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Ted Joans' surrealist history lesson

Joanna Pawlik *University of Manchester*

Abstract

This article argues for the importance of Ted Joans within histories of surrealism, which seldom acknowledge the existence of the movement post-World War II or its participants outside of interwar Paris. Since the early 1960s, Joans contributed to both the Paris and Chicago groups of surrealists, who continued to proclaim the relevance of mad love, the marvellous, and dreams to a radical politics long after the movement was alleged to have deceased. The majority of the article, however, addresses Joans' work composed prior to his 'formal' involvement with surrealism, exploring how his invocation of surrealist influence was framed by a narrative of surrealism's legacy of radical anti-colonialism and anti-racism to diasporic writers, artists and intellectuals such as Etienne Léro and Aimé Césaire. Joans' work self-consciously embeds his engagement with surrealism within a matrix of transatlantic cultural dialogues which dislodge it from its supposed headquarters in Paris in the interwar years, undermines its profile as white, Francophone and bourgeois, and problematizes unilateral models of influence. Drawing on Surrealist aesthetics, his early work deploys modernist formal innovation as a means to reflect on the historiography of modernism, and performatively protests the unequal access to the political and cultural ideals of modernity.

Keywords

Ted Joans
surrealism
African American
modernism
Negritude

Résumé

Cet article plaide pour l'importance de Ted Joans au sein des histoires du surréalisme, qui reconnaît rarement l'existence d'après-guerre du mouvement ou ses participants à l'extérieur de l'entre-deux guerres de Paris. Depuis le début des années 1960, Joans a contribué à des groupes surréalistes de Paris et de Chicago, qui ont continué de proclamer la pertinence de l'amour fou, le merveilleux et rêve d'une politique radicale, longtemps après que le mouvement était censé avoir disparu. La majorité de l'article, toutefois, porte sur l'œuvre de Joans composé avant de sa participation 'officielle' avec le surréalisme, explorant comment son invocation d'influence surréaliste a été formulée par un récit de surréalisme hérité de l'anticolonialisme radical et lutte contre le racisme à la diaspora des écrivains, des artistes et des intellectuels comme Etienne Léro et Aimé Césaire. Travaux de Joans incorpore consciemment ses fiançailles avec le surréalisme dans une matrice de dialogues culturelles transatlantiques qui il déloger de son siège supposée à Paris dans l'entre-deux-guerres, compromet son profil blanc, francophone et les bourgeois et pose des problèmes aux modèles d'influence unilatérales. S'appuyant sur l'esthétique surréaliste, ses premiers ouvrages déploient innovation formelle moderniste comme un moyen de réfléchir sur l'historiographie du modernisme et proteste contre l'inégalité d'accès aux idéaux politiques et culturels de la modernité.

Dubbed the only African American Surrealist by André Breton, Ted Joans maintained a close and committed, yet complex and idiosyncratic, relationship with surrealism throughout his life. After first sighting surrealist periodicals and images as a 10-year-old boy in 1938, surrealism became not simply an influence on his work, but a weapon for survival in segregated and racist America. Joans' engagement with surrealism occurs late in the history of the movement, which was launched in 1924 with the publication of the First Manifesto, and usually said to have attenuated during its exile in New York in World War II (Nadeau 1968 [1944]). Yet to Joans surrealism was not the bygone avant-garde of an earlier era, addressed exclusively to the social, cultural, economic, and political context of interwar France, but was still, as he stated in 1987, 'for this generation [...] the magical vital miraculous weapon needed in liberating human beings' (Joans 1987: 20). Downplaying the movement's defining investments in psychoanalysis and Marxism, Joans' poetry and his explanations of his relationship to the movement instead made a feature of surrealism's legacy to black artists and writers. His writings self-consciously participate in what Aldon Lynn Nielsen has termed 'a diasporic dialectic of cross-Atlantic rereadings' of surrealist modernism (Nielsen 1999: 412). This dialectic inheres in the multilateral web of influence between the Harlem Renaissance, Negritude, surrealism, and the post-war avant-gardism of African American poets such as Joans, Bob Kaufman, Will Alexander and Jayne Cortez, all of whom, in varying ways, invoked modernist cultural radicalism to critique western colonialism and racism.

Joans' involvement with the surrealist groups in Paris and Chicago from the 1960s onwards testified, and indeed contributed, to the frequently unacknowledged post-war afterlife of organized international surrealism. His participation in these groups served to extend and update surrealism's longstanding commitments to anti-racism and anti-imperialism in quite practical ways, to include campaigning for African American political causes; for example soliciting a letter of support and a donation from the Parisian group for the Huey Newton Defense Fund in 1968 (Rosemont et al. 1997: 32 and 241). This article, however, focuses on Joans' writing which predates his official involvement with surrealism. It proposes to explore how this work exploits surrealist poetics and the manifesto genre to intervene in the historiography of surrealism, and modernism more broadly, complicating dominant accounts of its geographical and temporal reach. In what Kathryn Lindberg has termed their 'characteristic double address to history and fantasy' Joans' early poetry and drama construct new approaches to the recording and function of history which blur distinctions between the rhetorical and the referential, between the imagined and the empirical (Lindberg 1998: 208). Decidedly non-linear and non-teleological, Joans' surrealist historiography harnesses temporal anachronism and spatial discontinuity to protest the uneven spread of political and cultural agency within modernity.

The post-war decades in both France and America were generally hostile to Breton's movement and within this context Joans' engagement with surrealism is conspicuous. Following their return to France from their wartime exile, the surrealists were subject to stinging attacks by Jean-Paul Sartre and other committed French intellectuals and artists who

saw the surrealists' courting of the irrational as impotent at best, and, at worst uncomfortably proximate to fascism (Sartre 1988). The publication of Maurice Nadeau's *The History of Surrealism* in 1944 seemed to confirm that surrealism had not survived the transition into the post-war period, supplanted from its position at the head of the European cultural and political vanguard by existentialism.¹

In an American context, although Joans' invocation of surrealism in the 1940s and 1950s coincided with a broader retrieval of modernism after its occultation by social realist hegemony during the 1930s, few of his contemporaries shared in his enthusiasm for the movement. Against a backdrop of consumer affluence, an invigorated culture industry, and the virulent anti-communism of the Cold War, the post-war revival of modernism in America was a contested affair. Renouncing the partnership between art and organized politics which had dominated the cultural landscape during the Depression, the New York Intellectuals and the New Critics promoted aesthetic formalism or abstraction as the sole means through which modernism was to be protected from the twin threats of totalitarianism and mass culture. Surrealism was either ignored or dismissed by these gatekeepers of high modernism. According to Clement Greenberg, with its insistence on figural representation, explicit political commitment and its emphasis on desire and psyche, surrealism was a reactionary trend in modernism, too vulnerable to recuperation by popular culture (Greenberg 1939; Sawin 1995; Tashjian 2001).²

The New American Poetry, as is well known, arose in the 1950s to protest this institutionalization and de-politicization of modernism. Of this new literary avant-garde, it was the Beat writers with whom Joans most closely associated. Broadly speaking, these writers sought to recover an authentic, expressive self which was threatened by Cold War militarism, consumer capitalism and social conformity (Belgrad 1998; Davidson 1999; Hobbs 1997). Yet Bretonian surrealism was not especially welcome in this faction of post-war American modernism either. Joans' Beat contemporaries, though certainly interested in European avant-garde precursors had, with only a few exceptions, rejected what they saw as Bretonian surrealism's political and aesthetic dogma as a model for their poetics and idiom of protest. Writers such as Allen Ginsberg and Michael McClure preferred the dissident surrealism of Antonin Artaud, celebrating, albeit politicizing, his works which dealt with madness, drugs and performance in particular (Pawlik 2010).

For Joans, and to a certain extent for fellow black Beat writers Bob Kaufman and Amiri Baraka, it was not the private 'limit experiences' suggested by Artaud's work and biography which underwrote the post-war currency of surrealist modernism, but the anti-colonialism and racial politics of Bretonian surrealism. Black Beat writers' engagement with the movement was more explicitly political and marked by a keener internationalist sensibility than their white contemporaries (Nielsen 1997, 1999 and 2002; Smethurst 2002; Lindberg 2000). In Joans' work, invoking surrealist modernism was a means of interrogating supra-personal structures of racial inequality as they had manifested themselves politically, culturally and socially in the trans-Atlantic world. It was also a way of aligning his work with other diasporic writers who had earlier laid claim

1. For a history of surrealism in France which suggests that the post-war years were not futile or inconsequential, see Alyce Mahon's *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros 1938–1968* (2005).
2. For discussions of surrealism's reception by American popular culture see Eggener (1993) and Zalman (2007).

to surrealism, such as Etienne Léro or Aimé Césaire. Some of Joans' statements about the sympathetic relationship between African or African American cultures and surrealism add, amongst others, blues and jazz musicians, Isadore Ducasse, and his grandfather (whose expression 'Well Shut My Mouth Wide Open' Joans describes as 'the very first surreal mouthing I heard'), to his revisionist pantheon of black surrealists (1980). Robin D. G. Kelley, like Joans, also isolates a latent surreality in Afro-diasporic cultures, evidenced in a shared embrace of 'the unconscious, the spirit, desire, humour, magic, and love' as the means through which social and political injustice could be both endured and protested (Kelley 2002: 191; see also Garon 1996).

Joans' surrealist history lesson certainly includes familiarizing us with previously marginalized or unknown black surrealists or surrealist practices, but perhaps the most subversive feature of his lesson is to be found in his early verse and drama. These, I argue, interrogate precisely the assumption that surrealist principles 'were present in Afro-diasporic culture even before Surrealism was named' (Kelley 2002: 159) by exploiting the paradox identified by Nielsen, whereby any assertions of (diasporic) African contributions to modernity, must 'have modernity already there before us' (2005: 22). Nielsen adds that '[i]t is as if black writers have had to steal past the disciplinary boundaries erected by whiteness around modernity, to slip inside modernity to demonstrate that they had been there all along' (2005: 22). In poems such as 'The Statue of 1713' (Joans 1999c) and 'Duchamp's decent daughter' (Joans c.1960) Joans makes clear the desirability but also the impossibility of asserting a pre-existing Afro-Surreal prior to the inauguration of surrealism proper.

Joans explains in his autobiographical text 'I, Black Surrealist', that his 'very first encounter with international surrealism' occurred when aged ten he read the surrealist periodicals and reviews, amongst them *La Révolution surréaliste* and *Documents*, which his aunt had retrieved from the rubbish bins of her white employers (Joans 1989: 46). He attended a school which prevented African Americans from learning a foreign language so, unable to read French, he saved up money earned from mowing lawns to buy a French dictionary and he began to translate the texts himself; 'word by word, like a miner in a deep gold mine, I put the puzzle together and often found gold' (Joans 1980). Joans left Indiana for New York in 1951 where in the bohemian underground of the Village he mixed with Abstract Expressionists, the burgeoning Beat scene, and surrealists such as Salvador Dali, Kurt Seligman and the American Joseph Cornell (Fabre 1991). After leaving America at the end of the decade Joans divided his time between Tangiers, Timbuktu and Europe and it was whilst in Paris in June 1960, that he encountered André Breton by chance at a bus stop. The two men talked about surrealism's international activities and Michel Fabre suggests Joans consulted Breton on 'all the links between blackness and surrealism' (Fabre 1991: 313). This meeting marked the beginning of Joans' formal involvement with surrealism. Between 1962 and 1969 he participated in the Parisian group's meetings, alongside the newer generation of Francophone surrealists such as Jean-Jacques Lebel and Jean Schuster. Excerpts from his letters to Breton and a collage from his *Alphabet Surreal* titled 'X' (after Malcolm X), appeared in the surrealist

periodical *La Brèche: Action surréaliste* 5, in October 1963, which introduced him as ‘the only authentic black surrealist who comes from the “hip” generation in America’ (Joans 1963: 64). The letter comments on the hipster scene’s relationship to surrealism and, carefully differentiating between its white and black participants, Joans explains that: ‘The white poets of the Beat Generation have borrowed the hipster attitude from black Americans. They have adopted their argot, comportment, and jazz music – all of which embody a surrealist point of view’ (Joans 2009 [1963]: 230). His manifesto ‘Black Flower’ was published in the later surrealist publication *L’Archibras* 3 in 1968, which passionately described his vision of a future free from American imperialism and racism, to be brought about through the activities of ‘guerillas surréalistes des Metropolis’ (Joans 1968: 10).

Joans later became an active member of the first group of surrealists in America which formed in Chicago in 1966 (some 42 years after the formation of the original Parisian circle), under the leadership of Franklin and Penelope Rosemont. Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley have suggested that prior to the inauguration of the Chicago group it was ‘the informal committee of two’, consisting of Joans and Kaufman, who had ensured that surrealism was not completely extinguished during the 1950s, the ‘century’s most ostentatiously antisurrealist decade’ (Rosemont and Kelley 2009: 219). Scholarship on this group is long overdue, though a full discussion of their activities and contribution to international surrealism falls outside of the scope of this article. Given the group’s longevity and modus operandi, it is perhaps more accurate to describe Chicago surrealism as less a form of post-war modernism, than an activist group with a particular investment in, and politicization of, the marvellous and the dream (see Garon et al. 1997; Sakolsky 2002).

It is the ways in which Joans’ poetry and drama utilize surrealist formal innovations to not only insist on surrealism’s relevance to an analysis of racial injustices in post-war America, but as a means through which to comment on modernism itself, that concern me here. Surrealism remained unique for Joans, distinct from other European and American modernisms. One reason for this was its invulnerability to charges of illegitimate cultural appropriation of which, for example, cubism or the Beats were guilty. Joans’ poem ‘Harlem to Picasso’ exhorts Picasso, admonishing the primitivism and cultural appropriations which underpinned so much modernist experimentation: ‘Hey PICASSO why’d you drop Greco-Roman &/other academic slop then picked up on my/black ancestors sculptural bebop’ (Joans 1999: 31). Within his own cultural milieu Joans noted a similar negrophilic fetishization of African American culture; from Jack Kerouac’s embarrassing peons to jazz, to Norman Mailer’s hymn to the ‘White Negro’. Joans charged his peers with ignoring the historical specificity and lived experiences of African Americans: ‘The black American knew that the injustices inflicted upon him were real and concrete [...] that he couldn’t escape into the oblivion of “beatnikism” with the same equanimity of his white cool cohorts’ (Joans n.d.). Despite this, Joans also conceded that he was content to occasionally associate with the Beat movement purely for the money or the women, and famously offered his services for hire as part of Fred McDarrah’s ‘rent-a-beatnik’ scheme. Joans

seldom casts his participation in surrealism, on the other hand, though often playful and humorous, in such a parodic or instrumentalized light. If Picasso and the Beats could be criticized for their appropriations of African and African American cultures, the same could not be said for surrealism. As Joans' letter to Breton in 1963 suggested, surrealism could be presented as intrinsic to black culture, rather than predatory on it. In this complex web of cultural traffic observed by Joans ironically surrealism was not available to white Beat writers save through their illegitimate possession of African American cultural practices. When viewed purely as a form of symbolic capital, surrealism could be traded in, a mode of exchange in which the Beats duly participated. Yet as a radical poetics in the service of a radical politics, Joans suggests that surrealism exceeds the boundaries of private property, avant-garde coteries, or national literatures and remained a valuable weapon for the politically and culturally dispossessed.

Joans' invocation of surrealist influence should be seen as strategic if we consider surrealism's track-record of representing and promoting the interests of colonized or diasporic subjects; its legacy to the "coloured" men' who Breton declared in 1945 'have always enjoyed exceptional favour and prestige in surrealism', is far from unambiguous (Breton 1978: 259). Scholars such as Petrine Archer-Shaw have seen little difference between surrealism and the prevailing negrophilic tastes and fashions of the Parisian 1920s, finding evidence across a diverse range of surrealist production of an essentializing and primitivizing stance towards the racial 'other' (Archer-Shaw 2000; Tythacott 2003). Conversely, others have found an ambivalence and contradiction within surrealism, drawing distinctions between the Bretonian group's exoticism and the more critical and corrosive stance towards cultural difference of the dissident group centred around Bataille and the publication *Documents* (Clifford 1981; Edwards 1998).

The Bretonian surrealists' interest in collecting and displaying non-western cultural production was supplemented by a portfolio of anti-colonial activities, beginning with their support for the Rif uprising in 1925, and including co-organizing, in conjunction with the Anti-Imperialist League, the 'Truth About the Colonies' Exhibition in 1931 as a protest against the spectacle of the French Colonial Exposition of the same year (Mileaf 2001; Bate 2004; Sweeney 2005; Stanstell 2003). Amanda Stanstell cautions against overstating the impact of the exhibition, suggesting that '[a]lthough the attendance at this exhibit was large for an avant-garde art exhibition (around 5,000 visitors), the limitations of audience reception must be taken seriously in any attempt to evaluate Surrealism's political potential' (2003: 118). The tract 'Murderous Humanitarianism' (Breton et al. 2001), which vehemently denounced colonial expansion as well as slavery, lynching, religion, capitalism, and uncritical interest in *l'art nègre*, appeared alongside other texts by surrealists such as René Crevel in Nancy Cunard's ambitious yet highly controversial *Negro: An Anthology* (1934). As Carole Sweeney has shown, evaluations, both historical and contemporary, of the *Anthology* depended in part on whether its attempt to reconcile (surrealist) modernism with political praxis were viewed as possible or even desirable (Sweeney 2005b; Winkiel 2006; Edwards 2003).

Scholarship by Edwards and Sweeney has demonstrated that Paris in the 1920s and 1930s was a crucible for an emergent Francophone black transnationalism, and surrealism could be, according to some diasporic artists, writers and intellectuals, of use in the contestation of French political and cultural imperialism, in both the metropole and the colonies (Edwards 2003; Sweeney 2004). ‘Murderous Humanitarianism’, which was signed by the Martinican students Jules Monnerot and Peirre Yoyotte is indicative of this convergence between surrealism and anti-colonial intellectuals. Along with René Ménénil and Etienne Léro, Monnerot and Yoyotte had been involved with the single issue publication *Légitime Défense*, produced in Paris in June 1932. The name was taken from a pamphlet issued by Breton in 1926. *Défense* famously broke with cultural assimilationism, suggesting that in communism, surrealism and psychoanalysis lay the means by which the ‘West Indian question’ could be tackled (Léro 2009: 37). Although surrealism’s influence on this publication and its subsequent legacy to diasporic writers has been keenly debated, to Joans there existed continuity between surrealism, *Légitime Défense*, the Negritude of Césaire, and his own writing.³ References to Césaire abound in his work (he dedicates his *Afrodisia* to him in 1970) and the *Légitime Défense* group are also included amongst those who ‘fly the banner of freedom at full mast’:

And how many old or young Blacks have heard of Etienne Lero, the Martiniquan Black Surrealist who published the most explosive Black journal ever in Paris of 1932 [...] They attacked the wrongs, and set up magnetic fields for those who preferred dreaming with eyes wide open.

(Joans 1980)

As is well known, Césaire’s engagement with surrealist textual experimentation in his *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* in particular inspired two generations of heated polemics. Césaire’s ‘wager [...] that the rhetorical tools of surrealism offered the best means of conveying his troubled relationship to France’ has been criticized nearly as much as it has been celebrated’ (Noland 2006: 64). Breton predictably celebrated and lauded Césaire’s achievements, writing in the preface for *Notebook* that Césaire brings ‘to the fore in bold type what surrealism has always considered as the first article of its charter: a deliberate will to deal the coup de grace to that which one calls “common sense”’ (Breton 2001: xvii). Césaire himself had claimed that:

I was ready to accept surrealism because I already had advanced my own, using as my starting points the same authors that had influenced the surrealist poets [...] I have accepted it joyfully because in it I have found more of a confirmation than a revelation.

(Césaire 2009: 298)

He later stated:

I recognize surrealism as the highest point of the European spirit, that point at which the European spirit harmonizes most with the spirit of the far east

3. According to Edwards (2003), early work by Kesteloot (1991) and anthologies such as Michael Richardson’s *Refusal of the Shadow* (1996) have unduly privileged surrealism’s influence on *Légitime Défense* as well as on *Les Tropiques*, the journal published in Martinique by Aimé Césaire, Suzanne Césaire, and René Ménénil from 1941 to 1945 (Edwards 1998 and 2003). For additional accounts of surrealism’s legacy to the Francophone Caribbean see Arnold (1981), Michel (2000), Sweeney (2004), Lewis (2006), Dash (1998, 2007 and 2003). Considerably less has been written on African American writers’ reception of surrealism, in either a pre- or post-war context, or on other non-European writers’ involvement with the movement (see Rosemont and Kelley 2009).

and the spirit of the black world. Of course my surrealism could not be the same as that of Breton, or that early Aragon. It is something different.

(Césaire 2009b: 298)

Sartre would in turn celebrate this difference in his essentializing and primitivizing text 'Black Orpheus', which argued that in the hands of a black colonial subject surrealist automatism acquired a political power it had hitherto lacked (Sartre 1964/5).

According to Césaire's own explanation, surrealism is an analogous rather than homologous articulation of 'the spirit of the black world', yet despite emphasizing the non-coincidence of this surrealism with Breton's, Franz Fanon famously viewed the relationship between Césaire and surrealism as one of colonial subject mouthing colonial discourse (however allusive and indirect), castigating Breton's congratulatory preface to *Notebook* for its paternalistic attitude towards Césaire. He wrote with deep sarcasm: 'But we should be honored, the blacks will reproach me, that a white man like Breton writes such things' (Fanon 1967: 40). In *Wretched of the Earth* Fanon took direct issue with what he termed the 'florid writing which on the whole serves to reassure the occupying power' (Fanon, cited in Noland 2006: 64).

But as Noland has convincingly argued, what Césaire inherits and reworks from surrealism is not, as is frequently assumed, simply the florid 'poetics of the nondescriptive, nonmimetic, and nonethnographic' through which, 'for generations of Césaire critics, it appears impossible to mobilize a resistance or utter a call to arms' (Noland 2006: 67–8). Instead what Césaire utilizes from surrealism are *the debates* about literary realism and anti-realism which split the group in the wake of the 'Aragon Affair' in 1931–32, an event described by Noland as 'central in establishing surrealism's use-value for colonial subjects' (2006: 77). Breton outlined his defence of Louis Aragon's social realist poem 'Red Front' (1930), for which Aragon had been threatened with imprisonment by Léon Blum, in his 'Misère de la poésie: "L'Affaire Aragon" devant l'opinion publique"' (1932). This text insisted on poetic language's entitlement, and almost responsibility, to avoid topicality and direct reference, what he termed 'social drama'. This could have limited surrealist poetics' potential for sustaining a politically engaged aesthetic wishing to address history and the social, yet Noland argues that the *Légitime Défense* group, who were associating with the surrealists at precisely this moment, subtly reworked Breton's pronouncements. Léro's text 'Misère d'une poésie', published in *Légitime Défense*, admires a poet who can combine the 'social iniquities of his country' with 'the passions of his race [...] [and] the value and disorder of his dreams' (Léro 1996: 57). Noland suggests that Léro's call for a poetry that balances both 'metaphorical detour and referential advance' (2006: 78), or in Léro's words, that acknowledges the Caribbean writer 'has a right both to eat and have a life of the mind', is realized by some of the verse in *Légitime Défense* as well as in Césaire's *Notebook* (Léro 1996: 58). Arnold and Edwards concur that Césaire reshaped surrealist poetics rather than receiving its formal innovations passively, prompting Breton to rethink his earlier hostility towards topicality and history (Edwards 2005 and 1998; Arnold 1981). As we shall see, Joans' work also writes back to Breton's

early rejections of 'social drama' and direct historical reference in poetry, through a blurring of the metaphorical and the referential which intervenes in the narrativization of surrealism's own history. His work performatively creates new histories for surrealism, as it simultaneously protests the omission and marginalization of diasporic artists and writers from dominant accounts of modernism's origins and remit.

For Joans, Surrealism remained far more than an experiment in innovative cultural production – this view he attributed to 'armchair surrealists' – and he never tired of castigating the movement's institutionalization by museums, universities and publishing houses. Surrealism was for Joans, 'above all a movement of revolt' explaining that '[i]t is *action* and at the same time reflection on the means and end of that action' (Joans 1980, original emphasis). Equating surrealism with the 'accomplishment of freedom and desire', required Joans to construct a version of surrealism which ensured that surreality obtains to the freedom of late modern African Americans and not only, as Fanon had charged, of white bourgeois European avant-gardists. To do this, Joans constructs a complex temporality of surrealist modernism, which troubles a unilateral, paternalistic model of artistic influence and exchange. Joans' surrealist history lesson exceeds adding names to a register of black surrealists, but instead constructs a particular mode of representing and understanding history. His narrativization of surrealism's geographical and temporal dispersal draws on those features which Noland has suggested marked diasporic writers' engagement with the movement since the publication of *Légitime Défense*, namely the tension between direct and indirect reference. Joans stressed that 'a surrealist is not a social-realist, therefore do not expect his creative output to be piece of propaganda', and his work certainly draws on features of surrealist poetic experimentation, but in ways that simultaneously address the social or historical (Joans 1987: 12). In his work, dates and events are freed from the responsibility to correspond empirically, and he performatively constructs a new mode of historiography with implications for narrativizations of modernity and modernism.

His poem 'Nadja Rendez-Vous' is indicative of this approach to history and temporality:

I first read his works in June 1942
I met him in June 1960
I last saw him in June 1966
I was going to see him again in 1967 June
but the Glass of Water in the Storm (1713)
of 4–2 rue Fontaine kept an almost forgotten
rendez-vous with Nadja in the Magnetic Fields

(Joans 1969: 113)

The poem initially seems to take an almost fetishistic approach to the documenting of Joans' encounters with Breton, keeping a careful and stable record of the dates of their meetings. However the inclusion of the anachronistic date '1713' punctures the realistic timeframe of the poem. Fabre notes that this date was 'the magic number suggested [to Joans] by the way Breton used to sign his initials' and Joans uses the date frequently

4. Joans' own collages, for example in *The Hipsters* (1961), provide another way of thinking about his engagement with the surrealist outmoded.

in his work as a metonym for the leader of Surrealism (Fabre 1991: 314). Dates in this poem function both denotatively *and* metaphorically, referentially *and* figuratively. It is not a question of differentiating between the 'literal' and the 'imagined' dates, between, say, '1942' and '1713'; the latter, although self-consciously the product of marks on a page, is not devoid of reference since it denotes Breton instead of a particular moment in 'real' time. Moreover some contextual information about Breton's handwriting is required for the meaning of '1713' to become 'clear'. Textuality is not, here, simply the free-play of the signifier, but rather a phenomenon still closely linked to context. If '1713' is a product of textuality, then the implication is perhaps that '1942' or '1960' might also be accidents of ink on paper, which thereby destabilizes typographic culture's linear understanding of time, the hallmark of modernity. With this performative undermining of the act of historical record, Joans challenges conventional understandings of modernism's life-span, as well as accounts of unilateral influence which depend upon the existence of a privileged original, temporally separated from those who duplicate it.

Bretonian Surrealism of the interwar years was itself no stranger to harnessing the critical potential of disrupting linear, teleological models of history, first noted by Walter Benjamin in his 1929 essay 'Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', which alleged that Breton:

was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the 'outmoded', in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct, grand pianos, the dresses of five years ago, fashionable restaurants when the vogue has begun to ebb from them. The relation of these things to revolution – no one can have a more exact concept of it than these authors.

(Benjamin 1978 [1929]: 181)

According to Benjamin the decaying detritus of nineteenth-century capitalism embodied the wish symbols of an earlier age, and when viewed as markers of promises betrayed, they yielded critical, revolutionary insight. Hal Foster explains that the surrealists' interest in the outmoded, evident in for example Aragon's marvel at the condemned Parisian Arcades in *Paris Peasant* (1926) or in Max Ernst's collage novels,

relativizes bourgeois culture, denies its pretence to the natural and the eternal [..] [and] challenges this culture with its forfeited dreams, tests it against its own compromised values of political emancipation, technological progress, cultural access and the like.

(Foster 1993: 162)

For Joans writing in the mid-twentieth century the ruins of the nineteenth century were not the still warm corpses which they were to the surrealists, yet he mines the critical potential of the anachronistic eruptions within linear history, testifying to the continued saliency of the outmoded.⁴ In Joans' work it is perhaps surrealism itself which has become outmoded, displaced from the paradoxical centre of avant-garde activity by existentialism in France and Abstract Expressionism in America (the retrieval of

the surrealist periodicals by his aunt from her employer's rubbish bin encapsulating rather neatly this sense of surrealism's destitution and ruination). Belonging to the bygone era of the historical avant-garde, whose ambitions for the transformation of the entire fabric of cultural, social and political life have yet to be redeemed, perhaps surrealism's legacy now lies in critically exploiting its very outmoded-ness. Joans is keen to stress that 'Surrealism, like Jazz, is not a return to a past age and outdated ideas' yet the outmoded is not to be confused with a wistful nostalgia (Joans 1980). His work reveals that looking backwards can be coterminous with looking forwards; by confronting modernity with its betrayed promises, its repressions and its lacuna, the outmoded opens the past out onto the present and the future. Drawing on the surrealist outmoded which challenged the universalizing assumptions of bourgeois capitalism, Joans explores the non-synchronous within the geographies and histories of surrealism, and challenges the totalizing Eurocentric assumptions of modernist historiography. His anachronistic recourse to surrealism's own predilection for the outmoded might be said to map onto an understanding of the past as the future anterior (what 'will have been'), through which according to Winkiel 'the disavowed histories of modernity' might be imaginatively recovered (Winkiel 2008: 10; see also Nielsen 2002).

In Joans' formulations Africa paradoxically provides both the prehistory and the future of surrealism, which has always already crossed the Atlantic in its history:

Surrealists have used the activity of art as one of the many means to provoke surreal awareness, to shove the conventional mind to the other side of reality. The mother of masks in certain places of West Central Africa did this to Black you and Black me long before those white belly boats arrived. The question is, have we forgotten? Africa is a surrealist continent, thus the most marvelous.

(Joans 1989: 48)

Like Césaire before him, Joans invests in an analogous, indigenous African surrealism, which pre-exists its later European counterpart. Although his question, 'have we forgotten?', alludes to the need to recover this African prehistory to surrealism, it remains an impossible paradoxical act of returning to something which could not have existed as such – that is to say, be recognized as 'surrealism' – until what followed after it. Africa, according to Joans, arrived early to surrealism yet it must also have arrived late. This is the paradox of the 'post' which Nielsen suggests always haunts revisionist or countermodernisms (2005: 22).

In an unpublished poem entitled 'Duchamp's decent daughter', Joans exploits the future anterior tense and paradox of the 'post' by providing a fantasized and highly subversive version of modernism's origins. Its opening lines read:

Duchamp's decent daughter/was the nude that descended/the stairway for she had just/left my pad after a long distance/fuck unfortunately her Dada daddy/dug her leaving my crib and did/the painting of her departure.

(Joans c.1960)

Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* was exhibited at the Armory Show in New York in 1913, which famously 'launched' European modernism onto putatively unsuspecting and scandalized Americans. On this occasion, rather than positioning African cultural production at the genesis of European modernism Joans, anachronistically, inscribes *himself*. In place of primitivist appropriation of African or African American cultural production by European modernists, Joans renders the process of cultural transmission as stemming from a single event, displacing shallow a-historical signifiers of 'Africa' and inserting eruptive, historical particularity in their place. The poem emphasizes the singularity and historicity of the event; it is one man, one woman, one liaison (albeit he is at pains to point out, a long one!), on one morning, at one address, to which the African (American) origins of modernism in America can be attributed. As with 'Nadja Rendez-Vous', this surreal, and rather patriarchal, history lesson from Joans depends upon a similar tension between the rhetorical and referential; the sheer impossibility of the encounter (Joans was not even born when Duchamp exhibited the painting), paradoxically marks the all too real absence of embodied African Americans at the Armory Show and within canonical modernism more broadly.

An early, short, unpublished play, written in 1949, titled 'Dont Fucketh With Me' and subtitled 'a surreal play', evidences Joans' reflections on the implications of transplanting surrealism into an American context and directly tests surrealism's ability to speak to subjects of modernity outside of interwar Paris (Joans 1949). Breton had placed the liberation of desire at the heart of surrealism, the free-play of the libidinal and the erotic believed to overturn the rationalism, moralism and instrumentalism of bourgeois reality (see Breton 1988). Yet, of course, the bourgeois reality which Breton sought to explode was specific to interwar Paris, and the repression of desire is patterned according to gender, sexuality, class, and race, as they are constituted in a given time and place. In her essay on Joans, Lindberg asks:

What efficacy or utility can the Surrealist release of unconscious repressed violence and sexuality offer Joans, Blacks and, for that matter Beats? [...] castration, immolation, and fragmentation, parodied and variously deployed by Surrealism, have an historical dimension for African American men and homosexuals – however differently, as super butch Joans is to point out.

(1998: 211)

This historical dimension she subsequently calls the 'excess baggage' unique to African American men, for whom castration and fragmentation were not the abstract psychoanalytical concepts they might have been for the surrealists, but painfully real punishments for specious sexual transgressions in segregated Jim Crow America.

Joans' play can be read as a dramatization of the consequences of pursuing surrealism's bid to liberate desire within a segregated society which polices sexuality and sanctions, often violently, breaches of the colour line. Set in Kentucky, the play opens with a dinner conversation between Mr and Mrs Whiteass, played by black actors with their faces painted white, during which they pour abuse on 'filthy blackass folks ruining our once

abundant table'. Mr and Mrs Blackass enter, played by white characters with their faces painted black, and repeat their exchange verbatim, only substituting 'whiteass folks' for 'blackass'. After smoking 'a reefer', Mrs Blackass and Mr Whiteass confess their mutual attraction and retreat to the kitchen to have sex (represented by waving their hands in the air), much to the dismay of Mr and Mrs Foreignass who make an appearance. Enter a rhinoceros and other 'jungle animals' who declare that 'these two people that you have banned from your worlds are only doing what is marvellous, beautiful in fact anything that is beautiful is marvellous, theirs is an artful act before an angelic giraffe'. Save for the last clause, this is a direct quotation from the 'First Manifesto of Surrealism' of 1924, which the rhinoceros continues to reference in his defence of the couple's sexual activities: 'They are letting their subconscious minds lead them into the true world of the marvellous, that surreal world where one exists in between the state of being half in dream and half awake' (Joans 1949).

The play closes with the entire cast – white, black and foreign, human and animal – all waving their hands in the air, enjoying the, albeit highly sublimated, expression of unbridled sexuality. The play offers us a glimpse, very early in his career, into Joans' belief that surrealism, if anything, answered a more urgent need on behalf of African Americans for the lifting of the repression of sexuality, than white Frenchmen's. Insisting on the inseparability of sexuality from race, and from history, Joans historicises surrealism and reveals as false some of surrealism's, as well as other modernists', constructions of the racial 'other' as somehow existing outside of modernity, as exempt from the excesses of 'civilization', rationalism, capitalism, etc. For as Joans makes all too clear, it is the excess of repression, 'civilization' and 'socialization' which separates African Americans' experiences of modernity from their white European counterparts'.

The play comments further on the transplantation of surrealism to America through its reproduction, verbatim, of the 'First Manifesto'. Joans' recontextualization of this text – by doubling it, making it signify in another time and place – draws attention to the conditions that need to be in place for the Manifesto's performative utterances to be felicitous, namely the absence of sanctions or violent punishment for sexual activity. Winkiel suggests that definitions of the modernist manifesto which emphasize its characteristic 'now' time, its emphatic break with the past, assume both a linear and progressive definition of history, and that historical agency is equally and identically distributed (Winkiel 2008). In instantiating, very conspicuously, a new 'now' time ('1949'), which is paradoxically concurrent with the 'then' time of the manifesto's original publication ('1924'), Joans establishes a non-linear version of history, and furthermore emphasizes that the promise of freedom contained in the manifesto, itself serving as a rebuke to modernity's unfulfilled pledge of universal liberty and equality, has not yet been redeemed for certain subjects of modernity.

The felicity conditions for the manifesto are both temporally and spatially determined, and as the play self consciously announces a new 'now' time for the Manifesto it also announces a new 'here'. The setting of the play in Kentucky serves not only to explore the different experiences of racially embodied subjects, black and white, living in France or the

American South, but also, paradoxically, to suggest the congruency of these locations, a congruency which is underpinned by a shared commitment to the need for the liberation of desire. In rendering surrealism both 'alien' and 'naturalized', simultaneously new and old, within post-war Kentucky, Joans has performatively enacted a new approach to understanding the geographies and histories of modernism, one which deploys contradictory spatial and temporal relations to make visible the unequal distribution of historical and cultural agency.

Composed in 1967 on the occasion of Breton's death Joans' poem 'The Statue of 1713' constitutes perhaps one of his most sustained reflections on surrealism's transatlantic origins and reach. The poet watches the construction of a statue of Breton in the West Saharan desert: 'The author of *Nadja* is sculpted nude/by five or fifteen Africans (fetish makers!)' who work tirelessly, as though immune to the cold desert night (Joans 1999c: 220). The statue is 'taller than forty-two giraffes' necks/and wider than a street of fountain pens' and repels the desert bandits who 'fear the truth of that poet'. Some of the fetish makers are 'entrusted to translate the surrealist manifestos into/ Tamachek thus enabling one to read them/backwards as well as forwards' (Joans 1999c: 220). The date, 1713, of this memorialization of Breton, is of course highly anachronistic, as he had not yet been born, much less deceased (yet as we know it resembled to Joans the way Breton signed his initials). The anachronistic construction of a monument to surrealism in the 'non or pre-modern' Saharan desert enacts precisely such an impossible stealing past disciplinary boundaries identified by Nielsen as characteristic of African American modernity, marking its paradoxical position of both early and late arrival to modernism. In the poem, time, like the translation of the manifestoes into Tamachek, can be read forwards and backwards, like the history of surrealism itself.

Fabre notes that Joans composed this poem in response to seeing Paris' small Statue of Liberty lying on its side on the Left Bank on its way to a new location (1991: 314). This adds a further dimension to Joans' presentation of the passage of modernity across the Atlantic. France presented America with the Statue of Liberty on the centenary of the Declaration of Independence, as a gift in recognition of their shared project of Revolution and Republican principles. Joans seems to be aligning the statue of Breton in the poem with the Statue of Liberty, or perhaps replacing the latter with the former, presenting surrealism rather than republicanism as the harbinger or beacon of liberty in the trans-Atlantic world. The poem's sly allusions to the 'fetish makers' or 'fetishers' parodies modernism's own fetishization of so called 'primitive' fetishes, and undermines potential charges of a hagiographic approach to Breton.

My own aim has been to avoid according undue privilege to Breton, or to overstate the 'influence' of surrealism on Joans' work. Joans claims Breton as one of two 'Février Fathers' who taught him '[t]o fertilize'; the other was Langston Hughes whom Joans celebrates with equal passion and enthusiasm (Joans 1999b: 180). Joans' work ensures that surrealism is contextualized within a matrix of cultural and political dialogue across the Atlantic, which takes account of both its influences from and influence on black diasporic cultures. As a reworking of surrealist poetics contributed to an anti-assimilationist aesthetic for the *Défense* group and for

Césaire, so too did Joans' own adaptation of surrealist poetic disruption enable both an engagement with the social and political conditions of African American modernity, and raised in relief his own recourse to (surrealist) modernism from his contemporaries'. Through Joans' complex interventions into the narrativization of modernism, through his destabilization of linear time and exploitation of spatial discontinuities and temporal anachronism, his work enacts new histories for surrealism and secures it new adherents and audiences, either living or posthumously. Ted Joans' surrealist history lesson exposes the omissions, inaccuracies and repressions endemic in conventional historiographies of modernism whilst simultaneously confirming the political importance of retelling modernism's past, for both the present and the future.

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Contributor details

Joanna Pawlik is a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Manchester, and a contributor to the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and its Legacies' three-year project on Queer Surrealism. Her DPhil thesis (University of Sussex, 2009) explored legacies of surrealism, both Bretonian and dissident, within the Beat and San Francisco Renaissance avant-gardes and she is currently working on a book length project on the same subject. Shorter research projects include articles on Brion Gysin and on Chicago surrealism. She is also co-editing a volume of essays on Queer Surrealism with Professor David Lomas.

Contact: Room 3.02 Mansfield Cooper Building, Art History and Visual Studies, University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9PL, UK.

E-mail: joanna.pawlik@manchester.ac.uk