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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Towards an anti-colonial aesthetic politics: Surrealist praxis and epistemic refusal

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Abstract

This paper considers what anti-colonial surrealist praxis can provide those of us interested in the nexus of aesthetics and world politics. Thinking beyond the commonly held notion of surrealism as a European cultural movement, I engage with the writings of 20th-century anti-colonial surrealists, namely, Suzanne Césaire, Aimé Césaire, and René Ménil. In doing so, I argue that anti-colonial surrealism is beyond a movement, a selection of methods, a genre or a set of ideas. Instead, I aim to position anti-colonial surrealist praxis as an epistemology that allows us to move beyond the limitations of representation, both by surfacing historical intimacies (rather than gaps) between content and form, while also questioning the demarcation between art and politics. I illustrate my argument's resonance in the contemporary political moment through an engagement with aesthetic interventions produced by Sai, an artist exiled from contemporary Myanmar. Sai's absurdist creative interventions and material drawn from in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations allow me to demonstrate the political possibilities of an 'anti-colonial surrealist praxis' approach, in its conception of aesthetics as co-constitutive, rather than only representative, of the political.

Keywords: aesthetic politics; anti-colonial thought; art; Myanmar; surrealism

'Poetic knowledge is born in the great silence of scientific knowledge.'[1]

Introduction

One hundred years after the supposed 'birth' of the surrealist movement in Paris, (re)iterations of surrealist practice are all around us. We might think of related ways of knowing and making the world which bend the notion of the real and push against the boundaries of reason; movements and genres such as science fiction, Afrofuturism, and magical realism, which destabilise fixed notions of temporality and space – and speak to the absurdity of the political present. In arts and culture specifically, we might even speak of a resurgence of surrealist (or adjacent) exhibitions, with multiple shows at major British cultural institutions within the past few years at the time of writing.[2] This cultural revival has often been marked by a decentring of European surrealism and an emphasis on global linkages and circulations of surrealism(s). What might we glean from this

[1] Aimé Césaire, *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry, 1946–82* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990), p. 17.

[2] For example, Surrealism beyond Borders, at Tate Modern from February–August 2022; In the Black Fantastic, at the Hayward Gallery from June–September 2022, and Objects of Desire: Surrealism and Design 1924–Today at the Design Museum from October 2022–February 2023.

cultural movement beyond its descriptive aesthetic? Alongside a renewed interest in surrealism in the wider cultural milieu, International Relations (IR) has been on an aesthetic and decolonial awakening of its own. Drawing together these seemingly unrelated contexts, this paper asks what we might learn by probing surrealist praxis for its political possibilities. Specifically, I ask how we can leverage anti-colonial surrealist *ways of knowing* to reformulate the relationship between politics and aesthetics, without flattening artistic interventions as merely representative of the political.

Surrealism as a cultural and political movement has been fluctuating and adapting since its moment of prominence in the early 20th century, but its fundamental critique aimed at exposing the inadequacies of Enlightenment rationalism remains broadly the same. Given this, my core contention is that (anti-colonial) surrealist praxis is beyond a movement, a selection of methods, a genre, or a set of ideas – rather, it could be thought of as an alternative epistemology to engage the world, one which sees aesthetics as co-constitutive, rather than only representative, of the political. The primary aim of this paper lies in developing a contextual reading of anti-colonial surrealist texts to demonstrate how 'anti-colonial surrealist praxis' could be used as an alternative epistemological positioning, one that is both attentive to aesthetic form and refuses the deference to Enlightenment reason. I read across two distinct moments, almost a century apart (anti-colonial thinkers from Martinique and an exiled artist from Myanmar),[3] to draw out linkages across global circulations of surrealist practice, and to demonstrate its purchase as a geographically and temporally untethered epistemology. As such, I instantiate my argument through an illustrative case study, by engaging with a contemporary manifestation of surrealist practice through a visual art series produced by Sai, an artist navigating exile from contemporary Myanmar. Beyond illustrating my argument and demonstrating surrealism's reverberations across varied mediums and forms, this example also serves to surface resonances and distinctions between the interwar context, from which the anti-colonial surrealists were writing, and the current post-colonial moment marked by perennial violence, the liberal international order, global authoritarianisms, and border regimes.

Such an exercise first requires us to ask: what is surrealism? According to Christine Sylvester, one of the few IR scholars to engage with the topic, for the European surrealists, the movement was grounded in a cultural essentialising approach, whereby 'primitivism was distantly ideal, admirable. It represented fantastic man before his loss of innocence to war and seedy politics, before he became something to fear, tame, threaten, conquer, bomb, napalm, bully, maim, malign.'[4] Although giving a cursory acknowledgement of surrealism outside of Europe, there is a conflation here between the European Surrealists and surrealist practice itself. We will return to thinking about surrealism as a globally connected cultural movement in the second section of this paper to destabilise this characterisation. Beyond Sylvester, surrealism has been sparsely dealt with in IR and adjacent scholarship in the context of critically engaging with the radical potential of artistic manifestos,[5] and leveraging a surrealist approach as a point of departure in structuring writing.[6] A more recent and meaningful engagement is Gabriel-Puri's subversive prioritisation of narrative and embodied experience over more conventional academic writing, which can only be found in the footnotes.[7] I aim to build on this type of critique by illustrating the methodological claims at the heart of my argument on representation and aesthetics, through the use of a writing style inflected with an impressionistic tone at times, and increasingly so as the narrative progresses.

[3]Throughout this paper, I primarily use the term Myanmar, rather than Burma, in reference to the contemporary nation-state, with an acknowledgement that both terms come with their own implicit connotations and historical weight. For a more extensive discussion on the debate around terminology in relation to Myanmar/Burma, see Lowell Dittmer, 'Burma vs. Myanmar: What's in name?', in Dittmer (eds), *Burma or Myanmar? The Struggle for National Identity,* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2010), pp. 1–20.

[4]Christine Sylvester, '(Sur)real internationalism: Émigrés, native sons, and ethical war creations', *Alternatives*, 24:2 (1999), pp. 219–47.

[5]Alex Danchev, *100 Artists' Manifestos: From the Futurists to the Stuckists* (London: Penguin UK, 2011).

[6]Marysia Zalewski, *Feminist International Relations: 'Exquisite Corpse'* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[7]Asees Gabriel-Puri. 'To/for Syrialism: Towards an "embodied" kind of war story', *Security Dialogue*, 55:1 (2024), pp. 42–59.

Genre-blending was central to the praxis of the anti-colonial surrealists whose writing I engage with to inform the epistemological position I develop, and so informs my writing as well. Related to this slight deviation in form, I also skirt a totalising definition of the surreal in favour of an engagement with its epistemic possibilities.

This paper has three interrelated contributions. First, it seeks to add to the pluralising of methods at the intersection of visuality, aesthetics, and politics.[8] Second, it contributes to the wider imperative across IR to destabilise a reliance on Western sites, approaches, and onto-epistemologies.[9] Lastly, it seeks to bring together two otherwise largely divergent literatures around aesthetics and the decolonial in IR.[10] What is at stake specifically in this analysis is a significant and growing number of cultural producers who, like Sai's story demonstrates, are forced to navigate systems of militarised rule and/or violent border regimes with little to no support for, or external understanding of, the active political work at play in their artistic practice. More broadly, what is at stake is a more expansive understanding of who political actors are, what sites are identified as politically salient, and *how* we understand what constitutes the political – questions that get at core animations of the wider discipline.

The paper proceeds as follows: I first open the discussion through an engagement with the aesthetic politics literature in IR, to tend to how this subfield has treated the relation between aesthetics and politics to date. Here, I argue that a focus on representation perpetuates a problematic distinction between art and politics, even if such efforts see aesthetics as inherently political. I then develop an alternative epistemological positioning from anti-colonial surrealist praxis, through a contextual reading of the writings of Suzanne Césaire, Aimé Césaire, and René Ménil. I demonstrate how, through its lineage in historical materialism, an anti-colonial surrealist approach both surfaces historical intimacies (rather than gaps) *between* content and form, while also collapsing the demarcation between art and politics. I then move to an engagement with aesthetic interventions produced by Sai, an artist exiled from contemporary Myanmar. Sai's surrealist interventions, and material drawn from in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations, allow me to demonstrate the political possibilities of an 'anti-colonial surrealist praxis' approach, in its conception of aesthetics as co-constitutive, rather than only representative, of the political. Following Suzanne Césaire, this paper attempts to think with a conception of surrealism as 'living, intensely and magnificently, having found and perfected such an efficacious *method of knowledge*' (emphasis added).[11]

Aesthetics in/and IR

The so-called aesthetic turn, since its demarcation in IR two decades ago, has reoriented the discipline towards subjects, objects, and sites of analysis that were otherwise overlooked in the high politics approaches of international relations that preceded it. As transformative as it has been, I argue that much of this literature has reproduced epistemological approaches largely in contrast with its normative commitment to critical scholarship.[12] Specifically, I argue that the reliance on representation in much of the discipline perpetuates a take-for-granted distinction between aesthetic interventions and politics, inadvertently reifying rationalist epistemologies. In this way, I see the approach to aesthetics as only a window into politics, as often undervaluing insights on cultural medium, by treating form as primarily a politicised vehicle for political content, while failing to account for instances where the representational gap is absent.

[8]Roland Bleiker, 'Pluralist methods for visual global politics', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:3 (2015): pp. 872–90.

[9]See Robbie Shilliam, *Decolonizing Politics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021).

[10]For an important exception, see Priya Dixit, 'Decolonizing visuality in Security Studies: Reflections on the death of Osama Bin Laden', *Critical Studies on Security*, 2:3 (2014), pp. 337–51.

[11]Suzanne Césaire, '1943: Surrealism and us', in Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (eds), *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 123–126 (p. 125).

[12]See Gerard Holden, 'Cinematic IR, the Sublime, and the indistinctness of art', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 34:3 (2006), pp. 793–818, for a critique of the aesthetic turn, especially regarding its positioning in IR as 'critical' scholarship.

The aesthetic politics literature is plural and heterogeneous, and its contours are no doubt contested and overlapping across related fields, such as those also interested in visuality and emotions. To clarify, I refer to sources that are also within 'Visual IR'; indeed, these terms and literatures are often treated as synonymous. Although the conflation of the visual and the aesthetic is outside the scope of this paper,[13] I see the visual as part of the aesthetic field and, as such, understand these literatures as inflected with similar epistemological tensions. Within this subfield, my critique is primarily in dialogue with analyses that centre on the so-called representational gap, which both makes up a large portion of the subfield and represents the most canonical and well-referenced texts.[14] In this way, I concur with Austin and Bramsen that visual IR scholarship has tended to focus on deep readings of 'artefacts', primarily through discursive analysis.[15] However, I depart from their prescription that the methodological limitations underlying the subdiscipline can be substantively addressed by adding in approaches grounded in 'close observation and description'.[16] Such treatment of aesthetics only serves to further entrench the status of aesthetics in conceptions of the political as '"windows" for the observation of the social world', rather than co-constitutive of it.[17] Additionally, throughout my engagement with this literature, I do not focus on what Galai terms 'visual writing', where scholars use the production of aesthetic interventions (such as film-making or novel writing) to theorise from – although I see such efforts as productively aligned with the epistemological shift I support in this paper.[18]

Tracing epistemological foundations

The aesthetic politics literature largely extends the core tenets of critical aesthetics and is broadly oriented towards unpacking the relation between aesthetic interventions and experiences, and global politics.[19] Situated in a critical space within the discipline that troubles the definition of the latter (i.e. what constitutes global politics in a world dominated by inter-*national* framing), the former (what constitutes aesthetics) often goes under-theorised. As such, let us briefly consider what we mean by aesthetics before exploring its relationship with politics and the implications of thinking with such a distinction in the first place.

Aesthetics can be seen as broader than, but encompassing, art and culture. Key to conceptions of aesthetics are the senses, which were largely separated from notions of reason by Enlightenment philosophy. At first conception in Western thought, aesthetics was understood to be mainly concerned with the sensory in a broad sense. Accordingly, in this understanding, 'aesthetics had to do with the perfection of perception and only secondarily with the "perception of perfection", or beauty'.[20] Kant would take this notion of aesthetics further, cementing the 'autonomy of the enclave now known as "art" but at the expense of sensory plenitude'.[21] The detaching of aesthetics from

[13] See David Howes, *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2021), p. 10.

[14] Such as the following texts from prominent scholars in the subfield: Roland Bleiker, 'The aesthetic turn in international political theory', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 30:3 (2001), pp. 509–33; Lene Hansen, 'Theorizing the image for security studies: Visual securitization and the Muhammad cartoon crisis', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:1 (2011), pp. 51–74; Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Katrine Emilie Andersen, and Lene Hansen, 'Images, emotions, and international politics: The death of Alan Kurdi', *Review of International Studies*, 46:1 (2020), pp. 75–95.

[15] Jonathan Luke Austin and Isabel Bramsen, 'Visual (data) observation in International Relations: Attentiveness, close description, and the politics of seeing differently', *Review of International Studies*, 50:6 (2024), pp. 965–86.

[16] Austin and Bramsen, 'Visual (data) observation in International Relations', p. 967.

[17] Austin and Bramsen, 'Visual (data) observation in International Relations', p. 966.

[18] Yoav Galai, 'Political visual literacy', *International Political Sociology*, 17:3 (2023), pp. 1–18.

[19] In addition to footnote 14 above, other prominent texts from this literature include: Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Houndmills, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Roland Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018); Lene Hansen, 'How images make world politics: International icons and the case of Abu Ghraib', *Review of international Studies*, 41:2 (2015), pp. 263–88; Michael J. Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 2008); Cynthia Weber, *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics and Film* (London: Routledge, 2020).

[20] Howes, *Empire of the Senses*, p. 245.

[21] Howes, *Empire of the Senses*, p. 246.

notions of perception and sensation paved the way for its conflation with beauty, taste, and art (a connotation that remains today in colloquial vernacular). This understanding of aesthetics was part of a broader epistemological commitment in the project of modernity to universalist truths and rationalist modes of thinking. Though postmodern approaches aimed to deconstruct modernity's commitment to universality, objectivity, and rationalism, postmodernism's reliance on subjectivity and deconstruction tends to overemphasise the discursive at the cost of other modes of engagement. Despite important distinctions between postmodernism as a broader cultural-philosophical movement and poststructuralism as an area of thought, key epistemological affinities between the two fields remain, such as the focus on language, power, and knowledge.

Methodologically, aesthetic politics as a subfield primarily draws on poststructural epistemological lineages, accounting for the focus on discursive analysis.[22] Given this, the subfield tends to embrace the chasm between 'representation' and 'the represented'. Such an approach 'assumes that there is always a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith. Rather than seeking to narrow this gap, as mimetic approaches do, aesthetic insight recognises that the inevitable difference between the represented and its representation is the very location of politics.'[23] Despite its heterogeneity in many respects, this remains the oft-quoted core tenet of the subfield to date, and thus the overwhelming epistemological underpinning in much of the literature. As such, I argue that the approach to knowledge production engendered by this area of the aesthetic politics literature still manifests in largely representational terms, by thinking of/with aesthetic interventions as a *means* to access novel insights into the political – rather than conceiving of aesthetics as politically transformative, in excess of representation.

Despite writing against positivist approaches, I read the aesthetic politics literature's focus on the gap between representation (art/form) and 'the represented' (politics/content) as the location of politics, as perpetuating the onto-epistemological commitment of a reality – even if it is rendered subjective – and aesthetic forms that mediate such a reality as analytically distinct. In this way, I argue that a focus on representationally grounded analyses of the aesthetic is drawn from the very historical epistemological project emphasising rationally dominated ways of knowing that poststructuralist approaches seek to deconstruct, in its focus in trying to *reason with* aesthetic interventions as an instrument of politics. Where aesthetics were *beyond* the grasp of reason, in other words, so awesome and all-consuming to render the subject in complete awe, the primary theoretical framework reached for tends to be Kantian theories of the sublime.[24] Following Wynter's formulation of Enlightenment thought as an onto-epistemological approach which was both produced by and productive of the subordination of feminised, colonised, and racialised subjects, who were rendered irrational, emotional, and contingent, this linkage is thus in tension with critical IR's positioning. Given the decolonial emphasis on epistemological domination,[25] the political implications of this connection should be recognised, and new epistemological positions forged.

The subfield has moved beyond these initial methodological insights in generative ways.[26] Even so, in revisiting the aesthetic turn 15 years on, the literature is still characterised primarily by

[22]For an interesting development in the methods used in the subdiscipline, see Lene Hansen, Rebecca Adler-Nissen, and Katrine Emilie Andersen, 'The visual international politics of the European refugee crisis: Tragedy, humanitarianism, borders', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 56:4 (2021), pp. 367–93, where the authors combine visual discourse analysis with content analysis.

[23]Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, p. 8.

[24]See, for example, the *Millennium* special issue on the sublime, which focused primarily on the Kantian sublime: *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 34:3 (2006). Jabri's contribution in this special issue is an important intervention herein, which is grounded in an argument of de-sublimination: Vivienne Jabri, 'Shock and awe: Power and the resistance of art', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 34:3 (2006), pp. 819–39.

[25]Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

[26]William A. Callahan, 'The visual turn in IR: Documentary filmmaking as a critical method', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 43:3 (2015), pp. 891–910; Priya Dixit, 'Visualizing others: A conversation with Cynthia Weber on films and visuality in the "war on terror"', in Priya Dixit, Jacob L. Stump (eds), *Critical Methods in Terrorism Studies* (London:

representability.[27] Steele gestures towards the decolonial imperative, calling for 'a move *outside of the aesthetic turn* in order to move our attention past this Western lens going forward' (emphasis added).[28] Such a shift is said to be accomplished through: (1) privileging the otherwise *un*seen to open up conversations about representability; (2) an empirical focus on the non-West and post-colonial experiences; and (3) a focus on the transformative potentials of aesthetic approaches in relation to pedagogy.[29] These are all pertinent threads that continue to push the aesthetic politics literature further in productive directions. In many ways, these conversations are already under way; we see how affect structures artist-activism responses in post-colonial Argentina,[30] or how a focus on visual literacy has shaped the classroom environment in transformative ways.[31] However, this paper makes a different and distinct intervention concerned with alternative ways of knowing, suggesting that the distinction between aesthetics (representation) and politics (what is represented), which underpins much of the subdiscipline, needs revisiting.

Overall, I argue that such a shift thus requires an epistemological reorientation. In emphasising what aesthetics and art *represent* politically, we miss what aesthetics do or could do politically. In representation-focused approaches, art and aesthetics are instrumentalised, positioned as novel, interesting, or alluring ways into politics – but 'politics' are still foregrounded. This manifests in trying to reason with aesthetic outputs, rather than seeing their possibilities in broader processes of worldmaking beyond representation. By instrumentalising aesthetics as an entry point into politics, we assume that aesthetic interventions can't be the politics themselves. But what does it mean for aesthetic interventions to be the politics themselves? I suggest that an engagement with (anti-colonial) surrealism is one such subversive knowledge system that helps us to begin to answer this question. I now move to an engagement with surrealism which decentres its European manifestation, through a historical contextualisation, as well as a rereading, of anti-colonial (surrealist) thought as an alternative epistemology for thinking about the relation between aesthetics and politics.

Provincialising European surrealism: Thinking with the Césaires and René Ménil

> "But surrealism has evolved: the very sign of its vitality. It would be more accurate to say it has blossomed."[32]

If you ask people what surrealism is, most will evoke the strange, ethereal, and otherworldly. Salvador Dalí's body of work will likely surface. Some might even trace surrealism's conventionally understood lineage to 1920s France. In this story, André Breton, a poet of the early 20th century, is said to be the Godfather of the Surreal. For Breton, surrealism offered a means of escaping the stranglehold that Enlightenment ontology had on the world and, through a focus on the subconscious and the dreamworld, had important linkages with psychoanalysis.[33] Surrealism as a cultural movement was spurred on by its predecessor: the illogical and irrational Dada arts movement. In at

Routledge, 2015), pp. 165–76; Sophie Harman, *Seeing Politics: Film, Visual Method, and International Relations* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP, 2019).

[27]Brent J. Steele, 'Recognising, and realising, the promise of the aesthetic turn', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45:2 (2017), pp. 206–13.

[28]However, such a shift is still, 'in order to take representability even more seriously': Steele, 'Recognising, and realising', p. 207.

[29]Steele, 'Recognising, and realising', p. 207.

[30]Holly Eva Ryan, 'Affect's effects: Considering art-activism and the 2001 crisis in Argentina', *Social Movement Studies*, 14:1 (2015), pp. 42–57.

[31]Galai, 'Political visual literacy'.

[32]Césaire, '1943: Surrealism and us', p. 124.

[33]David Batchelor, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art between the Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 50.

least one of surrealism's most canonical practitioners, European surrealists also gravitated towards obsessions with fascism. Salvador Dalí himself was expelled from the Surrealist group by Breton in 1934 due to his glorification of Hitler. Following his expulsion, Dalí would go on to declare his support for Spain's Francisco Franco,[34] highlighting the potential linkages between the surreal, notions of utopia/dystopia, and fantasies grounded in a racial world order.[35]

At the same time, 'The Surrealist Group', as they fashioned themselves, offered their support to decolonisation movements in the Third World.[36] According to Walter Benjamin, 'in the transformation of a highly contemplative attitude into revolutionary opposition, the hostility of the bourgeois toward every manifestation of radical intellectual freedom played a leading part. This hostility pushed Surrealism to the left. Political events, above all the war in Morocco, accelerated this development.'[37] The Surrealist Group penned a scathing critique opposing the Colonial Exposition of 1931 held in Paris, titled 'Don't Visit the Colonial Exhibition', followed by their own counter-exhibition.[38] These publications and projects underscore the *movement* of European surrealism as dynamic, one that was neither inherently emancipatory nor hegemonic.

One approach to decentring European surrealism is to make more explicit surrealist praxis honed by non-European thinkers, artists, and creative practitioners – and to do so in ways that are relational, rather than derivative, not as an attempt to show a direction of travel of surrealist ideas from Europe outwards, but rather to destabilise the notion of surrealism as a European avant garde arts movement. In doing so, I point to entanglements between practitioners that are often characterised as 'Western' and 'non-Western', as well as the global relations that underpin them. I focus predominantly on Suzanne Césaire, Aimé Césaire, and René Ménil, through their writings in the journal *Tropiques*, which they founded and edited, as well as some of Aimé Césaire's more prominent texts.

What is puzzling in the lack of critical engagement with surrealism in IR is both the prominence afforded to Aimé Césaire's scholarship in anti-colonial thought and his affinity with surrealism in his politics.[39] This dearth of engagement with surrealism effectively strips Aimé Césaire and his collaborators of their most potent medium, when the form itself was deeply imbricated in the intended political aims of their interventions. *Discourse on Colonialism* was itself written in a surrealist voice and intended to be read as such.[40] Aimé Césaire was a poet, after all, as well as a politician and theorist. Despite being the most prominent member of the so-called Caribbean Surrealists, he was not working alone. Born in the French colony of Martinique to a middle-class family, Aimé Césaire would eventually make his way to Paris to study at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure, where he would meet and marry Suzanne, also a thinker and writer from Martinique. There, he would also meet the likes of Léopold Sédar Senghor and Léon Damas and co-found the pan-African Négritude

[34]Robin Adèle Greely, 'Dalí's fascism; Lacan's paranoia', *Art History*, 24:4 (2001), pp. 465–92.

[35]Thanks to Yoav Galai for surfacing this tension. Although not explicitly concerned with surrealism, for a sustained engagement with fantasies of a racialised world order, see Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022). See also Galai for a discussion of race and visual technologies: Galai, 'Political visual literacy'.

[36]Richardson and Fijalkowski (eds), *Refusal of the Shadow*, p. 190.

[37]Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The last snapshot of the European intelligentsia', *New Left Review*, 108 (1978), pp. 47–56 (pp. 47, 52).

[38]Richardson and Fijalkowski (eds), *Refusal of the Shadow*, p. 183.

[39]Scholarship that addresses this chasm includes Jonathan Pugh and David Chandler, *The World as Abyss: The Caribbean and Critical Thought in the Anthropocene* (London: University of Westminster Press, 2023), who turn to Caribbean thought (including Aimé Césaire) for an ontological shift in Anthropocene theorising from relational to 'the abyss'. Although surrealism isn't the centre of analysis, the implications for modernity, rationality, and reason track with my own argument.

[40]Robin D. G. Kelley, 'A poetics of anticolonialism', in Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: NYU Press, 2001), pp. 7–28.

movement,[41] which shared important overlaps with surrealism, drawing on its core tenets and inflecting it further with a Pan-African political philosophy.[42]

Herself a writer and theorist, Suzanne Césaire wrote sparingly but fiercely on anti-colonial politics, poetry, and the surreal. For Suzanne, surrealism was more than an ideology, it was a state of mind. Together, the Césaires, alongside René Ménil and others, founded and ran the surrealist literary journal *Tropiques* from 1941–1945, with an audience consisting largely of student activists in Martinique.[43] The journal published work that moved between essay, poetry, and fiction, including by Breton, with whom the Césaires became close comrades and collaborators. Aimé Césaire met Breton in 1941, when Breton arrived by ship to Martinique with other émigrés escaping an increasingly fascist Europe, where he 'discovered the first issue of *Tropiques* in the window of a bookshop owned by René Ménil's sister; he proclaimed Césaire's writing as a "shaft" of light'.[44] The journal ceased publication in 1945.

Anti-colonial surrealist praxis as epistemology

Thus far in this paper, I have skirted the tendency to provide a comprehensive definition of the surreal, despite describing the ways in which surrealism has manifested in related cultural, political and aesthetic moments and movements. This evasiveness has been intentional, and although I have provided various suggestions from other thinkers about fixing the surreal, I am wary of defining surrealist practice beyond its epistemological possibilities. However, in this next section, I get closest to how I am thinking about surrealist practice: not as a movement, a selection of methods, a genre, or a set of ideas, but rather, as an epistemology that helps us engage with aesthetic politics in new ways beyond representationally focused approaches. The attention to political and historical context in my treatment of anti-colonial surrealist thought is imperative insofar as drawing out how cultural form and content are intimately co-constitutive. Relatedly, to hold anti-colonial surrealism's complexity in full is to recognise the composition of theories, praxes, and politics which it draws influence from, both culturally and intellectually. We have already spoken of the affinities between surrealism and Dadaism, as well as the connections between the 'European Surrealists' and the 'Caribbean Surrealists' (the boundaries of which are themselves blurred).[45] The anti-colonial surrealists from Martinque were also said to have taken much inspiration from the Harlem Renaissance and the jazz age movement led by prominent African American musicians, especially in terms of the latter's attention to irrational form and improvisation.[46]

Importantly, key among anti-colonial surrealist thought's influences is Marxist thought, whose weighty force looms large across their texts.[47] Marxist thought impressed upon anti-colonial surrealism an attention to material conditions, while also firmly leveraging an ideational and cultural critique. Rather than see the material and the ideational as bifurcated analytical frameworks, anti-colonial surrealist thought saw their socially situated connections. This is important as anti-colonial surrealist thought's grounding in historical materialism marks an onto-epistemological

[41]The Négritude movement was heterogeneous, with Aimé Césaire's and Senghor's thinking often diverging in fundamental ways. René Ménil, for his part, saw Senghor's Négritude as an essentialising, regressive ideology. See René Ménil, 'The passage from poetry to philosophy', in Krzysztof Fijalkowski, Dawn Ades, and Michael Richardson (eds), *The Surrealism Reader: An Anthology of Ideas* (London: Tate Publishing, 1999), pp. 150–59.

[42]Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time: Negritude, Decolonization, and the Future of the World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 23.

[43]Wilder, *Freedom Time*, p. 23.

[44]Wilder, *Freedom Time*, p. 29.

[45]This tension also has interesting connections to how Martinque's own specific mechanism of decolonisation, grounded in departmentalisation and absorption into the French empire. See: Wilder, *Freedom Time*, p. 21.

[46]Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), p. 161.

[47]Such influence is perhaps most strongly felt in *Discourse*, whose closing paragraph reads, 'it is a matter of the Revolution-the one which, until such time as there is a classless society, will substitute for the narrow tyranny of a dehumanized bourgeoisie the preponderance of the only class that still has a universal mission, because it suffers in its flesh from all the wrongs of history, from all the universal wrongs: the proletariat.' Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, p. 78.

evolution from Marxist thought, distinct from poststructuralist critiques more firmly situated in disavowal. According to Kelley, 'surrealism is night to Marxism's day: it breaks the chains of social realism and rationality, turning to poetry as a revolutionary mode of thought and practice'.[48] As I attempt to demonstrate in my engagement with Sai's work in the last section of this paper, a surrealist epistemic positioning manages to break with the metanarratives of (Enlightenment) reason without being confined only to the realm of discourse.

Colonial subjugation and anti-colonial surrealist practice

According to Gary Wilder, the anti-colonial surrealists and *Tropiques* 'challenged the distinction between art and politics'[49] through a profound cultivation of surrealist form in a context of colonial subjugation. As a journal, *Tropiques* came into being just as France fell to the fascist Vichy regime, which also governed the French Antilles by extension. As such, the journal was subject to strict censorship, as it was seen by the French colonial government to be 'poisoning the spirit of society, sowing hatred and ruining the morale of the country'.[50] Given this, the surrealist and aesthetic form characteristic of the publication was leveraged as a kind of obfuscation to dodge censorship by the Vichy regime. According to Kelley, 'in order for *Tropiques* to survive, they had to camouflage their boldness, passing it off as a journal of West Indian folklore'.[51] In this way, *Tropiques*' anti-colonial surrealist writing was intentionally slippery and elusive. This approach of leveraging a surrealist aesthetic to evade censorship and nurture a resistant politics will share obvious similarities with Sai's work to follow, and the historical context in which he is currently producing artwork. For both sites, cultural forms are more than entry points into the political. The surrealist forms themselves, and the traditions they draw on, are not only reflective of systems of subjugation, but also definitively seek to transform them.[52]

In Suzanne Césaire's writings, 'the ponderousness of her opening lines was a rhetorical ploy, indeed a camouflage, to divert the attention of the censors away from the dissident consciousness-raising content at the core of the essays'.[53] She wrote of revolt between the lines. The reader can sense this in the increasing politicisation and urgency in Suzanne's seminal surrealist polemic, '1943: Surrealism & Us', which starts in rhetorical, veiled language. By the end of the essay, in contrast, Suzanne writes with far more political precision, writing,

> 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.[54]

Surrealism becomes personified, a mocking thing living in plain sight in the pages of their writings. Humour is leveraged as a surrealist method here, which we will return to Aimé Césaire's *Notebook*. Here, the relation between form and content is something other than a gap to be explored, it is a historically situated co-constitution of form and content whose political possibilities lie exactly there. More than this, it is also an indictment of modernity's rendering of rationality and reason as bifurcated from affect and poetic knowledge, to which I turn next.

[48] Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, p. 192.
[49] Wilder, *Freedom Time*, p. 36.
[50] Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, p. 14.
[51] Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, p. 14.
[52] 'Tradition' here is used in a similar sense as the Black Radical Tradition, for example, rather than as a fixed cultural practice.
[53] Suzanne Césaire, *The Great Camouflage: Writings of Dissent (1941–1945)* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), p. xxiii.
[54] Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*, p. 37.

Surrealist practice and poesis

A surrealist approach doesn't assume a gap between representation and what is represented. Rather, it troubles this distinction and the notion of objective reality, through the concept of the imagined/imagination/imaginary. On this, René Ménil writes:

> The imagination though an abstraction is *what* becomes real or is in some way realized.
>
> The experience of objective reality would only be hypothetical if it wasn't necessary to resort to illusion just to continue *to be*. It is impossible for human beings to experience reality directly.[55]

He goes on:

> All reality as it is experienced is so distilled that it comes to us transformed, masked or embellished, its very strength is proportional to our capacities for passion and dream.
>
> As we live we elaborate the capacity of the world, the power of our imaginations.
>
> Nothing is more real than the imaginary especially when it is considered only imaginary.
>
> Reality and the imagination are not opposites the way that being and nothingness are, but rather the way *being* and what *will be* are.
>
> Of our dreams we ask questions, to their answers we listen, and we act in the light of their advice.
>
> On this motionless voyage, that we call dreamlike, we are the movers at the center of the world but it is life itself that will feel the footprints of our imagination.[56]

Here, Ménil articulates his philosophy of the real/imaginary, destabilising its conventional dichotomous understanding. Rather, the imaginary lays the groundwork for life as it *could be* lived. Thinking of imaginative practice in this way illustrates the importance of practitioners (whether they are artists, theorists or otherwise) who undertake this political imperative. In this way, the imaginary is beyond a world-critiquing exercise, it is a world-making one.

Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* also embodies the ability of surrealist practice to subvert Kantian conceptions of aesthetics and reason through an attention to form, content, and their interrelation.[57] According to Ménil, *Notebook* was written in three different voices which should, 'be understood in a continuous discourse without an explicit designation of the identity of the one who speaks – Césaire utilizing the literary process of collage which consists of pasting the word of the other into the sentence without recourse to inverted commas and without announcing the entrance of this other onto the stage'.[58] This shape-shifting juxtaposition and blurring of narration stretches the reader to a place where intuition may be just as useful as reason in making sense of the prose. At the same time, Aimé Césaire, through the use of humour and ironic narration, questions the very association between the colonised and irrationality while drawing on colonial stereotypes, writing 'because we hate you and your reason, we claim kinship with dementia praecox with the flaming madness of persistent cannibalism'.[59] Here, Aimé makes absurd the notion that the colonised are not capable of logical reasoning, despite the narrative of modernity that says otherwise. According to Wilder, 'it is a powerful example of what Césaire would later characterize as "poetic knowledge", a process of aesthetic understanding that points beyond easy oppositions between form and content, thought and action, art and politics, universalism and particularism, freedom and necessity, subjective will and objective constraints'.[60] This is a subversion in two parts

[55]René Ménil, 'The orientation of poetry', in Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley (eds), *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), pp. 82–83, (p. 82).

[56]Ménil, 'The orientation of poetry', p. 83.

[57]Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001).

[58]Ménil, 'The passage from poetry to philosophy', p. 153.

[59]Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, p. 18.

[60]Wilder, *Freedom Time*, p. 22.

and directions: in illustrating fluency in form beyond rationally oriented approaches to aesthetics, while simultaneously destabilising the dichotomous associations between rational/irrational and the West/non-West through absurdist humour.

Importantly, at the core of a surrealist approach lies a poetic embryonic flame, which shines light on the other registers of experience beyond Enlightenment thought's emphasis on rationality. Or, put more succinctly, 'poetry is full bloom'.[61] Without attempting to articulate what this might mean rationally, without being overly didactic, and in resisting the temptation to capture affect, Aimé Césaire gives us a blueprint for engagement here: that we might feel something like a flower feels when it blooms. For both Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, an expansive form of aesthetic engagement is brought to life in their writing through the repeated and surrealising deployment of ecological metaphor. By playing with the connection between embodiment and worldly and sensory engagement, the Césaires' writings ground us in an affective register that is effervescently alive. Aimé Césaire demonstrates this approach thus,

> It is not merely with his whole soul, it is with his entire being that the poet approaches the poem. What presides over the poem is not the most lucid intelligence, or the most acute sensibility, but an entire experience: all the women loved, all the desires experienced, all the dreams dreamed, all the images received or grasped, the whole weight of the body, the whole weight of the mind. All lived experience. All the possibilities. Around the poem about to be made, the previous vortex: the ego, the id, the world. And the most extraordinary contacts: all the pasts, all the futures (the anticyclone builds its planteux, the amoeba loses its pseudopods, vanished vegetations meets). All the flux, all the rays. The body is no longer deaf or blind. Everything has a right to live. Everything is summoned. Everything awaits. Everything, I say.[62]

In this sense, aesthetic practice is not only inseparable from politics but also beyond representational: it is lived, embodied, and brimming with political possibility. This is what Aimé evokes when he wrote, 'pregnant with the world, the poet speaks'.[63]

The praxis of the anti-colonial thinkers engaged with here demonstrates an alternative epistemology to consider the relation of content and form, or of politics and aesthetics. This shift moves aesthetic analysis beyond one focused on rationally grounded approaches alone. Absurdity and ironic humour are one conceptual entry point for this kind of epistemic posturing, and one that we will return to in the contemporary moment.[64] In sum, drawing on the work of anti-colonial surrealists, I contend that surrealist praxis is not about a separation between affect and cognition, politics and aesthetics, or theory and practice. Rather than assuming the relation between aesthetics and politics is always a gap, the view from anti-colonial surrealism paints a different picture. This manifestation of aesthetic practice surfaces historical intimacies between content and cultural form brought on by conditions of censorship and repression, while also demonstrating how such gaps can collapse altogether in political contexts of subjugation. I now turn to the contemporary moment to try to make sense of the post-colonial predicament through an anti-colonial surrealist epistemological approach. And so, we return to Paris, surrealism's supposed birthplace, nearly a century later – a site that serves as a heuristic crossroads for the anti-colonial surrealists, the European surrealist group, and Sai's own exilic journey.

[61] Aimé Césaire, *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry, 1946–82* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1990), p, xlix.

[62] Césaire, *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry, 1946–82*, p. xlvii.

[63] Césaire, *Lyric and Dramatic Poetry, 1946–82*, p. xlix.

[64] A conceptual focus on humour also connects with a nascent literature in IR and politics dealing with its importance in world politics. See Alister Wedderburn, *Humour, Subjectivity and World Politics: Everyday Articulations of Identity at the Limits of Order* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

Surreal politics, surrealist praxis from Myanmar to 'the West'

Reflections from 'Doh Ayay' exhibition, Poush, Paris, February 2023

It is a freezing, wet, and dreary weekend in the outskirts of Paris, and I find myself here to experience Sai's work in person. As I dodge puddles on the way to the exhibition where his work was being shown, I am reminded of the intellectual and cultural ghosts that haunt this city in ways that feel palpable, if often overdone. It wasn't only artistic and intellectual emigrés that have called this place home; Paris also acted as a key locus of anti-imperial political organising for the Third World Movement in the interwar period.[65] I recall thinkers who resided here, like the Césaires, who challenged the notion of a boundary between the intellectual, political, and artistic altogether. As I walk in the drizzling rain, I come to a series of interconnected warehouses that comprise the exhibition space. This is a place where industry has come and gone; in its wake stand vast warehouses, artist studios, hundreds of them. The buildings are capacious and derelict to a degree that risks bordering cliché, with high airy ceilings, cement flooring, and crumbling paint. Somehow, it feels colder inside the buildings than outside, and I can hear water running through the exposed pipes and dripping in unknown places. As I enter the warehouse, a steward points me in the direction of the area which houses the artwork related to 'Birmanie' – or Burma, also known as Myanmar. I float through the four rooms and connecting hallways of the exhibition and am met with stories and creative interventions from artists and cultural producers from Myanmar, which speak of trauma, resistance, displacement, revolt, exile, and abject horror. Here I was, consuming death and tragedy in the gallery. Other exhibition goers sip red wine and contemplate the violence alongside me. As I do so, I'm reminded of the sheer ease with which I was able to travel to this post-imperial metropolis, an ease not afforded to those whose work I'm confronted with. I might have begun to feel numb if it wasn't for a certain poetic intervention, a few simple words pasted on the floor of the entrance to the room housing Sai's work, which punctured any possibility of apathy: 'Please enjoy our tragedies', it read. There was simply nowhere to hide from being implicated in its insinuation; all I could do was laugh from discomfort. I was reminded then of the core surrealist contention cultivated in this very city a century ago: that the world is totally absurd, it is utterly *unreasonable*.

***

How might we make sense of this poetic intervention? And what might we miss by only treating it as a discursive *representation* of politics? This final section aims to provide an alternative answer to these core questions around representation, aesthetics, and politics, which guide this paper. First, before returning to Sai's work to illustrate how aesthetics can be more than representative of politics, I briefly sketch out how aesthetics, art, and culture have played a significant role in subverting military rule in Myanmar and the diaspora. This is intended to draw out parallels between the two sites, practitioners, and moments of surrealism engaged with throughout this analysis, to support my core contention that aesthetic interventions can be politically transformative. The parallels drawn between the two contexts also serve to further explore how conditions of subjugation bear on the development of cultural forms in ways that actively resist and subvert systems of power, broadly conceived. We then return to Sai's work to illustrate how aesthetics co-constitute, rather than only represent, politics. As we will see, irony and satirical humour live on as important responses to censorship, repression, and hegemonic political contexts that are themselves surreal and absurd. Throughout, I reiterate my argument that surrealism is beyond a method, a genre, a form, or an artistic movement. Rather, I aim to position anti-colonial surrealism as an epistemological positioning with which to grapple with the world politically and aesthetically, without necessarily drawing a clear demarcation between such categories.

[65] Michael Goebel, *Anti-imperial Metropolis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

On 1 February 2021, the world woke to a military coup unfolding in Myanmar,[66] what would be the third in the course of its life as a nation-state. Many outside the country came to learn of this historic moment through a fitness instructor's video. As Al Jazeera reported, 'pumping her arms to an electronic beat, aerobics instructor Khing Hnin Wai appeared oblivious as a convoy of armoured vehicles drove by – accidentally capturing Myanmar's military coup-in-progress in a surreal video that has now gone viral'.[67] To a relatively apathetic international community, this was perhaps a darkly sinister way to learn of a post-colonial nation-state 'falling back into authoritarianism'. But the violent impacts of the coup and the so-called return to overt military rule were much more than an imaginary dystopian nightmare for the more than 53 million people that live in Myanmar, as well as the approximately 3 million (and growing) in the diaspora.[68] Resistance to military rule in Myanmar and the diaspora following the 2021 coup is heterogeneous and no doubt still unfolding, made up of a patchwork of armed resistance groups and civil disobedience. Alongside a complex tapestry of armed resistance and popular revolt, artists and aesthetic interventions played a unique and important role in resistance to military rule, manifesting in an outpouring of artwork, creative protest strategies, and street performances. This convergence of aesthetic and political interventions builds on a deep lineage. Throughout both its history as a nation-state and prior to its contemporary demarcation, Myanmar has been home to dissident artist collectives, subversive creatives, and culturally grounded opposition movements. Creative dissent in Myanmar has taken many forms and mediums, including (but not limited to): written poetry,[69] satirical performance,[70] hip-hop,[71] punk music,[72] visual culture, and more. This lineage of cultural dissent should also be considered alongside a wider heterogeneous movement of radical oppositional politics that Aung and Campbell refer to as the Myanmar Radical Tradition, a constitution of theory and practice grounded in anti-colonial and anti-capitalist political resistance and intellectual production.[73]

[66]I contextualise my inquiry in relation to the 2021 coup, cognisant of the limitations that such approaches to periodisation carry, given that the coup and its aftermath marked a significant moment of political transformation for resistance in Myanmar, as well as in shaping the subsequent exile of cultural practitioners. The history of revolt, rebellion, and resistance to military rule in Myanmar and the diaspora is beyond the scope of this paper. For scholarship of this nature, see, for example, David Brenner, *Rebel Politics: A Political Sociology of Armed Struggle in Myanmar's Borderlands* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); David Brenner, 'Misunderstanding Myanmar through the lens of democracy', *International Affairs*, 100:2 (2024), pp. 751–69; Hilary Oliva Faxon, Jenny Hedström, Nicole T. Venker, Zin Mar Phyo, and Mi Mi, 'Revolutionary countryside: A feminist counter-topography of war in Myanmar', *Geoforum*,159 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2024.104164; Elliott Prasse-Freeman, *Rights Refused: Grassroots Activism and State Violence in Myanmar* (Standford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023); Charlie Thame, 'Myanmar's redemptive revolution: Constituent power and the struggle for sovereignty in the Nwe Oo (Spring) Revolution', *European Journal of International Relations* (2024), pp. 152–77.

[67]'Myanmar aerobics instructor dances as military coup unfolds', Al Jazeera (2 February 2021), https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/2/myanmar-aerobics-instructor-dances-through-military-coup.

[68]This so-called return to military rule came after a decade of what is often referred to as a quasi-democratic transition in Myanmar. Despite the language of democracy and transition, for many ethnic minority communities in Myanmar (most acutely, the Rohingya community), the so-called transitionary decade prior to the 2021 coup was a continuation of the violent, ethnonationalist state-building project that continually perpetrated genocide, institutionalised sexual violence, rampant cultural assimilation ('Burmanisation'), and mass displacement within and beyond the country's contemporary borders. See Mandy Sadan, 'Can democracy cure Myanmar's ethnic conflicts?', *Current History*, 115:782 (2016), pp. 214–19.

[69]There is a rich history of writers and poets becoming elected officials in Myanmar. See Joseph Freeman, 'Why are there so many writers in Myanmar's new government?', *The New Republic* (30 March 2016), https://newrepublic.com/article/132199/many-writers-myanmars-new-government.

[70]Thanyat is a specific form of satirical theatre, poking fun at politicians and often prominent in street protests. See Verena Hölzl, 'Thangyat reloaded', Frontier Myanmar (30 April 2016), https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/thangyat-reloaded/.

[71]Phyo Zayar Thaw, who started Myanmar's first rap group, ACID, eventually was elected to parliament as an opposition politician. He was arrested following the 2021 coup and eventually executed by the junta in 2022: Ko Sai, 'Myanmar junta hangs two leading democracy activists', The Irrawaddy (25 July 2022), https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-hangs-two-leading-democracy-activists.html.

[72]'"Infernal damnation": Sküm, punk and the political in Burma', *South Asia@LSE* (18 September 2023), https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2023/09/18/infernal-damnation-skum-punk-and-the-political-in-burma/.

[73]Geoffrey Rathgeb Aung, and Stephen Campbell. 'The Myanmar radical tradition: revolution, reaction, and the changing imperial world order', *Dialectical Anthropology* (2024), *48*(2), pp.193–219.

Within this varied history of cultural dissent within Myanmar and the diaspora, censorship and surrealist practice co-produce a fascinating relation, much like the anti-colonial surrealists' practices previously explored. In moments of encounter, censorship and surrealism have shaped each other through time, to further depths of Orwellian (sur)realities in the country's history.[74] Specifically, this can be seen in the rich history of Burmese surrealist poetry,[75] where elusive rhetoric and double entendres were intentionally leveraged to evade colonial censorship, followed by decades of varying degrees of Burmese military censorship. Beyond literature, censorship practices have also been widespread across the visual arts in Myanmar, where censorship boards applied wide-ranging control on visual cultural production for decades.[76] Although the 'transitory' decade saw an easing of censorship practices in visual culture,[77] it was not a completely unrestricted space in which visual artists produced work. Post-2021 coup, many of those who were detained due to their involvement in popular protest were arrested under Section 505(a) of the penal code, a colonial vestige among many across the legal architecture.[78] Immediately following the coup, the junta also made key changes to the penal code, broadening the scope for suppression in public and cultural discourse.[79] This resulted in the acute targeting of protesters, journalists, and artists, in particular.

Sai's artwork in focus: Absurdity in the global order

The artist who goes by the pseudonym Sai is one of the many cultural practitioners who left Myanmar in the aftermath of the coup under such conditions.[80] Sai, who is from Shan State, Myanmar, creates artwork that is steeped in family history; his practice personally engages with the political violence inherent in military rule. Sai's father, a National League for Democracy (NLD) member,[81] was arrested by the Myanmar military in 2022 and remains in custody (at the time of writing). Sai's work engages with experiences of militarism and exile directly and, when read discursively, surfaces the affective undercurrents of political violence. But Sai's work does more than this too – it is also transformative of political relations produced by a hierarchical international order. While Sai's 'Trails of Absence' series demonstrates how intimacies – rather than gaps – between content and form are politically and aesthetically insightful, the poignant titling of the work (i.e. the poetic invocation to 'Please enjoy our tragedies') is where we can sense the politically transformative possibilities of aesthetic practice most vividly. Engaging through an anti-colonial surrealist epistemology allows us to see another aesthetic manifestation in which the demarcation between politics and art is blurred or otherwise collapsed.

'Trails of Absence'

'Trails of Absence' is a mixed media series which reappropriates the genre of the family portrait to surface the affective atmosphere of political imprisonment and military violence (Figures 1, 2, 3 & 4). The production of this series has a surreal story of its own. At the height

[74]That Orwell's own political and creative insights on state censorship, surveillance, and repression were formed as part of his experience in the British Imperial Police force in colonial Burma is an interesting aside to my overarching argument on form, representation, and (surreal) cultural practice – especially in colonial contexts.

[75]For an anthology of Burmese surrealist poetry, see Ko Ko Thett and James Byrne (eds), *Bones Will Crow: An Anthology of Burmese Poetry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

[76]Melissa Carlson, 'Painting as cipher: Censorship of the visual arts in post-1988 Myanmar', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 31:1 (2016), pp. 116–72.

[77]Ian Holliday and Aung Kaung Myat (eds), *Painting Myanmar's Transition* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2021).

[78]'Myanmar: Post-coup legal changes erode human rights', Human Rights Watch (2 March 2021), https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/02/myanmar-post-coup-legal-changes-erode-human-rights.

[79]'Myanmar: Penal Code amendments portend long-term repression – ARTICLE 19', ARTICLE 19 (11 May 2022), https://www.article19.org/resources/myanmar-penal-code-amendments-portend-long-term-repression/.

[80]Sai meaning (close to) 'Mister' in the Shan language.

[81]The NLD being the pro-democracy party in Myanmar founded by Aung San Suu Kyi, among others.

Figure 1. 'Trails of Absence' series, by Sai, at Doh Ayay exhibition, shown at Poush, Paris in February 2023. Image used with permission from artist.

of the protest movement in Myanmar, Sai went into hiding and supported the movement from behind the scenes, through design and creative production (of posters, stickers, protest manuals, etc.). After his father's arrest, he and his partner decided to make the dangerous journey to Taunggyi, Shan State, where his mother was being kept under house arrest in the compound where his family lived. He decided to document this moment by smuggling his camera into their luggage, concealed by his partner's underwear.[82] The strategy proved effective as they crossed multiple military checkpoints on the journey from Yangon to Taunggyi. Eventually, they snuck into the compound, reuniting with his mother. This reunion formed the basis of this series, ghostly and sombre as it is in tone. Sai posed in his father's NLD uniform, in order to 'embody his spirit'. Sai and his mother hold a string in many of the photographs, symbolising attachment and (dis)connection with his father. Sai's father's non-presence glides along the string in the pieces, twisting along ripples in the fabric upon which they are printed – fabric that is infinitely more transportable and concealable than delicate print paper. Pieces of textile from the clothing of political prisoners, woven to mimic Shan carpets, were smuggled out of prison and now cover the faces of the subjects in the series.

The result is a kind of haunting – a cool estrangement blankets the pieces. Familiarities like home and the family photo are rendered eerie through the uncanny presence of a single string and the lack of facial recognition in the pieces. From the anonymisation of the subjects' faces by textiles sourced directly from political prisoners to the use of fabric itself rather than photo paper, we see how form is intimately related to political content in this series. Like the threads used in this work, a focus on intimate connections (rather than a gap) between form and content moves us closer to the ethnographic imperative of making the familiar strange and the strange familiar. As we saw in the praxis of the anti-colonial surrealists, the interrelation between form and content, both the impossibility of their uncoupling and the thread that binds them, is politically and aesthetically salient. However, although framed differently (in terms of a relational intimacy versus a gap), such an engagement

[82]This approach is underpinned by a cultural norm which sees women's underwear as dirty, unlucky, and to be avoided.

Figure 2. 'Trails of Absence' series, by Sai, at Doh Ayay exhibition, shown at Poush, Paris in February 2023. Image used with permission from artist.

Figure 3. 'Trails of Absence' series, by Sai, at Doh Ayay exhibition, shown at Poush, Paris in February 2023. Image used with permission from artist.

up to this point does not *necessarily* call for an alternative epistemological positioning to make sense of the series. Although the surrealist form, like that of the anti-colonial surrealists previously explored, was intertwined with the 'content' and therefore historically contingent, representationally focused analyses might be enough here. Crucially, though, Sai's intervention does not simply

Figure 4. 'Trails of Absence', by Sai, series at Doh Ayay exhibition, shown at Poush, Paris in February 2023. Image used with permission from artist.

stop here, and although the transformative political possibility in his artwork draws on a different surrealist method, i.e. irony and humour, it is vital to have engaged with the aesthetic and political insights in this series to get to grips with such possibilities. Therefore, although I argue for an epistemic reorienting in this paper, such shifts can also build on and add to representationally-oriented approaches.

Figure 5. 'Trails of Absence' series, by Sai, at Doh Ayay exhibition, shown at Poush, Paris in February 2023. Image used with permission from artist.

'Please enjoy our tragedies'

As we recall from the vignette that opened this section, pasted on the floor in proximity to the 'Trails of Absence' series, framing it for the audience, was Sai's most cutting aesthetic intervention to 'Please enjoy our tragedies' (Figure 5). Harking back to the writings of Suzanne Césaire, this intervention is an ironic subversion, grounded in a sort of 'laughing insolently, aggressively'.[83]

This creative indictment starts from and is concerned with questions that continually vex critical art practices around the nature of political artistic practice, the role of the audience, and the politics of cultural consumption. What does it mean to engage with art that is deemed explicitly 'political' in the post-imperial core? And what are the power dynamics implicit here? Sai's intervention seeks to sardonically, humorously ask these questions, often implicit or unspoken in work and exhibitions of this kind, without providing easy answers. Setting aside the politics of enjoyment

[83] Césaire, *The Great Camouflage*, p. 37.

invoked by the series,[84] inseparable from such consumption is a complex web of capital – material, social, and cultural – constituted by the global art world and, increasingly, NGOs and non-profits which often fund such work following the liberal imperatives of 'freedom of expression' and the worldwide defence of democracy.[85] This show broadly maps onto such tendencies. It was curated and organised by the Agency for Artists in Exile (*l'atelier des artistes en exil*),[86] a non-profit funded by various French government departments, among other foundations and funders. The omnipresence of this circulation of capital lurks in the gallery, it is the sometimes-invisible force that brought all this work into this space, after all. The politics are baked into the curatorial and programmatic imperatives that underpin such initiatives.

Without downplaying the real and devastating impacts of military violence and displacement on the artists supported by this organisation and organisations of its kind, and while still bearing in mind the services offered to participating artists, such as temporary asylum support, there is a wider political economy underlying this form of cultural production. Here, artists from authoritarian (read: post-colonial) contexts bear the burden of representing their tragedies, couched in national terms. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the afterlives of colonial relations are left largely unexamined by such programmes and projects in the post-imperial core, whose organisational social capital benefits from the consumption of tragedy in a cultural economy underpinned by broader political upheaval, while state-sponsored material capital keeps such organisations funded, their employees in the West salaried. In the context of this extractive model reflective of global inequalities, an anti-colonial surrealist approach, with its roots in historical materialist analysis, necessitates an attention to such circulations of capital (material and social). Indeed, thinking with hegemony is vital to understanding the very potency of Sai's critique in the first place. However, an anti-colonial surrealist approach simultaneously seeks to push beyond such insights too, to then *realise* refusal in contexts of structural violence.

Here, like with the anti-colonial surrealists, the political contexts of cultural production are vital – they are themselves the creative impetus. According to Sai, 'Please enjoy our tragedies', as a poetic intervention, was born from the repeated apathy that he was met with during his time in an artist residency in London. Over the course of his residency, he attempted to utilise art, advocacy, and academic spaces as a platform for engaging various publics about the urgency of the political situation in Myanmar, as well as the violent impacts of military rule, more broadly. In many cases, he was met with surface-level pleasantries but no meaningful solidaristic action. He reflected on the impetus of the series, saying:

> I didn't receive any kind of help from human rights organisations. I've been waiting, waiting from 2021 since the day my father was [imprisoned]. I've been patiently waiting and seeing how things will unfold. They say that they will help and then they ghost you. I just had to find a way by my own terms. The British government, even though they colonised Burma, they didn't help at all. There is no accountability or responsibility. This is basically my whole experience in the UK: I have to beg people to show this work. So, I wanted to make a statement even in the name of the [series] as a big fuck you to the whole experience.

[84]For a theorisation of the politics of enjoyment in relation to constructions of political subjectivity, see Uygar Baspehlivan, 'Cucktales: Race, sex, and enjoyment in the reactionary memescape', *International Political Sociology*, 18:3 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olae026.

[85]See Hanan Toukan, *The Politics of Art: Dissent and Cultural Diplomacy in Lebanon, Palestine, and Jordan* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021), for an extensive and insightful study of the interrelationship between capital and the NGO-isation of arts funding in post-colonial contexts (in relation to the Arab world, specifically). See also literature in the 'political turn' in contemporary art for related critiques, such as David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020); Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[86]'Agency of artists in exile' (n.d.), https://aa-e.org/en/.

> You can call it satirical, you can call it dark humour. For me, it is absurdity, I just want to express the absurdity that I've been facing; this Kafka situation.[87]

Through the formulation of this simple intervention, we see how surrealist humour punctures an apathy to 'the futility of everyday life', as Ménil characterises it, in the current post-colonial moment.[88] Sai's experiences in the West, like many whose lives are conditioned by the violence of increasingly securitised border regimes and post-colonial upheaval, are absurdly Kafkaesque, as he puts it. Many exiled cultural producers, including Sai, have even been accused of so-called asylum shopping while navigating the bureaucratic violence of the global border regime, layers of personal trauma, and the risk of military retaliation at home against family and friends. His experience and subsequent aesthetic response reflect the violent political (sur)reality lived at the intersection of post-colonial upheaval and the politics of bordering in post-imperial contexts. Here, we can sense how Sai reappropriates the absurdity produced by this collection of interrelated violences. The resulting bitterness is played back to audiences in the post-imperial core. It was always ours to wade through, and so Sai refuses to hold it. The absurdity is thus returned to the audience, its burden is heavily felt.

Sai's invocation surfaces the complex affective economy that we participate in when we engage with aesthetic interventions. The artwork lays bare the absurdity of a cultural consumption economy, whereby audiences in post-imperial contexts, such as Paris and London, consume trauma, tragedy, and abject violence happening 'elsewhere', with no direct engagement of our own place in the global order. The series utilises satire to play with this notion, using this implicitly felt, but rarely voiced, affective mood as source. We sense how a reappropriation of the power relations underscoring the global order is utilised in the artwork. It is a refusal by transgressive humour, which, according to Ménil, 'explodes the stagnant fixtures or institutions that immobilize (individual or social) life'.[89] In this case, the stagnant fixtures or institutions are unspoken normalisations of a hierarchical global order, where the violent afterlives of colonialism still dictate the lives of post-colonial subjects, which in turn is met with widespread apathy in the post-imperial core. As such, Sai's intervention satirises (and refuses) the subjective positioning of an apolitical audience. It challenges conventional and simplistic notions of 'art as resistance to authoritarian rule *elsewhere*' by turning this trope on its head and implicating a wider aperture with which to engage notions of power, global politics, and resistance. This is more than a novel rendering of military violence or an arresting portrayal of exile; it is thus *more* than a representation of politics located elsewhere (both analytically and geographically). It is a reformulation of political relations, a refusal of terms. Here, the art *is* the politics. Like the writing of the anti-colonial surrealists, there is no gap between 'the representation' and 'what is being represented'.

Thus, the epistemic shift I am gesturing towards asks what it would mean to see Sai's aesthetic interventions as something more than a new way to think about politics *through* aesthetics. Rather, using an anti-colonial surrealist epistemic positioning towards aesthetic politics, as outlined by the anti-colonial surrealists, opens a more expansive understanding of how Sai's interventions are themselves politically transformative. Not only does the 'Trails of Absence' series necessitate an attention to the intimacies between the form–content relationship (both in terms of the physical material of the pieces themselves, as well as the broader surrealist aesthetic which underpins the work), but a grounding in material analysis also requires an attention to circulations of capital which makes such work possible, visible, or mobile in the first place. Yet, even in relations of structural violence, the use of absurdist humour allows for a puncturing – a refusal – to implicitly reproduce current relations. Reading this work namely for what it is representative of (politics/content), without a historically grounded attention to the medium (art/form), and how these two

[87] Quote from interview in February 2023.
[88] Richardson and Fijalkowski (eds), *Refusal of the Shadow*, p. 162.
[89] Richardson and Fijalkowski (eds), *Refusal of the Shadow*, p. 169.

aspects of aesthetic interventions hang together, misses its political possibilities. Not only this, representationally focused analyses lack the epistemological framework to engage with aesthetic sites where the representational 'gap' is non-existent, as was the case for the two manifestations of surrealism explored. In post-colonial contexts marked by ubiquitous violence, where we might expect such gaps to be narrow or absent, this is an important epistemological reorienting.

Broadening our scope of what constitutes political practice in relation to aesthetic practice, and thus who political actors are, has lived impacts. The question of who is treated as a political actor by whom, and who is forgotten or neglected, does indeed have life-or-death consequences. This is no clearer or starker than in the case of Myanmar's military junta, who make no hesitation in classifying artists and cultural producers as politically dangerous, evidenced in their detaining, torturing, and killing of hundreds who have created artwork criticising military rule across the country.[90] Indeed, the violence exercised by the junta in Myanmar against cultural producers creates the very conditions of exile which dictate Sai's everyday, as well as others navigating such realities.[91] Beyond implications for cultural practitioners alone, the work of the anti-colonial surrealists explored and Sai's interventions push us to consider what resistance to subjugation might look like in concert with a politics of refusal to reify the current international world order, especially in contexts of overlapping subjugation.

Concluding thoughts

In this paper, I have made the case for the need to consider what anti-colonial surrealist praxis could mean for theorising at the intersection of aesthetics and international politics. I developed this epistemic positioning against a simple question: is representation enough to understand the aesthetic-political? To address this question, first, I identified a tension in the aesthetic politics literature grounded in the limits of representationally focused epistemes, which, I argue, works against the stated critical posturing of the subdiscipline by reproducing the assumption of a normative gap between artistic practice and politics. I then showed how surrealist praxis might help us move past this limitation through a contextual reading of surrealist texts from anti-colonial writers from Martinique, focusing on the work of Suzanne Césaire, Aimé Césaire, and René Ménil. In doing so, I demonstrated how representationally focused analyses alone obscure the more expansive political possibilities of aesthetic interventions. I pointed to the transformative potential of engaging through an anti-colonial surrealist epistemology, by drawing attention to the historical intimacies (rather than gaps) between content and form, while laying bare how contexts of subjugation can render the 'representational gap' otherwise indiscernible. To bring this epistemological framing to the contemporary moment, I engaged with artwork from Sai, an artist exiled from Myanmar, drawing out how cultural form and histories of domination interrelate, as well as how aesthetic practice plays active, co-constitutive roles in the making of political possibility. Ultimately, I have argued that surrealism is beyond a (European cultural) movement, a selection of methods, a genre, or a set of ideas. Instead, I have positioned anti-colonial surrealist praxis as an epistemology, one that embodies a form of *epistemic refusal*, or a knowledge system which refuses dominant and dominating ways of knowing.

An implicit irony in all of this concerns the genre in which it manifests, arguably in one of the most rational, reasoned, and logical forms possible. Academic writing perpetuates the notion of rationally based arguments as the only legitimate ones. What I have aimed to flesh out in this piece is how surrealist praxis refuses such epistemic capture. Although I have intentionally aimed to hold academic form lightly in parts, that I have done so in a medium which still ultimately works against this normative direction is the irony which haunts this intervention. Here, we might

[90] Freemuse, 'Myanmar, hunted, jailed and killed: Artists victims of conflict', in *The State of Artistic Freedom 2023* (2024), pp. 53–60. https://www.freemuse.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/saf-2023-compressed.pdf.

[91] Banki, Susan. 'Art is happening in Myanmar, and outside of it: Transnational solidarity art', *Globalizations*, 20:7 (2023), pp. 1048–64.

think of new tools or methods to make sense of the aesthetic political. How might we disrupt the location of knowledge production to consider how artistic practice and cultural production could push the boundaries of traditional knowledge creation in the social sciences? The turn towards creative practice as research, co-production, and research creation might begin to address these questions.[92]

In this paper, I have sought to reread sources familiar to critical IR (such as anti-colonial thought), in dialogue with literatures largely treated as analytically separate to date (i.e. aesthetic politics). Throughout, I have aimed to reframe how extant approaches to the aesthetic in IR obscure wider political insights and possibilities. Put simply, I have argued that we are missing a key site of resistance and refusal, which is often treated as only an entry point. The stories of exile and displacement, which form the violent underbelly of this research, have shown how cultural producers bear the brunt of this oversight in wider societal terms.[93] Sai's is but one story that is exemplary of the absurdity inherent in the current postcolonial order. Beyond the specificity of cultural producers themselves, this analysis opens up wider questions of how we constitute the political and what is at stake in such theorising. Within this imperative, it is critical that we continue to look beyond traditional subjects, sites, *and* ways of knowing to consider questions of power, resistance, and refusal anew.

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[92]Natalie Loveless, *How to Make Art at the End of the World: A Manifesto for Research-Creation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

[93]These are stories echoed throughout a wider ongoing research project, which engages a multitude of cultural practitioners who have fled Myanmar since the 2021 coup and are now residing across the world in Asia, Europe, and North America.

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