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ANDRÉ BRETON'S ANTHOLOGY OF FREEDOM: The Contagious Power of Revolt

Surrealism, armed with models of ideological struggle, has aroused at every level the spirit of protest among all those who do not accept, in any manner, the fate of human adversity. We wouldn't be able to frame surrealism in its historic place without recognizing its only chance at eternity: the contagious power of revolt.¹

In 1945, André Breton was invited to Haiti by fellow surrealist Pierre Mabilie, the French cultural attaché, to give a series of lectures in association with an exhibition of works by the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam at the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince. On 20 December, Breton gave his inaugural speech at the REX theater now known by the title "Surrealism and Haiti." Six hundred people attended the conference;² the large audience included Haiti's president, Louis Élie Lescot, his ministers, and their respective families.

Less than a month later, on 1 January 1946, the Haitian revolutionary periodical *La rouche* (The beehive), founded by poet and journalist René Depestre as a platform for opposition to Élie Lescot's government, dedicated an issue to Breton. The editorial declared that Breton's lecture at the REX had been electrifying: "André Breton has conquered our hearts and gathered our adherence to surrealism, a movement that is not only an enterprise of liberation of the psychological richness in the human brain but also an antifascist movement that has not stopped believing in the legitimate aspiration of men toward social justice and freedom."³ *La rouche* was subsequently banned by government authorities, and the editorial board was arrested. This attempt to muzzle opposition unleashed a student strike, which quickly transformed into a general strike. By the first week of February, Lescot's government had been overturned by a military coup. In August of that year, the military junta handed over power to Dumarsais Estimé. A popular, progressively inclined politician, Estimé was black—the first non-mulatto president since the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934—and the first Haitian president not to be at the service of U.S. interests.

Dominant narratives of Breton's trip to Haiti describe how a single lecture by Breton was able to bring down Lescot's government and usher in a

new progressive era in Haiti.⁴ While it is somewhat naive to think that Breton managed to start one of the most significant revolutions in Haiti's history single-handedly and with only one speech, it is indisputable that Breton in particular and surrealism in general acted as catalysts for that political upheaval.⁵ Nevertheless, the relationship between Breton's presence in Haiti and the revolutionary events that followed is far more nuanced and complex than has been previously discussed.

Surrealism's connection to Haiti is a subject that has many sides; this paper, however, focuses on the very specific moment of Breton's visit to the country and the relationship between his speeches and the events that followed. It will explore how Breton's visit cemented a connection between surrealism's ideas about freedom and the Haitian revolutionary context and—while acknowledging that there were preexisting conditions that prompted unrest in Haiti—how his presence became a trigger for revolution.

Haiti had figured prominently in Breton's imagination prior to his arrival there in 1945. He had been fascinated with the territory ever since the appearance of William Seabrook's travelogue *The Magic Island* (1929), which details the author's encounters with vodou. According to surrealist Michel Leiris, who reviewed the book in *Documents*, this publication was significant because it helped challenge stereotypes in the American press that associated Haitian religious rites with zombies and mindless violence.⁶ Haiti occupied an important place in the surrealist imaginary, in part because of its history of revolutionary struggle for freedom. On 22 August 1791, slaves in the northern region of what was then a French colony staged a revolt that allegedly began during a vodou ceremony. This was the beginning of the Haitian Revolution, which ended in 1804 with the creation of the black republic of Haiti, the first black-led republic in the world.

Breton's arrival was widely anticipated by intellectuals in Haiti, among them the poets and writers René Bélance, René Depestre, Paul Laraque, and Clément Magloire-Saint-Aude.⁷ The local media announced Breton's visit⁸ and expressed interest in hearing Breton's thoughts on his *doctrine moderne*, which they conceived of as a *révélation universelle*: for Haitian intellectuals, Breton's views had the potential to unveil a group of universal ideas that would make Haiti less isolated.⁹ In several statements about his impending visit, local poets expressed their expectation that Breton would bring a message of freedom to the country,¹⁰ and they were not disappointed. Poet Paul Laraque enthusiastically reviewed Breton's first appearance: "With a leonine head, a mane of sun, Breton stepped forward, a god begotten by lightning. To see him was to grasp the beauty of the angel of revolt. The shadows became sources of light."¹¹

However, the notion and practice of surrealism did not arrive in Haiti with Breton in 1945; the ideas of the French avant-garde movement had reached Haiti well before, which explains the heightened sense of anticipation among Haitian intellectuals and artists. Tired of domination,¹² Haitian intellectuals started looking for an “authentic” identity, mainly in everyday practices like the vodou religion. Jean-Price Mars’s *Ainsi parla l’oncle . . . ; Essais d’ethnographie* (So spoke the uncle . . . ; Ethnographic essays, 1928) was of critical importance in the change of perspective. Hatians’ new regard for popular tradition led to the formation of the avant-garde group Les Griots in the 1930s. Its members, Carl Bouvard, Lorimer Denis, and François Duvalier (who later rose to power as “Papa Doc”), aimed to recover African values. For these writers of the Africanist movement, surrealism was one of the modernist ideas coming from Europe that gave some legitimization—in its claim for the “primitive” and its assault on rationalism—to Haitian aims of developing a specifically black consciousness.

Local artists such as Pierre Mabile and Wifredo Lam had promoted surrealist ideas, and Breton’s visit was preceded by that of Martinique’s leading poet and politician, Aimé Césaire, whom Breton had called the “greatest black poet.”¹³ Césaire had arrived in Haiti in 1944 to deliver a series of lectures about the importance of establishing an alliance among islands in the Caribbean to prevent political, economical, and cultural colonialism. He published an article in the *Haiti-Journal* on 20 May 1944 titled “Appel au magicien: Quelques mot pour une civilisation antillaise” (Appeal to the magician: Notes toward an Antillean civilization). In this text, he argues that civilizations are founded on myth—a perspective he shared with Breton—and expresses his admiration for the leader of the surrealists, thus paving the way for Breton’s arrival a year later.¹⁴

Upon arrival to Port au Prince, Breton was invited to a dinner organized in his honor at the Hotel Savoy. There a captive audience of intellectuals heard his first public speech, which he concluded by quoting from Haitian writer and diplomat Jacques Roumain’s novel *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944; *Masters of the Dew*, 1947): “We’re poor, that’s true. We’re out of luck, that’s true. We’re miserable, that’s true. But do you know why, brother? Because of our ignorance. We don’t know yet what a force we are.”¹⁵

Six days later, Breton began his official speech at the REX theater by asking young Haitian poets to make themselves heard, voice their opinions, and impose their audacious solutions on everyday life.¹⁶ He spoke about the impossibility of the liberation of the spirit without the liberation of humankind and he called on poets and artists not to abandon their artistic work, arguing instead that they should use their skills to strive for freedom.¹⁷

Commentaries by young Haitian poets present at the speech indicate that Breton's lecture had a profound impact. In an article commemorating Breton at the time of his death in 1966, poet Roger Gaillard recalls:

André Breton was a force. To hear him, to get near him, was to enter into a fiery zone. It was to undergo the test of the magnetic fields. This miraculously intuitive spirit arrived only eighteen days before, and—the infallible diviner—had revealed the underground currents that, less than two weeks later, were going to rise up, swell, take away the detritus of the past, and carve out for the national culture this other way, another voice, another light.¹⁸

Developing an understanding of Breton's aims and intentions for this speech is a problematic undertaking. Breton's own comments on it are scant and dispersed among diverse publications and archives. When Breton was asked in interviews about his speech and the events that followed, his answers were often elusive. Nevertheless, Breton provides a rare, explicit account of his aims in an interview with the poet Jean Duché in 1946:

In an initial conference on "Surrealism and Haiti," I tried, not only for the clarity of my paper but also in deference to the spirit animating their history, to align surrealist aims with the age-old aims of the Haitian peasants. In the conclusion I felt compelled to condemn the "imperialism in no way averted at the end of this war, the game of cat and mouse cruelly carried on between proclaimed ideals and eternal selfishness"—as well as to reaffirm my faith in the motto of the Haitian flag: "union makes strength."¹⁹

Although Breton acknowledged some responsibility for the revolutionary events that followed his speech, he was not prepared to accept that he had single-handedly brought down Lescot's government. In the same interview with Duché, Breton resists overstating his role in the events in Haiti: "Let us not exaggerate. At the end of 1945, the poverty and consequently the patience of the Haitian people were at the breaking point."²⁰ In an earlier interview from Paris with Jean Bedel in 1946, Breton had elaborated on this point: "It would be absurd to say that I managed on my own to provoke the fall of the government.... I was caught amid a chain of circumstances that could happen only once in a lifetime."²¹ Breton's reticence might be explained in part by the fact that he went to Haiti as part of an official mission organized by the cultural affairs office of the French embassy in New York. He was also an official guest of the Haitian government, which at the time was strongly influenced by the

United States.²² These factors may have prevented him from being more forthcoming about his role in the revolt that followed his speech.

After the initial days of the revolution, Haiti's situation was fragile; the military government remained in power for the first six months before handing the power over to Estimé. Breton had initially intended to give two lectures every week for a couple of months at the law department in the university of Port-au-Prince. The tumultuous political events following his speech, however, prompted him to reduce his lecture program to seven speeches, which alternated between the subjects of painting and poetry. Eventually, Breton's stay was cut short by the military junta, which feared he might spark new riots and decided to expel him as well as Mabilie from the country by the end of February 1946.

The remaining lectures in the shortened program are fairly traditional, with the exception of the sixth lecture, "Evolution du concept de la liberté à travers le Romantisme" (Evolution of the concept of freedom through romanticism), delivered on 25 January 1945.²³ The sixteen-page typescript of the address, which now resides in the Getty Research Institute's Special Collections, is unlike the other Haitian lectures, but it is by far the most interesting of all—even more so than the legendary speech at the REX theater. It reflects not only Breton's fascination with Haiti's history of revolution and liberation but also his desire for the country to undergo further revolutionary upheaval and become a role model for the world.

In the sixth lecture, Breton announces that he has been considering publishing a critical anthology on the concept of freedom for some time.²⁴ He goes on to state that because the concept of freedom changes with the times he believes it would be very useful to compare different ideas about freedom. He hopes that a comparative discussion will help to synthesize diverse aspirations for freedom among different peoples worldwide or, at the very least, establish which concepts of liberty are genuine and viable and which are not. Most importantly, Breton argues that the idea of freedom does not sustain itself in the abstract sphere, where it tends to "evaporate."²⁵

Breton is particularly interested in the ideal of freedom associated with the French Revolution because for him the martyrs of the French Revolution had the most poignant understanding of the concept of freedom. He opens the lecture by quoting the French revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat: "There must be light, courage, care, and battles to conquer freedom; to keep it, there must be steadfastness and a virtue resilient to fatigue, deprivation, misery, hunger, danger and pain."²⁶ From there, Breton explores the work of three romantic philosophers, Claude-Henri de Rouvroy, comte de Saint-Simon, Barthélemy-Prospér (Père) Enfantin, and Charles Fourier. Fourier was of particular interest

to Breton because of the way he conceived of freedom. Despite coming from a divine source, freedom is not a given for Fourier; rather, it is something that must be conquered. This concept of freedom would have had particular resonance in the Haitian context.

Breton concludes the lecture by saying that freedom cannot be considered apart from necessity. For him, there must be a dialectic resolution for the confrontation between necessity and freedom. Freedom, according to Breton, is a “living force,”²⁷ which “must be thought of not only as an ideal but also as a constant recreation of energy. It must exclude all ideas of comfortable balance and instead be conceived as continuous rebellion.”²⁸ In that sense, Breton’s concept of freedom depends on instability, something Haiti had no shortage of.

It is hard to imagine that Breton’s decision to describe the concept of freedom as “continuous rebellion” was merely coincidental, given the lecture’s Haitian context, and it is equally hard to imagine Breton giving this speech anywhere else. Breton seems to speak to the specifics of the Haitian context, with its history of colonialism and revolutionary upheaval.

Beyond its convulsive history of political struggle, Haiti also embodied another type of freedom for Breton: that of spiritual freedom, reflected in the practice of vodou. While in Haiti, Breton was able to attend some religious ceremonies as a guest. These practices largely remained a mystery to him, however: his access was limited because he had not been initiated. Nevertheless, he thought of the vodou rites as being free from any rational constraint and therefore in tune with his surrealist sensibility and his desire for liberty of the spirit. Breton was influenced by his expectations of finding the primitive in these new territories and would not accept that there could be a different rationale in these practices rather than no rationale at all.

Breton’s thoughts about black culture as a redemptive force also helped connect his ideas about freedom with the situation in Haiti. In a speech delivered at a party celebrating his arrival in Haiti, Breton explained his thinking:

“Coloured” men have always enjoyed exceptional favour and prestige in surrealism. . . . We [surrealists] have found ourselves linked from the beginning with “primitive” thought, which remains less alien to you than to us and otherwise demonstrates a remarkable strength in Haitian voodoo. In periods of great social and moral crisis, I believe it is indispensable that we inquire into primitive thought, to rediscover the fundamental aspirations, the incontestably authentic aspirations, of mankind. It is therefore no accident, but a *sign of the times*, that the greatest impulses towards new paths for surrealism have been furnished during the war just ended, by my greatest “coloured” friends—Aimé Césaire in poetry, Wifredo Lam in

painting—and that I find myself at this moment among you in Haiti in preference to any other place in the world.²⁹

In an interview with René Bélance for the *Haiti-Journal* in 1945, Breton discusses the double condition that aligns surrealism with people of color. First, he states, there is a political relationship, insofar as people of color have always been against any form of imperialism³⁰ or colonization by whites. Second, surrealists and people of color share a view of reality that finds expression in a certain form of creativity. According to Breton, “the most profound affinities exist between the so called ‘primitive thought’ and surrealist thought . . . they both aim at suppressing the hegemony of consciousness in the everyday and look instead to conquer all revealing emotion.”³¹ This creative affinity is the reason that, for instance, he felt so attracted to Hector Hyppolite, a Haitian artist who was convinced that he painted possessed by the spirits and created his work according to their instructions. Hyppolite was later included in the 1947 edition of Breton’s book *Le surréalisme et la peinture* (first published in 1926).

If Haiti informed Breton’s ideas about freedom, surrealism became a path to critically approach the notion of freedom for Haitians themselves. Haitian intellectuals deployed ideas that were born and bred in Europe, but in a different context and for their own ends. For Haitian poets who were leading a fight against political, economic, and cultural colonialism, surrealism was synonymous with irreverence and struggle. Beyond being merely an influence on Haiti, surrealism and Breton’s ideas about freedom were a lens through which Haitians and people of color throughout the Caribbean could critically examine their own political situation. The idea that surrealism preached—of black culture as the future of civilization—was empowering for Caribbean artists and activists; it inspired them to continue acting in favor of their language, religious practices, and traditions.

Haiti occupies a unique place in the history of surrealism’s relationship to political struggle. Although the relationship between surrealism, politics, and revolution had existed since surrealism’s earliest days, as evidenced by the anti-colonial exhibition *La vérité sur les colonies* organized in Paris in 1931 by the surrealists as a protest against *L’exposition coloniale internationale* organized also in Paris in the same year, surrealism as an avant-garde movement never had the political impact that it achieved in the Caribbean, not even in Europe amid world wars and other colonial conflicts. What makes the case of Haiti so special is that, for the first time, surrealism had a direct relationship with hard politics that went beyond its poetic rhetoric of liberty, revolution, and protest. In Haiti, freedom did not remain in the abstract—it did not evaporate—it took the shape of a revolution that changed the history of the country.

In this regard, Haiti was exceptional, but it was not an isolated case. Surrealism had a profound impact on other Caribbean revolutionary movements; for example, it became a conceptual umbrella for the black struggle in Martinique. As in Haiti, poetics and politics in Martinique aligned—in a way that we do not see outside the Caribbean—to propel real political transformation.

Notes

All translations from French sources are my own, unless otherwise noted.

1. Alain Jouffroy, "Introduction," *Opus international*, nos. 19–20 (1970): 20.
2. André Breton, "Le surréalisme," in idem, *Ouvres complètes*, ed. Marguerite Bonnet et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 3:150. Although published with a different title in Breton's *Oeuvres complètes*, the lecture is widely known by the title "Surrealism in Haiti," as discussed in René Depestre, "André Breton à Port-au-Prince," *Conjonction: Revue Franco-Haitienne*, no. 193 (1992): 125–30. According to Depestre, in addition to the large audience in attendance, the newspaper *Le soir* had campaigned for Breton's lecture to be broadcast over the radio.
3. Reproduced in Jean Louis Bédouin, *Vingt ans du surréalisme* (Paris: Édition Denoel, 1961), 76.
4. See for instance Michael Richardson's assertion that Breton's lecture had a dramatic effect on Haiti's history in the introduction to Michael Richardson, ed., *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, trans. Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski (London: Verso, 1996), 20, or the essays by Paul Laraque and Réne Despetre about Breton's arrival to Haiti in the same volume.
5. I say political because his major resonance in Haiti was political, not artistic, although in Breton's eyes these would be inseparable. Despite the fact that he promoted Haitian painting and literature after his visit—especially Hector Hyppolite's painting and Magloire-Saint-Aude's poetry—Breton did not have an immediately significant influence on the development of these disciplines in Haiti.
6. Michel Leiris, "L'île magique," *Documents*, no. 6 (1929): 334: "Until now Haitian magic and the vodou rites were known in France only by vague pseudo-journalistic accounts. Occasionally the American papers, mostly avid to derogate the black people, announce a crime where the perpetrator was a black person affiliated to the vodou sects. In this way, they reproduce the accusations of ritual crime that central Europe had for a long time placed upon the Jewish people."
7. In Haiti, the poet Magloire-Saint-Aude was leading a so-called language struggle. Along with the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, he rejected colonialism and embraced surrealism. According to Michael Richardson, "with [Magloire-Saint-Aude's] work, surrealism places in evidence one of its most impressive claims to embody universal aspirations." He was no more European than Caribbean in his sensibility; however, he resisted French language by "contamination," and attempted to inscribe another voice into it. Magloire-Saint-Aude's practice seems to be close to surrealism in his imagery and the way that chance intervenes in

- the order of his words; the connection is especially notable in his disruptive use of Creole language and the sense of freedom brought about by automatism. Richardson, *Refusal of the Shadow*, 28.
8. The day before Breton's arrival, the newspaper *Le nouvelliste* outlined the history of surrealism from its origins, in order to prepare readers for the important visit.
 9. See Bédouin, *Vingt ans du surréalisme*, 73.
 10. See, for instance, the statements of Laraque and Gaillard quoted in this paper.
 11. Paul Laraque, "André Breton and Haiti," in Richardson, *Refusal of the Shadow*, 218.
 12. The young nation had liberated itself from the colonial power of France in 1804 only to fall under U.S. military occupation a century later (1915–34). Until then, the Haitian elite had considered themselves as the heirs of French culture, but the U.S. invasion led Haitians to question their identity.
 13. André Breton, "A Great Black Poet: Aimé Césaire," in Richardson, *Refusal of the Shadow*, 191.
 14. According to René Depestre, Aimé Césaire had prepared the young poets in Haiti for the "cultural shock" of surrealism and had introduced them to the movement. Depestre, "André Breton à Port-au-Prince," 125–30.
 15. Jacques Roumain, quoted in André Breton, *What Is Surrealism?: Selected Writings*, Ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Monad, 1978), 260. Paradoxically, Roumain had finished writing this inspiring book while he was Lescot's charge d'affaires in Mexico in 1943.
 16. Breton, "Le surréalisme" ["Surrealism in Haiti"], in idem, *Oeuvres complètes*, 3:150.
 17. Breton, "Le surréalisme" ["Surrealism in Haiti"], in idem, *Oeuvres complètes*, 3:164.
 18. Roger Gaillard, "André Breton et nous," *Conjonction: Revue Franco-Haitienne*, no. 103 (1966): 5–10.
 19. André Breton, "Interview with Jean Duché," *La littéraire*, 5 October 1946, reprinted in Breton, *What Is Surrealism?*, 262.
 20. Breton, "Interview with Jean Duché," in Breton, *What Is Surrealism?*, 262.
 21. Jean Bedel, "Comment sans le vouloir André Breton fit une révolution à Haiti," *La Minerve*, 7 June 1946, quoted in Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, 3:1217.
 22. According to the assignment delivered to Breton by the *Direction générale des relations culturelles* in New York, the purpose of Breton's visit to the French Antilles was to deliver a series of lectures and establish relationships with the "intellectual milieu" of the islands ("donner des conférences et établir des relations avec les milieux intellectuels de ces îles"). See Bédouin, *Vingt ans du surréalisme*, 73.
 23. André Breton, unpublished typescript for "Evolution du concept de la liberté a travers le Romantisme," 1946, the sixth lecture in Breton, "Haitian lectures" (960091), Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.
 24. In André Breton's letter to Enrico Donati, dated 1946 from Huelgoat, France, regarding the forthcoming *Exposition internationale du surréalisme* in 1947, Breton announces that the catalog will include such an anthology. André Breton to Enrico Donati, 14 August 1946, Enrico Donati Letters Received and Manuscripts (940120), Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. The anthology was never published.
 25. Breton, typescript for "Evolution du concept de la liberté," 2.

26. Jean-Paul Marat, from an article published in *Lami du peuple*, 1891, quoted in Breton, typescript for "Evolution du concept de la liberté," 1.
27. Breton, typescript for "Evolution du concept de la liberté," 1.
28. Breton, typescript for "Evolution du concept de la liberté," 1.
29. Breton, *What Is Surrealism?*, 259–60. According to Haitian poet Roger Gaillard, however, there were important points of discordance between surrealism's proposals and the ideas of his generation—including a crucial ones regarding race that involved "the opposition between white reason and black emotion, and the supposed superiority of the latter over the former" and "the doctrine of amazement toward the affectivity driven to the state of delirium and elevated to the dignity of an instrument of knowledge." Roger Gaillard, "Homage to André Breton," *Conjonction: Revue Franco-Haitienne*, no. 103 (1966): 5–10. Breton's visit coincided with the opening of Wifredo Lam's exhibition at the Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince. Breton's contribution to the catalog was the poem "La nuit en Haiti," reprinted in Richardson, *Refusal of the Shadow*, 213.
30. René Bélance, "Une sensationnelle interview de M. A. Breton," *Haiti-Journal*, 13 December 1945, reprinted in *Conjonction: Revue Franco-Haitienne*, no. 194 (1994): 107–9. Despite the Haitian victory, Haitian freedom was more nominal than real. France refused to recognize the newly independent country's sovereignty until 1825, in exchange for 90 million gold francs (approximately \$12.7 billion today). This fee was demanded as retribution for the "lost property"—slaves, land, equipment, and so on—of the former colonialists. Haiti agreed to pay the price to lift a crippling embargo imposed by France, Britain, and the United States, but to do so, the Haitian government had to take out high-interest loans.
31. André Breton, *Entretiens, 1913–1952: Avec André Parinaud et D. Arban, J.-L. Bédouin, R. Bélance, C. Chonez, P. Demarne, J. Duché, F. Dumont, C.-H. Ford, A. Patri, J.-M. Valverde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 237–38.