

Afrosurreal Narratives: The Distance Between Contingent and Gratuitous Violence

I. Introduction

Something interesting happens to the paradigm Afrosurrealism operates under when its mode of representation moves from poetry to narrative. It changes from mimicking the logic of a dream to reproducing the form of a joke. While poetry's lone speaker allows for fluid movements from one subject to the next, the presence of a diegetic interlocutor often bends Afrosurrealism into the familiar relationship of the double act (i.e., straight man/funny man) present in contemporary comedy¹.

When Afrosurrealism adopts this relation, it is aesthetically modeling a very specific Afropessimist tenet: the promise of contingent violence contrasted with the reality of gratuitous violence. Afropessimism, as first posited by Frank Wilderson in his book *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structures of US Antagonisms*, is the belief that Black beings are separate from human beings and civil society while endowing both with their very coherence². Wilderson also believes that Black beings' ontological state is one of constant violence, in part because the only way civil society is able to function is to pretend Black beings are a part of it, even as they are denied the privileges of membership³.

Afrosurrealism, when working in the mode described above, then, posits a straight man character in its Black protagonist who has been promised, as a member of civil society, contingent violence (or violence only when violating the social order), but instead they experience the world as a monstrous funny man who visits gratuitous violence (or violence for

¹ Shifreen, Lawrence J. "THE 'NEW WAVE' OF STANDUP COMEDIANS: AN INTRODUCTION." *American Humor*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1977, pp. 1–3.

² Wilderson, Frank B. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Duke University Press, 2010. P. 11

³ *Ibid.*

seemingly no reason) upon them in the form of mundane racism made fantastical by the narrative. This discrepancy is what I aim to discuss with this paper.

Before I elucidate further, I feel it necessary to define Afrosurrealism. In her essay *1943: Surrealism and Us*, Suzanne Césaire calls surrealism “an activity which assigns itself the goal of exploring and expressing systematically the forbidden zones of the human mind, in order to neutralize them: an activity which desperately seeks to give humankind the means of reducing the ancient antinomies that are ‘the true alembics of suffering’; a power, the only one that allows us to reconnect with this ‘original unique faculty, that the primitive and the child still retain traces of, that lifts the spell of the impassable barrier between the inner world and the outer world....to sum up the entirety of all its efforts in one magical word: freedom.⁴” As for the Afro- prefix, while in his “Afrosurreal Manifesto,” D. Scott Miller claims Afrosurrealism may potentially be undertaken by any outside of the European tradition, the term has mainly historically been used to refer to Black surrealists and their unique surrealisms (with their attendant goals) at all three flashpoints of Afrosurrealism in the past hundred years⁵. As such, I will posit Afrosurrealism as moving towards a particular kind of Césairean freedom: Black liberation or, as the Afropessimists put it, “the end of the world⁶.”

Why, though, does Afrosurrealism make use of these two systems, and is there any kinship between them? To answer the second question first, Sigmund Freud, in his *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, maintained that there is a very close relationship between humor and dreams. He believed that both originate in the unconscious, and that the same reason that one

⁴ Césaire, Suzanne, et al. *The Great Camouflage. ; Writings of Dissent (1941-1945)*. Wesleyan University Press, 2012. 1943: *Surrealism and Us*. PP. 34-35

⁵ Miller, D. Scott. “[Document] Afrosurreal Manifesto: Black Is the New Black—a 21st-Century Manifesto.” *Black Camera*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2013, p. 114., doi:10.2979/blackcamera.5.1.113.

⁶ Wilderson, Frank B. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Duke University Press, 2010. P. 120

is not always sure why something is funny is the same reason that they are unable to determine the meanings of their dreams⁷. Only through study and psychoanalytic therapy could the latter be determined, though not many people signed up to diagnose their senses of humor, so study on the former is limited.

The reason, though, that Afrosurrealism functions as a dream in poetry and a joke in narrative necessitates a return to Wilderson. He states that “the narrative arc of the slave... is not an arc at all, but a flat line⁸.” Poetry’s ability to resist narrative allows for Afrosurrealism more familiar to its white and Latine contemporaries: formless, preternatural, dream-like. The constraints of narrative, however, as in a work of prose, drama, or film, require an accommodation to resist what Wilderson calls “the ruse of analogy,” or the propensity of traditional narratives to remove the experience of gratuitous violence from Black characters⁹. As such, this (what I am calling) joke-form Afrosurrealism can be seen as a technique of direct resistance to the ruse of analogy.

This dream/joke distinction seems to bear out when we study Afrosurrealism in each of its three waves: The First Wave, an offshoot of mainline surrealism bolstered by an infusion of Negritude, began by Martiniquais such as Aimé and Suzanne Césaire, as well as René Ménil and various other thinkers associated with the literary magazine *Tropiques* in the 1920s¹⁰; The Second Wave, a selection of Black Arts Movement figures along with their contemporaries: Amiri Baraka, Henry Dumas, and Samuel R. Delaney, among others, in the 1960s and 1970s¹¹;

⁷ Freud, Sigmund. *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*. Penguin Books, 2003.

⁸ Wilderson, Frank B. *Afropessimism*. Liverlight Publishing, 2021. P. 102

⁹ Wilderson, Frank B. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Duke University Press, 2010. P. 38

¹⁰ Fijalkowski, Krzysztof, and Michael Richardson. *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*. Verso, 1996.

¹¹ Miller, D. Scott. “[Document] Afrosurreal Manifesto: Black Is the New Black—a 21st-Century Manifesto.” *Black Camera*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2013, p. 114-115, 117., doi:10.2979/blackcamera.5.1.113.

and finally the Third-Wave of Afrosurrealism, heralded by D. Scott Miller in his 2009 manifesto, but catapulted into the mainstream by contemporary filmmakers including but not limited to Boots Riley, Jordan Peele, Terrence Nance, and Janicza Bravo¹².

Upon first glance, it might appear that Black popular art's focal shift from poetry and prose to theatre and film as the twentieth century progressed would account for this paradigmatic shift from the dream to the joke in Afrosurreal representation, but a closer look at Aimé Césaire's plays in the first wave and Amiri Baraka's in the second reveals that when Afrosurrealism is forced to take the form of a narrative, it often takes on this comedic structure, even when the narrative itself is not comedic.

Through the rest of this paper, I will be elucidating various examples of both structures of Afrosurrealism using close readings of texts from all three waves of Afrosurrealism, looking first to dream logic Afrosurrealism, and then focusing the bulk of my analysis on joke-form Afrosurrealism. I will be considering the poetry of Étienne Lérot, Henry Dumas, and Will Alexander. I will also be looking at Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest*, Amiri Baraka's *The Dutchman*, Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*, Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, and Janicza Bravo's *Lemon*, as well as the trailer for her forthcoming *Zola* and the Twitter thread that spawned it. Using this method, I hope to explain not only how each mode of Afrosurrealism functions, but how the time period in which each was written affects the types of straight men and funny men (as well as women and non-binary people) that appear in these narratives.

II. Poetry & Dreams

From its inception, surrealism has always been heavily influenced by dreams. André Breton, considered to be the father of European surrealism, believed in not only the importance of

¹² Phillips, Maya. "Sorry to Bother You and the New Black Surrealism." *Slate Magazine*, Slate, 18 July 2018, [slate.com/culture/2018/07/sorry-to-bother-you-get-out-atlanta-and-the-new-black-surrealism.html](https://www.slate.com/culture/2018/07/sorry-to-bother-you-get-out-atlanta-and-the-new-black-surrealism.html).

dreams in general, but that Freud's work on dreams in particular was integral to his project. In his *Manifesto of Surrealism*, Breton stated "Freud very rightly brought his critical faculties to bear on the dream," that "dreams of sleep, is not inferior to the sum of the moments of reality [sic]," and that further study on dreams was necessary in order to continue to analyze them in the same way that society of that time analyzed waking life¹³.

Outside of the arts, not much of this study has come to pass, but a few scientists have taken up the call. Dr. John Cline, of the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and the American Board of Sleep Medicine has published some work on the nature of dream logic. While noting that the term originated in film studies, he has stated that he finds the notion useful to describe the break from reality that occurs while dreaming. In his article on the subject, Cline describes dream logic with the tenets that first "that the events within a dream often do not seem bound by the same laws of physics and norms of social convention as those of day-to-day life..." and second that "we all have an intuitive sense of how events play out in dreams and how they differ from ordinary day-to-day life¹⁴."

Early surrealist poets were heavily influenced by dreams. Breton's manifesto called for "[p]ure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought¹⁵." Techniques used to achieve this ("such as automatic writing, self-induced hallucination, and word games like the exquisite corpse¹⁶") were considered to be a way to bypass the conscious mind in order to access the unconscious: to be awake while dreaming.

¹³ Breton André, et al. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. University of Michigan Press, 2008.

¹⁴ Cline, John. "Dream Logic." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 27 Sept. 2020, www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sleepless-in-america/202009/dream-logic.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ "A Brief Guide to Surrealism." *Poets.org*, Academy of American Poets, 9 May 2004, poets.org/text/brief-guide-surrealism.

These poets, then, each became the dreamer, presenting on the page their thoughts and images encoded in dream logic.

Afrosurrealist poets took up a similar, but not identical, call to their European counterparts. As poet and politician Leopold Senghor, said of Afrosurrealism: “European Surrealism is empirical. African Surrealism is mystical and metaphorical.¹⁷” The concerns of Afrosurrealism still maintain a fidelity to the unconscious-seeking dreamscapes of their white counterparts, but they retain a fierce connection to the matters of race and racism, suggesting that perhaps that issue separating them from the European surrealists may very well be in the unconscious mind as well as the conscious one.

We find this to be the case as we look to the work of the poets. Étienne Léro was considered the first person of African descent to call himself a surrealist¹⁸, and already in his work are we seeing a more dream-like construction than his contemporaries. Consider this excerpt from “He Left Today.”

“And since
his memory floats, liquid and capricious on the golden steamer
that is the jealous soul of old deers
forgets in the forest of their dreaming youth
a shepherd
whistled a song that was never heard again¹⁹”

While free verse is certainly the norm at present, its existence outside of France in the 1920s was virtually unheard of, and even in French (which Léro did write in, though in Martinique), the tradition was less than forty years old and still quite niche. Furthermore, it was associated with

¹⁷ Miller, D. Scott. “[Document] Afrosurreal Manifesto: Black Is the New Black—a 21st-Century Manifesto.” *Black Camera*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2013, p. 114., doi:10.2979/blackcamera.5.1.113.

¹⁸ Rosemont, Franklin, and Robin D. G. Kelley. *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*. University of Texas Press, 2011. P. 35

¹⁹ Léro, Étienne. “He Left Today.” *Kyk-Over-Al*, vol. 5, no. 15, 1952, p. 9.

synesthesia and other methodologies of analyzing consciousness²⁰. This in addition to the imagistic logic of the piece contributes to the dream-like nature of it.

This would continue into the second and third waves of Afrosurrealism. Henry Dumas, for whom Amiri Baraka created the term Afro-Surreal Expressionist, claimed “Dumas’ power lay in his skill at creating an entirely different world organically connected to this one... a mythological presence pervades²¹.” Consider his “The Zebra Goes Wild Where the Sidewalk Ends.²²”

“Neon stripes tighten my wall
where my crayon landlord hangs
from a bent nail.

My black father sits crooked
in the kitchen
drunk on Jesus’ blood turned
to cheap wine.

In his tremor he curses
the landlord who grins
from inside the rent book.

My father’s eyes are
bolls of cotton.”

Dumas continues the dream-logic work of his forbears but brings in explicit racial imagery. It seems as if even in his dreams, Henry Dumas was not safe from the effects of racialization. This would prove to be true when Henry Dumas experienced gratuitous violence at the hands of a policeman who murdered him, mistaking him for someone else.

²⁰ Scott, Clive. *Vers Libre: the Emergence of Free Verse in France, 1886-1914*. Clarendon Press, 2011.

²¹ Baraka, Amiri. “Henry Dumas: Afro-Surreal Expressionist.” *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1988, p. 164., doi:10.2307/2904491.

²² Dumas, Henry. “The Zebra Goes Wild Where the Sidewalk Ends by...” Poetry Foundation, Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53475/the-zebra-goes-wild-where-the-sidewalk-ends.

The modern era has no shortage of successors to Dumas and Léro, including a postmodern mélange of technological allusions in their dream-states. Consider this brief excerpt from Will Alexander's "Towards the Primeval Lightning Field" which concerns the poet's depiction of the end of the world and what post rational things might form in its wake.²³ It is important to not here, Wilderson describes the end of the world as only able to come about through the gratuitous freedom of Black liberation, the opposite of gratuitous violence.²⁴

"And so, I speak of a new being of symbols, of lucid catacombs and spirals, its language being spun in fabulous iguana iridium. Now, with the decayed constitutional stages exploded by telepathy, by invulnerable oneiric intuitives, the mental axis transmutes, like a reddened swan, with a new cosmic skeletal reprieve, afloat amongst the forces of the primeval lightning field, taking on the dharma of the great sustained emotion of eternity."

As Afrosurreal poets bypassed their conscious minds to create art, it seems that they were unable to keep their racial realities at bay. As their dreams reflected their waking state, through fluid imagery that inevitably returned to the problems of Blackness, they found themselves increasingly concerned with the distance between the contingent violence they were promised and the gratuitous violence they experienced, in a way that no amount of word games or dream interpretation could solve for.

III. Narrative & Jokes

While extremely effective in the realm of poetry, these waking dream experiments conducted by surrealists were not nearly as popular when those artists tried to move into other mediums or create more longform projects. While there are both films (such as Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*) and more longform projects (such as William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*) that still make use of the dream logic paradigm, the surrealist narrative (especially in

²³ Alexander, Will. "Towards the Primeval Lightning Field by Will..." Poetry Foundation, Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47005/towards-the-primeval-lightning-field.

²⁴ Wilderson, Frank B. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Duke University Press, 2010. P. 38

drama and film) found itself mostly unable to use the same techniques that made its poetry so successful. Even Dali himself was forced to use somewhat more conventional structure for his first and only novel, *Hidden Faces*²⁵.

With dreams not providing a clear path to crafting a surrealist narrative, artists were forced to find another way to bypass their conscious minds and tap directly into their unconscious. Afrosurrealists seemed to figure out, almost immediately, that the answer was jokes.

As stated above, the joke—like the dream—is a product of our unconscious mind. Freud believed that humor is a coping mechanism that our unconscious gives to our conscious mind to distract it from its mortality and the pain of the human condition. He posited that “[t]he ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows in fact that such traumas are no more than occasions to gain pleasure... a preconscious thought given over to unconscious revision. A joke is thus the contribution made to the comic by the unconscious... humor would be the contribution made to the comic through the way of the superego²⁶.”

If humor is another way into the unconscious, then its chosen manifestation, in the form of the double act (e.g., Laurel and Hardy, Abbot and Costello, or more recently Jake and Amir), will be of no surprise to a dedicated Freudian humorist. Freud’s second method of humor, that which “may take place between two persons whom one... is made the object of humor by the other²⁷” perfectly describes the dynamic of a comedy duo in which “one party adopt[s] the role of the ‘straight man’ and the other... the ‘funny man’²⁸” In the double act, the funny man’s

²⁵ Dalí Salvador. *Hidden Faces*. Peter Owen, 2017.

²⁶ Freud, Sigmund. “Waarom Het Superego Je Vriend Is – Mijn Idee Van Humor En Dat Van Freud.” *Humor*, 2013, pp. 165., doi:10.4324/9780203986875-6.

²⁷ *Ibid.* P. 161

²⁸ Shifreen, Lawrence J. “THE ‘NEW WAVE’ OF STANDUP COMEDIANS: AN INTRODUCTION.” *American Humor*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1977, pp. 1–3.

outrageous behavior absolutely depends on the “normal” reaction of the straight man for the comedy to function.

Afrosurrealists have adopted this concept and taken it past the realm of pure comedy in order to use the structure of the double act as a path into their own unconscious, and as was apparent in the dream logic exercises, the unconscious of Black surrealists reveals different truths than their European compatriots.

Though not every Afrosurreal narrative functions this way (Samuel R. Delaney’s *Dahlgren* still operates under the dream logic paradigm and the work of Terrence Nance occasionally inverts the joke-form paradigm to have a white straight man and a Black funny man), the majority have used this form to posit not only a Black protagonist, but Blackness itself as the straight man in a particular text, making it the “norm” of that particular text. These texts then posit the world itself as a funny man making the subjective experience of racism into the surrealism of the piece.

Using an Afropessimist lens we are able to see the cause of this technique. As stated above, this Afrosurrealism is representing the dissonance that takes place in the unconscious when a Black being is promised contingent violence as a member of civil society, but they instead experience gratuitous violence as a result of their existence outside of that society.

We see this as early as the First Wave in Aimé Césaire’s *A Tempest*. The play is an adaptation of William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, and its most immediately apparent deviation from the original text is changing the character of Caliban into “a black slave.”²⁹ By making what was implicit in the narrative explicit, Césaire is able to use the play to comment on the illogic, and surrealism, of slavery.

²⁹ Césaire, Aimé. *A Tempest*. Translated by Richard Miller, TCG Translations, 1985.

The main conflict of Césaire's play is between Prospero and Caliban, the latter constantly plotting a slave rebellion and the former seeming to care more about keeping Caliban enslaved than *The Tempest's* main conflict of plotting his return to society through the marriage of his daughter. In *A Tempest*, Caliban, possessed by the logical desire for freedom, plays the singular straight man in the play proper (Ariel's mulatto status seems to align him with whiteness), but Prospero is not the only funny man about. In the third act of the play, Stephano and Trinculo, servants of Alonso, king of Naples, come upon Caliban. In the original text, Caliban begs the butler and jester to overthrow Prospero for him so he may serve them instead, but in Césaire's revision, Caliban entices them to join his cause. They agree, but not before playing their role in joke-form Afrosurrealism.

Caliban speaks perfectly cogently about his life on the island, but Stephano and Trinculo respond to him as if he's speaking gibberish, accusing him of being drunk, then stupid, then insane in quick succession before agreeing to take up arms against Prospero. Caliban is repeatedly the butt of jokes the servants crack to each other until they run into Prospero and Caliban is immediately proven right. They give up as in *The Tempest* and once again, Caliban is left without an ally, his attempts to get free rebuked by the funny man of the world³⁰.

This continues into the final scene. Another large departure from Shakespeare is the play's ending. Rather than return home with his newlywed daughter, Prospero stays on the island to continue to magically enslave Caliban until his death. Caliban's logical desire for freedom is denied, even after Prospero accomplishes all of his other goals, and the two are left to play out their straight man/funny man act until the final scene of the play.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

This paradigm continues into the second wave in Amiri Baraka's *The Dutchman*. The play concerns Clay, a young Black man who boards a train that already contains Lulu, a white woman. The play functions mostly as two-hander. Clay and Lulu discuss, among other things, music, sex, and the state of race relations in America. The end of the one-act play comes, after Lulu entices Clay to admit that, despite having every reason to, he has no desire to kill white people. Lulu then stabs him in the heart, killing him³¹.

Clay, here, carries an expectation of contingent violence; his death at the end of the play comes as a shock to both him and the audience, but why? Using our Afropessimist lens, Clay has merely experienced the gratuitous violence that is the ontological condition of the Black body. This moment of surprise functions as Afrosurrealism within the piece. Clay is the straight man, expecting to have a flirtatious, if intellectually challenging, conversation with Lulu on his train ride. Only as the piece plays itself out does Clay realize that Lulu is the funny man come to visit violence upon him.

This piece differs slightly from *A Tempest* in that its mode of surrealism is not as explicitly tied to chattel slavery. This is because it simply has more distance from it. As such, it exists in what Saidiya Hartman calls "the afterlife of slavery"³². This piece no longer casts the funny man as a slave master because, in the afterlife of slavery, all human beings are deputized into the maintenance of the racial hierarchy, even and especially desirable white women³³. This is what is meant when I say that the world is the funny man visiting violence upon Black beings, and that realization is represented in narrative as moments of shock, surprise, and Afrosurrealism.

³¹ Baraka, Amiri. *Dutchman*. Faber and Faber, 1983.

³² HARTMAN, SAIDIYA. *LOSE YOUR MOTHER: a Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. PROFILE BOOKS LTD, 2021.

³³ Wilderson, Frank B. *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Duke University Press, 2010. P. 82

The modern era has seen Afrosurrealism more explicitly catapulted into the mainstream, most notably with filmmakers Jordan Peele, Boots Riley, and Janicza Bravo. These three (in addition to Donald Glover and Terrence Nance) fit much more neatly into the joke-form Afrosurrealism than even the examples put forth in the other two waves.

In *Get Out*, protagonist Chris Washington (played by Daniel Kaluuya), is the only character on the Armitage property unaware of the plot to send him to the Sunken Place and take over his body. The piece uses his girlfriend's entire family and their business associates as funny men to twist a premise riffing on *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* into a metaphor for both slavery and cultural appropriation³⁴.

In Boots Riley's *Sorry to Bother You*, a similar dynamic plays out between Cassius Green (played by Lakeith Stanfield) and RegalView telemarketing. Cassius' everyman is over and over again surprised by an escalating strangeness that begins with the discovery of his magical "white voice" (played by David Cross) allowing him to sell anyone anything, up to his discovery that a tech CEO is planning to create an underclass of enslaved horse people. Cassius' Blackness is integral to his position as the protagonist as his need to hide his natural voice is the inciting incident for the film's fantastical events, and his ultimate position as the leader of the slave rebellion is yet another allusion to chattel slavery³⁵.

There is one thing unique about *Sorry to Bother You*, however: Blackness is the true straight man of the film, not just (and not always) Cash. When Cassius (a reference to the Shakespearean sell-out in addition to a verbal gag "cash is green") uses his white voice, he is able to enact surrealism on his own, much to the shock of his Black friends when he tries the voice out in a bar. They have, then, become the straight man, as Cassius, temporarily, becomes both the funny

³⁴ Peele, Jordan, et al. *Get Out*.

³⁵ Riley, Boots, et al. *Sorry to Bother You*.

man and a part of the world. This occurs textually in his promotion at RegalView but also metatextually in the structure of the humor in that scene. We see something similar when Detroit (played by Tessa Thompson) uses her white voice (played by Lily James) at an art show, to Cassius,' and the audience's, surprise. She has joined the world and become the funny (wo)man to Cassius' straight man.

Finally, I want to look at Janicza Bravo. Her *Lemon* does very similar work, but with one key difference: the Afrosurrealism comes from behind the camera rather than diegetically. The film centers around Brett Gelman's Isaac Lachman, a failed actor whose life is coming apart. He latches himself onto a Black hairdresser he meets at a commercial shoot, Cleopatra (played by Nia Long), and begins an ultimately doomed relationship with her³⁶.

The tone of the film is that of an off-beat comedy where Gelman's character makes a series of increasingly poor decisions. Long's Cleopatra, by contrast, is portrayed as explicitly and incredibly normal and rational. Here, the Afrosurrealism comes through Bravo's direction. The entire film is shot from the Black female gaze, or in other words from the perspective of a Black straight woman looking at the funny man. This directorial alignment with Cleo, even though she is not the protagonist, puts us firmly in a place where we see exactly how strange it is when she expects a reasonable response from the world, but her Blackness seems to totally short-circuit civil society.

Janicza Bravo's next film, *Zola*, about a Black stripper who accompanies a white sex worker on an odyssey to Florida has not yet been released, but I would like to bring it up for two reasons. First is that the Twitter thread³⁷ it is based on is quite literally a Black woman acting as the straight man, telling her audience about the various funny men (and women) she meets as she

³⁶ Bravo, Janicza, et al. *Lemon*.

³⁷ King, Aziah. *Imgur*, imgur.com/a/WDwyW.

embarks on this one-thing-led-to-another adventure. The second is simply a brief quote Janicza Bravo gave in an interview with the Ivy Film Festival on April 6th of this year. When talking about Zola, the character, she said “Everyone in the world is the clown, and she’s the straight man. She’s inside of it but she’s also right next to it³⁸.” It might appear, then, as if use of this technique is moving from the unconscious to the conscious minds of these filmmakers as well as their films.

IV. Conclusion

In his 1927 article on the subject, Freud said that “[h]umor is not resigned; it is rebellious.” This is exactly what we see as we consider Afrosurreal narratives across all three waves of the movement’s existence. Each of these narratives “express systematically the forbidden zones of the human mind” in order to illustrate a resistance to the Wildersonian ruse of analogy, “an ancient antinomy as old as humanity itself that may be considered ‘the true alembic of suffering’” for Black beings in the modern era. These artists know, unconsciously, that they have been excluded from civil society, even as they are promised incorporation with in it. They then represent this dissonance as the wild and absurd narratives of their books, plays, and films.

Evident as early as Aimé Césaire and as recently as Janicza Bravo, this type of Afrosurrealism allows Black artists “to reconnect with this original unique faculty” baked into the very nature of the project, and into surrealism itself. Even as dream logic is incorporated into more mainstream methods of expression, using jokes “to lift the spell of the impassable barrier between the inner world and the outer world” is always already able to function in existing narrative forms. As such, I imagine we will see its like until that goal of Afrosurrealism happens: freedom, otherwise known as the end of the world.

³⁸ “A Conversation with A24’s ZOLA Writer and Director, Janicza Bravo.” Ivy Film Festival, 6 Apr. 2021.