

Kaleidoscopic Sovereignty: Literary Montage and Geopolitical Entanglement in the Postcolonial 1960s

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The larger meaning...has shattered into a thousand and one useless pieces.
—Ayi Kwei Armah, *Fragments* (280)

In the Cuban novelist Edmundo Desnoes' *Inconsolable Memories* (1962), there is a moment in which the protagonist, Sergio Malabre—an alienated bourgeois writer who witnesses the missile crisis—juxtaposes in his mind two seemingly unrelated entities, “nuclear energy and [his] small apartment,” only to utter somewhat helplessly the following epiphany: “Everything is out of proportion” (170). The remarkably disproportional intersection at which the geopolitical meets ordinary individual life invites its own problematic of representation and narrative filters. The formal strategies that have been and continue to be useful in exploring the unfathomable distance between the individual and the geopolitical include the defamiliarization of reality, the expansion of narrative space, syntactic transgressions, the bricolage of diverse styles and voices, and non-mimetic modes of registering “the disjunctures in the *understanding* of the real” (Sangari 900). If, as Fredric Jameson argues, the global network of imperialism in the age of high modernism is imagined from the metropolitan vantage point, then, in the postcolonial era, one can talk about a reverse process of cognitive mapping; now it is the periphery that is trying to make sense of the larger network of the system. Pheng Cheah puts it another way, that “[t]he [postcolonial] nation recognizes itself in the world, which thereby becomes a world *for* it” (Cheah 357). Yet, the imperative of cognitive mapping and collective imagination in the postcolonial context comes with its own challenges, especially when one considers the disproportional relationship between the subject and the geopolitical totality. In this essay, I focus on the formal aspects of gauging the kaleidoscopic interaction between these two registers through a comparative analysis of a constellation of African, Latin American, and Middle Eastern post-national liberation texts from the 1960s. While there are significant particularities in the respective postcolonialities of African, Latin American, and Middle Eastern contexts, they also come together on the basis of certain shared vectors of encounters with the global North and utopian visions of delinking and non-alliance.

Postcolonial writing has assumed a self-conscious socio-political stance from its very inception, marking its difference from both the literary traditions of the metropole and the native oral and written

traditions of former colonies. Postcolonial *écriture* can be said to have initiated the groundwork for imagining the nation as the “gestative political structure” (Brennan 170) of belonging and commitment. Deemed to be already ahead of a backward economic mode of production, or an underdeveloped base, literature would account for, and overcome, the colonial past. Conversely, high expectations for a peculiarly “postcolonial” literature led to the establishment of a counter-discourse of disillusionment with postcolonial aesthetics for failing in the task of creating the nation in the collective imagination. By this argument, the nation in postcolonial writing could not but remain the absent object of desire and longing. After all, what hope was there for a belated literature in representing equally belated nations that tended toward cultural paralysis in response to the pressures of “catching up”? What this pessimistic approach has overlooked is the fact that literature is always already *entangled* with the social reality that it figuratively attempts to represent. I argue, therefore, against a certain ideology of postcolonialism that makes an impossible demand from the postcolonial fictive imagination, that being to transcend or subsume an entire set of contradictions in the social realm. I propose that postcolonial narratives of what Michael Denning calls “the age of three worlds,” as exemplified by Desnoe’s novel, represent the structural superimpositions of external systemic forces on the national space of sovereignty in a form that is reminiscent of montage.¹ Such narratives enact an affective transnational aesthetic that mediates the uneven relationship between individual and collective subjects and the external dynamics of historical-spatial transformations of the global system. As expressed in the original Eisensteinian notion that each sequential element is perceived not *next* to, but on *top* of the other, montage in this specific context refers to the collision of the national and transnational.²

Entanglement, montage, and delinking undergo a regressive semantic shift in the neocolonial context, which overlaps with the rise of dictatorships, authoritarian regimes, and military juntas in many postcolonies. As formulated by Édouard Glissant, entanglement or *point d’intrication* encapsulates the hybridization and creolization of human societies, as a result of the historical brutalities of colonialism and other forms of domination. Glissant proposes the concept to emphasize the fragmented diversity of the multiplied poetics of the world and the nonassimilatory relation of cultural difference from specific historical dispositions that are individually distinct but also variously connected.³ As Achille Mbembe states, “the postcolony encloses multiple *durées* made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another, and envelope one another: [in short,] an entanglement” (14). Reflecting the Benjaminian critique of historical positivism, montage also connotes mixture and non-linearity as a narratological method.⁴ As the cutting and reassembling of historical fragments and images, it functions to critique positivist and developmentalist understandings of modernity. Delinking, as conceptualized by world-system theorists such as Samir Amin, calls for the restructuration of the world-system for the benefit

of those disenfranchised on the periphery and in the name of national autonomy. In this sense, delinking is closely related to the fragmented diversity of Glissant's notion of entanglement. In the neocolonial conjuncture, however, entanglement can invoke a feeling of entrapment in the triangle of past dispossession, present peripheralization, and future uncertainty. In this context, delinking disfigures into an autarkic withdrawal from the outside world and montage becomes the formal logic of representing geopolitical disjunction and displacement.

The 1960s posed specific mimetic challenges for the consolidation of a postcolonial literary tradition. Literature had to take into account, first, the ways in which the geopolitical matrix of the Cold War period increasingly impacted the direction of decolonization and national development trajectories worldwide and, second, it had to consider the new global conjuncture. Postcolonial narratives responded to these challenges by transcoding national situations in relation to a polarized global system. I proceed with three minor but semiotically important examples to elaborate on the kaleidoscopic interaction between the local everyday and the global geopolitical conjuncture of this period. The first instance comes from the Cuban novelist Jesús Díaz's *The Initials of the Earth*, published belatedly in 1987. The novel's anti-hero, Carlos Pérez Cifredo, is inundated by images, news, and iconographies coming from *elsewhere* as he contemplates "what he really was." The "whirl of words" in which he finds himself caught up are established as colliding opposites and interpellations that come in from the outside: "Christ, Lenin, God, Devil, Washington, Moscow, Vatican, Havana, Believer, Atheist, Patriot, Traitor" (110). In the context of pre-revolutionary Cuba, each of these signifiers—already charged with the geopolitical weight of the worldwide Cold war conflict—permeates the national political sphere as well as the local struggle between the Communists and the nationalists. My second illustration comes from the Chilean novelist Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* (1982). In the section that chronicles the turbulence surrounding "the Chilean Path to Socialism" (*La vía chilena al socialismo*), we encounter a dramatic moment in which anti-communist forces stain the revolutionary murals with a single word printed in enormous letters: "Djakarta." The inscription of "that Asiatic word" on the walls conveys a strange and unfamiliar signifier to the people of the nation, who "had never heard about the piles of corpses in the streets of that distant city" (308). The political positions in the local public sphere are articulated through the idioms of the Cold War, idioms that constitute a mediational framework for the multiple local situations under the rubric of the "Third World." Finally, in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979)—an East European "postcolonial" text—we find an impressive portrayal of the geopolitical conflicts of the Cold War period as coming one after another in a dazzling speed:

The bloody massacre in Bangladesh quickly covered over the memory of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, the assassination of Allende drowned out the groans of Bangladesh, the war in the Sinai Desert made people forget

Allende, the Cambodian massacre made people forget Sinai; and so on and so forth until ultimately everyone lets everything be forgotten. (7)

The Cold War conjuncture generates a series of radical discontinuities and ruptures to the extent that history's time arrow does not take the fateful inexperience of nations much into consideration. History's delicate and jocular pressuring of its determinations—expressed in Beethoven's motif of "*Es muss sein!*"—turns into "*der schwer gefasste Entschluss*," or "the difficult or weighty resolution." The ruptured history of the nation may at first glance grant a certain lightness of being, but in the twentieth century this very lightness becomes unbearable. As expressed in the novel, it is "as dust swirling into the air" (195) and accompanies a desire for escape from "the *world* operating table" (234).

The non-aligned countries eventually could not escape the challenges of global strategies of containment. In the Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz's *Miramar* (1968), a novel that depicts the aftermath of Nasser's 1952 Revolution in Egypt, we observe the extent to which the policy of non-alignment is caught up in the global geopolitical matrix. Mahfouz uses elliptical sentences and "footage" from world news and newspaper headlines as a form of montage to formalize the limited choices the nation had at its disposal to achieve political and economic delinking. At one point in the novel, Tolba Marzuq, as one of the voices of the old land-owning class, praises Egypt's stance, referring to a red headline about the poverty of Eastern Germany as a Russian satellite. Then he sighs: "Russia has nothing to offer her satellites. But the United States . . ." (107). The elliptical ending of this sentence gives us a historical glimpse of why the established classes in the postcolonies were attracted to the non-alignment policy. Quite simply, it kept a socialist revolution at bay without eliminating the possibility of flirting with the United States. Developmentalism becomes the convenient ideology that supports the abortion of national autonomy and autochthonous forms of social egalitarianism.⁵ Equally important, the discourse of developmentalism provides the new governing elite with a framework for reinstating the older urban-rural, enlightened middle class-backward peasantry; modern-traditional binaries in reference to the so-called universal principles of modernity; and an ever-expanding process of modernization.⁶ The potential for resisting the imposed standards of the world-system are dismissed as challenging the international order of statehood in the name of chaos and fragmentation. The postcolonial nation-state as the political form of emancipation is gradually and systemically reduced to a unit that would work in harmony with the Cold War logic of the ascending U.S. hegemony, mediate the incorporation of the decolonized world into the new international division of labor, and channel disenfranchised citizens into a state-guided development project. Indeed, Franco Moretti's conclusion to his analysis of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) conveys a generalizable truth with regard to postcolonial fiction of the 1960s: "Eventually, Macondo comes back into contact with the outside world. With *the world*? Not any more. With only part of it: the United States. A thousand and one

possibilities then really do become a thousand and one dead ends: the multiplicity of possible developments, a set route” (244-45).

The neocolonial world of the Cold War era marks a significant shift from the preceding era, when fictions of emergence imagined the imminence of decolonization and participated in the national liberation struggles. As Richard Wright claims in his introduction to the first American edition of George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* (1953), emerging fictions of the mid-twentieth century invoke a powerful imagery of the transformation of the communal forms that were kept inert under colonialism: “a symbolic repetition of the story of millions of simple folk, who, sprawled over half of the world’s surface and involving more than half of the human race, are today catapulted out of their peaceful, indigenously earthy lives and into the turbulence and anxiety of the twentieth century” (xx). *In the Castle of My Skin* offers a firsthand account of the movement of colonial societies from the closed pattern of the local life to an outside world that is felt as “the large, invisible phantom” (27) in its exertion of authority over the collective consciousness of the native communities. After World War II, the logic of colonialism loses its hegemonic position to control their relationship with the larger world. Those in the colonies who are drafted from the colonies to fight for the Empire become aware of a shared experience of colonialism. Print and travel connect members of the community to “another world infinitely vaster” (296) than the colonial village. The village shoemaker learns from the newspaper about civil disturbance in Trinidad as well as the tradition of tournaments, both of which help him to realize that the people in Barbados share a similar history with other communities in the Caribbean and beyond. In the U.S., Trumper (another character from the novel) discovers “the Negro race” and a larger anticolonial struggle for freedom and rights. Even so, on the night before the autobiographical character of Lamming’s novel, named simply G., bids farewell to his native land, his father Pa warns him: “Remember this: this world is *a world o’ camps*, an’ you got to find out which camp you’re in . . . We both settin’ forth tomorrow . . . I to my last resti’-place before the grave, an’ you into the wide wide world” (302; emphasis added). If, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggests, narratives of emergence represent the transformations of the subject in a changing world, in postcolonial narratives the desired outcome of *Bildung*—“the ability to *see time*, to *read time*, in the spatial whole of the world” (24)—is not guaranteed. Lamming’s novel is aware of the limit and fragility of the situation; at the same time, it imagines the historic potential of a new collective being and existential project.

The climax of anticolonial revolution brings about the spontaneous enactment of this historic potential. To refer to Jean-Paul Sartre’s theory of the ensembles, individuals, filled with the excitement and passion of having the power to determine their future, re-createthemselves in the very moment of revolution. In *The Open Door* (1960), Egyptian novelist Latifa al-Zayyat offers a vivid description of the formation of the revolutionary ensemble in the case of the 1952 Egyptian Revolution:

July 23, 1952. Morning . . . Awe, disbelief, a belligerent joy and pride; as news of the revolution spread, new sentiments trembled on millions of lips and shone through the tears in people's eyes. . . . Spaces between bodies vanished as one person clapped the next on the shoulder [in] a mood of ease and belonging. (159-60)

The event of revolution enables the nation to refashion itself through a vitalistic sense of incarnation and the will to resist colonial disposability. It is geared, in other words, toward generating a new political ontology of self-actualization and freedom.

Jesús Díaz's *The Initials of the Earth* provides a parallel representation of the 1959 Cuban Revolution. Individuals, fully aware of living in a heroic time, are committed "to mak[ing] the earth tremble and [. . . changing] the face of America" (301). Whatever belongs to imperialism and its culture industry are thrown into the Caribbean Sea amidst joyous singing and revolutionary fervor:

And here's the latest,
Here's the latest in the comics,
The end of the Yanqui
Superman is screwed
...
Little Cuba has kryptonite now,
You've got kryptonite, my beautiful little Cuba. (367)

The vanishing of the older society and its fundamentals, the rise of the revolution as the great mediator of the social sphere, and the resolution to build a new world: all of these are crystallized in the screams of the ensemble (the revolutionary speech-act *par excellence*) that transform spontaneity into the lived experience of the insurgent everyday.⁷

Along with the foreign colonizer, the relics of the traditional native power structure are also discarded. Ahmadou Kourouma's *The Suns of Independence* (1968) is an exemplary narrative of the demise of the traditional status quo in the figure of Fama Dumbuya, a tribal chief, whose life suddenly appears barren and impoverished. As the protection of "ancestral shades" disappears, the scorching sun of independence exposes him as "a grotesque figure" (6). While as a former tribal chief he is reduced to "a sterile man living on alms in a city" (14), young revolutionaries—whom Fama curses as "bastards and sons of slaves" (61)—embark on the implementation of "African socialism" (107) in the new national space of sovereignty, despite the persistent challenges and lack of resources on the ground.

Yet there is a dark side to the revolutionary ensemble. In sweeping away the foreign colonizer and the traditional governing elite, it quickly reveals (in Franz Fanon's terms) its "weaknesses" and falls short of its "grandeur." In a considerable number of postcolonial novels, the psychic anxiety of the dissolution of the revolutionary ensemble is closely incorporated into the moment of revolution itself. In narratological terms, it is expressed through radical shifts in the mood, or *Stimmung*, of the collective. The intensity of these shifts can be gauged by their temporal speed. In Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1968), it is marked by the difference between the carnivalesque

climax of Kenyan independence, which is celebrated by dances performed only in initiation rites, and the sense of dullness and vacuum the next morning: “so dull we feared the day would not break into life” (231-32). In Kofi Awoonor’s *This Earth, My Brother* (1971), the figuration of the temporal gap is even more dramatic: the poor in the capital city are herded off into cattle trucks to outlying villages *before* the independence celebrations (118). In Al-Zayyat’s *The Open Door*, the scene that dramatizes the destruction of the statue of De Lesseps (the French architect of the Suez Canal) as the symbol of foreign domination reaches its climactic point in the prophetic voice of Layla, the novel’s female protagonist: “‘The head! Only the head is gone!’” The narrator continues: “Indeed, it was only the head and the paint that had gone; the body remained crouched in place as if its roots extended deep into the ground” (362). In this symbolically charged *mise-en-scène*, nobody who is taking part in the event is ready to hear Layla’s exclamation.

This thematization of the dissolution of the revolutionary decolonial visions after independence, in fact, begins as early as Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of This World* (1949), a historical novel about the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), the first anti-colonial rebellion. The novel presents the course of Haitian independence as foreshadowing what will take place in much of the neocolonial world almost 150 years later. As Carpentier states in his prologue to the novel, when “miracle workers turn into bureaucrats”—when, in other words, the magic of prevailing against the colonial master is subsumed by the intoxicating lure of power—the emancipatory prospects of revolution gradually vanish. The mulatto take-over mimics the colonial order and keeps the exploitative distance between the post-independence Royal Palace (*Citadelle Laferrière*) of Henri Christophe and the sufferings of “the Negroes of the Plaine” intact. Even though the colonizers are defeated, the motto of *Liberté, égalité* that decorates the walls of the Citadel remains “still unproved” (94). Ti Noël, the plebeian figure in the novel, plunders three volumes of the *Grande Encyclopédie* in the sack of the Palace of Sans Souci, only to sit on them when he eats his sugar cane. As a member of the new nation, Ti Noël paradoxically feels himself “centuries old.” With the failure of anti-colonial emancipation, he is overwhelmed by “a cosmic weariness, as if a planet weighted with stones fell upon his shoulders” (148). Postcolonial melancholia replaces the euphoric moment of decolonization. The epic of the revolution is gradually erased in the face of the prosaic “Kingdom of This World.” Now all that is left for Ti Noël and for his descendants is to commit their existence to the messianic expectation of “the possible germinations the future held” (149).

The confident epistemology of getting rid of the colonizer is displaced by an unclear sense of the meaning and purpose of the revolutionary struggle. A pattern is established wherein the rise and fall of the revolutionary decolonial visions after independence are engrained in the fabric of many novels of the “three worlds” era. To borrow Chinua Achebe’s metaphor from *A Man of the People*, the

sense of collectivity that gathers everybody under “the rain” of independence gives way to a scramble for the “one shelter—” that is, the state apparatus left by the colonizer (34). The utopian horizon of transforming a globally operating system disfigures into the lure of taking control of the state apparatus (Brown 173).

As a result of its defeat at the hands of the neocolonial state, the poetry of revolution comes to a halt. This is symbolized by Chinua Achebe’s young idealist, Obi Okonkwo, crumpling his poem “Nigeria” into a tiny ball and throwing it on the floor. Okonkwo’s discarded poem echoes Ernest Renan’s idea of civic national collectivity, which is premised on forgetting:

To build our nation dear;
Forgetting region, tribe, or speech,
But caring always each for each. (142)

Chinua Achebe has, perhaps, no other choice but to open his novel with a modernist epigraph, four lines from T.S. Eliot’s “The Journey of the Magi”:

We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.⁸

Instead of a new collective beginning in which individuals recreate and recognize themselves through altruistic amnesia, this epigraph conveys the sense of a prevailing colonial past, an estranging community in the present, and a dying future.

As the novels and poems of emergence are displaced by modernist narratives of alienation, what Chinua Achebe limits to an epigraph would soon become the very fabric of postcolonial fiction across Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa.⁹ In the Argentinian novelist Julio Cortazar’s *Hopscotch* (1963), the sense of *Weltschmerz* is conveyed through the figure of the intellectual misfit Horacio Oliveira, who experiences existential anxieties in the midst of a present revealing itself as “a strange and confused future” (93). *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (1962), a novel by Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes, is replete with the melancholia that results when one is condemned to live with a “geographical error” (28) that consigns Latin America to the periphery of the world-system. In *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) by Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih, disorientation reaches a dramatic climax in the indeterminacy of the flow of the Nile from the narrator’s perspective, preventing him from both going back *and* moving forward (167). In the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah’s *Fragments* (1969), the old peasant woman Naana speaks in her own language the disorienting truth of closure and concealment in the postcolonial “official” beginning. Naana, the blind seer (the Tiresias figure) of the community, loses any transcendental clarity of foreseeing the future. “From the world and the life around me,” she says, “nothing comes to me” (278). Her own familiar habitat looks alien and irreparably shattered. The modernizing state technologies

direct their energies to the destruction of Naana's lifeworld in the most symbolically brutal way possible: by pushing her underneath the earth. Naana's specter will haunt this end, straining for another beginning and refusing rest until it is found.

Even so, in the face of the absence of a secure sense of being-in-history and belonging in the world, where "the only figure of the unconscious is that of a radical series of discontinuous interruptions [and] a repeated tearing of time that cannot be sutured" (Spivak 208), it nevertheless falls to narrative to imagine and construct a sense of temporal and spatial existence in the midst of cancelled beginnings, entangled lives, incomplete revolutions, and fractured collectivities. If one were to use "a measure of success" to gauge the postcolonial writing of the 1960s, therefore, it would be the level of complexity through which entanglement is figured. In its literary variant, entanglement defines the spatiotemporal matrix in which postcolonial representations of the world are generated through creative acts of patching together ruptured histories, geographies, and subjectivities. As much as it invokes a sense of suffocation, the condition of entanglement resonates more accurately with the postcolonial heterotopia than the reductive logic of mapping the postcolony onto a linear plane. This peculiar feature of postcolonial aesthetics has given it a unique hermeneutical position in representing the new world-systemic transformations and the lives of so many diverse populations who felt the acute pressures of these seismic changes in every social sphere and yet still resolutely asserted themselves in a world that constructed them as disposable reserve. In the midst of the acronymic signifiers of global capitalism, they continued the poetry of revolution:

Untroubled by memories and doubts, puzzlement and despair in the eyes of the elders, little boys and girls prance about the banks, trying to spell out LONRHO, SHELL, ESSO, TOTAL, AGIP beside the word DANGER on the sidebely of the tankers. They sing, in shrill voices, of the road, which will surely carry them to all the cities of Africa, their Africa, to link hands with children of other lands.
(Thiong'o 263)

The synchronic juxtaposition of the revolutionary songs and the names of multinational oil companies epitomizes the extent to which montage and entanglement result from the specific predicaments of postcolonial writing as transnational critique. As neocolonialism renders the earthly local the weakest link in the chain, Ngũgĩ's children counteract effacement in the politico-economic and geopolitical cartography of the world through a subaltern (or plebeian) politics of self-assertion vis-à-vis the systemic forces of global capital and the closed circuit of a predetermined teleological path that they themselves dictate.

Notes

1. For further elaboration on "the age of three worlds," see Denning. Robert C. Young proposes "Tricontinental" as an alternative term to refer to the post-World War II conjuncture.

2. There has been increasing interest recently in the question of form and literary postcoloniality. As an important contribution to the topic, see Hitchcock.
3. See Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* and *Poetics of Relation*. For more sustained accounts of the correlated concepts of "transculturation" and "contrapuntal," see Ortiz and Said.
4. For a specific examination of literary montage in the context of Anglophone postcolonial poetry, see Ramazani.
5. The cultural anthropologist James Ferguson astutely remarks that the "development" apparatus was a manipulative tool that aimed to efface the history of colonialism. This was exemplified by a World Bank Report that described Lesotho as "virtually untouched by modern economic development" (qtd in Ferguson 25). The characterization ignores the crucial role played by labor reserve in the South African industrial economy. Lesotho, as with much other parts of the world, "was not untouched by 'modern economic development' but radically and completely transformed by it, and this not in 1975 or 1966, but in 1910" (27). See also Wallerstein.
6. For an extensive critique of the case in the Arab world, see Sheehi.
7. For the classical account of the insurgent moment, see Fanon.
8. Kofi Awoonor's *This Earth, My Brother* bypasses T.S. Eliot. The epigraph comes directly from Dante's *Inferno*: "In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost."
9. For critical approaches to the modernist turn in postcolonial writing, see Ahmad and Lazarus.

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