GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Artistic Commitment and Minority Resistance: Monica Popescu's At Penpoint and Niger Delta Poetry

By Mathias Iroro Orhero | July 6, 2022

Monica Popescu's *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* invites us to rethink the place of African literature in the context of the Cold War. Based on the premise that the superpowers — the West and Eastern bloc — held African cultural productions at "penpoint" through competing imperialisms and aesthetic systems, Popescu explores the intricacies, aesthetic alliances, and non-alignment that are reflected in the artistic commitments of African writers.[1] Drawing from Popescu's understanding of artistic commitment, I explore the concept of minority resistance in Nigeria's Niger Delta poetry in the context of the Cold War and its effect on a Global South nation like Nigeria. My premise is that the collusion of oil multinationals that are primarily headquartered in the West with their Nigerian state collaborators in the expropriation, exploitation, and marginalization of the people of the oil-rich Niger Delta necessitated an artistic response that can be understood in terms of what Popescu describes as "affective temporal structures."[2] I read the affective temporal structures that drive artistic commitment and minority resistance in some poems by Niger Delta writers.

In part one of her book, Popescu tracks the literary and cultural institutions, associations, and conferences that influenced early African writing and identifies the ideological binary of the modernist aesthetic and realism in Africa. She submits that "In engaging with or distancing themselves from aesthetic categories backed by the West or the Eastern Bloc, writers became participants in the processes of cultural production shaped by the Cold War."[3] In other words, the global impact of the Cold War plays out even in instances when African writers distanced themselves from the highly politicized aesthetic categories.

Described in the context of Wallerstein's world-systems approach, Popescu engages the "mythologies of modernism and realism" in African literatures. She argues that the superpowers used these categories to propagate their ideological and cultural warfare in Africa. Despite her refusal to describe any work as modernist or realist, she acknowledges how these aesthetic choices have been claimed and politicized and how African writers position themselves in this context by their acceptance, disavowal, or alteration of these categories. Citing the examples of little magazines and the writing of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Popescu discusses the different positionalities of African writers and how they subvert the aesthetic categories which try to claim African writing. Through her example of Ngũgĩ, she concedes that African writers have indigenized received aesthetic forms and achieved freedom from the "hold of the aesthetic world-systems," despite the abiding presence of artistic commitment.[4]

Furthering Popescu's understanding of artistic commitment in the context of "decolonization

of writing modes" in which she foregrounds Ngũgĩ's transition from a modernist through the socialist realist mode to a hybrid realist mode that draws from indigenous aesthetic forms, writers from Nigeria's Niger Delta also inscribe minority resistance through a hybrid realist mode that draws from indigenous aesthetic forms. In showing their artistic commitments to the issues affecting the region, Niger Delta writers frequently draw from the trope of revolution/resistance. The negative consciousness of the writers puts them against the politics of modernism and its association with multinational oil capitalists and the so-called economic core nations that have destroyed their region through reckless and unsustainable oil exploration and extraction. It also puts them against the Nigerian state whose derivative and asymmetrical nationalism and neocolonial tendencies necessitate a form of realism rooted in the trope of revolution and resistance and indigenous aesthetic forms that encode a sense of minority cultural nationalism.

Although Popescu's book historicizes the influence of modernism and realism in the context of the Cold War, my claim for a hybrid realist aesthetic in Niger Delta writing comes from two historical positions. The first is the immediate context of the Cold War, and the second is the continued relevance of the hybrid realist mode that evolved, based on Popescu's thesis, from the decolonization of aesthetic categories. It is noteworthy that Popescu's comment about Ngũgĩ's search for a different aesthetic form in the mid to late 1970s coincides with the rise of a type of poetry that Femi Osofisan and Funso Aiyejina describe as "alternative tradition."[5] Focusing on Nigerian writing, Osofisan contrasts those in the older generation whose works would be in the category that Popescu labels "African modernism" with younger writers: "The older writers represented a watershed (in both the socio historical and the purely aesthetic aspects of artistic expression) and it was a watershed from which we had to depart in order to keep our rendezvous with history."[6] In describing why the alternative writers felt the need for more artistic commitment, Osofisan cites the "decay that has followed the discovery of oil" and how the pessimism with Nigeria's peripheral capitalism, and by extension, the modernist aesthetic that had hitherto dominated writing culminated in a new aesthetic mode.[7] These new writers, Osofisan submits, "deserted the grandiose ambitions of the last decade, not as an accident, but as a conscious and infidel act of self-purgation. They openly dissociate themselves (even while paying due homage) from the posture and pronouncements of their predecessors and seek to create an art that would be accessible to the large majority of the Nigerian public, rather than to a cultured and privileged few."[8] In addition to their realist mode, they also rely on indigenous forms, or indigenous poetics, as Aiyejina calls it.[9] This recourse to indigenous modes, as opposed to the predominantly "anglo-modernist sensibility" of the earlier generation of Nigerian writers as well as the radical perspectives and "rigorous self-criticism to which these poets often subject themselves and their country" inspired the hybrid realist aesthetic that informs the poetry of Tanure Ojaide, a significant voice in the alternative tradition and arguably the most important and prolific poet from the Niger Delta.[10]

Following Popescu's thesis on the evolution of Ngũgĩ's writing, it is interesting that Niger Delta writing also follows the same trajectory, with early writers like John Pepper Clark and Gabriel Okara associated with the modernist tradition, and Tanure Ojaide, together with later poets, writing in a hybrid realist mode. The cultural politics of the Cold War also found full resolution in Niger Delta poetry and its decolonized aesthetic forms, artistic commitments, and its resistance trope. Ojaide's collection, *Labyrinths of the Delta* (1986), begins with a

quotation from Ngũgĩ's *Petals of Blood*: "There is no night so long that it will not give way to the light of day."[11] This intertextuality reveals Ojaide's commitment to Ngũgĩ's revolutionary and decolonial temper that Popescu foregrounds in her book, and it also confirms Ojaide's politics in the context of the cultural battles of the Cold War. The trope of resistance is couched in Ojaide's hybrid realist mode. Popescu's comment that revolutions can be understood in the context of "affective temporal structures" as "ways of perceiving the present moment and establishing relations (whether of continuity or rupture) between the present, on the one hand, and the past and the future, on the other" is quite useful in thinking of minority resistance in Niger Delta poetry as a social process in which individuals and communities that comprise the geopolitical and bio-regional enclave rally against socio-political domination (in the context of derivative nationalism) even as they affect and are affected by larger discourses.[12]

The resistance imaginary in Niger Delta poetry has been read as symptomatic of Marxist leanings, oil politics, and environmental degradation.[13] I read it here in the context of the Cold War and minority politics. Ojaide's titular poem in *Labyrinths of the Delta* is a relatively long poem with five distinct parts. The lines are unrhymed, and the stanzas are of unequal length. The first part of the poem introduces the reader to a people figured as "we," confirming Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd's position on the collective nature of minority discourse.[14] These people are chased by an oppressor known as "Ogiso," a tyrannical character from the mythic memory of Ojaide's Urhobo people, to a new land. In the second and third parts of the poem, the people make a home in their new Deltaic region, and the speaker romanticizes the environment and culture. By the fourth part of the poem, this new home is invaded by "Conquistadors" who "drove gunboats from the Atlantic."[15] In the fifth part, a new nation-state has been created, and the speaker invokes resistance against the derivative and asymmetrical nationalism of the new state using the hybrid aesthetic mode:

> In the thronged assembly, gods and men:
> Uhagwa in a feather-hat singing of the love we owe the land;
> Abadi, axe in hand; Egba with his leonine dog;
> And in our midst numerous deities, some unheard of
> But bearing our names. They have come back, the dead,
> Moved by our thumping feet, voices, and drums:
> For his dedication, Kwokori will be our main street;
> May Essi's matchet no longer be raised against neighbours,
> But against robbers of the new-found home;
> Mowarin, my namesake, telling us great things are coming;
> Okitiakpe, singing and dancing as no man has ever done;
> And thousands – the couriers whose blood was libation abroad –
> They have come to the concourse, happy spirits.
> Uvo! Ogidigbo! Your names will endure like the sky.
> After you were driven through half the world, you stood
> Your ground and beat back your foes – *ama hirhe erherie*.
> Not once did you go to battle without returning with spoils.
> O you warriors, give us the resolve to fight for years on years
> In the security of your shield of leaves.[16]

I have reproduced the poem at length in order to underscore the depth at which the resistance imaginary collaborates with the hybrid realist aesthetic of the poem. The poem speaker's negative consciousness, to draw from JanMohamed and Lloyd, comes from how power operates in the newly achieved "statehood" of Nigeria. [17] Figured as a group that has suffered oppression and domination over the years, the speaker invokes folk heroes and gods to rally the people against "robbers of the new-found home." The image of robbers represents those who plunder the region's natural resources and minoritize the people — the multinational oil companies and the nation-state that other dominant groups control. In a poetic style similar to *Udje* and other song-poetry traditions of the Urhobo people, Ojaide inscribes resistance by calling on the spirits of warriors to "give us resolve to fight for years on years." This resistance imaginary agrees with the poem's adoption of a hybrid aesthetic mode.

In terms of affective temporal structures, the poem speaker's resistance temper reflects the revolutionary tone that one finds in the works of writers like Ngũgĩ. With a focus on the agency of the people in taking their destiny into their hands, and in a populist language laced with folklore, Ojaide shows awareness of Cold War politics. In the face of Euro-American exploitation, the failure of Nigerian leaders to create a working and equitable national framework, and the neocolonialism of the Niger Delta, Ojaide connects the present moment with colonial domination and heritage, the failure of previous revolutions (through military coups), and the realities of the global scene at the time in his advocacy for minority agency through the function of resistance.

Later Niger Delta poets like Nnimmo Bassey, Ogaga Ifowodo, and Peter Omoko take up the resistance imaginary and hybrid realist aesthetic to further the cause of minority resistance against multinational oil capitalism and socio-political domination and marginalization, thus confirming the continued relevance of the Cold War-inflected aesthetic commitment in the contemporary moment. The cover image of Nnimmo Bassey's *I Will Not Dance to Your Beat* (2011) features a clenched fist in a red background. This image generally represents revolution and resistance. By using this cover image, Bassey visually inscribes the resistance imaginary and continues in the tradition that Ojaide had established in the 80s. Bassey also uses hybrid realist poetics in the titular poem in his *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood* to inscribe resistance: "They may kill all / But the blood will speak / They may gain all / But the soil will RISE / We may die / and yet stay alive."[18] Bassey's resistance temper here is in the context of environmental destruction and neglect of the Niger Delta region by oil multinationals and the Nigerian state that has pushed the region's people to a position of alterity.

Similarly, Omoko's "They Call Me Restive" articulates resistance through the negative consciousness of the speaker and the resulting binary of "we vs them" that reflects the operation of power in the Nigerian nation. Through "I" and "You," Omoko's speaker speaks to dominant structures and oppressors that have created the alterity and marginality of the Niger Delta people. The "you" is described as a "thief" who accuses the marginalized "I" of being restive "for asking to be equal."[19] The poem encodes resistance in the lines: "I shall come to you with clubs, cudgels, / And machetes to slice away that you've / Taken from me that we may be equal."[20] Here, too, the poem uses the hybrid realist aesthetic to portray minority resistance.

The affective temporal structures that inform the later Niger Delta poems are evident in the pessimism and anger of the poets' tone. Pained by the complicity of the West in their plights as well as the failure of the national collective in being sensitive to the region, the poets engage in a larger discourse that draws from the trope of revolution. However, as Popescu argues, they "wrest" the term from any Eurocentric grounding, and they reconfigure it in the form of minority resistance. [21] These poets invite their readers to rethink the nature of nation and nationalism, power, and oil capitalism in the context of minority groups and their experiences. This is particularly salient in Ogaga Ifowodo's "Ogoni," where the speaker is a military officer who is described as the "chief pacifier / of the lower Niger's / still primitive tribes" whose resistance had "shut down Shell's oil wells / and slimmed the nation's purse."[22] The Niger Delta poets continue to show artistic commitment in the way Popescu thinks of it through Ngũgĩ. Using a hybrid aesthetic mode that refutes Euro-American cultural provincialization, they articulate a decolonized understanding of resistance that is sensitive to their minoritized position in the national collective.

My argument so far is that Popescu's work provides a way to theorize minority resistance in Niger Delta poetry. In her claim for the agency of African writers in the context of the Cold War, Popescu provides the foundation to think of Niger Delta poetry using a Cold War lens. Through the idea of affective temporal structures and hybrid realist aesthetic, I read some poems based on the groundwork laid by Popescu. In doing this, I contribute a missing piece to Popescu's seminal monograph: the works of Niger Delta writers. I believe minority writers deserve special consideration because of how they are positioned in and against the nation. This position allows us to read the influence of the Cold War in Africa beyond the category of "national" or "continental." It also provides ways of seeing how the Cold War influenced specific cultures and traditions. This is what I have tried to demonstrate in this short essay.

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[1] Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures, Postcolonial Studies, and the Cold War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), https://muse.jhu.edu/book/77317.

[2] Ibid., 111.

[3] Ibid., 32.

[4] Ibid., 103.

[5] Femi Osofisan, "The Alternative Tradition : A Survey Of Nigerian Literature In English Since The Civil War," *Présence Africaine*, no. 139 (1986): 162–84; Funso Aiyejina, "Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: A Critical Survey," *Kunapipi* 9, no. 2 (1987): 24–36.

[6] Popescu, *At Penpoint,* 78; Osofisan, "The Alternative Tradition," 163.

[7] Ibid., 164.

[8] Ibid., 164.

[9] Aiyejina, "Recent Nigerian Poetry in English: A Critical Survey," 33.

[10] Ibid., 25, 31.

[11] Tanure Ojaide, *Labyrinths of the Delta* (Greenfield Review Press, 1986).

[12] Popescu, *At Penpoint,* 111; Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (U of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[13] See: Jide Balogun, "The Poet as a Social Crusader: Tanure Ojaide and the Poetry of Intervention," *Journal of Humanities* 20, no. 1 (2006): 78–88, https://doi.org/10.4314/jh.v20i1; Philip Aghoghovwia, "The Poetics and Politics of Transnational Petro-Environmentalism in Nnimmo Bassey's 'We Thought It Was Oil but It Was Blood,'" *English in Africa* 41, no. 2 (2014): 59–77; Sule Emmanuel Egya, "Nature and Environmentalism of the Poor: Eco-Poetry from the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 1–12, https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2015.1083848.

[14] Abdul R. JanMohamed and David Lloyd, "Introduction: Minority Discourse: What Is to Be Done?," *Cultural Critique*, no. 7 (1987): 5–17, https://doi.org/10.2307/1354148.

[15] Ojaide, *Labyrinths of the Delta,* 25.

[16] Ibid., 26–27.

[17] JanMohamed and Lloyd, "Introduction."

[18] Nnimmo Bassey, *We Thought It Was Oil But It Was Blood* (Kraft Books, 2002), 15.

[19] Peter Omoko, *Herding South* (African Books Collective, 2019), 19.

[20] Ibid., 19.

[21] Popescu, *At Penpoint,* 144.

[22] Ogaga Ifowodo, *The Oil Lamp* (Africa World Press, 2005), 37.

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