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## The Cultural Underground of Decolonization

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### Abstract

The African liberation movements and the early phases of nation-building on the continent, intertwined with the Cold War and the global student movement, left behind an array of textual, visual, and sonic traces that circulated through underground and clandestine networks across Africa and beyond. These cultural products, which include materials in African languages, remain marginalized in studies of African history and arts. This article posits the cultural underground of decolonization in Africa as a productive category for historical and literary inquiry and argues that exploring the literary and aesthetic aspects of this archive offers other ways of knowing and temporal epistemes important for the reconsideration of aesthetics, politics, and histories in and of Africa. I explore poems and songs from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, and Senegal to show how they provide avenues for a renewed engagement with decolonization and revolution.

**Keywords:** underground; decolonization; Africa; poetry; revolution

The year is 1964; the location—Havana, Cuba. About thirty undercover Senegalese men, members of the Marxist-Leninist African Independence Party (*Parti Africain de l'Indépendance*, or PAI, formed in 1957), arrive at the historic Hotel Havana Riviera. They spend the next six months reading and training in Cuba to lead a guerrilla war in the eastern region of Senegal against Senegalese president Léopold Senghor's regime, which they see as neocolonial.<sup>1</sup> In 1958, the PAI had

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All translations are mine unless otherwise specified.

<sup>1</sup> For more about the undercover mission to Cuba, see Sadio Camara, *L'épopée du Parti Africain de l'Indépendance (P.A.I) au Sénégal (1950–1980)* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2013), 119. See also Pascal Bianchini, "Les paradoxes du parti africain de l'indépendance (PAI) autour de la décennie 1960 au Sénégal," Conference Paper, African Socialism/Socialism in Africa, Paris, April 7–9, 2016.

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famously opposed Charles de Gaulle's referendum for Senegal to join the French community under the newly constituted French Fifth Republic—a referendum overwhelmingly approved by the Senegalese people at the time.<sup>2</sup> In 1960, the PAI, which had popularized the slogan “Mom sa rew” (Own your country), borrowed from a 1958 poem by Assane Sylla, was banned for allegedly causing unrest during the municipal elections.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1950s, Senghor's party had been the dominant political party in Senegal. The president-poet remained in power through various tactics, including absorbing other political parties, securing the loyalty of rural followers through support from Sufi brotherhood leaders, forming agreements with the French military and businessmen, appointing them as technical assistants and advisers in key positions in ministries, and increasing centralization of power through repressive and juridical measures.<sup>4</sup> The single party rule from 1966 to 1974 that Senghor referred to as a “unified party” rule would be followed by limited multipartyism in 1976 until Senghor's successor and protégé, Abdou Diouf, introduced an unrestricted multiparty system in 1981. While Senghor's rule was praised for contributing to Senegal's reputation as Africa's most stable democracy, some critics argue that it was the opposition's unwavering battle for political pluralism, characterized by clandestine politics articulated as revolutionary struggle, that led to real systemic efforts at decolonization, and truly defined what we now recognize as Senegalese democracy.

The entanglement of anti-imperial dissent with post independent clandestine politics is not unique to Senegal. In fact, many Africans were inspired by the Vietnamese, Cuban, and Algerian revolutions to express their opposition to imperialism in various ways, including culturally, socially, and through armed or unarmed resistance, both before and after nominal independence. Although extending far beyond the historical period in which these events occurred, the Cold War unfolded during and became entangled with African independence movements, the global student movement, as well as the first decades of nation-building across the continent.<sup>5</sup> Noting this parallel and relationality between the African political experience and that of the rest of the world during this period refutes “the denial of coevalness” that persists in perceptions

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<sup>2</sup> Despite the approval of the referendum in 1958, the PAI continued opposing colonialism in Senegal. Even after the party was banned, it operated clandestinely and held its first congress in Bamako in 1962, where its leader, Mahjemout Diop, sought refuge. However, Diop was later expelled from the party in 1967. The PAI faced multiple setbacks, internal dissension, and unsuccessful attempts to destabilize Senghor's regime. As a result, the party's influence began to crumble. This led to the emergence of a younger generation of more radical leftist groups, primarily composed of students, who steered the struggle in different directions. Pascal Bianchini, “The 1968 Years: Revolutionary Politics in Senegal,” *Review of African Political Economy* 46, no. 160 (2019): 189.

<sup>3</sup> Ibrahim Wane, “Chanson populaire et conscience politique au Sénégal: L'art de penser la nation” (PhD diss., Université Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar, 2012–13), 37.

<sup>4</sup> For a concise and insightful overview of Senghor's postcolonial governance approach, see Momar Coumba Diop's preface to Abdoulaye Bathily, *Mai 1968 à Dakar ou la révolte universitaire et la démocratie: Le Sénégal cinquante ans après. Deuxième édition revue et augmentée*. (Dakar: L'Harmattan-Sénégal, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> On the Cold War as a global rather than bipolar conflict, see Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

of African history.<sup>6</sup> Despite the different contexts, and outcomes of these various forms of struggles, an important commonality, which has been especially overlooked in the African context, has been the foregrounding of a countercultural relationship among literature, art, and social change.<sup>7</sup>

As clandestine modes of politics develop in response to neocolonial and authoritarian regimes, desires to develop a countercultural discourse meet with a drive to disseminate it at all costs. Underground and clandestine literature of this nature have been studied in other parts of the world. Both the Soviet *Samizdat* and *Tamizdat* served as methods to evade censorship and repression. The former involved the self-publishing of texts, whereas the latter involved the publication of Soviet literature abroad. These modes of publishing and circulating literary texts highlight the desire for self-expression beyond the restrictions imposed by the official state publishing house or *Gosizdat*.<sup>8</sup> Although much has been written about clandestine and underground literature in Eastern and Western Europe, the African continent has largely been ignored as a site of production of such literature. Its countercultural texts and the transnational channels of their circulation have remained mainly unexplored.

And yet, African liberation movements of the second half of the twentieth century left behind an array of textual, visual, and sonic traces across the continent that also stretched beyond its shores. Authored by students, activists, unionists, urban intellectuals, disaffected youth, guerilla fighters, musicians, factory workers, and political leaders, they include materials such as poems, songs, and manifestos; translations of the works of Marx, Lenin, Fidel Castro, Amílcar Cabral, and Mao Zedong into African languages; autobiographies of freedom fighters; pamphlets; cassette tapes; and underground newspapers; among other things. Circulating during the tumultuous times of their original creation through alternative, underground, clandestine, hidden networks, these cultural products remain marginalized by the official archives and literatures of African history and arts.

I posit the cultural underground of decolonization in Africa as a productive category for historical and literary inquiry. I am interested in unrecorded events, clandestine print networks, texts hidden in the city but also in the countryside. These are “écrits sous maquis” (“writings below the maquis”)—a secret hiding place in rural areas for people involved or supporting resistance movements—as Achille Mbembe so eloquently titled his edited volume of texts by Cameroonian anti-colonial leader Ruben Um Nyobè.<sup>9</sup> I am interested in the pseudonymous

<sup>6</sup> Fabian Johannes, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> *Samizdat* is the “unapproved material reproduced unofficially in the Soviet Union by hand, typewriter, mimeograph or occasionally by Xerography” and *Tamizdat* relates to works that have been “denied approval by the official censor but published abroad (either with or without their author’s consent) and then smuggled back into the Soviet Union.” D. Pospelovsky, “From Gosizdat to Samizdat and Tamizdat,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 20 (1978): 44.

<sup>9</sup> Ruben Um Nyobè, *Écrits sous maquis* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1989). For the origins of the word *maquis* and its use in the Cameroonian context, see Achille Mbembe, *La naissance du maquis dans le sud du Cameroun, 1920–1960: Histoire des usages de la raison en colonie* (Paris: Karthala, 1996), 7.

poets, writers, and artists of Africa who do not boast the international renown of an Ousmane Sembène or Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, but have nonetheless read the world from the African continent, articulated utopian visions of a socialist revolution, and left traces behind for us to retrieve and grapple with. While Ngũgĩ and Sembène, as quintessential revolutionary thinkers of their time, have envisioned alternative societies and futures for their peoples, exploring understudied voices from the underground, alongside theirs, allows for a broader understanding of the discursive structures within which they operated while making visible the intersections and contradictions between their ideas and aesthetic approaches.

There have, however, been different perspectives on the interpretations, timelines, and periodization of decolonization. The cultural underground I am studying primarily centers on liberation movements and post-independence struggles in Africa during the latter half of the twentieth century. These movements often framed their struggle in revolutionary terms, aiming for revolutionary decolonization as the desired form of liberation. However, this is just one aspect of the broader category of underground literature produced and circulated both within and outside the continent. My focus does not encompass texts that, although not explicitly anti-imperial, exhibit similarities with many underground texts in terms of their publishing methods and subversive content during and after the colonial period. These texts delve into various themes that might be deemed transgressive in specific contexts, including sexuality, violence, and religious revivalism, as well as nonsubversive themes such as hustling, romance, morality, marriage, and health issues.<sup>10</sup>

My definition of the cultural underground of decolonization is an extension of Paul Clements’s “creative underground” and Robert Darnton’s “literary underground of the Old Regime.” Clements articulates the creative underground broadly, in power-laden terms, as “cultural resistance through ‘art’ and creative sociocultural practices that oppose hegemony and ‘systems’ that preserve the status quo,” whereas Darnton emphasizes the literary underground in anti-institutional terms, as a countercultural and “seditious” literature that emerged at the margins of official literary publishing during the Enlightenment through the “illegal book trade.”<sup>11</sup> What they have in common is a view of underground literature as a cultural and social force—a perspective that is relevant and has yet to be applied to the studies of decolonization in Africa. Instead, the texts, images, and sounds of Africa’s cultural underground are typically studied as historical and anthropological documents, as reflections of a history and politics

<sup>10</sup> These texts are commonly categorized as popular literature. See, for example, Emmanuel Obiechina’s *An African Popular Literature: A Study of Onitsha Market Pamphlets* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), Karin Barber “Popular Art in Africa,” *African Studies Review* 30, no. 3 (1987): 1–78. See also Stephanie Newell’s analysis of “how-to” booklets of the Onitsha market in *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), and Emily Callaci’s exploration of the Tanzanian “briefcase publishers” and the pulp fiction “underground publishing industry” they have created in Dar es Salaam. Emily Callaci, *Street Archives and City Life: Popular Intellectuals in Postcolonial Tanzania* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 141.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Clements, *The Creative Underground: Art Politics and Everyday Life* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1; Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 114.

already settled. I contend that exploring the *literary* and *aesthetic* aspects of this archive offers other ways of knowing. Although historical and anthropological approaches have helped to enhance histories of ideas, urban studies, and sociologies of everyday life by focusing on topics such as marginality, illegal publishing, social protest, resistance, and revolution, I am interested in what culture, decolonization, and the underground yield beyond that. Grounding my inquiry in the African context, I see the cultural underground of decolonization as an archive of citizen-making. It is an archive of practices through which the self-understanding and self-representation of a given community are refracted, containing “modes of self-writing” that stoke imaginations along timelines less traveled and, in so doing, yielding temporal epistemes, important for the reconsideration of aesthetics, politics, and histories in and of Africa as well as other epistemes that deserve our attention.<sup>12</sup>

### Undergrounds, Archives, and Epistemes

Dominic Thomas has observed in his study of nation-building in Francophone Africa that “non-official authors,” or dissent writers, expand representations of the postcolonial experience by “producing a literature that remains engaged with the postcolonial reality while nevertheless foregrounding and allowing for newer kinds of aesthetic articulations.”<sup>13</sup> Thomas points out the importance of recognizing the generative potential that comes from giving equal attention to the multitude of discourses that have influenced a particular period. More recently, renewed interest in the Cold War and African literature have given rise to an exciting body of work that challenges received wisdom about the fields of postcolonial and African literatures. Fostering innovative forms of “Global South comparatism,”<sup>14</sup> the lenses they have adopted provide correctives to established literary histories and genealogies of influence derived from mainly official literatures.<sup>15</sup> In particular, I am interested in building on methods that provide alternative archives of literary and historical texts. In *Oxford Street, Accra*, Ato Quayson considers the street as “lively expressive archives of urban realities.” Although not limited to the context of the decolonization, his call to read the streets as a series of archives is useful as it presents the street-as-archive not as a “static” institution but instead as offering a “transcript of dynamic

<sup>12</sup> Achille Mbembe, “African Modes of Self-Writing,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (January 2002): 239–73.

<sup>13</sup> Dominic Thomas, *Nation-Building Propaganda and Literature in Francophone Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Hala Halim, “Afro-Asian Third-Worldism into Global South: The Case of *Lotus Journal*,” *Global South Studies: A Collective Publication with the Global South*, November 22, 2017 <https://globalsouthstudies.as.virginia.edu/key-moments/afro-asian-third-worldism-global-south-case-lotus-journal>.

<sup>15</sup> Duncan M. Yoon, “‘Our Forces Have Redoubled’: World Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Afro-Asian Writers’ Bureau,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 2, no.2 (2015): 233–52; Bhakti Shringarpure, *Cold War Assemblages: Decolonization to Digital* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Rossen Djagalov, *From Internationalism to Postcolonialism: Literature and Cinema between the Second and the Third Worlds* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2020); Monica Popescu, *At Penpoint: African Literatures Postcolonial Studies and the Cold War* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

discourse ecologies.”<sup>16</sup> A similar formulation surfaces again in Emily Callaci’s notion of “street archives” in Dar es Salaam, Ashleigh Harris and Nicklas Hållén’s category of “African street literature,”<sup>17</sup> as well as Burleigh Hendrickson’s call for historians of former French colonies to literally “take our research to the streets,” where Hendrickson sees “oral stories” and “underground pamphlet literature” as forming an “alternative archive.”<sup>18</sup> More generally, this focus on the street as archives resonates with Bhakti Shringarpure’s reading of the postcolony as a “Cold War ruin.” Expanding on the examination of ruins in relation to the legacies of empire, in the works of Julia Hell, Andreas Schönle, and Ann Laura Stoler, Shringarpure posits that “ruins become sites where alternative histories could be observed.” She posits that viewing the postcolony as a Cold War ruin opens avenues for reevaluating postcolonial historiography. Highlighting the intricate interplay between the “ruinations” caused by colonialism and the Cold War, she describes these as “two long and complicated durations” that are “deeply entangled,” with the Cold War “prolong[ing] and intensify[ing]” the effects of colonialism.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the vestiges of African liberation movements, marked by Cold War interference and internationalist solidarities, continue to be apparent in many postcolonies. Shringarpure shows that these historical events have left tangible remnants, such as “an abandoned aircraft” in Asmara Expo Park “riddled with bullets” and cities ruined by conflicts exacerbated by Cold War collusion and depicted in novels. These ruins, encompassing objects, people, texts, and landscapes, compel us to view them as “postcolonial Cold War site[s]” and a “corpus,” which resonates with Peter Kalliney’s argument that “the literatures of decolonization and the literatures of the Cold War” are “tightly conjoined and not to be separated contextually or otherwise.”<sup>20</sup>

The seeking out of alternative texts and voices is therefore underpinned by a desire to not just rewrite history, but to rewrite literary, political, and cultural history otherwise, and apprehend the worldliness of Africa through the street as an epistemological site. Taken together, these scholars’ conjuring of the street as a dynamic palimpsest for understanding the diversity of African literary and discursive forms reveals how limited the criteria have been for perceiving what

<sup>16</sup> Ato Quayson, *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 21 and 129.

<sup>17</sup> Callaci’s “street archives” refer to a wide range of texts published by newly arrived urban migrants in Dar es Salaam about what city life ought to be. Paradoxically, this “urban revolution” unfolded under Julius Nyerere’s Ujamaa, which promoted rural socialism. For Callaci, these texts served as an alternative approach to understanding city life in socialist Tanzania. Harris and Hållén’s “African street literature” refers to “emergent literature circulating in African urban spaces” that is nonetheless at the margins of world literature. Callaci, *Street Archives and City Life*, 14; Ashleigh Harris and Nicklas Hållén, “African Street Literature: A Method for an Emergent Form beyond World Literature,” *Research in African Literatures* 51, no. 2 (2020): 1–26.

<sup>18</sup> Burleigh Hendrickson, “From the Archives to the Streets: Listening to the Global 1960s in the Former French Empire,” *French Historical Studies* 40, no. 2 (April 2017): 319–42.

<sup>19</sup> Bhakti Shringarpure, “The Postcolony as a Cold War Ruin: Toward a New Historiography,” *Research in African Literatures* 50, no. 3 (2019): 159.

<sup>20</sup> Peter Kalliney, *The Aesthetic Cold War: Decolonization and Global Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 5; Shringarpure, “The Postcolony as a Cold War Ruin,” 159.

is literary and worthy of study. It illuminates the economy of exclusion at play in the literary marketplace, along with what has been the erasure of a great many voices in the process.<sup>21</sup> It also calls for a reassessment of Africa's position in world history while offering different avenues for the ongoing search for new epistemologies and methodologies. The concept of the street-as-archive also extends beyond its physical existence and holds symbolic significance as a realm that represents a collective consciousness separate from official history, national archives, and established literature. Many of the underground texts I will examine in this article belong to a type of literature that has, at best, been described as traces of the influence of Marxist revolutionary thought on popular consciousness and, at worst, dismissed as lesser forms of literature because of their unapologetically militant nature and their mode of publication. Its marginalization has caused two key elements of their form, content, and circulation to be overlooked: first, the very processes of vernacularizing Cold War ideologies, Marxist thought, and decolonization theories and adapting them to local intellectual traditions; and second, the novelty of the epistemes that emerge from such cross-cultural translation of ideas and practices.<sup>22</sup> Eschewing the labels "postcolonial" and "non-aligned" to describe a variety of internationalist-inflected literatures, Christopher Lee and Anne Garland Mahler understand what they have called, building on Marcel Cornis-Pope, "third way literary imagination" as encompassing "political and cultural self-determination, the revalorisation of local cultural forms and a dynamic engagement with local and international commitments." These "poetics of analogy," they argue, are "comprised of an inward focus on building local cultural traditions while simultaneously drawing translational parallels to similar experiences across distant geographies."<sup>23</sup> Texts emerging from the cultural underground of decolonization exhibit many of these characteristics. They articulate the intersection of locality and internationalism thereby offering insight from the underground into how these elements come together to offer other forms of social, cultural, and political organizations.

As a subterranean metaphor, the underground gestures toward that which is produced in secret and circulates through hidden networks. It is a "mythical topography" through which the history-making abilities of countercultural movements are made visible.<sup>24</sup> Because the underground is the realm of transgressive ideas and forbidden practices, it has historically also been the domain of avant-garde trendiness—a place where ideas are first workshopped before

<sup>21</sup> Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Jean-François Bayart, Achille Mbembe, and Comi M Toulabor, *Le politique par le bas en Afrique noire: Contributions à une problématique de la démocratie*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Karthala, 2015).

<sup>23</sup> Christopher J. Lee and Anne Garland Mahler, "The Bandung Era, Non-Alignment, and the Third Way Literary Imagination," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Cold War Literature*, ed. Andrew Hammond (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 185.

<sup>24</sup> Alfrun Kliems and Jake Schneider, *Underground Modernity: Urban Poetics in East-Central Europe Pre- and Post-1989* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2021), 11.

gaining popularity.<sup>25</sup> Definitions of underground literature differ by literary tradition, region of the world, and political history. For instance, the works of many anti-apartheid South African writers could be described as underground because at the time, they “exist[ed] under an automatic ban,”<sup>26</sup> while in the People’s Republic of China in the 1970s, the clandestine nature of underground literature (“*dixia wenxue*”) during the cultural revolution meant that “underground” referred primarily to “privately circulated literature ... hidden or at least withheld from the authorities.”<sup>27</sup> The diverse definitions of underground literature in different contexts prompt the question: How can they be grouped together under a single category? Rather than emphasizing the elusive nature of the term, my focus lies in exploring how different variants of underground literature throughout the world inform literary and social histories of the regions and time periods in which they emerge, offering glimpses into the self-understandings and self-representations of given communities at given times. In India, the state of emergency enforced by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi from 1975 to 1977 led to the circulation of underground literature in multiple languages, ranging in medium from leaflets to cartoons, letters, as well as local and foreign news bulletins with politically conflicting views.<sup>28</sup> In Turkey, underground literature, or *yeraltı edebiyatı*, refers to a specific form of counterculture tied to the influence of the Beat generation on the Turkish youth that chiefly emerged with the cultural transformations following the coup d’état of 1980.<sup>29</sup> In Latin America, the Chilean *escena de avanzada* of the 1970s and 1980s was an avant-garde art movement, born under the dictatorship of Pinochet, where artists and writers produced anti-dictatorial and anti-establishment art using experimental techniques.<sup>30</sup> Many of these examples of underground expression illustrate the power of cultural production in shaping people’s daily lives by creating unconventional modes of perception and being, and at times motivating members of a community to speak out against oppressive forces and take action. This challenges the deterministic Marxist base and superstructure framework that continues to be implicit in so much literary engagement with the Global South, where cultural products, which are seen as part of the superstructure, are

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey H. Jackson and Robert Francis Saxe, *The Underground Reader: Sources in the Transatlantic Counterculture*. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015); Friederike Kind-Kovács, *Written Here Published There: How Underground Literature Crossed the Iron Curtain* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> Omafume F. Onoge, “Towards a Marxist Sociology of African literature,” in *Marxism and African literature*, ed. Georg Gugelberger (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986), 50–63, esp. 51.

<sup>27</sup> Bonnie McDougall, “Dissent Literature: Official and Nonofficial Literature in and about China in the Seventies,” *Contemporary China* 3, no. 4 (Winter 1979): 49–79, esp. 57.

<sup>28</sup> Sajal Basu, *Underground Literature during Indian Emergency* (Calcutta: Minerva, 1978); see also Sajal Basu, *The Pen in Revolt: Underground Literature Published during the Emergency* (New Delhi: Press Institute of India, 1978).

<sup>29</sup> Erik Mortenson, “The ‘Underground’ Reception of the Beat in Turkey,” *Comparative American Studies An International Journal* 11, no. 3 (2013): 337.

<sup>30</sup> Nelly Richard, *The Insubordination of Signs: Political Change Cultural Transformation and Poetics of the Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).



understood in limited terms as aftereffects, or mere reflections, of the base of economic activity.

In Senegal, as elsewhere, dreams of cultural revolution—including a state of preparedness for the possibility of an armed uprising—led to an increase in underground activities. One notable underground cultural movement that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s was the Senegalese Cultural Front, or “FC,” as its former members call it. Founded in 1976 by urban intellectuals, many of whom were members of the clandestine Maoist-oriented party *And Jéf* (“to act together”), the FC was born in a small bedroom at the back of a courtyard house in the *quartier populaire* of Medina.<sup>31</sup> It was established after the arrest and imprisonment of several members of the party, including its leader, Landing Savané, and the seizure of its underground journal, *Xarebi*.<sup>32</sup> As Ibrahima Wane rightly argues, the FC was a “synthesis” of the larger anti-imperial countercultural movement of the Senegalese left, or *le mouvement patriotique* (“the patriotic movement”) that emerged in the first decades following independence.<sup>33</sup> The movement produced cassette tapes with protest songs; historical narratives of colonial massacres such as Thiaroye (before Ousmane Sembène’s famous 1988 film on the same event, *Camp de Thiaroye*); and brochures about anti-colonial figures. They translated revolutionary writings, including works by Mao Zedong into Wolof.<sup>34</sup> Importantly, they also published a cultural manifesto calling for a national “committed literature” that was widely circulated in the African diaspora, as well as three anthologies of poetry—one in Wolof, two in French. The FC saw their movement as “patriotic,” but their operations as clandestine, and therefore they used a mix of underground techniques to print and circulate their texts.<sup>35</sup> This contrasted with the public nature of one of their other key literary activities, which was the declamation of poems at cultural events.

Scholars have used a variety of terms and concepts to refer to the underground and clandestine literatures of the cultural Cold War in the context of decolonization and postcolonial nationalism, including “dissent literature,” “non-official literature,” “protest literature,” and “littérature engagée.” I delineate the

<sup>31</sup> Interview with El Hadj Momar Samb, August 23, 2022.

<sup>32</sup> *And Jéf/Xarebi*, born in clandestinity in 1974, emerged from another “clandestine organization” called *Rénu Rewmi* (roots of the nation), which originated from a split within the *Mouvement de la Jeunesse Marxiste Léniniste du Sénégal* (MJML), formed following the events at the University of Dakar in May 1968. Notable figures among them were Landing Savané and Omar Blondin Diop (a prominent figure in the May 1968 movement in France). Together, they returned to their home country to carry out their own revolutionary struggle. Bianchini, “The 1968 Years,” 191. These various movements, clandestine parties, and divisions demonstrate that the revolutionary struggle was not a unified and flawless movement but one with inherent contradictions. By exploring its cultural underground, we can gain insights into the diverse ways in which its members navigated these tensions.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Ibrahima Wane, Dakar, August 22, 2022.

<sup>34</sup> Ndiouga Benga, “Mise en scène de la culture et espace public au Sénégal,” *Afrique et Développement* 35, no. 4 (2010): 248; Adama Djigo, *Histoire des politiques du patrimoine culturel au Sénégal (1816–2000)* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2015), 293, 294.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with Ousmane Faaty Ndong, July 2, 2022; interview with El Hadj Momar Samb, August 23, 2022.

cultural underground of decolonization as a category that encompasses all of the above, to include a vast array of published and unpublished texts, songs, films, posters, novels, periodicals, pamphlets, cartoons, and memoirs, among other materials. It includes clandestine literature but is not limited to that.<sup>36</sup> The scope of the cultural underground of decolonization is more properly avant-garde and unofficial literature and art and is not limited to works of protest or dissent or subversive and seditious material. I also see the cultural underground of decolonization as a mode of publishing and circulating cultural products through hidden networks, using self-publishing and other makeshift methods. These are combined with tactics, such as the use of pseudonyms, and involve the smuggling of forbidden materials. In addition, the print network, periodicals, and alternative presses through which underground texts circulated are cultural sites worth exploring, revealing the underground's strategies for hailing an audience through pseudonymous and anonymous texts, for fashioning committed writers and readers, and for creating an underground imagination.<sup>37</sup>

Importantly, the cultural underground of decolonization is a “poetics of relation,” a cross-pollination of ways of seeing and doing at a time when Marxism was a global form of dissent, and when many articulated their struggle by refracting it through the prism of Marxism and blending it with vernacular forms.<sup>38</sup> Highlighting this calls attention to cultural agents' production of literatures in African languages and their translation of political ideas into local terms, seeking to dwell a little longer on attempts to “domesticate” Marxism and other social theories. Such activities may have led to forms of *creolization*, to use Duncan Yoon's–Édouard Glissant-inspired term, which results from the blending of various components that can produce unexpected and original outcomes.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The terms *underground literature* and *clandestine literature* are often used interchangeably to refer to both the *nature* of the texts (dissenting, anti-establishment, subversive, seditious) and their *mode of production* and *dissemination* (self-published, artisan publishing, hand-to-hand distribution, etc.) But while clandestine literature is de facto a form of underground literature, underground texts are not always clandestine. That is, although clandestine literature may rely on the underground as a metaphoric space through which its texts circulate, underground literature can circulate through official networks and still be considered “underground” because of the anti-establishment or avant-garde nature of its texts. See, for example, the selected works in Jackson and Saxe, *The Underground Reader*.

<sup>37</sup> Derek Peterson, Emma Hunter, and Stephanie Newell eds., *African Print Cultures: Newspapers and Their Publics in the Twentieth Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016). For examples of underground and alternative presses and periodicals, see Les Switzer, ed., *South Africa's Alternative Press: Voices of Protest and Resistance 1880s–1960s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), and the Moroccan cultural journal *Souffles-Anfas*, which published material that was deemed subversive and resulted in the arrest and torture of two of its founders; see Olivia C. Harrison and Teresa Villal-Ignacio, *Souffles-Anfas: A Critical Anthology from the Moroccan Journal of Culture and Politics* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 272.

<sup>38</sup> What I describe as a “vernacularizing” process is the literal process of translating a term, practice, or idea into a vernacular language and adapting it for that cultural context.

<sup>39</sup> Duncan M. Yoon, “Cold War Creolization: Ousmane Sembène's *Le Dernier de l'empire*,” *Research in African Literatures* 50, no. 3 (2019): 36; Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 34.

My call to consider the cultural underground of decolonization as a category for literary and historical inquiry resonates with Gary Wilder's argument that decolonization during the post-WWII period for thinkers such as Senghor and Aimé Césaire was not only about ending colonial rule, but also about envisioning alternative forms of political organization that went beyond national sovereignty.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, I posit the cultural underground of decolonization as a space where alternative forms of social and political organizations have been imagined and sometimes enacted. The underground corpus I explore is often produced by marginalized voices; it offers temporal epistemes, revolutionary praxes, and decolonized imaginings that expand more conventional narratives about decolonization. In doing so, it responds to Wilder's more recent call to take seriously forms of "translocal solidarity," "heterodox thinking about historical temporality," and "concrete utopian project(s) refracted through poetic knowledge."<sup>41</sup>

One of the temporal possibilities afforded by unearthing traces of the cultural underground is the rediscovery of invitations to turn a failed decolonization into a deferred revolution—a revolution that might take place in the twenty-first century. The FC's note to the reader, added to the new 2016 edition of their poetry anthology in Wolof, the *Téerebtànnu taalifu xare Senegaal*, nearly four decades after its first publication in 1977, gestures toward just such an invitation to imagine—and bring to life—the deferred moment of revolution:

After reading and closing this anthology, close your eyes.... You will see images of a dark, starless sky, ... And the men and women who tried to enlighten it with words sculpted from the heart ... Even if you were to forget everything, still echoing in your memory would be the sounds and rhythms breathed from the souls of people thirsting for freedom. The poets who wrapped themselves in the cloak of the clandestine to write, sing, excoriate, and disseminate these images are part of those who inadvertently shaped national culture ... Make these poems available to new poets, slammers, and rappers so that they, too, in their own way, raise their voices in the name of Senegalese culture, of human culture.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Gary Wilder, *Concrete Utopianism: The Politics of Temporality and Solidarity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), 11, 32, and 162.

<sup>42</sup> "Su ngeen noppee jàng Téerebtànnu bii, ba tëj ko, gëmm leen seeni gët. Di ngeen wéy di gis nataali guddi gu lëndëm kuruus, gu amul benn biddéew, te ay góor aki jigéen doon ko jéem a leeral ak ay baat yu ñu yattee ci seen xol ak ci seen xel yu fees dell.... Boo leen demee bay fátte lépp it, dina wéy di àddu ci seenug pàtteliku, riir ak galan yi ñu tëgge ci xet yiy gilli (mboloomi) ci ruu wu askan wu mar fecceeku. Te taalifkat yii dan làmboo malaanu guddi ngir di bind, di woy, di móol aka wasaare nataal yeek galan yooya, nañu ci nii tabax aw pàcc ci caadag réew mi, donte du woon seen coobare ..., jébbal leen maasi taalifkat, slamër, ak rapër yu yeex yii xew ci jamono, tey jéem ñoomit, ci seen mënin, di yëkkati ay làcc ci caada askanu senegaal, di aw pàcc ci caadag doomu-aadama." Front Culturel Sénégalais, *Téerebtànnu taalifu xare Senegaal*, (Dakar: Éditions Papyrus Afrique, 2016), 80.

The note reads like an anachronistic time capsule, seeking to bridge, after the fact, countercultural movements of the past with those of contemporary youth by inviting twenty-first-century slammers and rappers to continue the work of twentieth-century Senegalese Maoist poets. Just four years before the publication of this note, hip-hop artists rallied the youth to oust Senegal's third president, Abdoulaye Wade, following his unconstitutional bid for a third mandate.<sup>43</sup> Such moves to reach from the past into the present, even the future, are not arbitrary. They are conscious efforts to reinvent revolutionary imaginaries by bridging old and new cultural movements in a redefinition of citizenship. As poets of the seventies pass the baton to hip-hop artists of the new millennium, the underground networks where these texts and ideas circulated are being replaced by calls for political organizing on social media and hip-hop concerts in the urban periphery. Messages like that of the FC's note to the reader are attempts to combat the generational rupture in the transmission of cultural memory, to bridge the gap between the youth of the global sixties and the youth of the twenty-first century. Kerry Bystrom, Monica Popescu, and Katherine Zien have examined how "cultural events and the circulation and reception of objects" served as "temporal and affective sites" or "battlegrounds" of the cultural Cold War in the Global South, emphasizing the ways in which these sites "captur[ed] a sense of futurity."<sup>44</sup> The FC's note to the reader is an invitation to consider the cultural underground of decolonization for the epistemes it carries, for the historical and social practices it makes visible, and for the aesthetic and generic features that analyses of its texts and sounds would reveal. As an archive of citizen-making, the cultural underground of decolonization is a repository of forms of civic activism. It inscribes epistemes of temporal realization or frameworks for achieving these dreams and aspirations often emerging from understandings of time that differ from the ones in which traditional histories of decolonization are inscribed.

In the remainder of this article, I explore poems and songs from Zaire (today the Democratic Republic of the Congo), Cameroon, and Senegal to show how they provide avenues for a renewed engagement with the cultural underground of decolonization. My analyses culminate in a more in-depth look at the FC as an underground cultural movement that emerged in Senegal in the 1970s to offer reflections on the stakes of approaching the cultural underground of decolonization as a category for literary and historical inquiry.

### **Lyrical Time(s): Congolese Poetry and Cameroonians Songs**

The poems and songs of the cultural underground expand our repertoire of what we have come to call African literature. They democratize genres usually considered high culture (this applies especially to poetry), disrupting our

<sup>43</sup> See Rosalind Fredericks, "'The Old Man Is Dead': Hip Hop and the Arts of Citizenship of Senegalese Youth," *Antipode* 46, no. 1 (2014): 130-48.

<sup>44</sup> Kerry Bystrom, Monica Popescu, and Katherine A. Zien, *The Cultural Cold War and the Global South: Sites of Contest and Communitas* (London: Routledge, 2023), 8.

aesthetic value systems and inviting us to make the work of anonymous or amateur authors our subjects of study. What did such poems and lyrics and their authors try to tell the world? What kinds of imaginaries did these texts, sounds, and aesthetic sensibilities help to create as they were sutured together? I look first to *Matala Mukadi's* 1969 collection of poems, *Réveil dans un nid de flammes* (*Awakening in a Nest of Flames*). The poems first appeared in *L'Eclair*, the periodical of an underground Congolese Maoist student organization, before being published in Paris by Seghers and then banned in Zaire under Mobutu's rule.<sup>45</sup> The collection offers insights into a particular understanding of time, space, and solidarity movements in the cultural underground.

The collection's peritext is notable for how it builds internationalist and Pan-African bridges with other writers, social movements, and freedom fighters. The dedication page of the collection expresses Matala Mukadi's sympathies with tricontinentalism and Pan-Africanism, and he goes on to dedicate one of his poems, "Echo du maquisard" ("Echo of the maquisard") to anti-colonial Cameroonian-Senegalese poet David Mandessi Diop, who was a member of the PAI and died in a plane accident in 1960. Matala Mukadi's rendering of the struggle of life in the underground in "Echo du maquisard" can be read as a response to Diop's "Souffre, pauvre Nègre" ("Suffer, Poor Negro"). The latter had been published in the journal *Présence Africaine* in 1948, and later in Diop's poetry collection *Coups de pilon* (1956) translated as *Hammer Blows* (1973). Appearing to encourage the speaker of Diop's poetic lament, "Echo du maquisard" is as much a poetic work as it is a transtemporal conversation that uses the printed page as a site for building alliances.

Several verses of Matala Mukadi's poem resonate eerily with Diop's poem. David Diop's "Souffre, pauvre Nègre" renders the suffering of the colonized vividly in short verses linked together by anadiplosis:

Souffre, pauvre Nègre! (Suffer, poor Negro!)  
 Tes enfants ont faim (Your children are hungry)  
 Faim et ta case est vide (Hungry and your hut is bare)  
 Vide de ta femme qui dort (Bare of your wife who sleeps)  
 Qui dort sur la couche seigneuriale<sup>46</sup> (Who sleeps on the seignorial couch)

Here, Diop's portrayal of the colonized individual's impoverished circumstances as a vicious circle appears to be almost inevitable and insurmountable. In response, Matala Mukadi imagines a way to break the cycle of oppression of the colonized as portrayed and aestheticized in Diop's poem. "Echo du maquisard" is about the suffering of the freedom fighter hidden in the maquis;

<sup>45</sup> The periodical was funded by the Maoist faction of the Belgian communist party (*UJRC union de la jeunesse révolutionnaire du Congo*). Pedro Monaville, "Making a Second Vietnam: The Congolese Revolution and its Global Connections in the 1960s," in *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties: Between Protest and Nation-Building*, eds., Chen Jian, Martin Klimke, Masha Kirasirova, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 110.

<sup>46</sup> David Diop, *Hammer Blows*, trans. Simon Mpondo and Frank Jones (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 42, 43.

an echo response from the underground, it is more hopeful than Diop's "Souffre, pauvre Nègre."

In "Echo du maquisard," suffering is not caused by the subjection of the colonized, but is rather the result of the freedom fighter's resilience, which is described as a necessary evil for bringing about revolution. In response to the resigned lament of Diop's speaker, Matala Mukadi writes: "Voici venu le déclin de la saison des soumissions anciennes" ("Here comes the fall of the season of old submissiveness"). The Congolese poet seems to be saying to Diop's "poor negro": your time for languishing and self-pity is over. Parallels between the two poems push the conversation further. Both Matala Mukadi's freedom fighter and Diop's colonized suffer from hunger: for the freedom fighter, "La famine vrillait mon ventre" ("Famine was twisting my belly"), while the speaker of Diop's poem says of the "poor negro," "Tes enfants ont faim" ("Your children are hungry"). Unlike the colonized Black man in Diop's poem, however, whose wife sleeps in his master's bed, the freedom fighter still has his female partner by his side: "Et toi ma bien aimée sur la natte de nos nuits / T'étires et m'attends" ("And you, my beloved, stretching and waiting for me on the mat of our nights"). Presenting the freedom fighter's "beloved" as a passive character, waiting on a mat for her lover, Matala Mukadi's response to Diop enacts a masculinist Pan-African solidarity.<sup>47</sup> Women appear in both poems as objects of desire to be possessed, either by the colonized Black man, the freedom fighter (who appears in the poem as male by default), or the colonizer.

Interestingly, the freedom fighter speaks in the first person, while the speaker of Diop's poem is not the "poor negro" himself. The speaker of Matala's poem, as the fighter hidden in the maquis, is "combattant dans la montagne" ("fighting in the mountain"); he is "quête la dignité de mon vin éternel" ("questing for the dignity of my eternal vine").<sup>48</sup> In its poetic interruption of the vicious circle of oppression, Matala Mukadi's poem shows, through content and form, the shift from early postwar anti-colonialism to the 1960s anti-imperial revolutionary struggle. The act of redefining the "poor negro" as a maquisard, a symbol of resistance, lies at the heart of the poet's call to action. By reimagining this figure as a fearless fighter for freedom, Matala Mukadi has created a compelling vision of revolution and renewal. Indeed, "Echo du maquisard," written in memory of David Diop, is a poem in homage or response to an earlier poem. However, rather than emphasizing the linear progression whereby the consciousness of the oppressed awakens thereby leading to a revolution from the maquis, I submit that the Congolese poet's forging a new identity for the "poor negro" is a "phenomenology of revolutionary praxis constitutive of the future."<sup>49</sup> Matala

<sup>47</sup> As Monaville notes in his analysis of the poem, such a reductive view "was belied by the fact that many women lived in Mulele's maquis." Monaville, *Students of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 158.

<sup>48</sup> Matala Mukadi Tshiakatumba. *Réveil dans un nid de flammes: La foudre et le feu* (Paris: Seghers, 1969), 43 and 44.

<sup>49</sup> Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), xxi. In this rereading of Spinoza written while in prison, Negri proposes interpreting and understanding the past in a way that will enable us to identify methods

Mukadi's poem performs revolutionary resistance by responding to Diop's poem and turns the work of art into a rallying cry for those yearning for decolonization. Rather than the mere epiphenomenon of decolonization, poems of the cultural underground can be read as performing revolution and therefore as inciting acts of revolution.<sup>50</sup> Often turned into songs, they can inspire others to join in the fight and galvanize freedom fighters as was the case with Chimurenga songs or songs of the Zimbabwean liberation movement. These songs and poems are therefore rhetorical acts that may influence perceptions and foster solidarity. For instance, Cameroonian patriotic songs of the 1950s (or *tjembi di lon*, in the Basaa language) were chanted by peasants in the maquis of Boumnyebel and represented a "popular reappropriation and reformation" of the nationalist movement's discourse.<sup>51</sup> As Mbembe has demonstrated, they challenge the seemingly "monolithic and uniform appearance of nationalist discursive formation" in French, which "enriches itself" when reformulated in African languages.<sup>52</sup> Further, these songs from the maquis offer their own temporal structures for the Cameroonian independence movement. They "formulate political time, periodize and articulate the calendar and seasons, organize memory" but also "recount everyday life occurrences, periodize and structure their cosmic, religious, and epic dimensions."<sup>53</sup> These songs resonate with Stephanie Newell and Onokome Okome's characterization of popular culture in Africa as "the episteme of the everyday," while offering, in addition to insights on the everyday, other ways of apprehending the temporalities of decolonization.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, the *tjembi di lon* encode various temporalities; one song collected by Mbembe describes the colonial enterprise as a form of debt and the time of independence as the moment to collect said debt. "White men took our country from us ... Our laws have been abolished until today / Son of Kamerun, creditor of your people / claim back what is owed to you."<sup>55</sup> Colonial history is narrated in the song as a disturbance of a past order of things, and the call to action as a time of reckoning whereby the collectors, or "sons of Kamerun," must collect the debt incurred vis à vis the "ancestors" from whom the country was taken. The song

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that are necessary for a collective and transformative social and political action that can shape the future.

<sup>50</sup> See Pius Ngandu Nkashama's introduction to Matala Mukadi's autobiography in which he recounts the effect of *Réveil* on Congolese students; Matala Mukadi Tshiakatumba, *Dans la tourmente de la dictature (autobiographie d'un poète)* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000).

<sup>51</sup> Bayart, Mbembe, and Toulabor. *La politique par le bas en Afrique noire* (Paris: Karthala, 2015), 139.

<sup>52</sup> "L'apparence monolithique et uniforme de l'énoncé français s'enrichit dans la langue nationale"; Bayart, Mbembe, and Toulabor. *La politique par le bas en Afrique noire*, 135.

<sup>53</sup> "Ils relatent les faits de la vie quotidienne du mouvement ... en opèrent des périodisations en structurent les dimensions cosmiques religieuses ou épiques" and "énoncent le temps politique, périodisent, articulent le calendrier et les saisons, organisent la mémoire"; Bayart, Mbembe, and Toulabor, *La politique par le bas en Afrique noire*, 135 and 139.

<sup>54</sup> Stephanie Newell and Onokome Okome eds., *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>55</sup> "Des hommes blancs sont venus nous prendre notre pays / ... Nos lois ont été abolies jusqu'à aujourd'hui/Fils de Kamerun créancier de ton peuple/Fais-toi rembourser ton dû." The song was collected by Mbembe in Si-Ntim on August 29, 1983. Bayart, Mbembe, and Toulabor. *La politique par le bas en Afrique noire*, 165.

portrays the period of the Cameroonian nationalist movement as a temporal window that will soon close, creating a sense of urgency for the “sons of Kamerun” to reclaim what was taken during colonization. The call to action “there is still time, but the time is now” highlights the fleeting nature of this moment and the need to act quickly. The song also gestures toward the ephemerality of this temporal window: “soon, it will be late, and the deadline will be missed,” presenting the period in question as an opportunity that must be taken swiftly.<sup>56</sup> The song tells a story that builds up to a time that was long awaited and has finally arrived but will soon disappear.<sup>57</sup> However, just as in Matala Mukadi’s poem, the idea that time is up for colonialism is poetically encoded in many of these texts; these poems and songs also show how the temporality of freedom-seeking is intertwined with the futurity of the desired victory and a retelling of the colonial past that calls forth the imagined decolonized future they have been awaiting.

Monica Popescu examines the temporalities of “decolonization as revolution” through the concept of “affective temporal structures,” which she defines as “ways of perceiving the present moment ... between the present, on the one hand, and the past and the future, on the other.” As Matala Mukadi’s poem demonstrates, through its dedication to David Diop and its reformulation of another horizon of possibilities for the “poor negro” these temporal structures “refer to the desires, aspirations, or disillusionment that we invest in projections of the future.”<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, the poet’s involvement in the Congolese student movement in Belgium reminds us that the overlapping contexts of decolonization in Africa with that of the global student movement expand the category of cultural underground of decolonization to countries that were not colonized, such as Ethiopia, for instance.<sup>59</sup>

These different yet interconnected forms of struggle were able to coexist through articulations of solidarity visible in Matala Mukadi’s collection of poems and reference to Diop. Exploring such an intertextual Pan-Africanism and internationalism requires reading across official and underground texts to make salient the intertext of decolonization and its cultural underground’s imaginings of a new global order.<sup>60</sup> It reminds us that beyond—indeed, below—African “street archives,” and sometimes beyond the city, is yet another archive that expands our framework of analysis of African history and literatures and offers models for transoceanic and cross-cultural engagement, as well as other ways of

<sup>56</sup> “Il est encore temps mais le temps presse / Bientôt, il se fera tard, et l’échéance sera dépassée.” Bayart, Mbembe, and Toulabor. *La politique par le bas en Afrique noire*, 165.

<sup>57</sup> According to Mbembe, many actors in the independence movement viewed independence as being “suspended.”

<sup>58</sup> Popescu, *At Penpoint*, 111.

<sup>59</sup> See, for instance, Amsale Alemu, “Demystifying the Image: Anti-colonial Concepts of the Ethiopian Revolution,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 42, no. 2 (2022): 442–53; Bahru Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement C. 1960–1974* (Woodbridge Suffolk: James Currey, 2014).

<sup>60</sup> See for instance, Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).



knowing and apprehending revolutionary praxis and aesthetics. Exploring the texts published by the FC allows us to better apprehend such aspects of the cultural underground.

### The Senegalese Cultural Front

As an underground movement born in the 1970s, the FC articulated its members' national struggle in internationalist terms. Although theirs was a cultural rather than armed movement, the FC saw themselves as heirs of the October Revolution, of revolutions in Vietnam and China, and of the independence wars in Mozambique and Angola.<sup>61</sup> They traced their genealogy back to the Pan-African, anti-colonial activities of Senegalese communist and WWI veteran Lamine Senghor, who led the anti-colonial struggle in Paris among African and Afro-descended intellectuals during the interwar period.<sup>62</sup> Two of the FC's primary goals were to create a new Senegalese culture and a new kind of Senegalese citizen. To do so, they drew intellectually from Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, Amílcar Cabral, and Mao Zedong, as well as from Senegal's literary tradition in both African and European languages. Their manifesto, clandestinely printed in 1977 and circulated via underground methods throughout Senegal and the African diaspora, called for the creation of a *littérature engagée* ("committed literature") that would rejuvenate the spirits of their nation's people, engage their national languages and culture, and carry on the legacies of Mao and Lamine Senghor, among others. The FC's slogan, *Ferñent Mënna Taalug Daay* ("A Single Spark Can Start a Prairie Fire")—a Wolof translation of a quote from Mao Zedong's speech "On Democracy"—was printed at the bottom of the manifesto's front cover.

In 1977, 1978, and 1980, the FC published three anthologies of poetry that aimed to realize the *littérature engagée* called for in their manifesto. The 1978 and 1980 anthologies, *Anthologie sénégalaise de la poésie de combat* (Senegalese Anthology of Combat Poetry) and *Les braises rouges qui chantent* (The Singing Red Embers), were published in French to speak to a more international audience and devoted entire sections to liberation struggles beyond the boundaries of Senegal, such as in Vietnam, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, among other places. The 1977 anthology in Wolof *Téerebtànnu taalifu xare Senegaal* (Senegalese Anthology of Combat Poetry) was published in Wolof, primarily for a Wolof-speaking rural and urban audience and with an intent to "produce a readership" in national languages.<sup>63</sup> Entries from its various anonymous and pseudonymous

<sup>61</sup> Front Culturel Sénégalais, *Manifeste du front culturel sénégalais* (Dakar: Front Culturel Sénégalais, 1977), 4.

<sup>62</sup> See David Murphy, "Defending the 'Negro Race': Lamine Senghor and Black Internationalism in Interwar France," *French Cultural Studies* 24, no. 2 (2013): 162.

<sup>63</sup> Tobias Warner, *The Tongue-Tied Imagination: Decolonizing Literary Modernity in Senegal* (New York: Fordham University Press), 119. Warner shows how the task of addressing and cultivating a readership in Francophone Africa has been a central issue for African writers during the colonial and postcolonial eras, with vernacular language and literacy playing a crucial role. Through an insightful examination of writers' experimentation with "reflexive address" and editing practices in print media and fiction, he explores the concept of the "figure of the future reader" and its impact on shaping readership in French and Wolof.

authors dwelled on the struggles of the peasant, factory worker, ordinary citizen, and female freedom fighter, drawing deeply from the repertoire of Wolof agrarian poetry to experiment with different forms that the poets thought would appeal to local audiences. Even as it is making the national coeval with the international, it is also firmly inscribed in the national temporal framework.

The FC, that defined their movement as “avant-garde,” saw themselves as promoting experimental combat poetry.<sup>64</sup> Just as music was instrumental in struggles against imperialism, which in turn led to a repurposing of “traditional” genres and the emergence of new forms, the omnipresence of poetry in the cultural underground of decolonization is a commentary on the poetic genre itself. My emphasis on the anthologies of the FC is meant as a call to attend to the sheer volume of published and unpublished “combat poetry” and protest songs written by ordinary people in the midst of liberation struggles. The various social groups to which the poets belong, not to mention the mode of delivery of many of these poems often meant to be sung and memorized, indicate that they were meant to symbolize and enact a people-centered form of communication and expression that was written by a vast number of actors, both professional and amateur poets, from freedom fighters to political leaders, disaffected youth, future state officials, and so on. Such a poetry privileges clarity and evocative images, group authorship, or anonymity to appeal to the collective; it promoted an “uncomplicated use of words ... designed for educating the masses, raising productivity, informing about the revolution, solidarizing with revolutionary movements in the rest of the world.”<sup>65</sup> Writing about “traditional” African poetry, Lylian Kesteloot calls “la généralisation de l’activité poétique” (“the generalization of the poetic activity”) the fact that, in addition to professional poets, any member of society could create poetry and use it as a tool that would accompany daily activities, as a tool for “self-expression, communication with others.”<sup>66</sup> The example poem I will look at from the *Téerebtànnu* offers a glimpse into the types of experimentation the anthologies of the FC supported. Categorized under *woyu kañ* (“songs of praise”) the poem “Ndam” belongs to the genre of the *kañ*, usually sung to pace peasants’ activities in the fields—to “galvanize the worker” or “accompany” them in their work.<sup>67</sup> The FC’s anthology features a section of *woyu kañ* along with two other sections featuring *woyu mettit* (“songs of pain”) and *woyu yeete* (“songs of awakening”). These last two categories were the creation of the anthology’s compilers and denote the FC’s experimentation with literary genres by drawing on “traditional” forms to convey politically revolutionary ideas.

Woy is a Wolof word that can mean either “song” or “poem,”<sup>68</sup> and traditionally, there are many different subgenres of woy. The subgenre that a woy falls

<sup>64</sup> Front Culturel Sénégalais, *Téerebtànnu taalifu xare Senegaal* (Dakar: Editions Papyrus Afrique, 2016), 12.

<sup>65</sup> Georg M. Gugelberger *Marxism and African Literature* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986), xii.

<sup>66</sup> Kesteloot Lilyan, *La Poésie traditionnelle*, (Paris: Fernand Nathan, 1971), 3.

<sup>67</sup> Cissé, *Parole chantée*, 20.

<sup>68</sup> The word “poem” translates into Wolof as woy, but also as *xasida* and *taalif*. The latter two words derive from the Arabic *qaṣīda*, which translates as “ode,” and *ta’leef*, which means “to bring together.” In Wolof, these two lexical borrowings from Arabic are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to

under is often determined by the context in which it is performed (such as life-cycle events, harvest, and ceremonies) and by the type of person who sings it (a griot, farmer, etc.). Importantly, the *woy* is deeply entangled with gendered and labor activities within Senegalese cultures. As a genre of everyday life, it accompanies a vast range of activities in Wolof agrarian communities, and a *woy*'s subgenre often determines its performer's gender and sometimes their caste (for example, the *xaxar* subgenre is a type of satirical wedding song sung by women).<sup>69</sup>

The poem "Ndam," written by a woman, and later sung by a man is noteworthy for the way it disregards the gender restrictions imposed by its subgenres. It is not unique among the poems in the *Téerebtànnu* in doing this. The author, Bineta Mané Samb (1953–2016), who would later become a member of Senegal's first official feminist movement, contributed the poem under the pseudonym Jëmb Mbóoj, the name of a nineteenth-century queen mother of the kingdom of Waalo, which was located on the Senegal River.<sup>70</sup> Mbóoj was a figure of the women's resistance against colonialism. Notably, she was among the unsung heroes whom the FC helped bring to recognition in the 1970s and 1980s as part of their effort to rehabilitate Senegal's cast of national heroes.

Promoting self-reliance and hard work, the poem illustrates the FC's project of self-fashioning, moral reform, and model citizenship, and is suffused with Maoist and Fanonian theorizations of a peasant revolution. The poem mixes the subgenres of *kañ* ("praise poem") with that of *kañu* ("self-laudatory poem"). This is implied by the poem's title, which translates to "glory" or "success," and is enacted by the two speakers in the poem. The first speaker explains what success truly entails, whereas the second exhorts readers and listeners to follow in the first speaker's footsteps. Samb embodies the first speaker by voicing the thoughts of an exemplary peasant, illustrating what an ideal citizen should strive for, then uses her own voice as the second speaker to exhort others to model themselves after the farmer.<sup>71</sup> The second speaker, arguably in the author's own voice, exhorts readers and listeners to have "faith in one's own strength," conveying belief in the generative power of self-reliance as a solid basis for revolutionary action, thus calling for a revolution of the self that is seen as the precursor to a revolution of the country.

The eighteen verses of "Ndam" can be interpreted in a three-part structure, where the first two parts—verses 1 to 5 and 6 to 11, respectively—are spoken entirely in the voice of the peasant. In verses 1 to 5, the peasant establishes the conditions for success, recommending self-fashioning through hard work,

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poems, although *xasida*, when used in Wolof, refers specifically to Islamic poems in Arabic or Ajami. See Murtadaa Jóob, *Woy ak cax ci ettub làmmiinu Wolof (Poésie et devinettes dans la pensée wolof)* (Dakar: L'Harmattan-Sénégal, 2018).

<sup>69</sup> Momar Cissé, *Parole chantée et communication sociale chez les wolof du Sénégal* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010), 20 and Marame Gueye, "Woyyi Céet: Senegalese Women's Oral Discourses on Marriage and Womanhood," *Research in African Literatures* (2010): 65–86.

<sup>70</sup> Interview with El Hadj Momar Samb, August 23, 2022.

<sup>71</sup> Front Culturel Sénégalais, *Téerebtànnu taalifu xare Senegaal*, 51.

determination, and resourcefulness. Verses 6 to 11 describe the actual process of working the land, which comes across as a metaphor for the work of revolution.<sup>72</sup> The third part—verses 12 to 18—presents the work of the farmer as leading to happiness, and at verse 15 switches to the second speaker, who invites the reader or listener to follow the farmer’s example. Although the word denoting the subgenre *kañ* means “to encourage” and “to list one’s exploits,” the first verse of the poem especially illustrates how this particular *kañ* is more prescriptive than descriptive:<sup>73</sup>

Sumay ndamu, dafa fekk (Success lies in)  
 Coono di sama ndey (Exertion being my mother)  
 Pexe di sama baay (Resourcefulness being my father)  
 Mébét di sama maam (Purpose being my grandparent)  
 Nelaw di sama mbañ (Sleeping being my enemy)

For the sake of brevity and poetic rendering, this translation does not reflect the conditional mood of the original Wolof. A literal and wordier translation would be “If I were to glorify myself, that would be because exertion is my mother, resourcefulness is my father,” so on and so forth. Samb subverts the genre of the *kañ* by attaching the success of the peasant to conditionals, establishing a new set of criteria one must meet via hard work before being deserving of praise. The use of mesodiplosis, specifically the repetition of “di sama” in the middle of the verse, serves to highlight the musicality of the poem. This technique aims to instill moral values through short, easily memorizable verses. Such a repetitive syntactic structure also conveys the need to turn these personal qualities into habits—to perfect them via repetition—if one is to be a model citizen.

Like other poems in the FC’s anthologies, “Ndam” mixes realism and revolutionary romanticism to galvanize the masses and fashion the “new (wo)man,” thus meeting the movement’s dual awareness-raising objectives. But, more than that, “Ndam” can be read as an allegory for the way the Senegalese Cultural Front imagined the transformative process of their cultural revolution. As Wane discovered, “Ndam” went on to be turned into a song by male Mbalax singer Omar Pène in the 1980s. It eventually made its way from the FC’s underground publishing and distribution network to the realm of popular music. Although it may be difficult to assess the impact and scale of underground and clandestine writings on the audiences they targeted, “Ndam” is an example of how it was often ultimately through popular culture that the FC’s ideas were able to take hold in Senegalese society.

<sup>72</sup> The metaphorical inference can be interpreted from the use of the verb *jállarbee*, or *jállarbi*, which means “to turn the soil upside down” or “plough the land.” In many leftist Wolof texts of the seventies, this word gains a new meaning and translates as “revolution.” Unlike other Wolof semantic neologisms of the post-independence period, *jállarbi* did not emerge into common usage, but its meaning is documented in glossaries of leftist texts of the sixties and seventies. The intentionality of the author’s word play is confirmed by the message of the second speaker in the last part of the poem.

<sup>73</sup> Cissé, *Parole chantée*, 20.

Samb's agrarian metaphor for revolution in verse 17 of the poem, "Di fexe naataange law ni sèb" ("to find a way to make prosperity grow by spreading like cowpea roots"), presciently illustrates the gradual cultural transformation the poem itself took part in. Samb's metaphor of the cowpea root system offers an episteme of cultural revolution. Also known as the black-eyed pea, the cowpea is not only a very important crop originally domesticated in sub-Saharan Africa, but it is also known for growing in harsh environmental conditions, such as regions subject to frequent drought. The metaphor of the cowpea is therefore a succinct way to connote the harsh conditions of clandestine politics, in which the revolution needed to thrive. In addition, the cowpea's long taproot is supplemented by many smaller lateral roots that spread across the surface layer of the soil.<sup>74</sup> The Wolof verb *law*, which means "to grow by spreading," emphasizes the reach of these lateral roots and the depth of its taproot.

Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, building on Dorothy Wang's *Thinking Its Presence*, suggests "approaching poems as seeds of knowledge and poets as self-reflective participants in the institutions they help to make."<sup>75</sup> Wang and Suhr-Sytsma's call for theories of poetry generated from the form, content, and authors of Asian American and African poetry resonates with Césaire's concept of "poetic knowledge," which Wilder understands as "alternative forms of reason" and therefore as epistemes in their own right.<sup>76</sup> Taking my cue from these approaches, I posit Samb's use of the cowpea root system as a way of apprehending and representing the influence of the FC's cultural revolution in both time and space, especially in the way it evokes Mao's image of the spark that can spread like a prairie fire. Indeed, Samb's metaphor foreshadows this spread, providing a name for the process by which the underground becomes mainstream. Differing from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's rhizome, which emphasizes multiplicity and nonhierarchical models, Samb's metaphor captures the way that countercultural texts and ideas influenced African youth by spreading far and wide like the roots of the cowpea.<sup>77</sup>

There is much to learn from examining the cultural underground of decolonization. Instead of focusing on the contradictions and multiple dissensions inherent in revolutionary movements, my emphasis, in this article, has been on other ways of knowing such as the metaphor of the cowpea and on the underground's contribution to examinations of overlapping temporalities of decolonization. As these movements and the renewed interest on their histories suggest, the temporality of revolution was a moment that can be resparked at any time. But the temporality of decolonization might be more like the cowpea—clandestine politics, activities, and thoughts, sustained for a long time over harsh conditions.

<sup>74</sup> A. E. Grantham, *Cowpeas* (Columbia: University of Missouri College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts Agricultural Experiment Station, 1906), 8.

<sup>75</sup> Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, "Theories of African Poetry," *New Literary History* 50, no. 4(2019): 581–607, esp. 586.

<sup>76</sup> Wilder, *Concrete Utopianism*, 29.

<sup>77</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004).

## The Times and Spaces of Anti-Imperial and “Anti-Racist Praxis”

Significant for this article is Robin J. Hayes’s theory of the “diaspora underground,” which she defines as a “geography of anti-racist praxis,” a “transnational space-time that connects Black social movement organizations, activists, and constituencies across national borders through a configuration of spaces, routes that connect these spaces, and a shared understanding of the past, present, and future.” Placing the diaspora underground at the intersection of “African independence and Black power” movements, Hayes advocates for such a diasporic form of underground organizing around antiracism and liberation as a model for future global forms of organizing.<sup>78</sup>

The cultural underground of decolonization in Africa encapsulates spaces and times of global antiracist and anti-imperial praxis. Building on Hayes, this article claims the cultural underground of decolonization as an un-institution. It is a category of cultural, social, and political inquiry that pushes against structures of domination and official institutions of state power, while offering insight into social change and the burgeoning consciousness of a generation. My emphasis on the underground as an anti-structure and an anti-systemic and anti-institutional entity, despite the very concrete forms of organizing that constitute it, is due to its nimble rather than rigid shape. Without romanticizing the underground as a category that is not bound by the same constraints as formal institutions, it is able, despite its own set of organizational and restrictive set of constraints, to experiment with new forms of expression and push boundaries in ways that would be difficult or impossible within established systems. This freedom to tinker allows for a rich diversity of voices, styles, strategies, and perspectives to emerge.

To return to the tableau with which I opened this article, the Senegalese-desired revolution, as we know, did not reach its apotheosis, but the African Independence Party left behind multiple cultural traces of its underground activities. These include translations of Marx and Engel’s *Communist Manifesto* into African languages, as well as periodicals such as *La Lutte* (“The struggle”), which tackled Pan-African issues; *Momsarew* (Own your country), which focused on local issues, and was the official party organ; *Boksareew* (“Share your country”), which proffered satirical readings of Senegalese politics; and *Defarsareew* (“Fx your country”), which offered economic and political theories from a local perspective.<sup>79</sup> I contend that these traces, like many others, warrant our attention for they encapsulate affects, epistemes, and praxes of an era whose remnants and reverberations are still perceptible today, repurposed in contemporary aesthetics and local and global politics.

As a historical category, the cultural underground of decolonization points to overlooked and silenced historical narratives of revolutionary decolonization that have shaped the landscape and trajectory of formerly colonized countries.

<sup>78</sup> Robin J. Hayes, *Love for Liberation: African Independence, Black Power, and a Diaspora Underground* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2021), 28.

<sup>79</sup> Majhemout Diop, *Mémoires de luttes: Textes pour servir à l’histoire du parti africain de l’indépendance* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 2007), 74, 109.

Rather than a peaceful linear progress toward self-determination, it emphasizes the efforts and imaginings of ordinary individuals and marginalized communities in making the world a more equitable place. Further, the cultural underground as a literary archive encodes ways in which people understood and experienced time during the decolonization era, showing how colonialism created other temporalities that disrupted but did not erase but rather overlap with ones we have come to consider as conventional. It also contains various affects, ways of knowing, and experimental aesthetics. Finally, as the movement in space and time of underground texts such as the FC's reedited anthology of poems in Wolof shows, the cultural underground has the potential to challenge narratives of postcolonial disillusionment in African literature, through their creative contemporary repurposing as traces of deferred or suspended revolutions.

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