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CULTURAL ATTACHÉS: AFRICAN LITERATURE, THE CIA, AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION

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African literature

Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

Cold War modernism

Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF)

hermeneutics of suspicion

Mphahlele, Es'kia

Recent attempts to outline post-critical models of interpretation in literary studies have often fixated on suspicion, paranoia, or unmasking as their foils. But in the early decades of decolonization, it made sense to be paranoid: writers and artists were justified in suspecting that they were being covertly observed, funded, or promoted by para-state actors knee-deep in the Cold War battlefield of culture. Scholars have long debated whether and how covert state sponsorship for the arts matters. In postcolonial studies especially there has been a revival of interest in the CIA's activities as a cultural patron through its proxy foundation, the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF). Recent research on the CCF has tended to concentrate on what its clandestine sponsorship means for aesthetic autonomy – the notion that the artist has or ought to have some relative autonomy from meddling outside forces, a cherished value of both modernism and mid-century humanism. Focusing on the CCF's support for African modernism, this essay suggests that we need to look beyond autonomy as our default paradigm for assessing Cold War cultural patronage. Instead of joining the debate over what the CCF did or did not do to African literature, this essay asks: what did they even think they were

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doing? Drawing on research in the CCF archives, this essay argues that a better way to understand the CCF's approach is as a practice of attachment. The aim here is to re-describe Cold War cultural patronage – and, along the way, to ask what scholars of decolonization and the Cold War might stand to learn by engaging with ongoing debates about methodology in the broader field of literary studies.

Is it paranoid reading if they really are out to get you? What happens to the hermeneutics of suspicion if you really are being watched? Recent attempts to outline post-critical models of interpretation in literary studies have often taken a constellation of cagy affects as their foil – suspicion, paranoia, unmasking. For scholars of literature especially, the phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion" has taken on new life beyond Ricoeur and come to connote a critical thought-style bent on extracting hidden truths from texts or archives that stubbornly conceal them (Ricoeur [1970] 2008). In different ways and for different ends, Eve Sedgwick, Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, Stephen Best, and Rita Felski have all invited us to think beyond symptomatic reading as a default mode of cultural analysis (Sedgwick 2003; Marcus, Love, and Best 2016; Felski 2015). Their interventions have in turn sparked plenty of thoughtful responses and ripostes. This essay joins the conversation on method at a slightly different angle by exploring the warrant for suspicious reading at a site where one might expect it to be at its most justified: the manipulation of the postwar literary field by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), through its proxy organization the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF).

Although there is an abundance of recent work on the Congress for Cultural Freedom, scholars' assessments of the organization's impact on cultural production have tended to fall into two opposing camps whose boundaries are traced in response to the question of how paranoid one ought to be: either the CCF is portrayed as an astonishingly successful manipulator of the world republic of letters, or else it is a largely blameless philanthropic outfit since its CIA backing was unknown to most participants. These interpretations may seem opposed, but they are in fact united by their reliance on a normative understanding of aesthetic autonomy – the idea of art as a space of relative or provisional autonomy from outside forces. Suspicious readers of the CCF's interventions tend to argue that the institution compromised the autonomy of those whom it sponsored, whereas the opposing camp would tend to argue that such autonomy was not compromised since no one knew about the real origins of the money. In both cases, though, the engine of the argument is the need to prove or disprove the CCF's impact on the

aesthetic autonomy of those with whom it worked. On the one side, there are those who would place emphasis on the covert nature of the CCF operation and use terms like infiltrate and manipulate, uncover and reveal. And, on the other side, there are those who would insist on a lack of awareness among key players, or point to the ways the CCF perhaps served as a mere facilitator. While acknowledging the seriousness of the stakes here, my sense is that these positions simply do not exhaust the full spectrum of critical possibilities. Rather than pitting such interpretations against each other, I am curious about what becomes possible if we carefully consider what was *not* covert about the CCF. A fixation with aesthetic autonomy has generated an impasse that now stands in the way of a better understanding of what the CCF were actually doing.

Drawing on my own research in the archives of the CCF's African section, I argue that existing interpretations of the CCF are insufficient and that a reappraisal is overdue. Rather than trying either to unmask or explain away the CCF's impact on the cultural field, I seek instead to explore how the organization actually characterized its own aims and practices. My research shows that the predominant register used within the CCF to describe its work of cultural patronage was not a vocabulary of freedom or autonomy, but rather one of *attachment*. How would literary histories of the Cold War and decolonization look different if we were to take the CCF's account of itself seriously? And why should we bother doing so? My goal in this essay is neither to excuse nor to defend the CCF but simply to point out that the existing research has been so invested in arguing over the impact of its CIA backing that we have paid relatively little attention to what the CCF actually thought it was doing. My aim, then, is to re-describe Cold War cultural patronage – and, along the way, to ask what scholars of decolonization and the Cold War might stand to learn by engaging with ongoing debates about methodology in the broader field of literary studies.

In line with the larger theme of this issue, this essay also gestures toward ways of expanding our understanding of the discourses and practices of mid-century humanism. As internally diverse as the formations of the human could be in this era, they often shared a concern with rehabilitating the human as a locus for the practice of freedom in the service of transformations of various kinds. A focus on attachments complicates the idealism of mid-century humanist articulations of freedom, not by revealing them to be mere ideology, but rather by turning up the volume on the forms of cultural agency that were actually being practiced in support of them.

My case study is the CCF's support for African literary modernism in the 1960s. I focus especially on Ezekiel Mphahlele, the South African writer who was the Director of the African Section of the CCF from 1961 to 1963. During his tenure, Mphahlele traveled widely and organized many of the CCF's most famous projects, from the magazines *Transition* and *Black*

Orpheus to the Mbari Writers' Club and the Makerere Writers' Conferences (Kalliney 2015; Rogers 2017; Spahr 2018). In readings of the correspondence between Mphahlele, his staff, and a variety of African writers and intellectuals, I argue against interpretations of the CCF that prioritize aesthetic autonomy as their default hermeneutic paradigm. Attachment turns out to be the better idiom for understanding what the CCF was up to. While Bruno Latour's thinking on attachment does serve as a helpful interlocutor in these pages, I stress that I am not seeking to merely apply an actor-network perspective to the archives of the cultural Cold War. Rather, my goal is to ask what it might mean that some of Latour's key insights on power and agency seem to have been anticipated by these mid-century cultural brokers.

I conclude this essay with a reflection on the status of failure in literary history. Scholars have long tended to measure the CCF's influence in terms of its most spectacular successes: the marquee conferences it organized, the blue-chip careers it helped launch. While such a yardstick has obvious appeal, it is completely at odds with how CCF staff actually seem to have understood their work. Rather than primarily aiming at entangling themselves and their agenda with big-name artists and intellectuals (which they did at times do and are arguably best known for today), what often seems to have counted the most for the CCF were their countless and often mundane attempts at forging connections between individuals and institutions – many more of which failed than succeeded. In short, this was an institution that seems to have cared as much or more about its failed attachments than it did about the ones that now appear to us as landmarks. I ask what this perplexing dynamic means and what literary scholars and historians, even beyond those working against the backdrop of the cultural Cold War, could stand to learn from engaging with failure.

A hermeneutics of justifiable suspicion?

If there ever were grounds for a hermeneutics of justifiable suspicion, surely they would be found in the literary landscape of the Cold War. In the early decades of decolonization, a certain watchfulness (often in volatile admixture with optimism) was a common mood in literary production in what was then called the third world. And rightly so. Both contemporaneous revelations and more recent archival retrievals showed that mid-century writers were often justified in suspecting that they were being covertly watched, funded, or promoted by the para-state actors knee-deep in the soft-power Cold War battlefield of culture. The CIA's covert patronage of a dizzying array of artists and institutions through proxy foundations, notably the CCF, is the most famous

case. Active from roughly 1950 to 1967, the Congress funded projects across the globe. After the CIA backing was revealed in late 1966 and early 1967 by *Ramparts* and the *New York Times*, the project began to unravel (Saunders 2013, 320). State sponsorship for culture was extensive on the Soviet side, although less covert, making this field of research slower to emerge (Djagalov 2020; Popescu 2020). In the 1960s, then, there were good reasons for writers and artists to be suspicious of who was backing them and why.

Given such a paranoid literary milieu, can it be any wonder that suspicion also saturates much of the scholarship on this period? Although the CIA backing of the CCF has been known and discussed since the late 1960s, it was really only in the early 2000s that comprehensive, archivally driven research on the organization started to appear. Much of this early scholarship on the CCF focused on the North Atlantic, where the CCF was most visibly active (Coleman 1989; Scott-Smith 2003; Saunders 2013). Since these influential studies, the floodgates have opened for a wave of scholars examining the actions of the CCF across the globe, from the Middle East to the Caribbean, Southeast Asia to Africa (Rubin 2012; Holt 2013; Kalliney 2015; Rogers 2017; Spahr 2018; Djagalov 2020; Popescu 2020). This more recent research is diverse in its approaches and generative in its conclusions, but like earlier debates it circles the drain of a nagging question: what do we do with the covert CIA sponsorship of the arts in the age of decolonization?

Strongly suspicious readings of the archives of Cold War soft power have generated a critical stalemate. Scholars who grapple with this material sometimes seem compelled to pick a side: either the CIA's secret sponsorship mattered greatly and ought to shift our understanding of the topic at hand, or else it did not matter much, since it was covert and perhaps even benign in intent. Some might argue that while the CCF's involvement was extensive, ultimately its CIA backing matters little since it was clandestine and rarely crossed into direct interference. Others maintain that literature in this era was an instance of "state capture," with the CIA via the CCF working behind the scenes to amplify certain voices and views at the expense of others to the point that the autonomy of many mid-century writers and institutions was compromised. Both positions are attractive. Yet both are difficult to square neatly with the archival record. There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that the CCF was not always a mere funding source, and yet it would be difficult to argue that they consistently and single-mindedly amplified only (liberal) voices while marginalizing other (Left, Marxian) ones. After the scandal of CIA involvement broke in the late 1960s, Unsī al-Ḥājj, a former writer for the Arabic journal *Ḥiwār* (which took Congress money), wondered what it all meant: who had had the last laugh, he asked, "the Marxists who got the CIA to spread their ideas, or the CIA who made Marxists write in an "American" journal?" (quoted in Holt 2013, 98).

Although the Congress's sponsorship of mid-century African writers and literary institutions has long been known, the controversy around it has remained remarkably evergreen.[1] In the past decade especially, archivally driven research into the CCF has produced numerous monographs and articles that offer a range of interpretations of the issue of its CIA backing and whether it matters. Based on his work in the archives of the CCF and its affiliate, the Transcription Centre, Peter Kalliney (2015, 338) concluded that, "it seems highly unlikely that more than a few people at the CCF – and certainly not Mphahlele – were witting participants, to use the lingo of Cold War espionage, before the story broke." Andrew Rubin (2012, 72), by contrast, insists that the CCF's "regulation of thought" in Africa was acute and that the "self-reflexive, self-aggrandizing, and self-serving activities of the CCF saturated and subsequently shaped the limits of a whole generation of postcolonial Anglophone writing in Africa." Caroline Davis (2020, 28) largely agrees with Rubin, arguing that CCF sponsorship was "the covert means by which the United States exerted its cultural imperialism." Bhakti Shringarpure (2019, 165, 151) suggests that the CCF "largely succeeded" in promoting an apolitical modernism as the core of a transnational postcolonial Anglophone canon and identifies several ways in which the CCF "controlled and manipulated culture," including the cross-publishing of curated authors across CCF publications. Juliana Spahr (2018, 105) largely shares this interpretation of the CCF as a signal-booster: "Basically, the United States, through the CIA and private foundations, manipulated the world republic of letters to be more amenable to their political concerns. They belittled […] more resistant and autonomous literatures such as Negritude. They amplified a small number of writers whose concerns they felt overlapped their own." Asha Rogers (2017, 253–254) offers a more circumspect appraisal: "the CCF played a critical role in facilitating cultural modernism in anglophone Africa during decolonisation. Working with a relatively select set of elites, its funding created space for the literary forms, modes of criticism, and debates that would dominate African literary critical discourse in the second half of the twentieth century."

1 For a demonstration of the scandal's enduring potential to spark a polemic, see Soyinka (2021).

The mid-century African writers who were actually involved with the CCF experienced a similar split over whether and how it all mattered. Mphahlele (1967, 6) was defensive: "We must naturally bite our lips in indignation when we learn the CIA has been financing our projects. But it is dishonest to pretend that the value of what has been thus achieved is morally tainted […] we have done nothing with the knowledge that the money came from the CIA; nor have we done anything we would not have done if the money had come from elsewhere." Soyinka, whose plays were promoted by the CCF, was more damning: "we had been dining, and with relish, with the original of that serpentine incarnation, the devil, romping in our postcolonial Garden of Eden and gorging on the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge!

Nothing – virtually no project, no cultural initiative – was left unbrushed by the CIA's reptilian coils" (quoted in Rubin 2012, 73). An enduring split, then, from the moment the scandal broke: either everything was done in ignorance or else this was stunningly tentacular manipulation.

For mid-century writers and the scholars who study them, the problem of CIA involvement often turns on the question of aesthetic autonomy. As Andrew Goldstone shows, aesthetic autonomy has meant many things. A multifaceted problem space for aesthetic theory with roots stretching back to Kant's *Third Critique*. A peculiarly modernist obsession (Goldstone 2013). Aesthetic autonomy also remains a vital concept for scholars working on the cultural Cold War, since it helps us interrogate relationships between art and power. To make sense of the CCF, scholars have employed a variety of sophisticated frameworks which think through art's relative or provisional autonomy – including Bourdieu's field theory, and Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of the culture industry (Rubin 2012; Spahr 2018). These interpretations are compelling, but what are we to do with the fact that Bourdieu, Adorno, and Horkheimer all appear on a list of participants in seminars organized by the Congress ("Participants in Congress Seminars" n.d., 15, 16)? I don't bring this up merely to be flippant, but rather to suggest that this bizarre detail is less the exception than the rule. The archives of the Congress for Cultural Freedom overflow with moments such as this, moments that do not yield an "aha!" so much as a "what the hell?" The CCF's strangeness and eclecticism as a mid-century cultural player raises an important and underexamined question: what on earth did they think they were up to?

Autonomy tends to lead us toward readings of the CCF that are paranoid in one of two ways – either autonomy must be reclaimed as an aesthetic value through an indictment of the CIA involvement that compromised it, or it must be rescued by explaining away the complicity that might have compromised it. Although these two interpretations appear opposed, in fact they converge in their commitment to autonomy as a lens through which to understand the entanglement of the CIA and aesthetics at mid-century. In other words, both positions are equally suspicious – one just seeks to confirm its suspicions while the other seeks to allay them. The riddle of the Congress for Cultural Freedom is in fact a simple irony: how does the promotion of "cultural freedom" end up weaving a tangled web of patronage that undermines the aesthetic autonomy of those involved? This appears a contradiction to many, but was it really experienced as such? What if the apparent disconnect between theory and practice was never a bug for the CCF, but rather a feature?

My argument runs counter to the dominant ways in which the Congress for Cultural Freedom has been understood. Rather than understanding them as being engaged in the promotion of cultural autonomy or cultural freedom, I

suggest that their goals and practices seem rather to have been oriented toward the creation of attachments – between writers, artists, institutions, and so on. We need to reconsider how we hear the "freedom" in "Congress for Cultural Freedom." A helpful pivot here is Bruno Latour's axiom: emancipation is not being free of bonds, it is to be well attached (Latour 2005, 229).[2] Whatever we think of the universal applicability of Latour's claim, it more accurately and more consistently describes the CCF's approach than do either of the two dominant interpretations, which insist on arguing over legible complicity or causation. A reorientation in how we hear "freedom" here is helpful precisely because it squares the apparent circle between what the CCF professed to believe and what it actually practiced. Clearly, the CCF did indeed think of itself as working toward the goal of "freedom." Countless pieces of archival evidence point to this. But just as clearly, they did in practice often seem to pursue entanglements that would be compromising to any understanding of freedom as being unfettered from obligation. An equally imposing body of evidence can be brought into play here. If we attempt to make this tension fit within an understanding of freedom as being free from constraints, we tend to get a dissonance which we may either choose to pounce upon or explain away. But if we replace freedom-as-autonomy with an understanding of freedom-as-attachment, the nature of the CCF's work comes into clearer focus. The freedom that the CCF worked toward was *not* the freedom of being unconstrained or autonomous. It was the freedom of being well attached.

2 In *Hooked*, Rita Felski elaborates on Latour's thinking on attachment to rethink aesthetics (Felski 2020). Although I am sympathetic to aspects of Felski's project, my interest in attachment is not so much about how we become captivated by works of art, but rather how thinking through attachment helps us understand the nature and stakes of Cold War cultural patronage beyond a default lens of suspicion.

Let me be clear that such a re-description of the CCF should not be confused with an exculpation. It is *not* my claim that the CCF was merely a philanthropic institution interested in "connecting" writers and artists – as we shall see, the attachments they cultivated pose pressing questions about the complicity of those involved. But taking attachment seriously as a paradigm for understanding the CCF does change how the question of complicity can be posed. Setting aside approaches to this archive that aim a priori to prove or disprove complicity (whether individual or institutional) may understandably arouse concern. In response, I can do no better than to echo Eve Sedgwick: "to practice other than paranoid forms of knowing does not, in itself, entail a denial of the reality or gravity of enmity or oppression" (Sedgwick 2003, 128). Re-describing the archives of the cultural Cold War need not entail a foreclosure of critique, but we can and should reflect on what tools and assumptions we bring to the study of these entanglements. As attractive as a hermeneutics of justifiable suspicion is with regard to the CCF, it tends to foreclose consideration of a simpler set of truths: what the CCF was "up to" was not that hidden; and, untidy as it will come to seem, their work did have a coherence to it that is not reducible to a grand scheme of tentacular manipulation. The price of understanding this will be that we provisionally set aside litigating the complicity of individual writers, artists, or movements and

instead examine the CCF's work on its own terms. Far from disavowing the seriousness of the issues raised by CIA sponsorship of the arts, I hope to outline a different set of questions about the CCF and African modernisms. Rather than asking, "what did they really do?," I begin with an equally fundamental question: "what did they even think they were doing?"

"Heightening attachment"

How did the Congress for Cultural Freedom understand attachment? Let me turn to a confidential memo that was authored by Edward Shils. A professor at the University of Chicago and editor of the quarterly *Minerva*, Shils was a key figure in the Congress and had known of the CIA backing since the mid-1950s (Saunders 2013, 332). While Shils never tips his hand in the memo, he is more frank than usual in outlining "how far and under what conditions" the CCF might fortify "liberal, spirited and serious intellectuals" in newly decolonizing countries "without discrediting them as foreign stooges, or making them feel we are manipulating them for purposes beyond the intellectual fellowship and the heightening of the prospects of creativity which are our true concerns" (Shils n.d., 3). Shils frames the Congress's project as post-ideological:

> The congress does not seek to obtain subscriptions to an ideology. It does not seek to win intellectuals away from loyalty to their countries. It does aim, however, to heighten their attachment to universally valid standards of devotion to truth, to intellectual curiosity, and to the appreciation of creativity. It aims to cultivate an openness of spirit, a readiness to share experience and insight. […] Since the Congress does not aim to adhere to an ideology, it does not have to formulate one. […] [The Congress] wishes to weaken the barriers which separate intellectuals, rather than to strengthen them. (Shils n.d., 1)

To us justifiably suspicious readers, this is dangerous nonsense. Any claim to a lack of ideology cannot help but be ideological. But something else comes into focus if we take the memo seriously as an account of the CCF's practices. Shils' claims that the CCF was interested in "heightening attachment" and "weakening barriers" turn out to be a fair description of how the staff of the CCF, in its African section at least, explained and practiced cultural patronage. Rather than furthering an ideological agenda by any means necessary, the CCF staff often seemed to care *more* about the attachments they cultivated than the results of the projects. An example appears in the same memo, where Shils discusses the usefulness of one of the Congress's major forms of cultural work: the organizing of conferences and study

groups for writers, artists, and academics. Although he was one of the principal architects of such programs,[3] Shils candidly admits the seminars were pretty terrible (Shils n.d., 6). But after listing their shortcomings, he recommends that the Congress not only stick with them but search for new participants. In his opinion, their usefulness lay not in the propagation of particular views (a welcome byproduct, for Shils) but rather in their capacity to strengthen a sense of attachment among the participants.

3 See extensive description of Shils in Aronova (2012).

What were these attachments? What were they good for? An exchange from within the Africa section helps to illustrate how the slightest of connections mattered to the CCF. In 1962, Michael Josselson, the CIA's man within the CCF (Shils and Coleman 2009, 437), corresponded with Françoise Robinet, the Associate Director of the Africa section about a seemingly innocuous topic: magazine subscriptions. A year earlier, the Congress had, at Josselson's urging, gifted 80 subscriptions of *La Vie Africaine* to prominent African intellectuals.[4] Now that the subscriptions were expiring, the staff of *La Vie Africaine* were wondering whether they might be interested in continuing the arrangement. Why, Robinet asked Josselson, was the CCF doing this? Would it not make more sense to subsidize subscriptions to magazines that were more closely affiliated with the Congress, such as *Transition*? After all, Robinet (1962c) observed, "un cadeau prolongé se transforme vite en dû" (a long-term gift rapidly becomes a due). In reply, Josselson defended the subscriptions as a favor to the chairman of *La Vie Africaine*'s editorial board, Gabriel D'Arboussier: "I agree with you that a drawn-out gift rapidly becomes a due," Josselson (1962) writes, "But is it not then the case as much for a magazine as for an individual, and are there not certain individuals who deserve to receive such a due?" In this banal exchange, Josselson and Robinet allude to what could go unsaid about the CCF's work not because it was concealed but because it lay somewhere between common knowledge and what couldn't quite be put into words. The thought goes something like this: "the gifts we are giving have the potential to become obligations – both to us and to their recipients – even if they may not have been initially conceived this way." In other words, one kind of attachment can become another. For Josselson, the exchange was an opportunity to reassure Robinet that, indeed, a gift potentially becoming an obligation was the point. A revealing exchange, and yet little here needs unmasking. Of course gifts become debts; that is what gifts have the potential to do, since both gifts and debts are forms of attachment.

4 For more on *La Vie Africaine*, a monthly magazine that existed from 1959 to 1965, see Bush and Ducournau (2020).

English speakers may be misled here by the ghost of a familiar idiom in translation: that old notion of a "gift with strings attached." To read this exchange in such a way is to get everything backward. The gifts the CCF were giving did not need to have strings attached because the *gifts themselves* were the strings. In other words, the CCF's approach attempted to constitute

attachments the nature and function of which were *emergent* and could be *variously construed* at a later date. This does not mean that any transaction was innocent; it simply means that the gift itself was the point.

We miss this dynamic if we focus all our energies on trying to extract or deny a linear schema of causality or ideological manipulation from what was a rather messier enterprise. There does not seem to have been – as far as the archival record of the CCF and African literature as it currently stands can allow us to say – a clear, a priori understanding amongst all involved that the CCF's gifts always entailed a hidden obligation. But this is because the gifts themselves were the agenda, and not a hidden one at that. In other words, readings of the CCF and African literature that argue for hidden complicity/manipulation or autonomy via ignorance both risk missing the point, by trying to rescue a clearer account of agency from this archive than it can yield. The attachments the CCF cultivated did not need to always be instrumental because the attachments themselves were the goal.

Mphahlele at large

To give a fuller sense of how the CCF cultivated attachments, let us consider the many projects that were undertaken across Africa in the early 1960s under the directorship of Ezekiel (Es'kia) Mphahlele. Together with his deputy Robinet, Mphahlele channeled funding to numerous cultural institutions and coordinated many conferences. Some of the more famous projects he helped organize or sponsor were alluded to earlier but his African section undertook many more schemes which remain little known. Mphahlele traveled widely in the early 1960s. Over the summer of 1962 alone, Mphahlele crisscrossed the continent, stopping in Kampala, Ibadan, Brazzaville, Yaoundé, Accra, Freetown, Dakar, Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Zomba, and Harare (then Salisbury) (Mphahlele 1962a). He made contacts, checked in on established projects, and prospected for new ventures. Mphahlele was full of plans – for libraries in Ouagadougou, writing workshops in Accra, a music festival in Nairobi, a study group in Tanganyika (Mphahlele 1962a; Hunt 1962). In his reports to headquarters, he adopted an idiom of attachment to characterize the prospects for the CCF on the continent. John Hunt (another one of the CIA-adjacent operatives within the CCF) wrote to Mphahlele in late 1962 full of praise for his summer tour and plans for the future.

> I have been following with great interest your travels in Africa. Let me say at once that I have been greatly pleased with the way you have gone about developing a Congress program in Africa and the results which you have attained thus far. In

> the course of your memoranda, you have developed a conception of what our work in Africa should be, and I want you to know that it is one with which I profoundly agree. (Hunt 1962)[5]

5 Although Hunt and Mphahlele clearly understood each other on this occasion, this was not always the case (Rogers 2017, 246).

Mphahlele's thinking on the challenges and possibilities ahead clearly harmonized with the organization's self-understanding.

In addition to his internal correspondence, Mphahlele frequently had occasion to give an account of the Congress's work when he corresponded with persons of interest he met in his travels. In these letters as well, Mphahlele typically works within a discourse of attachment to characterize the Congress to his correspondents, sometimes in the face of skepticism. For example, writing to someone who had heard him give a talk and was interested in the Congress's mission, Mphahlele (1962c) explains, "The congress was founded about 10 years ago, serves to bring together artists, writers, scientists and scholars on a common platform for an exchange of ideas and the promotion of cultural freedom. … The African Department is a new institution. Our job is to carry Congress's into Africa, and to ascertain local needs where Africans may feel inclined to ask for our sponsorship." Writing to the Kenyan economist Julius Kiano later that same year, Mphahlele offered a similar account. His African tour was

> intended to help me contact writers and artists […] with a view to ascertaining local need which Congress can assist in fulfilling, provided that the people themselves in any place incite our assistance, as they, and they alone know what cultural programme to adopt. Congress only helps financially, and leaves each group to administer itself and serve the community independently, provided such a group does not use such aid to work against an established government. […] Congress gets its funds from various American foundations and sometimes from British universities. (Mphahlele 1962d)

Regardless of his interlocutor, Mphahlele was consistent in insisting that the CCF meant to develop links and common platforms for intellectuals and that the organization tried to limit itself to responding to a local request for help.

In reality, the process of receiving aid from the Congress was a more complicated and multidirectional negotiation. Mphahlele actively prospected for cultural needs that demanded to be met. For example, in early 1962, Mphahlele wrote to his compatriot Richard Rive, describing the Congress's mission and urging Rive to seek its support:

> [The Congress] is an international organization, and my job embraces a number of things: Looking for literary and artistic talent which needs to be encouraged and sponsored; ascertaining local needs […]; to help establish links between African intellectuals, scholars, writers, artists with the purpose of creating a healthy

> climate in which ideas can grow. […] You may have in mind a project […] Whatever it is, as long as it falls in the category of culture, I should be glad […] if you could let me know what it is and the amount of money you estimate would be involved. Needless to say at this stage we should keep this matter between us. (Mphahlele 1962e)

With Mphahlele's assistance, Rive received a grant from the Farfield Foundation (also later revealed to be a CIA front) for a 1963 trip across the African continent. That journey took Rive to London, where he met Chinua Achebe and others associated with Heinemann's African Writers Series – contacts that led to *Modern African Prose*, the landmark anthology Rive edited (Viljoen 2013, 91). In other words, the connections Mphahlele cultivated ramified.

While the African Department described its work in terms of cultural attachment, its collaborators did not always share its views. The archives abound with rumors about the CCF. Mphahlele later maintained ignorance, but he was well aware of others' suspicions about the nature of their funding. Robinet (1963b) describes a cocktail party in 1963 where Mphahlele had to defend the Congress's honor against the "sterile criticisms" of fifteen "future African diplomats" who believed the CCF was all about "anti-communism, American money, ulterior motives." Suspicions also sometimes got in the way of forging local connections. In 1962, Mphahlele corresponded with J. S. Kajunjumele, who had written to ask for CCF help for a cultural and Swahili language center in Dar es Salaam before suddenly having second thoughts. Addressing Mphahlele as "my fellow African," Kajunjumele (1963) explains that he had learned that "most of European organizations are really organs of the new forms of colonialism and imperialism and that is neo-colonialism" and so he felt compelled to "check the story" and if need be withdraw his request. Mphahlele (1963d) responds with perfect equanimity, explaining that the Congress is an "international organization" which "gave aid for cultural work" but which "imposes no programme or policy." Rumor also hindered the maintenance of attachments with African partners. Again in 1962, Mphahlele's deputy Robinet describes mounting frustration with the writer and historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo, apparently the CCF's principal contact in Haute Volta, now Burkina Faso. Although the CCF had offered to help him establish a "center and a library," Ki-Zerbo was ghosting them. "Now we're getting nowhere, he does not respond to letters," Robinet (1962b, 2) observed ruefully, "I ask myself whether there is not a kind of suspicion of us." Ki-Zerbo might have lost interest in collaborating with the CCF for any number of reasons, but the fact that Robinet immediately thought of *méfiance* (mistrust, suspicion) suggests this was not an uncommon problem. Whatever skepticism they encountered, though, the staff of the African section described themselves – with

remarkable consistency and in inward and outward correspondence – as being primarily involved in the cultivation of cultural attachments.

The power of these attachments stemmed from the fact that they could be put to use in various ways. Consider the case of the Congos. The CCF was active in Congo-Brazzaville through the Institut d'Études Congolaises, an adult education center and one of its first ventures on the continent. On March 23, 1960, Hunt wrote to Robinet to ask if she might make some inquiries into the political views of one Patrice Lumumba, then a rising politician and the future first Prime Minister of the neighboring Republic of the Congo (Léopoldville). "You will note in the attached clipping a description of Lumumba's organization as "leftish." Other clippings that I see from time to time describe him as being pro-communist. Could you do some research on Mr. Lumumba's political views and affiliations and give me a brief description of what you find?" (Hunt 1960). At a seminar organized by the Congress in Berlin, Robinet chatted with Emmanuel Kimbimbi, the director of a political science institute in Léopoldville. She replied to Hunt, glossing Kimbimbi's views on Lumumba:

> [He] was off to a great start [...] man of action, and a clear leader. Unfortunately, he is very influenceable and envies the popularity of the ascendant Sekou Touré and Nkrumah. [...] Not very measured in his words or actions, and used to expressing opinions that vary greatly from one day to the next. His exact situation with regard to Communism is difficult to define even for the Congolese. Kimbimbi indicated to me that Lumumba was known on certain occasions to display the hammer and sickle in his office, which made some observers think of him as a fervent partisan of the East, but for the Congolese this was absolutely not formal proof. (Robinet 1960, 2–3)

This inquiry came at a time when the American defense establishment was trying to get a handle on Lumumba's intentions and what they might mean for control of the Congo's vast natural resources. In the same folder in the CCF archive, there is a news clipping pointing to one of the spurs for such anxiety: Lumumba surprised the Americans, the Belgians, and the Soviets by signing away the rights to a large swathe of the new nation's mining and hydroelectric portfolio to a rather louche American businessman, only to then backtrack on the deal shortly after (Le Monde 1960). As is well known, Lumumba was later deposed in a coup and taken to the secessionist province of Katanga where he was tortured and murdered by rebel and Belgian forces, all of this with at the very least the CIA's awareness, probably its blessing too.

In the exchange around Lumumba, one of the CCF's CIA minders asks its staff to draw on its network of contacts to generate information on a future African president's political leanings. Even if this information was never put

to use within the CIA, one can readily imagine making a case for culpability here. But we might also say that what this exchange shows is simply how the attachments the CCF cultivated could be put to use. The strength of the CCF's cultural network was predicated on its *emergent* quality. To be an effective resource that could be called upon, the network had to be loosely defined. If the aim of the CCF really were to generate a web of directed but hidden manipulation, such a network would have had quite a limited reach. But, conversely, the Lumumba episode also contradicts a reading of the CCF's network as being entirely innocent because unwitting, the "just another funding source" position. The CCF tended a cultural network that could in certain circumstances be called upon to generate things. But this functioned precisely by virtue of the network not being oriented toward overt manipulation. This is not to suggest that there were not real and self-conscious espionage networks at the time. But the reach and power of the CCF's network derived precisely from its *not* being uniformly politically motivated or directed.

When attachments fail

The Lumumba episode is striking, but it is an exception – at least in the African section of the archive. As far as my own research suggests, there are few moments like it. The African Department was focused not on gathering information on political leaders but rather on more banal cultural schemes. Some of these projects proved influential and are well known today – the magazines *Transition* and *Black Orpheus*, the Makerere Conference of African Writers of English Expression. But an essential yet under-remarked aspect of the Congress's work in Africa is just how often its attachments failed. For every *Transition*, there were dozens of half-baked plans that did not pan out or leave much of a trace. When we focus our attention on the highest-profile attachments that the CCF successfully cultivated in relation to African modernism – the Makerere Conference, the renowned journals – we end up with a picture of the CCF's network that is more intentional and goal-oriented than was really the case.

The CCF was entrepreneurial – to the point of being improvisational – and it generated many more failures of attachment than successful examples. Here are just a few of the most striking examples from Mphahlele's tenure: they attempted to commission the Mbari center to produce English translations of landmark francophone works by Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Aimé Césaire, Ferdinand Oyono, and Mongo Beti (Mphahlele 1962a, 7, 1963c; Beier n.d.); they ran a short story and poetry contest open to "all non-white Africans" judged by Langston Hughes (Hughes 1962); and they

underwrote an unauthorized and ultimately unreleased film version of René Maran's *Batouala* (Robinet 1963a; Esménard 1963). Many more of their projects never even left the drawing board. While these are too numerous to list, some of the more astonishing schemes include a plan to sponsor an East African lecture tour for Aimé Césaire (Mphahlele 1962a, 33); and an attempt to commission Jean Rouch to direct a film of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Mphahlele 1963e).

This list of half- or un-realized projects is tempting to dismiss, perhaps with raised eyebrows, as merely a wish list happily relegated to the dustbin of history. But we would do well to ask ourselves why the African section kept pursuing these schemes. If we recall for a moment Shils' comments on the usefulness of the seminars in spite of their poor quality, things come into clearer focus. The CCF was far less in the business of tangible results than one might imagine, and far more invested in cultivating a web of attachments than has generally been appreciated. Many smaller projects failed, but the contacts they generated were valuable. Attachments could and did lead to something more. In this perspective, projects that did not pan out could be just as useful as those that appear "successful" to posterity. Histories of modern African literatures, especially those that center around anglophone writing, tend to foreground the 1962 Makerere Writers' Conference. But the other conferences that the CCF helped organize are rarely mentioned, even though they contributed to assembling a network of attachments.[6] The more historically legible "achievements" of the CCF in Africa (Makerere, the little magazines, and so on) would not have been possible without the parallel but far less visible churn of frustrating attempts at cultural patronage. In the flurry of organizational and promotional activity leading up to and following after Makerere, for example, one constantly finds Mphahlele leveraging relationships with people he had met on his African tours the previous year, people who had not initially proved useful but who suddenly found themselves invited to travel to Kampala.

6 For an important exception, see the discussion of the Dakar and Freetown conferences in Popescu (2020, 83–86).

If the Makerere Conference shows what was possible with successful connections, a parallel project in Senegal illustrates how and why the CCF's strategy often failed. In the early 1960s, the Congress was trying to set up a Committee for Cultural Freedom in Senegal. The outlook was promising. After initial contacts between Mphahlele and President Léopold Senghor, the Senegalese government constituted by official decree in January 1962 a committee to work toward a "plan" for "cultural renewal" that would establish "links with the international or foreign organizations or movements that attach themselves to similar objectives" (Dia 1962, 1). The committee apparently had Senghor's blessing; it also included many prominent local personalities.[7] Rather quickly, though, the CCF became concerned about its Dakar franchise, which was not producing anything tangible. The goal had been to "associate President

7 The CCF's list includes President Senghor, Gabriel

d'Arboussier, Lamine Diakhaté, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Jean Rous, Vincent Monteil, and other members of Senghor and Prime Minister Dia's inner circles (Robinet 1962a, 3).

Senghor more closely with [the CCF's] activities," but there was little initiative on the ground (Robinet 1965, 9–10). After this slow start, Amadou Samb, the group's *animateur*, was invited to the Makerere Conference only to show up with an elaborate budget and little else (Mphahlele 1962b). Mphahlele told Samb to come up with a "definite program" and although they met again in Dakar later that year, there was little progress. "It was definitely a big mistake," Mphahlele (1962b) vented to John Hunt, "for a committee to have been set up in this place without any idea of what the committee was going to do." The Senegal cell had become an "aborted" committee, Robinet (1965, 9–10) reflected later, concluding that Samb had perhaps viewed the committee as "an instrument that would serve his personal ends." The final nail in the coffin was the Conference on African Writers of French Expression in 1963. The CCF staff felt the Dakar Conference had been a minor debacle that had lain bare the limitations of their approach (Mphahlele 1963a, 1–2, 1963b). Held at the University of Dakar just a few months after Prime Minister Mamadou Dia's failed "coup" and President Senghor's assumption of sole executive responsibility as head of state, the conference was a rather testy affair, with Senghor trying to turn the proceedings into a celebration of negritude and francophone writing, much to the dismay of advocates of African-language expression such as Ousmane Sembène.[8]

8 For more on the Dakar Conference, see Warner (2019, 1–16).

The Senegal committee failed, according to Mphahlele, because the cultural scene was already so saturated by negritude, then congealing into the state ideology of an increasingly autocratic Senghor regime. "[I]ntellectual life" in Dakar, Mphahlele observed, "runs around in circles, never deviating from the negritude norm." While this was likely only ever true at a very elevated stratum, that was where the CCF had sought to make its *entrée*. Mphahlele vented in an exasperated confidential memo:

> The only people who are not attached to negritude or Senghor, and on whom *Présence Africaine* has no claims, are in the Opposition or not Senegalese. […] The governing elite are committed. And even if they do nothing about their attachment, they cannot permit an organization like ours to operate in an area which they know *Présence Africaine* claims as its province […] The rest of the elite in Senegal are in the Opposition and/or in prison. We couldn't dare use them. […] We have to work within the negritude assumptions in Dakar (although they are really only the assumptions of the governing elite). […] Our cultural ideology is that of the African country we work in, and we only go in when we are confident we can contain that ideology. (Mphahlele 1963a, 4–5)

There was simply not enough room for the new attachments the Congress sought to cultivate. Intellectuals were, outwardly at least, too attached to Senghorian negritude – by then a semi-official cultural policy. The regime

was still too attached to France as its principal patron. And Senghor's close ties to the journal *Présence Africaine* via its founder Alioune Diop meant that there was not room for another prestigious little magazine à la *Transition*. Although the CCF never established a thriving partner organization in Senegal as it did elsewhere, its persistence is informative. Mphahlele was disappointed – not by the Congress's inability to promote a particular agenda, but rather by the difficulty of generating attachments. However, the Congress did manage to cultivate connections with a number of the intellectuals who served on the Senegalese Committee who would later prove useful.

As scholars we are understandably fixated on moments of apparently successful connection and causality. But this can obscure a more complicated truth: such moments always emerge from a sea of heterogeneous attachments. When we focus on apparently decisive episodes of cultural patronage, we end up picturing the CCF as a rather more deliberate actor than they ever really were. Rather than satisfyingly conspiratorial manipulation that needs to be either confirmed or denied, this is actually a story of unpredictable and sometimes haphazard attempts to generate attachments the nature of which could not be known in advance. Some of these may well have been put to sinister ends, but most of them were cultivated for their own value as part of a wider web of interconnection (which is not to say they were in some way innocent!). Speculative schemes rather than grand projects were the CCF's stock in trade, and we will continue to misrecognize the institution's impact so long as we focus primarily on the clearest points of inflection they generated in literary history.

A concluding reflection, inspired by Mphahlele's ruminations on his time with the CCF, taken from his 1984 memoir *Afrika My Music*. "Why?" he writes. "Why? was the question. What was in it for the CIA, when it could never, even if it wanted to, dictate the activities its money made possible? Why? We had used the money to good ends, and there was no building with a plaque dedicated to the memory of the CIA" (Mphahlele 1984, 90). Nearly two decades later, Mphahlele still had no answer. What he offers instead is perhaps more instructive: a short parable on autonomy, attachment, and cultural production. He recalls a time in his youth in South Africa when he and some friends were putting on a series of plays for African audiences on a shoestring budget:

> Everywhere we performed, Johannesburg, East and West Rand, Pretoria, we raided wooded areas to pluck branches for the backdrop on the stage. [...] Creative energy without money to buy paper, paints or brushes or canvas, or silkscreen, or hire a carpenter to make props, or advertise yourself; without a decent place to work in. [...] You have to make the honey in your own hive, because the world outside will not give you free materials for the enterprise. (Mphahlele 1984, 91–92)

This, Mphahlele explains, is what he thinks of when he thinks of the CCF. He realized that: “I’d have to take the money as long as I wasn’t compromising the community and my own integrity; I’d have to take what money was being offered but promise nothing” (Mphahlele 1984, 91–92). So Mphahlele does not have an answer for *why* the CIA sponsored African modernism. Instead, he asks a different question: what is required for art to exist? For the plays he put on: actors and a script, yes. But also foraged branches. Paper. Paints. Brushes. Canvas. Money to buy them and a carpenter to fashion them. This all seems obvious, but what Mphahlele is drawing our attention to is really just the multiple sources of agency that participate in the creation and reception of art. Not just the artist, the actors, the script, but the means to make a stage. In this view, even objects like branches or nails are co-actors too. And if you don’t think they are, Mphahlele suggests, then try building a stage without them.

In order to understand what the CCF was doing, and indeed what Mphahlele was doing with the CCF, let us pause here with him and let the many co-actors who participate in the production of a work of art come into view. We might think of the above list as merely material or logistical concerns, but really these are the affordances of a well-attached condition, a condition that is, Mphahlele suggests, always necessary to some degree for the production of art. A well-attached condition is what the CCF sought to provide: the nails, the boards, the paint, the brushes, sometimes even the carpenter to put it all together. In other words, a stage – for African modernism in this case, but the analogy could be extended to the CIA’s many other soft-power entanglements, from Abstract Expressionism to the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. If we adopt a hermeneutics of justifiable suspicion, we are compelled to ask who was allowed on these stages and why; or perhaps to argue that a stage can also just be a stage, regardless of whose money built it. Such questions have their merits, but my argument here is different: the CCF cultivated attachments among writers and intellectuals that were often astonishingly small-scale. This was categorically not an innocent policy, as the Lumumba example above shows, but neither was it always or even primarily a scheme to orchestrate the world republic of letters to a play according to the CIA’s tune.

In this essay, I have argued that the real power and influence of the CCF came from the diversity of its portfolio and above all its understanding of the ways that small attachments could ramify. By re-describing the CCF’s avowedly humanist program of Cold War cultural patronage as a practice of cultivating attachments, I also gesture toward the ways in which this perspective pushes us to revisit the notions of agency and freedom that were often at stake in the different genres of humanism explored in this special issue. A focus on attachment draws our attention to the ways in which humanism itself has always been conditioned by forms of agency that

extend beyond the human. To further elaborate on Mphahlele's example of the theater troupe, the figure of the human and its quest for agency have at times been center stage in intellectual histories of decolonization. A focus on attachment would have us dim the spotlight on this well-studied protagonist – not to dismiss humanism altogether but rather just to pause and let the lights come up around it, in order to appreciate all the attachments, large and small, that make its performance of freedom possible in the first place. How else might one begin to ask what a non-human-centered understanding of human freedom might look like and whether it would be desirable or not?

That the CCF is an unlikely (and unpalatable) source for such a theory of freedom as attachment goes without saying. But that should not prevent us from exploring what this insight entails. Rather than concluding the present inquiry with any kind of sweeping call to apply a more descriptive, post-critical framework to the archives of the cultural Cold War, I find I am left with a stranger and more unsettling question. If the cultural cold warriors studied in this essay anticipated some of the insights with which actor-network theory asks us to rethink power, agency, and autonomy, what does it then mean that the CIA got there first?

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