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On the Margins of the Black Atlantic: Angola, the Eastern Bloc, and the Cold War

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I set in dialogue a documentary film, Abderrahmane Sissako's *Rostov-Luanda* (1997), and a novel, Mongane Wally Serote's *Scatter the Ashes and Go* (2002), to examine the role of the war in Angola in the cultural imaginary of African intellectuals. Angola was the site of one of the hot conflicts of the Cold War; yet it evokes not only tensions between the superpowers, but also political solidarities and cultural alliances that incorporate and go beyond the black Atlantic. These texts show that the Eastern Bloc is a constitutive part of the contemporary diasporic routes taken by black intellectuals. By taking into account diasporas routed through the Eastern Bloc during the Cold War, these texts also expand and modify the conceptual tools and theoretical perspectives of black Atlantic and postcolonial studies.

Halfway through Mongane Wally Serote's novel *Scatter the Ashes and Go* (2002), the narrator, Oupa, an antiapartheid revolutionary, wistfully announces that "the Cubans and the Soviets are packing and getting ready to move" (115). This cursory remark draws attention to the historical forces that introduced Cuban and Russian participants in the literary work of a South African writer, continents and oceans removed from the theaters of action and cultural landscapes where readers would expect them to emerge as characters in contemporary fiction. The events that brought together characters from such different backgrounds transpire in numerous contemporary works and, when read in a new light, modify the conceptual tools in established fields like postcolonial scholarship and black Atlantic studies.

The conflict represented in the novel was momentous indeed and on an unprecedented scale, for "never before had so many blacks from the New World

returned to Africa in such large numbers," remarks Don Burness regarding the hundreds of thousands of Cubans deployed to Angola (3). The event that triggered this significant movement across the Atlantic (reversing the routes and aiming to symbolically undo the rupture produced by the slave trade) was the war in Angola, a protracted conflict that broke out in 1975 immediately after the country gained its independence from Portugal.¹ Cuban soldiers enlisted and went to support the fledgling leftist MPLA government, under attack by rival political factions. The Cuban government created propaganda materials, such as documentaries featuring Fidel Castro giving advice to soldiers and even paying a visit to the Cuban camps in Angola.² In 1978, to further enhance political ties, the writers' unions of the two countries signed a cultural accord to promote each other's literature. In 1979, Angola's first president and most celebrated poet, Agostinho Neto, passed away; a Cuban writer, Ana Castellanos, imagined Neto's afterlife on the breeze "that saddens the Cuban / the very one that passes over / the people of Angola" (qtd. in Burness 64). This circuit involving numerous people, material goods and technologies, cultural practices, and ideological substance is one of the loops that defines the recent contours of the black Atlantic.

Yet, despite the long duration and magnitude of this transatlantic movement, Angola's war of independence and the subsequent civil war did not capture the world's imagination to the same extent that Ghana on the verge of freedom did. Where South Africa roused the revolutionary fervor of antiapartheid activists and Ghana kindled the Pan-Africanists' dream of a "return to Africa," Angola did not inspire the same kind of romantic attachment, or at least not in the English-speaking world.³ In addition, the black Atlantic and the postcolonial studies paradigms, devoted mostly to research on anglophone and francophone Africa, largely neglected lusophone studies. Today, however, whether due to an increased interest in Portuguese-African cultural connections, relations across the Atlantic with lusophone Brazil and Spanish-speaking Cuba, or the reviving memory of the Cold War, Angola is more frequently invoked in research on southern Africa.⁴ This new visibility elicits questions about the identity and cultural aims of African intellectuals who have reflected on the Angolan war—one of the hot conflicts of the Cold War—and its connections to larger global political configurations.

In this essay I set in dialogue a documentary film, Abderrahmane Sissako's *Rostov-Luanda* (1997), and a novel, Mongane Wally Serote's *Scatter the Ashes and Go* (2002), to examine the role played by the war in Angola in the cultural imaginary of African intellectuals.⁵ The retrospective view offered by a Mauritanian film director and a South African writer modifies the contours of the concept of the black Atlantic as they sketch out solidarities and tensions stretching beyond the continent. Their ties to Angola and the black diaspora beyond the continent diverge from the more easily recognized cultural and political routes crisscrossing Africa and linking it to the rest of the world. The directions they take challenge us to rethink methodological paradigms, expanding them to integrate the impact of the Cold War on recent black Atlantic circuits.

While the war in Angola most easily evokes the notion of the black Atlantic through the determining participation of Cuban soldiers, Serote and Sissako, along with many other intellectuals, remind us that black solidarities and cultural alliances were not woven only between the African continent, the Americas, and Western Europe. The use of an unexpected language (Russian) or the reference

to an event in Eastern Europe (the fall of the Berlin Wall) announce Sissako's and Serote's emphases on other trajectories and spaces that need to be woven into the account of events in southern Africa in order to understand the contours of the black diasporic experience during the latter half of the twentieth century. Grappling with the end-of-Cold War confusion and breakdown of earlier ideological certainties, the two texts nonetheless manage to incorporate earlier forms of displacement and bonding in meaningful ways. They account for a more capacious understanding of the diasporic experience and the black Atlantic during the 1970s and 80s.

At the end of *Rostov-Luanda*, the narrator (and director), Abderrahmane Sissako, observes that Alfonso Baribanga, the man for whom he has been searching, "lives in Berlin, but not for much longer. It's his last exile before returning to his homeland. On this October morning, I heard him pronounce in the language we learnt together—in the name of an old illusion—the word 'return' just like an accomplishment." Succinctly, yet forcefully, sketching out a different cultural and political circuit than the West-South and South-South axes to which we have become accustomed in postcolonial and black Atlantic studies, this abrupt conclusion reminds viewers that the struggles to throw off the colonial yoke as well as the vagaries of the post-independence days in Africa unfolded against the background of the Cold War. Unlike the narrative in French, the English captions do not transliterate the Russian word *vozvrashchenie*, yet its unexpected resonance and the language to which it points haunt the documentary. They ask spectators to revise and expand their understanding of the spaces and trajectories constitutive of the modern African experience. The word "return" not only refers to Baribanga's anticipated homecoming to Angola; it also functions as an imaginative guideline for the viewer, inviting a reconsideration of the many forms of return sketched out in the documentary. They range from an imaginative revisiting of Russia and of friendships formed there during the Cold War, of political alliances forged on both sides of the Iron Curtain, to a retracing of the scholarly debates surrounding African diasporas during the second half of the twentieth century.

FROM THE RUINS OF THE COLD WAR: BLACK ATLANTIC AND POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES

A blind spot of what we may call traditional research in postcolonial studies, the Cold War shaped the choices and opportunities afforded African intellectuals at the time when their countries were struggling for independence or emerging as new states.⁶ As Wole Soyinka pointed out in a public talk given shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, numerous African intellectuals and politicians could not bring themselves to support the Western world—the contemporary incarnation of cultures that had justified slavery, colonialism, and other forms of depredation—and preferred instead to find justifications for abuses taking place in the Eastern Bloc (39). The interlocked development of capitalism and colonialism meant that rejecting old and new forms of Western imperialism also entailed refusing the economic system for which the West stood. Yet not all intellectuals from the Global South embraced the Eastern Bloc by default. While now almost forgotten, the initial enthusiasm generated by the Bandung Conference (1955) and the formation of the Non-Aligned Movement (1961) galvanized the hope that the straightjacketing binarism of the Cold War could be cast off.

Whether initially persuaded by the internationalist posturing of the Soviet Union, moved by a history of imperialist oppression shared with Eastern European nations, or mistakenly assuming that a genuine leftist approach entailed unquestioning support for second world-regimes, numerous African intellectuals turned their sights toward and placed their hopes with the Eastern Bloc.⁷ This voluntary cultural and ideological alignment translated into a substantial number of Africans traveling to China and the USSR and its Eastern European satellites to study and to receive political and military training.

Given the long temporal span and the large number of people violently displaced by slavery and colonialism, the magnitude of the African diaspora in the Western world far surpasses its equivalent in the Eastern Bloc. However, as recent work by Charles Quist-Adade and Maxim Matusevich has shown, the impact of this diaspora in the Soviet Union and its satellites simultaneously affected the internal and foreign policies of these socialist states, shaping the image they projected for their own citizens and to the outside world. "Just like their fellow diasporans in Western Europe, Africans in the USSR functioned as agents of social change. In the insulated socialist society they often served as conduits to the outside world and in this capacity played an ideologically ambiguous and clearly modernising role" (Matusevich 55). Matusevich's argument inaugurated a new avenue of research, according to which African expatriates in the Eastern Bloc were not just passive recipients of positive or negative experiences in socialist countries, but agents of change and modernization in their own right.

It is within this context that the image of Angola projected by Serote and Sissako expands and clarifies the concept of the black Atlantic. Paul Gilroy's emblematic concept identified the transoceanic histories connecting people of African descent from West Africa, Europe, North America, and the Caribbean as they wove together a counterculture of modernity. Dislodging Africa from a romanticized position—the origin of the diaspora or the fantasy of a lost homeland—Yogita Goyal shifted the center of black diaspora studies, arguing that the African continent is a constitutive part of black modernity (7). Less conspicuously than the Atlantic, the ocean on the other side of the Americas has been reconfigured as the "black Pacific." Whether attending to the reciprocal fascination African Americans and Japanese share (Okihiro), the Afro-Asian synergies crystallized by the Bandung Conference (Jones and Singh), or moving even further afield to include the trade routes and cultural exchanges around and across the Indian Ocean (Ghosh; Hofmeyr), this research expands Gilroy's earlier paradigm by shifting the focus away from "a decidedly Westernized triangle of influence—Europe/Africa/North America," which "occludes significant areas of the diasporic world and black experience" (Mullen xxix). It is not always an oceanic body that conveys or hinders the transport of material and intellectual culture; carried by the political currents of the Cold War era, intellectuals of African descent rolled back the rims of the black Atlantic in their travels to Eastern Europe.

The global conflict that was "cold" only for the superpowers in the northern hemisphere created political and cultural choices that expanded the boundaries of the black Atlantic and the destinations taken by African American, West Indian, and African cultural and political activists.⁸ A growing corpus of research addresses the writings of the first wave of black intellectuals who traveled to the Soviet Union, attracted by the promise of a non-racial, classless society. With its

revolutionary aura, the zeal characteristic to all new beginnings and good, even if sometimes condescendingly expressed, intentions, the Soviet Union presented a striking contrast to the Jim Crow laws, unemployment, and destitution they left behind in the United States or the British-dominated West Indies. Luminaries like W. E. B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, and Richard Wright were drawn to the “Red Mecca” in the years between the two world wars.⁹ A numerically larger yet oftentimes ideologically less motivated second wave of black diaspora arrived in the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellite states after World War II in search of educational opportunities or military training.

Following a 1960 resolution, the Soviet Union inaugurated the Friendship University, also known as Lumumba University, an institution dedicated to serving the educational needs of young intellectuals from the third world (Matusevich 70). Less structured yet functional agreements with Eastern European countries like the German Democratic Republic, Poland, Hungary, or Romania ensured that African students benefited from scholarships and stipends enabling them to complete their studies. Writers and filmmakers were invited for exchanges and conferences. Like the pioneering figure of African cinema, Ousmane Sembène, Abderrahmane Sissako studied at Moscow’s prestigious film academy and Mongane Wally Serote went to the Soviet capital to be trained in revolutionary warfare.¹⁰ The young Sissako had not set out to study in the USSR and did not even harbor deep communist sympathies; yet, when a scholarship gave him the opportunity to study in the Soviet Union, he enthusiastically accepted it. His second short film, *October* (1993), is both a tribute to the craft he learned in Moscow and a reflection on the difficulties facing an interracial couple in the USSR in the late 1980s. Discussing his decision to study filmmaking in the Soviet Union and then to depart a decade later, Sissako observed that “the only reason for me to leave this country [Russia] where I spent more than 10 years” was that “I know I’m not accepted in this society. It’s sometimes hard to say that” (Niedan). Unlike Serote, whose role in the ANC entailed at least a formal ideological alignment with the Eastern Bloc, Sissako’s interpretation of Soviet society is more nuanced. His position as a student, confronted with the deprivations and problematic aspects of Soviet society (such as racism), afforded him a less rosy view of the Eastern Bloc. This more ambiguous position complicates the simplistic, dichotomous understanding of the Cold War climate, according to which one could either support the Eastern Bloc and consequently be against the Western world or the other way round.

Launching intellectuals on previously unanticipated cultural journeys, creating synergies that only a few decades earlier could not have been imagined, these Cold War routes also short-circuited other possible trajectories. As one of the interviewees in *Rostov-Luanda* observes, “[i]t’s nice to see young people from different countries of Africa united in Russia to study, to learn. It’s a pity they got their schooling from the Russians. It probably wasn’t to their advantage for building their future.” The unexpected collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the disappearance of communism as a legitimate political option invalidated the cultural currency in which the diplomas obtained by Africans in the Eastern Bloc were coined. What East Germans rather tamely called “the turn” (*die Wende*), in reality an explosive transformation that blasted its debris deep into people’s cultural and ideological unconscious, also placed the memory of this diasporic experience in a cone of shadow, willed to be forgotten at a time when to be Marxist or to have

communist affiliations was no longer respectable or expedient. Sissako and Serote, together with a few other African writers, are at the forefront of the effort to bring to light and make sense of the experience of what we may call, paraphrasing and adapting Amitav Ghosh, “traveling into the East.” At the heart of Ghosh’s book *In an Antique Land* (1992) lies the concept of “travelling into the West,” a journey of the mind that entails the (self)destructive assimilation of a competitive, bellicose way of intercultural interaction, based on a hierarchy that crowns the Western world as the pinnacle of political and intellectual achievement. In the belligerent, dichotomous Cold War climate, Moscow, and by extension the Eastern Bloc, emerged as the alternative political and cultural Mecca for left-leaning intellectuals. Like its counterparts in the West, it offered both opportunities and unanticipated challenges.

THE WAR IN ANGOLA AND THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL

Entwined with the Cold War, the Angolan conflict spun political ties and intellectual solidarities across the continent and the black Atlantic. Multiracial diasporas were set in motion to support the ideals of either camp. Global Cold War politics as well as regional interests dictated the movement of people, material goods, and ideologies into and out of Angola. The leftist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) controlled the capital and most of the country after independence, yet its government was contested by the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) and the National Front for the Liberation of Angola (FNLA). Holden Roberto, the FNLA leader, had close ties with Zaire. The MPLA gave safe harbor in exchange for military support to Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the African National Congress (ANC), as well as to South West Africa People’s Organization (SWAPO) forces preparing the liberation of Namibia. Nominally in pursuit of these SWAPO forces, but also concerned with having a Marxist neighbor that hosted MK military camps, the South African Defence Force (SADF) made frequent incursions into Angola to support the anticommunist UNITA. From across the Atlantic, sometimes overtly and other times covertly, the USA was providing tactical and financial support to UNITA and its leader, Jonas Savimbi. To counter what they deemed a Western imperialist onslaught, Cuba sent troops to Angola to buttress the position of the MPLA, a goal for which tactical support and training cadres were also provided by the USSR. During the last fifteen years of the Cold War, the political interests of neighboring and distant nations aligned or came to a head with each other over the territory of Angola. The battle of Cuito Cuanavale (1987–88)—the largest confrontation on African soil since World War II—represents the fulcrum of this conflict that brought together expected and unanticipated participants in a hot battle of the Cold War.

This war represents the background for a large part of Serote’s *Scatter the Ashes and Go*. The first half of the novel takes place in the late 1980s and leads up to the moment of Mandela’s release from prison in February 1990. Antiapartheid activists move from country to country; they live the peripatetic existence of MK cadres in exile who might meet and connect with each other in Zambia, reconnect on a sabotage mission deep within South Africa, miss seeing each other in Botswana, but are bound to reassemble at one of the ANC’s training camps in Angola. Oupa, the narrator, an MK cadre and commander, wonders where his love

interest, Sizakele, might have met Jackie, a nurse he had known in Angola: "Sizakele said she had long ago met Junior in England, in Italy, in Portugal. Where have people met Jackie? Where have people met me? Where have people met Ralph? We are such wanderers!" (202). This spatial dispersion captures the wandering, meandering spirit of the novel and its narrative strategy. *Scatter the Ashes and Go* does not offer a traditional plot; it is replaced by Oupa's and his fellow comrades' reflection on the goals of the antiapartheid struggle. They meditate on the facilitating synergies and the debilitating tensions arising between individual and organizational goals, on the role of personal and political friendship in the face of multifaceted forms of betrayal, on the function of nationalism and its enabling or hindering role in ushering in a new South Africa.

The title of the novel announces a moment of impermanence, an injunction to movement and transformation, sketching out a larger historical vista on southern Africa at the end of the 1980s than research concerned with national trends of literary development could hope to achieve. A telescoping narrative perspective—now zooming in on the thoughts of a character and then immediately zooming out with a comment that involves seemingly remote political actors—enjoins readers to relinquish traditional ways of thinking about South African literature, in particular, and African cultural trends, in general.

At the start of the novel, the narrator imagines his friend Vusi's state of mind shortly before the latter's death at the hands of a South African hit squad that penetrated into Zambia in the early 1990s. The period immediately following Nelson Mandela's release from prison on February 11, 1990 and the unbanning of the ANC and the South African Communist Party (SACP) was wrought with suspicion and tension; the antiapartheid movement engaged in negotiations with the Pretoria government while these former enemies were still conducting covert military operations. It is within this fraught context that Serote introduces the theme of insider betrayal—betrayal by one's own mind beset by illness and madness, treachery sown within the MK by Pretoria-trained agents, or disloyalty shown by international entities that had long acted as political supporters. A hallmark of American Cold War fiction, the fear of betrayal, duplicity, and espionage seeped into the thematic content of literature of the period across the globe.¹¹ An *impimpi*, an informer, opens fire on the MK soldiers at night, inducing anxiety and distrust in the ANC camp in Angola:

The comrade, no, the bandit . . . what are people that are treacherous called? Mpimpi?! Woke up at night, uncocked his rifle and started to shoot blindly at the sleeping comrades. Vusi remembers this very well for, that night, very bad news had reached the camp. The news was that large demonstrations, demonstrations of thousands and thousands of Germans, in the GDR, were demanding that the communist leadership must stand down in that country. He, and other comrades, had listened to the news. Each word from the news came as a stunning blow. Blow for blow the news came stunning him, staggering him and blinding him. (Serote, *Scatter the Ashes* 3)

The juxtaposition of the two events—the government mole's murderous spree and the East German demonstrations that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the entire Eastern Bloc—highlight the close, fraternal relationship that ANC and SACP members imagined they had with the socialist countries and their populace.

The novel dwells on stories of personal betrayal: Oupa killed the woman he loved, Naomi, because she had betrayed him by engaging in an affair with a policeman; Ndaba joins the MK training camps in Angola because his wife sold him to the security forces in an act of vengeance for the latter's marital infidelity. In the camp administered by Oupa, Sarah, a government agent, has slept with many of the comrades, eliciting potentially dangerous information from her sexual partners. And, as the narrative emphasis on the anticommunist protests in Eastern Europe suggests, betrayal by political allies is no easier burden. Intimate ties connect people but also compromise their security. With its focus on epistemological confusion (who is a friend and who is a foe? what is a good political decision and what is a destructive one?), *Scatter the Ashes and Go* is a novel of the aftermath of the antiapartheid struggle, unimaginable in the 1980s, when Serote and many of his comrades subscribed to a vision of culture as an instrument of the struggle.

In a paragraph that reflects on the shifting political landscape of the globe in the late 1980s, Oupa observes:

We had to change plans. It is not so long ago, twenty years gone by in a life, but in history it is nothing. It is not so long ago that seventy years of history told us there was hope for the oppressed and now, slowly, that hope evaporates with one after the other of the Eastern block [sic] countries falling apart. Soon, the Soviet Union will be no more—prophets predict it in the West, the most reliable prophets say so. (112–13)

By varying the length of the sentences from contracted format to elaborate subordinate clauses, Serote also changes perspective with agility, shifting the scope of the meditation from the narrow contingencies of the antiapartheid struggle to the larger twentieth-century panorama of efforts to produce social justice. The change in tactics that the ANC-SACP coalition (and their armed branch, the MK) had to implement responded to the situation in Angola in late 1989 and early 1990, where numerous MK soldiers were quartered. The order to move out of Angola was triggered by the change in political configurations not only in the host country, but in the world as well. In the aftermath of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale, despite the heavy losses incurred by UNITA and their SADF allies, the superpowers brokered an agreement that included the withdrawal of Cuban forces and MK bases and soldiers in Angola; in exchange, their departure allowed South West Africa to be freed from the grasp of the Pretoria government and paved the way to the country's independence under the new name of Namibia.¹²

Connecting disparate historical scenes and political landscapes, this moment in the novel clarifies the requirement to understand the events in southern Africa in the 1980s through a Cold War lens. The elliptical formulation enjoins the reader to reflect on which events twenty and seventy years earlier, respectively, had set up a vision of freedom now challenged by a shifting global political landscape. Twenty years prior to 1989, the command structures of the ANC in exile had met at the watershed Morogoro Conference in April 1969. It led to the adoption of a new document and guidelines regarding the unfolding of the antiapartheid struggle, the measures and tactics to be taken in order to break the resistance of the Pretoria government. The conference took place in Tanzania, a country that, under the leadership of its first President, Julius Nyerere, was developing a form

of African socialism. *Ujamaa*, as Nyerere called this concept, relied on the idea of the extended family and mutual support, both at the national and Pan-African level (Young 247). The development of ANC camps in the country, with educational and training facilities, spoke to a Pan-African vision of togetherness in the face of oppression. Serote's oblique allusion to this document summons up the vision of a united Africa, an Africa that in the late 1960s and 1970s was making a common front against the various forms of neocolonialism and oppression. The "Strategy and Tactics" document adopted at the Morogoro conference guided the actions of the ANC in the following two decades, until the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the concomitant withdrawal of its financial and tactical support forced antiapartheid activists to reconceptualize their strategy.¹³

Serote suggests that it is not only the practical plans—namely, which operations were still viable, which camps and hosting countries were still available—that had to change. The very historical vision of the ANC-SACP coalition, based on an abiding belief in a two-stage revolution—a national struggle of liberation to be completed by a socialist transformation of society—had to change, shaken by the winds of history at the end of the 1980s.¹⁴ For seventy years, the Soviet Union (with its roots in the Russian Revolution of 1917) had served not only as a political entity toward which formerly colonized nations and their political representatives often turned for support (especially during the Cold War). More importantly, the USSR represented a beacon of hope, a society perceived (even if incorrectly) as an example of an equalitarian form of organization. As Alex La Guma (Serote's fellow South African writer and ANC representative) lyrically expressed it in his travelogue *A Soviet Journey* (1978), a transformative experience awaited visitors to the USSR: "One wanted to touch, to feel, to smell even, in that way one would, perhaps, see, admire the sputniks. It was the blind learning Braille" (229). The synesthetic experience of social transformation and modernization that La Guma describes stands in for the ideological and idealistic investment African peoples under various colonial rules made in the positive outcome of social changes in the Soviet Union. It was not just the material benefits (training camps, support for the armed wing of the ANC, scholarships for meritorious students, financial backing, and ideological training) that were withdrawn with the collapse of the USSR, but the very vision that an equitable society could be established collapsed.¹⁵

An ironic substitution takes place in the paragraph above, as the Messianic vision of socialist societies (the belief that all forms of inequality can be abolished) is replaced by the so-called prophetic formulations of Western pundits. The fall of the Eastern Bloc is notoriously the event that political scientists and commentators on both sides of the Iron Curtain were unable to foresee. Foretelling the collapse of the USSR, in the wake of the democratic transformations in its Eastern European satellites, is a mean act of prediction—meager in vision and cruel in its destruction of South African hopes. This change of prophetic vision for charlatan predictions, of revolutionary dreams for despair, is reinforced by the tension between the meta-significance of the USSR (beacon of hope and supporter of liberation struggles) and the Soviet Union's decision to pull out of southern Africa, while also enforcing the withdrawal of its Cuban ally.¹⁶

The Eastern Bloc's dismantling of the communist system and the rejection of the utopia for which these countries stood dismayed numerous South Africans. The ANC and the SACP, the two parties at the vanguard of the antiapartheid

movement, accepted it only belatedly and with much reluctance. The alacrity with which these former allies discarded socialism, embraced capitalism, and a Western lifestyle was initially taken as a betrayal, the unexpected transformation of an ideological sibling into a rival.¹⁷ The news of the fall of the communist regimes came at the same time as orders for the MK troops to leave Angola. As the host country was disentangling its politics from the Cold War stronghold, the MPLA's leftist allies were also cut loose. The "hope for the oppressed" (Serote, *Scatter* 113) represented by the USSR's seven-decade existence evaporated and leftist freedom fighters had to rebuild the view of how the future would unfold:

Most of the people we have sent to the Soviet Union, to the GDR, and others of those countries, are coming back. They come back with news we know, but because the news is unfamiliar, perhaps unacceptable, and also because it has serious consequences, it shocks us and presents us with too many unknowns. (100–01)

The end of the Cold War signified that what used to be politically safe travel routes—journeys to allied countries—were reversed and ties were severed. The diasporic networks were swiftly reconfigured within a few months.

The epistemological shock experienced by Vusi and his MK comrades mirrors Serote's experience. The writer was in Moscow during the second half of 1989, being trained to seize power in South Africa by armed struggle; when the Soviet Union disintegrated, he confessed, his whole world collapsed (Ash 2). The ontological condition Zygmunt Bauman called "living without a [political] alternative" left numerous people around the world rudderless. At the narrative level, the dismantling of physical and ideological routes that leftist activists had been taking to the Eastern Bloc translated into a directionless plot. The friendships and enmities that had animated the Cold War years entailed sharply delineated literary and political plot lines. Struggle literature, the poetry and prose written by antiapartheid intellectuals during the 1970s and 80s, was animated by a clear sense of political goals, partnerships, and enmities and driven by the faith in the ultimate triumph of the liberation struggle.

In a 2012 talk commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the death of writer and activist Ruth First (who had been murdered by Pretoria agents with a letter bomb), fellow South African revolutionary Albie Sachs commented that it was not only First's death that he bemoaned; the "tunnel vision" that had characterized the years of the struggle also dissolved in the late 1980s. There is a narrative equivalent to political tunnel vision, a plot structure characterized by (sometimes almost mechanically) teleological, tidier narrative arcs.¹⁸ The novels of Alex La Guma, for instance, are driven by the protagonists' realization that the violence of apartheid has to be opposed with revolutionary armed resistance. While the terminus point of the struggle was not yet in sight, his fiction ends with the premonition that the future will bring vindication to the struggling masses. *To Every Birth Its Blood*, Serote's 1981 novel, concludes with the blood-soaked image of a child being born, to whom activist Jully serves as midwife; despite its violent beginnings, this birth foreshadows a better future. Mental and physical journeys in these literary texts have clear ideological ramifications. When La Guma chose the USSR as the country he traveled to and wrote about in his travelogue *A Soviet*

Journey (and not the UK, where he lived for many years), the physical voyage was doubled by an ideological pilgrimage to what he perceived as the matrix of Marxist anti-imperialist struggle. When characters in *To Every Birth Its Blood* are evocatively named Russia, Lenin, or Fidel, we understand that both their parents, intradiegetically, and the author, extradiegetically, willed them to undertake ideological journeys to the socialist world. Thus, with struggle literature, literal, ideological, and even literary routes connect African intellectuals with Eastern Europe. As M. Keith Booker and Dubravka Juraga have argued, there are formal and thematic similarities between the historical novel in Africa and the Soviet Union, borne out of the authors' desire to write anew their nations' histories in antibourgeois, non-elitist, comprehensive ways. In the case of South African writers, such formal similarities are explained by the role the Eastern Bloc played in the antiapartheid intellectuals' cultural imaginary.¹⁹

In *Scatter the Ashes and Go*, Serote revisits the tortuous transition from struggle to postapartheid democracy, a transition that overlapped with similarly radical transformations in the Eastern Bloc—the collapse of the communist regimes and the inauguration of democratic rule for the respective countries. This period, paradoxically characterized by a simultaneous “retreat from communism and anti-communism” (Nixon 213), challenged Marxist orthodoxies at the core of the struggle and the teleological vision of revolutionary triumph. Ironically, the dichotomies of the Cold War era were both divisive, pressuring intellectuals into choosing one camp over the other, and reassuring. Even if superficial, there was a clarity of goals and alliances: apartheid was to be defeated and those who supported the ANC-SACP alliance belonged in the same camp. With the hindsight of more than a decade since the end of the Cold War, *Scatter the Ashes and Go* shows how blurred the lines between belonging and separateness, commitment and betrayal actually were. This confusion comes to be represented in fiction as a disruption of the teleological narratives that had dominated struggle literature of the 1970s and 80s. A plotline that followed internal and external tensions, hardships overcome, and revolution finally accomplished was now no longer a plausible scenario. Meandering plots and a blurred experience of temporality replaced the earlier clarity. *Scatter the Ashes and Go* revisits this period of uncertainty, the interregnum that discarded what Sachs called “the tunnel vision” characterizing the years of the struggle and, as South Africa advanced toward the first free elections, gradually replaced it with newly articulated narratives, such as that of the rainbow nation.

The use of the present tense—“Vusi remembers” (3)—in an excerpt otherwise narrated in the past tense highlights the immediacy of the memory of this episode of the struggle. The imprint of some events, like the intimation of the fall of the Eastern Bloc, is more vivid in the narrative, even if objectively more distant than other events from the early 1990s. Serote's approach is strikingly similar to that employed by Mandla Langa in his novel *The Memory of Stones* (2000). Among the first black South African writers to revisit the memory of the war in Angola, Langa and Serote integrate not only Angola, but also the Eastern Bloc as defining spaces for the antiapartheid struggle. Events taking place there and the journey to that part of the world are constitutive of the South African activist identity during the last decades of the Cold War. In fact, the emotional and intellectual impact of that space and time is so powerful for Langa's narrator that flashbacks to the late 1980s

are narrated in the present tense, while the contemporary action is rendered in the past tense. This temporal reversal forces the reader to reconsider the causal relations between past and present (Popescu, *South African Literature* 50). It also actualizes the global circuits that supported the antiapartheid struggle during the Cold War, which rested heavily on financial support, ideological and military training, academic instruction, and publication and distribution networks from and in Eastern Europe.

Scatter the Ashes and Go urges the title of the novel, borrowing the line from a song by Stimela that also serves as the text's epigraph. The movement of dispersal as well as the purposeful yet directionless injunction to "go" illustrate the scattering of former networks that had been part of numerous South Africans' Cold War experience. The title of Sissako's documentary, *Rostov-Luanda*, also points at, and later modifies the expectation of, spatial movement. The film starts and ends with the idea of return, yet the symmetry both holds the promise of a full circle return to cherished ideals and highlights the impossibility of fulfillment, as time and global political events have altered the ways in which people relate to places and to former allies.

REVISITING THE COLD WAR CULTURAL AND REVOLUTIONARY ROUTES

Rostov-Luanda sketches out numerous spaces and vectors of migration. Some of them are expected, as they constitute the well-tread ways of research in black Atlantic studies and postcolonial literature: the journey to the Western European metropolis that attracts African intellectuals and cheap labor; the return to the rural home, a keeper of traditions; and the visit to the post-independence African city, with an architecture marked equally by colonial urban planning and the destruction wrought by protracted postindependence conflict. Others are more unexpected routes of migration.

At the beginning of the documentary, Abderrahmane Sissako, as narrator and character in his own film, returns to his native town of Kiffa, in Mauritania. Sanctioned by the authoritative voice of an older man, his decision to return from Paris is unlike that of his generational peers, who are still trapped by the lure of the foreign metropolis. However, this homecoming is only the beginning of a journey he undertakes across the African continent in search of his Angolan friend Alfonso Baribanga. The unnamed elder, who represents communal wisdom, questions Abderrahmane's decision to travel to Angola, invoking the risks of wasting the money accumulated in France. The elder's objection and eventual relenting suggests that traveling from Mauritania to Angola, without the expectation of a lucrative prospect, breaks the mold of the expected trajectories characterizing the modern African experience. Traveling to the former colonial center, France, or to the new imperial power, the US, returning home in economic triumph or to denounce the hostility of the metropolis—these are the most familiar contemporary routes taken by African migrants. To embark on a journey from Mauritania, an economically underprivileged country, to go to Angola, a country even more economically depressed as a result of the long civil war, for the seemingly frivolous reason of finding a friend appears irresponsible to small-town mentality.

However, as Sissako's documentary reminds us by revisiting them, only a couple of decades earlier there were other vectors of travel and other destinations beckoning young Africans. During the anticolonial struggle and after independence, young guerillas, politicians, and intellectuals travelled to other African countries to learn from the experience of their comrades or bask in the glory of their achievements: the beacon of independence represented by Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana, the training camps of the Algerian FLN in Tunisia, the effervescence of Dar-es-Salaam during Julius Nyerere's presidency, these were some of the destinations of choice in the 1950s and 60s. Likewise, with the Cold War in full swing, Africans traveled not only to the Western world, but also to the political Meccas of the East—to Moscow or Beijing. The images juxtapose Sissako's journey south over the off-white Saharan sand dunes with travelling through the wintry landscape of Russia, where drifts of snow instead of sand build up on the sides of the railway. This visual counterpointing highlights the alternative journeys of hopefulness undertaken by young Africans during the Cold War.

To find Alfonso Baribanga, a fellow African and former colleague in a Russian language class in Rostov-on-Don, Sissako travels to Luanda and from there through the countryside of an Angola still scarred by the civil war.²⁰ Sissako does not sentimentalize squalor nor does he present a varnished view of Angola. While there is a certain selection of the sites and subjects he approaches, given the linguistic limitations imposed by the European languages that act as *lingue francae* (Portuguese, French, and Russian), his camera presents an Angola faced with the legacy of the war (unemployment, poverty, destroyed buildings, scattered families) yet also animated by the resilience of its citizens. The search for his friend translates into the ritual of faces collected around and bent over the black-and-white picture Sissako holds out to the various people he encounters. In a country where families have been displaced by war and the ritual of searching for next of kin is a common experience, Sissako's journey elicits new definitions of friendship and spiritual kinship. By the end of the documentary, finding the individual person is no longer the goal of the journey, as other life stories are braided with that of Baribanga's. The focus of the narrator's search is shifted from the initial statement, "I recognize Baribanga. His features are those of a cherished freedom," to a more diffuse goal of finding a network of friends and an ideal of solidarity traumatically interrupted by the end of the Cold War and the suspension of the networks that linked to or were routed through the Eastern Bloc. "The memory of Baribanga is getting blurred. Not that I am forgetting him. But his features are drawing new faces, which my search leads me to. Such are the features of a friend," observes the narrator.

Sissako works with sound echoes, incomplete repetitions, and a slightly displaced temporality to suggest that the two time frames—the early 1980s and the late 1990s—are separated not only by temporal distance, but also by the rearrangement of the political and ideological landscape of the globe. A subtle echo on the phone line underscores the surprise Natalia Lvovna, the former Russian language teacher, experiences when asked to reminisce and provide details about a former student from the 1980s. The world in which Sissako met Baribanga in a Russian language class is that of the now extinct Soviet Union. A picture mailed by the teacher constitutes the *aide memoire* and Ariadne's thread that helps the narrator

on his search. We are first introduced to Sissako and Baribanga in an ekphrastic rendering of this black-and-white photograph from Rostov, a narrative of the picture that locates the two men in the photo. "I look at this picture," the narrator tells us, while the camera focuses on a traffic policeman in Luanda, directing cars and passersby in the same way in which Sissako directs the imagination of the viewer: "Baribanga is behind me on the right. I'm sitting in the front row holding a furry toy." The photograph itself is withheld until a few minutes later, the temporal gap suggesting that words and images alone cannot reconstitute the experience of solidarity of the late 1980s. Later in the film, a man misreads the picture, insisting that Natalia Lvovna "is for sure Cuban." The experience of other solidarities, like the one that brought Cubans to Angola, interposes itself and is left uncorrected by the narrator. Both vectors of connection belong to a world that no longer exists after the end of the Cold War.

Sissako locates the object of his searches at the end of the documentary, yet it becomes clear that the physical journey to find Baribanga was only a pretext for a journey of the mind to reconstruct and evaluate a moment of connection in the past. A network of Russian-speaking Angolans, imprinting on the narrative the watermark of former cultural routes, verifies that Baribanga is not to be found in his native country. He had settled in the former GDR at a time when the Iron Curtain and the wall still divided one part of Berlin from its other half and he continued to live there through the unification. As the camera lingers on Baribanga for only a few seconds at the end of the film, even less than the cursory glance we get of the graffiti-adorned remains of the Berlin Wall, we understand that Sissako had set out to find his colleague in the name of the hopefulness for the African continent that Baribanga represented. The documentary traces geographies of hope and routes of solidarity traveled by black intellectuals during the Cold War.

"I have found the Africa that Baribanga told me about. Where hope prevails in all circumstances," the narrator concludes on his last day in Luanda. To a certain extent, both the documentary and the novel propose a conventional view of rebirth out of destruction, an intimation of possibilities. Serote's novel is headed by an epigraph from a song by Stimela, which also gives the title of the novel: "Trees are falling down / And they scatter the seeds / The caterpillar is dying / And the butterfly is born . . . / Scatter the Ashes and go." Routed through the Eastern Bloc and the events that have taken place there (journeys of education, friendships, separations, and disappointment), these transformations led to new ways of self-reflection, of considering what is needed for the African continent in the twenty-first century. Beyond the conventional imagery of a new life arising out of the dying one, these two texts challenge conventional scholarly paradigms. In Sissako's film, the narrator never revisits Rostov. The name is an empty signifier, with no recognition value for a younger generation of Africans. It exists as a location of the past, yet without which one cannot imagine the present-day journey to Luanda, traversing the African continent from north to south.

Methodologically speaking, the texts challenge us to reconsider the rubric under which we record and analyze these connections between Africa and the former Eastern Bloc. In terms of temporal paradigms, they force us to yoke together the struggle against colonial or neocolonial domination in southern Africa with the Cold War. Angola is not only a constitutive site on the rim of the black Atlantic, but through it the methodological paradigm is expanded to include locations in

the former Eastern Bloc as part of the ideological and physical African diasporic experience in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Uncovering and addressing this blind spot in postcolonial and black Atlantic studies has consequences for the history and development of these fields. The existence of areas of penumbra or opacity—marginalized or unaddressed subjects—attests to the formation and development of these scholarly fields during the last decades and the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. As Timothy Brennan argued, fear of ideological partisanship created taboo subjects in North American scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s (32). Even an academic discussion of Marxism or cultural association with the former Eastern Bloc could lead to suspicions of ideological partisanship. Cold War era literary criticism was “a refusal of politics disguised as a high moral or political argument,” Tobin Siebers observed (viii). Although forward-thinking and revolutionary in content and intention, postcolonial scholarship of this period, with its emphasis on discourse analysis, was oftentimes a depoliticized version of the anticolonial writings of an earlier generation of critics of imperialism like Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, and Walter Rodney (Scott 14). It is telling, for instance, that there are only six passing references to the Cold War in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, the book usually credited with founding the field of postcolonial studies. This is not to say that scholars of postcolonialism or the black diaspora deliberately acted disingenuously, neglecting to take a clear ideological position in their work. The Cold War exerted pressures, the ramifications of which could not be sensed or anticipated at the time. Today, the emergence of texts like Serote’s novel and Sissako’s film attest to the influence the Cold War exerted over black diaspora routes as well as their representation in scholarship. Today it is also possible to see with clarity the alliances African intellectuals forged not only with the West, but also with the Eastern Bloc, or, in order to avoid the dichotomizing fault lines created by the Iron Curtain, across the continent or with nonaligned nations in the Global South. Researching at the intersection of black Atlantic, postcolonial, and Cold War studies can, therefore, highlight the full complexity of these cultural networks as well as make visible the historical reasons for their formation.

NOTES

1. Estimates of the number of Cubans deployed in Angola vary, from 150 to 200,000 (Burness 4) to close to half a million soldiers (George 1). They reversed the journey of the hundreds of thousands of slaves brought to Cuba from Africa, including the current territory of Angola (Burness 22).

2. See *Respuesta a la Escalada Sudafricana*. For Fidel Castro’s 1977 visit to Angola, as seen from a Soviet perspective, see Varganov. For the early years (1975–76) of the Cuban participation in Angola, see Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*.

3. For a discussion of Africa as the object of romantic narratives, see Goyal.

4. See Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions, Visions of Freedom*; Baines and Vale; Onslow.

5. Mongane Wally Serote (b. 1944) is a prolific poet and novelist who came to the attention of the public as part of the Soweto activist poets group in the 1970s and 80s. He made his debut with the poetry volume *Yakhal’inkomo* (1972) followed by numerous other collections, among which are *No Baby Must Weep* (1975), *Behold Mama, Flowers* (1978), *History Is the Home Address* (2004), and the novels *To Every Birth Its Blood* (1981) and *Gods of Our Time* (1999), *Revelations* (2010), and *Rumours* (2013). During the antiapartheid

struggle, he worked for the ANC's Arts and Culture Department. Abderrahmane Sissako (b. 1961) is an award-winning film director and producer best known for his film *Bamako* (2006), which questions the role of international financial institutions in the wealth or poverty of the African continent.

6. By traditional postcolonial studies, I refer to the discipline as it was shaped in the 1990s by the publication of readers, anthologies, and textbooks such as *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (1994), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, edited by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin (1995), *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, by the same scholars (1998), Ania Loomba's *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998), Leela Gandhi's *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (1998), and *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory*, edited by Padmini Mongia (1997). In the following decades, scholars like Neil Lazarus and Crystal Bartolovich, in their introduction to *Marxism, Modernity, and Postcolonial Studies* (2002), signaled the unfortunate split between a predominantly poststructuralist and a Marxist approach to the study of colonialism; the scholars contributing to that collection proposed ways in which the two streams and their respective strengths could be reconciled. However, even 1990s postcolonial scholarship that embraced a Marxist position, such as Aijaz Ahmad's *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (1992), does not engage with the Cold War in a sustained way.

7. For similarities between oppressed Africans and smaller nations within the Soviet Union or the USSR's Eastern European satellites, see Moore; Popescu, "Lewis Nkosi in Warsaw."

8. For new research addressing the global aspects of the Cold War, see Westad. Although insufficiently accounting for Africa's role, Andrew Hammond's edited collection of essays contributes to this new understanding.

9. See Baldwin; Blakely; Matusевич.

10. See Ash on his conversation with Serote about training in Moscow on the eve of the collapse of the communist bloc.

11. See Douglas; Piette; Hepburn.

12. See Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*.

13. Ellis and Sechaba consider the "Strategy and Tactics" document adopted at Morogoro to be "the single most authoritative statement of ANC strategy in the war fought over the next two decades with the South African state" (58).

14. The two-stage transformation was the official view proposed by the ANC and the SACP and it had its roots in the "colonialism of a special type" thesis. See *The Road to South African Freedom*.

15. For the forms of material support given by the USSR to the ANC-SACP movement, see Shubin.

16. For tensions between the Soviet and Cuban perspectives on southern Africa, see Gleijeses, *Visions of Freedom*.

17. See Slovo for a relatively delayed response to the significance of the fall of the Eastern European communist regimes.

18. This almost formulaic social realism backfired; by the late 1980s, some South African writers called for a "rediscovery of the ordinary" (Ndebele) and a moratorium on referring to literature as "a weapon of the struggle" (Sachs, "Preparing").

19. See Popescu, *South African Literature*.

20. After the end of the Cold War part of the conflict and the withdrawal of SADF and Cuban troops as well as American and Soviet support, the civil war between the MPLA and UNITA continued until 2002, when UNITA's leader, Jonas Savimbi, was killed.

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