

Surrealism, Existentialism, and Fictions of Blackness

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Since the Caribbean writer no longer lives in the great white mirage and no longer models his writing on European lines, doesn't a work that manages to subvert the form of the Western novel in its narrative strategy and structure also deserve to be called revolutionary – perhaps more so than any other? Isn't the fundamental issue to make a specific contribution to the world of literature?

All these questions are still being hotly debated.¹

— Maryse Condé (1996)

Rejected by its publisher in 1942, Richard Wright's follow-up to his massively successful novel *Native Son* (1940) was titled *The Man Who Lived Underground*. The title was a Dostoyevskian gesture that would later come to bolster Wright's reception by French existentialist writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in post-World War II Paris.² Wright's novel drew its plot from a *fait divers* published in *True Detective* magazine in the summer of 1941, which recounted the curious tale of a man (with the surname Wright) who lived for nearly a year in the Los Angeles sewer system.³ Wright's novel eventually saw publication in altered form as a short story in a 1944 anthology, appearing again in Wright's posthumous collection *Eight Men* (1961). It was only in 2021 that the novel-length version of *The Man Who Lived Underground* came to be published in its entirety. This new edition includes an essay Wright drafted around the time he sent the manuscript to his publisher, which reflects on the novel's inspiration and intellectual and political genealogy. In this

¹ Maryse Condé, 'Sketching a Literature from the French Antilles: From Negritude to Creolité', *Black Renaissance*, 1/1 (1996), 138–63 (at p. 138).

² See, for instance, Dale E. Peterson, 'Richard Wright's Long Journey from Gorky to Dostoyevsky', *African American Review*, 28/3 (Autumn 1994), 375–87.

³ Richard Wright, *The Man Who Lived Underground* (New York: Library of America, 2021), p. 222. The article was 'The Crime Hollywood Couldn't Believe', published in *True Detective* in the August 1941 issue. See also J. F. Gounard, 'Richard Wright's "The Man Who Lived Underground": A Literary Analysis', *Journal of Black Studies*, 8/3 (March 1978), 381–6.

previously unpublished essay, 'Memories of my Grandmother', Wright notes that *The Man Who Lived Underground* was unique among his writing to date on account of the 'far-reaching, complex, ruling idea-feeling' that compelled the novel's creation. As he notes, 'I have never written anything in my life that stemmed more from sheer inspiration, or executed any piece of writing in a deeper feeling of imaginative freedom, or expressed myself in a way that flowed more naturally from my own personal background, reading experiences, and feelings than *The Man Who Lived Underground*.'⁴ Wright likens these feelings to American blues and jazz music as well, notably, as to surrealism.

Invoking surrealism as part of the author's artistic and political imagination, Wright's posthumously published essay represents a proleptic confirmation of thinkers such as Jean-Claude Michel, Robin D.G. Kelley, Brent Hayes Edwards, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, Gary Wilder, Phyllis Taoua, and, more recently, Terri Francis and Rochelle Spencer, who have insisted on the continuities between surrealism and Black diasporic writing and thought.⁵ The point of such assertions is hardly to smuggle surrealism into the intellectual and political genealogy of transnational Black literature; rather, it is to propose that the history of surrealism cannot be thought without a full consideration of its intersections with the work of writers, artists, and intellectuals of the African diaspora. In his 'Memories of my Grandmother', Wright admits that the comparison might appear counter-intuitive at first: 'the Negroes of Mississippi, Texas, Arkansas have never heard, perhaps, of surrealism', he admits, adding, however, that this 'does not negate the strong surrealist structure and function of many of their folk utterances in song and music'.⁶ The notion that 'surrealism'

⁴ Wright, 'Memories of My Grandmother', in *The Man Who Lived Underground*, p. 183.

⁵ See esp. Jean-Claude Michel, *The Black Surrealists* (Amsterdam: Peter Lang, 2000); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002); Brent Hayes Edwards, 'The Ethnics of Surrealism', *Transition*, 78 (1998), 84–135; Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism between the Two World Wars* (University of Chicago Press, 2005); Phyllis Taoua, *Forms of Protest: Anti-colonialism and Avant-Gardes in Africa, the Caribbean, and France* (London: Heinemann, 2002); Terri Francis, 'Introduction: The No-Theory Chant of Afrosurrealism', *Black Camera*, 5/1 (2013), 95–112; Rochelle Spencer, *AfroSurrealism: The African Diaspora's Surrealist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2020). See also my 'Afrosurrealism as a Counterculture of Modernity', in Elliott King and Abigail Susik (eds.), *Radical Dreams: Surrealism, Counterculture, Resistance* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2022).

⁶ Wright, 'Memories of My Grandmother', p. 186.

described a political as well as aesthetic attunement to everyday phenomena, experiences, and cultural forms was an insistence Wright shared with other diasporic and European writers and thinkers, including those directly affiliated with the Bretonian surrealist group centred in Paris.

I begin this chapter with Wright's recently published early essay because it testifies to a number of striking and largely counterintuitive juxtapositions, which this chapter will examine at greater length: first, it proposes that surrealism shared many of the formal, epistemological, and political imperatives at work in Black diasporic writing and art throughout the anglophone, francophone, hispanophone, and lusophone worlds, particularly in exploring the affordances of 'imaginative freedom' through polyphony, linguistic and cultural creolization, and anticolonial politics. Second, Wright's genealogy suggests the extent to which European avant-garde movements such as surrealism and existentialism, as well as transnational artistic movements such as *négritude*, magical realism, and *créolité*, are far more porous and interconnected than the conceptual and geographical distance between such movements might otherwise suggest. Writing about surrealism and the francophone Caribbean, for instance, J. Michael Dash proposes that the aesthetics 'of the fortuitous and unpredictable' describes the very intersection of cultures and histories in the Caribbean as scenes of colonial modernity and legacies of the Middle Passage. This 'poetics of the crossroads', which rhymes with Wright's account of surrealism and the Blues tradition, accounts for 'the composite cultures of modernity' in a way that distinguishes this multiplicity from the by-product of a singular, coherent artistic or imperial enterprise or, for that matter, the wellspring of a 'timeless primitivism'.⁷ The Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant (1928–2011) famously refers to this interconnectedness as a 'poetics of relation'. Like Dash and Wright, Glissant is describing both a set of literary or cultural relations and a set of geopolitical relations: diasporic writing does not owe its legitimacy to some European origin, any more than the lands and people themselves. Instead, Glissant outlines a conjectural and open-ended mode of thinking that resists the imperial faith in certainty, linear time, direct influence, and 'the comfortable assurances linked to the supposed excellence of a language'. This poetics of relation acknowledges the reality of historical violence, while resisting the 'conquering linearity' that would render that violence irremediable,

⁷ J. Michael Dash, 'Le Je de l'autre: Surrealist Ethnographers and the Francophone Caribbean', *L'esprit créateur*, 47/1 (Spring 2007), 84–95 (at p. 92).

and thus instead remaining defiantly 'latent, open, multilingual in intention, directly in contact with everything possible'.⁸

For Wright, this relational poetics describes the shared qualities of the Blues tradition and surrealism, qualities that would animate his own fictional writing and political activism in turn. Surrealism, Wright explains, delineates 'a manner of looking at the world, a way of feeling and thinking, a method of discovering relationships between things'. As a phase of the creative process, surrealism inaugurates 'a certain *psychological distance* – even when it deals with realistic subject matter – from the functional meanings of society'.⁹ This distance, this 'obliqueness of vision', characterizes the African American blues tradition and surrealism alike. Commenting on the manner 'in which Negro blues songs juxtapose unrelated images', Wright explains that

The next experience that opened up a whole array of subject matter to me . . . was the advent of surrealism on the American scene. I know, of course, that to mention surrealism in terms of Negro life in America will strike some people like trying to mix oil and water; but the two things are not so widely separated as one might suppose at first glance. It seems that there has grown up in people's minds a concept of *just* what the Negro is, and anything that smacks of something which they do not want to associate with the Negro, for one reason or another, they will brand as alien. There is an unjustified but powerful tendency to regard the Negro as simple, unspoiled, childish, distantly removed from the debilitating experiences or art products of the city sophisticate, so says one school of the 'friends' of the Negro. Therefore, they say, do not mix the Negro with any such thing as surrealism. There is no such connection, they assert, and if you insist that there is, then it exists only in your own mind, meaning, of course, the mind of the fellow who declares the contrary.¹⁰

Wright's invocation of surrealism and the African American blues tradition is characterized, in other words, by the same qualities of objective chance and juxtaposition he identifies within both practices. Wright's very juxtaposition of surrealism and Black life is itself notable for the extent to which it denaturalizes the imperial certainties that might otherwise claim to presume their incommensurability. By contrast, surrealism and the blues tradition are predicated on formal operations that broach fundamental discontinuities or *psychological distance* within the real. Wright's surrealism in this regard is no more – nor no less – demotic than the surrealisms

⁸ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (1990), trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), pp. 32, 56.

⁹ Wright, 'Memories of My Grandmother', pp. 185, 186. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

described by many of his French contemporaries. Maurice Blanchot (1907–2003), for instance, famously characterized the extent of surrealism's place in post-war culture as a fundamental haunting by such discontinuity. To the extent that surrealism 'calls forth the unknown through chance and play', Blanchot writes, it 'invites a relation that is foreign to the ideology of continuity'.¹¹ In Wright's case, such 'continuity' referred not only to the structural violence of colonial and white supremacist régimes, but also to the psychic, epistemological, and existential structures they enforced and normalized as real. As an irruption of discontinuity within such structures, the surrealist aesthetic Wright invokes outlines what Fred Moten would later describe as the 'erotics of the cut', of Black radical aesthetics: 'submerged in the broken, breaking space-time of an improvisation. Blurred, dying life; liberatory, improvisatory, damaged love; freedom drive'.¹²

Though hardly the first person to refer to surrealism and the blues tradition in the same breath – as Wright himself notes – his insistence on likening his artistic process to surrealism is notable for at least two reasons: first, it documents Wright's interest in the surrealist movement well before his emigration to France in 1941 and his reception by and collaboration with the editors of *Les temps modernes* – and thus his emergence as a leading figure in the existentialist movement and the global discourse on decolonization that gained momentum throughout the 1950s. More substantively, it serves as one of the many subtle but marked points of convergence between surrealism and the Black radical tradition, as well as transnational Black and African diasporic writing and art more broadly. This chapter traces the intersecting histories of surrealism, existentialism, and the Black radical tradition through the production of fiction. In doing so it attends to the politics of literary activism – as well as the vexed histories of racism, cultural appropriation, exploitation, and erasure – in the work of Black writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, heeding the intersections between diasporic cultural production, avant-garde movements, and the evolving priorities of the international left. While attentive to the shift from an appropriative 'negrophilia' in the Parisian 1920s to the evolution of the negritude and pan-Africanist movements, this chapter also beckons to the multifarious genealogies of

¹¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* (1969), trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 9.

¹² Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 26.

contemporary Afrosurrealism, a heuristic term for experimental Black cultural production that both includes and radically exceeds the extent to which Black writers have been ‘influenced’ by or explicitly affiliated with vanguard movements such as surrealism.¹³ This chapter proposes not only that surrealism be understood as a significant coordinate in the Black radical tradition (as Robin D.G. Kelley and others have demonstrated¹⁴), but also that the surrealist movement is inconceivable without an appraisal of its relation to race, diaspora, and the thought and cultural production of Black intellectuals. In this regard ‘surrealism’ names an archive of intellectual and cultural ferment whose heterogeneity runs counter to the dominant geopolitical coordinates established during the Cold War era, which concentrated on the Manichean opposition between Soviet and US superpowers, that is, between communism and capitalism, as well as between the dominant literary and philosophical modes they normalized.¹⁵

A significant number of Black poets participated directly in the surrealist movement or have been associated with surrealism throughout the movement’s history, from US writers Jayne Cortez (1934–2012), Ted Joans (1928–2003), Bob Kaufman (1925–86), and Will Alexander (1948–) to francophone poets Aimé Césaire (Martinique, 1913–2008), Paul Laraque (Haiti, 1920–2007), Léon Gontran Damas (French Guiana, 1912–78), Léopold Sédar Senghor (Senegal, 1906–2001), and René Depestre (Haiti, 1926–), among numerous others.¹⁶ Yet the participation of Black *novelists*

¹³ See Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).

¹⁴ See Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, esp. pp. 157–94.

¹⁵ The recourse to surrealism in this manner echoes Njoroge Njoroge’s approach in his musical history *Chocolate Surrealism*. The title, Njoroge writes, ‘is taken from a 1992 recording by the Bay Area-based band the Broun Fellinis. Following some of the aural clues in their music and their representations of blackness, I am attempting to use the notion of surrealism in an extremely capacious (if slightly unorthodox) sense. My use of this term is less to reference the early-twentieth-century art movement, though it is clearly related, and more to denote both a method of exposition and analysis that attempts to both evoke and involve the musical unconscious through strategies of heterogeneous juxtaposition, rhythmic counterpoint, multiple cultural modalities, spontaneity, and disjunctive, creative approaches to the analysis of black expressive culture. The surrealist strategies have always characterized the cultural productions of the African diaspora. From Cachao to Claude McKay, from Romare Bearden to steel drums, from Jayne Cortez to Jimi Hendrix, Pixiguiinha to double-dutch, Sun Ra to bacalao, the musical, philosophical, literary, visual and everyday representations of “chocolate surrealism” abound.’ Njoroge Njoroge, *Chocolate Surrealism: Music, Movement, Memory, and History in the Circum-Caribbean* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), p. 138.

¹⁶ See esp. Michel, *Black Surrealists*; see also Franklin Rosemont and Robin D.G. Kelley (eds.), *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

in surrealism – or the fictional writings of poets such as Depestre¹⁷ – have been far less visible. Moreover, the convergences of diasporic Black intellectuals with the surrealist movement were often temporary, provisional, underrecognized, disavowed, or marginalized by critics and authors alike, with the result that the place of Black novelists, thinkers, and political figures in the evolution of surrealism as a global movement has only been partly illuminated.¹⁸ Echoing Kelley, this chapter proceeds from the insistence that surrealism occupies a minoritarian yet resonant place in the transnational circuits of Black postcolonial writing, radical thought, and experimental fiction that gained traction throughout the twentieth century. More fundamentally, perhaps, it also proposes that the foundational role of ‘blackness’ in the surrealist imaginary extends beyond the primitivisms and phantasmatic projections of white European subjects to include the reflections on race, diasporic belonging, and pan-Africanism articulated by non-white and non-European writers and thinkers in dialogue with the surrealist movement.¹⁹ Surrealism may have originated in the West, as Kelley notes, but it shares with Black, anticolonial, and Third World radicalisms the imperative to be ‘rooted in a conspiracy against Western civilization’.²⁰ Even so, surrealism’s minoritarian position is significant in itself, I propose, on account of its political as well as artistic distance from canonical accounts of post-World War II intellectual life.²¹

As key cultural voices and political leaders in independence struggles and the development of the Third World movement, mid-century Black writers such as Wright (1908–60), C.L.R. James (Trinidad, 1901–89), Césaire, Senghor, and others sought to articulate forms of political and intellectual solidarity that resisted the domination of imperial

¹⁷ Depestre’s 1988 novel *Hadriana dans toutes mes rêves* (*Hadriana in All My Dreams*) opens, for instance, with an instance of ‘surréalisme quotidien’. See René Depestre, *Hadriana in All My Dreams*, trans. Kaiama Glover (New York: Akashic Books, 2017), pp. 13, 25.

¹⁸ One of the most significant recent anthologies of surrealism, *Black, Brown, & Beige*, edited by Franklin Rosemont and Robin D.G. Kelley – two leading members of the Chicago Surrealist Group – has gone far to remedy this.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*; Elizabeth Ezra, *The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); and Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003).

²⁰ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, p. 159.

²¹ Whereas intellectual historians such as Tony Judt have tended to disavow surrealism’s place in European – and global – intellectual life after World War II, studies such as Michel Surya’s *La révolution rêvée: Pour une histoire des écrivains et des intellectuels révolutionnaires, 1944–1956* (Paris: Fayard, 2004), Bruce Baugh’s *French Hegel: From Surrealism to Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), and Suzanne Guerlac’s *Literary Polemics: Bataille, Sartre, Valéry, Breton* (Stanford University Press, 1997) assert the intimate ties between surrealism and experimental philosophy during the interwar and post-war periods.

nation-states; to this end, the Pan-African conference of 1956 sponsored in Paris by the journal *Présence africaine* presented itself as a ‘cultural Bandung’ that reflected the Third World principles of the Asian-African Conference that took place in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955.²² Drawing from intersecting political traditions and practices of cultural survival, such organized concentrations of Black diasporic writers forwarded a position that rhymed with that of many surrealist writings without ever drawing on them directly. Cedric Tolliver describes this position as bearing two essential claims that animated the pan-Africanism of the 1950s and after: first, that cultural work is a form of politics; and second, that culture, while distinct from the political domain, existed as a resource for politics.²³ At the same time, such declarations manifested an intellectual heterogeneity that likewise ran counter to the kinds of literary and artistic lineages that the Cold War division of superpowers helped to reproduce – such as the privileging of national literatures and the categorical distinction between ‘movements’ such as surrealism and existentialism, Beat writing and *Tel Quel* philosophy, *négritude* and magical realism, as well as, in particular, the identitarian separation of Black writing from Anglo-European forms and ideas. From Claude McKay (Jamaica, 1889–1948) to Toni Morrison (USA, 1931–2019), from Maryse Condé (Guadeloupe, 1937–) to Nalo Hopkinson (Jamaica, 1960–) and Calixthe Beyala (Cameroon, 1961–), to name only a handful of major figures, the *practice* of Black diasporic writing has both drawn from and contributed to the global evolution of surrealism as a ‘permanent readiness for the Marvelous’, as Suzanne Césaire (Martinique, 1915–66) put it in 1944.²⁴ What Césaire describes is a surrealism for which the ‘most urgent task was to free the mind from the shackles of absurd logic and so-called Western reason’, a living practice

²² For an illuminating account of this conference within the framework of African diaspora literary culture, see Cedric R. Tolliver, *Of Vagabonds and Fellow Travelers: African Diaspora Literary Culture and the Cultural Cold War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2019).

²³ Tolliver, *Vagabonds and Fellow Travelers*, p. 44.

²⁴ This is neither a definitive list nor a complete survey of diasporic Black authors who have been associated with surrealism. On McKay’s inclusion in the 1932 surrealist journal *Légitime défense*, see Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (eds. and trans.), *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London: Verso, 1996), and Aliko Songolo, ‘Surrealism and Black Literatures in French’, *French Review*, 55/6 (May 1982), 724–32. On Hopkinson and surrealism, see Spencer, *AfroSurrealism*, esp. pp. 112–16; see also Leif Sorensen, ‘Dubwise into the Future: Versioning Modernity in Nalo Hopkinson’, *African American Review*, 47/2–3 (Summer/Fall 2014), 267–83. See also Karen Lord’s formulation in conversation with Hopkinson and Leone Ross at the Toronto International Festival of Authors, 2021: www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QQkMXUrvgo (accessed 27 January 2022). On Morrison and surrealism, see esp. Amiri Baraka’s 1988 essay on Henry Dumas, discussed below.

that was as invested in autochthonous and vernacular knowledges as in philosophy or experimental literature.²⁵ As part of the ‘conspiracy against the West’ to which Kelley alludes, surrealism both draws from and takes part in the extensive global archive of experimental thought and imagination within which Black diasporic writing likewise participates, both drawing from and adding to an archive that includes immanent strategies of resistance to racial capitalism as well as knowledge traditions broken by, restored after, and remembered in spite of the Middle Passage.

Wright’s claim to surrealism becomes all the more legible in this context, particularly insofar as he describes surrealism as neither an art form nor even a historical movement – ‘a product of decadent Paris’ – but instead as a kind of critical apparatus that ‘makes its appearance when certain social relations are manifested in society’. Not coincidentally, Wright’s aggregation of surrealism and Black American music anticipates the US poet Amiri Baraka’s coinage of the term ‘Afro-Surreal Expressionism’ some decades later to delineate a genealogy of ‘black mythological lyricism, strange yet *ethnically* familiar!’ that undergirded the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and beyond. This genealogy includes African American writers and artists from the Harlem Renaissance through the present, for whom ‘Africa, the southern U.S., black life and custom are motif, mood and light, rhythm, and implied history’. Baraka (1934–2014), like Wright, does not claim a surrealist influence on transnational Black arts so much as a shared or analogous way of experiencing the world, the name for an aesthetics of strangeness that uses a ‘language of exquisite metaphorical elegance’ that could signify as powerfully as it could directly communicate: ‘The symbols *sing*’, Baraka explains, and ‘are *cymbals* of deeper experience, not word games for academics.’ The poetic appeal of, and to, such ‘deeper experience’ invokes the historical violence that animates transnational Black arts as well as the deep archive of strategies for survival and resistance.²⁶ Baraka describes how ‘the very broken quality’ of this surrealist-expressionist writing, ‘almost to abstraction, is a function of change and transition. It is as though the whole world we inhabit rests on the bottom of the ocean, harnessed by memory, language, image to that “railroad of human bones” at the bottom of the

²⁵ See Suzanne Césaire, ‘Surrealism and Us’, in Césaire, *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941–1945)*, ed. Daniel Maximin, trans. Keith Walker (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), p. 35. On the ‘practice of diaspora’, see Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).

²⁶ Amiri Baraka, ‘Henry Dumas: Afro-Surreal Expressionist’, *Black American Literature Forum*, 22/2 (Summer 1988), 164–6 (at p. 164).

Atlantic Ocean.²⁷ Significantly, Baraka's genealogy includes novelists as well as painters and jazz musicians; he cites Zora Neale Hurston (USA, 1891–1960), Jean Toomer (USA, 1894–1967), Henry Dumas (USA, 1934–68), and Toni Morrison as 'the giants of this genre of African American literary Afro-Surreal Expressionism', counting as well 'Jacob Lawrence, Vincent Smith, and Romare Bearden in painting; and Duke, Monk, Trane, Sun Ra in music'.²⁸ Much like Wright nearly half a century earlier, Baraka's 'Afro-Surreal Expressionism' pairs jazz and the blues tradition with surrealism as creative modes that explore 'motif, mood and light, rhythm, and implied history'²⁹ in ways that fundamentally disrupt the legacies of historical erasure, political marginalization, and structural violence leveraged against Black people – as well as Indigenous people and people of colour – since the colonial era.

In an essay on Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*, philosopher Kathryn Belle (formerly Kathryn T. Gines) extends this work of historical rectification to the genealogies of modern Black and European thought more broadly. Belle argues that Wright's 'existentialism' was not a derivative of European existentialism, as some philosophers presume; on the contrary, Wright's fiction bore existentialist leanings well before his self-exile to Paris after World War II. Drawing on literary-historical evidence and philosophical history alike, Belle not only demonstrates that Wright was a philosopher in his own right before coming into contact with Sartre, Beauvoir, and company, but also proposes that existentialism itself be understood as a transnational and pluridisciplinary discourse rather than a European or Eurocentric philosophy of existence. 'The subtlety, power, and complexity of Richard Wright's literary works are lost', Belle insists, 'if readers fail to see that his existentialist orientation is principally derived from, and deepened by, his own concrete existence and experience, not from his conversations with and reading of more widely recognized existentialists.'³⁰ Pivoting on the same work Belle situates as the focal point of her study, my own reflections on surrealism in this chapter follow Belle's understanding of existentialism. I propose, in other words, that Wright's recourse to 'surrealism' in his novel-length version of *The Man Who Lived Underground* and its companion essay likewise trace a practice of cross-

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 165–6. ²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 164–5. ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

³⁰ Kathryn T. Gines (Kathryn Belle), '“The Man Who Lived Underground”: Jean-Paul Sartre and the Philosophical Legacy of Richard Wright', *Sartre Studies International*, 17/2 (2011), 42–59, esp. pp. 54–5. Gines's article addresses the short-story version of Wright's text, though she and other scholars had long been aware of the existence of the novel-length manuscript in Wright's papers prior to its publication in 2021.

media invention that characterizes the multifarious intersections between surrealism, diasporic Black writing, and Black conceptions of liberation. Such intersections comprise neither a token of influence nor a sign of cosmopolitan derivation, but as Kelley puts it, ‘an injunction, a proposition, perhaps even a declaration of war’.³¹

The remaining portions of this chapter examine the history of Black diasporic fiction in the Atlantic world in the extent to which it both draws from and responds to the artistic and geopolitical coordinates of the surrealist and existentialist movements. From the surrealist interest in and appropriations of blackness in jazz-age Paris through the post-World War II development of pan-African and Third World movements and into the present era of #BlackLivesMatter, the writing and cultural production of African, Afro-Caribbean, African American, and Afro-European intellectuals fuelled the global development of leftist and anticolonial politics. So too did Black writing and art both inform and, in part, constitute the proliferation of aesthetic radicalism throughout the Atlantic world.

Fictions of Blackness

The notion of ethnic familiarity to which Baraka refers as ‘Afro-Surreal Expressionism’ ostensibly beckons to the metaphysical ballast ascribed to negritude and other pan-Africanisms – themselves informed by figures such as Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, Senghor, René Ménénil (Martinique, 1907–2004), and Paulette Nardal (Martinique, 1895–1986) and Jeanne Nardal (Martinique, 1900–93), who were in dialogue or at least familiar with surrealism.³² I propose, however, that such notions of Blackness or ‘Black soul’ appeal less to a set of essential racial characteristics than to a historical fiction perpetrated over the course of four hundred years, an ‘invention’ that emerges through the real spatial-geographical operations of slavery and colonialism that many white colonial appropriations of diasporic culture tended to mythologize or erase entirely.³³ By ‘fictions of

³¹ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 192.

³² On the belatedness of public and critical recognition of Paulette Nardal in particular, see esp. Brent Hayes Edwards, ‘Editor’s Column: Unsettled Legacies’, *PMLA*, 136/5 (October 2021), 681–95. On the important discourse of ‘ethnographic surrealism’, see esp. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), esp. chap. 4; see also Brent Hayes Edwards, ‘The Ethnics of Surrealism’, *Transition*, 78 (1998), 84–135.

³³ See, for instance, Patrick Lozès, ‘The Invention of Blacks in France’, in Tricia Danielle Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Tyler Stovall (eds.), *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 103–9. See also, most

blackness', I refer less to such romanticized portrayals of Black men and women in jazz-era Paris, than to the production and circulation of Black fiction across the diaspora – as well, most broadly, as to the notion of blackness itself *as* a fiction.

To refer to blackness as a fiction is to heed the political and existential exigency of fiction itself, rather than to presume its unreality or its distance from the political sphere. In his epoch-defining essay on 'The Fact of Blackness' ('L'expérience vécue du noir'), first published in 1951, Frantz Fanon (Martinique, 1925–61) describes the crisis in ontology experienced by Black people under conditions of white supremacy. This 'fact', Fanon proposes, refers to the dialectical construction of racialized selfhood in relation not only to a Black person's own body, history, and culture, but also to the cultural imaginary of white people. 'For not only must the black man be black', Fanon writes, 'he must be black in relation to the white man.'³⁴ 'Blackness' in this regard, is a surplus formation of colonial modernity, the epidermalization of political relations of domination. This condition – a structural condition historically particular to colonial modernity – means that the very 'fact' of blackness is constituted as a fiction: a 'historico-racial schema' generated less by tactile or other immediate sensory data than 'by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories'.³⁵ As Michelle Wright has written in a similar vein, these fictions are 'narratives of knowledge that are taught, learned, relayed, exchanged, and debated in discussions on the "facts" of Blackness'.³⁶ Such fictions are thus also *factual* insofar as they undergird and reproduce racialized relations of power: the French title of Fanon's article, in fact, describes not 'fact' but 'lived experience' (*expérience vécue*). Dismantling such narratives involves an intervention on the order of experiential facts and fictions alike: the creation and dissemination of counter-strategies for cultural survival, organized resistance, and the recuperation of eradicated memory.

Fanon's own discourse on the fact of Blackness is mediated through his dialectical engagement with the writing of the negritude movement, from

canonically, V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988).

³⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1956), trans. Charles Lam Markman (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 110. The original essay 'L'expérience vécue du noir' appeared in *Esprit*, Nouvelle Série, 179/5 (May 1951), 657–79.

³⁵ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 111.

³⁶ Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), p. 8.

which he distances himself on account of its hyperbolic primitivism; what Fanon challenges in the poetics of negritude – particularly in the work of Aimé Césaire, Senghor, and Damas – is the extent to which it embraces the ‘thousand details, anecdotes, stories’ of white-supremacist fictions as the fundamental components of Blackness itself. By this logic, Fanon argues, a Black person becomes ‘not a Negro but the Negro, exciting the fecund antennae of the world, placed in the foreground of the world, raining his poetic power on the world, “open to all the breaths of the world”’.³⁷ Both citing and parodying the ecstatic language of his fellow Martinican and former teacher Césaire, it is important to note that Fanon does not so much reject this work as dismantle its rhetorical appeal to essentialism. What this means is that Fanon situates negritude and corresponding European literary movements such as surrealism and existentialism historically, within transnational discourses about race, anticolonialism, and poetry, rather than interpolating such discourses as the very essence or ‘soul’ of Blackness itself. Fictions of blackness, like the fact of blackness, are historical and dialectical, not static. What this illuminates, I propose, is the extent to which Fanon’s critiques of negritude, surrealism, and existentialism form the very fabric of his cultural analysis of colonial relations of race: they are not themselves ‘surrealist’, but instead evolve in a dialectical relationship with surrealism. As Robert J.C. Young has noted, Fanon’s own early literary experiments, as well as his library of annotated books, disclose his own extensive investment in surrealism and existentialism alike, as well as in the writings of Césaire. Moreover, Young characterizes the two plays Fanon wrote in 1949, *The Drowning Eye* (*L’œil se noie*), and *Parallel Hands* (*Les mains parallèles*), as developing ‘what amounts to a distinctive form of surrealist existentialism . . . projecting a view of the world as an irresolvable paradoxical dualism that is either absurd or tragic’. Young documents Fanon’s attention to surrealism in a medical context as well, noting Fanon’s reading of Henri Ey’s *La psychiatrie devant le surréalisme* (1948) as part of his psychiatric training, a study which, much like Richard Wright nearly a decade beforehand, conceptualizes surrealism as a form of consciousness that deploys the characteristic marvellous ludic qualities of experimental language in a struggle against normative reality.³⁸

³⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 127.

³⁸ Robert J.C. Young, ‘General Introduction’, in Frantz Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, ed. Jean Khalfa and Robert J.C. Young, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 16. See also Henri Ey, *La psychiatrie devant le surréalisme* (Paris: Centre d’Éditions Psychiatriques, 1948). André Breton also owned a copy of this book, inscribed by the author; see www.andrebretton.fr/work/56600100437170 (accessed 27 January 2022).

This notion of a 'surrealist existentialism', understood as a worldview bearing a hybrid and fundamentally dialectical literary, political, and philosophical genealogy, is useful for describing the multifarious networks and associations through which surrealism informs the writing and thought of the Black diaspora, particularly in the decades after World War II. Perhaps more importantly still, it also offers an indication of how the surrealist movement itself might be considered from this perspective, that is, in terms of the 'obliqueness' (to use Wright's term) of its adaptation as a medium for fictions of Blackness.

By this logic, the early decades of the surrealist movement might be loosely characterized according to two intertwining stories: the first story is that of a largely white, male core of European poets and artists affiliated with the surrealist journals in Paris during the 1920s and 1930s, in the heady days of 'jazz-era' Paris. This is the story of a group that became increasingly politicized around the praxis of revolution and anticolonial insurgency in the wake of the Rif War in Morocco, and which formed allegiances with Black poets, thinkers, and visual artists from around the world in the 1930s, 1940s, and beyond. This story is a well-documented one.³⁹ But there is a second, contrapuntal story to tell here as well, which is that of a heterogenous array of intellectuals from around the world for whom 'surrealism' signified an articulation of consciousness, a reserve of experimental thought – or 'a method of discovering relationships between things', as Wright puts it – that could be variously adapted or transformed in the interest of anticolonial and abolitionist needs.

Alongside the field of literary production itself, an important critical discourse in postcolonial and Black diasporic thought centres on the very plasticity of such methods, often in opposition to the tendency for publishers, prize committees, critics, and literary historians to categorize experimental Black authors according to their implicit or explicit adherence to recognizable international movements. This discourse is far too extensive to summarize here, except to highlight the extent to which it has persisted in interrogating the politics and aesthetics of cultural 'influence', hybridity, and inventiveness across the contact zones and borderlands of colonial modernity. In her writing on the Congolese novelist Sony Lab'ou Tansi (Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1947–95), Lydie Moudileno meditates on what she refers to as the 'intricacies of postcolonial authorship' in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, particularly regarding the benefits and limits of terms such as 'surrealism', 'existentialism',

³⁹ See, for instance, Richardson and Fijalkowski (eds.), *Refusal of the Shadow*.

‘negritude’, or ‘magical realism’, which might appear to prescribe discrete genealogical or ideological affiliations but which often instead disclose viable genealogical and ideological continuities. While undeniably important for the literary visibility of Black authors – especially non-anglophone authors – within the global literary marketplace, Moudileno argues that such lineages and claims to affiliation be understood neither as an identification nor as evidence for ‘the specter of a dominating influence’, but instead as a kind of alternative ‘third space’ or ‘third tradition’ that blurs the boundary between colonizing (European) and colonized (non-European) forms of cultural expression.⁴⁰ Moudileno extends this argument to recent critical attention to Afrofuturism and Afrosurrealism as designators of various modes of speculative fiction, film, and poetry; one might add Young’s ‘surrealist existentialism’ and Baraka’s ‘Afro-Surrealist Expressionism’ to this list. Moudileno argues that such new labels both illuminate and reflect consciously on the ‘entanglement of labels’ already at work within decolonial literature and criticism.⁴¹ Speaking as a Caribbean writer of science fiction, for instance, Nalo Hopkinson notes in a 2021 interview that ‘if you look at Caribbean history, Caribbean reality, and you try to write about it, you get very quickly and easily to the fantastic, because trying to make sense of all those ideas and make them make some kind of sense, you go into the surreal, real fast’. Caribbean authors ‘have traditions for recognizing this’, she continues, and for putting it in our writing; what one calls it matters less than what one says. ‘We’re not so fussy about genre’, Hopkinson concludes.⁴² This is not a position of indifference, nor – for that matter – a dissolution of the historical, political, or aesthetic distinctions between artistic groups and movements. Rather, as Maryse Condé notes in a 1996 scholarly essay, the creolization of languages throughout the Black diaspora (as well, more specifically, as throughout the Caribbean) means that its fiction is already shot through with European, African, and indigenous polyphony and historical memory. Such writing is ‘not claimable by any singular

⁴⁰ Lydie Moudileno, ‘Magical Realism, Afrofuturism, and (Afro)Surrealism: The Entanglement of Categories in African Fiction’, in Richard Perez and Victoria A. Chevalier (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Magical Realism in the Twenty-First Century* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 72. See also Moudileno, ‘Magical Realism: “Arme miraculeuse” for the African Novel?’, *Research in African Literatures*, 37/1 (Spring, 2006), 28–41. Moudileno attributes this idea of a third space or ‘third literary tradition’ to Françoise Lionnet’s book *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁴¹ Moudileno, ‘Magical Realism, Afrofuturism, and (Afro)Surrealism’, p. 77.

⁴² Nalo Hopkinson in conversation with Karen Lord and Leone Ross in 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QQkMXUrvgo (accessed 27 January 2022).

movement, be it surrealism or *négritude* or Antilleanism or even “*créolité*”; rather, what *créolité* describes predates these movements and ‘is multiform, plural and polyphonic. It has spoken and continues to speak through the mouth of every Creole writer throughout the ages and wherever the tribulations of life sweep it along.’⁴³

Two contemporary francophone novels suggest how this hybridized, polyphonic, and dialectical understanding of diasporic cultural relations might serve as scaffolding for attending to the continuities between surrealism and decolonial politics in Black diasporic fiction. Published two years apart in the 1980s, Calixthe Beyala’s 1988 novel *Tu t’appelleras Tanga* (*Your Name Shall be Tanga*) and Condé’s 1986 novel *Moi, Tituba, sorcière* (*I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*) stage historical reflections through a relational framework that fuses unrecorded historical experience with an explicitly fictional, even fantastic, conceit. Echoing the I-thou dialecticism of Fanon’s surrealist existentialism while recalling also the intertextuality and psychological fugue-states of Parisian surrealist fiction, Beyala’s novel plays out as an extended act of mediumistic transmission, with the white Parisian ‘madwoman’ Anna-Claude giving voice to the life story of the dying West African woman, Tanga. The novel’s dialogue – whether spoken or unspoken – dwells self-reflexively on both the literalness and the outlandishness of this fictional premise; locked together in a West African prison cell, the voice of Tanga ‘speaks’ through Anna-Claude, even questioning the French woman about her doubts: “‘Why are you questioning yourself?’ Tanga suddenly says. ‘You refuse to believe that I am inhabiting you, and yet I am inside you.’”⁴⁴ Literalizing the Fanonian ‘fact’ of Blackness as a projected fiction, the dying Tanga is at once spoken for and, paradoxically, the speaker herself. Is Beyala’s gesture an ‘existentialist’ one, or a ‘surrealist’ one, or a ‘magical realist’ one? Tanga’s story-telling through and as Anna-Claude explicitly refuses characterization according to any such claims of methodological or literary-historical affiliation: Anna-Claude is ‘a long way from using the kind of pseudo-intellectual speech in which terms ending in *-ism* are tossed about, all those chopping black terms that divide people and remove them from life’.⁴⁵ The world is too busy burning, the novel explains, to warrant a concern for literary or sectarian political convictions.

⁴³ Condé, ‘Sketching a Literature’, p. 138.

⁴⁴ Calixthe Beyala, *Your Name Shall be Tanga* (1988), trans. Marjolijn de Jager (London: Heinemann, 1996), p. 22.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–3.

What takes priority instead in the novel's literal recourse to racial impersonation is its capacity to narrate unvoiced or unvoiceable histories of racialized trauma and violence, as well as to dramatize the nuances of difference and intimacy rendered possible by Anna-Claude's transmission of the words 'breathed by Tanga's body into her own flesh'. At once medium and double, interloper and surrogate, Anna-Claude's mad whiteness registers the history of (white, European) literature's presumptive recourse to Black stories and lives, while recasting this appropriation as a gift – the mortal transmission of Tanga's life story. In doing so, *Your Name Shall be Tanga* both extends and disrupts this history through its profound redoubling of the dialectics of alienation and identification, at once absurd and tragic.

The affordances of such a recasting are explored substantively in Maryse Condé's *Moi, Tituba, sorcière*, whose first-person fiction of a 'moi' can bear narrative witness to Tituba's own violent conception during the Middle Passage, and can likewise transcend the character's physical death. As a self-consciously metafictional novel, *Tituba* is, as Condé notes, the opposite of a historical novel, giving fabular form to a historical figure whose life yielded few documentary traces.⁴⁶ Midway through the novel, moreover, this metafictional existence comes fully into relief as Tituba meets the (fictional) heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne, in a jail cell. As in Beyala's prison novel, Condé's narrative premise enables the enslaved and imprisoned Tituba and the shunned and imprisoned Hester to stage an 'impossible' conversation across and through the medium of fiction. Speaking anachronistically in the language of contemporary feminism, Tituba and Prynne discuss experiences of motherhood, sexuality, and longing – as well as friendship and pleasure; the anachronism of this dialogue is significant insofar as its 'revolutionary' power derives not from its capacity to resist structural violence and historical erasure, but from its capacity to persist in spite of it. The critical fabulation of Condé's writing extends, I propose, from an obliquity of vision – as Wright puts it – that is not, in fact, ocular or cognitive but linguistic, poetic, and meta-historical: a distance effected through the folds, ruptures, and short-circuits of Caribbean language, which Condé likened both to surrealism and to vernacular experience alike. '[Aimé] Césaire the Surrealist realized', she writes, 'that for the writer and the poet all languages are foreign, that there is no mother tongue. It is

⁴⁶ Maryse Condé, *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (1986), trans. Richard Philcox (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), p. 201.

by dynamiting the forest of established signs, markers, and beacons that the poet blazes his trail.⁴⁷ In the case of a twice-enslaved, seventeenth-century Caribbean woman of African descent, the signs of Tituba's historical existence had long since been dynamited already, recorded only in the transcripts of the Salem witch trials. Much like Tanga's testimonial embodiment through and as Anna-Claude, it is through the dynamited forest of broken language, of redoubled alienation and distance, that Tituba's existence can speak.

Such refractive iterations of 'surrealism' throughout the fiction of the contemporary African diaspora need not be aggregated to a singular lineage or definition of surrealist techniques or works; their polyphone refers instead to the global dissemination and reception of surrealism *as an historical movement*. Neither Wright's nor Condé's understanding of surrealism represents an abstraction or distortion of some true 'ism' – indeed, Beyala vituperates against the 'grim and hateful' eyes of pseudo-intellectuals who 'splutter under their tattered flag' about the importance of staying true to such categorical convictions.⁴⁸ Rather, they heed the extent to which contacts with surrealism are necessarily diffracted, pluralized, hybridized, and even pre-empted in the fictions of Blackness, mutually shaped by racial capitalism and the trenchant histories of colonialism, Middle Passage, and anticolonial resistance. I propose that such fictions be considered as a necessary discursive field for understanding 'surrealism' in terms of its multifarious reception and reimagination by diasporic Black writers and thinkers in West Africa and the Caribbean, as well as throughout the Americas and Europe.

⁴⁷ Condé, 'Sketching a Literature', p. 138.

⁴⁸ Beyala, *Your Name Shall Be Tanga*, pp. 22–3.