

Légitime défense  
*From Communism and Surrealism to Caribbean Self-Definition*

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In 1932, eight Martinican students living in Paris signed their names to the declaration *Légitime défense*, paradoxically articulating their struggle for self-definition in a genre and language explicitly aligned with Communism and Surrealism, two movements of European origin.<sup>1</sup> Despite their Eurocentric platforms, Communists and Surrealists were appealing models for anti-colonial dissenters because of their revolutionary discourse and their rejection of the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris. Using the authority of Surrealism and Communism to launch their own program, the signatories of *Légitime défense* respond to a European vision of colonialism from a marginalized position. After outlining the demands articulated in *Légitime défense*, I will examine the use of the manifesto in this context to describe how the students appropriated Communist and Surrealist rhetoric for the purposes of initiating a Caribbean literary and political consciousness. As a genre, the manifesto claims its predecessors' authority while also reinventing the terms of their struggle. By positing their claims within the manifesto, the Martinican students foreground the primitivist contradictions inherent to their project and work towards developing an autochthonous literary discourse. They situate themselves within a European model of textual authority so as to define a uniquely Caribbean agenda.

*Légitime défense* aligns itself with both Marx and Breton, citing Marxist theories of dialectical materialism and co-opting its title from a 1926 essay by André Breton to introduce the first—and only—issue of a new journal.<sup>2</sup> By explicitly referencing their iconic forbearers, the students not only position themselves ideologically, but also usurp Marx and Breton's authority to create a new audience and subject-position. The signatories—Etienne Léro, Thélus Léro, René Ménil, Jules-Marcel Monner-

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ot, Michel Pilotin, Maurice-Sabas Quitman, Auguste Thésée, and Pierre Yoyotte—comprise a collective of Martinican students in their twenties living in Paris. Some of them had previously contributed to the 1931 *La Revue du Monde Noir*, a literary journal that lasted six issues, before following it with the decidedly more militant *Légitime défense*. Self-described as both “emerging from the French mulatto bourgeoisie, one of the most depressing things on earth” and as “traitors to this class,” they seek to gather an audience of identically situated subjects.<sup>3</sup> They identify as “people of the French Caribbean” and insist that the journal is “primarily addressed to young French Caribbeans.”<sup>4</sup> Unlike Marx and Engels who write on behalf of the proletariat, or Breton who retains control over the membership of his movement, the students constitute a genuine collective addressing their peers. Although the *Légitime défense* journal’s print run consisted of less than five hundred copies, it spurred the development of a burgeoning Caribbean consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

The majority of the *Légitime défense* manifesto works to define, delineate, and gather an audience that identifies with its writers. In defining its audience, *Légitime défense* also defines its opposition: “We are speaking to those who are not already branded as killed established fucked-up academic successful decorated decayed provided for decorative prudish opportunists.”<sup>6</sup> The urgent need to cultivate an audience that identifies with their struggle, based on their opposition to certain values, marks the text as inclusive despite its angry tone. They assert, “We are sure that other young people like us exist prepared to add their signatures to ours,” and invite these people to adhere to their movement.<sup>7</sup> This gesture reaffirms their intention to gather a true collective, rather than to establish themselves as leaders or prophets of forthcoming social or artistic change. “All those who adopt the same attitude no matter where they come from, will find a welcome among us,” they exclaim.<sup>8</sup> The Martinican students are part of the audience that they address and they refer to a colonial past with which their peers can identify. Their manifesto’s goal is to articulate this shared identity and to promote the formation of a collective consciousness within a like-minded audience.

The students suggest that this collective can work to transcend its political and literary condition, a struggle that they define in terminology inherited from Marx and Breton. Like their predecessors, the authors of *Légitime défense* oppose capitalism, religion, and the bourgeoisie. They “feel suffocated by this capitalist, Christian, bourgeois world.”<sup>9</sup> Borrowing terms from Marx, the students claim that it is only in lieu of a “black proletariat” that they are “addressing the children of the black bourgeoisie.”<sup>10</sup> They write, “if it is especially aimed at young blacks, it is because we consider that they in particular suffer from the effects of capitalism...and that they seem to offer...a generally higher potential for revolt and joy.”<sup>11</sup> While the students’

stance on the negative effects of capitalism can be attributed to Marx, their claim to a black “capacity for revolt and joy” diverges from him. It empowers but also reinscribes the black Caribbean subject within primitivist terms, a problematic that I will explore later in this essay. Although they use class terminology to define their public, the students ultimately seek out young, literate peers of their social class, an audience akin to that of European avant-garde manifestos.

The students not only adopt the terms of revolutionary struggle from Marx and Breton, but they also tactically insert themselves within a history of dissent from the position of textual authority established by the *Communist Manifesto* and later appropriated by the *Surrealist Manifestos*. Their forcefully repeated refrain in *Légitime défense*—“we declare” and even “we declare (and we shall not retract this declaration)” —reaffirms their commitment to their principles and acknowledges the history of the manifesto genre, recognizing it as a form in which to develop an ideology, gather adherents, and propose future action. “This is just a foreword,” the students write, as if hearkening back to the nineteenth-century prefaces that predated the avant-garde manifesto.<sup>12</sup> They assert that their project transcends their text: “this little journal is a provisional tool, and if it collapses we shall find others.”<sup>13</sup> To emphasize the seriousness of this textual assault, they proclaim, “we are hell-bent on sincerity,” a sentiment that also categorizes the manifesto genre. As a genre, the manifesto reinvents itself through each declarative pronouncement.<sup>14</sup> The students self-consciously claim both the authority of the manifesto genre as well as its specific implementation by Marx and Breton.

In using the manifesto to announce their position, and in citing Marx and Breton as influences, the students self-consciously participate in the manifesto discourse. Originally a formal decree issued by state authorities, the manifesto was adopted by dissenting groups to subvert official rhetoric. According to Janet Lyon, the manifesto became a “spectacular form of political militancy” because it used what were originally the terms of the state to reveal the underlying weaknesses of the government’s promises, values, and institutions.<sup>15</sup> Although by the nineteenth century the manifesto was established as a political tract with a distinctive formula and authoritative voice, the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* popularized it as the genre of political dissent, an authority and precedent cited by *Légitime défense*. Marx and Engels’ transformational doctrine was first published in London in 1848. Engels describes the manifesto in his preface to the 1888 English edition as a “complete theoretical and practical party program” intended to clarify his and Marx’s views to their audience and to their opposition.<sup>16</sup> Marx and Engels define their audience as all “Proletarians and Communists.” Their method for gathering their audience’s support is to establish common grievances against their opposition, the bourgeoisie. They openly

denounce “the exploitation of one part of society by the other,” an antagonistic class relationship that can be extrapolated to the relationship between colonists and their subjects in the context of the Martinicans’ struggle.<sup>17</sup>

While the students were clearly indebted to the textual paradigm offered by the *Communist Manifesto*, it is also important to note that the Communist Party was the only political group in France that openly denounced colonialism. This position was brought to the forefront of national debate by the May 6- November 15, 1931 “L’Exposition coloniale internationale de Paris.”<sup>18</sup> Because of the primacy of their manifesto, and because they were the only organized political party to denounce the Exposition, and in turn colonialism, the Communists served as both textual and ideological models for the students’ anti-colonial struggle.<sup>19</sup> The *Communist Manifesto* also addresses the colonial question by linking colonialism to capitalist imperialism, which it refers to as “naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.”<sup>20</sup> It urges its audience to “forcibly overthrow all existing social conditions” and situates social change within a dialectic wherein “new forms of struggle replace the old ones” and thereby allow colonial subjects to apply the tools of proletarian struggle to their own fight against colonialism.<sup>21</sup> *Légitime défense* declares, “We accept Marx’s dialectical materialism freed of all misleading interpretation and victoriously put to the test of events by Lenin.”<sup>22</sup> Not only do Marx and Engels establish the manifesto as a subversive political tool, but they also frame the terms by which colonialism can be understood and overthrown.

The only other organized group joining the Communists in their protest against the Colonial Exposition were the French Surrealists. Thus Surrealism also served as a model for the Martinican students’ anti-colonial campaign. The Surrealists were also indebted to the *Communist Manifesto* and had developed a volatile relationship with the Communist Party in France. Breton’s two surrealist manifestos, along with his other polemical tracts, including his *Légitime défense*, outline the movement’s artistic goals and political positions, pushing the genre of the manifesto beyond its previous incarnations. According to Martin Puchner, Breton, like Marx and Engels, wanted “to control and restrain the use of the manifesto” and thereby preserve it as a foundational act.<sup>23</sup> Instead of publishing a quantity of manifestos, Breton, like Marx, chose to adapt his two manifestos with prefaces. Breton’s first *Manifesto of Surrealism* defined and brought Surrealism into existence, working both to map out the Surrealist program and to rewrite the genre according to the tenets of the movement. Breton defines Surrealism as “psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express...the actual functioning of thought...in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.”<sup>24</sup> Breton at once uses the manifesto to declare his opposition to a rigorously defined

aesthetic program, and also enacts Surrealism by self-consciously repurposing the manifesto genre. In a surrealist gesture of contradiction, he uses the manifesto to declare the movement's opposition to codification: "I do not believe in the establishment of a conventional surrealist pattern at any time in the near future."<sup>25</sup> In many ways, the surrealist manifesto marks an attempt to enact its literary program, transforming the manifesto into a surrealist text and positioning Surrealism at the start of a new historical trajectory.<sup>26</sup>

Breton considers his readers potential followers of the movement, and grants them the "discretionary power" to participate in the manifesto and ultimately in Surrealism itself.<sup>27</sup> In his *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930) Breton indirectly includes the Martinican students who cite him two years later in this audience:

There are still today, in the lycées, even in the workshops, in the street, the seminaries and military barracks, pure young people who refuse to knuckle down. It is to them and them alone that I address myself.<sup>28</sup>

It is both the Surrealists' aesthetic program as outlined through these texts and the Surrealists' involvement with the anti-colonial movement that indebted the authors of *Légitime défense* to Breton's example. Throughout their manifesto, the Martinican students reference him and the tenets of Surrealism, proclaiming, "In the concrete realm of means of human expression, we equally unreservedly accept Surrealism with which our destiny in 1932 is linked. We refer our readers to André Breton's two manifestos."<sup>29</sup> The students map out further influences, which include Freud, Aragon, Crevel, Péret, Eluard, Hegel, Rimbaud, Lautréamont and Dalí, amongst others integral to Surrealist thought. "We seek everything Surrealism has taught us to find," they exclaim.<sup>30</sup>

The students also align themselves with surrealist tools for change. Like the Surrealists, the Martinican signatories ascribe to psychoanalysis, hailed by Surrealists for accessing the subconscious and who declared, "we want to see clearly into our dreams and we are listening to what they have to tell us."<sup>31</sup> They even hope that psychoanalysis can liberate them from their colonial shame: "We expect a lot from psychoanalytical investigation...we do not accept that we should be ashamed of what we suffer."<sup>32</sup> They position "Western Civilization" as the embodiment of their enemy, an "abominable system of constraints and restrictions, the extermination of love and the confinement of the dream," a condemnation that can be read in surrealist terms. In a footnote they announce, "From the next issue, we hope to develop our ideology of revolt," gesturing towards both surrealist revolution and the

Martinicans' political program.<sup>33</sup> Although they were an autonomous collective with unique concerns, the *Légitime défense* group attended activities at Breton's studio and published work in Surrealist magazines.<sup>34</sup>

In addition to connecting the Communist and Surrealist manifestos through their enumeration of influences, the Martinican students also reference the entanglement of the two groups through their journal's title, poached from Breton's 1926 *Légitime défense*, a response to the Communist party's accusations of surrealist disloyalty. In this text Breton asserts the political legitimacy of Surrealism and draws attention to the shortcomings of the Communist party.<sup>35</sup> He calls Communism a "minimum program" and claims, "we find ourselves lacunae which all the hope we put in the triumph of Communism does not satisfy."<sup>36</sup> Breton affirms the Surrealists' loyalty to class struggle and its revolutionary aims but refuses to abdicate his artistic experiments. He writes:

All of us seek to shift power from the hands of the bourgeoisie to those of the proletariat. Meanwhile, it is nonetheless necessary that the experiments of the inner life, and do so, of course, without external or even Marxist control. Surrealism, moreover, tends at its limit to posit these two states as one and the same.<sup>37</sup>

Breton wants to retain control over his artistic experiments, which he claims do not conflict with his political aspirations to overthrow the ruling class; rather, the two struggles are inextricable. Despite its contentious origins, the signatories to *Légitime défense* cite Breton's essay, which defends Surrealism's commitment to Communism while trying to remain autonomous from party politics. Emblematic of the tension between Surrealism's artistic and political goals, Breton's treatise offers the Martinican students an opportunity to reconcile an aesthetic program with political action.

Despite Breton's purported resolution of Surrealism and Marxism, the two were never wholly reconciled. As Robert Short writes,

If both [Marx and Breton] saw the revolution as a prelude to the founding of a world based on the desires of men, their ideas about the context of these desires were not the same. For the Marxist they were material while for the Surrealists they were primarily subjective and spiritual.<sup>38</sup>

According to Short, while Marxists focused on the collective, Surrealists

privileged the individual mind. In his *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930) Breton claims that transforming the unconscious is a necessary precursor to revolt.<sup>39</sup> More interested in abstract notions of liberation and revolution than the specific agenda of the Communist Party, Breton asserts, “Man, who would wrongly allow himself to be intimidated by a few monstrous historical failures, is still free to believe in his freedom. He is his own master.”<sup>40</sup> For Breton, class warfare and the colonial struggle begin with the individual mind. He defends Surrealism since it challenges man “to escape to some meaningful degree from the universal fetters.”<sup>41</sup> These “fetters” remain ambiguous and can be interpreted both artistically and politically.

Because Breton opposes slavery and class, albeit in abstract and often aesthetic terms, his work can nonetheless be extrapolated to address anti-colonial struggles; it therefore resonates with the *Légitime défense* group. Through a rhetorical maneuver that situates logic and rationality as the shared enemies of artistic and political revolution, Breton asks,

If we cannot find words enough to stigmatize the baseness of Western thought, if we are not afraid to take up arms against logic, if we refuse to swear that something we do in dreams is less meaningful than something we do in a state of waking...how do you expect us to show any tenderness, even to be tolerant, toward an apparatus of social conservation, of whatever sort it may be?<sup>42</sup>

Breton positions “Western thought” as a target to attack, an antagonist also cited by the Martinican *Légitime défense*. While Breton specifically recognizes class as an impediment, freedom as a goal, and rebellion as a value, he does not offer a clear political program to enact these ends beyond surrealist artistic experiments. He goes on to explain that class struggle is also internalized, and therefore requires personal transformation:

The end must be the total elimination of the claims of a class to which we belong in spite of ourselves and which we cannot help abolish outside ourselves as long as we have not succeeded in abolishing them within ourselves.<sup>43</sup>

Breton thus aligns himself with the values of the *Communist Manifesto* while retaining a space for his own artistic freedom. The Martinican students echo Breton’s rhetoric of abstract revolt in their text, even though they respond to a lived political struggle.

Putting aside their ideological differences, the Communists and Surrealists banded together in opposing the “L’Exposition coloniale internationale de Paris” and mounted a counter-exhibition, on September 20, 1931, called “La vérité aux

colonies” (The Truth about the Colonies). The Surrealists wrote two manifestos in opposition to the exhibition which they distributed outside factories and around the Exposition: “Ne visitez pas l’Exposition Coloniale” (Don’t Visit the Colonial Exposition); and “Premier Bilan de L’Exposition Coloniale” (First Assessment of the Colonial Exposition), calling for “the immediate evacuation of the colonies.”<sup>44</sup> The counter-exhibition criticized the Colonial Exposition for masking the violence of colonialism and for positioning Western artifacts as hierarchically superior to non-Western indigenous ones. In their display, the Surrealists and Communists had one room dedicated to explaining the relationship between capitalism and imperialism and the value of Communism. Another room showcased the Surrealists’ collection of African, Oceanic and American sculptures alongside European fetish objects, all installed under the quote from Marx, “A people that oppresses another cannot be free.” Although Communism and Surrealism retained fundamental philosophical differences, the joint Communist and Surrealist opposition to the Colonial Exposition remained the only visible critique of colonialism in Paris at the time, and may have been responsible for raising the consciousness of Caribbean students living in France regarding their own anti-colonial struggle.

Although the Surrealists battled colonialism, their critique was frequently ahistorical and abstract, thereby denying specificity to the anti-colonial struggle and serving as a problematic model for *Légitime défense*. Phyllis Taoua explains how this brand of anti-colonialism obscured historical reality since “the primitivist ideal is conceptually incompatible with an accurate assessment of the historical injustice of colonial exploitation.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, while the Surrealists and Communists seemed to be the only available models of dissent for the Martinican students in France, they provided the Martinicans with a discourse that reinscribed much of the racial and cultural difference that the students explicitly sought to critique. This primitivist bind in relation to Europe underlies many Latin American and Caribbean vanguards. As Vicky Unruh explains,

Latin American self-discovery was closely intertwined with a European rediscovery of what was imagined as the non-European world...European artists’ expectations for American art were often problematically shaped by primitivist quests and by romantic and vitalist conceptions of America as the organic. Even as their own work was marked by these same ideas, Latin America’s vanguardists were also ambivalently aware that their own New World stories manifesting these conceptions were often exactly what European artists wanted to hear.<sup>46</sup>

The Surrealists and Communists rejected the Colonial Exposition in favor of a celebration of African and Caribbean artifacts. While this display may have drawn attention to the value of Caribbean culture for the Caribbean students themselves,

it also repackaged the Caribbean and Africa as sources of a primitivist vitality that served to reanimate the Western European self rather than advance the anti-colonial struggle.

The Surrealists continued to privilege Western identity as central and normative while mining non-Western sources for more authentic, unmediated resources with which to freshly reinvigorate a decaying European civilization. As Patricia Morton argues,

The native object was valuable to the Surrealists only as a counter to Western logocentrism and convention, not of value in and of itself... African, Oceanic, and American objects on display at the Counter-Exposition served primarily as foils for Surrealist political slogans and for the satirized 'Fétiches européens.'<sup>47</sup>

Despite their anti-colonial stance, the Surrealists upheld a self/other binary that fetishized the non-European other and its cultural objects. Furthermore, this notion of the primitive other is temporally registered as that which both preceded Western civilization and also that which will later invigorate the declining West. Taoua argues that the Surrealists viewed the primitive as "that which comes before Western education and the process of acculturation [linking] the unconscious and 'primitive' cultures for the Surrealists, who approached both terrains as sources of artistic inspiration."<sup>48</sup> To the Surrealists, the primitive other also served as a metaphor for the unconscious, and was thus dually useful to better understand the self.

Working within the manifesto, a model of political and artistic dissent inherited from Europe, presented a paradox akin to that of citing Surrealist primitivism for the Martinican students, since both gestures perpetuated Western conceptions of the non-Western other. In using a European genre of dissent to introduce the value of Caribbean culture, the Martinican students fashioned themselves in the same primitivist mode that the Surrealists had assigned them and reinscribed the primacy of European textual models. Thus, if Surrealism provided a point of departure for the Martinican students' anti-colonial manifesto, it also provided distinct limitations. According to Michael Richardson, even René Ménil, one of the signatories, thought that the text "failed to avoid reifying black sensibility, so making a mystificatory ideology based upon race possible."<sup>49</sup> Because of the Martinicans' affiliations with both groups, Communism and Surrealism could in turn appropriate their cultural production for their own agendas. They could assign their work to the realm of exotic artifact, and further reinscribe the primacy of European textual forms.

While the primitivist bind in which the Martinican students produced their

manifesto is problematic, *Légitime défense* nevertheless maintains a tone of refusal that surpasses their predecessors in its political specificity. Because the students genuinely speak for their peers who suffer from a lived political oppression, their opposition to capitalism and Western civilization take on urgency that Marx and Breton's documents could not convey. Although they use a surrealist brand of "psychoanalytical investigation" to discover and articulate this condition, the students nonetheless proclaim, "We do not accept that we should be ashamed of what we suffer."<sup>50</sup> As they refuse their oppression, so the signatories "refuse to become part of the surrounding ignominy," including their potential cooption by the influences that they cite.<sup>51</sup> Lilyan Kesteloot points out that unlike the Surrealists who belonged to the civilization they sought to dismantle, *Légitime défense's* critique possesses an additional force garnered by its outsider status. She explains that "in contrast to the French surrealists, it was not their own mental structures or their own society they were combating, but a foreign establishment and its detested social order because it was both conqueror and oppressor."<sup>52</sup> While the students parrot much of Marx and Breton's ideology, their refusals resonate more powerfully because they are black colonial subjects. Moreover, the students are explicitly devoted to "the Caribbean question" that neither Communists nor Surrealists prioritized. They poach Marx and Breton's authority so as to redirect it to their immediate historic conditions. Grounded in both surrealist and Marxist ideology, *Légitime défense* uses its precursors' tools to surpass them by attacking the unique problem of race and colonialism from the position of the colonial subject.

The power of *Légitime défense's* critique lies not only in its political expediency, but also in its unique recourse to the aesthetics of Surrealism to further its political goals. Surrealism's model of dissent offered the Caribbean students access to a European voice distinct from those of their colonists. Michael Richardson argues that Surrealism provided a paradigm for these students to critique society:

Surrealism was instrumental in providing the students with a point of departure for their critique of colonial society for, in breaking with the ethics of European culture, it offered them a sort of Trojan Horse in which to enter the previously impregnable white citadel.<sup>53</sup>

The students identified with aspects of Surrealism, but repurposed it to serve their distinct political agenda. Richardson points out that *Légitime défense* "was the first publication in which colonized blacks collectively sought to speak with their own authentic voices," which distinguishes it from its predecessors.<sup>54</sup> The effectiveness of the students' tactics is evidenced by how threatening the French authorities found it.

The French authorities banned the journal, stifled its distribution in France and in the Caribbean, and suspended the students' grants.<sup>55</sup>

*Légitime défense's* reliance on Surrealism highlights both the Martinicans' allegiances and their capacity to transcend their predecessors. Franklin Rosemont and Robin D.G. Kelly argue that *Légitime défense* "marks an epoch" in both Négritude and Surrealism, and announce, "a decisive forward leap was made in 1932: year one of black surrealism."<sup>56</sup> The idea of "black surrealism" is itself a hybrid construct, suggesting the contradictions inherent to using a Western framework to articulate an autochthonous movement. Léopold Senghor, Senegalese poet and founder of Négritude living in Paris at the time of *Légitime défense*, acknowledges the shortcomings of the students' declaration but he also notes that their alliance with Surrealism served as a necessary step in the development of a black identity: "We accepted Surrealism as a means, but not as an end, as an ally, and not as a master. We were willing to be influenced by Surrealism, but only because Surrealist writing rediscovered Negro African speech."<sup>57</sup> Using Surrealism as a point of departure, *Légitime défense* established a position that later movements, including Négritude, later surpassed.

Ménil argues that *Légitime défense* cannot be read as an early proclamation of Négritude because of its historical limitations and its distinct cultural and political agenda. He maintains that "it would be anachronistic to expect *Légitime défense* to have raised questions or proposed solutions that have arisen only after it appeared and disappeared through the evolution of contemporary history."<sup>58</sup> Unlike Négritude, *Légitime défense* comprised an anti-imperialist struggle which roused colonial peoples against both the Western and its own bourgeoisie, situating political action in the Marxist framework of social transformation without conceiving the development of "black values" other than within such political conflict.<sup>59</sup>

Thus, *Légitime défense* can be read as an intermediary step towards developing autochthonous forms distinct from their European predecessors. In 1934 the students who worked on *Légitime défense*, among others, issued the journal *L'Étudiant Noir*, which worked explicitly to unite blacks of all nationalities. Senghor argues that where *Légitime défense* "rejected traditional Western values in the name of contemporary Western values, in the name of Communism and Surrealism," *L'Étudiant Noir* went on "to reject all Western values."<sup>60</sup> *Légitime défense* may not have gone far enough in asserting a unique black international literary and political identity because of its reliance on Western modes of thought, but it did provide a crucial step in a process of refashioning the black subject beyond European definitions.

Caribbean literary and political movements subsequent to *Légitime défense* also struggled to dismantle the self/other binary. *Légitime défense* relied on Surrealist discourse, which posits that the mind is a universal phenomenon that transcends in-

dividual difference, echoing the colonial ideology of a homogenous Frenchness that denies racial difference. Ménélik acknowledges these shortcomings; when a Martinican wants to “challenge that Other and assert his own particularity, he finds all too often that the only terms in which he can do so are the universalist or pseudo-universalist terms defined by the Other [such as]...Surrealist poetry.”<sup>61</sup> Négritude refuses this assimilative model and reinserts race into subjectivity. However, the criticisms leveled at *Légitime défense* may serve as a critique of Négritude as well. By reclaiming blackness as a positive, empowering attribute, the literary forms attributed to Négritude continue to maintain a racial distinction. As Richard Burton explains, “Négritude, though it comprehensively turned European racist stereotypes on their head, nonetheless preserved the basic structure of these stereotypes even as it contested them.”<sup>62</sup> While Senghor defines Négritude as a “refusal of the other” and as “an affirmation of the self,” these self-empowering identifications retain the self/other dichotomy.<sup>63</sup> Critiques of *Légitime défense* must be contextualized within the larger anti-colonial movement for writers who struggled to avoid reinscribing problematic racial distinctions.

Both *Légitime défense* and Négritude can be read as problematically entrenched with European formulations of subjectivity; yet both also introduce terms by that surpass these oppositions. Because the manifesto genre relies on its predecessors’ authority while simultaneously reinventing the terms of the struggle and the genre, it is well-suited to Martinicans’ task. The manifesto itself is intrinsically malleable, structured for rearticulating political and aesthetic struggles. Despite its historical handicaps, *Légitime défense* still serves as testament to a burgeoning Caribbean voice and agency. The Martinican students reframe the European terms of the anti-colonial debate so as to insert themselves within a discourse from which they were previously excluded by their status as other, a gesture that inaugurates black consciousness into both Western and Caribbean discourse.

Just as the Martinican students positioned themselves within a European trajectory to assume the authority of its discursive modes, so Breton claimed many Caribbean writers as Surrealists. Breton welcomed *Légitime défense*’s signatories into Surrealist activities in Paris and many in the group signed “Murderous Humanitarianism,” a denunciation of imperialism and racism, written by René Crevel in 1932 for Nancy Cunard’s *Negro: An Anthology*. The students were also active in Communist circles, participating in the *Union fédérale des étudiants* (Federal Students’ Union), part of the *Mouvement Jeunes Communistes de France* (Movement of Young Communists in France).<sup>64</sup> Breton’s relationship with the Martinican students facilitated his encounter with Aimé and Suzanne Césaire and the *Tropiques* group in Martinique in 1941.<sup>65</sup> Despite Breton’s relationship with Martinican writers, his experience with the students both in Paris and Martinique still problematically celebrated the primitive other as

providing new artistic resources denied to a decaying Europe. In this way the Surrealists and the Martinican students upheld an assimilationist model that fostered intellectual exchange but also relied on their groups' separation. While both sides upheld a binary that they claimed to dismantle, they also created and maintained their identity through poaching the other's literary forms.

Furthermore, the *Légitime défense* group radically expanded their own subject position through the use of the manifesto. The Martinican students intervene in the political and artistic debate through their polemical allegiances and refusals. Homi Bhabha suggests that such interventions into existing cultural discourses are what puncture the potentially totalizing narrative of the nation. He writes, "it is the space of intervention emerging in the cultural interstices that introduces creative invention into existence."<sup>66</sup> Not only do the students intervene in the hegemonic discourse, but because they were written as primitivist subjects, the very act of writing demonstrates their agency. The students resisted totalization by demonstrating their capacity to respond to and reform the texts of the Western other, using the authority of these textual forms to advance their own agenda.

While the students occupied a liminal position in relation to the dominant cultural forms established by their predecessors, this marginal space served as the place from which they rearticulated discourse. Bhabha characterizes this discursive space as producing "a contentious *internal* liminality providing a place from which to speak both of, and as, the minority, the exilic, the marginal and the emergent."<sup>67</sup> Minority discourse like *Légitime défense* models this "internal liminality" from within French literary production. Such minority writing may exist on the margins of the Communist or Surrealist communities, but serves as a productive location from which to challenge the movements' rhetoric. Read as a kind of translation of Communism and Surrealism, *Légitime défense* reveals the shortcomings of the universalist claims of each discourse.

Suzanne Césaire writes, "Surrealism has given us back some of our possibilities. It is up to us to find the others."<sup>68</sup> The Martinican signatories defy Breton's exotification of them by usurping and rewriting his incendiary texts, instigating a collective consciousness that reverberates through later moments of Caribbean self-definition. As Ménil explains, "*Légitime défense* announces and promises" rather than articulates a programmatic political or aesthetic agenda.<sup>69</sup> The development of Négritude necessarily eclipses this initial attempt to establish a new literary heritage. However, the manifesto allows these Martinican students to enter into an aesthetic and political debate from a position of authority. The writers of *Légitime défense* acknowledge the genre and their predecessors as enabling them to articulate their own project of revolutionizing art and politics.

- 1 *Légitime défense* translates as “Self-Defense” although it has been translated elsewhere as “Legitimate Defense.”
- 2 Etienne Léro, Thélus Léro, René Ménéil, Jules-Marcel Monnerot, Michel Pilotin, Maurice-Sabas Quitman, Auguste Thésée, and Pierre Yoyotte. “*Légitime défense*. Declaration” (1932), in *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, Michael Richardson, ed., Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, trans. (New York: Verso, 1996), 41. For an analysis of the essays included in the journal *Légitime défense* see Shirin K. Lewis, “*Légitime défense*. A Precursor to Modern Black Francophone Literature,” *Race, Culture, and Identity: Francophone West African and Caribbean Literature from Négritude to Créolité* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).
- 3 “*Légitime défense*. Declaration,” 43.
- 4 “*Légitime défense*,” 42.
- 5 Franklin Rosemont and Robin D.G. Kelley, eds. *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin, TX: U of Texas P, 2009), 22-3.
- 6 “*Légitime défense*,” 42.
- 7 Ibid., 41.
- 8 Ibid., 43.
- 9 Ibid., 41.
- 10 Ibid., 42.
- 11 Ibid., 42.
- 12 Many prefaces or forwards served the same function as the manifesto during the development of the literary market. For example, Wordsworth calls his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* (1800) “a systematic defense of the theory, upon which the poems were written.” (Samuel Coleridge and William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads: the Text of the 1798 edition with the additional 1800 poems and the Prefaces*, R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones, eds. (London: Methuen, 1963). For more on nineteenth-century predecessors to the manifesto see Frederick Karl, *Modern and Modernism: The Sovereignty of the Artist 1885-1925* (New York: Atheneum, 1985).
- 13 “*Légitime défense*,” 43.
- 14 Mary Ann Caws, ed, *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (Lincoln, Nebraska: UP Nebraska, 2001), xxviii; Janet Lyon, “Transforming Manifestoes: A Second-Wave Problematic,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*. 5.1 (1991): 102.
- 15 Lyon, 102.
- 16 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Frederick Engels, ed. (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 9.
- 17 Marx and Engels, 41.
- 18 Patricia A. Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 98-9.
- 19 I use the term “anti-colonial” rather than “postcolonial” because it was texts like *Légitime défense* that preceded and gave rise to Négritude and subsequent postcolonial debates.
- 20 Marx and Engels, 20.
- 21 Ibid., 57 and 18.
- 22 “*Légitime défense*,” 41.
- 23 Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 182.

- 24 André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), in *Manifestos of Surrealism*, Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, trans. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 26; In addition to defining Surrealism, Breton articulates the movement's values: "fear, the attraction of the unusual, chance, the taste for things extravagant," "nonconformism," "the omnipotence of the dream," "the disinterested play of thought." He defines Surrealism as the free reign of these elements, which offer greater access reality through their radical reformulation of unconscious thought. Breton, 16, 47, 26.
- 25 Breton, 40.
- 26 Puchner, 185. Such a posture was common to avant-garde manifestos, as evidenced by Tristan Tzara's announcement: "I am against systems, the most acceptable system is non principle to have none." Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries*. Barbara Wright, trans. (London: Calder, 1977), 79.
- 27 Breton, 7.
- 28 Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," 132-3.
- 29 "Légitime défense," 41.
- 30 Ibid., 41.
- 31 Ibid., 41.
- 32 Ibid., 42.
- 33 Ibid., 43.
- 34 Rosemont and Kelly, 22-3.
- 35 The Surrealists had previously aligned with the Communist Party in France in October, 1925 in support of Abed-el-Krim, who organized an uprising against French colonial rules in Morocco, by signing the public protest "La Révolution d'Abord et Toujours" (Revolution Now and Forever). See André Breton, *What is Surrealism? Selected Writings*. Franklin Rosemont, ed. (New York: Pathfinder/Monad, 1978) and Robin D. Kelly, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).
- 36 André Breton, "Legitimate Defense," (1926), trans. Richard Howard, in *What is Surrealism?*, 32.
- 37 Breton, "Legitimate Defense," 39.
- 38 Robert S. Short, "The Politics of Surrealism, 1920-36," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol.1, No. 2, "Left-Wing Intellectuals between the Wars," (1966): 21.
- 39 Breton, "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," 161.
- 40 Ibid., 187.
- 41 Ibid., 123.
- 42 Ibid., 128.
- 43 Ibid., 132.
- 44 Morton, 100.
- 45 Phyllis Taoua, "Of Natives and Rebels: Locating the Surrealist Revolution in French Culture," *South Central Review*, Vol. 20, No. 2/4 (Summer-Winter, 2003): 69.
- 46 Vicky Unruh, *Latin American Vanguards: The Art of Contentious Encounters* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 133.
- 47 Morton, 110.
- 48 Taoua, 76.
- 49 Michael Richardson paraphrasing René Ménéil's "1978 Introduction to *Légitime défense*" in his "Introduction," *Refusal of the Shadow*, 5.
- 50 "Légitime défense," 42.
- 51 Ibid., 43.

- 52 Lilyan Kesteloot, *Black Writers in French: A Literary History of Negritude*, Ellen Conroy Kennedy, trans. (Washington: Howard University Press, 1991), 45.
- 53 Richardson, "Introduction," 5.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 4-5.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 56 Rosemont and Kelly, 15 and 23.
- 57 L.S. Senghor in a 1960 letter, cited in Kesteloot, 86.
- 58 Ménéil, "1978 Introduction to *Légitime défense*," 37.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 38.
- 60 L.S. Senghor in a 1960 letter, cited in Kesteloot, 84.
- 61 Richard D.E. Burton, "Between the Particular and the Universal: Dilemmas of the Martinican Intellectual," *Intellectuals in the Twentieth-Century Caribbean*, Volume II, "Unity in Variety: the Hispanic and Francophone Caribbean," Alistair Hennessy, ed. (London: Macmillan, 1992), 186.
- 62 Burton, 202.
- 63 L.S. Senghor, "Rapport sur la doctrine et le programme du parti" (1959), cited in Kesteloot, 104.
- 64 Franklin Rosemont, "Introduction," in André Breton, *Martinique: Snake Charmer*, David Seaman, trans. (Austin, TX: U Texas Press, 2008), 10.
- 65 See André Breton, "A Great Black Poet: Aimé Césaire" (1943), in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith, eds. and trans. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001).
- 66 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 12.
- 67 Bhabha, 214.
- 68 Suzanne Césaire, "A Civilization's Discontent," (1942), in *Refusal of the Shadow*, 99-100.
- 69 Ménéil, "1978 Introduction to *Légitime défense*," 39.