

## “Run naked towards the sun/Raise your barricades/Make your Revolution”: Poetic Revolution and Postcolonial Discourse<sup>1</sup>

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“And now we will sing love/For there is no revolution without Love.”<sup>2</sup> When Algerian poet Jean Sénac wrote these words in January 1963 in Algiers, it had been six months since the liberation forces had marched into the city on 3 July 1962 and proclaimed the nation’s independence. Sénac’s poem “Citizens of Beauty” reveals a man still basking in the glow of a new spring. It ends somewhat ominously, however, warning that Algeria’s leaders were squandering away the country’s future, “at the cafes’ terraces our swollen monkeys/nibble at the future in between their peanuts.”<sup>3</sup> Despite the initial optimism, Sénac’s poem was a warning that the Algerian people must protect the Revolution. In 1963, like many of his fellow revolutionary poets from independent countries across Africa, Sénac was wary of declaring victory too soon. To these men and women, the political transition in power from European territorial control to independence was not enough; the Revolution would have to continue after the revolution. As Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi wrote in 1976 to his Angolan friend, poet Mario de Andrade, “the fight for liberation is not limited to territory, it is the fight for men and women, it is the fight to throw, in the same trash-can of history, colonialism and racism, and it is based in the power of the people.”<sup>4</sup> Through the 1960s and into the 1970s, Laâbi, Andrade, Sénac, and their Black and Maghribian peers rejected their states’ easy appeals to fixed national and racial solidarities (such as Pan-Africanism or *négritude*) and built instead a worldwide network of militant poets who decreed poetry, guerilla violence, and radical acts of love the crucial weapons in the struggle for the postcolonial future. Together these poets shifted the postcolonial discourse to break down the very notions of nation and race, turning their gaze inward in ways that eventually threatened political solidarity and their ideal of collective revolution.

<sup>1</sup> René Depeste, “Eros et Révolution,” *Poète à Cuba* (Paris: Editions Pierre Jean Oswald, 1976), 95.

<sup>2</sup> Jean Sénac, “Citoyens de Beauté,” *Citoyens de Beauté: Poèmes* (Charlieu: La Bartavelle, 1997), 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 15. Comparing turncoat African leaders to monkeys was common amongst the artists-militants of this period. These leaders were accused of imitating [*singer* in French] European leaders, mere copycats who preferred the comforts of collaboration to the unknowns of nonalignment. Abdellatif Laâbi, Moroccan poet, wrote a poem entitled “Les Singes électroniques,” comparing postcolonial African leaders to wind-up toys. Abdellatif Laâbi, “Les Singes électroniques,” *Souffles* 16-17, 4th Trimester (1969): 40.

<sup>4</sup> Abdellatif Laâbi, “Lettre a un ami angolais,” *Sous le Bâillon, Le Poème, Écrits de prison, 1972–1980*, (Paris: Editions l’Harmattan, 1981), 141.

## GENERATION MAGHRIB: THE MAGHRIB'S CENTRAL PLACE IN POSTCOLONIAL NETWORKS

Upon independence, the Moroccan, Algerian and Tunisian governments, intent on emerging as world leaders and unable to leverage power in the Middle East, turned south and, in an attempt to dominate the Pan-African field, offered military and financial aid to ongoing liberation struggles throughout Africa and the Americas. This official support of Black liberation struggles inspired militant artists to travel and even move to the Maghrib. Eager to escape American white supremacy, Black Americans and Caribbeans, such as beat poet Ted Joans or Haitian poet René Depestre, moved to Tangiers and Algiers, forsaking the European metropolises that had so enthralled their forefathers. Aided by the Moroccan government, Andrade and his Luso-African comrades made Rabat their home base, attracting young freedom fighters from Angola and Mozambique, and training them in military camps across Morocco. Starting in 1966, Tunis drew a host of young African filmmakers for the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage, distributing prizes to Sarah Maldoror for her movie denouncing Portuguese colonialism, *Sambizanga* (1972). In July 1969, the Algerian government threw a Pan-African fête in the streets of Algiers, inviting Nina Simone and Miriam Makeba to sing to the glory of postcolonial Algeria and Africa.<sup>5</sup>

While many of these artists were originally enthusiastic supporters of their young nations' first leaders, they quickly realized that these politicians were usurping the true revolution. Like Sénac who warned against the "swollen monkeys nibbling" away at their future, the Maghribian and foreign artists were not duped by their governments' supposed commitment to artistic freedom. They rapidly realized that political independence was not enough, that decolonization was a *longue-durée* enterprise and that the nation-state was ill fitted to lead the charge. And so, using government funds when possible, but rejecting political alliances that went against their ideals, these artists made the Maghrib a bastion for the struggle against neocolonialism and the tyranny of a state over its people. Parallel to the Maghribian states' various Pan-African projects (such as the Pan-African Festival of Algiers or the Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage), Sénac, Laâbi, Andrade, Depestre, Joans, and their peers created alternative spaces of encounter—moving away from governmental institutions, they politicized personal spaces. They met in bars, cafes, in each other's bedrooms, they published pamphlets

<sup>5</sup> Sayda Bourguiba, "Finalités culturelles et esthétiques d'un cinéma arabo-africain en devenir: Les Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage (JCC)" (PhD thesis, Université Panthéon-Sorbonne - Paris I, 2013); Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization and the Third World Order*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Brahim El Guabli, "Refiguring Pan-Africanism through Algerian-Moroccan Competitive Festivals," *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 20, no. 7: 1053–71; Samir Meghelli, "'A Weapon in Our Struggle for Liberation': Black Arts, Black Power, and the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival," in *The Global Sixties in Sound and Vision: Media, Counterculture, Revolt*, ed. Timothy Scott Brown and Andrew Lison (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Samir Meghelli, "From Harlem to Algiers: Transnational Solidarities between the African American Freedom Movement and Algeria, 1962–1978," in *Black Routes to Islam*, ed. Manning Marable and Hishaam Aidi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Elaine Mokhtefi, *Algiers, Third World Capital: Freedom Fighters, Revolutionaries, Black Panthers* (London: Verso, 2018); Ben Salama, *Alger: La Mecque des Révolutionnaires*, 56 minutes, 2016, Arte France.



FIGURE 1. *Souffles* – *Revue Culturelle Arabe du Maghreb* (property of author).

and journals, like the Moroccan literary journal *Souffles* (Figure 1), they interviewed each other on radio shows, like Sénac's *Poésie sur tous les fronts*, and filmed low-budget movies.<sup>6</sup>

#### FROM RACIAL SOLIDARITY TO AN IDEOLOGY OF RELENTLESS REVOLUTIONARY POETICS

The encounters in North Africa between Black and Maghribian artists challenged the foundations on which many believed postcolonial solidarities were based. Before traveling to the Maghrib, poets such as Andrade, Depestre and Joans articulated their ideals along the lines of racial and national solidarity. They were inspired by the poetry of the *négritude* movement; they read Leopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, and Léon Damas,

<sup>6</sup> This is the subject of the author's dissertation currently in progress at the University of Pennsylvania.

and throughout the 1950s, they searched for their own blackness.<sup>7</sup> Often this involved the pursuit of a nationally-specific *négritude*, an Angolan, Haitian or American Black identity. But as the 1950s turned to the 1960s and the leaders of the new Black nations became increasingly autocratic, the *négritude*-rendered-policy of Senghor in Senegal and Pap Doc Duvalier in Haiti became repulsive to these militant poets. As Depestre, Joans, and Andrade traveled in the Maghrib, they met Maghribian poets, such as Laâbi and Sénac, who were equally disenchanted with the new leaders of the postcolonial world. From Tangiers, Algiers, Rabat, and Tunis, they started declaring, in quasi-unison, that rigid racial solidarity was obsolete. In 1966, Depestre published an essay in *Souffles*, arguing that “separated from the historical context of the revolution in the Third-World, *négritude* became an unacceptable ‘black Zionism’ which kept the Black people away from their duty to do the revolution.”<sup>8</sup> Joans, who by 1966 had been living in the Maghrib for six years, wrote to his friend, poet André Breton, that he would not go to Dakar for what he called “*Senghor’s merde noire*” (Senghor’s Black shit), otherwise known as the First World Festival of Negro Arts, because he did not want to participate in an event where artists and poets would be “held up (financially). . . by Senghor’s black bourgeoisie gangsters assisted by the U.S.A fat-black-pussy-cat officials.”<sup>9</sup> He boycotted Dakar in his “own sweet way,” he continued, by “crossing the Sahara” to Oran.<sup>10</sup>

The Maghrib thus reshaped postcolonial cultural discourse during the 1950s, ’60s, and ’70s. Moving away from the racial solidarity extolled by many of their nationalist forefathers, these poets argued for the creation of a new ideology of continued revolution—one that was transnational, transracial and defied the new nation-states. This new ideology, articulated primarily through the arts, romanticized paramilitary action, at times even encouraging its advocates to drop the pen and to shoulder the gun. But perhaps more surprising than the devotion to violence, was the equal dedication to bringing love into the revolution. Committed to the idea that the revolution did not have to be drab, these poets labored against their states’ moral and austere injunction to fall in line. On the contrary, as Sénac noted in the opening line of this piece, “there is no revolution without Love.”<sup>11</sup>

Violence and love were no figures of speech. Eager not to be confused with elitist European poets, beatniks, or “hairy marijuana dealers,” these poets made clear that they were no mere “marchers of war and peace.”<sup>12</sup> Their intention was not to beat the “tam-tams of victory,”<sup>13</sup> to loll in the comforts of folklore and exoticism but rather to “dynamite the rotten halls of the old humanisms.”<sup>14</sup> And the lives of these poets were indeed steeped in violence. In January 1972, the writers of *Souffles* were arrested,

<sup>7</sup> In 1953, Mário de Andrade and his Sao Toman friend Francisco Tenreiro published the *cuaderno* “Poesia Negra de Expressao Portuguesa,” with the intention of publicizing a specifically Luso-African form of *négritude*. See Mario de Andrade, “Poesia Negra de Expresso Portuguesa (Cuadernos de Poesia),” May 1953, Arquivo Mario Pinto de Andrade, Fundação Mario Soares, <http://casacomum.org/cc/visualizador?pasta=04354.006.002#111>.

<sup>8</sup> René Depestre, “L’intellectuel révolutionnaire et ses responsabilités envers le Tiers-Monde,” *Souffles* 9, 1st Trimester (1968): 45.

<sup>9</sup> Ted Joans, letter to André Breton, 5 May 1966, Bibliothèque Littéraire Jacques Doucet.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Jean Sénac, “Citoyens de Beauté,”

<sup>12</sup> Abdellatif Laâbi, “Lisez ‘Le Petit Marocain,’” *Souffles* 2, 2nd Trimester (1966): 7.

<sup>13</sup> Mario de Andrade, “Culture et Lutte Armée,” *Souffles* 9, 1st Trimester (1968): 54.

<sup>14</sup> Abdellatif Laâbi, “Prologue,” *Souffles* 1, 1st Trimester (1966): 6.

tortured, and imprisoned, some, like Laâbi, for eight years. Sénac was first fired from his show on the Algerian radio, then assassinated in his apartment in August 1973, most likely for his outspokenness against the Algerian regime. Depestre was forced to flee Haiti, then Cuba, leaving behind most of his papers and a couple partners.<sup>15</sup> If their use and experience of violence was not rhetorical, neither was their mention of love. As René Depestre mandated in a poem entitled “Eros and Revolution”:

“Your gun in one hand  
Your right to orgasm in the other  
Run naked towards the sun  
Raise your barricades  
Make your revolution.”<sup>16</sup>

Poets like Depestre and Joans took this injunction quite literally, sleeping with women across the Maghrib, claiming, in doing so, to overcome the colonial barriers between Black and White Africa. In a poem entitled “My trip,” Joans described his trek across Africa, alluding to the many women he encountered. Through these women, Joans claimed to have become Moroccan, Algerian, and Tunisian. “I have been to the desert I have lived with the blue men, the Tuaregs,” he wrote, “That/was my trip/I have drank mint tea while sitting on my Harlesemese/haunches after Saharan hospitality lunches I have hitchhiked with my/fly wide open and spurted hot sperm into wide pelvic Berber women [. . .] That is my trip I have Moroccod/Algeried/Tunised.”<sup>17</sup> For Joans, sex with Maghribian women was a revolutionary act. It represented the potential to bridge the distance between Africa and America, between Black and White Africa, it allowed Joans to don a Maghribian identity. As Depestre explained to me in an interview in December 2017, “through my sexual relations in Algiers and Morocco, I discovered Arab poetry, Arab culture, the great sociologists of the past, like Avicenna.”<sup>18</sup> The unabashed hyper-sexualization that both Joans and Depestre deployed was central to their ideology—an ideology of revolutionary “love” and sexual conquest, one that, they thought, transcended the racial landscape Europe had imposed, and the national boundaries the new states dictated.

The encounters between artists in the Maghrib of the 1960s radically altered the language and reality of postcolonial networks. From a solidarity based primarily on race and hinged upon national liberation, was born a transnational movement of revolutionary poetics articulated around the use of poetry, violence and sex as tools to reclaim space from the colonial powers and the new postcolonial states. It is no coincidence that this transition happened in the Maghrib. The Maghrib’s interstitial position between the Middle East and Africa challenged pre-existing assumptions of racial solidarity and forced new forms of identification. These were expressed through a commitment to

<sup>15</sup> Kenza Sefraoui, *La Revue Souffles, 1966–1973: Espoirs de Révolution Culturelle au Maroc*, (Rabat: Editions du Sirocco, 2013); Kai Krienke, *Jean Senac, Poet of the Algerian Revolution* (PhD Diss., Graduate Center City University of New York, 2014); Rene Depestre, interview with author, 13 December 2017 in Lézignan-Corbières, France.

<sup>16</sup> René Depestre, “Eros et Révolution.”

<sup>17</sup> Ted Joans, “My Trip,” *Afrodisia*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970), 64.

<sup>18</sup> Rene Depestre, interview with author, 13 December 2017 in Lézignan-Corbières, France.

constant political and sexual revolution. Race did not matter as much as sharpness of tongue and blade, and sex was a way to bring together—quite literally—Blacks and Whites.

This ideological shift demonstrates that in the 1960s and 1970s, when historians have argued that intellectuals, politicians and artists concentrated on nation-building, a number of artists and militants from the postcolonial world ignored their state's calls to protect the nation-state and created a transnational network that in fact undermined the very foundations of these new nations. These are important narratives, as they demonstrate that the hardening of national borders, the construction of the nation-state, and the expansion of capitalism, that followed decolonization were not inevitable processes, but that people, like Joans, Andrade, Laâbi, Sénac, and Depestre fought these developments every step of the way. However, this ideological shift may be the very reason for the movement's eventual demise. Depestre and Joans traveled to the Maghrib with the aim of participating in a worldwide political project to decolonize culture and to fight state tyranny. Their personal lives were intimately intertwined with their political struggles, something that is of course inherent to the fight for postcolonial subjectivity. Through sex they argued that they better understood Africa, and that they could become truly African. Too often they substituted actual political action for the illusion that what happened between the sheets was inherently part of the struggle for continued revolution. The revolution thus became a personal project, a fact that is clear in the final line of Depestre's "Eros and Revolution": "make *your* revolution."<sup>19</sup> And so, these men "nibbled" at their future "in between their peanuts," turning their gaze inward, and at times forgetting the project of collective liberation that they had nurtured in the Maghrib.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> René Depestre, "Eros et Révolution,"

<sup>20</sup> Jean Sénac, "Citoyens de Beauté,"