INTRODUCTION

That which in the theses of surrealism can go beyond this war is for you, gentlemen, rather than me to decide.

André Breton, “Speech to the Students at Yale,” 1942

In 1938 a young African American boy in Illinois was given some strange yet compelling reading material. It had been retrieved by his aunt from her white employer’s rubbish bin. These Surrealist publications were written in French, but amply illustrated, and the ten-year-old Ted Joans, whose education in the segregated United States did not include the teaching of foreign languages, set about deciphering them. Saving money earned from mowing lawns, he bought a French dictionary and translated the material into not just another language but a culture extrinsic to the conditions from which it arose. “Word by word, like a miner in a deep gold mine,” he wrote in 1989, “I put the puzzle together and often found gold.” Joans, ever the prospector, and his discovery of Surrealist “gold” played a key (though often overlooked) role in the movement’s continuation and expansion on both sides of the Atlantic. This encounter with Surrealism serves as a reminder of the more circuitous routes through which the movement entered and was made available in the United States—routes that circumvented the more traditional conduit of the gallery.
Even, or perhaps especially, as something outmoded and abject, Surrealism appealed to Joans and others who were attuned to its critique of modernity’s social, political, and racial inequalities, which continued to resonate well beyond Paris in the 1920s. Surrealism’s transnational iterations were, in this example, informed by and would react on a society structured along racial, class, and gender lines, inviting reflection on how Surrealism might have signified or been re-signified in these contexts.

Surrealism did function in postwar North America, though its presence remains largely occulted by several assumptions that persist in the historiography of the movement. These posit its founder, André Breton, and its date and place of birth, interwar Paris, as its lowest common denominators, the sine qua non of its existence. Within these parameters, postwar North American Surrealist activity can only be anomalous at best, but is more often treated as illegible or invisible. If narrow definitions are used as a field guide to identify Surrealism outside of its presumed indigenous habitat, then the search will likely be futile; complete identity is impossible. But if one expands and enlarges the characteristics of Surrealism by taking cultural production and reception as primary and critical taxonomies as secondary, then Surrealism in the postwar United States enjoyed a robust and influential existence, both inside and especially outside the gallery. Its presence was not underwritten by pursuit of congruency with historical Surrealism, but rather by a recognition that claiming an affinity with Surrealism was a subject position that signified as “other” in the decades in which the movement was widely held to have been eclipsed by Abstract Expressionism and the semiotic derangement of postmodernity. Surrealism’s minoritarian status rendered it of particular significance to artists who were negotiating other forms of difference, whether national, ethnic, sexual, or gender.

Some of the figures explored in this book made a claim to being card-carrying Surrealists, such as the so-called foremost Surrealist US poet, Philip Lamantia, the first African American surrealist, Joans, and the first “official” group of US Surrealists, founded in Chicago in 1966. But adjacent to them, a whole range of artists, writers, and activists from the counterculture and radical fringes found Surrealism an ally in their challenges to the unequal access to political, social, and cultural agency in modernity. This book is not about membership in the Surrealist movement per se—indeed, it seeks to destabilize the criteria through which engagement with Surrealism has been taxonomized. Retrieving these agents for histories of Surrealism is not about playing fast and loose with the descriptor “Surrealist,” applying the term promiscuously with scant regard for detail and evidence. Historical Surrealism and postwar US avant-gardism are of course geographically and temporally distinct, but many of these artists and radicals who were committed to Surrealism in one way or another pursued different routes to exploit, elide, or transgress this discrepancy.

One of this book’s central claims is that these artists, activists, and writers cultivated different approaches to the construction and narration of cultural history, which complicated oppositions between the deictic markers “here” and “there,” “now” and
“then,” “us” and “them.” These have underpinned linear, mono-nationalist approaches to both Surrealism and postwar US avant-gardism that have to date monopolized understandings of their history and geography, due in no small part to their role in shoring up institutional, commercial, and national interests. Surrealism’s encounter with the United States in the immediate postwar decades, this book argues, gave rise to new transnational, trans-temporal, and trans-disciplinary formations that prompt a radical rethinking of what we know about the movement, its interlocutors, and more broadly the dynamics of cultural contact and change that have been aggregated as the historiography of twentieth-century avant-gardism. It makes a contribution to the ongoing feminist, decolonizing, and queer revisionism of Surrealism not only by including the work of neglected women, Black, and queer artists, but by delineating how their practices interrogated masculinist, heteronormative, and Eurocentric historiographies of the avant-garde that had either overlooked or erased them.

“FOR THE MINORITY WHICH IS EVER REBORN AND WHICH ACTS AS A LEVER”

Conventional accounts of Surrealism’s history and dispersal have followed a rather formulaic narrative of success followed by gradual downfall. The story begins with the movement’s emergence in 1924 from the embers of Dada, the horrors of the trenches and hospitals of World War I, and the hypocrisy of interwar reconstruction. The subsequent decade is usually presented as the peak of Surrealism’s productivity and innovation, with the founding of the periodical *La Révolution surréaliste*, the opening of the Bureau de recherche surréaliste, a series of group exhibitions, and new members such as Salvador Dalí. The publication of the “Second Manifesto of Surrealism” in 1929, however, revealed a group plagued by disunity, attempting to redefine and reassert itself in the wake of internal crises as members worked through competing and increasingly incompatible loyalties to Surrealism and the Communist Party. Though the 1930s witnessed some of the movement’s major achievements, such as the notorious *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in 1938, forays into film, such as Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s *L’Âge d’or* (1930), and the endorsement of Pablo Picasso, Surrealism, it is widely held, was starting to decline—specifically, in Susan Rubin Suleiman’s metonymic formulation, moving from the street to the salon, abandoning its political commitments in favor of erotic, commercial, and aesthetic substitutes. Seeking exile in New York from Vichy France in the early 1940s, the émigré Surrealists struggled to assert themselves in culturally alien and socially inhospitable surroundings, and the movement’s atrophy during the war was, according to most commentators, fatal. The returning exiles arrived back in France to find existentialism at the vanguard of Parisian cultural and political life. Surrealism’s politicization of the irrational and its independent Marxist position were now out of tempo with the postwar mood. In an increasingly indifferent Paris, Surrealism is presented as stuttering along until shortly after Breton’s death in 1966, when it too finally expired.
This narrative emerged from early scholarship such as Maurice Nadeau’s *The History of Surrealism* (1945) and Anna Balakian’s *Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute* (1959), but, in becoming increasingly axiomatic in subsequent decades, it has standardized the history and geography of Surrealism. Influential monographs such as Hal Foster’s *Compulsive Beauty* (1993), Steven Harris’s *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s* (2004), and David Lomas’s *The Haunted Self: Surrealism, Psychoanalysis, Subjectivity* (2000) have tended to equate Surrealism with if not Paris then certainly Europe; its borders, spatial and temporal, remain in place even as these projects may have revaluated the movement’s poetics, practices, or politics. More recent scholarship has begun to disrupt the conventional periodization of Surrealism, such as Alyce Mahon’s *Surrealism and the Politics of Eros, 1938–1968* (2005), which argues that the group was far from bankrupt in postwar France and instead responded to the exigencies of the postwar years with an invigorated portfolio of demands and strategies. The 1960s were, according to Mahon, a fertile context for the movement, whose pursuit of the erotic in particular chimed with the aspirations of the next generation of Parisian radicals and the burgeoning counterculture. Similarly, Gavin Parkinson’s *Futures of Surrealism: Myth, Science Fiction and Fantastic Art in France 1936–1969* (2015) argues for the continuation of the movement in postwar Paris, predicated upon its engagement with a portfolio of broader social, political, and cultural debates, including parapsychology, the Algerian War, conspiracy theories, and situationism.

Although it has been retrospectively confined to interwar Paris, Surrealism was a resolutely transnational avant-garde, explicit in its disregard for the borders of the nation-state, the preservation or expansion of which had, the group argued, launched numerous wars and exacted considerable human cost. The movement had been internationalizing during the 1920s, but the process of forging political and artistic allegiances across borders intensified during the 1930s and early 1940s, galvanized by the growing threat of totalitarianism in Europe and continued opposition to France’s colonial activities. The group’s declaration in 1925 that it was “disgusted by the idea of belonging to a country at all, which is the most bestial and least philosophic of the concepts to which we are subjected,” was prompted by its support for the Rif uprising in Morocco, but born of a wider belief that it was not just colonized subjects but the proletariat who were subjugated in the name of the nation-state. Alliances followed with the Communist Party and the Anti-Nationalist League in protest over the *Colonial Exhibition* held in Paris in 1931, for instance, and in 1935 with assorted grassroots organizations as part of the short-lived Contra-Attaque group, which declared itself opposed to the fascist, communist, and capitalist factions that were competing for control of Europe.

Surrealism was not just politically but discursively aligned with people and practices outside of Europe, typified by Breton’s problematic declaration to an audience of Haitian writers in 1945 that “we found ourselves linked from the beginning with ‘primitive’ thought, which remains less alien to you than to us.” This affinity had mani-
fested through the Surrealists’ collection, discussion, representation, and exhibition of Oceanic and pre-Columbian, and to a lesser extent African, cultures. The construction and recruitment of this transnational “other” was undertaken in the name of subverting the political, social, and aesthetic hierarchies that underpinned the assumed superiority of Western modernity. Non-Western cultures also provided Surrealism with new allies, such as the Martiniquan writers Aimé Césaire and Suzanne Césaire, or the Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, though cultural production rather than people crossed national borders more frequently within the matrix of Surrealist modernism, which is another way of saying that Surrealism often appropriated more than it was given—that it sometimes spoke for, or over, rather than with its non-Western fellow travelers. Nonetheless, Benjamin Péret noted in Cahiers d’art in 1935 that Surrealism “should, to keep from drying out, go beyond the narrow framework of this country’s borders and adopt an international aspect,” an accurate description of Surrealism’s aspirations that would see by the early 1940s the movement represented in not just Western metropolitan centers but more globally, in Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Tenerife, Argentina, England, Peru, Cuba, Yugoslavia, Denmark, Japan, Mexico, Romania, Haiti, and Martinique. These collaborations were nourished by major Surrealist exhibitions in London in 1936 and in Mexico City in 1940.

North America is often left off the roster of countries fostering Surrealist activity. If it is inscribed into histories of organized Surrealism at all, it is most often as a context for its attenuation, its swan song. Scholarship on the Parisian group’s wartime exile in New York by Dickran Tashjian, T.J. Demos, and Martica Sawin rehearses the assumption that Surrealism was “brought to its knees” in the United States, leaving the truism that “Surrealism was born out of the traumas of the First World War and suffered its death throes during the Second” relatively intact. This book builds on more recent scholarship that has sought to address this lacuna by demonstrating that Surrealism became useful to US artists who were unwilling to relinquish figuration at midcentury, and who were drawn to its interest in the fantastic and the uncanny.

My approach, however, seeks to reorient historiographies of Surrealism’s presence in the US context away from the familiar reference points of form, theme, or the institution, and instead to uncover its mobilization by artists, activists, and radicals as a way to articulate the experience of differently embodied subjects of modernity. This book calls for the vital importance of feminist, queer, decolonizing, and critical race theory approaches to the field, not only as a means through which previously neglected interlocutors and vectors of Surrealism might become visible, but also to prompt a rethinking of the historiographic methods used to model cultural contact and exchange that have given rise to their erasure.

The modern United States had not really piqued the Surrealists’ interest prior to their exile. They preferred the pre-Columbian cultures of the Pacific Northwest and the Southwest. The group declared, “The States of Northern America are as immense a reservoir of stupidity as of merchandise” in a 1927 statement published in the United
States in English, and the infamous “Map of the World According to the Surrealists” in Variétés in 1929 represented the United States as all but imperceptible, merely a hinge between Alaska and Mexico. In turn, North America was not without its own reservations about Breton’s movement before the group’s wartime emigration. The popular and middlebrow press throughout the 1930s responded to Surrealism with a mixture of fascination and ridicule, constantly declaring its obsolescence in a way that paradoxically implied it had more influence and longevity than they explicitly acknowledged.

Surrealism’s introduction to North America in the 1930s coincided with protracted and partisan debates over the currency of Marxism and the rightful relationship between art and politics. In attempting to combine radical aesthetic experimentalism with radical political commitment, Surrealism was vulnerable to attacks from both the left and the right. From the left, Breton’s movement could be charged as reactionary, and from the right Surrealism’s investment in Marxism seemed deleterious to its artistic endeavors. Surrealism had been mediated to Americans through publications such as Jane Anderson and Margaret Heap’s Little Review and Eugene Jolas’s transition during the 1920s and early 1930s. More often than not its appearance was coterminous with, or accompanied by, some form of critique or reevaluation of its politics or poetics. Jolas made clear in numerous issues of transition that publication of Surrealist material was in no way an endorsement of the movement, offering his manifesto “Revolution of the Word” as an alternative template for aesthetic innovation. The movement’s careful construction of an independent Marxist position that fell afoul of the left and the right in the 1930s would be precisely what attracted 1960s radicals and avant-gardists, who were themselves revising the Old Left model of political revolution and its neglect of the expressive, embodied individual.

One strategy for promoting Surrealism in the United States during the 1930s was to downplay its politics altogether and to construct a version of it that emphasized its appeal to whimsy and fantasy. As Tashjian, Keith Eggener, Lewis Kachur, and Sandra Zalman have argued, European Surrealism’s contestation of modernist abstraction through the exploration of dreams, madness, the irrational, and the fantastic rendered it comparable to the irreverence and escapism of mass entertainment, and this version, whose politics were all but invisible, proved enormously influential, not to mention lucrative. The earliest exhibition of its pictorial works at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1932, organized by Julian Levy and entitled Newer Super-realism, marginalized Breton’s importance to the movement’s development and advocated Dalí, whose right-wing politics were less visible, though increasingly as deeply held. The hugely successful Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism show, curated by Alfred H. Barr at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1936 followed a similar pattern by aggregating Surrealism with Dada and conflating its interest in the fantastic with precursors such as Pieter Bruegel and contemporaries from Walt Disney Studios. As Levy observed of his 1932 exhibition at Wadsworth, “I wished to present a paraphrase [of Surrealism] which would offer it in the language of the New World rather
than a translation in the rhetoric of the old.” Designed to domesticate and Americanize, such “paraphrases” tended not only to make a feature of Surrealism’s US cousins such as Mickey Mouse and the Marx Brothers, but also to promote the commercially minded Dalí as a figurehead for the movement in the United States. Dalí’s publicity-seeking activities, such as the arresting window for Bonwit Teller in New York, his ill-fated Dream of Venus Surrealist pavilion at the New York World’s Fair, and his collaborations with Walt Disney, raised the profile of his commercialized interpretation of Surrealism, although Dalí’s practice remained an important reference point for subsequent generations of artists.

A consequence, then, of exceeding the limits of its immediate circle was that the Parisian group was not in control of Surrealism’s iterations. It was made available and useful in the United States as something other than its self-narrations in Paris. This is often presented as though it was a problem for Breton, who is often cast as anxious about his authority over the group. Indeed, his writings are strewn with references to the misperceptions and degradations to which Surrealism had been subjected by those eager to either emulate and codify or discredit and caricature. He reflected on the fate of the movement in “Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto of Surrealism or Else” (1942), noting that it now spanned from New York to Martinique to Tokyo. The text, published in French and English in the group’s mouthpiece during its exile, the little magazine VVV, protested that “what, in a very definite sense, is being done, bears little resemblance to what was desired.” Despite lamenting such discrepancies, in the same text he also eschewed unanimity and partisanship, declaring himself “for the minority which is ever reborn and which acts as a lever,” adding that his “greatest ambition is to insure [sic] the continuation after me of the theoretical significance of this minority.”

Here, as in his “Speech to the Students at Yale” in the same year, Breton recast Surrealism in nondenominational terms, as an implacable nonconformism whose vitality and relevance were dialectically dependent on the continued existence of those who suffer under capitalism and its thirst for profit and militarism. It is possible to speculate that Breton’s apparent willingness in these texts to surrender the movement to its future interlocutors might have created a particular identity for the movement in the eyes of US Anglophones for whom the full archive of Surrealist (textual) production was inaccessible. Surrealism emerges here in pragmatic rather than absolutist terms, as a receptive rather than an exclusory group, and indeed this is the version that was interrogated, claimed, and furthered by some of the movement’s US sponsors in subsequent decades. This book assumes that discrepancies between what was carried out under the banner of Surrealism and Breton’s definition of the movement are not just inevitable consequences of spatial and temporal dissemination, but could often be generative of new possibilities for Surrealism once Breton’s approval or convergence with European formations were removed as guarantors of transnational Surrealist practices.

According to most historians, the group’s exile was disastrous, compounding an embattled period in its history that had seen its post-national position increasingly
difficult to defend in Europe and prompted a sacrifice of its political ambitions in favor of retreat to the aesthetic and the erotic. The language barrier, visa conditions, and financial hardship dogged the Surrealists’ exile, undermining the extent to which it could withstand the attendant ignominies, let alone transcend them. Anna Balakian presents Breton as “a powerful man trapped in a cage,” head of a once-powerful avant-garde now emasculated and struggling to defend his leadership from threats by the Greek Surrealist Nicolas Calas and the Mississippian Charles Henri Ford.23 Far from the streets of Paris where it had once derived its lifeblood, Surrealism was, according to some, a little too comfortably accommodated in the galleries of New York, featured as it was in three big shows in 1942: one at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery, organized by Guggenheim; Artists in Exile at Pierre Matisse Gallery, organized by Henri Matisse; and First Papers of Surrealism at the Whitelaw Reid Mansion in midtown Manhattan, organized by Breton and Marcel Duchamp.24 That last show was in conjunction with the Coordinating Council of French Relief Society, who had connections to Vichy France, which added to the impression that the exigencies of exile were accelerating a reactionary move to the right, with the movement increasingly tying its fortunes to metaphysics, myth, and mystification.25

“REVOLUTION, NOT SPECTATOR SPORTS”
As is frequently rehearsed in histories of art, the Surrealists’ exile served as a coda for their own movement and a prelude for another; their presence in the United States contributed to the ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism, catalyzing the transition of cultural capital from France to the United States that saw New York replace Paris as the crucible of modern art. Future Abstract Expressionists acquainted themselves with Surrealists such as Roberto Matta, whose studio sessions were attended by Robert Motherwell, William Baziotes, and, occasionally, Jackson Pollock in the winter of 1941–42. Surrealism, it is widely held, had a formative impact on the development of the automatic, unconscious aspects of their work. Despite its transformative effect on US art, Surrealism’s impact was muted by Abstract Expressionism’s great champion, Clement Greenberg, according to whom Abstract Expressionism was the apotheosis of modern art’s pursuit of medium specificity and opticality. Surrealism, with its emphasis on psychoanalysis and figuration, was all but disbarred from this narrative of formalist, abstract modernism, and as a consequence of Greenberg’s extensive influence, the movement had little currency within institutional art history in the immediate postwar years.26 Abstract Expressionism, as is well known, was recruited to wage battle on the cultural front of the Cold War, mobilized to promote US cultural and political liberalism to Europe, which was still in throes of political dictatorships.27 The jingoism and cultural chauvinism informing Greenberg’s view in 1948 that “the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States, along with the center of gravity of industrial production and political power,” are palpable.28 Surrealism was a casualty of this triumphalist narrative that celebrated, and in part effected, transitions in cultural capital from one nation to another.
Surrealism was also a casualty of another nationalist definition of cultural legitimacy. In France, accounts of its demise were premised on its alleged inability to chime with the anti-fascist discourse advanced by Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir, which prescribed the political and aesthetic coordinates of committed literature in the Fourth Republic. The supra-personal irrationalism of Surrealism that privileged behavior born not of conscious good faith, but unconscious, unknowable impulses was not palatable, and to be out of tempo with hegemonic definitions of postwar French culture and politics was, it would seem, synonymous with attenuation and decay. Accounts of Surrealism’s alleged postwar invisibility in the United States and bankruptcy in France are advanced from perspectives of national culture, from dominant though divergent definitions of artistic and political freedom. From a transnational perspective, the success or failure of Surrealism cannot be captured by measuring its health in France alone, but requires that multiple, even competing definitions of political and artistic freedom are kept in play, against or for which Surrealism could be mobilized.

Abstract Expressionism has largely overdetermined the reception of Surrealism in the United States in narratives that privilege East Coast cultural activity and the visual arts. The controversial Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage show in 1968, curated by William Rubin at MoMA in New York, put forward the institutionally sanctioned version of the movement’s history in the postwar years, which assumed it was defunct, indivisible from Dada, and practiced nearly exclusively by white males, and emphasized its aesthetic rather than political ambition. The show included contemporary artists such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg under the banner of neo-Dadaists, and only a handful of works by Claes Oldenburg were linked with Surrealism. The show testified to the critical consensus that challenges to abstract modern art during the 1950s and 1960s, from Rauschenberg to Pop art, were attributable to a revival primarily of Dada, with the influence of Surrealism only visible “to a much lesser extent.” Gene Swenson’s 1966 exhibition The Other Tradition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, also sought to inscribe Dada and Surrealism within developments in anti-modernist postwar art. Rather than, as Rubin had, looking for formal similarities between US art and Surrealist precursors, Swenson brokered thematic connections coalescing around a shared interest in dreams and the erotic.

Yet a series of artists, activists, and writers seized the movement, implicating Surrealism in far-reaching challenges not just to modernism but to inequalities within modernity more broadly. From the streets outside Rubin’s show, protestors threw stink bombs and paraded placards declaring “Surrealism means revolution, not spectator sports.” Among them were members of a Chicago group who declaimed Swenson’s interpretation of Surrealism, finding it anathema to their own, which saw the movement as a blueprint for a total transformation of the US cultural and political landscape. This book focuses on those who were, for a variety of reasons, mobilizing Surrealism in contexts outside of even this “other” tradition of modernism. Looking
beyond a shared interest in Surrealism’s formal and thematic concerns, this book restores the political valences to Surrealism’s reception in the United States, which have been occulted by institutional and mono-nationalist approaches to the movement’s historiography. I argue that Surrealism provided a matrix through which the politics of not only class but also gender, sexuality, and ethnicity might be negotiated in the postwar United States.

The chapters that follow necessarily build on feminist interventions that began in the 1970s and wrought irrevocable change within Surrealist studies, to the extent that a reading of Surrealism that ignores the gender politics at play in the production and reception of its artworks is now conspicuous. That the hitherto unmarked Surrealist subject position should be identified as male and the movement’s quest for aesthetic and political revolution dependent upon appropriation and exploitation of the feminine have become well-rehearsed features in Surrealism studies. The twofold operation of feminist revisionism proceeded by interrogating the representation of women within masculinist Surrealism, and recovering the extensive participation of women artists in the movement.

Few feminist scholars now agree that Surrealism was as uniformly, unremittingly, unequivocally misogynist as some of its earlier detractors suggested; now they reread the movement as heteroglossic, characterized more by internal variation than consistency. Pioneering this “postmodern” approach to Surrealism, Rosalind Krauss located a radical deconstruction of gender at the heart of the project, in its photographic practices in particular, arguing that “much of what was truly original and far-reaching in surrealist production-across-the-boards was feminized.” In such formulations, Surrealism espouses, or ventriloquizes, a feminized position across a variety of signifying practices, attesting to a structural homology between the avant-garde and the feminine, but as others have commented, this reduces gender to a function of textuality, and overlooks its material and historical construction.

There are obvious intersections between the patriarchal and heteronormative or homophobic discourses in Surrealism, though these regimes do not necessarily function symmetrically. The exaltation and objectification of the feminine by masculinist Surrealism was coterminous with a mobilization of heterosexual desire. As is often remarked, although the trope of “woman” was central in the Surrealist imaginary, actual embodied women were often marginalized within the movement. If Surrealism’s challenge to modernity depended upon an appropriation of the feminine, it was also dependent upon a disavowal of same-sex desire, which was not seen to disrupt bourgeois morality or values as the heterosexually eroticized feminine did. Although the mobilization of heterosexual desire produced an overdetermination of the feminine and a concomitant erasure of embodied women as subjects, producers, or consumers of Surrealism, in contrast it rendered homosexual desire all but invisible, yet queerly desiring male bodies did not, it seems, experience a comparable degree of marginalization. The following chapters seek to queer historiographies of Surrealism.