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Jean Sénac, Poet of the Algerian Revolution

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Jean Sénac,
Poet of the Algerian Revolution

by

Kai Krienke

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York.

2014
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
Abstract

Jean Sénac, poet of the Algerian Revolution

by

Kai Krienke

Advisor: Ammiel Alcalay

The work presented here is an exploration of the poetry and life of Jean Sénac, and through Sénac, of the larger role of poetry in the political and social movements of the 50s, 60s, and early 70s, mainly in Algeria and America. While Sénac was part of the European community in Algeria, his position regarding French rule changed dramatically over the course of the Algerian War, (between 1954 and 1962) and upon independence, he became one the rare French to return to his adopted homeland. I will argue, sometimes polemically, that Sénac was and should be considered a properly Algerian poet even though he was (and in many ways still is) considered an outsider because of his European origins, because he had no particular ties to either the Arab or Berber cultures, because he was gay and more fundamentally because he was claiming the right to be an Algerian poet “who had unequivocally chosen the Algerian nation”. I will also argue that there are important ties to consider between the Algerian and American poetic contexts, which illuminate the larger era of post-colonialism through the poetic expression of popular movements, which often inspired poets in their use of language and their relation to the political space poetry came to occupy.
Acknowledgments

Five years ago I was about to abandon graduate school altogether. Disillusioned with academia, frustrated with the department, losing touch with the practice of writing, a PhD was looking increasingly like a pipe dream. Instead I decided to focus my attention on my family and two children who were my inspiration, and on the Comparative Literature courses I was teaching at Queens College.

There, during one of my many conversations with Chris Winks, Jean Sénac and his correspondence with Albert Camus came up and sparked my interest in their 10-year friendship. A year later, in 2010, I visited Hamid Nacer-Khodja, the most generous, dedicated and knowledgeable academic on Sénac, in Algeria, and came back more inspired than ever, by the poet, by the country, and by a project that has carried me for the past four years.

This dissertation is dedicated to Roberto Butinof, life long friend and mentor who passed away in 2012 as I was close to submitting my proposal. He believed that the university was much more than the institution itself. It was a practice that one carried everywhere, especially in the most solid friendships, which is what I first saw between Sénac and Camus. My parents were an essential financial support during years of economic hardship. My two children, Jan and Äya have been most patient with the third member of our family, “the dissertation”. I would also like to thank Karen Rester, a faithful companion in times of doubt and darkness who understood as a writer that one often doesn’t see the horizon until one gets there.

While my studies at the Graduate Center were often less than inspiring, I cannot express enough my gratitude to those who provided me with the necessary oxygen. First and foremost Ammiel Alcalay whose teaching of 20th century American poetics opened up a completely new ground that went far beyond the classroom, into every facet of culture and friendship. His engagement with the project of my dissertation has been extraordinary and has restored in me
the confidence to move forward and onward with my writing and thinking. I also owe much to the
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I would finally like to thank those in Algeria who welcomed me so warmly during my
visits and made me discover the country that Sénac had cherished.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

My dissertation examines the life and career of the Algerian poet and writer Jean Sénac. While exploring his own particular context as an Algerian of European descent who chose to support the revolution, I have drastically shifted the ground through which I am viewing his work. Instead of placing him in the contexts of post-colonial and queer theory, approaches through which he might now more expectedly be interpreted, I have chosen to view Sénac through the contemporaneous lens of North American poetics and the thought of poets who found themselves outside the mainstream consensus of Cold War institutional literary, cultural, academic, and political frameworks. Given that Sénac himself viewed Americans associated with the Beats and the Black Arts Movement as revolutionary poets, this framework has proven very productive in my re-contextualization of Sénac's own forms of resistance in his life and work.

In 1957 Jean Sénac wrote a remarkable manifesto titled Le soleil sous les armes [The Sun under the Weapons], during his exile in Paris in the thick of the Algerian war. It is a rare breed of writing, similar in many ways to Oprhée Noir, Sartre’s introduction to Leopold Senghor’s Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache, published in 1948. While Sartre was building on the concept of Négritude, developed by Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor and Léon Damas, to encompass a wide range of poetry emerging from Africa and the Caribbean, Sénac combined Algerian and French poetry in a common resistance against colonialism (Algeria) and fascism (France). Written two years after Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism, Le soleil sous les armes bears within it the traces of momentous and tragic events, which in many ways sealed Sénac’s allegiance to Algeria, and to a form of poetry that upheld human dignity and was a repository of popular resistance in language.
The translation of the manifesto, half of which is included in the Appendix, is an opportunity to re-experience a text that has essentially been out of circulation since its original publication in 1957. Other than Hamid Nacer-Khodja’s thesis (published in Algeria this year 2014), which included a substantial commentary on the manifesto, and an essay published by Yvonne Llavador in AWAL in 1993, relatively little attention has been given to a work that joins in one narrative the poetry of Victor Hugo, Rimbaud, René Char, Robert Amat, Aragon, Eluard, Jean Grosjean, Henri Kréa, Jacques Lévy, Roland Doukhan, Aït Djafer, Mohammed Dib, Kateb Yacine, Youri, Nourredine Tidafi, Mohammed Belkheir, and that of transcribed oral Arabic poetry from the early 1900s.

In the dichotomized cultural and intellectual debates that Sénac was witnessing in Paris at the time, which Le Sueur examined in Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics During the Decolonization of Algeria, there was increasing uneasiness with the practice and reality of French colonialism, but other than Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Henri Alleg and few others there was a wanting lack of political clarity among the left. Camus had retreated in silence after 1956, only to declare in 1957 that between his mother and justice, he would choose his mother. Sénac, who had been Camus’s friend and protégé for almost 10 years, and in regular correspondence (published as Albert Camus Jean Sénac ou le fils rebelle, by Nacer-Khodja in 2004), wrote to his mentor a series of accusatory letters concerning the Nobel Prize winner’s inability to take a position on the Algerian conflict, or the “events” as they were called. Sénac’s letter and open support of Algerian nationhood in Le soleil sous les armes led to the definitive and bitter ending of their friendship. That Sénac wrote and presented his manifesto during one of the most intellectually conflicted periods in France should be seen as a response to the overall climate and as a desire to resituate the debate on new grounds. Of course he understood that poetry
could not rival the full-blown war going on in Algeria, which he stated in the following introduction to a speech titled *Le Poète Algérien dans la Cité* [The Algerian Poet in the City]:

Ladies, Gentlemen, Brothers and Comrades,

You might find it a bit trivial that I come to talk to you tonight about poetry, in the midst of this tragedy that we are all experiencing more or less violently, this tragedy in which the suffering Algerian people are finding their soul, and where France, torn, tries not to loose hers; this tragedy that's called war and no lyricism will ever hide the brutal reality, that is a growing field of corpses – what we call... a field of honor. (manuscript in Archives de Marseille, translated)

The reasons for a focus on poetry nevertheless becomes clearer in the following paragraph, where Sénac speaks for an Algerian poetic tradition:

We have poetry in our blood, because it is for us the simplest, the most direct, the most common and the most often employed means, to “tell what is happening”. And our great poets are not those who are writing, but the great illiterate people, without whom we would be but a dried out tree. (ibid.)

In this statement Sénac includes himself within a particular poetic tradition that will need to be explored further, but that fundamentally stems from the oral roots of popular poetry. While Algeria’s liberation was mostly viewed as an armed struggle, Sénac upheld the fundamental role of a poetic expression that spoke for a different type of liberation.

According to Sénac, “If the Algerian people are at war, it's also because they demand the right to their poetry, their rights to Poetry.” As surprising as this may sound, it ties very solidly together the fight against oppression with poetry’s ability to uphold beauty and truth amidst the horrors of war. While Sénac understood and supported the need for an armed resistance against French colonialism, he believed that poetry was committed not only to the political cause of popular resistance, but also to its language. Sénac’s unusual move, though, is to join
Algerian resistance poetry to that of France against Fascism, inspired in many ways by his most influential mentors, René Char and Albert Camus. This solidarity was common among French resistance fighters, including Jean Subervie (1917-1989), who according to Hamid Nacer-Khodja in Un éditeur en guerre d’Algérie: Jean Subervie, had taken over his father’s press in Rodez (in 1953), in order to publish Algerian writers and poets that he had met during WWII. Subervie’s meeting with Sénac in 1954 lead to several publications on Algerian poetry, including the manifesto.

North African literature, especially francophone, has been the subject of many studies over the years and has produced one of the most fertile grounds for research on the effects of colonialism, the issues of language, the experience of exile and migration, with the important influences of gender studies, feminism, gay and subaltern studies, it is worth noting that poetry has been often marginalized. The very first attempts at delineating Algerian writing did in fact include poetry, for example Jean Déjeux’s La Poésie algérienne de 1830 à nos jours: approches socio-historiques, published in 1964 under the direction of Albert Memmi. Déjeux, a White Father who for many years directed the Glycines Diocese and research center in the heart of Algiers from 1966 (the year of its creation) to 1981, was an autodidact and in fact never finished his baccalaureate. According to Charles Bonn, a student of Déjeux who became one of the most recognized authors on North African literature, “Quelles que soient en effet les positions de chacun des chercheurs sur les littératures du Maghreb vis-à-vis de lui, Jean Déjeux était pour nous tous celui chez qui tout avait commencé.”

Déjeux’s most important critical works, though, were to be on Algerian novels, since it was becoming increasingly clear to Algerian writers that this was the form through which they could

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1 Hommes et Migrations, n° 1171, novembre 1993
appeal to the French publishing world. According to Rêda Bensmaïa, in his introduction to Experimental Nations: Or, the Invention of the Maghreb, this literature quickly became “reduced to anthropological or cultural case studies”. (Bensmaïa and Waters 6) Bensmaïa’s stated objective was to transcend the narrow categories that have enclosed North African writers into regional cultural and ethnic boundaries and to offer instead, through close attention to the literary works themselves, the idea that they represent an "experimental nation":

My nations are experimental in that they are above all nations that writers had to imagine or explore as if they were territories to rediscover and stake out, step by step, countries to invent and to draw while creating one’s own language. (ibid. p.8)

Bensmaïa’s concept of the “experimental nation” is useful when addressing the reductive readings that have plagued many Third World literatures, and allows for transnational comparisons to be made among writers that don’t belong to same cultural spheres, but I will argue that we also need to view them as rooted in very specific contexts. This does not necessarily mean reducing them to ethnic or cultural frameworks, but viewing the writers (even those that might appear exiled) as an integral part of a given time, a given place, and a given community.

Bensmaïa addresses another important element in relation to my current project, which is the specific role of poetry within the literary landscape. But while he does include the poetry of Nabile Farès in his study, it is viewed through the lens to Deleuze and Guattari’s Mille Plateaux, which seemed contradictory in light of what he presented in his introduction, that when texts were “finally integrated into the deconstructed canon of world literature, they were made to serve as tools for political or ideological agendas.” I would argue that Mille Plateaux falls within the category of that deconstructive move, even though Bensmaïa’s analysis is clearly referencing francophone and translation theory. When integrating such theories, which is the
most common practice of francophone and post-colonial theory, one runs the risk of decontextualizing the literature in favor of more abstract notions such as “minoritarian literature”. Ammiel Alcalay in After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture, pays close attention to how certain writings that have been categorized as “minority”, “other” or “third world”, not only stem from very established cultures and practices, but often define modes of resistance that are as much politically based as they are part of the writers’ aesthetic and language:

Refusal to be defined by others also means refusal to be subjected by others. In coining the term “resistance literature,” for example, the Palestinian writer and activist Ghassan Kanafani explicitly connected his academic research to the liberation movement of his people, with no disclaimers of “scientific objectivity”. As he put it, “There are those who can bring to a given topic a completely critical theory. This is not the case for us, however, who are part of the very question of resistance”. (Alcalay 19)

In light of this issue, with respect to Sénac and to his context in general, I would like to be as careful as possible not to reduce him or others to simple modes of resistance, but to consider the more fundamental aspects of cultural and political resistance that poets and writers were part of through their language and person. It is through careful attentiveness to very rooted resistances that one can start imagining a broader aesthetic and comparative picture.

Bensmaïa made a compelling argument, when he stated that his approach “allows us to see that there may be more affinities between an Algerian writer and an African American writer today than there were between this same writer and another writer from his or her own country.” (ibid. 21-22) While being sensitive to the comparison between Algeria and America, which is a large part of my project, I would question the assumption that Algerian and African American writers are somehow part of a deterritorialized and imagined community. That Sénac has much in common with African-American poets means that there are common languages at play within very specific circumstances that the poets are part of, albeit languages that threaten the
dominant cultural discourse. They constitute unrecognized or threatening representations of the cultures they are fundamentally part of. This relates very significantly to Andrea Khalil's argument in *The Arab Avant-Garde: Experiments in North African Art and Literature*, with respect to the North African writers she is examining, that “their literary discourse is threatening to the political and cultural authorities under whose jurisdiction and control they ostensibly fall”, and that they constitute a “struggle against an internal hegemony” (Khalil xxii). Sénac, as a poet and a cultural activist, threatened the cultural jurisdiction of post-independent Algeria, but he also represented and defended fundamental aspects of the revolution itself.

Sénac's vision that poetry played a fundamental part in liberation movements was manifest again in the radio shows he directed at Radio Alger between 1964 and 1972, where he presented Brecht, early 20th century Soviet poets such as Akhmatova, Aseev, Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Mayakovsky, Yesenin, those of the fifties and sixties such as Yevtushenko, Voznesensky and Akmadouлина. Included were American poets Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Bob Kaufman, and African-American poets Phillis Wheatley, George Moses Horton, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes and LeRoi Jones aka Amiri Baraka. Younger poets of the Maghreb such as Boujedra, Skif, Alloula and of Morocco, mainly those around Souffles such as Mohammed Khair-Eddine, Abdelkébir Khatibi and the journal's founder, Abdellatif Laâbi also figured. Also present was the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, Roberto Retamar, René Depestre, and finally Nazim Hikmet.²

The inclusion of African-American poets in his radio programs, representative of the interconnection of poetries throughout the world at the time, also points to the strong influence that African-American culture had within the postcolonial Third World. There are crucial ties to revisit between Malcom X’s Nation of Islam, the Black Arts movement, the birth of Black Studies

² List provided by Katia Sainson.
programs in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, the exile of the Black Panthers in Algeria and their presence at the 1969 Pan-African festival, the influence Franz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth* as well as the aesthetic appeal and political message of Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers*. Understanding how closely African-American leaders, artists and intellectuals were tied to Third World movements, often through Algeria, also sheds light on how they were interconnected artistically. Sénac, already in 1956 on behalf of young Algerian poets, addressed his *Salut aux écrivains et artistes noirs*, to the first Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris. Participants included Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Jean Price-Mars, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Amadou Hampaté Bâ, George Lamming, Mercer Cook, James Ivy, Frantz Fanon, Edouard Glissant, René Depestre, Cheikh Anta Diop, Abdoulaye Wadé and Josephine Baker.

The exploration of Sénac’s connection to the American poets, through the African American and Beat poets mainly, lead me to a another group of poets that had been emerging in the 40s, 50s, and 60s among them Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Diane Di Prima, Amiri Baraka, Robert Duncan, John Wieners, George Oppen, Lorine Niedecker, Lorenzo Thomas, Ishmael Reed, Daniel Henderson, associated with movements such as The Objectivists, the Harlem and San Francisco Renaissances, the Black Mountain and New York Schools, the Beats and the Umbra Arts movement. The new forms of poetry that were emerging in these groups found very little traction in the American culture at large, leading many to constitute informal networks among themselves and means of distribution through their own journals, such as Robert Creeley’s *Black Mountain Review*, Amiri Baraka’s *Yugen*, Vincent Ferrini’s *Four Winds*, Diane di Prima’s *The Floating Bear* and John Wiener’s *Measure* (which circulated from 1957 to 1962, often at no more than 500 copies). Given the lack of recognition they received, in part because of the unwillingness of critics to engage with “experimental” forms, many were seeking out poets of the previous generation, Muriel Rukeyser, Langston Hughes, Kenneth
Rexroth, Vincent Ferrini, H.D., William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Patchen among others in order to find the support and validation they needed. What was at stake during one of the most, if not the most, creatively innovative times in American culture, was laying the foundations of a poetic culture that was distinct from previous forms, informed locally, and decidedly resistant to the dominant culture of consumerism.

Sénac experienced a similar situation after Algeria’s independence. The growing interconnectedness of writers such as Sénac, Mohammed Dib, Mouloud Feraoun, Albert Memmi, Kateb Yacine, Jean Daniel, Émile Dermenghem (through readings, mimeographed publications, reviews such as Soleil and Terrasses, and often extensive correspondence such as those that Sénac had with Dib, Camus and Char), was severely undermined by the Algerian war. While Sénac was very involved in defining new grounds for Algerian poetry during his “exile” in Paris, his return to Algeria in ’62 and his intense involvement in recreating an Algerian cultural scene was met with increased resistance and animosity. The new generation of writers no longer had Camus, Audisio and Roblès to support them and was confronted with the task of defining Algerian writing almost from scratch. Sénac was in many respects the beacon for the young Algerian poets and artists who were seeking confirmation and orientation in a post-independent landscape that had not yet turned against them. He published their works in anthologies, read their poetry on his radio shows and organized readings throughout Algeria. His home and heart were open to anyone who sought his advice, and those who are still around today, such as Denis Martinez, Hamid Tibouchi and Hamid Nacer-Khodja, will confirm it. As the political climate was changing and becoming increasingly adverse to the Algerian poets, writers and intellectuals who were continuing to write in French, and to expose the growing tensions that were emerging in the new Algerian nation, Sénac transitioned to a poetry of the body, for example A Corpoème, and in light of the cultural and sexual revolution of ’68, to homoerotic poetry. While it’s hard to think of a more provocative statement in an increasingly conservative
Islamic state, one must understand that Sénac was not only advocating for his own sexual rights, but for those of the Algerian society in general, including women.

When looking at Sénac's positions on so many aspects of Algerian culture, one should also consider the roles of his poetic and sexual identities, and their relation to language, cultural marginalization and politics. The list of political gay poets that he is part of includes, García Lorca, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Reinaldo Arenas, Fernando Pessoa, Allen Ginsberg, Walt Whitman, Robin Blaser, Robert Duncan, who in The Homosexual in Society (1944) called upon the gay writer to see “in his own persecution a battlefront toward human freedom”. It is presumably the experience of sexual repression, marginalization and discrimination that lead many of these poets to defend in their writings the rights of other repressed minorities throughout the world and to do so in language’s most powerful vehicle, albeit one of the most minoritarian today.

A step back to step forward

When I began my work on Jean Sénac, I quickly felt something familiar that I was not able to formulate. While parts of Sénac's poetry were easily accessible and relatable to the early French modernist poets, his later poetry became increasingly difficult to situate in light of a “tradition” and I found myself having to move both backwards and outwards in my research in order to understand what I was looking at. The backwards glance was towards the larger context of languages in North Africa and the various layers of poetic influences from the Arab, Berber, Touareg and other African cultures that had intermixed for centuries. While I understood that Sénac was not directly tied to any of them, in terms of his own origins, his writings reflected

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3 While Sénac's homosexuality has been the subject of more recent Queer Theory and deserves to be explored further, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation and will be discussed only tangentially.
his increasing awareness and exposure to both the written and oral poetry of North Africa, albeit through translation. Given the tremendously rich and very specific heritage of Arab poetics in terms of the language, which Adonis and many others have delineated, one cannot easily advance that Sénac has any place in it as an exclusively francophone poet. But in learning about Arab poetics and the oral traditions that had permeated North African cultures, often through the Berbers, I saw a ground for Sénac’s own poetic practice, and a useful lens through which to gain better understanding of his language. By that I don’t mean the French language, but what he called “poésie algérienne de graphie française”, an “Algerian poetry of French graph” that has more to do with the historical and cultural grounds of Algeria than with the actual languages. While not an extensive survey of Arab poetics or of the deep roots of Berber culture, my research has given me further insight into a facet of Algerian culture that remains rather obscure.

I realized also that placing Sénac in that context was polemical in light of the devastating impact French colonialism had on Algerian culture in general, and in terms of Algeria’s need to reject a civilization that had so fundamentally negated its traditional base. Calling Jean Sénac a “Poet of the Algerian Revolution” in a nation that had fought 132 years against France, including in its poetry, is a way to reveal the European Algerians who had become personally committed to a liberation that far transcended the narrow confines of statehood. While there were many Algerians writing poetry during that time, including Kateb Yacine (before he became a novelist and playwright), I found that very few were as adamantly patriotic and revolutionary as Sénac. This lead me to explore the socialist aspects of the Algerian revolution that Sénac so often celebrated in his poems and identified with in terms of its universal aspirations, and to the wider context of Third World movements, both politically and poetically. The concept of a common poetic language to Third World revolutions also stemmed from Sénac’s belief that poetry
revealed an intimate connection between revolution and language, which can be easily verified when looking at the writings of Cabral, Fanon and Césaire on that very issue.

What also became increasingly apparent around 1965, was that the revolution of poetry ran against powerful post-colonial forces that sought to consolidate the new nations that had emerged, and saw poetry as a threat to their vision of statehood. In Algeria this lead to the string of assassinations so movingly memorialized in Assia Djebar’s *Le blanc de l’Algérie*, and to the mass emigration of writers that followed. In attempting to better understand the nature of the repression against political poetry and literature of that era, I found that it connected to the context of poetry in America and to the cultural Cold War that the US and the Soviet Union were waging throughout the Third World. This meant the silencing of the voices of dissent that often found their most powerful expression in poetry. The argument that I am trying to make in this statement, is that the silencing of Algerian writers was part of a global phenomena, and not just the expression of local politics and agendas.

I felt that I needed to address as many aspects of culture, of history, of language and of politics as possible in order to even begin situating Jean Sénac, and found among the American poets mentioned earlier a fertile ground that was parallel and contemporaneous to him, not like the theory, after the fact. There were also very concrete historical connections to establish between communities of poets of a same era that revealed very similar practices and concerns. My exposure to 20th century American poets had in fact preceded my discovery of Sénac, and had a profound effect on my understanding of poetry. What most struck me at first was the notion that poetic language was not a property of the mind exclusively, but that it emerged within our experience of reality, i.e. that it lived in our materiality. This meant, by extension, that the structure of the poem, it’s language, it’s organization was not bound by predetermined linguistic or literary rules, but that it could conceivably flow from the larger entity we are part of. The
formidably ambitious project of poetry that Olson and many others imagined, was one where we could reach back historically to the very beginnings of time, and stretch simultaneously inward and outward in order to encompass the totality of experience. That idea of totality reverberated in Sénac’s ‘Corps Total’, or the idea that poetry could be one with our body, and one with the larger Body, or universe. This cosmological dimension of poetry could ultimately allow us to transcend the objective and exterior position we have claimed in the name of “scientific objectivity”, and to imagine a fundamentally different relation to each other and to the world. As such it would constitute an alternative to politics, or a reinstatement of politics through poetry, which was Sénac’s ultimate purpose in his “Algérie totale”.

The process through which I came to these conclusions often stemmed from the poems and texts themselves, and through juxtapositions inspired to certain degree by the poetic practices that I encountered. Jean Sénac at times became the organizing principle through which to explore a wider range of texts and contexts, and I was particularly inspired by Jamel Eddine Bencheikh’s statement that “no French poet to my knowledge has had such an abundant discourse on his own language as Sénac, and not in theoretical texts, but in his poems.” This statement applied to the many other poets that I combined in my readings, which indicated quite clearly to me that there was rarely a need to superimpose external theories. There is perhaps also, in the nature of poetry, an engrained resistance to theoretical appropriations and interpretations, and a call to be met on its own terms, whatever they may be. I tried to be as attentive as possible to those terms and to give them a context that would make them apparent to the reader.
Chapter 2: Jean Sénac, a history

“After death’s sentence is pronounced, I hope to scrutinize a writing, and nothing else. I therefore declare that all biographical reference is futile”.

Jamel-Eddine Bencheikh

Sénac was buried discreetly on September 5\textsuperscript{th}, 1973, in the Christian cemetery of Aïn-Benian (then called Guyotville) on the outskirts of Algiers, overlooking the Mediterranean, even though he had wished to be buried among the Muslims. A small group of friends and poets, “mostly French” according to his once close friend Mostefa Lacheraf, were there to pay their last respects. No Algerian official was present and no homage was given to the life of a poet who had given everything to the nation and the people he loved. A plaque made by artist Denis Martinez, a longtime friend of Sénac, bearing the symbol of the sun, was eventually destroyed by neglect, time and perhaps a final murderous gesture. The sun had been Sénac’s symbol and signature, the representation of the warmth and life he saw in Algeria. His death in many ways was the announcement of the darkness to come in a nation that had been an emblem of anti-colonial revolution and rebirth.

Jean Sénac was assassinated during the night of August 30\textsuperscript{th}, 1973. The government-led investigation of his murder produced no evidence other than a petty crime and the perpetrator was eventually released. According to author Rachid Boujedra, one of Sénac’s closest and most loyal friends:

Jean Sénac was the first victim of Algerian Islamic fundamentalism. He was stabbed to death in an atrocious way in September 1973 because he was a pied-noir, because of his French origins. A symbol of multiracial and multi-religious Algeria […] Jean Sénac, the gaouri, was assassinated by fundamentalists out of hatred for intelligence and the other. (Katia Sainson 34)
According Katia Sainson, the symbolism of Sénac’s death was not lost on Jean Pierre Péroncel-Hugoz, correspondent to Le Monde, who had met the poet in the early 70s and “wrote a book on the poet that is part memoir and part investigative report on his death” (33) with very similar conclusions to Boujedra’s. Sainson also mentions Assia Djebar’s moving depiction of “Algeria’s lost intellectuals” in Le Blanc de l’Algérie [Algerian White] and her reference to Sénac’s death, when “ten years after independence, the country was repudiating its tradition of openness and plurality, that had been, until recently proclaimed”. (ibid.)

Djebar’s reference to Algeria’s “tradition of openness and plurality” was tied to the very initial aspirations of the Algerian Revolution, those proclaimed and upheld by its revolutionary leader Ben Bella during the initial three years of his presidency. These were also the ideals that Sénac had firmly believed in and incarnated in his person and poetry. The intimate tie between Sénac and Algeria, both before and after the Revolution make him a crucial testimony to a largely lost and misunderstood history, and a controversial figure in terms of the Algerian identity he assumed during the early years of the Algerian war. According to Sainson again:

Sénac’s writing always emphasized the multiplicity of the Algerian national make-up, but at the same time, there was the acknowledgment of the thorny question of who could claim to be Algerian. In fact, it can be argued that starting with the war in 1954 and until his death in 1973, when he was still fighting to be recognized as a full-fledged Algerian citizen, this would be one of his work’s central preoccupations. (Sainson 34)

Sénac’s lifelong struggle to be recognized as Algerian is often tied to his own search for a legitimate father. His mother, Jeanne Comma, was allegedly raped and left her hometown for Béni Saf, a small mining town on the western coast of Algeria, in order to give birth in anonymity. A few years later, around 1930, she married Edmond Sénac and had her second child, Laure-Thérèse, in 1931, but divorced him in 1933. Much of Sénac’s childhood, spent in poverty, is described in his autobiographical novel Ebauche du père [Sketch of the Father]. In it Sénac relates his experience of precarity with the closeness he felt to the Arab population:
Dans la société, l'Arabe était le méchant. Je grandis contre lui. Mais vraiment contre. A tel point qu’un jour on se réveilla presque collés, frères siamois. Comme lui j’étais l’Exclu... Silence, humiliation, frustration, c’étaient les miens... On l’appelais bâtard, moi, je l’étais. (Sénac 69)

[In society the Arab was the vilain. I grew up against him. Really against him. To such a degree that one day we woke up almost glued to each other, like Siamese brothers. Like him I was the Excluded... His silence, humiliation, frustration, were mine... He was called a bastard, I was one.]

"Batard" [bastard], commonly by the ‘pied noir’ to designate Arabs, also described Sénac's own sense of being fatherless, both biologically and nationally. While the “Arabs” had become foreigners in their own country under the French, Sénac was foreign to the pied noir community because of his poverty and illegitimacy. This double-exclusion is perhaps what distinguished Sénac from most other pied noirs, including Camus who otherwise shared a very similar Spanish background. It is undoubtebly this experience of alienation that also made Sénac sensitive to the segregation he experienced in what was then the mixed community of Oran:

L’Oranais, qui c'est ça? L’Arabe, l’Espagnol, le Juif, le Français, le Berbère? Dans la rue, un Blanc, un Brun, on se serre la main, on s’aime. “Baise le chien sur la bouche jusqu’à ce que tu en aies obtenu ce que tu désires.” Races maudites! Races ennemies! Chacun retourne à son ghetto. (Sénac 69)

[The Oranese, who’s that? The Arab, the Spaniard, the Jewish, the French, the Berber? In the street, a white man, a brown man, we shake hands, we love each other. “Kiss the dog on its mouth until you get from it what you want.” Cursed races! Enemy races! Everyone returns to his ghetto.]

Sénac’s youth was spent mostly in Oran, where his mother had returned after selling her share of her father’s small farm. There were no Arabs in his class, and only one Jew. Sénac's ambition after school was to become a school teacher, but he failed to enter the Ecole Normale in 1943 and decided instead to teach at a private school in Mascara. He had started to publish poems in 1942, and founded a literary association in 1943, with poets and Christian Guerrero, with whom he kept close ties throughout most of his life. In 1944 he was drafted in the military, and spent most of the war doing office work. Having abandoned his hopes to pursue an
academic career, Sénac’s attention focused on developing his poetic style. He became a regular contributor to the weekly Moroccan journal Le Pique-Boeuf.

His first adolescent influences were Hugo, Verlaine, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and through his friends he discovered Valéry, Eluard, Artaud. He became close to the main literary figures of Algiers, poet Edmond Brua and writers Jean Pomier and Robert Randau who were part of the Algerianist school, and Emile Dermenghem, “rightly considered one of the greatest French Islamists.” (Témime and Tuccelli 36) It is also during this period that Sénac meets painter Sauveur Galliéro, who “leads his friend into the interior of the country during trips that would last days, and sometimes weeks.” (ibid. 43) Galliéro, who lived in the Casbah, invited Sénac to stay with him and revealed to him the poverty of the Arab population that lived there. It is perhaps these experiences that first opened Sénac’s eyes to the realities of colonialism and to consider art as a reflection of that reality.

Sénac experienced a moral and religious crisis shortly thereafter, became increasingly ill and was hospitalized for pleurisy in 1947 and sent to the Rivet sanatorium. The year he spent at the sanatorium marked an important turning point in his career as it wasn’t just a physical, but a personal crisis Sénac was experiencing, both around his Christian faith and his struggle with his homosexuality. At Rivet he became close friends with its director, Robert Llorens with whom he maintained a correspondence until the end of his life, and on June 16th 1947 wrote his first letter to Camus, who incidentally had suffered from a very similar illness. Camus answered soon thereafter, on June 24th, “Few letters can touch me as much as yours…” and adds, “I am not worried [for your health]. It’s an illness that benefits Algerians. In ten years, it has allowed me to produce the work of two men. My idea is that one has to keep the strength (isolation and reflection) that it brings, and refuse its weakness.” (Nacer-Khodja, Camus, and Sénac 21)
In March 1948 Sénac met Camus during the Sidi Madani cultural meetings near Blida. The conferences were held from December 1947 to March 1948 and were intended to be a gathering for writers, artists and intellectuals from France and Algeria in a spirit of mutual understanding and dialogue. Among those present were Jean Cayrol, Emile Dermenghem, Emmanuel Roblès, Mohammed Dib, Ben Slimane, Mimouni, Mohammed Zerouki and Nabahni Kouriba. A repeat conference was planned but did not make it past the French colonial administration, for political reasons (Sartre had not been invited because of his leftist positions). While very successful from the perspective of the participants the newspapers hardly covered the event, which was never repeated due to increasing hostilities.

Sénac returned to Algiers at the end of 1948, and became a recognized personality within a small literary and artistic world. Robert Randau, Edmon Brua and Jean Pomier enthusiastically supported the young poet and published his works in the review Afrique. Sénac also befriended Emmanuel Roblès, an important playwright, novelist, and one of the first translators of Federico Garcia Lorca into French.

In 1949 Sénac began a poetry program at Radio Alger with a pacifist show, *Le massacre des innocents* [The Massacre of the Innocents]. The program was seen as a controversial reference to the massacre of an Algerian village by the French army that same year. Poetry by Victor Hugo, Aragon, Paul Eluard and Sénac was read by children against a background of falling bombs, dramatized further by music from Beethoven and Tchaikovsky. This could be one of the first examples of Sénac’s artistic commitment to the denunciation of colonialism’s violence toward the Arab population, which Camus had been doing for quite some time already. That same year Sénac started his first literary review, *M*, which saw only one issue, but it would be the precursor to two important literary endeavors, the reviews *Soleil* and *Terrasses*. 
Soleil and Terrasses

Soleil, in many ways parallel to reviews being created by US poets, was born around a group of five young poets, and included eight issues from January 1950 to February 1952. The aim of the journal was to “assemble young writers who wanted to express themselves on this African soil, to be witnesses to a healthy and luminous spirit, and to underscore amidst the differences and anxiety the fraternity and hope of men”. (Nacer-Khodja 164). We find, alongside texts and poems by the founding members, the following texts and authors:

- Kateb Yacine’s long poem La séparation des corps, which prefigures his later groundbreaking novel Nedjma
- Mohammed Dib’s Un après-midi d’été, which is the first chapter of his novel L’Incendie to be published in 1954
- translations of 14 “bwaqel”, presented as “little folkloric Algerian poems”. (ibid. 167)

This form of oral poetry was mainly sung by women in dialectical arabic. The “bwaqel” were first transcribed and then translated by Hamid Bouzelifa and artist Baya, Sénac overseeing the French adaptation since he had no knowledge of Arabic. This practice of intermingling written and oral literature would become one of Sénac’s signatures, connecting the roots of Algerian oral poetry to the young writers emerging in the 50s.

- Mouloud Feraoun’s Le Désaccord, published for the first time and which prefigures “future paragraphs of Earth and Blood [La Terre et le Sang]” (ibid. 169)
- poems by Léopold Sédar Senghor; Les Remparts du monde by Albert Camus which would become part of L’Homme révolté; poems by René Char and Gabriel Audisio

Soleil was also a review for local artists combining paintings and illustrations with the various texts. “More than illustrators, the artists of Soleil are related with texts, or authors, through a subtle synchrony. Poepainting [a term invented by Sénac to designate the mixing of the two
media] is here a crypted universe where the immaterial forms of image are combined with their material other, words.” (ibid. 174). With every new edition of Soleil, shows of the published artists were organized in Algiers with “parallel events in Algiers and Paris.” (ibid.) These shows were welcomed with positive reviews on both sides of the Mediterranean and constituted one of the first forays of modern Algerian art into the Parisian art world. Combining writers and painters, “without discrimination”, was a way for Sénac to present a global Algerian movement in the arts, and revealed relations between pictorial and textual creations that were “not surrealist, not classical, not existentialist, or anything like that.” According to Sénac “Soleil is solar.”

This spirit of dialogue and separateness between Algerian and French art is something consistent in Sénac’s work and is in many ways culturally informed by the political evolution of Algeria. While Algeria was increasingly at war with French presence and influence, the art and literary world seemed to propose opportunities of reconciliation, first and foremost by making the French audience sensitive to the experiences translated by Algerian artists and writers, as well as recognize a distinct artistic identity which needed to be promoted.

Sénac was also responding to a certain “complacency of Algerian art critics toward local creators” (ibid. 175) and to the need to promote Algerian art as legitimate in its own right, therefore creating within Algeria an autonomous cultural scene in order to reflect the larger struggles of the Algerian people. Sénac’s involvement in the Algerian cultural world was very much a response to a certain vacuum created by the French themselves, which becomes more explicitly expressed in Le soleil sous les armes. 4

4 Although very little information is available on this, French colonial censorship toward local Algerian artists was a major part of the reason why local Algerian art never really took root. France’s cultural censorship under colonialism was the subject of Camille Risler’s La politique culturelle française en Algérie.
In August 1950, the same year he started his review **Soleil**, Sénac received “a Lourmarin grant, given by the general government” (Témime and Tuccelli 58), and was able to spend two years in Paris, from October 1950 to September 1952. There he received the protection and support of Camus, and was able to spend a week with René Char, in Isle-sur-Sorgue. Soon after, he wrote him a letter on the concept of ‘Corps Total’ [Total Body], which he saw as the reconciliation of “body and soul, the ‘presence to the world’, intimacy with the cosmos, with beings, with things.” (Sénac and Archives de la ville de Marseille 23). Sénac’s two years in Paris did not meet his expectations, though, and besides exploring the bohemian and artistic world of the capital, having passionate affairs with several young men, and working menial jobs to support himself, he felt he accomplished little. From Paris he had continued his collaboration with **Soleil**, but although it had enjoyed a wide circulation it was discontinued after its last issue in February 1952.

Upon his return to Algeria, and with funds that he had inherited from his uncle, Sénac decided to create a sequel, **Terrasses**, which came out in June 1953, and included in its editorial committee members of **Soleil** as well as Mohamed Dib, Mouloud Mammeri, Jean-Pierre Millecam, Sauveur Galliéro, Jean de Maisonseul and Louis Nallard. While the first three were published writers, the last three were visual artists who had already shown regularly. The balance between the writers and artists was this time even more pronounced and reflected the philosophy expressed in the following editorial:

1 - At a time where the most solid Western values are put into question, Terrasses attempts to bring a specifically Algerian testimony as a cultural point of intersection, and attempts, within the limits of its sphere, to extricate man from his confusion.
2 - But as the West is in the process of enumerating and choosing its vital riches, the young countries of Africa are attempting to express a new spirit, elaborate an order, establish an equilibrium in which life is no longer mutilated.
3 - By confronting the Mediterranean thought to that of the desert, the oriental and roman messages, the European and Islamic structures, Algeria, among others, defines itself progressively as one of the most generous melting-pots in contemporary literature. (ibid. 183)
These statements simultaneously define a political climate and an artistic response. While we cannot be certain what Jean Sénac is referring to, in terms of “the most solid Western values” (les valeurs les plus assurées de la civilisation occidentale), or of “establishing an equilibrium in which life is no longer mutilated” (établir un équilibre où la vie ne soit plus mutilée), it is somewhat clear that he has in mind the consequences of colonialism on France’s own humanism and the ways in which it was betrayed by the brutal and repressive practices of French rule. Literature, for Sénac, became the space where both the “Mediterranean” and the “desert”, “Eastern” and “Western”, “Roman” and “Islamic” cultural traditions could coexist in an ideal Algeria at the crossroads of civilizations. While this utopian view resembles in many ways Albert Camus’s “Mediterranean culture”⁵ (which strongly privileged the Greek and Roman over the Islamic), Sénac’s hybridity can be perceived as a third way, a reconciliation around shared cultural ideals and projects.

What we see in both Terrasses and Soleil are endeavors to simultaneously foster an Algerian cultural scene as well as address the growing divide between France and its colony and provide a cultural blueprint that could mesh together the various strands of Algerian identity. While artistically these endeavors received generous attention it became increasingly clear that the polarization of Algeria leading up to 1954 would eventually break apart the vision of an Algerian cultural melting-pot. Sénac nevertheless went beyond the Franco-Algerian sphere and for Terrasses envisioned, in a letter to Dib December 24 1952:

...texts of great significance, a sort of “Journal of many voices” edited by all of us and important chronicles on the “evolving” literatures of the Mediterranean (North Africa, Egypt, Palestine, Greece, Lebanon, Spain, Italy, Yugoslavia, etc.) and south-American literatures. (ibid. 185)

⁵ See Albert Camus's The New Mediterranean Culture, by Neil Foxlee, published by Peter Lang in 2010
Following again Camus’s humanistic footsteps, Sénac envisioned a universal literature finding its place on the shores of Algeria, in an apparent contradiction with the realities endured by the Algerian people. If Sénac knew of those realities, how was it that he continued up to 1954-55 to believe that a literary universality could take root in Algeria when most of the Algerians themselves lived in abject poverty, poverty portrayed by his close friend Galliéro and which he witnessed himself in the Casbah of Algiers? Ait Djafer’s Wail of the Arab Beggars of the Casbah, published in 1951 by the Democratic Union for a Free Algeria could not have escaped him either.

The open denunciation of this reality would emerge four years after Terrasses, in Jean Sénac’s Le soleil sous les armes (translated here as The Sun under the Weapons) published in 1957. While the violent uprisings led by the newly constituted FLN in 1954 served as the catalyst for Sénac’s radicalisation, there were prior signs of a shift in artistic representation. Mouloud Mammeri’s La Colline Oubliée, published in 1952, struck Sénac as well as many others in Algeria as too esthetic and not sensitive enough to the “tragedy of a people forced to choose their destiny”. Sénac framed the following dichotomy: “Algeria places the writer that wishes to depict her in a peculiar situation: if he wants to remain faithful to his subject, he must leave nothing out at the risk of shocking or displeasing; if he does the opposite, his prudence will silence certain troublesome behaviors, hide a painful moral climate born out of weariness, demands, exasperation, revolt.” (ibid. 187)

Sénac’s concern with depicting the Algerian reality in art finds its first formal expression in an art show that he organized in October 1953, which included Sauveur Galliéro, Jouis Nallard, Jean Simian, Baya and Hacène Bénaboura. The text that Sénac wrote for this show, Visages d’Algérie, Ecrits sur l’art, “constituted a true manifesto of the ‘group’” (ibid. 206). In it he condemned the dominant orientalism in Algerian art and rallied for a “contemporary pictural
fact”, i.e. works that “express the real part of our era [and] can testify to the future” (ibid. 207).

In this view Sénac sides with a form of social realism and the criticism that abstract art was fundamentally bourgeois and capitalist. In an article written for Liberté, titled Against abstract painting!, Sénac honors “[a] painting that finds its mission in helping to see [...] the reality of the colonial regime”, against “an individualist painting [...] conforming to the interests of crude colonisation” and whose “reactionary thesis of art for art’s sake” is a “form of decadent expression.” (ibid. 207)

We find a similar political evolution in Sénac’s radio shows on Radio Alger, especially those he directed from October 1952 to June 1954. Only a few transcripts remain and all of the tapes were destroyed in the early 70s. Toward the end of 1953 Sénac’s articles and poems abandon “the idealist and esthetic militantism [...] expressed in Soleil and (relatively) Terrasses reviews” in favor of a much more “partisan militance”. This militance can also be perceived in the tone he chooses in a radio program dedicated to François Mauriac, underlining his anticolonialism and his role in “affirming for our youth France’s true face and denouncing once and for all the colonial lie.” (ibid. 221)

In a radio show broadcasted on May 3rd 1954, Sénac separated for the first time two schools of Algerian writers, those around Mouloud Feraoun, Millecam, Mohammed Did, Mouloud Mammeri, Albert Memmi and Ahmed Sefrioui (ibid. 223) and those around Louis Bertrand, Musette, Randau, Lecoq, among which he placed Albert Camus and Emmanuel Roblès. Their works were essentially differentiated by the stances they took on the Algerian issue. According to Nacer-Khodja “Sénac separates them, with premonition, way before the Algerian war”, stating

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7 ibid., cited by Hamid Nacer-Khodja in his thesis.
8 Katia Sainson, author of many essays on Sénac and translator of a collection of Sénac’s poems is currently working on the scripts in an attempt to reconstruct the formidable enterprise reflected there.
even more categorically that “[his] literary nationalism was a prelude to a political nationalism to come.” (ibid. 223)

This attitude, as well as the public mention of an “Algerian fatherland” during an interview of Mammeri would eventually lead to an “open conflict with his colleagues at Radio-Alger”, and to his resignation. Sénac would state in July 1954: “I no longer sign my shows. I will no longer pact with the mediocrity of the texts, of the interpreters, of the means which we have at our disposal. I refuse to collaborate with this sabotage, this negation of Algeria’s personality.” (ibid.). Sénac will come back to this position later on, in *Le soleil sous les armes* when he will denounce the “ignoble collusion, in Algeria, between Atrophied Art and the colonial powers.”

In the same quote Sénac attacked the radio’s editorial staff: “Pivin faults me for using Mustapha Kateb in an “English” show. What is this! Are the French more English than the Arabs in claiming the privilege of the accent? Ridiculous more than revolting.” (ibid. 224) He later accused Gabriel Audisio “of only mentioning Mammeri, Feraoun and Taos [Amrouche], and not Mohamed Dib” in a radio show of his on Paris Inter entitled “the indigenous genius”(ibid.). This, Sénac believed, “perpetuates the harmful and insidious politics of the General Government toward Berberism.” During that same period Sénac had become friends with the future FLN leaders Larbi Ben M’Hidi, Layachi Yaker, Amar Ouzegane and Mustapha Kateb, and was becoming increasingly close to the nationalist movement, but tired with the provincialism and racism at Radio Alger, and in the cultural scene in general Sénac accepted Camus’s invitation to come to Paris in September 1954. A few months prior to his departure he had received the first copy of his *Poèmes*, published by Gallimard, foreworded by René Char, marking his formal entry into the Parisian literary circle and giving him hope that a career awaited him in France.
Sénac’s political transformation in Paris was radical, from the mostly apolitical Poèmes to the clearly pro-independence and revolutionary Matinale de mon peuple [Dawn of my People], published in 1961 shortly before his return to Algeria. The Algerian war for independence, which began on November 1st, prompted Sénac to join the French Federation of the FLN in Paris. He took part in clandestine operations, for example the creation of the underground El Moudjahid newspaper with the assistance of the editor Subervie. His poems grew more militant and were published in various anti-colonial and leftist reviews: Esprit, Action poétique and Afrique-Action. In 1957, Sénac published Le soleil sous les Armes [The Sun under the Weapons], a foundational text in many ways, that built upon the cultural dialogues he had already established in his reviews and radio program and that brought them into the context of the Algerian war. In it Sénac juxtaposed both Algerian and French resistance poetry as ways to advocate for poetry’s Mallarméan allegiance to “giving a purer meaning to the words of tribe”, i.e. to the language of the people. It was during that same period, and around the armed struggle of the FLN that Sénac’s friendship with Camus painfully ended. Camus, who in many ways had opened Sénac’s eyes to the political reality of Algeria, did not support Algeria’s independence. While Sénac organized many meetings between his mentor and exiled FLN leaders in an attempt to draw Camus into the cause, their differences became increasingly obvious and irreconcilable.

Sénac was also experiencing a tormented homosexuality, which Sainson links to his political struggle. While his poetry, essays and articles became increasingly political, Sénac kept journals both before and after his arrival in Paris in 1954, published as Journal d’Alger, which includes Leçons d’Edgar (in reference to one of his lovers), and Carnets Paris (1954-1955) which he started in December 1954. In it he wrote: “je suis entre deux feux, deux vérités, l’une à dire, l’autre à taire. Est-ce bien la seule vérité qu’il faut?” “I am between two fires, two thruths, one to be spoken and another to be silenced. Is truth alone what is needed?”” (Katia Sainson 37) This question for Sainson reflected both Sénac’s ambivalence towards coming out as gay,
and that of coming out for the Algerian independence, and whether one would be at the expense of the other. The issue was also explored in *Ebauche du père* [Sketch of the Father], written between 1959 and 1962, although much more ambiguously in the search for a Father and Fatherland as representations of guilt and repressed sexual desires:

> The author’s shifting, fragmentary poetic style brilliantly captures his highly problematic relationship with the father that he never knew, a homeland that did not recognize him, and a sexuality that brought him guilt, humiliation and shame. (Katia Sainson 40)

In October 1962, three months after Algeria’s declared independence on July 5th, Sénac returned to his freed homeland and was given an apartment at Pointe Pescade, near Algiers, overlooking the Mediterranean. He was welcomed by Ben Bella’s revolutionary government as poet of the revolution, was offered a job as consultant to the Minister of Education and was part of the committee in charge of rebuilding the Library of Algiers burned down by the OAS. He wrote his most famous poems glorifying the revolution in *Citoyens de beauté* [Citizens of Beauty] and celebrated socialist self-management with his famous line “tu es belle comme un comité de gestion” [you are beautiful like a management committee].

Sénac became secretary of the Union of Algerian writers, created in October 1963 by an assembly of Algerian writers, including Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi, Bachir Hadj-Ali, Mouloud Mammeri, Mohand Tazerout and Mustapha Toumi, and drafted the Union’s charter. From the very beginning, though, the union was threatened by the conflicting political views of its members and by the increasing restrictions of a “new ruling class, which often lived off illicit profits instead of official salaries”. (Témime and Tuccelli 130) This general climate of corruption lead Sénac to write, in his poem *Arbatache*:

> No, brother, it’s not the colonist monsters any more, it’s the napalm of our own bourgeoisie, of profiteers,
He resigned from the union shortly after Boumedienne’s military coup on June 19, 1965. Although Sénac was increasingly at odds with the military regime, he continued to be published in many nationalist reviews. His cultural militancy extended to the arts where he curated shows of young Algerian painters and published a book on Algerian art in 1968, illustrated by Abdallah Benanteur, which he donated to the Library of Algiers. In 1967 he had reclaimed his poetry program at Radio Alger, this time representing mostly young Algerian poets alongside poets and writers from all over the world, Brecht, Pasternak, Mayakovsky, Whitman, Ginsberg, LeRoi Jones, Khatibi, Laâbi, Adonis… creating synergies between local and global expressions and aspirations. Yet, he was feeling increasingly excluded, as a European, but more fundamentally as a homosexual and transitioned toward more intimate poetry in which he tried once again to reconcile body and language and give poetic expression to his sexuality, as in *Avant-Corps* published in 1968. Far from being a retreat from politics, Sénac understood that the body was “also in need of its revolution”. While the revolution liberated the people, their bodies remained uncared for in terms of their basic needs. Sénac’s alienated homosexuality is what allowed him to understand and connect with the plight of the oppressed in the context of emergent post-colonial nations.

After 1965 writers and intellectuals who had chosen not only to write in the language of the colonizer, but to critique the new regime’s betrayal of the revolution itself were under increasing pressure and censorship. Among the pied noir writers, Sénac was among the few who chose to stay in Algeria, and despite growing repression he was still highly popular among Algeria’s disenfranchised youth. In 1971 Sénac published *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie algérienne*, [Anthology of new Algerian poetry] including Youcef Sebti, Abdel Hamid Laghouati, Rahid Bey, Djamal Imaziten, Boualem Abdoun, Djamal Kharchi, Hamid Skif, Ahmed Benkamla, and Hamid
Nacer-Khodja. Sénac was about to air a program on young Algerian poets in 1972 when his radio show was shut down, forcing him to leave his view of the Mediterranean for an abject cellar apartment overlooking a rat-infested garbage dump.


Although much has been published on Sénac recently, there is still much to explore around Sénac’s life, both in France and Algeria, and around the various connections he had with militants, intellectuals and writers. While never sharing Camus’s prominence, he was nevertheless a key player in Algeria’s evolution, and simultaneously a representation of the marginalized in the nation’s thwarted revolution. The complex nexus of poetic language, post-colonial nation-building, Eastern and Western cultures in Algeria, hybridity and cultural diversity, homosexual identity versus national heterosexuality, all find their expression in Sénac’s writing. As such he is the ground of an endless cultural biography that simultaneously resists representations, frameworks and facile conflation of life and work. While a biographical map is useful in terms of broad strokes, it cannot, following Bencheikh’s quote, account for the poetry itself, nor serve as a reliable interpretative model. The attempt hereafter will be to explore through poetry the much larger cultural and historical context Sénac was part of, as well as to imagine continuities and connections between the Algerian and American spaces.
Chapter 3: The myth of Algerian origins

Sénac's sense of belonging to Algeria goes against many formal definitions of nation. While he had French nationality before Algeria’s independence, he decided to relinquish it (literally throwing his passport into the Mediterranean) upon his return to Algeria in 1962 and to become Algerian. Sénac believed, perhaps naively, that as a poet who had “unequivocally chosen the Algerian nation” he would automatically be granted citizenship by the newly formed government. Rather, his numerous requests were met with Kafkaesque bureaucracy demanding an endless list of proofs and documents, and in the end he was never granted the nationality he had pleaded for in countless letters for over 12 years. Relinquishing the French passport and being denied Algerian nationality meant that Sénac lived in a semi-clandestine limbo for the last 10 years of his life. Arguably the French would have provided a new passport had he requested it, but Sénac understood himself as Algerian even though he was increasingly aware of the price he would have to pay. The following passage from a letter that Sénac wrote to the Minister of Justice in 1969 during one his stays with his adopted son, Jacques Miel, in the South of France, illustrates the contentious issue of his residency:

For a long time I was injured by the fact that the District Attorney of the Republic of Algiers thought that his duty was to “inform me that my request to adopt the Algerian nationality, formulated at the City Hall of Algiers on June 15 1965, was not receivable since the condition of residence was not met”! Yes, we read correctly (in this terrible month of August 1967), that it pertains to a “residence” clause, I who was born in Algeria, who have always lived there and who left it only because of the revolutionary struggle [along with many other revolutionary expatriates]...

More than ever, today, and with the perspective that time and distance allow (even with the prodigious “temptations of the West”) I am Algerian and want to act as such. (Sénac 146, transl.)

Sénac’s desperate and failed struggle to become Algerian is a symbol of why Sénac falls between the cracks of Algeria’s borders, both internal and external, as an Algerian writer. While many pieds noirs were granted Algerian citizenship upon request and were able to stay in
Algeria, Sénac’s case as a poet indicates a larger and deeper issue around the definition of a national Algerian identity through literature. The denial of Sénac’s citizenship, combined with the eventual exclusion of his poetry and his assassination are all testimonies to the place Sénac occupied and the particular role he played within the literary landscape of Algeria. Whereas my initial intention in this chapter was to place Sénac in Algeria, it is his “placelessness” that carries much larger significance and potential in undermining our efforts to conflate literature with national culture.

Sénac’s desire to see his birth and role as a poet as tied to the nation of Algeria was legitimate in terms of how invested he was throughout his life, yet it is much less obvious when one considers not only the history of colonialism, but that preceding it. Sénac’s poetic language, his “French graph”, should be read against the longer history of languages in Algeria and North-Africa, which is in reality a heterogeneous composit of Tamazight spoken by the Kabyles, Arabic through both Islamic and pre-Islamic influences, Spanish, French, Maltese, Italian, through European colonialism and settlements. Sénac, even though he started out within the French culture, was increasingly receptive, often through Jean Amrouche’s own translation, to the oral and written traditions of the African and the Arab worlds that were very much alive among the Algerian population. Sénac was aware that these traditions, because of France’s suppression of Arab culture, were most often accessible only through the French language, severing most Algerians from their own cultural heritage:

Here we have to address the questions of language and idiom. It’s certain that the only way young intellectuals could access culture was through the arbitrary means of the French schools, since the national language, Arab and the Berber dialects, were systematically smothered or rejected by the colonial regime into somewhat resistant “reserves”. Yet, these schools carried within them the seeds of revolution that their own masters seemed to have repudiated. Aside from a few revolutionaries – the poets Mohammad al-Id Hammou Ali, Mohammed Ababsa or Moufdi Zakarya, historians Tawfik al-Madani or Abd al-Djilali, the playwright Abdallah Nekli, the collaborators of the *Ach-Chihāb* review or a few isolated youths, a few popular storytellers (Cheikh El-Anka),
a few inveterate “bards”, especially in the South (Mohammed Belkheir, Abdallah Ben Kerriou, Cheikh Smati, Mohammed Ben Azouz el Boussadi) and in Kabylia (Si Mohand, Smaïl Azikioui) – the voice of the Algerian people would manifest itself, mostly in the form of “transcriptions”, in the language imposed by the coloniser. (Sénac 18-19)

This passage from *Le soleil sous les armes* exemplifies the degree to which Sénac was conversant with the live roots of the Algerian poetic tradition, which he included in his own poetry in the form of the Diwan or through references to the pre-Islamic Arab poet Antarah ibn Shaddad. That Sénac became alienated as a francophone poet, especially after Algeria’s independence, corresponds not only to the linguistic tensions referred to previously, in terms of what constitutes the legitimate language of Algeria, but to constitutive elements of Algeria’s culture that his poetry upholds, often against reductive religious, historical or nationalist definitions.

Resistance to Francophonie

Regarding the issue of defining Algerian literature in French, Jean Déjeux in his essay with Ruthmarie H. Mitsch, *Francophone Literature in the Maghreb: The Problem and the Possibility* cites the following alternatives: “littérature d’expression française”, “littérature de langue française”, “littérature algérienne d’expression arabe mais de langue française” (proposed by Ahmed Lanasri), “littérature arabe écrite en français” (suggested by André Miquel), and finally Sénac’s own “littérature de graphie française”. In Morocco, Kacem Basfao has offered “littérature marocaine de langue véhiculaire française”, which seems close to Sénac’s definition. What these competing definitions suggest is not only the historical difficulty of defining and situating the French language within North African writing, but the recurring attempt to appropriate the language within a contentious geographical and cultural context. What is also notable in all of these definitions is that the term “francophone” is consistently avoided although it had been officially in use as a post-colonial category since Senghor’s adoption of the term in
the early 60s. It is essential to understand the reasons for this avoidance, which have to do with the particular agenda of the francophone framework.

While the term "Francophonie" allowed for a larger linguistic framework to include an increasingly diverse group of writers who belonged very loosely to the heritage of the French language, it also perpetuated a certain form of cultural imperialism. As such Francophonie, while post-colonial in its acknowledgment that French was no longer the exclusive property of France and that a large part of the world had appropriated it in various hybrid forms, continued a certain vision of French anthropologist Onesime Reclus, who in 1880 saw French as a constitutive cultural element of France’s colonies. Zineb Ali-Benali and Françoise Simasotchi-Bronès, in a recent essay on Francophonie’s relation to the post-colonial, consider that the definition of Francophone is itself nomadic and can easily pass from the “literature of the Maghreb” to that of the “ultramarine”, or Caribbean, and that the “linguistic considerations are modulated by geographical positions” which should determine Francophonie as a plural instead of a singular. The essay further suggests that it is not “a simple problem of classification”, but that there are implicit questions of “expectation and readership”. “For the newly decolonized writer, the question is no longer that of denouncing colonialism. It’s about knowing for whom he writes in a country that is mostly excluded from reading, what he writes about and how.” (Ali-Benali and Simasotchi-Bronès 54) It is indeed quite different to consider the issue of language from an exterior theoretical position than from the perspective of the writer within the linguistic process of decolonization and in relation to the actual audience.

Abdellatif Laabi’s revue Souffles, published from 1966 to 1972, was one of the first attempts to redraw the contours of post-colonial North African literature and poetry written in French and Arabic. While understanding the predicament of the French language in an Arabic context and references that were either local provincial attempts to mimic French writers, or orientalist and
neo-colonialist, Laâbi also conceived of French as an instrument of denunciation of the neo-colonial realities emerging out of the newly independent North African nations. Laâbi in his introduction to the first edition of Souffles, referred to Malek Haddad and Albert Memmi’s definition of North African literature as an “object of the past”, “condemned to die young”, representative of a “pathetic determinism” according to Laâbi. He understands that the first generation of North African writers in French (Kateb, Dib, Feraoun, Mammeri, Chraïbi), was “closely tied to the colonial phenomenon in its linguistic, cultural and sociological implications.” (Laâbi 4)

For Laâbi, in most of this writing, from colorful and pacifist autobiographies of the 50s to the militant and protest writings during the Algerian war, one can see that despite the diversity of talent, the creative power, all this production is defined within the rigorous frame of acculturation. It illustrates perfectly in the cultural sphere this relationship between the colonized and the colonizer. (ibid.)

One of the main objectives of that literature was to show to the colonial center, or Métropole, that “the Kabyle fellah or the worker of Oran were not so different from the Breton farmer or the longshoreman from Marseilles.” (ibid.) To Laâbi, these writers, while revealing the conditions of the Algerians under French colonialism, were addressing a “gigantic open letter to the West, a sort of Maghrebi list of complaints.” While acknowledging the tremendous importance of this generation of writers, the post-independence writers of the Maghreb are confronted with a much more difficult predicament, that of representing “current realities, entirely new problems in which we are gripped by confusion and savage revolt.” The task of North African poets in the newly independent nations was not only to reveal the post-colonial “confusion”, but also to do so in a language that reflected the thwarted aspirations of those who had fought so hard against the repression of colonialism only to find that their own voices were being silenced by the new Cold War era regimes. Poets who wrote both in Arabic and French posed a particular threat to these regimes and Laâbi’s review was shut down in 1972. Laâbi and many others were imprisoned, and tortured, in the infamous Kénitra prison.
When considering the type of persecution Laâbi and other writers faced when writing, not just in French, the idea of a Francophone community seems a grossly inadequate for writers who were creating a language reflecting constant political turmoil. Furthermore, belonging to a larger community of writers in French was secondary to the task of addressing a local audience that did not have access to education. Who were the new readers of Maghrebi writers going to be when the vehicles of French education and publication were being dismantled and not replaced? While Maghrebi literature in French can be seen as “object of the past”, it is an object that continues to have crucial relevance to the understanding of both the past and the present of North-Africa.

Francophonie has furthermore been a subject of recent debate in relation to postcolonial studies, as to whether it is too limiting in its focus on a linguistic community rather than a new global reality. According to Emily Apter, it has become “a disciplinary site of theory much like Comparative Literature at the dawn of its institutional formation in exile during and after World War II”. (Apter 297) Yet, she believes that while “Comparative Literature has been historically marked by empire, Francophonie–as a territory of languages with French colonialism as common ground–has a more specific history of colonial dependency and disciplinarity to overcome.” (ibid. 298) The issue with Francophonie is that it is based on the linguistic legacy of French colonialism, and hence cannot clearly separate itself in order to include a wider diversity of literatures or contexts. In order to avoid being too restrictive, Francophone theory “must define what the field is by virtue of what it is not: not French canon; not the literature of the hexagon; not a discrete linguistic territory.” (ibid.)

One should be equally cautious with regard to the category of World Literature, which has made its way into French theory as Littérature-Monde. The debate between Francophonie and Littérature-Monde is mostly centered on issues of post-colonial theory and the hold that
American academia has had on claiming the higher ground against its French counterpart. The more recent adoption and translation in France of post-colonial theory by Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Benedict Anderson and Edward Said, has placed Francophonie in a strange predicament. According to Laurent Bubreuil, France has had difficulty tolerating what is often perceived as a typically “Anglo-Saxon move or obsession. One might argue, however, that francophone writers of the 1950s and 1960s, such as Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Albert Memmi, and Frantz Fanon, were already writing (post)colonial works.” (Dubreuil 6) The question is, why are those authors still polemical in France while most found in America a receptive audience? Answers to this question might lie in the ways America, itself a post-colonial nation, established its cultural and academic dominance in the post-World War II era. Dubreuil, while being representative of the recent openness of French intellectuals to postcolonial theory, nevertheless cautions against the narrow view of history that it defines, which is why he places ‘post’ in parentheses, to suggest an ‘after’ that is in reality a continuation of what was there before in the preceding centuries of European expansionism. To the “short view” of (post)colonialism, Dubreuil prefers “the long historical view, going from the territorial expansion of Europe to the “New” World up until today.” (ibid.)

Dubreuil’s is a salutary caution with regard to the history of the frameworks we choose in determining an era. This has particular relevance to our cultural and geographical relation to post-colonial nations. The hold that postcolonial and deconstructive reading has in America should also be used with caution in relation to the Cold War era we are still emerging from. While a “long historical view” is an essential consciousness to have, it cannot be included in the framework of this chapter. Rather, as a counterpoint to the theories, I would like to suggest that through specific writers and perhaps more vividly poets, we arrive at a better and more complex understanding of the space in which literature was being created, during, and in the aftermath of anti-colonial wars and revolutions.
The larger issue here is the relation between literature, language and nation in the post-colonial, or (post)colonial, context of nation formation. While Sénac viewed pre-independence Maghrebi literature in French as an intermediate and perhaps transitory phase toward an independent literature to be defined, there remains the difficult work of establishing the contours of a literature in French that was simultaneously trying to depict the political, social and cultural realities of post-colonial North-Africa while confronting the linguistic hegemony of the Arab language which was being used to consolidate a national identity at the expense of “minority” languages throughout North-Africa.

The history of Algerian languages

While several early French historians, in a long lineage of historians who have attempted to record the complex and often misunderstood history of North-Africa from Herodotus to Ibn Khaldun, were able to perceive the very complex relations between the “indigenous” populations of North-Africa, commonly referred to as Berbers, and the successive presence of civilizations including the Phoenicians, the Romans, the Vandals and Byzantines, the subsequent waves of pre-and Hilalian Arabs, the Ottomans, Spanish, Italian and finally French, there remains a tragic simplification of North-Africa outside of specialized disciplines. This simplification, one must add, is also a product of the French colonial administration, which divided Algeria into what Patricia Lorcin describes as “good Arabs”, mainly the Berbers, and “bad Arabs”, meaning the traditionally Arab Muslims. The colonial distinction was not based on historical facts, but on a desire to split two communities that had a shared history since the 7th century and the early Arab migrations. It was also a revisionist attempt to sever the indigenous Berbers from the Arab influence in order to create a mythical connection to the Roman, Vandal and Byzantine

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9 See Carette et Varnier, Description et divisions de l’Algérie, Paris, 1847
presences in North-Africa that would historically legitimize their integration to French colonialism through a constructed cultural and religious continuity. While early Christians had in fact settled in parts of North-Africa during the 2nd and 3rd centuries, mainly Hippo and Annaba (Saint Augustine is thought to be a Christian of Berber descent), it is the Donatist movement opposed to the religious authority of the emperor that had taken root. According to Kateb Yacine, Saint Augustine is responsible for the violent Roman repression of the Donatists, although other sources contest this version and present him as a mediator for a peaceful resolution.

The history of the Berbers, it turns out, has little if no connection to Western civilization, but an extremely rich history of its own that is only now slowly resurfacing\textsuperscript{11}. An extremely detailed account of that history is found in Hosni Kitouni’s \textit{La Kabylie orientale dans l’histoire}, published in 2013. The term “Berber”, a legacy of the Greeks and Romans, was used to describe the North Africans who did not surrender to the Greco-Roman civilization and hence were “barbaric”. Nothing is further from the truth in this assumption, which found its correlation in France’s definition of the “noble savage” attributed to the Berber populations encountered by early French explorers. While very few historical documents exist on the culture of the so-called Berbers, the extensive research of Kitoumi is an attempt to reposition the Berber tribes as the dominant cultural influence in Algeria. The term Berber includes a wide range of tribes that occupy North-Africa from Eastern Tunisia to Morocco. The Berber tribes present in Algeria are predominantly the Kabyles, a name derived from the Arabic “qbâ’il”, meaning “tribe”. It is thought that this term came about during the arabization of the Maghreb to designate those that lived in the hinterland. The Kabyle language, which has many variants among the ancestral Berbers, has a relatively obscure origin, but is thought to be of Lybic origin with Punic, Greek, Roman

and Hilalian influences. Its variants are referred to as Tamazight, Zenâta, Chaouïa, the Tamazight being the most predominant among the Algerian Kabyles.

In his study, Kitoumi pays particular attention to the Kutama, a tribe that had settled in the mountains of Oriental Kabylia, part of what the French later called Great Kabylia. An inscription found in El Hofra (Constantine) bears the initial KT, which supposedly designated the Kutama tribe near Cirta. “In the 7th century the Kutama occupied all of the important towns from the Aurès to the coastal area from Bougie to Bona.” (Kitouni 40) The Kutama became powerful allies of the Shiite Fatimid dynasty and defeated the Aglabids in 908. They supported the Fatimid campaigns in Spain, Sicily and across the Maghreb, but following the conquest of Egypt and Khalif El Moezz Ibn Badis’s move to Cairo in 973 they lost their leadership and fell into decline. The Kutamas suffered tremendous religious persecution thereafter, because of their Shiite faith (considered heretical), and disappeared into the mountains. By the 14th century they had all but vanished in name, although they retained their language and culture. Kitoumi’s thesis, in exploring the story of the Kutama, is that theirs is a complex and little recorded history in terms of the interactions between Berber and Arab cultures. Their language, which persist today, is a “true linguistic sedimentation […] composed of a first Berber strata on which came a second Berbero-Arab followed by a third Arab layer creating a complex picture of a language that had been created from the contact of populations from many different horizons.” (Kitouni 80) An extremely interesting feature of the language, is that while “almost all of the topographical elements are Berber, human creations carry Arab names.” (ibid.) Far from being Arabized, the Kabyles were able, despite the successive Arab and Ottoman conquests, to retain their languages and culture through integration and preservation of their own. While Berber warriors such as Massinissa, Jugurtha, and La Kahena have been celebrated for their resistance to foreign occupation, Kitouni presents a subtler and perhaps more fundamental form of resistance through culture and language, albeit a language that had long lost its Lybian alphabet.
The Arab culture in the Maghreb is highly heterogeneous, “characterized by multilingualism in the sense that many languages and varieties are used in different domains, namely, classical Arabic, standard Arabic, the regional varieties of spoken Arabic, Kurdish, Berber, English, French, Spanish and Italian.” (Fishman and García 384) The status of classical Arabic has to be considered in relation to the standard Arabic and the regional spoken dialects, a linguistic situation that Ennaji characterizes as triglossia. Classical Arabic, or Fusha, “is the language of pre-Islamic poetry, the Qur’an, the whole of the written Arabic tradition.” (Elinson 716) As such it is very codified and not effective in terms of unifying large illiterate populations. In order to adapt Arabic to the modern world, including the influence of western science and technology, and to make it more accessible as a vehicle for Arab nationalism, a standard form was created, contemporary fusha, which is used in education, administration and the media. While standard Arabic allowed nationalist movements to foster Arab patriotism in the fight against colonialism, it was not an effective vehicle in a post-colonial world where “knowledge of French and, increasingly English [was] viewed as necessary for success in a wide range of fields including science, technology and business.” (ibid.)

The issue with standard Arabic, ever since the beginning of the 19th century nahda (rebirth) movement, is whether it is “sufficiently expressive, flexible, and intelligible for the majority of Arabs, which in turn calls into question the very ideal of Pan-Arabism.” (Elinson 717) As a consequence we have a situation where most North Africans use regional Arabic in their daily lives, combined to various degrees with standard Arabic, French and English depending on their level of education and contact with the West. While originally an exclusively oral language, regional Arabic has been increasingly codified into a written language in order to reach the local readership. In Morocco, “publication in darija [term used to designate colloquial North African languages] has been increasing in print media, fiction, and works translated into Arabic, and
there are those who strongly advocate for its acceptance as a written language.” (ibid.) Elinson further remarks, “written darija has gained support as serving the practical, political and artistic needs of a dynamic and multilingual society.” (ibid.) While not formally codified, it has been used increasingly in journalism and more recently translations. While the choice of standard Arabic in writing appeals to the broader Arab world, the local darija ensures a local readership. The presence of French remains very strong, especially through the media, but it is increasingly challenged by the global dominance of English.

An Algerian lingua franca

The legacy that this long history left on the day of Algeria’s independence is one of deep unresolved conflicts that are the cause for much of the turmoil Algeria experienced ever since independence and the main reason why the problems of language and literature are so profound. The issue of linguistic categorization of literature in North-Africa is not only complicated by the history of colonialism, but by pre-existing pre-national histories which came to be redefined in the post-colonial age through Pan-Arab nationalism, a post-colonial construct which attempted to unify the Arab world through the institution of a common Arab language and the religion of Islam despite a much more heterogenous cultural reality. Kateb Yacine, himself a Kabyle, went as far as saying that “Arabo-Islamic Algeria is an Algeria against itself, an Algeria foreign to itself”. (Yacine 57-68) As polemical as this statement may seem, we must emphasize that Kateb was also one of the first Algerian authors to write in the spoken ‘darija’ of Algeria. At stake in the question of literature is not whether there is an Algerian literature, but what the context of that literature should be in light of both the history of Algeria and the post-colonial politics of nation formation around somewhat mythical categories.

In Mémoire des langues, Jocelyne Dakhlia offers a way to resolve the continuing conflict left behind by French colonialism, in terms of the mutual exclusion (although at times
interdependence) of the French and Arab influences in Algeria. Dakhla observes that colonial presence produces simultaneously a “métissage” (miscegenation) of cultures and “a refusal of miscegenation, a separation of the societies in contact, and a polarization of dominated and dominant identities, a centering of one’s self against the other.”(Dakhla 41) In terms of the modern Maghreb, this has produced a situation characterized as “bi-lingualism” or “bi-languages”, according to Abdelkébir Khatibi, between both the Arab and French and between the Arab and Berber languages. Dakhli believes that “it is an illusion to think that the Maghreb discovered the French, and in addition Spanish and Italian languages with colonization” (ibid.), and counters that “the Maghreb is in fact the “land of election” of a Mediterranean ‘lingua franca’, a composite language based on Spanish and Italian, mixing other contributions from romance with a few rare Arab and even Turkish elements.” This language, spoken predominantly along the Mediterranean coast “reflects the composite character of the North African population itself.” (ibid.) While the relegation of Arabic and Turkish linguistic influence to “a few rare elements” seems dismissive, the important contribution is that there needs to be what Dakhli calls a “consciousness of this miscegenation”, since “memory is not only that which we remember, but the language in which we remember, or even the language or languages that we remember.”

(42) She cites in literature the examples of Abdelwahab Meddeb’s title Phantasia, “a term that is emblematic of lingua franca” (found also in Assia Djebar’s L’Amour, la fantasia), or Talismano, which “comes from the Arab tilasm and from the Greek telesma.” According to Dakhlia again

Meddeb uses fantasia under multiple registers: that of Italian, which imposes itself again as a third language between Arabic and French, through Dante, author of “Alta fantasia”; that of the prestigious medieval Arab culture, through Al Kindi, who comments on the Greek notion of phantasia, or through Al Farabi or Ibn ‘Arabi… (44)

Here is yet another reason to revisit the sometimes facile frameworks of colonial and post-colonial dichotomies in order to arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of the existing hybridities in the Mediterranean world, which instead of pointing to any single unique source of culture or language, offer a never-ending multitude of possible combinations and influences.
The larger theoretical categories of Francophone, (post)colonial and World Literature do not seem to apply when analyzing works of literature “being made in the urgency of saying and the peril of existing” (Miliani 14) Situating the poetry of Jean Sénac in this landscape becomes both incredibly arduous and deeply relevant in terms of how his particular position fits into the incredibly rich and diverse history of an Algeria at the crossroads of the Mediterranean. While nationalist readings often have restrictive agendas, the role of the poet is to transcend them into a larger common language. (See Aimé Césaire’s Poetry and Knowledge)
Chapter 4: Sénac and Algerian writing

While Algerianist writers, such as Robert Randau, Edmond Brua and Jean Pomier and those belonging to the Ecole d’Alger, or Ecole Nord-Africaine–Emmanuel Roblès, Gabriel Audisio and Albert Camus–are seldom included in post-colonial anthologies and dictionaries of Algerian literature, Jean Sénac often is although he shares the same background as most pied noir writers. An example of this is Christiane Achour’s Dictionnaire des oeuvres algériennes en langue française. Achour, who has written numerous essays on Algerian literature and is considered one of the authorities on the subject, includes Sénac along with Henri Kréa, Anna Gréki, Denis Martinez and Corinne Chevalier in a list of over 200 Algerian writers and poets, most of them North African. Corinne Chevalier is a pied noir writer whose father was the mayor of Algiers under Pierre Mendez-France. She stayed in Algeria after its independence and became an Algerian citizen. Denis Martinez is a painter born in Oran, founder of the Aouchem movement, and close friend of Sénac who also became an Algerian but decided to leave in 1994 after the assassination of Tahar Djaout. Although not a writer per se, Martinez included text and calligraphy and illustrated poems by Sénac. Henri Kréa, whose mother was Algerian, was a poet, dramatist, and novelist born in Algeria, and also a close friend of Sénac. His poems dealt extensively with social change and the Algerian revolution, for example La Révolution et la poésie sont une seule et même chose published in 1957. Kréa left for Paris in the early 60s and died there in 2000. Anna Gréki, a poet, was born in Batna in 1931 and joined the Algerian struggle for independence. “Arrested in 1957 and jailed at Barberousse (an infamous prison in Algiers), she was expelled from Algeria and could only return after independence in 1962.” She died in childbirth in 1966. Her poetry was also political, “charged with the promise of a better future, despite the horrors of the colonial war…” (Joris and Tengour 333)
Poems for the New Millenium, edited by Pierre Joris and Habib Tengour, presents a collection of North African poetry going back to Callimachus, including Sénac, Kréa and Gréki, and in addition Jacques Derrida, Jean Pélégrí and Juan Goytisolo.

Albert Memmi’s Anthologie des Ecrivains maghrébins d’expression française (1964), one of the first anthologies of North African literature, included the following list of authors:

Ait Djafer, Jean Amrouche, Malek Bennabi, Mohammed Boudia, Mourad Bourboune, Driss Chraïbi, Mohamed Dib, Assia Djebar, Mouloud Feraoun, Malek Haddad, Kateb Yacine, Henri Kréa, Mostefa Lacheraf, Mohammed Aziz Lahbabi, Mouloud Mammeri, Albert Memmi, Malek Ouary, Ahmed Sefrioui, Jean Sénac, Margerite Taos and Noredine Tidafi.

Again, Jean Sénac is included, along with Henri Kréa among a selection of 21 North African writers and poets. When asked about his choices, Memmi “responded that the works of Maghrebi authors were distinctive in the sense that they gave voice to communities that had experienced the colonial situation from the perspective of the colonized.” (Déjeux and Mitsch 7) While the decision of including Sénac, Kréa, Gréki and a few other pied noir writers and poets is never clearly explained, it seems that from Memmi’s commentary we can induce that they in fact “gave voice to communities that had experienced the colonial situation from the perspective of the colonized.” This distinction, understandable in the immediate aftermath of the Algerian War, has continued to operate a division among writers who can legitimately speak for Algeria, and those who represent the culture and perspective of the colonizer, including Camus, Roblès, Audisio, and of course the Algerianist writers who preceded them. The distinction also suggests that there is a particular experience that poetic language grasps and which places Sénac, Kréa, Gréki within the realm of the colonized, while prose tended to represent the perspective of the colonizer among the pied noir writers.
Where in the cultural and linguistic makeup of Algeria does one place a poet of French expression, or “graphie francaise” within the tradition of North African writers? Is Sénac more on the side of Camus and Roblès, or on that of Yacine and Feraoun? Are those distinctions really useful in determining a literary space that has always been the site of confrontations and formulations between several cultures and landscapes? Francophone studies have suggested that there is a unifying language in France’s ex-colonies, yet those languages have more to do with local translations in the language of the colonizer than with an intentional adoption. While the challenge after Algeria’s independence was to determine the properly Algerian literature, which was emerging out of the post-colonial world, our current responsibility might be to reintegrate literary history in order to include all facets of Algerian writing.

Literature and colonial experience

Separating Camus and Roblès from Yacine and Feraoun also suggests that differences in literary genres and boundaries are determined by cultural and “racial” distinctions. These do not seem to apply to Sénac, even though from a cultural perspective Sénac is closer to Camus and Roblès since all three shared Spanish descent as North African natives. It is their mode of expression and perspective that differentiate them from the rest of the North African writers more than anything else.

Since the North African indigenous writer focused upon social conditions, in contrast to his or her European counterpart, the traveler or the pied-noir (the European born in North Africa) who foregrounded exoticism and the themes of social justice and nationalism quickly entered the emerging body of francophone literature. As the Algerian writer Mouloud Feraoun explained: “Je crois que c’est surtout ce désir de réalité qui m’a poussé à écrire”

Again, according to Mildred Mortimer:

Poverty, colonial justice, violence, and exile are themes that mark all the literary production—poetry, novels, play—of the colonial period. Yet the novel is perhaps the most
interesting form to study because, as a distinctly European literary form highly developed in French literature, it serves to illustrate the Maghrebi paradox. (Mortimer 3)

For Feraoun, and many other indigenous writers, it was the issue of social justice and their perspective on colonialism that pushed them to write, whereas the pied-noir writers were already immersed in a tradition that they used to shape their particular experience as foreigners. That is not to say that they weren’t also concerned with the violence and oppression of native Algerians, but they simply could not entirely connect with that experience within their own writing. A striking example of this inability is found in Camus’s Meursault, who can feel no guilt in the killing of the Arab. Sénac understood the predicament full well in one of his essays on the famous novel:

It’s because Camus has typical reactions, the mentality of the community that he belongs to. Like it, he carries with the tip of his pen, without even knowing it, in all innocence, that terrible indifference, that ABSENCE that for more than a century will mark human relations in Algeria\textsuperscript{12}. And his famous reporting on the “misery in Kabylia”, his positions in favor of progressive Algerians could not keep him from writing “The Stranger” at the same time. (Jean Sénac, \textit{Pour une terre possible}, op. cit., pp. 216-222)

As a critic Jean Sénac wrote many pieces on Algerian literature from the early Algerianists to the young generation of post-independence poets and writers, something that also distinguishes him from other writers of his generation. Situating Sénac and his poetry within a dichotomized universe reveals deeper issues as he was himself a product of the first generation of Algerianist writers and continued to recognize their importance in creating the context for Algerian literature in French even though he supported and felt part of the later indigenous writers of Algeria.

Most contemporary readings tend to forget the Algerianists due to their perceived attachment to the bygone era of colonialism, and they made it possible for Jean Sénac to become a literary and poetic figure, and gave him his first wings as both a poet and a literary critic in Randau’s \textit{...}

\textsuperscript{12} In that same text, Sénac likens Meursault’s casual killing of an Arab to the way Cowboys killed “Indians”, suggesting a common colonial violence.
review Afrique. Their first objective was to bear witness to the emergence of a new culture on the African soil, and to create a literature that would be a testimony to a distinct ‘Algerian soul’ (Dunwoodie 157). While Bertrand, the first ideologue of the movement, believed that they were representatives of ‘latinity’ in Africa, Randau conceived of a more local and regional identity. Algerianist writers were convinced that they were becoming part of a distinct race (a term that Camus uses as well), a hybrid of Mediterranean and African cultures that was radically separate from France even though it coexisted with the reality of French colonialism. While they were part of colonialism, their common project as writers was to forge a separate identity from that of the Métropole and to oppose the orientalist and antiquated colonial perceptions.

Whereas Algerianists privileged the concepts of ‘peuple, race, communauté’, and “the ideologically charged metaphorical language of center/periphery, insider/outsider” (Dunwoodie 175) that allowed them to differentiate themselves culturally from Europe and create a specific definition for Algerian writing, Audisio and Camus (as the representatives of the younger generation of writers) went to great lengths to distance themselves from these notions of borders and embraced a more diffuse Mediterranean space:

Where the Algerianists reduced even Bertrand’s exploratory enthusiasm for the South and saw other Mediterranean people as primarily a source of incoming labour/settlers for the colony–hence their tendency to privilege signifiers of settlement and roots like s’établir, se fixer, s’enraciner–Audisio’s alternative discourse is expansive, centred on ports, docks, ships, and seafarers; it privileges signifiers of movement–échappée, départ, péréple, course (escape, departure, journey, race). (180)

While Albert Camus, Gabriel Audisio and Emmanuel Roblès were the prominent representatives of a school loosely called Ecole d’Alger (although Camus preferred the broader notion of “Ecole Nord-Africaine des lettres”), neither categories were used by the writers themselves as they felt part of a more borderless and fluid Mediterranean world. Camus saw the Algerianists as more Latin and Roman in their desire to root themselves in the Algerian soil, and claimed the Greek
origins as a more civilized alternative. At a conference he gave in Algiers 1937, called 
**Indigenous Culture: The New Mediterranean Culture**, Camus made clear this distinction:

> The error [in defining a national Mediterranean culture] stems from a confusion between Mediterranean and Latin, from ascribing to Rome what began in Athens. For us, it is clear that the only nationalism at issue is the nationalism of sunshine. We will not subjugate ourselves to tradition or tie our vital future to exploits already dead. (Camus 188)

The Southern Mediterranean world for Camus, in opposition the Northern Latin, is strikingly apolitical and seems to celebrate the senses, the “nationalism of sunshine” above a nationalism of culture and history. This is one early example of how Camus came to oppose any nationalist Algerian movement, preferring instead a community of the senses (which one finds also in many of Sénac’s writings and his poems celebrating the body). Camus links nationalism with Roman Imperialism and advocates instead for a regional and Mediterranean sphere that could transcend the idea of Nation altogether. While closely connected to Camus as an intellectual and writer, Sénac never shared this vision of a nationless Mediterranean world, and was closer to the Algerianist notion of rootedness, of ‘soil’. Perhaps this is related to the rootedness of his poetry, which made him part of an existing North African culture, not a literary transplant like Audisio or Camus who finally chose Paris over Algiers.

Poetry as the perspective of the colonized

While Camus, Roblès and Audisio never claimed to be Algerian writers, both Jean Sénac and Henri Kréa saw themselves as part of Algerian literature. Sénac declared in 1957, in *Le soleil sous les armes*, that an Algerian writer is someone “who had definitively opted for the Algerian nation”, while Henri Kréa stated that is was “in the absolute that one has chosen the Algerian motherland no matter what one’s racial origin or religious or philosophical adherence might be.” (Ibid.) Considering these differences and the fact that the issue of authentic and “inauthentic”
Algerian literature continues to be a source of deep conflict among Arabic-language critics\textsuperscript{13}, mainly around language, we should consider Sénac’s perspective as a bridge knowing that it isn’t shared by many North African critics, such as Merdaci and Memmi. While respecting and understanding the desire to reject France’s cultural colonialism through its language, the idea of a legitimate “perspective of the colonized” seems too reductive when trying to understand the overall reality of Algerian and North African writing\textsuperscript{14}. The fight over the definition of Algerian literature has a strong influence over the fate of Jean Sénac and other lesser-known pied noir writers.

In terms of placing Sénac among the “generation of ’52”—mainly Mohammed Dib, Mouloud Mammeri and Kateb Yacine—we are faced with a much more complicated task as it implicates not only the literary, but the political context they were in. From a strictly cultural perspective, and because he has no Arab or Berber roots in Algeria, Sénac cannot be placed among the writers who experienced the interior conflict of being Arab-Berbers writing in French. From a cultural perspective there is a fundamental difference between Mouloud Feraoun’s \textit{The Poor Man’s Son} and Jean Sénac’s \textit{Ebauche du père}, in terms of the social spaces they occupy within colonial Algeria. The shared focus on the Father-Son relation in both novels, though, points to a common filial preoccupation that one also finds in Kateb Yacine’s \textit{Nedjma}, in terms of the search for an allusive Algeria represented by the metaphorical character of Nedjma. Looking for roots, for origins in semi-autobiographical novels, is a common trait of Algerian writers.

\textsuperscript{13} “During the festival of Mohammed Laïd Khalifa at Biskra, for example, Abdallah Hamadi frivolously maintained that, “despite its genius,” Kateb Yacine’s \textit{Nedjma} “isn’t an Algerian work” and that Rachid Boudjedra isn’t “an authentically Algerian writer,” even though he has written in Arabic since 1982. Hamadi concludes by arguing that Algerians who write in French are not “representative of the national literature” (See Djaout) Jean Déjeux and Ruthmarie H. Mitsch. "Francophone Literature in the Maghreb: The Problem and the Possibility." \textit{Research in African Literatures} 23.2 (1992)8 Print.

\textsuperscript{14} This is something that Memmi addressed in the second edition of his anthology, published in 1985, where he included the Algerianists Camus, Audisio, etc…, saying that French is a legitimate language of North-Africa. Merdaci on the other hand, a contemporary critic, seems to reject that notion in favor of an exclusively Arabic tradition.
The search for the father also figures predominantly in Camus’s unfinished novel *Le Premier Homme*, but in Camus’s writing the search leads more to a feeling of estrangement than belonging as do most of his novels.

While Camus was immensely instrumental in putting Algerian literature on the map by becoming the renowned Paris intellectual, and supporting the emergence of “local” Algerian writers, his novels represented a blatant lack of developed Arab Algerian characters to the new generation of indigenous writers:

> I saw a group of Arabs leaning against the front of the tobacco shop. They were staring at us in silence, but in that way of theirs, as if we were nothing but stones or dead trees. (Camus 48)

This is not to say that Camus was indifferent toward the Arab Algerians, or that this passage represents his views on Algeria. While the prevailing perception among many Algerians was that Camus had betrayed them by being silent on the Algerian War, more recent scholarship suggests that he was deeply aware of his role as a public figure and felt that speaking out would aggravate the situation further. In fact Camus wrote numerous pieces on the Algerian conflict in *Algerian Chronicles*, first published in 1958 and republished in English translation in 2013, where he attempts to find a middle ground in the escalating violence between the Algerians and the French. This middle ground, as noble as it seems, seems blind to the tremendous imbalance of force between the French and indigenous Algerians, similar to the ways the Palestinians are accused of being violent when they seek revenge for Israeli bombardments. The neutrality of Camus as an intellectual, trying to steer away from extremism on both the Left and the Right, seems rather distasteful given France’s disproportionate use of military violence upon the Algerian population.

Sénac, on the other hand, was consistently in contact with Algerian poets and writers, promoted them in his literary journals, in his radio shows and anthologies, and drew heavily from the
Arabo-Muslim tradition in his manifesto. His commitment to an indigenous Algerian literature places him squarely among Algerian writers even though his origins are European, which is unique among Algerian writers. Still, what perhaps most characterized the literature of Algeria is its unclassifiable nature, no matter how much one tries to draw distinctions. As such Sénac, as traversing all groups, including that of literary genres, might be one of the most representative of that diversity.

The issue of placing literature within national categories in Algeria is arguably impossible to solve, as is the dilemma of where the different representatives and schools of literature fit within the larger and diffuse category of Algerian or North African literature. It is tempting to say that such categorization is besides the point and does not bring any clarity to the discussion, as do the various theories that would attempt to draw larger parallels. Sénac as an absolutely singular writer, belonging in none of the proposed categories, allows us to consider all Algerian writers as absolutely singular in their attempts at writing. Seeing writing from Sénac’s perspective frees up the space of writing as that which cannot fit into larger frameworks, which also undermines the academic project of defining.

Algerian Poetry: “Wind of Beyond or Wind of the Roots?”

Poetry in North-Africa belongs to larger and older Arab and Berber traditions that go back thousands of years, long before Western influence. Poetry is much harder to anthologize from a Western perspective since its sources in North-Africa are in ways independent from Western tradition. While Sénac is clearly inspired by French poets in his youth, he is increasingly influenced by pre-colonial poets going back to the pre-Islamic era and to Berber oral chants that were transcribed by Jean Amrouche and others as testimony to their rich literary history. Sénac occupied a liminal space within that tradition as representative of a Western poet who drew from
the existing poetic culture of Algeria, and although he couldn’t read that poetry in its original language he had been exposed to it in everyday life since early childhood, and in the Chaâbi music he listened to. As such it was part of his ear, if not his pen. Furthermore, due to the French suppression of the Arab culture that severed Algerians from their poetic tradition, Sénac’s poetry could be seen as an attempt to bridge the poetic void of French presence and to link pre- and post-colonial Arabic poetry in Algeria. That the French language would be that bridge is ironic, but Sénac understood that future Algerian poets would write in Arabic and that his generation was only a transition. Three other poets shared Sénac’s belief, Edmond Brua, Sadia Lévy and Henri Kréa.

Nadia Ghalem and Christiane Ndiaye mention many poets who preceded them in the Maghreb: Sidi Boumedienne Chu’aïb (1100-1168), born in Sevilla, lived in Algeria and was buried in Tlemcen. “A poet, a scholar and a mystic, he is well-known in the arabo-muslim world.” Abd-el-Khader (1808-1883), “emblematic figure of the resistance to French colonization, died in exile in Syria.” Mohammed Benguitoun (1800-1890), “born near Biskra, composer of Hiziya, classical poetry that is still sung today.” Si Mohand (1850-1901?) from Kabylia and whom Sénac often refers to. Heddi Zerki (1890-1949), a rare example of a female poet, “born in the great Algerian South, in Oued Souf.”(Ndiaye 198)

Ghalem and Ndiaye, in order to emphasize that “the European settlers did not arrive in countries without a culture, literary (in Arabic or Amazigh) or oral tradition” (ibid.), cite the following passage from Jean Déjeux’s anthology, published in 1982,

Ibn Khaldun had already referred to certain famous performances and known figures, such as Ibn Amsaïb (13th century) from Tlemcen, Adbalah ben Kerriou (died in 1921) from Laghouat, or Mohammed al Id Hammou Ali born in Ain Beida in 1904, and whose work is prominently included in Mohammed El Hadj as-Sanoussi’s anthology,
Contemporary Poets (Tunisia 1345/1926)... And the “Kabyle Verlaine” Si Mohand.15 (ibid.)

Whereas one could say that literary fiction in North Africa was a European influence (keeping in mind that the birth of the picaresque novel was in many respects tied to The 1001 Nights, and to the rhymed prose maqamah brought in through Andalus), poetry was already deeply rooted. In light of this, one could see Sénac as part of existing Algerian and Maghrebi traditions in poetry, both oral and written, and claim with Malek Haddad that Sénac was “writing French, but not writing in French”. Sénac’s own definition “écrivain algérien de graphie française” could be an allusion to not only the graphic Arabic calligraphy, but the calligraphic art of the Aouchem group, which derives its origins from the prehistoric cave paintings in Tassili. Sénac was very close to Algerian artists and directed a radio program on the Aouchem group where he stated the following:

In the Aouchem group, the painters Martinez, Akmoun, Benbaghdad write [like their companion Laghouati] as frequently as they paint or make reliefs. They integrate frequently calligraphic texts in their works. (Sénac 184)

If Arab or Berber francophone writers could “write Arabic or Berber in French”, since their mother tongues were historically foreign to French, Sénac’s native tongue would be closer to his mother tongue, an Oranese French idiom mixed with Spanish, Italian, Maltese, Arabic and Turkish. The term “graphie française” was perhaps a way for him to solve the issue of being an Algerian poet who didn’t speak or write Arabic, but it was also a way to formulate a concept of poetry, language and literature, which abstracted the mother tongue as the foundation for native literature. What Sénac is defining is a broader definition of Algerian writing, tied to particular historical and even pre-literate cultures of Algeria.

Jean Sénac’s collection of poems *The Myth of the Mediterranean Sperm*, [Le mythe du sperme-méditerrannée] would be an example of this. Written in 1967 but published only posthumously because of its homoerotic language, they suggest that any single (and perhaps male) origin in the Mediterranean is a myth. In it one finds the following poem, titled *Un dernier rêve, Margot, avant la mort*, [One last dream, Margot, before death], possibly alluding to Queen Margot and the desperate attempt to reconcile French Protestants and Catholics under Charles IX:

But Antar will come. I have always said it  
That he will come out of my wounds like a white flag without a sign  
When a strong enough wind will turn my body into  
The Red Sea.  
Wind of Beyond or wind of the Roots?  
O may he split the poem in two!  
Antar will be born. No need of his mouth to invade me I love you.  
Nothing will remain of the crime, or of the night. (Sénac 547)

Antar is a figure that often appears in Sénac’s poetry and is part of a personal mythology that could refer to lovers as well as to religious, literary or historical figures. According to Hamid Nacer-Khodja, it was Sénac’s habit to mesh these figures, sometimes deviating them entirely from their original meaning, or attaching them to people he knew personally or intimately. Antar here could also refer to the heroic pre-Islamic warrior poet Antarah ibn Shaddad (525-608), a symbol of courage and resistance in the Arab world, featured in an opera by Palestinian composer Mustafa al-Kurd in 1988. In Sénac’s poem Antar is emerging from the poet’s own wounds, as though from the increasing persecution he was experiencing as gay and poet of the French “graph”, and from Algeria’s own post-colonial “linguicide”. Sénac’s body becoming the Red Sea, the link between Africa and Arabia, is a link to the past, to the “roots”, but also one of the “beyond”, to be, in Antar’s being reborn. The question of “wind of beyond or of the roots” also echoes the concerns of both Algerianist writers and those of the Ecole d’Alger. While the Algerianists were seeking to root their writings in Algeria, albeit in French, the later generation,
including Camus, was more interested in transcending borders within the wider Mediterranean world. This poem also fits into Sénac's belief that the future language of Algeria would be Arabic, "Antar will be born", and would find its origins in pre-Islamic African Arab poetry. The poem, opened in two like the Red Sea in the Bible, offers a crossing, a bridge to that past and to the future. The relation between the poem and the title is difficult to interpret, but the reference to religious warfare seems obvious and perhaps Sénac is alluding to his own death as a casualty of a new war of religion in Algeria. The object of Sénac's love is often enigmatic, "I love you", and could refer simultaneously to a lover, to the poet, but he also does not need his mouth, his words, "No need of his mouth...". "To be invaded" in a sense without language, without words. The last stanza "Nothing will remain of the crime, or of the night" is a possible allusion to Sénac's gay nightlife, and to the guilt he felt toward his homosexuality, which the poem seems to purify. Senac often fused his personal identity with that of Algeria, which means that the elements of poetry, of love, of crime are both personal and representative of a larger reality.

The line "Wind of Beyond or wind of the Roots?" echoes Nathan Hare's essay on the 1969 Pan-African festival in Algiers, where he observed the conflicts that divided the Black Panther movement (which Hare designates as the Stokely-Eldridge split), between those who believed in a national cause for African-Americans, and those who believed in a cultural cause, one seeking homeland in the future through nation, whereas the other sought home in the African heritage against nation. Evidence of the split could not have been more obvious to Hare: "I never saw Stokely at the Afro-American Cultural Center and I never saw Eldridge at the Palace of Nations." The idea of a separate nation, or "land base" for African Americans was likened to the state of Israel, giving the same rights to the persecuted Blacks as to the Jews. It was becoming clear, though, that the state of Israel, especially after 1967, was itself becoming imperialist, presenting a problem for the idea of a national cause. The search for roots also had its dangers, essentialising the past in terms of a specifically African culture—which the Négritude
movement was accused of—that Algeria would be part of, although it was also partly Arabic (sometimes characterized as white African). The question of “Wind of Beyond or wind of the Roots” that Sénac posed in 1967 was at the core of the political debates going on at the time, and, depending on when it was written, a response to the Six-Day-War. The Algerian connection to African-American poetry will be further explored in the following chapter, but it is important to note how the fundamental questions being addressed in Sénac's poem connect to the era of post-colonial nationalism.

Going back to the tradition of the North African poetry that Sénac was part of, we can cite one of the first attempts at delineation in Jean Déjeux’s *La poésie algérienne de 1830 à nos jours*, published in 1963 under the direction of Albert Memmi. In it we read:

> En Algérie, comme dans tout le Maghreb, le poète continue, toutes proportions gardées, à jouer ce rôle capital. Que ce soit en pays berbérophone ou dans les régions à prédominance arabe, le contour et le chanteur publics perpétuent les antiques traditions de défenseurs des tribus, de hérauts des événements glorieux et malheureux, ou, tout simplement, de chantres de la vie quotidienne. Les poètes sortent ordinairement du peuple et savent parler au peuple. (Déjeux 10)

Déjeux stresses that this poetry is fundamentally a popular expression and one that defends the people and the tribe against any outside invader. It also goes back to ancient oral traditions:

> Les œuvres poétiques prennent place dans la très vaste littérature populaire algérienne, à côté des traditions orales, des contes et légendes, des dictons et proverbes, des poésies gnomiques et sentences. L’inventeur de ces œuvres nous résiste vraiment les richesses profondes, enfouies au cours des siècles dans la caverne dont parle Yacine Kateb dans *Nedjma*. (ibid. 13)

Consider the following poem by Kateb Yacine, whose poetry later became the material for *Nedjma*, which Sénac included in *Le soleil sous les armes*:

> The arms of other men
> Have severely
> Accustomed me to my own muscles
I have become
Another man
The Douars have recognized me
As a militant
I have treaded immeasurable distances
With the lightness of an insect

I heard the life of blood, the cry of my mother in labor, I hear the life of the tribe reaching my veins under the sirocco, and I rise at dawn toward the ancient poplars whose trembling stature moves leaf by leaf, willed by an irresistible vegetal gallop, which recalls, in the advancing night, the Numidic cavalry of the Maghreb renewing their charge.
(Sénac 39)

Kateb Yacine’s poem, as well as Sénac’s Un dernier rêve, Margot, avant la mort, both embody an ancient Numidic tradition that is being recalled in the present. The “I” in both cases has been invaded by warrior ancestors. Kateb has become “another man” through the “arms of other men” while Sénac is being taken over by the voice of Antar, a warrior like Kateb’s “Numidic cavalry”.
The poetic reference to ancient warriors is part of an ancient tradition very much alive in North-Africa, and which was taken up again by poets who were joining the resistance against French colonialism, such as Mostefa Lacheraf:

The heredity that inhabits me and whose souls and tastes I carry is more imperative than all the efforts. Distant child of the nomads, I carry within me the vision of immense steppes and caravans. And from the furthest corner of myself rises the chant of the “hadi”, and of the deepest part of my being rises the image of the first fatherland…And I love all the steppes of the world with intensity: the plateaux of Nedj that saw the birth of my race; Mongole steppes, kingdom of horsemen; the Russian steppes of Mazeppa, and you, steppes of my country where there is only sagebrush and wind! (ibid. 43)

And this poem by Sénac, Once the teacher…:

Once the teacher
dreamingly approached the splinters of the book:
“Our ancestors…”
and his tongue remained silent,
trampled by the Bedouin cavalry,
skinned at the edges of the text.
(The lie, its wound fooled us all!

Since we do not descend from the Gauls.
Our ancestors were all scorched by the sun
and their pores burst with the desert winds.
Contained in our bodies, it’s their space that roars.) (Sénac 277)

It is remarkable and at the same time logical that Sénac would, as an Algerian poet, connect back to the tribal ancestors of the desert, instead of the Gauls. It is also the restitution of a history that was erased by colonial historiography. Although one might think that Sénac is simply taking the side of Algeria against France, one must look at deeper aspects of a common poetic tradition that transcend limiting definitions of culture and language. Sénac, by placing himself within the lineage of the Numidic warriors, is also placing himself within the nomadic tradition of poetry, one that can claim the words of the tribe within any culture against the imperialism of arbitrary borders, whether they be national, historical, ideological, religious, racial or sexual. Sénac’s homosexuality was a strong factor in his ability to transcend cultures and side with the oppressed, those whose language was being colonized by the emerging national identities. To speak as a poet is to speak a singularity in language, to uphold that singularity against all forms of oppression.

The anchoring of poetry and literature in Algeria is to find root within a continuous tradition of both linguistic and physical resistance against categorizations and appropriations. The Numidic cavalries are both historical and metaphorical in that they represent the continuous struggle for tribal and singular preservation in a language that is a weapon of resistance. That Sénac is revolutionary should be understood within the poetic context as well, as a popular movement of poetic expression. That the Algerian revolution became so conflated with nationalism did not escape the poet, for whom Algeria was a poetic entity, just as it was for Kateb Yacine in the evasive and unattainable Nedjma.
That poetry is a form of revolution will be explored in the following chapter, in terms of both its realist and popular aspirations. Whereas the notion of realism stems from European literary and theoretical traditions, including social realism, it is worth considering that the poetry born out of post-colonialism is fundamentally realist because of the experience that it stems from. Rather than an objective prosaic depiction of reality, poetry strives from the truthful experience of reality in language. Revolution, as understood by Sénac, is fundamentally poetic and as such, a lived experience. While carrier of hopes and aspirations, the revolutionary poetry born out of post-colonialism also expressed the disillusionment of a generation that witnessed the new world order of the cold war era.
Chapter 5: The common language of revolutionary poetics

“there’s no Revolution without love” – Jean Sénac

20th century revolutionary or political poetry has remained an under-appreciated and often misunderstood art form. This is due in part to a separation between the political and the aesthetic where political art has been relegated to a lesser rank because of its ideological content. The move to separate the political in favor of a supposedly apolitical aesthetics is also part of a particular political context that needs to be scrutinized. The post-colonial era, especially in the Third World, saw an explosion of poetic expression that, to my knowledge, has rarely been looked at from a global perspective in terms of a common political and aesthetic agenda. This is a consequence, I will argue, of a historical turn of events in which Third World anti-colonial and leftist or Communist revolutions that gave rise to a generation of poets were slowly eroded by the advent of capitalist globalization. It is startling to witness the profound engagement that poets had with popular revolutions in an age that has relegated poetry to marginal cultural spaces. Far from being isolated, local poetic movements within emerging postcolonial nations were deeply aware of and connected to movements throughout the world, constituting a global form of artistic communication. The ostracism which political art has been subjected to has hindered in many respects its recognition as one of the most powerful movements in the 20th century, one which remains as a testimony of past struggles and as a repository for future movements. The power of the poets that Jean Sénac and others brought together in journals, readings and radio shows lies in both the heterogeneity of their aesthetics and in their common attention to social issues.
The recent uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Turkey have shown that poetry remains an inspiration for popular movements. In the West, though, the denigration of ideological analysis has led to a gradual resistance to forms of political art, and especially with regard to poetry. That poetry went from being the most powerful tool of popular expression, including in the US through the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, the Black Mountains poets, the Beats, the African-American poets, to the most marginalized in today’s literary and academic institutions, should lead us to the question of its political role and to the reasons for its literary marginalization. Encountering Sénac’s poetry was for me an awakening to the role poetry in Third World revolutions, to the passion poetic language can summon as an expression, as experience and as a human possibility. Sénac is an entry point into the much larger universe he was part of, culturally, historically and politically, as a proponent of human emancipation through poetic language. He is also an illustration of the tragic ending of this emancipation that began with Third World anticolonial movements, through his own gradual marginalization from Algeria and assassination. While I originally thought of his death as being specific to the political circumstances of post-independent Algeria, I realized that assassinations, incarcerations, torture of poets and increasing resistance to poetic art were prevalent.

The existence of a global movement in poetry is apparent in Sénac’s radio shows at Radio Alger, especially those he directed after Algeria’s independence, from 1964 To 1972. The poetries that he presented went from transcribed Berber chants to the following writers who also appeared in his reviews and anthologies: Brecht, early 20th century Soviet poets such as Akhmatova, Aseev, Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Mayakovsky, Yesenin, those of the fifties and sixties such as Yevtushenko, Voznesensky and Akmadoulina.
Sénac included American poets Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Bob Kaufman, and African-American poets Phillis Wheatley, George Moses Horton, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes and LeRoi Jones aka Amiri Baraka. Among the contemporary poets of the Maghreb were Boudjedra, Skif, also Alloula and from Morocco, those around Souffles like Mohammed Khair-Eddine, Abdelkébir Khatibi and the journal’s founder, Abdellatif Laâbi. There were also the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, Cuban poet Roberto Retamar, and the Haitian poet René Depestre who was in exile in Cuba, and finally Nazim Hikmet from Turkey.¹⁶

The list encompasses a large group of writers across cultural boundaries, transgressing national literary frameworks and including for most part writers who were connected to leftist anti-colonial, revolutionary movements. Unfortunately the tapes of Sénac’s radio programs were destroyed after his resignation in 1972, leaving us with little archival material other than Sénac’s own transcripts. Sénac was not alone in his endeavor, nor was he the first to encompass such a wide scope of poetry. Jean Amrouche’s own radio programs in Tunis (1938-1939), and Algiers (1943-1944), as well as Abdellatif Laâbi’s Souffles (1967-1972) were similar in scope and intent: to reveal a common movement which remains largely unexplored as a whole in literary criticism. El Corno Emplumado, a very similar, although perhaps more global poetic journal, founded by Margaret Randall in 1962 and co-edited with Sergio Mondragon, had to terminate its publication in 1969, also due to political repression in Mexico.

¹⁶ This list was provided to me by Katia Sainson who is currently researching Sénac’s radio shows.
Poetics, realism and popular expression

The aesthetics of 20th century revolutionary art that many of these poets were part of was a subject of fierce debates between theorists such as Brecht, Lukacs and Adorno, around the social role of art as representation of class struggle. The birth of revolutionary art went hand in hand with certain principles of Marxist thought, and it is historically relevant to see it through the lens of the aesthetic debates going on within Marxist theory, such as the role of aesthetics in portraying reality, whether there is such a thing as unmediated reality in literature, or whether the primary role of writing in a socially conscious way is to reveal the reality and existence of class structures and class warfare.

Brecht’s writings on art and aesthetics present ways to interpret aesthetic mechanisms in political art, which in turn will help define political poetry by asking certain questions on referentiality, place of the author, mediation of reality, audience and most importantly the role of the poet as social realist. This last proposition is perhaps the most contentious as poetry is rarely associated with realism, yet it is the notion of realism that we have to investigate through its poetic representation.

...
novel, but unlike other theorists such as Lukacs, Brecht understands that there is a need to address the social realism of poetry in that it can speak the language of the people perhaps better than any other form of literature. The people who suffer in fact became the primary subjects of many revolutionary poets, including themselves as part of the suffering. The anti-colonialist struggles were not just against forms of external domination, but against the cultural, social and economic effects of colonialism on the people themselves as Aimé Césaire so vividly understood. Poetry then is a form of popular art as mirrored by the poet. While Brecht did not intend there to be a direct connection with colonialism, his social critique within the European continent speaks of a larger issue that challenged art’s relation to the reality of the masses.

Aït Djafer’s poem, La Complainte des mendients arabes de la casbah, was written in 1951 and portrays the miserable living condition in the casbah of Algiers, considered to be at the time the largest and poorest ghetto in the world. The poem was later republished by Sartre in Les Temps Modernes in 1954 with a preface by Kateb Yacine, and translated by Jack Hirschman in 1972, poet and political activist and editor of Art on the Line, a collection of essays on the intersection between art and politics, published in 2002. Hirschman’s translation of Djafer’s poem in 1973, (republished in 2004), points to the global nature of activist poetry at the time and the conversations that were happening among US and Algerian poets. Aït Djafer’s poem was based on a tragic event that represented the extreme despair that poverty and hunger created among the Arab poor. A father throws his own daughter under a truck to end a life of starvation, and is ultimately acquitted on the grounds of insanity and sent to an asylum. Included in the poem is a news article that presents the incident and the trial as a representation of the complete disconnect between the judicial system and the fundamental injustice that the father was experiencing. Aït Djafer, instead, delves into the father’s reasons and turns his action into a scathing denunciation of France’s blindness. The poem includes French nursery rhymes as a
way to contrast the brutality of colonialism with the innocence of children, and places that
innocence in the eyes of the observer:

Before dying little
Yasmina
  Slept there
  With her little papa
  Who murdered her
  simply
  abruptly
  with the fatherly pat
    (and not at all nasty)

of a hardworking conscientious
peasant, who sows the tiny nine year-old
seed
in the furrow
on the treads of a big truck passing
[and passing again]

When the child appears...
  la-da-dee...
  and when the child disappears...
  la-da-da... (Aït Djafer and Hirschman 19)

Djafer, here vividly translated by Jack Hirschman, plays with the monotony and innocence of
nursery rhymes to describe an unimaginable act of desperation. The poem is both a journalistic
account of a real event, and the impersonation of the child who might try to understand or
describe such a tragedy. While the scene could have been described in prose, the poetry
breaks down the parts in a fragmented narrative as though the language were itself losing
coherence and rhythm. Simultaneously one senses the sadness and horror of the poet, the
impossibility of coming to grips with the suffering the father was experiencing. It becomes an act
of poetic recreation of the real meant to immobilize forever the image and rupture the innocence
behind the nursery songs children would learn in French colonial schools. While one side of
political poetry might be to inspire and mobilize, the other is to present the stark reality of oppression, as in Djafer’s poem.

Djafer’s poetry is, to a large degree connected to oral forms of popular expression. The oral tradition, whether it be in Haïti, Turkey or Algeria, is the ground upon which a new poetry was born during the 20th century, one which followed the rules dictated by often brutal reality. Where this form of expression differs from Brecht’s definition, in terms of a “demand for a realistic style” is that the poets born out of Third World anti-colonial movements write less from a predetermined ideological or aesthetic imperative, but more in the process of creating an aesthetic that is compatible with lived oppression. It is not social realism as defined by leftist ideology, but realism as that which is lived by the poet and which cannot be told any other way.

The ever present question is then how to read and define a literature that stems from the reality of oppression while never reducing it to that reality, since what makes the poetry of revolution enduring is its aesthetics, the beauty represented in the conscious struggle to create art from the violence of colonial history. The dilemma in this debate is to balance a somewhat elitist and academic position regarding the aesthetic merit and the political content of this type of poetry, and to understand that it is the combination of both artistic and political expression that make it a powerful presence in 20th century literature.

The politics of poetry

While the concept of revolutionary poetry seems obvious when reading Sénac, the connection between poetic expression and political and social movements needs to be clarified as a methodological tool, especially when it comes to the concept of the political.
At the 1965 Berkeley Poetry conference, a decidedly non-academic event but more like a convention of those poets active from the 50s, uniting with and addressing those who would be involved with and sometimes spearheaded the movements of the later 60s, poet Jack Spicer addressed a group of young students on the connection between poetry and politics. In reaction to an idea that poetry could influence political events, such as the Vietnam war at the time, Spiced stated in essence that there had not yet been poetry that could have concrete political influence, and that according to him no poem ever changed the world. When asked if the poets were the unacknowledged “pullers of strings”, Spicer answered “No, of all the poets in the world, what poet has pulled the strings? [...] Now, who pulled the strings, of any poet that you’ve ever heard of, in any society you’ve ever heard of, even indirectly”? (Spicer 156). Mao was acknowledged as a possible example, but Spicer remarked that his poetry, contrary to his actions, did not have political meaning, i.e. that there was a radical separation between the poet and the political leader. For poetry to be effective, in Spicer’s terms, it must remain poetry, or else lose its effectiveness. Mary Norbert Körte who was also in the audience brought up “the labor songs of the thirties and the songs of the civil rights movement”, and remarked that “[t]hose certainly have aroused everybody in every facet of society, either to hate or to some kind of an affinity”. The debate on whether popular songs are part of poetry stems back to the very roots of poetry and its various forms and expressions in social and political movements. Far from being in opposition with each other, Spicer and Körte were perhaps both political in their statements, advocating for different definitions of the political. (Spicer and Gizzi 163)

James Scully, in a talk on political poetry in the early 80s, made an introductory remark that sounds like a rebuttal of Spicer’s position:

My first response to the symposium topic is to wonder what brings us to this pass, where we have a meeting about “politics and poetry”. Not about kinds of politics, or kinds of poetry”: just “politics” and “poetry”. The issue, so defined, is so undefined
it’s quite crude. Not that we’re to blame for this. It’s remarkable that there even is such a meeting. Ordinarily “political poetry” is considered beneath comment. Nonetheless, if we look at the historical record, at the poetry that has been kept and revered, it’s astounding that there are any reservations whatever about the viability of political poetry. (Scully 1)

For Scully the tenuous “viability of political poetry” stems from a misconception concerning both the poetic and the political and from a separation that was not always as drastic as it is today.

What in fact do we mean by “political poetry”? Again, Scully:

Most major poetry is consciously political, and always has been. Where do we want to start? With Aeschylus? Virgil? Dante? Can you imagine looking at Dante in the face and saying that poetry and politics don’t mix? And these are ‘canonized’ poets: Milton, Blake, whoever. Do I have to mention Dryden? (Scully 4)

Questioning poetry’s political nature is similar to asking whether prose can be literary, or journalistic, or to discovering the existence of “love poetry”. For Scully, poetry has always been concerned with politics, since like love, politics is a fundamental component of human society, and since poetry, like all forms of art, deals with what most concerns human existence. But whereas we know what we mean by “love poetry”, the category of “political poetry” (and the two, love and politics, are also intimately related, as we see in many of Sénac’s poems) always seems to need further explanation and debate. When speaking, most often to diminish or denigrate, of “political poetry”, do we mean “protest poetry”, “dissident poetry”, and what about “revolutionary poetry”, or “popular poetry”? Granted, we should not elevate all forms of political poetry either. Scully clearly does not when he states that “Most protest poetry is shallow”, regarding “typical protest anthology: poems in opposition to the Vietnam War or to the coup in Chile, ecologically concerned or antinuke poetry…”. This poetry (conflating both dissent and protest, which is arguable), for him “tends to be reactive, victim-oriented, incapacitated, lacking the theoretical practical coherence that could give it muscle and point.”
On the other hand for Scully there is a poetry that “speaks the active rage or resolution of people on the receiving end. I mean oppressed and exploited people. The real subject is the poet’s own tender sensibilities, not what is actually, systematically going on.” (ibid. 3) And perhaps here we have a more operational definition of “political poetry”, as that which is lived by the poet, not just designated. Scully cites Nazim Hikmet, César Vallejo and Bertolt Brecht as examples of this poetry, especially Hikmet “because he can, and does, write of the other—who is never merely an excuse for self-immersion.’ (ibid. 5) Political poetry, which I would like to extend to the poets of anti-colonial and revolutionary movements of the 50s and 60s, should be considered as an art form in its own right, and like Hikmet, Vallejo and Brecht, “their aesthetic achievement is because of their politics, not in spite of it.” (ibid. 4) The theoretical, poetic and political ramifications of Scully and Spicer’s statements tie very clearly to Sénac’s poetic, political and aesthetic legacy, not only within Algerian poetry, but as part of the global movement for concrete emancipation.

The issue with political poetry is whether it can be read independently from the context, as an autonomous work of art that one can appreciate for its language, but that seems to replicate old aesthetic distinctions that no longer serve in the particular context of post-colonial conflicts. Amiri Baraka wrote a whole range of poetry, much of it not political in intention, but the political poetry shouldn’t be separated from the rest just because of its message or intention. The same with all poets who chose to enter the fray of political movements through their language. This poetry deserves recognition as an art form that sought concrete action. Popular songs should not be considered a lesser form of art either, but part of the material that the poet can draw from and feed into. In that sense political poets such as Sénac, Laâbi, Baraka, Djafer, Césaire are populist poets, not poets of any elite establishment, whether it be revolutionary or not. It is their close attachment to the people, to their language that gave them the poetry, and not the other
way around, meaning that the people were the real source of the politics that the poet expressed.

Modernism and the Dionysian turn

While Scully reaches back to the ancient Greeks for a concept of poetry that is always political, Aimé Césaire sees a major transformation in poetic possibilities in mid-19th century France, during the birth of Modernism:

1850–The revenge of Dionysus upon Apollo.
1850–The great leap into the poetic void.

An extraordinary phenomenon… Until then the French attitude had been one of caution, circumspection, and suspicion. France was dying of prose. Then suddenly there was the great nervous spasm at the prospect of adventure. The prosiest nation, in its most eminent representatives […] with all weapons and equipment went over to the enemy. I mean to the death’s-head army of freedom and imagination. Prosy France went over to poetry. And everything changed. Poetry ceased to be a game, even an honorable one. Poetry became an adventure. The most beautiful human adventures. At the end of the road: clairvoyance and knowledge.
And so Baudelaire…(Césaire, Smith, and Eshleman xlv)

The exact date of 1850 might seem enigmatic, but it coincided roughly to Baudelaire’s early poetry, the birth of modernity and what constituted a fundamental shift in perception according to the poet. American poet John Wieners saw a similar shift in the US in 1955:

Since 1955, poetry or verse as some would prefer it be called has, despite all forebodings that it was dying, taken through a handful of writers in the United States, a stranglehold on established modes of thought, analysis, and attention. (Wieners and Foye 132)

That Césaire perceived the new world as Dionysian, prone to exuberance, passion, imagination, instead of the purely rational, objective structure of the classical world suggests a turning point in sensitivity that would have revolutionary implications in poetry, no longer a world of imitation
but of creation! Wieners perceived this change in the ways Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, the I Ching, experimental Jazz music and marijuana, once only the “esoteric pastimes of the wealthy and decadent” were now “scholastic careers for contemporary scientists and priests”. This wider cultural revolution around previously esoteric interests occurred “[m]ostly because artists and poets wrote poems about them.” Nietzsche’s Birth of the Tragedy, which must have inspired Césaire poetic transposition, contains the following passage:

Hence, our aesthetic must first solve the problem of how it is possible for the “lyricist” to be an artist. For he, according to the experience of all ages, always says “I” and sings out the entire chromatic sequence of the sounds of his passions and desires. This Archilochus immediately startles us, alongside Homer, through his cry of hate and scorn, through the drunken eruptions of his desire. By doing this, isn’t Archilochus (the first artist called subjective) essentially a non-artist? But then where does that veneration come from, which the Delphic oracle, the center of “objective” art, showed to him, the poet, in very remarkable sayings. (Nietzsche 13)

It is the “I” of a larger reality that the lyricist experiences through song. From there, and perhaps in an oversimplifying move, one can understand that the new Dionysian order carried by the French poets would allow for a radically new form, not only of poetic expressions, but of a poetic knowledge that would challenge the hold of scientific objectivity as that which defines reality. It represents the return of ancient myth, which one finds as both component of and opponent to 20th century revolutionary ideologies, those same ideologies that claimed scientific and predictable truth. The poet became the teller and shaper of the popular imagination in ways that had been previously unthinkable, and perhaps became simultaneously a real threat to political and religious establishments of all stripes. Why else then, would they be subject of such brutal repression in the second half of the 20th century?

Césaire’s “clairvoyance and knowledge” is the defining trait of the literary movements that emerged within the colonized world of the 20th century, movements which subscribed in many respects to the ideals of their early French counterparts while simultaneously fighting against
European colonial regimes. The depictions of poverty, war and political corruption in western literature became part of the writer’s aesthetic material, revealing to the colonized writers ways to portray their own oppression. A prime example of this is given in Sénac’s *Le soleil sous les armes*, where he cites the following passage from Víctor Hugo’s *Toute La Lyre* (see Nietzsche’s *lyricist*), a series of poems first published in 1856:

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Everywhere strength instead of right. The crushing
Of the problem, that’s the only denouement...
Agonizing Africa is dying in our grip.
There, a whole people groan and ask for food.
Famine in Oran, Famine in Algiers.
– That’s what our superb France has done!
They say. No corn, no bread. They eat grass.
And the Arab becomes mad and dreadful. (Sénac 12-13)
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That Víctor Hugo was able to foresee the terrible human consequences of French colonialism, 26 years after the French arrived in Algeria, speaks volumes to the power of poetic perception, the ability to “write of the *other*” in Scully’s own terms, and that right at the beginning of the Dionysian turn that Césaire describes.

The poetic opening of the French modernists had an important effect on Arabic culture, which interests us here in relation to Sénac and the context he was part of, and on the sources of its own modernity, which might explain the conflict that arose between Modernist Western poetry and the existing poetic tradition in the Arab world. Adonis, in *An Introduction to Arab Poetics*, reveals the deep tensions between the Arab world and the West, which began with the Crusades and continued with colonialism. While the Crusades had a devastating effect on the birth of Arab modernity, which Adonis situates in 1258 after the fall of Baghdad, colonialism—albeit another form of cultural domination—brought with it a new concept of modernism, a radical break with tradition that encompassed the realm of poetic language, a fundamental component
of Arab culture. This contact brought about an Arab renaissance, known as the nahda, and revived a debate similar to that between the ancients and the moderns in Europe:

Opinions were divided into two general tendencies: the traditionalist/conformist (usuli) tendency, which considered religion and the Arab linguistic sciences as its main base; and the transgressing/non-conformist (tajawuzi) tendency, which saw its base, by contrast, as lying in European secularism. (Adonis and Cobham 77)

In the case of Arab culture, though, the ancient “is the ideal of true and definitive knowledge” (ibid.), and therefore cannot be transcended, especially when it came to the Arabic language “regarded in theory as the essence of Arabness”. While the sources of Arab modernism in poetry were to be found in pre-Islamic oral traditions, those were not allowed to take hold within a fundamentalist culture, leading modern poets such as Adonis to find new sources within Western poetry that in turn revealed the modernist Arabic tradition anew:

It was reading Baudelaire which changed my understanding of Abu Nuwas and revealed his particular poetical quality and modernity, and Mallarmé’s work which explained to me the mysteries of Abu Tammam’s poetic language and the modern dimension in it. (Adonis and Cobham 81)

The double-edged sword of modernity created what Adonis called “a state of ‘double siege’” between a cultural dependency on the West and a “fetal relationship with the traditionalist past”. It is crucially important to understand this conflict within Arab culture when considering the political implications for Algerian poetry, which existed simultaneously within Western, Arabic and Berber traditions. The culture that allowed poetic expression and transgression of a conservative tradition simultaneously ran against powerful conservative forces.

While giving rise to a new generation of Arab poets, Chebbi, Darwish and Adonis among them, who found within Arab culture the sources of its own modernity, the francophone Algerian poets born out of the revolutionary years (1954 to 1962) were increasingly at odds with the post-colonial Algerian regimes that sought to consolidate national identities against the West.
Algerian writers such as Kateb Yacine, Mohammed Dib, Jean Amrouche, Malek Haddad, Habib Tengour, Tahar Djaout, who developed their voices during the Algerian war and defined a new Algerian literature in French, were increasingly marginalized in a nation that was simultaneously eradicating the western influences they were drawing from and establishing forms of traditional culture that drew from its most conformist, and in many ways, essentialized past. One can understand how, in this perspective, Sénac as an outsider was able to connect the modernist French tradition to that of pre-Islamic poetry, but he also drew substantial inspiration from traditionally oral and popular sources which had continued to exist throughout Arab history and found particular inspiration during times of resistance:

Resistance and poetry appear as a single blade where man relentlessly sharpens his dignity. Because poetry is conceived as dynamic, because it is "written by all", an "ignition key" with which the community moves and exalts itself, it is, in its fury, as in its serene transparency, in its mysteries as in its shamelessness, openly resistant. As long as the individual is hindered in his claim of total freedom, poetry will guard the outposts and brandish the torches. And Mallarmé himself affirmed our allegiance to the world of blue and lava when he assigned to us this rallying cry: "Give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe". (Sénac 9)

What is poetry resistance to? This goes back in many ways to Scully’s remarks on political poetry, where “politics” and “poetry” should in fact be considered one and the same. This is not politics in the sense of propaganda, ideology, or protest, but the popular root of politics. Going back to Nietzsche through Césaire it is the Dionysian society that poetry represents, against the Apollonian, although Nietzsche never saw a clear dichotomy. Rather, he saw a complementarity, a balance between the two that had been broken. Mallarmé’s words “give purer meaning to the tribe”, is also to claim the centrality of language as purveyor of truth. The popular poet, through his relation to the people’s language, is then given the responsibility to oppose ideological propaganda or traditional conservatism. This is perhaps why many of the poets presented here became opponents to both colonial imperialism and closed nationalism, claiming on the other hand a world of poetic possibilities carried by popular aspirations. This is not to say that all
popular or political poetry, or even that all popular movements are progressive either, as seen in Karadzic’s proto-fascist poems during the Bosnian war. There is perhaps a difference to draw between poets who subscribed to narrow nationalist movements and those that side with the people against forms of oppression that can arise within any system. The overthrow of colonialism was only a step in the establishment of a new national identity, but the poetic objective was beyond as resistance to any appropriation. Poetry’s claim is that of complementarity, for the totality of being, where “love” is not separate from “politics”, but both part of the same continuum, as expressed in one of Sénac’s most famous poems written in 1965, *Citoyens de beauté*, translated here by Jack Hirschman:

And now we’ll sing love for there’s no Revolution without love, no morning without smiling. Beauty on our lips is one continuous fruit: it has the precise taste of sea-urchins one gathers at dawn and relishes when the Golden Sea-Urchin breaks away from the mists and warbles its song on the waves. Because everything’s song, ---except death!

A few pages later, we find these lines that became one of Sénac’s most famous pro-revolutionary statements:

I love you. You’re strong as a management committee A farm cooperative A nationalized brewery The afternoon rose The unity of the people A literacy program A professional center A meddah’s word The fragrance of jasmine in Tayeb’s street A gouache by Benanteur The song of walls and the metamorphoses of slogans
This declaration of love for the more mundane aspects of socialism, the “government committee”, the “farm cooperative”, the “professional center”, might seem at first overly romantic, but what is suggested is the primacy of the emotion over the structural elements of the revolution, including over “Revolution” itself, since “there’s no Revolution without love”. What does Sénac mean by this? Perhaps that the real revolution is not only political, but a more fundamental revolution of the senses through which we can strive toward liberation.

The poem, written after a visit by Che Guevara, whom Sénac met in 1963, translates the optimism of revolution as well as some irony concerning its more mundane and bureaucratic aspects, the government committee. But in this poem it is treated as part of a beautiful process that gave to the people of Algeria a sense of itself, of its unity. The political here also ties to the natural, to the sea, the sun, the waves. It is all one continuum, not separate spheres of experience as taught by rationality. For Césaire “[w]hat presides over the poem is not the most lucid intelligence, or the most acute sensibility, but an entire experience…”(Césaire, Smith, and Eshleman xlvii). Sénac’s poem is an illustration of the “entire experience” revolution is part of, “because everything’s song, ---except death!”. “You’re as strong as a government committee” might also appear as an example of “propaganda poetry” unless Sénac was in genuine admiration over socialist management.
Beauty and revolution

One finds similar revolutionary poetry from Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton, who published *Poetry and Militancy in Latin America* in 1963 on the role of the poet as part of the Communist revolutionary struggle. Dalton became part of the El Salvadoran Communist party in the 1950s and was among the exiled community of leftist Latin American writers in Cuba, in 1961. He was assassinated in 1975 for political reasons that have yet to be investigated, and a recent case hearing on the roles of Villalobos and Meléndez, leaders of the leftwing People’s Revolutionary Army at the time, was dismissed. His short manifesto, translated by James Scully and republished by Jack Hirschman in 2002, brings further credence to the deep connection among poets of that era, and to the existence of a somewhat unified vision of poetry. Dalton, in his essay, believes that the poet is a fundamental element of the revolution in so far as he is not only representative of the ideological tenets of the revolution, but of the beauty that art upholds. Hence beauty is an intrinsic part of the revolutionary process, much like what Sénac expressed in his poem. The nature of the political understood poetically is larger than most definitions, and includes for Hirschman the power of imagination:

> Imagination, for instance, heightens reality, and in those circumstances its expression must be, to some extent, valuable to people, inasmuch as it not only grants them a primary understanding of the real—but puts them in touch with the truly transcendent, we could say eternal, aspects of that reality. (Hirschman 5)

And, he continues:

> There’s no need to forget that in pursuing the political (achievement, on the part of the people, of becoming conscious of itself and of its needs) poetry and art must do so with their own special means, that is to say, artistic means, which are the most effective means of picking up on the reality that needs to be expressed. (ibid.)
Both these passages exemplify a very important point regarding the aesthetic purpose of political art, which is that the poet is responsible for both the political in the sense of representing the reality of the people to the people, but also for the very nature of the poetic imagination which serves to “heighten” that reality in a gesture which also reveals its beauty.

In other words, political art must concern itself both with the material reality and with the immaterial and universal world of beauty in art. Dalton, similarly to Césaire, declared that “all that fits into life fits into poetry”. As a revolutionary, the poet “is addressing all people in defense of their own highest longings”, since it is by nature universal as are the fundamental aspirations of those involved in revolutionary struggles.

The end of utopia

This does not assume that the poet is a blind utopian either, quite the contrary. While Sénac wrote celebratory revolutionary poetry, he was also very aware of the dangers that were lying ahead and could foresee, as did many others, the darker turn of events that would eventually unfold in the postcolonial world. Algeria’s revolutionary optimism would, in fact, be short-lived as the reality of the post-colonial world started to set in.

In *Arbatache*, Sénac writes:

> My people are alienated, tortured, de-brained,
> my people are suffering and there’s no bread.
> No, brother, it’s not the colonist monsters any more,
> it’s the napalm of our own bourgeoisie, of profiteers,
> of “militants” without foundation
> ---and it’s not a dead hand they’re putting out! (transl. Jack Hirschman)

Ben Bella himself realized toward the end of his presidency that the neo-colonial bourgeois interests would try to sabotage the accomplishment of both the agrarian revolution and the industries that had been turned over to self-management: “It has not escaped my notice that by
their denigration of autogestion, the rich Algerians have betrayed their secret ambition to return to private enterprise and its unfair profit system. If their ambition were realized, it would be the end of socialism in Algeria.” (Merle 160) And one could say that it did in fact end shortly after Ben Bella was deposed and imprisoned in a military coup by Boumedienne in 1965. The poetry of Sénac was a correct assessment of how the socialist revolution was being undermined by interests that remained close to Western colonial capitalism. The “Napalm of our own bourgeoisie” is an example of the poetic power of language to “heighten reality”, to make it more shocking and effective by tying bourgeois interests to the French napalm bombings that decimated the forests of Algeria.

The transition from the utopianism in the first part of Sénac’s Citizens of Beauty to the violent critique in the last is both a testimony of the poet’s own personal progression from optimism to disillusionment. The struggle against the colonizers has been won, but new forms of internal colonialism had emerged within the revolution itself. The global climate was also changing, with the gradual weakening of Communism’s ideological prestige internationally after both the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and the Soviet Union’s repression of the Prague Spring in 1968. The Pan-Arab movement that had seen its most important rebuke of American and European influence around the Suez Canal crisis of 1956, was severely undermined by the Six-Day-War of ’67 which in many ways announced the new alliance between Israel and the US in the Middle-East. Whereas the US had been supportive of Third World anti-colonial struggles against Europe in years following the end of WWII, it quickly shifted its focus to the fight against Communism and in doing so realigned itself in support of the Western European powers, which included its vested interest in maintaining control over their ex-colonies. All of these were determining factors in the shifting course of post-colonial independence movements, which saw increasing internal conflicts around the new alliances that the US was establishing as representative of the “Free World”. These alliances most often curtailed the revolutionary spirit.
of the people in favor of severely repressive military control through the support of proxy-governments.

But what was perhaps the most influential on the course of Third-World revolutions was the Bandung Conference of 1955, which defined a veritable third way for the colonized to reject both Western liberalism and Soviet Communism by redrawing the balance of power along racial and religious parameters and creating an international solidarity of those oppressed by “white power”. This shift was especially visible from the perspective of the African-American movements in the US, such as Nation of Islam, which fundamentally redefined America’s position within the post-colonial Cold War era in the ways it dealt with the perceived threat of racial and religious radicalization.

Black Arts and the Third World

Third World struggles around race, religion, anti-Western ideology and nationalism had profound effects on Black radicals in the US and the ways they expressed those struggles within the framework of the increasing global influence of American Cold War imperial designs. One should see the Black writers as participants in both processes, as strongly linked to the outside world and deeply connected to the historical legacies of racism in America. This is also how and why many Black artists gained international recognition, either as part of the US’s effort to rebrand its image as a multiracial post-colonial nation, or as part of an ongoing revolution which sought to overthrow a capitalist system which was fundamentally based on the racist exploitation of Third World nations. These artists understood that America’s continuing internal racism toward African Americans would invariably lead to racism on the international stage, such as during the Korean and Vietnam wars. Algeria, in its successful war against France, became an inspiration to Black radicalism, and Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and
Pontecorvo’s Battle of Algiers became very strong influences in the formulation of a Black aesthetic in both writing and film.

There are deep connections between the African-American writers that were part of the Harlem Renaissance in the 20s and 30s, mainly Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson and Sterling Brown, the influence they had on Leopold Senghor and Aimé Césaire’s concept of Négritude, and the African revolutionary movements which later included members the Black Panther Party. Many of them, including Eldridge Cleaver who was exiled in Algeria at the time, were present at the 1969 Pan-African festival. Nathan Hare, a founder of the Black Studies program at San Francisco State University wrote a report for the first issue of the Black Scholar:

There was a battle in Algiers in late July, with lighter skirmishes both old and new, and emerging signs of struggle which now lurk ready to boomerang around the world in the years (and months) to come. The troops came together, African general and foot soldiers in the war of words and politics that splashed against the calm waters of the Mediterranean Sea—in the First Pan African Cultural Festival—from everywhere in greater numbers than ever before; from San Francisco to Senegal, from Dakar to the District of Columbia . . . (Hare 3)

Also part of the department that Nathan Hare chaired was poet Sonia Sanchez, who helped “introduce the first Black Studies program in the United States” (Thompson 167). These programs were born out of the Black Arts Movement and the Civil Rights movement that were bringing African-American intellectuals, and many poets, into the recently desegregated academic environment. Danny Glover, who was a student leader at the time and who helped organize the massive strike that helped create the Black Studies program, had been exposed to the Black Arts movement through the theater of Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins.
Sénac, who had been presenting African-American poets in his radio shows since 1964 wrote the following poem, *Salut aux écrivains et artistes noirs* already in 1956 for the first International World Congress of Black Artists and Writers held in Paris:

We, Algerian Writers
salute the First Congress
of Black Writers and Artists,
with the cry of our executed,
the pain of our women
and this crime:
the bitterness of our children.

We salute them with all the blood
of our people on our phrases,
with the [blackness]\(^{17}\) of our people
on our hands of mad frost,
salute them with the hope
of our dead and our living
[...]
Salute them with our people’s
response to ignorance,
with the torn hands of cleaning women,
with the Rebel’s fist [reviving love]
in the bivouac of tears.

O, brothers! If our syntax
[isn’t itself] a cog of liberty,
if our books [must] continue to weigh
on the [docker’s shoulder]
[if our voice does not relay the stars
for the railwayman and the shepherd]
if our [poems are not also] weapons of justice
in the hands of our people,
oh, let us be silent!
... (Sainson 22-25)\(^{18}\)

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\(^{17}\) Sainson and Bergman translated “noir” as “grime”, but I believe Sénac chose “noir” for a specific reason. He was referring to the blackness that Algerians shared with the Africans, as well as the experience of colonialism through white racism.

\(^{18}\) With all due respect to Katia Sainson and David Bergman’s translation, I have modified parts in order to better convey the passion of the poem. It is also perhaps my own attempt to draw closer to the text.
Speaking in the name of all Algerian writers for a country that was fighting for its own independence, Sénac was in direct continuation with the spirit of the Bandung Conference, linking together the people of the Third World around a single experience and positioning the writer as the “relay” within the very “syntax” of the oppressed. Sénac’s solidarity with the Black artists and writers was a result of his solidarity with the Algerian people, and it is remarkable that he assumed the identity of “blackness” (if one accepts my alternate translation as meaning that his own hands, those of “our people”, were black, i.e. the hands of the African writer). This is very different from Sartre’s introduction to Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, written in 1961, a solidarity in ideology, but one that remains distinctly European. It is through Franz Fanon and Sartre’s support, though, that Algeria would become an intellectual beacon for African revolutionary movements.

In *Black Star Crescent Moon: The Muslim International and Black Freedom Beyond America*, Sohail Daulatzai paints very clearly not only the various strands of Black movements in the US starting in the 50s, but the ways in which they related to the wider process of decolonization. In a sense the Black movements in the US help understand the wider post-colonial political context in that they experienced first hand both the internal legacies of slavery and racism, and the ways in which Third World countries were defining themselves in relation to emergent ideological forces: Pan-Arabism, Pan-Africanism, Communism, liberal democracy, etc… This connection allows us to see Black writers and poets in light of the global revolutionary movements, especially that of the Muslim International which sought to transcend the narrow lens of race through an alternative Islamic post-racial humanism. Malcom X’s influence as ideological leader of the Nation of Islam was fundamental in this respect:

Malcom X made his first trip to the African and Arab world in 1959, was deeply affected by the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, met with Fidel Castro in Harlem, supported Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt and his defiant stand against the colonial powers, was
vocal about the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya and the Vietnamese victory in Dien Bien Phu, and made numerous references to not only Third World national liberation struggles but also the Bandung Conference in 1955, all while he was still in the Nation of Islam. (Daulatzai 5)

It is worth pausing at this historical account of Malcom X’s involvement in Third World liberation movements in order to appreciate how instrumental he was in linking “Black liberation struggles in the United States with the worldwide rebellions taking place against European colonialism.” (ibid. 6) James Baldwin was deeply aware of the connection in The Fire Next Time, mentioning for example that the 1954 Supreme Court decision to outlaw segregation in American universities was a consequence of “the competition of the Cold War, and the fact that Africa was clearly liberating herself and therefore had, for political reasons, to be wooed by the descendants of her former masters.” (Baldwin 86) He further believed that:

The word “independence” in Africa and the word “integration” here [in America] are almost equally meaningless; that is Europe has not yet left Africa, and black men here are not yet free. (ibid. 87)

The Truman Doctrine, in sensing that the issue of racism in America would undermine its global credibility as the leader of the Third-World started, through the State Department, to sponsor Black artists through worldwide Jazz and speaking tours. As a result a liberal wing grew out of the movement, including Edith Sampson, Carl Rowan, W.E.B. Du Bois and J. Saunders Redding (Daulatzai 13), in line with America’s anti-Communist agenda, while a more radical wing continued to view America’s fight against Communism as a continuation of Western colonialism. This was the case of the Black Panther party, which continued to align itself with Third World revolutionary movements.

In fact, when the Cold War was in full swing and the repression of the Black Left and anticolonialists was on the rise, it was through the Nation of Islam that Malcolm X carried the torch and illuminated a path of Black liberation that traveled alongside the national liberation movements of Africa, Asia, and Latin America. (Ibid. 15)
The presence of the Black Panthers in Algiers in 1969 was extraordinarily important symbolically as Algeria was still at the time representative of the global anti-colonial revolution, both politically and artistically, yet it also marked the beginning of the end. Malcom X was assassinated in 1965, Che Guevara in 1967, Martin Luther King in 1968, Chile's Allende in 1973. Algeria’s own revolutionary leader, Ben Bella was held in house arrest from 1965 to 1980, and was later exiled in Europe. Baraka’s *A Poem Some People Will Have to Understand*, published in 1969, as part of *Sabotage*, ends with these lines:

We have awaited the coming of a natural phenomenon. Mystics and romantics, knowledgeable workers of the land.

But none has come.
(Repeat)

but none has come.

Will the machinegunners please step forward?

(Baraka and Harris 210)

The last line of Baraka’s poem “Will the machinegunners please step forward?” could be read as a response to both state violence and to the radicalization of the Black revolutionary movements in the US, which happened right around that time as a consequence of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King’s assassinations and the growing consciousness among the African American movements that violence would be necessary. In a sense it says that Franz Fanon’s idea of legitimate violence against the colonizer took precedence over Dr. King’s non-violence. Amiri Baraka was involved in the riots that rocked Harlem and Newark, and understood the reasons behind the outrage. Baraka was involved with people’s aspirations and frustrations, not only writing dissent poetry to go back to Scully’s remark, and he was willing to bear the consequences. While there was severe repression going on all over the world at the time, Baraka describes the following experience during a riot in Newark:
Now blows rained down on my head. One dude was beating me with the long nightstick. I was held and staggering. The blood felt hot on my face. I wouldn’t see, I would only feel the wet hot blood covering my entire head and face and clothes. They were beating me to death. I could feel the blows and the crazy pain but I was already removed from conscious life. I was being murdered and I knew it. (Baraka 370)

Torture, incarceration and poetry’s resistance

The simultaneous assassination and incarceration of poets in North Africa, in the years following 1972, coincides with the militarization of the revolutionary movements within Arab nations. Projects such as Laâbi’s Souffles and Sénaï’s radio programs became increasingly threatening to regimes that were seeking to consolidate their power and control over the newly formed nations, often in collusion with Western capitalist interests. Laâbi and other Moroccan intellectuals were arrested in 1972, tortured and imprisoned and Souffles, the magazine which constituted perhaps the greatest endeavor in defining a bilingual North African post-colonial literary landscape was shut down. Ammiel Alcalay, in A Little History, draws parallels between these arrests and the erosion of Third World movements through increasing US intervention that simultaneously targeted “radical groups” such as the Black Panthers through COINTELPRO, and covertly supported military regimes that sought to repress revolutionary movements:

Laâbi was imprisoned for eight and a half years. The group included a very famous political prisoner and part of the political opposition, Abraham Serfaty. As an anti-Zionist, Serfaty’s case was suppressed by the Israeli and American Jewish establishment, despite the cruel and unusual punishment he was subjected to for seventeen long years. It was in looking through old issues of Souffles, that I saw, in 1969, that Serfaty had hosted the delegation of the Black Panther Party to Morocco and Algeria. He delivers his “salute to the African-Americans” at the cultural festival in Algeria. This is at the same time that COINTELPRO was running campaign and planting infiltrators at home to paint the Black Panther Party with the brush of anti-Semitism, to subvert any cooperation and coalition between the blacks and Jews, a linkage crucial to previous Civil Rights organizing. (Alcalay and Dewey 72-73)
In an interview with *Jeune Afrique* in 1972, quoted by Victor Reinking in his introduction to *World’s Embrace*, Laâbi gives the following assessment of Moroccan writers in the post-revolutionary years:

Our generation was the generation of independence, of the will for decolonization, of the cry similar to that of Frantz Fanon in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*. A generation that rediscovered the enormous creative energy of the people, within the enthusiasm of the beginnings of liberation. Then, quickly, a generation of disillusion, of nightmares, of false independence, of semantic drama, of the spectacle of resignation and deterioration, but also of the radicalization of hopes. (Laâbi xiv)

The experience of imprisonment and torture within the context described by Alcalay and Laâbi became itself the source of poetic resistance, one that exposed the connections between language and the ability to survive the most extreme pain and isolation. For Laâbi, the physical constraints and torture exposed an inner expansion of poetic and universal proportion, tying it not only to his subjective experience, but that of the people. To subject the poet to torture is to subject the language to the same violence, but this attempt at silencing simultaneously creates a “radicalization of hopes”, as in the following passage from *Demain le séisme*, and illusion to both the earthquake of 1960 in Agadir, and the seismic proportions of the revolutionary upheaval to come:

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the enemies of my people
almost murdered the poetry in me
so much did I scream scream scream
so much did I bleed bleed bleed
scream and blood had become my poetry
but now
I want it to be a spark
that might ignite
the whole field (ibid.)
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19 The ignited plane in this poem recalls the ignited fields in Yeshar Kemal’s *Memed my Hawk*, and the volcanic eruptions in Césaire’s *Notebooks of a Return to the Native Land*. The body, as site of oppression and repressions becomes the symbol of a whole nation in telluric proportions, where the geological becomes the sign for the corporal and social upheaval: “Words? While we handle quarters of the earth, while we wed delirious continents, while we force steaming gates, words, ah yes, words! But words of
Laabi’s endurance of torture through poetry was reflected in many other narratives that emerged from the notorious Kénitra and Derb Moulay Cherif prisons in Morocco, where many dissidents and Marxist-Leninist militants had been imprisoned during King Hassan II’s rule in the early 70s. Because no pen or paper were available, poets would have to memorize the poems that they would later write, reciting them to each other and thus creating a poetic memorialization of incarceration. According to Susan Slyomovics, “[r]eporting torture and human rights abuses is a genre of writing. As Moroccan writers’ works shows, the sources of writing styles are protean [...] Torture is the motivating narrative frame and oral performance is a primary mode of transmission.” (Slyomovics 90) Poetry as an originally oral literature became the means to memorize and transmit the experience of the unimaginable experience of torture. This poetry is political in another sense, that of transmitting the physical pain that went beyond words, and creating a language that simultaneously connected to a tradition when it was spoken in Arabic and transgressed all tradition in its depiction of untold violence. Abraham Serfaty, who was “among Morocco’s longest-imprisoned political detainees”, an “Arab Jew”, anti-Zionist and founder of the “Marxist group Ila al-Amam” expressed the following:

The world of torture is a world so inhumane that it becomes unimaginable for common mortals, happily moreover […]. But this destruction of the body, this degradation in the vile, this rending of an entire being in suffering without limit, cannot be felt by means of a description that will be always, for the reader, abstract, unreal. (Slyomovics 90)

Narratives such as these fundamentally disrupt any attempt at literary classification and bring into question the very nature of the text as it relates to experiences of unimaginable suffering. How does one theorize or use a text that was recited during years of the most degrading treatment. The political in these instances is the very act of telling, but one must also consider fresh blood, words that are tidal waves and erysipelas and malarias and lava, and brush fires, and blazes of flesh, and blazes of cities...”Aimé Césaire, Clayton Eshleman, and Annette Smith. Notebook of a return to the native land. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001. Web.
that they were often told in literary genres such as the love poem, the cartoon, the testimony, etc., i.e. that the genre would give a kind of redeemable format to inhuman experiences. At the same time it would allow the writer to escape the realm of the unspeakable and find irony, comedy or love in a carceral world. This relates to Genet’s *Lady of the Flowers*, one of the most groundbreaking texts of the 20th century, written in prison and brilliantly introduced by Sartre:

...this work is, without the author suspecting it, the journal of detoxification, of a conversion. In it Genet detoxicates himself of himself and turns to the outside world. In fact, this book *is* the detoxication itself. It is not content with bearing witness to the cure, but concretizes it. Born of a nightmare, it effects—line by line, page by page, from death to life, from the state of dream to that of waking, from madness to sanity—a passageway that is marked with relapses. (Genet 4)

There would be much to explore in Genet’s work and the role of writing within experiences of extreme pain and isolation, perhaps the topic of another essay to be written in the context of revolutionary poetics. There is a poetic aesthetic of universal proportion in the various political expressions that writers incorporate. The realm of the political as poetic expands as one moves deeper into it, revealing a poetic of the political, not only in terms of ideological politics, but those lived in concrete physical experiences. Language, as a fundamentally physical experience, as is that of writing, cannot be separate from personal emancipation within the brutal forms of oppression that existed throughout the 20th century and which called for a renewed language. This language, most often through its poetic nature, allowed for a transgression of one’s own world into that of the Other. Sénac’s poetry allowed him to converse with both his own people and the larger outside world, its movements, and including his own desire for a language that could be reconciled with the body:

We are saved in language. From the reality lived in combat, in the uncomfortable and prodigious liberation movement of our people, new elegies are born, a lyricism stripped of the subterfuges that are so much in vogue on the twin café terraces of Algiers and Paris. Disenclaved, the “citizens of beauty” announce a human being reconciled with the naked flesh of the poem.
With “Avant-corps”, “Diwan du Noûn” and “A”, from the iliac poems to the bodypoem [corpoème], I attempted to write a Journal that could be a written Body. (Sénac 627)

This passage, written somewhere between November 1971 and December 1972, was an introduction to some of his last poems, dérisions et Vertige, and corresponds to a period of increasing disillusion regarding the future of Algeria, but they are also testimonies to resistance and hope, just as Genet’s prison writings were a triumph over incarceration. If poetry could become physical in Sénac’s term, physical beings could also become poetic.

Homosexuality as a site of post-colonial politics

This meant for Sénac that an emancipated language be also reconciled with his own sexual emancipation, which he believed was within the Algerian revolution. Sénac’s turn toward homoerotic poetry after 1965, while often seen as a turn away from politics, is in reality a turn toward one of the most burning political issues regarding globalization of Western sexuality and ways in which it was resisted in the Third World. Jarrod Hayes argues very convincingly in Queer Resistance to (Neo-)colonialism in Algeria that perceived Algerian repression of homosexuality had less to do with cultural conservatism as it was a consequence of Western neo-colonial influence, a position that has direct relevance on Sénac’s homosexuality. His gay identity became an issue only after 1965, when

the collaboration between quasi-military governing elite, what some have called the mafia politico-financière, and its increasingly violent fundamentalist opposition [which] foreclosed the possibility of a lesbian and gay movement modeled on the Algerian feminist organizations that were resisting changes in the family code. (Hayes 74)

Hayes further believes that Sénac’s gay militancy was in fact part of the Algerian revolutionary movement in that it was resisting the globalization of Western sexuality, just as it had resisted the colonial heterosexual model: “anticolonial resistance sometimes took the form of an
anticolonial homosexuality” (81). Assumptions that traditionally Muslim societies, which Algeria was to a large degree, were fundamentally adverse to Western notions of homosexual egalitarianism also assume that the West is itself open and tolerant by definition and that Muslims were in need of liberation. Western readings of “Islamic homosexuality” have a long colonialist and orientalist history, which we can’t fully survey here, but its main trait was to believe in its “traditional” i.e. more “savage” nature as opposed to the more “civilized” West. Hayes suggests that in reality “‘traditional’ forms of same-sex sexual behavior resist [Western] globalization”. (83) In light of these arguments Sénac was in fact simultaneously adopting a Western form of open homosexuality and resisting the religious conservatism that Western influence was exacerbating in Algeria. Queer theories have pointed to many examples of Algerian homosexuality in literature, including Rachid Boujedra’s La R épudiation, published in 1969 (the same year as the Stonewall uprising) “which contains some of the most explicit representations of homo sex to date in Algerian literature in French.”(90)

Sénac’s later homoerotic poetry should be read in this light, as being essentially part of Algerian culture instead of considering it, from a paternalizing Western perspective, as being repressed only by Muslim conservatism. The religious conservatism that would eventually kill Sénac and that did take hold of Algerian society was a consequence of the political realignments of regressive Algerian interests with the West and with the US in particular in its fight against the Soviet Union. Whether Sénac understood those ties is not clear, but he clearly saw that sexual liberation was one of the essential components of a liberated people, and that the conservative turn in Algeria went hand in hand with the dramatic global shift post-67, referred to in the following poem, Erosion, written in 1970:

*suicide & Co.*

In the lentisk bushes
Eros kills him
In the lettuce
Eros rubs him
In panic
Eros complicates
The game of have-everything-you-want

The words the words in all this?

And Palestine (otherwise Eros-Sion)‽

And a hundred thousand dead?
And happiness?
Or a small and insignificant Maccabean.

In the lentisk bushes
etc. (Sénac, OP 669)

My sense in this poem, given Hayes’s argument, is that there is a simultaneous allusion to the complication of Eros in the game of desire and to the deaths in Palestine. The semantic play between Erosion, the title of the poem, and Eros-Sion, as confounding as it may be, seems completely relevant to Sénac’s own sense of thwarted desire and the tragic insignificance of Palestinian deaths where words have lost their meaning. This reading only scratches the surface, but my sense is that very few attempts have been made to interpret Sénac’s erotic poetry in this light, and it is one that needs to be explored further.

The political nature of homosexuality that one finds in Sénac’s poetry, as that which connects him to the Palestinian victims, also comes across in Robert Duncan’s *The Homosexual in Society*, published in 1944, which compared homosexual victimization with Zionism and which proposes instead, through the example of Hart Crane, that the experience of sexual ostracism and repression be a “link with mankind” through poetic expression:

[w]here the Zionists of homosexuality have laid claim to a Palestine of their own, asserting in their miseries their nationality; Crane’s suffering, his rebellion and his love are sources of poetry for him not because they are what make them different from,
superior to, mankind, but because he saw in them his link with mankind; he saw in them his sharing in universal human experience.

Sénac's poem, in reference and content, mirrors a very similar preoccupation even though it was written 26 years after Duncan's groundbreaking statement. Duncan and Sénac were both resisting a homosexual ghetto (Sénac being in the position of being "ghettoized") not unlike what the State of Israel is for the Jews, and they both understood that their struggle for complete recognition and integration was not just a personal battle around their sexual identities, but one concerning society's ability to be common. The battle Sénac was waging in Algeria in the 70s was not unlike the battle that Duncan was leading in the United States of the 40s, further exposing the hypocrisy of those who saw in Western homosexuality a paradigm of cultural superiority. Homosexuality for Duncan, in *Rites of Participation*, was to be understood instead as a key to the recognition of injustices and oppressions, and as "identification with the universe", in all of its living forms, instead of the "hierarchy of higher forms" imagined by the "restricted community of Athenians":

The Symposium of Plato was restricted to a community of Athenians, gathered in the common creation of an *arete*, an aristocracy of spirit, inspired by the homoEros, taking its stand against lower or foreign orders, not only of men but of nature itself. The intense yearning, the desire for something else, of which we too have only a dark and doubtful presentiment, remains, but our *arete*, our ideal of vital being, rises not in our identification in a hierarchy of higher forms but in our identification with the universe. To compose such a symposium of the whole, such a totality, all the old excluded orders must be included. The female, the proletariat, the foreign; the animal and vegetative; the unconscious and the unknown; the criminal and failure—all that has been outcast and vagabond must return to be admitted in the creation of what we consider we are. (Rothenberg and Rothenberg 328)

The attempt to delineate a global movement in poetry presents great challenges in terms of the simultaneous formulation of poetic statements and their connection to political circumstances that were related in the postcolonial era. Poets of this era were not only inventing new poetry, but also grasping with the theoretical grounds in which they were writing, and reinventing a
language that could give meaning to human experiences of colonial and postcolonial oppression. Sénac in his connection to so many elements of both Western and Third World poetic traditions offers a completely unexplored lens through which to understand the role that poetry had within both the rise of popular movements and as testimony to their increasing suppression. Sénac was also pointing to fundamental connections between popular and political movements which involved the poet not only in language but in body. He rightly foresaw that the body would become the new battleground for emancipation, as political and sexual resistance to dominant models propagated by Western globalization. This is a poetry to be acknowledged and respected as a powerful counter narrative to dominant discourses, one that was constantly inventing a language as part of the post-colonial turmoil. While attempts at theorizing are useful, no theoretical framework can really give justice, or close the debate on the worth or role of poetry that sought to emancipate the individual from real oppression, including that of language. This chapter sought, at times chaotically, to reveal the deep connection between the various poets and movements, and how invested American poets were, both in their poetry and in their thinking on its political role. As such American poetic theory is one of the most pertinent and unacknowledged frameworks to that era, one which can shed much light not only on the global context of poetry, but on an American poetic culture that was at the forefront of intellectual thought. The next chapter will continue to pursue the context of American poetics and its relation to both definition of public space and relation to the larger physical reality that poetry and language are part of.
Chapter 6: American poetics and the language of place

Two existentialisms

When looking at political poetry of the post-WWII era, we should see it as part of a specific response of artists, thinkers and philosophers to a radically transformed environment, one that carried the prospect of complete destruction as witnessed during the Holocaust and the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as revolts against colonialism. Both events, as well as the prospect of endless warfare announced by the new Cold War era called for deep revisions of Western Civilization, especially within Modernism. In Europe this gave rise to both Surrealism in the arts and Existentialism in philosophy. Seen very simply, Surrealism and Existentialism represent fundamental revisions of our place in the world, in terms of the representation of reality in literature and the arts, and our ability to exist in it as free human beings. The very notion of humanity was being questioned as our beings were becoming increasingly disposable, replaceable and destructible. The Sartrean existential move to place our existence first, before essence, was a response to a fundamental loss of teleological meaning.

Within Existentialism, and Surrealism, we could draw two currents that relate directly to the experience of colonialism, one that represents the existential crisis of the West in the post-WWII era, the other that represents the crisis of the Third-World in the aftermath of colonial violence. While Sartre is the most obvious ideologue and architect of an existentialist philosophy born out of the devastation of WWII, Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon are representatives of another form of existentialism connected to the very concrete consequences of Western racism. In terms of the arts, it is crucial to understand that there were very clear connections between movements
which were affected very differently in the post war era, leading for example André Breton to see Césaire’s *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, first published in 1939 and republished in 1947, as a striking example of surrealist poetry in that it was

a deliberate will to deal the coup de grâce to that which one calls “common sense” (which does not stop short of calling itself “reason”), and the imperious need to do away with the deadly division in the human spirit in which one component has managed to give itself complete license at the expense of the other…. (Césaire, Eshleman, and Smith xvii-xviii)

According to Césaire, Surrealism, through the influence of psychoanalysis, was an opportunity to sounds his own depths, which in turn lead him to the defining existential concept of Négritude. Fanon, who experienced racism first hand during the French naval blockade of Martinique in 1940, then as part of the French Army in Algeria, wrote *Black Skins/White Masks* as a different type of human sounding through psychoanalysis and dialectical materialism, studying the psychic effects of colonialism’s Manichean world on the colonized subject. The focus on dialectical materialism and existentialism lead Sartre, Césaire and Fanon to a very powerful commitment to the anti-colonial struggle, both internal (Fanon understood colonialism as originating from a colonial mindset) and external, against the concrete oppressors. It is worth noting though, that the existential crisis and anguish of the European bourgeoisie had very little to do with the very concrete alienation that Africans, Arabs, Asians and Jews felt in relation to White racism, leading Frantz Fanon to write that “[i]n the white world, the man of color encounters difficulties in elaborating his bodily schema. The image of one’s body is solely negating. It’s an image in the third person.” (Fanon 90)

Sartre’s *Black Orpheus*, published in 1948 as an introduction to Senghors’ *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre and malgache*, presents very clearly the interconnections between European and African surrealist and existentialist currents. In his essay, in many ways precursor to Sénac’s manifesto, Sartre shows that the Surrealism in African poetry was in reality a depiction of lived colonial experience that was both tied to European Modernism in its imagery
and connected to the live roots of traditional languages that were being expressed through the French language. According to Sartre, Césaire’s poetry is where “the great surrealist tradition is realized, it takes on its definitive meaning and is destroyed: surrealism – that European movement – is taken away from the Europeans by a Black man who turns it against them and gives it a rigorously defined function.” (Sartre and MacCombie 34) The poetic language that was dying in Europe after WWII takes on new life and meaning through the lived experiences of the colonized as both testimony of violence, slavery, torture, and racism, but also as a powerful instrument of resistance to oppression and negation. This experience is fundamentally tied to the essence of being black or African, which places existentialism on the grounds of Senghor’s concept of Négritude, defining the African experience essentially in terms of both negativity in relation to the West, and existential affirmation through a common African history and identity.

It is important to note that even though the Négritude movement in literature was international and produced a wide range of writings, it was never given the legitimacy of European Existentialism. This was partly because it came from an experience and a tradition that was not easily consumable by the Western publishers and audience, in terms of its content and language: “This language of colonialism cannot just be disposed of since it contains/embodies the history of resistances of/to colonialism.” (Ammiel Alcalay. Email)

In America we find among poets “involved in “non-official” verse culture, from all the “defined” schools (Beats, Black Mountain, SF, Umbra, Black Arts, etc.) and those affiliated20, [an

20 This wide ranging group of poets gathered (and categorized as Black Mountain, New York School, Beats, etc.) in the 1960 anthology The New American Poetry […], was not a reflection of the reality of those poets or the very diverse range of other poets they emerged from and were connected to. Given the “chilling” effects of the Cold War, the criminalization of drug use, “deviant” sexuality, and “deviant” thought, many figures coming of age in the late 1940s and early 1950s sought out those whose experience was forged in an earlier era, when divisions between politics and aesthetics were not clear-cut. Thus, younger writers turned to William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound (despite his political sentiments), Langston Hughes, Kenneth
insistence] on experience as knowledge that is NOT subjective but world forming”. While there was no “tradition of “philosophic” discourse in [the European] sense”, there was the “awareness of the almost complete colonization of knowledge structures (i.e. “fields) under the aegis of the [emerging] Cold War”. (Alcalay. Email)

There was also, among these poets, the understanding that following the devastation of WWII there was a new need for poetry as an alternative cultural grounding. Jed Rasula points out that poet Charles Olson “abandoned a budding political career for poetry in the aftermath of the atomic bomb and the disclosure of the Holocaust”. Olson, he continues, “turned to poetry as the most imaginatively expedient means of reckoning the cost, to the species, of such historical traumatization.” (Rasula 380)

Body of resistance

Olson, who left the Office of War Information in 1944 and politics altogether as US policies and language were changing radically under Truman, wrote an essay titled The Resistance. Published in 1953 (but written before) Olson’s piece was dedicated to his friend Jean Riboud, a French Holocaust survivor: “When man is reduced to so much fat for soap, superphosphate for soil, fillings and shoes for sale, he has, to begin again, one answer, one point of resistance only to such fragmentation, one organized ground…” The answer, for Olson, is “his body intact and fought for, the absolute of his organism in its simplest terms, this structure evolved by nature…” (Olson, Allen, and Friedlander 174) Hence, for Olson, poetry would be situated in that very body, also as a “structure evolved by nature”. The body as place of resistance where language must reside, is what allows for an experience that can become knowledge. This is in many ways

Rexroth, Muriel Rukeyser, and others, in order to seek out confirmation. (Alcalay. Adapted from email)
analogous (for very different reasons), to Sénac’s concepts of the “bodypoem”, as that which connects back to our mythological and cosmological origins, as well as the collective memory of the species located within our very organism.

Our physical beings, as well as the physical worlds we are in, become the resistance to the historical reduction we have been subjected to and which has estranged us by placing us within a discourse on the past instead seeing within the current world and its stories the ground of our own existence. Far from being reductive to the present, a physical existence in the present allows for a much broader and integrated view of both our historical and geographical boundaries. This is the reason why Olson connected the “Old” and “New” worlds through Sumer and the Mayans, as a means to “relieve the pressures of US historical oblivion (Operation Red, White and Black, exploring Native, Colonial and African experiences), [which] also meant positioning a whole new structure of knowledge”. (Alcalay. Email)

In the mid-50s Olson gave a series of talks, published as The Special View of History in 1970, where he defined a form of estrangement in many ways reminiscent of existential estrangement but grounded in a much larger historical context going back to 490BC. Olson believed that it was history as a generalizing category from that point on that was responsible for the predicament that Heraclitus expressed as “Man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar”. Rather than a discourse on past events, history, or istorin going back to the Greek root, is “finding out for one’s self”, which places us back in the present moment and place. The history that takes place in the present also calls for a new consciousness, different categories of knowledge and the verification through a regrounded physical experience.

Olson’s Maximus poems are situated mostly in his hometown of Gloucester as a way to ground an expansion outward, geographically, historically, and cosmologically, and inward toward his
own universe or mythology. His language and theory stem from the location, and from there span out within the space of the poem. In his *Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27* [withheld], Olson writes:

I come back to the geography of it,
the land falling to the left
where my father shot his scabby golf
and the rest of us played baseball
into the summer darkness until no flies
could be seen and we came home
to our various piazzas were the women
buzzed

These recollections, he continues are not abstractions imposed on reality

This, is no bare incoming
of novel abstract form

[...]

These are, Olson continues

.... the imposing
of all those antecedent predecessions, the precessions

of me, the generation of those facts
which are my words, it is coming

from all that I no longer am, yet am,
the slow westward motion of
more than I am

Recollections, pasts that are born from a particular location, a particular history, are what simultaneously constitute the material of Olson’s poem and their structure. He is receiving these “precessions of me” only to realize that he is constituted by something larger than he, “the generation of those facts which are my words.” The words are Olson’s, but the sequence of experiences and memories are determined in the physical process of the poem, within its own logic, not by and external pre-determined poetic craft.

There is no strict personal order
for my inheritance.

No Greek will be able
to discriminate my body.

An American
is a complex of occasions,
themselves a geometry
of spatial nature.

I have this sense,
that I am one
with my skin

Plus this – plus this:

(Olson and Butterick 185)

The poem for Olson is not an order of events, but a spatialization of events as they occur. These are located within us, our bodies, as ourselves, and should not be discriminated against by some other logic. That “No Greek will be able to discriminate my body” could mean that it is
not the ordering of Greek *logos* that takes precedence, but what appears with “no strict order”.

To be “one with my skin” is not to operate a division between internal and external, but to understand that the two are essentially the same, i.e. that what comes from within is also what comes from without, “a complex of occasions”, that Olson defines as American in their “spatial nature”, but which could also be understood as tied to geography.

Sénac's poetry proposes a similar syntax of place, geography and body, one that has a particular personal and universal dimension that reaches back into ancient African and Arab oral poetry and connects it to European modernism through a common universal language that he found in Algeria.

Sénac's poetry was resistant to political and cultural appropriation even though he was part of the initial stages of the Algerian revolution. While he was ideologically close to the revolution, Sénac also understood that language would have to be poetically renewed in order to reflect the new consciousness that it brought about in the people. Sénac's relation to politics is poetic in that he believes, like Olson did, that poetry could be the answer to historical traumatization:

If the new man doesn’t invent a new language worthy of his consciousness, may the new man crumble.
If the new man’s consciousness remains a gambling house where vices go hand in hand, may the new man perish.
If socialism is a balm under which wounds still fester, may socialism shatter to bits.
If the new man doesn’t forge a new tongue, if he attends to misfortune with constant misery, may he perish, him, his language, his newness may they be gulfed by fired!
From the essence, comrades, from the essence\textsuperscript{21}.
So long,
Brothers.

And we would have been able to love one another…. (Sénac, OP 421, transl.)

An ideology without a new language would just replicate the old logic and tend “to misfortune with constant misery”, i.e. a language that does not reflect the reality of the Algerian people. “From the essence”, depending on the translation (see footnote), is a call for the militants, the “comrades”, to connect to the fundamental aspirations, instead of a socialism that would be nothing more than an “emollient salve under which the wounds remain”, i.e. just rhetoric. Sénac understood from very early on the danger of a disconnection between revolutionary ideology and lived reality, and saw poetry as the vital link between the two. The fundamental connection between language and consciousness that Sénac upholds is in fact genuinely Marxist:

\begin{quote}
Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men. (Marx et al. 51)
\end{quote}

Marx sees language and consciousness as coexistent in our intercourses with each other, and places its universality as a condition for personal meaning, i.e. language has meaning only if it is commonly shared. Sénac warns that if a “new vocabulary” is not created to match the new consciousness brought about by revolution (which is a human revolution), that it will also fail in its universal aspirations. The intimate connection between language and consciousness in Sénac is very clearly Marxist, but added to it is a poetic architecture that reveals this consciousness. Sénac’s universal conception of language is also very close to Heidegger’s:

\footnote{Katia Sainson translated these lines as “Gasoline, comrades, gasoline!”, in her \textit{Selected Poems} (p. 83), meaning the gasoline to feed the fire. Hirschman’s “essence” is a different and interesting addition to the meaning in Sénac’s poem.}
language belongs to the closest neighborhood of man’s being. We encounter language everywhere. Hence it cannot surprise us that as soon as man looks thoughtfully about himself at what is, he quickly hits upon language too, so as to define it by a standard reference to its overt aspects. Reflection tries to obtain an idea of what language is universally. (Heidegger 190)

The “reflection” that “tries to obtain an idea of what language is universally” becomes located within poetry. Sénac brings both Heidegger’s and Marx’s concepts of language, as that which is universal, to the specific of experience of Algeria, which was to be the new measure of a universal language, just as America was for Olson. While most of Sénac’s epistemological or philosophical reflections are within his poetry, there are examples of his writing that draw the contours of a conceptual position on language, as expressed in the following preface by Sénac to his poems Avant-Corps:

We live because we are named. All life exists within us through the word it exalts. And the endeavor of the poet, in the space of his torments, aims only at reconstituting the syllables where the Face can emerge living from a single love. That it be, even in sound pure chaos, and our writing would no longer be an absurd flight toward a paper moon but a cosmogony rooted in the earth and cared for by the moon of the cosmonauts. (Sénac 447)

Here life and language are intrinsically connected to the point where it is life that “exalts” the word. But the word is also in Sénac’s statement what allows life to “exist within us”. The poet in this equation, is “reconstituting the syllables” of a language that seems to come from “pure chaos” in order for it to be “rooted in the earth”. The image of “reconstituting the syllables” can be related to some of Spicer’s theories on dictation and his image of the Martian visitor (Sénac’s “moon of the cosmonauts”) being the hidden energy within the poem, which the poet translates with his vocabulary. Spicer calls this a “third stage” in poetry, similar to Cocteau’s image of Orpheus receiving coded messages through the car radio, as opposed to the common view that the poet is the creator of images and technician of language. (Spicer and Gizzi 7-9) Poetic

22 “I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom cave to now. I spell it large because it comes large here. Large, and without mercy.” (Call me Ishmael, Collected Prose, 17)
language, according to Spicer, operates as though it were being arranged, through the poet as receiver (Cocteau’s car radio), by mysterious forces from outer space, what Olson called energy.

The nature of language

In part II of The Human Universe, written in 1952, Olson formulated ways in which we, especially in the West, can be reconnected with the larger universe we are part of, a connection that was broken with our particular use of sciences:

> Discovering this discarded thing nature, science has run away with everything. Tapping her power, fingering her like a child, giving her place, but somehow, remembering what truth there was in man’s centering the use of anything, god, devil, or holy ghost, in himself, science has upset all balance and blown value, man’s peculiar responsibility, to the winds. (Olson, Allen, and Friedlander 160)

This use of the world has entailed what Olson described as a tremendous waste of energy, as “the very thing nature disallows—that energy can be lost” (ibid. 163). Instead of seeing action as the transposition of energy received, “where experience comes in that is delivered back”, we have claimed for ourselves the act of creation, cutting out the external world as what “comes in”, and which constitutes the basis for a renewed poetic knowledge. This attentiveness to what comes in and goes back out is the “door” through which Man becomes “responsible to more than himself.” (ibid. 162) Our “peculiar responsibility” includes that toward history as the very nature of ourselves. Amiri Baraka, in an interview for Henry Ferrini’s film on Olson, Poet and the City: Charles Olson and the Persistence of Place, mentions that one has to be grounded again in history in order to understand where we come from and put “the hinge back on the door” of a “one-sided society” which has hidden or obfuscated that history. Within that process language is tied back to the very foundations of life.
Olson’s concept that “Art does not seek to describe, but to enact”, had tremendous influence on 20th century poetics in America and provides new ground for interpretation that place physical experience before abstract formulations. To read Sénac in this light is to see his language as an enactment of the reality he was in, and not as an external description of it. This extends later to his homoerotic poetry as a “demonstration of the limitations of the revolution so far defined… (Alcalay. Email), in the sense that the revolution had left the body behind.

Matinale de mon peuple [Dawn of my People], written in 1950, included in Jean Sénac’s first collection of published poems, reflects a concern for a renewed relation to the world through language:

\[\textit{for Baya}\]

You were saying easy things  
worker of the morning  
The forest grew in your voice  
trees so deep that the heart would tear apart  
and know the weight of song  
The warmth of a clearing  
for the righteous man who demands  
a word of peace  
a word adapted to our dimension (OP 253, transl.)

Language in this poem bears the imprint of the natural world, “[t]he forest grew in your voice”. The external reality is what comes into the poem, growing “trees so deep that the heart would tear apart”. The trees are both external and internal to the mysterious “worker of the morning”, whose heart, “the heart”, or center, would “know the weight of song”. The song of the forest would also reveal the “warmth of a clearing for the righteous man who demands a word of peace”. Sénac’s struggle with finding language, “a word adapted to our dimension” is apparent in this poem, the desire to arrive at a reconciliation between the word and the world, or to create a language that would be as tangible as physical reality.
This struggle with the reality of words is also apparent in the following small poem, included as a note in the same poem:

If the word that I offer you is not a juicy fruit
if when I say it fertile saliva
does not come to our lips and drown us
I lie and I must find the play that I owe you. (Notes 6, transl.)

The word clearly no longer designates, but becomes ingested, savored. The physical attributes of language that Sénac suggests are not far from Olson’s breath, the idea that language ties into certain physical rhythms or senses. Furthermore, that words must “drown us” in our own saliva means that they overpower our senses, become stronger than the fruit itself. This early emphasis on the sensory nature of language presages his later “bodypoems” ‘corpoèmes’.

**Dawn of my People** echoes in many ways Robert Duncan’s poem, **Often I am permitted to return to a meadow:**

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
that is not mine, but a made place,

that is mine, it is so near to the heart,
an eternal pasture folded in all thought
so that there is a hall therein

that is a made place, created by light
wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall.

[…]

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
as if it were a given property of the mind
that certain bounds hold against chaos,

that is a place of first permission,
everlasting omen of what is. (Duncan 7)

In his first poem in *The Opening of the Field*, Duncan reverses poetic representation, by situating the meadow as an internal reality “made-up by the mind”, but by a mind that is “not mine”, i.e. an outside mind. The meadow is not a referent to an external one, “but a made place”, although we cannot imagine one without the other. The “made place”, on the other hand “is mine”, in terms of the meadow Duncan imagines, but it is also “created by light/wherefrom the shadows that are forms fall”, placing the “made place” back again in an external physical reality where the laws of light are themselves reversed. This continuous play between representation and reality is meant to conflate the two into one, “a place of first permission, everlasting omen of what is.” To be permitted by whom? Perhaps by the world itself, allowing the images to occur within us and within our own language. The echo with Sénac’s poem, the contrast between the “clearing” and the “meadow”, brought about by the forest as that which grows its trees deep within our very own hearts, allows a deeper representation to take place in terms of Sénac’s search for a “word adapted to our dimension”.
Poem, body and world

In the *Life of Poetry*, Muriel Rukeyser refers many times to Walt Whitman’s poetics as an attempt to identify with the world around him in all of its contradictory diversity. The task for Whitman, according to Rukeyser, was one of integrating a dichotomy within himself which he also saw within the world, that between good and evil. While many saw Whitman as unable to distinguish the two in his vision of totality, Rukeyser thinks that he was profoundly aware of it, but not as a matter of choice. Rather, it was the problem of good and evil as a dichotomy that became Whitman’s focus, within himself as within American society. The issue for Whitman, as for Melville, was that darkness could emerge from light, evil from good, and to see that problem within one’s self as well as within the world around us. The poems for Whitman were places where his own contradictions could become manifest, which then became representative of the multitude he saw around him, the destruction of the American Civil war, the assassination of Lincoln, the growing inhumane industrialization as well as the birth of a new nation. These were not fights of good vs. evil, but of inherent contradictions at play in modern society, which the poet made manifest in language. Part of Whitman’s solution to the split was to place it within his physical being, and to see its meter as that of his own breath.

Rukeyser quoted the following line by Whitman: “Be not afraid of my body”, and comments that “He remembered his body as other poets of his time remembered English verse. Out of his own body, and its relation to itself and the sea, he drew his basic rhythms. They are not the rhythms, as has been asserted, of work and lovemaking, but rather of the relation of our breathing to our heartbeat, and these measured against an ideal of water at the shore, not beginning or ending, but endlessly drawing among the breakers, seething in the white recessions of its surf, never finishing, making a meeting-place.” (Rukeyser 74-75)
The long catalogs within Whitman poems were punctuated by the rhythms of his own body, a physicality which restored the unity, joined the “halves” in an attempt to remake himself:

It is in the remaking of himself that Whitman speaks for the general conflict in our culture. For, in the poems, his discovery of himself is a discovery of America; he is able to give it to anyone who reaches his lines. (ibid.)

Sénac experienced a similar conflict with regard to Algeria, and wrote a poem called *Paroles avec Walt Whitman* [Words with Walt Whitman], in 1959, which reflected a desire for a poetic companionship:

I sing with you, Walt Whitman.
The companion you were expecting has arrived,
And within your long beard the anxious rye is already sprouting.
“I wasn’t expecting this sadness nor to give consent to the words of others.
I wasn’t expecting this moon nostalgia.
What I was expecting, camarado, was the athlete with the vital greeting
And the naked word, in a halo of liquor
What I was expecting, lips to lips,
Was the sun in a coarse word.”
O Walt Whitman,
You reject my thistles!
So we must get back on the road,
Walk, Walk and walk toward the Center
And get back on the road,
And walk.
And walk.(Sénac, Sainson, and Bergman 89-90)

This imaginary encounter with Whitman reflects Sénac’s own disillusionment with himself as a poet. Rather than “the athlete with the vital greeting”, “the naked word”, “the sun in a coarse word”, Whitman would find Sénac’s “sadness”, “moon nostalgia”, and “thistles”. The “solar” poet that Sénac was striving to be also acknowledged and embraced the darker side, but for this he would need to “walk toward the Center”, to get “back on the road” of an inner journey.
The mind of poetry: bringing in the outside

The relation between the inner and outer conflicts that Rukeyser draws within Whitman’s poetry as one that is fundamental to the world both Sénac and Whitman experienced—and perhaps also the birth of the Algerian and American nations—is developed from an anthropological perspective in Gregory Bateson’s *Steps To an Ecology of the Mind*. In an essay called *Form, Substance and Difference*, Bateson points to a profound flaw in our Western civilization, similar to what Olson sees, that of separating the internal from the external, ourselves and our minds from the world around us:

> We commonly think of the external “physical world” as somehow separate from an internal “mental world”. [...] The mental world—the mind—the world of information processing—is not limited by the skin. (Bateson 454)

Following this thought, mind is then something located and originated both internally and externally, as a product of ourselves in the environment, not as our exclusive and privileged property. If the mental world is not “limited by the skin”—which reflects Olson’s “I am one with my skin”—then what becomes of our language and its relation to reality? Is it not also a product of the world we are part of? Bateson sees religion as one of the culprits in how we have set ourselves apart from the world, which by extension sets language apart, as an instrument of designation, rather than a-part-of:

> If you put God outside and set him vis-à-vis his creation and if you have the idea that you are created in his image, you will logically and naturally see yourself as outside and against the things around you. And as you arrogate all mind to yourself, you will see the world around you as mindless and therefore not entitled to moral or ethical consideration. Your survival unit will be you and your folks or conspecifics against the environment of other social units, other races and the brutes and vegetables. (Bateson 462)

The dichotomy for Bateson leads directly to the environmental tragedy we are currently experiencing, the use of the world for selfish reasons, which language then comes to reflect if
not seen as part of the ecological system. What is needed, according to Bateson, is a total restructuring of our thinking and a transcendence of the dichotomy which both Whitman and Olson were deeply aware of. Poetry, and art, is where this restructuring can take place. Bateson cites Bach’s famous line “I play the notes, in order, as they are written. It is God who makes the music”. Whatever the designation, God or nature, it is clear that the music for Bach lies in a transcription, an “enactment” in Olson’s words, of that which exists, not an external creation from that which exists. For William Blake, Bateson continues,

Poetic Imagination was the only reality. The poets have known these things all through the ages, but the rest of us have gone astray into all sorts of false reifications of the “self” and separations between “self” and “experience”. (Bateson 463)

It is important to consider then, in light of these thinkers, an entirely different experience of poetry outside of the realm of criticism, and within a realm that is yet to be defined. We have yet to understand what poetry leads us to, and what the destruction of our external position would mean to our concept of poetry: “Indeed, if what I have been saying is at all correct, the base of aesthetics will need to be reexamined.” (Bateson 464) All we can do, according to Bateson, is build bridges between “levels of mental process”, which appear as “spiritual realities” in the following poem by Robin Blaser:

Image-Nation 21 (territory

wandering to the other, wandering
the spiritual realities, skilled in all
ways of contending, he did not search
out death or courage, did not
found something, a country,
or end it, but made it endless,
that is his claim to fame, to
seek out what is beyond any single
man or woman, or the multiples
of them the magic country that
is homeland
the bridges I strained for, strings of my vastness in language, and the cars rushed by in both directions flashing at one another

(Blaser and Nichols 265)

This poem seems to represent the aesthetic predicament, “the bridges I strained for”, those “strings of my vastness in language”, which could represent also those bridges that tie us to the world, both concrete and imaginary, the link between self and experience. The gap between the first stanza and the second also indicates mysterious strings between the “magic country that is homeland” and our desire to reach it over the bridge of language, only to see that the two sides can signal to each other but cannot meet: “the cars rushed by in both/directions flashing at one another”. The predicament, of mind vs. reality can be found in Sénac’s recurring attempt at building a language that can be reconciled with the world, instead of being outside of it.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in his concept of the “bodypoem”, or in that of the “total body”, or poem that can become body. The resolution of the dichotomy between language and world for Sénac, much like Whitman, was to situate it within the body and to see it and the world as a vocabulary. The poem would no longer remain on the page, but would be incarnated and as such would be a living being in the world, a “world-language” according to Jamel-Eddine Bencheikh, in Poétique d’une monde-langage chez Jean Sénac: La Tragédie du Corps Poème.

Bencheikh’s essay is one of the few attempts at creating a theory of Sénac’s poetry. In it he also admits, and this is the insoluble dilemma concerning poetic language, that no interpretation is possible: “L’entreprise la plus présomptueuse, celle de l’expliquer, n’aboutit qu’à un champs de décombres.” [The most presumptuous endeavor, that of explaining it, can lead only to a field of ruins] (Bencheikh 49) We are continuously defeated by the attempt to explain,
Les méthodes les plus fines ne sont qu’approches lentes vers une cible mouvante. L’invention du langage et la quête de l’analyse vivent en deux temps inconciliables, ce qui ne réfute pas le droit à la réflexion, mais déclare l’inviolabilité de la création.

[the finer methods are only slow approaches toward a moving target. The invention of language and the quest of analysis live in two irreconcilable times, which doesn’t refute our right to reflection, but declares that creation is untouchable](Ibid.)

This dilemma is at the core of a poetic theory, which is partly why poets have integrated it to their poetry, as Robin Blaser, Robert Duncan and Charles Olson did in their poems. The issues of poetic language and its relation to the world have become the preoccupation of the poet in language, which leads Bencheikh to write that: “Il n’est pas à ma connaissance, de poète français qui ait tenu un discours aussi abondant que celui de Sénac sur son propre langage, et non pas dans des textes théoriques, mais dans des poèmes” [No French poet to my knowledge has had such an abundant discourse on his own language as Sénac had, and not in theoretical texts, but in his poems]. From a poet who wanted to reconcile the word and the world, it’s easy to understand that a theory would not lie outside the poem either, but within, which places us in the following interpretative predicament: how is it possible to have a discourse on this poetry that does not violate its totality? This is not to say that it is impossible to interpret, but the modalities of that interpretation would have to be rethought entirely.

We can see a poetic theory at play in Sénac’s poems *Avant-Corps*, which Katia Sainson translated as *Fore-body*. Architecturally, it signifies a porch, or pavilion, i.e. the entry to a building, which could relate to poetry as entry point to the larger reality we are part of. One could interpret the title as meaning “before the body”, which would create an interesting conundrum, placing poetry as that which is prior to our existence. Bencheikh offers a possible interpretation,
based on the same passage quoted above: “We live because we are named. All life exists within us through the word it exalts.”23

“L’écriture se définit”, Bencheikh continues (citing Sénac), “dès lors comme ‘une cosmogonie enracinée à la terre’. Terme qu’il faut prendre au sens propre: la poésie entreprend d’expliquer la formation de l’univers. Ambition suprême qui fonde une poétique.” [Writing is defined, then, as ‘a cosmology rooted in the earth’. Term that one must take literally: poetry attempts to explain the formation of the universe. Supreme ambition that founds the poetic.] (Bencheikh 52)

Writing as a “cosmogony” is then what engenders the earth and the universe it is in, but it is simultaneously “rooted to the earth” and not somewhere outside. An extension of this thought would place poetic expression, whether written or oral, at the creative center of the universe, prior to any body, or mind. Creating poetry is then an act that precedes the body, going back to the title, but Sénac is also trying to found the body as poem, or what he calls later on the Total Body, ‘Corps Total’, which could also be the universe.24

Bencheikh continues with the following: “Le poète décrypte des messages réellement inscrits dans l’espace par la matière. Choses et corps sont des formes animées par le movement d’existence” [The poet decrypts messages concretely written in space by matter. Things and bodies are forms animated by the movement of existence]. If our bodies, along with all things, are “animated by the movement of existence”, then they contain the messages inscribed within matter which the poet decrypts. The act of decryption is both internal and external to go back to

23 Bencheikh leaves out the end of the sentence: “…d’où le Visage pourrait surgir vivant du seul amour”, and for some reason does not mention the reason for the omission. He doesn’t comment on the passage either, but moves on to the next quote. The Face mentioned is important, since it suggests a physical reconciliation brought about by the reconstituted syllables, which could live of “a single love.” To reconcile the language seems to indicate a reconciliation of the body, hence positioning poetry as a body “before the body”, which seems to coincide with the statement that “We live because we are named”. The naming here is ambiguous since it leaves out the namer, but there is reason to believe that it is the poet who is named and whose life is exalted by the word.
Bateson’s essay, and lies in a language or writing that is itself a “cosmogony”. To decipher poetry is equivalent to deciphering creation, which reestablishes myth as a viable alternative or counterweight to scientific thought. Yet, for Sénac, not all myths are worth conserving:

Si, en effet, comme nous l’avons noté, le poète entreprenait naguère de réintégrer la terre par le mythe25, l’homme-poème proclame du haut de ses “terrasses glorieuses” qu’il veut, pour vivre, “fracasser les mythes inutiles, ceux qui nient notre corps.”

(Bencheikh 54)

[If, in fact, as we noted, the poet undertook reintegrating the earth through myth, man-poem proclaims from the height of his “glorious terraces” that he wants, in order to live, “smash the useless myths, those that negate our body.”]

To “smash the useless myths, those that negate our body” echoes Olson’s “No Greek will be able/to discriminate my body”. In the order of things, and of myths, the body takes precedence. The poets “reintegrate the earth through myth” by reestablishing the body as fundamental connection and place of imagination, reversing the Greek order of the mind-body dichotomy, or destroying it altogether by dwelling in a body that is freed from myths:

Le verbe ne délivre plus le message d’une existence enfin découverte; il vit de l’existence du corps enfin délivré des mythes, il est son graphisme couché sur la page. Si “l’invention frémissante” est de pouvoir écrire, la source unique de l’imagination naît du corps seul créateur d’images (Ibid.)

[The verb no longer delivers the message of an existence finally disclosed; it lives from the existence of the body finally delivered from myths, it is its graphism laid on the page. If “the quivering invention” is that we can write, the only source of imagination is born from the body as the only creator of images.]

The verb, the word, language is not what delivers the message; the body, when “freed from myths”, IS the “graphism”. There is a noticeable contradiction between the poet who “reintegrated the earth through myth”, with that of the poet who “smashes the useless myths that negate our bodies”. An elucidation of this contradiction can be found in Olson’s “Special

View” on Muthos, where he ties mythology to “the kosmos inside a human being—the order
harmony of universe which we usually call our individual or personal experience”. (53) The close
companion of mythology, according to Olson, is EROS, ”which amounts to say as a psyche man
is only an order comparable to kosmos when he or she is love—the only love is order in the
vertical of the self.” (54) One can understand from there that Sénac’s mythology is the cosmos
already present in the body, when it is love, and not an external one to be discovered or
integrated.

Avant-Corps, when published in 1968, was preceded by Poèmes Iliques and followed by
Diwan du Noûn. The Noûn, the Arabic letter N, bears a mysterious meaning related to a Surat
in the Quran Sénac, in a short preface to the Diwan, mentions an assembly of young people
with the Master of the Noûn. This master is probably the poet himself as he who carries the pen
which wrote Allah’s laws. Iliac can also be read as polysemic, referring to the upper part of the
hip bone, an artery in the hip, “hanche” which Sénac often uses in his poems to designate the
angel “ange”. The fight between the Angel and Man is represented in Jacob’s fight with the
angel and appears in several paintings which portray the angel and Jacob literally hip to hip.

26 The meaning of Noûn, which is the letter “n” in Arabic, is enigmatic and subject to much debate. In
the introduction to Diwan du Noûn, Sénac writes “At Pointe-Pescade (Algiers), by the sea, young
people and the Master of the Noûn spend nights discussing, establish the dream, live their summer
with intensity. While around them (the beach, the room) and in them the Fight with the Angel (with
Man) takes place.

The Noûn is the Arab letter N which mysteriously engages a surat of the Quran and who’s
mythical shape, ن, opens on the Sign of the Two Earths.” Jean Sénac. Œuvres Poétiques. Arles: Actes

27 Hamid Nacer-Khodja mentions that Sénac also meant it as that which is unintelligible to the West,
a ”surprarational meaning”. (HT 327) The Noûn, or Nun, is mentioned in René Guénon’s Les
Symboles fondamentaux de la science sacrée (Gallimard, 1962), as a symbol of resurrection
representing the arch which is found in many creation myths going back to the ancient Hindu and
Hebraic traditions. Guénon associates it was well to the whale, meaning which is found in a Surat of
the Quran, representing the creation of the world.

28 See for example the paintings and drawings by Rembrandt (circa 1659), Alexander Louis Leloir
(1865) and Leon Bonnat (1876).
The syntax of bodypoem

Avant-Corps, Poèmes Illiaques and Diwan du Noûn fit within Sénac’s attempt at defining a cosmogony, from the origins of creation to the embodiment of poetry through the struggle with God in the form of the Angel. The struggle is one for language as source of creation, which Sénac ties to both its origins and to its final emancipation from myth. Here Sénac might be talking of religious myth, which also discriminates, similar to what Bateson said about religion placing us outside of the world, instead of within. The myth is what emanates from within the world, whereas monotheistic religions placed God outside. Poetry on the side of myth is then what is within both world and body, but it must also “free itself” from the other religious/political myths which discriminate. The struggle with, and emancipation from, God as myth would lead to the final reconciliation between body and spirit and to a “language that would be both writing and flesh, body and poem, bodypoem”. (HT 327)

And the word
Like an effusion of water
Takes the very shape of our bodies.
Writing becomes
A vertiginous anatomy

(From Deuxième poème Illiac [Second Iliac poem], trans.)
(Sénac 453)

Here the fusion between word and body is likened to an “effusion of water” that is both tangible and intangible. Writing becomes anatomical, constitutive of our physical structure, but also “vertiginous” in that it takes us to soaring vertical heights. The body reconciled with language would become the body reconciled with the world as a Total Body, freed from repression, which is where Sénac’s poetics became politics. Emancipated bodies became emancipated language, yet the same language can become enslaving:
Words have invaded me, have tied me up.  
I thought I was free, they have turned everything upside down, they travel  
From one limb to another, from the nails to the vertebra, from the heart  
To the moon, that empire  
Where I reign without looking, without holding, for millennia as sure as my skin.  
Time… (Silence)

From Avec nos cinq sens conquérir les autres  
(Sénac 486)

The body reconciled with language, first perceived as being “a vertiginous anatomy” becomes at other times imprisoned by the very same language that comes from without, “an invasion”, since language also precedes us. Instead of freeing, these words “turned everything upside down”, traveling within the body as well as within the “empire” of the universe “from the heart to the moon”, where the “I” of the poet reigns “without holding” as sure as the skin exists without us having willed it. The poem ends in silence, abandons words, and leaves “time” as the last ultimate ruler.

At other times in Sénac’s poems the world rushes in without language:

The sea rushes into my mouth,  
Sticks its jellyfish upon my unformulated sentences (the real ones!), haunts me.  
The sky takes over – all that blue! seduction! clogged conjugations! (ibid.)

Whereas in the previous poem the words invade only to “tie me up”, here the physical world rushes in as “the sea rushes into my mouth”, and seems to hinder the sentences that were being formulated within. What Sénac means by “real ones” can only be read poetically as either those same sentences are unformulated. Are these sentences then real because they are unformulated, i.e. before language, or are they real because they are the syntax of the unformulated reality rushing in? This reality “takes over”, seduces the poet and hinders any “conjugation” i.e. any syntactic formulation. The invasion becomes a welcome, the silence a
“disintegration of man into the poem”. The rushing in of the external world is what the poem captures in an immediate gesture:

Only a camera could make my art poetic:
Your muscles, your laughter,
Ballet of signs upon the blocs.

(From Troisième poème Illiaque [Third Iliac Poem], trans.)
(ibid. 458)

Sénac seems to realize in this stanza that if poetry is in the world, then only a camera (i.e. a replica in image) could render his poetry. One is reminded here of the classical debate on art as imitation, but that is not what Sénac means at all. He strives to be real above all, which in this case is the reality of an impossible art. “Your muscled, your laugh” are designated as being outside of the poem, as a “ballet of signs upon the rocks”, not an image existing within the poem.

In After Lorca, Jack Spicer makes a similar point:

A poet is a time mechanic not an embalmer. The words around the immediate shrivel up and decay like flesh around the body. No mummy-sheet of tradition can be used to stop the process. Objects, words, must be led across time not preserved against it.(Spicer, Gizzi, and Killian 465)

Sénac’s “ballet of signs” are Spicer’s “words around the immediate”. What counts is not the words, but the poems ability to bring the immediate into the present moment: “your muscles, your laughter” simply put without any need for other devices. In three lines Sénac renders a moment that can “be led across time”, which leads to Spicer’s comment that “the perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary” (Spicer, Gizzi, and Killian 122-123). In another poem, Schéma de la misère, Sénac acknowledges the failure in trying to artificially make words correspond to things:

Words, I threw them away without knowing,
At the mercy of the sun, of the urchins.
At the mercy of greedy beasts,
My words, bowls of avid hands.

Entirely devoured by gold and emptiness,
Fatal, intrepid words.

Cold hair, horse’s mane,  
A few words maybe too much.

At the mercy in the morning  
Of a lip that wished to drink

Words, my orders, my disappointments,  
My bread, my bulwark and manure.

And to cut you with a chisel  
Bloc of sorrow, with memory,  
Words!

(From Schéma de la misère [Sketch of misery], in Avant-Corps, trans.)
(Sénac 464)

“My words, my orders” in the sense of belonging to the poet are by extension “my disappointments”. A language placed upon reality will only lead to misery, whereas a language stemming from reality will carry the moment with it “across time”. It is perhaps this realization that leads Sénac to search for another principle in the erotic as enactment of the real. Instead of seeing the body inhabited by “unformulated sentences”, Sénac turns to desire as a poetic principle that also connects his being to the outside world and others. Starting with Avant-Corps, and continuing with A Corpoème, Spoerme, and Dérisions et Vertige (1962-1972) Sénac’s aesthetics became increasingly meshed with erotics, a sublimated sexuality in deed and in language.
Eros, the impossible revolution

Sénac found within society’s most repressed corners the elements of a poetics which had failed to find a public space within the new Algerian Nation. Sexuality became representative of the body’s yearning for freedom, through which Sénac sought to free language, and yet it is that body which would become increasingly threatening in the context of post-revolutionary Algeria, and perhaps to politics in general. Sénac’s increasing isolation after 1965 cannot be abstracted from the disintegration of his language, its disappearance into the body that found no political recognition:

This poor body also
Needs its war of liberation!

(From Le Prince d’Aquitaine, trans.)
(Sénac 602)

By integrating poetry to a body that had not been liberated, his language became increasingly part of a struggle that anticipated in many ways the sexual revolution in Western democracies. Sénac’s erotic poetics could only exist in a political space where that was possible, and by 1966, becoming increasingly aware of his isolation, he retreated from public life and dedicated himself to his poetry and to the promotion of young Algerian poets through his radio shows, poetry readings and anthologies. None of his poems would be received by Algerian publishers and most of his friends had abandoned him to his dark cellar. Despite all this Sénac continued to write, although more and more painfully, and to advocate for a different Algeria. Sénac made the following comments on his poems in Avant-Corps in an interview he gave in 1970:

…to sing total Algeria ‘l’Algérie totale’ is as much to fight for the agrarian reform through language as it is to reintegrate the structure of happiness. If the Algerian man needs
bread and work, if it’s essential that Algerian women have the same rights as her brothers, it is also necessary to maintain within us the natural wonders, the pleasures of the beach, the semantic flavors and the right to a full enjoyment.

The “Bodypoem”, which is sometimes expressed through the irony mark, wants to be the sign of man’s integration to today’s full and entire reality.

“Avant-Corps” is important for me because if in my war poems I confronted the oppressor, in these bodypoems ‘corpoèmes’ I confront alienations, among other things, by confessing for the first time, with complacency or ostentation, that I am homosexual. It’s not important, it’s simply a component of my being that merits as much respect as my socialist conviction.29

(Sénac and Archives de la ville de Marseille 27)

The “total Algeria” is one that will have completed a political and a poetic revolution that incorporates “the structure of happiness”. Sénac is aware by the time that he made this statement, in 1971, that the rights that women had won during the revolution were being lost again to a religious conservatism that was not being countered by the Algerian government.

Sénac understood the rights of women, and of the alienated, through his own alienated homosexuality and believed that it was a “component of my being that merits as much respect as my socialist conviction”. The notion that poetry, as “bodypoem” is the synthesis, the “sign” of men and women’s integration to “today’s full and entire reality”, encompasses a much wider understanding of a politics that had abandoned its initial liberating intention in favor of an increasingly restricted sense of nation.

Sénac’s politics, while being staunchly nationalist and anti-colonialist during the years of Algeria’s war, turn decidedly against the established revolutionary government in the years after, because the nature of poetics does not stop at the political reality, but strives constantly for what is beyond, in Blaser’s words:

what is beyond any single

29 Interview by J.-P. Peroncel-Hugoz
Algiers, November 1970
(L’Afrique littéraire et artistique – Dakar – n°15 – February 1971)
man or woman, or the multiples
of them the magic country that
is homeland

In the context of Algeria’s deep struggle in defining itself as a new nation, Sénac’s preoccupations with poetry might seem trivial next to the urgency of providing the Algerians with food, jobs and education, and yet Sénac believed that without freeing the minds, the bodies and the language of Algerians, there could be no successful revolution. A revolution, in order to be effective, had to be simultaneously poetic. While many have seen in Sénac’s erotic poetry a retreat away from the politics of his earlier writings, we could just as well say that he moved to the center of politics, that which lies within the nature of our bodies and existence, our desire for reconciliation with the world itself, to the total nature of reality. It would be presumptuous to say that Algeria’s revolutionary goals fell short given that it achieved a victory against a powerful occupier, but in the victory it lost sight of a deeper aspiration that perhaps the poet was the only one to see.

Sénac’s poetic tragedy, since he understood his failure, becomes the political tragedy, for the failure of the Algerian revolution, as with so many others, was not to bring about a more fundamental change, but to replace one dominance with another. Sénac saw a larger picture than most, but Kateb Yacine, who incidentally had distanced himself from Sénac after the revolution, also understood that Algeria was building for itself a new myth, that of an exclusively Arab and Muslim identity at the expense of its own diversity. In a dividing political context where “bodies loose their individuality, the baroque poetry of Jean Sénac, in a paradoxical gesture, re-aggregates the disparate elements.” (Fintz 249) The body becomes, “in an ethical degradation brought about by those who confiscated the revolution…”, “…the ultimate place of freedom.” The freedom of the body is not only sexual, but represents “those who, under torture, have lost access to speech.” Sénac’s “lyrical body, if it is undeniably Dionysian, reveals itself to be
political: it is a hymn to the massacred bodies of Auschwitz and Sétif, those pulverized in Hiroshima and elsewhere starved.” (ibid. 250)

Claude Fintz calls this an “anthropological poetic, “which”integrates the bodies”. Algeria, for Sénac, is an “imaginal land (not fantasmagorical, as some have thought), where the contact of skins make the bodies loose their borders and dissolves the distance that separates them”. (ibid. 251) Fintz offers us a powerful poetico-anthropological reading of Sénac’s poetry, which recognizes simultaneously the political reality it was up against. Sénac, aware that he was increasingly disturbing to the ruling class, took on the term used to denigrate him, “gaouri”, and thereby designated himself as the sacrificial scapegoat. As Algeria was finding its national identity in an increasingly exclusionary definition of itself, Sénac took on the role of the most excluded.

In his tragic death Sénac also comes to represent the recurrent fate of the poet, as he who is continuously sacrificed in order to consolidate a “collective identity”. Sénac understood his ending in those terms, and refused to leave for France when he could have. Staying on to the bitter end was to defend the essence and truth of poetry and defend the cause of truth in the face of intolerance. That Sénac had identified himself to Algeria to the point of dissolving the two skins makes his disappearance all the more symbolic of Algeria’s fate as a nation. Defining itself by killing the poet, already having killed its own freedom

The time has come for you to slaughter me, to kill
In me your own freedom, to negate
The festivity that obsesses you. Stricken sun, from the pillaged years
My BODY
Will resurface.

Wilde, Lorca, and then…
Algiers, October 15 1971
The tragic marginalization of Sénac’s later poetry closely mimicked not only the political evolution of Algeria, but also that of the poetic world of the early 70s as one could also witness in America. The discussions that Olson, Duncan, Creeley, Rukeyser, Levertov, Spicer, Blaser, Baraka were part of connected to a much larger political, sociological, environmental, anthropological, ideological universe that was itself being marginalized within later 20th century American culture. Looking back at the early American interest in Algeria in 60s and to the poetic spaces that were being created through Sénac’s poetry is part of the project of retrieving the “figures and histories that have fallen by the wayside” in order to “open up models for experience of the present and an imagination for the future.” (Alcalay)

The tremendous contribution of Sénac’s poetry is that he formulated a synthesis, which includes and grounds our bodies into a poetic nature, which he then ties to the wider universe. Whether such a vision succeeds or fails is less important than the fact that it was put forth as an answer to the fundamental disconnection we have established between language and the reality we experience. The birth of the Algerian nation was the ground for such a vision, even though politically it never achieved the grand vision of its makers. Sénac was no more a dreamer than Ben Bella who also envisioned a harmonious co-existence of languages, cultures and religions in the early days of the Algerian revolution. The exclusionary politics of state can be read as the same exclusionary politics of language, as that which established differences between “self” and “other”, whether it is from a Western or Arab perspective.

While deeply tied to the Algerian context, Sénac’s poetry speaks for the “human universe” and should be read in a global context. Sénac has too often been reduced to political circumstances of the Algerian war. While being excluded, alienated, marginalized by politics, what has
marginalized him more is a continuing inability to read poetry as a fundamental human activity and to engage with it as a “Total Body”. Many of the connections developed in this chapter were intuitive and not predetermined by any specific theory. Rather, the theory was drawn from within the poems, respecting Bencheikh’s comment that Sénac’s theory is within his poetry. The meanings derived from the poetry stemmed from the various juxtapositions of texts, and from the initial framework of American poetics that allowed for inroads into the debate on the ways in which words, language, poetry can be related to the external world. The answers given point to a common poetic preoccupation of that particular era that seem to question our ability to reintegrate the world of poetic experience, and perhaps the world itself.
Chapter 7: ‘Le Soleil sous les armes’ and the poetry of resistance

On August 29 1954, upon Camus’s invitation, Sénac left Algeria for Paris, and began what Hamid Nacer-Khodja defines as a “voluntary exile” (which would coincide with the duration of the Algerian war almost exactly), primarily to write and publish with Camus’ support. Sénac’s Paris years were perhaps the most formative of his political thinking. His militancy was amplified by the beginning of the Algerian insurrection on November 1st 1954 and by his close connection to the underground F.L.N. movement in Paris. Sénac already had significant contacts with the founders of the CRUA (Revolutionary Committee for Unity and Action) who had gathered in the Spring of 1954 and were organizing the armed struggle under the clandestine name Le Patriote. Bernard Mazo refers to a text that Sénac wrote called La Patrie, as a possible revolutionary manifesto for the movement. This text, along with the longer poem written in May 1954, Dawn of my People [Matinale de mon Peuple] in many ways preannounces an independent Algerian nation. In it he writes:

My people whisper and surround me. [...] My fathers have imposed upon these shores a civilization of masters (...) How little I feel part of their race! Have they not meditated upon the conqueror’s confession: what I admire most in the world is how impotent power is to found anything. We have grown as citizens of foreign fatherlands when our own in Islam we leave to it lament (...) What does the hatred or the indifference of my fathers matter to me now, since truth is on the move, and since I walk among its ranks. I am conscious that I am participating, that I am part of those that I love, no longer a rootless dreamer but a lucid man. This is why I know that we are right. (Mazo 199)

While Sénac seemed to have distanced himself from the events in Algeria, his close connections with the CRUA and later the FLN (National Liberation Front) kept him informed on the evolution of the Algerian insurrection.
Without a regular source of income and going through his savings quickly, Sénac lived sometimes extremely precariously, not eating for days. Camus found him a room for him with the writer Edouard Roditi who described Sénac as taking very poor care of himself: “I often had to remind him to take a bath, to change his clothes. I hosted him, fed him, washed his clothes which were falling apart.” (ibid. 216) This neglect was somewhat typical of Sénac, who cared little for his own comfort. During his stay with Roditi he would invite many Algerians, including Kateb Yacine and “other ‘politicized’ Algerian friends living in Paris.” These activities drew the attention of the DST, the French secret services, who questioned Roditi on these visits, but it seems that Sénac kept them sufficiently secret and was never interrogated himself.

Sénac, who found Camus too “tepid and quiet with respect to the events that were shaking their common fatherland...,” decided to invest himself fully in Algeria’s struggle, not only through his writings, but through political participation in the FLN. It’s thus that he meets Ahmed Taled-Brahimi and Layachi Yaker\textsuperscript{30}, two leaders of the FLN’s very new French Federation, at the Old Navy, a bar in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, on January 21 1955. His fate is then decided: he joins without further ado the nationalist struggle. “ (ibid. 218) Mazo also notes that it is during this period that Sénac starts to sign his writings with the symbol of a sun surrounded by five rays.

Sénac’s poetry from 1954 to 1957 saw a similar political radicalization, such as in \textit{Diwan de l’état-major} [Diwan of the General Staff] where he writes the following:

\begin{quote}
The free men...

The free men, in the street, they dance.  
In our country the free men burn again the fences.  
But what can the rifles do against speech?  

Your assurance is inhuman.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Soleil sous les Armes} would be in part dedicated to the two leaders.
It’s at this height that I have reached man,
that I have tied his fainting attacks,
that I have made them into the Night Spray.
You are right, chief.
The music of July smells of powder. (Sénac 273)

August 20th 1955 was a turning point in the Algerian war with the violent insurrection in North-
Constantine during which 129 Europeans were hunted down and brutally massacred by bands
of men “hastily armed with axes, pitchforks, sickles and knives”, including whole families. The
brutality of these events profoundly shocked the pied-noir community, and Jacques Soustelle,
then Governor General for Pierre Mendes-France, never recovered from the scenes he
witnessed:

A seventy-three-year-old grandmother and eleven year-old daughter, the father killed in
his bed, with his arms and legs hacked off. The mother had been disemboweled, her
five-day-old baby slashed to death and replaced in her mother’s womb. (Horne 121)

The slaughter was carefully orchestrated by the FLN, which had cut off all means of
communication before the attack, and was perpetrated by bands (mostly of workers who knew
where the pied noir villagers lived) that had been given the order to attack the villages and kill
every person they found. The FLN was hoping to drive a definitive wedge between the Arab and
pied noir communities by bringing on a relentless retaliation. Days after the slaughter the French
army was called in with the order to shoot virtually at will on the Arab population, killing an
estimated 12,000 Algerians according to FLN estimates.

The impact of that summer and the subsequent months were irreversible and doomed the
prospect of any reconciliation between France and Algeria even though many attempts were
made. Albert Camus, during a visit to Algeria in January 1956, gave a conference in which he
supported a “civil truce”, but little did he understand the anger of the colons who had felt
betrayed by the liberal government. The animosity that he experienced from the crowds outside
the conference hall shouting “Camus au poteau”, the general tension and the way the FLN was
using his presence for political advantage caused Camus to abandon the cause altogether.

“From now on he withdrew into his shell. Breaking with L’Express, Combat and France-
Observateur, he was to re-emerge to write only once more about Algeria, at the beginning of
1958, before his tragic death in a car accident two years later.” (Horne 126)

While silent during the months after the August massacres, Jean Sénac seems to have followed
an opposite trajectory to that of Camus. In an a semi-fictional essay published in Le Monde
Ouvrier in March 1956, titled La Race des hommes [The Race of men], where he takes on a
third person narrative, Sénac wrote:

This new outburst of anger among the North African “rebels” did not surprise him, but he
felt as though he had participated in it somehow, with them, or against them. This spilled
blood now started to burn in his veins and gave him the sense that the tragedy
concerned him intimately. […] Today it was very precise: the French were killing the
Arabs, the Arabs were killing the French. The Arabs needed to kill French in order for the
tragedy to inhabit him and keep him from sleeping, since despite his convictions and his
generosity, the French were still his flesh […] He felt sorrow, a great sadness, but he
didn’t given into panic or hatred, not for a second. His certainties were bitter… (Mazo
226)

Like Camus, Sénac seems to feel, transposed into a fictional third person, a certain despair
after the events, going so far as to feel affected in his flesh by the French deaths. His allegiance,
hinted in the last words, nevertheless goes towards the cause of the FLN and their armed
struggle. We sense a conflict in Sénac’s character. While in his mind he felt part of the Algerian
rebellion, his body felt France’s pain, and perhaps ties into the continuous struggle Sénac had
with reconciling the two.

Le soleil sous les armes was an extension of Sénac’s own matured position for the Algerian
cause through its poetry and art. If prior to his departure from Algeria in 1954 he had supported
an autonomous Algerian art and an independent nation, it was in France that his position
became solidified and committed, especially after the August massacres. In Paris Sénac met
with FLN leaders\textsuperscript{31}, became close friends with Ben M’Hidi and the renowned historian Mohammmed Harbi, and participated in the creation of the revolutionary and then clandestine newspaper El Moudjahid, to be printed by Subervie.

Sénac's manifesto brought together Algerian and French resistance poetry in an effort to respond to the escalating tension between cultures that were moving further and further apart from each other in an increasingly violent conflict. Sénac was close to the French Left that sided with the oppressed and denounced France’s colonialist interests in Algeria, but unlike many on the left he was also supportive of the political aspirations of the FLN in its fight for independence. \textit{Le soleil sous les armes} is both a militant, a nationalist and a poetic text that attempts to transcend narrow ideological and political frameworks by revealing common aspirations within the poetic voices of the Algerian revolution.

Sénac straddled poetically two worlds that were drifting apart, and was trying to show through poetry that both shared a common history of resistance. In France it was resistance to German occupation and fascism during WWII, while in Algeria it was over 120 years of resistance to French occupation. The mirror that Sénac presented through poetry reveals a shared history against both internal and external oppression as a means to create a sense of shared destiny within a new Algerian nation. Sénac also understood at that time that Algeria and France would separate, and that the new nation would be built on foundations that remained to be defined in relation to the colonial past. Sénac’s voice is a rare voice of hope and reconciliation at a time when the other dominant voice, that of Camus, had retreated into silence. Fanon, who had been

\textsuperscript{31} The degree of Sénac’s involvement in the underground FLN movement is otherwise not well-known and not documented, other than the fact that he knew most of the leaders within the expat community and met with them regularly at the café Old Navy. It was through these connections that Sénac was informed about the situation in Algeria in ways that Camus never was, which could have been the cause of their substantially different positions on the “events”.
a vocal part of the intellectual French debate up to 1957, had abandoned the discussion altogether during his Tunisian exile and sided with the political objectives of the FLN and of the Third-World anti-colonial movements. *Le Soleil sous les armes*, on top of revealing a poetic tradition that most people in France ignored, constitutes a bridge between the extreme positions of Camus’s silence on Algeria and Fanon’s wholesale condemnation of French presence. Beyond the official anti-colonial and nationalist discourse, it was the people that the poet cared for, whose voice was often drowned out by political rhetoric.

Published on October 1st 1957, *Le soleil sous les armes* immediately situates us at a pivotal moment of the Algerian war. The Battle of Algiers had started in January of the same year. Resident minister Robert Lacoste had called in General Massu and the Tenth Division of Parachutists in order to eradicate the now highly organized FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) that had taken over the Casbahan of Algiers under the leadership of Saadi Yacef and Ali la Pointe. The Algerian resistance, sensing that it had little traction in the countryside, had moved into the cities the previous year and began to prepare a full-out “urban warfare” against the French, including civilians. In response the Europeans organized “ratonnades” (rat hunts), randomly killing any Arab they found. On August 10th a group of European terrorists placed a bomb outside of a supposed FLN safe house in the center of the Casbah, killing 70 people. On September 30th the first bomb attack by the FLN targeted the Milk Bar, a cafeteria, and the Air France terminal, injuring 60. The Casbah was thereafter completely cordoned off with barbed wire and military check points. While men could no longer cross the lines, women were increasingly used to smuggle explosives into the European quarters. In the countryside European militias, called *Unité territoriale*, would patrol and execute anyone they suspected of belonging to the Algerian insurrection in cold blood. Under Colonel Marcel Bigeard the use of torture had become prevalent among the French paratroopers in order to break into the structure of Saadi Yacef’s “terrorist network”. The methods proved “successful”. Larbi Ben
M’hidi, a chief military commander was captured on March 6th. Abane Ramdane and Krim were smuggled out and left for Morocco. Bombings and “ratonades” continued until Yacef was captured on September 24th 1957, essentially ending the battle.32

In France the war was taking place mostly between the FLN and the more conciliatory MNA. In 1956 there were 42 political murders. By 1958 there were 47 killings in Lyon alone during the first 8 months of the year. In all of France it amounted to two killings a day. While the battle of Algiers was the most visible side of the war, which was the intention of the FLN in the first place, to bring the war to the attention of the international community, there was a much more complicated reality both on the ground between the various factions that were vying for the support of the Algerian population and in France among the Leftist intellectuals and artists, including Sénac.

Sénac rebels against Camus

1957 was, according James Le Sueur “a major turning point for French and Algerian intellectuals” (Le Sueur 4). Le Sueur describes Camus as being increasingly isolated in his belief that Algeria and France shared a common destiny and that his role was to seek modes of reconciliation and to place himself above partisan debates. Camus, who had in his earlier career as a journalist, denounced the poverty and racism that the Arab Algerians were subjected to, also denounced the later violence of the FLN as being inexcusable. The ambiguity of his position led many on the left, including Simone de Beauvoir, to call Camus a hypocrite (Le Sueur 100). Le Sueur draws a much more nuanced picture of Camus being “torn”, as a leftist intellectual, between his belief (as a pied noir) that the Algerian French had a right to stay in

32 For a detailed account of that period, see Saadi Yacef’s, The Battle of Algiers: A Memoir, Dec 1956 – Sept 1957, which was made into the now famous The Battle of Algiers by Italian filmmaker Pontecorvo.
Algeria, and his increasing uneasiness with the reciprocal violence erupting between both French and Algerians. He believed that any reconciliation would have to be founded on the denunciation of violence as a means to achieve a political end. His moral position regarding Algerian violence conflicted with his open denunciation, on October 31, 1956, of the Soviet Union’s crushing of Hungary’s democratic uprising. This contradiction was not lost on Sénac and others in Algeria, who wondered how Camus could denounce Soviet imperialism but not see France’s own imperialist practices. For Katia Sainson, “Sénac was not alone in discerning a troubling ambiguity in Camus’s solidarity for Hungarians at a time when he was silent of the fate of those in Algeria.” (Sainson 1204) She further cites a letter that Sénac wrote to Camus, but which was never sent:

Today, concerning Hungary, you enter the public space all enlightened with Demand and Honesty. Certainly Hungary is close to us, but in Algeria, every day, our blood is spilled. French blood, Arab blood, what’s the difference, the blood of men! All that at home, Camus, at home. (ibid.)

As further proof of the growing conflict between the two men, Sainson cites in its entirety an unpublished poem by Sénac titled *A Albert Camus qui me traitait d’égorgeur* [To Albert Camus who called me a cut-throat], written in September 1956 to defend himself against Camus’s accusation that he was complicit with the FLN’s assassinations. Sénac in his poem tries to clarify the difference between the Poet and the *Master of the Absolute* (referring to Camus):

Between the men and you the blood flows
says the poet
and you no longer see
Me, I plunge my hands into the wounds
to stop the blood from flowing
and like surgeon I accept the pain
of others, and the regrets,
so that our Total Body is returned to us.
But he continues:

Swimming pools, stadiums, books  
the Master of the Absolute composes for himself a scenery of forgetfulness  
The absinths, the blood of his friends haunt him  
(Sainson 1207)

Juxtaposed here are what Sénac perceives as two radically different concerns, those of the poet digging his hands into the wounds, into the reality of tragic war, in order to stop the tragedy, and those of prestigious Master, concerned only about his ideals and the blood of his friends.

Camus’s untenable position became clear a year later when he received the Nobel Prize in October 1957. While the prize was seen as an opportunity for Camus to finally influence France’s politics in Algeria, a declaration he made to students at the University of Uppsala seriously undermined that authority in the eyes of the Algerians. Responding to an Algerian student who had criticized him on his perceived support of France in the Algerian conflict, Camus declared that:

It is not without a certain repugnance that I give my reasons like this in public. I have always condemned terror. I must also condemn a terrorism which is exercised blindly, in the streets of Algiers, for example, and which one day could strike my mother or my daughter. I believe in justice, but I would defend my mother before justice. (Le Sueur 125)

Camus’s statement, “I would defend my mother before justice”, even though he tried to correct its meaning shortly thereafter in an article he published in Le Monde, was the beginning of the end of his friendship with Sénac. Sénac was about to publish a scathing response to Camus’s Nobel Prize speech in France Observateur, but decided to retract it after Camus’s article and write a letter to him instead. The full content of that letter, as well as Camus’s final and last response provide an essential backdrop to Le soleil sous les armes, and explain some of its urgency, and at times, anger:
Paris, December 18 1957

Albert Camus

After having read your letter published in tonight’s Le Monde, I have just retracted the enclosed article that France Observateur was going to publish. This text seemed a bit “parricide” to me. It’s with relief that I cancel its publication. But that doesn’t change anything to the main elements of our respective positions or to my being convinced that I partly understand the deep reasons for your silence.

There. It had to be said. I have tried to contact you several times. I thought that you were a man of dialogue. I have written you 30-page letters that I never sent. All that is so useless… It’s why I decided to speak publicly. Beyond our little ambitious persons, there are those others and we speak for them. One day I will undoubtedly pursue that article more seriously. It’s essential. I’m going to publish a paper in L’Action on “the Algerian intellectuals and the revolution” – where I speak of non-violence and again of you (but only in regard to that question).

If I’m not in the “maquis” of the mountains, it’s because they refused me three times. But I serve my people in my own way (that people of nine million Arabo-Berbers and a million Europeans and Jews). I try to serve love and not hatred, at the very heart of violence.

I know that I am faithful to both the oppressed Arabs and to the blinded Europeans. Our face is not that of despair, maybe that of unhappiness but also of unshakable hope. And already a few young Europeans from Algeria are preparing the stones of the city with our brothers in combat, each in his/her modest place, my mother has joined me in hope herself. It’s one of the biggest joys of my life. The verb then becomes flesh and lives among us. The others will come, I know it. We will vanquish through trust, through love despite the appearances.

No, I am not answering to anyone’s order. I am not “from the FLN”. It’s my own solidarity, my difficult honesty. I am on board. I am not part of the feast. I reread “Les Feuilles d’Hypnos” too often to be duped by the powerful of this world!

Tomorrow in Algiers, it’s Jean Daniel that they will receive with great ceremony in the independent Republic, and you, Albert Camus. Not me. Even if I have the joy of seeing my people finally free. I have chosen poetry, frankness, with everyone, love and not the masks.

But already the young are surrounding me, loving me. Others will be born that will know me. My victory is not of this world. But of this world are my combat and my fraternity!

I wrote to you in my first letter, 11 years ago, that I was a Christian anarchist. Today that definition make me smile. But there is a baptism there, an order of mind to which I have remained faithful, even more so since I have understood what commits us, that little Algerian word.

Jean Sénac. (Nacer-Khodja, Camus, and Sénac 257-258)
Saison points out that the “little Algerian word” (ce petit mot algérien), “committed” (engagé), was really what differentiated Sénac from Camus in the sense that Sénac had in fact, according the Hamid Nacer-Khodja, lived among the “Arabs” of Algeria, and felt that they were his “alter-ego”. It is in fact the closeness that Sénac felt to the Arab Algerians that lead him to support their cause, reflected in the following passage from his biographical novel _Ebauche du père_, written during same period: “Within our soles and our hearts we were blood brothers”. (Sainson 1211)

Camus answered with a short letter on December 19th 1957:

> What haste, Sénac! That nice closing argument, built on reported speeches, improbable for whoever knows me a little, and before I was even able to rectify them, is assuredly not that of friendship, even saddened. I was lucky that my correction was published in time, and saves me of seeing your name, at the end of that, and in _France Observateur_. But I will not have had the chance to preserve in you the simple memory, in terms of what concerns you and of what concerns the Algerian people. So be it. At least accept one last advice from your friend: if you continue to speak of love and fraternity, do not write any poems that glorify the bomb that indiscriminately kills the child and the terrible “blinded” adult. That poem, that I still have on my heart, took away any value to your arguments, so little assured I am of the value of mine.

> Good luck!

> Albert Camus.

(Nacer-Khodja, Camus, and Sénac 259)

Camus’s reference to “poems that glorify the bomb”, was most likely an allusion to the following, published in _Diwan de l’Etat major_, in 1957:

> On every bomb
> the name of my Beloved
>
> For every bomb
> a calendar of tears
>
> With every bomb
> a season won over darkness.
> Terrorists, shredded smiles. (Sénac 230)
To Camus’s short and somewhat condescending response, Sénac wrote a long letter where he defended his solidarity with the anger and frustrations of the Algerian people:

In the despicable climate of exasperation that a hundred years of rejected friendship, exploited patience, flouted hope, have plunged them in, I believe that the Algerians, including the political leaders (who under the circumstances react like the rest of the people, i.e. with atrocious frankness, a furious and royal naïveté) were at the end of their tether and responded to the endless lies and calculated crimes with a sort of rage, a mortal embrace (there is in this drama a “heartache”, a sort of sacred jealousy). (ibid. 161, translated)

The final correspondence and breakup between Sénac and Camus reflect the growing abyss between French and Algerian realities, and a selective understanding on Camus’s part that borders on racism. One could arguably defend Camus and acknowledge that his unfortunate comment on choosing his mother over justice did not reflect his overall commitment to the Algerian people, but it is also clear from his exchange with Sénac that Camus does not understand the growing violence of the Algerian insurrection. Camus’s argument elsewhere was that Arab intellectuals failed to denounce Arab violence against Europeans when their European counterparts denounced that of France. This somewhat neutral position was unacceptable for someone like Sénac who understood that it was impossible not to take sides when the balance of power was so asymmetrical. The moral high ground that Camus took was reflective of the established public figure he became, whereas Sénac had always remained a rather minor actor, and hence had nothing to lose, but his position was also moral in the sense that he felt he had to defend the Algerians despite their violence. It was not an apology for violence, but an understanding of its roots, which was reflected in the poem that Camus denounced.

Sénac’s statement, “I choose poetry, frankness with everyone, love, and not the masks” can also be read in contrast to Camus’s own position on the role of the writer. According to Le Sueur, “Camus retraced the theme of societal pressures on the writer. No doubt with his own case in
mind, he lamented that silence had become politicized. Even ‘silence has dangerous implications’\(^\text{33}\). And today’s artist had to be aware of his own presence. The artist could no longer remain outside history.” (124) It is within the latter statement, that an artist could no longer remain outside of history, that one can recognize Sénac’s intention, and which, unlike Camus, he put into practice. Sénac understood both the violence of the oppressed and the blindness of the Europeans, but defends the “undamaged hope” he perceived in poetry. The poet here also clearly distances himself from partisan politics when he declares that he is not “from the FLN”, but adds that he chooses the truth even if it means he might not have a place in the “Republic of independence”.

The contrast between Camus and Sénac’s positions on the Algerian war echoes another important actor in the French and Algerian intellectual crisis, Frantz Fanon. While Fanon is mostly known for his denunciation of racism in \textit{Black Skin White Masks}, published in 1952, and powerful critique of colonialism in \textit{The Wretched of the Earth}, published posthumously in 1961, his deep involvement with the Algerian conflict is much less studied and forms the basis of David Macey’s extensive biography. In it Macey draws compelling parallels between the increasingly disturbing reality of the Algerian conflict and the evolution of Fanon’s theory and practice.

\(^{33}\) Le Sueur cites Camus’s lecture “Create dangerously”, given at the University of Uppsala on December 14\(^{\text{th}}\) 1957, and published in \textit{Resistance}. 
The crisis of the French left

While Fanon is stereotypically known as an apologist for anti-colonial violence, the reality is far more complex and nuanced in terms of the political realities Fanon was witnessing and giving voice to in his writings. Fanon is diametrically opposite to Camus on Algeria and represents the radicalism of Third World intellectuals even though Fanon was himself part of the French intellectual scene up to 1957. It was Fanon who denounced leftist hypocrisy and its inability to see the Algerian struggle as fundamentally anti-colonialist in a series of articles published in _El Moudjahid_ in December 1957:

> Fanon was quite unequivocal about where the duty of French intellectuals and democrats lay: they should unconditionally support the national demands of the Algerian people. [...] The relative isolation and introversion of the left meant, however, that no real attempts were made to explain the situation ‘to the whole population of the colonialist country.’ (Macey 332)

The isolation and introversion that Fanon described was partly a product of the left’s inability to move beyond ideology and to clearly align itself with the political struggle of the colonized. Rather, most on the left believed that a form of reconciliation was possible and that Algeria would remain French if all parties could agree on a common struggle for freedom, which was essentially the position of the PCF. The situation of French intellectuals regarding the FLN’s legitimacy was further complicated by the tragic events in Melouza, on May 28th, 1957 during which 301 Muslim inhabitants of Melouza were supposedly massacred by extremist factions of the FLN. While several conflicting accounts were given by both French authorities and the FLN, the current official version is that the FLN violently punished those who sided with the rival MNA (Mouvement National Algérien) headed by Messali Hadj, in order to impose themselves as the only representatives of the Algerian people.
The Melouza massacre was used by Lacoste and the French government to portray the image of a “barbaric” FLN that would lead Algeria down a path of death and destruction. While many intellectuals understood that the massacre was being manipulated by both parties for political gain, few understood where it was coming from and how to respond other than to denounce it on moral grounds. Indeed it was an incredibly dark episode which in many ways revealed the brutality of the FLN, but according to Fanon one must also understand the nature of a war that had been brought about by France’s own savagery and the fact that “[i]n the colonial context, there is no truthful behavior.” (Macey 352) The truth was that the FLN, by blaming the massacre on the French, was able to rally internal support to their cause, while the French government was able to rally the support of the international community. In the end Melouza further separated Algeria from France and weakened the hold that intellectuals had on a conflict that was spinning out of France’s control.

Fanon’s radicalism in recognizing legitimate violence was not an apology for violence, but a recognition that a people subjected to colonial oppression without any means to resist would eventually turn to violent action as the only way to redeem their dignity and be heard by the colonizer. Fanon was speaking from his personal experience in Algeria from 1953 to 1957 as a psychiatrist and witness to the psychological effects of the Algerian war on both the victims and the victimizers, the most notable example being those involved in torture.

The use of torture was further exposed in brutal detail by Henri Alleg in La Question, published on February 18, 1958. In it he described how he had been interrogated and tortured during his imprisonment in Algeria, mainly for being a member of the French Communist Party (PCF) and supporter of the Algerian insurrection through an underground newspaper. Maurice Andin, a close friend of Alleg and also a French Jew, was subjected to similar interrogation and disappeared, leading Pierre Vidal-Naquet to compare Andin’s case to that of Dreyfus and to
suggest that France’s torture practices upon French citizens was reminiscent of the Nazis. In June 1959, ed. Minuit published *La Gangrène*, which exposed the torture experienced by five young Algerians, this time on French soil, in the heart of the Republic:

The book reviewed by most of the French dailies and several newspapers suggested that there were disturbing parallels between the Nazi occupation of France and the DST’s use of torture in metropolitan France during the French-Algerian War. (Le Sueur 229)

According to Le Sueur, the use of torture upon French citizens, combined with the “migration of torture to metropolitan France via the DST” and de Gaulle’s “desire to suppress all such reports at any cost gave most French intellectuals reason to pause and fundamentally reevaluate the effects of the war on French society and French law.” (ibid.) Alleg’s revelations, the Andin affair and *La Gangrène*, had a huge effect on the intellectual community, proving that France’s war in Algeria was slowly eroding the very foundations of the Republic. This lead to an increasing radicalization of the intellectual left, and according to Edgar Morin in *Les intellectuels et l’Algérie*, to a “hidden duality” between “the left who wanted ‘peace’ and the left who wanted to ‘adhere to the Algerians.’” (Le Sueur 236-237)

It is within this crucial political, cultural and intellectual crisis, in both Algeria and France, that Sénac wrote and presented his manifesto, even though it was written predominantly for the French audience. The tragic events in Algeria, the bitter ending of 11 years of correspondence with Camus, the internal corruption of the French Republic and its own violation of human rights, including that of its own citizens, all provided the grounds for the genuine cry for peace that Sénac found among the poets who defended, both in France and Algeria, the dignity of the oppressed.
Le soleil sous les armes was first presented by Sénac at a conference organized by the Student Union of the New Left (L'Union des Etudiants de la Nouvelle Gauche) at the Geography Hall in Paris March 13 1956. “It was the first encounter that the poet had had with an audience outside of Algeria” (Nacer-Khodja 233). It was later published by the political and literary review Exigence, directed by Gael Le Roy, on January 5 1957, but was immediately confiscated and destroyed by the French authorities. (ibid.) An enriched version of the manifesto was presented on March 19 1957 at the UGEMA (General Union of the Algerian Muslim Students) headquarters in Paris, after which Sénac decided to have it published as an essay with Jean Subervie, with the agreement of his first publisher Gallimard. Sénac wanted to publish his manifesto as soon as possible “for imperious political reasons” (ibid.) that were most probably related to the general climate described earlier. Finally published on October 1 1957, Le soleil sous les armes would be presented in a conference the following year in Grenoble, once under the title Le poète algérien dans la cité (The Algerian poet in the city), on March 14 1958, and the next time as Le poète algérien et la révolution (The Algerian Poet and the Revolution), which he was already referring to in one of his last letters to Camus.

Jean Subervie, who had published clandestine journals such as Combat during the French Resistance along with false papers, “could not help but compare the situation of Algeria to that of France at the time of German occupation” (Nacer-Khodja) and hence supported Algerian writers who were exposing the violence of French colonialism. Sénac first met Subervie in Paris in 1956 during an evening he organized for the publication of Malek Haddad’s Le Malheur en danger. Shortly thereafter Sénac coordinated for Subervie a special issue of Entretien sur les lettres et les arts dedicated to Algerian art and literature, in collaboration with Malek Haddad and Khaled Benmiloud. Presenting a wide range of texts and illustrations representing all facets of Algerian culture, including poems translated from Arabic, Entretien was “the first to present Algerian culture in its singular and rich diversity” (ibid.), and in many ways a precursor to
Sénac's manifesto published a year later. Subervie also published Sénac’s poems Matinale de mon peuple with a preface by Mostefa Lacheraf in 1961, and Citoyens de beauté in 1967.

In a rare essay on the manifesto published in AWAL, Yvonne Llavador describes it as “Algerian resistance poetry’s single manifesto” and the “first platform of Algerian poets.” (Yacine 26)

Nothing like it had been written before (although one could find elements of it in Sartre’s Black Orpheus) and even though Sénac had been involved in the promotion of Algerian literature in his essays and literary journals, it rarely took on such a degree of revolutionary fervor. There are, in fact, no other examples in this time period of essays that attempt to delineate a tradition of resistance poetry encompassing both Algeria and France in a common struggle while defending the cause of the Algerian war against colonialism. In order to do so, Sénac draws upon both the oral tradition in Arab culture in its resistance to France’s invasion, and France’s own tradition of resistance poetry, which includes anti-colonial poems by Victor Hugo and Rimbaud, and more contemporary poets such as Char, Aragon and Eluard. In addition Sénac defines a common cause for poetry, which he expresses in the first subtitle of Le soleil sous les armes as Contre la pacification de la poésie (Against the pacification of poetry). The term “pacification” was meant to be read both in relation to France’s attempt to “pacify” Algeria through brutal military repression, but also as a swipe at Albert Camus’s Nobel Prize, which Sénac called the Nobel Prize of Pacification. While Camus had been pacified by Nobel officialdom, poetry would remain on the battlefronts. The term also denotes the colonial practices that attempted to muzzle and marginalize the voices of popular movements.
Giving purer meaning to the words of the tribe

With regard to the manuscript itself, Nacer-Khodja remarks that there was “practically no correction or trace of any addition, a practice that was not usual for Sénac, who would overload the preliminary drafts of his texts destined to be presented in writing or orally. The draft was then the definitive text written in one go.” (Nacer-Khodja 236) The immediacy comes across in the text’s vitality and the way it progresses organically around a number of cited passages which Sénac then ties back to several central notions stated in the first pages of the manifesto.

A quote from Mallarmé in the very first paragraph “To give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe”, could be read several ways. Sénac extracted it from the following stanza in Mallarmé’s Tomb for Edgar Poe:

```
Like a Hydra’s vile spasm once hearing the angel
Give a purer sense to the words of the tribe
They proclaimed with loud cries the sortilege drunk
From the dishonored depths of some black brew. (Mallarmé and Caws 51)
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Sénac’s use of the quote could mean that the poet gives “a purer meaning” to the words of the people, the “tribe”, but Mallarmé seems to imply that the poet is ordered (“they proclaimed”), perhaps by the people referred to as the “Hydra”, to give purer meaning to their own language. In the context of modern poetry that could mean a return to a language that people can recognize, or classical language, instead of the sortilege, or witchcraft, that modern poetry was often perceived to be, and would mean a complete reversal of the common interpretation of Mallarmé. Sénac is then revealing two opposite directions in Mallarmé’s call, one saying that the poet is at the forefront of language, a modernist position, the other saying that he is tying the
words of the tribe back to their traditional roots. The strange modernist reversal that Sénac is suggesting came across in a recent email correspondence I had with poet Ben Hollander:

If what you say is indeed the case, that "the purer meaning is the classical meaning of poetry that "society" was demanding of the poet, instead of the "dishonored depths of some black brew" that perhaps relates back to witchcraft of modern poetry," then the modernists got Mallarme all wrong....

in other words, the role of the poet for Eliot, for example, was to be the so-called progressive voice ahead of the so-called conservative audience..."to purify the dialects of the tribe" (so that the poet had language--the real thing--while the tribes only had primitive dialects)

so, instead of Mallarme being the poet who led us "forward" to a minimalist French poetry of the theatrical page, we have, in your reading, a Mallarme who may want poets to take us "back" to classicism...to the roots of poetry in the people. How wonderfully strange.....

(Correspondence with Ben Hollander)

Whereas modernism, with Mallarmé at its head, was thought to lead the people away from classicism, Sénac, as suggested here by Hollander, is calling for a poetry that reconnects the people with the traditional roots of their language, as the "purer meaning of the words of tribe". One finds a very similar, although somewhat opposite, debate in relation to modern Arab poetry, through Adonis:

All poetry in the Arab world in this period [1950s] was either traditionalist or nationalist... What we were trying to achieve was a rediscovery of the self, against the tribe, against the summa, against all these ideological forms of culture. (Furani 243)

For Adonis the tribe is that of Arab traditionalism, which he sought to oppose through the secular influence of European modernists. According to Palestinian scholar Khaled Furani, in Silencing the Sea, "this poetry occurs within a quest to secularize Arabic poetry and society. In other words the impenetrability of contemporary literary poetry [as opposed to the oral tradition] distinctly belongs to the secular." (Furani 253) Furani further believes that the influence of modern European poetry in the Arab world, for example through free verse, lead to a split between the poets who were breaking away from tradition within the newly formed nation-states and those who were claiming that the only legitimate source of poetry was within a larger
religious and pre-national tradition. Furani’s claim is that the secular movement did in fact distance the poet from the broader popular appeal of the oral tradition, because of its literary “impenetrability”. Read in that light Sénac’s appeal to the tribe is closer to the classical Arab tradition than Adonis! Sénac, ironically through Mallarmé, was calling for a language in modern poetry that could reconnect back to the popular roots of language, making Sénac simultaneously a modernist, a traditionalist, a nationalist and a populist.

In the context of Algeria this poetry was a “rallying cry”, a continuation of a tradition in which the poet is the storyteller of the people, of their very real resistance against oblivion. The battle of weapons, for Algerian national identity, became the battle of language, as stated in the very beginning of Le soleil sous les armes: “Poetry and Resistance are the cutting edges of the same blade where man relentlessly sharpens his dignity.” (Sénac 6) The sharpened dignity is here restored by poetry as a means of resistance. Sénac owes his reference to France’s resistance against German occupation to René Char, who was one of Sénac’s biggest influences aside from Camus, and who represents the archetypal poet of the French resistance, writing Feuillets d’Hypnos in the thick of World War II. Even though Sénac, like Char, was a committed poet, there are nevertheless important differences between them. Sénac is interested in poetry as a popular mode of expression during war, whereas Char was adamant about not making poetry serve a particular cause. Char was highly critical of the intellectual posturing and those who used the war as pretext to write. He refused to publish during the conflict, considering that his actions were louder and more important than his words, and that his words could not give justice to the reality he was experiencing. Feuillets d’Hypnos was published only after the war, in 1946. Char’s position, that in times of war language becomes inadequate, is diametrically opposite to Sénac’s, yet both are resistant in their own ways, through silence and through words. Sénac showed that there was in poetry a tradition that gave voice to the violence of war, and that it should be acknowledged as a fundamental part of popular resistance. Far from seeing
poetry as an external and absolute truth that had to distance itself from crude reality, Sénac saw within that reality the very foundations of poetic expression.

Sénac refers to the larger and more universal tradition of French resistance poetry when he cites Rimbaud’s poem *Jugurtha*, written in Latin in 1869 when he was only fourteen years old, and which celebrated in 72 Latin verses the historical and mythical Numidian warrior:

[… Rise up, subjugated tribes!  
May the ancient courage be revived in your tamed hearts!  
Brandish your swords again! And, remembering Jugurtha,  
repel the victors! Spill your blood for the fatherland!  
Oh, may the Arab lions rise for war  
and tear apart the enemy’s battalions with their teeth!]³⁴ (Le soleil sous les armes 15, transl.)

According to Hédi Abdel-Jaouad in *Rimbaud et l’Algérie*, little did the Academy of Douai where the poem was first presented understand that it was essentially resurrecting the great Numidian warrior as a parallel to Abdelkader, the first Algerian nationalist and leader of the war against the French from 1840 to 1847. Rimbaud’s poem furthermore compares Rome’s occupation of Numidia to that of the French under Napoleon’s rule, and according to Abdel-Jaouad constitutes “a true anti-nationalist and anti-patriotic provocation” (une vraie provocation anti-nationaliste et anti-patriotique) (Abdel-Jaouad 18) at the height of France’s own nation-building campaign. Rimbaud’s poem had tremendous influence on Algerian writers and poets, such as Kateb Yacine, Malek Alloula, Youcef Sebti and Habib Tengour, yet interestingly it is still hard to find in print, signaling perhaps an intentional censorship of Rimbaud’s politics and of the solidarity that French poets expressed with the Algerian people.

Jean Amrouche, Algerian writer and poet, also refers to the mythical warrior in an essay called *L’éternel Jugurtha*, published in 1946. To Amrouche, Jugurtha as both poet and warrior,

³⁴ Arthur Rimbaud wrote 75 verses in latin, dedicated to Jugurtha and celebrating Algeria’s resistance, in 1869.
represents the “African genius” in the sense that he is fundamentally heretical: “As soon as heresy’s triumph becomes orthodoxy, as soon as it no longer sustains the revolt, Jugurtha finds in his genius the source and in the circumstances the opportunity for a new heresy” [Dès que l’hérésie triomphe en orthodoxie, dès qu'elle ne nourrit plus la révolte, Jugurtha trouve en son génie la source et dans les circonstances l’occasion d’une nouvelle hérésie]. The summoning of Jugurtha is simultaneously that of resistance against the foreign invader, and that of a poetic spirit that cannot be conquered or controlled. Perhaps the reason why poetry, for Amrouche, Rimbaud and others, became so connected with the spirit of Jugurtha was that it represented poetic language’s absolute resistance to an imposed colonial order:

Jugurtha ou l'infidélité : en vérité ne sommes-nous pas en présence de l'envers d'une grande vertu, qui n'est autre que la fidélité à soi-même, que le désir de se garder tout entier, de ne pas fixer ce qui est mouvant, de ne pas éliminer un certain nombre de chances, de ne pas stériliser par avance l'avenir ? La véritable affaire de la vie n'est peut-être pas d'inscrire comme des preuves de sa propre existence les traces de l'action dans l'espace et dans le temps. Pour Jugurtha, vivre, c'est épouser aussi étroitement que possible le mouvement, la durée, c'est rester souple, pour faire face aux circonstances changeantes, qui modifient sans cesse les conditions de l'action. (Amrouche 9)

[Jugurtha or infidelity: in truth are we not in the presence of the flipside of a great virtue, which is nothing but loyalty to oneself, the desire to keep whole, not to fix what is moving, not eliminate a number of chances, not sterilize in advance the future? The real business of life is perhaps not recording as evidence of one's existence the traces of action in space and time. For Jugurtha, to live is to espouse as closely as possible movement and time, to remain flexible, to respond to changing circumstances, which constantly alter the conditions of action.]

Amrouche might as well be describing the role of the modern poet, “which is nothing but loyalty to one’s self, the desire to keep whole, to not fix what is moving, not eliminate a certain number of chances.” “The recording as evidence of one’s existence” is more the purpose of prose, whereas the role of poetry “is to espouse as closely as possible movement and time”, which is continuously changing. This stance reminds us of Sénac’s own position with regards to the Algerian nation, as a poetic entity that cannot be encompassed by a “nationalism closed on its
cactuses”. The poetic nation is one that is continuously in the making, since it follows the ever-evolving nature of its people.

As another example of poetry’s resistance, Sénac cites Belkheir, who “refuses to surrender, continues his anti-French poetic propaganda, is arrested and deported to Corsica. He died in 1900. But all of Algeria still recites his poems:

We are warriors serving a holy cause: our army is far from negligible.
We apply what God has prescribed to us in the Koran…
Our exploits give satisfaction to the Prophet, who established the distinction between truth and error.
Great is our joy when we receive guests.
This world full of illusions has, in our eyes, no price.
Our great deeds free the people.
And our renown spreads from Algiers to the Sudan.”
(Sénac 30)

This poetry, Sénac believes has deep foundations within our people. It would be a mistake to think that it is a recent manifestation of late nationalism. Fruit of an uninterrupted resistance since 1830, this poetry is linked to the most constant wills of this land which, despite those who are desperate and the scheming satisfied with their servitude, never ceased to stand, throughout the centuries, against all the endeavors of injustice and alienation. (Sénac 24-25)

In other words the anti-colonial poetry that emerged in the 20th century was inspired by a larger tradition that found its roots in an “uninterrupted resistance” within “the most constant wills” of Algeria. While the early 19th century Algerian poetry that Sénac cites, including songs and tales, contain many references to the Koran and to the early heroes of the Algerian resistance, there is a remarkable shift in 1945 around the Sétif massacre, “which would intensely affect the current poetic generation and, by giving it ‘matter of support’, would announce the birth of a true literary movement, breaking with the movements that had preceded and announced it”. Sénac
gives as an example of these new poets who “will denounce evil in raw notes, and paint a vast fresco, a shocking Geography of Grief”, that of Noureddine Tidafi:

I come from the humiliated olive tree, that entered its revenge;
I come from Aïn-Naga the unsuspected, from Palestro
I come from your spilled fruit, from your glaring anger…
humming over his manly grief…
O Algeria, daughter of all the rebellious syllables!
I tell of the fixed tortures and of the distant tears
I tell of the murmured blood of your adolescents buried
without a shroud
without a prayer… (ibid. 36, transl.)

Sénac gives other examples from Mohammed Dib, Kateb Yacine and from his own poetry that portray the “tragedies of Insurrectional Love”, as in Nedjma or the Encircled Corpse (Le Cadavre Encerclé), which “suddenly take on the dimension of a delirious fresco in order to shed an almost unbearable light on our current drama”. (ibid. 39) This poetry is not only an “inventory of sufferings, despair and hatred”, but it can “transcend despair, affirm, impose, the rights of the future”. (ibid. 40) While the darkness of events led Algerian writers and poets to portray suffering, cruelty and destruction, it was not a poetry of darkness by any means, but one that sought to redeem humanity through poetic expression. Sénac saw this poetic redemption in the “serene assurance” of Mohammed Dib:

Our dead
make the walls
of dry earth crumble
the walls of grief.

In front of us: the blood
of the most naked people
gathers
its land
and the tyrant reels.

The movement
of our bodies
strafes him
with its freshness (ibid. 40)

That the dead have not died in vain would be too simplistic a reading, since what Dib also refers to is the “nakedness”, the bodies of those who will overthrow the tyrant. The spirit of the resistance is within the blood and within the land, within the physical beings of the Algerians that poetry here upholds. Nakedness, language, body and resistance are brought together here in a fundamental relation, where the most fragile becomes the most powerful.

Sénac further believed in his manifesto that “at the heart of this combat, and despite atrocious ‘mistakes’\(^3^5\), there was no place for racism of any kind.” Algeria, he continues “is practically arabo-berber and Muslim, but it is Algerian above all, and the place for minorities cannot be underestimated.” As examples he cites poets Malek Haddad and Jean-Pierre Millecam who “had the right to speak of ‘his’ people, he ‘whose heart revealed every day, through the hatred that opposed the two communities, Algerian European and Muslims, that the only solution to the problem is a reconciliation and a fusion of both communities.’” (ibid. 41-42) The claim for a diverse Algeria is reflected in the following poem by Henri Kréa, also included in Sénac’s manifesto:

```
Je n’ai jamais su quand à moi
qui était l’Algérie
ma mere ou le pays
le Malheur ou moi-même
jusqu’au jour où je vis
que tout cela se ressemblait
curieusement
Saluez nations du globe
l’apparition de la totalité
d’une nation qui groupe
plusieurs nations
```

\(^3^5\) Referring perhaps to the Melouza massacre, the FLN bombings and retaliations against European civilians
(I myself have never known/who was Algeria/my mother or the country/Unhappiness or myself/until the day I saw/that all that looked alike/strangely/Salute, nations of the globe/the appearance of totality/of a nation that includes many nations) (Sénac 42)

One finds in this poem another reference to Camus’s unfortunate comment on his mother. Henri Kréra’s answer was that in the end Algeria’s future was not a matter of choice between communities, or between justice and nation, but in the recognition of the nation’s inherent openness and diversity. Sénac was led to believe that the FLN had “avoided the ghetto temptation as well as the hasty conclusions of a reductive and chauvinist nationalism” (ibid. 42), in the Political Platform that they presented during the Congress of August 20 1956, published by El-Moujahid. As proof, Sénac quoted the following section in a footnote:

The Algerian Revolution is a national struggle in order to destroy the anarchic regime of colonization and not a religious war. It is a march forward for humanity in a historic sense and not a return to feudalism. It is a fight for the rebirth of an Algerian State in the form of a democratic and social republic, guaranteeing a true equality, without discrimination, and not the restoration of a monarchy or of a bygone theocracy.

To Sénac, this “free and independent Algeria” would furthermore “break down the racial barriers founded on colonial arbitrariness”. In retrospect this rhetoric could seem shockingly naïve given the reality on the ground, but one should see that it as consistent with larger hopes that the post-colonial liberation announced a new era of fraternity among all people. Sénac’s universalist appeal was also directed to the French leftist intellectuals, who should “recognize the validity of the claim of the Algerian Resistance and […] feel that this revolution was first and foremost and answer to human dignity and historic truth.” Sénac recognized this answer in the poetry of Russian militant “Youri” (possibly Yuri Galanskov)

France is those dockers
who refuse to load war material
those journalists who were imprisoned
for having told the truth
those soldiers who loudly sing peace
while their wives and mothers
lay down on the train tracks (ibid. 45)

It is difficult to ascertain whether this poem is in fact by Galanskov, since he would have been 18 at the time Sénac published his manifesto, but it is consistent with the positions Galanskov later took in the Soviet Union as part of the samizdat movement. He was arrested in 1967 for publishing Phoenix, an underground magazine, and tried along with Alexander Dobrovolsky, Vera Lashkova and Alexander Ginzburg. He was sent to labor camp in 1968 and died in 1972. Sénac’s citation might have been a commentary on the tepid position the PCF took on the Algerian war, choosing a Russian poet who did in fact side with the dissent of the French workers and soldiers (a little-known historical fact). It also seems that Sénac is responding to intellectual debates when he states that: “More and more French are escaping the official lies of “pacification” and trying to flay the darkness” (ibid. 46). The “flayers of darkness” are those who courageously took position and defended the rights of the Algerian people. He also recognized that many on the left, similar to Le Sueur’s portrayal, were guilty of ideological paternalism, speaking for the oppressed while not being part of their struggle:

the action of the anti-colonialist left is often, sadly, tainted with a deplorable mentality of arbitration and mediation, sometimes even a curious paternalism, as though the people who are fighting for their liberation, affected by infantilism (Citing Jean Daniel and J.-M. Domenach), could only progress with the crutches that were so generously given to them by their counselors and guides…

Sénac mentions that the values of the French Revolution were those being defended in Budapest and in the Casbah of Algiers, while “we massacre a people to the sound of a revolutionary hymn, [a people] who would be the only one worthy enough to assume its greatness and sacred furor!” (ibid. 47) It is therefore the Algerians who, through their poetry, have taken on the task that France itself had abandoned, as expressed by Paul Ortega:

We will give them the peace that they have betrayed!
In the struggle against “the administrations of lies and crimes”, the Algerian poets have remained “violently faithful to the teachings of western and oriental cultures, because they have acquired the certainty that it is the whole of man which is questioned and questioning in that refusal [...].” For Sénac the Algerian poets became the new synthesis between Eastern and Western cultures in their fight for total emancipation. He quotes Abdelkader, whom Rimbaud compared to Jugurtha in his poem: “If the Muslims and the Christians would lend me their ear, I would make their disagreements come to an end, and they would become brothers inside and outside.” (Sénac 50)

It becomes increasingly apparent toward the end of Sénac’s manifesto that the possibility of reconciliation was to be found on Algerian terms and not in France, and that it was within the Algerian poetic, political, cultural and religious traditions that a solution to the underlying divisions was to be found. In addition to Abdelkader’s call, to the FLN platform, Sénac cites Mostefa Lacheraf’s appeal to the left in Les Temps Modernes to support a community that would be “finally free, hospitable, open to progress, respectful of the legitimate rights of each and the equality of all.” Reiterating the FLN’s message, Lacheraf added that if Europeans wanted to stay in Algeria and could recognize the leadership of the resistance, that “nothing will distinguish them from their Muslim countrymen.” This position was again repeated by Ferhat Abbas, delegate of the FLN, who stated that “The Europeans of Algeria are part of the common fatherland. The destiny of their children and ours will be the same, and this marriage between two civilizations, two languages treated on equal footing, will constitute for our country an element of progress and of prosperity.”(ibid. 50-51)

To the religious, literary and political voices of reconciliation, including Mouloud Mammeri’s, Sénac ends his pamphlet with a string of hopeful poems by Henri Kréa, Mohammad al-Id, and by the following transcribed chants of Algerian women collected by Mohammed Dib:
O you, from whom I have multiplied joy,  
Come and rejoice with me,  
Give back to me the joy that I gave you!

For a long time, a very long time  
We were in the shadow's field!

But the star that was just born,  
Is already spreading its light  
The light of the full moon!

which echoes the following poem by Henri Kréa

Travelers  
you are in a free country  
Algeria welcomes you  
you are the hosts  
that we have waited for  
a hundred and thirty years  
the wait was long  
but  
enter quickly  
the sky that we have furnished  
with blood.

This is not of course a happy ending, but a painful beginning, in Sénac’s words, a “difficult and unique adventure awaits us. We are privileged. But there are hard privileges.” (ibid. 55) What transpires in Sénac’s intervention is a desire to see beyond the growing divisions and hatred the potential for reconciliation and renewal, which poetry represented as the language of resistance. Resistance against oppression, but also resistance against division, exclusion and racism.

In Le soleil sous les armes and other texts that he wrote on Algerian poetry, Sénac defined the Algerian poet or writer as one “who has unequivocally sided with the Algerian Nation”. This perspective is mainly the product of militant position in the sense that Sénac is advocating for an Algerian poetry within a revolutionary and nationalist movement. Few other Algerian pied noir poets were able to occupy the same space while claiming both the French and Algerian cultures
openly and prominently. Anna Gréki and Henri Kréa, also pied noir poets, were close to Sénac’s militancy, yet neither were as vocal and populist as he was, or as involved in the Algerian cultural scene. They were nevertheless strong influences on Sénac and supported his defense of Algerian independence.

That a pied noir poet would speak for the tradition of Algerian poetry as a nationalist gesture is fraught with contradictions, which makes *Le soleil sous les armes* a particularly compelling text, aside from its attempt to delineate a tradition that comprises both Arabic and French elements. The vision of a diverse Algerian culture would last only for a few years after Ben Bella’s revolution, which had originally defended the idea that an integration of French culture was possible. This was paradoxically also the position of France starting 1954 when it became clear that the French were loosing the Algerian “hearts and minds”. Their cultural policies became more open to Algerian influences and promoted integration, while their military doubled in repression. There was indeed a deep conflict between France’s cultural and military agendas, which were also reflected in the intellectual debates described by Le Sueur. Sénac was revolutionary in proposing a unified reading of French and Algerian poetic traditions, but he was going against the grain of the radical factions that one side were demanding the eradication of French culture and on the other ignoring the brutal realities of French colonialism since 1830.

Also, presenting a combined Algerian and French poetic tradition did not take into account the Algerians who might view the francophone poet with suspicion. While during the revolution poets could claim a popular base, this potential audience became somewhat suspicious of the writers who, like Tahar Djaout, spoke in their name. In a documentary on Tahar Djaout’s assassination, Algerian writer Tahar Ouettar stated that he understood the resentment of many Arab-speaking Algerians toward those privileged writers who took on their cause while

36 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3RREPoRp0A
being able to navigate both French and Algerian worlds. The question of audience, literacy, and Arabization, is at the forefront of the post-revolutionary cultural tension that affected Sénac’s own work. In hindsight Sénac’s project of cultural fusion was utopian, but its utopianism simultaneously provides a future potential.

*Le soleil sous les armes* is also, and very importantly, an attack on the “stagnating values” of a cultural colonialism, which links both the progressive intellectuals and the political militant in Algeria in a common struggle for a “freedom of expression.” This freedom is undermined by “the mediocrity” of the administration in charge of culture and their censorship of popular modes of expression, to the extent where “the true creators had to flee, to Paris for example, in order to find the moral means through which to express themselves and to find an audience for their work.” This was, according to Sénac:

> among many others, the case for Albert Camus, Kateb Yacine, or the abstract painter Louis Nallard. By encouraging conformity (pseudo-orientalism, pseudo-school of Paris, pseudo-school of Algiers, etc...) and a false avant-garde, the public authorities have once more proved that all true art is dangerous, because it is fundamentally revolutionary and dynamic, and because it is connected to the live roots of the country. (Sénac 17)

Sénac makes a clear distinction between the art promoted by France’s colonial agenda, even those who claimed to be among the avant-garde among the North African pied noir writers, and that which was produced by indigenous Algerians. The exile of those writers and artists who didn’t subscribe to “pseudo-orientalism and pseudo-school of Paris”, was caused by an insurmountable provinciality of the Algerian cultural scene that Sénac was at times desperately trying to disrupt by promoting new Algerian voices within the Arabic tradition. This “right to poetry” was, for Sénac, also what Algeria was fighting for, a right to have a voice that was not conditioned or censored by colonialism or nationalism.
Sénac, with Fanon, Césaire and Memmi, maintained that poetry was fundamental to the liberation of the colonized. While historians will often focus on the armed struggles, or the resistances that are visible and effective, Sénac understood that a “right to poetry” is a right to one’s voice and to the national imagination that it speaks for. While one might criticize the somewhat privileged position of the poet, or doubt that poetry can “give purer meaning to the words of the tribe”, Sénac represents a concrete attempt at defining a poetic language of resistance that originates in popular expression. The poet, for Sénac, does not speak for the people, but from them, and must put aside his or her own “verbal pretensions” in order to serve those who are fighting on the ground:

Poètes, soyons humbles. L’exemple que nous donne notre peuple est trop haut pour supporter une quelconque démagogie verbale. Farouche en son maquis, il assemble, difficilement, les vocables d’un univers meilleur, démocratique et social. Si nous avons parfois la prétention d’éclairer, n’oublions pas que c’est avec les lanternes qu’il nous donne, avec les éclairs glorieux que son sacrifice suscite. Il est, à sa façon, un militant du Verbe. Sans notre frère analphabète nous ne serions qu’arbres secs. (Sénac 52)

(Poets, let’s remain humble. The example that our people give us is too great to stand any kind of verbal demagogy. Fierce in his maquis, he assembles, with difficulty, the words of a better universe, social and democratic. If we sometimes have the pretension of illuminating, let’s not forget that it is with the lanterns that he gives us, with the glorious lighting that his sacrifice evokes. He is, in his way, a militant of the verb. Without our illiterate brothers we would be only dried up trees.)

It is then both as a historical testimony and as a ambitious poetic program that we should read Le soleil sous les armes, whose title can be read as a rebuttal of the claim that only the armed struggle can reclaim the nation. When defining a role for poetry in Algeria, it should be viewed as having the same commitment as the armed struggle itself, regardless of the language it was expressed in. Sénac gave voice to the many poems he collected, some translated, others transcribed, including some of his own, interspersing them with commentaries that never imposed an interpretation but rather allowed them to reveal their own multitude of voices. The last paragraph of the manifesto reveals that intention:
A travers quelques œuvres éparses, pour la plupart inédites, et parfois clandestines, nous avons essayé de faire entendre la voix de notre peuple. Dans la mesure où nous ne possédons qu’une faible partie de ce qui se chante et s’écrit actuellement en Algérie, dans les prisons ou dans les chambres de l’exil, cet essai est forcément incomplet, et provisoire. Nous espérons, du moins, qu’il n’aura pas déformé le visage de ceux qui souffrent, luttent, et vivifient aujourd’hui le Nord de l’Afrique. (Sénac 56)

(Through a handful of scattered, mostly unpublished, and sometimes clandestine works, we have tried to make the voice of our people heard. Insofar as we have only a small part of what is sung and written currently in Algeria, in prison or in rooms of exile, this essay is necessarily incomplete and provisional. We hope, at least, that it will not have deformed the face of those who suffer, struggle, and today vivify Northern Africa.)

Little, or none of this poetry was accessible to the French public at the time, or to any public for that matter. Sénac’s great accomplishment was not only to advocate for a common ground, but to reveal a voice that up to then had not been heard. The archival, in terms of “what is sung and written currently in Algeria, in prison or in rooms of exile”, reveals and hence humanizes those who “who suffer, struggle, and today vivify Northern Africa.” To understand this poetry is to understand through our own humanity a voice that we can recognize, especially when that voice is being crushed and violated. One senses that Sénac was pointing to a larger project, which he would continue upon his return to Algeria through his radio programs, anthologies and poetry readings. Poetry was not just an art form, but represented those who were fighting against oblivion. I am reminded here of Mahmoud Darwish’s image of the Trojan poet in one of his last poems:

So who are you on this journey? A Trojan poet who escaped the massacre in order to tell the story, or a mixture of that and a Greek who lost his way home? The enchantment of myth makes you susceptible to choosing metaphors, so take what fits the rise of song to another end, deep enough for the lost voice of the Trojan victim and for the failure of the Greeks’ victory to restore youth to their warriors, prematurely aged by the yoke of home and road. (Darwish and Antoon 66)

Darwish is referring to himself as the escaped Trojan retelling the absent stories of the Palestinian victims, but also as the Greek in his wandering and desire for home. The poet
strives to be both stories, since the supposed Greek victors were also “prematurely aged by the yoke of home and road”. Darwish’s call to “take what fits the rise of song to another end, deep enough for the lost voice of the Trojan victim” is strikingly reminiscent of Sénac’s Mallarmean evocation at the beginning of his manifesto, in terms of reclaiming, through poetry, the lost voices of the victims. The lost stories of Darwish’s poems restore both a memory and a future, a future through poetic remembrance. Sénac is on a similar quest to reveal, through the voices of the vanquished, another possible future in Algeria, and maybe through those voices a possible reconciliation. Perhaps what should also be protected from forgetfulness is that there was, and hence still is, an opening in Algeria and elsewhere for a true dialogue to emerge between the marginalized narratives on all sides of history.

From so many wounds he tears away the only words that will not perish. (Sénac 9)
Chapter 8: Conclusion

The exploration of Sénac’s poetry is the beginning of a much larger project following his mantra that “Poetry and Resistance are the cutting edges of the same blade where man relentlessly sharpens his dignity.” That poetry and resistance are so closely linked in colonial and post-colonial history calls for a larger exploration of poetries across the world that aspire to emancipate the individual, the “Total Body” that Sénac imagined, tying the individual to the larger cosmos. The language of poetry is one that is made physical, reunited with the realities of our existence, carrying the voices of popular uprisings from Tiananmen to Tahrir, from Selma to Algiers, the silences of the tortured, memories of the assassinated, resilience of the most fundamental human aspirations. Reality here should not be understood in it’s somewhat reductive sense, but as what experience is made of, including that of the imaginary. But the poetic value of popular poetry and its accessibility remains an unresolved issue, as to whether popular poetry, in production or in audience, is to be made transparent, consumable, or whether there is a simultaneous desire to resist easy appropriation or simplification of popular language. The question of poetry’s purpose as political bears on that of use, as to whether poetry should be or can be used for ulterior motives. In other words, is poetry’s resistance also that of being resistant to being consumed or integrated to dominant national cultures, and by extension does that interpretive resistance also serve communal resistance in times of conflict? As much as Sénac celebrated the revolution as such and the people of Algeria, and poetry that depicted the reality of post-colonial corruption, he was occupying an increasingly marginal and resistant space within his own writing and body that also stood against hollowed ideological rhetoric. The fact that his post-67 poetry was never published during his lifetime is testimony to that.
Another common trait to be explored further in what I have called here “revolutionary poetics” are the ways in which poetic language and communities of poets, globally, have proposed an alternative national imaginary in the ways they have resisted restricted and hegemonic national agendas. One could say that the nature of “revolutionary poetics” is precisely not to move into mainstream politics, but away as a more powerful political message, illustrated very powerfully by Charles Olson’s resignation from government politics in 1945 in order to take advantage of the possibilities that poetry could offer. Olson’s subsequent marginalization, along with a wide community of American poets who could not easily fit into the Cold War propaganda machine, which included many English departments and anthologies, in fact ties them to the marginalization happening globally to poets and writers who refused to subscribe to what Sénac termed as the “ignoble collusion […] between Atrophied Art and the colonial powers”.

Marginalization, incarcerations and assassinations of poets were part of a global attempt to control discourse and silence the “Dionysian turn” that Césaire found within poetry’s political emergence. It is not only poetry that was silenced, but the poetic nature of the massive global post-colonial awakening that was thwarted in that silencing. Sénac understood the Algerian war was simultaneously, anti-colonialist, national and poetic in that the Algerians also had a “right to Poetry”, meaning a right to their own rich poetic tradition and to an imaginative and linguistic revolution that was ultimately confiscated. The deeply popular roots of poetry were threatening to the establishment of a one-sided nationalist narrative, as well as to the new order of the Cold War. Recovering and revealing this poetry is ultimately reclaiming the fundamental role that it has had throughout history as an alternative political space, a place of popular resistance.

Sénac, within that trajectory, believed that the poet was at the forefront of our most fundamental freedom, and that “As long as the individual is hindered in his claim for total freedom, poetry will guard the outposts or brandish its torches.”
The translation started here of Sénac’s *Le soleil sous les armes* [The Sun under the Weapons], will be completed and published in entirety in *Lost & Found, Series V*, sometime toward the end of 2014, beginning 2015, along with expanded commentary and contextualization. This project, made possible by Ammiel Alcalay’s incredible support, with further research on Sénac to be conducted in Algeria during the summer of 2014, could ultimately lead to a Sénac Reader, which would not only present Sénac to the wider American public and serve as a primer to his poetry, but provide a necessary expansion of our understanding of Algerian poetry and literature at a time when still so little is available to the English-speaking audience. That Sénac, in a sense the most excluded among Algerian poets, be the voice for their poetry is testimony to the resilience he so often represented through his actions and his words, more often concerned with promoting and encouraging the young poets of Algeria and disseminating global poetry to those who had least access to it, than with his own personal legacy.
The Sun under the Weapons, translated from French

JEAN SENAC

THE SUN UNDER THE WEAPONS

(Elements of Poetry of the Algerian Resistance)37

EDITIONS SUBERVIE
RODEZ

37 [Translator’s note: initially subtitled “Against the pacification of poetry”]
TO
THE WOMEN OF MY COUNTRY

TO
MY BROTHERS
FLAYERS OF DARKNESS

TO
ANNIE FLORIO
AHMED TALEB AND LAYACHI YAKER

TO
KADER

We came to the world fraternal
May the hands of the Divider be broken
(M.Z. Algerian national chant)

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38 According to Hamid Nacer-Khodja, the use of “écorcheurs” was a rebuttal of the terms “égorgeurs” used by the colonial press to describe the Algerian resistance fighters. To Sénac, they were “flayers” of the colonial darkness.

39 Annie Fiorio was a pied-noir militant for the Algerian cause, arrested by the French in 1956 and imprisoned in Algeria for 5 years, then in France until Algeria’s independence. We see that Sénac is particularly careful in representing all sides of the resistance.

40 Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahim, Layachi Yaker and Abdelkader Kallache were leaders of the French Federation of the FLN, whom Sénac met during they stay in Paris from 1954 to 1960.
Poetry and Resistance are the cutting edges of the same sword upon which man relentlessly sharpens his dignity. Because poetry can only be dynamic, and because it is “written by everyone”, an ignition key with which society moves and exalts itself, it is, in its fury as in its serene transparency, in its arcana as in its shamelessness openly resistant. As long as the individual is hindered in his claim for total freedom, poetry will guard the outposts or brandish its torches. And Mallarmé himself affirmed our allegiance to the world of blue and lava when he assigned to us this rallying cry “To give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe.”

In the thick of the fray, desperately listening, the poet will live from the breath of his own people. He will translate its breathing, oppressed or radiant, the smell of mignonette as that of the mass graves. He carries the shared reasons, hope and pain, at their highest point of effusion. He sheds permanent light on their drama. He does not write history, but day by day and also by the tip of the sword, transcribes the History built by the people. He adds punctuation, balances the syntax and passes the baton to the watchful. He tears from the wounds the only words that will not perish. He derives universal signs from local action and permanence where man’s heart recognizes itself. His feet in the mud and the blood, through the dignity of art, he perpetuates the dignity of a cause. He opens both panes of the sun upon our tears.

One must choose a party. Poetry remains “the single expression of man which is not longer ambiguous”. Eluard and Char affirm and prove it, along with Ganzo, in the dark meadows of France-of-the-Caves with respect to the nazi torturers. And at the same time they show that the bitter greatness of weapons can erase neither the freshness of a blouse nor the path of schoolchildren. When they stand against the grocers and executioners with sometimes disproportionate violence, it’s simply because the arrogance of commerce and of hate restrict the light and mutilate the whole body of Beauty. Poets, we will maintain an inexhaustible nostalgia for Samothrace’s Victory smile and it is this desperate and lucid claim that helps us wield our pens against the conservatives who are satisfied with their ruins.

The alleged phenomenon through which poetry becomes the most noble verbal expression of the events of History and, particularly, the most faithful reflection of the eras of national liberation, can be easily proven. This miracle is only the implementation of different natural orders.

It is then natural that poetry, once again, is not only committed in Algeria, but that it is at the forefront of the struggle against man’s alienation. It is here that Léon Bloy’s terrible words resonate like a charge against the swords : "Who will speak for the mute, for the oppressed and the weak, if those that were given speech remain silent? The writer that loses sight of Justice is a robber of the poor, and is just as cruel as the evil rich. They squander their wealth and are on top of it guilty of abandoning hope."
It’s because they refuse to let poetry be indoctrinated by lying and criminal administrators, because they remain violently faithful to the teachings of western and oriental cultures, because they have acquired the certainty that it is the whole of man which is questioned and questioning in that refusal, that the Algerian poets have put their modest weapons at the service of the Revolution. “Because in reality every Algerian has a place in the Revolution. In reality there’s not a single Algerian who doesn’t lend his mouth, his voice, his fortune to Revolution. In reality Algeria is an occupied nation. And because of this an analysis at the level of the Algerian revolutionary conscience would reveal that neither hunger, nor dignity are the question. The Algerian is fighting to defend the national territory. To defend, not to liberate, as the Algerian revolution has already been made and France’s war is nothing other than a war of conquest. 41 It is then up to the poet to reclaim the Vital Fire that Tidafi speaks of:

Out of my Algeria42
they made the prisons taller
than the schools.
They sullied the nocturnal roots
of the People,
the serious Tree
of the remote Barbary43...
They denied the certainty of our Land,
they tore apart Islam, its color,
its fantastical tribes, even the shame
that makes them live.

They denied the Vital Fire, our Flag
They exiled the humble joys of our huts
slow at the return of corn...

Blind! Blind!
On my Infinite People
they applied the whip without understanding
the power of books,
the rhythm of our blood,
our right to sacrifice,
to impatience.

41 “L’Action”, Tunis
42 Translator’s note: “De mon Algerie” means “from my Algeria” which is grammatically unusual in French, meaning perhaps “out of my Algeria they made prisons taller than schools”, transforming Algeria into prisons taller than schools
43 No English equivalent that I can think of
Our whole body refused it.

Prisoners of their forfeiting
they listen to the dark crashes of the sticks
that mingle with the wind
following powder.
Without sight and without words
they assign the precise patrol
among raisins,
its halt under the dark pride of pines
at the detour of furious crossings,
the resumed cry of the Patriots
from which freedom falls like an eagle.

Those who would accuse the Algerian poets of being on the side of injustice because of their choice could meditate on this enduring “reportage” by Victor Hugo, in “The whole lyre”:

Everywhere strength instead of right. The crushing
Of the problem, that’s the only denouement...
Agonizing Africa is dying in our grip.
There, a whole people groan and asks for food.
Famine in Oran, Famine in Algiers.
– That’s what our superb France has done!
They say. No corn, no bread. They eat grass.
And the Arab becomes mad and dreadful.44

They could remind us that the warning signs never ceased and that, for example, since 1949 the students of the Faculty of Algiers, who were not prone to extremism but were sensitive to the distress of an entire people exiled in their own land, tried to revive a conscience confined to its own egotism: Philippe, the “French”:

Given the hunger
Given the fear
Given the hatred
A glance slams from the window
A child dies in the street
Enough
Break everything!
And Jacques, the “Jew”, after the Sidi Ali Bounab massacre:

Arabesques arabesques
the wheat of vengeance upon the walls of memory...
if we blind the ruins
if forgetfulness dances among the dead
if the tire tracks are covered in sand
upon the blinded ruins, among the forgotten dead, on the

44 Toute la lyre, was published posthumously in several parts between 1888 and 1897. It seems that this particular poem is not found in some translations.
the tire tracks  
red flowers will spring  
Arabesques of night arabesques of fire  
arabesques of blood.

And Aït-Djafer, the “Arab”, in his “Wail of the Casbah”:

A naked man, starving, alone,  
A man  
Died from cold in a garbage dump!  
Where, my god, is the  
Drum that beats the call for the  
Revolted?

These are not excesses of language or hasty generalizations, but the faithful lyrical relation of daily occurrences. How can we not understand then this text shouted by a young man from Constantine the day after May 8 1945:

We have devoured the iron  
We have ground up the automatic weapons with only our extended arms  
And our forty thousand dead heaped from Sétif to Guelma  
Shine like those tomatoes nourishing ants in the sun  
We have slaughtered broken disemboweled shredded  
O the softness of assassinations on grass!  
They have pounded us with shells, burned our shacks  
But soon their yellow hearts were covered in knives  
We joyfully climbed upon their tanks  
They saw the invincible strength of men.

Don’t come and cry foul! This student was just extending, in the same language and on the same topic, but with the added taste of authentic and experienced violence, the furious cry of another student at the Charleville high school who wrote in Latin verse in July 1869:

… Rise up, subjugated tribes!  
May the ancient courage be revived in your tamed hearts!  
Brandish your swords again! And, remembering  
Jugurtha,  
repel the victors! Spill your blood for the fatherland!  
Oh, may the Arab lions rise for war  
and tear apart the enemy’s battalions with their teeth!45

That Arthur Rimbaud, almost fifteen years old, salutes with a prophetic warmth the glory of Jugurtha, “the Arab fatherland and nation”, this “sublime people” and the “mountains of Algeria”, constitutes for us poets, a moving recognition of the “fact of the Algerian nation”.

45 Arthur Rimbaud wrote 75 verses in latin, dedicated to Jugurtha and celebrating Algeria’s resistance, in 1869.
Let's not mistake our intentions. The point is not to use just any argument and defend a nationalism that is both narrow and closed in on its cactuses, but to unequivocally affirm our presence in the reality of this land, which is undeniably national. “For some”, writes Robert Ganzo, “the fatherland is a privileged place from where they can affirm dignity for all men.” It's not about defending a poetic tradition of demands and hatred, which is incompatible with the essence of poetry, but about being receptive to testimonies and to pay attention to the few Transparents burned by truth. I’m thinking of Mohammed Dibs words: “We need a lot of strength to resist despair, if not we would become ferocious animals.” And of this terrible splinter by Henry Kréa: “We mistook the generosity of the Algerian people for renunciation.” Before biting, before being a formal notice, our poetry was a formal warning:

My country smiles to the tourists  
White Algiers sleeps peacefully  
the police vans come and go  
the heart’s leprosy is well guarded

Who will then denounce  
the great bitterness of the hives?  
With restricted bodies  
the poor cheat with the cold

Beautiful skin of soft oranges  
and the fresh morning’s teeth  
misery deceives  
do not trust so much beauty

Here we die in silence  
without a trace under the thick sun  
but who will want to taste  
tomorrow’s bitter honey?  

The Café itself, in this country of consenting sleepers, tells Roland Doukhan:

...the smell of slums  
The naked feet on the cold floor  
The chipped cup, and the bed  
In the middle, like a wooden corpse

He tells about the plain in the Fall  
The immense plain of Algeria  
Tired like a sick woman  
The long cry of dogs in the night.

We don’t need to be ashamed of such a constant wail. It only reinforces our current opinion, and by liberating us from our qualms it can only make us more intensely committed to our guerilla brothers. It’s not our fault if our peaceful calls, tirelessly repeated, have continuously struck the dikes of the Masters of the vine and the permanent Ambassadors of France’s shame!

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46 Jean Sénac: Dawn of my people
The artistic life in Algeria has been so humiliated, ransacked and given to the mediocre with the precise and vigilant complicity of the Administration, that the true creators had to flee, to Paris for example, in order to find the moral means through which to express themselves and to find an audience for their work. This was, among many others, the case for Albert Camus, Kateb Yacine, or the abstract painter Louis Nallard. By encouraging conformity (pseudo-orientalism, pseudo-school of Paris, pseudo-school of Algiers, etc...) and a false avant-garde, the public authorities have once more proved that all true art is dangerous, because it is fundamentally revolutionary and dynamic, and because it is connected to the live roots of the country. There is a huge case to be investigated one day on this question, which will reveal the despicable collusion, in Algeria, between the colonial powers and Atrophied Art. And that in all areas: literature, painting, architecture, music, theater, film, radio, etc... Do we know that the Cultural meetings at Sidi-Madani were interrupted because the organizers, even though they were official, had dared to invite Paul Eluard, Vercors, Breton, and Jean-Paul Sartre? That a sound director at Radio Algérie was criticized for employing an “Arab” comedian in a “French” show? And that the film The Divers of the Desert by Tahar Hannache was boycotted by the general Government under the pretext that it was entirely financed, produced and performed by “natives”!

All that is certainly logical. As soon as a creator chooses to express himself freely he opts for an independent mode of thinking and manifests it through a kind of terrorism of sensibility and intelligence directed against certain stagnating values. It’s normal that this type of man, through the exercise of this requirement, is able to understand and encourage the same tendencies when they appear in other areas of human activity. This awareness causes the intellectual to understand that his revolution is similar in its necessity and its ramifications, if not in its immediate expression, to that of the progressive political activist. To such a degree that the two eventually become one man, flayer of darkness, convinced by the Ultimate Battle and by the urgency of a Single Front.

If the Algerian people are at war, it’s also because they demand the right to their poetry, their rights to Poetry.

Here we have to address the questions of language and idiom. It’s certain that the only way young intellectuals could access culture was through the arbitrary means of the French schools, since the national language, Arab and the Berber dialects, were systematically smothered or rejected by the colonial regime into somewhat resistant “reserves”. Yet, these schools carried within them the seeds of revolution that their own masters seemed to have repudiated. Aside from a few revolutionaries – the poets Mohammad al-IId Hammou Ali, Mohammed Ababsa or Moufdi Zakarya, historians Tawfik al-Madani or Abd al-Djilali, the playwright Abdallah Nekli, the collaborators of the Ach-Chihâb review or a few isolated youths, a few popular storytellers (Cheikh El-Anka), a few inveterate “bards”, especially in the South (Mohammed Belkheir, Abdallah Ben Kerriou, Cheikh Smati, Mohammed Ben Azouz el Boussadi) and in Kabylia (Si Mohand, Smaïl Azikiou) – the voice of the Algerian people would manifest itself, mostly in the

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47 Rencontres Culturelles de Sidi-Madani
48 Les plongeurs du désert
form of “transcriptions”, in the language imposed by the coloniser. But, as Kateb Yacine said: “The French language, which was introduced in Algeria as a way to depersonalize, became, by a rightful turn of events, the most powerful mouthpiece of a country with a thousand faces, of a country that is arriving at its unity by the shortest path: that which its latest conquerors opened for it. It’s most often in French that we proclaim our belonging to the Algerian community. One does not use a universal language and culture in vain when humiliating the soul of a people. Sooner or later the people take possession of this language, of this culture, and make out of them the long range weapons of their liberation. Far from “frenchifying” us, the French culture could only stoke our thirst for freedom, even for originality.”

This is why, as paradoxical as it may sound, the Algerian Resistance will often express itself in the language of the “enemy”. Yet, aware of its national vocation, i.e. universal in its specificity, the contemporary Algerian writer, deeply rooted in the maternal language and traditions, instead of indulging in some kind of remorse, complex (in relation to the spoken language of the people) and nostalgia will on the contrary fight with his demons.

Beyond the temporary split, he will refuse the ease and the approval of a colonized language, a cooked language where the fruit have only to macerate. Indeed, we are heirs of the universes bequeathed by Breton, Lorca, Eluard, Char, Faulkner, Maïakovski, Aragon, Valéry. It is our responsibility to break the enchantment and to stick our ears to the native land. There we will hear overwhelming ballads and fabulous cavalcades. Poets of the French language, we will remain faithful to the breath of our people, its tumultuous past, and will proudly pass the baton to our brothers, the Arab poets of tomorrow. In short, among the questions of the hour, and assuming that our present literature is nothing more than a Transition literature toward the Great Arab Work, there would be reason to consider the following definition in order to remove any ambiguity: The Algerian writer is any writer who has permanently chosen the Algerian nation.

We must nevertheless insist on the following statement by Gabriel Audisio: “It isn’t strange that in Algeria, and for reasons that are mostly political, the Arab culture is seeing a great revival. Some even think of it as an innovation. In any case this “renaissance”, begun in the 1920s through emir Khaled’s propaganda and through the movement of the reformist Oulemas, among which we should mention first and foremost cheikh Tayeb el Okbi, the scientist Ben Badis and his current successor cheikh Brahimi, has established itself since the end of the last war alongside the nationalist movements. But first one had to organise the teaching of classical Arabic, which remains an unknown language to most of the Muslim Algerians. Schools, press, film, circles, concerts, radio, theater, all contribute in their own way. But it seems that it is theater which shows the greatest signs of activity, until proven otherwise. It has on its side the strength of popular reach, in a country where the tradition of mimes, of storytellers and baladins is still very much alive. Rachid Ksentini was the precursor of this movement. He was rightly referred to as the Father of Arab theater in Algeria.” (Visages de l’Algérie - Horizons de France, Paris 1953).

We should note that an Arab anthology of “Contemporary Algerian poets” [Poètes algériens de l’époque contemporaine] was published by As Senoussi in Tunis in 1926.

Translator note: This is a recurrent idea of Séanc’s that the “poets of the French language” (Séanc never used francophone) would be the bridge to an Algerian poetry mainly in Arabic. That is not to say that there weren’t Arab poets in Algeria at the time, but that the Arab language and poetry had been so suppressed that Séanc saw the French language as being the relay between the past and the future. The language that had essentially colonized could become the same language that would free Algeria’s poetic expression. Of course the perspective of the Arab poets on this issue is missing, whether or not they would welcome that kind of bridge, or whether it would be seen as an unacceptable denial of their own tradition.

This definition implies a strong activist intention, which would apply mostly to someone like Séanc who adopted the Algerian cause as an outsider. The question remains as to whether this definition applies to indigenous Algerian writers. Was the act of supporting the Algerian nation a necessary gesture for the writer?
This definition implies a constant effort of “transcreation” in order to provide the artistic expression with the characteristics of the nation, on the level of sensitivity and vision as well as on the level of grammar. And this being in French as in Arabic or Berber, while never forgetting that the Algerian Nation is nine tenths Arabo-Berber and Muslim with nevertheless a strong western imprint.

We can easily understand that this will to express a specific universe and to integrate it in modern thinking makes of the poet an authentic fighter of Liberation. Even more so since the Algerian insurrection was provoked by the dismissive opposition to the truthful expression of a whole people. Franz Fanon, the psychiatrist, was not mistaken: “The events in Algeria are the logic consequences of an aborted attempt to debrain a people... A society that pushes its people to solutions of despair is a non-viable society, a society to be replaced. The duty of the citizen is to say it.” Is it not René Char the resistant who, at the edge where Violence and Honesty are fascinated with each other and confront each other, screams at us from the lookout and gives us at the same time the true sense of Purity:

   Faced with everything, WITH ALL THAT, a colt, promise of the dawning sun!

At the French liberation Camus made the following comment on committed literature: “What else can one ask of a poet today? In the midst of our dismantled citadels, there is bread, women and proud liberty. In the desert of time rises the Beauty that we were desperately thirsty for, gathering its true wealth. She emerges from these “Leaves of Hypnos”\(^{53}\), burning like the weapons of the resistance, and from being soaked in the blood of combat we recognize her for what she is. Not the anemic beauty of academia but that which we can live from, red, dripping from a strange baptism, crowned with lighting. In the midst of combat, weapons in hand, here is a poet who dared scream at us: “In our darkness, there isn’t a place for Beauty. The entire place is for Beauty.” And from this moment on every poem by Char marked a road of hope, similar to the fires that Char discovered from the plane that took off in Africa, and that his comrades in the maquis had lighted one after the other all the way to the sea in order to salute their brother and the coming victory, tracing above the still imprisoned valleys the inflamed path of freedom.”

Today we try to stifle the voices that rise from this tortured road, but, from all of its wounds, its mouths of light, Algeria speaks, and as the French poet Robert Amat writes:

   Ground, pillaged, crushed,
   Scraping its bones on the forks of misery,
   Algeria raises itself on the pallet
   And speaks…
   You want to kill Algeria,
   You will not kill Algeria,
   Algeria’s stomach is empty
   But in its heart she has
   The lips of the sun.
   Kill, rob, massacre
   And massacre
   And trample the eyes of truth,
   Algeria speaks

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\(^{53}\) Series of resistance poems published by René Char in 1946 and dedicated to Camus.
And who could silence her?

The bitter hour has finally come, this hour of the “insurrection of the dead”, captured as “rumors at the Rama landfill” by the Parisian Jean Grosjean, who in an admirable poem justified its coming:

My gag fell from my jaw.
You will hear from me, false victor, merchant of shadows:
The dead can kill you with an enormous throat…
I will howl because my sons are no more.
In the ground the human race has its mothers
Who will spit out their furoir on your glories…
Where are my sons? Join me, my dead, stand!...
You kill too many for them to be dead long…
As for me, I undo the veil and shout my shame…
For your palaces, your schools and your temples
Were all founded on our tortures.
You blinded our douars with your darkness,
But on every hill, in every valley, our dead scream:
What harsh avenger you will need to silence us!
Yes, I twist, roar, yelp, stamp,
Yelp your wrongs to the ceiling of world…
Dead, you can do anything, except make God forget…
God can no longer avoid avenging its poor.

Whether it be in Arabic, in Kabyle, in French, a same machine gunned throat, not even healed, tirelessly modulates the pain, the relentlessness, the stubborn hope. But it’s from the depths of the mountains that the roughest, most confident chants reach us:

Inhabitants of the mountains
guard them precisely!
Neither planes nor canons can scare us.
Their beauty is worth more than all the gold in the world.

Our country is sad
from all the past torture.
But this century of silence
will be quickly filled

The people are with us
and that is our strength
Even our fathers are in the struggle,
they who no longer believed.

Facing all of their bullets

54 “The superior officers, the zone commanders, the political commissioners, the executives and the soldiers of the Army for National Liberation [ALN], are honored like national heroes, glorified in popular chants which have already penetrated the humble shack as well as the miserable khaïma, the ghorfa of the casbahs and the living rooms of villas” (“El-Moudjahid”, 1956)
we have, o brothers
the love for our country
and we know that we are not alone in the struggle.\textsuperscript{55}

The miracle is that we find, unscathed, within the assurance of these warrior rimes, proud subtlety and that somewhat ironical tenderness which gives popular Maghrebi poetry its flavor:

\begin{verbatim}
Why do you cry my mother
if my brothers called me
 to join them in the struggle?
Why burden me with your love?
Why want to buy me with the price of your jewelry?
If I am glorious, I honor you.
I will be the first in the face of danger.
The sound of the canon in the maquis
 resembles that of the violin or the lute.
The struggle is made for men.
Your jewels, keep them for my future wife.\textsuperscript{66}
\end{verbatim}

This poetry has deep foundations within our people. It would be a mistake to think that it is a recent manifestation of late nationalism. Fruit of an uninterrupted resistance since 1830, this poetry is linked to the most constant wills of this land which, despite those who are desperate and the scheming satisfied with their servitude, never ceased to stand, throughout the centuries, against all the endeavors of injustice and alienation. Louis Veuillot, in a study on “the literature of Algerians”\textsuperscript{57}, writes in 1841: “Mr. de Toustain agreed to translate for me two political pieces that he knew, one on the capture of Algiers, the other on the capture of Constantine. The first, composed in 1831 by an ulema, has been very popular. Those that it could move have left the city to be with Abd-et-Kader:

\begin{verbatim}
Mozghranna\textsuperscript{58}, who will heal your injuries?
Indeed, to that one I will dedicate my life!

To he who will close your heart’s wound,
And will chase the Christians far from your walls.

Your defenders have betrayed you.
They were undoubtedly drunk.

Tears flow from my eyes;
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{55} Translated by Hadj Omar
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Cf. Les Français en Algérie, Souvenirs d’un voyage en 1841, by Louis Veuillot (A. Mame et Cie, printers, Tours, 1845). [What Sénac fails to mention was that Veuillot was giving examples of what he termed “singers of trifles”, framing the whole of Algerian poetry as base and effeminate. Sénac does call Veuillot “severe” and “unjust” in his appraisal of its literature, when in fact he should be called insulting. Here is one of the contradictions in Sénac’s approach, using an example of Algerian poetry from one its most denigrating readers, without attacking the premises and defending the poets. Veuillot continues his critique of the cited poem as being ineffectual in rallying the Arab cause, even though he acknowledges that many did rally around Abd-e-Kader as a consequence, “to be regretted” he adds.]
\textsuperscript{58} Old poetic name of Algiers; it’s like when we say Lutèce (Note from Louis Veuillot). [Lutèce is the old Roman name for Paris]
My heart is oppressed with sighs.  
In every corner dark worries follow me,  
Everywhere my soul is prey to despair.  

Waiting is no longer possible.  
I succumb… Sleep flees from my bed.

The good man is stupefied, distraught…  
The whole city is annihilated by his pain.

… My heart can no longer bear so many disasters:  
O Mozghranna! I will leave your shores…

O fatherland I am abandoning,  
See how I am watering you with tears!

You will belong to others.  
Who will now set their foot on your ground?

Indeed, betrayal changes your fate…  
My nights are no longer followed by days.

Can my heart be separated from you,  
Sojourn that my fathers inhabited?

Only your sight inflames my sense…  
Your tears have deeply hollowed my cheeks.

The infidel fills your streets…  
That I may rejoin my fathers!

He violently occupies your houses…  
My heart is drenched with bitterness.

Despair tears apart my guts,  
It is in vain that I try to sustain my life.

O my eyes! Oh! Never stop crying!  
Crying on the fall of Algiers.

They have penetrated your forts;  
They have destroyed and pillaged.

Joyful, they have ravished your riches,  
That we watered with our tears.

They destroyed the stores and the markets,  
And threw the good to the wind.

They filled and passed around the cup,  
And the infamous gave themselves up to them.
... They tore up your trees,
They dispersed your people.

The noble men have left,
Some by sea, others by land.

God, one day, will end your pain,
Because he is merciful, and he is master of the two worlds.

The lament on Constantine’s capture is at the same time a provocation of the holy war addressed to all the Muslim princes:

*My heart is consumed by a burning flame,*

*Since the Christians took Constantine.*

*O fire of my heart, how sad my heart is!*
*I cry, I moan, my tears oppress me.*
*They seized the gardens, the city…*
*Yet the powder was exploding, our guns were being loaded.*

*O fire of my heart, devour my life!*

*Since the Christians took Constantine.*

*O fire of my heart, let my tears flow!*
*Algiers fell into their irons; Bône is in their hands,*
*Nothing resisted them, their weapons are the mistresses…*
*Yet the powder was exploding, our guns were being loaded.*

*O fire of my heart, devour my life!*

*Since the Christians took Constantine.*

*O Bey of Tunis, elegant, gracious Hamouda,*
*How can you stand the lowering of sheriffs?*
*Quick! Gather the troupes, call the free men,*
*And may the powder explode, may the rifles be filled!*

*O fire of my heart, devour my life!*

*Since the Christians took Constantine.*

*O Sultan of Fez, you who are so noble, such a saint!* 
*How can you see with calm eyes the degradation of the Arabs?*
*Arm your people; come to us on clouds,*
*And as the powder explodes, as our rifles are loaded!*

*O fire of my heart, devour my life!*

*Since the Christians have taken Constantine.*

*O Bey of Egypt… Méhémed Ouali!...*
*Would you applaud the crescent’s shame!*
*Gather your strength, which they say is immeasurable,*
And march! The time for holy war has come…

O fire of my heart, devour my life!
Since the Christians have taken Constantine.

And you, Sultan of Stamboul, with angered senses,
Wake up, or, you will loose your scepter!
Gather your ships, may they split the waves,
And may the powder explode, may the rifles be loaded.

O fire of my heart, devour my life!
Since the Christians have taken Constantine.

O Bey of Tripoli! Why feign ignoring
That Constantine is now in the power of the Cross?
You know the prophecy! Come to us then…
Since the powder is exploding, and the rifles are being loaded…

O fire of my heart, devour my life!
Since the Christians have taken Constantine.

O fire of my heart, they are destroying the Mosques.
Where is then the believer who is worth ten men, and whose avenging arm
Will brandish the lance, gird the sword,
Will make the powder explode and load our rifles?

Elsewhere Louis Veuillot, who can be extremely harsh, and maybe unjust toward the literature of that time, remarks: “Kiss the dog on the mouth until you get from him what you want. This aphorism is the ordinary answer of those who are accused of making alliances with the French.”

Mostefa Lacheraf pointed out in Temps Modernes that “popular art does not spare, in its naïve manifestations, the occupying army. In fact, the public presentations of Karagöz, or shadow theater, in general constitute a satire on foreign occupation. Observed in 1835, Maxime Rodinson wrote, ‘this form of popular dramatic art served to criticize the colonial regime. The French soldier would appear and invariably be beaten up.’ This kind of show, which would eventually be banned by the military authority in 1843 nevertheless continued to clandestinely entertain the people of Algiers.”59 A century later, directors staging Arab adaptations of Roblès’s “Montserrat” and “Tartuffe” by Molière must have experienced similar difficulties with the administration. But it’s the Duke of Orleans who saluted—perpetual paradox!—in his “Campaigns of the African Army, one of the first poets of the Algerian fatherland: “The death of a simple Hadjoute horseman, Bouthelja the Poet, killed during an engagement, was a significant loss for the Arab cause. Within this people’s movement of resurrection, which was reborn from the blood of its bravest children, Bouthelja was the most inspired because he was the most convinced of all the poets. His lyrical chants, with touching pain and fierce patriotism, had become popular among the Arab youth. The poet preferred to remain as a volunteer in the first ranks of the Hadjoutes… And like Koerner, a simple soldier, he died by the hands of a Frenchman, while fighting for a country that both had dreamed large, but had only known unhappiness.” But the rebellious syllables are invincible. The precious deposit is whistling everywhere with the sand.

Mohammed Belkheir, the warrior-poet, takes the flame and becomes the champion of Ouled Sidi Cheikh who, in 1862, make the habitants of Southern Oran rise up. In 1882, they give up their arms.

Belkheir refuses to surrender, continues his anti-French poetic propaganda, is arrested and deported to Corsica. He died around 1900. But all of Algeria still recites his poems:

We are warriors serving a holy cause: our army is far from negligible.  
We apply what God has prescribed to us in the Koran...  
Our exploits give satisfaction to the Prophet, who established the distinction between truth and error.  
Great is our joy when we receive guests.  
This world full of illusions has, in our eyes, no price.  
Our great deeds free the people.  
And our renown spreads from Algiers to the Sudan.  
The Assembly of our leaders surpasses all the others, but the elegance of their manners.  
With our rifles from Tunis, we will break our adversaries as soon as they appear.  
Each one of our warriors is armed with a two-shot rifle, initiated by capsules, and a pair of guns.  
As soon as he unloads them on the enemy, he attacks with the Yatagan.  
He who does not honor the cause of the Prophet with his bravery, doesn’t really have any honor.  
Is it not to our Prophet that the Koran was revealed?  
And has he not the power to intercede with God?  
...The tents of our Leader emerge from the plain,  
Some of them long and spacious, the others of conical shape,  
Always ready to receive the guests.  
The fire of the mechoui never ceases to spread its smoke;  
Coffee makers always standing near the copper furnaces,  
Serve tea in glasses with sugar at the bottom.  
Secretaries are seated next to Sid Ahmed Ben Hamza to take note of his instructions.  
They write and send messages of peace to all those who proclaim their submission.  
Horsemens, on their impetuous horses, are always ready to defend their herds of camels:  
They carry guns, bags embroidered with gold and yatagans.  
The Ouleds Sidi Cheikh\(^{60}\) have saddles from Msila  
Made heavy by golden embroidery.  
The yellow copper stirrups rival in brightness the Gemeni Constellation.  
The assaults are led on powerful couriers,  
Mounted by young and proud horsemen, with good judgment,  
Jealously guarding their honor and full of piety.  
What magnificent Baraka do the descendants of Sidi Cheikh possess!  
The Muslims of Tell invoke us,  
When they speak of our exploits, saying:  
"So and so did... So and so accomplished..."

... Thinking of us, a true Muslim must spend his night in joy.
... Our warrior Confederation marches, accompanied by the salvation of God \(^{61}\).

From the Sahara to the tumultuous rocks of the Aurès, the oral tradition transmits burning images of a glorious past:

O young and valiant men  
Unsheathe your sparking swords!

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\(^{60}\) Pre-Saharan tribe which fought against the French in 1860.  
\(^{61}\) (1) Translation by H. Boubakeur, “Simoun”, Oran.
Be the real horsemen of Jugurtha
Who confronted the Roman army! (2)

This prestige is set by women in hoarse and tender chants, on a particular rebel or deserter who held fast against the French army and who, in his maquis, unconsciously maybe, symbolized the pride and the aspirations of the tribe, like Messaoud Ben Zelmat, killed in 1921:

On the mountains of Zellatou
My beloved
Keeps its enemies on its knees.
In the right hand a charged 86,
On the shoulder a rifle with firing pin,
On the left side
A bag filled with ammunition.
How courageous is my beloved
Messaoud Ben Zelmat!
He wears on his feet
Thongs with flat soles
Studded with iron pegs.
Day and night
The whole country is his
From Mellagou to Ahmar Khaddou…

The path of my beloved
Is dotted with obstacles…
Beware on all sides,
The enemy is tracking you.
Your salvation is in the maquis…

The soldiers and the goums my friend
Surround the whole country…
Onward, riflemen
And hunters
Behind, – the black Senegalese
Chase Salah Boumesrane
And climb toward Baniane.
On the right, the spahis
The goums and their rais.
To the left, the Zouaves
Camped in the Bou-Diaf fort.
Do not be scared
My joy!
Do not fear your enemies,
For Allah leads your steps.
Have trust in God (1)

(2) Translation by Y.-Georges Kerhuel, “Simoun”, Oran (Transl. note: Simoun was a literary review published in Oran and edited by Jean-Michel Guirao)

(3) Adaptation by Y.-Georges Kerhuel.
The theme of the “bandit of honor”, whose exploits so strangely resemble those of the most noble heroes, we find them in every region of Algeria, and I think that it represents very clearly a very strong tradition of resistance and that it constantly affirms in an almost mythical way the pride, independence and secret hope of the oppressed communities. A tale such as this one, collected in the Kerrata Gorges in 1950, leaves no doubt:

Praise to God!
The Single, the Only, the Highest, the Most-Generous, the Most-Sublime,
Who gave life to Si Laidouï Hamza, the most loved, the most respected vigilante that all Muslims venerate.
Allah (Praise to Him, the Greatest!) gave him, simultaneously, strength and intelligence.
Listen, rather, o brother, to what this country’s people have to say about him.
Laidouï Hamza was the kindest thief, the kindest assassin who ever treded our countrysides’s stubble, rocks and bushes.
From the rich who possessed too many herds, he would take the sheep, the nicest, in order to redistribute them among those whose misery is infinite.
To the powerful who oppressed or wronged others, and would be guilty of committing injustice, he would slash their face and cut their hated throat.
This way he, Laidouï Hamza, the hearty, the clever, would soften the work of the ill-spirited like rose petals and golden oil calm the wounds.
However, o brother, this behavior does not follow the law of the French, – do you understand? These people even say that such acts are not inspired by God (He who sees everything!). The men of Government were mad and hurried black soldiers who were born under the sun of Senegal to our tribes in order to seize the most-generous. And you will hear the adventure that Aït, son of Azouz, son of Ali, son of El Hadj was witness to, the year that the drops of rain changed into living butterflies.

One day the brigand (the well-loved) was savoring tea perfumed with wild mint, with a roumi (may the white head of this wise man be blessed! May God protect his family!). He would thus frequently invite himself to the homes of his friends. When, all of a sudden, the house was surrounded by troops. Those sons of dogs (who have no religion!) searched every single corner, jostled the furniture, the pottery and the laundry, and left empty handed!

While those demons, trembling with anger, ransacked every room in the villa, he, the cunning Hamza, disguised himself as a moor woman, took a water jug and went to the fountain whose water provides good advice.

He was arrested by a sergeant who questioned him on Laïdouï the bandit (May merciful God bless him!).
Hamza then responded: “Those are terrible stories the mean and the infidels tell; we have never seen nor heard of the person you talk about.”

The black troops stayed in the country a while longer. But tired by many fruitless searches they left one day toward the south. Our evil wishes followed them.
And he, Laidouï Hamza, the modest, continued to protect the poor and the weak.

Later, the Great War that ate all the real believers ended.
And when the year of the great clouds of grasshoppers as dark as a day that is about to
die arrived, a jealous and treacherous woman (may she be cursed many times!) plunged her
long blade into the back of our hero. (It is said that another woman had taken over his heart).

Since that day, and forever, underneath Fort Takitouni which was his refuge, the incense
from the wretched from all of our tribes burns.
That place is sacred, o brother, tell it on our roads! (1)


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