Jean Sénac and the Embodied Poetics of Emancipation

My paper will focus on the work of Algerian poet Jean Sénac (1926-1973) and will argue that he is a crucial literary link between pre-independence and post-independence Algeria through a poetic project that reflects and represents the three stages of Algeria’s struggle against France: the first period bearing the influence of French Modernist and Surrealist poets (Verlaine, Hugo, Mallarmé, Char) during the colonial period (pre-1954); the second period inspired by Third World revolutionary poets and writers (René Depestre, Frantz Fanon, Cheikh Anta Diop) during the Algerian War (1954-1962); and finally the role of American poets (Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti) in Sénac’s later (and lesser known) erotic poetry after Algerian independence (post-1962). While Algerian literature and poetry have often represented the historical, cultural and linguistic conflicts of Algeria’s war for independence, for example the works of Katek Yacine, there are very few examples of Algerian writers as politically committed as Jean Sénac. As a pied noir Algerian who never knew his father, a strong advocate of Algerian nationalism and independence, a poet who strove to reconcile French and Algerian linguistic and literary traditions, an openly gay writer looking to bring to Algeria the sexual revolution of the 60s, a strong advocate for an international poetic movement among Third World, Beat and African American poets (whom he represented in his radio shows on Radio Algiers), and one of the first casualties of the violent repression starting in the early 70s, Sénac is paradigmatic of a violent cultural displacement that would become increasingly widespread. While prose was often privileged in the narration and exploration of this displacement, poetry has been given much less critical attention and arguably it is resistant to the predominant subject position of post-colonial studies.

My presentation will expand parts of my dissertation, Jean Sénac, poet of the Algerian Revolution, and will draw from archival research conducted in Algeria and France in 2014, partially published in Jean Sénac: The Sun Under the Weapons, Correspondence & Notes from Algeria (Parts I & II), Lost & Found Series V, Spring 2015, CUNY. I will be referencing the crucial work of Hamid Nacer-Khodja, Algerian scholar and teacher who played a central role in revealing the work of Jean Sénac and his essential contribution to Algerian culture. I will be also be providing a new theoretical framework through a number of American poets of the 50s, 60s and 70s (Jack Spicer, Charles Olson, Muriel Rukeyser, Amiri Baraka) who were contemporaries of Jean Sénac, thus bringing a new perspective on the Algerian struggle for a poetic language that could transmit and embodied politics of emancipation.