Global Histories

A Student Journal

A "Child of our Empire"?: Epistemic Rupture and Anticolonial Consciousness in Interwar Paris

Ananya Agustin Malhotra

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2023.565

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 9, No. 1 (November 2023), pp. 62-79.
ISSN: 2366-780X

Publisher information:
Global Histories: A Student Journal is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. *Global Histories* is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:
For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

A "Child of our Empire"? Epistemic Rupture and Anticolonial Consciousness in Interwar Paris

By

Ananya Agustin Malhotra

Abstract

This article argues that a growing number of students from French colonial contexts in Paris following World War I sought to reckon with colonialism as a phenomenon requiring epistemic revolution. Reading surveillance reports and personal papers alongside periodicals and newspapers, this work of global intellectual history situates anticolonial student groups, intellectuals, and activists like the Martinican surrealist René Ménil (1907-2004) and Vietnamese phenomenologist Tran Duc Thao (1917-93) in a transnational context. It situates developments in anticolonial thought within histories of French colonial education, a growing transnational anticolonial consciousness, and the new artistic and philosophical traditions of surrealism and phenomenology in the 1920s and 30s. First, I outline the colonial motivations of Third Republic education to cultivate an Antillean and Indochinese elite through admission to and scholarships for France's grandes écoles. *Secondly, I show the connections between the "epistemological rupture" in intellectual and artistic disciplines following World War I, including the developments of surrealism and phenomenology, and the growing transnational consciousness amongst left-wing anticolonial groups in Paris. In doing so, I argue that anticolonial student groups in the late 1920s began articulating the necessity for intellectual and cultural emancipation as a precursor for political decolonisation, often turning to transnational sources. I conclude by looking closely at the anticolonial writings of Tran Duc Thao in* Les Temps Modernes *and the anticolonial student-run journal* Légitime Défense *(1932), which Ménil co-founded, as a product of these intersections.*

About the author

Ananya Agustin Malhotra recently received an MPhil in History (Modern European History, 1850-2000) with distinction from the University of Oxford. Her BA is from Princeton University, and her research interests lie in global intellectual history, anticolonial political thought, and the history of international order.

Introduction: Decolonisation as an epistemic problem

In the wake of the First World War, during which around 750,000 African, Caribbean, and Asian migrant workers and soldiers were recruited to the metropole, large groups of secondary and university students from the French empire began to arrive in Paris through scholarships established by the French minister of the colonies between 1920 and 1930. Though the French empire had long seen colonial education as core to its colonial project, the post-WWI years saw the French government increase admission for colonial students to universities in France, including to its *grandes écoles* (elite specialised universities with highly selective admission). As a new discourse of nationalism erupted on the international scene in the wake of World War I and threatened to disperse through "the capital of men without a country," more than ever, French colonial officials sought to forge a cadre of colonial elites loyal to uphold French rule in their home colonies.[1]

Yet, this wave of students, arriving in Paris at a moment of political ferment, was part of a broader process of transnational intellectual exchange which generated new ideas about the nature of systemic colonialism, drawing from a range of intellectual inspirations, including the *avant garde* philosophies popular amongst European intellectuals. Instead of internalising the educational imperative to uphold French rule, many Vietnamese, Caribbean, and West African students forged a panoply of anticolonial student activist organisations. This article shows how anticolonial students increasingly argued that new epistemic tools were necessary to combat the deeply rooted emotional and cultural consequences of colonial education on their psyches. In the ferment of *avant garde* "epistemological rupture" in Europe after the trauma of World War I,[2] a growing number of anticolonial thinkers and student organisations from diverse colonial contexts recognised that the first step towards decolonisation necessitated confronting the cultural and psychological aspects of French colonial rule, exemplified in the universalist French colonial education. They sought new intellectual resources with which to confront these psycho-social legacies, and looked, in part, to the new philosophies and political movements taking shape in European metropoles. Many anticolonial student groups found the traditions of surrealism, phenomenology, and Marxism, which were exploding in popularity in Europe after World War I, especially useful. Working within these traditions allowed them to confront colonialism as an epistemic problem.

Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), a Martinican psychologist and philosopher, is traditionally credited with first articulating the role of culture and psycho-social formation in colonialism. In 1952, Fanon outlined the connection between epistemology and decolonisation in *Black Skin, White Masks*.[3] Fanon's insights into culture, epistemology, and decolonisation were likely informed by important but understudied influences in anticolonial thought during the interwar and wartime periods, led by anticolonial student groups. This article attends to these key intellectual precedents, which critically probed the relationship between epistemology, culture, and colonialism to endeavour towards a more complete intellectual history of decolonisation.[4]

The article traces this story through two students: the Martinican philosopher René Ménil (1907-2004), who would later help establish *Tropiques* (1941-45), the Martinican wartime periodical of anticolonial surrealist art and literature, and the Vietnamese philosopher and activist Tran Duc Thao (1917-93), who would pen in *Les Temps Modernes*' storied pages a phenomenology of colonised existence which foreshadowed Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*.[5] Ménil, who studied in Paris in the early 1930s, co-founded the Martinican anticolonial surrealist publication *Légitime Défense* as a student, and Thao, one of the first Vietnamese students at the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*, published a pathbreaking thesis on Edmund Husserl and was arrested for his leadership in anticolonial student circles.

Both Thao and Ménil remain underappreciated figures in the intellectual history of decolonisation. Seldom have scholars placed their work in historical perspective within the political context of interwar and wartime transcontinental anticolonial organising. These thinkers are usually studied individually insofar as their work relates to their regional historiographies, French literature, or French republicanism and citizenship.[6] Though Ménil's role in the anticolonial student group *Légitime Défense* has been well-studied, connections between Thao's background as an anticolonial activist and his political anticolonial thought have remained unexplored thus far. As for Thao, scholars have begun to comment on the importance of his intellectual contributions to the history of phenomenology but have neglected his anticolonial ideas and political activity.[7] Imprisoned for his activism as President of the General Vietnamese Delegation in France, Thao led *Les Temps Modernes*' first theoretical discussion of liberation strategies from colonialism and cemented its approach to anticolonialism squarely in phenomenology.[8] This article reads their work together as part of a broader anticolonial intellectual and political tradition for the first time.[9] By reading French police records alongside the archives of anticolonial political thought and student activism, this article shows that anticolonial intellectual history cannot be divorced from the social histories of student activism. Both thinkers were part of an intellectual history of anticolonial political thought, which saw colonialism as a totalising phenomenon requiring epistemic revolt.

Thao and Menil, in some ways, came from divergent colonial contexts. Broadly speaking, Antilleans and Vietnamese held very different experiences and stances towards French colonialism, and their political programmes departed strikingly from one another. Antilleans, as residents of the *vieilles colonies*, had significant privileges over residents in Indochinese territories, composed of Cambodia, Laos, and the three provinces of Viet-Nam: Tonkin (*Bac-Ky*), Annam (*Trung-Ky*), and Cochinchina (*Nam Ky*). The *indigénat* legal code did not apply to Martinicans, who were considered full-fledged French citizens rather than subjects of France.[10] French republican principles were largely popular amongst twentieth-century Martinicans, educated in schools about "our ancestors, the Gauls."[11] By contrast, in the 1920s and 30s, the anticolonial sentiment was widespread among the Vietnamese peasantry, who comprised 90 percent of the population, as well as amongst the industrial working class and urban professional classes.[12] Despite these differences, I consider the

work of students from differing colonial educational contexts in conjunction to see how anticolonial activists resisted colonial structures through demands for intellectual and cultural emancipation. I trace the roots of contingent and varied processes of political decolonisation from their intellectual and cultural stages in this period of "world-historical opening".[13] These anticolonial actors sought to make decolonisation thinkable, whether in a federated structure or as an act of existential revolution.

In their epistemological worldmaking endeavours, these budding anticolonial intellectuals engaged with the *avant garde* cultural movements gaining popularity in academic and artistic spheres they traversed, among them Marxism, surrealism, and phenomenology. As described by its founder, André Breton, surrealism constituted "pure psychic automatism by which one expresses…the real functioning of thought." With its emphasis on dreams, subconscious desires, intuition, and poetry, surrealism presented tools for Ménil and his fellow Martinican students in the anticolonial group *Légitime Défense*, established in 1932 to liberate the mind against the reigning colonial epistemologies of European Enlightenment rationalism.[14] In particular, surrealism, which the group "accept[ed] without reserve", provided for the *Légitime Défense* group a form of epistemological rupture and an artistic ethic with which to grapple with their dual identity –as Black Caribbean students, and yet as highly privileged members of the colonial bourgeoisie.[15] Although globally, surrealism was understood by artists and writers from around the colonised world as a dialectic which lent itself inherently to reinvention and transformation, in Europe, it connoted a more limited discourse, restricted to Breton's Parisian group.[16]

In addition to surrealism, both Ménil and Thao were also deeply influenced by the academic philosophy, a 1930s export from German philosophers like Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. These philosophers shaped the sensibilities of some of Thao and Ménil's key teachers, including Henri Bergson, Gaston Bachelard, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Phenomenology prioritised the exploration of structures of experience, feeling, and consciousness over the traditional neo-Kantian rationalism of French philosophical academia. Phenomenology thus proved useful for confronting the legacies of colonial education.[17] The emphasis was on personal experience, especially that of colonised subjects: Thao argued that Marxism required a phenomenological revision to contribute towards human emancipation, rooting "economic liberation" in human experience as the "essential condition of human freedom."[18] In this way, Thao extended Marxist analysis beyond its orthodox theoretical framings by grounding it in the experiences and "life-world" (*Lebenswelt*) of colonised people.[19] For Thao, the Marxist revolution required the uprooting of related forms of oppression, especially colonialism, which he described as that "particularly perfected form of capitalism."[20]

Thao, Ménil, and other anticolonial students critiqued and transformed European dialectics of surrealism, phenomenology, and Marxism and applied them in ways their architects never envisioned. These thinkers, educated in the colonial metropole, drew from these traditions, amongst others, to imagine new solidarities –ontologically and

geographically– from within the limited political imaginaries offered to them. In the interwar and wartime years, Thao, Ménil, and their contemporaries confronted colonisation as a "cultural as well as…psychological and ontological" problem.[21] Reading French police records alongside the archives of anticolonial political thought and student activism, I show that student organisations from diverse colonial contexts drew attention to the necessity for transnational intellectual emancipation as a precondition for political emancipation. These student groups forged a transnational consciousness tied to their identities as colonial students through what Brent Hayes Edwards calls the "archive" of "discourses of internationalisms" in journalism, criticism, manifestoes, correspondences and surveillance reports.[22] The interwar period, I argue, oversaw two intertwined developments: a nascent "epistemological rupture" in the intellectual life of the metropole and the germination of a stronger transnational anticolonial consciousness.

The cultivation of a colonial elite

In 1932, within the pages of the inaugural issue of *Légitime Défense* (*LD*), the young philosophy student René Ménil reflected on what he identified as the French colonial educational system's impact on Martinican students. Proclaiming the intellectual and political agenda of his compatriots in *LD*, influenced by surrealism and Marxism to advance anticolonial liberation, Ménil wrote that in Martinican schools, Antillean students' "own genius [are] mechanically denied," as they are "nourished" on "books written in other countries for other readers."[23] As a result, they are forced to "renounce [their] race, body, [their] particular and fundamental passions, and [their] specific ideas about love and death," and dwell "in an unreal domain determined by abstract ideas and the ideals of another people."[24] Ménil was not just critiquing the state of Martinican literature; he levied a powerful epistemological critique: that colonial education in Martinique inflicted the "ideals of another people" –namely, French republican ideology– on Martinicans, and that new traditions were necessary to disrupt the intellectual legacies of French colonial education. Although surrealism and phenomenology were identified as originating in Europe, Ménil and his compatriots in *LD* believed they could be transformed and applied to new anticolonial ends.[25] The writers of *LD* declared in their manifesto, "We accept equally and without reserve surrealism, to which – in 1932 – we link our future." They sought to liberate their consciousness from the intellectual and cultural legacies of French colonialism, writing, "our dreams allow us to see clearly into the life which has been imposed upon us for too long."[26]

LD, in form and content, responded to the colonial project of Third Republic education, which saw schooling as a vital tool for perpetuating France's universalising colonialism. France's Jules Ferry laws in 1881 and 1882 promised "free, secular education" for all within metropolitan France and the colonies in order "to civilise [the weak] and to raise [them] up to its own levels."[27] Colonial education, per Prime Minister Ferry, was not a "luxury" but constituted the "foremost duty" of the coloniser.[28] This heavily standardised assimilationist educational agenda maintained that colonies were integral parts of a France

whose society and population ought to be made "in France's image".[29] This universalist mission sought to make the colony the "intellectual extension of France," requiring secondary schools around the colonies to participate in metropolitan concours or standardised tests.[30] This homogenising effort was especially acute in Antillean primary and secondary education, where students were taught in school that they were French, erasing Creole culture, language, and identity.[31]

In both the metropole and colonies, Third Republic education emphasised the "democratic ideals of the Republic" and Kantian, nineteenth-century scientific positivism.[32] According to this positivist tradition, science would provide the foundations for the laws of reality and the indefatigable human quest for progress. Phenomenology and surrealism responded as parallel developments in philosophy and aesthetics to the stifling and positivistic environment of French republican higher education. Gaston Bachelard's notion of the need for an "epistemological rupture", elaborated in *Le Nouvel Esprit Scientifique* in 1934 to reflect fragmented subjectivities in the wake of the First World War, was especially influential and said to have been "read by every individual in the Surrealist group."[33] This "epistemological rupture" resonated with anticolonial thinkers, who fused surrealist idioms and phenomenological concepts to reflect colonised experiences and probed the possibilities of epistemic decolonisation. Colonial students of philosophy, Ménil and Thao among them, would come of age in this intellectual context at the elite Parisian secondary institutions of Lycées Louis-le-Grand and Henri IV, which prepared students for admission to the prestigious *grandes écoles*.

In the late 1920s, in response to growing nationalist sentiment in its Southeast Asian colonies, French officials began advocating to expand colonial education to higher education in the metropole itself, encouraging scholarships for colonial students to study in the metropole to inculcate "French" values over other influences.[34] As early as 1927, Colonial Minister Jean Fabry wrote that it would be beneficial for students from around the empire to "come to study in our schools" to "assimilate our mentality, our customs" and "feel the usefulness for their country of relying on a great European Nation" before returning the colonies to uphold French rule.[35] By the late 1920s, offering admission at the *grandes écoles* to a select few exceptional students from the colonies had become official policy.

In 1929, the Governor General of Indochina wrote to the Minister of the Colonies that ignoring increased demands by Indochinese students for admission would have "serious consequences from the political point of view" as it would "discourage" Indochinese youth who "sought to elevate themselves" and would result in "distanc[ing] them from French culture."[36] The Minister conceded in 1933 to the requests to admit more Indochinese students to *grandes écoles* like the École Normale Supérieure (ENS), on the condition that it was toward the cultivation of an "indigenous elite…like in Siam and the British or Dutch Indies" in the service of the "economic development of our overseas empire."[37] This "generosity" was thus highly strategic: French authorities maintained that it was imperative to proceed with caution in empowering "natives", clarifying that education in

such universities was "above all a question of giving our colonies the native architects necessary to their economic development" and not about endowing them with French nationality *ipso facto* and the rights of French citizens.[38] Entrance into military schools was excluded, for fear of the "serious disadvantages" of France's colonial rule if colonial students could form a French-trained and armed cadre of officers capable of carrying out an armed revolt for self-governance.[39]

Admission to the *grandes écoles* was thus explicitly part of a colonial project to cultivate a colonial elite loyal to continued French rule. Importantly, such scholarships to study in Paris were not equitably distributed amongst colonies. As the monthly organ of the *Ligue de la Défense de la Race Nègre* (League of the Defence of the Black Race, or LDRN), *The Black Race*, pointed out in September 1927, the "situation of Black students [was] the most lamentable in Paris," as Antillean students were given preferential treatment over students from West and French Equatorial Africa, and students from French Indochina were similarly granted "exceptional position of favour."[40]

It is in this context that Tran Duc Thao was permitted to arrive in France in October 1936 for two years of study at Lycée Louis-le-Grand, the prestigious preparatory school which fed into the ENS, where the Martinican anticolonial poet Aimé Césaire had graduated just one year earlier.[41] After an additional year at Lycée Henri IV, he placed third in the entrance examination to ENS in July 1939.[42] A brilliant but unassuming student, Thao reportedly "abhor[red] publicity" and lived humbly – continuing, as French authorities noted, to eat and dress "in the manner of his ancestors."[43] At ENS, Thao experienced the simultaneous consolidation of Vichy rule in collaboration with the Nazi Third Reich and the acceleration of Vietnamese nationalism in France, twin processes which emboldened him to take several leadership positions in Vietnamese anticolonial groups. In 1940, Thao attracted the attention of the Parisian police for his anticolonial activity as secretary for an anticolonial student organisation, the Association of Annamites of France.[44] Simultaneously, at ENS, Thao studied German and immersed himself in the contemporary philosophical currents of the phenomenological "generation of 1933" characterised by the influence of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.[45]

Acutely aware that they had been brought to France to be cultivated as part of a powerful bourgeoisie, Thao and Ménil knew it was the hope of the French government that they would return to their colonies and prevent elite colonial intellectuals from joining forces with the proletariat in anticolonial revolution. This claim was echoed by a broad range of anticolonial groups. The anticolonial publication *Le Cri des Nègres* declared in 1935 that Black, Arab and Vietnamese students educated in *grandes écoles* were "educated in the capitalist sense" with an aim to make them "docile servants" and "automatons" whose mission was to "defend and blindly serve the capitalist regime" or else be deemed "ungrateful".[46] Black students, in particular, the paper argued, needed to understand the "distortion" to which "capitalist instruction drags them," as under capitalism, they would "bastardise [themselves] up until the total annihilation of their personality."[47] Several key anticolonial student groups thus recognised the impact of colonial education on their

psyche and their relationship to capitalist ideology. *Le Cri des Nègres*' shrewd analysis of the overlapping role of capitalism and colonial domination was explicitly intended to foster relations of transnational anticolonial solidarity across cultures. More broadly, this period saw the explicit connection between education and capitalist ideology emerge, as anticolonial groups increasingly levied critiques of bourgeois education as juxtaposed to the anticolonial struggles of labouring masses in their homelands.

Colonial French authorities took a special interest in monitoring high-achieving students from the colonies who appeared vulnerable to anticolonial or "anti-French" sentiment.[48] French police began to monitor Thao's movements following his winning entrance exam to ENS. In Thao's surveillance folder, French police filed a clipped article from *Le Journal* about Thao's admission to ENS.[49] The article's last line declared, "This brilliant result, won by a…child of our Empire, is it not striking proof of the colonising genius of our country, and of the effort she makes to transfer her culture to her adopted sons?"[50]

This characterisation of Thao as "a child of our Empire" powerfully exemplifies the paternalistic logic of French colonial education. The French educational system was imagined as a mechanism to uplift colonial students worldwide and educate them in the nationalist ideologies of French superiority and mould them in the service of its empire. The French newspaper did not consider Thao's success a product of his own capabilities; rather, his success is attributed solely to the "colonising genius" of France and its efforts to transpose its culture to its "adopted sons". Linking Thao's success to broader colonial educational efforts, another journalist covering Thao's acceptance noted:

> The French are happy to see that their yellow and black brothers assimilate to their culture to the point of beating the best of them at their own game. Isn't it wonderful that young people of another race, belonging to a civilisation so different from ours, manage to expound brilliantly on what constitutes the heart of our culture?[51]

The supposed "universality" of French culture and the perceived innate force of its internal logic to assimilate the most varied constituents of the French empire is credited for colonial students' academic success. And yet, this success did little to dissuade French authorities of the importance of keeping a close watch on Thao and other such successful colonial students.

Anticolonial Student Movements

By the time Thao and Ménil arrived in Paris, new Vietnamese, Caribbean, and West African anticolonial student groups had formed and issued clarion calls for international and class solidarity amongst colonial students in Paris. These new organisations provided an infrastructure for anticolonial intellectual trends to circulate. Ménil, for example, was highly influenced by groups and publications like Martinicans Paulette and Jane Nardal's l'*Étudiant noir and Revue du monde noir*, and was likely familiar with the West African Tiemoko Garan Kouyate's League of the Defense of the Black Race (LDRN), which had

defined imperatives for cultural emancipation to effect intellectual and cultural decolonisation.[52] The LDRN had founded a "Group of Black Students of the League" in 1929 to create a transnational black student movement devoted to the "intellectual emancipation of our race."[53] According to the LDRN, Black students and young intellectuals ought to rely only on themselves and the "solicitude of [their] elders" through transnational cooperation to achieve the "liberation of their minds" and the "liberation of their countries," which the LDRN believed were inextricably linked.

Similarly, both Thao and Ménil were likely influenced by Vietnamese student groups who echoed the LDRN in forging anticolonial student protests linking education, class, and cultural emancipation against the elite French colonial project. Following the 1930 Yen Bai Massacre, during which a Vietnamese revolt was met with violent French repression, several Vietnamese students protested at the Cité Universitaire, the foreign students' residences. Linking their status as students to the political freedom at home in Vietnam, on 20 February 1930, following the establishment of the Vietnamese Communist Party, the students declared:

> We affirm our revolutionary solidarity with their brothers in struggle, condemn the policy of plunder and oppression of French imperialism, and salute the Communist Party of Indochina, the only organisation capable of leading the Indo-Chinese workers and peasants to liberation.[54]

Foreshadowing Thao, who argued that Vietnamese students and intellectuals were indebted to their proletarian compatriots and not to the benevolence of French education, the AGEI declared that the "Annamites who suffer and labour in the rice fields under the burning sun, on the scaffold, under bombardment, in jails, will see how you reward their work" and "ruin their fortune and their hope."[55] Thus, the AGEI, at first a nominally apolitical group, had been radicalised by 1930 following the Yen Bai massacre.[56] They cited repression against students in Indochina and the founding of the assimilationist Maison Indochinoise as their impetus to "modify, if not totally transform, the ideological basis of our association."[57] Their manifesto reads as a pointed critique of the dualistic worlds of coloniser and colonised, which Thao would later raise in the pages of *Les Temps Modernes*.

As a student-activist himself who attracted the attention of the Parisian police for his activity in anti-French Indochinese circles as secretary for the Association of Annamites of France,[58] Thao was likely influenced not only by Husserl and Marx but also by Vietnamese anticolonial student co-organisers. The AGEI declared politics the "condensation of all social activities, resulting from two increasingly complex component forces, those of the oppressed and those of the oppressors."[59] Describing French limits to secondary education in Indochina as an "intellectual blockade", they critiqued the colonial dynamic that Thao would later raise in his analysis of colonial education and class solidarity. In an early articulation of pan-Asian intellectual transfer, the AGEI wrote that after the Japanese victory over Russia in 1905, their "ancestors, feeling stifled in their own country, crossed borders illegally to study in Japan, China, and Siam," a "movement of clandestine emigration" which alarmed the French government, who concluded that it was "preferable that these young Indochinese students submit to the influence of French culture instead."[60]

Because of this, they wrote that in 1908, the "door of Marseille was thus half-opened to us, or more precisely, our elders, at the price of a thousand sacrifices, forced the door open for our generation."[61] Drawing out a preliminary anti-capitalist historical analysis of colonial education, the AGEI worked to create a nascent anticolonial consciousness which looked transnationally for intellectual inspiration.

Recalling Ménil's critique of Martinican literature, accusations of intellectual collaborationist sentiment stemming from French colonial education were central to AGEI's critique of colonial education. The AGEI identified the creation of the assimilationist and loyalist "Maison des Indochinois" as a reincarnation of the "old intellectual blockade, reborn in 1930" whose leaders "actively work[ed] to push them imperceptibly but surely down the path of collaborationist betrayal."[62] In the aftermath of Yen Bai, nationalist animosity towards any suspicion of collaborationism or loyalty to France was high. Following the surveillance of these tracts, the AGEI was dissolved by decree in June 1930.[63] Consequently, several members of the AGEI joined the Mutual Association of Indochinese, while those who were "openly communist" joined the Indochinese Section of the Federal Union of Students.[64] The Vietnamese section of the Federal Union of Students published a journal called The New Students, which contained a "colonial supplement" carrying articles against French colonisation — for example, criticising the "French teaching methods in Indo-China."[65] This focus on French teaching methods and class critique would be taken up in earnest by Thao in the phenomenology of the colonial dispossessed he laid out in *Les Temps Modernes* after the war.

In a 1946 issue of *Les Temps Modernes*, Thao outlined a phenomenology of colonised existence, theorising that the French and the Vietnamese live in different worlds of possibilities. He wrote that the "Annamite lives in a world where he projects the possibilities of an independent Vietnam, free to industrialise, to create the number of schools it would have wanted, to send all its students to all the universities of Europe and America."[66] In contrast, the Frenchman is "taught in school that Indochina is French" and that it would be "contradictory that anything which was part of French domain could have an independent existence: that is unthinkable."[67] Thus, Thao argued that French colonial education limited the phenomenological life-worlds of the coloniser and the colonised from imagining the unthinkable – liberation for France's colonies. Thao argued that Vietnamese and French life-worlds held incompatible conceptions of the "possible" and incommensurate "horizons". The French could not comprehend Vietnamese independence since Vietnam only existed as part of the French community. For the French, Vietnam's independent existence was "unthinkable". Thus, for the Vietnamese, any liberal federalist form of belonging to France was unacceptable; the only solution was a violent revolution. As such, Thao incorporated a phenomenological emphasis on lived experience and the life-world of the colonised into a theory of class solidarity and anticolonial revolution with existential stakes. In doing so, Thao extended both phenomenological and Marxist analysis beyond its orthodox theoretical framings by grounding it in the lived experiences of colonised peoples.

Légitime Défense

The growing transnational anticolonial student consciousness based in epistemic critique is equally reflected in the pages of *Légitime Défense* (*LD*), a Sorbonne-based publication of anticolonial surrealist and Marxist revolt published by Ménil and a group of Martinican students in 1932. Taking after their colleagues in *La Revue du Monde Noir* (1930), *LD* was part of a growing body of student movements in Paris amongst the Martinican *bourgeoisie de couleur* (bourgeoisie of colour).[68] Through its emphasis on surrealist and Marxist dialectics and African-American literature, *LD* drew attention to the necessity of epistemological rupture for anticolonial revolt. They took their name from a pamphlet published by Breton in 1927, which detailed his theory of surrealist change, linking language, writing, and emancipation through social revolution.[69]

LD presented the first instance of surrealism being invoked as an epistemic rupture in an anticolonial context by Caribbean students. Though *LD* would later be dismissed by many, including Aimé Césaire, for being too "limited" in its frameworks of Marxism and surrealism and failing to achieve new literary forms itself,[70] *LD* constitutes an early historical example of Martinican students wrestling with the problem of colonialism as a totalising phenomenon, conceptualising it as requiring epistemological revolution, grounded in materialist historical analysis. The young authors of *LD* sought diverse methods to reckon with the historical, material, and epistemological factors that conspired to send them to Europe as children of the Martinican bourgeoisie. The political possibilities the young members of *LD* entertained were conditioned by the political and historical moment they lived under, coming of age at the "height of the colonial project."[71] In straining against the epistemic possibilities presented to them, their work contained themes of strident class solidarity and anticolonialism well before their time. As Ménil later reflected, their project was "more Fanonist than Senghorian or even Césairist," surpassing the Negritude generation to prefigure the work of its critics, Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant.[72] *LD*, an early product of the twin developments of epistemic rupture and transnational anticolonial consciousness, combined a critique of capitalism with the colonial ideologies of French education, looking to surrealism as a potential intellectual avenue to liberate Martinican consciousness.

LD drew attention to colonial education's impact on the bourgeois Martinican psyche. The authors linked longstanding colonial conditions to the need for cultural, literary, and epistemological revolt. Moreover, like its descendants in the wartime Martinican surrealist journal *Tropiques* (1941-45), the writers of *LD* looked to raise the ontological stakes of Martinican literature to what they believed was a more genuine expression of lived experience, something absent from the body of Martinican literature they accused of imitating and reproducing European thought. Finally, consistent with *Tropiques*' later goals, the writers of *LD* articulated an incipient theory of poesis as worldmaking, in which creating poetry could open up new political possibilities in the imagination and combat the effects of French colonial education. *LD*'s intellectual descendants in the writers of *Tropiques*

declared themselves committed to the necessary task of "creat[ing]" a new "world" in contradistinction to the existing one of colonial Vichy oppression, selecting surrealism as their path.[73] Following their predecessors in *LD*, they understood poetry as a worldmaking surrealist speech act[74] to join the ideal and material and intervene on concrete and ideational planes.

As Michael Joseph points out, Antillean socialist thought had long held "systematic anti-imperial critiques grounded in anti-capitalism," both in Paris and the Antilles.[75] Following this tradition, *LD*'s authors offered an analysis of the colonial roots of education and class structures of the Martinican bourgeoisie, to which most authors belonged. Surrealism, which the group "accept[ed] without reserve", provided the *LD* group with a form of epistemological rupture and an artistic ethic to grapple with their dual identity –as Black Caribbean students and as highly privileged members of the colonial bourgeoisie.[76] *LD* member Jules-Marcel Monnerot, the son of Jules Monnerot, a founder of Martinican communism, identified the group as "children of the coloured bourgeoisie raised in the cult of fraud…who, after high school, go to France," and "conform to the customs and character of the majority of their fellow European students."[77] Surrealism served not only as an aesthetic form of rebellion but also as a way to liberate their minds from the "hideous face" of the *bourgeoisie de couleur*, which, in Monnerot's words, "leaned over my cradle…as soon as I learned to read and write."[78] The focus on reading and writing paralleled Ménil's analysis of Martinican literature, which linked intellectual activities intimately to a sense of self, possibility, and imagination. Ménil and Monnerot were responding here to the "seamless inheritance of nineteenth-century French exoticism" reflected in the poetry of non-white Antillean poets in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which the dominant conception of value was determined by the extent to which the "poet's race could not be guessed from reading the text."[79]

LD writers displayed early and acute attention to historical class structures, analysing how the Martinican "hereditary white plutocracy… makes human objects of the black proletariat" in an "inexorable" colonial sugar and rum economy.[80] Linking economic structures and aspirational bourgeois politics to race, education, and culture, they illustrated the necessity to link epistemic revolution to political praxis. In a biting critique of those "children of the *bourgeois de couleur*" to whom *LD* is addressed, Monnerot writes that their desire to "assimilate" confers a "tragic character to their slightest move."[81] Through an analysis of the colonial and capitalist structures of race and class, he writes that these students "obtain whiteness" in their endeavours for the "guarantee of a French university education," while "in the countryside, *des noirs* continue to cut cane and do not yet think to off the heads of those who repeatedly betray them."[82] *LD* thus modelled the politics of intracolonial class solidarity, which figured prominently in the anticolonialism of Vietnamese student activists.

Beyond surrealism, *LD*'s authors cited two important sources of inspiration outside of France for their epistemological rupture: African and Oceanic art and the "poems, stories, and jazz" of the Harlem Renaissance.[83] They included a translated chapter of the Jamaican-

American writer Claude McKay's *Banjo*, first published in the U.S. in 1929, which became, in its French translation, a "manifesto for black cultural radicalism."[84] Alluding to their transnational anticolonial ambitions, the *LD* writers wrote that they were "indifferent towards the conditions of time and space which, defining [them] in 1932 as Antillean," thus established their "initial field of action" without in any way confining them.[85] For example, *LD* member Étienne Léro provided political commentary on the Scottsboro trials, expressing a sophisticated critique of American anti-Black racism, an issue followed closely by Black anticolonial groups like LDRN.[86]

To counteract the education which left Caribbean students "filled to bursting with white morality, white culture, white education and white prejudices,"[87] Ménil called for a literature and artistic creation which explored instead the "feelings of the cane cutter before the ruthless factory, the feeling of Black solitude throughout the world" and "revolt against the injustices he especially suffers in his country."[88] These topics, Ménil maintained, would "move black, yellow, and white people as the poems of Black Americans touch the whole world."[89] Here, Ménil called for a creative expression specific to place and rooted in lived experience while fostering broader transnational solidarity, pointing to the examples of Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay.

Finally, *LD* writers created a nascent theory of poesis as worldmaking, creating an intellectual and political opening for epistemological decolonisation.[90] Ménil categorised literature which "moves towards the world", "expresses fundamental needs", and "seeks to transform existence" as "useful literature", as opposed to literature "chained to logical and utilitarian thought."[91] In Jules Monnerot's view, poetry was a part of worldmaking as a communal project in that the "dialectical progress of surrealism" could join language to the "very matter of representation" to "engineer the passage of the word into the world."[92] Like Thao's phenomenology of colonial education, which linked the act of intellectual and cultural emancipation to the political project of decolonisation, *LD*'s worldmaking ushered in a new intellectual and cultural anticolonial political thought which would manifest in political action after World War II.

Conclusion

Transnational anticolonial student activism in the 1920s and 1930s identified colonial education's universalising *mission civilatrice* and associated French colonial project to create a French-educated colonial elite to uphold colonial rule as its primary target. In tracts, manifestos, and publications, students from Vietnam, West Africa, and Martinique argued that intellectual and cultural emancipation would be necessary to combat the legacies of French colonial education and its universalist civilising mission. In conjunction with new academic and aesthetic movements like surrealism and phenomenology focused on epistemological rupture, anticolonial students in LDRN, AGEI, and *Légitime Défense* progressively made sophisticated demands concerning the economic and cultural role of education in colonial oppression. They argued that the intellectual, cultural and psychological impacts of French colonial practices demanded corresponding efforts at

intellectual and cultural emancipation -and drew attention to the need for transnational collaboration in this effort. Whether looking for inspiration from Black diasporic writers like Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, historically Black colleges in the United States, or the histories of pan-Asian collaboration, anticolonial student groups sought new tools to combat the epistemic legacies of colonial education, often looking across oceans to do so. French imperial education presented a totalising infrastructure constructed to prevent colonised people from accessing senses of "place" divorced from the world that colonialism had made. Embedded in colonial orderings of time and place was the notion that France would teach its colonies how and what it meant to be modern, developed, and civilised. Across cultural contexts, anticolonial students worldwide sought to imagine the unthinkable as the first step in decolonisation.

Notes

[1] Roger Nash Baldwin, quoted in Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 3.

[2] Gavin Parkinson, *Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science: Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 59.

[3] See Frantz Fanon, "The So-Called Dependency Complex of Colonized Peoples," *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Markmann (London: Pluto, 1967), 83-108.

[4] Cyrus Schayegh and Yoav Di-Capua, "Why Decolonization?," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 1 (February 2020): 138.

[5] Matthew Renault, "Fanon and Tran Duc Thao: The Making of French Anticolonialism," *Nottingham French Studies* 54, no. 1 (March 2015): 107–118.

[6] Some important exceptions within the literature on Ménil include: Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley, eds., *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009); T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Krzysztof Fijakowski, ed., *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1996).

[7] Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora;* Jérôme Melançon, "Trân Duc Thao," in *The Routledge Handbook of Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2021); Tim Herrick, "'A Book Which Is No Longer Discussed Today': Tran Duc Thao, Jacques Derrida, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66, no. 1 (2005): 113–131.

[8] Howard Davies, *Sartre and 'Les Temps Modernes'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 19.

[9] Independent studies of Thao and Ménil can be found, inter alia, in: Jocelyn Benoist and Michel Espagne, eds., *L'itinéraire de Tran Duc Thao: Phénoménologie et Transfert Culturel* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013); Jeremy F. Lane, "'Marvellous' Ellington: René Ménil, Jazz, Surrealism, and Creole Identity in Wartime Martinique," in *Jazz and Machine-Age Imperialism: Music, "Race," and Intellectuals in France, 1918-1945* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 155-179.

[10] Eric Jennings, *Escape from Vichy: The Refugee Exodus to the French Caribbean* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 131.

[11] Kristen Stromberg Childers, *Seeking Imperialism's Embrace: National Identity, Decolonization, and Assimilation in the French Caribbean* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5, 16.

[12] Kevin Ruane, *War and Revolution in Vietnam, 1930-75* (London: UCL, 1998), 3.

[13] A "world-historical" moment is one that is globally significant. See Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Duke University Press, 2015), 1–2.

[14] André Breton, *Manifestes Du Surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 37.

[15] "Avertissement," *Légitime Défense*, facsimile with preface by René Ménil (Paris, 1932; fac. Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1979), 1. Unless otherwise stated, citations hereafter refer to the original page numbers from the 1932 publication.

[16] Stephanie d'Alessandro and Matthew Gale, eds., *Surrealism Beyond Borders* (New York: Yale University Press, 2021).

[17] Ethan Kleinberg, *Generation Existential: Heidegger's Philosophy in France, 1927–1961* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 5.

[18] Tran Duc Thao, "Questions sur Communisme," *Confluences* 8, no. 18-20 (1947): 277.

[19] Thao, "Questions sur Communisme," 277.

[20] Tran Duc Thao, "Sur l'Indochine," *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 5 (February 1946): 897.

[21] Schayegh and Di-Capua, "Why Decolonization?," 138.

[22] Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 7

[23] René Ménil, "Généralités Sur 'l'écrivain' de Couleur Antillais," *Légitime Défense*, no. 1 (1932): 7.

[24] Ménil, "Généralités," 7.

[25] For similar examples, see Omnia El Shakry, *The Arabic Freud: Psychoanalysis and Islam in Modern Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Yoav Di-Capua, *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Decolonization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

[26] "Avertissement," 1.

[27] Quoted in Jane Hiddleston, *Decolonising the Intellectual: Politics, Culture, and Humanism at the End of the French Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), 4.

[28] Trinh Van Thao, "L'idéologie de l'école en Indochine (1890-1938)," *Revue Tiers Monde* 34, no. 133 (March 1993): 173.

[29] Raymond Betts, *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory, 1890-1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 8.

[30] Van Thao, "L'idéologie," 174.

[31] Sarah Moon McDermott Thompson, "Creole Citizens of France: The Trans-Atlantic Politics of Antillean Education and the Creole Movement since 1945," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2012), 31-32.

[32] Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 42.

[33] Parkinson, *Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science*, 59.

[34] David Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 35.

[35] Quoted in Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis*, 119.

[36] "Le Gouverneur Général de l'Indochine, à Monsieur le Ministre des Colonies," 15 July 1929, ref. III SLOTFOM 118, Archives Nationale d'Outre-Mer (ANOM).

[37] "Note au ministre 77 sur l'admission des indigènes de nos colonies dans les Grandes Ecoles," 22 September 1933, ref. III SLOTFOM 118, ANOM.

[38] "Note au ministre 77."

[39] "Note au ministre 77."

[40] "Pour nos étudiants," *La Race Nègre*, no. 3 (3 September 1927). Racist hierarchies and status within the French empire likely contributed to the inequalities faced by West African students as opposed to Antillean or Indochinese students.

[41] "M. Tran Duc Thao: Agrégé en Philosophie," *L'Écho Annamite*, 23 September, 1943, 2.

[42] "M. Tran Duc Thao," 2.

[43] "Un succès pour la jeunesse de l'Empire: un tonkinois est reçu troisième à Normale lettres – Le Beau Palmarès de M. Tran Duc Thao," *L'Intransigeant*, 23 July, 1939, 1.

[44] *Annamite* refers to a resident of *Annam*, the French colonial name for the central province of Vietnam. "A.S. of Tran-Duc-Thao, in relation to the Vietnamese Delegation," 22 December 1949, ref. 1 W 765 30311, Archives de la Préfecture de Police, Paris (APP).

[45] Kleinberg, *Generation Existential*, 8.

[46] S. Ceron, "Pour server à l'Education des Travailleurs Nègres," *Le cri des nègres*, no. 19 (August 1935).

[47] Ceron, "Pour server à l'Education."

[48] "Note de l'Agent Désiré," 25 May 1929, ref. III SLOTFOM 3, ANOM.

[49] "Un jeune Tonkinois reçu troisième à Normale supérieure," 23 July 1939, ref. III SLOTFOM 124, ANOM.

[50] "Un jeune Tonkinois," ANOM.

[51] "Un succès pour la jeunesse de l'Empire: un tonkinois est reçu troisième à Normale lettres – Le Beau Palmarès de M. Tran Duc Thao," *L'Intransigeant*, 23 July, 1939, 1.

[52] Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 38-79; Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 119-186; Imaobong Umoren, *Race Women Internationalists: Activist-Intellectuals and Global Freedom Struggles* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 15-22.

[53] "Cher Compatriote," 4 March 1929, ref. III SLOTFOM 24, ANOM; "Circulaire de La Ligue de Défense de la Race Nègre en langue anglaise," 24 June 1929, ref. III SLOTFOM 24, ANOM.

[54] "Une manifestation de solidarité des étudiants indochinois en France," *l'Humanité*, 22 February 1930, ref. III SLOTFOM 3, ANOM.

[55] "Copie du manifeste affiché au Restaurant de la Cité Universitaire," 9 April 1930, ref. F/7/13410, Archives Nationales (AN).

[56] "Note sur l'action revolutionnaire aux colonies," 4 June 1931, ref. F/7/13412, AN.

[57] "Manifeste de l'Association Generale des Étudiants Indochinois," 12 March 1930, ref. F/7/13410, AN.

[58] "A.S. of Tran-Duc-Thao."

[59] "A.S. of Tran-Duc-Thao."

[60] "A.S. of Tran-Duc-Thao."

[61] "A.S. of Tran-Duc-Thao."

[62] "A.S. of Tran-Duc-Thao."

[63] Note, 8 July 1930, ref. F/7/13410, AN.

[64] "Note sur l'action."

[65] "A/S. de l'Union Fédérale des Etudiants (section indochinoise)," 13 February 1930, ref. F/7/13410, AN.

[66] Thao, 'Sur l'Indochine," 882.

[67] IThao, "Sur l'Indochine," 883.

[68] Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 21.

[69] Gerard Aching, "In Legitimate Defense," *Nka Journal of Contemporary African Art* 2021, no. 49 (November 2021): 192.

[70] Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 195; René Ménil, Daniel Maximin, and Christiane Goldman, "Dialogue with René Ménil," trans. Rebecca Krasner, *The CLR James Journal* 26, no. 1 (2020): 41.

[71] Yarimar Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 20.

[72] René Ménil, "Préface," *Légitime Défense*, 2.

[73] Aristide Maugée, "Poésie et Obscurité," *Tropiques* no. 2 (July 1941): 10.

[74] This aligned with Breton's first articulation of surrealist poetry as a method of social liberation in his 1926 pamphlet which inspired *LD*'s name; see André Breton, *Légitime Défense* (Paris: Éditions surréalistes, 1926).

[75] Michael Joseph, "Beyond the Nation: Anticolonialism in the British and French Caribbean after the First World War (1919-1939)," (D.Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 2019), 205-206.

[76] "Avertissement," 1.

[77] Rolande Bosphore, *Militants et militantismes communistes à la Martinique, 1920-1971:*

identification, forme et implication (Matoury: Ibis Rouge Éditions 2015), 17; Jules-Marcel Monnerot, "Note touchant la bourgeoisie de couleur française," *Légitime Défense,* no. 1 (1932): 4.

[78] Monnerot, "Note," 3.

[79] Jeannie Suk, *Postcolonial Paradoxes in French Caribbean Writing: Césaire, Glissant, Condé* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2001), 24

[80] Monnerot, "Note," 3.

[81] Monnerot, "Note," 4.

[82] Monnerot, "Note," 4.

[83] Ménil, "Généralités," 9.

[84] Sarah Dunstan, *Race, Rights and Reform: Black Activism in the French Empire and the United States from World War I to the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 87; Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora,* 187-240.

[85] "Avertissement," 1.

[86] Étienne Léro, "Civilisation," L*égitime Défense*, no. 1 (1932): 9; see also *Le Cri des Nègres*, no. 1 (August 1931) and no. 8-9 (March-April 1932).

[87] Étienne Léro, "Misère d'une poésie," *Légitime Défense*, no. 1 (1932): 10.

[88] Ménil, "Généralités," 8.

[89] Ménil, "Généralités," 8.

[90] "Avertissement," 1.

[91] Ménil, "Généralités," 8.

[92] Ménil, "Généralités," 8.