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The Shadow of Shadows

Brent Hayes Edwards

In the summer of 1927, the American Civil Liberties Union lawyer Roger Baldwin wrote an article for the magazine Survey, which made a remarkable claim about the significance of Paris during the period between the two world wars. If from the U.S. vantage point the “roaring twenties” connoted an age of conspicuous consumption and summer sojourns in Europe, Baldwin contended, the period was shaped just as indelibly by the roiling political unrest in the wake of World War I, which had deposited a kind of secret history of agitation in the European metropolis. Although “Paris means a half-dozen things to Americans—fashion, sport, art, side-walk cafe life, Montmartre music-halls, the charm of a ripe old metropolitanism,” the French capital has an entirely different importance to the tens of thousands of “political outcasts” who find in it “the only safe haven of refuge in all the world.” One might have to “dig under the surface of life” to recognize it, Baldwin writes, but Paris is the “capital of the men without a country.”

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The “atmosphere of toleration” in the city drew an enormous range of refugees from dictatorships and political struggles throughout Europe: noisy clutches of Italian antifascist intellectuals, a nostalgic menagerie of Russian czarists and aristocrats, political exiles and dissidents from Spain, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Greece, and Yugoslavia. Of course, the decade also marked the high point of European colonial expansion in Africa and Asia, and Baldwin notes that the “men without a country” included “the groups of black, brown and yellow French colonials who agitate there for freedom of the colonies from French rule, just as our Filipino independence advocates agitate in the United States. But with the difference that in France they may agitate freely what it is illegal to advocate in the colonies themselves.”

Baldwin considered the scattered colored activists from the French colonies—including soldiers and workers who chose to remain or were stranded in the metropole after the war, students, artists, and drifters—to be “of far less importance in numbers and activity” than the European political exiles. But the story of the black, brown, and yellow “men without a country” constitutes an important chapter in the history of resistance to European colonialism, one written in the very center of the imperium, in the belly of the beast. My particular focus here will be not only the work of such groupings, but more specifically their interaction with one another: the intercolonial crossings and collaborations that were arguably the most extraordinary feature of the metropole.

More recently, Raymond Williams has singled out Paris in considering the role the metropolis played in the development of cultures of modernism, noting that during the interwar period in the major cities of the West, “there was at once a complexity and a sophistication of social relations, supplemented in the most important cases—Paris, above all—by exceptional liberties of expression.” What counts most for Williams is the “miscellaneity” of the modern imperial metropolis, the anonymity that allowed “small groups in any form of divergence or dissent” room to operate and experiment to a degree not possible elsewhere. For intellectuals from the colonies, though, complexity and miscellaneity meant first of all that they crossed paths with each other—whether as coworkers, neighborhood acquaintances, roommates, students, or activists in the “colonial” branches of the French Communist Party—in ways that influenced their nascent discourses of nationalism and
anticolonialism. Historian J. S. Spiegler, one of the first to consider this milieu, has argued that Paris “afforded young colonials possibilities for association with militant French intellectuals” but that “even more important was the chance for contacts with natives of other colonies.”

A number of critics have considered the exchanges and influences among writers and intellectuals of African descent in Paris. If *diaspora* is an appropriate term to describe these circuits, it is partly because it (a Greek word, arising in Jewish exilic intellectual circles, applied to a scattering of peoples from Africa and Asia) forces us to understand a context like Paris as multiple, as heterogeneous, in a manner that makes it impossible to consider any single history of migration and exile without considering “overlapping diasporas”—simultaneous, transnational patterns that influence one another.

This essay was originally framed more explicitly as an engagement of issues raised by the work of the Subaltern Studies collective of historians writing about peasant insurgency on the Indian subcontinent. The point is not to ask about the uses of “Asian” modes of knowledge production for scholarship on “African” topics. On the one hand, I hope to reassert and interrogate the description of Subaltern Studies as a collective, as a project of collaboration and historiographical “convergence.” As I understand it, collective knowledge production must remain an open question, rather than an uneasy stage to be bypassed or forgotten with the shroud of consensus, and it is in this sense that I am considering issues of collective work and circuit crossing among intellectuals attempting—in another context—to practice anti-imperialist historiography. On the other hand, I ask whether such a historiography can be pursued in a condition of what Edouard Glissant calls “detour”—outside the locus of a particular nation-state and a particular colonial dynamic. One could raise this issue with a number of examples (one thinks immediately of the work of Frantz Fanon), but here I will consider two intellectuals in Paris who are neither sycophantic parrots of imperial discourses of benevolent colonialism, nor the voices of an equally elitist emerging national bourgeoisie in their homelands. In other words, I am wondering whether it is possible to speak of a subaltern studies or a “colonial studies”—to use the phrase employed by the men themselves—that is elaborated among colonial intellectuals in the metropole, a possibility that may seem either anathema or oxymoron when juxtaposed with the
relatively “pure” oppositionality of Subaltern Studies in India. In doing so, I question the characteristic reluctance among scholars associated with Subaltern Studies (partly responding to the peculiarities of British colonialism) to consider contexts outside of India, even with regard to the emergence of figures such as M. K. Gandhi or Jawaharlal Nehru.\textsuperscript{11}

For most of the anticolonial activists from West Africa, North Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia who worked in the metropole in the post–World War I period, nationalism only arose as a discourse contiguous with the heady and ambitious internationalisms of the time. It should come as no surprise, then, that the two intellectuals I will consider here were linked both to emergent anticolonial nationalisms of the South and to emergent anticapitalist internationalisms.

My examples will be two men of almost the same age who surfaced near the end of the First World War in Paris: Lamine Senghor and Nguyen Ai Quoc (who was later to be better known as Ho Chi Minh). One, a gravely wounded, decorated Senegalese war veteran (who would die of his war wounds in 1927), living on his disability pension in the metropole, and the other, a studious drifter who had come to France after years at sea, working sporadically selling Vietnamese food, teaching Chinese, and making candles until he found a job as a photo retoucher.\textsuperscript{12} Although both read voraciously at the Bibliothèque Nationale and audited classes at the Sorbonne, neither gravitated toward the academy; both were seduced by the critique of capitalist expansion that arose with the institution of the Communist International.

Nguyen Ai Quoc, born under the name Nguyen Sinh Cung in 1890, had spent at least two years at sea before settling in France around the end of 1917. He had passed through Marseille in France, but also apparently spent time in the United States, working as a laborer and domestic servant in New York and Boston, and perhaps traveling to the South (where it is rumored that he witnessed a lynching). Biographer William Duiker conjectures that during his time in New York, he may have attended meetings of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association in Harlem, as Nguyen would claim in a number of autobiographical writings and interviews many years later.\textsuperscript{13} He “told a delegation of peace activists who were visiting Hanoi at the height of the Vietnam War that he had been strongly moved by the plight of black peoples around the world and had
contributed generously to the movement.” If such interest did not begin during his travels in the United States, it certainly blossomed during his time in France. Soon after his arrival, Nguyen Ai Quoc made contacts with syndicalists and pacifists in the metropole, and he met French socialists like Paul Vaillant-Couturier, the future legislator and editor of the Communist Party newspaper, *L’humanité* (and later, the translator of Jamaican writer Claude McKay’s 1929 novel *Banjo*). Nguyen shared a room not just with his compatriot Phan Van Truong, but also with an African: Jean Ralaimongo, a former soldier and schoolteacher from Madagascar, who was likewise leaning toward revolutionary causes. Both Nguyen and Ralaimongo would contribute articles to the newspaper *L’action coloniale*, which between the fall of 1920 and 1924 became an important forum for progressive colonial intellectuals from the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia, and in 1923, Ralaimongo founded and edited a newspaper of his own called *Le libéré* (it was subtitled “Tribune of the Malagasy People”). They often attended political speeches and debates at the Club du Faubourg, and both became involved with a group of young radicals including Max Clainville Bloncourt, a lawyer born in Guadeloupe in 1887, who had been living in the metropole since 1909 and whom at least one commentator described as “Nguyen’s most intimate friend.”

The most influential militant in these circles may have been Louis Hunkanrin (born in 1887 in Porto-Novo, Dahomey, what is now Benin), one of the first to call openly for intercolonial solidarity. In November 1920, Hunkanrin and Bloncourt founded a newspaper called *Le messager dahoméen*, which was “perhaps the first common initiative of Africans, West Indians and Malagasies.” *Le messager dahoméen* published only six issues between 1920 and 1921, and Hunkanrin’s stay in the metropole was quite brief; almost all his political activities over the subsequent decades were centered in West Africa. But for many colonial intellectuals, this return itself represented an important model of an activist attempting to move between the metropole and local African struggles. A number of the group became involved in protests over the so-called Porto-Novo incidents in 1923, when French colonial authorities crushed a small and peaceful rebellion of Dahomean notables and leaders rejecting increased taxation and conscription. Almost all of the recollections of anticolonial activism in Paris after World War I start with words associating Nguyen Ai Quoc and Louis
Hunkanrin. Max Bloncourt described Hunkanrin as being “dedicated heart and soul to the cause of his African brothers . . . A kind of mystic.” For him, Nguyen Ai Quoc was “a mystic, like Hunkanrin.” Camille Saint-Jacques, an engineer born to a middle-class Haitian family in Neuilly-sur-Seine, described Hunkanrin mainly by reputation as “dedicated, unflinching . . . by far the most remarkable man of the time,” and added: “He had that gift, like Ho-Chi-Minh (Nguyen Ai Quoc)—the need to sacrifice himself for his comrades. No self-indulgence. Together with Ho-Chi-Minh, he had the most stature of any of our militants . . . A forerunner.”

Apparently Nguyen wept on hearing that the colonial authorities in Dahomey had arrested Hunkanrin in 1921. For Bloncourt, this reaction was evidence that Hunkanrin’s example and courage served, in these activist circles in Paris, to spur “a realization of a community of fate” [une prise de conscience d’une communauté de sort].

Nguyen Ai Quoc left Paris for Moscow at the end of 1923, though his influence reverberated among colonial radicals for a number of years to come. There is a mention of “a Senegalese friend” accompanying him as he was preparing to depart; one Vietnamese, Bui Lan, recalls going to the offices of the newspaper Le paria and finding Nguyen talking with “Le camarade Seigho [sic] de l’Afrique occidentale” (comrade Senghor of West Africa).

A meteoric figure, by all accounts the most charismatic and energetic African radical during the period between the wars, Lamine Senghor was born on 15 September 1889 in Joal, Senegal. He apparently volunteered for service among the West African recruits in the French army during World War I, and was gassed in action at the front. Repatriated after the war, Senghor returned to France around 1922 and found work as a postal clerk. He moved in radical circles on his return to the metropole and later joined the Union Intercoloniale, the unit of the French Communist Party that had been formed to sponsor rebellion throughout the French colonies by training “native” propagandists.

In the spring of 1926, Senghor left the union and founded a black radical pressure group called the Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre (Committee for the Defense of the Negro Race), which brought together labor organizers and intellectuals from the Caribbean and West Africa, and published two newspapers: La voix des Nègres in early 1927, followed by La race nègre,
which continued for another decade. Shuttling between the comité in Paris, his white French wife in Fréjus, and efforts to organize black dockworkers especially in Marseille, Le Havre, and Bordeaux, Senghor was extraordinarily driven, but his war injuries caused a steady decline in his health. He was “intense, tall, thin” according to the Barbadian Richard B. Moore, who met Senghor at the Congress of the League against Imperialism in Brussels in early 1927; another activist who was there, the Algerian Messali Hadj, described him as being “afraid of the cold” and said he “seldom went out.” This did not temper the general awe at Senghor’s intelligence and skills as a public speaker. Camille Saint-Jacques called him “colorful, uninhibited,” and said that Senghor “said just what he thought.” Although he almost certainly had little or no formal schooling, acquaintances knew him, too, as an extraordinary autodidact; according to Adolphe Mathurin, he was “always trying to educate himself.”

Claude McKay, who most likely met Senghor in Marseille in 1926, wrote that “his ideas were a mixture of African nationalism and international Communism.” Senghor was arrested under mysterious circumstances in 1927 in Cannes, and imprisoned for part of the spring at Draguignan. His war injuries, already quite serious, were aggravated during the imprisonment, and he died in November 1927 at his home in Fréjus. At some point during that final year (perhaps in Brussels, where Senghor’s speech garnered a great deal of attention), Roger Baldwin was able to interview Senghor for “The Capital of the Men without a Country.” Baldwin describes a “rangy black Negro from Senegal” who “painted in sharp colors the attitude of the natives.” Senghor informed him in fiery tones that “they don’t sell us nowadays individually. They trade in us wholesale. Our people are passed from one country to another, as we were after the War, without consulting us. They say slavery has been abolished. It has only been modernized.”

**Toward an Intercolonial Internationalism**

In Senghor’s striking theorization, *modernization* has nothing at all to do with the expansion of European models of economic development and “universal civilization,” but instead is another word for the fine-tuning of an already existing system of exploitation. What I want to consider briefly are
the modes of this theorization, this critique of colonialism, as it developed among thinkers and militants like Senghor and Nguyen. Although the organizing and political protest activities of both men deserve attention, I will focus here particularly on their efforts and experiments as writers, seeking a form of knowledge production, as well as a venue of publication, appropriate to their developing anticolonial and internationalist discourses. Baldwin writes that “the native movements of protest against colonial exploitation are growing in all the French colonies, and find their reflex in Paris in an increasing number of little papers, a large pamphlet literature, public meetings arranged both by Communists and respectable middle-class intellectuals, and by a nervous vigilance on the part of the French colonial office.”

Here I will offer a reading of a small portion of that burgeoning “pamphlet literature,” along with a few articles in the many “little papers” that sprung up in these circles.

Both Nguyen and Senghor joined a collective of “native” activists organized under the aegis of the French Communist Party called the Union Intercoloniale (Intercolonial Union), which included a range of young intellectuals: the Guadeloupean Bloncourt, the Haitian Saint-Jacques, Samuel Stéphany from Madagascar, the Martinican socialist legislator Joseph Lagrosilière, Jacques Barquisseau from the island of Réunion, and the Algerian Abdelkader Hadj Ali, among others. The union was formed in 1921; Nguyen was one of the initial members, but there were not many West Africans in the group at first, and although he attended meetings earlier, Lamine Senghor would not formally join until 1924. At its origin, it numbered approximately two hundred, with headquarters located on the rue du Marché-des-Patriarches in the fifth arrondissement in Paris. As Philippe Dewitte describes it, the Union Intercoloniale was the “conjunction of diverse militant trajectories, of heteroclite political sensibilities, and of disparate, at times even opposed, national claims.”

It should be noted first of all that the Union Intercoloniale was not simply a pressure group or clearinghouse for radical work in the colonies. It was primarily conceived as the mass-organizational wing of a collective whose project also involved a certain kind of history writing. Concurrent with the union, there was established a Comité d’Études Coloniales (Colonial Studies Committee). Between about 1921 and 1924, the goal of the committee was
both to offer instruction and indoctrination to colonial activists and, more broadly, to produce a body of knowledge useful to Communist International theorization and propaganda around the so-called colonial question. The group, in a sense, was attempting to teach itself to teach a history of colonialism to the Comintern. The Colonial Studies Committee “brought French and colonial militants together, and its work was more centered on theoretical reflection, the diffusion and coordination of slogans [mots d’ordre], whereas the Union Intercolonial created in parallel was aimed only at the colonials and was called on to become a mass organization.”

In April 1922, the Union Intercoloniale also founded its own newspaper, *Le paria*, subtitled the “Tribune des Populations des Colonies,” which appeared in a monthly run of two thousand copies (later, as funding became more difficult, it appeared every two months). Apparently the association intended initially to start a “cooperative publishing house,” but turned to a periodical funded mainly by subscriptions and the monthly contributions of a small core of members. Nguyen was the driving force behind the journal, serving as editor, often drawing political cartoons and illustrations for the articles, and even wrapping it and distributing it to sellers and subscribers.

In the center of the front page in the first issue, *Le paria* included an “Appeal,” which announced the special collaborative aims of the paper: “There is, indeed, absolutely no precedent in the history of the indigenous masses of the French colonies of a newspaper created in order to proclaim their suffering and their common misery [misère], without distinction by country or race. *Le paria* is born out of the ardent communion of comrades from North Africa, French West Africa, French Equatorial Africa, Madagascar, Indochina, the Antilles, and French Guyana.” Calling itself the “manifestation of a clearly perceived collective consciousness” that the profiteers and the privileged would not abdicate their authority after the war, *Le paria* deliberately concealed to some degree its communist ties in the “Appeal.” Instead, it emphasized its ambitions as a project of producing “colonial studies”: “*Le paria* intends to denounce the political abuses, the administrative arbitrariness, the economic exploitation of which the populations of the vast overseas territories are the victims. It intends to call those populations to come together to work toward their own material and moral progress; it
intends to call them to an organization that has as its goal the liberation of
the oppressed from the forces of domination, and the realization of love and
fraternity.” In these two sentences, the call combines the goals of the Union
Intercoloniale (as a mass organization) and the Comité d’Études Coloniales
(as a forum to produce a critique of colonialism).

The Union Intercoloniale encountered extreme difficulty in attempting to
distribute the journal in the French colonies, where mail was intercepted and
natives were detained if *Le paria* was found in their possession. According
to Adolphe Mathurin, the paper often recruited African sailors as “post-
men and newspaper distributors” who would clandestinely deliver copies
to southern ports. In terms of Vietnamese readers, Nguyen Ai Quoc would
write later that

We sold the newspaper to Vietnamese workers who could not read
French; however, they liked to buy the paper because they knew it was
anti-West and, after they purchased it, they would have French workers
read it to them. Also, there were places in Paris where we could sell the
paper and earn a profit. Because we were all comrades, they sold the paper
for us and took no money in return so they sold quite a few papers because
practically every *Le Paria* printed was purchased by the French Ministry
of Colonies.  

It is not difficult to find works by intellectuals of the so-called peoples with-
out history in this period that are modeled explicitly on the fact-based util-
itarianism and ideological rigidity required in institutionalized Comintern
modes of knowledge production. Examples would include George Pad-
more’s stylistically turgid (albeit statistically impressive) 1931 *The Life and
Struggles of Negro Toilers*, and perhaps even Claude McKay’s more idiosyn-
cratic 1923 *The Negroes in America*, written at the behest of the Comintern
when McKay was visiting Moscow and published in Russian translation.
Although early work by Nguyen and Senghor hones largely to the party line,
either can easily be characterized as entirely committed to these models.
Nguyen’s best-known work from this period, the book *Le procès de la coloni-
sation française* [French colonialism on trial]—published after he left Paris,
but almost entirely composed of articles he wrote for Paris newspapers (es-
specially *Le paria*) in the early 1920s—would at first appear to be a work in this
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vein: a lengthy compendium of French colonial abuses and a call for revolution in the colonies. But instead of a proletarian internationalism or an Annamese nationalism, Nguyen’s collection offers a remarkable “intercolonial” approach. The book employs a number of examples of colonial exploitation from Africa, especially Dahomey, and the rhetoric strives constantly to find links between the situation of black, brown, and yellow indigènes (natives). It opens: “Before 1914, they were only dirty niggers and dirty Annamese [ils n’étaient que de sales nègres et de sales Annamites], at best good only for pulling rickshas and receiving blows from our administrators. With the declaration of the joyful new war, they became the ‘dear children’ and ‘brave friends’ of our paternal and tender administrators and governors.” *Le procès* describes Africans as “Batoulas,” alluding to the title of the 1921 novel by Martinican René Maran (which was controversial for the criticisms of French colonialism in its preface), and the book even quotes a letter from a former soldier from Dahomey complaining about forced conscription in the war. Moreover, the book concludes by reproducing the 1922 manifesto of the Union Intercoloniale.

If neither the Comité d’Etudes Coloniales nor the writings of Nguyen Ai Quoc fit the model of communist knowledge production seamlessly, it might be possible to read the work of Nguyen and Senghor (and the way their projects approach each other) as a kind of limit case or horizon to an emergent Comintern discourse of internationalism. This is especially true of the ways in which both challenge the international’s failure to pursue a consistent “colonial policy” and to support with the requisite commitment the conditions of possibility of socialist revolution in the colonized world. As the Comité d’Etudes Coloniales put it in 1921, “the study of colonial questions must comprise, from now on, an integral part” of the project of the Third International, “the Communist Revolution having a goal that is not only European but also worldwide [mondiale].”

Even as the Comité d’Etudes Coloniales was founded, French party members were still discussing the possibility of revolution in the colonies with disdain and barely disguised racism, one circular claiming to observe an “almost general inaptitude of the natives to emancipate themselves. They have no revolutionary past; in many colonies, they are used to servitude and do not conceive yet of the possibility of being delivered from it.” A Russian article
published in Izvestia in November 1922 shares a similar bias, arguing that in the African colonies, "the Communist International is disturbing virgin terrain here [trouble ici un terrain vierge]. It is true that in general the degree of intellectual development among the Negroes [Nègres] is quite low, but it must not be forgotten that they are excessively exploited and that they live in horrific conditions."36

Nguyen and other members of the union battled constantly against such prejudice. In one of his early articles in L’humanité, Nguyen castigates the habitual "indifference" of the metropolitan worker to conditions in the colonies:

In his theses on the colonial question, Lenin clearly stated that "the workers of colonizing countries are bound to give the most active assistance to the liberation movements in subject countries." To this end, the worker of the mother country must know what a colony really is; he must be acquainted with what is going on there, and with the suffering—a thousand times more painful than his—endured by his brothers, the proletarians in the colonies. In a word, he must take an interest in this question.37

Here, Nguyen shrewdly uses Lenin’s 1920 “Theses on the National and Colonial Questions” to place the burden of anticolonialism squarely on the shoulders of the often oblivious, if not racist, metropolitan proletariat.38 More important, Nguyen’s reflections lead directly to a call for the work of the Union Intercoloniale, emphasizing the necessity of producing knowledge and scholarship on the situation in the colonies. “Faced with these difficulties, what must the Party do?” the article asks in conclusion, and offers the following answer: “Intensify its propaganda to overcome them” [Intensifier sa propagande pour les vaincre]. This solution hinges on the work of the Comité d’Etudes Coloniales itself, the only unit in the party intended to inform the metropolitan proletariat “what a colony really is.”39

In the end, the Union Intercoloniale disintegrated in the middle of the decade around precisely these issues, particularly after the violent revolts led by Abd el-Krim in Morocco in 1925, when the West African members began to sense that the Comintern was more interested in Indochina and North Africa. Lamine Senghor was pressured to run for office in Paris under the Communist banner, but then was given little support for his campaign in
the Salpêtrière section of Paris (in the thirteenth arrondissement). When he was soundly defeated in the first round of voting, Senghor felt he was being used as a *faire-valoir* (stooge), a means for the party to claim it was supporting black candidates. The last straw was the American Negro Worker’s Congress held in Chicago that fall: the party agreed to send Bloncourt and Senghor as representatives, but asked them to pay their own way—going so far as to ask Senghor to work as a sailor or to stow away in order to make the trip across the Atlantic. Although he remained committed to communism, Senghor subsequently strove to build a black organization that would maintain ties with the party from a position of autonomy. At the beginning of 1926, he left the Union Intercoloniale and formed the Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre, while at the same time other independent colonial groupings, the Etoile Nord-Africaine and the Annamese Independence Party, were established by North African and Vietnamese militants, respectively.

The work of the Union Intercoloniale in the early 1920s to theorize anti-imperialism from a foundation of solidarity and shared interests among the colonies in the French empire represents what Edward Said has called an “adversarial internationalization.” This is true in part because the Union Intercoloniale aimed at a difficult collective project: a historiography—a writing that tells “what a colony really is”—that would be anticolonialist and internationalist at the same time, in a manner sometimes significantly discrepant with a Comintern proletarian internationalist teleology. The adversarial quality is rooted in the refusal of activists such as Nguyen and Senghor to countenance a “universal” class consciousness that would forget the constitutive links between imperialism and racialized and gendered forms of exploitation.

Of course, the writings emanating out of the Union Intercoloniale and the Comité d’Etudes Coloniales are extremely varied, as members strove to combine these elements into a theoretically sound discourse of mass appeal. For example, one circular calling on colonial “compatriots” to join the Union Intercoloniale, signed by Nguyen, notes that

this Union has as its goal to group and to guide the colonials living in France; [and] to illuminate those who are living in the colonies about
things in France, toward the goal of solidarity; to discuss and to study all questions of colonial policy and economy.

[Cette Union a pour but de grouper et de guider les coloniaux habitant en France; d’éclairer sur les choses de France ceux qui sont aux colonies, dans le but de solidarité; de discuter et d’étudier toutes les questions de politique et d’économie coloniale.]^{13}

In this ambiguous phrasing, solidarity would seem to point in at least three directions. On the one hand, it indicates an international working class consciousness. But it also seems to refer to an alliance between metropole and colony (between “colonials living in France” and “those who are living in the colonies”). And perhaps most pointedly, it alludes to the mutual support of colonial natives (between one colony and another), precisely to an intercolonial union.

In December 1922, the Comité d’Etudes Coloniales composed an appeal “Aux Indigènes des Colonies” [To the natives of the colonies], self-described as a “tract to be reproduced in native languages and distributed everywhere” [tract à reproduire dans les langues indigènes et à répandre partout].^{44} Here, the theorization goes in an entirely different direction, in an appeal authored in the voice of “the communists in the metropole” and addressed to “native workers.” It opens: “Native workers! The communists of the metropole are aware of your sufferings” [Travailleurs indigènes! Les communistes de la métropole se rendent compte de vos souffrances], and it attempts to theorize the particular situation of the worker in the colonies, a question on which the Comintern still did not have a firm policy: “You are doubly exploited: as workers and as natives. Your masters, come from the metropole, are not acting alone. The powerful men of your country, the big landowners and bosses, wanting to conserve their riches and their authority, ally themselves with the administration, the colonizers, and the European Companies in order to take advantage of you.” This theory of “double exploitation” attempts to push toward a proletarian internationalism while taking stock of the exploitation peculiar to colonialism. At the same time, the language here refuses to mention other issues of “identity”—exploitation based on race, ethnicity, or gender, for instance—beyond the reference to “native” status (which remains somewhat vague, since the “powerful men of your country”
are of course “natives” as well). The appeal goes on to instruct its audience that not everyone who lives in the metropole is rich and powerful and that in France, too, there are “men who have nothing, who work to live” under the authority of the same exploiters. “Having a little more freedom than you [Ayant un peu plus de liberté que vous],” the Appeal continues, “we have been able to come together to struggle against our masters, and we are preparing to overthrow them [les renverser]” by forming “a great Communist Party” that “struggles for the deliverance of all workers.” It is left unclear here, of course, just what “having a little more freedom than you” means, as is the precise manner in which that universalist figure of “un grand Parti Communiste” would take into account the double exploitation of a large portion of the workers of the world.

Unfortunately we do not know the origins of the title of the Union Intercoloniale newspaper, *Le paria*, but one wonders whether the phrase was chosen in order to point at such an analysis of “double exploitation.” As Claude Liauzu has pointed out, the term is ambiguous, as the *pariah* or the *outcast* could seem to connote either a “willfully sordid populism” [un populisme volontiers misérabiliste], or on the contrary, a “state of rebellion” among those that society excludes—or put differently, it points either to a “demand for integration into civil society” or to a “rejection of its norms.”

Another way to read this ideological diversity and flux, though, is to note that *Le paria* in particular and the Union Intercoloniale in general were above all concerned to *translate*, to move beyond barriers of nation and language toward an internationalist register. As Samuel Stéphany put it in one letter requesting subscriptions from correspondents in Africa, “In the interest of justice, truth, and progress, the factitious distance that seems to separate you must be abolished [il faut supprimer la distance factice qui semble vous séparer]. *Le Paria* is the first newspaper that will have as its goal to accomplish this task.”

This is reflected in the title page of the journal itself, where the title *Le paria* appears not just in French, but also in Arabic and Vietnamese—although interestingly, the Vietnamese (*Lao dong bao*) makes simply for a generic name: “workers’ paper.” One might extrapolate from this imperative in the journal a broader point about knowledge production: for the Union Intercoloniale, the work of colonial studies must not be circumscribed by a
nationalist identitarianism. Historiographic practice must be the ground of any possible collective, any possible intercolonialism.

Such a position is demonstrated on the one hand in terms of literal translation, as when *Le paria* published articles taken from English-language newspapers about the Pan-African congress meetings in Lisbon in 1923, or excerpted a selection from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in discussing racism in the United States. But it also has an impact especially on Nguyen Ai Quoc's version of colonial studies: it is part of the reason for his remarkable and detailed work throughout this period in articles on colonialism in Africa, on Marcus Garvey, and even on lynching and racialized violence in the United States.

This impulse to translate in the broadest sense also influences the work of Lamine Senghor a few years later. As I mentioned earlier, in February 1927 Senghor attended the inaugural meeting of the League against Imperialism in Brussels. The German Marxist Willi Münzenberg had organized the congress, whose discussions of colonial independence attracted a wide range of activists, including Jawaharlal Nehru, Messali Hadj, Richard B. Moore, Roger Baldwin, the Puerto Rican José Vasconcellos, and the South Africans J. T. Gumede and J. A. La Guma. Senghor had just quit the Union Intercoloniale, and he introduced himself as the representative of the Comité de Défense de la Race Nègre. Still, his speech at the congress—calling explicitly for an Afro-Asian solidarity with an appeal to the Chinese delegates—remained very much in the intercolonial paradigm of the alliance. It was highly influential at the gathering, and widely reprinted. In the middle of his speech, Senghor performed intercolonialism, breaking a litany of French colonial abuses to address the Chinese delegates directly, in a gesture of solidarity:

My fellow countrymen were led off to slaughter during the first Morocco war. Later, during the World War, they were again forced to serve. Afterwards and still to-day, they were killed and they are still being killed in Morocco and in Syria. Blacks [nègres] are being sent to Madagascar; blacks are being sent to Indochina because that country borders on China, which gives it an excellent revolutionary example.

Addressing himself to the Chinese delegates, Senghor says to them:
I would like to embrace you, comrades, because you give a good revolutionary example to all the peoples suppressed under the colonizers’ yoke. I only hope that they will all take inspiration from your revolutionary spirit. . . .

The French imperialists have sent blacks to Indochina, commanding them to shoot upon the Indochinese if they revolt against French colonization. They tell them that they are not of their race, and that they must kill them if they revolt against the so-called Motherland [Mère Patrie].

Comrades, the blacks have slept too long. But beware! He who has slept long and soundly, once he has awakened will not fall asleep again.51

It is above all in translation, in crossing boundaries, only in what Raymond Williams terms a community “of their own practices,” that the Union Intercoloniale finds the foundation of the internationalism they strive to articulate.52 This sensibility is not distant from Richard Wright’s reaction on first reading Marx and Lenin: “It was not the economics of Communism, not the great power of trade unions, not the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole.”53

Performing the Archive

It should be noted that like Senghor’s gesture mid speech, the interventions favored by Union Intercoloniale intellectuals were to a large extent performative, extending the robust Marxist dramatic metaphors of world historicism onto the stage of sectarian policy debate. For instance, at the 1924 Fifth Congress of the Communist International in Moscow, the black delegate, a militant young lawyer from Guadeloupe named Joseph Gothon-Lunion, contrived to be photographed sitting in the traditional throne of the Russian czars. The photo was reproduced widely in the French press, causing much consternation. The magazine *L’illustration* called it “truly symbolic,” a “singular warning” [singuier avertissement] from the “echoes” of the congress, and mocked the “Babel in Moscow,” noting that among the “improvised ambassadors” from the colonies, “Comrade Lunion and Comrade
Nguyen-Ai-Aouka [sic] rivaled each other in the vehemence of their indictments of France.”

Perhaps the best example of such performativity came in December 1920, when Nguyen Ai Quoc was the Indochinese delegate—the only Asian delegate, in fact—at the conference at Tours, during which the French Socialist Party heatedly debated whether to align itself with the Third International and the Bolshevik Revolution. He spoke for more than ten minutes about the abuses of French colonialism in Vietnam: “Comrades, I would have liked to come here today to collaborate with you in the work of worldwide revolution, but it is with the greatest sorrow and the deepest desolation that I come here today as a socialist to protest against the abominable crimes committed against my country of origin.” As Nguyen called for the party to “take effective action in favor of oppressed natives,” enumerating a litany of colonial violence and exploitation, one delegate interrupted him, objecting to the suggestion that the party had not defended the natives’ interests. Identifying Nguyen Ai Quoc only as “Le Délégué d’Indochine,” the official transcript reads:

—Jean Longuet: I have worked to defend the natives!

—Indochinese Delegate: When I began, I imposed the dictatorship of silence [J’ai imposé, en commençant, la dictature du silence]. (Laughter) The Party must undertake socialist propaganda in all the colonies. We see in the adhesion to the Third International the formal promise of the Socialist Party at last to give colonial questions the importance they deserve.

The joke, playing with the phrase dictatorship of the proletariat, is amusing enough, especially when one knows that Jean Longuet was Karl Marx’s grandson. But I would argue that this moment also performs a crucial critical point. In speaking, Nguyen Ai Quoc imposes the “dictatorship of silence” to talk about the “colonial question”—precisely what has been silenced in the discourse of the debate up to that point. And if a “dictatorship of silence” claims universality, like a “dictatorship of the proletariat,” Nguyen is also adding that the silence remains absolute: that in a sense, his intervention cannot be heard in that context.
In a larger sense, the indispensable point about this kind of performativity is that it demonstrates an especial sensitivity to issues of inscription: the ways a voice is transcribed, the ways an individual is inscribed into the archive. Writing about this issue in the context of subaltern studies work, Gayatri Spivak notes the paradox in that “it is only the texts of counter-insurgency or élite documentation that give us the news of the consciousness of the subaltern.”

History writing, then, is sometimes a matter of reading what Ranajit Guha calls “an image caught in a distorting mirror,” while other scholars associated with subaltern studies turn to an aural metaphor, like Dipesh Chakrabarty, who suggests that “the ruling-class documents often used for historical reconstructions of working-class conditions can be read both for what they say and for their ‘silences.’” In terms of the French empire at least, this issue proves as pressing with regard to insurgency in the metropole as with regard to unrest in the colonies. The main source of information on the Union Intercoloniale is a section of the Archives Nationales gathered from 1916 to 1954, which falls under the acronym SLOTFOM (Service de Liaison avec les Originaires des Territoires Francaises d’Outre-Mer). This archive includes correspondence between the ministry and the governors of the various colonies aiming at coordination of policy; monthly syntheses on “revolutionary activity” prepared by the ministry; postal interceptions; collections of “insurgent” tracts; newspapers, journals, and propaganda; and most important, a collection of surveillance reports by infiltrators using code names, who recorded the movements of suspected agitators with a religious perseverance.

The surveillance unit, which generally tracked the movement of “natives” who had remained in the metropole after the war, would in 1923 be graced with the ironic moniker the Service de Contrôle et d’Assistance en France des Indigènes des Colonies (CAI).

Of course, militant activists like Nguyen Ai Quoc and Lamine Senghor were well aware of the surveillance. Both entered seemingly abruptly into prominence when the French state identified them as agitators: Nguyen Ai Quoc through his publication of an eight-point platform titled the “Revendications du Peuple Annamite” [Demands of the Annamese people] in L’humanité in June 1919, and Lamine Senghor through his testimony as a war veteran [ancien tireur sénégalais] at a 1924 trial when the newspaper Les continents (founded by the Dahomean Kojo Tovalou Houénou and
the Martinican René Maran) was sued for libel after criticizing Senegalese legislator Blaise Diagne’s role in forced conscription in West Africa during World War I.59

How does one take into account the modes of the surreptitious encounter between the state and the colonial “alien” insurgent? It operates in a discursive space within the archive that constitutes an emergent site for what one might term a dissonant historiography, an “attempt to forge a practice,” in Spivak’s crucial distinction, a historiography that could take into account the general “failure” in “attempts to displace discursive fields”—which one might go so far as to call the condition of the archive.60 Might one analyze, in other words, something like a practice of inhabiting the archive—manipulating an unavoidable inscription of a “subject-effect” called a “suspicious character” or “agitator”—as precisely a practice of a historiography?

The biographer William Duiker has recently claimed that Nguyen Ai Quoc’s writing is “pedestrian and heavy-handed,” adding that “his articles had no subtlety. Relying heavily on facts and figures to make his point, he appeared to his readers to be a walking statistical dictionary on life in the colonies—from the level of capitation taxes in the Ivory Coast to the colonial budget for French Indochina.”61 I am less convinced, particularly given a shrewd and subtle intervention in the writings into the ways “Nguyen Ai Quoc” was inscribed into an overarching and hostile imperial archive. It should not be forgotten that the name itself was an invention, a pseudonym he chose deliberately when he settled in Paris.62 Nguyen, the family name of the period’s imperial dynasty, was also the most common last name in Annam; ai is a prefix that indicates affection; and Quoc means “country”: the pseudonym is usually translated simply as “Nguyen the Patriot.”63 As the French colonial authorities were scrambling to figure out whom this strange name referred to—indeed, wondering if the man actually existed—Nguyen himself was toying with their surveillance, both in writing and in person.

In June 1922, Albert Sarraut, the French minister of colonies and the former governor-general of Indochina, took the extraordinary measure of inviting Nguyen to his offices for an interview. Sarraut expressed his admiration for the young man’s willpower, but then told him brusquely that anyone planning to disrupt French colonialism in Indochina would be “crushed,” and finally switched tactics again, offering that “If you happen to want
anything, I am always at your service.” Nguyen replied: “The main thing in my life and what I need most of all is freedom for my compatriots,” and walked out. The incident led to one of his best-known publications, an “An Open Letter to M. Albert Sarraut,” which was reprinted in *Le paria, L’humanité*, and *Le journal du peuple* at the end of the summer. Addressing Sarraut as “Your Excellency,” the letter opens with an ornate flood of false praise: “We know very well that your affection for the natives of the colonies in general, and the Annamese in particular, is great.” Nguyen Ai Quoc singles out Sarraut’s role in establishing a state archive of colonial control—particularly through endless surveillance. He writes:

You have created in Paris itself a service having the special task—with special regard to Indo-China, according to a colonial publication—of keeping watch [surveiller] on the natives living in France.

But “keeping watch” alone seemed insufficient to Your Excellency’s paternal compassion, and you wanted to do better. That is why for some time now, you have granted each Annamese—dear Annamese, as Your Excellency says—private assistants [aides-de-camp].

Though still novices in the art of Sherlock Holmes, these good people are very devoted and particularly friendly. We have only praise to bestow on them and compliments to pay to their boss, Your Excellency.

Ludicrously and hilariously, Nguyen Ai Quoc goes on to decline this “service,” saying that “it would seem to us antipatriotic” to accept aides-de-camp “at a time when Parliament is trying to save money.” But there is a simple solution:

If Your Excellency absolutely insists on knowing what we do every day, nothing is easier: we shall publish every morning a bulletin of our movements, and Your Excellency will have but the trouble of reading.

Besides, our time-table is quite simple and almost unchanging. Morning: from 8 to 12 at the workshop. Afternoon: in newspaper offices (leftist of course) or at the library. Evening: at home, 9, impasse Compointe in the seventeenth arrondissement of Paris, or attending educational talks. Sundays and holidays: visiting museums or other places of interest. Voilà!
Hoping that this convenient and rational method will give satisfaction to your Excellency, we beg to remain etc.\(^{65}\)

This can only be termed, I think, an epistemological irruption, a moment that inscribes consciousness (and sarcasm, and evasion) into the very archive itself. The very rationalism of Nguyen’s schedule critiques the irrationality and overkill of colonial surveillance. One should remember Spivak’s qualification that “the subaltern is necessarily the absolute limit of the place where history is narrativized into logic.”\(^{66}\) I am merely suggesting the existence of a certain “wiggle-room,” a certain discursive malleability, at that point of irruption, which constitutes and subtly operates a shift in the archive itself, even as it marks the receding of a limit of narrativization that we name the “militant” or the “subversive.”\(^{67}\)

**Literary Experimentation and Intercolonialism**

In a recent consideration of the poetics of Rabindranath Tagore, Dipesh Chakrabarty has offered a brilliant attempt to theorize what he terms a “non-totalizing concept of the political.” He reexamines Tagore’s understanding of the word *imagination*, suggesting that “we often bring under the jurisdiction of this one European word” a number of “heterogenous practices of seeing,” and that that very multiplicity or diversity has a great deal to do with the sense of the political in Tagore’s writing. “To breathe heterogeneity into the word ‘imagination,’” Chakrabarty argues, “is to allow for the possibility that the field of the political is constitutively not singular.”\(^{68}\) Stylistically, Tagore relies on a somewhat romantic “division of labor” between a historicist and objectivist “prose” register that “spoke of poverty, ill health, factionalism, ignorance, casteism, ‘feudal’ oppression, and so on” and a “poetic” register, which hung “outside of historical time” and was for that reason the only mode in which “nationalist sentiments” regarding Bengal could be expressed. Around 1920, Tagore begins experimenting with a new form called *gadyakabita* or prose-poetry (or “rhythmic prose” in his own phrase), which combined the two registers to create an effect where the poetic broke into prose to serve as “that which, in the middle of the everyday, helped to transport one to the level of the transcendental,” to “pierce the veil
of the real” with *darshan* or “divine sight.”60 In Chakrabarty’s reading, such a mixed genre or formal heterogeneity in portraits of labor in contemporary Bengal functioned as a literary strategy precisely because it “interrupted one definition of the political—the one that aligned the political with the realist and the prosaic—to introduce unannounced the political charge that only poetry could deliver. It thus made the political effective by making it not-one.”70

I will argue in what follows that one encounters a remarkably similar aesthetic strategy in the prolific and multigenre writings of Nguyen Ai Quoc and Lamine Senghor in the same period. On the one hand, the argument that it may be possible to hear consonance between modernist literary innovation in the European metropole among migrants from the colonies and literary innovation in the cities of the South—echoes or strategic parallels between Paris and Calcutta—may perhaps appear surprising. It is on the other hand a perhaps even more surprising argument that literary innovation—and efforts in fiction in particular—play an indispensable role in the development of a number of anticolonial militants’ sense of politics.

As I have written elsewhere in more detail about Lamine Senghor’s writing, I will concentrate here particularly on the work of Nguyen Ai Quoc, who may well stand as the most important and prodigious writer in radical circles in Paris during the first part of the 1920s, publishing a torrent of wide-ranging articles not only in *Le paria* but also in *L’humanité*, *Le journal du peuple*, *La voix ouvrière*, *Le libertaire*, *Clarté*, and *L’action coloniale*.71 Remarkably quickly, by the beginning of 1922, Nguyen Ai Quoc had established an expressly anticolonial, satiric style, largely defining what J. S. Spiegler terms “the characteristic Union Intercoloniale ‘documentary’ style” in *Le paria*, which consisted most often of articles composed “of a continuous series of anecdotes: accounts of incidents of colonial barbarity and atrocities couched in violent terms, interspersed with short, often bitterly ironic comments.”72 There are a number of little masterpieces of parody, essays such as “Ménagerie,” and the exquisite “Zoologie” in the second issue of *Le paria*, which notes that a new “animal species” has just been discovered, one of which even Darwin was unaware. After a long description of the animal’s physical characteristics, Nguyen writes:
Some of its useful characteristics are superior to those of our domestic beasts. Once tamed, it lets itself be sheared like a sheep, loaded up like a donkey, and sent to the butcher like a calf. It is of an extreme fascinatibility: if one individual is taken, the biggest or strongest of the herd, and a brilliant substance like a gold piece or a cross is hung about its neck, it becomes utterly docile, and then one can make it do absolutely anything and go absolutely anywhere, and the others follow . . . like beasts, if I may put it in such terms.

Summing up the description, the punch line names this “animal-phenomenon” under the generic name of “Native of the Colonies” [*Coloniae Indigena*] and adds an extra bite in a postscript, recording that “our colleague, the knowledgeable naturalist De Partout” had just identified a specimen appearing to be related to the just discussed phenomenon: its scientific name was “the Proletariat.” As the colleague’s name is De Partout (lit., “From Everywhere”), the satire closes not just with a jibe in pseudoscientific jargon at the beastly treatment of the “native” under French colonialism; it also points toward the universalism that would be able to locate the native and the proletariat under the same banner of internationalism—but interestingly prefers to move in that direction only in the register of satire, rather than that of the solid mass appeals of the Union Intercoloniale.

The same month, Nguyen Ai Quoc published two remarkable documents in *L’humanité*. They appeared at the bottom of the page, under the seldom used heading “Contes et Récits” [Stories and tales], and both were titled “Paris (Extrait de Lettres à ma cousine).” In a subtitle, the articles were identified as selections “translated from Vietnamese by the author” [*traduit de l’annamite, par l’auteur*] from a manuscript entitled *Letters to My Cousin*. There is no evidence that such a manuscript exists, or that the articles are in fact translations. What is important is that Nguyen with this gesture *frames* his work in a particular manner: as a first-person narrative (in the sense of a *récit* in French); as a serial epistolary work; as an intimate composition negotiating a condition of exile (a man in the metropole writing back home to his female cousin); perhaps as a somewhat distanced or mediated mode of expression (a translation from a mother tongue). The “Letters to My Cousin” flirt with the genre of autobiography, obviously, but there is no
particular reason to assume that Nguyen Ai Quoc is describing events in his own life.

Both letters describe the neighborhood in Paris where the narrator lives. The first focuses on the areas around the Arc de Triomphe, including the middle-class Quartier des Batignolles and the working-class neighborhood called the Epinettes. The second is set in the soup kitchen in the Epinettes that the narrator “is obliged to pass by on the way to my atelier.” Usually he shares a laugh with the old men waiting in front of the soup kitchen (one, rubbing his hands together and stamping his feet against the cold, tells him: “You see, we’ve got our own central heating!”) and continues on his way. He notices one cleanly dressed man in particular, always standing in the back of the line, and one day invites the old man to have a meal. The Frenchman, a former sailor (who in his voyages had traveled to Saigon and Haiphong) says he is destitute and miserable: during the war, his two sons died in the fighting, and his house was bombed, killing his wife and daughter. “Every time you pass by in front of me,” he says, “a profound sorrow overtakes me, and I want to cry. I understand your surprise, but here’s why: seeing you, I think of my younger son, whom I lost in the war. He was about your age.” The old man, overwhelmed in recounting his story, rails against the indiscriminate horrors of war:

You see, my dear sir, the war, this accursed war killed everything I had, my happiness, my home, the wife I loved, and the children I cherished, and here I am living off public charity after so many years of work and suffering. Who knows, yes, who knows whether my poor Albert isn’t the one who sleeps today beneath the Arc de Triomphe! He wiped away a large tear, trembling, took up the glass I had just filled, and said to me, “À la vôtre, monsieur.”

It is a subtle conclusion: for if the young Annamese narrator reminds the old sailor of his son, then metonymically the “native” likewise is positioned (and toasted, sentimentally) as a possible representative of the nation, as anonymous and universal as the body that lies in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

In June 1922, Nguyen Ai Quoc published another text under the “Contes et Récits” rubric, a kind of dream story or fable titled “Les lamentations
de Trung-Trac” that was written, according to a note, on the occasion of a visit to France by Khai Dinh, the emperor of Annam. It recounts a strange nightmare that bedevils the sovereign: he is visited by a ghost named Trung-Trac, an ancient patriot and soldier, who berates the emperor for his cowardice and his acquiescence to foreign domination of Annam. The ghost runs through a whirlwind nationalist history lesson:

Open the history of your country and you will find in the persons of your predecessors examples of virtue and courage, of character and dignity. Ly-Bon (544) with a rebellious fist rose up and broke the yoke of Chinese domination. Ngô-Quuyên (938) defeated the foreign army that was invading the ground of our fatherland. . . Look, look then, unhappy child, look around you. Do you see China awakening, Japan modernizing itself, Siam living in independence? Do you see that the whole world is advancing and that only your people sink down, thanks to you and your ministers, into the miserable pit of ignorance and slavery!

In a conte, in a dream, Nguyen Ai Quoc finds a venue for an explicit nationalism that does not otherwise surface in his writing, even in his scathing anticolonial political articles in the period.

In the same L’humanité column in August, Nguyen Ai Quoc published the most striking of his efforts, another récit titled “L’Enfumé” [The one who was smoked out]. The tale starts with a dedication (“À Nahon, assassiné par le militarisme colonial, je dédie ce récit”) to an Algerian “native” brutally murdered by a French colonial military officer named Vidart. Nguyen had written an anecdotal article about the incident the month before. So the turn to fiction starts off from the ground of the historical, from one of the daily atrocities of colonialism. There is also an epigraph, credited to his old nemesis, Albert Sarraut: “Most of our great military leaders have learned combat in the conquest of the colonial empire; they have led us to victory, and French opinion celebrates their glory when they carry our flags under the skies of Africa and Asia.” Then, unusually, a setting and date, indicated before the first line of text: “Haoussas, janvier 1998.” One reads this marker and reads it again. The story is Nguyen Ai Quoc’s first—and to my knowledge, only—effort at futuristic speculative fiction. “L’enfumé”
is set nearly seventy-five years into the future, just before the dawn of the millennium.

The story proper opens with a paragraph describing Haoussas:

The city of Haoussas was triumphantly decorated with banners. One would have said that a spring fairy had touched the dry wood paneling of the balconies and windows with her magic wand, causing innumerable red leaves, now flapping gracefully in the wind, to grow there. It was the fiftieth anniversary of the African Federative Republic. Never before had the people participated to such a degree in similar ceremonies. Since the morning, the streets and squares had been like a human river. Processions of schoolchildren, waving flags before them, moved through the city singing the Internationale to the applause of the population. On the Place des Soviets, an old man was holding forth before the crowd. It was Papa Kimengo, nicknamed l’Enfumé.

This opening can only be described as stunning: Nguyen Ai Quoc’s tale imagines the future victory (in 1948!) of a communist revolution, but the setting is neither Europe, where Nguyen is writing, nor Indochina, his own place of birth. Instead, the revolution is situated in Africa, in what appears to be a Pan-African vision of an “African Federative Republic.”

Kimengo is described as a nonagenarian with a “magnificent crown” of white hair, a “former fighter in the revolutionary army, one of the founders of la République noire.” With a “particularly perceptive intelligence,” the old man had not only “done everything to awaken his brothers of color from the deep sleep of the slave” [tout fait pour réveiller ses frères de couleur du profond sommeil de l’esclave], but also “worked hard to destroy all prejudices of nationality and of race, and to unite the exploited of all colors in the common struggle.” Papa Kimengo is one of the rare men who have lived through “the great difficulty of sowing seed and the great joy of reaping the harvest.” In other words, the story is constructed around a man who has lived through the independence moment; it imagines the “other side” of revolution. In the midst of the anniversary celebrations, Kimengo is instructing the crowd about the peculiarities of the past. The narrator recounts:
We arrived while he was already in the middle of his speech, and here is what we heard:

“... The words that we old men were used to hearing and pronouncing no longer exist in our vocabulary. And so much the better. When we speak of a court, the police, the army, prison, taxes, few of you understand what it all means.”

Kimengo says that the republic was formerly a French colony, where the “rich” were “the people who had everything, but had done nothing,” and the “poor” were “the people who had done everything but had nothing.” There was a “blood tax” [impôt de sang], which meant that the poor had to go to war when the rich didn’t get along with one another, and a “money tax” [impôt de l’argent], which meant that the poor had to turn over all the products of their labor to the rich. The “white capitalists” who had colonized the people wanted to make them pay taxes, even though they had nothing to give.

Papa Kimengo fled into the woods with more than two hundred others, and when the colonizers pursued them with dogs and guns, they tried to hide in a cave that is “today called the Cave of the Martyrs.” Although hungry, they thought they were in relative security in the “eternal night” of the cave, until one day they smelled a pungent odor invading their shelter: smoke. The colonizers had set a fire at the mouth of the cave. The people scrambled to save themselves, but were trapped in the “hell” of that “black corner filled with smoke.” Kimengo recounts the story of his own survival:

I found myself all the way at the back of the cavern. Instinctively, I closed my eyes and mouth, and pressed my face against the wall. I sensed that I was breathing more easily and fell asleep without realizing it. When I awoke, I saw a thin shaft of light falling obliquely on my face. It was a crack of sun in the ground that had allowed me to breathe, thus saving my life. I wanted to dig an exit, but I only succeeded in tiring myself uselessly. I decided then to risk everything and go out through the entrance to the cave. After groping my way and walking over two hundred smoky bodies, I found the open sky.

I ate grass and roots, I wandered from village to village, and in the end, I was paternally received by the father of our white comrade here [notre
Edwards I The Shadow of Shadows

*camarade blanc que voici*. He is the one who raised me in the principles of fraternity and communism; it was he, too, who taught me the name of the white man who, to bring in more taxes, had asphyxiated us in such a savage manner. The ‘enfumeur’ was named Bruère, representative of France and administrator of Haoussas.

Even in a speculative fiction, Nguyen cannot abandon here in the conclusion of the récit the Comintern notion that the natives in Africa and Asia would have to be instructed in their progression toward revolutionary consciousness by a paternal white metropolitan vanguard. Moreover, the story leaves the reader with the question of the narrator’s identity; recall that “We arrived while he was already in the middle of his speech.” One wonders whether the only hint comes at the end of Papa Kimengo’s narrative, when he points out a white man in the audience, the son of his savior and tutor (“notre camarade blanc que voici”)—could this be an indication of the narrator? There are no grounds to decide, though the mention of the “white comrade” would seem otherwise extraneous. In any case, it is important to note the hesitant and loosely situated manner in which the first person enters this story, precisely because it represents such a leap for the young Nguyen writing in Paris about an imagined Africa.

“L’Enfumé” is exceptional, a singular effort to practice intercolonialism. A story about a futuristic Africa, written by a Vietnamese, and dedicated to an Algerian victim of the French colonial authorities, it mixes speculative fiction and futurism, historical fact, and perhaps even—in the gesture of the dedication above all—what one might call sentimentality. The implication is that the mode of expression proper to communist internationalism is experimentation in fiction—an effort to imagine that is itself heterogenous, in Chakrabarty’s sense. That heterogeneity articulates a universalism, the revolutionary triumph, as inherently uneven, necessarily intercolonial, a discourse predicated on crossing boundaries.

Although I have seen no other reading of this series of publications in *L’humanité*, Nguyen’s similar efforts at experimentation in fiction (as well as his political cartoons and illustrations in *Le paria*) have attracted only disdain from historians and biographers. Just as William Duiker criticizes the literary qualities of Nguyen’s writing, Claude Liauzu calls Nguyen’s
Lamine Senghor’s own attempts at fiction have earned similar epithets. Elsewhere I have offered a close reading of a short, illustrated book the Senegalese published shortly before his death in 1927. Called La violation d’un pays [The violation of a country], the text is an allegorical portrait of the history of French colonialism in Africa which strives to imagine the liberation of the natives through a worldwide communist revolution.

Although the book has been characterized as “impoverished” and a “failed attempt,” I am particularly concerned with its ambitions as an experimental text, where generic vacillation is perhaps most importantly an indication of an effort to invent the proper form to tell “what a colony really is.”

Likewise it seems crucial to consider the links between the experiments in fiction of these two highly devoted militants. I would suggest that the utility of fiction to Nguyen and Senghor has a great deal to do with the qualities of generic mélange that all commentators on their work note. In addition, one might contend more directly that Senghor’s writing shows the influence of Nguyen’s earlier spirit of experimentation in fascinating ways. A line from “L’Enfumé” (that Papa Kimengo had “done everything to awaken his brothers of color from the deep sleep of the slave”) echoes in the conclusion of Senghor’s speech at the Brussels congress of the League against Imperialism. Senghor’s use of illustrations in La violation d’un pays, and even some elements of his sarcastic tone, might well be derived in part from Nguyen’s example. And like Nguyen at the end of “L’Enfumé,” Senghor ends La violation d’un pays committed to a vanguardist party conception of the dissemination of revolutionary consciousness.

One might ask as well why both Nguyen Ai Quoc and Lamine Senghor chose to publish their experiments in fiction under the auspices of the French Communist Party. Nguyen published his contes et récits in L’humanité (although at the same time, he was writing satirical articles such as “Zoologie” in Le paria), and Senghor’s La violation d’un pays was printed by the party publisher, the Bureau d’Éditions in the Saint-Denis section of Paris (although by 1927 he had broken ties with the Union Intercoloniale and was attempting to keep his newspaper La race nègre more or less autonomous from party influence). It is as though the experimentation needed positioning within the confines of a party institution: its “adversarial internationalization” takes its
power in part from its juxtaposition with its surroundings, its departure from the official line and the usual protocol. Raymond Williams characterizes part of the impulse of modernist creative expression as a need to challenge “the metropolitan interpretation of its own processes as universals.” The artist working in the city works against the grain of her or his environment, discovering in “the necessary negations of these conditions, and from the strangeness of a new and (as it seemed) unbonded social form, the creative leap to the only available universality—of raw material, of medium, of process.” But in terms of the experimentation of Nguyen Ai Quoc or Lamine Senghor, this formulation proves inexact: for both turn to experimentation with medium and process precisely in striving to articulate an alternative universality, one written both against the grain of the universalist pretensions of high Western bourgeois culture and also against the grain of the communist institutional discourse challenging that culture. That two-part “creative leap” is articulated through literary experimentation and formal heterogeneity where the only effective politics of internationalism is represented in a mix of approaches. In other words, in the writings of Nguyen Ai Quoc and Lamine Senghor, the task of a “colonial studies” to tell “what a colony really is” requires not only a flood of hard data and testimonies of oppression, but also a prose that stretches into symbolic fable and speculative fiction, conte et récit, memoir and allegory. The form of intercolonialism can only be imagined as not-one.

The title of this essay is taken from W. E. B. Du Bois’s marvelous 1924 essay “The Negro Mind Reaches Out,” where, in charting the ways that “empire is the heavy hand of capital abroad,” he offers another figure based in the optical metaphorology he favored. In the postwar period, Du Bois suggests, empire is not an effect but a constitutive condition of modernity, for “with nearly every great European empire to-day walks its dark colonial shadow.” Thus it is possible to “read the riddle of Europe by making its present plight a matter of colonial shadows.” Du Bois patiently follows this trope, tracking the vagaries of colonial regimes in sections including “The Shadow of France” and “The Shadow of Britain.” The phrase “the shadow of shadows” arises when Du Bois attempts to chart the possibility of a new adversarial internationalism from below, from the “colored world,” lamenting in particular that “while the colored people of to-day are common
victims of white culture, there is a vast gulf between the red-black South and the yellow-brown East.” I echo it here not just to endorse its early call for an Afro-Asian collaboration, but also to propose that historiography, perhaps, is spun not so much through oppositions and binaries as in layers: if an emergent Communist International discourse serves as a “shadow” of dominant celebrations of the inexorable march of capital, then the adversarial, intercolonial critiques of that discourse by intellectuals like Nguyen and Senghor form the “shadow of shadows.” And finally, to remind us of the issue of methodology: if that adversarial discourse of intercolonialism surfaces only within the institution, within the archive, at the limit point where “history is narrativized into logic,” then in tracking that trajectory of irruption we read something less than a photographic negative, something ephemeral, something faint and fading—in other words, something like the shadow of shadows.

Notes

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2 Ibid., 465–466.
3 Ibid., 465.


10 Guha famously opens “On Some Aspects” with the complaint that “the historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism” (37). He calls for a historiography that would challenge such elitism by attending to the “politics of the people” (40), noting the ways that Indian nationalism was shaped by “the co-existence and interaction of the elite and subaltern domains of politics” (43).

11 Of course, Nehru was active in Paris during the 1920s, the period I will consider. Even the Subaltern Studies work on Gandhi seldom takes up questions of exile in considering radical nationalist intellectual formation. See Shahid Amin, “Gandhi As Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921–2,” in Subaltern Studies, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 31–61; Partha Chatterjee, “Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society,” in Guha, Subaltern Studies, 153–195.


14 Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, 50–51.


19 Ibid., 33, n. 2, 34.
24 Much of the biographical information is taken from Tiemoko Garan Kouyaté’s obituary for Senghor, “La Ligue est en deuil: Son très dévoué président Senghor Lamine est mort,” La race nègre, May 1928, 1. For more detail on Senghor’s activities, see the sources cited above as well as J. Ayodele Langley, Pan-Africanism and Nationalism in West Africa, 1900–1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), and Lamine Senghor: Vie et oeuvre (Dakar: Front Culturel Sénégalais, 1979).
28 Dewitte, Les mouvements nègres en France, 97.
30 “Appel!” Le paria, 1 April 1922, 1.
33 Nguyen Ai Quoc [Ho Chi Minh], Le procès de la colonisation française (Paris: Librairie du Travail, [1925]); translated in Bernard B. Fall, ed., Ho Chi Minh on Revolution: Selected
Edwards I The Shadow of Shadows


34 Comité d’Études Coloniales, “Projet de Rapport” (document found in Nguyen’s home), 20 November 1921, series 1, box 27, Archives Nationales Section d’Outre-Mer (hereafter AN-SOM), Service de Liaison avec les Originaires des Territoires Francaises d’Outre-Mer (hereafter SLOTFOM), Aix-en-Provence, France. Qtd. in Gaspard, Ho Chi Minh à Paris, 147.


37 Nguyen Ai Quoc, “Quelques réflexions sur la question coloniale,” L’humanité, 25 May 1922; translated in Fall, Ho Chi Minh on Revolution, 25–27. I have modified Fall’s translation for this essay.


39 Nguyen Ai Quoc, “Quelques réflexions sur la question coloniale.”

40 Senghor received 965 votes in the first round, while the candidate who would go on to win (Calmels) received 1767 (out of an electoral pool of 4459). See “A travers les arrondissements et les quartiers,” L’humanité, 28 April 1925; “Les elections municipales,” L’humanité, 11 May 1925. The term faire-valoir comes from Dewitte, Les mouvements nègres en France, 109–110.

41 See Dewitte, Les mouvements nègres en France, 112–113. On the American Negro Worker’s Congress, see Harry Haywood, Black Bolshevik: Autobiography of an Afro-American Communist (Chicago: Liberator, 1978), 143–147. The only subsequent attempt at an intercolonial formation in Paris was the Rassemblement Colonial, which operated in the late 1930s (without any ties to the Communist Party); this group was a coalition spearheaded by the African Emile Faure, the Vietnamese Nguyen The Truyen, and the Algerian Messali Hadj, among others. See Spiegler, “Aspects of Nationalist Thought,” 82.
43 The quote comes from article 2 of the group’s statutes. Gaspard, *Ho Chi Minh à Paris*, 142.
44 Appeal from the Union Intercoloniale, signed Nguyen Ai Quoc.
47 Samuel Stéphany, letter, 1 February 1922, “Union Intercoloniale” folder, series 3, box 87, ANSOM, SLOTFOM.
48 There is some fluctuation in the Arabic term (*Al Mankur*) as well, which connotes more a sense of the “unknown,” “rejected,” “disavowed,” “repudiated.” (See Liauzu, *Aux origines des tiers-mondismes*, 113–114 n. 43.) In other words, *Al Mankur* has something like the tones of a denial or prohibition, as opposed to the reference to caste and human social hierarchy connoted by *Le paria*, with its Southeast Asian roots (its etymological root is the Tamil word *paraiyan*, or “drummer”).

52 Williams, Politics of Modernism, 45.


54 “Babel à Moscou,” L’illustration, 16 August 1924, 135. See also Nguyen Ai Quoc, “Report on the National and Colonial Questions at the Fifth Congress of the Communist International,” in Fall, Ho Chi Minh on Revolution, 63–72.


58 J. D. Dion, catalogue overview, ANSOM, SLOTFOM.

59 On the libel suit, see “Le procès fantôme,” Les continents, 15 November–1 December 1924, 1.

60 Spivak, “Subaltern Studies,” 201.

61 Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, 80.

62 The name “Nguyen Ai Quoc” first appeared as the signature on the previously mentioned “Revendications du peuple annamite,” which was presented as a petition to the Western powers at the Versailles conference that asked for President Wilson’s fourteen points to be applied to the French colonies in Asia. See ibid., 58–59.

63 See Jean Lacouture, Ho Chi Minh: A Political Biography (New York: Random House, 1968), 20. Nguyen Ai Quoc was the primary, but not the only pseudonym he used in Paris, and his identity was an issue of endless concern and annoyance among the French authorities. In Ho Chi Minh: A Life, Duiker quotes one letter from the administrator Pierre Guesde to the minister of colonies on 12 October 1922: “Who is this Nguyen Ai Quoc? He frequently changes his name and is currently hiding his identity behind an assumed name that cannot
fool anyone who is even slightly familiar with the Vietnamese language. He claims that he has no documentation from the administrative authorities of Indochina that would identify him, but he interferes in our politics, takes part in political groups, speaks in revolutionary reunions, and we don’t even know in whose presence we are! The information that he provides is clearly false” (70).

64 Duiker, Ho Chi Minh, 83.

65 “An Open Letter to M. Albert Sarraut, Minister of Colonies,” Le paria, 1 August 1922, collected in Gaspard, Ho Chi Minh à Paris, 165–167. The letter is translated in Ho Chi Minh, Selected Works, 27, but I have modified that translation.


67 This is not to suggest, of course, that Nguyen is in any sense himself a “subaltern.” My argument is twofold. On one hand, if the “subaltern” in Spivak’s phrase marks a certain absolute limit of narrativization, I am suggesting that it is possible to read relative limits of narrativization with regard to a host of subject-effects (here, the “militant” or the “subversive” as it is applied to Nguyen). At the same time, I am suggesting that part of Nguyen’s militancy and subversion is precisely that he is attempting to write a certain kind of critical history: the project that the Union Intercoloniale comes to term colonial studies. To extend the parallel with Subaltern Studies, one might suggest that in Nguyen’s history writing, the absolute limit of narrativization is the “native” (indigène).


69 Ibid., 153, 169, 175.

70 Ibid., 164–168, 178.

71 On Lamine Senghor’s work, see Edwards, The Practice of Diaspora. For an overview of Nguyen Ai Quoc’s publications, see Gaspard, Ho Chi Minh à Paris, 174–175.


75 Nguyen Ai Quoc, “Les lamentations de Trung-Trac,” L’humanité, 24 June 1922. Nguyen also published an open letter to the emperor in the 9 August 1922 issue of Le journal du peuple,
and he produced a play ridiculing Khai Dinh, titled *Le dragon de bambou*. See Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, 81–82. Apparently Duiker is not aware of the material in *L’humanité*.


78 It should be noted that in literary French, *nous arrivions* could indicate either first person plural (“we arrived”) or first person singular, an effect not unlike the so-called royal we in English.


82 I discuss *La violation d’un pays* at some length in Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*.

83 Williams, *Politics of Modernism*, 47.