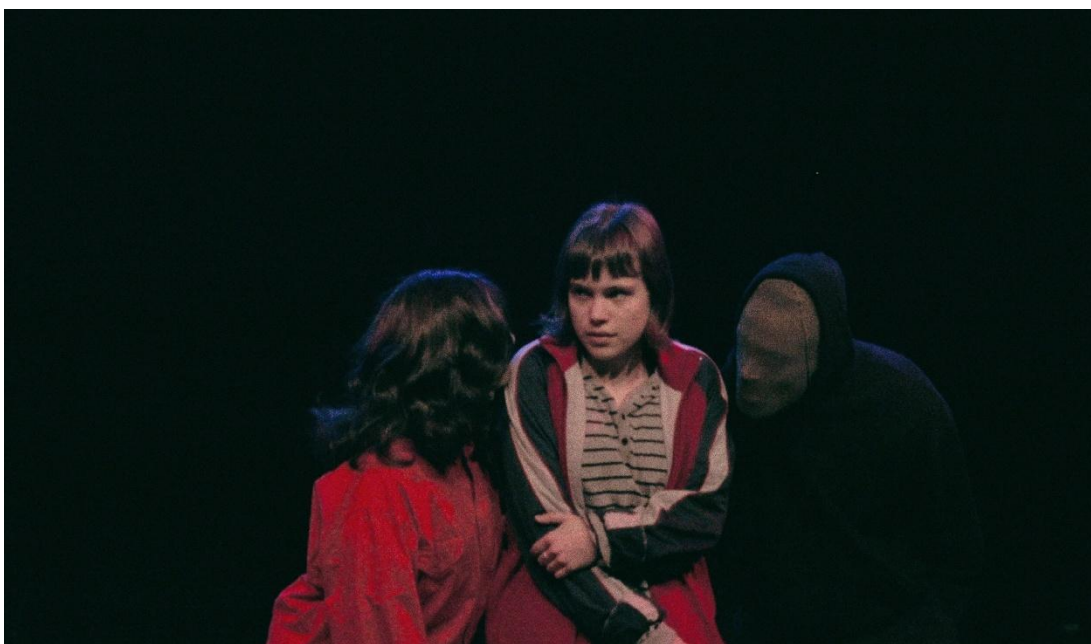


An Exploration of The Foundational Concepts of Afro-surrealism

As a Psychosocial Phenomenon in Theatrical and
Non-Theatrical Spaces

IKENNA UGOCHI ANYABUIKE



ABSTRACT

29/03/25

AUTHOR Ikenna Ugochi Anyabuike	MASTER'S OR OTHER DEGREE PROGRAMME Master's Degree Programme in Directing
TITLE OF THE WRITTEN COMPONENT/THESIS An Exploration of The Foundational Concepts of Afro-surrealism	NUMBER OF PAGES + APPENDICES IN THE WRITTEN COMPONENT 46 pages
TITLE OF THE ARTISTIC/ ARTISTIC AND PEDAGOGICAL WORK MANNEQUIN DREAMS. Premiered January 31st, 2025, Studio 3, TEAK Recording: https://vimeo.com/1053757498 . The artistic work is produced by the Theatre Academy. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The artistic work is not produced by the Theatre Academy (copyright matters have been agreed upon). <input type="checkbox"/> There is no recording available for the artistic work. <input type="checkbox"/>	
<p>This thesis is an attempt to create the foundational groundwork for the performance theory of Afro-surrealism. Afro-surrealism is a new artistic movement spanning across different mediums. As a result of this recency the information on Afro-surrealism is scarce in comparison to other artistic movements. This scarcity of information is particularly acute when the concepts of Afro-surrealism interact with the theatre. This essay will attempt to mend these issues within the field. I am an Afro-surrealist, and this theoretical framework has informed my craft and was critical to my practical thesis. As a result, I will attempt to provide well-researched clarity to the artform by outlining its historical connection to surrealism but emphasizing the points where Afro-surrealism deviates. It is important to note that Afro-surrealism is not a subgenre of surrealism but its own artistic movement. The connections to surrealism are both to contextualize the history of Afro-surrealism and provide a digestible timeline for future research. Additionally, I will attempt to discern what makes something Afro-surreal and how Afro-surrealism functions in theatrical and non-theatrical spaces, as this dynamic is crucial to understanding its artistic potency. I will distill these concepts into three main points inspired by decolonial literature. These three concepts are social death, ontological resistance, and Black potentiality. All this information will be explored within the framework of the theatre. Additionally, there will be discussion on how these concepts should be utilized and the mental care needed to continue to engage with them. This paper also documents my personal artistic journey and highlights how Afro-surrealism exist both in and out of the theatre depending on societal dynamics or directorial guidance. I discuss in depth my practical thesis and its effect on my perception of Afro-surrealism. I discuss navigation of institutional and personal hurdles as well as the mechanism that can be unlocked in the rehearsal process. The goal of this paper is to expand and deepen the research on Afro-surrealism and provide a foundation that can guide future practitioners towards a new exciting artistic movement as well as providing much needed information on Afro-surrealism's foundational concepts as it relates to theatre.</p>	
KEYWORDS Afro-Surrealism, Neocolonialism, Theatre, Performance, Violence, Decolonisation, Blackness, Revolution, Identity, Potentiality	

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION	4
2. AFRO-SURREALISM WITHIN THE SURREALIST MOVEMENT	7
2.1. <i>Early Signs of Shared Goals</i>	8
2.2. <i>Neocolonialism and The Current Afro-Surrealist Movement</i>	9
2.3. <i>Informational Frameworks and The Afro-Surrealist</i>	11

3. WHAT MAKES SOMETHING AFRO-SURREAL? HOW DOES AFRO-SURREALISM FUNCTION?	15
3.1. <i>The Social Death of Blackness</i>	16
3.2. <i>The Horror of Ontological Resistance</i>	20
3.3. <i>The Potentiality of Blackness as a Form of Surrealist Disalienation</i>	24

4. THE CONNECTION OF AFRO-SURREALISM TO THEATRICAL FORMS AND DEVICES: CASE STUDY 'MANNEQUIN DREAMS'	27
4.1. <i>Interconnectedness of Lived Experience and Creative Output</i>	27
4.2. <i>An Afro-Surreal Process</i>	31
4.3. <i>Discovery in the Rehearsal Process</i>	35

5. CONCLUSIONS	41
----------------	----

References

Appendices

1. INTRODUCTION

Afro-surrealism is the complex interplay between the ontological interrogation of Blackness and the reclamation of an inherent surreality within the experiences of Black people. While surreality can exist on a spectrum regarding different groups, Afro-surrealism is unique in its expression. This is because of its ties to colonial history and the relationships between racialised imagery, socioeconomic discourses, and Black performance. In this sense, Afro-surrealism is simultaneously a series of artistic sensibilities, tastes and perspectives manifested on stage whilst also being a metatheatrical phenomenon that calls into question the very nature of our racialised world. Within the theatre, the vestiges of colonialism, disenfranchisement and stereotyping all create a tension and a violence that can aid or hinder the creative process. In the words of the philosopher, playwright, and psychologist Frantz Fanon “I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning... and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects” (Fanon 82).

Afro-surrealism is unique, not only due to how it constructs theatre, but also in how it explores the dissonance that occurs in perpetuity once the theatrical space is removed. To be an Afro-surrealist is to acknowledge that your very existence in society is a surreal performance that you never consented to and cannot stop. This temporal, phenomenological, psychosocial phenomena give Afro-surrealism its artistic potency. It is responding to and deconstructing current realities and their interplay with past histories of colonialism. In the words of D. Scott Miller in his 2009 *Afrosurreal Manifesto* that “The future has been around so long it is now the past. Afro-Surrealists expose this from a ‘future-past’ called RIGHT NOW” (Miller 2).

This duality of artistic practice versus experiential phenomena is maintained and informed through the current organisation of both our economic systems and psychosocial perspectives. Thus, any accurate exploration of Afro-surrealism must situate itself in explaining the constructs that enhance that surreality within and outside of the theatre. It must contextualise the present. Additionally, it is important to understand and address the usage of the term ‘Afro’ within Afro-surrealism. Miller actively highlights that Afro-surrealism encompasses “a shared

language between Black, brown and Asian peoples of the world” (Miller 2). However, in a 2016 article titled *‘Afrosurreal: The Marvelous and The Invisible 2016’* Miller rejects the desire to erase the artistic and political implications of Afro-surrealism from black radical thought, lambasting those who would seek to relegate it to a subgenre or conflate it with Afrofuturism (‘Open Space’ Miller).

Miller emphasises that technological advancements will not solve ontological dispositions, stating that individuals “have attempted to use its tenets and lexicon without acknowledging the Manifesto or the movement” (‘Open Space’ Miller). I highlight and am grateful to D. Scott Miller for formulating a cohesive structure and useful coinage to a fascinating phenomenon. However, there are still various complexities that need to be addressed regarding Afro-surrealism. A prime example of what makes mapping out the intricacies of Afro-surrealism so difficult is the oscillation between the surrealist movement, Black revolutionary/Pan-African thought and lived experience of oppressed groups. This relationship with the Western surrealist movement creates a fragmentary, non-linear timeline where the surrealists influenced the revolutionary perceptions of individuals who would then go on to inspire Afro-surrealist literature and vice-versa. From its embryonic stages the surrealist movement was focused on how “to manifest the emancipatory potential of surrealist experience” (Lusty 63). This interconnected web of artistic taste, political activism, Black performance theory and materialist analysis coalesce into a unified whole that has deep theatrical and creative potential. However, whilst surreality can exist through other vectors the prime example that shall be used during these discussions is ‘race’ and the inherent surreality that comes from Blackness along with its potential for artistic discovery. In doing so I shall attempt to describe how Afro-surrealism functions in the performative sense as there is scant research on this topic. Furthermore, there will be an analysis of a play I wrote and directed titled ‘Mannequin Dreams’ which was born from my afrosurreal perspective. Both the play and the environment it was created in provided ample information to me about the translation of Afro-surrealism on stage and in my personal artistic journey.

Lastly it is important to note that although I have done my best to deliver the following information in a precise manner, this paper is still simply scratching the

surface of what is undoubtedly a growing artistic language. A language made more complex due to its inextricable connection to what was already a dense philosophical, politically charged practice. My goal in writing this is to simultaneously document my artistic progress, whilst also creating a foundation for future practitioners to reflect on and deepen their practice both on and off the stage. In the words of the poet and decolonial thinker Aimé Césaire “surrealism provided me with what I had been confusedly searching for...It was a weapon that exploded...It shook up absolutely everything” (Césaire 83).

2. AFRO-SURREALISM WITHIN THE SURREALIST MOVEMENT

When analysing Afro-surrealism it is extremely important to contextualise its connections to surrealist movement, particularly as there will be overlap and deconstruction of said theories in the following sections. It is crucial to understand that the surrealist movement was highly politically charged and decolonial. The surrealists disgust for the colonial pursuits of France in Morocco, their admiration of the 1917 Russian revolution as the precursor to a greater cultural revolution and their contempt for patriarchal, colonial forms of thinking placed them in constant friction with the artistic circles they frequented (Spiteri and LaCoss 1-2; 25). By the end of the Spanish Civil War, they found themselves supporting anarchists and Trotskyists (Spiteri and LaCoss 5). While the group's political interest in Russia as a site of revolutionary potential would suffer due to the totalitarian inclinations of Stalin. The decolonial fervour for surrealism would only increase.

Surrealists wanted a mass change in societal cognition as exemplified by Breton in his 1936 London advertisement which posed a response to the question ‘What is Surrealism?’ In this advertisement Breton characterises surrealism as “As a deliberate and even a desperate attempt to transform the world...you will not be able to ignore it” (Dempsey 67). For Breton, surrealism was always an artistic movement that was meant to give rise to a greater societal and cognitive change. For the Afro-surrealist the inverse is true: the progression of psychosocial texts found in the work of Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Frank B. Wilderson and countless others allowed for crystallisation of ideas that had been previously fragmented. The story of Afro-surrealism is not a linear one. D. Scott Miller wrote the Afro-surrealist manifesto in reference to Amiri Baraka’s analysis of the work of Henry Dumas. Baraka used the phrase Afro-surreal expressionism and Miller (with approval from Baraka) crafted the term Afro-surrealism (‘Afro-surrealism’ Bakare; Miller 1).

2.1. Early Signs of Shared Goals

In 1941 both André Breton and Aimé Césaire met. Césaire stated that after discussions with Breton he felt that “there was a complete convergence between my research and Surrealist research” (Spiteri and LaCoss 141). Césaire’s work in question being the foundational concepts for Pan-Africanism and post-colonial thought. Breton similarly wrote that he felt a “close communion” in their meeting (Spiteri and LaCoss 141). By 1947, Breton would write “the emancipation of people of colour can only be the work of those people themselves, with all the implications inherent in that” fully cementing the anticolonial trajectory of the surrealist movement (Spiteri and LaCoss 144). This era of mutual informational exchange highlights a pivotal moment for both the surrealists and the modern Afro-surrealists. It is important to note that while Césaire never formally joined the surrealist movement, his writings on the experiential nature of surrealism are critical to understanding the modern Afro-surrealist perspective.

The late 1950s and early 1960s are often characterised as the twilight of the surrealist movement. Nevertheless, the decolonial action only increased in these years. There was the protest of the French occupation of Algeria and the Soviet invasion of Hungary as well as the continual support of civil rights both within France and on the international stage (Lusty 342). However, most books discussing the surrealist movement choose to end it around this period, often citing the death of André Breton in 1966 as a point at which the movement fizzled out. Although the surrealist movement was highly rebellious and politically forward thinking, they also refused any form of organisational militancy resulting in a situation where concrete goals and political aims developed “an intangible character” (Lusty 77). However, scholars vastly underestimate the cultural impact that surrealism had created amongst oppressed groups, as well as international discussions that would further crystallise the foundational aspects of Afro-surrealism. After all, this was the civil rights era, and surrealism lay around. For many it was a cultural revolution and a resistance to the status quo. The time was discussed through surreal terms. Scholars noted how in the protest movements of the United States the “surrealist spirit was soon making its presence felt just about everywhere. Distrust of authority, defiance of injustice, and passionate yearning for Freedom Now!” (King and Susik 7). Note here how surrealism is defined by its political aesthetics not

just its artistic sensibilities, it is from this root that Afro-surrealism evolves. Here we see plays such as *'Funnyhouse of a Negro'* by Adrienne Kennedy and *'Dutchman'* by Amiri Baraka two plays that explore blackness through a lens of surreality employing a deconstruction of race and circumstance. During this same time discussions regarding the resurgence of neocolonialism began to take place. This is a crucial fact of information to understand when contextualising Afro-surrealism within the surrealist movement.

2.2. Neocolonialism and The Current Afro-Surrealist Movement

When Miller states “Afro-Surrealists expose this from a ‘future-past’ called RIGHT NOW” (Miller 2), he is referring to how previous colonial devices and structures were not fully erased but instead restructured to dissolve the most transparent aspects of their violence. That does not mean progress has not occurred with regards to civil liberties. Instead, it shifts focus to understand that progression happens both ways. As people progress with their desire for emancipation, so do the mechanisms which continue their subjugation. The article *'Neocolonialism Is Dead, Long Live Neocolonialism'* by Godfrey N. Uzoigwe, defines neocolonialism as “the nature of relations after independence between European powers and their former colonies of the non-European world” (Uzoigwe 62). It is unsurprising that theatres created work around this time that showed Blackness through a lens of temporal distortion. *'Funnyhouse of a Negro'* depicts characters like the Duchess of Hapsburg, Patrice Lumumba and Jesus in the isolated thoughts of a young Black woman in America discussing her mixed ancestry alone in a New York apartment. Similarly, *'Dutchman'* features two characters drenched in symbolism talking on a train, before an explosion of racial violence occurs and the events reset, destined to occur again.

In both texts the temporality is blurred due to the dissolution of what was previously transparent colonial violence. As the world transitioned into the 1970s and 1980s, discussions of neocolonialism became more fraught. Uzoigwe states that “neocolonialism, far from being dead, is alive...the difference between the old and new neocolonialism is that while the former was more transparent, the latter is more

sophisticated and devious and, indeed, more dangerous” (Uziogwe 65-66). The revolution of thought spoken of by the surrealists had begun to manifest. However, there was an ensuing backlash, a re-establishment of colonial cruelty and a reduction in the transparency of the past. One may rightly question why the Afro-surrealist manifesto did not come along during this time and instead arrived decades later within the 21st century. The answer is multifaceted.

One theory that I hold, is that due to Afro-surrealism’s connections to revolutionary scholarship, the amount of death and political violence during that era on a global stage, created an atmosphere of fear and paralysis around expression. This was succinctly encapsulated by the writer James Baldwin in his infamous 1973 interview with fellow acclaimed poet and writer Nikki Giovanni where he stated “when the holocaust comes, and it will come eventually-no matter how simple black and white terms may be today, life is not that simple-and sooner or later, if I do my work as I should do it, when I’m needed I’ll be there” (Baldwin & Giovanni 26-27). The era of civil rights and the neocolonialism that precipitated after (and some may rightly argue is still occurring to this day) created an inevitability to the ontological tensions that spurred the foundations of the Afro-surrealist movement. This era and its consequences were crucial to shaping a branch of philosophical thought commonly placed under the umbrella term ‘Afro-pessimism,’ a complex deconstruction of foundational perspectives of Blackness and its relationship with humanity.



Figure 1 'Apéritif chez Pierre Matisse' André Breton (Far left) with Aimé Césaire (Far right) Photo: Unknown

2.3. Informational Frameworks and The Afro-Surrealist

The proliferation of internet access has allowed for the transfer of information to happen with unprecedented speed. Unfortunately, it has also allowed the informational and perceptual biases of people to spread. Current research has shown that the internet has exploded with hate-speech and toxic rhetoric stating that “80% of people have encountered hate speech online and 40% have felt attacked or threatened via Social Network Sites [SNS]” -the main target of ire for this vitriol being social groups (Castano-Pulgarín 1). A disturbing aspect to this information was that normative behaviours found in individuals who consistently engaged in hate speech included, but were not limited to, defamations of character and calls to violence (Castano-Pulgarín 1).

In June of 2024, the United Nations published a report titled, *'Contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related*

intolerance' in this report grave concerns about the mass transfer of information through AI systems were highlighted. The report focused on how mass transfer of information has also led to a mass transfer of biases and perceptual deficits regarding AI systems, detailing how these complex systems could reinforce institutional biases between gender, sex, race and other denominators (K.P 7-9). Information is not neutral nor is it stable. The artistic frameworks we create function in the same way. For example, if the framework views your race as inherently performative what role does the theatre, then play as a form of perceptual emancipation? This revolution of artistic form and social cognition was crucial to the surrealists as I have laid out, and the global network of information and biases that we now exist in have made it equally crucial to the Afro-surrealist.

It is why the explosion of Afro-surrealist texts in the 21st century is unsurprising. From the works of Suzan-Lori Parks in texts like *'The America Play'* which take its structures from jazz compositions to more recent works like Arinze Kene's *'Misty'* or Jackie Sibblies Drury *'Fairview'* as we move into what many consider both the information/misinformation golden age, our ability to succinctly critique a phenomenon becomes clear. Similar to how the surrealists deconstructed the society of their time and actively resisted the colonial, white-supremacist inclinations. The Afro-surrealists continue in that legacy informed by revolutionary literature and Black scholarship. I would go as far as saying that based on all the information I have discussed, as well as the increase in anti-colonial rhetoric and action towards the latter stages of the surrealist movement; Afro-surrealism is the logical evolution of the surrealist movement. A movement that was inspired by psychology, decolonial scholars and a desire for a perceptual revolution made manifest through the pursuit of universal emancipation.

Some scholars may debate or disagree with the Afro-surrealist legacy, stating that "Afrosurrealism is not a counterculture in the sense that its terms are defined by the dominant culture it resists; rather, as the embodied, damaged surplus of this dominant culture" (King and Susik 154). Whilst I understand the thinking behind this sentiment, it vastly underestimates the inherent counterculture potential of deconstructing an individual's identity. The normative structures do not uphold this

perspective; if it did, neocolonialism would not be maintained in this current system. I also do not believe that Afro-surrealism is defined by the dominant culture it resists. Rather it is instead a reaction to the perceived neutrality of that dominant culture and its own place within culture. The Afro-surrealist realises that our current reality is not normal. Instead, it is unique in its abnormality. Its desire to codify this abnormality as normal is the ontological tension that the Afro-surrealist experiences. A tension which is defined by its ability to become violent at any moment

To conclude, the history of the Afro-surrealist movement consists of a fragmentary timeline which converges and diverges with the surrealist movement. As directors it is critical to understand the history of what we deconstruct on stage. Information and the lack of information are not neutral positions. Both have consequential outcomes on both how we treat the audience and the actors. An informed director allows for both careful considerations and wild implementation. To be an Afro-surrealist one must ask what surreality their given identity has placed them in and what informs that position. To quote Miller again- “in this land of buzzwords and catchphrases, Afro-Surreal is necessary to transform how we see things now, how we look at what happened then, and what we can expect to see in the future” (Miller 3).

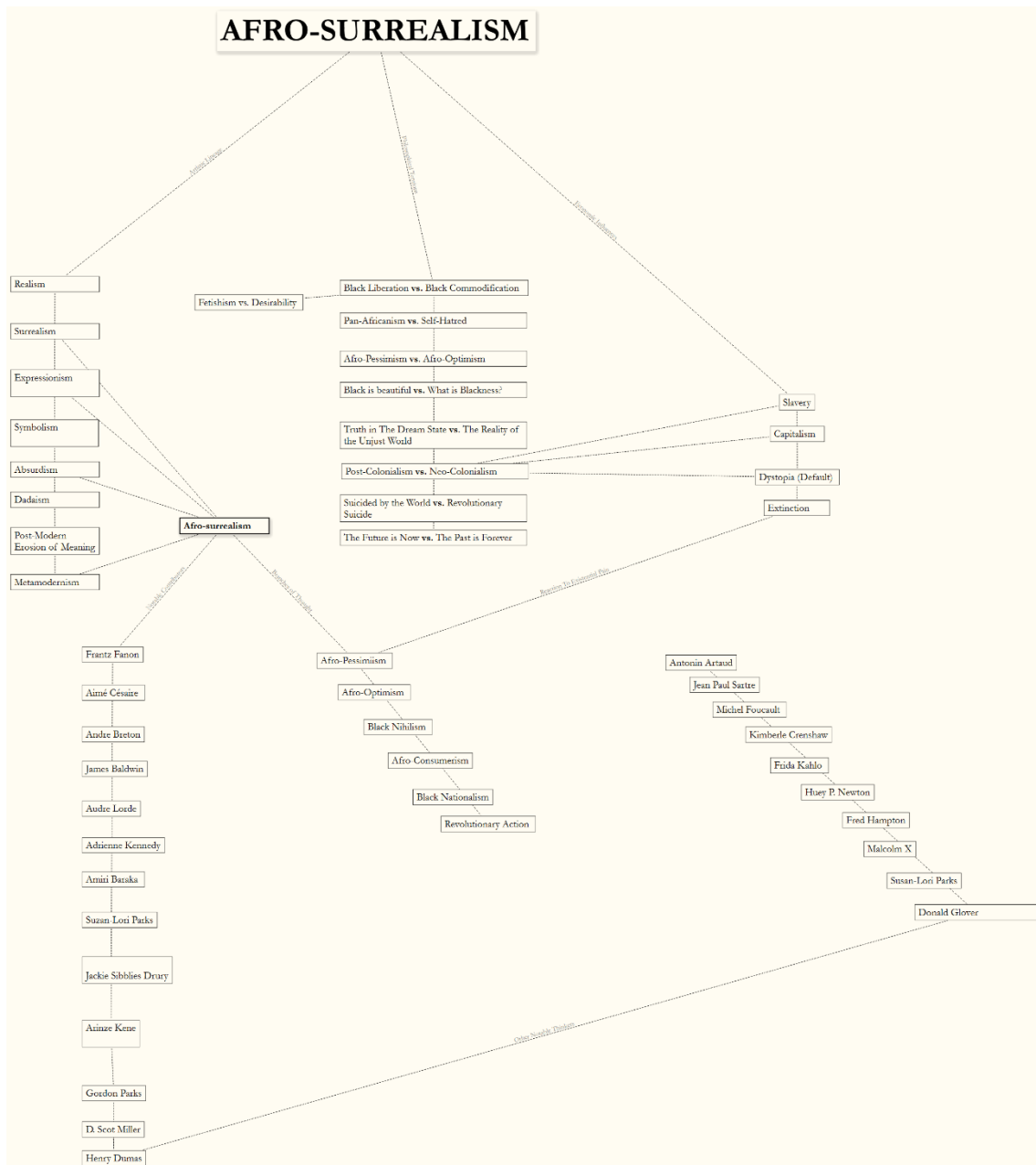


Figure 2 Afro-surrealism Mind Map Photo: Ikenna Anyabuike

3. WHAT MAKES SOMETHING AFRO-SURREAL? HOW DOES AFRO-SURREALISM FUNCTION?



Figure 3 'Mannequins Dreams' Act II Scene I Photo: Ikenna Anyabuike

A few caveats are needed from this point on to maintain a focus and clarity when discussing Afro-surrealism. The first being that surreality- the extent to which something is surreal, can fall on a spectrum through a myriad of psychosocial vectors. From this point on I will be using the discussion of Blackness as the vector in which I experience a never-ending surreality. My reason for doing this is twofold. The first being that I have provided ample evidence to show Afro-surrealism's deep connection to Black radical philosophy, the second being that my perceptual relationship to Blackness informed by Afro-surrealism was crucial in my practical thesis which shall be discussed later. Lastly, in the interest of brevity and succinctness. I will highlight what I feel like are the main contributing factors to Afro-surrealism. However, the goal is for a future Afro-surrealist to take these words and expand on what is a growing artistic movement.

Surrealism can be defined when something is “above realism” or “more than real” (Dempsey 11). Afro-surrealism highlights the inherent surreality of Blackness as an ontological relegation to a non-human entity. This has numerous creative and social implications that create a state of excitement if properly utilised on

stage. However, to fully understand Afro-surrealism we must analyse a few texts and place them within a theatrical context. While there are multiple layers in which to analyse Afro-surrealism. It functions as a theatrical device for three main reasons:

1. The ‘social death’ of Blackness both on and off the stage
2. The horror of ontological resistance.
3. The potentiality of Blackness as a form of surrealist disalienation.



Figure 4 'Mannequin Dreams' Final Scene Photo: Ikenna Anyabuike

3.1. The Social Death of Blackness

Now we shall expand upon the theatrical framework to explore the Afro-surrealist perspective. Earlier in this dissertation issues regarding AI models and the information they were gathering for their frameworks was highlighted. The perceived neutrality of information was brought into question. Theatre is inherently about representation, in similar ways every play is a framework of information, consumed by an audience- some of whom may be inspired to create their own works. However, when an individual has experienced social death and faces what Aimé Césaire called “the law of progressive

dehumanization” then we must analyse how they are represented on stage. In the case of Blackness, the answer is unfortunately quite ugly.

The book *‘Imperialism and Theatre’* by J. Ellen Gainor discusses how costume devices are utilised by colonial forces within theatre to signify a lack of humanity and civility. We are invited to question “the ways in which costuming on our stages has not simply involved transplanting European codes and fashions but formulating a complex, sometimes ambivalent, response to their underlying assumptions” (Gainor 103). Additionally, the article *‘Dark Continent, Dark Stage: Body Performance in Colonial Theatre and Cinema’* details how “the display of Blacks in colonial expositions aimed primarily to prove to Western visitors that Africans were savages to be civilized by the Empire” (Konkobo 1094). Within this text is an analysis of how bodies are treated under the colonial systems that readily subjugates and oppresses the perceptual nature of those bodies. This colonial framework transforms the very presence of black bodies into a fractured phenomenological costume. Meaning that their representation is meant to signify a truth. However, when confronted with the thing it represents, this colonial costume becomes indistinguishable from minstrelsy. This is supported by the historical accounts of human zoos which details how “Organizers of the zoo coached their ‘actors’ to perform ceaseless and violent physical movements, thus inducing animalistic behaviour and therefore justifying, among other things, the need to use brutality to civilize Africans during the conquest” (Konkobo 1097). Once again, we find a construction of Blackness as a non-human entity and the theatre as the reinforcement of that construction. Some may say that Blackness is a costume that cannot be removed because it was not made to identify but rather to dehumanise. Within Wilderson’s framework, the history of Western colonial theatre comes to represent the manifestation of social death on stage. Black bodies are dehumanised and exposed for the audience's titillation. Performers are made slaves to the perception of the audience and so are open to dishonour through the sheer existence of them as black actors.

A current example of this, is in the treatment of the up-and-coming, highly venerated Francesca Amewudah-Rivers in the Jamie Lloyd Company theatre group’s production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Rivers reported death threats, racist messages online,

hate mail both personally and to the theatre. The level of abuse was so great that friends and family members close to Rivers reported fearing for her safety (Khomami 1). The issue? She was a dark-skinned woman deemed to be inadequate for the role of Juliet. Her existence was deemed to be the core of the issue, her existence as a non-human entity in the eyes of white supremacist frameworks. To put it more bluntly; her Blackness prevented her from being considered human enough to represent anything. This absence of humanity left her open to be the lightning rod for gratuitous violence.

There can be a temptation to separate these colonial vestiges as something of the past, something that existed outside of theatre. An article by the Guardian posed the title *'Should we confront the toxic legacy of blackface ... or just forget it?'* discussed the transferral of minstrelsy from American stages to British theatre and British television, with the cancellation of shows like 'The Black and White Minstrel Show' only occurring in 1978 (Olusoga 1). Whilst I understand the thought process behind leaving sordid aspects of history behind. The sheer popularity of minstrelsy points to a far more pressing issue, an issue that should not be readily erased before it has been properly confronted. The history of minstrelsy is the history of theatre. The history of human zoos is the history of theatre. The history of blackface is the history of theatre. For the Afro-surrealist, a body on stage is inherently a political act, but a black body anywhere is a political intrusion. However, the Afro-surrealist recognises a dual-dynamism within Blackness on stage. Blackness is treated and perceived as a costume due to its linkage to colonialism and dehumanisation. Black people are made minstrels onstage and offstage. So, the Afro-surrealist can weaponize these biases against themselves through surrealism. This will be further discussed in the section on black potentiality.

One might argue that times have changed, that we are far removed from colonialism, but I think the perception of progress is both overstated and overexaggerated. The last globally recognised human zoo was only shut down in 1994 in France, after protests and consistent complaints about human trafficking, the scandal that was 'Bamboula village' ceased to be (Reix 6-7). During this period the word 'Bamboula' saw a resurgence in the usage as a slur for Black people highlighting the relationship that the process of dehumanisation shares both in theatrical and non-

theatrical spaces (Reix 5). In 2012, a German theatre company utilised blackface in a performance to portray an older black man, the director of the company justified this by stating he “couldn't find an elderly black actor who fit the role and could speak with a perfect German accent, we opted for blackface make-up” and emphasised that “blackface is part of a theatre tradition” (‘Germany's Schlosspark Theatre defends 'blackface' actor’). My goal is not to lambast or chastise these actions out of a moral distaste, it is instead to highlight that the representational aspects of theatre are tainted in the same way as our material reality.

For the Afro-surrealist both social death within the theatre and outside the theatre are an inevitability. They do not know when it will happen, only that it will. However, rather than simply submit to these false perceptions the Afro-surrealist recognises that maintenance of this social death is carried out through violence and that the tension and randomness of that violence can be depicted on stage to great effect. When we speak of violence it is also important to note the extent to which that violence is visible and explicit to the audience. Our current reality seeks to appear as neutral as possible; it attempts to obfuscate the violence and the intention behind that violence. The representation of violence is crucial to the Afro-surrealist because so much of their existence is defined by it and maintained by it. Nevertheless, that does not mean one can acquiesce to the concept of social death. Instead, one must find interesting ways to interrogate the randomness of violence. Where does the violence situate itself in the body of your actors? Where in the story can you place that threat of violence? Are the audience culpable in it? Are they willing participants? Are you interested in portraying your black actors as human? Or do you seek to add commentary to their existence by portraying them as something else? The inevitability of the violence should only add to its potency.

In conclusion it is important to note that the concept of social death has both real world and theatrical implications. Studies have shown that “high trauma exposure to experiences of implicit discrimination and explicitly racist behaviours, these stressors have a cumulative impact on mental health” (Webb et al. 1). An Afro-surrealist must keep this information in mind when creating work, as the mental strain could result in them compromising their health and wellbeing in pursuit of artistic

exploration, especially if they are from a marginalised background. The Afro-surrealist should maintain a healthy regimen of meditation, exercise and journaling to reflect on their progress, but also to prevent chronic stress issues which are incredibly common for marginalised communities. Research indicates that the allostatic load- a complex interplay of psychophysiological responses in response to stress was “significantly associated with racism-related stress...greater everyday discrimination was associated with higher allostatic load, even after adjusting for other health-related (e.g., medication use, smoking status) and psychosocial (e.g., depression symptoms, lifetime discrimination) factors” (Webb et al. 3). Similar to how the surrealists utilised psychoanalysis to inform their exploration into surreality. The Afro-surrealist must maintain an awareness of the psychological implications of their existence and tirelessly protect both their own mind and the mind and body of their actors.

3.2. The Horror of Ontological Resistance



Figure 5 Mannequin Dreams Act II Scene IV

“Nevertheless with all my strength I refuse to accept that amputation.” These are crucial words of Frantz Fanon when faced with the reality of an ever-present dehumanisation (Fanon 108). Focus should be drawn to the element of struggle and horror that this sentence contains, the refusal of permanent physical and mental scars at the hands of societal structures. The medicalised terminology. This weaponization of

personhood has been consistently framed as normal. This is where afrosurrealism finds its horror. The appeal to an inhumane structure that claims that a human being is deserving of respect, dignity, and rights under the legal system. This tension mediated by the refusal to accept injustice, even in the face of a cruel apparatus, is terrifying. The reality so generally perceived as normal to some, is deeply terrifying and barbaric to others. The inability for others to see this cruelty only makes the ontological resistance more terrifying. How do you convince society that you are human? If theatre is based on representation, how can Black humanness be represented as something that exists on stage if it is consistently undermined in the real world?

In September 2024, the British actor Reece Richards was coming home after performing in the musical tour for the show 'Hairspray,' there had been a robbery in his area and two men in a getaway car crashed close to his home. After pointing in the direction that the two individuals went, the police ignored his gestures and attacked him, pepper-spraying him whilst accusing him of committing the robbery. Richard stated that "I was confused, unable to understand why I was suddenly being treated like a criminal" (Ambrose 1). In the article *'Did You Mean Post-Traumatic Theatre?': The Vicissitudes of Traumatic Memory in Contemporary Postdramatic Performance* by Karen Jürs-Munby, an interrogation of the representational difficulties of trauma lead to the conclusion that the fragmentary experience of trauma and its resurgence lends it towards avant-garde or post-dramatic forms of theatre which can more closely represent a feeling, rather than a narrative cohesion that may or may not exist. Jürs-Munby also emphasises the role that media dissemination plays with regards to how we experience trauma, noting that the "context of a mass media society also complicates the question of traumatic memory, as 'most people encounter trauma through the media, which is why focusing on so-called mediatized trauma is important'" (Jürs-Munby 203). Realising that your categorisation is based in the desire to view you as a non-human entity is traumatising. Social death is traumatising and the representation of that social death in the history of theatre is also traumatising. Much of what the Afro-surrealist knows was conceptualised by and articulated through an immense amount of pain. A pain that one is forced to confront or overcome. This inevitable confrontation is where a tremendous amount of horror or the potential of horror may appear.

This horror is part of an ontological terror. A terror that is explored in the book *'Ontological Blackness, Nihilism and Emancipation'* by Calvin L. Warren. Warren uses a Heideggerian perspective to highlight that Blackness is inextricable from nothingness, a nothingness that can never be understood and is then open to insurmountable amounts of violence (Warren 2-4). Warren states that "Put differently, anti-Blackness is anti-nothing. What is hated about blacks is this nothing, the ontological terror, they must embody for the metaphysical world" (Warren 9). This perspective pushes the conceptualisation of Blackness past the view of an ontological non-human entity into the absence of something. Blackness becomes a void, characterised by its absence of being with the only engagement with this nothingness being the foundations of our modern world, a place where "black torture, dismemberment, fatality, and fracturing are routinized and ritualized—a global, sadistic pleasure principle" (Warren 2). This Black nihilism in the face of Afro-surrealism is a core aspect of the horror often explored in the artform. Ontological resistance is terrifying. Henry Dumas, a focal centre of the Afro-surrealist movement, the man who inspired Amiri Baraka, was a poet, writer, and activist. The highly venerated Maya Angelou once remarked that she was "impressed with his boldness of language and his boldness of breadth" (Ahmed 1). He was gunned down by a police officer whilst on a train. Now there exists a surreality between the life that exists in his work versus the brutality of his death. The ubiquity and randomness of violence that so frequently occurs whenever Blackness is present within our greater superstructure gives this ontological resistance its horror. The Afro-surrealist should explore the nature of horror in their plays, what vector does it take, how does it restrict, is it meaningless? Is the horror meant to unsettle the audience or the actors? Is the horror based on the perception of blackness as a non-human entity or as nothingness manifest?

It is also important to note that this horror is also unique in its ever-prevalent sense of paranoia. In the book *'Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness'* by Simone Browne. Brown discusses how the creation of race by colonial powers and the transferal of authoritative power over other races being gifted to colonial citizenry creates a form of mass surveillance. Both to increase the efficiency of the system of slavery as well as legitimise colonial ideology; an ideology which built much of the modern policing system. Modern forms of surveillance are incredibly racialised

both amongst white citizenry and amongst the fabric of society. The Orwellian dystopia is possible, but only when aided by white supremacy (Browne 20-22). Browne discusses the concept of dark sousveillance. A racialised form of observation popularised by unfair power dynamics in the colonial era, whilst surveillance comes from a top-down position, with individuals at the upper echelons of society looking down at the rest of the society. Sousveillance is the reverse, those at the lower rungs of society looking at the top. However, dark sousveillance racializes this dynamic, causing individuals who should be looking at those in the economic or social ladder above them to look at racialized groups at their same class levels (Browne 22). Browne continues to build her argument by connecting the surveillance apparatus to the history of branding from a modern, consumerist lens. Browne states that “commodity racism, that being to consume while at the same time alienating blackness. Collecting and consuming blackness, and black people, whether kitsch or corporeal, forms part of the larger history” (Browne 132). This commodification also informs the justification of dark sousveillance, hypervigilance is consumption of the non-human entity both out of fear but also out of curiosity. Once we add the previous section on social death. Dark sousveillance becomes inextricable from the spectacle of violence, in some cases it may even cause it.

One might naively say that this ontological terror is simply paranoia informed by historical trauma. However, Afro-surrealism asks us to contextualise the present. Research points to growing fascistic parties and sentiments across Europe as a combination of economic stagnation through neoliberal policies and the racialisation of immigration policies (Carnut 231-235; Williams & Etkins 194). Studies have also found that a result of discrimination “prior arrest history was associated with the prevalence of major depressive disorder among African Americans and Caribbean Blacks (Williams & Etkins 194). All of this is compounded by COVID-19 which had “a substantial economic strain worldwide, with the degree of impact varying across nations” (Ahmad Faramarzi et al. 9). As economic losses are blamed on minority communities as scapegoats there are growing concerns of the result of far-right radicalisation (Ayers 425). As an Afro-surrealist director you must ask yourself how you will display this ontological resistance. Which stances do you take, does Blackness symbolise nothing? Or that of a non-human entity? Are you causing the audience to engage in a dark

sousveillance of your actors? Or is there something watching your audience? These questions are necessary to unlock the radical potential and horror. The approaches be they nihilistic or otherwise allow for a freedom in the very presence that someone has on stage. How does temporality affect the feeling of horror? Do you draw a juxtaposition between this ‘future-past’ or seek to normalise it. What aspects of reality are normal for others but present some sort of resistance for you? As Afro-surrealist directors these are questions one should ask themselves when analysing the horror of ontological resistance.



Figure 6 *Mannequin Dreams Act 1 Scene II* Photo: Ikenna Anyabuike

3.3. The Potentiality of Blackness as a Form of Surrealist Disalienation

In the article ‘*The Case of Blackness*’ by Fred Moten, Moten uses a Heideggerian analysis of Blackness to come to a vastly different conclusion than other scholars we have seen, Moten analyses Heidegger’s conceptualisation of a ‘thing.’ This ‘thing’ has its own innate essence, its own ability to be even if it is not being utilised for anything in each moment. An example of this can be a ‘jug.’ Even if the jug is empty. It still has the potential for being filled with something. Its thingness is unchanged. Function in this context is irrelevant. Instead, what is crucial is the inherent being. For Moten, we can conceptualise Blackness along similar thought processes. Not as an empty vessel

defined by others, but instead as a thing in the Heideggerian sense. An energy with its own potential. A potential that has capacity and agency to shape and be shaped by the world (Moten 183-186). The performative implications of this are endless. In many ways it is unsurprising that many modern afro-surrealist plays explore this perspective rather than the nihilism of the earlier Afro-surrealist work. The potentiality of Blackness opens the possibility of joy, the possibility of respite, humanity, and justice. The theatre is a perfect environment to explore Black potentiality. Even in hopeless situations one can dare to dream, the stage provides a place to represent both what could be and what is. Given that the markers of Afro-surrealism exist beyond the stage, the stage can now become a place of respite and well-intentioned exploration, this surrealist black potentiality is what I assume Aimé Césaire when he described surrealism as “a process of disalienation” (Césaire 84). Highlighting that despite all the hardships and uncomfortable truths afro-surrealism causes you to accept. Afro-surrealism ultimately provides a freedom within our existing reality to view the world through a lens previously thought impossible. In doing so we not only reclaim our personhood but are allowed to dictate our own potentiality. Theatrically, the Afro-surrealist is not limited by the perspectives that came before. There is no etiquette or notions of civility because civility was a colonial construct meant to dehumanise those perceived as ‘savages.’ Theatre becomes a wild space for the reclamation of potential. This energy destabilises all structures around it. This destabilisation, in a sense, is the purest form of violence, a different kind, connected to disruption rather than status quo. This should not come as a surprise. As Fanon said in his seminal work *‘The Wretched of the Earth’* - “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon” (Fanon 27).

In conclusion, the functions of Afro-surrealism provide a bevy of theatrical opportunities for directors willing to take the time and explore its various artistic inclinations. Afro-surrealism is an incredibly rewarding, extremely under researched field of study. A large reason is due to its artistic complexity as both an artistic branch and psychosocial phenomenon. Nevertheless, this research has led me to conclude three major things that have shaped my artistic process, both during my time at the university and in my personal career as an early-stage artist:

1. Blackness is inherently surreal.

2. Black surreality is maintained through social death, ontological resistance and the potentiality of Blackness.
3. Theatre is the perfect environment to explore Afro-surrealism in a safe and respectful manner.

These three things have guided my thought process over the past few months and enabled me to dig as deeply as I could into Afro-surrealism. It has meant that I routinely refer to myself as an Afro-surrealist and has given me clarity in both the types of work I wish to create/ am creating. Modern information on Afro-surrealism is surprisingly scant particularly where theatre is concerned. That was one of my main motivations in authoring this paper. I wished to provide a clear, concise, and articulate analysis of an artform I hold dear. I hope that I can continue to synthesise my experiences and that someone may one day look upon my life's work and let the final words of the Afro-surrealist manifesto ring true:

“We will say, with blood beneath our nails and mud on our boots: This is Afro-Surreal!” (Miller 3).



Figure 7 'Mannequin Dreams' Act I Scene VII Photo: Ikenna Anyabuike

4. THE CONNECTION OF AFRO-SURREALISM TO THEATRICAL FORMS AND DEVICES: CASE STUDY ‘MANNEQUIN DREAMS’

I'm not a surrealist. I just paint what I see.

— *Frida Kahlo*



Figure 8 'Mannequin Dreams' Act II Scene IV Photo: Ikenna Anyabuike

4.1. Interconnectedness of Lived Experience and Creative Output

In March of 2024, three things occurred in quick successive order. Firstly, I was diagnosed with an acute sleeping disorder and suffered from chronic fatigue because of this sleeping disorder. Secondly, I was accepted into an international mentorship with the artist Julian Hetzel in conjunction with the Irish theatre company ‘Pan-Pan Theatre’ and as part of this mentorship I would write a play. Lastly, I suffered a severe burn on my leg, charring my skin and muscle tissue. This wound became instantly infected. Due to my chronic fatigue the wound refused to heal properly and as my flesh began to rot away, I was sent to hospital where I was told that I would have to attend hospital visits

every three days for the next four months. I was rendered partially immobile as my leg began to swell to the point that I could not fit them into my shoes and was promptly given compression bandages to relieve the stress. As the wound refused to heal, treatment became more aggressive, and the pain of my leg became intolerable. At times I would be in so much pain that in the few moments I did sleep I would scream myself awake due to the pain in my leg. This in turn meant that my sleeping patterns grew worse and prior to my diagnoses they were already at their breaking point. Eventually, I began to periodically lose consciousness at inopportune times, sometimes I would collapse and hit my head off an object. Which I sardonically viewed as a brief respite from existence. Other times the situation would be less humorous. After a brief scare where I collapsed in my kitchenette and awoke to smoke everywhere, and my pot partially melted. I began leaving plastic chairs in every room and pillows on the floor which I could collapse on top of. This was to reduce the chances of me accidentally dying in my apartment unbeknownst to all my loved ones. Although I have never feared dying, as my health worsened, and my fevers rose, and my leg continued to swell, and my blood tests piled up; I thought about how long it would take for someone to find my body if I did die in my apartment. I thought about who would call me first, I thought about who would notice when I was not responding.

Occasionally, I would still manage to drag myself to class. I would usually be late, occasionally a fellow classmate would make a comment about my lateness, and I would think briefly about telling them that clumps of my hair had begun falling out, or that the pain medication was no longer working and that I had been violently vomiting all night due to the fevers. I wanted to tell them this, but I did not. At that moment I realised something. I am unsurprised by dehumanisation. In fact, I am used to it. There are very few places where I feel I am treated like a human being; universities are no different. My goal in writing this long and personal section is that it was in writing and crafting my practical thesis for 'Mannequin Dreams' did I realise the full potential of Afro-surrealism, because in these moments I thought of Afro-surrealism. I thought of writers who emphasised that Blackness is a nothingness open to perpetual violence and that those perceived as black should start their emancipation "By abandoning the human, humanness, and the liberal humanism that enshrouds it, we can better understand the violent formations of antiblackness, particularly ontological terror"

(Warren 170). Moreover, I thought about the potentiality of Blackness. I thought about my identity. Even in these conditions, where my own body felt like it was betraying me, the blood that I spat in the sink still made it clear that I was human. The physical state I was in created a perpetual dream state that matched my internal philosophical processes.

I still felt denigrated. I did not feel human. I quickly recused myself from classes choosing to complete courses remotely while my conditions worsened. Frequently, I would lose consciousness while writing and vivid nightmares would assail my mind. Eventually, my consistent rumination had left me so mentally exhausted that it allowed for a type of honesty. An honesty informed by an Afro-surrealist perspective that felt like it could have only come at that possible moment. So, when my first meeting with Julian Hetzel occurred and he said, “tell me something interesting, strange or uncomfortable you’d like to explore.” It was with little hesitation that I promptly responded- “I hate mannequins.”

It was in these conditions that I wrote the play ‘Mannequin Dreams’ and it was under these conditions that Afro-surrealism unlocked the potentiality of theatre for me. I realised in that moment that surreality presented an opportunity to explore my existence at its most vulnerable state. Regarding my personal experience, mannequins represented the worst aspects of society. Naked consumerism that had the veneer of humanity, the presence of something without any individuality that exists simply just to sell you something. For me, mannequins resembled a distortion, a dehumanisation that feels familiar yet foreign. A mannequin resembles the failure of ontological resistance and the erosion of the self under scrutiny. The Afro-surrealist perspective allowed me to unlock the potential of mannequins. Drawing from my own life experiences and traumas. I related to the dehumanisation and the restriction of movement. There was a clear connection between my reality and that of a mannequin. Additionally, the concept of a mannequin now represented a social death, a kind of nonhuman entity open to violence and subjugation. Much like a mannequin, I felt with each passing day I was losing my identity. This feeling was enhanced as I realised, I did not feel safe at the institution, I felt the spectre of social death everywhere I went.

I took inspiration from my own life. A life that seemed to be marked by its exhaustion and unpredictability. I found myself enamoured by the universality of exhaustion, particularly as documented by 'Paweł Jaszczuk' a Polish photographer whose notable works in Japan stirred both controversy and interest as he documented the physical exhaustion of Japanese salarymen falling asleep on the street. Highlighting the contrast between their distinguished clothing and their often sordid and desperate attempts at respite. I draw focus to this period in my life as I had never created something in the manner at which I created 'Mannequin Dreams' - I knew I would be directing the play once it was finished, which left me in a tense state. Usually, I prefer to write a play and give it to a different director. As I enthusiastically support the collaborative aspects of theatre. I finished the first draft of the script in May and continued to refine it over the following months. I had decided to fully commit to taking from my own experiences. The eclectic cast of characters were a smorgasbord of my childhood tastes. My love of detective novels meant there was a detective and a serial killer in the piece, my experiences working with children at a youth group meant there was a childlike character within the play. Various other experiences both positive and negative allowed me to craft a main heroine. It was in this year that I began journaling. A practice which I think every Afro-surrealist should partake in. Writing down your thoughts everyday with the assumption that only you will read them adds a clarity to your thinking. It also allows you to easily reflect on the beginning and end of processes and measure the effect that an artistic project has had on your psyche. It is through my journal entries that I realised upon completion of the script and acquisition of actors, I did not feel safe. In fact, I felt something that can only be summed up in a single word, dread. Perhaps it was my own paranoia but something about the way communication had been structured between myself and the college left me in a state of unease. Unease that would only grow as the process continued.

Now that the project is behind me. I realise that my fears were not unfounded but instead completely rational and what I would experience was the intersection between social death, ontological resistance and black potentiality in my material world whilst trying to represent these concepts on stage. In many ways the creation of the play was equally as Afro-surreal as the play itself.



Figure 9 Cover of Pawel Jaszczuk's 'High Fashion' book Photo: Pawel Jaszczuk

4.2. An Afro-Surreal Process

“My whole life. I've had to get through it. I've had to meet constant, violent, abusive resistance. For what? For art, for survival, for some way to hope? At every level of institution, I have been treated like a subhuman. I think it's driving me insane.”

These are the words I wrote in my journal on 9th of October 2024. I do not share this lightly, I am an extremely private person, I share it to highlight that whilst I enjoyed collaborating with my actors and directing, crafting, and experimenting with the scenes. I did not enjoy the process of completing my practical assignment. If I am to be blunt, I would confidently say the process left me feeling devoid of any hope, faith, or general feelings of excitement as both a student and a human being. I felt degraded. In every sense of the word. Which is both unfortunate but also useful as that degradation provided me with resolve and desire to adhere to my artistic principles as an Afro-surrealist regardless of any disenfranchisement. As I do not wish to dwell too long on these issues, primarily because they are painful to write and take a deep toll on my mental health, I will condense the main problems into one brief section.

Both the space and the amount of time that I applied for were denied in my initial application. On the 26th of September 2024 I sent the following message out:

“There cannot simultaneously contain a reduction in space and a truncation of timeline. There must be one or the other, as essentially the occurrence of both, destroys any level of practicality when it comes to scheduling, crafting and performance as a whole. If I am forced to sacrifice space, then I shall insist on the original timeline. I do not know how I am expected to fulfil the obligations of the course, if timeline's, negotiations, and structures change sporadically in ways that derail any kind of healthy artistic professional environment.”

My concerns were brushed aside. Around the same time, I was told that the designers I wished to have on the project could no longer do the project and that I should attempt to get only designers from the MA studies. Unfortunately, there is an extremely limited pool of MA students and those that expressed interest in collaborating with me stated that they would only be available in the fall of 2025. I was also told that due to the sheer number of shows being produced there would be a restriction of resources. I asked if there was a feasible way to hire designers or people with designing experiences. I was told no and that volunteer work from a designer would also not be allowed. I was also then given a week to transform a highly detailed daily six-week schedule plan (I was told that I could apply for more weeks If I made a compelling case for their necessity) into a four-week schedule. Meaning that I then had to go and renegotiate all my previously agreed upon times with the five actors that made up my cast. Upon completion of this assignment, I was notified that one of the actors I had acquired would not be allowed to do the piece citing prior commitments which the actor had. I appealed this and was rejected. I appealed this a second time with proof that there was no scheduling clash; again, I was rejected. In December upon another appeal from a lecturer, that actor's inclusion was granted. Unfortunately, due to the timing of the third appeal. The actor, through no fault of their own, had made commitments which meant they would be unavailable for the month-long rehearsal in January. Around this same time, I had a different actor leave due to unforeseen tragedies and although I was able to replace that actor due to a volunteer brought in by an incredibly thoughtful cast

member. The acquisition of a second replacement would not have been possible if not for my year head.

Once rehearsals did start, there was a bevy of issues. One of my actors suffers from chronic illnesses. This is fine, I have many members of my family who have chronic illnesses and the best way to deal with that is to provide an environment which accommodates people instead of further disabling them. An Afro-surrealist should not view this as a challenge but instead an invitation to explore new ways of crafting. This actor highlighted certain reactions to dust, fungi, and cleaning products to me early on, and so through emails and in meetings. I mentioned this topic and was assured it would not be an issue. However, when the rehearsals began in January 2025, multiple actors in the cast reported feeling unusual fatigue, headaches, and dizziness. After a rehearsal, where another actor almost lost consciousness, I made the decision to book separate rooms than rehearse in the space whilst an investigation was conducted. However, due to the high number of performances around this time I had to book several rooms in one day just to be able to rehearse scenes. It was found that there were issues within the ventilation system and a dryness in the air. This meant I would often stay back to cross ventilate and clean/remove dust from pillows or any props in the space. On one occasion my cast noted the smell of urine in the space, and it turned out there was some kind of leak from bathrooms directly into my theatre space. Much of the design choices in the space became focused on addressing these issues. The two large dehumidifiers as part of the set design were not my original intention but I chose to incorporate them to create a more tenable working environment for the actors. I even leaned into this aspect of the set design by adding a watercooler that I felt matched the aesthetic of the dehumidifiers. I chose to work with what I had.

Additionally, there were times where statements would be made for me without my consent or without notifying me resulting in my cast assuming that I had made the statement. I can recall over three instances of this happening, where there was miscommunication on who would be allowed into the space causing my cast to think they were going to have an audience nine days before the show was ready to be launched and being quite incensed that I hadn't notified them. Information that was equally new to me. Lastly, because I did not have designers. It meant that I was the

focal point for every production meeting as I ended up doing the sound and lighting design. Meaning that I spent all time outside the theatre going over both the light and sound design. At times I would complete an aspect of the design, only to realise the college had not updated the software they used and would have to reprogramme that aspect of design on older software, doubling my workload. In a dark twist, I look at my October entry with a certain understated gaze. After the production was over. I was so exhausted that I fell ill for several days. Unable to gather the strength to leave my bed. A piece born from chronic exhaustion and dehumanisation left me feeling exhausted and dehumanised. After all, I spent the bulk of what would have been my time to rest over the Christmas holidays designing a lighting plan and composing roughly an hour of original music. Fortunately, I am a musician and have scored plays professionally before, and hosted exhibitions in galleries, which gave me rudimentary lighting knowledge. There are more issues to address, but as previously stated this is a brief glimpse.

One would assume that the project resulted in a slew of negativity hence my long analysis of the working conditions. On the contrary, the reception I received for the piece was exceptional, many people came to see it twice which was flattering, and three of the four nights went exceptionally well (there was one night where certain protocols were not adhered to). My frustration was only compounded because the reception received was so positive. As I reflect on the process, I realised that at numerous moments, I wished to abandon the project. The frustrations seemed irreconcilable. However, I am glad I did not abandon the project for two main reasons. The first being that I adored working with my cast and watching them flourish has allowed me to experience the true extent of black potentiality as a means of disalienation. In many ways working with them was a consistent reminder of the fulfilling and communal nature of theatre and I learned much about myself and about the craft of directing from each one of them. These range from practical things like time management to more abstract tools that dealt with the explanation of a specific aesthetic. The second reason is that, as far-right parties seem to litter Europe, there will be increasing hostility towards identities such as mine. The normalisation of dehumanisation is not always resisted by artistic forces. At times it is codified by it. Throughout the creative process I found myself thinking of Audre Lorde's *The*

Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House where Lorde succinctly states “For within living structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive” (Lorde 9-10). I write this extensively not to lambast the college. There are numerous lecturers I have a deep respect for and courses I have enjoyed. I am just stating the conditions in which I worked in as they shaped my thinking and my process as an Afro-surrealist. Moving past the scope of this institution, academics are sounding the alarm bells of what has been casually referred to as “the spectre of neofascism” drawing attention to increasingly far-right rhetoric becoming normalised in the political sector. The Afro-surrealist must learn to create regardless of circumstance. We must endure, we must survive, but survival should not be the end goal, we must never allow ourselves to forget our ability to create. We must never forget our own potential.

4.3. Discovery in the Rehearsal Process

As I previously mentioned, I was not satisfied with the time allotted to me. So, I began doing what I dubbed ‘preliminary rehearsals’ throughout November. These were brief two-to-three-hour rehearsals that occurred after I finished my usual nine-to-five classes during the day. I would simply book a room and work on the various aspects of the production. If anybody wished to come in and rehearse their character, I would do a one-on-one rehearsal session or a group session depending on how many people showed up. In these sessions, I would talk about movement, the theme of mannequins, experimentation and what the script meant to them. Whilst these preliminary rehearsals were done out of desperation due to not being given enough time, in these moments I found the relationship that I was able to cultivate with the cast to be extremely moving. It was in these sessions that people naturally gravitated towards characters that resonated rather than me having to select them. In these sessions I realized that I liked giving my actors a certain level of agency. I presented them with questions, games, tasks and reading extracts. I discussed some of the concepts of Afro-surrealism that I talked about in this piece, and I also allowed them the freedom to choose large aspects about their character early on -including some of the props they would use in the final production. Doing this gave them a certain level of agency and forced me to think more creatively, moving away from archetypes and stereotypes. Allowing actors to choose

their characters sometimes meant gender swapping roles, which provided different textures for scenes. The preliminary rehearsals forced me to see my own work in a new light. It also provided a low stakes environment to experiment in. Many of the best decisions were made during this hectic month. One of those being the discussion of language. English was the second language to many of the cast members. My scripts can often be difficult, containing razor sharp rhythms, colloquialism and intonations, but I found that allowing the cast to speak in the voice that felt most comfortable was one of the best decisions I made. It gave the script an unusual quality, added charm and history to certain characters and placed the cast much more at ease. Every voice is an instrument and dialects and accents are like tuning. There is no need to avoid dissonance or a differentiation of intonation. When used correctly, the eclectic nature of different voices can often add an additional texture to the piece. In these preliminary rehearsals I learned to both give agency to the actors and accept their differences. An acceptance that had material and immediate effect rather than a blasé slogan of tolerance.

Additionally, these preliminary rehearsals allowed me to come to several philosophical realisations with regards to how I conceptualised the play. I began to view movement as its own independent mask. I would give the actors psychological tasks like “choose a movement which does not match your emotion” or “use a vocal intonation that is at odds with a given scenario,”- these exercises would often yield advantageous and humorous results. However, the more I continued to do these exercises the more my actors felt comfortable asking me various things about my life. I began to think about my own mask. My cast was quite ethnically and culturally diverse and the differences in their experiences and cultural backgrounds created the template for engaging discussions. They would ask me about how I grew up, my various habits and why I spoke so passionately about Afro-surrealism. In discussing Afro-surrealism with them I began to realise that every aspect of this play was in some way, a reaction to everything I had experienced in the past two years. The emphasis on the erosion of identity. My desire to distort the body. The ways in which I tried to play with violence; I found myself often talking about the violence that we see and the violence that is felt. The invisible violence. I realised that these two modes of violence worked differently for me. The violence we see in our everyday life is tangible. It is numerical, cold, and

calculated, but the practicality of traditional violence highlights that it is a state that shall pass. I realised that for me, the scariest form of violence was violence we cannot see, the violence we are forced to experience through our own emotions or our desire to simply exist. For example, if someone were to break your nose whilst reading this, completely catching you off guard, it would be an unpleasant experience. It would probably be quite traumatising. However, the event, for better or worse, would pass. Now let us say the same scenario occurs but instead someone convinces the world that you are a monster, that you're subhuman, that you don't deserve to live and that anything that does happen to you is justified because your existence is a crime. At any moment someone could break your nose. Rather than the event passing, you instead think: "Who else out there thinks it's okay to break my nose?" -in this second scenario, everyone around you could be your executioner. This is the difference between these two forms of violence.

By working with my cast and allowing them to interrogate my beliefs, I realised just how much of my work was a delicate balance between the Afro-surrealist experiences of my life and the theatrical devices I had come to love. Fast paced, often rhythmic dialogue, the usage of form as content, moments of metatheatricality where the play seemed akin to a state of consciousness. All of this was compounded by my rapidly declining health which caused me to delve into aspects of my being. Nevertheless, when I began to ruminate about the questions my actors posed, I began to feel quite uncomfortable. The work started to feel too personal. As I reflect on the work, I now know there is no such thing as 'too personal.' It is like Fanon said "It is always easier to proclaim rejection than to actually reject" - as Afro-surrealists we must reject the parts of ourselves that have been conditioned to marginalise our own experiences. If the mind cannot be free to indulge, what hopes do its creations have?

As February approached I made the decision to often begin every rehearsal with a 'check in' as I like to know the physical and mental state of my actors. I find that checking in also relaxes the environment and allows people to fully commit to the work as they are not burdened by suppressed issues. My actors responded well to this dynamic and it allowed them to communicate with me more freely. Additionally, I used games and work sessions to help me conceptualise abstract concepts into tangible

physical forms. I would often use a lot of dance exercises in the beginning of rehearsals, scoring the play to my eclectic taste of jazz, psychedelic rock, and classical music. During these rehearsal periods I would often give the actors tasks and mental goals but ultimately, I would give them the freedom to explore space, levels, dynamics of touch, intensity. In some ways I wished to liberate the theatre, so much of theatre can be focused on control instead of experimentation. A liberated body is one that can synthesise experimentation into exciting choices on stage, many of the strongest moments of choreography manifested itself from this process, the sharp quality shifts of the characters and their personality shifts were painstakingly mulled over. Furthermore, I decided to let my actors choose their own props. I would often bring things into the space and see how they interact with it. Both these decisions meant that we could create games within games. From hiding candy bars, to dropping notes, to whimsical caps. Moments of improvisation and play allowed for the surrealist construction appear more fluid. One of my favourite scenes involving a character drinking from a juice box after an incredibly tense scene, arose out of this desire to play. A suggestion that became a game, that quickly became potent theatre.

There was also the utilisation of repetition on stage. I am a huge proponent of repetition; it adds a texture and a gravitas to the stage. Scenarios repeat, blocking is mirrored, words are repeated. However, each time this occurs there was a significant effort placed on making each mode of repetition different. Recontextualising the images for an Afro-surrealist allows us to cultivate disalienation through the systemic analysis that comes from seeing a concept repeated in a cycle. As a result, the stage itself became a collage that is to say- “a means by which a represented object could be segmented and reassembled as it truly was – viewed simultaneously from all angles” (Stockwell 91). This dynamic both kept in line with the surrealist tradition but also commented outside of it. Repetition is a crucial tool kit in the Afro-surrealist playbook. Namely because one could argue the concepts of social death, ontological resistance, and black potentiality, all repeat. There is a cyclical nature to human existence. Once we were a few days from the premiere I was inspired by my discussions with my actors. I decided that from the moment the doors were open, I would wear a mask when interacting with the audience. A distortion of who I was, it felt liberating. I did not

remove myself from the dynamics I established with the actors. I allowed myself to become a part of their collage.

Overall, I succeeded in creating an Afro-surrealist play that touched upon many of the issues I have listed above such as social death, ontological resistance, and the potentiality of Blackness. However, I wish I could have taken these concepts even further. The main goal was to see if I could balance these concepts whilst telling a compelling story. I succeeded in cultivating an environment where my actors felt comfortable in their personhood and ability to ask for clarity or demand certain things from me. Some of my most pertinent experiences outside of my own artistic development was recognising my own limitations with organisation and communication and being told by my actors, areas in which I could improve. These moments, while brief, were critical to making what was a stressful environment, as stress-free as possible but also highlighted the success of my prior communication strategies. There were very few instances where I was not acutely aware of the physical and mental disposition of my actors, and I tried to the best of my ability to adapt to any deficits in my communication or time management that I may have had. When dealing with such abstract but equally emotionally charged artistic philosophies. A respectful environment is tantamount to air. Necessary for survival and crucial for the sustainability of the production. The reception to the show was mainly positive and several individuals came to see it twice. That was a pleasant surprise as it proved that the work resonated and connected with the audience. I created a play where the form was crucial to the work. It can be easy to cultivate an overreliance on the script and tone down some of the more bizarre elements of the piece, but I avoided that. I leaned into the bizarre of the work.

With the given resources and time allotted there are few things I would have done differently. However, if I had more time and resources I would have liked to experiment further. I would also have liked to see what would occur if I changed the dynamic with the audience, by giving them a passive instruction or allowing them to erode their identity through a simple action. Furthermore, I would have liked to spend more time experimenting with my fantastic cast. What if an entire scene was projected like a film that the characters watched on stage and the audience saw them watching themselves? What if there were moments where the play begins to break down even

further? What if there was more dance involved in the overall play? What if I had the time and energy to bring a piano on to stage and compose/play live music during pivotal scenes? What if I gave an actor a baseball bat to crush a mannequin live on stage? As you can see, there is still much experimentation left to do. Honestly, I feel as though I have only scratched the surface. Truthfully, I simply wish I had more time to spend with my actors and a resolute team of designers to explore the fullness of their potentiality. I would also like to work with more dissonant objects like sand or water or paint in a space. Ultimately, I simply wish to push things further and see if I can maintain the quality of a narrative whilst wholly giving into the Afro-surreal inclinations I have discussed thus far.



Figure 10 Mask I wore when addressing audience in 'Mannequin Dreams' Photo: Ikenna Anyabuikie

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, my goal in writing this dissertation was to provide an academic framework for Afro-surrealism within the context of theatre, while also showcasing its relevance as psychosocial phenomenon. It was also to discover myself and my place within art. In many sections throughout these pages, I have posed questions informed by Afro-surrealism. That is because the inquisitive nature of this artistic genre requires a curious mind. It requires that you question every aspect of your given reality and contemplate the very nature of your existence. For a director, there is no greater skill than that of curiosity. The desire to look upon something and explore is a core skill that shall keep theatre relevant for future generations. This essay has also highlighted the complex historical ties that Afro-surrealism has to the surrealist movement and emphasised its functionality within and outside of the theatre. I hope that in providing this information to the world, someone is inspired to see the power of their own surreality. These have been two of the most vulnerable and difficult years of my life, but that vulnerability is the greatest strength that we as artists have. When faced with daunting and complex subjects such as social death, ontological resistance, and Black potentiality, there can be a fear of ‘getting it wrong’ but the best that we can do as artists is try. Even in the most desperate circumstances the dream state persists. An article published in October 2024 titled ‘*Afrosurrealism Is Dead (And it’s about damn time)*’ by Miller once again highlights how academia can often replace, subsume, and dilute the cultural touch stones of a movement in favour streamlining it for mass consumption. Miller described how “No one in the industry ever solicited me, and I was excluded from the movement my manifesto created. Ironically, Afrosurrealism was treated as a subgenre of Surrealism, when no art critic with integrity would say that Surrealism is a subgenre of Realism.” (‘The Brooklyn Rail’ Miller). I can only hope these words of mine emphasise the importance of what he coined and the foundations he constructed. In writing this I hope to counter the erasure that Miller discusses. Afro-surrealism is here, and it is not going anywhere. Afro-surrealism as a genre has allowed me to conceptualise the fragmentary and at times painful revelations of existence into a coherent and potent artform that recognises my humanity irrespective of whatever situation I find myself in. It has influenced how I approach directing, how I approach performance, how I treat my cast and how I live my life. Whilst my practical thesis did

not contain all the exploration I desired; it has given me the ability to see the depth of the Afro-surrealist framework. A depth that I wish to explore to its fullest capabilities. To all those who may read this, I hope it provides fuel for your creativity. I shall end with the words of the late Henry Dumas in his poem '*Black Star Line*':

“Bones of my bones,
all you golden-black children of the sun,
lift up! and read the sky
written in the tongue of your ancestors.
It is yours, claim it” (Dumas 17-18).

Works Cited

- Ahmed, Beenish. “Henry Dumas Wrote about Black People Killed by Cops. Then He Was Killed by a Cop.” *NPR*, NPR, 1 Oct. 2015, www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/10/01/433229181/henry-dumas-wrote-about-black-people-killed-by-cops-then-he-was-killed-by-a-cop.
- Ambrose, Tom. “Actor Claims Met Police Pepper-Sprayed Him after Returning Home from a Show.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 17 Sept. 2024, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/sep/17/actor-claims-met-police-pepper-sprayed-him-after-returning-home-from-a-show.
- Ayers, Alison J. “‘the fire this time’: The long crisis of neoliberal capitalist accumulation and spectre of neofascism.” *Critical Sociology*, vol. 50, no. 3, 30 Aug. 2023, pp. 413–435, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205231195229>.
- Bakare, Lanre. “From Beyoncé to Sorry to Bother You: The New Age of Afro-Surrealism.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 6 Dec. 2018, www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/dec/06/afro-surrealism-black-artists-racist-society.
- Baldwin, James, and Nikki Giovanni. *James Baldwin, Nikki Giovanni: A Dialogue*. Lippincott, 1973.
- Browne, Simone. *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Duke University Press, 2015.
- Carnut, Leonardo. “Marxist critical systematic review on neo-fascism and international capital: Diffuse networks, capitalist decadence and Culture War.” *Advances in Applied Sociology*, vol. 12, no. 06, 2022, pp. 227–262, <https://doi.org/10.4236/aasoci.2022.126020>.
- Castaño-Pulgarín, Sergio Andrés, et al. “Internet, social media and online hate speech. systematic review.” *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, vol. 58, May 2021, p. 101608, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2021.101608>.

- Césaire, Aimé. *Discourse on Colonialism*. Translated by Joan Pinkham, Monthly Review Press, 2000.
- Dempsey, Amy. *Surrealism*. Thames & Hudson, 2019.
- Dumas, Henry. *Play Ebony, Play Ivory*. Random House, 1974.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Penguin Books, 2021.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann, Pluto Press, 2008.
- Faramarzi, Ahmad, et al. "The global economic burden of covid-19 disease: A comprehensive systematic review and meta-analysis." *Systematic Reviews*, vol. 13, no. 1, 16 Feb. 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-024-02476-6>.
- Gainor, J. Ellen. *Imperialism and Theatre: Essays on World Theatre, Drama and Performance*. Routledge, 1995.
- "Germany's Schlosspark Theatre Defends 'Blackface' Actor." *BBC News*, BBC, 10 Jan. 2012, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-16492222.
- Jürs-Munby, Karen. "'Did You Mean Post-Traumatic Theatre?'" "The vicissitudes of traumatic memory in contemporary postdramatic performances." *Performance Paradigm*, vol. 5, 2009, pp. 201–223.
- K.P., Ashwini. Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance - Report of the Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance *Fifty-sixth session ed., Agenda item 9, United Nations*, 2024, *A/HRC/56/68*: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/56/68>
- Khomami, Nadia. "Black Actor Who Faced Abuse over Role in Romeo & Juliet Calls for Industry-Wide Action." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 18 Sept. 2024, www.theguardian.com/stage/2024/sep/18/black-actor-francesca-amewudah-rivers-racist-abuse-romeo-juliet-industry-action.

- King, Elliott H., and Abigail Susik, editors. *Radical Dreams: Surrealism, Counterculture, Resistance*. PENN STATE UNIV PRESS, 2023.
- Konkobo, Christophe. “Dark Continent, Dark Stage: Body Performance in Colonial Theatre and Cinema.” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 40, no. 6, 18 Nov. 2008, pp. 1094–1106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934708325379>.
- Lusty, Natalya. *Surrealism*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.
- Miller, D. Scot. “Afrosurreal: The Marvelous and the Invisible 2016.” *Open Space*, 13 July 2017, [openspace.sfmoma.org/2016/10/afrosurreal-the-marvelous-and-the-invisible/](https://www.openspace.sfmoma.org/2016/10/afrosurreal-the-marvelous-and-the-invisible/).
- Miller, D. Scot. “The Brooklyn Rail.” *Afrosurrealism Is Dead (And It’s about Damn Time)*, 4 Nov. 2024, [brooklynrail.org/2024/10/criticspage/afrosurrealism-is-dead-and-it-s-about-damn-time/](https://www.brooklynrail.org/2024/10/criticspage/afrosurrealism-is-dead-and-it-s-about-damn-time/).
- Miller, D. Scott. “Afrosurreal Manifesto.” *FOUNDSSF*, www.foundsf.org/Afrosurreal_Manifesto. Accessed 18 Mar. 2025.
- Olusoga, David. “Should We Confront the Toxic Legacy of Blackface ... or Just Forget It?” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 23 July 2023, www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/23/should-we-confront-the-toxic-legacy-of-blackface-or-just-forget-it.
- Reix, Justine. “The Racist Zoo Where Visitors Paid to See Black People in the 90s.” *VICE*, 9 Aug. 2024, www.vice.com/en/article/human-zoo-france-safari-african/.
- Spiteri, Raymond, and Donald LaCoss. *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*. ROUTLEDGE, 2020.
- Stockwell, Peter. *The Language of Surrealism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Uzoigwe, Godfrey N. “Neocolonialism is dead: Long live neocolonialism.” *Journal of Global South Studies*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2019, pp. 59–87, <https://doi.org/10.1353/gss.2019.0004>.

- Warren, Calvin L. *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*. Duke University Press, 2018.
- Webb, E. Kate, et al. “The neurophysiological consequences of racism-related stressors in Black Americans.” *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, vol. 161, June 2024, p. 105638, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2024.105638>.
- Wilderson, Frank B., et al. *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*. Racked & Dispatched, 2017.
- Williams, David R., and Onisha S. Etkins. “Racism and mental health.” *World Psychiatry*, vol. 20, no. 2, 18 May 2021, pp. 194–195, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20845>.