CHAPTER 19

Decolonial Surrealism

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One of the principal artistic and intellectual movements of the twentieth century, Surrealism grew – the story often goes – from a Paris-based group of young poets and artists to a broadly international intellectual phenomenon, gaining adherents and fellow travelers throughout the world through the late 1960s and beyond. Surrealism engineered new ways of thinking – of writing, of making art, of living – that sought not only to defy but actively to *fight back* against the seemingly unthinkable events and atrocities that might otherwise stand uncontested as reality. Through experiments in poetry and art that could be carried out by virtually anyone, Surrealism produced "miraculous weapons" for renovating the ways in which thinking takes place, and for wresting reality away from the clutches of governing elites and ideological commonplaces.[1] But what did such a commitment to "fighting back" comprise? The history of the surrealist movement is a history of this question, the animating and disintegrating imperative of a set of poets, artists, and intellectuals for whom political militancy was reducible neither to an artistic theme nor to an extra-artistic array of instrumental actions.

Long considered a period of decline for the surrealist movement, the decolonization era of the 1950s and 1960s certainly saw a renewed intensification of anticolonial activism on behalf of the members of the surrealist group in Paris. Most notably, perhaps, the *Manifesto of 121* (1960), which was drafted by the leftist writer Dionys Mascolo along with surrealist Jean Schuster and philosopher Maurice Blanchot, framed the Algerian war as a war for independence, declaring the "right to insubordination" on behalf of the decolonial struggle. Among the 121 signatories of the manifesto were

[1] Aimé Césaire, *Les Armes Miraculeuses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946). Césaire's first published book of poetry (his famous *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* was published in book form the following year, having appeared in the French journal *Volontés* in 1939) is available in translation in Aimé Césaire, *The Complete Poetry of Aimé Césaire*, trans. A. James Arnold and Clayton Eshleman (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 62–305.

dozens of artists and writers affiliated with the surrealist movement, along with other leading intellectuals such as Simone de Beavoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, François Truffault, and Marguerite Duras. The document was, moreover, one of many surrealist tracts and declarations written in support of anticolonial insurrection over the movement's first half century of existence.[2]

In terms of the growing counter-hegemony of anticolonial insurgency movements and independence organizations across the Global South, however, the work of Surrealism hardly registers at the forefront of the decolonial imagination. For the Martinique-born psychiatrist and revolutionary theorist Frantz Fanon, the anticolonial project required weapons far different than those offered by a European avant-garde movement such as Surrealism. For Fanon, writing in the midst of the Algerian war (and Leukemia treatments) in 1961, decolonization "is always a violent phenomenon," whereby the struggle for freedom demanded a "genuine eradication" of both colonial power structures and "the superstructure built by . . . intellectuals from the bourgeois colonialist environment."[3] Such a struggle was reducible neither to a rationalist, universalizing declaration of "rights" nor – for that matter – to an effort "to escape from the claws of colonialism" through a recourse to poetic lyricism and myth.

Fanon's understanding of decolonization both extended from and rhetorically broke with the Surrealism-inflected writing and thinking of his former teacher and fellow Martiniquan Aimé Césaire, whose poetics of *négritude* in the 1930s and 1940s sought to forge a new mode of diasporic solidarity predicated on a fundamental inversion of the subaltern condition of global Blackness. Famously anticipating Audre Lorde's claim that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," Fanon writes in *Wretched of the Earth* that "You will never make colonialism blush for shame by spreading out little-known cultural treasures under its eyes."[4] Fanon's ideas about anticolonial violence and the demands of radical political, social, psychic, and epistemological change proposed to supersede

[2] See especially the postwar surrealist tracts "Freedom Is a Vietnamese Word" (April 1947) and "The Example of Cuba and the Revolution: A Message from the Surrealists to Cuban Writers and Artists," published in *La Brèche* 7 (December, 1964), and in Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski, eds. and trans., *Surrealism against the Current: Tracts and Declarations* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 193–195 and 126–127. The "Manifesto of the 121" is included as "Declaration on the Right to Insubordination in the Algerian War" in *Surrealism against the Current,* 195–197.

[3] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 1 and 46.

[4] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 110–113; Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth,* 223.

the "miraculous weapons" of earlier twentieth-century intellectual movements such as Surrealism and, in particular, *négritude*, weaponry that could just as easily staunch the subaltern recourse to violence – real, historical violence – as channel it rhetorically.[5]

This chapter proposes to begin telling the story of Surrealism during the period of decolonization and neoliberal re-entrenchment that extends roughly from the end of World War II to the contemporary moment of ever-accelerating extractive capitalism and climate disaster. In doing so, it begins to trace the overlapping but also discontinuous channels of transmission according to which anticolonial movements throughout the world – and in particular throughout the Global South – drew upon, rejected, and reinvented surrealist thinking as a medium, if not a "weapon," for the development of decolonial thinking and praxis. My aim, in other words, is to approach anew the question of Surrealism as a political movement according to its discontinuous place – or absence – in decolonial thought and insurrectional movements and solidarity networks around the world. Whereas decolonization refers to the historical process whereby an imperial power withdraws from a former colony, the neologism "decolonial" marks a fundamental distinction between administrative independence and the broader struggles for liberation and sovereignty that have taken place in the wake of centuries of colonial exploitation. Such struggles extend, even in the wake of national independence, from insurrectional tactics to institutional practices – such as collective organization and administration – and cultural traditions and epistemologies that likewise bear the imprint of colonialism.

By approaching "Surrealism" through its varied reception at sites of decolonial thought and action – that is, by studying how it was understood from a subaltern perspective – this chapter proposes to suspend the common narrative according to which Surrealism originated in Paris after World War I and "spread" to other countries, whether through the travels of individual European artists and writers, or through groups of second-order adherents. In place of a genealogy or "legacy" of surrealist

[5] Fanon's *Peau Noir, Masques Blancs* (1952) is framed explicitly as a response to Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism,* including the surrealist reception of Césaire as "a great black poet." Such a "ready-made" phrase, Fanon writes with blistering understatement, which seems "in a common-sense way to fill a need – for Aimé Césaire is really black and a poet – [has] a hidden subtlety, a permanent rub . . . what I am trying to say is that there is no reason why André Breton should say of Césaire, 'Here is a black man who handles the French language as no white man today can'." Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 39–40. On *négritude* and decolonization, see especially Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

techniques and adherents disseminated throughout the nether reaches of the colonial world, I propose instead to explore the ways in which thinkers throughout the Global South, particularly in North Africa and the Americas, have built Afro-Caribbean, transcontinental, pan-African, and Indigenous networks of artistic and political activity through the medium of a surrealist movement rendered plastic through translation and diaspora. The key here is the plasticity according to which what is knowable as "Surrealism" is variously refracted, reinvented, or rejected according to the particularities of its reception by non-European thinkers.

For the sake of illustration, I will gesture to the collaborative work of Brooklyn, US based contemporary artists Chitra Ganesh and Simone Leigh, who describe the evolution of their collaboration as GIRL, particularly the making of the 2011 digital video *My Dreams, My Works, Must Wait Till After Hell*. As Ganesh explains in a recent interview,

> the digital video GIRL produced, came out of a series of experiments that harnessed a concurrent interest in tropes of surrealist photography and figuration. We were both reading art historian Whitney Chadwick's 1998 book *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*. These investigations were also informed by MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] curator Cornelia Butler's 2007 groundbreaking exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*.[6]

The "Surrealism" from which Ganesh and Leigh draw, in other words, is a Surrealism that proceeds from their reading of Whitney Chadwick's work on the women artists involved in the movement, such as Claude Cahun, Leonor Fini, Leonora Carrington, Dora Maar, Valentine Hugo, and others. This refraction through feminist scholarship registers not only in the figural economy of their artwork, but in its political intensity as well, insofar as the very function of artistic practice takes part in a project of subaltern enfranchisement and solidarity. As Leigh puts it:

> we both feel that for artists who occupy marginalized positions within a mainstream Euro-American art structure, one of the most radical acts is consistently to make one's work. We both agree that key to this process—of both surviving and *thriving* artistically—is to develop the internal logic that guides one's practice as well as the personal, emotional, and institutional structures that would enable it.[7]

[6] Simone Leigh , Chitra Ganesh, and Uri McMillan , "Alternative Structures: Aesthetics, Imagination, and Radical Reciprocity: an Interview with Girl," *ASAP/Journal* 2.2 (May, 2017), 241–252: 246.
[7] Ibid., 248.

It is certainly not my intention either to situate Surrealism at the origin of decolonial thinking, or to posit it as a stable influence upon individual thinkers and movements. Nor, for that matter, is it my purpose merely to "provincialize" it, by inverting the asymmetry according to which European movements continue to serve as a universalizing paradigm for insurrectional politics, although this is *partly* my aim. Rather, Surrealism constitutes a cultural medium through and often against which some decolonial thinkers have developed "new loci of enunciation," as Walter Mignolo has put it, forming new centers of knowledge and practice within what have often been understood as the margins of colonial modernity.

Mignolo, synthesizing the work of numerous Latin American and African intellectuals, refers to this recentralization as a border thinking or "border gnosis," signifying a knowledge "conceived from the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world system."[8] Such a conception of border thinking is understood not as hybridity or even creolization (or, for that matter, as an encounter with "otherness") but instead as "an intense battlefield in the long history of colonial subalternization of knowledge and legitimation of the colonial difference."[9] To the extent that Surrealism has a place at this border, it has to do with the movement's instrumentalization as a critical tool for the rearticulation of knowledge and power from a subaltern perspective – whether as a discourse, a polemic, a set of poetic practices, or an ever-expanding genealogy and archive of surrealist practitioners. The example of Surrealism serves, therefore, as an invitation to think about the intellectual practices and resources of insurrectional movements and collective struggles for self-determination in tandem with the historicity of cultural transmission.

Much has been written about the role of Parisian intellectual life in the development of Pan-Africanism, global feminism, *négritude*, pan-Arab, and other subaltern and Third-World movements and liberation philosophies – on account less of the international prestige of French intellectual life than on the intense historical encounters Paris afforded among diasporic artists and intellectuals.[10] Reciprocally, the centrifugal movement of countless international surrealists to and from Europe in the years before and during

[8] Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, second ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 11.

[9] Ibid., 12.

[10] Vijay Prashad's "People's History of the Third World," begins, for example, with a chapter on Paris – on account of the nation's betrayal of independence movements in Haiti (1801) and the "overseas territories" in Vietnam, Africa, and the West Indies after 1945. See Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 3–15.

World War II established numerous formal and informal networks of surrealist activity in countries at various stages of decolonization: this included the *Art et liberté* group in Cairo, the *Poesía sorprendida* group in the Dominican Republic, the *Mandrágora* group in Chile, and the *Poesía en voz alta* and *Dyn* groups in Mexico City, among many others. Yet no less significant were the travels of non-European figures and their engagement, whether directly or indirectly, in surrealist activities: The global travels of surrealist artists, and of surrealist ideas, have come increasingly to the foreground in the scholarly understanding of Surrealism in recent years, yet scholars and curators have tended to focus on the artistic *influence* of the movement. The exchanges and transformations in political thinking at such points of contact have been far less systematically investigated, in spite of the overlapping and strikingly cosmopolitan intellectual genealogies of many Third World thinkers and political leaders.[11]

The transmission of Surrealism throughout the world is neither unidirectional *nor* is it directionless; so too are the intellectual genealogies of decolonial movements, thinkers, and activists of the past seventy years neither singularizable nor without a common set of exigencies. The significance of investigating Surrealism through its global reception is thus twofold. First, it means attending to the transcultural formations and refractions in the conceptual and tactical development of anticolonial and decolonial groups, artists, theorists, activists, and political figures worldwide. This research is thus necessarily in line with contemporary studies of Indigenous movements, Third World political history, and decolonial methodologies. Second, it thereby means rethinking

[11] As a case in point, Todd Shepard opens his study of Algerian decolonization by narrating its centripetal force in attracting and training international activists and leaders:

> The Algerian Revolution (1954–1962) won independence for Algeria. For many people, it also became the very archetype of the mid-twentieth-century struggle to end Western colonialism. The "Mecca of the revolutionaries" stirred militants such as the young African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela, who trained at a nationalist military camp in Morocco; the Palestinian nationalist Yassir Arafat, who witnessed the entry of liberation forces into Algiers on 3 July 1962; and the American radical Angela Davis, who in 1961 discussed what the triumph over imperialism meant with Algerian students in Paris. Those who fought them also studied its lessons: the police of apartheid-era South Africa relied on French military theories about "revolutionary war"; FBI agents in the 1960s watched Gillo Pontecorvo's magnificent film *The Battle of Algiers* (1965) to help them crush groups like the Black Panthers; and Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon kept a copy of Alistair Horne's magisterial recounting of the conflict, *A Savage War of Peace* (1977), on his nightstand.

Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 1.

Surrealism according to its staggered and often agonistic reception by such figures – as well as a recognition of the necessary limits of any such reception history. Only to this extent, I propose, can Surrealism be fully considered a global or international movement on a world-historical scale.

Encounters

With regard to the local histories of Surrealism's place in decolonial thinking, the emergence of Surrealism as a set of poetic and political affordances owed much to its association with the political Left and, in particular, to the role of anticolonial revolt in radicalizing surrealist politics. Even the Caribbean surrealists who participated directly in the surrealist movement – such as the Martinican poets associated with the journal *Légitime defense* who participated in anticolonial activities in Paris in 1931 and 1932 – were Marxists before they were surrealists.[12] A second-order discovery on the order of discourse, Surrealism's poetics were as politically charged in their circulation as in their creation. For Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, writing in the Martinican journal *Tropiques* during World War II, the poetic genealogies associated with Surrealism offered a "miraculous weapon" to supplement their arsenal of ideological and imaginative armaments, part of "the unprecedented mobilization of forces which poetry necessitates."[13] As Suzanne Césaire writes in 1943, "Surrealism has given us some of our possibilities. It is up to us to find the others."[14]

Other artists and intellectuals of the Caribbean tended to concur with this spirited, if measured, assessment. For the young poets associated with the Haitian journal *La Ruche* in 1946, for instance, André Breton's visit to Haiti was a spur to revolutionary action, but a "spur" planned and arranged by the Haitian student movement and not spontaneously incited by Breton. According to Gérald Bloncourt, a contributor to *La Ruche,* the date and time for the 1946 revolution had already been set in advance, and he visited Breton on behalf of "La Jeunesse Révolutionnaire d'Haïti" (Revolutionary Haitian Youth) to convince him to address his final evening

[12] The sole issue of *Légitime défense* appeared in 1932; for the texts in English, see Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski, eds. and trans., *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London: Verso, 1996), 37–68. On *Légitime défense,* see especially Jean-Claude Michel, *The Black Surrealists* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000); see also Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), esp. 157–194.

[13] See Césaire, *Les Armes miraculeuses*; and "Poetry and Knowledge" [1945], *Refusal of the Shadow*, 145.

[14] Suzanne Césaire, "The Malaise of a Civilization," *Tropiques* 5 (April, 1942); also in *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941–1945)*, trans. Keith L. Walker (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 28–33: 33.

lecture on the subject of liberty.[15] The "Homage to André Breton" published in *La Ruche* recognized the French surrealist poet and theorist through affinity rather than, perhaps, "influence" or formal affiliation. As René Depestre, the editor of *La Ruche,* later wrote, the poets that broke with Surrealism in the name of Communist militancy – such as Paul Éluard and Louis Aragon in particular – were as important to his thinking as any formal allegiance with the Bretonian movement.[16] Depestre and other Haitian poets first learned about Surrealism, moreover, through Aimé Césaire, who visited Port-au-Prince in 1944, the year before Breton visited the island: Surrealism was already mediated though diasporic affinities.

Such an open genealogy was fundamental, in turn, to Depestre's evaluation of the movement itself. For Depestre, Surrealism, like the *négritude* movement Césaire cofounded, was useful to the project of decolonization only insofar as it designated an *ongoing* "movement," that is, an open process, rather than a static concept.[17] Surrealism, by this logic, offered a *medium*, an open set of relations that do not comprise a *filiation from* Surrealism – that is, an extraction from it or a lineage with it – but instead a terrain for *marronage.* Naming the historical persistence of clandestine, autonomous societies of escaped slaves in the Caribbean wilderness, – such "armed flight," as Edouard Glissant later termed it – also named a set of cultural practices that involved an immanent, provisional centering of the subaltern as a new site of enunciation.[18]

"The antinomian predicament of [Aimé] Césaire's thinking derives in part from the origin of Surrealism as a blanket refusal of bourgeois society and a life dominated by instrumental or technological reason," writes Epifanio San Juan, Jr. Describing Césaire's "marronage poetics," he writes of the poet's claim that Surrealism provided a "weapon" that enabled him to "explode the French language," and that this relationship constituted a "paradoxical mediation in which negativity is anatomized, divided and sublated."[19] For Césaire, in other words, Surrealism was neither an

[15] See especially, Gérald Bloncourt and Michael Löwy, *Messagers de la Tempête. André Breton et la Révolution de janvier 1946 en Haïti* (Paris: Le Temps des Cerises 2007). Also, Matthew J. Smith, *Red and Black in Haiti: Radicalism, Conflict, and Political Change, 1934–1957* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

[16] See especially, René Despestre, "André Breton en Haïti," in *Bonjour et adieu à la négritude* (Paris: Seghers, 1980), 227–235.

[17] Depestre, *Bonjour et adieu*, 234.

[18] Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 248.

[19] E. San Juan, Jr., "Aimé Césaire's Insurrectional Poetics," in *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, ed. Raymond Spiteri and Don LaCoss (London: Routledge, 2003), 230.

"influence" nor a coherent political strategy in itself; rather, what rendered surrealist language "miraculous" was its status as a medium for the dialectical construction of an emancipatory politics – as well as an epistemology – of dynamic, volatile forms and solidarities.

Césaire develops this double movement systematically in his *Discourse on Colonialism*, a speech first published in Paris in 1950 and reprinted, in expanded form, by *Présence Africaine* in 1955. The *Discourse* is a profoundly polemical text that sought to "think clearly – that is, dangerously" about the colonial system as both a political–economic regime and an epistemological formation, which was not only predicated historically upon slavery and murder, but also legitimated its perpetuation and erased its devastating effects. "I am talking," Césaire writes, "about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled underfoot, institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed, extraordinary *possibilities* wiped out."[20] The task of decolonization was thus double-edged, demanding not only the revolutionary overthrow of the colonial regime – that is, capitalism – but also the overthrow of, or at least an "armed flight" from, its epistemological regime as well. Césaire urges his reader to

> hold as enemies – loftily, lucidly, consistently – not only sadistic governors and greedy bankers, not only prefects who torture and flog, not only corrupt, check-licking politicians and subservient judges, but likewise and for the same reason, venomous journalists, goitrous academicians . . . ethnographers who go in for metaphysics, presumptuous Belgian theologians, chattering intellectuals born stinking out of the thigh of Nietzsche . . . all of them tools of capitalism, all of them, openly or secretly, supporters of plundering capitalism, all of them responsible, all hateful.[21]

The poetic "weapons" associated with Surrealism were not in themselves sufficient for the revolutionary overthrow that decolonization demanded, but they could certainly identify the enemy and thus initiate the call to *marronnage*.

The Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, who began participating in surrealist activities in Paris in 1938 after fighting against fascism in Spain, makes a similar observation in a late interview from 1980. He describes the scissors held by the central figure in his iconic 1943 painting "The Jungle": "The scissors mean that it was necessary for us to sever ourselves from the culture

[20] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* [1950], trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), 43.
[21] Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 43.

of colonialism . . . that had already dominated us enough culturally."[22] Thus allegorically figuring the epistemological scission or "explosion" of the French language to which Aimé Césaire refers, Lam claims in the same interview that "my painting is an act of decolonization (*un acto de descolonización*) not in a physical sense, but in a mental one," insofar as it relocates "Black cultural objects in terms of their own landscape and relation to their own world." With an artistic practice developed through his immersion in Spanish politics and antifascist combat, Lam stressed his role as a "polemical representative of the Third World within European Culture."[23]

It is important to note here that this instrumental recourse to Surrealism as a medium for both a fundamental scission and the constitution of new lines of solidarity was historically continuous with the evolution of Surrealism itself; in spite of the fact that neither Suzanne Césaire nor Aimé Césaire, nor even Wifredo Lam, ever formally affiliated themselves with the surrealist movement, their work nonetheless left its impression on the broader movement's anticolonial politics.[24] Beyond the wartime set of diasporizing encounters that yielded texts such as Breton and André Masson's *Martinique, Charmeuse de Serpents* and Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques,* among others, Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* was very much at the forefront of the surrealist imagination in the 1950s and early 1960s, as the movement redoubled its anticolonial political stance in light of the Algerian war and other decolonization movements, as well as the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956. Breton appeals to the *Discourse on Colonialism* in a speech delivered in April 1956 to an organization of Leftist intellectuals mobilizing against France's military suppression of colonial uprisings in Algeria, as well as against de Gaulle's incarceration of Left-wing French reporters who printed dissenting views. In the speech, "For the Defense of Liberty," which was published in the inaugural issue of the magazine *Le Surréalisme, Même,* Breton explicitly invokes Césaire's depiction of colonialism as a violent disruption of Indigenous culture, closing his speech with a number of citations from Césaire's text, whose distribution he calls

[22] Wifredo Lam, "'My Painting is an Act of Decolonization,' an Interview with Wifredo Lam by Gerardo Mosquera (1980)," trans. Colleen Kattau and David Craven, *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 3.1–2 (2009), 1–8: 3.

[23] Ibid., 3 and 5.

[24] Much like Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, Lam refused to be absorbed into the category of "Surrealism," claiming that "Surrealism gave me an opening, but I haven't painted in a surrealist manner." He instead insisted that "I keep providing a solution to Surrealism." Ibid., 6.

a "spiritual weapon *par excellence.*"[25] The history of Surrealism cannot be told without this contemporary reception by decolonial thinkers, as part of the political energy embedded within its international and anticolonial project.

Such recursions are characteristic of the *movement* of Surrealism as a movement, testifying to the staggered encounters with and among world intellectuals through the medium of Surrealism as a "spiritual weapon." From the *Art et Liberté* group in Cairo to the Chicago surrealist group in the United States, the adaptation of or self-recognition in certain surrealist strategies served as a medium – a *border gnosis* – not only for the continued development of emancipatory political, poetic, and collective strategies, of what Robin D. G. Kelley has named "freedom dreams," but also for the reciprocal adaptation of and self-recognition of what "Surrealism" entails.[26]

Such decolonial appropriations of – or, in Lam's terms, "solutions" to – Surrealism tended largely to center on the cultural practices of militant artists and intellectuals. Yet not only is it one of the most decisive surrealist imperatives to consider poetic and political practices as necessarily communicating rather than distinct spheres of liberatory endeavor, but this is also the practical insistence of decolonial activity. The profound transformation "of self, community, and governance structures," as Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes, is "a historical and collective process" that extends from governance to sexuality, from being to knowing.[27] Both Suzanne and Aimé Césaire taught a generation of Martinican students, including Fanon, as teachers at the Lycée Schoelcher in Fort-de-France during the 1940s, and Aimé Césaire enjoyed a long career as a politician, from his election as mayor of Fort-de-France in 1945 through his tenure as President of the Regional Council of Martinique in the 1980s.

It lies far beyond the purview of this chapter to detail the full significance of such careers; but from Sylvia Wynter to Edouard Glissant, Maryse Condé, Raphaël Confiant, and many other Franco-Caribbean writers and intellectuals, anticolonial and decolonial thinkers worldwide have engaged both explicitly and implicitly with the thought and praxis of

[25] André Breton, "Discours au meeting 'Pour la Défense de la Liberté,' Salle des Horticulteurs, le 20 avril 1956," *Le Surréalisme, même* 1 (3rd trimester, 1956); reprinted in Marguerite Bonnet, ed., *Perspective cavalière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 121–126; 126 (my translation). See also Jean Schuster, "Open Letter to Aimé Césaire," *Le Surréalisme, même* 1 (1956), 146–147.

[26] Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*.

[27] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7–8.

both Aimé and Suzanne Césaire. The Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, for instance, recasts "the decolonization of the mind" as an institutional as well as an artistic project that shifts the language of enunciation from colonial languages (French, English) to Indigenous "languages of the people" such as Gikuyu, which, when combined "with a message of unity and hope," become truly subversive.

The Guadeloupean writer Maryse Condé invokes Césaire's "armes miraculeuse" ("miraculous weapons") in a 1995 address to the College Literature Association "to illustrate the nature of the magnificent tool [that is, words] that the imagination of every writer has at his or her disposal to build a world of his or her own." In doing so, she makes a key shift in genealogical precedents that seeks not only to displace the "influence" of Surrealism on Caribbean writing, but also the singularity of Aimé Césaire. As Condé notes, "People are prompt to trace the influence of the poet André Breton on the writing of both Suzanne and Aimé Césaire." She continues, "We do not deny that the debt of the Césaires to Breton was great. However, at the same time, Césaire is deeply rooted in the African tradition," in which according to numerous "myths of origin . . . words preceded the universe." Condé's own articulation of a decolonial project hinges on an analogous supplanting of Césaire: "It is an accepted fact that French Caribbean literature was born with Négritude during the 1930s. In fact, it was born long before when a female writer called Suzanne Lacascade took up a pen to discard the layers of lies covering her identity."[28] Such decolonial "solutions" to the surrealist project continue to shift the site of enunciation for such "spiritual weapons" from Surrealism itself to the evolving contingencies of decolonization.

Autopsy

Whereas Aimé Césaire approached Surrealism primarily through the medium of poetics – albeit a poetics understood as necessitating an "unprecedented mobilization of forces" – it was the political affiliation of Surrealism that occasioned some of the most strident criticisms of and divisions within the interwar surrealist group. This had very much to do with the extent to which Surrealism comprised something other than a poetry movement, aspiring instead to historical, even world-historical, significance. Beginning with the movement's debates in the mid-1920s

[28] Maryse P. Condé, "Language and Power: Words as Miraculous Weapons," *CLA Journal* 39.1 (September, 1995), 18–25: 19.

about whether or not to join the Communist Party, contemporaneous with the articulation of an anticolonial position toward the French intervention in the Rif war, journalists and fellow travelers alike posed the question of whether the "Revolution" to which surrealist journals of the 1920s dedicated themselves, referred to anything other than a metaphor – or a pretense.

Of the numerous public responses to the Parisian group's Leftist political affiliation during the interwar period, two of the most resonant were texts by German philosopher Walter Benjamin and Peruvian poet César Vallejo, who took the movement's stance toward organized Marxism as a significant gesture. Whereas Benjamin sought to recover Surrealism for the Marxist imagination – as a movement that was developing something far more than literature, but "literally with experiences," rather than "with theories and still less with phantasms" – Vallejo was far less recuperative, seeing in the movement not "the last snapshot of the European intelligentsia" but instead a symptom of the death throes of Western capitalist civilization.[29]

In his 1930 essay "Autopsy of Surrealism," published more or less simultaneously in Lima, Santiago de Chile, and Buenos Aires, Vallejo argues that Surrealism took on a social importance only when (some of) the group became communists. "From the simple fabric of poems in series," he writes, "it transforms into a militant political movement and into live, revolutionary, intellectual pragmatism. Surrealism then deserved to be acknowledged and qualified as one of the most vibrant constructive literary trends of the age."[30] From the vantage point of 1930, Vallejo argues that the movement ultimately lacked the courage to live up to its potential, instead falling back on literary formulas and thus betraying the Marxist cause: "While mocking the law of vital transformation, the surrealists became academics, I repeat, for their own sake and intellectual crises and didn't have the strength to go above or beyond them with truly revolutionary destructive-constructive forms."[31] In her study of Surrealism in Latin America, Melanie Nicholson testifies to the significance of Vallejo's text for the reception of Surrealism in the Americas, insofar as his critique was not only in concert with the negative or ambivalent judgments of

[29] Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia" [1929], in Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, eds., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 1927–1934*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 208.

[30] César Vallejo, "Autopsy of Surrealism" [1930], in Joseph Mulligan, ed., *Selected Writings of César Vallejo*, trans. Richard Schaaf (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2015), 203.

[31] Ibid.

many writers and intellectuals, but partially determinative of their formation.[32] For Vallejo, who was in the midst of his own formal dedication to orthodox Communism, Surrealism had value only insofar as it could be superseded by newer, living combinations of art and revolutionary politics; Surrealism itself, however, was a corpse, albeit one from which it was nonetheless possible to witness the pitfalls of "anarchic" and individualistic poetic ambitions.

Vallejo's dispatch on Surrealism was, moreover, the extension of a major rift within the Parisian surrealist group. The poet's autopsy report was published in response to a collective tract, entitled *Un Cadavre* (*A Corpse*), a mock newspaper that depicts Breton as the titular corpse, travestying his leadership of the surrealist movement as a "pope" and a "cop" on account of the "authoritarian" means by which he cajoled the group into political affiliation with the Communist International. For Vallejo, reporting on the tract on behalf of the Spanish-speaking world and in the name of Communist orthodoxy, this declaration applied just as strongly to all the surrealists: "The historical foundation of Surrealism is almost null, from whatever angle it's examined."[33]

Like its relation to party Communism, the question of Surrealism's relation to the anticolonial project, to which so many surrealist and surrealizing thinkers around the world have been committed, is a fraught one; it often forms the uneasy medium of transmission and judgment through which surrealist ideas travel throughout the world. It is to this latter question of Surrealism's portability or nonportability within the Americas that the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier refers when he describes "the great surrealist bargain basement" (*el gran baratillo surrealista*) in his 1953 novel *Los Pasos perdidos* (*The Lost Steps*), itself titled after Breton's 1924 book of essays by that name. Carpentier, who was a close friend of the French poet and erstwhile surrealist Robert Desnos on whose passport he traveled to Paris from Cuba in 1928, had contributed a brief "*témoignage*" to the *Cadavre* tract in 1930, dismissing Breton's significance in Latin America. And it was through the rejection or at least the dialectical supersession of Surrealism that Carpentier sought, in turn, to articulate a poetic imaginary for the Americas; he imagines an aesthetic as well as an ideological act of decolonization insofar as it posited the cultural history of the Americas as the living embodiment of the poetic marvelous to which

[32] Melanie Nicholson, *Surrealism in Latin America: Searching for Breton's Ghost* (London: Palgrave, 2013), 96–99.
[33] Vallejo, "Autopsy of Surrealism," 205.

a European avant-garde such as Surrealism could only gesture. As a major figure in the Boom generation of Latin American novelists, as well as a radio personality, musicologist, and influential diplomat and intellectual in post-Revolutionary Cuba, Carpentier's own "autopsy" of Surrealism represents another resonant locus of enunciation in the reception of Surrealism in the Americas.

As if expounding on his and Vallejo's dismissal of Surrealism nearly twenty years later, Carpentier's axiomatic preface to his 1949 novel *El reino de este mundo* (*The Kingdom of This World*) proposes to abandon the revolutionary terms of the surrealist imaginary in favor of the revolutionary *reality* of historical processes in the Americas. Whereas Surrealism courted "the marvelous" as the poetic site of discontinuity within the real, which instantiated both a crisis in *conscience* and a coming into awareness, Carpentier recast the marvelous as a historical phenomenon. The surrealist, European of this history had become one of exhausted formulae: "The result of attempting to arouse the marvelous at all costs is that the thaumaturges become bureaucrats," he explains. Moreover, "[i]nvoked by means of cliched formulas that turn certain paintings into a monotonous mess [*un monótono baratillo*] of drooping clocks, seamstress' dummies, or vague phallic monuments, the marvelous is stuck in umbrellas, or lobsters, or sewing machines, or wherever, on an operating table, in a sad room, in a stony desert."[34]

By contrast, the revolutionary energy at work in "*lo real maravilloso*" ("the marvelous real") derives not from literary techniques and parlor games but from the aggregate colonial entanglements and paradoxes of the Americas in their historical and material reality, particularly "the fecund racial mixtures it enabled." The magical real, as Carpentier famously described this mode of border gnosis,

> is found every step of the way in the lives of people who inscribed their dates on the history of the continent and left behind surnames still in use . . . In contrast to Western European folk dancing, which has lost all magical or incantatory characteristics, rare is the collective dance in the Americas that doesn't embody a deep sense of ritual and create around itself a whole initiating process.[35]

As a musicologist, Carpentier studied the creolization of musical forms as they traveled and commingled in the wake of the slave trade,

[34] Alejo Carpentier, "Prologue to *The Kingdom of This World*" ([1949], trans. Alfred Mac Adam, *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 26.47 (Fall, 1993), 28–32: 29.
[35] Ibid., 30.

colonization, and revolution in ways that both romanticized their "magical" capacities and yet fully recognized the deep histories of violence to which they bore witness.

Often considered to be an attack on Surrealism, Carpentier's postwar writings – from *The Kingdom of This World* to *The Lost Steps* – are in many ways additive to it. While indeed leaving behind the "bargain basement" (*baratillo*) of the movement as a static set of European personnel, rhetorics, and techniques, Carpentier retains what, in his interpretation, the surrealist marvelous seeks: a set of "mythological riches," as he puts it, that the Americas have never come to exhaust. Such "riches" may literally be the historical legacy of the violently extractive logics of colonialism and slavery, but even for this reason they constitute the living cultural and aesthetic forms for making such logics knowable, in their crisis-inducing capacity as "the marvelous real."

An autopsy rather than an outright rejection, Carpentier's marvelous real recalls other approaches to the problem of disarticulating Europe's colonial imprint on the cultural and imaginative landscapes of the Global South – as well as on its social, economic, and physical environments. The most famous reference point in Carpentier's project is the *Antropófago* movement in Brazil, which proposed to "cannibalize" European colonial modernity as a way to resist its cultural hegemony while consuming its cultural products – a dynamic figured as an ironic inversion of the tendency of European collectors to gather and assimilate the materials of so-called primitive cultures as raw materials for their own artistic products and cultural institutions. In a 1929 article on French surrealist poet Benjamin Péret, the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade reminds readers of the São Paulo-based journal *Revista de Antropófagia* – "Let us recall that Surrealism is one of the foremost pre-antropofago movements" – casting Surrealism not as an "influence" on the Brazilian avant-garde movement, but as one of its numerous (and "cannibalized") precursors. Andrade continues, "After Surrealism, [there is] only antropofagia."[36] Carpentier's marvelous real renames such gestures of cultural hybridization in terms that both beckon toward the possibilities of transnational solidarity and belonging and redouble, at least rhetorically, the exigency of struggle and cultural survival latent in the *Antropófago* movement's recourse to primitivism.

Carpentier's own rhetoric of decolonial salvage recasts Andrade's tongue-in-cheek cannibalism and Vallejo's clinical "autopsy" into

[36] CUNHABEBINHO [pseudonym of Oswald de Andrade], "Péret," *Revista de Antropofagia do Diário de São Paulo* (March 24, 1929), 6.

a living – and violently mythological – cultural paradigm. In the 1949 preface to *The Kingdom of This World* Carpentier allegorizes the critical distinction between the surrealist marvelous and *lo real maravilloso* as a violent distinction framed through an allusion to rape. "There are still too many 'adolescents who take pleasure in raping the freshly murdered cadavers of beautiful women'," Carpentier writes, citing Lautréamont (who, he notes in passing, was born in Uruguay); he continues the distinction by critiquing the adolescents for their failure to "realize that it would be more marvelous to ravish them alive."[37] This is, no doubt, a terrifying model for decolonization. My aim here is neither to champion nor dismiss its place in Carpentier's thinking, or in the intellectual discourses about decolonization in Latin America. Rather, I cite Carpentier's use of Lautréamont – a perennial reference point for surrealist writers throughout the movement's history – to stress the virulence with which Carpentier's decolonial thinking engaged with and disengaged from the surrealist imaginary. As Carpentier dramatizes throughout *The Kingdom of This World*, moreover, the "border thinking" of Latin America designated a violent zone of cultural transmission and historical atrocity alike, consistent with the legacies of slavery and Indigenous conquest it bears, along with continued neocolonial exploitation.

Other thinkers have – unsurprisingly – sought explicitly to redress and disrupt rather than reproduce such rhetorical or epistemological violence, particularly insofar as rape, murder, and terror are tools of domination and conquest rather than revolution and solidarity. Here, too, we encounter the limitations of Surrealism as a medium for decolonial thought – not, I maintain, because Surrealism is constitutionally misogynistic or prone to romanticizing violence, but because the knowability of Surrealism has so often been bound up in a restricted canon.

Conclusion: Analogy, nonrelation, and the limits of genealogy

Third World solidarity movements emerged during the "decolonization era" through a sequence of international conferences and communications, as much as through local and regional activism. The Bandung Conference of April 1955, a meeting that brought together representatives and heads of state from 29 Afro–Asian nations – many of which had either recently become independent or were in the process of doing so – was one of a series of transnational endeavors to formalize principles of cultural and economic

[37] Carpentier, "Prologue to *The Kingdom of This World*," 29.

solidarity in the face of colonialism and neocolonialism. As Vijay Prashad has written, the "Third World" was a project, rather than a place, representing the international movement among "the darker nations" (Asia, Africa, as well as the Caribbean and Latin America) not only to win their freedom but "to demand political equality on the world level."[38] From Bandung (1955) to Cairo (1961), Belgrade (1961), and Havana (1966), formerly colonized and non-UN-aligned countries came together to address "problems of common interest." Scholars of decolonization and radical liberation movements have increasingly attended to the periodical culture and intellectual genealogies of such state-level organizations, demonstrating the extent to which world-historical political organizations both extended from and, in turn, contributed to liberatory artistic and cultural production during and after the Cold War.[39]

Whereas certain surrealist figures or rhetorical insistences may be traceable as a leitmotif within the formation, development, and ultimate transformation of the Third World project, this is hardly the point. Far from proposing a surrealist genealogy for Third World solidarity movements – or other decolonial movements for Indigenous sovereignty or Black Power – it is instructive instead to recognize not only the limits of surrealist-oriented political ideas and terminologies, but also the surprising and often minoritarian ways in which they return in artistic and political contexts discontinuous with any "genealogy" or lineage.

While Carpentier's appeal to the marvelous real as a version of "Surrealism" proper to the Americas – an Indigenous Surrealism of sorts – is fundamentally imbricated with his own relations with the surrealist movement in Paris, other instances of a decolonial recourse to Surrealism in the Global South are notable for their *genealogical nonrelation to the surrealist movement* in its numerous forms. The decolonial project named by "Surrealism" in this sense has to do with a fusion of liberatory political and epistemological imperatives that is correspondingly independent from either established surrealist groups or the Anglo-European reception of the movement. This is anything but a paradox.

A provocative instance can be found in a recent study by the Syrian poet Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said Esber), whose 1995 book *Sufism and Surrealism* invokes Surrealism as a strategy for critiquing Islamic fundamentalism throughout the Arabic world, and advocates instead a non-Shari'a-based

[38] Prashad, *The Darker Nations*, xvi.
[39] See especially, Anne Garland Mahler, *From the Tricontinental to the Global South: Race, Radicalism, and Transnational Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

form of Islamic spirituality. Rather than appealing to the political intensity of either Surrealism or decolonization, *Sufism and Surrealism* compares the Sufi faith to Surrealism as analogous but otherwise unrelated spiritual, mystical, and gnostic ways of knowing. On the "encounters and intersections, sometimes opaque, other times apparent, between Sufism and Surrealism," Adonis writes, the point at issue "is not who has influenced whom, or the extension or interaction between them, so much as the issue of that inner tension shared by all creators who find themselves travelling along similar paths in search of a solution, but who, because they are attracted to different things, attain different goals." What Sufism shares with Surrealism, in other words, is not a genealogy or even a direct relation but a kind of mystical analogy, based on the principle of gnostic revelation: the rendering manifest of an absolute. Meditating on the respective spiritual and poetic epistemologies of the Sufi faith and the surrealist movement, Adonis explores how their analogy enables a mutual, reciprocal illumination of their core tendencies.

The polemical, political thrust of Adonis's comparison becomes manifest only late in the study, in a chapter on creativity and form in which he leverages a more or less Marxian understanding of poetic form toward a critique of contemporary Islamic state formations. "Forms," he writes, "which are the product of social experience, as in the case of the Arab poetic form, will not change unless there is a change in the socio-cultural experience that produced them and a change in the values that sprang from this experience."[40] The right to free speech and thought, he concludes, "is not available in Arab society . . . This concept continues to be rejected today by the 'regime' and the 'party' as it has already been rejected by the *umma* (community of Islam)."[41] Adonis's critique of religious nationalism led to the author's expulsion from the Arab Writer's Union in 1995 – the same year as the publication of *Sufism and Surrealism* – and subsequent death threats he received for his critiques of the Islamic state; yet his discussion of Sufism and Surrealism is notable for its largely *implicit*, "gnostic" substitution of fundamentalist Islam with a visionary and explicitly pacifist spiritual cosmology. The tenets of Surrealism, so to speak, stand together with "Heretical Sufism" not as a spur to fiery rhetoric (you heard the fieriest part of the book), but as a tacit substitution for clerical nationalism.

More subtly still, Adonis's recourse to "Arabic Surrealism" recalls, if only obliquely, the far more explicitly anti-Islamic invocation of surrealist

[40] Adonis, *Sufism and Surrealism* (London: Saqi, 2013), 178. [41] Ibid.

anticlericalism by the *Désir libertaire* group of Arab writers in 1970s Paris. As the Syrian poet Maroine Dib and the Iraqi poet Abdul Kader El Janabi, along with other members of the group, propose in a 1975 manifesto:

> Our Surrealism signifies the destruction of what they call "the Arab fatherland." In this world of masochistic survival, Surrealism is an aggressive and poetic way of life. It is the forbidden flame of the proletariat embracing the insurrectional dawn – enabling us to rediscover at last the revolutionary moment: the radiance of the workers' councils as a life profoundly adored by those we love.[42]

Whereas religious nationalism and "strategic essentialism" offered effective tools for the early phases of decolonization, the recourse to Surrealism – whether as "revelation" or as a medium for critique and subversion – suggests continued possibilities for invocation in the long aftermath of independence and the demand for continual struggles for collective, bodily, spiritual, intellectual, and sexual freedom.

Decolonial Surrealism is thus my heuristic for an approach to considering surrealist modes of intranational, international, and extranational transmission according to a discontinuous theory of value – a political economics of translation *and* refraction, refusal, adaptation, and mistranslation – within which surrealist thinkers participated, and to which the exemplarity of Surrealism likewise furnishes contemporary artists and thinkers with a significant model and body of discourse. In his 1959 address to the Second Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Rome, Fanon named the creation of surrealist poetry by "native intellectuals" as a symptom of assimilation, albeit as one phase of their dialectical radicalization. It is my contention that even Fanon recognized here the value of surrealist practice within such a transformation, even though it meant abandoning Surrealism along the way.

Throughout this small handful of examples my aim has thus not been to insist on Surrealism as either a cause or a genealogical antecedent of decoloniality, but instead as an occasional and site-specific medium for its development, a condition or even an instrument for the cultural transmission and persistent inventiveness of border thinking and liberatory imagination. To make this claim is to detract neither from the specificity of Surrealism as a movement, nor to compromise the specificity of Indigenous, subaltern, insurgent, and other solidarity movements

[42] The Désir Libertaire group, *Manifeste de 1975*, originally published in *Arsenal: Surrealist Subversion* 3 (1976).

through an insistence on their dialectical entanglements with the European avant-garde. It is instead an appeal to think about the necessarily evolving and site-specific, though nonetheless also migratory and transnational, sets of cultural and intellectual tools at the disposal of the decolonial project – however "miraculous" or provisional or temporary those tools might be.