soon settled in his eyes turning them into marble
> who heard
>
> when the mother turned away from the court
> holding her boy by the hand
> her heart missing beats in disbelief
> that her man was gone to prison for life [11]

Later in the poem, Serote describes an imprisoned old man, driven mad by isolation. Serote's speaker is angry, traumatized. He demands answers from the mad old man: "tell me old man, tell me / through your absent eyes and mind / can i forgive / i walk / i hide in shadows which keep fading / listen / but how can i forgive / but how can i forgive."[12] Serote does not shy away from criticism of the state and its gross abuses of humanity and human rights. He does this, of course, in alignment with the Communist cause, despite whatever human rights violations may be occurring on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

Fast-forward to the post-apartheid era, with the benefit of hindsight: Serote's anti-apartheid sentiments have not changed, and in the novel *Gods of Our Time* he provides a crystal-clear articulation of what the anti-apartheid movement necessitated to defeat the repressive regime.[13] The novel proceeds by associative logic: circuitous and contingent, the stories of characters build a coherent narrative only in concert, occasionally literally. Individual voices rise to the surface momentarily, and are subsumed again in the crowd. During one of many funeral scenes in the novel, Lindi, a singer and old friend of the narrator, emerges as "a single voice whose strength held this large, strong, angered crowd" (171). Her voice cannot sustain the movement alone. The thousands gathered for the funeral follow and fortify her song: "There was movement. More song. Lindi took the song. Her voice sailed above the voices of the thousands of people. She led the song, increased the pace of the rhythym [sic]. The people began to dance the toyi-toyi" (174). Emblematic of the anti-apartheid struggle, the toyi-toyi only works in a crowd. It is necessarily massive, and therein lies its revolutionary force. While Lindi leads the crowd in song, the narrator broadens his focus:

> A young voice intercepted the song; the crowd replied. Another song. I realised then that there were fathers and mothers in the crowd. I realised that I had not understood what it was when I kept saying the community, the community—everyone was here. They came from Natal, OFS [the Orange Free State], and the Cape—many, many shades of blacks. Young men, young women, singing in line, in rhythym [sic] with the chant, with the slogan. And these kept them close with old men and women. Workers, I thought, are here. They must be here because they are the community! For a while I felt safe. Just for a while. (174)

The movement is necessarily diverse, intersectional, and collective. It draws from different

age groups, genders, geographical points, and occupations. Collectivity is a necessary device to *Gods of Our Time*, for narrative reasons as well as for political ones. In the novel, Serote endeavors to represent the interconnections among a litany of socio-political actors and issues. Racial equality, women's rights, gay rights, AIDS in South Africa, and poverty, among others, feature as central to the main characters and plotlines. When asked in a 2014 interview what he hoped for the future of South African literature, Serote replied, "I wish that it can bloom, it can create more new writers who are honest, who are uncompromisingly patriotic, who will always continuously evaluate what the struggle for liberation has gained, and how it should be taken forward."[14] Crucially, literature's revolutionary potential is not spent when the apartheid regime ends.

Conclusions

What can we learn from these two authors, whose political alignments were in direct conflict? Havel tries to separate himself from a circumscribed Soviet politics; in his writings he thinks through civic responsibility in the face of totalitarianism. Serote, on the other hand, views the political as deeply necessary to cultural work; his works articulate a version of democracy based on increasingly broader inclusion. In both cases, the conceptions of citizenship or community that emerge rely on a broad notion of what we might call democracy — not in the sense of government, but of human communities and human rights — despite contradictory "political" orientations. In her rejection of "the still deep-going assumption that democracy is necessarily a national form," Bonnie Honig insists that, "democracy is not just a set of governing institutions." Instead, it is "a commitment to local and popular empowerment, effective representation, accountability, and the generation of actions in concert across lines of difference."[15] Democracy is inclusionary, rather than exclusionary. It necessitates diversity, plurality, and community. Both Havel and Serote imagine communities that are substantively democratic — whether Communist or otherwise — and they give the lie to their respective governmental regimes and social systems that claim to be egalitarian.

By way of conclusion I want to suggest that we have much to learn from these two contexts—that reading them together, understanding their nuances, distinctions, and overlaps might help us in *this* historical moment, especially for those of us in the US, to see and to understand our own social systems and political structures more fully. I doubt it is a coincidence that both Havel and Serote spent time in the US during the civil rights era and immediately following. Serote incorporates what he learned from Black activists into his writing—from references to civil rights leaders and Black American activist musicians in his works, to the searing lines from "Behold Mama, Flowers," where his speakers asks, "how can i forget, even if i want to forget / that in the fathoms of the sea are bones / screaming bones still chained and bloodstained."[16] Havel, meanwhile, "delayed [his] departure [from the US] and joined other writers and theater people to participate in [a Central Park civil rights] march, which protested segregation and honored [Martin Luther] King's memory"; he was deeply affected by the US civil rights movement, and considered it a model he could apply to the post-totalitarian system.[17] In our current moment, totalitarian moves and capitalistic structures determine the landscape. While I don't have space to explore fully what Serote and Havel together can teach us, at very least reading these authors together shows us that imaginative literature, despite ostensible political alignment, has something to do with democratic commitment.

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

[2] Charter 77. Reprinted as "Manifesto Charging Rights Violations in Czechoslovakia." *The New York Times*, 27 January 1977. http://www.nytimes.com/1977/01/27/archives/manifesto-charging-rights-violations-in-czechoslovakia.html?_r=0

[3] Stoppard, Tom. "Introduction (to *The Memorandum*)." 1980. *Václav Havel: Living in Truth*. Ed. Vladislav, Jan. London: Faber, 1987: 279. Kundera, Milan. "Candide Had to be Destroyed." 1979. *Václav Havel: Living in Truth*. Ed. Vladislav, Jan. London: Faber, 1987: 261.

[4] "Charter 77."

[5] Post-totalitarianism for Havel is essentially a less physically violent form of totalitarianism, but it retains its deeply repressive aspects in less physical ways.

[6] "Charter 77."

[7] Ibid.

[8] Havel, Václav. "The Power of the Powerless." 1978. *International Journal of Politics* 15.3/4: *The Power of the Powerless* (Fall-Winter 1985-86): 29-30.

[9] Žantovský, Michael. *Havel: A Life.* New York: Grove Press, 2014: 116.

[10] Serote himself was detained, imprisoned, and tortured under Section 6 of the Terrorism Act in 1969.

[11] Serote, Mongane Wally. *Behold Mama, Flowers*. Johannesburg: Ad. Donker, 1978.

[12] Ibid, 18.

[13] Serote, Mongane Wally. *Gods of Our Time.* Cape Town: Ravan Press, 1999. All subsequent citations in parenthesis.

[14] Serote "On the Role of Literature in the Struggle for Liberation." *SABC Digital News*. South African Broadcasting Corporation. 3 May 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTjvSEPHdlY

[15] Honig, Bonnie. *Democracy and the Foreigner*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001: 13.

[16] Serote 1978, 12.

[17] Rocamora, Carol. *Acts of Courage: Václav Havel's Life in the Theater*. Hanover, NH: Smith and Kraus, 2005: 93.

About the Authors

Carolyn Ownbey is Assistant Professor and Chair of English, Communications, and Literature at Golden Gate University in San Francisco. Her scholarly work focuses on anticolonial literature and performance, new media and protest, and theories of democracy and citizenship. Dr. Ownbey has essays published in *Law & Literature*, *Textual Practice*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, and *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies*, among others.

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