Temporality is an interesting feature of our lives, of all life for sure. But temporality as that combination of Time and Being is worth pausing on ever so often. One thinks here of Nietzsche’s famous essay on the Uses and Abuses of History for Life. Nietzsche remarks in there that the past appears to us as an oracle of the present— not in the sense of the notion that you have to understand the past in order to understand the present— but that the present— this Time— is a projection onto the past. We know this view of course today in certain theoretical discourse as the idea of the History of the Present, and as a Foucauldian formulation.

In one geographical, historical iteration of the present some universities are in a pitched battle with a state that accuses them of anti-national activities. In India, at Jawaharlal Nehru University and Hyderabad University we have been witnessing arrests, harassments, police charges and court cases being filed against students, against scholars, against journalists— for the expression of sentiments within a university, within a classroom, that are deemed to be inappropriate to a particular rendition of the nation. We are familiar I think now with these assertions of Hindu

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1 This paper should be read as tentative thoughts rather than a worked out research effort. Most of the texts dealing with the material I discuss are in French, and I have to acknowledge my limitation in language proficiency in Francophone languages.

2 The essay is one of four published as Nietzsche, F (1997) Untimely Meditations, UK: Cambridge University Press
nationalism that have been made possible under the present BJP led government in India. History features here as a story of the past’s purity; one in which the nation has been infiltrated by settlers from outside- they are a minority that troubles and does something bad to the nation in its majoritarian purity- alleged Hindu purity- ³

In another geographical, historical iteration of the present, we have a society in which a question permeates the current discourse in an odd temporality- almost like a question in our time, but with the curious dissonance of being not of our time.

And this is the question of decolonization. In our time, but not of our time. What do I mean by this?

There are a number of ways we can think of decolonization. There is the political moment of decolonization- across the colonial world, and in Africa from the late 1950’s onwards, culminating some say with the 1994 elections in South Africa marking the end of settler colonial rule. There is economic decolonization- marking the moments of bringing into existence forms of, or attempts at forms of, modes of economic arrangements attentive to national populations, in the Foucauldian biopolitical sense. There was along with the moment of political decolonization, the efforts toward cultural decolonization as part of the heralding of a new state- the creation of national theatres, national schools of art, national schools of music, and in some instances film. I was reminded of the latter when looking at the work of a

Mozambican documentary photographer recently and seeing images she had taken of the French new wave film director Jean Luc Godard running workshops with aspirant film makers, an act of solidarity on his part with the revolutionary ambitions of Frelimo. Elsewhere on the continent, Guinea, Ghana, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria, in Senegal and Zaire, official state institutions, programmes and policies were inaugurated with great celebration, to mark a moment when the independent political entities of postcolonial Africa would instantiate forms of cultural production that would literally, figuratively, visually and aurally produce the nation of the future in the present.

Out of these initiatives we have the legacy of film festivals today like Fespaco, we have the rich heritage of modernist writings, sculpture and arts in Nigeria. We have the film making of Ousmane Sembene and Djibril Diop Mamberty in Senegal. We have the legacy of musicians like Ali Farka Toure, who emerged as a musician after working as a sound engineer for Radio Mali, recording and creating an archive of the traditional music of the different regions and cultural groupings in Mali created with the ambition of producing Mali as such.

Its worth however differentiating these experiences, and I want to briefly offer two vignettes- one a story told about Guinea by a foremost historian and writer from that country, Lansine Kaba; another a more recent story about Senghor’s Senegal, as told by the distinguished philosopher from that country, Souleymane Bachir Diagne.4

Lansine Kaba has written a piece about two of Guinea’s most famous artists in the period just before independence, and their fates thereafter. The one was a poet, musician and cultural producer – Fodiba Keita, immensely popular within the country, his popularity due partly due to a skillful weaving of Mandinka traditional and folkloric styles and lyrics with urban sounds current at that time. The other, a novelist, Camara Laye, highly regarded, but less in the ordinary popular sense, and more read abroad than actually read in the country due to his preference for writing in French.

For our purposes I want to trace very synoptically the trajectory of Fodiba Keita here. He had trained in Paris, worked in theatre, and together with a group of young musicians that drew on their Griot lineages, established an ensemble that travelled the region of French west Africa to popular acclaim. By 1953 Fodiba Keita was heralded as ‘the most popular writer and artist in all of French-speaking West Africa’.

Parallel to the trajectory of Keita, by the early 1950’s, emerging from the Postal Workers Union, the political figure Sekou Toure emerged as the most popular political leader in colonial Guinea. Toure goes to Paris as an elected deputy, and in the process befriends Fodiba Keita there. The latter is persuaded of the need to merge art and politics and himself becomes a representative of the district in his hometown, a development which sets off a certain political trajectory in his life.

To get a sense of the allure of aligning with Sekou Toure’s ideological project in the immediate wake of independence in 1958, it’s worth recalling aspects of Sekou Toure’s thinking at the time.
In an important speech given in 1959 titled “The Political Leader Considered as the Representative of a Culture” Toure outlined a series of thoughts that shaped the cultural-political terrain of how decolonization was envisaged. Sekou Toure was keenly attentive to the totalizing nature of colonization, its processes of ‘depersonalization’ that required the ‘negation of the cultural, moral and intellectual values of the subjugated peoples’. As he pointed out, ‘our school books in the colonial schools teach us about the wars of the Gaul’s, the life of Jan of Arc or Napoleon, the list of French Departments, the poems of Lamartine or the plays of Moliere, as though Africa never had any history, any past, any geographical existence, any cultural life…our pupils were only appreciated according to their aptitude in the policy of cultural assimilation.’ He went on, ‘So long as we argue solely in the light of an external acquisition, so long as we continue to judge and to make our determinations according the values of a colonial culture, we shall not be decolonized, and we shall not succeed in giving our thoughts and acts a national content, that is to say, a utility placed at the service of our Society. So true is that every culture worthy of the name must be able to give and receive; we can only regard foreign cultures as a necessary contribution to the enrichment of our own culture’.

In that sense, Sekou Toure was adamant that insularity was not the aspiration: ‘The future will be the sum of cultures and civilizations which do not measure their special contribution or drive a bargain in respect of their singular values. To reach these successive summits it is not too much for each one to join his efforts with those of others, to deliver to the world his intellectual resources and his scientific and technical knowledge, for no people, no nation, can move and grow except with and by the

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5 http://www.blackpast.org/1959-sekou-toure-political-leader-considered-representative-culture
6 ibid; all quotes below from Toure are from this text unless otherwise cited.
others. Any doctrine of cultural isolation of cellurization, whether its motives are a proud superiority or an unacceptable group selfishness, conceals a fatal error in consequence of which the isolated particle will succumb.’

But he did have a view that there was something distinct, uniquely African, and formulated a view that this authenticity resided not in science, which was universal, but in culture: ‘How many African intellectuals have unconsciously deprived themselves of the wealth of our culture so as to assimilate the philosophic concepts of a Descartes or a Bergson?’ he asked. ‘Intellectuals or artists, thinkers or researchers, their capacities have no values unless they really concur with the life of the people, unless they are integrated in a fundamental manner with the action, thought and aspirations of the people…It is not enough to write a revolutionary hymn to take part in the African revolution; it is necessary to act in the revolution with the people—act with the people and the hymns will come of their own accord…In order to exercise authentic action, it is necessary to be oneself a living part of Africa and its thought, an element in that popular energy which is totally mobilized for the Liberation, progress and happiness of Africa.’

I have remarked that by 1953 Fodiba Keita was seen as the most popular cultural figure, a parallel to the popularity of Sekou Toure. The historian Lansine Kaba emphasizes that Fodiba Keita was popular in a very particular way of thinking the popular: ‘Thus, he says, ‘Fodéba Keita appeared to be a classic example of a ‘popular’ artist, this word suggesting a patient search for the best interpretation of the folklore and soul of the people, in a repertoire consistent both with old norms and modern play techniques and language. The songs and dances of the Ballets attempted to convey an authentic expression of the traditional musical heritage, as well as of the
changing image of modern Africa. Accordingly, the new culture did not need to break with the past. It rather reinforced the link between past values, present conditions, and future goals. A 'living' culture is thus a rational qualitative transformation of the traditional situation rather than a rejection of it; and the quality of the present lies in its conformity with what remains significant in the cultural heritage. Within this context, Fodéba was an authentic bard, and a faithful student of history and politics. His writing revealed the simplicity of the elementary-school composition, the mastery of portrayal, and the charm of African story telling. The association of these qualities constituted his originality, and was the source of his appeal to African audiences’.

This relation between heritage, the concept of a living culture, and its anti-colonial elements, was not lost on Sekou Toure. In the same speech of 1959 I have quoted from above, Toure made special mention of Fodiba Keita. Making reference to the troupe of performers that Keita and others from West Africa formed in Paris that became known as the Les Ballet Africains, Toure noted with great praise: ‘Take the example of the Ballets of our comrade Keita Fodeiba which for several years have been touring the world to reveal through the medium of that traditional mode of expression, African dancing, the cultural, moral and intellectual values of our Society. And yet it was not at the Paris Opera or the Vienna Opera that these artists were initiated. Their choreographic initiation merely starts from their authentically African education and the national consciousness of our artistic values. The troupe is an anonymous troupe in which there is no first or second star. The singers only know the popular songs of Africa as they learned them in their far-off village. The value of the troupe of our comrade Keita Fodeiba is its authenticity, and it will have done more to reveal the social and choreographic values of Africa than will ever be done by all the
works of colonial inspiration which have been written on this subject. And that because no author has been able or has understood how to interpret the internal significance of the dance, which is, in Africa, a part of the social and intellectual life of the people.’

Between 1958-1968, a decade of independence, and through his political role, Fodiba Keita became one of the most influential voices shaping the new Ministry of Arts and Culture under Sekou Toure’s rule. It is a period that Kaba describes as a renaissance of sorts. There was a vigorous investment in resources and energy that drew on the traditional aspects of cultural life, seen as a heritage, to rehabilitated, but in a way that had defined the popular in Keita’s own stylistic reworking’s of the old and the new. It was less a recovery than a reworking but alert to time and place.

As Kaba puts it: “Every administrative region created its own artistic groups, combining the knowledge and skills of the old musicians with the imperatives of the new socio-political context. Modern dance orchestras emerged in every town, transforming traditional songs into popular music for nightclubs, using African languages and instruments, and thus contributing to the campaign against cultural dependence on France. This renaissance of classical and popular national music was accompanied by a programme of adult and rural education, which has to some extent raised the level of literacy. In summary, the first decade of Guinean independence led to an increased awareness of cultural heritage and pride, and the formulation of a positive ideology of further cultural development.’
But as the relationship between the popular masses that heralded in political
independence shifted, and the ruling nationalist party recalibrated its own ideological,
geopolitical place in the world, and centralization of the vanguardist role the party
under Toure, 1968 marks the introduction of the Guinean Cultural Revolution in
Guinea.

Sekou Toure declared at the time: 'Europe should neither dominate nor guide our
cultural evolution, for she can do it only at the expense of our independence, our
spiritual values and our sense of responsibility." The Cultural Revolution entailed a
gradual renunciation of French and a plan of literacy in African languages. Related to
this had been the elaboration of 'a revolutionary literature', breaking with foreign
patterns and criteria, and expressing the national realities through Touré's own
writing. The search for this curriculum involved a critique of African literature in
European languages. Indeed, in reply to the question, 'What had been until now the
cultural role of the African writer?’ Touré stated that the native intellectual writing in
a foreign language thought he was expressing Africa, but was really developing value
systems which had no relation with indigenous societies. He continued this argument
as follows:

“we have to renounce and even combat all the absurd complexes through which it was
assumed that true intelligence must absorb knowledge in Paris, Berlin, London or
New York … The engineer, the professor or the writer whom we will train here in
Africa will be socially superior to the one educated overseas, for he will have not lost
contact with African realities at any moment. As this suggests, the maintenance and
transmission of cultural authenticity require a physical and permanent association
with the tang of native soil and fellow countrymen, thereby rejecting the notions of
assimilation and mission civilisatrice, and rebuking the idea of rediscovering one's heritage. The Cultural Revolution thus implies that the native writer seeking and interpreting his past, while living in Europe, has totally lost it, and cannot fully return to it because of the fictive nature of the new rediscovery. This view, suggests Kaba, also legitimized Toure’s own literary claims- Toure had written over 20 books on all matters from science to philosophy and poetry- since he did not study or live in any foreign country.

Through his close relationship to Toure, and his active role in the state, including two Ministerial roles, Fodeba Keita was part of establishing the centralized party machinery and its repressive apparatuses to enact the Cultural Revolution. At the same time, both he, and the novelist Camara Laye, were celebrated abroad as exemplary figures of the African artistic community, particularly in the Francophone world. It was a combination of his popularity abroad, and what was perceived as his influential role in the state, that created the intrigued that undid him. Fodeba Keita soon found himself being held in suspicion by Sekou Toure. Fodeba was arrested in 1969 and charged with conspiracy, and sentenced to death by a military court and executed in a prison that, as Kaba points out, was built under his tenure as Minister of Internal Affairs. The novelist Camara Laye, who had a very different political presence, fled Guinea ended up living a destitute exile in Dakar.  

Their works, novels and audio recordings were banned and they were only to be name

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as enemies of the state and nation, not the cultural icons they had been. In 2002 an exhumation of a mass grave near the infamous Camp Boiro\(^8\) concentration camp next to the prison where Fodeba Keita was executed in Conakry, uncovered 50,000 bodies, a tally that added dramatically to the thousands of alleged enemies of the Cultural Revolution, so called enemies of the Revolution and the Nation who perished during that time.

It is striking that when Sekou Toure articulated his vision for the Cultural Revolution in 1967 that he pointed out the absurdity that knowledge had to be learnt in Paris, London and New York. In the Francophone world, it was comment directed in particular to some of the intellectuals in neighbouring Senegal- in particular against Senghor and the Negritude movement.

As Sekou Toure was to declare: “Négritude is presented by some 'de-Africanized' philosophers as a scientific and mobilizing given. Now négritude is a nonsense which, unfortunately, is still taught in African schools. This definition of 'negro' in relation to Africa is a kind of negation of ourselves … Négritude is not an objective criterion, for skin colour is a fact related to the conditions of the milieu… Among animals, has the bovine race the same colour? No! And some people want to determine man's nature according to his colour! Négritude is a product of history, a product of white people who practiced systems of domination, exploitation, oppression, colonialism, and imperialism. The theoretical justification of this system is to deny Africans all human capacities.”

\(^8\) There is an extensive Francophone literature on Camp Boiro. In English a brief discussion can be found in Manthia Diawara’s memoir (1990) *In Search of Africa*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press p38
It was of course against that line most associated with Senghor by critics of Negritude, that Toure was railing: the line that ‘Emotion is Negro, Reason is Hellenic’, or in other translations, ‘Emotion is Negro- Reason is Hellenic’.

Against this, Sekou Toure retorted: “we permit the adversary to destroy us with a racism which we had thought of as being anti-racist, and we give them new arms to destroy and despise us, since we affirm in the face of the world that 'if reason is Hellenic, 'emotion is Negro'. Thus we now make a full confession: we Africans were emotion, irrationality, illogism, if not unreasonable, while they as the majestic heirs to Greco-Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Germano-Saxon civilisations have always been 'Reason'. Négritude therefore has been a subjective reaction. It is the expression of a depersonalization and alienation of Black human values…”.

Let me now in the last section of my comments here today, leave Lansine Kaba’s account of Toure, and the tragedy of Fodeba Keita, and turn briefly to a conversation on Senghor and Negritude that Sekou Toure’s critique invites us to reflect on.

I would urge you all to read Souleymane Bachir Diagne’s 2011 meditation on Senghor, *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson, and Negritude*. In this work Diagne offers a profoundly thoughtful reinterpretation of the legacy of both Senghor and Negritude. His reading dismantles with great care and finesse, the sloganized ways and easy dismissals that have characterized criticism of Negritude- as essentialist, and romantic, and as racialized. He offers us a Senghor that does not lend himself to the binary of black or white essentialisms, , nor the ontological and
epistemic binary of Europe versus Africa, nor a colonized self versus an authentic self. Through a reading inspired partly by Henry Bergson and Nietzsche, Bachir Diagne’s Senghor stands in strong contrast to the kind of cultural decolonization- a decolonization I would say of rejection, displacement, destruction and erasure, that Sekou Toure’s cultural revolution offers us as an historical inheritance.

When describing the intellectual and political milieu from which Negritude emerged, and remember its emergence was seen by the writers and poets of Negritude as a movement, as something distinctly African, an act of self-reclamation and assertion- when describing that, Diagne notices in his excavation of its archive, that it is “a product of the Harlem Renaissance, it is also a product of Jean Paul Sartre, of Henri Bergson, of Lucien Levy Bruhl, of Karl Marx and Frederich Engels, of Ferdinand Goerge Frobenius, of Pablo Picasso, of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin…”. In other words, it- Negritude- is, ‘the theoretical use of all available means’.

Where Sekou Toure later sort to expunge a certain inheritance of the West and its traces in his form of revolutionary decolonization, Senghor’s project was to immerse oneself in the heritage of the traditions of thought available from all parts of the world, but to refashion those through the creative act of expression into a distinctly African philosophy. For this reason, as Diagne and others have argued, for Senghor, African art was philosophy. The plastic arts were rhythm, and in his Bergsonian way, rhythms were movement. African philosophy would therefore cultivate an ethic of movement, beginnings, as Edward Said argued, rather than origins. The question then was not of a fidelity to an originary moment, but a fidelity to movement, to invention, to a constant creative vitalism that would draw into itself its influences. We might say that the echo of Nietzsche’s last lines in the essay on the Uses and Abuses of History
ring here, when he encourages a certain act of individual imagination- when he says, ‘organize the chaos around us into our own needs’. Or as I have quoted Bachir Diagne’s rendering of this injunction – as ‘the theoretical use of all available means’.

I hope that I have said enough to suggest that when the question might be asked of those who raise the question of decolonization of the epistemic field there are at least two questions that emerge from within the inheritance of predicaments we inherit in the strange temporality of our decolonizing moment. Firstly, when we are asked, do we want to return the particular against the universal, do we want to step out of the global and the cosmopolitan into the local and parochial, we might want to pause before answering affirmatively. Some of us have been called applied nationalists for making the argument that our location and history matters to how we fashion our futures. This is not to make light of the very important skeptical voices and the questions they pose. And we only need to turn to the current predicament on Indian campuses to worry about that. Or recall some experiences of decolonization, like in Guinea, that I have just alluded to.

But what these skeptics seem to miss is that there is an authorizing structure of nationalism that animated the project of universalism in its imperial and colonial forms, as well as the revolt against it, which as the Indian scholar Partha Chatterjee so eloquently reminded us, was not simply a derivative discourse9. I have found Edward Said helpful here. He was well aware of the ambiguity of nationalism in the anti-colonial revolt, and worked within it while being critical of it. For him it was an

indispensable phase towards a certain kind of future defined not by more identity politics but in a certain way, toward a future less defined by identity politics. For Said it was not about giving up identity, but about dealing with the destructiveness that follows the investment of identity with a political stake. For him, sensitive to the colonial predicament of postcolonial modernity, and of the question of Palestine in his own biography, one had to first have the right to the identity in order to exercise the sovereign right to choose to give it up. It was a question of how and in which way to do that without erasing the distinctiveness of histories of filiation. Colonial occupation precisely withholds sovereignty and by extension invalidates the right to choose one’s identity. Recall his poignant discussion on the figure of the exile through the writings of those he admired: Nietzsche, Lukacs, Auerbach and Adorno, Said paused on a remarkable quote by Victor St Hugo cited by the exiled Erich Auerbach: ‘the tender soul’ said St Hugo, ‘has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.’ But as Said went on to emphasize-- lest we see in that a rejection of an attachment to place that a colonized and exiled subject holds on to-- for St Hugo ‘the “strong” or “perfect man” achieves independence and detachment by working through attachments, not rejecting them.’

Attachments, to histories, and what he called experiences, were central to Said’s formulation of a critical consciousness. Decolonizing the curriculum stems from a critical consciousness that opens the possibility to recognize the injustice that cultivates what Gyatri Spivak has called asymmetrical ignorance- the view that we must know your traditions, but you have no need to know ours. And it allows us to

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appreciate and come to terms with the importance of attachment, the political necessity and pracarity of naming. To say we need to Africanize our universities is perhaps to say we need to work in order to define anew for ourselves what that might mean and work towards shaping it. We do not drift without form or shape in an ocean from nowhere that is everywhere, and that knows only the atemporality of cosmopolitanism. Ours is indeed a particular time and a particular story where iron shackles mark place, where slave clocks mark time, where textbooks encouraged shame, were trespass was the name for walking between town and countryside. This is what is particular about our universality.

But in that injunction to register difference, there are resources from which to think of difference not as severance or displacement or amputation, but a different, perhaps more equitable form of articulation of conjunction, of suturing. There is a way in which Said found in his other passion, that of music, a way to imagine this kind of living together, glimpsed in his work with the Israeli pianist and conductor, Daniel Barenboim. It was a collaboration that gave practice to counterpoint, a musical concept that he put to political work in the world. Here is John Rahn elaborating on counterpoint:

It is hard to write a beautiful song. It is harder to write several individually beautiful songs that, when sung simultaneously, sound as a more beautiful polyphonic whole. The internal structures that create each of the voices separately must contribute to the emergent structure of the polyphony, which in turn must reinforce and comment on the structures of the individual voices. The way that is
accomplished in detail is ... “counterpoint.”

The second question this inheritance bequeaths to us is the relationship between thought- intellectual and political thought, and how we consider the political effects of these. There are moments of convergence in the early thinking of Sekou Toure and Senghor in the rendition of him we have from Souleymane Bachir Diagne. Both seemingly disavow a return to an idealized pre-colonial African subject, both seemingly disavow a certain kind of Afrocentricity in their conception of Africanity, acknowledging universality as the repository of a multitude of sources, even as also disavow a universalism that erases the particularity of what it means to be African, or a distinctively African vantage point on the universal. But as Lansine Kaba notes in his paper, the political effects of Toure’s project, leading to the centralization of power and the mass killings of those who come to be seen to be threats to the African revolution and the will of the people, as embodied in the figure of Toure himself, is a markedly different history to that of Senegal and its relatively plural and embracing ‘tolerance’ in the political sphere.

How then to we understand politics in relation to political thought? It seems evident that political thought might best be thought of as glimpsed in political practice, not as a discrete domain of the textual object, but as a script of political life understood in the concrete practices of political subjects.

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