

# The Great Camouflage

Writings of Dissent (1941-1945)

**SUZANNE CÉSAIRE**

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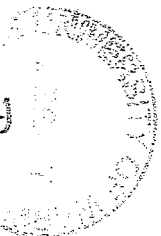
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1943

**Surrealism and Us**

the river of grass snakes that I call my veins  
 the river of battlements that I call my blood  
 the river of bantou spears that I call my face  
 the river trekking on foot around the world  
 will strike the Artesian rock with one hundred monsoon stars

Liberty my only pirate water of the new year my only thirst  
 love my only sampan boat  
 we shall slip our fingers of laughter and calabash  
 between the icy teeth of the Sleeping Beauty in the woods

Many have believed that surrealism was dead. Many wrote so. Childish nonsense: its activity extends today to the entire world and surrealism remains livelier, more audacious than ever. André Breton can look with pride upon the period between the wars and affirm that the mode of expression he created more than twenty years ago is opening upon an increasingly vast and immense "beyond."

If the whole world is struck by the influence of French poetry at a time when the most horrible disaster in its history swoops down upon France, it is, in part, because the great voice of André Breton was not stilled, and that is because everywhere, in New York, in Brazil, in Mexico, in Argentina, in Cuba, in Canada, in Algiers, voices echo that would not be what they are (in timber and resonance) without surrealism. Actually, today as twenty years ago, surrealism can claim the glory of being at the extreme point of the bow of life drawn to the breaking point.

The presence therefore of surrealism. Young, ardent, and revolutionary. Most certainly, in 1943, surrealism remains what it has always been, an activity which assigns itself the goal of exploring and expressing systematically the forbidden zones of the human

mind, in order to neutralize them: an activity which desperately seeks to give humankind the means of reducing the ancient antinomies that are "the true alembics of suffering"; a power, the only one, that allows us to reconnect with "this original, unique faculty, that the primitive and the child still retain traces of, that lifts the spell of the impassable barrier between the inner world and the outer world." But as the surrealist cause in art, as in life, is the cause itself of freedom, the sign itself of vitality, surrealism has itself evolved. Evolution, better yet, a blossoming outward in all directions. When Breton created surrealism, the most urgent task was to free the mind from the shackles of absurd logic and so-called Western reason.

But when freedom found itself threatened throughout the world in 1943, surrealism, which never for a single instant ceased to stand in service to the greatest emancipation of humankind, wanted to sum up the entirety of all its efforts in one magical word: freedom.

In art as in life, the surrealist cause is the cause itself of freedom. Today more than ever, to draw one's inspiration abstractly from freedom, or to celebrate it in conventional terms, is to do it a disservice. In order to enlighten the world, freedom must make itself flesh and blood and, toward that end, must be reflected and recreated in language, in the word.

Thus speaks Breton. The demand for freedom. The necessity of absolute purity—it's the Saint-Just side of Breton, hence his "Thank you, but no" to concessions, harshly denounced by his friends more given to compromise.

To those who ask periodically why certain schisms have occurred at the center of the surrealist movement, why such abrupt exclusions have been pronounced, I believe I can reply in all clear conscience that those who eliminated themselves in the process had, in some more or less obvious way, broken a solemn pact with freedom, freedom being revered in its pure state by sur-

realists—that is to say, advocated in all its forms—there are, of course, many ways to have broken this pact. In my opinion, it was, for example, to have returned, as did some former surrealists, to fixed forms in poetry, when it has been demonstrated, particularly in the French language—the exceptional influence of French poetry since Romanticism allows me to generalize in this way—that the quality of lyric expression has benefited from nothing so much as the will to be emancipated from obsolete rules: Rimbaud, Lautréamont mute things, the Mallarmé of “A Throw of the Dice,” the most important symbolists (Maeterlinck, Saint-Pol-Roux), Apollinaire’s “conversation-poems.” And this would be just as true for painting during the same period. In place of the preceding names, it would suffice to cite those of Van Gogh, Seurat, Rousseau, Matisse, Picasso, Duchamp. It was also a betrayal, once and for all, of the freedom to renounce personal expression” and in that way even dangerously always outside the strict frameworks to which a “party” wants to restrain you, even were it in your eyes the party of freedom (loss of the feeling of uniqueness). Freedom is at once madly desirable and quite fragile, which gives it the right to be jealous.

The intransigence consequently of freedom, which is, moreover, itself the condition of its fruitfulness. And we see that Breton, at the end of his most moving examinations, does not hesitate to venture into the most wide-ranging virginal spaces that surrealism has yielded to human daring. What does Breton ask of the most insightful minds of the period? Nothing less than the courage to embark upon an adventure which may prove deadly, from all one can tell, but which one may hope—and that is the essence—will lead to the total conquest of the mind. “A period, like the one we live in, can manage, if it has as a goal the arousal of mistrust for all the conventional ways of thinking the insufficiency of which is only too obvious, for travels à la Bergerac and Gulliver. And, not excluded from the voyage on which I invite you today, is every possibility of arriv-

ing somewhere, even after certain detours, to lands more reasonable than the one we leave behind.” Surrealism is living, intensely, magnificently, having found and perfected a method of inquiry of immeasurable efficacy. The dynamism of surrealism. And it is this sense of movement that has kept it always in the avant-garde, infinitely sensitive to the disruptions of the period, the “scourge of balance.”

Such is surrealist activity, a total activity, the only one that can liberate humankind by revealing to it the unconscious, one of the activities that will aid in liberating people by illuminating the blind myths that have led them to this point.

■ And now, a return to ourselves.

We know where we stand in Martinique. The arrow of history dizzyingly indicated for us our human task: a society, corrupt from its origins through crime, reliant for the present on injustice and hypocrisy, fearful of its future because of its guilty conscience, must morally, historically, and inevitably disappear.

From among the powerful war weaponry the modern world now places at our disposal, our audacity has chosen surrealism, which offers the greatest chances for success.

Already one result is established. At no moment during these difficult years of Vichy domination was the image of freedom ever totally extinguished here, and we owe this to surrealism. We are happy to have sustained this image in the eyes even of those who thought they had destroyed it forever. Blind because they were ignorant, they failed to see it laughing insolently, aggressively, in our pages. Cowards later, when they did understand, fearful and ashamed.

So, far from contradicting, diminishing, or diverting our revolutionary feeling for life, surrealism shored it up. It nourished in us an impatient strength, endlessly sustaining this massive army of negations.

And then I think also to tomorrow.

Millions of Black hands, across the raging clouds of world war, will spread terror everywhere. Roused from a long benumbing torpor, this most deprived of all people will rise up, upon plains of ashes.

Our surrealism will then supply them the leaven from their very depths. It will be time finally to transcend the sordid contemporary antinomies: Whites—Blacks, Europeans—Africans, civilized—savage; the powerful magic of the mahouls will be recovered, drawn from the very wellsprings of life. Colonial idiocies will be purified by the welding arc's blue flame. The mettle of our metal, our cutting edge of steel, our unique communions—all will be recovered.

■  
Surrealism, tightrope of our hope.

SUZANNE CÉSAIRE  
Tropiques, nos. 8–9, October 1943

## The Great Camouflage

There are, melded into the isles, beautiful green waves of water and of silence. There is the purity of sea salt all around the Caribbean. There is before my eyes, the pretty square in Pétienville, planted with pines and hibiscus. There is my island, Martinique, and its fresh necklace of clouds buffeted by Mount Pélé. There are the highest plateaus of Haiti, where a horse dies, lightning-struck by the age-old killer storm at Hinche. Next to it, his master contemplates the land he believed sound and expansive. He does not yet know that he is participating in the island's absence of equilibrium. But this sudden access to terrestrial madness illuminates his heart: he begins to think about the other Caribbean islands, their volcanoes, their earthquakes, their hurricanes.

At this moment off the coast of Puerto Rico a huge cyclone begins to spin its way between the seas of clouds, with its beautiful tail sweeping rhythmically the semi-circle of the Antilles. The Atlantic takes flight toward Europe with great oceanic waves. Our little tropical observatories begin to crackle with the news. The Wireless Telegraph Services go crazy. The boats flee, but to where? The sea swells, here, there, with a delicious bound, the sea stretches its limbs for a greater consciousness of its elemental water power, faces dripping, sailors grit their teeth, and we learn that the southeast coast of the Haitian Republic is in the path of the cyclone passing at a speed of thirty-five miles per hour, making its way toward Florida. Consternation seizes objects and the people spared at the fringes of the wind. Do not move. Let it pass . . .

At the center of the cyclone everything cracks, everything collapses in the ripping sound of great manifestations. Then the radios go silent. The great line of palm trees of cool wind unfurled somewhere in the stratosphere, there where no one will go to follow incredible iridescences and waves of violet light.

After the rain, the sun.

The Haitian cicadas are thinking of screeching love. When there is no longer a drop of water in the burnt grass, they sing furiously that life is beautiful, they explode in a cry too vibrant for an insect body. Their thin film of dried silk stretched to the breaking point, they die while letting surge forth the least moist scream of pleasure on earth.

Haiti goes on, enveloped in the ashes of the sun sweet to the eyes of the cicadas, with scales of the mabouyus, with the metallic face of the sea that is no longer of water but of mercury.

Now is the moment to look out the window of the aluminum clipper with its great banking turns.

Once again the sea of clouds is no longer virginal since the Pan American Airways System planes have been flying through. If there is a harvest maturing, now is the time to try to glimpse it, but in the prohibited military zones, the windows are closed.

On the planes they bring forth the disinfectants, or the ozone, whatever, you will see nothing. Nothing but the sea and the indistinct outline of lands. One can only guess the easy lovmaking of fish. They make the water move and wink amicably for the aircraft's porthole. Our islands seen from above, take on their true dimension as seashells. And as for the hummingbird-women, tropical flower-women, the women of four races and dozens of bloodlines, they are there no longer. Neither the heliconia, nor the frangipani, nor the flame tree, nor the palm trees in the moonlight, nor the sunsets unlike any other in the world . . .

Yet they are there.

Yet fifteen years ago, a revelation of the Antilles, from the eastern flank of Mount Pelé. From that point on, I knew, very young, that Martinique was sensual, coiled upon itself, stretched out, unwound in the Caribbean, and I suddenly thought about the other islands which are so beautiful.

Once again in Haiti, during the summer mornings of '44, the presence of the Antilles, more than perceptible, from places in

which, like Kenscoff, the view over the mountains is unbearably beautiful.

And now total insight. My gaze, over and beyond these shapes and these perfect colors, catches, upon the very beautiful Antillean face, its inner torments.

For the pattern of unfulfilled desires has trapped the Antilles and America. From the time of the arrival of the conquistadors and the rise of their technical know how (beginning with firearms), the lands from across the Atlantic have changed, not only in facial appearance but in fear. Fear of being surpassed by those who remained in Europe, already armed and equipped, fear of being in competition with people of color quickly declared inferior in order to better beat them down. It was necessary first and at all costs, be it even the price of the Black slave trade's infamy, to re-create an American society richer, more powerful, better organized than the European society left behind—yet still desired. It was necessary to take this revenge upon the nostalgic hell that was vomiting its adventurer demons, its galley slaves, its penitents, its utopians upon the shores of the New World and its islands. For three centuries, colonial adventurism has continued—the ways of independence are only an episode—and the American people, whose behavior *vis-à-vis* Europe has remained often childish and romantic, are still not freed from the grip of the old continent. Of course it is the Blacks of the Americas who suffer the most, in a daily humiliation, from the degradations, the injustices, and the pettiness of colonial society.

If we are proud to observe everywhere on American soil our extraordinary vitality, if definitively this vitality seems to hold out the promise of our salvation, one must, however, dare to say that refined forms of slavery still run rampant. Here, in these French islands, they debase the thousands of Blacks for whom a century ago the great Schœlcher sought, along with freedom and dignity, the title of citizen. Since many among the French seem determined to tolerate not even the slightest shadow being cast upon that vis-

age, one must dare show, on the face of France, illuminated with the implacable light of events, the Antillean strain.

The degrading forms of the modern wage-system continue to find in our homeland a ground on which to flourish without constraint.

There the system will dump, along with outmoded material from their factories, these few thousands of second-rate manufacturers and grocers, this caste of would-be colonizers responsible for the human deprivation of the Antilles.

Released onto the streets of their capitals, an insurmountable timidity fills them with fear among their European brothers. Ashamed of their drawing accent, of their unrefined French, they sigh longingly for the peaceful warmth of Antillean houses and the patois of the Black "nanny" of their childhood.

Quite prepared to engage in all types of betrayals in order to defend themselves against the constantly rising tide of Blacks, if the Americans had not just claimed that the purity of their blood was more than suspect, these same people would have sold themselves to America, as they had during the '40s when they declared loyalty to the Vichy admiral: Pétain being for them the sacrificial altar of France, thus Admiral Robert necessarily became "the tabernacle of the Antilles."

In the meantime the Antillean serf lives miserably, abjectly on the lands of "the factory," and the mediocrity of our townships is a nauseating spectacle. In the meantime the Antilles continues to be paradise, this soft rustling of palms . . .

Irony that day was a shining vestment full of sparks, each one of our muscles was expressing in a personal manner a fragment of desire scattered among the mango trees in blossom.

I was listening very attentively, without being able to hear your voices lost in the Caribbean symphony that was launching whirlwinds of water against the islands. We were like thoroughbreds, restrained, pawing the ground with impatience, at the edge of this salt savannah.

On the beach there were some "metropolitan functionaries." They were landed there, without conviction, ready to take off at the first signal. The new arrivals are hardly adapting to our "old French territories." When they lean over the malefic mirror of the Caribbean, they see therein the delirious reflection of themselves. They dare not recognize themselves in this ambiguous being, the Antillean. They know that the métis have a part of their blood, that they are, like them, of Western civilization. Of course it is understood that the "metropolitans" are unaware of the prejudice of color. But colored descendants fill them with fear, in spite of the smiles exchanged. They were not expecting this strange bourgeoning of their blood. Perhaps they would like not to respond to the Antillean heir who shouts, but does not shout out "my father." However one will have to deal with these unanticipated boys, these charming girls. One must govern these unruly people.

Here is an Antillean, great-grandson of a White colonizer and a slave Negress. Here he is deploying, in order "to get up and running" in his island, all the energies formerly necessary to greedy colonizers for whom the blood of others was the natural price of gold, all the courage necessary to African warriors who perpetually earned their living from death.

Here he is with his double strength and double ferocity, in a dangerously threatened equilibrium: he cannot accept his negritude; he cannot whiten himself. Spinelessness takes hold of this divided heart. And, with it, the usual trickery, the taste for "schemes"; thus blossoms in the Antilles this flower of human baseness, the colored bourgeoisie.

On the roads bordered with glycyrridia, delightful little black kids, ecstatically digesting the roots cooked with or without salt, smile at the luxury automobile passing by. They feel abruptly, deep in their navel, the need one day to be the masters of a beast equally as supple, shiny, and powerful. Years later, dirtied with the garage grease of happiness, one sees them miraculously give the spark of life to junkyard wrecks, disposed of at a very low price. By instinct,

the hands of thousands of young Antilleans have weighed steel, found joints, loosened screws. Thousands of images of gleaming factories, virgin steel, liberating machines, have filled the hearts of our young workers. There is, in hundreds of squalid warehouses where scrap iron rusts, an invisible vegetation of desires. The impatient fruits of revolution will spring up from it, inevitably.

Here, between the wind-smoothed mountains is Free-Peoples-Estates. A peasant who himself was not swept up in the hoopla surrounding the mechanical adventure, leaned against the great Mapou tree of spirits that shades an entire side of the mountain, and felt rising within himself, through his toes dug firmly into the mud, a slow vegetal up-thrust. He turned toward the sunset to discern the next day's weather—the orangey reds indicated to him that planting time was approaching—his gaze is not just the peaceful reflection of the light, for it grows heavy with impatience, the same kind that stirs up the land of Martinique, his land that does not belong to him yet is however his land. He knows that it is with them, the workers, that the land has a shared and common cause, and not with the colonial Whites or the mulattoes. And when, abruptly, in the Caribbean night, all decked out in love and quiet, there bursts forth the call of drums, the Blacks ready themselves to respond to the desire of the earth and of the dance, but the landowners lock themselves up in their mansions, and behind their metallic spider-web curtains, they are, under the electric light, so like pale and entrapped moths.

Around them the tropical night swells with rhythms, Bergilide's hips have taken their cataclysmic speed from the heaving rising from the depths to the flanks of the volcanoes, and it is Africa herself who, from across the Atlantic and the centuries pre-dating the slave-ships, dedicates to her Antillean children the gaze of sun-filled desire that the dancers exchange. Their cry exclaims in a husky and full voice that Africa is still there, present, that she waits, undulating, devourer of Whites, immensely virgin in spite of coloniza-

tion. And upon the faces constantly bathed in marine effluvia close to the islands, on these small restricted lands surrounded by water, like great impassable gulfs, the tremendous wind passes by, come from a continent. Antilles-Africa, thanks to the drums, the nostalgia for earthly spaces lives on in the hearts of these islanders. Who will overcome this nostalgia?

The heliconia shrubs and flowers of Absalon Forest bleed over the chasms, and the beauty of the tropical landscape goes to the heads of the poets passing by. Across the swaying latticed networks of the palms they can see the Antillean conflagration rolling across the Caribbean that is a tranquil sea of lavas. Here life lights up in a vegetal fire. Here, on these hot lands that keep alive geological species, the fixed plant, passion and blood, in its primitive architecture, the disquieting ringing suddenly issue from the chaotic backs of the dancers. Here the tropical vines rocking vertiginously, take on ethereal poses to charm the precipices, with their trembling fingertips they latch onto the ungraspable cosmic flurry rising all throughout the drum-filled nights. Here the poets feel their heads capsize, and inhaling the fresh smells of the ravines, they take possession of the wreath of the islands, they listen to the sound of the water surrounding the islands, and they see tropical flames kindled no longer in the heliconia, in the gerberas, in the hibiscus, in the bougainvilleas, in the flame trees, but instead in the hungers, and in the fears, in the hatreds, in the ferocity that burn in the hollows of the mountains.

It is thus that the Caribbean conflagration blows its silent fumes, blinding for the only eyes that know how to see, and suddenly the blues of the Haitian mountains, of the Martinican bays, turn dull, suddenly the most blazing reds go pale, and the sun is no longer a crystal play of light, and if the public squares have chosen the lacerations of Jerusalem thorn as luxury fans against the fierceness of the sky, if the flowers have known how to find just the right colors to leave one dumbstruck, if the tree-like ferns have secreted golden



saps for their white crooks, rolled-up like a sex organ, if my Antilles are so beautiful, it is because the great game of hide-and-seek has succeeded, it is then because, on that day, the weather is most certainly too blindingly bright and beautiful to see clearly therein.

SUZANNE CÉSAIRE

Tropiques, nos. 13-14, 1945



Part Two