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Claude Cahun, Freudo-Marxism, and Poetry's Political Action

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Abstract: This article examines Claude Cahun's 1934 pamphlet, *Les Paris sont ouverts*, conceived as a report to the literary section of the PCF-led Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires (AEAR). I address how Cahun's intervention generates a set of politico-aesthetic arguments for the place of avant-garde poetics in the context of communist literary culture. These arguments are constructed using what I discuss as surrealism's form of "aggregate Freudo-Marxism." Cahun sought to advance the surrealist position within the AEAR and promote avant-garde techniques in poetry as politically efficacious. To illuminate her thought, I analyze surrealism's relationship to Freudo-Marxism and to Socialist Realism of that period. I then explore Tristan Tzara's influence on Cahun and the similarity between Cahun's and Herbert Marcuse's deployments of Freudian concepts. Finally, I ask how we might contemplate the creation of political ethics, integral to the surrealist project of militancy, today. In this way, Cahun's conception of poetry's political action can also be extended to practices beyond the page. The purpose of this article is not to explore Cahun's communist activism *per se*, but to elucidate her defense of surrealist Freudo-Marxism and its proposed relationship between poetry and politics, as one response to the question of what historically constitutes a Marxist poetics.

Keywords: *Claude Cahun; Freudo-Marxism; Surrealism; Poetry; Politics*

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Poetry's Indirect Action[1]

Since the earliest days of modernism, writers have sought a definitive answer to the political remit of poetic practice. Their debates played heavily upon the division between mainstream, establishment, and popular poetry and between experimental, anti-establishment, and coterie poetry. In the North Atlantic World and across its empires, both poetic orientations claimed social relevance, pointing to the political uselessness of the opposite tendency to bolster their arguments. Mid-century surrealists were, for the poets affiliated with the French Communist Party (PCF), "bourgeois individualists" whose formal preoccupations diluted the "ideologically correct" literary content of class struggle and victory.[2] To these accusations, surrealists made several ripostes from the 1930s through to the end of the war. One such text was by the antifascist and homosexual communist Claude Cahun (née Lucy Schwob), whose 1934 essay-manifesto *Les Paris sont ouverts* (All bets are off) denounced Louis Aragon's then-recent turn against the poetic avant-garde.[3] First conceived as a report to the literary section of the Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires (AEAR) in early 1933, Cahun continued her analysis throughout 1934 and published this defense of surrealism the next year with the press José Corti.

This article will address how *Les Paris sont ouverts* generates a set of politico-aesthetic arguments for the place of avant-garde poetics in the context of communist literary culture. These arguments are constructed using what I will later discuss as surrealism's unique form of "aggregate Freudo-Marxism." Cahun sought to advance the surrealist position within the PCF-directed AEAR and promote avant-garde techniques in poetry as politically efficacious. Pursuant to this goal, she developed a tripartite schema for poetry's political action, which she divides into "direct action," "direct action in the opposite direction," and "indirect action" (511–15). The first of these involves transparent, ideological

sloganeering, and Cahun gives *La Marseillaise* as an example. "Direct action in the opposite direction" refers to a poetics whose ideological tactic is a sort of mischievous deception—irony or satire. The third, "indirect action," which she judges the only effective form of action, both poetically and politically, points to poetry that works on conscious and unconscious levels, poetry that requires the reader to engage their desire. I will return to this schema below. For the moment, some contextual remarks are in order.

In contemporary anglophone scholarship, Cahun's political and literary writings have been significantly overshadowed by her photography and visual art.[4] Focusing on gender-fluid experimentation, Cahun's visual work was undertaken collaboratively with her partner Suzanne Malherbe (pseudonym Marcel Moore), but much of it was not published or shown publicly in their lifetimes.[5] Cahun and Malherbe were leftist lesbian artists who began to frequent surrealist circles around 1932 for both artistic and political purposes. Cahun, a member of the AEAR between 1932 and 1933, later signed the Contre-attaque manifesto in October 1935, the first text by the group of antifascist and anti-Stalinist communist intellectuals headed by André Breton and Georges Bataille.[6] Malherbe joined the surrealist wing of Contre-attaque and signed, among other texts, the letter of group dissolution due to Bataille's "surfascisme" in March 1936.

Les Paris sont ouverts, written in the same period, is among Cahun's many works untranslated in their entirety. Recently, however, the text was partially translated into English for the *Surrealism and Anti-fascism Anthology* and re-published in French as a stand-alone pamphlet.[7] Depictions of the couple's antifascist activities in Jersey feature in a new British stage-play and a French novel, pointing to Cahun's relevance to the present political conjuncture.[8] Surrealism's much celebrated 2024 centenary collides with the global renaissance of reactionary forces, a major feature of which is the anti-feminist, homophobic, and transphobic fixations of the contemporary far right. Cahun's queer antifascism is a timely inheritance for queer antifascists today, particularly in the field of culture. While her life and legacy have shaped this inheritance in the anglophone world, her political writings have been largely disregarded or simply left undeciphered.

The purpose of this essay is not to explore Cahun's queer antifascism *per se*, but to elucidate her defense of the surrealist relationship between poetry and politics as one response to the question of what historically constitutes a Marxist poetics. This intellectual-historical field, like the history of Marxist aesthetics more broadly, is plural and fragmented, relegating less orthodox and more heretical positions to the margins. In his analysis of Cahun, Michael Löwy observes that "while her politics in this pamphlet are obviously Marxist, her reflections on poetry owe more to Romanticism, Symbolism, and Hegelian aesthetics

than to the vulgar Marxism which ruled in France."[9] Surrealism's attempts to correct vulgar Marxism through a robust anthropological conception of human emancipation drew on Freudian psychoanalysis, left Nietzscheanism, utopian socialism, and romantic idealism. These innovations represent a significant if under-theorized component of the history of Marxist aesthetics in its avant-garde variant. The queer and antifascist character of Cahun's politics necessarily gives definition to her Marxism in the period, but it may be fruitful to view Cahun's queer antifascism as the subjective impetus by which she was led to a revolutionary romanticist position on poetics, rather than a subjective state from which she produced political art. Löwy asserts that, "by emphasizing the anthropological nature of poetry, its intimate link to erotic feelings, its magical power, and its capacity to produce emotional breakthroughs, she raised the issue to a much higher level [than vulgar Marxism] in true Surrealist spirit."[10]

Cahun's attraction to surrealism and defense of its principles can also be understood, as Jennifer L. Shaw observes, as arising from the deceptively simple need to "both support the revolutionary cause and work independently in the artistic realm."[11] Her theorization of this necessity would briefly become a "touchstone for Surrealist political writing" as *Les Paris sont ouverts* was referenced by Breton in 1934 in "Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme?" (What is surrealism?).[12] As François Leperlier observes, Cahun's intervention was soon eclipsed by other texts on poetry's political action, such as Breton and Leon Trotsky's "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art" (1938) and Benjamin Péret's "Les deshonneur des poètes" (The dishonor of poets; 1945), perhaps the most important treatise on poetry and communist antifascism.[13]

Unlike these works, Cahun's influential articulation of surrealism and revolutionary practice is marked by the presence of Freudian concepts. For example, she explains that to measure the value of a poem in terms of its utility as communist propaganda, one must not consider its themes but the way "the emotions" are "triggered by a reading" of it (511).[14] She then comments that "perhaps it is only psychoanalysis that could shed some light on the nature of the emotions triggered by a reading. But in order to be able to draw directives from it, psychoanalysis would need to be more generally practiced" (511). As we will see from the mobilization of specific notions in *Les Paris sont ouverts*, Cahun's surrealist politics are definitively Freudo-Marxist, making her the partisan of a position over which the Surrealist Group would be thrown into crisis in the early 1930s.

Amalgamate versus Aggregate Freudo-Marxisms

At the Kharkov Congress in November 1930, members of the Paris Surrealist Group courted Moscow's favor, hoping to secure a hegemonic place for surrealism within the ecology of communist cultural institutions. Aragon and Georges Sadoul, surrealist delegates to the Congress, conspired to benefit from Henri Barbusse's declining influence in the PFC and maneuvered to have the party officially declare surrealism revolutionary. But the opposite would transpire, as Soviet leaders condemned surrealism for lacking a serious Marxist analysis due to its petit-bourgeois, non-proletarian character.[15] This diagnosis was evidenced, they argued, by the split between surrealists who sided with the Trotskyist opposition and those who continued to pursue orthodox communism through an ideologically correct historical materialism—one which properly theorized "the decomposition of the bourgeoisie as a consequence of the development of its internal contradictions."[16] These latter surrealists might one day become true communist writers, the Soviets affirmed, once they "definitively adopt proletarian ideology," and correct the many errors found in the "Second Manifesto of Surrealism."[17] In particular, the party's condemnations focused on the manifesto's "Freudo-idealist conceptions" as a major cause for concern.[18] In this sense, the surrealist interest in Freud was considered irrevocably incompatible with the communist cultural project. A. Stolyarov's contribution to the party's position on the literature of the world revolution in 1931 denounced "Freudism" as "anti-social" and "ultra-individualist," placing the word Freudo-Marxism in scare quotes to indicate the sheer absurdity of combining Freud and Marx.[19] It was made clear to Aragon and Sadoul in the space of the congress that for surrealism to be considered revolutionary and communist, it must firstly abandon psychoanalysis.[20]

Freudian ideas were nonetheless inextricable from surrealist political positions, as they arguably constituted surrealism's primary political vantage point across the 1930s.[21] In this period, surrealists deployed an idiosyncratic blend of Freud and Marx to explore both the political capacities of poetry and the psychic elements of fascism's counter-revolution. Martinican surrealist Pierre Yoyotte wrote in the 1934 text, "The Antifascist Significance of Surrealism" that, "starting with emotional repression (still poignantly part of today's reality), the Surrealists immediately addressed themselves to the defense of desire, to individual inspiration, to solutions that were diametrically opposed to the Mussolinian or racist militarization of their time."[22] More enigmatically, Yoyotte continues: "The ethics of the future will not consist of suppressing the irrational emotions; instead, we shall master them and subordinate them to desire."[23] Such an assertion becomes legible through the basic argument of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930): that civilizational progress advances *at the expense* of human instinctual life, requiring an ever-increasing

repression of pleasure and destructiveness.[24] While the Freudian analysis of repression formed the basis of the surrealist critique of Western civilization, Breton and others strove to emphasize and liberate the irrational aspects of the human instinctual matrix, where Freud sought their rationalization. The total liberation of the drives, as advocated by Breton, Salvador Dalí, and others, is incoherent with respect to both psychoanalytic and Marxist conceptions of social existence. This disparity is the content of the mutual confusion between Freud and the surrealists. Additionally, Breton believed that automatic writing could approximate the psychoanalytic experience of free-association and refused to see the clinical setting as more than a space of authentically "spoken thought." Later, Breton's perhaps willful incomprehension would be extended to the interpretation of dreams.

Surrealist Freudo-Marxism of the interwar and occupation periods involved a combinatory non-reconciliation of select tenets of historical materialism and psychoanalysis through the principle of juxtaposition, or montage.[25] Surrealist Freudo-Marxism did not submit Freudianism or Marxism to the strictures of the opposite system of normative suppositions, as Wilhelm Reich's or Erich Fromm's projects did—I call these attempts "amalgamate" Freudo-Marxism. Rather, the surrealist option was the "aggregate" Freudo-Marxism of montage and loose combination, in which historical materialism and psychoanalysis become experimental protocols that are allowed to co-exist in mutual contradiction, particularly those elements that when taken in orthodox terms refute the opposite framework (such as the question of reconciling individual nonconformism and class consciousness). As Breton wrote in the "Second Manifesto of Surrealism":

> To be sure, Surrealism, which as we have seen deliberately opted for the Marxist doctrine in the realm of social problems, has no intention of minimizing Freudian doctrine as it applies to the evaluation of ideas: on the contrary, Surrealism believes Freudian criticism to be the first and only one with a really solid basis. While it is impossible for Surrealism to remain indifferent to the debate which, in its presence, pits qualified practitioners of various psychoanalytical tendencies against one another just as it is obliged to consider daily and with impassioned interest the struggle taking place within the leadership of the International—it need not interfere in a controversy which, it would seem, cannot long pursue a useful course except among practitioners. This is not the area in which Surrealism intends to point up the result of its personal experiments.[26]

This is certainly the "have your cake and eat it, too" option of Freudo-Marxism, but what it allows surrealist poets to do is to construct their experimental moral philosophy upon a romantic-revolutionary foundation, which holds aesthetic, oneiric, and political experience together as a unified basis for their treasured

category: "life." As Walter Benjamin observes in *The Arcades Project*, "the Surrealists constantly confuse moral nonconformism and proletarian revolution," arguing that their materialism is markedly anthropological rather than dialectical or historical and thus conceptually situated at a moment anterior to the development of Marxism.[27] Benjamin bases his assessment on the surrealists' "hostility toward progress" and the rejection of reason for mysticism.[28] By making the abolition of social class isomorphic with liberation from psychically embedded cultural oppression, the surrealists inaugurated a long-standing confusion between social repression and psychic repression. But we must ask what is produced from this creative confusion, as robust if experimental notions of political ethics issued freely from surrealist circles, but not from the psychoanalytic schools nor the communist party cadres on their own.

Across the first two decades of their existence, the surrealist group mounted a critique of modern, occidental civilization according to three primary characteristics: 1) the generalized domination and disfiguration of life through money, 2) sexual repression in the family and church, and 3) racial and imperial violence in colonialism, militarism, and social hierarchies.[29] Unlike the surrealists' political commitments to proletarian revolution and anticolonial struggle, their political views on sexuality—to risk a pun—leave much to be desired. If the repression of desire is undoubtedly central for surrealism, Breton's views on homosexuality reveal reactionary elements within the group's ideology.[30] The surrealist "defense of desire" would be most fully elaborated by the Jewish Romanian and communist poet Ghérasim Luca, whose invention of "non-oedipal thought" in his 1945 manifesto *Dialectique de la dialectique*, was the direct precursor to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*.[31] It is striking, therefore, that despite Cahun's elaborate, non-conformist gender politics, her allusions, in *Les Paris sont ouverts*, to sexuality as an integral aspect of human civilizational life remain within the precise orbit of Breton's Freudo-Marxism. The conception of poetry as a space of irrationality, fantasy, and reconciliation thus appears, under Cahun's queer eye, to potentially re-orient surrealist Freudo-Marxism away from Bretonian sexual conformism and homophobia. More generally, the political legacy of surrealism has been shaped by an over-identification of the movement with Breton's ideas and literary projects. While Breton's conception of surrealism is central to any historical analysis, surrealist practices of the period exorbitantly exceed it, gesturing to a surrealist political aesthetics—Cahunian or otherwise—that overcomes its founder's ethical limitations while nonetheless locating itself within surrealist orthodoxy.

Breton was himself incapable of the "revolutionary morality" he sought to discover through poetic experimentation.[32] Cahun nonetheless believed in his project and committed herself to its social ramifications across the 1930s and arguably, according to Lizzie Thynne, during her 1940s antifascist activism

in Jersey.[33] For Thynne, Cahun's invention of the category of poetry's "indirect action" in *Les paris sont ouverts* became the theoretical motor of her and Moore's subversion practices against their Nazi occupiers in the early 1940s. The use of indirect messaging and cryptic persona meant to destabilize fascist ideology during their counter-propaganda campaign would later be explained by Cahun in her post-war letters as "the logical consequence of my activity as a writer during the Popular Front period" and as "a militant surrealist activity which we had wanted at the time of *Contre-Attaque*."[34] As Löwy observes, "this story of two women, a Surrealist artist and her companion, challenging the Third Reich for four years, all alone, sowing trouble and discontent among the occupiers with an old Underwood typewriter" is one of the more original forms of antifascist resistance among writers in the period.[35] Both Thynne and Löwy gesture to Cahun's exploration of Freudo-Marxist ideas, pointing to how such ideas were developed into a material political practice. On the other hand, neither provide in-depth analyses of specific Freudian or Marxian concepts in Cahun's political writings. Löwy and Leperlier have both noted Cahun's use of Freudian categories, including the use of latent and manifest content.[36] Here, however, I attempt to develop an analysis of these categories as elements of a larger Freudo-Marxist dynamic within her text—a topic to which we will now turn.

Latent and Manifest Content

Freudo-Marxism was not a term used by the surrealists themselves to describe their aggregate combination of psychoanalysis and dialectical materialism. We know that Tzara was aware of the term, using it himself in a 1935 text, but he negatively attributes it to amalgamate combinations like those of Reich.[37] Scholar Henri Béhar sees in Tzara's rejection of the term a "dénégation freudienne," a Freudian denial in both senses of the term.[38] A charge of "delirious Freudo-Marxism" was nevertheless levied against the surrealists in 1933 by fellow members of the communist AEAR, in their official press organ, *Commune*.[39]

In Cahun's text, published the following year, she makes use of the Freudian categories of latent and manifest content, drawing on Tzara's transposition of these categories from Freud's dreamwork to the poem.[40] Tzara develops this conceptual transposition in his important 1931 article, "Essai sur la situation de la poésie" (Essay on the situation of poetry), published in the fourth issue of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution*.[41] Like Freud, Tzara's demonstration reveals the latent content of the poem to have primacy over its manifest content. The latent content corresponds in Cahun's tripartite proposal to the poem's indirect action, or what Cahun describes as "switching it on and letting it break

down," figuring the poem as a vehicle whose experimental functionality may risk running out of gas, forcing the reader to get out and push (514). She also represents the indirect poetic function in Breton's words as "*leaving something to be desired*" (514; italics in the original). This enables, according to Cahun, "indirect contradictions" that "suggest rather than express the contradictions of a truth" (514).

For Cahun, the danger of making the poem's manifest content the sole criterion for its political value involves the possibility of attracting opportunists who see political poetry as a tool for climbing the social ladder, careerists who simply use poetry as a means for their own bourgeois advancement. She claims that focusing on the ideological content of the poem is conducive to the spectacle of ideological one-upmanship, a critique directed, naturally, at Aragon. "The liberation from formalism," Cahun writes, "is precious because it prevents poetry from being reduced to a game among men-of-letters," implying that bourgeois intellectuals are sociologically prone to using ideological principles and causes to advance themselves personally (509). As a "poet of bourgeois origin," whose salon was attended by large swathes of the Parisian left intelligentsia, we might safely say that Cahun knew something about *des arrivistes* (527).[42] To return to the text, Cahun explains that poems whose manifest content is ideologically correct in the communist revolutionary sense often contain "subconscious reluctance" (*réticences subconscientes*) as well as political slips-ups, blunders, and gaffes that signal unconscious "heresies" (509). In this schema, the bourgeois intellectual fantasy whereby ideological purity leads to personal power is nonetheless punctured by a revealing *lapsus*, a Freudian slip that discloses the latent unrevolutionary, or at least uncommitted content of official political poetry.

In the same section of the text, Cahun engages another of Tzara's conceptual inventions; namely, the distinction between "poésie-moyen d'expression" (poetry-as-a-means-of-expression) and "poésie-action d'esprit" (poetry-as-an-action-of the-mind). Here, rather than poetry being a means of representation and emotional catharsis, Tzara privileges a conception of poetry as theoretical praxis, a dialectical synthesis of idea and material practice via the category of action. For Tzara, *poetry-as-a-means-of-expression* is a socially coded pastime of the non-laboring classes, whereas *poetry-as-an-action-of the-mind* taps into the transhistorical oneiric unconscious of human collective life, making it, as Cahun claimed above, for the many, not the few. As Elmer Peterson observes, poetry for Tzara is importantly not a "way of writing" but a "mode of thinking."[43] As Tzara explains regarding Gérard de Nerval, the elements that composed Nerval's *poetry-as-an-action-of the-mind* included his dandyism, creating public scandal, and his quotidian revolt which "should not only be considered as a challenge to the hated bourgeoisie but most of all, as real poetic elements"

real poetry existing "en dehors du poeme," outside of the poem.[44] In this connection, Tzara argues for a normative historical law: from its beginnings as a means of expression, "poetry's tendency is to become an action of the mind" by dissolving its relationship to form and by making its link to language one of relative autonomy.[45] Nodding to Enlightenment presuppositions that forms of thought move from the irrational to the rational, from the unconscious to the conscious, for Tzara, poetry's historical tendency moves in the opposite direction: from rational to irrational, from conscious to unconscious.

Cahun's deployment of Tzara's many novel concepts in *Les Paris sont ouverts* represents the collective conceptual project of theorizing surrealist poetry's indirect political action as the most efficacious, as it registers both the conscious and unconscious life of the human world. The surrealists see their political action as a theoretical praxis that produces "real poetic elements," and they conceive of these as the basis upon which to build a new moral philosophy and set of human values necessary to ethically orient the revolutionary praxis of the proletariat. This is what Yoyotte meant when he linked surrealism's antifascist significance to "the ethics of the future," arguing that "the united antifascist action in France depends upon a wide moral unity. The program of action will proceed from it."[46] This sense of complementarity—suggesting a dialectical movement between the moral-aesthetic realm and the political-ethical realm—makes surrealists like Cahun appear, at times, more like Freudo-Hegelians than Freudo-Marxists, though her defense of the proletarian class struggle is a strong feature of *Les Paris sont ouverts*, as indicated by the work's subtitle, discussed below.

The title, *Les Paris sont ouverts*, like the expression "all bets are off" in English, would appear to signal the essential unpredictability of poetry's action on the political sphere, thus contradicting the diagnosis of poetry's political efficacity. But is this what Cahun was trying to suggest? Perhaps the material form of the text will give us some indications. Dappled with numerous epigraphs and citations as well as lengthy footnotes, the pamphlet contains oblique paratextual material, such as the work's mysterious subtitle:

Which side do you take to put an end
To the exploitation of man by man?
With your own dilemma:
Exploited Exploiter
?
Exploited Exploiters
Even in love, poetry
And defense of the proletarian cause (3)

The physical spacing between the terms "*exploité*" and "*exploiteur*," in the singular, and "*exploités*" and "*exploiteurs*," in the plural, is evocative of the divisive sensibility of Cahun's intervention, which calls upon AEAR's members to choose sides, despite these leftist artists believing they have already chosen the side of the proletariat against bourgeois class rule. This rhetoric serves to remind political intellectuals that such choices are undertaken continuously within militant organizations, both consciously and unconsciously.

The next paratextual element of the pamphlet is a dedication to Trotsky, which positions Cahun firmly against the Stalinist majority of the Moscow-piloted AEAR. In the dedication, she writes of Trotsky's consideration for Vladimir Mayakovsky, about whom Trotsky wrote, "We mustn't turn a blind eye to the difficulties of his path" (505). Cahun explains in her brief note here that the difficulties of the poet's path should be an integral concern of revolutionary leadership, noting that Trotsky did not neglect the poet's role and circumstances "during the greatest and most agonizing days of a revolution…" (505).

Cahun's text begins after this dedication and is divided into two main sections: "Poetry keeps its secret" (La poésie garde son secret) and "Poetry reveals its secret" (La poésie livre son secret). Though she never defines these terms, we come to understand the two designations in the process of reading her text. Poetry that keeps its secret corresponds to the poetry of indirect action, that of the surrealist tendency. Poetry that reveals its secret is typified by Aragon's propagandistic poetry, the directness of which, Cahun believes, is a "method of cretinization" of the masses.[47] The Stalinist poetry of direct action holds the intelligence of the proletariat in contempt, progressively lobotomizing it through aesthetic simplicity.

Cahun opens the piece with an allusion to recent debates within the AEAR, including the communist value of poetry itself, about which I will say much more below. In the next paragraph, she states that writers have discussed the need for "polemical activity" and "appropriate critique" against the existence of a poetry deemed "reactionary or counter-revolutionary" (507). This critical need, she tells us, presupposes the capacity to judge what constitutes reactionary or counter-revolutionary poetry. About the capacity to make these determinations, Cahun writes that it is

> a difficulty that is not particular to poetry, but which will be particularly troublesome for poets, and that anyway we can only discuss after the fact, as it were, from the outside, driven by laws other than its intrinsic laws. Let us not forget that we're not examining two questions in turn but examining a moving network of links and non-links, a constant bundle of inconstant relationships between poetic evolution and social evolution, questions that we consider subordinate to each other. (507–8)

Here, Cahun asserts that the confirmation of criteria to judge poetry as either revolutionary or counterrevolutionary cannot be made based on the singular poem or book of poetry itself but rather the imbrication between the poetic work and the external world of political reality. Meanings that exist in political reality transform meanings that exist within the poem, subjecting the poem to laws outside of the artwork. Instead of considering poetic and political questions in turn, these realms must be analyzed as a "a moving network of links and non-links" whose comprehension unfolds dialectically. This moving network of poetic and social facts cannot be discussed in the precise moment of its unfolding but necessarily "only after the fact" (*qu'après-coup*).

At this juncture, allow me to offer an anecdote as an event of objective chance, drawing on surrealist methods. In a PDF of *Les Paris sont ouverts* available online and scanned from the Florida State University Library, someone has written the word "Nachträglichkeit" and made an arrow from it to the words "qu'après-coup." Having begun my work on this article using the hard-copy book of Cahun's *Écrits* and not the PDF, such a discovery makes for a fascinating coincidence insofar as the Freudian aspects of Cahun's political texts are not widely remarked upon in published scholarship. A notable exception can be found in Steven Harris's work, which explores oedipal relations such as the castration complex and phallic femininity in Cahun's visual art by contextualizing her attraction to psychoanalysis during the Popular Front period.[48] The Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, or afterwardsness, was popularized in the early 1950s by Jacques Lacan, who translated it as "après-coup." This marginalia suggests a Lacanian reading of Cahun which post-dates the publication of Cahun's *Écrits* by Jean-Michel Place in 2002. Extensive anglophone feminist scholarship and art criticism of the 1990s and early 2000s links Cahun's photographic practice and Lacan's notion of the mirror-stage.[49] One might soundly infer the sense of the "Nachträglichkeit" marginalia from this longstanding trend.

Following the method of objective chance, we might ask what else our anonymous interlocutor has transmitted to us through the materiality of the book's collective use. Certain words underlined in pencil point to terms of potential psychoanalytic interest: *détournés* (divert), *subi* (suffer/undergo), *surenchère* (outdo), *attardés* (backward), and *l'inconscience de classe* (class unconsciousness). In contrast, others seem to indicate words or phrases that a non-francophone scholar might need to look up, such as *serrés* (squashed) or *servir d'étalon* (serve as a standard). The only other word written in the margins besides *Nachträglichkeit* is the word "Eros," which is scrawled on the first page of the text and connected with an arrow to Cahun's phrase "undoubtedly linked to the sexual instinct"—a passage to which we will now turn.

Poetry, Eros, and the Reality Principle

Les Paris sont ouverts begins by Cahun stating that poetry's political utility has been questioned in the space of the AEAR, leading some to believe that poetry will cease to exist in a future communist civilization. She writes,

> Some among us may think that poetry, devoid of practical utility, can henceforth tend only toward self-destruction and will play no role in future societies. In attempts at poetry, even those of the proletariat, they will see only vestiges of capitalist society and will decree that we must guide those confused comrades toward the more precise tasks of Marxist propaganda. (507)[50]

Considered a simple effect of capitalist decadence, poetry may productively give way to more useful actions. To these detractors, Cahun responds that poetry, having existed "in every historical era and place […] seems undeniably to constitute an inherent need of human—even animal—nature, one undoubtedly linked to sexual instinct" (507). Locating the origins of poetry among our non-human animal ancestors in the pre-human past seems more fantastical than historically verifiable. But Freud's conception that the life and death drives develop not only at the point of our species emergence (anthropogenesis) but at an archaic stage in the existence of organic life itself (understood as the drive for and against a return to inorganic matter), lends a certain theoretical tenor to Cahun's argument.[51] In Freud's analysis, civilization is the effect of the sublimation of our "animalistic" drives, Eros and Thantos. The existence of culture, for Freud, necessitates oedipal repression. But for Cahun, poetry is linked to human or higher primate sexuality, situating poetry's emergence as anterior to human civilization and thus antagonistic to the instinctual sublimation on which it is founded.[52] Similarly, the Freudo-Marxism of Herbert Marcuse sees sexual pleasure as connected to art's capacity to unearth the "repressed harmony of sensuousness and reason," negated by the current repressive reality principle.[53] Poetry—surrealist poetry, at least—is proof of the potential to reestablish the reality principle on a liberated Eros.

Such a claim is based on Marcuse's assertion that the "primary 'drives' of the human organism […] are subject to historical modification."[54] While the drive is universal and transhistorical in form, its content or expression is historical, meaning socially malleable. For his part, Reich also maintains that "the sexual instinct is modifiable, plastic."[55] Drives are thus transformed through social, historical, and cultural specificity. For Marcuse, capitalism's *surplus repression* reveals the historically contingent character of the drive's expression. To put it another way, the libido is a socially organized biological given. The socialization of the drive can be considered from the standpoint of a communist political

ethics, which argues not only for a set of rational, law-like prohibitions but also a set of liberating permissions in line with a vision of emancipated collective life activity.

It is difficult, though, to discern whether the surrealists see human sexuality as pertaining to first or second nature, in the Adornian sense.[56] The surrealists see in the libido a utopian potentiality that has not yet been submitted to capitalist instrumentalization and commodification. If understood as first nature, the libido *represents* an anteriority to contemporary social relations and thus demonstrates the historically contingent character of reified capitalist existence. The "non-identical" quality of first nature resists total absorption into second nature, suggesting a negative utopia or symbol of the potentiality of social transformation. Sensuous, non-instrumental relations do instantiate a critique of the present, but the major difference between the Frankfurt School and the surrealists is that, where the former see the power of the drive as a negative critique of the present, the latter see it as a positive overcoming of the present. In the first "Manifesto of Surrealism," Breton claims that the word "freedom" is capable of "sustaining the old human fanaticism," which seems to be a manner of describing the transhistorical, liberating quality of the libido.[57]

Though he does not engage Adorno's theory of second nature in *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse's discussion of Orpheus as a model for a non-instrumental, "non-identical" reality principle holds relevance for exploring surrealist links between poetry and politics. For Marcuse, art and literature are the last reservoirs of fantasy and imagination not suppressed by the principle of capitalist performative productivity.[58] He points explicitly to the surrealist program to "pratiquer la poesie," a statement which, in *Eros and Civilization*, appears in the original French, perhaps because *pratiquer* indicates more than simply practicing poetry and connotes something akin to *enacting* poetry in life.[59] The Situationist project of destroying the division between art and life finds its source here, though the Situationists criticize the positive project at the heart of surrealism which preserves art practices despite the overcoming of traditional forms. From a Bretonian or Marcusian perspective, "pratiquer la poesie" doesn't imply the abolition of literature's discrete existence. Poetry need not be abolished to enact poetry beyond the page, as the Orphic image suggests.[60]

Aimé Césaire's allusion in his famous essay "Poésie et connaissance" (Poetry and Knowledge) to Mallarmé's definition of the poet's sole duty as "the Orphic explanation of the Earth" is salutary here.[61] While Césaire leaves no comment upon his citation, Marcuse's exploration points to the Orphic mode of being as defined by the eroticization of the external world, claiming that the "things of nature […] receive their telos" in an unrepressed erotic reality.[62] In this sense, no aesthetic or poetic gesture can be disambiguated from the erotic conception

of object relations. But Cahun's remark concerning the pre-human origins of poetry implies more than erotic connections, pointing to a curious tension between a poetry that is world-historical and a poetry that is transhistorical.

Cahun's assertion early in the text that "given its existence in every historical era and place, poetry seems undeniably to constitute an inherent need of human—even animal—nature, one undoubtedly linked to sexual instinct" (507) generates an argument for poetry's transhistoricity in psychoanalytic terms. For Freud and Freudians, culture emerges within archaic human societies and arises from a species-wide process of sexual renunciation and sublimation of instinct.[63] While being historically modifiable, the sex drive, according to Freudo-Marxists, is a transhistorical phenomenon in that it concerns humans in all times and all places. Freud would later describe the sex drive, modeled on Plato's Eros, as the libido, and endow it with an economic aspect. While the misogyny and Eurocentrism of many Freudian claims have been the target of both feminist and postcolonial criticisms of psychoanalysis, the weak transhistoricity and universality of the sexual drive prevails as the precondition of species continuity everywhere that people empirically exist. In stronger terms, transhistoricity can, for many surrealists, involve a vitalistic conception of human species-being, linking surrealism to many strands of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Romanticism. This is the substance of Césaire's exploration of what he calls "the first days of the species" in "Poésie et connaissance."[64] For Césaire, poetry is *the* means of accessing archaic human sensibility, coherent with the Bretonian interpretation of surrealist operations accessing the unconscious. It is unclear from Breton's or Césaire's writings themselves whether the principle of transhistoricity, which they see as romantically ameliorative of our present social relations, should be considered idealistically, as an abstract species essence or materialistically, as the totality of human historical practice. The former would involve an anthropological idealism and the latter anthropological materialism, but surrealism arguably combines the two.[65]

On the other hand, Cahun's text also dwells on the world-historical quality of surrealist poetry, responding to Aragon's criticism that surrealists do not permit their poems to include questions of historical circumstance and revolutionary agitation, rejecting the arch political themes of the Soviet Union and colonial wars. Cahun's riposte exhibits examples of surrealist poets writing "about" current political events, drawing on Péret, René Crevel, Breton, and, cheekily, Aragon himself during his surrealist era. In not only permitting but producing the seemingly contradictory coincidence of the world-historical and the transhistorical, surrealist Freudo-Marxism draws out the temporal orientations underpinning their experimental moral philosophy, which involve the timely necessities imposed by the present state of things and untimely necessities pointing beyond the present to a future world wherein the normative

principles of how people should live together and what human life should be are held as true in the now as they are in the not yet. Poetically speaking, this involves a style or variegation of styles emerging from an aggregate combination of, on the one hand, the oneiric, mythical universe of romantic and psychoanalytic transhistoricity and, on the other hand, the political universe of world-historical referentiality and circumstantial intervention. In this way, transhistoricity and world-historicity are not simply poetic themes but forms of collective experience.

At this juncture, one might ask: What is Marxist about the horizon of a new reality principle based on the combined world-historicity and transhistoricity of Eros? Or the conception of poetry as a potentially utopian anthropological fact? Have we not waded too far into purely Freudian matters, leaving politics behind us? The Freudo-Marxism of the surrealists entails reconciling two supposedly irreconcilable spheres: the sphere of conscious social life and the sphere of unconscious desire. This juxtaposition, however tumultuous, promises an extended vision of the human in culture, one that surrealists argue is necessary for an anthropologically robust conception of freedom. As Löwy points out, the necessary confluence of the warm and cold currents of Marxism implies a hierarchy between them: "the cold current exists for the warm current, in the service of it."[66] I concur that the cold critique of capitalist political economy exists in the service of the realization of an anthropologically complex social emancipation, which I call elsewhere *species humanization*.[67] Surrealism sought to overcome the inadequacy of both apolitical romantic idealism and vulgar Marxist rationalism, foregrounding an exploration of the moral and material potentiality of the human being from within the crises of Western civilization. Against *art for art's sake*, the surrealists equally rejected *politics for politics' sake* and wagered that poetry, dream, myth, the marvelous, love, humor, and revolt are the humanizing values that communism must hold dear, else it risks becoming a new form of domination replete with material and psychic oppression.

This basic presupposition regarding the anthropologically oriented tendency of surrealism animated Cahun's schema for poetic action, as it animated the many surrealist rejections of Socialist Realism during the period in question. For them, poetry names the total life activity that captures the movement of human existence over and against capitalist alienation; it does so by affirming both the world-historical and transhistorical dimensions of experience. In this connection, Leperlier asserts that, "as an originary and foundational activity, poetry cannot be reduced to the production of texts."[68] Poetry's action involves the production of political ethics as part of an expansive and experimental moral philosophy which surrealists judged necessary for the existence of a new kind of human society.

Producing New Political Ethics

At the end of Cahun's text, she states that she has put the question of poetry's political action to "comrades who are only incidentally interested" in it, noting that they have given her their "'historical' point of view" (530). What follows in *Les Paris sont ouverts* is a long quotation by these comrades, who go unnamed, but with whom Cahun does not exactly agree.[69] They assert that "the Dadaist-surrealist experience" undoubtedly represents the most revolutionary poetic experience to be undertaken in capitalist times—in France and possibly in all of Europe. Dadaism–surrealism was capable of destroying "all the artistic myths that, for centuries, have enabled the ideological as well as economic exploitation of painting, sculpture, literature, etc." (530). Their destruction of capitalist ideology, Cahun's comrades claim, can and should serve as an example for the proletariat, who must also engage in the destruction of capitalist myths that pertain to the life of the class. In this way, "the positive lesson of this negating experience, i.e. its transfusion into the proletariat, constitutes the only valid and revolutionary poetic propaganda" (530). Such an assertion entails a devastating blow to Aragon's camp, which sought to have surrealism categorized as political adventurism and poetic heresy. Cahun's comrades maintain that Dadaism–surrealism enabled the destitution of bourgeois values, both ethical and economic, precisely by means of poetic heresy and political adventurism. They continue:

> The body of experimental phenomena bequeathed by surrealism to materialist appreciation must be remembered as the path to the negation of a general mechanism and the affirmation of the class mechanism of poetic inspiration, *an affirmation that will determine the very end of poetry.* (531)

Cahun's comrades allude here to a debate discussed throughout Cahun's text concerning the "class mechanism of poetic inspiration." This term appears to have had currency in the context of the AEAR and is used by Aragon to suggest that communist poetry arises not from the metaphysical insights of the non-laboring classes but from the inspiration offered by the workers' struggle. Within one of her extravagant footnotes, Cahun describes the adoption of this notion of the "class mechanism of poetic inspiration" within Marxist circles as the attempt to "transpose historical materialism into psychology" (526). This is a curious comment for a writer with strong Freudo-Marxist leanings, but we might understand Cahun's criticism as being leveled against the Socialist Realist fantasy of eliminating the individual poet's psyche—contaminated as it is with empathy for the commodity—and replacing it with an idealized proletarian revolutionary consciousness. This psyche would be devoid of the contradictions, the "communal-divergences," that Cahun esteems as "the most representative of the epoch" (528–29).

According to Cahun's comrades, the affirmation of the class mechanism of poetic inspiration can only take place at a "stage of human affirmation" far in advance of the present, one located at the limit of our conception of reality (531). As discussed in the quote above, such an affirmation will signal the end of poetry as a specialized human activity. The end of poetry as isomorphic with the end of alienation is theorized by both Dadaism and surrealism as the project of negating the bourgeois cultural sphere. The bourgeois writer ransoms poetic inspiration as a hypostatized separation wall between supposedly intellectual and supposedly non-intellectual class fragments, instituting obedient intellectuality as class leisure to bolster the economic, political, and moral status quo. Socialist Realists, Cahun claims, "live, directly or indirectly, from prostituting themselves to the proletariat," such that they cannot exercise their historical role of contributing to proletarian disalienation (526).

In response to her comrades' "historical perspective" on the question of poetry's political action, Cahun provides a footnote in which she rejects preemptive justifications for poetry's abandonment in the present and cautions against the transformation of claims for the purported end of poetry into "a confession that desires the death of poetry" (531). She agrees with her comrades, and with communist poets across the surrealism–Socialist Realism divide, that surrealism, like all poetic movements, has a historical deadline in relation to the coming communist revolution. Situated in the future and not in the present, this deadline refers to "that unforeseeable date when—the fusion having taken place—poetry will cease to have a specific determination, in other words, it will cease to exist BECAUSE POETRY WILL BE MADE MAN" (531). Cahun's perspective here potentially radicalizes that of Lautréamont quoted in the pamphlet's first footnote, wherein Cahun comments that "if poetic specialization tends toward its own ruin, it is not that poetry should disappear. Quite the contrary. It is because it 'MUST BE MADE BY EVERYONE, NOT BY ONE'" (507).

The analytic space between a perpetual poetry made by everyone and poetry's dissolution into disalienated human life activity may only be clarified by the experience of reading Cahun's pamphlet from beginning to end and imputing a progressive movement of thought into the linearity of her remarks. The reader is nevertheless left uncertain about this major detail, a concern on which the question of poetry's political activity continues to be situated. Whether we are dealing with poetry as a transitional state of general dreaming or poetry as the final form of collective existence, the production of political ethics necessarily arises from the surrealist project of negating bourgeois values and replacing them with what Tzara called "real poetic elements." These real poetic elements not only transvaluate values in political and moral terms, but dialectically transform values, signaling the combinatory logic and conceptual radicalization

of left Nietzscheanism within the Freudo-Marxism of surrealists during the Popular Front period.

As Michel Leiris put it in the conclusion of his 1939 text "De la littérature comme une tauromachie," the writer of literature "must contribute evidence to the trial of the present system of values."[70] Or as the Martinican Freudo-Marxists of *Légitime défense* wrote in 1932, "as traitors" to the values of the French colonial bourgeoisie, which they infamously describe "as one of the saddest things on earth," they intend, "as traitors to this class, to spit on everything they love and hold dear, on everything that gives them nourishment and joy."[71] But for bourgeois writers militating against bourgeois morality, the negativity of critique must give way to the dialectical project of discovering new collective values. As mentioned above, the elaboration of a revolutionary ethics can take the form of "real poetic elements," real poetry existing "outside of the poem." For example, the betrayals of *Légitime défense*, if practised or enacted, can be seen as the real poetic elements of a transformation of values central to the surrealist project, a project subtended by an aggregate Freudo-Marxism that takes place on an ethical plane of action. This, of course, assumes that the destruction of the value form of the commodity of labor—were that to take place at some point in the future—will not lead to an entirely novel moral-ethical universe and considers such an idea to be anthropologically naïve. The surrealists understood, as Louis Althusser would later theorize, that communist society, or communist civilization, would require an operative ideology.[72]

From whence do the modern revolutionary values of equality, solidarity, cooperation, collective power sharing, and collective learning arise if not from an ideological proposal that emerged within the Enlightenment tradition, and was radicalized and reworked throughout periods of mass collective struggle and subversive collective thought. Whether we agree with them or not, the surrealists saw themselves as best suited to make such a proposal in their time, involved as they were in the desecration of bourgeois morals and the concomitant creation of new socio-poetic forms of collective experience.[73] Cahun wrote after the war that in her and Malherbe's antifascist activities, they "fought for a rainbow of values stretching from the ultraromantic black to the flaming red. We fought for the Germans against Nazi Germany. We fought as surrealist writers with weapons of chance."[74] Here she links the deployment of surrealism's "miraculous weapons" to a spectrum of political values stretching from mystical anarchism to those of a militant, materialist communism. In Löwy's analysis, the negativity of surrealist poetic action is programmatically put in the service of "an aggregate of qualitative values—ethical, social, and cultural—in opposition to the mercantile rationality of exchange value."[75]

Yet, has such a project of producing new political ethics through a dialectical transformation of values passed its historical expiration date? Are the *de facto* ethical relations used in political agitation and organizing on the left today those that we would wish to cede to future generations? These ethics and morals are certainly critical of bourgeois, capitalist values but are they veritably disalienated? Or to put it crudely, are they desirable? Do we wish that people of the future world inherit our current system of political ethics? If not, perhaps the project of the transvaluation and transformation of all values by poetic means remains a valid one. In an 1843 letter to Arnold Ruge, Marx writes,

> Our program must be: the reform of consciousness not through dogmas but by analyzing mystical consciousness obscure to itself, whether it appear in religious or political form. It will then become plain that the world has long since dreamed of something of which it needs only to become conscious for it to possess it in reality. It will then become plain that our task is not to draw a sharp mental line between past and future, but to *complete* the thought of the past. Lastly, it will become plain that mankind will not begin any new work, but will consciously bring about the completion of its old work.[76]

In reading this passage, an affinity between the humanist program of the young Marx and the surrealist project of revolutionary ethics becomes evident. Here Marx describes socialism as that dream about which the human species must become conscious in order to actualize its future metamorphosis. Césaire, too, would describe socialism as "what humanity has for so long cherished as a dream."[77] The dream of socialism, like all dreams, is composed of latent and manifest content. Drawing out its latencies will yield unconscious meanings through which to rationalize what Cahun might call "pre-revolutionary" political ethics as a basis for new social relations. In this regard, returning to the mid-1930s for material with which to consider our current moment is propitious, as their epoch was fertile in the kinds of disasters that lie in wait for us.

NOTES

1 The author would like to warmly thank Louis Hartnoll, Tobias Dias, and Dominique Routhier, the conveners of the special issue and the symposium that preceded it, as well as Eunsong Kim for her comments on the article.

2 See the now-canonical work of literary history, Carole Reynaud-Paligot, *Parcours politique des surrealistes 1919–1969* (CNRS éditions, 2010), 113. While beyond the scope of this article, Reynaud-Paligot's study covers in detail the major events of surrealist participation in French communist literary institutions in the early 1930s. Her study reveals the following synoptic overview: The surrealists entered the orbit of the PCF in the late 1920s, hoping to fuse Marxist revolutionary politics with their own project of psychic and cultural liberation. By the early 1930s, they were actively trying to assert surrealism as a revolutionary cultural form and to counter the party's growing commitment to Socialist Realism. Aragon's definitive alignment with party orthodoxy in 1932 marked the beginning of the surrealists' marginalization within the PCF's cultural apparatus, and in 1933 this exclusion became explicit as the AEAR leadership, following the party line, increasingly blocked surrealist participation and launched formal polemics against their "idealism." This process culminated in the Moscow-led 1935 Congrès international des écrivains pour la défense de la culture in Paris, where surrealists were effectively sidelined, sealing the break between surrealism and the party's Stalinized cultural front. For the purposes of this essay, Cahun's text appears within the polemical 1933 to 1934 period, before an official schism occurred.

3 Claude Cahun, "Les Paris sont ouverts," in Écrits, ed. François Leperlier (Jean-Michel Place, 2002), 499–534; hereafter, page numbers are given in text and refer to this edition. All translations of this text are mine unless otherwise stated.

4 Cahun's writings were not collected and published until 2002 in French and have yet to be significantly translated into English. Only François Leperlier's two monographs on Cahun systemically analyze her political writings. See, François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun: L'écart et la metamorphose* (Jean Michael Place, 1992) and François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun: L'exotisme intérieur* (Fayard, 2006).

5 Cahun and Moore's photographic work, *Le père* (1932), is an important exception.

6 George Bataille and André Breton, *Contre-attaque: Union de lutte des intellectuels révolutionnaires* (Ypsilon, 2013).

7 The text was partially translated (by Franklin Rosement) as "Poetry Keeps Its Secret" and "Surrealism and Working-Class Emancipation," in *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, ed. Penelope Rosemont (Athlone Press, 1998), 53–58. For a more recent partial translation, see Claude Cahun, "Poetry Keeps its Secret," trans. Ara H. Merjian, in *Surrealism and Antifascism Anthology*, eds. Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus und Kunstbau München, Karin Althaus, Adrian Djukić, Ara H. Merjian, Matthias Mühling, Stephanie Weber (Hatje Cantz, 2025). This anthology, produced for the Lenbachhaus Munich exhibition *Aber hier leben? Nein danke. Surrealismus + Antifaschismus* (But live here? No thanks: Surrealism and anti-fascism; October 15, 2024 to March 30, 2025) has translated about one fifth of the original pamphlet into English. *Les Paris sont ouverts* is slated for publication in English in 2026 by translator Susan de Muth, who recently released a new English edition of Cahun's 1930 work *Aveux non avenus*, translated by de Muth as *Cancelled Confessions* but originally titled *Disavowals* in English. Claude Cahun, *Cancelled Confession*, trans. Susan de Muth (Thin Man Press, 2023). A new edition of *Les Paris sont ouverts* was published in French in 2024. The press states that the republication is occasioned by the centenary of the surrealist movement. See Claude Cahun, *Les Paris sont ouverts* (Editions Le Rayon Blanc, 2024).

8 *Who is Claude Cahun*, written by D. R. Hill and directed by David Furlong, ran at the Southwark Playhouse from June 18 to July 12, 2025.

9 Michael Löwy, *Morning Star: Surrealism, Marxism, Anarchism, Situationism, Utopia* (University of Texas Press, 2009), 72.

10 Löwy, *Morning Star*, 73.

11 Jennifer L. Shaw, *Exist Otherwise: The Life and Works of Claude Cahun* (Reaktion Books, 2023), 162.

12 Shaw, *Exist Otherwise*, 162.

13 Leperlier, *Cahun*, 269. According to Shaw (*Exist Otherwise*, 162), Cahun is cited not only in Breton's "Qu'est-ce que le surréalisme" but also in these two texts, though this appears to be untrue.

14 Here, I am using Franklin Rosemont's translation.

15 Reynaud-Paligot, *Parcours politique des surrealistes*, 111–12.

16 Reynaud-Paligot, *Parcours politique des surrealistes*, 113.

17 Reynaud-Paligot, *Parcours politique des surrealistes*, 113.

18 Reynaud-Paligot, *Parcours politique des surrealistes*, 114.

19 A. Stolyarov, "Freudism and 'Freudo-Marxists'," in *Literature of the World Revolution: Central Organ of the Union of International Revolutionary Writers* 1 (June 1931): 90–99.

20 Reynaud-Paligot, *Parcours politique des surrealistes*, 114.

21 See Kevin Duong, "Freud in the Tropics," *Les Cahiers Philosophiques de Strasbourg* 50 (2021): 13–52.

22 Pierre Yoyotte, "The Antifascist Significance of Surrealism," in *Black Brown & Beige: Surrealist Writings from African and the Diaspora*, ed. Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley (University of Texas Press, 2009), 44.

23 Yoyotte, "Antifascist Significance of Surrealism," 44.

24 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Stratchey (W. W. Norton, 1961).

25 The third element of this montage is Nietzscheanism. Though its relationship to Marxism and Freudianism within surrealist circles is generally beyond the scope of this article, I will mention it at the end of this essay.

26 André Breton, “The Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” in *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (University of Michigan Press, 1969), 159–60.

27 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Harvard University Press, 1999), 698.

28 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, 698.

29 Such an analysis derives from a panoramic reading of the surrealists’ political tracts between 1922 and 1939. See *Tracts Surréalistes et Déclarations Collectives (1922/1969)*, *Tome I: 1922–1939*, ed. José Pierre (Éditions Eric Losfeld, 1980).

30 Carolyn J. Dean, “Claude Cahun’s Double,” *Yale French Studies* 90 (1996): 78.

31 Ghérasim Luca and Trost, *Dialectique de la dialectique, message adressé au mouvement surréaliste internationale* (La Sociale, 2011); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

32 Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” 146.

33 Lizzie Thynne, “Indirect Action: Politics and the Subversion of Identity in Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore’s Resistance to the Occupation of Jersey,” *Papers of Surrealism* 8 (Spring 2010): 1–24.

34 Cahun quoted in Thynne, “Indirect Action,” 1–2. These comments are derived from Cahun’s letter to André Breton quoted in Leperlier, *Cahun* (2006), 267.

35 Löwy, *Morning Star*, 79.

36 Löwy, *Morning Star*, 70; Leperlier, *Cahun* (2006), 278.

37 Henri Behar, “Le freudo-marxisme des surréalistes,” *Melusine* 8 (1992): 174.

38 Behar, “Le freudo-marxisme des surréalistes,” 174.

39 Behar, “Le freudo-marxisme des surréalistes,” 181.

40 Leperlier also discusses Cahun’s use of latent and manifest content in *Cahun* (2006), 278.

41 Tristan Tzara, “Essai sur la situation de la poésie,” in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution: Collection complète nos 1 à 6, juillet 1930 à mai 1933*, ed. André Breton and Jacqueline Leiner (Jean-Michel Place, 2002), originally published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* 4 (December 1931): 18–22.

42 Anecdotally, Jacques Lacan was one of these verifiable salon attendees at her studio, 70 bis rue Notre dame des champs in Montparnasse. See Leperlier, *Cahun* (2006), 222.

43 Elmer Peterson, *Tristan Tzara: Dada and Surrational Theorist* (Rutgers University Press, 1971), 86.

44 Tzara, “Essai sur la situation,” 17.

45 Tzara, “Essai sur la situation,” 18.

46 Yoyotte, “Antifascist Significance of Surrealism,” 44.

47 Cahun quoted in Thynne, “Indirect Action,” 5.

48 Steven Harris, “Coup d’oeil,” *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 1 (2001): 89–112.

49 For example, see Corinne Andersen, “Que me veux-tu? / What do you want of me?: Claude Cahun’s Autoportraits and the Process of Gender Identification,” *Women in French Studies* 13 (2005): 37–50; Katy Deepwell, “Uncanny Resemblances: Restaging Claude Cahun in ‘Mise en Scene,’” *n.paradoxa: International Feminist Art Journal* 1 (December 1996): 46–51; Therese Lichtenstein, “A Mutable Mirror: Claude Cahun,” *Artforum* 30, no. 8 (1992): 64–67, https://www.artforum.com/features/a-mutable-mirror-claude-cahun-203547/. Carolyn J. Dean opposes this trend in “Claude Cahun’s Double,” analyzing Cahun from the vantage of a feminist art history, rejecting the hegemony of feminist psychoanalytic readings of Cahun’s visual work.

50 Here, I have used Franklin Rosemont’s translation.

51 Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1970), 115.

52 In relation to this passage, Leperlier suggests the following: “To the most exclusive historicist discourse, Claude Cahun opposes both ontological argument and anthropological measure (universality and inherence of the poetic will). In the continuity of German Romanticism, this is the central affirmation of Surrealism. The question is not to discuss the existence of poetry, but to act in order to record and host the transformations of its various manifestations.” Leperlier, *Cahun* (2006), 276.

53 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 121.

54 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 26.

55 Wilhelm Reich, *Sex-Pol: Essays 1929–1934*, trans. Anna Bostock, Tom DuBose, and Lee Baxandall, ed. Lee Baxandall (Vintage Books, 1972), 23.

56 For Adorno’s mature theoretical discussion of these concepts, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (Continuum, 2007).

57 André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism,” in *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (University of Michigan Press, 1969), 4. At the end of the same paragraph, Breton asks: “Where does it [imagination] begin to turn bad, and where does the mind’s stability cease?” The question of limits is cogent to a political rather than a phantasmatic ethics.

58 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 50.

59 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 133.

60 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 139. According to Marcuse, song is the connection between Orpheus, the Thracian community, and the natural world; each of these groups respond to song and are transformed by it.

61 Aimé Césaire, “Poetry and Knowledge,” in *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry 1946–1982*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Caraf Books, 1990), xlvi.

62 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 136.

63 Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 91. Here, Freud writes: “Sublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural evolution; this it is that makes it possible for the higher mental operations, scientific, artistic, ideological activities, to play such an important part in civilized life. If one were to yield to a first impression, one would be tempted to say that sublimation is a fate which has been forced upon instincts by culture alone […] it is impossible to ignore the extent to which civilization is built up on renunciation of instinctual gratifications, the degree to which the existence of civilization presupposes the non-gratification (suppression, repression, or something else?) of powerful instinctual urgencies. This cultural privation dominates the whole field of social relations between human beings.”

64 Césaire, “Poetry and Knowledge,” xliii.

65 On this point, refer to Benjamin’s discussion of anthropological materialism described and cited above. Also see Breton’s discussion on the surrealist use of the dialectical method and their own need to overcome idealism in Breton, “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” 139–41.

66 Michael Löwy, “Romanticism, Marxism and Religion in the ‘Principle of Hope’ of Ernst Bloch,” trans. Rodrigo Gonsalves, *Crisis and Critique* 2, no. 1 (2015): 351–355, here at 354–55.

67 Jackqueline Frost, “Aimé Césaire’s Anticolonial Humanism as Species Autopoiesis,” *Small Axe* 76 (March 2025): 159–168.

68 Leperlier, *Cahun*, 276.

69 Leperlier clarifies in *L’exotisme intérieur* that the comrades in question are those of the “Groupe Brunet,” including Néoclès Coutouzis, Jean Legrand, Nine Goffin, Lilette Richter, and Pierre and Simone Caminade. In my correspondence with Leperlier (March 2025), he confirmed that the original text from which Cahun quotes has certainly been lost. Many thanks to Dr Leperlier for his kind responses to my inquiries about this group.

70 Michel Leiris, *Manhood: A Journey from Childhood in the Fierce Order of Virility*, trans. Richard Howard (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 164.

71 Etienne Léro, Thélus Léro, René Ménil, Jules-Marcel Monnerot, Michel Pilotin, Maurice-Sabas Quitman, Auguste Thésée, and Pierre Yoyotte, “Légitime Défense Manifesto,” trans. Alex Wilder, in *Black Brown & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, ed. Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley (University of Texas Press, 2009).

72 Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (Verso 1965), 232, 252.

73 The theoretical praxis of transvaluation would go on to have a long career in the European avant-garde projects of Lettrism and Situationism, remerging in the theories of de-subjectivation undertaken by Tiqqunism, which until recently enjoyed mass appeal on the far left. But is a transvaluation (negativity) without transformation (negation of negativity) sufficiently dialectical?

74 Cahun quoted in Löwy, *Morning Star*, 76.

75 Löwy quoted in Donald LaCoss, “Surrealism and Romantic Anticapitalism,” Introduction to *Morning Star*, xii.

76 Karl Marx, “Letter from Marx to Arnold Ruge in Dresden” (1843), https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/letters/43_09-alt.htm.

77 Aimé Césaire, “Letter to Maurice Thorez,” trans. Chike Jeffers, *Social Text* 28, no. 2 (103) (2010): 146.