Other works by Robin D. G. Kelley

Three Strikes: The Fighting Spirit of Labor's Last Century (with Howard Zinn and Dana Frank)

Yo' Mama's Disfunctional! Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America

Into the Fire: African Americans since 1970

Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class

Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression

To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans (co-edited with Earl Lewis)
Statement" or even the writings of Angela Davis or June Jordan or Barbara Omolade or Flo Kennedy or Audre Lorde or bell hooks or Michelle Wallace, at least not from the groups who call themselves leftist. These women's collective wisdom has provided the richest insights into American radicalism's most fundamental questions: How can we build a multiracial movement? Who are the working class and what do they desire? How do we resolve the Negro Question and the Woman Question? What is freedom?

Barbara Smith, one of the founding members of the Combative River Collective, is among the radical voices that have addressed these questions. Since the heyday of the civil rights movement, she has been telling white people that fighting racism is necessary for their own survival and liberation, not some act of philanthropy to help the downtrodden Negroes of the ghetto. She has been telling black activists that fighting homophobia is their issue because the policing of sexuality, no matter to whom it is directed, affects everyone. And she has been sharply critical of lesbian and gay movements for the narrowness of their political agendas. She knows what it will take to win freedom. "As a socialist and an alert Black woman, it is clear to me that it is not possible to achieve justice, especially economic justice, and equality under capitalism because capitalism was never designed for that to be the case. . . . The assaults from the present system necessitate that most activists work for reforms, but those of us who are radicals understand that it is possible to do so at the very same time that we work for fundamental change—a revolution."

Now there's the real question: Can we all get along long enough to make a revolution? Perhaps, but history tells us that it will mean taking leadership from some very radical women of color, and if that's the case I'm not holding my breath. What the old-guard male militants really need to do is give up the mic for a moment, listen to the victims of democracy sing their dreams of a new world, and take notes on how to fight for the freedom of all.

It's always night or we wouldn't need light.

Thelonious Monk, quoted in Time magazine, 1964

Monk's statement should be taken as more than a clever observation about physics. As one of the greatest "jazz" pianists and composers of the twentieth century, Monk often began work after the sun disappeared over the horizon; thus he understood the power and ubiquity of night. "The night time is the right time," a time to reveal and fulfill desire, a time to dream, the world of the unknown, the hallucinatory. It was nineteenth-century poet Isidore Ducasse—known to his readers as Comte de Lautréamont—who wrote in his Poésies (1870): "It is only by admitting the night physically that one is able to admit it morally." For black folk, however, the night represents pleasure and danger, beauty and ugliness. Besides its blackness, with all its mystery and elegance, richness and brilliance, the night is associated with hooded Klansmen and burning crosses, the long night of slavery, the oppression of dark skin. Yes, "it's always night," which is why we absolutely need light: the light of social movements ("I've got the light of freedom"), the light of hope ("facing a rising sun/ of a new
day begun”), the light of spirit (“this little light of mine I’m gonna let it shine”).

Monk meets Lautréamont on the night train to freedom. It is one of many chance encounters that reveal a deep affinity between black life and culture and surrealism. Neither man would have identified himself as a surrealist, although Lautréamont, along with another nineteenth-century French poet named Arthur Rimbaud, are considered the spiritual fathers of surrealism before the movement was declared after World War I. And yet they embody the basic principles of surrealism, a living, mutable, creative vision of a world where love, play, human dignity, an end to poverty and want, and imagination are the pillars of freedom.

What is surrealism? Its definition is as rich and evasive as the night itself. Here is one answer from the Chicago Surrealist Group (1976):

Surrealism is the exaltation of freedom, revolt, imagination and love. . . . [It] is above all a revolutionary movement. Its basic aim is to lessen and eventually to completely resolve the contradiction between everyday life and our wildest dreams. By definition, surrealism is intended not only to discredit and destroy the forces of repression, but also to emancipate desire and supply it with new poetic weapons. . . .

Beginning with the abolition of imaginative slavery, it advances to the creation of a free society in which everyone will be a poet—a society in which everyone will be able to develop his or her potentials fully and freely.

By plunging into the depths of the unconscious and lessening “the contradiction between everyday life and our wildest dreams,” we can enter or realize the domain of the Marvelous. Surrealism is no mere artistic movement like cubism or impressionism, and it is not primarily concerned with art. Surrealism is about making a new life. As Franklin Rosemont explains in André Breton—What Is Surrealism? Selected Writings:

Surrealism, a unitary project of total revolution, is above all a method of knowledge and a way of life; it is lived far more than it is written, or written about, or drawn. Surrealism is the most exhilarating adventure of the mind, an unparalleled means of pursuing the fervent quest for freedom and true life beyond the veil of ideological appearances. Only the social revolution—the leap, in the celebrated expression of Marx and Engels, from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom!—will enable the true life of poetry and mad love to cast aside, definitively, the fetters of degradation and dishonour and to flourish with unrestrained splendour.

Some of these principles, one might argue, were present in Afro-African culture before surrealism was ever named. In this chapter I explore how black revolt shaped the development of surrealism as a self-conscious political movement, as well as the impact surrealism has had on modern political and cultural movements throughout the African diaspora. Surrealism, I contend, offers a vision of freedom far deeper and more expansive than any of the movements discussed thus far. It is a movement that invites dreaming, urges us to improvise and invent, and recognizes the imagination as our most powerful weapon.

“Surrealism and Us”

Surrealism may have originated in the West, but it is rooted in a conspiracy against Western civilization. Surrealists frequently looked outside Europe for ideas and inspiration, turning most notably to the “primitives” under the heel of European colonialism. Indeed, what later became known as the Third World turned out to be the source of the surrealists’ politicization during the mid-1920s. The Paris Surrealist Group and the extreme Left of the French Communist Party were drawn together in 1925 by their support of Abd el-Krim, leader of the Rif uprising against French colonialism in Morocco. In tracts like “Revolution Now and Forever” the surrealists actively called for the overthrow of French colonial rule. That same year, in an “Open Letter” to writer and French ambassador to Japan, Paul Claudel, the Paris group announced, “We profoundly hope that revolutions, wars, colonial
insurrections, will annihilate this Western civilization whose vermin you defend even in the Orient." Seven years later, the Paris group produced its most militant statement on the colonial question to date. Titled "Murderous Humanitarianism" (1932) and drafted mainly by René Crevel and signed by (among others) André Breton, Paul Eluard, Benjamin Peret, Yves Tanguy, and the Martinican surrealists Pierre Yoyo and J. M. Monnier, it was first published in Nancy Cunard’s massive anthology, Negro (1934). The document is a relentless attack on colonialism, capitalism, the clergy, the black bourgeoisie, and hypocritical liberals. Arguing that the very humanity upon which the modern West was built also justified slavery, colonialism, and genocide, the writers called for action: "We surrealists pronounced ourselves in favor of changing the imperialist war, in its chronic and colonial form, into a civil war. Thus we placed our energies at the disposal of the revolution, of the proletariat and its struggles, and defined our attitude towards the colonial problem, and hence towards the color question."

In other words, the revolts of the colonial world and its struggles for cultural autonomy animated surrealists as much as reading Freud or Marx. And they discovered in the cultures of Africa, Oceania, and Native America a road into the Marvelous and confirmation of their most fundamental ideas. For example, the surrealists practiced of "pure psychic automatism"—sometimes described as automatic writing—was much more than a modern "technical" invention, for it quickly led to the recognition that entire cultures had methods of thought and communication that transcended the conscious. Surrealist automatism, which dates back to 1922, was neither "stream of consciousness writing" nor an experimental writing strategy but a state of mind—a plunge below the surface of consciousness. Related more to shamanism and trance states than to "modernity" as it was understood in the West, automatism was a struggle against the slavery of rationalism, a means to allow the imagination to run free.

Early on, surrealists discovered this kind of imaginative freedom in African-American music. The attraction to black music must have seemed natural, for as the Chicago Surrealist Group reflected in a special surrealist supplement to Living Blues magazine in 1936, "The surrealists could hardly have failed to recognize aspects of their combat in blues (and in jazz), for freedom, revolt, imagination and love are the very hallmarks of all that is greatest in the great tradition of Black music." Natural, yes, but not immediate. Some surrealists—Jacques Baron, René Crevel, Robert Desnos, Michel Leiris—appreciated jazz from the start, but others—including André Breton, author of the 1924 Surrealist Manifesto—initially could not see how music might be a medium for the kind of freedom they found in the literary and plastic arts. Even the great painter Giorgio de Chirico proclaimed, "No Music." The winds shifted in 1929 when Belgian surrealist Paul Nougé published an essay titled Music Is Dangerous, which offered a critical defense of music as one of many artistic forces "capable of bewitching spirit." And a few years later, in an essay titled "Hot Jazz" in Nancy Cunard’s Negro anthology, Robert Goffin, a nonsurrealist critic, directly related surrealism to jazz. Although Goffin reinforced the then common perception of black music as a spontaneous, emotion-driven folk form, which was thus devoid of the kind of creative intellectual work one associates with "Western" arts, he nevertheless placed black musicians squarely within the pantheon of surrealism’s founders. "What Breton and [Louis] Aragon did for poetry in 1920," noted Goffin, "Chirico and Ernst for painting in 1930, had been instinctively accomplished as early as 1910 by humble Negro musicians, unaided by the control of that critical intelligence that was to prove such an asset to the later initiators."

Meanwhile, from the early 1930s on, black surrealists such as Etienne Léopold and René Menil praised jazz and black vernacular music as key elements of their revolutionary project; Egyptian surrealist Georges Henein published a substantial lecture on jazz in 1935. During and after World War II, black music gained enthusiastic support from such important surrealists as the Chilean Roberto Matta, the Romanian Victor Brauner, the Sicilian-American Philip Lamantia, and many others. By 1945 André
Breton—having heard live jazz in Harlem during his years in New York as a refugee from Nazi-occupied France—had thoroughly revised his earlier views on music.

It is no surprise that Thelonious Monk turned out to be one of the surrealists' major heroes. Monk's music appealed especially to the surrealists' struggle for complete freedom and the overthrow of bourgeois concepts of beauty and art. He made music that destroyed many Western ideas about music making, turning conventional rules of composition, harmony, and rhythm on their heads. He stripped romantic ballads of their romanticism and took his listeners on wild harmonic rides filled with surprising dissonances. His admirers included the important surrealist theorist Gérard Legrand—who wrote the first surrealist book on jazz, *Paisiennes du jazz* (1953), Romanian poet Gellu Naum, and poet-critic Georges Goldsamy, who suggested that painters and poets had much to learn from Monk by listening to how he interpreted a song. Victor Brauner did a striking symbolic "pietro-portrait" of Monk in 1948 (years before Monk became well known in the United States). Claude Tanaud wrote a poem for Monk in which he imagined him in a combo with Rimbaud, Brauner, and de Chirico.

Although black music has long served as a model for black poetry and prose, Ted Joans—who studied trumpet, sang bebop, and earned a B.A. in fine arts from Indiana University before moving to New York's Greenwich Village in 1951—has always understood modern jazz, from bebop to the avant-garde, as essentially surrealistic. He often describes the way Charlie Parker or Cecil Taylor alters or improvises on melodic lines, or scat singing, as "surrealizing" a song. Joans's own poetry not only celebrates and interrogates the music, life, and meaning of jazz brilliantly, but also takes on the characteristics of jazz performance—anther way of "surrealizing a song." One can find many examples in this collection of his poetry, especially *Black Pow-Wow, Funky Jazz Poems, Afrodisia*, and his recent volume of selected works, *Tedducation*. Just listen to "The Sax Bit," Joans's homage to that obscure European instrument that black people made famous:

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This bent metal serpent / holy born with lids like beer mug / with phallic tail why did they invent you before Coleman Hawkins was born?

This curved shiny tune gut / hanging lynched like / I shaped initial of jazz / wordless without a reed when Coleman Hawkins first fiddled it / kissed it with Black sound did Congo blood suckin' Belgis frown?

This tenor / alto / bass / baritone / soprano / moan / cry & shout-a-phone! sex-o-phone! tell-it-like-damn-the-iss-a-phone! What tremors ran through Adolphe Saxe the day Bean grabbed his ax?

This golden mine of a million marvelous sounds / black notes with myriad shadows / or empty crooked tube of technical white poor-performance / calculated keys that never unlock soul doors / white man made machine saved from zero by Coleman Hawkins!

This saxophone salvation / modern gni gni hanging from jazzmen's necks placed there by Coleman Hawkins a full body & soul sorcerer whose spirit dwells eternally in every saxophone NOW and all those sound-a-phones to be

The surrealists' discovery of the Marvelous in black music extends well beyond jazz. Jazz's very heart, body, and soul—the blues—was the subject of one of the most important surrealist texts to come out of the United States. Paul Garon's *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (first published in 1975; revised and expanded in 1996) argues, among other things, that the blues is poetry or, more specifically, the poetic expression of the black working class. Insisting that blues artists are much greater poets than T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound, or any number of European poets for that matter, Garon regards the blues as "true poetry"—for what is poetry but the revolt of the spirit? Unlike dozens of other scholars of the blues, Garon is less interested in what the blues may tell us about social reality than in comprehending desire. "Fantasy alone," he writes, "enables us to envision the real possibilities of human exis-"
tence, no longer tied securely to the historical effluvia passed off as everyday life; fantasy remains our most pre-emptive critical faculty, for it alone tells us what can be. Here lies the revolutionary nature of the blues: through its fidelity to fantasy and desire, the blues generates an irreducible and, so to speak, habit-forming demand for freedom and what Rimbaud called "true life."

Desire and sexuality, and their relationship to revolt, have always been central themes in the music, but were too often avoided by well-meaning defenders of the race concerned about reinforcing stereotypes of Black promiscuity. Surrealists, on the other hand, had a long-standing interest in sexual liberty and the power of the erotic, which must have rendered the blues all the more attractive.

Organized surrealism came late to the English-speaking world, and largely because of the language barrier, awareness of the power of the blues came late to surrealism. One can only imagine how the movement's own sexual revolt might have benefited had it embraced the poetry of black women's blues in the 1940s and 1950s. During this period, leading surrealists women in Europe and the United States, such as Toyen, Valentine Penrose, Leonora Carrington, Meret Oppenheim, Claude Cahun, and Mary Low proposed a more revolutionary sexuality and resisted the subjugation of women to men's desires. In searching for models, they might have drawn on women's blues, for as Angela Davis and Hazel Carby have argued, artists such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Alberta Hunter, Memphis Minnie, Lucille Bogan, and Ida Cox created a poetics of sexual freedom and power, a poetics to articulate desire, as well as pain, loss, alienation, and dislocation. The music captures the magical, transformative quality of the erotic—something even the best scholarship on the blues rarely addresses because prevailing critical frameworks seem unable to move beyond social realism.

Besides embracing the erotic and working through new visions of love, black musician-poets have relentlessly critiqued alienated wage labor. Their utopias are always free of "work"—meaning low-wage, unfulfilling, backbreaking labor—and full of pleasurable leisure. This is not to suggest that people do not want to

"work," but that the work they are forced to do is not fulfilling, creative, or enjoyable. Blues poets, drawing on the everyday language of the black working class, often invoke the word work to mean nonwaged activity: musical performance, dancing, sex, etc. But one also finds in the blues a strong desire for freedom from toil. Ma Rainey sings:

I've got those misery blues.
I've got to go to work now,
Get another start,
Work is the thing that's breaking my heart
So I've got those mean ol' misery blues.

Part of what made the blues so attractive to surrealists was its humor. "Misery" does not define the blues, contrary to popular belief. The blues is often characterized by blues artists themselves as "happy music," stories replete with punch lines and double-entendres. Charlie Campbell's "Goin' Away Blues" tells his listeners, "I don't want a woman who wears a number nine/I wake up in the morning, I can't tell her shoes from mine." Even songs of poverty, loss, and tragedy are filled with absurdities meant to elicit laughter—what André Breton ironically called "black humor." In the wild and wacky world of Black humor—and here the double-entendre is quite deliberate—the blues is just the tip of the iceberg. The absurdity of racism and the fragile and strange world of white supremacy produced a deep wellspring of jokes, hilarious folktales, and humorous word games (e.g., "the dozens") that cut to the heart of our past and present slavery. Consider the yarn about a Southern white dentist charging a black patient two thousand dollars to pull a tooth while his white patients paid only fifty dollars. Why? Because in the South a Negro doesn't dare open his mouth to a white man, which meant that the dentist had to pull the tooth through the anus.

Freem Dream from the Jungle

As European surrealists found renewal in the cultures and revolts of the "colored" and colonial world, several young intellectuals
from that world discovered surrealism. The first known group to embrace surrealism was Martinican students sojourning in Paris. In 1932 Étienne Léro, René Menil, J. M. Monnerot, Pierre Yoyotte, his sister Simone Yoyotte, and a few others published one issue of a journal they called Légitime Défense (Self-Defense). In it they declared their commitment to surrealism and communist revolution, critiqued the French-speaking black bourgeoisie, celebrated several black American writers like Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, and published poetry and automatic writing by several members of the group. Although the journal was promptly suppressed by the colonial authorities, it had its impact. Like other journals of the Black Renaissance (e.g., La Revue du Monde Noir, Fretol, African Times and Orient Review, and, a bit later, L’Étudiant Noir), the editors of Légitime Défense denounced racism (paying special attention to the Scottsboro case) and affirmed their African past as well as the cultures of the diaspora. Members of the group also made major critical contributions to surrealism’s theoretical development: J. M. Monnerot produced a stinging critique of the “civilized mentality” for Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution (1933), and Pierre Yoyotte wrote a penetrating essay on the significance of surrealism in the struggle against fascism, published in a special surrealist issue of the Belgian journal Documents (1934).

Aimé Césaire was part of a different intellectual circle centered around a journal called L’Étudiant Noir, whose editors included Leopold Senghor from Senegal and Leon Gotman Damas, a childhood friend of Césaire’s from French Guiana. All three men were outstanding poets, and together they would help found the “Négritude” movement celebrating the African cultural heritage in the Francophone world. In L’Étudiant Noir’s March 1935 issue, Césaire published a passionate tract against assimilation in which he first coined the term Nègritude. It is more than ironic that at the moment Césaire’s piece appeared, he was hard at work absorbing as much French and European humanities as possible in preparation for his entrance exams for L’École Normale Supérieure. The exams took their toll, for sure, though the psychic and emotional costs of having to imbibe the very culture Césaire publicly rejected must have exacerbated an already exhausting regimen. After completing his exams during the summer of 1935, he took a short vacation to Yugoslavia with a fellow student. While visiting the Adriatic coast, Césaire was overcome with memories of home after seeing a small island from a distance. Moved, he stayed up half the night working on a long poem about Martinique of his youth, the land, the people, the majesty of the place. The next morning when he inquired about the little island, he was told it was called Martinska. A magical chance encounter, to say the least. The words he penned that moonlit night were the beginnings of what would subsequently become his most famous poem of all: “Cahier d’un retour au pays Natal” (Notebook of a Return to My Native Land). The next summer he did return to Martinique, but was greeted by an even greater sense of alienation. He returned to France to complete his thesis on African-American writers of the Harlem Renaissance and their representations of the South, and then on July 10, 1937, married Suzanne Roussy, a fellow Martinican student with whom he had worked on L’Étudiant Noir.

The couple returned to Martinique in 1939 and began teaching in Fort-de-France. Joining forces with René Menil, Lucie Theèsée, Aristide Maugée, Georges Gratiant, and others, they launched the journal Tropiques. The appearance of Tropiques coincided with the fall of France to the fascist Vichy regime, which put the colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guiana under Vichy rule. The effect was startling; any illusions Césaire and his comrades might have harbored about color-blind French brotherhood were shattered when thousands of French sailors arrived on the island. Their racism was blatant and direct. As literary critic A. James Arnold observed, “The insensitivity of this military regime also made it difficult for Martinicans to ignore the fact that they were a colony like any other, a conclusion that the official policy of assimilation had masked somewhat. These conditions contributed to radicalizing Césaire and his friends, preparing them for a more anticolonialist posture at the end of the war.”
The official policy of the regime to censor Tropiques and interdict the publication when it was deemed subversive also hastened the group's radicalization. In a notorious letter dated May 10, 1943, Martinique's chief of information services, Lieutenant de Vaisseau Bayle, justified interdicting Tropiques for being "a revolutionary review that is racial and sectarian." Bayle accused the editors of poisoning the spirit of society, sowing hatred, and ruining the morale of the country. Two days later, the editors penned a brilliant polemical response:

To Lieutenant de Vaisseau Bayle:

Sir,

We have received your indictment of Tropiques.

"Racists," "sectarians," "revolutionaries," "traitors to the country," "poisoners of souls," none of these epithets really repulse us.

"Poisoners of Souls," like Racine, . . .

"Ingrates and traitors to our good Country," like Zola, . . .

"Revolutionaries," like the Hugo of "Châtiments."

"Sectarians," passionately, like Rimbaud and Lautréamont.

Racists, yes. Of the racism of Toussaint-Louverture, of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes against that of Drumont and Hitler.

As to the rest of it, don't expect for us to plead our case, nor vain recriminations, nor discussion.

We do not speak the same language.

Signed: Aimé Césaire, Suzanne Césaire, Georges Gratiot, Aristide Maugée, René Menil, Lucie Thésée.

But for Tropiques to survive, they had to camouflage their boldness, passing the publication off as a journal of West Indian folklore. Yet, despite the repressions and the ruses, Tropiques survived the war as one of the most important and radical surrealist publications in the world, lasting from 1941 to 1945. The essays and poems it published by the Césaires, René Menil, and others reveal the evolution of a sophisticated anticolonial stance as well as a vision of a postcolonial future. Theirs was a conception of freedom that drew on modernism and a deep appreciation for precolonial African modes of thought and practice; it drew on surrealism as the strategy of revolution of the mind and Marxism as revolution of the productive forces. It was an effort to carve out a position independent of all these forces, a kind of wedding of Negritude, Marxism, and surrealism; this group's collective efforts would have a profound impact on international surrealism, in general, and on André Breton, in particular. Tropiques also published Breton, as well as texts by Pierre Mabille, Benjamin Peret, Victor Brauner, Jorge Cáceres, and other surrealists.

The influence of surrealism on Aimé Césaire has been called into question many times, by critics as different as Jean-Paul Sartre (1948) and Jahnheinz Jahn (1958). The question of his surrealism, however, is generally posed only in terms of André Breton's influence on Césaire. In this view, surrealism is treated as "European thought" and, like Marxism, is considered alien to non-European cultural traditions. But such a "diffusionist" interpretation seems too simplistic, too one-sided, overlooking the possibility that the Césaires (Aimé and Suzanne) were creative innovators of surrealism—that they actually introduced fresh surrealistic ideas to Breton and his colleagues. I don't think it is too much to argue that the Césaires not only embraced surrealism—indeed, independently of the Paris Group, I might add—but also expanded it, enlarged its perspectives, and contributed enormously to theorizing the "domain of the Marvelous." Aimé Césaire, after all, has never denied his surrealist leanings. As he explains: "Surrealism provided me with what I had been confusedly searching for. I have accepted it joyfully because in it I have found more of a confirmation than a revelation." Surrealism, he explained, helped him to summon up powerful unconscious forces. "This, for me, was a call to Africa. I said to myself: it's true that superficially we are French, we bear the marks of French customs; we have been branded by Cartesian philosophy, by French rhetoric; but if we break with all that, if we plumb the depths, then what we
will find is fundamentally black.” And in another interview with Jacqueline Leiner, he was even more enthusiastic about Breton’s role: “Breton brought us boldness, he helped us take a strong stand. He abridged our hesitation and research. I realized that the majority of the problems I encountered had already been resolved by Breton and surrealism. I would say that my meeting with Breton was confirmation of what I had arrived at on my own. This saved us time, let us go quicker, farther. The encounter was extraordinary.”

We know far less about Suzanne Césaire, though judging from her all-too-brief writings, it is not too much to proclaim her as one of surrealism’s most original theorists. Unlike critics who boxed surrealism into narrow avant-garde aesthetic tendencies alongside futurism or cubism, Suzanne Césaire linked it to broader movements such as romanticism, socialism, and Negritude. Surrealism, she argued, was not an ideology but a state of mind, a “permanent readiness for the Marvelous.” In a 1941 issue of *Tropiques*, she imagined new possibilities in terms that were foreign to Marxists; she called on readers to embrace “the domain of the strange, the marvelous and the fantastic, a domain scorned by people of certain inclinations. Here is the freed image, dazzling and beautiful, with a beauty that could not be more unexpected and overwhelming. Here are the poet, the painter and the artist, presiding over the metamorphoses and the inversions of the world under the sign of hallucination and madness.” And yet when she speaks of the domain of the Marvelous, she also has her sights on the chains of colonial domination, never forgetting the crucial reality of everyday life in Martinique and the rest of the world. In “Surrealism and Us: 1943,” she writes with boldness and clarity:

Thus, far from contradicting, diluting, or diverting our revolutionary attitude toward life, surrealism strengthens it. It nourishes an impatient strength within us, endlessly reinforcing the massive army of refusals.

And I am also thinking of tomorrow.

Millions of black hands will hoist their terror across the furious skies of world war. Freed from a long numbing slumber, the most dispossessed of all peoples will rise up from plains of ashes.

Our surrealism will supply this rising people with a punch from its very depths. Our surrealism will enable us to finally transcend the sordid antinomies of the present: whites/Blacks, Europeans/Africans, civilized/savages—at last rediscovering the magic power of the maquis, drawn directly from living sources. Colonial idiocy will be purified in the welder’s blue flame. We shall recover our value as metal, our cutting edge of steel, our unprecedented communions.

One painter who succeeded in creating the kind of art Suzanne Césaire demanded, of producing what Breton called “convulsive beauty,” was the Cuban-born Wifredo Lam. The eighth child born to an eighty-four-year-old Chinese father (Lam Yäm) and “rudatto” mother of Indian, African, and Spanish descent, Lam grew up in an environment that, in his view, prepared him for surrealism by exposing him to African culture. His godmother, Mantonica Wilson, practiced Santería and was consulted far and wide for remedies for physical and spiritual afflictions. And as a young man, Lam knew revolt firsthand: While studying art in Madrid, he participated in the defense of Republican Spain during the civil war. After leaving Spain for France in 1938, he befriended Pablo Picasso, whose interest in African art turned out to be a considerable factor in Lam’s work as well as his politics. “What made me feel such empathy with [Picasso’s] painting more than anything else,” Lam remembered, “was the presence of African art and the African spirit I discovered in it. When I was a little boy, I had seen African figures in Mantonica Wilson’s house. And in Pablo’s work I seemed to find a sort of continuity.” Picasso also brought Lam to the Surrealist Group in Paris, introducing him to such critical figures as André Breton, Michel Leiris, Benjamin Péret, Jean Miró, Dora Maar, Tristan Tzara, and Paul Eluard, among others.

Bringing together his interest in African figures, his memory of
his Cuban homeland, and surrealism, Lann’s work became less naturalistic and more totemlike, less androcentric and more magical in its fusion of human and animal forms. In his efforts to depict the spirit world of Santeria, his figures became mythic, larger than life, even majestic in character. Lann’s politics, like those of the Tropiques group, were rooted in a combination of surrealism, Negritude, Marxism, and an intense love of his native land. He detested the “picturesque” imagery of Cuba “for the tourists” as well as social realism, and instead sought to represent “the Negro spirit, the beauty of the plastic art of the blacks.” In this way I could act as a Trojan horse that would spawn forth hallucinating figures with the power to surprise, to disturb the dreams of the exploiters. I knew I was running the risk of not being understood either by the man in the street or by the others. But a true picture has the power to set the imagination to work, even if it takes time.”

Lann beautifully executes this vision in what may be his most famous painting, “The Jungle.” Completed in 1943, it depicts four monkeylike creatures with enormous feet and masks rising in the jungle surrounded by spirits. Critic Alain Jouffroy has called it “the first revolutionary statement in a plastic art of a Third World that is already conscious of the need for all cultures to make common cause, the prophetic announcement of that awakening on a world scale.” Lann himself thought of it as a representation of revolt but from the depth of the unconscious. “My idea was to represent the spirit of the Negroes in the situation in which they were then. I have used poetry to show the reality of acceptance and protest.”

A Poetics of Anticolonialism

Another powerful “revolutionary statement . . . of a Third World that is already conscious of the need for all cultures to make common cause” found voice in Aimé Césaire’s Discourse on Colonialism (1950). Césaire’s first nonfiction book, Discourse was very much a product of its time and a reflection of the changing political landscape. By the end of the war, Césaire became more directly involved in politics, joining the Communist Party and successfully running for mayor of Fort-de-France and deputy to the French National Assembly on the Communist ticket. His main concern, however, was not proletarian revolution but the colonial question. In 1946, he succeeded in getting the National Assembly to pass a law changing the status of Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guiana, and Réunion from colonies to “departments” within the French Republic. He believed that the assimilation of the old colonies into the republic would guarantee equal rights, but it turned out not to be the case. In the end, French officials were sent to the colonies in greater numbers, often displacing some of the local black Martinican bureaucrats. It was a painful lesson for Césaire, perhaps the main catalyst for Discourse on Colonialism.

A fusion of ideas drawn from surrealism, communism, Negritude, and national liberation movements, as well as Césaire’s imagination, Discourse might best be described as a declaration of war. I would almost call it a “Third World manifesto” but hesitate because it is primarily a polemic against the old order befitting the kind of propositions and proposals that accompany manifestos. Yet Discourse speaks in revolutionary cadences, capturing the spirit of its age just as Marx and Engels did 102 years earlier in their little manifesto. It appeared just as the old empires were on the verge of collapse, thanks in part to a world war against fascism that left Europe in a material, spiritual, and philosophical shambles. It was the age of decolonization and revolt in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Five years earlier (1945) black people from around the globe gathered in Manchester, England, for the Fifth Pan-African Congress to discuss the freedom and future of Africa. Five years later (1955), representatives from the nonaligned nations gathered in Bandung, Indonesia, to discuss the freedom and future of the Third World. Mao’s revolution in China was a year old, while the Mau Mau in Kenya were just gearing up for an uprising against their colonial masters. The French encountered insurrections in Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, Cameroon, and Mada-
gascar, and suffered a humiliating defeat by the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu. Revolt was in the air. India, the Philippines, Guyana, Egypt, Guatemala, South Africa, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Harlem, you name it: Revolt! *Discourse on Colonialism* was indisputably one of the key texts in this tidal wave of anticolonial literature produced during the postwar period—works that include W. E. B. Du Bois’s *Color and Democracy* (1945) and *The World and Africa* (1947), Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952); George Padmore’s *Pan-Africanism or Communism? The Coming Struggle for Africa* (1956); Albert Memmi’s *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957); Richard Wright’s *White Man Listen!* (1957); Jean-Paul Sartre’s essay “Black Orpheus” (1948); and journals such as *Présence Africaine* and *African Revolution.*

As with much of the radical literature produced during this epoch, *Discourse* placed the colonial question front and center. Although, remaining somewhat true to his Communist affiliation, Césaire never quite dethroned the modern proletariat from its exalted status as a revolutionary force, he made the European working class practically invisible. This was a book about colonialism, its impact on the colonized, on culture, on history, on the very concept of civilization itself, and most importantly, on the colonizer. In the finest Hegelian fashion, Césaire demonstrates how colonialism worked to “decivilize” the colonizer: torture, violence, race hatred, and immorality constituted a dead weight on the so-called civilized, pulling the master class deeper and deeper into the abyss of barbarism. The instruments of colonial power relied on barbaric, brutal violence and intimidation, and the end result was the degradation of Europe itself. Hence Césaire could only scream: “Europe is indefensible.”

Europe was also dependent. Anticipating Fanon’s famous proposition in *The Wretched of the Earth* that “Europe is literally the creation of the Third World,” Césaire revealed over and over again the colonizers’ sense of superiority and their sense of mission as the world’s civilizers, a mission that depended on turning the Other into barbarians. The Africans, the Indians, the Asians could not possess civilization or a culture equal to that of the imperialists, or the latter had no purpose, no justification for the exploitation and domination of the rest of the world. The colonial encounter, in other words, required a reinvention of the colonized, the deliberate destruction of their past, what Césaire called “thingification.” *Discourse,* then, had a double-edged meaning: It was Césaire’s discourse on the material and spiritual havoc created by colonialism, and it was a critique of colonial discourse. Anticipating the explosion of work we now call “postcolonial studies,” Césaire revealed how the circulation of colonial ideology—an ideology of racial and cultural hierarchy—was as essential to colonial rule as police and corvée labor. Moreover, as a product of the post–World War II period, *Discourse* went one step further by drawing a direct link between the logic of colonialism and the rise of fascism. Echoing a number of black radicals, including W. E. B. Du Bois, George Padmore, and C. L. R. James (see chapter 3), Césaire provocatively pointed out that Europeans tolerated “Nazism before it was inflicted on them, that they absorbed it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples; that they have cultivated that Nazism, that they are responsible for it, and that before engulfing the whole of Western, Christian civilization in its reddened waters, it oozes, seeps, and trickles from every crack.” So the real crime of fascism was the application of colonial procedures to white people “which until then had been reserved for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa.”

The very idea that there was a superior race lay at the heart of the matter, and this is why elements of *Discourse* also drew on Negritude’s impulse to recover the history of Africa’s accomplishments. Taking his cue from Leo Frobenius’s injunction that the “idea of the barbaric Negro is a European invention,” Césaire set out to prove that the colonial mission to “civilize” the primitive was just a smoke screen. If anything, colonialism resulted in the massive destruction of whole societies—societies that not only functioned at a high level of sophistication and complexity, but that could offer the West valuable lessons about how we might
live together and remake the modern world. Indeed, Césaire’s insistence that precolonial African and Asian cultures “were not only anti-capitalist... but also anti-capitalist” anticipated romantic claims advanced by African nationalist leaders such as Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, and Senghor himself that modern Africa could establish socialism on the basis of precolonial village life.

Discourse was not the first place Césaire made the case for the barbaric West following the path of the civilised African. In his introduction to a book by liberal French scholar Victor Schoelcher, Esclavage et colonisation (1948), he wrote:

The men they took away knew how to build houses, govern empires, erect cities, cultivate fields, mine for metals, weave cotton, forge steel.

Their religion had its own beauty, based on mystical connections with the founder of the city. Their customs were pleasing, built on unity, kindness, respect for age.

No coercion, only mutual assistance, the joy of living, a free acceptance of discipline.

Order—Earnestness—Poetry and Freedom.

Reading this passage and the book itself deeply affected one of Césaire’s brightest students, Frantz Fanon. It was a revelation for him to discover cities in Africa and “accounts of learned blacks.” “All of that,” he noted in Black Skin, White Masks (1952), “exhumes from the past, spread with its insides out, made it possible for me to find a valid historical place. The white man was wrong. I was not a primitive, not even a half-man, I belonged to a race that had already been working in gold and silver two thousand years ago.”

Negritude turned out to be a miraculous weapon in the struggle to overthrow the “barbaric Negro.” And yet despite Césaire’s construction of precolonial Africa as an aggregation of warm, communal societies, he never called for a return. Unlike his old friend Senghor, Césaire’s Negritude was future oriented and modern. His position in Discourse was unequivocal: “For us the problem is not to make a utopian and sterile attempt to repeat the past, but to go beyond. It is not a dead society that we want to revive. We leave that to those who go in for exorcism... It is a new society that we must create, with the help of our brother slaves, a society rich with all the productive power of modern times, warm with all the fraternity of olden days.”

Then comes the shocking next line:

“...for some examples showing that this is possible, we can look to the Soviet Union.”

Now, given everything he had written thus far, everything that he had lived, why would he hold up Stalinism in 1950s as an exemplar of the new society? Certainly, his praise for the U.S.S.R. was a logical manifestation of his Communist Party membership. But why would a great poet and major voice of surrealism and Negritude join the Communist Party in the 1940s? Actually, once we consider the context of the postwar world, his decision is not shocking at all. First, remember that Communist parties worldwide, especially in Europe, were at their height immediately after the war, and Joseph Stalin spent the war years as an ally of liberal democracy. Second, several leading writers and artists committed to radical social change, particularly in the Caribbean and Latin America, became Communists—including Césaire’s friends, Jacques Roumain, Nicolas Guillén, and René Depestre.

Thus given Césaire’s role as Communist leader, we should not be surprised by Discourse’s nod to the Soviet Union, or even the final closing lines of the text where he named proletarian revolution as our savior. What is jarring, however, is how incongruous these statements were in relation to the rest of the text. After demonstrating how Europe was a dying civilization, one on the verge of self-destruction in which the chickens of colonial violence and tyranny had come home to roost, and the white working class looked on in silent complicity, he proposed proletarian revolution as the final solution! Yet throughout the book he anticipated Fanon, implying that there was nothing worth saving in Europe, that the European working class had too often joined
forces with the European bourgeoisie in support of racism, imperialism, and colonialism, and that the uprisings of the colonized might point the way forward. Ultimately, *Discourse* was a challenge to, or revision of, Marxism that drew on surrealism and the antirationalist ideas of his early poetry and explorations in Negritude. It was fairly unmaterialist and quite surrealistic in the way it cried out for new spiritual values to emerge out of the study of what colonialism sought to destroy.

Césaire’s position vis-à-vis Marxism became even clearer less than one year after the third edition of *Discourse* appeared. In October 1956, Césaire penned his famous letter to Maurice Thorez, secretary general of the French Communist Party (CP), tendering his resignation from the party. Besides its stinging rebuke of Stalinism, the heart of the letter dealt with the colonial question—not just the Party’s policies toward the colonies but the colonial relationship between the metropolitan CP and the Martinican party. Arguing that people of color needed to exercise self-determination, he warned against treating the “colonial question . . . as a subsidiary part of some more important global matter.”

Racism, in other words, could not be subordinate to the class struggle. His letter was an even bolder, more direct assertion of Third World unity than *Discourse*. Although he still identified himself as a Marxist and was still open to alliances, he cautioned that there “are no allies by divine rights.” If following the Communist Party “pillages our most vivifying friendships, wastes the bond that unites us to other West Indian islands, the tie that makes us Africa’s child, then I say communism has served us ill in having us swap a living brotherhood for what looks to have the features of the coldest of all chill abstractions.” More important, Césaire’s investment in a Third World revolt that would pave the way for a new society certainly anticipated Fanon. He had practically given up on Europe and the old humanism and its claims of universality, opting instead to redefine the “universal” in a way that did not privilege Europe. Césaire explains, “I’m not going to entomb myself in some strait particularism. But I don’t intend either to become lost in a fleshless universalism. . . . I have a different idea of a universal. It is of a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all.”

What Césaire articulates in *Discourse*, and more explicitly in his letter to Thorez, distills the spirit that swept through African intellectual circles in the age of decolonization. This pervasive spirit was what Negritude was all about then; it was never a simple matter of racial essentialism. Critic, scholar, and filmmaker Minsthi Diawara beautifully captured the atmosphere of the era and, implicitly, what these radical critiques of the colonial order such as *Discourse on Colonialism* meant to a new generation:

The idea that Negritude was bigger even than Africa, that we were part of an international moment which held the promise of universal emancipation, that our destiny coincided with the universal freedom of workers and colonized people worldwide—all this gave us a bigger and more important identity than the ones previously available to us through kinship, ethnicity, and race. . . . The awareness of our new historical mission freed us from what we regarded in those days as the archaic identities of our fathers and their religious entanglements; it freed us from race and banished our fear of the whiteness of French identity. To be labeled the savors of humanity, when only recently we had been colonized and despised by the world, gave us a feeling of righteousness, which bred contempt for capitalism, racism of all origins, and tribalism.

In light of recent events—genocide in East Africa, the collapse of democracy throughout the continent, the isolation of Cuba, the overthrow of progressive movements throughout the so-called Third World—some might argue that the moment of truth has already passed, that Césaire and Fanon’s predictions proved false. We face an era in which fools are calling for a renewal of colonialism, in which descriptions of violence and instability draw on the very colonial language of “barbarism” and “backwardness” that Césaire criticized in *Discourse*. But this is all a mystification; the fact is, while colonialism in its formal sense
might have been dismantled, the colonial state was not. Many of
the problems of democracy are products of the old colonial state,
whose primary difference with the current states is the absence
of black faces. It has to do with the rise of a new ruling class—the
class Fanon warned us about—that is content with mimicking
the colonial masters, whether they are the old-school British or
French officers, the new jack American corporate rulers, or the
Stalinists whose sympathy for the "backward" countries often
mirrored the very colonial discourse Césaire exposed. Corruption
runs rampant; violence and intimidation are employed to
keep order and "motivate" workers; profits for big capital take
precedence over the problems of poverty, health, and safety for
the poor.

We are hardly in a postcolonial moment. The official apparatus
might have been removed, but the political, economic, and cul-
tural links established by colonial domination still remain, with
some alterations. Discourse was less concerned with the specifics
of political economy than with a way of thinking. Its lesson was
that colonial domination required a whole way of thinking, a dis-
course in which everything that was advanced, good, and civi-
lized was defined and measured in European terms. Discourse
called on the world to move forward as rapidly as possible, and yet
called for the overthrow of a master class's ideology of progress,
one built on violence, destruction, and genocide. Both Fanon
and Césaire warned the "colored" world not to follow in Europe's
footsteps, and not to go back to the ancient way, but to carve out
a new direction altogether. What we've been witnessing, however
(and here I must include Césaire's own beloved Martinique),
hardly reflects the imagination and vision captured in these brief
pages: the same old political parties, the same armies, the same
methods of labor exploitation, the same education, the same tec-
tics of incarceration, exiling, and killing artists and intellectuals
who dare to imagine a radically different way of living, who dare
to invent the Marvelous before our very eyes.

In the end, Discourse was never intended to be a road map or a
blueprint for revolution. It is poetry and therefore revolt. It is an
act of insurrection, drawn from Césaire's own miraculous
weapons, molded and shaped by his work with Tropiques and its
challenge to the Vichy regime, by his imbibing of European cul-
ture and his sense of alienation from both France and his native
land. It is a rising, a blow to the master who appears as owner and
ruler, teacher and comrade. It is revolutionary graffiti painted in
bold strokes across the great texts of Western civilization: it is a
hand grenade tossed with deadly accuracy, clearing the field so
that we might write a new history with what's left standing. Dis-
course is hardly a dead document about a dead order. If anything,
it is a call for us to plum the depths of the imagination for a dif-
f erent way forward. Just as Césaire drew on Comte de Lautré-
mont's Chants de Maldoror to illuminate the cannibalistic nature
of capitalism and the power of poetic knowledge, Discourse offers
new insights into the consequences of colonialism and a model
for dreaming a way out of our postcolonial predicament. Al-
though we still need to overthrow all vestiges of the old colonial
order, destroying the old is just half the battle.

The Noise of Our Living:
In the Wilderness of North America

Surrealism's influence in the black world extends well beyond
the formally colonized people. In North America, it is reflected
in the work of black artists as diverse as Frank London Brown,
Bob Kaufman, Jayne Cortez, Ted Joans, Will Alexander, and
Richard Wright.

Richard Wright?

Only a handful of critics have acknowledged Wright's surreal-
list influences, and yet it is hard to comprehend some of his most
radical political impulses without surrealism. As early as 1940,
Kenneth Burke characterized Native Son as a "surrealist"

novel, and more recently, Eugene E. Miller's insightful study,
Voice of a Native Son: The Poetics of Richard Wright (1990), argu-
that Wright's fascination with surrealism was more than a
passing flirtation. According to Miller, the manuscript version of

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Wright's *American Hunger* reveals that he knew about Dadaism (a short-lived forebear of surrealism founded in 1916, emphasizing humor, irreverence, and a critique of bourgeois conceptions of "art"). Also, Wright's poem "Transcontinental" (1935) was modeled on surrealist Louis Aragon's celebrated pro-Communist poem "Red Front." Moreover, in an essay titled "Personalism" written some time between 1935 and 1937, Wright advocated the use of "any and all techniques, including those of Dada and Surrealism, in order to express a writer's deepest subjective feelings."

Wright's most sustained discussion of surrealism appears in his unpublished "Memories of My Grandmother." Surrealism, he suggests, helped him understand the character and strengths of African-American folk culture and clarify "the mystery" of the way his grandmother—like blues singers—used language and composition. The blues juxtaposed elements that had no rational connection, and it possessed no narrative sequence. Wright found the blues structure analogous to the surrealists' use of the "exquisite corpse," the chance encounter, the juxtaposing of seemingly unrelated things in order to reveal the Marvelous.

Wright indirectly acknowledged the influence of surrealism on his most famous novel, *Native Son*, in his classic essay "How Bigger Was Born." In Wright's novel, Bigger Thomas is the protagonist whose degradation under racism and capitalism compels him to murder and rape, but just as he is about to face his own execution he recognizes the redeeming power of working-class collective action through the Communist Party. Wright did not try to pass off *Native Son* as social realism or proletarian realism, and he did not characterize it as mere social commentary. Rather, it is a psychological journey that attempts to communicate what's incommunicable; it is about alienation and yearning for something, but Wright isn't sure exactly what it is. In trying to make sense of Bigger, Wright succumbed to the power of imagination:

While writing, a new and thrilling relationship would spring up under the drive of emotion, coalescing and telescoping alien facts into a known and felt truth. That was the deep fun of the job: to feel within my body that I was pushing out to new areas...

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"Keepin' It (Sur)real: Dreams of the Marvelous" of feeling, strange landmarks of emotion, tramping upon foreign soil, compounding new relationships of perceptions, making new and—until that very split second of time—unheard-of and unfelt effects with words. It had a buoying and tonic impact upon me; my senses would strain and seek for more and more of such relationships; my temperature would rise as I worked. That is writing as I feel it, a kind of significant living.

For Wright, black people did not have to go out and find surrealism, for their lives were already surreal. He suggested that it was exactly the forced exclusion of black people that produced a different way of looking at the world and of feeling it—an idea made evident in his 1941 text *Twelve Million Black Voices*. Wright used Farm Security Administration photographs to drive his narrative. The text captured the surreal character of black life and turned to poetry as a means to elucidate alienation and its impact on the psyche. "The noise of our living," he writes, "boxed in stone and steel, is so loud that even a pistol shot is smothered." In the foreword, Wright announced that he was not interested in celebrating the black middle class, the success stories who were "like single fishes that leap and flash for a split second above the surface of the sea." He really wanted to write a "history" that attempted, as Baudelaire put it, to "plunge to the bottom of the abyss, Hell or Heaven... to the bottom of the Unknown in order to find the new!" His world was the world of the 90 percent, the tragic school that swims below in the depths, against the current, silently and heavily, struggling against the waves of vicissitudes that spell a common fate. It is not, however, to celebrate or exalt the plight of the humble folk who swim in the depths that I select the conditions of their lives as examples of normality, but rather to seize upon that which is qualitative and abiding in Negro experience, to place within full and constant view the collective humanity whose triumphs and defeats are shared by the majority, whose gains in security mark an advance in the level of consciousness attained by the broad masses in their costly and tortuous upstream journey.
I don't think it is an exaggeration to declare *Twelve Million Black Voices* a surreal text. Employing dream imagery, Wright conveyed to his readers the long nightmare that is black life in America and held out the possibility of a new dream, one rooted in African-American folk values which he attributes to the absurd and impoverished life black people have had to endure. Unlike the “lords of the land,” slavery’s descendants never had the option of creating a culture based on property ownership, accumulation, and exploitation. Instead, black families were held together “by love, sympathy, pity, and the gnawing knowledge that we must work together to make a crop.” “That is why we black folk laugh and sing when we are alone together,” Wright mused. “Our scale of values differs from that of the world from which we have been excluded; our shame is not its shame, and our love is not its love.”

The implications of black folk culture as the basis for a new politics was made explicit in Wright’s most surreal passage, rendered ironically as a sermon. It reads like a piece of automatism, spoken from the unconscious, free of form or punctuation. In this breathtaking tale of good versus evil, Satan versus God, Jesus “dies upon a cross to show Man the way back up the broad highway to peace and thus Man begins to live for a time under a new dispensation of Love and not Law. . . .” The congregation’s response was as important as the sermon itself: The people “sway in our seats until we have lost all notion of time and have begun to float on a tide of passion. The preacher begins to punctuate his words with sharp rhythms, and we are lifted far beyond the boundaries of our daily lives, upward and outward, until drunk with our enchanted vision, our senses lifted to the burning skies, we do not know who we are, what we are, or where we are. . . . But the hope of a new dispensation keeps their souls nourished until tomorrow.

Wright’s engagement with surrealism seemed to parallel that of many other black intellectuals. They have found in surrealism confirmation of what they already know—for them it is more an act of recognition than a revolutionary discovery. As we have already seen, Aimé Césaire insisted that surrealism brought him back to African culture. Ted Joans wrote Breton that he “chose” surrealism because he recognized its fundamental ideas and camaraderie in jazz. Wifredo Lam said he was drawn to surrealism because he already knew the power of the unconscious, having grown up in the Africanized spirit world of Santeria. The contemporary Senegalese artist Cheikh Tidiane Sylla is even more explicit about how surrealism reveals what is already familiar in African culture. “In the ecologically balanced tribal cultures of Africa,” he wrote in *Arsenal/Surrealist Subversion* (1989), “the surrealist spirit is deeply embedded in social tradition. The ‘mysticism’ prevalent in all Black African philosophy presupposes a highly charged psychic world in which every individual agrees to forget himself or herself in order to concentrate on the least known instances of the mind’s movement—a thoroughly emancipatory experience.” He further asserted that in Africa the practice of poetry was always a way of life, whereas in the West surrealism was the product of a long philosophical and political struggle “to recover what the traditional African has never lost.”

In other words, all these black artists with whom the surrealists identify suggest that a thorough understanding and an acceptance of the Marvelous existed in the lives of blacks and non-Western peoples—before Breton, before Rimbaud, before Lautréamont—in music, dance, speech, the plastic arts, and above all philosophy. We are, after all, talking about cultures that valued imagination, improvisation, and verbal agility, from storytelling, preaching, and singing to toasting and the dozens. Indeed, when I first read Lautréamont’s injunction that “Poetry must be made by all,” I was reminded of Olaudah Equiano, a former slave who wrote in his *Interesting Narrative* (1792) that the world from which he was stolen was “almost a nation of dancers, musicians, and poets [where] every great event . . . is celebrated in public dances . . . accompanied with songs and music.” For all of the problems and exploitations and oppressions one finds in precolonial Africa, there remained a deep longing for that world, for it was remem-
bered and experienced as a world that kept us whole. Richard Wright's *Twelve Million Black Voices* located the heart of African "civilization" in the imagination: "We smelted iron, danced, made music, and recited folk poems, we sculptured, worked in glass, spun cotton and wool, wove baskets and cloth..." In her poem "I Wonder Who," Jayne Cortez goes one step further than Wright, juxtaposing Africa's creativity and self-reliance against the corruption of neocolonial schemes of "modernization":

We have been calling across fields  
& false to snapping & mourning  
in deep Shona deep Edo deep Mandingo  
before the erection  
of artificial systems  
& we have been building granaries  
pounding grain  
going from dry stream  
to dry stream  
since the beginning of  
the illumination of stars  
We have been pulling tons of wood  
up the road  
in the rain  
in malagana land  
for thousands of years  
& we have been ploughing across deserts  
linking events  
& circulating information  
since the division of night & day  
day & night...  

The second half of the poem asks, Who will get rid of Africa's oppressors, the "Presidents Ministers and Chiefs," "all the non-serious scholars & serious expert invaders of indigenous cultures," the white settler regimes, the mercenaries sent by the forces of imperialism to foil revolutionary movements? The beauty and peace Africa might one day enjoy, again, is musically illustrated in her recording of "I Wonder Who," which is backed by Salieu Suso's and Sarjo Kuyateh's magnificent koré playing.

Cortez, after all, is first and foremost an activist. In 1963, SNCC leader James Forman persuaded her to go to Mississippi, where she attended mass meetings and met with grassroots organizers, including Fannie Lou Hamer. She returned to Los Angeles that year and founded Friends of SNCC, a gathering of movement supporters that attracted a broad array of figures from the performing and visual arts. Friends of SNCC succeeded in drawing celebrities and raising money, but Cortez wanted to focus her energies on grassroots organizing. In 1964 she created Studio Watts with Jim Woods, a community theater in the heart of South Central Los Angeles's black community that performed highly politicized street theater and poetry readings before the Watts rebellion of 1965. Studio Watts grew rapidly, attracting committed artists. Cortez and others broke with Jim Woods in 1967 and formed the Watts Repertory Theatre Company, becoming one of the most dynamic community arts projects in the nation. Although she relocated to New York soon after the WRTC was founded, she returned in 1968 and 1970 to direct Jean Genet's moving play *The Blacks*.

As with Césaire, Richard Wright, Wifredo Lam, and others, it was surrealism that discovered Cortez rather than the other way around. Surrealism was less a revelation than a recognition of what already existed in the black tradition. For Cortez surrealism is merely a tool to help create a strong revolutionary movement and a powerful, independent poetry.

Jayne Cortez dreams anti-imperialist dreams. It is not enough to imagine what kind of world we would like; we have to do the work to make it happen. Today, in an era when many young people believe that surrealism is merely an aesthetic or a hip style, Cortez exemplifies the revolutionary commitment that has always been at the heart of the black radical imagination. We hear in her performances with her band Firespitters (which plays all
manner of Afrodiasporic music) a vibrant poetic imagery drawn from the deep well of the blues. This is certainly evident in collections such as Passstained Stairs and the Monkey Man’s Wares (1969), Celebrations and Solitudes (1975), Conglurations (1984), Everywhere Drums (1990), Poetic Magnetic (1991), and Somewhere in Advance of Nowhere (1996). She wages poetic war against imperialism, racism, sexism, fascism, consumerism, and environmental injustice, while schooling those who don’t know to some of our great artists—from Nicolas Guillén to Babs Gonzalez. She creates magnetic images of convulsive beauty, to be sure, but they are fighting words. Poems such as “Stockpiling” and “War Devoted to War” reveals the connection between war and capitalism, whereas “Rape” and “If the Drum Is a Woman” are antiwar “songs” about the vicious and violent assault on women’s bodies. But Cortez is a true radical feminist; she refuses to write women as victims. One of the greatest lyrical paens to the resistance of women to all forms of domination is Cortez’s “Sacred Trees.” Using trees as a metaphor for all women, she laments their abuse and exploitation while celebrating their strength, longevity, and rebellion. Women here are the forest; they grow, resist, and lay the foundation for new dreams, a new life:

...everytime I think about us women
I think about the trees
I think about
the subversive trees laden in blood
but not bleeding
the rebellious trees encrustated
but not cracking
the abused trees wounded
but still standing
I think about the proud trees
the trees with beehive kits buzzing
the transparent trees
the trees with quinine breath hovering

the trees swaying & rubbing their
stretched marked bellies
in the rain
the crossroad trees coming from
the tree womb
of tree seeds
Trees...,

"There it Is" is a warning to the liberals and fence-sitters who don’t believe that we are fighting for our lives:

The enemies polishing their penises between
oil wells at the pentagon
the bulldozers leaping into demolition dances
the old folks dying of starvation
the informers wearing out shoes looking for crumbs
the lifeline of the earth almost dead in
the greedy mouth of imperialism
And my friend
they don’t care
if you’re an individualist
a leftist a rightist
a shithead or a snake...,

To call this “protest poetry” misses the point. It is a complete revolt, a clarion call for a new way of life. Cortez not only lifts the proverbial rug covering the mess created by our global systems of domination, but she also opens our imaginations to new possibilities in some unlikely places: “A promenading surface of erotic strokes/Rebellions carried on the felt tip of an evening sunset” (from “In a Stream of Ink”). And in the tradition of the great blues poets from whom she descends, Jayne Cortez understands and embraces the transformative, magical quality of the erotic. Listen to “Say It”:

Say it
and peel off that grey iguana skin mask
Say it
and clean out your cockpit of intoxicated spiders
Tear the sexual leaves of grief from your heart
Pluck the feathers of nostalgia from your nipples
Push the slowmoving masochistic mudslide
of contraYo voices
from your afternoon skull of anxiety
Say it
and let the tooth chips fall from
your hide of rebellious itches.

Ted Joans has the distinction of being acknowledged by André Breton as the only African-American surrealist he ever met. He is the author of more than thirty books of poetry, prose, and collage, including Black Pow-Wow, Beat Funky Jazz Poems, Afrodisia, Jazz Is Our Religion, Sure, Really, I Is, Double Trouble, Wow, and Treeduction. Perhaps his best known statement is a poem titled “The Truth.” He warns us not to fear the poets, for they speak the truth; they are our seers, clairvoyants, visionaries. And yet, to the enemies of freedom, poets, like Joans and Cortez, are dangerous. Joans knows this all too well, which is why he calls one series of poems “hand grenades,” poems meant to “explode on the enemy and the unhip.” Although his subjects range from love to poverty, Africa to the blues, race to rhinos, all his writing, like his life, is a relentless revolt. Back in 1968, Joans dispatched his nearly forgotten “Black Flower” statement, a black surrealist manifesto in support of a black freedom movement for dignity and spiritual unity. He envisaged a movement of black people in the United States bringing down American imperialism from within using the weapon of poetic imagery, “black flowers” sprouting all over the land.

While some of his poems blow up like a bomb, others spring to life like a snake in a can. His imagery is rich with humor, joy, and sensuality, characteristics Joans finds fundamental to surrealism’s liberatory ethic. He makes us laugh with the “Flying Rats of Paris” or the darkly humorous “Deadnik.” Or he might douse us with the fragrance of freedom, as he does with his radically erotic “Successful”:

Our noble implements
That liberate love
That marvelous joy
Propelled in sudanic sun
Wide open is desire
Ushered by
Red filter tip toes
Under brown roasted surface eyes
our own thighology.

When Joans speaks of “Our noble implements,” he is not just thinking of genitalia; he is referring to the imagination. Fantasy, imagination, dreaming—these are the characteristics that distinguish surrealism from the kinds of social critiques at the core of leftist politics. In fact, it is quite possible that black dissatisfaction with socialist realism had to do precisely with the suppression of key elements of black culture that surrealism embraces: the unconscious, the spirit, desire, humor, magic, and love. At the same time, ironically, the fact that relatively few black radicals actually took part in the international surrealist movement may well be because of its very familiarity; its revolutionary core was recognized as having always existed in African and black diasporic life. Thus in 1948 Ralph Ellison wrote of Harlem as “a world so fluid and shifting that often within the mind the real and the unreal merge, and the marvelous beckons from behind the same sordid reality that denies its existence.”

Revolution of the Mind

The idea of a revolution of the mind has always been central to surrealism as well as to black conceptions of liberation. By revolution of the mind, I mean not merely a refusal of victim status. I am talking about an unleashing of the mind’s most creative capacities, catalyzed by participation in struggles for change. As the
black radical thinker Cedric Robinson pointed out nearly two decades ago in his Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition, the focus of black revolt was always on the structures of the mind. Its epistemology granted supremacy to metaphysics not the material. Likewise, as the surrealist writer and blues scholar Paul Caren put it: "Human freedom depends not only on the destruction and restructuring of the economic system, but on the restructuring of the mind. New modes of poetic action, new networks of analogy, new possibilities of expression all help to formulate the nature of the supersession of reality, the transformation of everyday life as it encumbers us today, the unfolding and eventual triumph of the marvelous."

Juxtaposing surrealism and black conceptions of liberation is no mere academic exercise; it is an injunction, a proposition, perhaps even a declaration of war. I am suggesting that the black freedom movement take a long, hard look at our own surrealism as well as surrealist thought and practice in order to build new movements, new possibilities, new conceptions of liberation. Surrealism can help us break the constraints of social realism and take us to places where Marxism, anarchism, and other "isms" in the name of revolution have rarely dared to venture. From the 1940s on, surrealism has recognized the decadence of Western civilization, and has never ceased to sharpen its critique of the West's institutions and value systems, but it has always refused to fall into the trap of cynicism or technotopias or fatalism and false prophets. After all, surrealists have consistently opposed capitalism and white supremacy, have promoted internationalism, and have been strongly influenced by Marx and Freud in their efforts to bridge the gap between dream and action. In other respects, surrealism is right to Marxism's day: It breaks the chains of social realism and rationality, turning to poetry as a revolutionary mode of thought and practice. In many ways surrealism has real affinities with aspects of Afrodiasporic vernacular culture, including an embrace of magic, spirituality, and the ecstatic—elements Marxism has never been able to deal with effectively.

At the same time, surrealism is not some lost, esoteric body of thought longing for academic recognition. It is a living practice and will continue to grow as long as we dream. Nor is surrealism some atavistic romanticization of the past. Above all, surrealism considers love and poetry and the imagination powerful social and revolutionary forces, not replacements for organized protest, for marches and sit-ins, for strikes and slowdowns, for matches and spray paint. Surrealism recognizes that any revolution must begin with thought, with how we imagine a New World, with how we reconstruct our social and individual relationships, with unleashing our desire and building a new future on the basis of love and creativity rather than rationality (which is like rationalization, the same word they use for improving capitalist production and limiting people's needs).

By superseding existing reality, we must break with the current injunction to "keep it real." Of course, in contemporary hip-hop the power of "keepin' it real" means many things: It is a challenge to commercialism, a recognition of the ghetto as a site of creativity, a call for solidarity with oppressed classes. But if we believe in revolution, the critical moral of this essay is that we need to move beyond the real and make it surreal. And in the "wonderful world" according to Ted Joans, this is what being hip is all about. Go ahead Ted, take us out with a final chorus of "Let's Play Something!"

LET'S PLAY THAT WE ALL HIP, very hip and wise/ thus we are hipsters and hipstresses/ we use machinery and do not allow the machinery to use or mis-use us/ as hipsters we are spiritually involved with life/ and we dig good food/ good sex/ and the finest of arts and we travel all over this wonderful world/ for the entire earth is ours/ we love those whom wished to be loved/ we kiss but do not kill/ we work at jobs that give us thrills/ we abuse all money/ and we pick up all knowledge that we can use/ we experience all great kicks/ we avoid conformity/ disaffiliated with any organized goof/ thus digging freedom/ freedom/ freedom now/ freedom for all/ and create a new life that is an eternal surreal ball/ marvelous for yellow ones/ black ones/ living/ sharing/
Freedom Dreams

caring and healthy creating/ a new hip world where nobody is
hungry where nobody is oppressed and where there is hope

YEAH LADIES AND GENTLEMEN BOYS AND GIRLS
LET'S PLAY THAT YES LET'S PLAY THAT FOR REAL
LET'S PLAY THAT WE ARE ALL HIPSTERS AND REALLY
BEGIN TO LIVE!!!

"WHEN HISTORY WAKES":
A NEW BEGINNING

... When History wakes, image becomes deed, the poem is
achieved: poetry goes into action.

Octavio Paz, "Toward the Poem"

When I first conceived of this book, I imagined ending on a
dream of my own. In fact, on September 11, 2001, the epilogue
was already written and my dream was poised for action. It was a
long dream to be sure, a fantastic, futuristic tale of a group of
“Maroon poets” who transform a local struggle over police bru-
tality into a full-fledged revolution rooted in love, creativity, and
cooperation over the course of seven hundred years. In my
dream, it took thirty generations of poets, surviving and creating
in the “liberated zones” of North America’s ghettos, to build a co-
operative world without wages or money.

After September 11, however, my original epilogue/dream felt
uncomfortably apocalyptic. The immediate question of “where
do we go from here” invaded my daydreams and dominated my
nocturnal adventures, along with the constant stench of burning
metal, concrete, and Lord knows what else enveloping our neigh-
borhood, and the horrendous image of bombs raining down on
Sources


Sources

"Women United Free the Panthers!" In Baxandall and Gordon, Dear Sisters.

6. Keepin' It (Sur)real: Dreams of the Marvelous

Sources


Sources


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If I thanked everyone who deserved to be thanked, the additional pages would double the size (and the price) of this book. I only hope that those I have not mentioned will understand and accept my gratitude in some other form.

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