

Race Shapes: Racial In/Visibility in Contemporary Francophone Literature and Cinema

By:  
Sarah Gamalinda

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
(African Cultural Studies)

at the  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON  
2022

Date of final oral examination: 8/17/2022

The dissertation is approved by the following members of the Final Oral Committee:

Vlad Dima, Professor, African Cultural Studies

Joshua Armstrong, Associate Professor, French

Matthew Brown, Associate Professor, African Cultural Studies

Brigitte Fielder, Associate Professor, College of Letters and Sciences

Marissa Moorman, Professor, African Cultural Studies

© Copyright by Sarah K. Gamalinda 2022

All Rights Reserved

## Acknowledgments

I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the many people who have taught me, inspired me, commiserated with me, fed me, and shared in this graduate school journey with me.

My committee members are exemplars of integrity and generosity. I thank my advisor, Vlad Dima, for supporting me, believing in this project from the beginning, and being a compassionate guide in matters big and small over the last several years. Thanks also to Joshua Armstrong, who introduced me to some of the French authors who thrill and perplex me most. I thank Professor Brigitte Fielder for her critical insights and for challenging me to think more freely about academic disciplines and what is possible. I also thank Matthew Brown and Marissa Moorman for engaging with my work, welcoming me into the department of African Cultural Studies, and being pedagogues in the hallway and over Zoom.

My gratitude goes out to the department of French and Italian—my departmental home for many years. I especially want to thank staff members Mary Noles and Shawn Ramer for their big-hearted care and friendship. I am also deeply grateful to the department of African Cultural Studies, to our graduate coordinator Toni Landis and department administrator Bill Bach, for the chance to study, teach, and spend a very cherished year with such wonderful people.

I am indebted to the Writing Center, especially to Angela Zito who led my first experience of a writing group during the Covid lockdown. I continue to be amazed at the kind of support offered by the Writing Center and the critical pedagogies its teachers pursue. Out of the Writing Center spawned writing groups that brought me back to my desk and lifted me up on the dreariest of days. Much love to Mary Beth Marklein, Elizabeth Collins, and Molly Carroll; Jess Howsam, Jorge Lasa, Molly Minden, and Luke Urbain; and Carolina Balvin Aravelo, Tina Lynch, and Kimberly Rooney.

For life-lessons on the power and wisdom of stories: Jennifer Gipson. For feeding me and Keith astoundingly good food while also being research consultants: Angeline Peterson, Andy Stoiber, and Majula Swareh. For racing to the finish line together and shining a light on the path: Sandra Descourtis and Hilary Emerson. For being patient and wise, taking my overdue calls, and still inviting me to COTS: Kyla Pilliod. For being there from day one, my role model for all things communication, learning, balance, friendship, and how to keep loving what you love: Kimberly Rooney.

For their unwavering love and support, I thank my parents Mark and Diana Gamalinda, my brothers Matthew and Aaron, my in-laws Nancy, Steve, Jason, Anthony, and Alex. Keith Phelps, thank you for teaching me about punk rock, for reminding me to go outside, for asking the right questions, for reading my messiest drafts, and for being my best friend.

## Abstract

This dissertation asks how processes of racial formation shape and take shape in literature and film. Turning literary and film analysis towards apprehending the systematic workings of race subtending aesthetic and narrative forms, this project explores several analogies for how race is constructed and perceived. Across a selection of works by Ousmane Sembene, Virginie Despentes, and Marie NDiaye, race—particularly Blackness and whiteness—takes textual, visual, and aural shape against a backdrop of French universalism’s racial erasure. These forms and racial analogies manifest as skins and surfaces, voices and sounds, material and cultural institutions, and physical and psychic sensations.

Drawing on African diasporic and Transatlantic Black studies, this project reaches across seemingly disparate contexts, starting with early francophone African film, moving to twenty-first-century French post-punk popular literature, and closing with quintessentially French (and decidedly not-not-African) postmodernism. Each case study in this dissertation presents a different perspective on a coherent story of race in France, broken down into three stages of racial visibility: hypervisibility, invisibility, and spectrality. Sembene, Despentes, and NDiaye emerge here as race theorists, participating in the textual, aural, and visual act of race-making, whether intentional or not.

Texts are also racialized by the bodies of authors, readers, and characters with whom they engage, and together they influence the coalescing of national corpuses as well as scholarly institutions and their critical practices. In addition to, and sometimes in absence of, historical and social understandings of how race and colonialism shape the present, these kinds of aesthetic—textual and textural—linkages can offer frameworks for apprehending the endurance of race and racism in French and francophone literature and film. These frameworks are critical for their attention to the spectral and can help us to attune our awareness to structures of race and racism that thrive in their elusions of easy perception. This project is motivated by the belief that greater attention to racial representation will better equip ourselves as readers, writers, and members of our communities to be able to do and teach anti-racism work.

## **Note on Translations**

I have used existing English translations wherever possible. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are my own and are aimed at facilitating the reading of French texts.

## Contents

Acknowledgments	i
Abstract	ii
Note on Translations	iii
Introduction	1
1. Methodological Framework: Hypervisibility, Invisibility, Spectrality	6
2. Race in French Studies: Disciplinary Distinctions	7
3. Chapter Summaries	10
Chapter 1: Hypervisibility: The Skin as a Carceral Space in Ousmane Sembene’s <i>La Noire de...</i>	13
1. Race Shapes	18
2. Sounds Like Diouana	30
3. Materialized Metaphors and Second Skins	43
4. The Legible Surface	58
Chapter 2: Invisibility: Encounters with Whiteness and “Bleachness” in <i>Vernon Subutex</i> by Virginie Despentes	67
1. Plot Summary	69
2. Literary and Critical Contexts	71

a. <i>Whiteness and France</i>	77
b. <i>Whiteness in the Text</i>	81
c. <i>Contemporary Readers of French Whiteness</i>	89
3. Intersectionality, French Feminism, and Footnotes	92
a. <i>Black Feminism's Citational Lineages</i>	98
b. <i>Virginie Despentes as a White Woman</i>	102
c. <i>What is a White Woman?</i>	106
4. Representing Bleachness	113
a. <i>A Contemporary French "Tragic Mulatto" Story</i>	116
b. <i>"Swallowed up, body and soul"</i>	121
Chapter 3: Spectrality: Writing the Imperfectly Imperceivable in Marie NDiaye's <i>Ladivine</i>	126
1. Plot Summary	134
2. Colonial Memory and Being Not-Not-African	135
a. <i>The Author</i>	135
b. <i>The Text</i>	140
3. NDiaye's Racialized Subject in Three Movements: Split, Wall, Leap	152
a. <i>Split: On the Train Again</i>	153
b. <i>Wall: Synthetic and Soundproof Skin</i>	158
c. <i>Leap: History, Historicity, and Moving Slowly</i>	165
Conclusion	172
Bibliography	179

## Introduction

This dissertation aims to draw out implicit structures of racial formation in francophone literary and cinematic texts. Racialization, or the process of making race, relies upon turning metaphorical meanings into accepted social realities. This project therefore champions the use of tools drawn from literary and film analysis in deconstructing the formal, textural, and poetic ways in which race is constructed. Particularly in the field of French and francophone studies where race-evasive discourse prevails in cultural and institutional norms, to read race is to participate in analytical expansion. To apprehend the aural, visual, textual forms subtending race is to open pathways for understanding untapped story-telling modes and a multiplicity of representational forms and illustrations of human experiences. One of the longer-term goals for this project is to contribute to the growing field of study of theoretical and philosophical understandings of race in literary and cinema studies, particularly in French and francophone contexts. I argue that not only *should* race be read and thought more theoretically with these texts by academic scholars, but race *is* being thought theoretically by French and francophone artists. The call for further inquiry into race in French and francophone literary and cinema studies is all the more pressing and promising due to these artists' deep and active engagement with race through their creative work.

As Cécile Bishop and Zoë Roth (2019) point out in their work on race and the aesthetic, a focus on the aesthetic foregrounds “the role perception, appearance, and the imagination play in the social construction of racial categories” (2). Race is, on the one hand, the result of discourses – race is a discourse-effect, a metaphor and metonymy for culture and difference. On the other hand, it is experienced as social reality, often through the body. Race is not a biological reality,

yet the concept has been deployed as both the catalyst and the conclusion for countless epistemological matters: hypotheses on the Origins of Man, the belief in physical manifestations of one's moral character, philosophical underpinnings of nation-formation, questions of placelessness and belonging in an era of globalization, or diversity and inclusion institutional initiatives. Racial constructions are constantly evolving, while the concept has steadily cut across the history of human experience.

In addition to broadening the range of conceptual and analytical tools one can employ to analyze how race continues to organize societies along racial (racist) norms, these analyses extend to challenging dominant ways of interpreting and evaluating visual and textual expression: broadening definitions of the literary and of literacy in general; or interrogating the racialized constructions of categories such as French, African, francophone, and global. Therefore, this dissertation presents an ethical case for educating critical and suspicious readings and readers. As makers of meaning in a world where we stumble through invisible structures of normalized inequalities, such as institutional and systemic racism, it is crucial to address and expose these structures while simultaneously tracing the processes by which these structures both embed and camouflage themselves into the socio-cultural fabric of our world.

While it would be extremely useful to compose a survey or a compendium of examples from which to map a broad understanding of racial representation in contemporary francophone cultural expression, this project settles on a deeper exploration of three exemplary case studies, with a focus on representations of Blackness and whiteness. Chapter one turns to Diouana, the protagonist of Ousmane Sembene's short story (1962) and film (1966), both titled *La Noire de...*, or, in the English translation, *Black Girl*. Chapter two focuses on Alexandre Bleach in Virginie Despentes's *Vernon Subutex* trilogy (2015, 2015, 2017). Lastly, chapter three focuses on the

doubly-named character Clarisse/Malinka and, to a lesser extent, her daughter in the novel *Ladivine* (2013) by Marie NDiaye. Sembene, Despentès, and NDiaye have very little in common aside from being well-known twentieth and twenty-first-century writers and filmmakers of the francophone world.<sup>1</sup> However, their dissimilar backgrounds and distinct styles arguably make their shared interests and overlapping approaches to writing stories about race, citizenship, whiteness, and Blackness in France all the more provocative for study.

From the 1960s, immediately following Senegalese independence (Chapter 1), to the first two decades of the twenty-first century in France (Chapters 2 and 3), the works in this project span several decades. During this period, France saw the development of the politically engaged literary and cinematic *Beur* movement,<sup>2</sup> escalating police brutality in the *banlieues* leading up to the well-publicized riots of 2005, and the establishment of activist groups against racism and discriminatory immigration policies (e.g., *SOS Racisme* founded in 1984, the *sans-papiers* protest movement in 1996, and the *Conseil représentatif des associations noires* [Representative Council of France's Black Associations] founded in 2005). One might expect the texts in this study to reflect political progress regarding France's treatment of race and racism over time, and there certainly are writers who have engaged in crafting anti-racist narratives and focused on

---

<sup>1</sup> They are well-known in the fields of contemporary French and francophone literature and cinema, highly visible on the scene of national awards in France for literary and cinematic works, and frequently taught and discussed in university classrooms. Bearing the stamp of national approval and a subsequently wide readership, these texts carry discursive power in the public sphere as well as in academic fields.

<sup>2</sup> *Beur* literature coalesced as a corpus with a particular story to tell: to narrate the experiences of Maghrebi immigrant, Arab-French communities in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, mostly written by members of these communities. These texts largely address socio-economic and cultural challenges that Arab-French families faced in postcolonial France, focusing on the reality and symbolism of *banlieue* marginality and resistance as well as tensions between familial and public education as young *Beurs* navigated and forged identities shaped by disparate and often conflicting societal values. See for example Niang, Mame-Fatou. 2019. *Identités françaises: banlieues, féminités et universalisme*. Francopolyphonies. Leiden: Brill-Rodopi.

stories of hope and resistance.<sup>3</sup> However, the texts elected for this project reflect less of a progression in thinking about life-giving, liberating possibilities for Black representation and demonstrate more of a continuity in the way that they represent contemporary conditions of anti-Black racism in a society that still holds on to the idea of Frenchness as racelessness.

Scholars of the history of race in France have traced the current, self-proclaimed “color-blind” ideology in French politics and culture primarily to three defining moments in the last two and a half centuries.<sup>4</sup> Universalism, a highly valued concept in the racial philosophy of “color-blindness,” is prized over factional forms of sub-group formation, or *communautarisme*. That is to say that affirming solidarity based on specific markers of identity—highlighting the racialization, sexualization, or nationalization of a certain group—is seen as anti-Republican, anti-French. The first and most discussed of historical motivations for “color-blindness” harkens back to the French Revolution of 1789 and its founding myth of the *République*: a universal ‘Rights of Man’ that establish equality as the basis of French unity, the nation’s foundation, and a citizen’s sole identity. Such a claim to equality renders ethnic, racial, gendered, and religious differences irrelevant to being, above all, French. The second solidification of “color-blindness” follows post-war anti-racism movements after the fall of the Vichy regime in the mid-twentieth century, as France grappled with the horrors of racism and anti-Semitism that dominated and devastated France and much of Europe during the Holocaust. In response to racism from the Vichy Regime and the National Front, policymakers “focused most of their energy on the fight

---

<sup>3</sup> See for example the affirmations of diasporic, Black identity put forth in Fatou Diome, Léonora Miano, and Henri Lopes’s texts, respectively: *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* (2003), *Afropea: Utopie post-occidentale et post-raciste* (2020), and *Ma grand-mère Bantoue et mes ancêtres les Gaulois* (2003).

<sup>4</sup> See for example: Silverman, Maxim, ed. 1991. *Race, Discourse, and Power in France*. Research in Ethnic Relations Series. Aldershot, Hants, England : Brookfield, Vt., USA: Avebury ; Gower Pub.; Peabody, Sue, and Tyler Edward Stovall, eds. 2003. *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*. Durham: Duke University Press.; and Chapman, Herrick, and Laura Levine Frader, eds. 2004. *Race in France: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Politics of Difference*. New York: Berghahn Books.

against hate speech and intentional racism, to the detriment of issues of discrimination in jobs and housing and indirect racism” (Chapman and Frader 2004, 180). The third and most recent development in approaches to race in France reflects a shift away from “color-blindness” and towards a tenuous recognition of ethnic and racial differences. This recognition emerges out of a reaction to increased non-European immigration to France in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly of migrants from former French colonies in North and West Africa. As a higher concentration of non-white peoples settled predominantly in the *banlieues* of Paris, these immigrants from former French colonies have been met with reactionary racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic sentiment, reflected in the gains made by the white nationalist *Front National* which has moved from the fringes of French politics back squarely to the mainstream. For all of its insistence upon a raceless French society, the evidence of racial segregation, historical violence towards Arab and Black individuals and communities, and the anxieties regarding “Frenchness” as a now precariously white identity all point to the fact that France’s claim to not “see” race is a severe and pervasive act of denial.

It is important to recognize, however, that talking about race in France is not an activity solely associated with the far-right, as it is often described, or only relegated to acts of quotidian racism and xenophobia. Sociologist Crystal M. Fleming explains in *Resurrecting Slavery* (2017, 104) that conversations about race do still take place on micro to macro levels, between individual citizens, activists, scholars, and in public policies.<sup>5</sup> To speak about the history of race

---

<sup>5</sup> There are contexts in which race is much more openly named and discussed: for example, Crystal Marie Fleming, professor of Sociology and Africana Studies, examines commemorative events around slavery in France, often put together by a majority-Black group of people. She remarks that, “[w]hile public talk about race remains fraught, especially for minorities, my fieldwork shows that speakers in public forums routinely used ethnic and racial categories. This finding counters the widespread perception that France’s official discourse of “color-blindness” actually reflects how people live and interact at the micro-level. On the few occasions that references to racial distinctions were criticized, these criticisms did not result in the suppression of racial categories and racial identities in public discussions” (104).

in France is indeed to speak about France's insistence on (and 'failure' to adhere to) "color-blind" discourse.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore crucial to see and remember that discourses of race, whether through imperialist rhetoric, anti-immigrant sentiment, antisemitism, or activist discourse for racial equality, have played across France's political and cultural history over many centuries, fully contesting the claim that France has ever achieved the idealistic "color-blindness" it purports.

### **Methodological Framework: Hypervisibility, Invisibility, and Spectrality**

My methodological framework deliberately sets itself against this backdrop of ideological racelessness and its manifestations of so-called "color-blind" socio-political and cultural practices. By focusing on race's varying states of perceivability in these texts, I emphasize that it is not the presence of race itself that makes race visible; race is always present, though not always perceived. We perceive race through contrast and comparison, often detecting the "presence" of race in what is deemed non-normative, meanwhile the racialization that aligns with the dominant norm tends to go unnoticed.<sup>7</sup> Racialization is situated always at a crossroads of perception and subjectivities, between the readers, viewers, authors, and characters as well as those who are read, viewed, and imagined. Therefore, as a means of providing both organizational structure and a theoretical apparatus for exploring various stages of racial

---

<sup>6</sup> See Peabody, Sue, and Tyler Edward Stovall, eds. 2003. *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*. Durham: Duke University Press.

<sup>7</sup> See Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley & Chavous, "Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity: A Reconceptualization of African American Racial Identity." *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 1998. They show that the fluctuation in perception can occur similarly for other aspects of intersectional identity: a person's sexuality, gender, religion, or class may increase or decrease in relevance and/or centrality to their self-perceived and socially-perceived identity depending upon the context. Race is but one component of a multidimensional identity; a person's racial salience or their perceived racialization can be more or less visible depending on both the context and the racial literacy of the perceiver.

in/visibility in francophone literature and cinema, I propose thinking about racial visibility in three modes: hypervisibility, invisibility, and spectrality.

It is important to recognize that these three representational “settings” are necessarily categorical and over-emphasize the visual aspects of racialization. I mean for them to be used as points of departure, particularly for the purpose of establishing points between which to explore the so-called “gray zones.” Much like the language used to talk about race—particularly in the discourse of race-as-color; in the erasure of cultural, geographic, historic specificities among large groupings; and in the operative Black/white binary—these terms are reductive and cover over a heterogeneity of forms. Each chapter takes one of these three “settings” as its point of departure and examines both the process that brings this in/visibility or spectrality about and the consequences of this development. As perception is at the heart of the issue of race and racialization, this tri-part study of race offers a paradigm through which to reflect on the perceiving and perceived human subject and notions of the Human as they are evaluated along bodily and affective rubrics. A critical consideration of race as a phenomenon of perception, considered broadly, therefore opens valuable analytical avenues for discussing concepts of social power, identity, artistic creation, and human self-understanding.

### **Race in French Studies: Disciplinary Distinctions**

Beyond being a meaningful textual element, racialization has an equally important extra-diegetic influence upon the work as it is produced and consumed. As Marie NDiaye’s case exemplifies, texts circulate through book publishing markets attuned to the flows of racial capital. Race acts as a “sticky sign,”<sup>8</sup> pregnant with an accumulated meaning, attaching itself to

---

<sup>8</sup> The “sticky sign” comes from Sara Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004). Ahmed bases the “sticky sign” off of Judith Butler’s analysis of the phenomenology and changing signification of the word *queer*. “To reflect

the text, author, and reader as part of a comprehensive package. This is also why Sembene, Desportes, and NDiaye's racial identities and backgrounds carry weight in the construction of this project's "corpus"—as literal, not just literary, "bodies" can proclaim racial meaning. Many racialized experiences are tied to the body, and in each of the three chapters we will see that the author's racialization is also constructed alongside and sometimes at what feels like a threshold of their own texts. An additional aim of this dissertation is to attend to the socio-historical significance of these embodied identities in my analysis of each author's treatment of race while cautioning against reducing the artist to the sole role of "racial representative." This project aims to contribute to a growing understanding and articulation of this "sticky" and shifting concept of race as it moves throughout literary and cinematic circles, picking up and depositing meaning upon the people, places, and things with which it comes into contact.

However, in literary studies, there remains a strong willingness—arguably more pronounced in French departments—to see the *text* as clearly distinct and liberated from its *context*, or from the way in which texts, authors, and readers are socio-culturally, historically, and politically situated.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, the particular study of race and postcoloniality in French

---

on queer feelings is also to reflect on 'queer' as a sticky sign. [...] [T]he word 'queer' is performative: through repetition, it has acquired new meanings (Butler 1997c). [...] Importantly, as a sticky sign, 'queer' acquires new meanings not by being cut off from its previous contexts of utterance, but by preserving them. [...] What we hear when we hear words such as 'queer' depends on complex psycho-biographical as well as institutional histories" (Ahmed 166 n3).

<sup>9</sup> See Ann Laura Stoler's analysis of the ways in which critical awareness of race and colonialism in particular has been cyclically buried or forgotten and "rediscovered" in the French academy. Stoler, Ann Laura. 2016. *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Durham: Duke University Press, pp. 122-170. Here is a sample, worth quoting at length: "[I]n each of these moments—the surge in rethinking the colonial in 2000, after 2005, and again now—attend little to the ambivalent treatment of colonial issues in preceding decades. French scholarship careened between a deafening silence on the nature of colonial governance and critical recognition of its resilient structures, if not its contemporary effects. This is not a linear history or one that was formerly obscured and is only now emerging from darkness to light. It has *repeatedly* come in and out of focus, has more than once been represented as "forgotten" and then rediscovered. It is a history that erupted at the center of French politics, then was remanded out of public debate, the nation, and its scholarly bounds. This is about more than malicious intent, historical illiteracy, or the bad faith of individual actors. It is about the very nature of political thinking within and outside fortified French academe that has valorized only some formats for considering questions of human dignity—as though abstractions from France's own racial history converts privileged philosophical worth. Not least, what has been

and francophone literature necessitates interdisciplinarity and the ability to recognize discourses that have been informed by social constructs of race, histories of colonialism, and other politicized forces in this regard. Bishop and Roth note that “history and the social sciences are the main fields of inquiry that have produced arguments about race in France,” marking a contrast with Anglo-American practices “where literary studies have played a key role in probing the interconnections between colonial domination and cultural representations, particularly in the field of postcolonial studies” (2019, 1). Charles Forsdick and Jennifer Yee (2018), writing about the application of (post)colonial theory to nineteenth-century francophone literature, have also outlined a general split between francophone and anglophone approaches “in the ‘post-Theory’ decades, when [Anglo-American institutions] have derived a great deal of energy from identitarian politics (relating in particular to gender and postcolonial identities)” (2018, 170). While some may have felt that the split began narrowing in the early 2000s, particularly following the 2005 Paris uprisings, the enthusiasm for work on (post)colonialism and race in the decade following has still been “felt in English studies departments more strongly than in *lettres modernes*” (171).

This project grows out of the consequences of that split and, as a response, proposes to place the question of racial meanings at the fore. Ousmane Sembene’s didactic uses of visual and aural symbolism, Virginie Despentes’s (un)ironic attachments to social scripts, and Marie NDiaye’s fascination with the impossibility of racelessness help us to ask what else attentive readings of race could reveal for francophone literary and film studies more broadly. Throughout this dissertation, race will shape and take shape in the forms and textures of skins and surfaces,

---

persistently unaddressed is why one of the global heartlands of critical social theory and the philosophies of ‘alterity’ and difference has so rarely turned its acute analytic weapons to the deep structural coordinates of race in France” (133, original emphasis).

sounds and vibrations, architectural structures, cultural institutions, citational practices, relations and proximities to other humans, physical and emotional sensations, and non-human beings. All of these analyses are borne from the question: if we read race, then what?

## Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1, “Hypervisibility: The Skin as a Carceral Space in Ousmane Sembene’s *La Noire de...*,” explores the processes and consequences of hypervisible racialization in Senegalese author-filmmaker Ousmane Sembene’s 1962 short story and 1966 film, *La Noire de...*, and argues that Sembene can be read as a theorizer of race and Blackness alongside Transatlantic thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe, and Christina Sharpe. Bringing together the affordances of realism, formal aesthetics, and metaphor, Sembene makes visible or legible the very cultural and social infrastructures of white supremacy undergirding the racialization, or indexing, of both whiteness and Blackness in 1960s France. An analysis of Diouana’s aural body and visual body presents a perplexing case study of *acousmatization* (in the way originally meant by Michel Chion, 1999) in which, rather than “wandering the surface,” the *acousmètre* is trapped within the hypervisible, racialized body, all while remaining alienated from the physical world and denied an embodied home (1999, 4). As a result, Diouana’s metaphorical hollowing and reduction leaves us with the object of a black leather suitcase as surrogate skin. From an assemblage of skins (photographs, leather, shadows, and clothing), Sembene turns the spectator’s attention to the act of looking itself by repeatedly pointing us to and holding our gaze upon the surface of things.

The second chapter, “Invisibility: Encounters with Whiteness and ‘Bleachness’ in *Vernon Subutex* by Virginie Despentes,” focuses on racializing whiteness in the *Vernon Subutex* trilogy (2015, 2015, 2017), written by French author-filmmaker Virginie Despentes. The analyses in this chapter are divided into four parts that extend from the *Subutex* trilogy to the author’s non-fiction and public-facing commentary, to the field of Despentician scholarship, and back again to one of the novel’s main characters, Alexandre Bleach. Across these areas, I examine ways that the author and other critics have skirted around questions of race and whiteness in particular, despite the centrality of these concepts to the gendered and classed identity theories for which Despentes’s work is well known. Furthermore, although Despentes frequently invites her interlocutors and readers to see whiteness—to raise one’s awareness of the existence of white privilege, or to counter the prevailing narrative of French racelessness—the methods she employs for apprehending race’s existence rely upon but do not critically address historical, anti-Black imagery. I explore these dynamics via a detour through her earlier non-fiction writing, the feminist manifesto, *King Kong théorie* (2006). The chapter closes with an analysis of Alexandre Bleach’s mixed-race Black racialization and the symbolic role he plays in ensuring the survival of the human race through his discovery of time-warping sound waves, while his own bodily autonomy is stripped away by racial capitalism. Alex Bleach, like Diouana, is subjected to racialized, capitalized commodification, separating his aural body from his physical or visual ones. His voice is all that is preserved in a set of tape recordings, which, in textual form, amount to yet another aural body lost to immateriality.

The third chapter, “Spectrality: Writing the Imperfectly Imperceivable in Marie NDiaye’s *Ladivine*,” highlights the *trompe-l’œil* phenomenon of France’s (and Europe’s) systematic

‘deadening’ of the memory of colonialism and its racist regimes, exemplified in Marie NDiaye’s novel *Ladivine* (2013). Spectrality, in the very broad way used here, refers largely to the visual and haptic perception of what is visually and physically not fully there. The analyses in this chapter also take into substantial consideration the author’s public negotiations of race, Africanness, and Frenchness, as NDiaye’s negation of racialization offers another point of comparison for understanding the negating activity at the heart of her literary texts.

Through the mother-daughter relationships in *Ladivine*, NDiaye dramatizes states of (willed) ignorance and troubles the mixed-race characters’ inheritance of white and non-white ancestry. Revisiting the tragic mulatto/a trope (first appearing in chapter 2) and echoes of Diouana’s transformation into the skins of flattened and hollowed objects (discussed in chapter 1), this final chapter draws upon specters of other Black and mixed-race figures that have come before—including allusions to Frantz Fanon’s “becoming Black” on a train in France—to piece together a map of racial meanings that might provide a psychological route towards self-constructing in lieu of self-disintegration. The protagonist, Clarisse Rivière née Malinka Sylla, resembles a Fanonian “triple person,” but strives to remain in this painful state by becoming an unfeeling, mechanical being. She ultimately transforms from this painfully fractured being into a “whole” being—as a dog. I read this transformation as an ambiguous, NDiayean (mis)interpretation of Fanon’s call to introduce invention into existence as a way to escape the culturally imposed racial schema.

## Chapter 1

### **Hypervisibility: The Skin as a Carceral Space in Ousmane Sembene's *La Noire de...***

This first chapter examines the literary and visual aesthetics in Ousmane Sembene's written and filmic versions of *La Noire de...* (short story 1962, film 1966), the story of a young Senegalese woman named Diouana. Sembene's cinematic and literary mastery of genre, narrative discourse, and symbolism in both the film and short story provide richly aesthetic material from which to draw a textually based theory of his conceptualizations of race and racialization. By his rendering, the racialization of Blackness under the authoritative discourses of European white supremacy and colonialism results in a hollowing out of Diouana's body, leaving behind the objectified form of a carceral black skin.

The notions of enclosure and entombment take shape in a very material sense, achieved through Sembene's careful manipulation of form, both textual and aural/visual. Sembene first sets the short story in 1958, but then transposes us to the 1960s post-Independence for his film. In Dakar, Diouana finds work with a white French family as their nanny and maid. When Madame, Monsieur (these are the French characters' given names), and their children leave Senegal, Diouana continues her employment with them, following them back to France where she experiences the horrendous and dehumanizing effects of confinement, harassment, and exploitation. Diouana's subjection to anti-Black racism and to new forms of colonization and enslavement enact a project of totalizing objecthood over her body and being and push her towards suicide. Ultimately, she fulfills (in the familiar sense of achieving the status of, and in the physical sense of becoming the material fullness of) what Achille Mbembe (2017) describes of the Black subject, "the only human in the modern order whose skin has been transformed into

the form and spirit of merchandise – the living crypt of capital” (2017, 6). Through the textual analyses presented in this chapter, Sembene appears as a theorizer of race and Blackness alongside Transatlantic thinkers like Mbembe and Frantz Fanon. Bringing together the affordances of realism, formal aesthetics, and metaphor, Sembene *makes visible* or *legible* the very cultural and social infrastructures of white supremacy undergirding the racialization, or indexing, of both whiteness and Blackness in 1960s France.

Sembene’s work is notable for his steadfast anti-colonial convictions in addition to his prolific creation and self-adaptation across literary and cinematic genres. “La Noire de...” first appeared in *Voltaïque* (1962), a collection of mainly short stories with the addition of one poem. *Voltaïque* is the fourth of Sembene’s ten book publications, following his first three novels (*Le Docker noir* [1956], *O Pays, mon beau peuple!* [1957], and *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* [1960]) and appearing in the same year as his first short film (19 minutes) *Borom Sarret* (1962). In 1966, *La Noire de...* became what is considered to be the first feature-length sub-Saharan African film (65 minutes). It was the first of eleven full-length films he would go on to produce over the next four decades, with the addition of one more short film, *Niaye* (1964). In *La Noire de...*, the accounts of exile and racism experienced by Diouana in France add to those from Sembene’s first novel, *Le Docker noir*. The story of the docker, Diaw Falla, finds many parallels with Sembene’s own experiences of racism and of socioeconomic precarity while living in Marseille. In another text, Nafi, the protagonist of “Lettres de France,” an epistolary short story in the *Voltaïque* collection, immigrates to France with her elderly husband and finds herself in total isolation and on the brink of despair. These stories of migration and their depictions of social isolation, racism, and economic precarity could be said to preoccupy a corner of thought in Sembene’s earlier works, perhaps influenced by his time in France (1948 - 1960).

It would be a mistake, of course, to think of Sembene as limited to these narratives. Indeed, his capacious filmic and literary works tenaciously interrogate the inner workings of ideas and power as they shape and take shape in the minds of individuals, communities, and institutions in Africa. The compendium of social and political issues tackled in Sembene's oeuvre include and exceed such subjects as: religious power (*Ceddo* [1976] and *Guelwaar* [1992 film and 1996 novella]), sexual power ("Ses trois jours" [*Voltaïque* 1962], *Xala* [1973 novel and 1974 film], and *Faat Kiné* [2004]), the idea of wealth (*Niiwam* [1987] and *Le Mandat* [1966 and 1968]), colonial history (*Emitai* [1971] and *Camp de Thiaroye* [1988]), cultural domination (*O Pays, mon beau peuple* [1957] and *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu* [1960]), public debate and education, ethnic insularity, storytelling, authenticity, and representation.

But just as it would be inaccurate to construe Sembene as narrowly concerned with any one or two of these issues, it would also be misguided to content ourselves with "cataloguing the various themes evoked in the course of his novels and films, explaining away their relative lack of interest in aesthetic matters by casting Sembene as a straightforward social realist who is only really worth reading (or watching) because of the social issues that he raises" (Murphy 2000, 6). Alternatively, to read and view Sembene in the way David Murphy (2000) proposes is to build up a conscious awareness of how generic and narrative structures, workings of form, and materializations of abstract ideas work to tell a story and illustrate an experience: not only to engage the reader or viewer's affective response to or critical reflections on social issues, but to draw our attention to the art of illustration itself – a communicative, constructed, and political act. Mbye Boubacar Cham (1984) describes this phenomenon in Sembene's films as the "dramatization of ideology" (1984, 81, cited in Murphy 2000, 72)<sup>10</sup> and Jonathon Repinecz

---

<sup>10</sup> Cham. 1984. 'Art and Ideology in the Work of Sembène Ousmane and Hailé Gerima', *Présence Africaine*, 129, 81. Cited in Murphy, David. 2000. *Sembène: Imagining Alternatives in Film & Fiction*. Oxford: Currey, 72.

(2016) stresses the reflexivity, fictionality, and dialogism in Sembene’s cinematic work, referencing the self-conscious ellipses with which a film “index[es] its own status as an object requiring discussion and interpretation” and “thematize[s] [its] own fictionality” (2016, 183–84). The specific focus in this chapter on representations of race in *La Noire de...* is not meant to elevate these specific texts or their social issues as the sole or most important in Sembene’s œuvre. Rather, it takes the opportunity to champion these arguments for greater attention to Sembene’s artistry and demonstrates that the same self-conscious aesthetics that scholars have found so compelling in Sembene’s fiction are also those undergirding his representations of a racial system and racializing processes.

As will be addressed in the first section, Sembene first “encounters” Diouana entombed within—while simultaneously scrubbed from—the neocolonial news archive which announces her suicide. The story, the author claims, was inspired by a news article he read in *Nice-Matin* (Hennebelle 1969). Thus, the short story, too, begins with Diouana’s death before launching into the long flashback which temporally structures the piece, thereby reproducing Diouana’s post-mortem fictional revival. With the short story, Sembene rearticulates Diouana’s omitted backstory through his own imagination and writing, insisting on her life and existence though still retaining the notion of prior entombment, of death as context. This notion of imagining and injecting Diouana’s excised life and being into the seemingly fixed absences of colonial memory shifts in Sembene’s second retelling of *La Noire de...*. The film takes a more linear approach to time, but meanwhile explores other means of enclosure through the mediums of sound and image. Rather than maintain the flashback structure of the short story, Sembene anchors the film narrative in the time while Diouana is still alive. Spatial, temporal, and psychic enclosures

assume physical manifestations through photographs and other objects (a suitcase, a dress, an apron), black and white contrasts, framed images, and the use of voice-over.

*La Noire de...* presents a narrative of neo-enslavement, of ongoing subjugation in the labor economy established between France and newly independent Senegal, of a life lived in the context of anti-Blackness, where, to use Christina Sharpe's words, "the push is always toward Black death" (2016, 106), where we are caught in the force of what Achille Mbembe (2019) describes as "the death drive... the convolutions of colonialist and racist passion" (2019, 160). Keeping the ongoing histories of the Transatlantic Slave Trade present in our minds works not only as a challenge to dominant narratives about the absence of slavery in France, but also as a challenge to the lack of discussions of race and racism (the presumed absence of both) in French contexts.<sup>11</sup> Sharpe's *In the Wake* (2016) and Mbembe's *Critique of Black Reason* (2017 [2013]) and *Necropolitics* (2019 [2016]) act as guiding lines of thought in this chapter. Their reflections on Frantz Fanon's existential, phenomenological force—in addition to his historical, political, and clinical insight—reverberate across the Black Atlantic world in the second decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>12</sup> The readings of Sembene's work in this chapter also think with Fanon at nearly every turn, reinforcing the notion of both men as Transatlantic figures in their own right.

---

<sup>11</sup> See works countering the narrative of absence regarding the history of slavery in France: Peabody, Sue. 1996. *There Are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime*. New York: Oxford University Press.; Fleming, Crystal Marie. 2017. *Resurrecting Slavery: Racial Legacies and White Supremacy in France*. Philadelphia Rome Tokyo: Temple University Press.

<sup>12</sup> As explained by John Drabinski in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's* article on Fanon, his methodological approach in *Black Skin, White Masks* lends itself to multiple branches of philosophy. "The primary approach in the text is existential-phenomenological, something borne out in the rich, textured personal narratives that seize upon the essential structures of the narrativized event of anti-blackness, and also indicated in the title of the fifth chapter—*L'expérience vécue* (*expérience vécue* translates the key phenomenological notion of *Erlebnis*, properly rendered in the Richard Philcox translation as "lived-experience"). Lewis Gordon's work on Fanon has argued for the centrality of existentialism and existential framing of key questions across his oeuvre, especially in Gordon's early work *Fanon and the Crisis of European Humanity* (1995) and recently in *What Fanon Said* (2015). The influence of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty also lends credence to the phenomenological characterization, but Fanon's sustained engagement with the Négritude movement, psychoanalysis, Hegelian thought, and Marxism (something evidenced most clearly in later works and documented

## Race Shapes

In July 1958, Ousmane Sembene purportedly picked up a copy of the daily newspaper *Nice-Matin* and read a story of a young, Black, African woman who took her life while working as a maid for a French family. In an interview with Guy Hennebelle for *L'Afrique littéraire et artistique*, Sembene relayed the following: “The film relies on various authentic facts, which I read in *Nice-Matin* in July 1958. It is from there that I wrote the short story [...] The situation that I decry in *La Noire de...* remained, roughly speaking, the same” (Hennebelle 1969, 79).<sup>13</sup> So it would seem that Diouana’s story—eventually becoming the subject of the first full-length sub-Saharan African film—began as a regional news headline. Retrieving the newspaper article has not been a primary focus of scholarly pursuits; mentions of Sembene reading *Nice-Matin* appear often in passing with noncommittal comments about the veracity of the director’s claims. One is left to wonder how the journalists might have portrayed the young maid’s life and death, whether her name really was Diouana, whether the headline attributed her self-destruction to nostalgia or to something else. And yet, it is easy to recognize that historical confirmation of the news story’s existence might likely do very little, if anything at all, in telling us who Diouana really was, how she died, or how she lived. Thinking from the locus of the young woman’s deathly beginnings in newsprint, we are immediately faced with difficult questions related to archival recovery – its possibilities and its limits.

---

in Reiland Rabaka’s multi-volume interpretation of Fanon, Négritude, and revolutionary Africana theory) opens up the question of methodology to any number of interpretations and remains one of the more engaging areas of Fanon-interpretation” (Drabinski 2019).

<sup>13</sup> The interview was translated from French to English by Anna Rimpl and reproduced in *Ousmane Sembène: Interviews* (Sembène, Busch, and Annas 2008, 14).

Scholars of postcolonial studies, subaltern studies, and particularly those who have worked on the histories of the Atlantic Slave Trade have long made clear their view of archives as “mechanisms of racialized discourse and governance rather than simply a storage medium” (Helton et al. 2015, 4). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “The Rani of Sirmur” and “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1985 and 1988, respectively), and Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past* (1995), are well-known examples of interrogating power in the construction of the imperial archive for “who is dropped out, when, and why?”<sup>14</sup> Edward Said’s study of Orientalism famously exposed the discursive *creation* of “Others” that entered into and shaped historical memory in “a form of radical realism” (1977, 185). Earlier transatlantic Black thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, Anna Julia Cooper, Mercer Cook, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon) tied inter/transnational social and political struggles for freedom and independence to historiographical efforts arguing against the narrative that Africans and people of African descent had no history.<sup>15</sup>

Sembene does not hesitate to locate his fiction (textual or visual) within this larger, inter/transnational, historiographic dynamic. He offers a privileged space to the questions: who has voice, who has language, who has access to and authority over h/History? Text and images of newspaper headlines similar to the one he describes having read appear in both the story and

---

<sup>14</sup> Here, Spivak reminds us “of the meticulously tabulated cadets whose existence is considered “reasonable” enough for the production of the account of history,” while the Rani “emerges only when she is needed in the space of imperial production” (Spivak 1985, 270).

<sup>15</sup> The impact of Black African and diasporic historiographical work is present throughout each of their œuvre, beyond what can be listed here: Du Bois, William E. B. 1998. *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860 - 1880*. 1. ed. New York, NY: The Free Press.; James, C. L. R. 1989. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint l’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. Second edition, Revised. New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Inc.; Cook, Mercer. 1934. *Le Noir: Morceaux Choisis de Vingt-Neuf Français Célèbres*. New York: American Book Company.; Fanon, Frantz. 2011. *Œuvres: Peau noire, masques blancs. L’An V de la révolution algérienne. Les Damnés de la terre. Pour la révolution africaine*. Paris: La Découverte.; Césaire, Aimé. 1962. “Y a-t-il une civilisation africaine?” Presentation given through the Associazione Culturale Italiana.

film. These non-fiction genres erect their own versions of what happened to Diouana within Sembene's fictional retelling. As a prime example, the short story uses the French reporters' officialized version as the very last words of the text: "The next day, in the newspaper, on page 4, column 6, hardly noticeable, was a small headline: 'Homesick African Girl Cuts Throat in Antibes'" (Sembene 1997, 54).<sup>16</sup> Mireille Rosello characterizes the headline as a "mimetic gesture of white witnesses who are in a rush to make the body disappear, physically and figuratively" (2001, 122). She and many others have pointed out that Sembene's written text and subsequent film are indeed direct responses to this erasure. However, where Rosello also states that the flashback and ultimately the short story itself are meant to "take the place" of the journalists' narrative, "replacing their interpretation" (2001, 122), I would suggest that, rather than replace, Sembene's use of the paper headlines and long flashback deliberately and formally close around his version of events, holding them captive within officialized information.

By choosing to end the short story with the very headline his own work as a fiction writer repudiates, Sembene traps the reader in a temporal loop that acknowledges, if not emphasizes, the seemingly fixed nature of those same white witnesses' authority to racialize and to silence. What is so powerful about this structure is its insistence upon the violence that the (en)closure continues to generate, even after Sembene's imaginative work as an author injects Diouana's life and language, complexity and struggle into the body and memory of the text. Rather than replace the silencing narrative with his own remedy, Sembene establishes them in a power differential

---

<sup>16</sup> This and subsequent English translations of "La Noire de..." by Ellen Conroy Kennedy. "Le lendemain, les quotidiens, publièrent en quatrième page, colonne six, à peine visible : « A Antibes, une Noire nostalgique se tranche la gorge. »" (Sembene 2013, 184). The English translates "*une Noire*" from the original French to "African Girl," notably obscuring the racial modifier and, one could argue, diminishing the agency of her self-destructive actions as those of an adult by portraying her as a "homesick" girl child. Sembene, Ousmane. 1997. "Black Girl." In *Under African Skies: Modern African Stories*, edited by Charles Larson, translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy, 42–54. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

and maintains the narrative frame and “contour” of the story as one still forcibly fixed to the shape of the French daily news and of Madame’s (another national allegory) absent memory.

The following close readings of the short story’s opening scene, which privileges the white witnesses’ perspective, reveal just how tightly Sembene constructs this enclosure, and how physically or materially felt these literary effects are. In addition to the temporal closure which frames the flashback, the characters’ carefully circumscribed perspectival limits draw our attention to other silences. These appear in many cases as the result of denial—omissions, distractions, dismissals—and subjective narratives which inevitably constitute the final record.

This is most effective in the opening scenes as a result of contrasts and constraints of form. Tension builds between the focal point of the story (the characters and dialogue which demand the reader’s attention) and the silent surroundings which press in upon an ever-narrowing field of vision. At the start of the short story, the police and a news crew arrive at the French family’s private home. The point-of-view techniques used in the opening are reminiscent of a cinematic detective drama, perhaps, as Vlad Dima (2014) has noted, an early artistic contribution from Sembene’s filmmaker side.<sup>17</sup> Any portrayal of individuals at first remains quite distant; indistinct crowds of people “swarm the beaches” [envahissaient la plage] in late June, unaware of the historic moment in which they are living (Sembene 1997, 42; 2013, 157). Mireille Rosello illuminates this very point of contrast and contradiction in the opening as yet another example of perspectival limits, of “outsides” and “insides.” She calls this juxtaposition: “a frame whose presence the participants in the story choose to be oblivious to” (2001, 121). She tells us, “we shall have to keep in mind that we were warned about the risk of separating history

---

<sup>17</sup> Vlad Dima considers at greater length the cinematic nature of Sembene’s short story and point-of-view techniques, describing this literary introduction as going from “an establishing shot, to an extreme long shot, to a long shot, and eventually all the way to a close-up” (2014, 64).

from what goes on in the house” (2001, 121), in a reference to the French crowd’s ambivalence towards the future of Algeria, the impending collapse of the Fourth Republic, and the death of a Black African woman.

A literary variation in the short story of the cinematic “establishing shot” begins along the Riviera, then watches from above a line of reporters’ cars arriving upon a villa, touches down on the gravel road, moves through the garden, enters the living room, and finally locks onto two women hunched together and crying (Sembene 1997, 42). The progressive movement deeper into the house elevates a sense of enclosure within a shrinking physical space. Once inside, the focus locks onto a descriptive close-up of Madame before launching an intense back and forth of dialogue. With the close-up on Madame’s face, the shift from “outside” to “inside” parallels a shift in visual, or descriptive, breadth to narrowness. She and her sister share “the same straight forehead, the same curved nose, the same dark circles about eyes reddened from crying” [*le même front étroit, le même nez à arête bombée; les mêmes cernes noirâtres noyaient leurs yeux rougis par les larmes*] (1997, 42–43; 2013, 158). There is a cramped feeling (the women are “hunched together” [42]) and an airlessness in the close-up view of her face. Her emotional frailty is physically borne out. Her vulnerable appearance and runny nose intrude upon her carefully chosen words. “She stopped, wiped her nose, and began to cry again” [*Elle se tut, s’essuya le nez. Elle pleurait*] (1997, 43; 2013, 159). When she speaks, she slips on her words and the self-correction feels unwittingly vulnerable: “I thought to myself, it’s the maid taking her bath. I say ‘the maid,’” she corrected, “but we never called her anything else but her name, Diouana” [*Et je me suis dit, c’est la bonne qui prend son bain. Je dis la « bonne », rectifia-t-elle, mais jamais on ne l’appelait que par son nom—Diouana*] (1997, 43; 2013, 158). The effect of the close-up on Madame vacillates between evoking sympathy and intimacy between the

reader/spectator and the character and, perhaps more effectively, suspiciously scrutinizing and surveilling her behavior. It reveals Madame as cautiously (perhaps not cautiously enough) monitoring how she presents herself, uneasy with the idea that she might be understood as someone who would ignore the name and individuality of another person by referring to them only by the service role they fill. Interestingly, even as we have moved to an “inside” space within the house, as readers we are only able to access what is externally perceivable about Madame and have no access to her inner thoughts or feelings. These kinds of constraints heighten the passage’s sense of enclosure—that we have breached the outer walls of the home and yet all that the close-up vantage point seems to reveal is a magnified barrier.

As the dialogue then takes precedence, the surrounding descriptive narrative quite literally disappears, as though this layer of contextual evidence has faded out of focus or been cropped out of the main frame. The dialogue is accompanied by very little descriptive text and reads in many parts like a transcript, lacking contextual space or time to breathe between statements. Even the narrator’s task gets reduced from narrating to note-taking—to the extent of putting descriptions in parentheses. The English translation omits this punctuation, but the original version includes actual parentheses—words themselves walled-off – to form the aside: “(elle se moucha)” [she blew her nose] and “(Il portait un pantalon blanc et une veste bleue.)” [He was wearing white pants and a blue jacket] (2013, 158, 160). By relegating descriptions to “asides,” the characters’ speech exists in a narrative void. They, the white characters, communicate in a speaking space, the edges of which drop off into silence and redacted context. The surrounding silence—a new “outside”—is notably that of silent or silenced objects, a classification of which Diouana will ultimately take part.

Like the visual close-up, the uninterrupted direct discourse simulates a kind of aural close-up which ultimately detracts from the reader's capacity to judge at a distance. Such direct access to these enunciations with no further description has the potential to hide the characters' psychological and emotional realities, keeping all expression safely within the realm of objective declarations. This has the secondary potential to stall the reader's psychological engagement or metacognitive awareness of their emotional reactions. As is common practice in Sembene's work, the narrator's lack of moral guidance poses a challenge to the reader's sensibilities and suspicions. For example, the narrator does not explicitly name Madame and Mademoiselle's actions as appealing to a sense of pity when Madame tearfully recalls, "The door was locked from the inside... I waited for more than an hour... I went back and called, knocking on the door" [La porte était fermée de l'intérieur (...). Pendant plus d'une heure, j'attendis, mais ne la vis pas ressortir. J'y retournai. Appelai. Frappai à la porte] (1997, 42–43; 2013, 158–59). It is for the reader to interpret Madame's message—beyond factual reporting on events—as she appeals to her audience on the basis of her own presumed innocence. Her storytelling builds off of racialized notions of white womanhood to portray herself as the one up against all odds (a Black woman's death), helplessly caught up in the wrong situation, herself a principal victim of these traumatic events. Hers is a sentimental narrative of certain uncertainty, made possible in this moment for lack of an alternative.

And yet an alternative might have been possible, and the reader glimpses it briefly when towards the end of the interrogation the inspector interrupts the steady drum of dialogue. A series of images (dead body, slit throat, kitchen knife) and the recitation of biographical facts (Diouana's geographic origins, estimated age, date of immigration) perform a procedural, fill-in-the-blank exercise when a third investigator suddenly catches Madame in speech, "Ah!..."

‘Why do you think it was suicide?’” [Ah ! (...) Pourquoi croyez-vous à un suicide ?] (1997, 44; 2013, 161). This time the blank-to-be-filled seems to stretch out, the question less easily answered. The narrator, like the investigator, deviates momentarily from aural transcription to note that the inspector’s eyes remain fixed on the Africanist trinkets scattered about the house [l’inspecteur (...) ne cessait de regarder les bibelots] (1997, 44; 2013, 161). This is arguably the closest any character ever gets to bringing the “outside” and the “inside” to meet—seeing the surrounding Africanist objects as hunted treasure, and intimating that, perhaps, an alternative to suicide might have been murder. This further supports the notion of an obstinate and racialized silence that reigns within the walls (filmed later as decidedly *white* walls) of the home. In this way, white speaking subjects literally inhabit a white narrative space which is structurally separated from the Blackness and Africanness of silent objects. Lingered outside of direct quotations, the meaningful display of Africanist trinkets exists on the periphery of our unspoken imaginations, doubly distorted through the narrator’s translation of the inspector’s attentive gaze.

While failing to meaningfully interrogate the family’s décor and bring this all-surrounding context to bear upon the interrogation, the investigator’s question ‘why suicide?’ nonetheless triggers a rare opening for subjective narration. What connections might be drawn, what series of events or set of conditions could have led to Diouana’s suicide? The question disrupts the procedural exchange of factual knowledge by requesting Madame provide a historiographical account, an interpretation. Looked at in another way, the investigator’s question asks how Madame might bring the speechless (by multiple accounts) *Diouana*—who arguably inhabits/inhabited that airless, noiseless space of Africanist objects—into contact with the highly controlled, speaking, sounding space.

The inspector's question occasions a kind of jam or delay in the otherwise smooth transaction of the investigation, not only because of his own inability either to ignore or to name the unspoken meaning in the display of Africanist objects, but also because of how the witnesses (fail to) respond. The Commodore speaks up before Madame can reply, perhaps subconsciously stalling for her, and dismisses the investigator's question with another racist presumption about the maid's total insignificance. For the journalists' response, the narrator in fact breaks from the strict adherence to direct discourse and presents their attitudes through free indirect speech. This marks the first and only occurrence of free indirect speech employed pre-flashback. Their thoughts read, infused into the narration, "The suicide of a maid—even if she was black [...] was nothing newsworthy" [Le suicide d'une bonne—fut-elle Noire—ne peut figurer à la une. Ce n'est pas matière à sensation] (1997, 44; 2013, 161). The emphasis the journalists put on Diouana's Blackness demonstrates their understanding of the value of Black death as a point of newsworthy intrigue in an anti-Black society, but which was rendered insufficiently intriguing when coupled with the sexism and classism attendant to the identifier: "maid."

Finally, in the original French version Madame provides a one-word answer: "Nostalgie" (161). She casts a blanket of apathy and mystification over the matter and adds that Diouana had been acting funny lately, that she hadn't been the same. From the fast clip of uniform direct discourse to this clunky mix of narrative modes and opposing perspectives, the investigator's question, "Why suicide?", slows the narrative and creates a tear in the fabric of formalized control which had given the white characters' perspective a unified and recognizable shape, contour, or body. Especially after such a suspiciously lengthy lead-up, Madame's one-word answer is so paltry and vague that the inadequacy of her reply betrays the inadequacy and dishonesty in her perspective. The initial "seamlessness" of the controlled narrative form catches

on her weak response and creates an opening for the reader's own critical perspective and skepticism to take hold. And there is one more snag that further reveals the frayed edges of white witnesses' perspective: the troublesome flashback transition from the present to past.

Sembene faces an understated difficulty in needing to transition into a long flashback about Diouana's life while starting from Madame's perspective. While the minimally satisfied inspectors and journalists take their leave, the overwhelming inconclusiveness of Madame's answer still lingers. Nostalgia, that which Madame proposed in a closing-over of the investigator's unanswerable question, ends up overtaking Madame herself. Little by little, Madame sinks into [sombra dans] her memories, transported "back to Africa" [là-bas en Afrique] (1997, 44-45; 2013, 161-162). From the French woman's point of view, we watch Diouana push open the gate and hush the barking German shepherd. Abruptly, however, the perspective jumps again: "It was there, in Africa, [là-bas en Afrique] that everything had started. Diouana had made the six-kilometer round trip on foot three times a week. For the last month, she had made it gaily—enraptured, her heart beating as if she were in love for the first time" (44-45).<sup>18</sup> The flashback begins again as if Madame's were something of a false start.

Having an omniscient third-person narrator makes the perspectival jump feasible enough, but the disjuncture is admittedly awkward and arguably unnecessary. It strains the reader's sense of temporal continuity and spatial coordination—are we inside the gate watching Diouana arrive or outside on the road with Diouana still a ways away? What holds us in the slightest of cognitive tension is the insistence on Madame's perspective as the inaugural portal through which we move—or sink—into the past. In establishing Madame's point of view first, Diouana's

---

<sup>18</sup> "C'est là-bas en Afrique, que tout commença. Diouana, trois fois par semaine se tapait ses six kilomètres aller et retour. Mais depuis un mois, elle était gaie, ravie, cœur battant, comme si elle découvrait l'amour" (Sembene 2013, 162).

backstory remains held within the French woman's perspectival confines: that is, Madame's dim memory and her own nostalgia covers up and covers over the much more torturous realities of Diouana's experience. And yet the incongruity of the "false start" catches the reader's attention, pulling us out of what otherwise would come across as a seamless encapsulation of events all within the white French characters' perspective. These snags betray the constructedness of the enclosure; out of the initial spatial and temporal confusion we find potential to distinguish Diouana's memory as one fundamentally set apart from Madame's. However, the question remains of whether and in what condition Diouana's memory can survive as one not thoroughly distorted by Madame's historiographic authority.

This encapsulation of Diouana's memory within Madame's colonial nostalgia adds another layer to the multiple mediums through which we encounter the young woman. Prior to the literal and figurative "closure" of investigative dossiers and cases, and even before Diouana brings her own life to an end, Madame's last words to the young woman envelop her in an epistemological and ontological fetter. In the final moments before Diouana takes her life, Madame subjects her to petty gaslighting and cheap, racist insults. As an epistemological attack, Madame accuses Diouana of *lying*, fundamentally negating her perceptual knowledge and grasp of objective facts. On the level of identity and subjecthood, Madame attempts to bury Diouana beneath a racist and colonialist stereotype (a lying "indigène"), besieging her knowledge of Self. It is worth naming Madame's lethal use of formidable power despite of and thanks to its pettiness. If we simply view her facile and unfounded accusation (not to mention the banality of a dirty washroom) as the "last straw" for Diouana, we fail to recognize the visceral, tangible, and intangible mechanisms of racial and colonial trauma in Diouana's dispossession of knowledge

and selfhood. The narrator notes Diouana's trembling mouth, the most fleeting of moments wherein the possibility and desire to make sound lies just out of sight behind closed lips.

Through all of these layers and negotiations of power – power to speak, to narrate, and to remember -, Sembene constructs a racialized historiography such that the naturalized white archive appears to have “graspable” edges. In laboring over these layers, he anticipates and counteracts the tendency for the white historiographical perspective to slip into incorporeal ubiquity. Therefore, Sembene's literary creation could be said to intersect the formal discipline of history, as suicide's racially-based historiography (based on the race both of the historian and of the person to commit suicide) is its own field of research. Marc A. Hertzman (2017) provides an extensive historiography from the sixteenth to the twentieth century on racialized notions of suicide in relation to forced labor in the Americas. Hertzman interrogates these racialized suicide narratives from “a collection of (in this case mainly white, mainly male) historical actors – writers, conquerors, clergy, travelers, surgeons, slave traders, masters, scholars” (2017, 318). His expansive and thoroughgoing historiography highlights the “remarkable reversals, inconsistencies, and great change” that reinforced racial logics and accommodated various colonial and abolitionist projects over centuries (2017, 345). He writes,

The elasticity of racialized discussions of suicide is a testament to the perpetual and simultaneous unreliability and durability of suicide myths and, at least in part, a product of the act itself. The nature of self-destruction raises questions that contemporaries, let alone historians, cannot answer. This open-endedness made for potent raw material in the hands of racial theorists, who trafficked in a world so uniquely fungible and firm that it was possible to permanently assign labels such as “civilized” and “savage,” even as the traits associated with those labels freely changed. (2017, 344)

Sembene includes contemporary examples of white journalists, Commodores, police investigators, and private employers of postcolonial France to find similar racially encoded narratives favorable to white supremacy and neocolonial projects. Seeming to align with

Hertzman's analyses, one also finds plenty of scholars today writing on *La Noire de...* who have landed upon various ways to understand Diouana as a politically and racially encoded victim or martyr, and to understand her suicide as agential or resigned.<sup>19</sup>

The short story and the film (discussed shortly) both construct and denaturalize the dominant, white perspective by revealing its limits. Narrative and figurative structures in the short story's opening "wall-off" the speaking subject from the silent object. The white characters' innocence and control of an anti-Black narrative becomes increasingly contrived, meanwhile racism is maintained and reinforced by a paradoxically dispassionate and subconscious effort, evidenced through the journalists' matter-of-fact racism through free indirect speech and Madame's flimsy storytelling. The "hitch" in shifting between Madame's and Diouana's memories betrays the contested control over Diouana's memory and leaves us with a snag in the near seamlessness of the white perspective. Sembene guides us along the contours of these narrative, figurative, and spatial forms which have been shaped by and have given a more graspable, concrete shape to whiteness.

### **Sounds Like Diouana**

This section continues with the theme of structural enclosure, though with a greater attentiveness to the film version's effects of sound and voice-over in creating a kind of aural detachment of Diouana's aural and visual bodies. As a result, in addition to analyzing the physical forms "captured" on film, I also take up the notion of body and skin through a

---

<sup>19</sup> See for example Davies, Lyell. 2015. "Why Does Diouana Die?: Facing History, Migration, and Trauma in Black Girl." In *Ousmane Sembène and the Politics of Culture*, edited by Lifongo J. Vetinde and Amadou Tidiane Fofana, 97–114. London: Lexington Books.; Pallister, Janis L. 1992. "From 'La Noire de. . .' to 'Milk and Honey': Portraits of the Alienated African Woman." *Modern Language Studies* 22 (4): 76–87.; and Virtue, Nancy. 2014. "'Le Film de...' Self-Adaptation in the Film Version of Ousmane Sembene's 'La Noire De...'" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 42 (3): 557–67.

consideration of the aural bodies at play. Diouana's voice-over has been subject to many debates over its symbolic impact. Because logistical constraints to Sembene's filmmaking process prevented him from producing Diouana's voice-over in Wolof, the result poses an existentialist framework for how Black, African, neocolonial subjecthood can be aesthetically and politically represented in film. The following analyses lay out an understanding of how Diouana's aural body and visual body together present a perplexing case study of *acousmatization* (in the way originally meant by Michel Chion, 1999) in which, rather than "wandering the surface," the acousmètre is trapped within the hypervisible, hyper-racialized body, all while remaining alienated from the physical world and denied an embodied home (1999, 4).

Differing from the short story whose narration gives us Diouana's experiences second-hand, the film develops the young Black woman's first-person perspective. She reflects upon her experiences both in France and in Senegal through a voice-over interior monologue and flashback narrative, recorded by Haitian actor Toto Bissainthe. The voice-over accompanies select close-up camera shots on the Senegalese actor, Mbissine Thérèse Diop, who plays Diouana on screen. The consistent aural and visual focalization on the young woman provides insight into her psychic life with perhaps more sensitivity than what the short story's third-person narrative mode allows. The expressive visual and voice acting by Diop and Bissainthe, respectively, garners sympathy for Diouana's grief and humanizes the very painful realizations she has about the lies with which Madame has lured her into servitude. Several critics have therefore noted the duality of, or relationship between, Diouana's outward silence and internal verbosity through an "overflowingly vociferous voiceover" (Nunn 2019, 194). Rachel Langford notes the voice-over's "vital challenge to such silencing," as it "allows the audience privileged access to Diouana's 'for intérieur', her innermost being, while highlighting the extent to which

her French employers tacitly deny that she possesses any such interior” (Langford 2001, 15). Certainly, this interior access to Diouana’s thoughts and feelings through voice-over corresponds to Sembene’s use of the voice-over in relatively traditional cinematic fashion: the voice-over as flashback or as interior monologue. The voice-over of a conventional flashback “return[s] to the body as a form of narrative closure. [...] the voice-over narration is, indeed, linked to a body (that of the hero)” (Doane 1980, 41). The voice of an interior monologue “manifests its inner lining [...] display[ing] what is inaccessible to the image, what exceeds the visible: the ‘inner life’ of the character” (1980, 41). Nonetheless, Sembene’s employment of a “traditional” voice-over – one that fuses together the voice and body of a character – takes on unconventional, vexing meaning when exercised through Diouana as a Black African woman and domestic worker whose physical body undergoes extreme visual pressures.

Indeed, others have also noted the complex effects of the voice-over and of Bissainthe’s dubbing as empowering for the protagonist and as deceptively limited in what this empowerment entails. On the one hand, the voice-over tracks Diouana’s maturing consciousness and communicates to the spectator her otherwise silent and silenced resistance to oppression. On the other hand, the inherent technical and cognitive effort needed to join these two actors’ work together supports an understanding of Diouana as a composite entity always split in two – sound and image –, thus raising the question of if Diouana is ever a whole being (Dima 2020, 166–69). The aural-visual cohesion further runs into some difficulty because Diouana is not supposed to be able to speak much French, her oppressed raciolinguistic identity critically shaping her sense of isolation and ultimate demise as she is cut off from all communication outside of her own

thoughts.<sup>20</sup> However, Bissainthe’s delivery of Diouana’s thoughts are all in French. Of course, Sembene’s original intention was to film *La Noire de...* in Wolof—which he would go on to do for a number of subsequent films—but he was required to make the film in French for funding reasons (Pfaff 1984, 114–15). This forced linguistic concession exemplifies the kinds of neocolonial relations at play in the French-controlled film industry. The illogical self-representation of Diouana talking to herself in French muddles the message that the film achieves a more intimate retelling of her story and blurs the distinction between individual agency and what is state sanctioned *as* individual agency. Logistical debates over Sembene’s linguistic concessions aside, the point still stands that the voice-over is a crucial facet of Diouana’s multiply mediated representation, one that inevitably adds on additional layers of mediation in order to simulate a more intimate representation of subjecthood.

Critical discourse surrounding the voice-over reveals how readily the paradoxical intimacy and removal of Diouana’s voice can accommodate notions of both her willful subjectivity and subjection to disembodied abstraction. In fact, focusing on Diouana’s willful subjectivity alone brings about its own contradictions as well. Nancy Virtue, in an intriguingly conflicted example, notes Diouana’s role as actor and narrator to be something that affords Diouana “a certain narrative distance, an ability to be simultaneously both inside and outside of [her] own narrative in order to represent that experience intelligibly and meaningfully to others” (2014, 561). The voice-over therefore allows Sembene to transform Diouana’s suicide from a “self-destructive act into an act of self-determination” (2014, 561). Remarkably, however, Virtue also sees in Diouana’s narrative commentary a shift away from naivety to “equivocalness,”

---

<sup>20</sup> Though the construct itself is old, the term “raciolinguistics” is relatively new to sociolinguistics. For more discussion on raciolinguistics, see Rosa, Jonathan, and Nelson Flores. 2017. “Unsettling Race and Language: Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective.” *Language in Society* 46 (5): 621–47.

ultimately landing Diouana with the charge of “willful blindness or even collusion” (2014, 563). While I generally disagree with this line of thought, I find the argument itself fascinating for how it reveals the slippage between “self-determination” and “blameworthiness” in the tragic figure of Diouana. Missing from Virtue’s argument is a more protracted interrogation of the conditions in which this so-called “self-controlled” subject was both formed and exploited. Here, for example, are Diouana’s final words: “Madame lied to me. Madame has always lied to me. She won’t lie to me again. Never again will she lie to me. She wanted to keep me here like a slave” [Madame m’a menti. Elle m’a toujours menti. Elle ne me mentira plus. Jamais plus elle ne mentira. Elle voulait me garder ici comme une esclave]. The short and cyclical phrases denounce the pervasiveness of Madame’s lies, even as they reveal her entrapment in the horrific reality of having already been deceived. The tragedy and discomfiting message of *La Noire de...* lie in the neocolonial deceptions and ambiguities which configured an idealized, self-determined subject only to thrust that agential power into the non-choice of self-destruction. As Saidiya Hartman noted of the “enduring legacy of slavery” post-emancipation in nineteenth-century America, it was the “travestied liberation, castigated agency, and blameworthiness of the free individual” that characterized Black subjecthood and perpetuated the domination and exploitation of those who were free(d) (Hartman 1997, 6). Nearly a hundred years later across the Atlantic, Sembene’s short story, set in 1958, and his film, set in the 1960s, straddle Senegal’s fight for and gain of independence from colonial rule. As a Transatlantic figure, he, too, echoes and laments the enduring legacy of slavery and insists upon it even, and especially, at a time of great hope for Senegalese sovereignty and entrance into relations of supposed equality with France.

The possibility for and consequences of willfulness, consciousness, and self-determination for Diouana run parallel to the other quandary of her self-possession and simultaneous disembodiment. Vlad Dima, writing cautiously of the “seemingly evident progress” made by the growing revolutionary strength of the voice in francophone African cinema more broadly, points out that “the overall problem to keep in mind is that of a voice that garners agency but then escapes the body, and in doing so, empties it, leaving behind only a shell” (2020, 168). Indeed, this is true for Diouana as an early case study, as she literally and figuratively cuts and empties her voice out from her own body. While many have championed the film’s use of voice-over as a constructive element in developing Diouana’s agency, this tendency towards hollowing Diouana’s body feels incongruent with the narrative of increased self-control. The following close readings will attempt to demonstrate Diouana’s deteriorating self-possession even as visual and aural representations of her material embodiment grow ever clearer and more visceral.

Months into her job with the French family, Diouana has been overburdened with housecleaning and subjected to a number of humiliating incidents at the hands of Madame, Monsieur, and their friends. One evening while the French family is preoccupied, a despondent Diouana wonders via interior voice-over monologue about her role in this France which so defies her expectations of social mobility and prosperity. With her back to the camera, she raises her hands and places them flat against the wall to either side of the displayed African mask, then, tilting her head from side to side as if studying its curves, she wonders, “What must they think of me in Dakar? ‘Diouana is happy in France...’ That I’m living well.” [Que doit-on penser de moi à Dakar? ‘Diouana est heureuse en France...’ Que je vis bien.] It is worth noting that her voice here is soft, understated, slightly strained. Her voice cracks into a whisper as she pronounces the

last word, *bien*, bearing out the physical, vocal fatigue in her body – a notable contrast to the expectations of wellness from those still in Dakar. The camera then pans left and Diouana occupies the center of the shot and her projected shadows on the wall come clearer into view. While one body, the shadow of her silhouette, doubles her on the wall to the right, the second (more faded) branches out on her left. With her arms still raised, her hands and body frame the mask almost as if to embrace another invisible body. She turns her head as though following the sightless gaze of the mask to an unknown spot over her shoulder. If the mask could see, if the mask could talk, what would it make of this France? “France here is the kitchen, the living room, the bathroom, and my bedroom,” [La France ici, c’est la cuisine, le salon, la salle de bain, et ma chambre à coucher] Diouana replies for the both of them. Breaking apart under the pressures of imprisonment and isolation, Diouana’s body splits, flattens, and fades. At the same time, however, one can also read the appearance of the shadows as extensions or outgrowths of Diouana’s being, suggesting possibilities and complexities that a constricting historico-racial schema could never contain. The doubling and tripling of her body further suggests at least the very painful beginnings of her development of Duboisian or Fanonian black or double consciousness.

Furthermore, just as her conceptions of France and its splendor collapse into a “black hole” [“Est-ce trou noir qui est la France?”], her belief in her own self-possession also starts to crumble. Rather than ask ‘*who* am I?’, Diouana asks ‘*What* am I *here*?’ [Qu’est-ce que je suis ici?] displacing the subject with the object pronoun while also ambiguously localizing her objectification: if trapped in a black hole, then Diouana is “here” but also “nowhere.” Dima argues that while Diouana’s visual body “continues to come apart” in this scene, her voice-over “remains steady and unified,” thereby pointing to the possible existence of a “fuller, aural body,”

a potential means for Diouana's survival beyond physical or visual deterioration (2020, 169). As Dima also notes, however, one problem facing the aural body is its unknowable location. Since it appears not to rest wholly within the diegesis or outside of it, this second body remains detached from the physical world and possibly slips into the void (Dima 2020, 169). Though it is not until later that Diouana proclaims herself to have been tricked and enslaved by the French family, this scene marks a significant break in her perception of her self-determination and, per the context of neocolonial forced labor, her self-possession.

This scene is important for understanding Diouana's psychic and bodily alienation as she loses all relation to others and to the world around her. While grappling with her disillusionment she is also cut off from knowledge or experience of the outside world, her world being ever more restricted to the walls of the apartment and to the "echo chamber" of her own thoughts. At one point, we are left with the sightless and soundless mask as Diouana's only witness. While the African mask does act as a kind of mirror to whom she can speak, or as she dialogues with herself and her multiplying shadows, in the end these amount not to comforts but to reminders of her lack of a witness, an ally, or a defendant. This tension between Diouana's aesthetic growth or multiplication and her total isolation reflects the political conflict between, on the one hand, her nascent consciousness and resistance to oppression, and on the other hand, her eventual suicide. To understand this, I believe that in the end having *only* herself as an interlocuter was not enough to save her but was just enough to kill her; the impossibility of communicating her despair with another person (for lack of both human contacts and means of oral or written expression) is what secures Diouana's decision to die. As noted previously, Diouana's dual role as both character and narrator in the film signify a marked difference from her total isolation, distanced as she is from the anonymous third-person narrator of the short story. This is often referenced as a point

of progress for the film version's re-creation of Diouana's subjecthood, but it is difficult to absorb the amplified collateral torment and grief that also results from Diouana's overtly conscious act of suicide.

Still, or perhaps because of this, scholars have been compelled on the one hand to locate Diouana's voice someplace apart from her tormented physical body, and on the other hand, to locate *in* Diouana's voice a kind of surrogate saving grace that would provide continuity and be a dwelling place for her prospering agency and will. What I am interested in is how this search for fullness and completion can result in a separation of the racialized body from the "ideal," the non-racialized (which is whiteness' greatest illusion and prize) voice or soul or mind.<sup>21</sup> Instead of seeking the reunification of Diouana's aural and visual bodies by assuming her more "real" body lies in an unknown space from where her voice-over must freely emanate, it may be worth re-examining the relation between visual and aural bodies starting from the premise of wholeness, even if such wholeness for Diouana is fleeting. Alongside the film's tendency towards emptying Diouana's body of her voice, Sembene in fact employs many techniques implying that Diouana's voice and physical body act temporally and materially as one. The following analyses aim to show that while Diouana's body does leave the visual field and takes the source of enunciation (symbolically, her mouth) with it, she is still *there* as she always has

---

<sup>21</sup> Tessa Nunn, for example, claims that Diouana's voice-over constructs a more humane body elsewhere, inaccessible to the spectator. (See Nunn, "The Screaming Mother and Silent Subaltern in Ousmane Sembene's *La Noire de...*" in the *Women in French Studies Special Conference Issue*, 2019). She implies that reconciliation between Diouana's aural body and physical body is fundamentally impossible. This impossibility is largely due to how Nunn relegates Diouana's silence and physical body to the ocular-centric diegesis and Diouana's voice and more-human body to an "unknown space" in the extra-diegetic space. I contend that this separation seems logical at first but ultimately is misguided, and its consequences for a racialized ontology and epistemology are quite severe because it requires Diouana to transcend her physical body in order to find a more "real" and whole embodiment only possible in an unknown elsewhere. For an in-depth philosophical study of identity, phenomenology, and race as it relates to the separation of bodies from minds, see Linda Alcoff's *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford University Press: 2006).

been—materially established in the diegesis, present in synchronous time and space with her voice. This ever-present body has simply been covered up by something else: a second skin.<sup>22</sup>

Before addressing this additional covering, it is important to touch upon some examples of Diouana’s voice as embodied, joined to her physical body represented on screen. While most of her voice-over speech constitutes a synchronous, interior monologue, this is not the only kind of voicing that happens throughout the film. Diouana also frequently converses diegetically (and—even more frequently—intradiegetically via flashback) with other characters. In the historically chronological sense, Diouana’s very first words are in fact uttered coolly to Ousmane Sembene himself, playing a schoolteacher. “Diouana, where are you going?” [Où vas-tu?] he asks. “Looking for work,” [Chercher du travail] she responds with an edge of defiance before turning and walking away. Once hired, she returns home, running down the road shouting (also to Sembene in passing), “I’ve got a job!” [J’ai du travail!]. Later on, she converses with her boyfriend at the Place de l’Indépendance, where she asks him whether he thinks France is more beautiful than the downtown square. These are simple examples, but they are important for recognizing that Diouana’s speech and voice-over do not simply constitute an interior monologue.

It is true that the interior monologue dominates as a mode of voice-over throughout the film. The interior monologue obviously differs from direct discourse between characters, as there is no other person diegetically “there” to verify the receipt of communication. However, Diouana’s interior thoughts are important for how she makes sense of the physical world in which she finds herself. These perceptions rely upon her material and sentient presence within the diegesis, and the film makes a point to showcase her point of view. For example, just before

---

<sup>22</sup> The concept here comes from Anne Anlin Cheng’s *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface* (Oxford University Press: 2010), which will be explored in detail shortly.

the second flashback, Madame and Monsieur go out and leave Diouana to watch their son, Philippe. Diouana, however, shuts herself in her room. She refuses to do Madame's bidding (despite the threat of "if you don't work, then you don't eat"), knowing now that Madame had tricked her into coming to France to serve as a maid and an exotic spectacle for house guests. As she sits on her bed, Diouana looks up at the ceiling. The camera follows Diouana's gaze and travels back and forth across the featureless plaster. The subjective shot and movement accentuate Diouana's embodied perspective, yet while this technique seems to center and privilege her position (giving her some power over the spectator's view), the visual also heightens the sense of being walled in. The fraught negotiation over Diouana's subjecthood/objecthood continues as her searching gaze (the back-and-forth camera movement) finds no end to the obstinate blankness. Indignantly, she says to herself, "I am not the object of Madame" [*Je ne suis pas l'objet de Madame*], but then, still searching, concludes bitterly, "This is life in France" [*C'est ça la vie en France*]. One is left with a rather bleak negotiation of selfhood—one where Diouana's resistance to a world of deceptions and lies has resulted in closing herself off from an objecthood prescribed to her by others, but which has left her all the more cut off from an external world. This echoes the earlier scene where the camera pans across a blank wall and the imperceptible French Riviera at night and Diouana finds France to be empty, resembling a black hole. Unlike in that scene, where Diouana's aural body seems to dissipate into the void, this time the camera returns the subjective viewing position back to Diouana to verify the match cut. The scene tethers Diouana's visual and aural perspective to her physical body and emphasizes her existential crisis and physical imprisonment inside the ever-shrinking concept of "France" and its sinister companion, freedom.

Going one step further, not only is France a carceral space, but this constricting pressure is also applied to the physical confines of Diouana's own body. In the following example of diegetic speech and sound-making, Diouana's aural body provides the camera shot, and by extension the spectator, with a precarious sense of her mortal physicality. This comes from one of the film's most striking scenes: when Madame and Diouana get into a dizzying tug-of-war over the mask. Diouana had previously taken the mask off the wall and kept it in her room, but as Madame tries to retrieve it, Diouana leaps up from where she had fallen to the floor and repeatedly shouts, "That's mine!" [C'est à moi!]. The direct verbal and physical confrontation constitute an initial testament to Diouana's material presence. The two women pull at the mask and spin in circles. We hear both women's vocal straining as well as their scuffling feet—Madame wearing heels, Diouana barefoot. The camera cuts back and forth to a close-up of each woman in a literal face-off then steadies focus on Madame and the spinning stops. The sounds of breathing, crying, and footsteps, combined with the swirling images creates an effect of dizzying "corporeal implication" for the spectator. Because the camera remains on Madame, Diouana's whole body leaves the visual field, but her bodily sounds (sniffling, crying) envelope the subjective shot and imbue it with her physical presence. This kind of acousmatic projection resembles what Michel Chion terms an I-voice, or *voix-je*, occasioning an "effect of *corporeal implication*, or involvement of the spectator's body, when the voice makes us feel in our body the vibration of the body of the other, of the character who serves as a vehicle for the identification" (1999, 53). What is so interesting about this aural/visual moment for Diouana is that her bodily invisibility coincides with and makes possible a moment of intense physical presence thanks to the power, not necessarily of speech, but of sound. There have been other camera shots that have taken on Diouana's perspective (e.g., looking up from her bed at a sour-

faced Madame), but these perspective shots have not been framed in any sound-based way. In a flipped version of Chion's de-acousmatization, when the acousmètre becomes visually rooted to a place of enunciation (classically, the mouth), Diouana's "human and mortal body where the voice will henceforth be lodged" (28) is revealed through her aural body made physical, through breath and feet.

Chion's unseen and disembodied voices, or acousmètres, are powerful, "special being[s], a kind of talking and acting shadow. [...] The powers are four: ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence" (21, 24). For example, the narrator (whose voice guides the narration yet whom we do not see), "is in the best position to see everything [...] is in the best position to see you" (24). Of course, the contrary is true in Diouana's case. Although her voice-over narration might possess an increased power (relative to the short story, for instance) to guide the spectator's witnessing of events, her acousmatization is never fully realized. Though the connection between her aural and visual bodies is undeniably tenuous and at constant risk of splitting in two, Diouana's voice is denied control over her image and thus denied access to these god-like powers. Quite the contrary, Sembene accentuates the mortality of her physical body at the precise moment that she leaves the visual field and becomes purely an aural body. On the significance of de-acousmatization in film, Chion writes, "*Embodying the voice* is a sort of symbolic act, dooming the acousmètre to the fate of ordinary mortals. De-acousmatization roots the acousmètre to a place and says, 'here is your body, you'll be there, and not elsewhere.' Likewise, the purpose of burial ceremonies is to say to the soul of the deceased, 'you must no longer wander, your grave is here'" (27-28). The aural body made physical in the tug-of-war scene prepares the way for Diouana's death, eventually transforming silence/sound into a material symbol marked on the visual body. Her suicide is a profoundly violent, embodied act

whose destructive symbolic power comes from the ties that have bound the aural body to the physical body. Diouana slitting her own throat is in fact the ultimate moment of de-acousmatization in that it indelibly unifies the aural, visual, and material together, finally making physical and visible the violently silenced screaming mouth of an open wound.

These different moments of enunciation complicate our understanding of the voice-over in its relationship to Diouana's visual and physical representation. Even if there are moments of aural/visual disassociation or bodily fragmentation, Diouana's aural body is not altogether a specter of the Self, but rather is tethered to a diegetically present character and constitutes her physical embodiment. Through Diouana's voice-over and bodily sounds, we are invited to view, hear, and imagine her from the specific coordinates—spatial, temporal, and psychic—which place her in a world under a strictly imposed racial logic. In the following section, I will examine how the pressures of colonialism and racism exercised upon the Black body engender a covering of Diouana's body at its outermost layer, skin. The racial logic of Blackness' hypervisibility and materiality envelopes Diouana's body and becomes the carceral chamber within which her voice resounds.

### **Materialized Metaphors and Second Skins**

Diouana becomes an exemplary model of Achille Mbembe's (2017) Black subject, "the only human in the modern order whose skin has been transformed into the form and spirit of merchandise" (2017, 6). As argued above, Diouana's voice emanates from a body within the diegesis, but her visual body frequently seems to depart from the visual field. To understand this optical illusion, we must recognize racialization's power to reify Blackness as an indexical sign, a "second skin," which envelopes the body, deflecting the viewer's sight-based perception of

body and being. In *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (2011), Anne Anlin Cheng's innovative and ornamentalist study of Josephine Baker's iconic performances develops a critical understanding of racialized skin (and Baker's reflective, "prosthetic skin") as "costume, prop, and surrogate" (2011, 110). Elucidating the phenomenon of a materialized metaphor and "racial logic," Cheng writes:

there can never be a truly naked body. When it comes to the racialized body, the literal is always metaphorically manufactured, even as that fabrication bears a literalness of its own. We are, in other words, looking at the material traces of the metaphorical. Or, to put it less aphoristically and more exactly, we are recovering the literal residue of a racial logic that operates allegorically. (78)

Unlike Josephine Baker, who Cheng considers able to "escape into surfaces" in such a way that deflects misogynist and racist logic, Diouana is imprisoned within authoritative discourses of white supremacy and does not seem able to escape that "literal residue" that results from racialization (119). She is locked somewhere inside. The fatal, non-negotiable racialization of Diouana as a Black woman is administered through systematic and systemic anti-Black racism and culminates in her death. Shortly, I elaborate upon the metonymic reduction of Diouana into the black leather suitcase. The analysis will show how, through Sembene's perhaps understated use of metaphor, Diouana's story is that of a decidedly tragic enclosure that re-figures her Blackness and being into a hyperlegible sign and object—emptied out, inert, and transportable.

Diouana arrives in France with a great sense of hope, but this is undermined by subtle imagery signaling that a process of objectification has already begun to take hold of her person, reducing her complexity and governing her self-possession. When the large white cruise ship, Ancerville, comes into Antibes Harbor, Diouana walks out wearing a white polka dot dress and a soft white scarf wrapped around her head. She crosses the gangway carrying a white bag lightly in one hand and a black leather suitcase in the other. In the port, she scans her surroundings, and

a cart loaded up with tagged luggage rolls past. We watch Diouana lay her suitcase down flat onto a low bench marked “*SUD*” and, after a cutaway to another inspector, the camera refocuses on the suitcase. The shot then shows the lower half of a uniformed officer draw with a piece of white chalk a stiff “L” into the black leather on the lower left corner (see figure 1). The brief customs inspection is an unremarkable part of the film’s opening; this is perhaps again a disposable piece of institutional reality confirming the viewer’s procedural expectations about immigration. However, the casually consistent focus on these traveling objects also suggests that there is something to be made of the traveling bags in relation to their travelers. The white “L” is likely an institutional marking, possibly to assign and index the status of the bag’s (and owner’s) blessed entry into the country. It is also a marking of surface; it stands out as not of the black leather but applied to it from without, assuring the object’s objecthood by finding its limits. The black leather suitcase is not just a prop for expository setting purposes. However, its very mundanity justifies both its presence and easy dismissal on the part of the casual viewer. The suitcase can disappear into a realm of disposable things that signal meaning to us as “truths” (i.e. Diouana is traveling from abroad; she, like the rest of the passengers, carries some possessions; etc.). The film’s ending, however, solidifies the suitcase’s importance as Monsieur returns the hollowed container of possessor-less possessions to Diouana’s family after her suicide. For now, though, we are reminded of Diouana’s own transportability and how her passage to France is facilitated by the commodification of domestic laborers in a neocolonial economy of so-called free exchange.



*Figure 1. A customs officer marks Diouana's black leather suitcase with a white L*

Once arrived to the *Chemin de l'Ermitage*, Monsieur and Diouana get out of the white car. As Diouana looks upwards to the apartment building towering above her, she reaches down to pick up the suitcase. The camera cuts from the full shot of the alley to another close up on the suitcase, as the "L" remains visible. Diouana straightens up, and the camera follows the suitcase's movement before slowly rising up the rest of her arm, traveling over her body to finally settle on her upward lifted face. Like through the border inspection, both the traveler and the traveler's possessions move as one. The distinction lessens between the traveler and the suitcase as the camera's smooth movement makes one the extension of the other. In line with the heavily emphasized visual contrasts between black and white throughout the film, one could also read this cohesive movement as symbolizing the black leather's extension of Diouana's own "black" skin, foreshadowing the suitcase as a surrogate figure for Diouana's body.

The film's visual play of black and white extends to the contrast between Diouana's dark skin and her bright white surroundings. This remains a persistent theme in the French family's apartment and gives concrete visual structure to Diouana's physical and psychological subjugation and isolation on the basis of racial difference. Three weeks into her stay in France, we see her put on the same white polka dot dress (a second-hand gift from Madame, as we learn later), jewelry, and heels just as she wore when she first arrived. We know, however, that she has been ceaselessly put to work cleaning the house, doing laundry, and serving Madame and Monsieur food and drink. In a humiliating scene, Madame yells at Diouana for continuing to dress as if she were going to a party. By demanding Diouana remove the dress, Madame undoes the symbolic contract of equality between gift-givers, revealing the gift's true significance as a lure and a fake. She comes back and ties an apron around Diouana's waist, over the white polka dot dress. Madame's physical manipulation of Diouana's clothing and body reinforces the notion that Diouana is a failed copy of the western bourgeois woman—glaringly inappropriate on account of both her class and race. The white and black striped floor stretch out beneath her like prison bars with an unbreachable difference separating one stripe from the other.<sup>23</sup> This contrast extends to play out over Diouana's own body. Madame makes Diouana turn around, tying her up within the humiliating combination of both a maid's apron and the party dress, now inescapable signs of her racial and class transgression.

The French family then have guests over for a meal, to be prepared by Diouana. As they partake of "real African cuisine, prepared by the maid!", [la vraie cuisine africaine, préparée par la bonne] and make disparaging comments about how "in Africa, the natives eat nothing but

---

<sup>23</sup> Vlad Dima notes that in addition to the flooring's resemblance of prison bars, the dress Diouana changes into later sports a striped pattern rather than polka dots. It is "sadly ironic," he writes, "that Diouana's best outfit, her fancy dress, also carries the connotation of enclosure" (2014, 60, 65).

rice” [en Afrique, les indigènes ne mangent que du riz], Diouana’s individual humanity is reduced to a continental African stereotype and consumed. On Diouana’s exoticization and commodification, Mireille Rosello writes, “Diouana, mutatis mutandis, functions as a belly dancer, whose body adds flavor to her dishes. The specter of cannibalism is not too far off” (2001, 134). Diouana’s body is harvested for its “flavor” of Black Africanness, caught within the confines of the white dress and apron, and devoured with great pleasure. The older white man then rises from his chair announcing a showy performance of misogynoir. He jovially exclaims, “Excuse me, Miss, I’ve never kissed a *négresse* before!” [Vous permettez mademoiselle, je n’ai jamais embrassé une *négresse*]. The others happily watch as he puts his hands on her shoulders and kisses her cheeks. His actions generate Diouana’s indexical image (her second skin) as a Black woman. The kissable *négresse* eclipses and assumes the role of her real body. And while the older white man excitedly revels in the novelty of his first ever execution of this specific type of racial and sexual physical violence, the horrifying echo of the rape and violation of Africa and of African women over centuries of European imperial conquest is amplified through his grinning face.

Diouana absents herself from the dining room and sits silently in the kitchen, yet there is no escape from the now palpably oppressive white aesthetic around her: the narrow kitchen closes in on her body as white walls, bared pipes, and door frames box her in behind a table, and Madame follows after her. With her sweetly exasperated pout, she chides Diouana for sulking, insisting, “It was just to be funny that he kissed you. Your rice was very good, I’m happy with you.” [C’était pour rire qu’il t’a embrassée. Ton riz était très bon, je suis contente de toi.] In an act of gaslighting, Madame thwarts any possibility feminine solidarity between herself and Diouana as she instead dishes out a specific kind of racially charged, colonialist condescension

on Diouana for having impressed the white guests with “good rice.” According to Madame, Diouana has fulfilled her role as laborer and spectacle, providing sexual-gastro-psychic nourishment for the guests.

At the same time as violence accumulates within these moments of racist stereotyping, racialized sexual assault, gaslighting, and dehumanizing comments (e.g. one guest compares Diouana to an animal that understands French but cannot speak), Sembene stages a visual proliferation of white objects and backdrops in the home. The unrelenting visual whiteness (walls, bedsheets, and glossy bathroom porcelain) of the apartment brings Diouana’s Blackness into sharp contrast with the space around her, highlighting the surface of her body, increasingly the first and last “thing” that the white inhabitants can see, touch, or know. Brought together, these white surroundings, the constricting aberration of her black and white apron-dress, and (as we will return to shortly) the black leather suitcase piece together an allegory of Diouana’s acutely physical, spatial imprisonment on the basis of racial difference. These powerful and differentializing visual contrasts provide us ample opportunity to inquire of the nature of racialization as perspectival, highly visual, and physically and materially experienced.

Frantz Fanon, born across the Atlantic in Martinique only a few years after Sembene, is perhaps most famous in the francophone canon for highlighting the systems and processes by which he too was “indexed” as Black, and what that experience brought to bear on his knowledge of selfhood and of identity. In *Peau noire, masques blancs* (2000 [1952]), he writes famously of a corporeal malediction wherein his body and Self as he perceptually knows himself to be (through touch, sound, movement, and sight) cannot be reconciled with the historico-racial schema crafted by the white man and white society (Fanon 2000, 112). He describes this agonizing, splitting of his body and his skin, asking, “What else could it be for me but an

amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?” (112). In Gail Weiss’s words, the historico-racial schema is “a structure that provides the “racial parameters” within which the corporeal schema is supposed to fit” (Weiss 2013, 27). Put simply, Diouana undergoes a similar agony. Sembene marks out distinctive moments in Diouana’s physical and psychic life as she progressively comes to realize that this historico-racial schema and its racial parameters have indeed engulfed her; she has been dressed and crafted (or as Fanon says, “woven... out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (2000, 111)) by Madame, Monsieur, and their white acquaintances.

With Fanon in mind, I will now consider in full the first two of three critical bathroom scenes in the film, the third being the scene of Diouana’s suicide. The first one takes place just five minutes in, at which point Diouana has only just arrived in France and begun work. The brief scene captures a tragic and morbid irony, as she scrubs the glossy white porcelain bathtub—the container which will come to hold her dead body and over which her blood will be spilled—before straightening up to wipe down the bathroom mirror with a rag. Diouana moves the rag back and forth across her own reflection (see figure 2). For one, the movement suggests a kind of preemptive self-erasure, perhaps a foreshadowing gesture towards her eventual suicide. But it can also be read as Diouana not quite seeing, not quite touching herself, concentrated as she is on the glass’s surface and not on her own reflection or existence “within” or “beyond” it. The glass of the mirror functions similarly to Fanon’s “dialectic”—the white lens, white logic, white system of values and norms established between Diouana and the world, between herself and her perception of herself. The racializing dialectic holds Diouana’s body and Blackness hostage under the imposed definitions of whiteness, ones that she eventually discovers and realizes are incompatible with her self-knowledge. It is still early, however (the very first “day”

after Diouana's arrival), and she moves about the apartment unaware, perhaps unconvinced, of the racial dialectic's existence. As she concentrates on the glass—ironically doing work to improve its reflective function—, no matter how clean the mirror is, she cannot see herself. Her relationship to the mirror is dictated by her prescribed identity as a maid; she is to clean the mirror, not to make use of it.



*Figure 2.* Diouana wiping down the mirror in the first bathroom scene.

The second scene that takes place in the bathroom occurs almost exactly halfway through the film. At this point, any notion of Diouana's naivety is long gone. Instead, she is deeply distressed, and the horror of her imprisonment and persecution reaches a new level of urgency. Madame pounds at the bathroom door, shouting Diouana's name and demanding that she come out, while Diouana silently presses her back to the door, biting her lip and closing her eyes as if in prayer. Unlike the simplicity of the continuous shots in the first bathroom scene, this one

emphasizes conflict and confinement, as it shows Madame and Diouana, respectively shut out and shut in, one screaming and the other wordless. Madame eventually gives up shouting and banging, but the ensuing silence offers no respite as resentment and fear mounts between the two women. Madame (unlike her husband) has begun to panic, as Diouana refuses to fulfill the role of housemaid, servant, and nanny. Madame's precarious power within a patriarchal and racial/colonial hierarchy is indeed most threatened by Diouana's unwillingness to serve, as she will be forced to take on childcare and housekeeping roles in the event of Diouana's absence.

Still in the bathroom, Diouana brushes her hair in silence. This time, she looks into the mirror at a reflection that we, however, cannot see (see figure 3). From the camera angle, the large mirror appears empty except for brief sightings of her right arm. Behind her head, a smaller hanging mirror reveals a blurry, cropped view of her profile. And once more, within the larger mirror, the smaller one appears again, but empty. As a reversal of how the first bathroom scene fully featured Diouana's reflection to emphasize her psychic state of non-recognition, this time Diouana *is* looking at herself *and* touching herself – notably not putting on a western-style wig or dress but brushing her natural hair. Yet rather than reveal the fullness of her body and being reflected back towards her, the shot sets her up to be surrounded by empty and fragmented projections. The emptiness amplifies Diouana's alienation and isolation under inescapable and oppressive racialized and gendered pressures. Here, Fanon's words have a powerful resonance:

In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places. I had already stopped being amused. It was not that I was finding febrile coordinates in the world. I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other... and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea... (2000, 112)

Fanon describes how in perceiving himself through the white Other's eyes and, even more importantly, through the white Other's affect—the emotional and psychic sense of disgust,

anger, and fear—he undergoes a violent splintering of the Self. He moves towards the Other, but as he approaches, the Other vanishes and takes along with him the possibility of temporally and spatially locating and identifying this perspective as anything but objective Truth. Sembene powerfully captures a similar epistemological fragmentation—abstracted parts of Diouana captured by two of the frames—also accompanied by a ubiquitous sort of white echo where these mirrors disappear and disorient one’s sense of point of view.



*Figure 3.* Diouana’s fragmented and absented reflections in the second bathroom scene.

This bathroom scene offers a parallel reading of the fracturing and objectification of Diouana’s body from the earlier scene when her body cast shadows on the wall around the mask. In both of these instances of bodily undoing, Sembene plays with the materiality of the body to reveal the conflicting negotiations of Black dis/embodiment subjected to the authoritative context of white supremacy and colonialism. The flattened and faceless shadows attest to

Diouana's materiality and opacity (she is "there" to obstruct the passage of light) and also show her reduced to her body's two-dimensional contours. We also remember how it is not fully Diouana's body whose shadow is thrown against the white wall, but the specific surface of her skin, or as Anne Anlin Cheng calls it, "the literal residue of a racial logic that operates allegorically" and encapsulates her body (2011, 78).<sup>24</sup> The materialized metaphor of Blackness comes to disturb negotiations of power between subjecthood and objecthood along the same contested line that designates flesh as a sign of "the embodied and the encumbered." These are Saidiya Hartman's words again, expanding on Fanon's corporeal malediction, as she describes the "castigated particularity" of those who were emancipated and yet excluded from "the privileges of disembodied and unencumbered universality" (Hartman 1997, 122–23). She writes, "the denigrated and deprecated, those castigated and saddled by varied corporeal maledictions, are the fleshy substance that enable the universal to achieve its ethereal splendor" (122). Through each of these scenes, Diouana's fragmented, refracted body leaves visual traces of the encumbered, "literal residue" of her black skin beneath the pressures of white supremacist racial logic. Sembene reveals the presence of the Fanonian epidermal schema through these various shots of shadows and of Diouana's misrecognition, thus removing her body from the visual field and replacing it with a surrogate skin.

It is worth mentioning here Sembene's attention in the short story to skin as a kind of article of containment. Where the film can work through visual symbolism, Sembene's delivery in the short story is much more explicit, linking her skin to the very horizons of France which seem to shrink around her. The parallel structure in the original French phrasing emphasizes the

---

<sup>24</sup> The full citation reads, "When it comes to the racialized body, the literal is always metaphorically manufactured, even as that fabrication bears a literalness of its own. We are, in other words, looking at the material traces of the metaphorical. Or, to put it less aphoristically and more exactly, we are recovering the literal residue of a racial logic that operates allegorically" (Cheng 2011, 78).

spatial metaphor of her own body: “Le territoire du pays se limitait à la surface de la villa. [...] Les larges horizons de naguère se limitaient à la couleur de sa peau” [The country seemed limited to the immediate surrounds of the villa. [...] The wide horizons of a short while ago stopped now at the color of her skin] (Sembene 2013, 176; 1997, 51). This phenomenological understanding of Diouana’s bodily horizons as a natural extension into the world around her recalls Fanon’s existentialist description of a world of ubiquitous anti-Blackness in which Black people are “rooted at the core of a universe from which [they] must be extricated” (Fanon 2000, 10). In John Drabinski’s words, Fanon describes “the psychological, linguistic, ontological, and libidinal landscape that is structured through and through by anti-Black racism” (2019). The notions of a racist-based “landscape” and “horizon”—and that Diouana finds herself locked within these materially structured worlds—reflects the total project of colonialism’s devastating reach across space and time, affecting tangible and intangible realms, from political geographies to individual subjectivities.

As we near Diouana’s suicide and the final scenes of the film, the camera returns to the object of the black leather suitcase and its metonymic relationship to Diouana of black skin and a hollowed container. Reminiscent of Fanon finding himself to be “an object in the midst of other objects,” (2000, 109) Diouana faces a similar horror of finding herself akin to the objects trapped inside the suitcase and the black leather box itself, skin stretched over a hollow frame. In the scene that returns us to France after the second flashback, Diouana has fallen asleep next to her suitcase lying open on the bed. The shot begins with her bare feet, then moves in a circular, clockwise motion, up over the open suitcase, across the length of Diouana’s body, then downward over her removed apron whose ties hang to the floor. On the floor, the mask lies next to the photographs of Diouana and her boyfriend the day before her departure. The photographs

seem as if they have fallen from the bed, as if Diouana dropped them when she fell asleep looking at the old pictures. The camera then moves over her sandals and returns to show Diouana's feet alongside her suitcase to close a ring around the constellation of objects. She is one object among many to be packed up and quietly removed after her death. The camera's careful movement circles around Diouana as she sleeps, further distancing the subjecthood of deliberate movement from the objecthood of inertia and dormancy.

The image of Diouana as one of many objects spilling out from her suitcase sees a tragic reprisal in the final moments of Diouana's life. In a final flurry of activity, she seizes the mask from Madame, throws down the apron at Monsieur's feet, rejects the money they offer, and begins to pack her suitcase. Her movements are ambiguous: consciously deliberate and yet reflexive, heroic and yet robbed of potency. She fills the suitcase with clothing, accessories, and the photographs—an assortment of layers of contested meanings, of indexical images that tell a fragmented story of her life. She has taken off and folded up the fancy dress, perhaps signifying that she rejects its symbolism of European supremacy. She decries Madame's deception, having promised Diouana inclusion in white, bourgeois French society only to try to keep her, in Diouana's words, "like a slave" [*comme une esclave*]. Despite this realization however, the diligently packed clothing and accessories seems yet to archive the preciousness of these false promises with ambiguous consequences. The western dress, wig, and high heels in particular represent painful reminders of the racial dialectic which excludes Diouana from this world of whiteness on the basis of her Blackness. One is left to wonder whether Diouana feels wronged because she has been denied equality with Europeans, or if she sees that the root of this insult goes back to having been conditioned to believe in the superiority of Europe in the first place. Packing the suitcase can thus be interpreted as an ambiguous and conflicted act. It is also

difficult to say that Diouana foresaw the returned suitcase to Dakar and anticipated it being a kind of warning to others of how she was deceived. It would have been quite different should Diouana have turned towards these objects with violence or more evident refusal—for example if she were to have worn a blood-stained western party dress in the bathtub as a didactic reminder of the violence of colonial mimicry and internalized racism. But this does not happen. Her voice trembles with anger and grief, reaching a frenzied crescendo as she repeats to herself, “Never again will Madame see me. Never again will she say anything to me. No more Diouana. Never again will I see them either” [Jamais plus Madame ne me verra. Jamais plus elle ne me dira quelque chose. Jamais plus de Diouana. Jamais plus je ne les verrai, moi aussi]. The emphasis on the end of her own sight in addition to Madame’s underlines the external and internalized violence that visibility has enacted upon her body and being. Her resistance to the historico-racial schema into which she has been fitted culminates in her self-destruction—an end Fanon implores his readers to avoid—and the cutting of her own skin.<sup>25</sup>

Sembene’s depiction of Diouana’s physical and psychological racial oppression resonates deeply with an existentialist phenomenological view of oppressive racialized and gendered experience. Sembene gives us a tragedy, a warning, and an indictment. From the singular example of Diouana, the question of reconciliation for these multiple bodies remains an unhappy one, with the powerful tragedy of Diouana’s suicide making visible the invisible violence of psychological and visual pressures on the Black body. Diouana’s death unifies the aural, visual, and material bodies together in one—a powerful act to counter the fragmentation of these bodies. Sembene does not allow us to sit in any kind of heroic and self-sacrificial triumph, however. In

---

<sup>25</sup> “The prostitutes too, and the maids who are paid two pounds a month, all the hopeless dregs of humanity, all who turn in circles between suicide and madness, will recover their balance, once more go forward, and march proudly in the great procession of the awakened nation” (Fanon 2002, 130).

metaphorically and literally cutting her voice and life *out* of her body, she leaves behind the visual remains of the metaphorical-made-literal, a carceral skin. He leaves us in horror to watch as the very agent of whiteness returns Diouana's surrogate corpse, now fully conformed to the "spirit of merchandise" (Mbembe 2017, 6), to Dakar.

### **Conclusion: The Legible Surface**

This chapter began by discussing structural enclosure in the short story's opening scene and the nearly seamless narrative encapsulation of Diouana's story within the white French person's memory. The analysis then shifted focus to the film and the various layers of mediation through which we encounter Diouana's story. Though we encounter her in some ways more intimately in the film, we still face interference on visual and sonic levels which disrupt her construction as a whole and self-possessed subject. And finally, this disruption manifests itself most violently through the racialized hollowing and metaphorical transformation of Diouana's body into the Fanonian epidermal schema in the form of the black leather suitcase. Through the process of hyper-racialization in the eyes of her white employers, her body and being are subjected to racism, sexism, and a physical and psychological imprisonment; the fullness of her being thus violently and symbolically reduced to black leather, stretched over a hollow frame, and ultimately expelled from the hexagon.

By way of conclusion, we return to the interrogation posed in the introduction: if we read race, then what? A similar question emerges here: having now read race, if this "hollow enclosure" is where Sembene leaves us, then what? What does reading race, and what does reading Sembene's theoretical rendering of race specifically, *make possible*?

As explained above, Sembene’s work of telling and retelling Diouana’s story can be read alongside those Transatlantic Black scholars and artists who have rendered, through theory and art, the Black experience. Alongside Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), *La Noire de...* emerges as another one of the many stories and images produced by, in, and in response to the “wake,” Sharpe’s metaphor for the multidimensional afterlives of slavery (2016, 17–22).<sup>26</sup> The “Ship,” a recurring coordinate in the mapping of Black life in the wake, and also the “Weather,” Sharpe’s metaphor for the “total climate”<sup>27</sup> of anti-Blackness and white supremacy, are both there in the beginning of *La Noire de...*, as Diouana steps out from the white cruise ship, *Ancerville*, into the blustering wind, through the all-white crowds, and through French immigration control. Sharpe’s “Weather” is also there in the short story, carried by the investigators, journalists, and photographers who register and produce and circulate “a set of quotidian catastrophic events” that repeatedly deliver texts and images of “Black social, material, and psychic death” (2016, 20–21). “This orthography,” Sharpe tells us, “makes domination in/visible and not/visceral. This orthography [...] registers and produces the conventions of anti-Blackness in the present and into the future” (20–21). When examining the short story and film side by side, one cannot help but also note the cyclical nature of Diouana’s death, caught, as Sharpe might say, in “residence time” (41), the *longue durée* of the wake.<sup>28</sup> Crucially, it is a European death—Diouana dies *ad nauseum*, instead of joining a cosmic continuum as would be

---

<sup>26</sup> Sharpe’s metaphor of the wake brings together the English word’s many meanings: “A reprise and an elaboration”; “Wakes allow those among the living to mourn the passing of the dead through ritual”; “the track left on the water’s surface by a ship”; “a region of disturbed flow; in the line of sight of (an observed object); and (something) in the line of recoil of (a gun)”; and “being awake and, also, consciousness.” (Sharpe 2016, 21)

<sup>27</sup> See Sharpe 2016, 34–41, 105–107.

<sup>28</sup> “Residence time is the amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean. Human blood is salty, and sodium, Gardulski tells [Sharpe], has a residence time of 260 million years. [...] We, Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which “everything is now. It is all now” (Morrison 1987, 198)” (Sharpe 2016, 41).

customary in African beliefs. The allegorical nature of the story is all the more prescient here, because if Diouana's singular death represents one among many others, these, too, continue to have *already* been happening ad infinitum.

In response to this orthography of the wake, Sharpe asks how we might “attend to physical, social, and figurative death and also to the largeness that is Black life, Black life insisted from death” (17). She collectively speaks and thinks with a chorus of Black feminist artists and thinkers who ask the same question. “If we are lucky,” she writes in the first-person plural, “the knowledge of this positioning avails us particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world. [...] I want *In the Wake* [...] to position us in the modalities of Black life lived in, as, under, despite Black death: to think and be and act from there” (22). From “there” recalls Fanon’s “véritables Enfers,” the “zone of non-being” from where he urges his body to make of him a man who questions (2000, 10, 232). From “there,” we also recall how Sembene first encountered Diouana from those deathly beginnings in newsprint. It would seem logical to end the chapter with some further thoughts on this, as anti-Black racism and death are posed as brackets around life, where they are context, horizon, and landscape. From “there,” then, how does Sembene write against the orthography of the wake?

For one, he writes against this orthography similarly to how Sharpe, Hartman, Cheng, Fanon, Mbembe and others have: refuse to allow the orthography of the wake to continue in invisible and intangible dominance. As noted from the short story’s near-seamless transition through Madame’s memory into the long flashback, Sembene leaves us with a seam, a snag, betraying the constructedness of the white narrative’s hold over memory. In the film, Sembene shows us the fleshy surface of skin as a meaningful covering, a metonymy of Blackness. Sembene’s cinematic aesthetic brings together the affordances of realism and metaphor, yielding

a medium that is highly productive for replicating the workings of race as a socio-discursive, embodied, and material matter.

Secondly, Sembene then turns and looks, feels, and imagines against those (now legible, now tangible) discourses of anti-Black enclosure in his own work of “imagining otherwise” (2016, 18).<sup>29</sup> Instead of a more traditional conclusion, it may be worth examining how Sembene does this work through the recurring appearance of the photograph of Diouana and her boyfriend. The photo appears multiple times throughout the film. Its final appearance, though, comes after Diouana has committed suicide, and the French couple decide to take her suitcase (her material “remains”) back to Dakar.

The camera looks from over Monsieur’s shoulder as he opens the suitcase, and Diouana’s photograph is revealed sitting atop her belongings. Monsieur holds out the photo with both hands, and its glossy surface flashes in the light (see figure 4). The themes of enclosure and captivity are abundant in this shot; they overwhelm the smallness and vulnerability of the photo which was taken the day before Diouana left for France. As Monsieur holds the photo out, it is framed by the upper lid of the suitcase as a reminder of Diouana’s captivity in this skin that has horrifically outlasted her own body and life in the French family’s possession. The black and white bars of the flooring stretch across the width of the shot, and because of the downward angle of the shot, they also reach from foreground to background – in other words from “top” to “bottom” of the frame.

Furthermore, this shot is a perverse remake of another. Before Diouana dies, we watch her from the same angle looking at the same photograph from within the confines of the suitcase

---

<sup>29</sup> Sharpe develops terms for three kinds of practices for imagining otherwise: aspiration, Black annotation, and Black redaction. See pp. 108-130.

(see figure 5). The exhibition of the photo is nearly identical in both shots, and the repetition of shots makes them all the more theatrical in their performances of looking. The original shot of Diouana suspends a quintessentially melancholic subject-object. There are two Diouanas in fact: one from the past looking into an unrealizable future, one in the present looking into an irretrievable past.<sup>30</sup> This tension is perversely resolved in the second making of the shot; Diouana's fragmented subject-objecthood is put to an end by Monsieur replacing her as the present observer, as Diouana has now become fully object.



Figure 4. Monsieur, holding out and looking at the photograph of Diouana from within the frame of the suitcase.

<sup>30</sup> My thinking of the photograph here as another symbol of Diouana's melancholy is inspired by Dima's reading of the poster image of *La Noire de...* and Diouana's position there as a subject-object as well. See Dima, Vlad. 2014. "Ousmane Sembene's 'La Noire de...': Melancholia in Photo, Text, and Film." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 26, no. 1: 56–68.



Figure 5. Diouana, holding and looking at her photograph from within the frame of the suitcase.

Of course, neither Monsieur nor Diouana could be called the only observers, but in the larger ecology of “looking subjects,” the camera has facilitated the spectator’s watching. By making observance a performance—through Diouana and Monsieur’s staged and choreographed movement—Sembene turns the spectator’s attention to the act of looking itself. Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography* (2005 [1977]), “The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: ‘There is the surface. Now think – or rather feel, intuit – what is beyond it, what the reality must look like if it looks this way.’ Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy” (2005, 17). Sembene makes a performance of photography’s “ultimate wisdom,” again and again pointing us to and holding our gaze upon the surface of things. In this way, Sembene not only does his own work to “imagine otherwise,” but he repeatedly calls upon the spectator to “now think – or rather feel -” what is beyond.

In response to these surfaces, Sembene has provided some preliminary models of what it might look like to think, feel, and imagine what is beyond the skin of the image. As noted earlier, one of the biggest differences between the film and the short story are the film's incorporation of flashbacks to Diouana's life pre-departure. These flashbacks are certainly not idealized imaginings of the past. Rather, they are motivated by honest (if not desperate) reflection as Diouana seeks to understand how she could have been so wrong about France, about Madame, about the state of her self-possession. Her memories are worked back to from the line of sight of the present and, because of that, they carry with them a kind of weight of inevitability as she prods naivety out of hiding with hindsight. As a militant artist, Sembene never presents a world existing outside of neocolonial realities. However, there is a particular scene of tenderness between Diouana and her mother that deserves our prolonged attention. In this brief but e/affective scene, Sembene captures the tender touch of hands, face, and shoulders, drawing out a concentrated moment of care and intimacy and throwing the neocolonial paradox of "Black life lived in, as, under, despite Black death" (Sharpe 2016, 22) into tragic relief.

Once chosen by Madame, Diouana runs home to tell her mother the good news, kneels at her feet, and affectionately lays her head on her mother's knees while she recalls, "My mother threw the mask aside and told me to be brave" [Ma mère jeta le masque et me recommanda d'être courageuse]. Diouana's news of work comes after a long series of rejections and disappointment. She had sat at the "*place des bonnes*" (a maid market) for many days, and this only as a last resort after searching for work in the downtown apartment complex to doors slamming in her face. When Diouana's mother tosses the mask aside, she does so lightly, playfully, moving to draw her daughter in closer. The mask falls somewhere out of the line of sight of the camera, hidden behind Diouana's head. The camera never reveals Diouana's

mother's face, but perches just behind her shoulder. In these close quarters, we see Diouana look up at her with a subtle smile; the warmth of speckled sunlight on her skin complements her mother's soft touch to her head, neck, and shoulders. The close-up shot is able to capture these nuances and amplify Diouana's mother's uninhibited love for her daughter within this small space.

Yet in the next shot when the little boy enters into both the camera's visible field and the enclosed area, the point of view shifts to far opposite the courtyard, and we see him slowly pick up the mask from off the ground. It is at this point that Diouana rises and promises to pay him fifty francs for the mask by the end of the month. Suddenly, what was tossed aside to make room for a rare—if not the only—moment of care and intimacy re-issues in the measurement of colonial currency and a contractual pay period. The camera's contrasting perspectives present the mask—and subsequently Diouana, her family, and her community—as caught between, on the one hand, human-to-human care and economic hope for the individual, and, on the other hand, the inequitable realities of neocolonial economic dependence and its collective ensnarement. These ever-present realities momentarily rest out of sight when eclipsed behind Diouana's youthful smile. There is a concurrence of two fundamentally oppositional forces at play. These are perspectives which ultimately constitute antithetical realities: one to revel in the minutia and nuance of care in life, and the other to mark the persistent, fatal suppression and determined destruction of all of it.

Finally, Sembene brings to life his fullest performance of looking, feeling, intuiting beyond the surface in the film's closing image. The young boy holds the mask to his face (a literal *sur-face*) as he pursues Monsieur out of the city. This final *sur-face*, another metaphorical instance of second skin, recalls race and racism's "fundamental characteristic of always inciting

and engendering a double, a substitute, an equivalent, a mask, a simulacrum ... a ghost of a face” (Mbembe 2017, 32). However this time, rather than the sur-face distorting reality with a racist substitute brought up from the “hidden zones of the unconscious” (2017, 32), the mechanism of the covering is demystified as a tool consciously powered both by the boy and by Sembene as *metteur en scène*. In the final close-up shot, the young boy lowers the mask from his face and stares directly into the camera. Once unmasked, the boy’s outward gaze remakes the paradigm in the photograph of Diouana whose gaze into the camera was never fully returned to her as subject. This young boy looks through the screen to the spectator, who meets his gaze as a seen and seeing subject. But just as one surface is removed and the spectator and subject “encounter” one another, Sembene himself—through the metonymy of his proper name—throws text across the screen in a final performative act of making legible the skin of the image.

## Chapter 2

### **Invisibility: Encounters with Whiteness and “Bleachness” in *Vernon Subutex* by Virginie Despentes**

This chapter focuses on whiteness and its uneasy constructedness through the example of French author Virginie Despentes and her latest award-winning trilogy, *Vernon Subutex* (2015, 2015, 2017). I argue that whiteness is a voluntary focus of Despentes’s—I read her fiction, non-fiction, and public addresses as self-conscious explorations of the tensions that arise when she and others apprehend the social constructedness of whiteness as it is cyclically denaturalized and renaturalized. In the *Subutex* trilogy, this tension comes about through the character Alexandre Bleach. The racialization of the mixed-race Black character named “Bleach” is enacted across symbolic and narrative forms of whiteness, such as in his very name. Despentes makes whiteness as the ordinary, or as the absence of difference, strange. Whiteness as ordinary absence opposes Blackness as non-existence, and these two versions of “nothingness” cyclically emerge and recede in conscious and unconscious thought. This narrative attention to whiteness extends beyond the text, thus raising questions about the author’s own positionality as a white French woman who writes within, along, and across racialized subjectivities, and about France’s real cultural and political apprehensions of race and whiteness. In this chapter, racial invisibility applies both to whiteness, as it tends toward imperceivable dominance, and Blackness, in the construction of Alexandre Bleach through multiple layers of absence.

Scholars interested in Despentes and her work tend to sit within the domains of literary studies and feminism and gender studies, and I contend that scholarship on Despentes’s work has dealt uneasily with the whiteness that she highlights, performs, manipulates, and contests. The author is framed as a provocative white, French author and feminist due, in part, to her

ideological alignment with the third wave and intersectionality, and therefore her linkage to a genealogy of Black (American) and woman of color feminism said to originate outside of France. However, Desportes's emphasis on race and race-consciousness—and on whiteness, specifically—fails to take hold in the scholarly assessment of how Desportes is deemed an intersectional feminist. What is fascinating about this scholarship is that race and whiteness are not *entirely* absented from feminist, cultural, and literary analysis. Instead, race and whiteness are relegated to footnotes and explicitly placed outside of the scholarly scope of a text. I take this “rendez-vous manqué,” or missed opportunity, as Lloyd (1998) would call it, as an alternative occasion to reflect on the undiscussability of whiteness and the persistent discursive, symbolic, and material presence/absence of whiteness not only in these interpretative moments of Desportian scholarship, but also in the fields of French literary studies and women and gender studies more broadly.

This uneasiness towards whiteness is in itself a testament to whiteness as an important subject of analysis and interrogation for French studies, where ideologies of racelessness have obscured and suppressed racialized experiences as a social, material, psychological reality. I will approach this question of racelessness and whiteness from four complementary avenues of analysis: one is through an examination of the social and political attitudes towards race in France in the past few decades, a second avenue is through an examination of critical scholarship on Desportes with particular attention to feminist thought, a third is through discourse analysis of Desportes's authorial commentary in interviews and her non-fiction, and the fourth is through literary analysis of *Vernon Subutex* and the character Alexandre Bleach.

Alexandre Bleach's body, like Diouana's, is subjected to racialized, capitalized commodification and a torturously unfinished operation of erasure. However, although

Despentès's deployment of literary forms of physical and aural containment might seem analogous to those used by Sembene (chapter 1), Despentès's racialized, white positionality vis-à-vis the text produces a political relationship akin to ventriloquy that displaces Alex Bleach's aural, textual, visual body to a place even further removed from the collective body of voices that comprise this contemporary *comédie humaine*, or human comedy.

### **Plot Summary**

The *Vernon Subutex* trilogy is a monumental work of over twelve-hundred pages, where each chapter aligns with the focalization of one of the nearly thirty characters. An overview will be provided here while subsequent references to the text will periodically introduce specific moments throughout the rest of the chapter.

*Tome 1*: It is the mid-2010s in Paris, and Vernon is evicted from his apartment. Since closing his record shop, he has relied on the financial support from his friend, the now-late celebrity rockstar, Alexandre Bleach. Before Alex died, he had recorded a monologue, several hours long, while staying at Vernon's house. Vernon was asleep at the time and never bothered to watch them. Once evicted, Vernon plans short-term stays with old acquaintances. As Vernon becomes more and more difficult to track down, the word of Alex Bleach's tapes also starts to spread. Rumors reach the bigshot producer, Laurent Dopalet—the trilogy's central villain.

Bleach's tapes threaten Laurent Dopalet's reputation, as Bleach was aware that Dopalet was responsible for the death of the famous porn star (Bleach's former girlfriend) Vodka Satana. A race to find the tapes ensues, involving several characters: the lesbian cyber detective, la Hyène (a recurring character from Despentès's *Apocalypse Bébé* [2010]); Sélim, film professor, emphatically secular son of Maghrebi immigrants, and Vodka Satana's (or Faïza's) ex-husband;

Aïcha, their daughter; Pamela Kant, famous porn star and formal rival of Vodka Satana; and Céleste, a young bartender and amateur tattooist who befriends Aïcha and helps her track down the truth about her mother's death.

*Tome 2:* The search for Vernon, who has gone missing, and for Alex Bleach's tapes becomes the pretext for the formation of an alternative community, socially counterintuitive to each character's expectations. La Hyène ultimately gets hold of the tapes and decides to screen them privately for the eclectic group of friends. During Bleach's hours-long monologue, he tells the story of his spiritual awakening via rock music, the development of his career, and his selling out. Bleach, as suspected, reveals information about Vodka Satana's death and ties to Laurent Dopalet. Aïcha and Céleste ultimately get to Dopalet, tattooing "rapist" and "murderer" across his back. La Hyène quietly delivers the young women out of the country, for they have exposed themselves to grave danger.

Meanwhile, something in the universe has been unlocked. There is a tenderness and a generosity that undergirds all interactions. This sense of connectivity is strongest when Vernon DJs at the Rosa Bonheur and everyone dances. In a collective trance, everyone moves and is filled with a kind of energy—just visible as light—channeled by the music itself. The key to the metaphysical shift is a specific set of alpha waves that Alex Bleach had discovered and recorded in his album before he died, and which Vernon has now begun mixing into his DJing sets. The "Subutex group" establishes clandestine dance seances all over France, attended by hundreds of people. The spatial-temporal plane of reality is slowly being opened to other alien, post-mortem, and divine worlds.

*Tome 3:* The euphoria of the "convergences"—the dances—is cut short by banal financial conflict, and the group disbands. Laurent Dopalet, however, hires a hitman named Max, an

archetype of capitalist violence. Max kidnaps Céleste who is then tortured and raped. La Hyène and Olga rescue her before she is killed and bring her back to Paris. In the wake of the Bataclan attack (Paris, November 2015), the group plans one more convergence to take place in a church in Rennes-le-Château in the south of France.

Online, Max meets the young woman, Solange. He convinces her to execute a mass shooting at the last Subutex convergence. Vernon is the only survivor. Max and Dopalet create a hugely successful television series and a graphic novel spin-off of about the Subutex group, capitalizing on public fascination following the massacre. The trilogy closes with an epilogue set nearly one thousand years in the future. Subutex is now an unofficially recognized religion, only spared persecution due to the government's and intellectuals' interest in the effects of the "portals" opened by the vibrational passages (Alex Bleach's alpha waves) played during the early convergences of the twenty-first century.

### **Literary and Critical Contexts**

*Vernon Subutex* is Virginie Despentes's most recent literary publication, and its award-winning popularity has marked the continuation of a shift in her career, ushering her into the "mainstream" in ways she had not been characterized before.<sup>31</sup> Now a former member of the jury for France's most prestigious Prix Goncourt, Virginie Despentes's first rape-revenge novel *Baise-moi* (1994) was first circulated among the underground punk rock scene before being published by the counter-cultural editors, Florent-Massot (Sharkey 2002). Despentes's works are unmistakably linked to her personal experiences, whether through the autobiographical accounts

---

<sup>31</sup> Michèle Schaal examines this very phenomenon and employs the phrase, borrowed from bell hooks's *Feminist Theory*, "from margin to center." See Schaal, Michèle. 2018. "Introduction to Special Issue on Virginie Despentes. From Margins to Center (?)." *Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association*, Special Issue on Virginie Despentes, 72, no. 1: 14–35.

of rape and sex work given in her essay and feminist manifesto, *King Kong théorie* (2006), or in the recurrence of key themes pertaining to sex work, queerness, violence, and marginality in her novels (*Les Chiennes savantes* [1996], *Les Jolies choses* [1998], *Bye Bye Blondie* [2004], *Teen Spirit* [2012], and *Apocalypse Bébé*), short stories (*Mordre au travers* [1999]), a graphic novel (*Trois étoiles* [2002] illustrated by Nora Hamdi), and films (*Baise-moi* [2000], *Mutantes: Féminisme Porn Punk* [documentary 2009], and *Bye Bye Blondie* [2012]). Indeed, as Nadia Louar has noted, Desportes's authorial posture is both the product of and skillfully sourced material relevant to all of her work: "[h]er personal affiliation with her marginal and lawless protagonists is one of the constitutive elements of an ethos of authenticity grounded in a being-true-to-oneself paradigm" (Louar 2018, 129).

Both Desportes and her artistic productions have been highly mediatized, perhaps most intensely when the film adaptation of *Baise-moi* (co-directed with Coralie Trinh Thi) was censored in France and became the first film to be banned in twenty-eight years. In her autobiographical essay, *King Kong théorie*, Desportes comments upon the similarities between being an "écrivain médiatisé" (a mediatized writer) and a prostitute: "le sentiment de ne pas tout à fait s'appartenir, de vendre ce qui est intime, de montrer ce qui est privé, est exactement le même" [the feeling of no longer quite belonging to yourself, of selling something intimate, of displaying that which is private, is exactly the same] (2013, 75; 2010, 70). I will return to *King Kong théorie* later on to discuss its oblique treatment of race. For now, it suffices to emphasize Desportes's use of conscious awareness of both her mediatization and performance as a means to reclaim self-representational authority. She raises herself to the position of critic, rather than object of study, correcting the erroneous distinction between two roles: the prostitute is indistinguishable from the author, and she is performing them both. This is but one example of

the ways in which Desportes plays with social convention, broadly speaking, essentially turning this into an esthetic. Nicole Fayard (2006) notes how *Baise-moi* becomes a “parody of the genre” of the noir thriller and the *femme fatale* type (2006, 168). Lucas Hollister (2019) has also noted how Desportes plays with the conventions of genre and gender using the crime novel in order to question the definitions of the literary, of “contemporary,” and of “French.” Michèle Schaal (2012), too, has examined how Desportes’s reworking of the fairy-tale genre adapted to punk rock ideologies and esthetics deconstructs both gender and genre in *Bye Bye Blondie*. This ability to manipulate and deconstruct forms is important for how Desportes approaches the taboo subjects of and her own personal relationship to rape, pornography, and the abject by “commodif[ying] its abjection” (Louar 2018, 135).

*Vernon Subutex* arguably departs from the overt genre/gender role-play and parody that characterizes so much of Desportes’s earlier work. Some have interpreted this move away from parody, pornography, and violence as the author also having “gradually receded from the feminist stance [...] to engage in a broader critique of glaring societal failures in contemporary France. No longer considered an interloper in the French literary world, Desportes is praised today for her incisive depiction of French society” (Louar 2018, 125). Indeed, *Vernon Subutex* quickly became a talking point in the national conversation about literature and “the return of the real” in contemporary France and has been characterized by the dual markings of being an impressively universal work of fiction while highlighting something distinctively Other within this depiction.<sup>32</sup> *Vernon Subutex* reveals that there is something amiss in this universal portrait,

---

<sup>32</sup> Nelly Kapriélian declares French literature of the 2010’s to be witnessing “le retour du réel,” following the previous decade marked by autofiction, or “écriture de soi.” See Kapriélian, Nelly. 2015. “Nos années 2010, 2015. Naissance de *Vernon Subutex* : Desportes raconte.” *Les Inrockuptibles*, February 1, 2015. <https://www.lesinrocks.com/livres/dans-vernion-subutex-virginie-desportes-cartographie-la-societe-102778-01-02-2015/>. For more on the prominence of realism in contemporary French literature, see also Wampole, Christy. 2020. *Degenerative Realism: Novel and Nation in Twenty-First-Century France*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1-31; Jourdan, Camille. 2016. “Pourquoi cherche-t-on toujours le «nouveau Balzac»?” *Slate.fr*. January 23,

such that the “cracks in the master map of global capitalism” have opened wide enough for Vernon and his circle to fall through, and where “authors and characters of even the most traditional ‘French’ identity lose their bearings, become *dépaysés* [disoriented], and suffer the existential crises that come with the alienations intrinsic to globalized capitalism” (Armstrong 2019, 116, 8–9). In the wave of realist fiction shaping France’s literary landscape in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, it is worth noting that Virginie Despentes’s name often surfaces in literary and cultural discussions about the French writer Michel Houellebecq, whose depictions of national decline tend to position the (white, French, male) anti-humanist at the forefront of literary reflections on social issues.<sup>33</sup>

Christy Wampole (2020), using Houellebecq as an enigmatic example, terms this mode *degenerative realism*: the latest iteration in a long history of a realist genre “through which anxieties about social and political discontent take shape” (2).<sup>34</sup> While *Vernon Subutex* does not entirely fall under Wampole’s rubric of contemporary French degenerative realism, there are some striking similarities.<sup>35</sup> For one, the structuring force of demography and its preoccupation

---

2016. <http://www.slate.fr/story/108735/pourquoi-nouveau-balzac>.; and Viart, Dominique. 2011. *Le roman français au XXe siècle*. Paris: A. Colin, pp. 149-177.

<sup>33</sup> See Williams, Russell. 2020. “The Writer and the Terrorist: On Michel Houellebecq.” *Textual Practice* 34, no. 9 (September): 1599–1622. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1808302>.

<sup>34</sup> The degenerative realist text reveals the decomposition of the “mimetic techniques used historically by realist writers to create verisimilar worlds,” such that realism itself is prone to degeneration (2). Realism therefore can no longer survive in “an age in which reality and truth have become negotiable,” resulting in “a double disillusionment with both the novel and the nation” (4). The degenerative realist genre remains a provocative reading for the contemporary moment, given an uptick in, or at least a persistence of, anxiety-driven apocalyptic visions of French society. This can be seen for example in the campaign narratives central to Éric Zemmour’s presidential candidacy, announced November 30, 2021.

<sup>35</sup> Despentes’s trilogy does readily depict the trajectory of a “*collective worsening of life*,” treating themes that are common in the degenerative realist strain (Wampole 2020, 2; original emphasis). Up to and including *Vernon Subutex*, Despentes has consistently offered powerful depictions of the “brutalité générale” of the era (Leyris 2015). From her early feminist manifesto and violent thrillers confronting sexual violence against women, to *Subutex*’s portrayal of economic precarity and socio-political volatility in the face of neoliberal globalization and the radicalization of a new generation of “baby fascists” (Armstrong 2019, 120-125), to the violence of terrorist attacks both real and imagined (Châtelet 2020).

with the decline of certain white, cis-het male, post-Catholic, middle- and upper-class French populations (perhaps the most famous example of this is Renaud Camus's (2011) *Great Replacement* theory) echoes through the minds of racist characters in *Vernon Subutex* like Xavier, Noël, and Solange. *Vernon Subutex* carries "vitalist" impulses as well, "in the survivalist sense of living at all costs" (Wampole 2020, 50), with significant racist implications—to which we will return in a later section. The villain, Laurent Dopalet, is one contemporary French manifestation of vitalist tendencies; what sets him apart from the other characters in the novel is the sheer fact of his brutality in the face of (versus a resigned capitulation to) any threat to his power. *Vernon Subutex* in many ways reflects a certain horror and fascination with the rise of self-preservationist thinking in France.

One major distinction between *Subutex* and the degenerative realist mode is that the trilogy arguably sustains a belief in the novel's ability to critique contemporary social life in the hopes of finding ways to improve it, rather than abandon or destroy it. It is through this meta-discursive critique that the *Subutex* trilogy, just like the *comédie humaine* to which it is so often compared, sustains the reader's belief in the novel's ability to be a means not just for understanding, but for working to improve contemporary conditions.<sup>36</sup> Despentès makes use of demography and social types—highly recognizable characters who are overdetermined by social and economic forces—to build a meta-discursive critique of the deterministic socio-economic

---

<sup>36</sup> As Maxime Goergen notes, in the Balzacien model, "l'œuvre littéraire est à la fois la description exhaustive et critique du monde réel et une société fictive, développant dans sa construction narrative une autonomie et une cohérence que n'ont pas le monde social. Critique et utopique à la fois : voilà sans doute les connotations que charrie l'épithète « balzacien », et qu'on pourrait bien appliquer à *Vernon Subutex*" [the literary work is, at the same time, an exhaustive description and critique of the real world and a fictional society which develops, in its narrative construction, an autonomy and a coherence that the social world does not have. Critical and utopic at once: these are perhaps the connotations which drive the "Balzacien" epithet, and that one could very well apply to *Vernon Subutex*] (179). See Goergen, Maxime. 2018. "Vernon Subutex et le roman « balzacien »." *Rocky Mountain Review*, Special Issue on Virginie Despentès, 72, no. 1: 165–82.

constraints against which each character struggles. Her middle-aged women characters especially fall prey to a kind of misogynist social script that revolves exclusively around their private emotions, sexual objectification, and (thwarted) love interests (M. A. Schaal 2018, 478). As Schaal puts it, Desportes “conscientise ses lecteurs et lectrices” [raises the consciousness of her readers] as to the persistence of gendered and sexualized scripts internalized by her characters (481). What this means is that if genre/gender manipulation is no longer overtly parodied as it was in Desportes’s earlier works, and realism is embraced in a normative (even classic) understanding of the genre, Desportes still leverages realism’s genre-specific functions to “conscientiser” the reader into becoming an active critic rather than passive spectator.

From the extant scholarship on Desportes’s prolific work, the only scholarly work to address Desportes’s literary and theoretical engagement with race is an article by Virginie Sauzon (2012) who analyzes Desportes’s representations of racialized sexualities. Sauzon argues that Desportes rejects the stereotype of the Arab or Black “violeteur de banlieue” [banlieue rapist]. She charts Desportes’s literary and rhetorical strategies for unsettling the equation: “jeune banlieusard d’origine maghrébine = machiste en puissance, et son pendant, femme d’origine maghrébine = victime en puissance” [North African suburban male youth = chauvinist in the making, and his twin, North African woman = victim in the making] (15). Sauzon interprets Desportes’s public discourse and literary works as rejecting the racist and patronizing instrumentalization of a white, bourgeois, French feminism that would seek to liberate Arab women through a hypocritical rhetoric of racial domination.<sup>37</sup> As I point out later on in this

---

<sup>37</sup> A potential avenue for future research would be to examine the connections and/or ruptures between Desportes’s *banlieue* setting in her earlier works (such as those studied by Sauzon) and a shift to the Parisian city center in *Vernon Subutex*, where her multiperspective fiction continues to represent the racialized, sexualized, gendered debates over the social effects of *laïcité*. One could ask, for example, how Aïcha’s narrated sexuality and reclamation of the veil in *Vernon Subutex* break with, comment upon, or align with other Muslim women’s discourse in Desportes’s earlier texts?

chapter, beyond Sauzon's critical foray into racial analyses in Desportes's work, scholarship has maintained a remarkable distance vis-à-vis race. I emphasize "distance" rather than "absence," however, because of the ways critics have quite literally placed race into the margins of textual analysis via the use of footnotes, and yet at the same time have emphasized Desportes's affinities with famed critical race theorists bell hooks and Frantz Fanon.<sup>38</sup> These analytical maneuvers deal in proximities to Blackness and, I argue, are testament to race's importance for understanding Desportes's work as well as ideological underpinnings of Desportian scholarship and French studies more broadly.

### ***Whiteness and France***

Recent scholarship such as Cohen and Mazouz's (2021) special issue "Whiteness in France" points to a critical awareness in the fields of sociology and politics of the rise of white nationalism and the development in racializing secular and religious spheres, especially in the case of racializing Muslim identity in France (Beaman 2019). In their introduction, they provide an overview that cites the Anglo-American Black intellectual tradition of the 1980s and 1990s as laying the groundwork for the critical whiteness studies, such as in Toni Morrison's literary analyses in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), while also recognizing earlier, nineteenth-century African American writers Frederick Douglass (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 1845) and W. E. B. Du Bois's (*Black Reconstruction in America: 1860-1880*, 1899) attention to the effects of slavery and racism not only on Black people, as it is often portrayed, but on white people as well. Cohen and Mazouz also emphasize French whiteness on a global geopolitical scale, looking at the mainland in relation to its former colonies and overseas territories. As

---

<sup>38</sup> For bell hooks, see Schaal 2018. For Frantz Fanon, see Brassard, Léonore. 2018. "Les Damnées de Virginie Desportes." *Rocky Mountain Review*, Special Issue on Virginie Desportes, 72, no. 1: 36–58.

scholars of France have noted, hesitation and denial have long characterized French cultural, legal, and political approaches to apprehending race and racialization, tied also to the strategic removal of French colonialism and slavery from historical memory (Marker and Pichichero 2019; Fleming 2017). Achille Mbembe (2005) has underscored the deceptive abstraction of Republican universalism, insisting that “[w]hat must be challenged are the devices and discourses which, while daily producing forms of exclusion justified by nothing else but “race,” hide behind the mask of a purely a-historical universalism in order to claim to have surpassed “race” (Mbembe 2005, 157).<sup>39</sup> As Cohen and Mazouz explain, this “abstraction from social attributes purportedly allows individuals to emancipate themselves from group memberships, be they chosen, inherited, or assigned, in a way that furthers national cohesion” (2021, 11).

This goal of national cohesion is not just philosophical, but has been pursued through governmental policies such as the information privacy law n° 78-17 from 1978 that prohibits the collection of census data on ethnic or racial information (Chapman and Frader 2004, 1). The idea of Frenchness as whiteness and whiteness as racelessness is reinforced once more through “divergent practices” of not taking racial and ethnic census data in the mainland, and yet accepting “racial distinctions as relevant in territories that are otherized” along historic and contemporary colonial lines (Cohen and Mazouz 2021, 13). The false notion that there are no races in France, just as there were no slaves in France (Peabody 1996), plays out in France’s (neo)colonial fantasy of both race and racism only existing elsewhere, “relegated to overseas regions” (Cohen and Mazouz 2021, 13). This legal, psychological, and physical marginalization of race—as a weight that distinguishes the person from the emancipated racelessness of

---

<sup>39</sup> “Ce qu’il faut récuser, ce sont les dispositifs et discours qui, tout en produisant quotidiennement des formes d’exclusion que rien d’autre ne justifie sinon la « race », s’abritent derrière le masque d’un universalisme purement a-historique pour mieux prétendre avoir dépassé la « race ».”

Frenchness—repeatedly produces the structure of center and margin, from the empire, to the city center and *banlieue*, and even to narrowed intellectual “scope.”

The practice of reinforcing national cohesion through so-called French “color-blindness” (Beaman and Petts 2020) or “race-blindness” (Keaton 2010) is one of the main cultural and political backdrops against which this dissertation is set. Indeed, scholarly criticism in French studies has not been unaffected by universalist ideals. Scholars have noted that an avoidance of race has in fact come to define a certain quality of the French academic institution as well. It appears to be a requirement (see the introductions to many studies of race or racialization in France)<sup>40</sup> to note that there has been a “split” and an unhelpful nationalization of gender theory, postcolonial studies, and critical race studies, where these have been explored in the Anglo-American intellectual tradition and therefore are viewed as “foreign” to French application. As we will see later, this has had a particular effect on French feminism’s engagement with the concept of intersectionality, particularly as it pertains to race in the tripart “gender-race-class” analytic.

In order to approach the subject of whiteness in *Vernon Subutex*, studies coming from the social and political sciences are just as important as theoretical, philosophical explorations of whiteness along the lines of ontology, subjectivity, and existentialism. Frantz Fanon, as a touchstone of the francophone canon, forms a kind of lonely bridge across the “split” between anglophone and francophone intellectual traditions, as well as sociological research and philosophy. Fanon famously theorizes whiteness in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (2000 [1952]),

---

<sup>40</sup> See for example each of the introductions to: Forsdick, Charles, and Jennifer Yee. 2018. “Towards a Postcolonial Nineteenth Century: Introduction.” *French Studies* 72, no. 2 (April): 167–75. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kny005>; Keaton, Trica Danielle, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Tyler Edward Stovall, eds. 2012. *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*. Durham: Duke University Press.; Ndiaye, Pap. 2009. *La condition noire: essai sur une minorité française*. Paris: Gallimard.; and the 1999 preface to Butler, Judith. 2006. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Third. New York: Routledge.

engaging in whiteness not only on the level of physical appearances, but language, psychology, imagination, sexualities, and spatialities. Regarding the latter, he famously describes a moment of racialized existentialism: “All around me the white man, above the sky tears at its navel, the earth rasps under my feet, and there is a white song, a white song. All this whiteness that burns me...” (Fanon 2000, 11, 114). As Fanon experiences his own body reduced and transformed into a Black skin under the racist white gaze, the white man’s body expands from being a single body to being the embodiment of the world. The white man’s body becomes landscape and atmosphere, omnipresent as both sound and light (that which “burns”). This is also why Fanon’s sense of horror is of utmost importance because horror becomes for Fanon a critical tool, a lens through which to morally and affectively reject an experience that one otherwise has limited control over. Horror is not the end of Fanon’s conscious existence, but the beginning, for he will continue to untangle the psychic threads constituting the white man’s gaze as it fights to overpower his own.

Fanon’s depiction of the white man paradoxically dissolving into and constituting the world as if it is of his own being is quite useful as an analogy of whiteness’s self-representation as “non-particularity, the space of ordinariness” (Dyer 1997, 223). In being “non-particularity,” whiteness is able to “embody the commonality of humanity,” by which whiteness is so often conflated with universalism and the transcendent experience of pure existence. In a majority-white and white supremacist society, transcendence is reserved for those un-marked by race, whereas “corporeal maledictions” (Fanon 2000, 112) besiege the Other.

### *Whiteness in the Text*

Moving to representations of France, this section examines universalist and sociological readings of Desportes's *Vernon Subutex* in order to make legible certain constructions of whiteness in the demographic fiction of Frenchness. Making sense of Virginie Desportes's contemporary Parisian trilogy *Vernon Subutex* requires a double vision of the real and the representational, the sociological and the literary. Contemporary realism with its demographic drive requires the reader to turn to their own understanding of the social world, to read the high-resolution scan of gestures, expressions, and physical details as "social phenomena" (Lucey 2018). The French journalist Nelly Kapriélian wrote for *Les Inrockuptibles*, "We've waited a long time for a French writer to pen a great novel about the state of our society, and Virginie Desportes has done it with *Vernon Subutex* [...]. An amazing mapping of contemporary French society" (Kapriélian 2015).<sup>41</sup> It bears repeating here the notion that French Republican universalism "can at times also serve as an incubator for white identity" (Stovall 2003, 66–67).

To introduce an early "taste" of what is to come in a subsequent section on Desportes's treatment of whiteness in interviews, I will touch on a reading given by Desportes on June 1, 2017, at Maison de la Poésie in the third arrondissement of Paris.<sup>42</sup> In the ensuing conversation with host Sophie Joubert, Desportes spoke from her authorial position about some of what shapes *Vernon Subutex*: her aggravated fascination with the steady rise of the far-right, even amongst her friends; her surprise with the lack of discussion in recent French novels about the social and economic fallout after the 2008 financial crisis; and her own enjoyment of collective experiences, not those with the aim of rallying against a common enemy, but of collaboratively

---

<sup>41</sup> "[O]n attendait depuis longtemps qu'un écrivain français signe un grand roman sur l'état de notre société, et Virginie Desportes l'a fait avec *Vernon Subutex* [...]. Une formidable cartographie de la société française contemporaine."

<sup>42</sup> The hour-long event was recorded by Maison de la Poésie and made available on YouTube. See "Virginie Desportes, 'Vernon Subutex 3' – *INTÉGRALE*. Accessed 5 October 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=12R8t7d0FkU>.

creating something light—even ridiculous—for the pleasure of being together. Joubert asks Desportes how she came to develop some of the characters who do not quite belong in the Subutex core group but who exist around it, such as the younger characters, Aïcha and Céleste. In response, Desportes explains that in fact there were many other characters who had “disappeared” from the books—characters who took too long, or who “slowed the pace” (“il me semblait qu’ils ralentissaient”). Off the cuff, she then adds:

I don’t know, it’s not at all exhaustive, there was no desire on my part – no ambition to represent all of a white society, contemporary [society], or um, even non-white, because Aïcha isn’t... but it’s those who – who I found – **who emerged, who emerged well.** Those whom I believed in enough to keep in the novel all the way to the end. (‘Vernon Subutex 3’ – *INTÉGRALE*”; my emphasis)<sup>43</sup>

Joubert inhales and raises her mic again, but before she can articulate a response, Desportes quickly interrupts to return to what was the initial question, that is: what to make of side characters in general.

As with all interviews, one must take them with a grain of salt when looking for ways to gain insight into an author’s work. Still, even anecdotally, the surprise emergence of whiteness from implicit to explicit presence, of its momentary suspension, and finally of its dissolution invites some interpretation. Joubert’s question was not directly related to a question of racial representation (of the two characters mentioned, Aïcha is Arab and Céleste is white), yet something prompted Desportes to declare her lack of desire or ambition to represent “toute une société blanche [...] ou même non-blanche.” Was the non-sequitur the result of a

---

<sup>43</sup> “Je sais pas, c’est pas du tout exhaustif, il y a aucune volonté de chez moi de – aucune ambition de représenter toute une société blanche, contemporaine, ou euh, même non-blanche, parce que Aïcha est pas, mais c’est ceux qui – que j’ai trouvé que – **qui émergeaient, qui émergeaient bien.** Auxquels je croyais assez pour garder dans le roman jusqu’au bout, quoi.” The verb “émerger” could be translated and therefore interpreted in a number of different ways. I have chosen to go with the more direct translation of “to emerge,” but one could consider that Desportes is describing how characters “take shape,” or “appear more clearly” over time. The imperfect tense (émergeaient) implies an action drawn out over an undefined period of time, something that the English “emerged” does not necessarily convey.

misunderstanding of Joubert's question? Or was it not a non-sequitur at all, but rather a conscious decision to declare a whiteness that characterizes the group of Subutex followers and that factors into the formation of the group's coherence? Since whiteness so often benefits from the politics of invisibility and can maintain its status as non-Other, Despentès's unanticipated focus on it reads as a socially divergent if not deliberately contrarian act. Whether Despentès's commentary was interpreted by the audience as consciously contrarian or a forgivable faux-pas, the moment of whiteness' drawn-out emergence, or coming into focus, threatens to particularize what had been up to that point a very universalizing interpretation of the novels.

Critics' universalist readings of Despentès's trilogy as a contemporary Balzacien social sketch are to be expected to some extent (and they are ubiquitous). Ever since the publication of tome I (2015), journalists and reviewers have been in a "happy unanimity" praising Despentès's ability to capture the spirit of a generation in France who have struggled through economic decline and intensified neoliberalism at the turn of the twenty-first century.<sup>44</sup> Despentès's portrait of precarious Gen-X, punk-rock affiliates strikes a chord with readers who find themselves reflected in the text: "Bold and sophisticated, this thrilling, magnificently audacious picaresque is about France and is also about all of us; how loudly we shout, how badly we hurt. It is the story of now" (Battersby 2018). In the words of anglophone scholars and journalists, the *Vernon Subutex* trilogy is "sprawling," "zeitgeisty," and "epic."<sup>45</sup> Macmillan publishers, responsible for

---

<sup>44</sup> French journalists and critics Jérôme Garcin, Patricia Martin, Nelly Kapriélian, Michel Crépu, and Jean-Claude Raspigeas came to "une jolie unanimité" regarding Despentès's third tome. See *Le Masque: Jolie unanimité autour de "Vernon Subutex" de Virginie Despentès*. (2017, July 3). France Inter.

<sup>45</sup> For "sprawling," see: Spiegelman, Nadja. 2020. "As Clean as Rage." *The New York Review of Books*, April 23, 2020.; Sacks, Sam. 2019. "Fiction: Paris, Punks and Videotapes." *Wall Street Journal*, November 1, 2019. For "zeitgeist," see: Nell Zink, quoted in Colyard, K. W. 2019. "The Best Books Of The 2010s, According To 30 Of The Decade's Debut Authors." *Bustle*, December 18, 2019.; Nettelbeck, Colin. 2018. "The Novelist as DJ." *Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association*, Special Issue on Virginie Despentès, 72 (1): 183–202. For "epic," see: Erskine, Wendy. 2020. "Vernon Subutex 3: Sex, Drugs and Rock'n'roll Epic Ends with a Bang." *The Irish Times*, June 24, 2020.

producing the English translations by Frank Wynne, promote the trilogy as “Part social epic, part punk-rock thriller,” and as “a sprawling human comedy taking in all strata of French society with a provocative and revealing eye toward modern culture on the edge of disaster” (“Vernon Subutex” n.d.). In 2018, the first tome was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize and framed with a universal appeal as a text that “casts a penetrating light on the dark underbelly of modern urban life” (“Vernon Subutex 1” 2018). In each of these reviews, critics note that Desportes has achieved something extraordinary and difficult: she has grasped, even if fleetingly, the universal and the now.

Complicating these universalizing discourses and the deep sense of appreciation for a utopian social cohesion despite individual differences is the reminder, to quote Richard Dyer’s *White* ([1997] 2017), that “white people in white culture are given the illusion of their own infinite variety”; for, “going against type is a feature of white representation” (1997, 12). This illusion of an infinite variety of white characters (all but three: the Arab father and daughter, Sélim and Aïcha, and the late, mixed-race Black Alexandre Bleach) is key to the trilogy’s plot and contemporary world-building—for example, to map out the tense co-existence of various groups, divisible along such lines as class, gender, sexuality, age, religion, and political leaning. Among these are the *soixante-huitards* [the May ‘68-ers]; the *bébé fachos* [baby fascists]; the stock trader; the mobile and homeless; the childless forty-year-old, post-punk, *petit-bourgeois* woman; a trans and cisgender pair of former porn stars; and a twenty-something amateur tattoo artist waiting tables. The accumulation of types that exceed their own typification recalls what Dyer described as the tendency for whiteness to become a canvas for human diversity, to “take up the non-particular position of ordinariness” while, at the same time, embracing “novelty and transgression, where the bounds of the typical are exceeded” (2017, 233, 12). In *Vernon*

*Subutex*'s social portrait of a generation, let alone a nation, whiteness gets to function on both planes, as the blank canvas and as the blotches of a creative medium.

This phenomenon is perhaps most apparent in the final lines of the first tome. Vernon is delirious, sitting atop a hill in the rain in Paris, in the Buttes-Chaumont Park. The narrative voice suddenly detaches from Vernon's singular perspective. The text builds to a crescendo with the repetition of the phrase "I am" [je suis] and of snapshots of twenty-four different individuals: "I am a teenager obsessed with the idea of losing my virginity and the redhead I've had a crush on for months just told me we can go to the movies together [...]. I am the stowaway who slipped through the barbed wire at Melilla I am walking up the Champs-Élysées" (Despentes 2019, 340).<sup>46</sup> The list is mostly comprised of humans without racial markings, and also includes animals, vegetation, and natural phenomena: "I am a tree, its branches bare, manhandled by the rain, the child wailing in his stroller, the dog tugging at her lead, the prison warden envious of the prisoners' carefree lives, I am a black cloud, a wellspring, a jilted bridegroom going through the photos of his former life, I am a hobo perched on a hill, in Paris" (340).<sup>47</sup> Vernon's point of view multiplies into the diversity of beings of the city and then returns back to him, though anonymously the second time as simply "a hobo." Vernon exemplifies the assumed capaciousness of whiteness and comprehensiveness of universality here to represent all beings. Vernon, in his transcendence, shifts from particularity to non-particularity, and in doing so he is given a special representational power—he is, as whiteness is, able to be the blank slate and the

---

<sup>46</sup> "Je suis un adolescent obsédé par l'idée de me faire dépuceler et la rouquine que je convoite depuis des mois vient de me faire comprendre qu'on pouvait aller au ciné ensemble [...] je suis le clandestin qui a passé les barbelés de Melilla je remonte les Champs-Élysées" (Despentes 2016a, 428–29).

<sup>47</sup> "Je suis l'arbre aux branches nues malmenées par la pluie, l'enfant qui hurle dans sa poussette, la chienne qui tire sur sa laisse, la surveillante de prison jalouse de l'insouciance des détenues, je suis un nuage noir, une fontaine, le fiancé quitté qui fait défiler les photos de sa vie d'avant, je suis un clodo sur un banc perché sur une butte, à Paris" (Despentes 2016a, 429).

variegated pattern, while still remaining relatable to the reader as a unique and earthly human, taking the shape of the unmarked, anonymous, ordinary man, bound by socio-economic determinism.

One of the key themes of *Vernon Subutex* is the question of sociability and community in the face of growing vitalist anxieties driven by neoliberal, capitalist individualism. What could possibly bring people together when survival ostensibly requires the destruction of others?<sup>48</sup> The trilogy proposes a few answers, but cohesion is always presented as a surprise, as though the novel itself is skeptical of its own doing. *La Hyène*, for example, provides about as close to an answer as one can get for how the Subutex group functions as a group:

all this proved that there was something going on in this little group, something that she could not define, but which, when she spent time with them, was almost tangible: a pleasure at being together that was completely mysterious. They did not like each other, they had little in common, they had no interest in hanging out together, but as soon as they got together, there was a congruity. (Despentes 2020, 157–58)<sup>49</sup>

Another partial answer is that the novel itself provides cohesion through narrative structure. The trilogy is structured in chapters, each one told from the third-person omniscient perspective of a single character. This structure allows for variations, types, and stylized voicings to jostle alongside one another in the effect of a dynamic fictional and social cohesion: the group is united by very little in demographic (excluding racial) and ideological terms, rather it is a narrative

---

<sup>48</sup> I appreciate the sarcasm of Emily Watt's review of *Vernon Subutex* for *The New Yorker*. She ends by saying, "The only authentic alternative to the dehumanization of capitalism is, apparently, something resembling Burning Man." There is a great deal of racial meaning to unpack from the Burning Man reference, as it is often perceived as being part of white American culture. The "Black Burner Project" among other essays and articles problematize the racialization of "Burners" as white, at the same time as Burning Man's efforts to be more welcoming to non-white "Burners" has struggled with its own identity as an event for white people. Future scholarship on psychedelic culture, music festivals and genres, and race all promise to shed light on the racial workings of the *Vernon Subutex* utopia. Watt, Emily. 2021. "The Stinging Provocations of Virginie Despentes." *The New Yorker*, May 19, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/the-stinging-provocations-of-virginie-despentes>.

<sup>49</sup> "il se passait quelque chose dans ce groupe qu'elle était incapable de définir, mais qui relevait du presque tangible quand on passait du temps avec eux : un plaisir d'être ensemble, qui relevait du mystère. Ils ne s'admiraient pas, ils ne se ressemblaient pas, ils n'avaient pas d'intérêt à se côtoyer, mais une fois rassemblés ils s'agençaient" (Despentes 2016b, 189).

thread—an omniscient narrator and a string of coincidences—that draws them together. This creation of a heterogeneous whole presents the reader with a utopic universalism that still feels grounded in the granular unpredictability of the real and the irreducible individual.<sup>50</sup> From this dichotomy of heterogeneousness and unity arises the idea that the embers of a dying, universal humanity have not entirely been extinguished by late capitalism, yet this form of sociability is so fragile that it may soon become a thing of the past—and, indeed, the epilogue seems to suggest as much.

Within the storyline, the explanations given for this inexplicable congruity is a mixture of things, partly old friendship, partly a common enemy, and partly transcendent, psycho-vibrational linkages brought on by music. The latter is strongest when Vernon uses Alex Bleach’s alpha waves in his DJs sets at the Rosa Bonheur and eventually at clandestine dance “camps” held all over France. In a collective trance, everyone can “feel the sound penetrate and fill [their] fingers” [sentir le son lui rentrer dans les mains] with a kind of energy—just visible as ribbons of light (Despentes 2020, 244; 2016b, 285). The second tome ends with a most enigmatic scene of a “convergence” (what they call the sessions) in Corsica, with Bootsy Collins’s funky, psychedelic *I’d Rather Be With You* (1976) playing over the alpha waves. Alex Bleach himself appears as a heavenly figure, smiling down upon them, as Vernon “makes contact” with both the living and the dead and navigates “the secret passages through time and the solidness of things” (Despentes 2020, 351–52).<sup>51</sup> Notably, in a similar stylistic move to the closing passage of the first tome, the narrative departs from the conventions of social realism by employing much more

---

<sup>50</sup> My thinking is inspired by Maxime Goergen’s analyses of 19<sup>th</sup>-century French realism. See Goergen, Maxime. 2018. “Vernon Subutex et le roman « balzacien ».”

<sup>51</sup> “[Vernon] établit le contact avec les absents. Mentalement, il cherche les parois mobiles—les passages secrets dans le temps et le solide des choses” (Despentes 2016b, 405).

lyrical language and liberally stretching the physical laws of consciousness, space, time, and individual embodiment to end with something much larger—something cosmic. The expansiveness of the “I” at the end of the first tome and of Vernon at the end of the second is made possible by activating, on the one hand, a written elasticity in lyricism and poetic repetition and, on the other hand, a kind of physical elasticity where the “I” is no longer contained by a singular embodied perspective but can visit with, move through, and encapsulate many other bodies. With all of this in mind, if we return to Desportes’ interview with Maison de la Poésie and consider this “emergence” of an all-white (or nearly all-white) society, it is possible to see how whiteness has re-presented itself as it aspires to universality. It slips between the particular and the non-particular and exists without intention or purpose to signify anything except, simply, to be.

These compelling disembodiments and paradoxes between the individual and the universal repeatedly recall Richard Dyer’s reading of white identity, in that it is “founded on [...] a need to always be everything and nothing, literally overwhelmingly present and yet apparently absent, both alive and dead” (1997, 38). And yet the disembodied idealism of simply “being” is not something that Desportes or her works have ever really been known for. Recall that Desportian scholarship has repeatedly emphasized her signature manipulation of established conventions—gender, genre, type, taboo—and that bodily performativity and subversion has been key to her engaged writing, raising the consciousness of her readers. Whether or not Desportes has explicitly prepared *Vernon Subutex* to engender a meta-discursive critique of whiteness, whiteness is certainly something that has “emerged” and continues to do so. Whiteness’ capacity to slip into ubiquity, to inhabit contradictions and yet not raise concerns of non-normativity, makes it a challenging construction to dislodge from invisibility. Therefore, the

question of both racial legibility and racial literacy—the complimentary dynamics taking place between author, text, and reader—come to the fore.

### *Contemporary Readers of French Whiteness*

Returning to Christy Wampole (2020), she further defines degenerative realism as “an account of French literature at the dawn of the twenty-first century” that tells the story of “the discontents of this new age” (5). By “new age,” she is referring to a long list of changes to the French literary scene: “an opening-up of once-inaccessible literary institutions; a widening of the canon; an effort at identity-based inclusivity; a persistent focus in scholarly studies on both sides of the Atlantic on *Francophonie*, postcoloniality, and righting the wrongs of France’s imperial tentacularity; and an expansion of what counts as relevant and legitimate in the field of literature” (5). *Degenerative Realism* is not about this story of French literature, but of a particularly racialized and gendered reactionary one. However, while Wampole’s analyses are in fact attentive to the (re)production of a *fictional* or diegetic whiteness in contemporary French realism, her analysis of the construction of whiteness as part of an extradiegetic, social reality stops short with a disclaimer. She writes:

The reader will notice that the novels presented in *Degenerative Realism* are written almost exclusively by white men. I acknowledge this fact without extrapolating anything from it, a task I will leave to readers if they see something meaningful in this pattern. [...] In my view, the more interesting question is how contemporary political life in France is portrayed through their fictions. To put it plainly, the reactionary spirit governs these worlds, where pluralism is an abomination, identity politics abhorrent, and political correctness a blow to freedom. These are not feel-good books. France cannot be made great again, they seem to conclude. In fact, they oblige us to suffer along with those who perceive themselves as losers in the twenty-first century. (6)

Wampole’s disclaimer methodologically draws a line for herself and in some ways dares the reader to cross it—perhaps in a kind of reverse psychology. In whatever way Wampole imagines

the reader will proceed, she claims to leave whiteness and maleness in the “real world” unexplored to the extent that it is possible. The disclaimer allows these dominant subjectivities to hover on the edge of scrutiny and self-implication in the text—something that women authors and non-white racialized authors do not avoid. It is also interesting that Wampole draws the line for reading whiteness at the limit of diegesis and fiction, even though blurring the lines between fiction and reality is one of the central themes of *Degenerative Realism*. Indeed, Wampole’s analysis of degenerative realism is that it is a narrative mode that remakes white subjectivities (also often cishet male ones) in order for white subjectivation to remain legible to itself in a changing social landscape.<sup>52</sup> This deliberate cordoning-off of white men authors is an important reminder that reading practices, not just writing, also participate in the (re)production of social hierarchies.

Some of Despentès’s readers have inquired into the choice of maleness (though not whiteness) for the trilogy’s protagonist. In 2015 with the publication of the first tome Despentès acknowledged that “journalists were [saying], *this is very interesting work about politics*,” which had “never happened” before (Oyler 2015; original emphasis). The unanimous, positive reception of the *Subutex* trilogy has certainly not escaped the author’s notice, as her presence in the French literary sphere has always been marked by the censorship and controversy around *Baise-moi* (2000). In 2020 around the publication of the English translation of tome 2, she spoke with UK journalist Sarah Hughes of her surprise at “how the critics automatically viewed it as a chronicle of Paris and French society and quoted Balzac.” She continues, “But if a woman had

---

<sup>52</sup> I am using the term subjectivation as it has been developed by feminist theory. For an excellent example of the study of white women’s subjectivation in the French context, see Lépinard, Éléonore. 2020. *Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Postsecular Times*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. For the term subjectivation, see Smith, Anna Marie. 2015. “Subjectivity and Subjectivation.” In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth, 1:1–19. Oxford University Press.

been at the centre of the story, they [critics] would instead have seen it as the story of a poor woman making bad choices and being a nymphomaniac. [...] For many male critics, it's difficult to think of a woman as representing society" (Hughes 2020). According to Desportes, her white male protagonist essentially yielded hyperbolic results and revealed once again the misogyny of her readership. In yet another interview with Nina Herzog and the *LA Review of Books*, she extends this reading practice to "even female readers, they look for how she [a female character] did this to herself, what she did wrong" (Herzog 2021). Desportes's awareness of gendered reading practices is in line with her usual approach, and it presents her as somewhat of a didactic author vis-à-vis the reader. Herzog pursues this line of thinking and asks Desportes what "we," as writers, should do about readers who continue to view men more favorably than women.

[Desportes:] First of all, we hope that things are really changing, and we keep on going. I think this is changing now, the mentality. In my opinion, it is a revolution. And I think young people are going to be able to be different readers, with tenderness for women. But for people my age, they are very much tougher on female characters. Second of all, in my case, we use male characters more often, because why not? To make them do things more easily, people are more comfortable. I can handle male characters. I'm okay with that. I have the feeling that I am witnessing a deep change about gender in the younger generation, women and men. And I didn't expect it to happen so quickly. I don't know what's coming next but now I think we have an audience ready to accept female characters differently. So, we try again. I hope that in 10 years it will be possible for even a Black female to represent the world. About this I am optimistic. And about the younger generation I am also optimistic. They are building something new, something possible because of what we did before. (Herzog 2021)

Desportes's optimism is heartening even if a bit simplistic in its hope for a linear narrative of progress. She also shifts control of the narrative from the author to the reader, as she suggests that readers are the ones responsible for defining what counts as universal. This gestures also towards her view of herself as an author who has written both against the grain and in alignment with the reading habits of her audience—sometimes challenging them, other times leaning into them, for the sake of ease.

Despentes's mention of race invites consideration given that she is somewhat known for writing white protagonists, a subject to which we will return shortly. In interviews, when it comes time to deconstruct the universal figure of Vernon as the white man representing all of society, Despentes's political engagement with gender (and often age as well) is strong. Her engagement with race, racism, and racial representation, however, is much less straight forward, but interesting for how uncomfortably or incompletely she and her interlocutor deal with the subject. She has the tendency to bring up race unsolicited—perhaps this is simply a taboo she knowingly enjoys highlighting—, but after bringing it up, there is often a missing follow-up, either on her part or on the part of her interviewer. How might Despentes's critique of racism in public addresses relate in political or even aesthetic terms to her fiction writing? In the absence of this immediate answer, though it is something we will return to later in the chapter, I find the discursive disjointedness around race fascinating because it is unnecessary. It would be rather easy to simply ignore race entirely when discussing *Vernon Subutex*, yet Despentes doesn't seem interested in taking that presumably smoother route. In what follows, I examine some exemplary evasive maneuvers in Despentian scholarship, where readers quite literally relegate mentions of race, particularly whiteness, to the footnotes.

### **Intersectionality, French Feminism, and Footnotes**

Scholars of Despentes present her and her works as exemplary of the French third-wave feminist movement. Despentes mobilizes several defining features of the third wave: a rejection of the concept of universal "woman" to focus on individual experiences, an emphasis on performativity, a critique of *féminisme bien-pensant* which falls prey to normative propriety, and an embrace of post-porn pro-sex representation (M. A. Schaal 2017, 17–29). "More than any

other writer in my corpus,” writes Schaal, “Despentes incarnates the feminist renewal” of the third wave, in both the “continuities and ruptures” it manifests with regard to the second wave (2017, 102–3). While I do not disagree with these assessments, what I am interested in is the way that Despentes’s work is or is not read along one of the defining characteristics of third-wave feminism: the concept of “intersectionality.” Some of the clearest demonstrations of an avoidance of race in Despentian scholarship is precisely and paradoxically when intersectionality is raised, which, when writing about contemporary feminism, is remarkably often. The avoidance occurs on a discursive level as well as a structural one, as mentions of whiteness and race are relegated to the footnotes and distanced from the analytical center. Hesitation and avoidance become a common link between race, whiteness, and intersectionality in French studies. Moreover, I argue that this attitude can itself be understood as a kind of whiteness reproducing itself.

Michèle Schaal, one of the most prominent Despentes scholars, writes in a footnote about the main characters of Despentes’s *Les Jolies choses* (1998): “Pauline and Claudine are white women and only interact occasionally with people of color” [Pauline et Claudine sont blanches et n’interagissent qu’occasionnellement avec des personnes de couleur] (2017, n. 27, p. 108). This footnote appears in *Une Troisième vague féministe et littéraire* (in English, *A Feminist and Literary Third Wave*, 2017), and resides in a chapter building on Schaal’s former work to establish Virginie Despentes as a French third-wave feminist author. One of the ways that she links Despentes to the third wave is through identifying in Despentes’s writing an intersectional account of characters’ experiences and social identities and of the kinds of oppression they encounter. Intersectionality, as Schaal notes, is a term that came from Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and which was born of a discursive and material field that has historically been racialized, linked

as it is to Black feminist and feminist of color thought in the United States. Schaal cites French feminist and sociologist Christine Delphy, who describes “sexism’s *three solidarities*: that of gender, which unites men against women, that of class, which unites the rich against the poor, and that of race, that unites whites [les Blancs] against the darker skinned [les Bronzés].”<sup>53</sup>

Immediately after this declaration, Schaal turns back to a discussion on Despentes.

I reproduce Schaal’s text here complete with the footnote placements (the numbers 27 and 28) to illustrate the careful positioning of bodies, citations, and ideas taking place. Schaal writes: “If intersectionality with race does not play out in *Les Jolies choses*,<sup>27</sup> intersectionality with gender and class does”<sup>28</sup> [Si l’intersectionnalité avec la race ne figure pas dans *Les Jolies choses*,<sup>27</sup> celles de genre et de classe y sont représentées<sup>28</sup>] (108). The footnote indicator, number 27, is perched meaningfully at the end of a dependent clause, contingent upon whatever is to follow. Where footnote 27 simply states that “Pauline and Claudine are white women” without interpreting the fact any further, footnote 28, by contrast, presents an exceedingly long list of twenty-seven references (and this includes five citations to Schaal herself). Each of these references in footnote 28 is said to address the relationship between *class* and *gender* in Despentes’s work. The string of names, numbers, and semicolons pile up as analyses of class and gender, excluding that of race, are collapsed in on themselves, expressing both abundance and ambiguity. Because the two footnotes sit so closely together, the sheer density of footnote 28 nearly eclipses the brief footnote preceding it. All the while, Despentes’s link to the politics of intersectionality—as in, that critically racialized, discursive, political movement so important to the formation of the feminist third wave—has been forged and extensively reinforced. From one

---

<sup>53</sup> “du sexisme en France [...] et celle des *trois solidarités* : celle de genre, qui unit les hommes contre les femmes, celle de classe qui unit les riches contre les pauvres, et celle de race que unit les Blancs contre les Bronzés” (Delphy 2011, 7–8 original emphasis, cited in Schaal 2017, p. 107-108)

moment to the next, race is evoked and deferred, brought into the analytic space, and then relegated to a space outside of the scope of analysis. Its removal, too, is obscured by the literal symbols and self-referentiality of the citational practice.

In one of the self-cited works listed in footnote 28, Schaal refers to her 2011 article in which she first identifies Virginie Despentes as one of the French third-wave authors and activists who, at the turn of the century, was preoccupied with “American third-wave feminism” (2011, 40). Schaal writes that the feminists of this wave shared the desire “to deconstruct the universal and essentialized concept of “Woman,” a perception deemed naïve, for it concerned mostly privileged Western white women. The new wave stresse[d] the significance of intersectionality, or how differences such as class, race, or sexual preference trigger discriminations among women” (40). Here, the symbol of “privileged Western white women” and the tripart analytical model “class, race, or sexual preference” are key in highlighting the importance of intersectionality’s analysis of interconnected social hierarchies. While Schaal discusses other key features of the third-wave movement (e.g., performativity, pornographic articulations of feminine sexual desire), the element she mentions first and reserves for last is intersectionality. However, when Schaal reads Despentes’s fiction for representations of women’s experiences at the intersection of multiple, complex forms of oppression, she focuses exclusively on “Social Class and Gender Inequalities” (48-51). Race is totally missing from the tripart model, yet Schaal still manages to conclude the article by saying, “Despentes’s novels resemble the American approach to intersectionality as she provides the underrepresented, underprivileged, or silenced women with their own voices” (48). In this conclusion, Schaal acknowledges the scope of the work as being inherently limited and states: “in [Despentes’s] narratives, she further tackles issues of intersectionality, namely “ordinary” racism as

experienced by second- or third-generation Arab immigrants” (51). Unlike the example of an abundance of footnoted citations in footnote 28, discussed above, there are no footnotes here to accompany this closing reference to the French Arab population. Intersectionality may very well be one of the most practical discursive gateways to mention by not mentioning, to acknowledge without analyzing, race in Despentès’s œuvre.

I will give one more example, this one with two parts. The footnote in this case starts with Léonore Brassard, and the article is published in a special issue edited by Michèle Schaal. Brassard’s footnote reads: “[T]he main characters she [Despentès] creates are always white” [les personnages principaux qu’elle met en scène sont toujours blancs] (2018, n. 7). Brassard’s article is entitled “Les Damnées de Virginie Despentès,” with the gendered adjective *damnées* indicating the feminine, and is a comparative study of both Despentès and Frantz Fanon’s concepts of violence. The footnote goes on to state the parameters of the article, noting that Fanon, too, has been criticized for the way he writes and doesn’t write about women. Brassard goes on to say that even if the critique is valid and might give us pause (though without giving an explanation for why having all-white main characters is reason for either critique or pause), “the subject of this article is not to lay out arguments around Fanon’s feminism or chauvinism, or around the representation of races in Despentès’s books” [le propos de cet article n’est pas d’argumenter autour du féminisme ou du machisme de Fanon, ni autour de la représentation des races dans les livres de Despentès] (2018, n. 7).<sup>54</sup> The Fanon-Despentès comparison goes forth without any further analysis of race in Despentès’s works.

---

<sup>54</sup> Here is the footnote in its entirety: “Frantz Fanon a été maintes fois critiqué par rapport à la place (ou l’absence de place) réservée aux femmes dans ses écrits. Une pareille critique peut être faite à l’encontre des récits de Despentès, en ce que les personnages principaux qu’elle met en scène sont toujours blancs. Si ces deux critiques sont valides et méritent qu’on s’y arrête, le propos de cet article n’est pas d’argumenter autour du féminisme ou du machisme de Fanon, ni autour de la représentation des races dans les livres de Despentès. Il cherche plutôt à faire dialoguer le cadre théorique que pose l’un à propos de la situation colonial avec celui de la pensée féministe telle qu’elle peut se déployer dans les textes de l’autre. Notons toutefois que la question de la marginalization des Arabes en France est

The second part of this example returns to Schaal, as editor. In the introduction to this special issue on Despentes, Michèle Schaal opens the issue by entitling her preface, “From Margins to Center (?)” She opens by stating, ““From Margin[s] to Center,” bell hooks’s subtitle to *Feminist Theory* (1984), could not better illustrate Virginie Despentes’s parcours in the French literary world: from antiestablishment to acclaimed author” (2018, 14). The specific use of hooks’s work to frame Despentes’s authorial trajectory is yet another application of what are unavoidably racial politics to a situation that does not take race into account. Indeed, Schaal is seemingly aware of this as she proceeds to state that her “purpose here is not to equate hooks’s narrated experiences or the historical marginalization of African American women or of other people of color to Despentes’s path as an author. As a white middle-class woman, Despentes holds a relatively privileged position within French society. [footnote 1]” Here, we might think, “at last, the mention of whiteness!” We turn to footnote 1, however, and there is no mention of race or whiteness at all. Rather, Schaal mentions class and sexuality: Despentes’s “recent embourgeoisement” and her identity as a lesbian—“a sexual Other.” The entire opening introduces Despentes through hooks, wrapping Despentes in hooks’s words and in one instance inserting the word “French” in brackets into a hooks citation: “Moreover, in her fiction, essays, and films—just as hooks has advocated to do—Despentes has “examined [French] culture from a feminist standpoint rooted in an understanding of gender, race, and class” (hooks xii). [footnote 3]” (14). In footnote 3, we find a familiar citational scene, a compilation of twenty-two references (including three of Schaal’s own), all of which are deemed “Sources for Despentes’s work as intersectional.” All of these references are also those that appear in footnote 28, studied at the beginning of this section, with the addition of one reference to those very same pages

---

abordée de façon centrale chez Despentes, dans *Baise-moi* avec le personnage de Fatima, et dans *Apocalypse Bébé* par celui de Yacine. À propos du sujet plus spécifique du féminisme de Fanon, consulter Sharples-Whiting.”

where we first read footnote 28. The result is a spiraling layering of citations that continues to defer the moment of whiteness' address.

With just these few examples, Despentian scholarship demonstrates a remarkable flexibility and coordination when it comes to traversing distances and proximities to race, so much so that one must eventually ask the question of how race is actually at work in Despenties writing. I again emphasize “distance” rather than “absence” in these instances because of how race is brought into the realm of analysis though never analyzed. In short, each of these examples point to the ways in which race seems to trouble the flow of the analysis the scholar wishes to make. As a result, whiteness is dealt with by way of deflection—literally and symbolically relegating race to a footnote—and cordoned off from the principle analytical space.

### ***Black Feminism's Citational Lineages***

Thinking about the politics of citational practice is not new for Black feminism and Black feminist scholarship. Footnotes are a principal mechanism for crafting citational lineages, and the citational practice around intersectionality links it to a genealogy of black feminist theory and women of color feminist theory. In Jennifer C. Nash's book, *Black Feminism Reimagined* (2019), and essay, “Citational Desires” (2020), she discusses the production and protection of the field of Black feminism and Black feminists, arguing that the difference between “care” and “defense” can sometimes be lost, to the detriment of the Black feminist movement. When providing an overview of the term intersectionality, she describes “enter[ing] the terrain of historicizing intersectionality with a sense of caution and an awareness of the potential risks of fetishizing history as the preferable orientation toward understanding intersectionality's varied work” (2019, 6). Intersectionality's intellectual history is comprised of “multiple genealogies in

both black feminist and women of color feminist traditions” (2017, 126), though it is most often attributed to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s works: the 1989 article, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” and 1991 “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color.”<sup>55</sup>

As Nash both demonstrates and problematizes, along with many of the women she cites, such as Ann duCille, Brittany Cooper, Sara Ahmed, and Kyla Wazana Tompkins, citational practices are an important means of (re)producing the bounds of a scholarly field, not only its conceptual material but its people.<sup>56</sup> The political and ethical gravity of citational practices in the Black feminist tradition must be understood from its location in a context of racism and sexism, particularly in the US academy, where to cite Black women has been framed as doing the minimum to “un-forget.”<sup>57</sup> There other ways, too, beyond the bare minimum of un-forgetting, that citational practices are imbued with generative political power. “Citation is figured as more than an act of “centering” Black women; it is a way of building another world entirely organized around Black women’s brilliance, one that undoes violence and embraces an ethic of redress” (Nash 2020, 81).

---

<sup>55</sup> The term intersectionality is preceded and accompanied by other analytics (for example, Frances Beal’s “double jeopardy,” Deborah King’s “multiple jeopardy,” Patricia Hill Collins’s “matrix of domination”) and works that have come to constitute a black and women of color feminist tradition, analyzing complex constructions and interrelated forms of oppression. See also May, Vivian. 2012. “Intellectual Genealogies, Intersectionality, and Anna Julia Cooper.” In *Feminist Solidarity at the Crossroads: Intersectional Women’s Studies for Transracial Alliance*, edited by Kim Marie Vaz and Gary L. Lemons. New York: Routledge; Carastathis, Anna. 2016. *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons*. University of Nebraska Press.

<sup>56</sup> This is an argument Nash (2019) explores in chapter 1, “A love letter from a critic, or notes on the intersectionality wars.”

<sup>57</sup> On “un-forgetting,” see Nash, Jennifer. 2020. “Citational Desires: On Black Feminism's Institutional Longings.” pp. 83-86.

Race is, indeed, central to the concept of intersectionality, and so much so that Black feminists, Black feminism, and intersectionality are imagined as intertwined in intensely political, ethical, embodied ways. This is what Nash argues to be the root of the US academy's "intersectionality wars." She writes that,

Feminist theory has long imagined black woman as the quintessential location of complexity and marginality, a figure that disciplines the interdisciplinary project of feminist theory by demanding an account of gendered racism and racialized sexism, and by advocating a feminism that transcends a preoccupation exclusively with gender. Intersectionality is regularly envisioned as *the* paradigmatic analytic that stands for both black feminism and black women (indeed, the two are regularly collapsed and conflated), the theory that requires women's studies to reckon with black woman and her imagined complexity. It is intersectionality's ostensible capacity to remedy all that has ailed feminist theory, to provide "political completion," that gives the analytic its analytical, political, theoretical, and even administrative-programmatic muscle. (2017, 117–18; original emphasis)

If we read the few of examples of Schaal and Brassard's citational maneuvers within the context provided by Nash's "citational desires," we can view these race-avoidant maneuvers as a response to that "collapsed and conflated," desired and feared, Black feminism and Black woman figure at the core of intersectionality (2019, 2, 29).<sup>58</sup> Schaal and Brassard exempt white protagonists from intersectional, colonial, and racial purview, thus reinforcing the Black woman/Black feminism conflation, and adding coloniality to this conflation of racialized bodies and racialized thought. Yet at the same time as they remove whiteness and white women from the analysis, Schaal and Brassard also make the effort to explicitly recognize the absence of Black and other non-white women in their subject matter. In the end, when we do not have either Black, Arab, non-white, or even white women to consider racially, why claim proximity in thought to intersectionality at all?

---

<sup>58</sup> See also Lee, Rachel. 2000. "Notes from the (Non)Field: Teaching and Theorizing Women of Color." *Meridians* 1.1: 85-109.

I do not argue for a one-to-one equivalency between American and French “intersectionality wars,” and so I find it useful to think about who, in the French context, is being “pushed to the periphery” of intersectionality (Nash 2020, 77). In the US context, for example, the concept of intersectionality has achieved a level of institutionalization. Importantly, it has been popularized and mobilized by academic fields and institutions to do what one might call ‘diversity work,’ demonstrating a rhetorical “investment in difference” that “*stand[s] in for performing* a kind of intellectual and political work” (2019, 18, 25; my emphasis).<sup>59</sup> In contrast, intersectionality in the French context has not reached this level of popularization or mobilization. French feminist debates have remained more focused on whether or not intersectionality has been or will be institutionalized (Roca i Escoda, Fassa, and Lépinard 2016, 7). Sociologist and feminist studies scholar Éléonore Lépinard, for example, has argued since the early 2000s for using intersectionality as an analytic through which the religious and racialized dimensions of feminism have presented themselves in French debates over Islam (Lépinard 2005; 2014; 2020). In a context where women of color feminist activism has struggled against the overwhelming cultural politics of universalism in France, Lépinard explains, “the politicization of race and racial identities has been stalled and obscured” (2020, 135). This, in addition to the “American” signifier marking the intellectual histories of intersectionality and critical race studies, points to a predicament for French feminism, in which claiming intersectionality as a critical analytic runs certain risks, not least of which is a racialization of thought where race must remain unthought.

---

<sup>59</sup> Here Nash draws on Sara Ahmed’s notion of “non-performativity.” Ahmed notes: “In my model of the non-performative, the failure of the speech act to do what it says is not a failure of intent or even circumstance, *but is actually what the speech act is doing*. Such speech acts are taken up *as if* they are performatives (as if they have brought about the effects they name), such that the names come to stand in for the effects. As a result, naming can be a way of not bringing something into effect” (2012, 117; original emphasis). See also Ahmed, Sara. 2015. “Women of Colour as Diversity Workers.” *Feministkilljoys*. November 26, 2015. <https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/11/26/women-of-colour-as-diversity-workers/>.

There is a clear need to historicize women of color French feminism in order to bring more nuance and clarity to the false binary of American/French and raced/raceless. One conclusion we can draw from the above phenomena is that French literary studies continues to struggle with the Anglo-American/Francophone split that was previously mentioned. Reading Schaal and Desportes within that context, one can see how an application of certain analytical terms (e.g., intersectionality) requires an engagement with race that outpaces the field's scholarly practices. In the more specific arena of Desportian scholarship, there is an ongoing internal conflict when it comes to dealing with race, whiteness, and feminism, and there is a need to mobilize analytics that can conceive of whiteness as having a social, political, aesthetic dimension. Whiteness may even be something that Desportes has counted among the unavoidable taboos in her texts. The uneasiness scholars have shown toward race and whiteness only reinforces this probability.

### **Virginie Desportes as a White Woman: Race Cognizance and White Privilege**

If scholarship on Desportes has struggled to discuss whiteness, this is not because Desportes herself has considered whiteness to be undiscussable. As we have already seen in a few previous interview examples (e.g., with the *LA Review of Books* and the *Maison de la Poésie*), Desportes tends to bring up race and whiteness in conversation, with somewhat ambiguous results—sometimes she herself appears unprepared to talk about it. Against France's silencing approach to race, Desportes pokes at the issue of race. This section therefore returns to Desportes and the question of whiteness' (un)discussability. From Desportes's interviews and non-fiction, then, I ask how these discussions of whiteness might contribute to our understanding of the white characters and whiteness that “emerge[s] well” in her fiction. Rather than footnote

the sticking point of whiteness as an obstacle to analysis, I argue that these moments reveal race-conscious negotiations that the author herself makes, as she constructs and conceives of herself as a white woman via various texts.

On the podcast *Les Couilles sur la table* (2019), Despentès talks about speaking with boys at a younger age about sex and sexuality, adding in her dry fashion that she believes there are boys who don't actually want to become rapists, aggressors, predators. When host Victoire Tuailleon prompts her to explain what she means, Despentès goes on to say,

This doesn't mean I always make it, but for me, as a white woman [meuf blanche], I don't want to be an asshole [une connasse]. That doesn't mean I'm going to succeed every time because, well, this is what I am, and I lug around all that I have to lug around. But if you ask me, uh, I'd very much like to take 5 minutes to think and try to not be an asshole. I think there are a lot of guys who are in the exact same spot, as guys... They don't... at the end of the day, they don't want to say to themselves "I was a major asshole and I took everything by force every chance I had." (Tuailleon n.d.)<sup>60</sup>

As a white woman, she has a kind of "baggage" ("I lug around all that I have to lug around") prone to dealing in harm, and it is both her and society's responsibility to stop the "connasserie," the "asshole-ry," that this baggage is likely to produce due to powerful socializing forces. Much in line with Despentès's style of quasi-didactic repartee, she presents a crude form of race cognizance along with a critique of white privilege but does not attempt to nuance. As a result, Tuailleon has to follow up, to interpret what Despentès is saying and fill in the rhetorical gaps. "Right, it's the whole problem of privilege, in fact—it's—do we want to recognize it, can we get rid of it, or do we prefer to be in denial... and not reflect on it?"<sup>61</sup> Despentès agrees, asking

---

<sup>60</sup> "Ça ne veut pas dire que j'y arrive, moi par rapport, euh, en tant que meuf blanche, j'ai pas envie d'être une connasse. Ça veut pas dire que je vais y arriver à chaque fois parce que de toute façon c'est ce que je suis, et je trimballe tout ce que j'ai à trimballer. Mais si tu me demandes, euh, je veux bien prendre 5 minutes pour réfléchir et essayer de pas être une connasse, je pense il y a plein de mecs qui sont exactement dans le même zone de position en tant que mecs,... et ils ont pas.... À la fin de la journée, ils ont pas envie de se dire, "j'ai été un gros connard euh, qui a usurpé de ma force à chaque fois que j'en ai eu l'occasion."

<sup>61</sup> "C'est tout le problème du privilège en fait. C'est, est-ce qu'on a envie de le reconnaître, est-ce qu'on peut s'en débarrasser, ou alors est-ce qu'on préfère être dans le déni et donc nier qu'on a ce privilège là et pas y réfléchir ?"

another rhetorical question, “Do we want to try to move towards something better? [...] Even just for the sake of the exercise?”<sup>62</sup> She goes on to advocate for speaking to youth openly about their sexuality in order to change the misogynistic culture that perpetuates sexual violence—to act on the fact that it is a probability, but not an inevitability. Even though her focus is on talking to boys about sexuality, power, and male privilege, the wider scope that includes white privilege continues to operate in her analyses.

After the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, as Black Lives Matter protests swept France as well, Despentès caused another stir by publishing a letter on June 4. Her “Lettre adressée à mes amis blancs qui ne voient pas où est le problème” [Letter addressed to my white friends who don’t see where the problem is] was read aloud by Augustin Trapenard on the radio program “Letters from the Interior” on the channel *France Inter*. In the letter, she repeats the line, “In France we are not racist but” [En France nous ne sommes pas racistes mais], pinpointing patterns of racial profiling by police, racial segregation in housing, unequal access to healthcare in racially segregated areas, and economic racial disparities worsened by Covid. She then criticizes the racist imbalance of the value judgements made to decry violence regarding the protests, but not violence regarding the arrest and asphyxiation by police of Adama Traoré in 2016. “Shame is the bare minimum,” she concludes [la honte, c’est juste le minimum]. The letter closes with a critique of (the denial of) white privilege. Echoing her conversation with Tuaille on a year earlier, she writes in the letter, “I cannot forget that I’m a woman. But I can forget that I am white. That’s being white. Thinking about it, or not thinking about it, depending on your mood.

---

<sup>62</sup> “Est-ce qu’on a envie d’aller vers quelque chose qui serait mieux? Juste pour la fin d’exercice...”

In France, we're not racist but I don't know a single Black or Arab person who has that choice."<sup>63</sup>

At a basic level, Despentès's commentary is an example of what Ruth Frankenberg called "race cognizance" in her 1993 study of US white women and racism, *White Women, Race Matters*. "Race cognizance" is a discursive repertoire that differs from "color- and power-evasiveness,"<sup>64</sup> but the two can often work side by side, as Despentès points out that she "can forget that [she is] white." For Despentès, as for the women in Frankenberg's study, race cognizance alone does not necessarily lead to political activism, nor does it promise a permanent or continuous recognition of the ways in which race shapes white women's lives. However, naming whiteness and denaturalizing its ties to dominance (not *just* human rights, but real privileges), is an important act, especially in a context such as France, where the non-specificity of whiteness allows its links to dominance, universality, and normality to proceed uninterrogated.

### ***What is a White Woman?***

---

<sup>63</sup> "Je ne peux pas oublier que je suis une femme. Mais je peux oublier que je suis blanche. Ça, c'est être blanche. Y penser, ou ne pas y penser, selon l'humeur. En France, nous ne sommes pas racistes mais je ne connais pas une seule personne noire ou arabe qui ait ce choix."

<sup>64</sup> Frankenberg defines race cognizance and grasping one of the key internal contradictions that makes racism so effective: "on the one hand, [race cognizance] acknowledges the existence of racial inequality and white privilege and, on the other, does not lean on ontological or essential difference in order to justify inequality or explain it away. (By contrast, the color- and power-evasive repertoire is organized around the effort to repress or evade this contradiction.) Race cognizance in this sense generated a range of political and existential questions about white complicity with racism, and these women sought to grapple with such questions in individual or collective ways" (Frankenberg 1993, 160).

In the above examples, Despentès has openly declared herself to be a white woman. Now, the question is: what is a white woman according to Despentès? To begin to answer this question, we might turn to Despentès's autobiographical essay and feminist manifesto *King Kong théorie* (2006). The text is known primarily for presenting a condemnation of rape culture, informed by Despentès's own experience as a survivor; an indictment of the stigmatization of sex work, also from her personal experience; and a rallying cry to embrace the gender revolution that will "tout foutre en l'air" [fuck it all up] (Despentès 2013, 145; my translation). It is one of her most widely read texts and has been translated into at least sixteen languages (Bellan 2018). The subject of race in *King Kong théorie*, not to mention the racial history of King Kong—whose legacy was notably inspired by French-American zoologist and anthropologist Paul du Chaillu's *Explorations and Adventures in Equatorial Africa, with Accounts of the Manners and Customs of the People, and of the Chace of the Gorilla, Crocodile, and other Animals* (1861)—would constitute a fascinating study of its own.<sup>65</sup> For now, I focus on what Despentès has to say about white femininity, how she defines it, how she articulates its social definition, and how she makes a project of embodying some form of "white woman."

The first four lines of *King Kong théorie* are the most often cited, and these are also the text that is reproduced on the back cover of Grasset's editions: "I am writing as an ugly one for the ugly ones: the old hags, the dykes, the frigid, the unfucked, the unfuckables, the neurotics, the psychos, for all those girls who don't get a look in the universal market of the consumable

---

<sup>65</sup> To my knowledge, there currently is no scholarship that reads Despentès's interpretations of King Kong for either its racial importance or its connection to a history of literary, theatrical, and cinematic activity using King Kong to advance theories of gender, race, and sexuality. However, the study of King Kong and race, gender, power, colonialism, sexuality, and its global reception has seemingly endless possibilities and permutations, as Cynthia Erb has demonstrated in her sweeping study of the King Kong story and its many adaptations and recreations. See Erb, Cynthia Marie. 2009. *Tracking King Kong: A Hollywood Icon in World Culture*. 2nd ed. Detroit: Wayne State University Press. For the historical influence of zoologist and anthropologist Paul de Chaillu on Merian C. Cooper's 1933 film, see Reel, Monte. 2013. *Between Man and Beast: An Unlikely Explorer and the African Adventure That Took the Victorian World by Storm*. Random House Inc, 268-269.

chick” (2010, 7).<sup>66</sup> The same chapter’s closing lines, however, do not experience the same level of citational popularity, and one might consider this yet another manifestation of whiteness’ undiscussability. These closing lines specify a “counter-type” to the “ugly ones” in the figure of “the archetypal white woman” [l’idéal de la femme blanche]. The ideal figure of the white woman, Despentès writes, is

sexy but not slutty, married but not meek, with a good job but not so successful she upstages her husband, slim but not hung up about food, eternally youthful without needing to be hacked at by plastic surgeons, fulfilled as a mother but not overburdened by diapers and homework, a talented hostess but not some retro housewife, intelligent but less intelligent than a man. (Despentès 2021a, 7)<sup>67</sup>

She draws upon her signature style of interminable lists, always adding a bit of unruliness and excess to her designs in order to parody the chaotic logic of all social definitions. The lengthy rubric for the ideal white woman is also deliberately oppositional, repeatedly using the binary “this but not that” to mirror the binary already established between “ugly vs. ideal.” By positioning the archetypal white woman as the singular counterpoint against which she, as an “ugly” white woman, is writing, she identifies herself according to an existing racial hierarchy, but rejects the cultural rubric of whiteness (white femininity) in favor of another one. Note how she does not reject whiteness as an embodied phenomenon—she will still be perceived physically as a white woman and therefore her racialized embodiment will still shape her relations with others and the world. There is a striking echo in Despentès’s words with those of Ruth Frankenberg (1993), who writes, “Satisfying our desire for a “nonugly” white tradition

---

<sup>66</sup> “J’écris de chez les moches, pour les moches, les vieilles, les camionneuses, les frigides, les mal baisées, les imbaisables, les hystériques, les tarées, toutes les exclues du grand marché à la bonne meuf” (Despentès 2013, 9).

<sup>67</sup> “Parce que l’idéal de **la femme blanche**, séduisante mais pas pute, bien mariée mais pas effacée, travaillant mais sans trop réussir, pour ne pas écraser son homme, mince mais pas névrosée par la nourriture, restant indéfiniment jeune sans se faire défigurer par les chirurgiens de l’esthétique, maman épanouie mais pas accaparée par les couches et les devoirs d’école, bonne maîtresse de maison mais pas bonniche traditionnelle, cultivée mais moins qu’un homme” (Despentès 2013, 13).

requires, as much as anything, the creation of a different political reality, a different balance of power, or, at the very least, the context of an active white antiracist movement that could generate a countercultural trajectory and identity” (1993, 232). Of course, in Frankenberg’s use of the term “nonugly,” she is referring to a form of white identity that eschews white supremacy; white supremacy being the epitome of “ugly” white. Despentes’s “ugly” white functions in the opposite sense—that which white supremacy (and heteropatriarchy) deems “ugly” is precisely what she chooses to be.

In the chapter “King Kong Girl,” Despentes opens with a close reading of Peter Jackson’s 2005 remake of *King Kong*. She writes, “King Kong has neither cock nor balls, nor boobs. The viewer is never able to ascribe a gender to it. It is neither male nor female. It is merely hairy and black” (106).<sup>68</sup> Extrapolating on this observation, she presents her analysis:

In this film, King Kong becomes a metaphor for sexuality before the separation of the genders politically imposed at the end of the nineteenth century. King Kong is beyond male and beyond female. It is hooked on (the hinge) the link between man and beast, adult and child, good and bad, primitive and civilized, black and white. It is hybrid, before the imposition of the binary. (106)<sup>69</sup>

The paradigm that Despentes extracts from the King Kong figure for her feminist framework is representative of something that has been true for many King Kong viewers: Kong is that “compelling figure because of his monstrous hybridity and instability, and because of his apparent invitation to experience the world from the perspective of the exotic” (Erb 2009, 253). The exotic certainly provides the space of “utopian possibility” that both “unquestionably trades

---

<sup>68</sup> “Ce King Kong n’a ni bite, ni couilles, ni seins. Aucune scène ne permet de lui attribuer un genre. Il n’est ni mâle ni femelle. Il est juste poilu et noir” (Despentes 2013, 112).

<sup>69</sup> “King Kong, ici, fonctionne comme la métaphore d’une sexualité d’avant la distinction des genres telle qu’imposée politiquement autour de la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. King Kong est au-delà de la femelle et au-delà du mâle. Il est à la charnière, entre l’homme et l’animal, l’adulte et l’enfant, le bon et le méchant, le primitif et le civilisé, le blanc et le noir. Hybride, avant l’obligation du binaire” (Despentes 2013, 112).

in [...] racist themes,” and “sometimes offers a way of rethinking the terms of culture” (176).<sup>70</sup> In Despentès’s reading, the white woman (Ann Darrow, played by Naomi Watts in 2005) is drawn to Kong’s monstrous and ambiguous sexuality; this pre- or non-binary (gender and beyond) existence is representative of something that she has lost/will ultimately lose when Kong is killed: “Elle est coupée de sa puissance fondamentale” [She is cut off from her own essential power] (Despentès 2013, 115; 2010, 109).

One of the difficulties with Despentès’s theorization of Kong as a symbol of hybridity, however, is that Kong still has to participate in the binary structure that is the classic Kong/Darrow, Black/white relationship—not to mention the fact that Kong is still described as “hairy and black” which, for centuries, has signaled the animalization of non-white racialization and linked Black men to apes in racist iconography.<sup>71</sup> Even though Despentès claims that King Kong is in and of themselves the “hinge” (la charnière) that links both “black and white,” the fact of King Kong’s racial coding as Black is so longstanding and emphatic that it is arguably impossible to escape.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, Despentès does not read Peter Jackson’s work as really challenging this racial coding. This is not to say that it would be impossible to explore alternatives to and the destabilization of racial binaries in King Kong (as there are, in fact,

---

<sup>70</sup> Erb’s analysis here focuses on the “jungle narrative” genre.

<sup>71</sup> See Winthrop Jordan’s discussion of “The Apes of Africa” and “Negroes, Apes, and Beasts” (pp. 28-32, 228-234) in Jordan, Winthrop D. [1968] 2012. *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812*. 2nd ed. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. The fact that Despentès is never explicitly theoretical about race, despite talking about it frequently, is worth mentioning again. The way that she talks about the politics of race is often loose, ambiguous, vague, and trite—provocative soundbites more than explanatory theories. This is not to excuse scholarship for not addressing race when writing about *King Kong Theory* and Despentès’s feminist message, but it suggests one possible explanation for why this conversation has seemed so difficult to bring forth directly.

<sup>72</sup> See for example *Skyscraper* (2018), in which Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, a mixed-race Black American actor, climbs atop a Hong Kong skyscraper amid military air strikes, evoking the scene of King Kong’s ascent of the Empire State Building.

parodies which attempt to do just that by exploiting the arbitrariness of racial hierarchy and construction through cross-racial drag<sup>73</sup>). But if Despentès applies a great deal of interpretive pressure to Jackson's representation of Kong's non-binary gender and sexuality (more or less convincingly wresting the traditional portrayal of Kong away from pure, virile, masculinity), the same cannot be said for an interpretive challenge to Kong's or Ann Darrow's traditional racial representation.

Instead of replacing the Black/white binary with a romanticized, raceless ambiguity, race is still socially operative in Despentès's framework. The "ugly one vs. ideal white woman" binary that was established in the opening chapter of *King Kong théorie* has developed now into the "archetypal, Black, non-binary being vs. the ideal white woman," and the drama that is to unfold is that of the "real" white woman: Ann Darrow and Virginie Despentès. Where Nadia Louar reads this story as one of "a punk female author who succeeds where King Kong has failed," I contend that it is not King Kong who has failed in Despentès's story, but Ann Darrow (Louar 2018, 130). Kong does not fail for not surviving the assault, but Darrow fails because she does not "defea[t] the socializing forces that attempt to lure her into conformity" (Louar 2018, 130).

Despentès reflects on her own life trajectories deeper into and then away from the regulated bounds of white supremacist femininity and sexuality, particularly during the outpouring of backlash against and censorship of *Baise-moi*.

It wasn't a conscious decision. More a strategy of survival. Restraining my gestures physically, opting for gentler movement. Speaking more slowly. Making time for things that weren't frightening to others. Going blonde. Getting my teeth done. [...] Luckily, along came Courtney Love. In particular. And punk rock in general. A taste for conflict. I

---

<sup>73</sup> See Erb's extensive analysis of one example, Ronald Tavel's play *Gorilla Queen* (1967). Erb, Cynthia Marie. 2009. *Tracking King Kong: A Hollywood Icon in World Culture*, pp. 169-177.

rebuilt my mental health, **in the shadow of that blonde persona**. The monster in me had retained its grip. (123-124; my emphasis)<sup>74</sup>

In these self-reflections, Despentès's overly simplistic use of the phrase "going blonde" challenges the reader to engage in the underlying complexities of the phrase regarding femininity, whiteness, embodiment, and social and political power and behavior. Photos of Despentès in her teens show her with red, spikey hair, about which she remembers her psychiatrist asking her "why [she] had made [herself] so ugly" (Despentès 2010, 109). Despentès's time of "going blonde," then, is both literal and symbolic, material and political, of course recalling the archetypal figure of the white woman—the Ann Darrow—whose role in what Despentès calls "la littérature masculine blanche" and "la production cinématographique blanche" [white male literature and white film] (Despentès 2013, 126; 2010, 119) is to be "rescued at the last minute from [her] plunge into a nether world of dark desire [...] and, in turn, rehabilitated" (Berenstein 1996, 164). This is the "jungle-horror" genre that Despentès consciously or unconsciously chooses, as a white woman, to inhabit and to rewrite when she says: "Je suis plutôt King Kong que Kate Moss, comme fille" [As a girl, I am more King Kong than Kate Moss] (Despentès 2013, 11; 2010, 9). As Rhona Berenstein wrote about the 1933 *King Kong* original, part of the "jungle-horror" film genre's effect is to have the blonde female not only Kong's victim, but potentially his friend, ally, and even lover.

Like so many horror heroines, then, most white women in jungle films are both conventional icons of female fear and the vehicles through which social boundaries are transgressed. They highlight the supremacy of white males when, as victims of dark creatures, they cry out for heroism. Yet in their own doubling with dark animals and black men, white heroines remind heroes that acts of bravery—and an insistence on racial purity—do not always translate into conquest and supremacy. Boundaries between white

---

<sup>74</sup> "Ça n'a pas été une décision consciente. Plutôt un calcul de survie sociale. Limiter les mouvements, physiquement, préférer les gestes doux. Ralentir la diction. Privilégier ce qui ne fait pas peur. Devenir blonde. Refaire mes dents. [...] Heureusement, il y a Courtney Love. En particulier. Et le punk-rock, en général. Une tendance à aimer le conflit. Je me refais une santé mentale, **dans mon ombre de blonde**. Le monstre en moi ne lâche pas l'affaire" (Despentès 2013, 130–31; my emphasis).

and dark, human and animal, are crossed repeatedly in the genre, no matter what white heroes do to keep them intact. (Berenstein 1996, 164)

The racist horror of that crossing and re-alignment of white women with King Kong as the stand-in for Black men—encapsulating fears of interracial sex, white queerness, and the non-reproduction of whiteness—is something that Desportes would likely embrace enthusiastically. However, Desportes’s realignment of Darrow with Kong is hard pressed to read the “hairy and black” animal outside of its binary constructions.

What can be said about Desportes’s theory is that it uses the racial binary set-up in the Kong/Darrow structure in order, not so much to apprehend Blackness (which, here, has more of a hypervisibly racist status), to qualify whiteness—especially white femininity. She is able to identify white femininity as a co-constructor of white supremacist heteropatriarchy. In the end, Desportes has grasped the conventions of the King Kong and jungle-horror genre in its anxieties over maintaining white, hetero femininity: “[The white heroine] is also the white man’s object of desire, his romantic partner at the conclusion, and a painful reminder that white heterosexuality is never a given but has to be won under conditions that rarely guarantee its enduring success. The white heroine, whatever her other metaphorical functions, signifies the fragility of whiteness in general and white masculinity in particular” (Berenstein 1996, 196). Desportes has kept the Black/white racial binary operative and, in doing so, gone against the more common French rationale that idealizes a post-racial world as part of the feminist project. However, without a more critical engagement with the racist history of Blackness in King Kong, these narrative and symbolic powers also remain uncritically operative.

## Representing “Bleachness”

The question “who is Alexandre Bleach” is one that troubles the characters in the novel as much as it does the reader, as the plot in the first half of the trilogy is largely driven by a search for Alexandre Bleach’s video recordings—the last testimony he made before he died. In the beginning of the first tome, when the narrator announces that “Alexandre Bleach is dead” [Alexandre Bleach est mort], we read also that, “[s]eeing his name plastered all over Facebook, Vernon does not immediately grasp the significance” [Vernon, en voyant son nom se répéter sur Facebook, ne percute pas tout de suite] (Despentes 2019, 20; 2016a, 30–31). Despentes winks at the reader, for neither will they “immediately grasp the significance” of Alex Bleach—his omnipresent name, his music, his death, his personhood—, a significance yet to unfold over nearly twelve hundred pages, extending to the “twilight of the third millennium” [crépuscule du troisième millénaire], per the trilogy’s epilogue (Despentes 2021b, 370; 2018, 406).

This section therefore turns its attention to Alex Bleach and his presence-absence in both diegetic and non-diegetic spaces and discusses what is at stake in that silence. In the trilogy Alexandre Bleach has a gravitational pull—he has a larger-than-life, mythological presence which sets the world of *Vernon Subutex* in motion, even (and especially) after he dies. He is a mixed-race Black French character who becomes a celebrity rock and punk musician in the 1990s. He is reportedly found dead at the very start of the first novel—drowned (a combination of alcohol and pain medication) in a hotel bathtub. The image of Diouana’s place of death in the bathtub comes to mind again here. Across the story arc of the trilogy, Alex Bleach’s death is the figurative black hole that pulls apart space and time, on the one hand opening “cracks in the master map of global capitalism” (Armstrong 2019, 116), through which Vernon and his circle will start to fall and on the other hand paving the way for the opening of fantastical portals to

other alien, post-mortem, and divine worlds. Alex Bleach's exploration of "alpha waves" apparently enables him to tap into an undiscovered energy, and this energy becomes critical for the metaphysical recalibration of earthly life and human survival.

On the personal level, Alexandre Bleach was at times a friend, lover, enemy, idol, and enigma in the subjective view of each of the trilogy's many characters. Alex Bleach was many things to many people, and as a major celebrity he was certainly highly mediated. The memory of Alex Bleach, too, is mediated, especially for the reader who is only able to glean what or who Alex Bleach was through the representations made by others. Moreover, even when Alex Bleach records himself alone for several hours and provides an autobiographical account of his life (what becomes the missing Bleach tapes), this self-representation is only transmissible to the reader through yet another medium, another ghost: Alex's testimony is ultimately a transcription of an audio-visual recording which is, in other words, an imperfectly rendered trace of a voice far removed from its body.

For all of Alexandre Bleach's significance to the plot of the novels and to the way that the novels configure racialized society, there is a notable silence when it comes to interpretation and analysis of Bleach on the part of readers, reviewers, and scholars engaging with the *Vernon Subutex* trilogy. Even at the level of general public engagement, which is quite active, one can search today to find dozens of articles, blog posts, and book reviews that scrutinize the meaning behind the name "Vernon Subutex" and learn, for example, that it was a Facebook pseudonym that Virginie Despentes had used for some time, and that "Subutex" is the name of a drug used to treat opioid addiction. In contrast, an internet search for Alexandre Bleach may bring up various reviews of the trilogy, but none that lean into a deeper curiosity about the character. This section explores Alex Bleach and his overwhelming presence and absence in the text and reads them

alongside the silences and evasions surrounding the text in his regard. From having examined the social, authorial, and scholarly contexts shaping discussions of race in the field of French literature and more broadly, one might anticipate the kind of hesitancy with which readers and scholars prone to race-avoidance might respond to a character being *mixed-race Bleach*. In what follows, I show that race is precisely that which one cannot avoid when talking about Alexandre Bleach—for he is *mixed-race Bleach*, implying that he is identified in or by whiteness but not “naturally” white. The name “Bleach” emphasizes, on the one hand, the role of hypodescent and anxieties about racial mixture in Alex Bleach’s racial genealogy (his mother is white, and it is never explicitly mentioned that his father is Black). Additionally, the name “Bleach” alongside the slurs “Oreo” or “Bounty” underscore the way that Alex Bleach’s cultural-political identifications with Blackness were criticized by those who viewed his punk and rock music celebrity as his affiliation with whiteness.

Alexandre Bleach is, in fact, a tribute of sorts to the Black American pop star Whitney Houston whose racial identity, among other parts of her life, was also intensely scrutinized by the media in profoundly harmful ways. In conjunction with the hypervisibility—racial and otherwise—attendant to Bleach’s celebrity and over-exposure, it may be worth examining the formal, narrative construction of his presence/absence in the novel, particularly through the tape recording of his testimony. Alexandre Bleach’s lost-and-found tape recordings are a complex, racially- and diegetically-layered text that charts a series of scrambled binaries of black and white, real and representation, voice and body, self and other. These binaries, however scrambled, remain insistently structured rubrics of difference along psychic, textual, embodied, and oral/aural lines. As a result of how the singular tape-recording chapter is constructed, I argue

that the faint record of Alex bleach's voice draws Virginie Despentès's racialized, authorial, embodied presence closer to haunt the text.

### *A Contemporary French "Tragic Mulatto" Story*

Bleach's tape-recorded testimony reproduces a storyline of mixed-race Blackness along the lines of a "tragic mulatto/a" trope set in twenty-first-century, post-racial France. The "tragic mulatto/a" narrative trope features a transatlantic character dating back through the nineteenth century, and its prevailing significance in the twenty-first century is a testament to the durability of racial (racist) imaginaries.<sup>75</sup> A key element of the trope is the "tragedy" of racial mixedness. In arguably the most prominent version of the "tragic mulatto/a" trope, the mixed-race hero or heroine (and the narrative is often gendered, featuring a mixed-race woman) faces the revelation of Blackness where it was not initially suspected—for example, crisis may befall a light-skinned woman, passing as white woman, when her genealogy is revealed to have Black ancestry and her inheritance, marriage, motherhood, and social standing fall into disarray as a result. It is important to acknowledge that this is not the only strain of the racial trope, as Black writers—and Black women writers in particular—have narrated alternatives for mixed-race Black people where Blackness is celebrated.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Marlène L. Daut traces the French colonial origins of the transatlantic "tragic mulatto/a" trope to the early-nineteenth century, Victor Séjour's "Le Mulâtre" or "The Mulatto," published in Paris in 1837. See Marlène L. Daut's "'Sons of White Fathers': Mulatto Vengeance and the Haitian Revolution in Victor Séjour's 'The Mulatto'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (June 2010), pp. 1-37. See also Daut's *Tropics of Haiti: Race and the Literary History of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World, 1789-1865*, Liverpool University Press: 2015, pp. 345-372. See also Zélie Asava's *Mixed Race Cinemas: Multiracial Dynamics in America and France*, Bloomsbury Publishing: 2017, pp. 57-67, 163-165.

<sup>76</sup> The discussion of the "tragic mulatto/a" both here and in chapter 3 (in *Ladivine* by Marie NDiaye) warrants an expansion of analyses beyond these instances of Black rejection, which are not representative of all writings on mixed-race protagonists. See for example Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892) and *Minnie's Sacrifice* (1869). In addition to extending analyses to works written by Black women writers in particular, future research on earlier French works theorizing race and racial mixture could also include Victor Hugo's *Bug-jargal* (1826) and Gustave de Beaumont's *Marie, ou l'esclavage aux Etats-Unis* (1835).

In the twenty-first-century French context, Alex Bleach does not pass as white on the basis of his skin color, but because of the illusion of race-avoidance. In other words, the fantasy of race-avoidance is racial erasure. Alex Bleach's Blackness can therefore be revealed to him by some other means than phenotype. In his own convoluted re-telling, he attributes the revelation of Blackness to his celebrity and its attendant hypervisibility:

I had my share of success. And I discovered I was black. I don't see how I could have been expected to work it out before, being raised by a blond mother in a village in Creuse. Yeah, sure, people sometimes called me Snow White and [made me eat snow laughing at the contrast it made with my skin],<sup>77</sup> yeah, I was the only black kid in the class. But I was good at soccer. Like a black guy—not that anyone said that at the time. I never really had any grief in the playground: everyone wanted me on their team. I concentrated on whatever worked. What else are you supposed to do when, in your mother's eyes, you are the embodiment of sin, of the fall? I grew up to be a white guy like everyone else. (Despentes 2020, 116–17)<sup>78</sup>

Bleach recalls two separate moments during which he was conscious of being Black—the “first” after he became famous as an adult, and the “second” when he was a child in school. At the same time, he asserts that he “grew up to be a white guy,” or that, to translate the French directly, he “became a white guy” [je suis devenu un Blanc]. The binary racial terms “Black” and “white” are insufficient for describing the kind of socio-cultural and embodied experiences he had growing up and then in his adult life when he became more publicly visible. This kind of binary phrasing evidences the compounding contradictions in racial logic, where 1) race is defined by terms that reinforce the notion of race-as-color, 2) race is tied to genealogical ancestry, 3) race is

---

<sup>77</sup> In the English translation, Wynne omits this line about forcing Bleach to eat snow, as the color of the snow contrasts with the color of his skin. Reasons for why Wynne would omit such a line are unclear.

<sup>78</sup> "J'ai eu du succès. Et j'ai appris que j'étais noir. Comment veux-tu que j'aie pensé à ça plus tôt, moi. Avec ma mère toute blondinette qui m'a élevé au fond de la Creuse. Bien sûr qu'on m'appelait Blanche-Neige, de temps à autre, pour me faire bouffer de la neige en rigolant du contraste avec ma peau de seul Noir de la classe. Mais j'étais bon au foot. Comme un Noir, mais à l'époque on ne me l'a pas fait remarquer. Dans la cour de l'école je n'ai pas eu souvent de problèmes : ils me voulaient tous dans leur équipe. Je me concentrais sur ce qui allait bien. Qu'est-ce que tu peux faire d'autre quand dans les yeux de ta propre mère tu représentes la faute et la chute ? Je suis devenu un Blanc comme les autres" (Despentes 2016b, 141–42).

culturally determined, situational, and constantly redefined based on a negotiation of the individual's self-perception and how they are perceived by others, and 4) race can operate contradictorily on all of these levels at once. The ostensibly simplistic, nominative meaning in the word "Bleach" spills quickly into the contradictions inherent in racial thought and a socially constructed Black/white binary—Alex Bleach is phenotypically dark; his mother is white and so, apparently, is his taste in music.<sup>79</sup>

The functioning yet illogical binary furthermore leads us to the universalist conundrum of race-avoidance in France, such that to be racialized as "Bleach" is actually very "French," intentionally accompanied by the quotation marks. That is to say that, by universalist terms, Alex Bleach is denied Blackness (Blackness is erased) yet also denied the unspoken law of whiteness that defines *French* without the quotation marks. In fact, Bleach himself points out the contradiction, claiming that when white people call him "Oreo cookie," the candy "Bounty" in French, his retort is that he is "descended from the Gauls, so fuck that" [Bounty. Et alors ? J'étais un descendant des Gaulois, et basta] (Despentes 2020, 116; 2016b, 141). Bleach (the character and the racial symbol) is therefore "French"—a false white. Also worthy of note is that the racist "Alex Bounty Bleach" nickname is the closest anyone actually gets to discussing the obvious racial play of his name. The racial play of "Bleach," even in these passages, is never directly spoken about, but well-protected by the veil of cynicism and humor.

---

<sup>79</sup> This is reminiscent of what James Spooner, American bi-racial director of the documentary *Afro-Punk* (2003), recalls about a similar interrogation:

Q. Are you black or punk?

A. I don't care, I choose PUNK FUCKING ROCK! [...]

Q. Are you black or punk?

A. PUNK ROCK! Fuck you for asking. [...]

Q. Are you black or punk?

A. Uh ...fuck me. [...]

Q. Are you black or punk?

A. Both (and yes, FUCK YOU.)

Forward by James Spooner in (Duncombe and Tremblay 2011, xiv–xvii)

Zélie Asava (2017), discussing interracial relationships and mixed-race representation in American and French film, writes, “[t]o recognize mixed-race identity is to acknowledge the politics of difference and the illogic of racial categories” (2017, 163). She states that, “‘Post-race’ politics in both countries have led to a popular colour-blind ideal, presented in various media forms [...]. But mixed characters still usually provide the ‘trouble in the text’ in visual media, evoking fears of cultural violation/creolization, just as racism endures in society” (161). Alexandre Bleach becomes a key figure of (racial) incomprehension, thus troubling those same politics of race-evasiveness. To be “mixed-race Bleach” is also, therefore, to experience an identity formed by the illogics of “color-blind” universalism that, to quote Tyler Stovall, “can at times also serve as an incubator for white identity” (2003, 66–67).

If it was “success” that brought about Alex Bleach’s realization of his racialization as Black, Bleach implies that this is because celebrity entails hypervisibility and the free-for-all identity prescriptions of others.

I was an open door—I was supposed to grant everyone access. [...] I’d be out somewhere and some loser would come up and say, ‘Oh, I’m not disappointed at all, you’re just how I imagined.’ Meaning I made a lot of mistakes in French, and the guy found that exotic. Or you’d get someone making that little pout of disappointment when you think something’s fake: ‘I expected you to be a bit more ethnic.’ (Despentes 2020, 120)<sup>80</sup>

He vents frustration at the liberty others take with prescribing an identity to him that plays out racist representations. He also critiques the essentializing expectation that his physical appearance and his cultural affinities (music production) be more predictably aligned. This includes racial-cultural alignment painted as “positive” representations—“a suggestion for my

---

<sup>80</sup> “J’étais une porte ouverte – je devais garantir l’accès à tout le monde. [...] J’étais quelque part et un tocard me félicitait « oh je ne suis pas déçu, c’est exactement comme ça que je vous imaginais ». Ça, Ça voulait dire que je fais beaucoup de fautes de français, le mec trouvait ça exotique. Ou au contraire, avec les lèvres un peu pincées par la déception que suscite le frelaté : « Je m’attendais à ce que vous soyez plus sauvage »” (Despentes 2016b, 147).

next record. Hip-hop. Reggae. Funk. Even fucking zouk. They'd listen to my records. They'd hear me play rock. I sold a shitload. And all they could think was 'world music'" (Despentes 2020, 118).<sup>81</sup> Speaking with journalist Angelique Chrisafis, Despentes mentioned two "seeds" for the *Vernon Subutex* trilogy: the 2008 financial crisis and the death of Whitney Houston (Chrisafis 2018).<sup>82</sup> Both Houston and Bleach are subjected to anti-Black racism from the perspective of white and non-Black listeners and fans who would seek to essentialize their racialization and their interest in ethnicized and racialized music. Moreover, they also receive a shared critique coming from a Black perspective, as they are nicknamed "Oreo" and "Bounty" (chocolate on the outside, coconut cream on the inside). Despentes recreates for Alexandre Bleach the mocking play on Whitney "Whitey" Houston through the nickname Alex "Bounty" Bleach. While she is not mixed-race like Alex Bleach, Whitney Houston's experience of the compounding hypervisibilities of celebrity as well as being a Black woman in a "white pop world" (Rose 2018) provide a comparable rubric to the kinds of racial commentary and political tensions Alex Bleach faced in what he identifies as the white music industry in general, though this could arguably be more pronounced in the specifically white punk world.

Bleach rejects the racial essentialism underlying music genres, but in the process of critiquing these racial "boundaries," his critique sometimes begins to lose nuance as his frustration grows.

---

<sup>81</sup> "il fallait que pour mon nouveau disque, il ait une suggestion. Hip hop. Reggae. Jazz. Funk. Jusqu'au zouk. Ils écoutaient mes disques. Ils entendaient single ethnique" (Despentes 2016b, 145).

<sup>82</sup> Vernon, the protagonist, was inspired by the mention of "a particular friend, who wasn't well known, who stayed in the shadows, but who some implied was [Whitney Houston's] mistress. That's where the idea came from of someone who wasn't well known but who was friends with a famous singer." Chrisafis, Angelique. 2018. "Virginie Despentes: 'What Is Going on in Men's Heads When Women's Pleasure Has Become a Problem?'" *The Guardian*, August 31, 2018, sec. Books. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/31/virginie-despentes-interview-baise-moi-vernon-subutex>.

The people who were angriest with me were other black guys. I'm a traitor. Alex "Oreo cookie" Bleach. [...] Blacks look down on me. I don't care. I can ignore them, I don't have to work with them. But there's no way to avoid white people. They're music journos, producers, booking agents, record producers, designers, photographers, they're the people who decide radio playlists. You can't ignore the boss man. You can't diss the white man. (Despentes 2020, 117)<sup>83</sup>

This is a strikingly lucid and self-deprecating moment, where Bleach capitulates to structural white supremacy and anti-Black racism yet seems not unaware of the power dynamics involved—and this, too, becomes a point of shame for him. With pained sarcasm, he muses, “People say it's no big deal, selling your soul is no big deal, you'll get it back, intact, at the end of the show” [On s'est dit vendre son âme c'est pas grave, on la récupérera, intacte, à la fin du spectacle] (Despentes 2016b, 141; 2020, 116). Bleach's story is a painfully lucid one of compounding factors of loss of self: through celebrity, over-exposure, racial hypervisibility, and shame, against a backdrop of anti-Blackness and neoliberal capitalism. The tragedy and pessimism of Bleach's story is also the only story we have of him, preserved as he is post-mortem in the singular tape recording.

### ***“Swallowed up, body and soul”***

In Gerrick Kennedy's *Didn't We Almost Have It All: In Defense of Whitney Houston* (2022), he writes, “The sad truth is we'll never know. Just as we will never really know who Whitney was. The woman behind the voice was an enigma, and that state of unknowability is remarkable on its own given how much the concepts of fame and celebrity as we've always known them operate on overexposure and oversharing” (2022, introduction, n.p.). In the way

---

<sup>83</sup> “Les plus en colère contre moi, c'étaient d'autres Noirs. Je suis un traître. Alex Bounty Bleach. [...] Les Noirs sont ceux qui me méprisent le plus. Je m'en fous. Les Noirs, je peux les ignorer. Je n'ai pas besoin de travailler avec eux. Les Blancs, c'est impossible de les contourner. Ils sont les journalistes, les producteurs, les directeurs de salle, les tourneurs, les graphistes, les photographes, les responsables de programme de radio. On n'ignore pas le patron. On n'ignore jamais le Blanc” (Despentes 2016b, 143).

Kennedy describes her, Whitney came to him as a voice—or *The Voice*, as she was also known. But this voice, rather than being a more intimate representation of who Whitney was, is one more obscuring layer of representation. The voice is yet another façade behind which Whitney—Alex Bleach’s tributary—lived.

When Vernon and the Subutex group have squeezed into La Hyène’s apartment for a viewing, at long last, of Alex Bleach’s final videotape testimony, it is his voice that we hear first. As the tapes begin to play, “gradually a silence falls and the living room is filled with the sound of Alex’s voice” [le silence se fait petit à petit, la voix d’Alex remplit le salon]. An image of his face comes next and fills the frame of the screen: “Then Alex’s face swims into frame” [Alors le visage d’Alex cherche le cadre] (Despentes 2016b, 133–34; 2020, 109). His physical and aural narrated entrance into the novel arrives with a paradoxical fullness: mediatized and out of time, Alex takes shape and takes up space in a way that only reminds us of his absence and containment. Despentes’s emphasis on the way that Alex’s voice “fills” the room recalls Dolar’s (2006) theory of the voice as “an excrescence” (2006, 73) or an outgrowth of the body. Alex Bleach’s bodily representation in this scene is rather ghostly, anticipating discussions of the spectral to which I will turn in chapter 3.

Then, from one chapter to the next, the novel abruptly changes in narrative form. What had been third-person narration and free-indirect discourse up until this point shifts to a direct representation of Alex’s speech—essentially a transcription. Building on the previous scene’s outgrowth of Alex Bleach’s aural body, Alex’s voice—or rather, the bodiless trace of Alex’s voice—temporarily becomes the full text of the novel itself. Bleach’s multi-media representation produces contradictory developments in his embodiment. In some ways, transcribing Bleach’s voice removes his material (aural and/or visual) body even further from the novel. On the other

hand, written text remains open and therefore vulnerable to the reader and to the reader's direct engagement. As a whole, the fragmented and mediatized representation of Alexandre Bleach's voice prolongs the dilemma that faced his physical body—exacerbated both by his celebrity and his racialization as Black. In fact, because the voice is often considered to embody “the very coincidence of the quintessential corporeality and the soul” (Dolar 2006, 71), the representation of Bleach's voice increases the tension between what feels as though it *should* be intimate (the soul) but, for some reason, is prevented from revealing itself in a space of intimacy and co-presence. Completely alone, right before his own death, he confesses his guilt to an absent audience. He confesses having sold out to the capitalist forces of the music industry, abandoning that original revolutionary spirit that fueled his art. Even more shamefully, he confesses cowardice and numbness at submitting to the idea that his lover Vodka Satana's death (a homicide) was “normal. Sad and pathetic” [Et au fond, j'ai trouvé ça normal. Dégueulasse et triste] (Despentes 2020, 131; 2016b, 159), despite the fact that “She'd told me a hundred times: ‘He said he was going to kill me and I don't know where to go where to hide he said he's going to kill me’” [Elle m'avait répété cent fois : « Il a dit qu'il allait me tuer et je ne sais pas où aller me cacher il a dit qu'il allait me tuer] (Despentes 2020, 131; 2016b, 159). In lieu of intimacy, in the sense of empathy and co-presence, Alex Bleach is hyper-exposed to guilt and shame.

Alex Bleach, marked by difference, does *not* get to embody the narrative form of blended narrator-character focalizations that every other character has known. This is unlike elsewhere in the novel where Despentes's writing suggests the author and reader could, in Elisa Bricco's words, “se glisse[r] dans la peau des autres” [slip into the skin of others] (Bricco 2019, para. 14), Alex Bleach's singular narrative control over his speech affords him a kind of unique impenetrability. Bleach's thoughts are candid and fluid (aided by a sleepless night and hard

substances), but his psyche cannot be tapped by a narrator slipping beneath the surface of conscious thought to expose what is otherwise left unsaid. In some ways, this might be seen as agential or even empowering. Without the need for a narrator, Alex's direct speech takes over the chapter right up to its edges with total disregard for a narrator-mediator who would have liked to facilitate the exchange between a character and reader. Furthermore, the recording begins with a direct address: "Remember, Vernon, we entered into rock music the way you enter a cathedral, and our story was a spaceship" [Souviens-toi, Vernon, on entrait dans le rock comme on entre dans une cathédrale, et c'était un vaisseau spatial, cette histoire] (Despentes 2020, 110; 2016a, 135).<sup>84</sup> Though the direct address to Vernon would position the reader as a more passive spectator, because Vernon is asleep on the couch, the reader is invited to move in closer and take the seat of the would-be interlocutor.

Against the overexposure and hypervisibility constantly bearing down upon Bleach, the fact of his narrative control over what (not) to disclose is socially and politically important. Bleach drives the content uninterrupted, able to build significant discursive momentum with Despentes's charismatic and manifesto-like style. He repeatedly challenges Vernon's unresponsiveness, brandishing his autonomy by calling attention to the absence of dialogue. "You asleep, Vernon? You're not even listening, are you? You asleep? C'mon, bro, wake up, how can you fucking sleep, you've put three grams up your nose!" (Despentes 2020, 113).<sup>85</sup> Vernon and Alex's asynchronous communication guarantees Alex a kind of safety from critique at the cost of delayed care or solidarity: "I'm glad you're asleep, you little shit, 'cuz otherwise I

---

<sup>84</sup> In Wynn's translation, "remember, Vernon," is placed in the middle of the phrase. I have shifted it to reflect the emphasis in French on the direct address.

<sup>85</sup> "Tu dors, Vernon ? Tu ne m'écoutes pas ? Tu dors ? Vas-y, réveille-toi, t'as trois grammes dans le nez, comment tu peux dormir ?" (Despentes 2016b, 139).

couldn't bitch like this" [Je suis content que tu dormes, connard, sinon je ne pourrais pas me plaindre comme ça] (Despentes 2020, 118; 2016b, 145). Despentes unsettles the positive correlations one might expect between a speaker's rehabilitated narrative agency, an interlocutor's empathy, and the speaker's resulting empowerment. Non-communication—not empathy—is a pre-requisite for Bleach's narrative agency. "I need to talk, and you're zonked out. I like that about you – you're never in time, but never really off-beat. You're a syncopated guy" [J'ai besoin de parler et toi tu pionces. J'aime bien ça, chez toi—t'es jamais sur le temps, ni franchement décalé. T'es syncope, comme type] (Despentes 2020, 123; 2016b, 150). Bleach's monologue verbalizes his unspoken fears, guilt, and shame, along with his belief that all of these horrible feelings take root in the fact of that he consciously submitted to a violent system of oppression. The recording is a non-communicative space where autonomy does not equate to either control or power, but where freedom is circumscribed to a specific kind of missed opportunity—Alex Bleach does not risk being either recognized or understood, and therefore he is able, finally, to confess.

I will conclude with thoughts on the racialized nature of this aural, textual, (dis)embodied encounter between Alexandre Bleach and Virginie Despentes. In whatever way one views Despentes's use of mediatization—protecting, exposing, exploiting, or advocating for the Other—it is fair to say she has constructed narrative limits and traversed them. Once again, Despentes's work raises the question of racial (and gender) crossing—particularly the ventriloquism of a Black man's voice by a white woman. The construction of the text invites an awareness of Despentes own positionality as a white French woman who writes within, along, and across racialized ontologies. It is impossible to deny the psychic presence of race in

Despentes's writing, especially when she drafts a full-blown narration of Alex Bleach's coming to racial consciousness, complete with his own experiences of reading Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la Terre* at the behest of a girl he dated who was "intense sur les questions postcoloniales" (Despentes 2016b, 143).<sup>86</sup> Despentes, as the author, emphasizes racial difference in narrative form—delineating the scope of Bleach's existence on several mediated levels—and then proceeds ahead with her own authority to construct and cross those differentials in order to "être le monde" [to be the world] or to "se fondre dans le monde" [to blend in with the world; literally to melt into the world] (Librairie Mollat 2015). Yet as the author "melts" into the world, her own whiteness, embodiment, and authorial presence becomes more perceivable. For example, the removal of even the narrator's voice brings the author's bare hand more heavily upon the character's bared voice. From a technical perspective, Bleach's recording should directly attest to an empirically documented reality of sound, giving the illusion that Alex Bleach's story was mechanically, automatically generated. But the novelist's authorial work reminds the reader that to write this way is not a work of empirical documentation but of stylistic technique. On either side of the medium of this written text, the virtual ghost of Alex Bleach grows fainter while the phantom presence of the author gains perceivable mass.

---

<sup>86</sup> The entanglement of Alex Bleach's race-conscious journey in Despentes's own journey to race-consciousness reminds me of the messy scenario in which Frantz Fanon read Jean-Paul Sartre's reading of the négritude poets through which Sartre, in Fanon's words, "destroyed black zeal" (Fanon 2000, 135).

### Chapter 3

#### **Spectrality: Writing the Imperfectly Imperceivable in Marie NDiaye's *Ladivine***

As a logical follow up to discussions of racial hypervisibility and invisibility in chapters one and two, this chapter pursues the question of reading race through the lens of spectrality. Spectrality is a compelling term for its wide applicability to the way that perception and classification work together in the race-making process. This dissertation project has been written against the backdrop of a specifically French type of race avoidance that continues to hold sway in French social, political, and intellectual life. Race may be a social construct without any grounding in biological reality, but neither this nor an attitude of staunch denial changes the fact that race is still perceived and interpreted along hierarchical power structures with very real consequences.

Though chapters one and two structured their respective analyses around racial hypervisibility and racial invisibility as two distinct aesthetic states, both Diouana and Alex Bleach's stories demonstrate the ways in which racial hypervisibility can equate to socio-political invisibility and result in representations of immateriality. We have seen glimpses of spectral states of incomplete racial erasure already, for example in chapter two with the afterlife of Alexandre Bleach—in life a hypervisible celebrity, in death a voice that hides a body that is always marked by racial difference. His singular absence opens wide the socio-economic cracks of Parisian life and, at the same time, rescues various members of this nearly all-white society by pulling them into new forms of social belonging, the epitome of which occurs as his spirit moves through the dancing crowds.

Spectrality in the very broad way that I am using it refers largely to the visual and haptic perception of what is visually and physically not fully there. It usefully characterizes states of incomplete erasure, willed ignorance, and other insufficient schemata of “not seeing” race. France’s so-called “color-blind” approach to race haunts Marie NDiaye’s texts in exemplary fashion, as so many of her characters are disoriented by this consistent uncertainty with regard to their racialization. While this final chapter will focus primarily on one of Marie NDiaye’s texts, it is worth mentioning the extent to which NDiaye’s impressive corpus of “inhospitable fictions”<sup>87</sup> have problematized the difficult expressions of racialized pain in a language and a society that has willed itself into only representing race’s non-existence. From “glittering” [miroitant] blackness in the play *Papa doit manger* (2003, 11); to an indescribable difference of appearance that expels Fanny from her place within the family in the novel *En famille* (1990); to the “flavor of a certain mystery” [la saveur d’un certain mystère] in the form of two *métisses* sisters, one “nearly white,” the other “almost black” [la fille quasi blanche et la fille presque noire] (2008, 10); NDiaye’s characters and stories are filled with troubled perceptions and spectral racialization.

The analytical structure of the final chapter relies on spectrality not only because it looks at historically denied or forgotten narratives of anti-Black racism in France, but because certain patterns of racial non-recognition in the novel *Ladivine* are variations on structures from previous texts. Marie NDiaye’s works are commonly studied comparatively because of the ways in which each of her texts carries ideas over from one to the next, and I will selectively reference texts from her corpus throughout this chapter. As Christine Jérusalem points out, we can see just how coherent the universe of Marie NDiaye is [“On voit par là combien l’univers de Marie

---

<sup>87</sup> Jordan, Shirley. 2017. *Marie NDiaye: Inhospitable Fictions*. Cambridge: Legenda.

NDiaye est cohérent”] (2009, 91). This “universe” of Marie NDiaye is vast. She is a prolific writer, having published her first novel *Quant au riche avenir* in 1985 at the age of seventeen. She has gone on to write a dozen more since, winning the Prix Femina in 2001 for *Rosie Carpe* and the Prix Goncourt for *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009), gaining international visibility throughout with the long-listing of *Trois femmes puissantes* for the Man Booker International prize. In addition to publishing several short stories, NDiaye has also authored mixed-media pieces (*La Naufragée: J. M. W. Turner* (1999) includes fragmented images of Turner’s painting *Slavers throwing over the dead and dying—typhon coming on* (1840), and *Autoportrait en vert* (2005) is a photobook novella), penned several plays (the award winning *Hilda* (1999) and *Papa doit manger* (2003), which was performed at the Comédie-Française), and co-wrote the screenplay for Claire Denis’s *White Material* (2009). *Ladivine* (2013) is NDiaye’s tenth novel, and it falls into NDiaye’s second cycle, per Andrew Asibong’s cataloguing, a period marked by NDiaye’s establishment as a “mainstream literary star” during which she “began to push her exploration of blankness in the direction of emotional recognition and healing as well as something occasionally resembling politicizable representation” (2013a, 30). Consistent with NDiaye’s corpus as a whole, *Ladivine* revisits the author’s thematic preoccupations with parental estrangement and familial rejection, suppressing emotional expression to an absolute minimum, perceived or real social stigmatization, and an anxious self-awareness in anticipation of the way even the smallest of actions could produce untold number of reactions (often the predictable ones are the most painful) from others.

In the novels *Quant au riche avenir*, *En famille*, and *Rosie Carpe* for example, it is the parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents who are missing or who disavow the child, unlike in *Ladivine* where the daughter is the one to reject her genealogy. To continue this brief detour on

*En famille*, the eighteen-year-old protagonist, Fanny (whose real name is not Fanny, but her family refuses to call her by anything else), seeks familial recognition from her contemptuous Aunt Colette and coldly indifferent mother, but there is something about the young woman's physical appearance that prevents anyone from recognizing her. Misrecognition escalates to blatantly ignoring Fanny at the dinner table during her grandmother's birthday party. When Fanny stands up and gives a lengthy, impassioned speech about tracking down her missing Aunt Leda (it is hinted that Leda was marked by some kind of racial transgression as well and could even be Fanny's mother), everyone continues on as though nothing had happened. Her cousin Eugène gazes into space with his mouth wide open and teeth showing, while her Aunt Colette, supposedly "without realizing it," pushes Fanny "towards the corner of the table. [...] She had forgotten Fanny's presence at her side; her hands waved back and forth with such gesticulations that Fanny had to keep moving her chair to avoid being hit" (NDiaye 1997a, 14–15).<sup>88</sup> The refusal of familial recognition often seems poorly disguised, as though everyone doing it realizes the unpleasantness of this behavior, yet no one seems able to resist the meanness and unnaturalness of the exercise.

Fanny is never explicitly racialized as non-white, but her exclusion is based in a stigmatized physical appearance that links her to her "foreign" father, to the indiscernible faces of the working- and lower-classes, and to her lover named George whom she resembles and whose family is very accepting of her. Clarissa Behar (2013) has written of NDiaye's use of the word "singularité" as a broadly applied euphemism for non-white racialization that, when used as a refusal to racialize physical appearances, contrasts with the sharply defined descriptions given of the bodies of the white members of Fanny's family: a slew of red, purple, and pink

---

<sup>88</sup> "Tante Colette, sans s'en apercevoir, la poussait peu à peu vers le coin de la table, par de grands gestes nerveux." (NDiaye 1990, 16)

fleshy faces and lips “come to “color” whiteness in the process of incarnation in NDiaye's texts” (29).<sup>89</sup> Eugène’s “glowing pink, rather soft mouth” [sa bouche toute rose, luisante, un peu molle] and “pink flesh” [la chair rose] become fetish-like in Fanny’s constant awareness of them as she pursues her missing Aunt Leda in the hope of finding something, anything, that will link her more tightly to the family that rejects her (NDiaye 1997a, 40, 41; 1990, 49, 51).

It is only after Fanny’s “first death” (she is killed by the family dogs during a wedding) and resurrection in a new body that her Aunt Colette considers Fanny, finally, to belong in the family. Aunt Colette remarks, “For though I still called her Fanny, I found nothing to fault in that face and I even managed to find in it a vague resemblance to my own, which has the typical features of our family” [Car, si je l’appelais encore Fanny, je n’avais rien à reprocher à ce visage-là, auquel je parvenais même à trouver une vague ressemblance avec le mien, qui présente les traits typiques des visages de notre famille] (NDiaye 1997a, 171; 1990, 211). Via Aunt Colette, Fanny’s name is obliquely used as a way to differentiate between Fanny’s “real” identity and the version of the young woman that remains unacceptable in the family’s eyes. Aunt Colette finds this new Fanny in a forest, surrounded by “a pink halo” [au cœur d’un halo rosâtre] and now appearing to have a “whitish colouring” [teinte blanchâtre] (NDiaye 1997a, 171, 172; 1990, 211). Her exclusion is thus (temporarily) resolved, but she will eventually resume her previous appearance when her parents still disown her. Approaching her second death, Fanny literally grows invisible when another cousin encourages her to change back once again to a whitened form. In the end, Aunt Colette proceeds to carry Fanny’s “imperceptible silhouette” [l’imperceptible silhouette] out to the shed, laying Fanny down and “carefully closing the door

---

<sup>89</sup> “[T]oute une série de précisions sur la couleur du « visage rougeaud » des habitants du village de la famille maternelle de Fanny, du « crâne violacé » de l’oncle maternel de Fanny, ou de la « chair rose d’Eugène », entre autres, viennent « colorer » cette blancheur raciale en train de s’incarner dans les textes de NDiaye” (Behar 2013, 29).

so the dog could not get in” [en fermant soigneusement la porte afin que le chien ne pût entrer], telling only her son Eugène about Fanny’s lamentable state (NDiaye 1997a, 252; 1990, 305–6).<sup>90</sup>

*Ladivine* will develop some of the formulations of mixed-race tragedy that *En famille* has provided as a kind of benchmark text. In particular, NDiaye will take Fanny’s family’s rejections of her, resulting in her disintegration, and alter the directions of familial rejection from the daughter towards her mother. NDiaye will also invest deeply in the psychological complexities of intentional self-deadening in *Ladivine*. Unlike Fanny, to whom things seem to happen, Clarisse/Malinka takes full responsibility for bringing about her own disintegration. In *Ladivine*, Malinka/Clarisse, the protagonist of part one, makes it her “very mission in life” [la mission même de toute son existence] (NDiaye 2017, 3; 2013, 12) to prevent anyone from ever knowing who her mother was so as to avoid anyone’s recognition of the physical similarities she might have inherited. Beyond the abundant explorations of self-referentiality and palimpsestic revisions of her own themes (a limited selection of which will be considered shortly), NDiaye’s writing is also remarkably open to and resonant with the other works studied in this dissertation. This particular chapter on the novel *Ladivine* revisits missing persons, the “tragic mulatta” trope, barking dogs, and encountering the limits of social scripts. Moreover, the tangible and intangible of Frantz Fanon’s body and memory hover, specter-like, over NDiaye’s text.

One of the objectives in this chapter is to apprehend the dehumanizing paradoxes unfolding in a racial system of double denials. I do not focus on what might be considered more “productive” formations of French Blackness—viewed politically or otherwise—that move toward positive recognition and individual and group identity formation, rather than only

---

<sup>90</sup> I have altered the English translation from “faint silhouette” to “imperceptible” to retain the paradox of Fanny’s in/visible state.

negation. These other conversations reside in rather close quarters with Marie NDiaye's work, given that her brother, Pap Ndiaye, published a breakthrough historical and sociological text for Black Studies in French: *La Condition Noire: essai sur une minorité française*.<sup>91</sup> In order to think with Marie NDiaye and spectral representations of race, I linger in what is much more pessimistic, antisocial, and politically faltering.

The analyses in this chapter are divided into two parts. The first part focuses on rejections of Black and African identity in tandem with the suppression and loss of French colonial memory. The second part draws connections to images, scenes, and paradigms from other stories of racialization where many of these connections have been severed or disavowed. I begin part one with an overview of the author's very public negotiations of race, in particular her rejections of the labels African and Black, as her stances provide another point of comparison for the novel's dramatization of Clarisse/Malinka's life-long mission to not be identified as Black.<sup>92</sup> I then focus on moments where NDiaye rather brutally cuts off her character's awareness of social, historical, political mechanisms of power, while at the same time hemming them in with racist, colonialist symbols and discourse. NDiaye explores a world in which colonialism triumphs over the life of the mind. Frantz Fanon returns again in this first half of the chapter as a

---

<sup>91</sup> For an introduction to Black France, see also Keaton, Trica Danielle, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Tyler Edward Stovall, eds. 2012. *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*. Durham: Duke University Press.; Stovall, Tyler Edward. 1996. *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.; Thomas, Dominic Richard David. 2007. *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism*. African Expressive Cultures. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.; and recently Soumahoro, Maboula. 2020. *Le triangle et l'hexagone: réflexions sur une identité noire*. Paris: La Découverte.

<sup>92</sup> To the American reader in particular, it is possible that Marie NDiaye's public refusals to identify as Black or African come across more as a wholesale rejection of Blackness than as a complicated question of diasporic identity formation. In his work on the Black French diaspora, historian Tyler Stovall has argued that members of the Black French diaspora often exhibit a greater sense of loyalty to the idea of universalism than other Black diasporic subjects. This tension could also be further explored alongside the recent translation of Maboula Soumahoro's (2020) *Le triangle et l'hexagone: réflexions sur une identité noire* into English by Kaiama Glover, with the new title, *Black is the Journey, Africana the Name*. Critical South. Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity.

critical anchor, this time especially in his role as psychoanalyst. I pursue Fanonian thought in the remainder of the chapter as well, charting out three key moments of racialized subject formation/disintegration in *Ladivine*. In my attempt to bring the absurd events of the novel into socio-historical coherence, I read these scenes as echoes of previous moments with the aim of strengthening the imperfectly erased memory of colonialism and racism's socio-historical mechanism.

### **Plot Summary**

I provide a plot summary of NDiaye's novel *Ladivine* for those who are unfamiliar with the storyline. *Ladivine* presents several intimately haunted narratives that coalesce around the repression of personal and inter-generational familial traumas—often profound, psychic failures of connection between spouses, parents, and children, with a particular emphasis on mothers and daughters. The first-generation's mother is Ladivine Sylla. Her daughter (the second generation) disowns her in a move we gather to be race- and class-motivated and changes her name from Malinka Sylla to Clarisse. Known by the name Clarisse, who insists she has no mother, Malinka/Clarisse can pass as white. Clarisse marries the white, French car salesman Richard Rivière and, though she never introduces her mother Ladivine to anyone, names their daughter Ladivine. This young Ladivine (third generation) also grows rather estranged from her impenetrable, secretive mother, and moves to Berlin with her husband. Richard Rivière leaves Clarisse after decades of marriage due to the emotional and psychological toll that her secrecy and impenetrability has had on their relationship. Clarisse eventually starts a new relationship with an abused and troubled man named Freddy Moliger who, in some ways restoratively, accepts Clarisse as Malinka and actually goes with her to see her disavowed mother Ladivine.

Cutting short Malinka's painful return to life and social connection, Freddy Moliger brutally murders her in an explosion of anger after being offended by Clarisse's daughter Ladvine. In her dying moments, Malinka/Clarisse describes drifting into a dark forest.

The daughter Ladvine awaits Freddy Moliger's murder trial while on vacation with her family in an unnamed yet vaguely African location (hinted to be grandmother Ladvine's birthplace), during which odd things—*déjà vus*, murderous semi-hallucinations, and uncontrollable irritability and fatigue—disturb the family's attempt to properly "vacation." In typical Ndiayan oneiric fashion, the vacation ends (if it hadn't already) when Ladvine follows what she believes to be her dead mother's voice into a forest, lies down, and morphs into or merges with a familiar dog. Ladvine is never seen in human form by her family again. Back in Berlin, Annika (fourth generation), Ladvine's daughter, recognizes her mother in the dog that waits for her across the street when she leaves to go to school.

In France, the mother Ladvine Sylla testifies at Freddy Moliger's trial, noting that her daughter Malinka did seem happy with Mr. Moliger. Following the trial, she invites her ex-son-in-law Richard Rivière—whom she had never met before the trial—to her home. She hears a scratching sound at the door, opens it, and lets in a dog who, she is convinced, bears the beating heart of her daughter Malinka.

### **Colonial Memory and Being Not-Not-African**

#### *The Author*

Where the works studied in the first two chapters of this dissertation called for challenging scholarly reading practices of *not* reading race in francophone cultural expression, the case of Marie NDiaye stands as a notable departure. NDiaye's works and personal presence

in the French literary world have been scrutinized for racial meaning unlike any other.<sup>93</sup> Despite and perhaps in part because of NDiaye’s adamant public statements of *not* belonging to any identity but that of being exclusively French [“exclusivement Française”] (NDiaye 1997b, 68) and of *not* being able to view herself as a Black woman [“Je n’arrive pas à me voir, moi, comme une femme noire”] (Asibong and Jordan 2009, 199) regardless of social, political, or historical prescriptions of race, it becomes fairly impossible when talking about Marie NDiaye *not* to address those very rubrics of citizenship and race against which she is always read. Her rejection of Black identity significantly arises from a context in which journalists and scholars have insisted, often with little nuance, upon NDiaye’s Blackness as a predetermined starting point. These comments typically involve facile remarks that collapse Africanness and Blackness—already exceedingly broad terms—into a single notion and lead NDiaye to contest the claim. She famously sent a letter in 1992 (when she was roughly 25 years old) to a French professor who intended to classify her as a francophone African writer, to which she responded that she could not be classified as such and was slightly concerned that he might be studying other writers as “superficially African” as she [“des romancières aussi superficiellement africaines que je le suis”] (NDiaye 1992). These kinds of exchanges continue, for example, following the publication of *Ladivine* in 2013, when Tirthankar Chanda, writing for RFI (Radio France Internationale), spoke to NDiaye:

---

<sup>93</sup> See Moudileno, Lydie. 2013. “Marie NDiaye : entre visibilité et réserve.” In *Une femme puissante: l’œuvre de Marie NDiaye*, edited by Cornelia Ruhe and Daniel Bengsch, 159–75. Brill-Rodopi. This is not to say that readings of NDiaye’s works only ever read race. To the contrary, several scholars intimate their surprise at how long one needed to “wait” for criticism to address the issues of racialization in NDiaye’s early work. See Asibong, Andrew. 2013. “The Spectacle of Marie NDiaye’s *Trois Femmes Puissantes*.” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 50, no. 3 (September): 385–98. <https://doi.org/10.3828/AJFS.2013.28>; Burnautzki, Sarah. 2013. “Jeux de visibilité et d’invisibilité : la production romanesque de Marie NDiaye à la lumière de la crise du républicanisme français.” In *Une femme puissante: l’œuvre de Marie NDiaye*, edited by Daniel Bengsch and Cornelia Ruhe, 141–57. Brill-Rodopi. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401209700>; and Behar, Clarissa. 2013. “Écrire en pays à majorité blanche : *En famille* de Marie NDiaye.” In *Une femme puissante: L’œuvre de Marie NDiaye*, edited by Daniel Bengsch and Cornelia Ruhe, 125–40. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401209700>.

TC: You were born to a Senegalese father and a French mother. Does this Black origin determine your writing?

MN: No, I write neither as a woman, nor as a Black woman. I do not define myself as a Black woman, born in France in 1967. These are facts of no importance when it comes to my writing. I write as a human being. (Chanda 2013)<sup>94</sup>

These exchanges are predictably rehearsed in NDiaye's many interviews, such that interviewers even preface the question by anticipating NDiaye's rejection of the identitarian claim:

AR: You don't like when people define you as born to an African father and a French mother...

MN: That reflects an image which is not mine. My father went back to Africa when I was a year old. I never lived with him. I grew up in the suburbs, I am 100% French, vacationing in la Beauce... People incorrectly think that I have dual citizenship, dual culture. (Raya 2009)<sup>95</sup>

This line of questioning becomes so common that Andrew Asibong notes NDiaye's preemptive distancing from Blackness in his own interview with the author. She rejected any identification with Blackness, "despite [Asibong's] open question about attitudes to 'race' not, in fact, having asked for any such self-definition" (Asibong 2013a, 7). It is notable that the term "African" is always evoked first—the initial identification of difference being framed as one of geographical, national, and of course postcolonial relation to France—before making the uncritically seamless transition into Blackness.

Much commentary (including entire dissertations) has been dedicated to understanding both NDiaye's literary content and her public statements as perplexing reflections of a "bad faith" self-declaration and of the illusion of racelessness in the construction of French

---

<sup>94</sup> "[TC:] Vous êtes née d'un père sénégalais et d'une mère française. Est-ce que cette origine noire détermine votre écriture ? [MN:] Non, je n'écris ni en tant que femme, ni en tant que femme noire. Je ne me définis pas comme une femme noire, née en France en 1967. Ce sont des notions factuelles qui n'ont pas d'importance, s'agissant de mon écriture. J'écris en tant qu'être humain."

<sup>95</sup> "Aurélié Raya: Vous n'aimez pas que l'on vous définisse comme née de père africain et de mère française... Marie NDiaye: Cela renvoie une image qui n'est pas la mienne. Mon père est rentré en Afrique quand j'avais 1 an. Je n'ai jamais vécu avec lui. J'ai grandi en banlieue, je suis 100 % française, avec les vacances dans la Beauce... On pense à tort que j'ai la double nationalité, la double culture. Mais je ne suis pas gênée que l'on dise de moi au Sénégal que je suis africaine."

republicanism (Asibong 2013b; Behar 2011; Burnautzki 2013; Jensen 2017; Moudileno 2009). The exchanges between NDiaye and journalists are trademarked with paradoxes and contradictions, where the rules of “not seeing color” (especially vis-à-vis the creation of art, for which French criticism has notoriously battled for independence from political identity) are repeatedly broken when it comes to Marie NDiaye, thus resulting in the peculiar situation where NDiaye herself momentarily becomes *the* champion of a raceless, specifically non-Black, Frenchness.

Though negation has largely come to characterize Marie NDiaye’s public figure, discourses around difference and multiculturalism began to change both for NDiaye and for the literary marketplace in the 2000s and 2010s, particularly with the publication of *Trois femmes puissantes*. The rush to read the Africanness of this text has been labeled as a misreading,<sup>96</sup> yet at the same time, NDiaye could be seen changing her approach, no longer negating the racial, geographical, cultural labels of Blackness and Africanness as she typically had done before. As critics have argued, NDiaye’s “exotic” origins became a huge selling point, “transforming her from an artist generally characterized by relative invisibility, ordinariness and republican-style Frenchness into a brown-skinned poster girl for difference and diversity” (Asibong 2013b, 387–88). *Trois femmes puissantes* thus represented

[a]n exotic mode of perception *par excellence* which resorts to a communicative code tinged with stereotypes. The text corresponds to the postcolonial order of “marketing the margins” which wants texts to be consumer products that are relatively easy to access—and this is how it [*Trois femmes puissante*] won the Prix Goncourt in 2009. In adopting the normative literary aesthetic of francophone literature, i.e. *world literature*, the author herself seems to be voluntarily self-formatting [*auto-formatage*], linked, it seems to me, to the strategic choice of endorsing differentialist and multiculturalist discourse peddled

---

<sup>96</sup> “Despite occupying less than a quarter of the novel’s volume, Khady seems to take over every single extra-diegetic representation of *Trois femmes puissantes*. This is a book about asylum seekers and economic migrants, we are told, despite the fact that neither Norah’s nor Rudy’s story has anything to do with these issues. Khady’s story is discussed again and again, in breathless and admiring tones, as the main thing to retain about *Trois femmes puissantes*, this searing and apparently “realistic” tale about the horrors of African migration” (Asibong 2013b, 394).

by “la Francophonie.” This becomes for Marie NDiaye a possible means of access to literary recognition. (Burnautzki 2013, 152–53)<sup>97</sup>

In conjunction with Burnautzki, Asibong has argued that NDiaye’s “act of revelation and concealment [sometimes] seems playful and banal; at others, especially in more politically charged contexts, it seems irresponsible and almost offensive” (2013a, 14). Ultimately, scholars have been drawn to (to the point of possibly feeling thwarted by) the political flexibilities and co-optations that characterize the relationships between NDiaye, the literary marketplace, and the politics of race.

Adding NDiaye’s protagonists onto this dynamic of racial sensitivities, one finds a proper web of people anxiously exposed to and dependent on the racial literacies of others. Light-skinned characters like Clarisse/Malinka in *Ladivine* and Paula in “Les sœurs” avoid social encounters where they perceive others perceiving their Blackness, as they already anticipate that this racialization will play a determining role in the negative outcomes of the social situation. On the other hand, Victoire, Paula’s darker-skinned sister, refuses to perceive the ways in which she is perceived as Black. Bertini, the sisters’ white, male classmate (in love with Victoire) verbalizes the racism he witnesses Victoire being subjected to, and in response Victoire punishes him with a look of “glacial, controlled resentment” [ressentiment glacial, contrôlé], and proceeds to “flee,” to “escape” from Bertini’s presence [Elle se mit d’ailleurs à le fuir. Elle lui échappa] (NDiaye 2008, 14–15). In his analyses of NDiaye’s protagonists, Asibong usefully mobilizes the term “*blancness*” to mean a psychic negation (“blankness” in Freudian, Bionian, Winnicottian,

---

<sup>97</sup> “Mode de perception exotique par excellence et qui recourt à un code de communication teinté de stéréotypes, le texte de Marie NDiaye correspond à l’ordre postcolonial du « marketing the margins » qui veut que le texte soit un produit de consommation relativement facile d’accès et c’est ainsi qu’il a remporté en effet le Prix Goncourt en 2009. En s’approchant ainsi esthétiquement de la norme littéraire francophone, voire de la *littérature-monde*, l’auteure elle-même semble se soumettre volontairement à un autoformatage esthétique, relié, me semble-t-il, au choix stratégique d’endosser le discours différentialiste et multiculturaliste propagé par la Francophonie, qui devient pour Marie NDiaye une voie d’accès à une possible reconnaissance littéraire.”

or Giovacchinian forms) but which responds specifically to a racialized stigmatization.

*Blancness* therefore encapsulates the “attempted attainment of absolutely ‘post-racial’ being” wherein “those who are recognizably racialized as minority subjects [...] attemp[t] to evade this unwelcome (mis)recognition” (Asibong 2013a, 19–20). The resulting “(un)comfortably numb condition” (2013a, 20, 13–14) is a violent one indeed, where the subject is both subjected to and complicit in the deadening, the blanking out, of both knowledge and feeling with regards to the part of themselves that is split off by a racist and self-declared raceless society.

### *The Text*

In *Ladivine* as in her other works, Marie NDiaye has a way of exploiting the crudeness of absolutes, for example the ubiquity of the word “never,” and the purity of opposites, such as the Black-white race-as-color binary, or the devastating distinction between truth and lie. NDiaye has the unnerving skill of taking what is overly simplistic—in other words, a paradigm that would invite critical deconstruction—making it cause intense pain to a character, and locking this painful experience into non-linear time and psychological confusion such that a deconstructionist critique never fully arrives. The mixed-race protagonist Clarisse Rivière (formerly known by the name Malinka Sylla) must abide by an unforgiving mathematical formula: she “silently thought of her existence to come and imagined it wholly devoted to two commandments that were two aspects of one single charge, to renounce Malinka’s mother and adore Richard Rivière, but never to fail in even her tiniest duty towards either” (NDiaye 2017, 50).<sup>98</sup> Clarisse’s marriage to the white, French man, Richard Rivière, reinforces her ability to

---

<sup>98</sup> “elle considérait son existence à venir et se la figurait vouée à deux commandements qui étaient l’envers et l’endroit d’une même mission, renier la mère de Malinka et adorer Richard Rivière tout en ne manquant jamais, pour l’un comme pour l’autre, au moindre de ses devoirs.” (NDiaye 2013, 68)

pass as white, something she both admits and avoids ever actually saying (“elle ne se le disait pas mais elle savait”), for “that awareness never left her [...] the awareness that she was a married woman who would be named Clarisse Rivière until the end of her days, and never again, because now that was all over forever, a very young girl with no link to the world save the painful sense that she didn’t legitimately belong to it” (NDiaye 2017, 51–52).<sup>99</sup> Clarisse/Malinka represents a subject formation traumatically marked by the experiences of racism to the point that she internalizes it as a totalizing law of her world—there is no way to conceive of a positive, accepted sense of herself as Black. Her belonging in the (white) world, as is often the case in NDiaye’s worlds, is dependent upon familial belonging—either she is Black, inheriting this racialization genealogically from her mother, or she is white, given entry into Richard Rivière’s white family and racialized by the presumed ability for the couple to reproduce whiteness.<sup>100</sup> The problem is that her racialization as white is never a permanent status, and she loses this status when Richard leaves her for another woman, literally another Clarisse. She clings desperately to fixed absolutes (“until the end of her days,” “never again” “forever”) yet proceeds to live in a constant state of self-surveillance and paranoia, for she is presumably forever at risk of a second exile if her Blackness is re-revealed.

Every one of her actions is positioned as a reaction to the strict racial (racist) logics of “hypodescent,” as Clarisse Rivière’s story aligns with the narrative trope of the “tragic mulatta.”

---

<sup>99</sup> (NDiaye 2013, 69–70) “Et cette conscience ne la quittait pas, [...] d’être une femme mariée qui s’appellerait Clarisse Rivière jusqu’à la fin de ses jours et non plus, car c’était fini à jamais, une toute jeune fille que rien ne reliait au monde sinon le pénible sentiment de n’en faire pas légitimement partie.”

<sup>100</sup> My understanding of the sexual and racial politics of interracial kinship is primarily informed by scholarship in American Studies and is particularly influenced by Brigitte Fielder’s insight into the importance of white women’s unstable racialization. Further comparative work on interracial kinship and stories of re-racialized (white) women in the French context might build on these foundations alongside Camiscioli, Elisa. 2009. *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press.; and Vergès, Françoise. 2020. *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism*. Translated by Kaiama L. Glover. Theory in Forms. Durham: Duke University Press.

Both the law of hypodescent—the “one drop” rule that racializes as Black anyone with any supposed “quantity” of Black genealogical ancestry—and the tragic mulatta narratives are familiar racial structures in early American social and legal contexts. In this contemporary French context, one can quickly recognize the recurring belief in only negative representations of Blackness, and that Blackness is reproduced genealogically in a “‘downward’ direction” (Fielder 2020, 3). In Ladivine and Malinka/Clarisse’s case, Blackness is passed from the mother to the child (as in the 1662 colonial Virginia slavery law of *partus sequitur ventrem* where the child inherits the race and legal status—enslaved or free—of the mother). Clarisse’s story is a tragic, cautionary tale that emphasizes the unforgivable wrong she commits against Ladivine when she forces their relationship into silence. Clarisse never challenges her idolization of whiteness, but only feels increasing anguish at the thought of the bitter pain she has caused to her own mother.

“Malinka’s mother,” is another of the names Clarisse gives to her mother in a persistent movement away from that maternal relationship. The disavowal of her mother’s existence becomes Clarisse’s “very mission in life, which had no other purpose, she told herself, as resolute as she was evasive, than never to let it be known that Clarisse Rivière was Malinka, and that Malinka’s mother was not dead” (NDiaye 2017, 3).<sup>101</sup> The multi-clause sentence replicates the length to which Malinka/Clarisse will go linguistically, psychologically, socially, and physically to distance herself from her mother. Even before Malinka adopts the name “Clarisse,” she had taken on the habit of referring to her mother as “the servant” when speaking with classmates or teachers at school. This linguistic habit dominates what she calls her mother even in private thought. One should also note that taking a third-person perspective vis-à-vis herself

---

<sup>101</sup> “...dans la mission même de toute son existence qui n’avait d’autre sens, se disait-elle aussi évasive qu’implacable, que de dissimuler à tous que Clarisse Rivière s’appelait Malinka et que la mère de Malinka n’était pas morte” (NDiaye 2013, 12).

(“her mission [...] she told herself, as resolute as she was evasive”) hints at Clarisse’s fracturing selfhood in her efforts to split off those unwanted aspects of herself. This is underscored by the repeated proper names she gives herself which have a way “of becoming tokens of their distance,” as Thangam Ravindranathan puts it, “thought thus expressing its emergence from a place *outside* the intimacy of self-identity, or already hurtling away from it” (2020, 145–46). The externalization and estrangement of her proper name further plays out in the meanings associated with the name itself: “Clarisse” was, first of all, the name of an old classmate about whom the only detail Malinka can recall is that her hair was long and “fell down her back like a silky curtain” (NDiaye 2017, 29). In addition, “Clair(e),” French for “light (in color)” and “lisse,” meaning “smooth,” become the visible trademarks of the protagonist’s desired white, or whitened, racial embodiment (“son front était pale et lisse,” [her brow was pale and smooth]) (NDiaye 2017, 23, 68), as references to her pale and smooth skin are recurrent throughout part one of the novel.

Furthermore, “Malinka” is one letter removed from “Malinke,” a West African ethnic and linguistic group; and “Sylla,” Malinka’s family name, is a common West African surname. The short distance from “Malinka” to “Malinke” anticipates a slip from person to people, inviting a reading that links the two where that link would be quickly disavowed by the author herself, whose own surname has always signified foreignness through her Senegalese heritage in excess of her chosen identity and French citizenship. This distinction is the basis of Fatima El-Tayeb’s articulation of “European others,” an ongoing, (post)colonial, ethnonational ideology—and in the case of Europe, this is based on “postnational” identity—wherein those who are marked as non-white (here, by a linguistic linkage rather than a visual one) “are eternal newcomers, forever suspended in time, forever “just arriving,” defined by a static foreignness overriding both

individual experience and historical facts” (El-Tayeb 2011, xxv). The history of colonial politics, economics, and discourse that produce the “invisible racialization” El-Tayeb describes in her book are never pointed to as indications of what might have motivated the young Malinka to want desperately to abandon all association with her mother. As NDiaye wields the heavy-handedness of these names, repeatedly using the full and proper name in place of pronouns where pronouns would obviously be less cumbersome, they beat a non-French, (post)colonial Otherness of racialized meaning into a text about a character who wants nothing less than to notice she is being racially bludgeoned.

The referent of “West Africa” is unspoken, yet its presence surfaces in the text as a forbidden geography and history, that which Malinka/Clarisse understands implicitly she is never to acknowledge. Though Ladivine’s place of origin outside of France is never identified, the idea of it—repressed, feared, heavily marked by Clarisse’s dislike and anxiety—appears in a hazy description:

Where Malinka’s mother was born, a place Clarisse Rivière had never gone and never would go—though she had, furtive and uneasy, looked at pictures of it on the Internet—everyone had those same delicate features, harmoniously placed on their faces as if with an eye for coherence, and those same long arms, nearly as slender at the shoulder as at the wrist.

And the fact that her mother had therefore inherited those traits from a long, extensive ancestry and then passed them on to her daughter (the features, the arms, the slender frame and, thank God, nothing more) once made Clarisse Rivière dizzy with anger, because how could you escape when you were marked in this way, how could you claim not to be what you did not want to be, what you nevertheless had every right not to want to be?

But anger too had abandoned her. (NDiaye 2017, 6)<sup>102</sup>

---

<sup>102</sup> “Dans la région où la mère de Malinka était née, où Clarisse Rivière n’était jamais allée et n’irait jamais mais dont elle avait regardé furtivement, avec une sensation de lourd malaise, quelques images sur Internet, les gens avaient ces mêmes traits délicats, bien rassemblés sur le visage comme par souci de cohérence, et ces mêmes longs bras presque aussi fins à l’épaule qu’au poignet. / Et que sa mère eût ainsi hérité les caractéristiques physiques de toute une postérité, puis les eût transmises à sa fille (les traits, les bras, la longueur de la silhouette et, grâce à Dieu, c’était tout) avait autrefois étourdi de colère Clarisse Rivière, car comment échapper durablement se l’on était ainsi marqué, comment prétendre n’être pas ce qu’on ne voulait pas être, ce qu’on avait pourtant le droit de ne point vouloir être ? / Mais la colère aussi l’avait quittée” (NDiaye 2013, 16).

NDiaye stretches the linguistic expectations of the phrase “how could you claim not to be what you *were*” by not allowing the verb “is” (were) to exist in the indicative, but to be circumvented awkwardly, with a great deal more cognitive effort, through a past imperfect volition: “how could you claim not to be what you *did not want to be* (ne voulait pas être).” Clarisse Rivière’s anxious efforts to hide what *is/was* are thwarted by her inability to actually deny ever existing in that way. The snaking (river-like) sentences replicate what Leslie Hill (2000) noted about NDiaye’s very first novel, *Quant au riche avenir* (1985). NDiaye’s characters wage linguistic battles, not using language “as revelation but concealment, words used as a kind of rampart, designed seemingly to ward off distress, but only in the full anxious knowledge that whatever words are meant to protect against has insidiously and unavoidably already taken root within them” (Hill 2000, 182). In Clarisse/Malinka’s observations on the unnamed country, the absence of stereotypically racializable, localizable information imposes itself onto what is otherwise recognizable as such: a homogenizing, evaluative gaze upon specific bodily traits and the impersonal observations of the foreignness of a faraway place. The repression of this racializing information makes its unspoken presence known in Clarisse’s great relief at there being, “thank God, nothing more” [grâce à Dieu, c’était tout] to describe here: no skin color, no texture of hair. NDiaye does not need to provide the taxonomical origins for these racist fears in order to evoke them. In place of the omission, François Bernier and a long history of race scientists’ theories on “different species of the Africans” rises from the unconscious to the surface with all the more transgressive force.<sup>103</sup>

---

<sup>103</sup> See Bernier’s essay “A New Division of the Earth,” in Bernasconi and Lott 2000, 2.

Furthermore, one could understand the “river” in Clarisse’s new, French family name as symbolizing her fantasy of stepping into the stream of time to emerge no longer as the same person, free of historical contingency, fulfilling her desire to rid herself of racial signifiers. Clarisse adopts this new name most eagerly after her boss, catching sight of Malinka/Clarisse’s mother at a table in the restaurant, takes a sweeping look at Clarisse, over her “long legs, narrow hips and thin face, now probably not to measure that slender body’s resilience but to gauge its likeness to that other body, the body of the black woman [*la négresse*] sitting up very straight in her chair near the window” (NDiaye 2017, 35).<sup>104</sup> The homogenizing gaze Clarisse/Malinka had cast over the unnamed people of that unnamed country of her mother’s unspoken origin now turns and covers over her. This experience is presumably what pushes Clarisse to change jobs, move apartments, and withhold all of this new information from her mother.

It is worth taking a theoretical detour from the novel to bring in Frantz Fanon in his capacity as a psychoanalyst who paid great attention to patients’ experiences of racial trauma. In the novel, the historical models of indexing and hierarchizing racial groups play out without characters like Fanny or Clarisse ever apprehending them as the historically imposed, cultural structures they are. In Clarisse/Malinka’s dilemma of what Fanon called “*turn white or disappear*,” Clarisse is cognitively barred from having her experiences incorporated into the context of the world outside of the “psychoanalytic office.” Disagreeing with Jung, Fanon writes, “The collective unconscious is not governed by cerebral heredity: it is the consequence of what I shall call an impulsive cultural imposition” (2000, 165). That is to say that Jung’s collective unconscious—“an expression of bad instincts, of the darkness inherent in every ego, of the

---

<sup>104</sup> “[S]es yeux parcoururent encore les jambes longues de Clarisse, ses hanches étroites, sa figure mince, non sans doute, cette fois, pour évaluer la résistance de ce corps svelte mais pour établir à quel point il ressemblait à l’autre, celui de la négresse assise bien droite près de la vitre” (NDiaye 2013, 50).

uncivilized savage and the black man who slumbers in every white man”—is an acquired archetype, imposed by white society upon everyone, such that a Black man “who has lived in France, breathed in and ingested the myths and prejudices of a racist Europe, and assimilated its collective unconscious, can, if he splits his personality, but assert his hatred of the black man” (2000, 165). Writing with the clinic always in mind, Fanon recognized the need to broaden his work from the individual (to “become *conscious* of his unconscious and abandon his attempts at a hallucinatory whitening” [2000, 100; original emphasis]) to enact changes in the social structure proper.<sup>105</sup> “If you took the trouble to note them,” Fanon writes addressing his reader, “you would be surprised at the number of expressions that equate the black man with sin. In Europe, the black man, whether physically or symbolically, represents the dark side of the personality. As long as you haven’t understood this statement, discussing the “black problem” will get you nowhere” (2000, 165-166).

Clarisse’s restricted world of colonial “common sense” evidences her entrapment in, her enslavement to what Fanon calls “cultural imposition.”<sup>106</sup> In *Ladivine*, NDiaye brutally cuts out the social, historical, political mechanisms of power in order to explore the effects of racism and postcoloniality in a psyche under the control of colonial regimes of knowledge.<sup>107</sup> Ann Laura

---

<sup>105</sup> In a clear explanation of the progressive structure of *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Robert Bernasconi has emphasized the importance of chapter six, “The Black Man and Psychopathology,” over the more frequently referenced chapter five, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man.” See Bernasconi, Robert. 2020. “Frantz Fanon and Psychopathology: The Progressive Infrastructure of *Black Skin, White Masks*.” In *Race, Rage and Resistance: Philosophy, Psychology and the Perils of Individualism*, edited by David M. Goodman, Eric R. Severson, and Heather Macdonald, 34–45. New York: Routledge.; and 2020. “Frantz Fanon’s Engagement with Phenomenology: Unlocking the Temporal Architecture of *Black Skin, White Masks*.” *Research in Phenomenology* 50, no. 3 (October): 386–406. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691640-12341458>.

<sup>106</sup> On cultural imposition, Fanon provides the definition thus: “Without resorting to the notion of collective catharsis it is easy for me to demonstrate that the black man impulsively chooses to shoulder the burden of original sin. For this role, the white man chooses the black man, and the black man who is a white man also chooses the black man. The Antillean is a slave to this cultural imposition” (Fanon 2000, 168).

<sup>107</sup> Other critical texts on colonial regimes of (un)knowing include, but are not limited to, Said, Edward W. 1979. *Orientalism*. 1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books.; 1994. *Culture and Imperialism*. 1st Vintage Books

Stoler employs the concept of “colonial aphasia” (2011, 2016): a phenomenon which “emphasizes both the loss of access and active dissociation” regarding historical knowledge that would equip the subject with critical resources for decolonial thought and action (2016, 128). The broader world of *Ladivine* hovers detached over an absence of history, context, or any memory of what has come before, much in the same uncanny way that Clarisse Rivière chooses to pass on the name of her mother (the name which haunts her) to her own daughter, though she never informs either one of the other’s existence. The comment Clarisse makes regarding her child’s naming is rather useless except for its heartlessness, as she distinctly forgoes the word “mother” and retains only the designation “servant” to indicate the absence of familial relation: “When the child was born, she named her Ladivine. That was the servant’s first name” [Quand l’enfant fut née, elle la prénomma Ladivine. C’était le prénom de la servante] (NDiaye 2017, 57; 2013, 76). It is difficult to determine whether Clarisse is conscious of the counter-intuitive choice she makes in naming her daughter Ladivine. If looked at from the point of view of Clarisse’s internalized racism and rejection of Blackness, this seems counter-intuitive in a masochistic way (her “mission” in life was to eliminate this relation). Ladivine’s existence and motherly relation to Clarisse is also what produces Clarisse/Malinka’s racialization as Black, and the regeneration of the name “Ladivine,” and of the dim memory of this maternal lineage, seems likely to reproduce Blackness. Why ensure that race, Blackness is yet again reproduced “in relation”? (Fielder 2020, 4). While Clarisse’s story is far from the Black feminist, anti-passing stories that Fielder illuminates, where mixed-race protagonists prioritize their Black genealogy, there is

---

ed. New York: Vintage Books.; Mudimbe, V. Y. 1988. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. African Systems of Thought. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.; and Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 2015. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press. See also Vimalassery, Manu, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein. 2016. “Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing.” *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4. <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/633283>.

perhaps a germ (if the reader is willing to hope generously) of something more complicated taking place in *Ladivine* than the clear-cut prioritization of whiteness that has often dominated NDiaye's stories.

This complicated hope may only be tenuous and temporary at best. It seems to be dashed quickly as Clarisse is unable to give her daughter access to her emotional or psychic interior life, something which frustrates the daughter Ladivine as much as it saddens her. Though Clarisse dearly loves her daughter, she is increasingly aware that “her voluntary, permanent self-effacement had constructed a thin wall of ice all around her” [son oubli volontaire et permanent d'elle-même avait construit autour de sa personne une mince muraille de glace] (NDiaye 2017, 66; 2013, 87). In free indirect speech, Clarisse's thoughts flow openly through the text yet remain uncommunicated to her loved ones when she recognizes that “the invisible presence of Malinka's mother in her dark street kept her from giving her gestures and words the guilelessness that would warm them” [l'invisible présence de la mère de Malinka là-bas dans sa rue noire l'empêchait de donner à ses mots, à ses gestes le naturel qui les eût réchauffés] (NDiaye 2017, 67; 2013, 88). In giving the second Ladivine this name of such overwhelming significance (as every name has taken on such excessive, racial, allegorical meaning), yet by also refusing her family any knowledge of the past and its import in all of their lives, Clarisse Rivière passes down a disoriented and disorienting inheritance—strikingly, this is a triumph of a key aspect of colonial inheritance, that is, its self-perpetuation through self-erasure.

Ladivine will indeed face disorienting, dreamlike scenarios of extreme relationality during her vacation to an unspecified, but hot, tropical country later on in the text. I will quote one exemplary passage in its entirety for NDiaye's stunning ability to construct parallel, fantastic

selves, familiar selves that break from icy removal with heightened sensorial intimacy. Ladivine leaves her children and husband Marko at the hotel and goes for a walk through the market.

She stopped at a straw hut that sold mango juice.

She put her elbows on the counter, ordered a drink, and the young brown-skinned woman who puréed the pieces of mango, added water, and poured the nectar into a glass was not a stranger, though this was the first time she'd seen her.

She recognized the woman's very motions, her precise way of peeling the fruit and then pulling the flesh from the stone – she'd seen all that before, exactly the same, no less than the high, smooth forehead, the little dark mouth, the cheek slashed by a thick scar, the faded red T-shirt and the pointed cones of her breasts underneath.

Down to the tiniest moment, she'd experienced all this before, though she'd never been to this market—how she raised the glass to her lips and saw that the rim wasn't clean, saw the lingering trace of other lips, slightly sticky, perhaps crusted with sugar, and how she deliberately placed her own lips on that residue and found no distaste in her untroubled heart. (NDiaye 2017, 122-23)<sup>108</sup>

NDiaye takes Ladivine's recognition of the woman to a new level of relationality over-saturated with color, taste, and all kinds of fleshy sensations: alongside the non-stranger's thick scar and the comforting residue of other lips, the moving skin and flesh of the mango even seem to have feeling. There is much to unpack in these sticky residues—one could trace the Freudian fetish of Ladivine's absent (now dead) mother's breasts to the breasts of this “jeune femme au teint brun,” and further back to Fanny's (*En famille*) search for the wordless outline of the dark breast of Aunt Leda.<sup>109</sup> Similarly, Fanny's own obsession with lips lingers in the residue of Ladivine's

---

<sup>108</sup> “Elle s'arrêta devant une paillote où l'on vendait du jus de mangue. / Elle s'accouda au comptoir, commanda une boisson et la jeune femme au teint brun qui mixa les morceaux de mangue, ajouta de l'eau puis versa le nectar dans un verre, n'était pas une inconnue pour elle, bien que ce fût la première fois qu'elle la voyait. / Ses gestes mêmes, elle les reconnaissait, la manière précise dont la femme avait épluché le fruit puis taillé la chair au plus près du noyau – tout cela, elle l'avait déjà rencontré exactement, ainsi que le haut front lisse, la bouche petite et noire, la joue barrée d'une cicatrice épaisse, et le tee-shirt rouge délavé sous lequel pointaient les seins allongés. / Et jusqu'à l'instant, elle l'avait vécu déjà, bien qu'elle ne fût jamais venue dans ce marché – comme elle portait le verre à ses lèvres et s'apercevait que le haut n'en était pas propre, que la marque d'autres lèvres un peu collantes, peut-être barbouillées de sucre, s'y trouvait encore, et comme elle posait délibérément les siennes sur cette trace et constatait que son cœur serein n'en éprouvait nul dégoût” (NDiaye 2013, 156).

<sup>109</sup> “Leaning eagerly towards him, Fanny asked what her Aunt Léda's breast was like. The man could not find the words to describe it, so he raised his hands to caress an invisible form and smiled [...]. Yet Fanny felt a sharp pleasure in knowing that the man had seen Aunt Léda's breast and had perhaps even touched it, thus proving better than anyone the physical reality of Aunt Léda” (NDiaye 1997a, 45). Andrew Asibong has described Aunt Léda as a fantasy ‘dark mother’ figure in competition with the ‘dead mother’ complex Fanny holds vis-à-vis her own mother, and he notes that Léda's “dark fantasy breast” is “offered up for tantalizing consumption” (2013a, 59–60).

deliberate, sugary, fantasy “kiss,” though this one is much more pleasing than Fanny’s near-devouring of her cousin Eugène’s “glowing pink, rather soft mouth” (NDiaye 1997a, 40). The sensorial bursts rush forth in increasingly longer, yearning sentences that push Ladivine’s connection with the young woman and with unknown previous drinkers to an unnatural (but for Ladivine, not unpleasant) place.

The significance of this passage for our current discussion lies in the way in which Ladivine imagines and in some ways actually does create a *relation* with this woman—one that, delusional or not, reciprocated or not, rewrites and begins to racialize, Africanize her own past. Unaware of her grandmother’s (West African) lineage, this identitarian leap is the result of her “longing for a connection founded in a wondrous hallucination, on the incarnation of shadows she alone had perceived” [l’espoir d’une complicité fondé sur une hallucination merveilleuse, sur l’incarnation d’ombres qu’elle était seule à avoir formées] (NDiaye 2017, 124; 2013, 158). Ladivine’s hallucinatory connection to the brown-skinned woman in a fruit-laden, unnamed African locale constitutes a happy presence to fill in the absence of her dead, white(ned) mother with a dark “motherland.” The connection remains one-directional, however. “The woman looked at her, slowly shook her head, then at once turned away, as if dreading another idiotic question and embarrassed in advance for them both” [La femme la regarda, secoua lentement la tête puis aussitôt détourna les yeux comme si elle craignait une autre question stupide et, d’avance, en fût gênée pour elles deux] (NDiaye 2017, 123; 2013, 157). What continues to be amiss in these encounters, and what disorients and sours the embarrassingly sweetness of these moments of connection are the suppressed layers of guilt, of bitter and painful memories that insist on influencing the present from deep in Clarisse/Malinka’s unconsciousness. Though Ladivine herself has no access to these memories, the reader and narrator have been steeped in

Clarisse's shame and self-annihilation in her disavowal of an essentialized Africanness and Blackness, and so these moments of intense connection rub uncomfortably against the silenced wounds of severed genealogies. "Reluctantly, she walked away, and now her enchantment was dimmed by the feeling she'd done something wrong, shown a lack of discretion" (NDiaye 2017, 123). Ladvine's ignorance—her occluded access to this knowledge—is not a relief, but a source of unlocalizable embarrassment. Shame of an unknown but not unknowable cause spreads to the woman, to the reader, to the memory of Clarisse, but it does not find any figure or mechanism to hold responsible for the forces that have led these women to such dissociative states. As a result, the construction of text as "not-not-African" simultaneously points to and away from a racializing genealogy that extends from the diegetic world to extradiegetic reality.

### **NDiaye's Racialized Subject in Three Movements: Split, Wall, Leap**

In this next section, I focus my analysis on three movements in Clarisse/Malinka's bewildering passage through racialized states of being. NDiaye's microscopic focus obscures the faint memory of racial, colonial contexts by pushing them to the periphery of an episode. Despite their obscurity, certain rubrics may yet be available for apprehending the episode as an event within a racialized, historical context. I lean upon the close-reading examples of other spectral and familiar Black and mixed-race figures—Frantz Fanon, Diouana, and Alex Bleach. The first passage reveals NDiaye's constructions of the self in a Fanonian "triple person," with configurations that resemble Diouana's fractured reflections and non-reflections in mirrors, walls, and windows. The second collection of scenes exposes the synthetic fibers of walls Clarisse/Malinka builds around herself as she embraces the "triple person" as an unfeeling, mechanical being so as to remain in a fragmented state. These walls and skins are marked by a

particularly absorbent silence, reminiscent once again of the fraught relationship between the sound and image of racialized bodies previously encountered in Diouana and Alex Bleach's examples. Finally, Clarisse/Malinka and her daughter Ladvine's mysterious transformation into secret-bearing dog relatives can be read as a "*leap*" of self-invention with ambiguous results. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of NDiaye's dogs and the complicated association they carry for animalized Blackness. I read these scenes as an NDiayean (mis)interpretation of Fanon's call for a "*leap*" from a being that is confined to the culturally imposed racial schema to something new, but something distinctly human that results from "introducing invention into existence" (Fanon 2000, 229. Original emphasis).

*Split: On the Train Again*

NDiaye begins *Ladvine* with a paradigmatically blank and temporally disorienting sentence: "She was Malinka again the moment she got on the train, and she found it neither a pleasure nor a burden, having long since stopped noticing" [Elle redevenait Malinka à peine montée dans le train et ce ne lui était ni un plaisir ni un désagrément puisqu'elle avait cessé depuis longtemps de s'en rendre compte] (NDiaye 2017, 1; 2013, 9). The pronoun "she" [elle] starts us off with a reference to, precisely, no one. Whomever Malinka was *not* before "she" becomes Malinka again opens the novel *in medias res*. We will of course find out later that this person ("she" who is not-Malinka) goes by the invented name Clarisse Rivière, but how we figure this out is also a multi-step process of deduction. The third-person omniscient narrator goes on:

It happened, she could tell, for no more could she answer without a second thought to Clarisse when, rarely, someone she knew took that same train and called to or greeted her as Clarisse, only to see her stare back in puzzled surprise, a hesitant smile on her lips,

creating a mutual discomfort that the slightly flustered Clarisse never thought to dispel by simply echoing that hello, that how are you, offhandedly as she could.

It was this, her inability to answer to Clarisse, that told her she was Malinka the moment she got on the train to Bordeaux. (NDiaye 2017, 1)<sup>110</sup>

Never actually saying that “she” was “Clarisse” (only that she could no longer *respond* to the name Clarisse) before becoming “Malinka,” the prolonged and circuitous description stretches out for much longer than just a “moment,” creating space enough to isolate three distinct figures: she, Clarisse, and Malinka. We, therefore, find ourselves on a train with a “triple person,” and not for the first time.<sup>111</sup> In the world of the novel, this train scene is an iteration of a repeated cycle; “she” repeatedly becomes Malinka whenever she gets onto the train to visit her mother in Bordeaux, a trip she takes once a month. Unlike in Fanon’s case, in which his interpellation by the child is an inaugural moment, the “original” moment of Clarisse/Malinka’s becoming Black is lost in the repetition.

In the extradiegetic world, this train scene also recalls other “triple persons” on other trains, such as the one Frantz Fanon famously rode half a century earlier in the oft-referenced chapter of *Peau noire, masques blancs*: “In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person. In the train I was given not one but two, three places. [...] I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other... and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea....” (2000,

---

<sup>110</sup> “Mais elle le savait car elle ne pouvait plus alors répondre spontanément au prénom de Clarisse lorsqu’il arrivait, c’était rare, qu’une personne de connaissance ait pris le même train, la hèle ou la salue par son prénom de Clarisse et la trouve déconcertée, stupide et vaguement souriante, créant une situation de gêne réciproque dont Clarisse, un peu hébétée, ne pensait pas à les sortir en rendant simplement, avec un semblant de naturel, le bonjour, le comment ça va. / C’est à cela, à sa propre incapacité de répondre au prénom de Clarisse, qu’elle avait compris qu’elle était Malinka dès qu’elle montait dans le train de Bordeaux” (NDiaye 2013, 9).

<sup>111</sup> For other readings of the significance of “threes” in NDiaye’s work, see Asibong (2015): “[T]hese triptychs can be interpreted as textual representations of a soul that has been split into the three shards of personality described above as paradigms of traumatized dissociation. Each three-part book comprises firstly, an emotionally repressed yet potentially alive, child-like fragment; secondly, a fragment identified with mad, quasi-divine, annihilating experience and, thirdly, a fragment that has become desensitized, emptied-out, zombified” (151-152).

112). For Fanon, being split into a “triple person” occurs as a result of being subjected, by others and/or by one’s own doing, to a severe form of objectification. Even though he acquiesced to having an internalized “Other’s” viewpoint through which to see himself self-consciously, the surplus multiplication of subject positions in “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” is the result of a specifically racializing objectification: “For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man” (2000, 110). For Fanon, then, he must fight against the illusion of an original subject position measured to the European construct of Man and must grasp the mechanism of this racist ontological construction. We have seen this imposed ontology attack and fracture the Self in *La Noire de...* (chapter one) and in *Vernon Subutex* (chapter two), through the splitting of Diouana’s and Alex Bleach’s aural, visual, material bodies, not least in the damage done to an intangible Being that is, in Alex’s words, “swallowed up, body and soul” (Despentes 2020, 124). Barred from what he once took as a universal corporeal schema, Fanon rightly begins to understand that this universal has always been racialized as white: “I thought that what I had in hand was to construct a physiological self, to balance space, localize sensations, and here I was called on for more” (2000, 111).

Like Fanon, Clarisse/Malinka is indeed called on for more than balancing space or localizing sensations. But unlike Fanon, the state of her Being in “triple person”—something Fanon can only describe as “an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood”—leaves her utterly sensationless (2000, 112). As she cycles between racialized states of being, becoming and unbecoming whoever (or whatever) “she” did not want to be, she claims nihilistic unconcern: it is “neither a pleasure nor a burden.” Yet this claim to sensationless nonchalance proves to be untrue. As Clarisse/Malinka’s thoughts continue to play out, we realize the delusional extent to which she negates what is un-negatable. First, she plays

through a hypothetical situation in her mind that horrifies her, for “[i]t was not out of the question that a woman her age might one day accost her and ask in delighted surprise if she wasn’t that Malinka from her past, from that school and that city whose name and look she, Clarisse, had forgotten” (NDiaye 2017, 1–2).<sup>112</sup> And if this were to occur, if she suddenly “remembered the danger that came with consenting to be Malinka again, [...] What she would have to do then, she didn’t dare even think” [se souvenir du danger qu’il y avait pour elle à accepter de redevenir Malinka, [...] Elle n’osait penser alors à ce qu’il lui faudrait faire] (NDiaye 2017, 2; 2013, 10). Suspended in French in the conditional tense, Clarisse/Malinka’s hypothetical response to this hypothetically devastating question is held temporarily at bay.

She sat in the train, eyes fixed on the window, on the grain and tiny scratches she never saw past – such that she would have been hard put to describe this countryside she’d been travelling through for years, once a month, one way in the morning, the other in the evening – and trembled uneasily as she imagined having to hold herself back should someone call her Malinka. (NDiaye 2017, 2)<sup>113</sup>

More deliberately than Diouana, whose attention was fixed on the surface of the glass of the mirror and prevented from apprehending her reflection within/beyond it, Clarisse/Malinka observes the very fibers that separate her from the world—neither seeing her own reflection nor the landscape beyond it—in a deliberate act of self-censorship (or “sense-orship,” as it were). We will return shortly to the walls that Clarisse/Malinka relies upon to dull sensation, giving herself over to inanimate materials and symbols so as to relieve herself of existential pain.

---

<sup>112</sup> “Il n’était pas impossible qu’une femme ayant son âge l’aborde un jour et, avec un air de surprise ravie, lui demande si elle n’était pas cette Malinka de son passé, de ce collègue et de cette ville dont elle, Clarisse, avait oublié le nom, l’aspect” (Ndiaye 2013, 10).

<sup>113</sup> I have modified the English translation from the “specks” of the glass to the “grain” of the glass, as in its fibers. This replaces the emphasis back onto the fibrous constitution of the glass itself, rather than on the glass’s surface. “Assise dans le train, les yeux fixés sur la vitre, sur le grain et les menues rayures du verre que son regard ne traversait pas, si bien qu’elle aurait été en peine de décrire le paysage qu’elle parcourait dans un sens le matin, dans l’autre le soir une fois par mois depuis des années et des années, elle tremblait d’appréhension en s’imaginant devoir se composer une attitude judicieuse dans le cas où quelqu’un l’appellerait Malinka” (Ndiaye 2013, 10-11).

Shortly thereafter, another hypothetical scenario runs through Clarisse/Malinka's mind as she imagines being recognized by an old acquaintance who might ask to where she is headed. She thinks to herself that, simply unable to answer such a question untruthfully, she would reply, "I'm going to see my mother" [Je vais voir ma mère]. Not daring to think what she would do—as if the thought alone could bring about the same consequences—she still thinks it. And, immediately following this admission, the narrator adds: "That she might have to speak such a sentence was unthinkable" [Il était inconcevable qu'elle pût être amenée à prononcer une telle phrase] (NDiaye 2017, 3; 2013, 12).

Clarisse/Malinka's habitual and, significantly, hypothetical self-censorship traps her thoughts in a loop of anticipations and negations that never really happen. In reality, she does not run into anyone who asks her these questions. But it is the interpellation that she fears the most and that, even in the hypothetical, is too powerful for her not to respond to in the affirmative. Implicit in this exchange is the power of the one who "hails" over the one who is hailed. For Fanon, this power comes from a history of anecdotes and stories that have already embedded and naturalized themselves as the common sense of racist stereotypes. One can also easily recognize Clarisse/Malinka and Fanon in what Judith Butler (speaking of a different context) has described regarding the discursive power of an interpellation when enacted in a situation of a power differential:

Imagine the quite plausible scene in which one is called by a name and one turns around only to protest the name: "That is not me, you must be mistaken!" And then imagine that the name continues to force itself upon you, to delineate the space you occupy, to construct a social positionality. Indifferent to your protests, the force of interpellation continues to work. One is still constituted by discourse, but at a distance from oneself. (Butler 1997, 33, cited in El-Tayeb, p. 169)

Clarisse/Malinka, like Butler's audience, is called to "imagine" this likely scene, but the novel turns this imagination from a productive illustration of reality to something like an unconfirmable nightmare that no one within the world of the text would ever admit to being true. If the interpellation itself is a horror, the result of the loss of one's bodily autonomy and discursive power, Clarisse/Malinka's horror is doubled by the fact that this is all "quite plausible." The conditional tense dominates Clarisse/Malinka's narrative. In her apprehension, she enters the plausible in order to try to negate it there, where it resides, to save herself from suffering in the present.

*Wall: Synthetic and Soundproof Skin*

Coinciding with the analogy of the hypervisibility of Blackness forming a "literal residue" (Cheng 2011, 78) covering over the surface of skin, one way of conceptualizing the invisibility of racialized bodies is through the phenomenon of "sinking in," or receding into a three-dimensional background. As Sara Ahmed (2015) has argued, some bodies within institutions are able to "sink into" the specific shapes prepared for them by the institutional body; these bodies within institutions can become unconscious extensions of the spaces within which they are housed. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Ahmed writes, "Objects that we "tend towards" become habitual insofar as they are taken into the body, reshaping its surface. [...] When bodies are orientated towards objects, those objects may cease to be apprehended as objects, becoming extensions of bodily skin" (2015, n.p.). From restricting her field of vision to the fibers of the windowpane, to erecting a "thin wall of ice all around her" [une mince muraille de glace], to relishing in the "furious little music of her heels tapping the floor," [la furieuse petite musique de ses talons sur le carrelage], Clarisse/Malinka constructs a

synthetic body, or bodily casing, for herself. The following passages draw connections between Clarisse/Malinka's efforts to embody whiteness understood as an invisible racialization and the strategies by which she efforts to embody that which supposedly can neither perceive nor be perceived.

It is worth restating the thesis of Sara Ahmed's (2015) essay, that to be racially invisible is not to transcend race but to inhabit and embody a skin of a *particular racialization* (a classed, gendered, dis/abled whiteness) that near-seamlessly extends from the institutional body to the body within the institution. What happens if the "literal residue" of another *particular racialization* is not fully integrated into the racialized (white) institution of colonialism? When Clarisse/Malinka fixes her attention on the train's glass, she focuses her attention on an inanimate material so as to not perceive her own animate body and mind—her thoughts and sensations. In an effort to distance herself from the name "Malinka" and from her trembling, she isolates and removes both the thought ("Malinka") and the sensation (trembling). To do so, she attributes all of these sensations and thoughts—the unwelcome evidence of her consciousness—to an inanimate, unconscious movement.

Then her thoughts wandered, little by little she forgot why she was trembling, though her trembling went on and she couldn't think how to still it, in the end vaguely putting it down to the vibrations of the train, which, beneath her feet, in her muscles, in her weary head, chanted the name that she loved and despised, the name that filled her with both fear and compassion, Malinka, Malinka, Malinka. (NDiaye 2017, 2)<sup>114</sup>

An early attempt at displacing bodily manifestations of fear and racial trauma, the trembling she had felt at "holding herself back should someone call her Malinka" is transferred into the vibrations of the train, only for those mechanical vibrations to return to her own body as the

---

<sup>114</sup> "Puis ses pensées dérivèrent, elle oubliait peu à peu le motif de son tremblement même si le tremblement demeurait et qu'elle ne savait comment le faire cesser et qu'elle finissait confusément par l'attribuer au mouvement du train qui scandait sous ses pieds, dans ses muscles, dans sa tête fatiguée, le prénom qu'elle aimait et détestait, qui lui inspirait peur et compassion en même temps, Malinka, Malinka, Malinka" (NDiaye 2013, 11).

name she so desperately is trying not to recognize. This is not a cathartic externalization and return/reflection of Malinka back to Clarisse for Malinka to be re-integrated into her being. It is more of a haunting. The train, symbolic of larger institutional and (post)colonial, modern mechanisms, connects with Clarisse/Malinka's body. However the name "Malinka" remains on the sensational, vibrating surface rather than being allowed to "sink in" unnoticed. Additionally, while Clarisse might have been able to isolate or distance herself from the thought of the name "Malinka," now the word Malinka has returned via full body vibration. It would now seem quite cruel (amid an already cruel scene overall) and impossible to extract this word's vibrations out of her muscles. Regardless, she will continue to move from an organic, fleshy, affectable state to one that is more mechanical, synthetic, and unfeeling.<sup>115</sup>

It also may be worth mentioning that in Clarisse's first job as a waitress, she felt a "plaisir machinal" at the feeling of her nylons rubbing together while she briskly moved about (NDiaye 2013, 49). Where the French "machinal" retains the sense of the mechanical, of the machine, it translates to the English "reflexive," "unconscious," or "automatic." For Clarisse, engaging in unconscious movement is pleasurable, and pleasurable sensation is mechanical. After she marries Richard Rivière, a euphoric Clarisse Rivière takes a job as a server in a pizza restaurant. She is euphoric because of how her marriage to Richard Rivière allows others to see her as "wonderfully normal," with customers "never guessing that she might bear any other name or be

---

<sup>115</sup> "Affectability" is a term that comes from Xine Yao's *Disaffected* (2021), in which she draws upon Denise Ferreira da Silva's study of race. "Affectability defines raciality: the 'transparent I' has the agency to know and affect, while the 'affectable I' is the susceptible, the 'scientific construction of non-European minds'" (Yao, 4). While I do not explore these ideas in full here, there are promising avenues for making sense of NDiaye's unfeeling characters in conversation with recent work on race and the biopolitics of feeling. See for example Schuller, Kyla. 2018. *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*. Anima. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.; Yao, Xine. 2021. *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*. Perverse Modernities. Durham: Duke University Press.; and Silva, Denise Ferreira da. 2007. *Toward a Global Idea of Race*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

anything other than she appeared, a simple creature” (NDiaye 2017, 51).<sup>116</sup> She clings specifically to her “awareness” [cette conscience ne la quittait pas] of this new resemblance and, spurred on by it, takes to her work with an increasingly smooth, mechanical energy:

The work was harder, but she loved taking the stage amid that unvarying spectacle, hearing the furious little music of her heels tapping the tile floor, feeling her arm muscles tense and harden when she brought out the plates, her response perfectly calibrated to the demands of the task, just as she loved the feeling, at the end of a shift, as she sat with a cigarette in the now clean, empty room, of having once again successfully transmuted potential disarray, with the customers pouring in and all demanding quick service, into a smooth and efficient mechanism, so discreet as to seem effortless, of which, with her clacking heels, her youthful muscles, her quick thinking, she was at once the inventor and one of the gears. (NDiaye 2017, 51)<sup>117</sup>

Clarisse’s “plaisir machinal” reaches new heights in this marriage of performance (awareness) and machine (unawareness). Ever since she was a young student, another of Clarisse/Malinka’s paradoxes has been to labor strenuously towards her goal of self-effacement, to appear to others so precisely calibrated to social laws that she can disappear, wonderfully unnoticed and overlooked, as just another mechanism of the larger machine. Though she failed to understand the content or concepts of lessons, she excelled in apprehending the “express or unspoken laws governing the relations between pupils and teachers, which she obeyed in a mix of keen pleasure and arduous rigor, and so literally that she could have vanished without anyone noticing, so absolute was her submission to the image of a pupil who was nothing more than a pure receptive

---

<sup>116</sup> “...tout le monde pouvait ainsi les voir tous les deux ensemble, aimables et charmants et merveilleusement normaux, [...] sans soupçonner jamais qu’elle pût s’appeler autrement ni être tant soit peu autre chose que ce qu’elle paraissait, une simple créature” (NDiaye 2013, 69-70). I have modified the English translation to retain the phrase “simple creature” rather than “simple and ordinary person,” as I feel that personhood is not so stable here.

<sup>117</sup> “Si le métier était plus dur, elle aimait se produire sur la scène de ce spectacle invariable, entendre la furieuse petite musique de ses talons sur le carrelage, sentir les muscles de ses bras se contracter et durcir, quand elle transportait les assiettes, en une réponse impeccablement adaptée à ce que l’effort leur demandait, de même qu’elle aimait cette impression, après chaque service, assise à fumer dans la salle nettoyée et déserte, d’avoir réussi une fois de plus à transformer une situation de possible désordre, quand les clients arrivaient nombreux et réclamaient tous d’être servis rapidement, en une mécanique harmonieuse, efficace, si discrète qu’elle en paraissait simple et dont elle était à la fois, avec ses talons claquants, ses jeunes muscles, son bon sens, l’inventeur et l’un des rouages” (NDiaye 2013, 69).

mind” (NDiaye 2017, 25).<sup>118</sup> Nothing seems to please her more than to be integrated on levels of image and function, relying on her fine-tuned observational skills and expending energy in precisely the right quantities, qualities, and directional flows so as to become not just invisible but imperceivable in every way. Clarisse/Malinka differs from previous protagonists, such as the Woman from *La Femme changée en bûche* (1989) and Herman from *Un temps de saison* (1994), who also “take a certain comfort in the experience of losing control,” though their trajectories take them “closer and closer towards a state resembling vegetation” (Asibong 2013a, 63). The Woman quite literally turns into a log—a pleasing and nihilistic experience—while Herman, seeking integration into a village of blond inhabitants, uncomfortably rots and melts from the inside. Clarisse/Malinka’s transformation takes her closer and closer towards an inorganic state.

She, too, will face another kind of brutal death (she, unlike Fanny or Herman’s disintegrating figures, will be stabbed) following her return to what one could call a hyper-sensitive,” feeling, organic state of relationality, and it is worth taking a moment to examine how NDiaye brings Clarisse/Malinka’s coldly detached, mechanical state to its breaking point. Her fear of racial recognition spreads to all kinds of recognition, and she walls herself off defensively in order to minimize her affectability. Similar to how, as a young girl, she simulated the role of a student, she simulates the face and gestures of a woman, a wife, and a mother. She performs the image of someone listening carefully to her loved ones, while working hard to remain internally blank: “[S]he had already closed her ears to the things Richard Rivière and Ladivine said, though she pretended to listen, though her face and her gestures were the picture of careful attention – but only the commonplace words by which they ordered their day-to-day lives were allowed into

---

<sup>118</sup> “Elle n’entendait bien que les lois, exprimées ou implicites, qui organisaient les relations entre élèves et professeurs, elle y obéissait dans un mélange de plaisir aigu et de rigueur martyrisante et si littéralement qu’elle eût pu disparaître sans qu’on s’en aperçût, tant était stricte sa soumission à l’image d’un élève qui ne serait que pur esprit réceptif” (NDiaye 2013, 37).

her consciousness. The rest she was not hear” (NDiaye 2017, 67).<sup>119</sup> At the same time, she immures herself in the guilt of having locked her mother and herself into the unbearable situation of never being able to love one another openly, and she responds to this torment with a silent suffering, telling herself that “she would be lying if she talked about this or that like a free woman” [elle aurait menti en discutant de ceci ou de cela comme une femme libre] (NDiaye 2017, 68; 2013, 89). She is conscious of and greatly pained to see her daughter and her husband’s hurt confusion at her emotionlessness and she represses the knowledge of their slow detachment from her. Ultimately, Richard Rivière announces to her that he is leaving—not *her*, exactly, but *the house*. “I’m going away, I’m leaving this house” [Je vais m’en aller, je quitte la maison] (NDiaye 2017, 69; 2013, 91).

In a tortuous and lengthy passage, Clarisse Rivière finds herself once again caught in a state of incomplete integration into a structure, this time not of the train, but of the house. Consciously refusing to hear Richard’s words, her internal emotional response surges but does not fully reach the surface where it would become legible to Richard Rivière’s searching gaze: “she only smiled vaguely, retied her blue dress’s belt on her hip, started out of the room” [elle avait souri vaguement, refait le nœud de la ceinture de sa robe bleue, sur la hanche, esquisse un pas pour sortir de la pièce] (NDiaye 2017, 69; 2013, 91). But as his words slowly cut through her own defensive walls, the emotional surge of hatred and pain she feels is directed (there is no Subject doing the directing, it’s more like the emotion just follows engrained channels; agency

---

<sup>119</sup> “[...] elle avait déjà fermé ses oreilles aux mots que prononçaient Richard Rivière et Ladvine, quoiqu’elle feignît d’écouter, qu’elle eût même le visage et les gestes de l’attention – mais seuls avaient le droit d’atteindre sa conscience les mots familiers qui leur servaient à ordonner la vie quotidienne. Quant aux autres, elle ne devait pas les entendre” (NDiaye 2013, 89).

eludes her once again) not towards Richard Rivière, but diverted to the external, unfeeling structure of the house:

she hated the house as she had never hated anyone in her life.

Because long before she did, that house had heard and understood what Richard Rivière said, and its old brick and stone walls would forever preserve the memory of those terrible words, unaffected, never once sighing in sympathy with her sadness. [...]

She wanted the house to grieve and suffer as she did, she wished it would collapse and swallow them both, her who did not want to go on living, and him, Richard Rivière, who had spoken those strange, dangerous words she'd long before managed to stop hearing [...]. (NDiaye 2017, 68-69)<sup>120</sup>

Here it is the still and silent house, rather than the rumbling train, that was meant to absorb all sensation and thought in order to protect Clarisse Rivière from needing to feel them in her own body. Yet this house, like her perfected, machine-like performances, fails to save Clarisse Rivière all the same. Like the perpetual return of the name “Malinka” in the vibrations on the train, Richard Rivière’s condemning words have been “preserved” into the surrounding structure of Clarisse Rivière’s dwelling place as a memory. One might understand her hatred of the house as a deeply felt jealousy and a sense of betrayal—the two were meant to be extensions of one another, safer in their frozen, inanimate, unfeeling states. Additionally, Clarisse/Malinka’s dreams of perfect integration with the mechanism proves not to be as safe as she had hoped, for “the words and their cruel meaning had pierced her defenseless skin, the delicate, creamy, lily-like flesh that Richard Rivière once never wearied of caressing and clutching, [...] and she felt her skin closing over those words, and those words calmly, meticulously beginning to wreak

---

<sup>120</sup> “[...] voilà qu’elle se prenait pour la maison d’une haine qu’elle n’avait jamais éprouvée envers personne. / Car la maison avait entendu et compris avant elle ce qu’avait dit Richard Rivière et nul doute que ses vieux murs de brique et de pierre conservaient à jamais le souvenir de ces mots terribles, sans en être affectés, sans laisser sourdre la moindre plainte de sympathie à son égard. / Elle aurait voulu que la maison se désolle et souffre comme elle-même souffrait, que la maison s’écroule et les engloutisse tous les deux, elle parce qu’elle ne voulait plus vivre et lui, Richard Rivière, qui avait prononcé de ces mots singuliers et dangereux qu’elle s’était ingéniée, longtemps auparavant, à ne plus entendre [...]” (NDiaye 2013, 90).

their damage” (NDiaye 2017, 69-70).<sup>121</sup> The description of Clarisse’s skin as essentially “lily-white” explicitly underscores the ongoing drama of racialization. The color of her skin may not change, but changes to her kinship ties and to her social identity will indeed “wreak their damage” in ways that are less visible at the surface of her body. These absorbent walls and skins prove to be extremely vulnerable to words, especially to words that establish who Clarisse/Malinka is in relation to other racialized bodies, activating the race-making process. She feels pain “vainly trying to throw open her breast so it could get out,” and is only able to let out a single moan. Unable to speak, to cry, or even simply to fall, “her firm, solid flesh had closed over that pain like the house’s walls over Richard Rivière’s irrevocable words, and nothing, she thought, would ever dislodge it” (NDiaye 2017, 71).<sup>122</sup> This is another kind of carceral, racialized skin and materialized metaphor, and its anti-Black foundations are what short circuit Clarisse/Malinka’s discursive power.

*Leap: History, Historicity, and Moving Slowly*

Frantz Fanon once again provides a helpful framework for approaching the existentialist questions put forth by the novel. In his own writing of his relationship to history and historicity, Fanon foregrounds the critical importance of historical, sociological knowledge—that which gives him the ability to grasp the enduring mechanisms of power that structure the racialized social systems at work in the present. As referenced earlier, Fanon repeatedly emphasized the

---

<sup>121</sup> “Mais les mots et leur signification brutale avaient pénétré sa peau sans défense, sa chair de lis fine et laiteuse que Richard Rivière ne s’était jamais lassé de caresser et d’empoigner, [...] et elle avait senti sa chair se refermer sur ces mots et ceux-ci commencer, calmement, méticuleusement, leur ravage” (NDiaye 2013, 91).

<sup>122</sup> “Elle se sentait si mal cependant, si terriblement mal que sa gêne refluit, repoussée par la douleur pleine d’écœurement, de mépris et d’horreur de tout qui avait gagné son corps entier, qui faisait trembler ses membres et tentait vainement d’écarter sa poitrine pour sortir, mais sa chair dense et ferme s’était refermée sur la douleur comme les murs de la maison sur les paroles irrévocables et rien ne serait plus capable, songeait-elle, de l’en extraire” (NDiaye 2013, 93).

importance of attending to changing the social structure in addition to working with his psychiatry patients on an individual level. “We need to move slowly,” he wrote. For “the problem lies in having to gradually expose mechanisms that reveal themselves in their totality” (2000, 165). The demand to “move slowly” is not because Fanon is not impatient for justice to be served and for racism to stop—this is far from the truth. He compels the reader to move slowly here because he is grasping something that cannot be overstated: “Can this statement be fully understood? *In Europe, evil is symbolized by the black man. We have to move slowly—that we know—but it’s not easy*” (2000, 165; original emphasis). He is talking about exposing the colonization of the mind and the body through “cultural imposition,” or those colonial regimes of knowledge that have woven themselves into History such that one is born into an environment that has already normalized and unequally distributed power according to the values of white supremacy and anti-Blackness.

These colonial regimes of knowledge draw great power from their control of History and the details, anecdotes, and stories which weave together a well-worn landscape of racist beliefs. “At the beginning of his life a man is always clotted,” writes Fanon. “[H]e is drowned in contingency. The tragedy of the man is that he was once a child” (2000, 231). It is worth mentioning that when Fanon writes of “man” caught in his contingency, this includes both Black and white men, as both are trapped within the bounds of their racialization. “*Historicity*”—a phenomenological concept Fanon “learned about from [Karl] Jaspers”—is, to put it simply, what makes the historico-racial epidermal schema so inescapable. To describe his experience of that inescapability, Fanon writes, “I could no longer laugh, because I already knew that there were legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity*” (2000, 112). On Jaspers, Ronny Miron explains that “in consciousness of historicity, which is part of the consciousness of Existenz, it

perceives itself as an entity forming in time. This means that Existenz perceives its existence in the present as a continuation of previous forms of existence, and as part of a reality that will continue even after it ceases to exist” (Miron 2012, 128). For Fanon, then, his own consciousness, as an “entity forming in time” and “as a continuation of previous forms of existence,” is reproduced alongside the psychic and material realities of the racial schema. For a while, wherever he went to “make” himself a new (Black) identity (whether it was through claiming Africans *do* have an impressive history, or through the poetics of Négritude), he finds himself reacting to, negating, reclaiming, and rewriting his place in the world (2000, 130-138).

But though his consciousness of historical contingency is the source of his anguish, it is precisely this consciousness that he must maintain in order not to be overtaken by History’s colonial overdeterminations. At the end of what has been a painful, languishing experience of no-escape, Fanon sketches out a posture of psychic and bodily openness in the final lines of this text: “I want the world to recognize, with me, the open door of every consciousness. My final prayer: O my body, make of me always a man who questions!” (2000, 232). His “questions” constitute an adamant refusal of historicity, which is in turn a refusal of the colonized and racialized History that laid the foundations for his historico-racial schema: “I am not a prisoner of history,” he declares. “I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny” (2000, 229). Fanon is able to negate this false foundation because he has been able to grasp the hidden contours of its construction.

What comes next? How is one to depart from a historicity of “cultural imposition”? Fanon’s response is to “constantly remind [himself] that the real *leap* consists in introducing invention into existence (2000, 231; original emphasis). The “*leap*” of “introducing invention into existence” is the opening of possibilities—meanings, beings, feelings. In taking this “*leap*,”

Fanon is no longer bound to the historico-racial schema. On the level of poetics, Fanon's short, declarative sentences and evocation of this "real *leap*" build a sense of rushing ahead; he is rejoining with time itself—perhaps even getting ahead of it—and gaining purposeful momentum. David Marriott (2011) calls this way of writing Fanon's "future imperfect: a moment of inventiveness whose introduction necessarily never arrives and does not stop arriving, and whose destination cannot be foreseen, or anticipated, but only repeatedly traveled, and, therefore, not future at all" (2011, 53).

With Fanon's final declaration of the desire for the "world to recognize, with [him], the open door of every consciousness" (2000, 232), I return to *Ladivine*, whose final pages are in fact filled with a similar desire, openness, and future orientation. Fanon's "open door" of co-recognition recalls the final moment in which Ladivine opens the (literal) door to recognition. Ladivine finds that behind that door is the new consciousness of her estranged daughter, reincarnated as a dog: "The dog turned to look at her with its knowing eyes, its chaste eyes. [...] It was bringing Malinka's throbbing heart back to them, and maybe too, she thought in the ardour of her joy, the promise of a new light cast over each and every day" (NDiaye 2017, 324).<sup>123</sup> Similarly to how Fanon's prose rushes ahead, eager to arrive at a future state of recognition, the narrator tells us that Ladivine "heard the scratching at the door even as she realized it must have been going on for several seconds already" (NDiaye 2017, 324). The "*leap*" could therefore also be understood as a productive moment of confusion and of apprehension (and this would fit with Marriott's description of something which does not stop arriving).

And then Ladivine Sylla was taken by surprise, whether because she was paying too close and too proud an attention to her burbling coffee maker or because she was having too much fun picturing the look on Richard Rivère's face if she began poking fun

---

<sup>123</sup> "le chien tourna vers elle ses yeux savants, ses yeux chastes. [...] Il leur rapportait le cœur palpitant de Malinka et peut-être aussi, pensa-t-elle dans l'ardeur de sa joie, la promesse d'une clarté nouvelle posée sur chaque jour" (NDiaye 2013, 403).

at him, and she heard the scratching at the door even as she realized it must have been going on for several seconds already. (NDiaye 2017, 324)<sup>124</sup>

The long phrase makes room for two present but disconnected moments to re-join together in Ladivine's surprise and apprehension of what has already been happening because of what is also *about* to happen. NDiaye continues to blur the line between the "already" and the "not yet," when she writes that Ladivine "knew at once who it was" [sut immédiatement qui était là] (NDiaye 2017, 324; 2013, 402). Through NDiaye's poetics, Ladivine could be said to be experiencing the *leap* toward being "for somewhere else and for something else" that Fanon so desired.

In Shirley Jordan's elegant reading of troubled, human-animal thresholds in several of NDiaye's works (the mermaid of *La Naufragée*, birds in *Trois femmes puissantes*, and dogs in both *Ladivine* and *Mon cœur à l'étroit*), she argues that NDiaye's interspecies relations challenge our thinking on the "ethics of human-human hospitality" (2017, 39). In Jordan's analysis of *Ladivine*'s "emotional" dogs, she considers the "possibility that animals are capable of resolving, or helping to resolve, the consequences of human inhospitality," and emphasizes the dog's offering of "deeply nurturing," "unsolicited comfort or even empathy" (2017, 52-53). The animal gaze "indicates, curiously that the dog has more 'humanity' than its human counterparts and the unconditional nature of its welcome alludes to the hyperbolic Law of hospitality, the black hole of absolute unconditional openness around which thinking on hospitality continues to dance" (Jordan 2017, 54). Given the devastating lack of emotional connection that dominates the novel, I do not deny that these dogs and their "deeply reciprocal" gazes have a significant appeal (2017,

---

<sup>124</sup> "Alors Ladivine Sylla se laissa surprendre, que ce fût parce qu'elle prêtait une attention trop grande et trop fière aux gagouillements de la machin à café ou qu'elle prenait un plaisir trop fin à s'imaginer l'expression de Richard Rivière si elle venait le taquiner, et elle entendit les grattements à la porte en même temps qu'elle comprit qu'ils devaient se produire depuis plusieurs secondes déjà" (NDiaye 2013, 402).

54). However, what gives me pause is the way in which Jordan deploys the universalist language of “humanity” when we have seen that there is also a long and racist history involving the animalization of Blackness, and this may very well be an element of historicity that Fanon lamented. This is one of the key messages of Bénédicte Boisseron work, *Afro-Dog: Blackness and the Animal Question* (2018). She explains that even to analogize (and we are dealing with literal transformations in the novel) a Black person as a dog is to come dangerously close to the actualization of the racist trope and the animalization of Blackness.

The “the black hole of absolute unconditional openness around which thinking on hospitality” (Jordan 2017, 54) brings to mind the kind of relationship that Despentès’s writing establishes with the absence of the character Alexandre Bleach and the ventriloquy work of the white author through a Black voice (chapter 2). Despentès’s engagement with Alexandre Bleach as though he is a kind of black hole of unconditional openness cautions us against moving too quickly into universal language of the human that does not take power dynamics into account. Jordan’s use of the first-person plural (e.g. “another species may serve as effective intermediary in order to bypass *our* chronic inability to open to each other” [54-55; my emphasis]) risks losing pace with what one might call Fanon’s many speeds if it does not take into account the racialized and gendered nature of hospitality. For although Fanon urges himself to *leap*, operating in the “future imperfect”; in some cases he also crucially urges us to “move slowly” and grasp the colonial mechanism through historical and political contextualization (2000, 165).

This final scene of reunion and recognition therefore remains tinged with a racial history that ties the presence of a dog to racist practices of animalizing Blackness and to the use of dogs by white people to control Black people (e.g. to recapture enslaved people seeking freedom and escaping from plantations). Even from within the texts of this dissertation project another scene

comes to mind. In *La Noire de...*, Diouana knocks on doors around the city of Dakar while looking for work. She approaches the entrance to a high-rise building in the city center, and as she rings the doorbell at the gate, a German Shepherd leaps forward and barks, guarding the passage. Fearfully, Diouana turns and runs away. She is therefore still in need of work and makes her way to the “maid market” where she will eventually be selected by Madame.

## Conclusion

When I started writing the dissertation proposal in 2019, the 2017 French presidential election was an obvious point of reference for the rise of French white nationalism in Marine Le Pen's increasingly mainstream political agenda (Schultheis 2017). As was predicted then, the presidential race in 2022 evidenced an even greater enthusiasm for Le Pen's far-right ideologies. This time, the race called for a presidential run-off, decided on April 24, 2022, as Emmanuel Macron was not able to secure a wide enough margin in the second round to secure reelection. Le Pen's agenda—with promises to ban the Muslim headscarf from public spaces and, at the top of her presidential campaign manifesto, plans drafted for a constitutional immigration referendum “d’interdire toute forme de peuplement qui vise à altérer l’identité de la France” [to prohibit population of all forms that aims to alter the identity of France]—is an unambiguous delineation of France as the Nation (her capitalization) of the French under threat of “la submersion migratoire” [the migratory deluge] (Le Pen 2022, 8). Though Macron won the run-off, Le Pen's vision of and for France resonated with over thirteen million French voters or nearly twenty percent of the population. Lest it seem that I am pointing fingers, the fact that in the United States in 2020 Donald Trump earned over seventy-four million presidential votes, roughly twenty-two percent of the population, serves as a reminder that these events are neither singular nor isolated.

It is both orienting and disorienting to write about race and racism in francophone film and literature against this backdrop of the much anticipated, but no less horrifying, gains in white supremacist politics—both in France and in the United States. This socio-political reality orients my project, underscoring the urgency of the need to practice critical skills of reading and

imagining against racist logics. At the same time, racism's very real and persistent harm can be discouraging and frustrating, especially when deeply held loyalties to white supremacy attempt to hide behind the illusions of a society that has rid itself of racism by eliminating race from conscious thought. The overall aim of this project can be boiled down to a simple exercise, seeking to prove a simple point: that it is both possible and fruitful to turn the critical tools of literary and film analyses towards apprehending the systematic workings of race subtending the visual, aural, and textual forms used to tell stories. This exercise of reading race might be deemed as "simple" because the methods and approaches deployed analyze visual, aural, and textual forms are not particularly new, for example: deconstructing metaphors, weighing emphases, mapping lexical fields, or isolating patterns. However, what complicates and validates the exercise for me lies in the novelty of turning these tools towards representations of race within the context of French and francophone studies.

This project has sought to expand analogies of the racialized subaltern's experience beyond the symbolism of "silence"—arguably the dominant metaphorical paradigm in (post)colonial scholarship for describing a colonized, dispossessed state.<sup>125</sup> Throughout this dissertation, I have investigated what else beyond "silence" could constitute a fruitful analogy for understanding the constructedness of race and the politics of representation at play in francophone literature and cinema. Adding to "silence," I have examined racial symbolism through analogies of: skins and surfaces, sounds and vibrations of a "real" rather than symbolic voice, physical architecture and cultural institutions, citational practices, relations and

---

<sup>125</sup> See for example Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 2015. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.; Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1993. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Edited by Patrick Williams and Chrisman, Laura. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, 66–111.

proximities to others, imagined and real physical sensations and psychological feelings, and non-human beings.

Though I have not engaged with the term Afro-pessimism to develop any argumentative lines in this current project, it is not difficult to recognize in each of the texts the societal conditions of anti-Blackness identified in Afro-pessimist theory, particularly those conceptualizations of Blackness as antithetical to the Human. For example, one can draw parallels between Diouana and Alex Bleach's impossible acousmatization and the Afro-pessimist premise that "the black (or slave) is an unspoken and/or unthought sentience for whom the transformative powers of discursive capacity are foreclosed *ab initio*—and that violence is at the heart of this foreclosure" (Douglass, Terrefe, and Wilderson 2018). In each of the three major works studied, Black and mixed-race protagonists face the death drive, to paraphrase Christina Sharpe (2016) by way of Freud, and incipient foreclosures of anti-Black racism—Diouana dies *ad nauseum*, Alexandre Bleach is already dead, and Clarisse/Malinka is not fully dead but eminently deadened. These three works read together present an overwhelmingly pessimistic view of Black experiences in the French metropole—a narrative that does not represent all of Black, African, and African diasporic experiences. It is important to acknowledge the limited nature of this kind of racial representation, even if one could argue that pessimism (including Afro-pessimism) holds a prominent place in French and francophone African cinema and literature. Greater attention to Black joy, in particular, remains crucial for developing a more accurate understanding of race and racial theory in the francophone context, and the work begun in this project would benefit from an expansion of this corpus to account for other stories in which anti-Blackness is not portrayed as the only world that people, Black people in particular, can experience.

Reaching across seemingly disparate contexts, starting with early Francophone African film, moving to twenty-first-century French post-punk popular literature, and closing with quintessentially French (and decidedly not-not-African) postmodernism, each case study in this dissertation presents a different perspective on one strain of the story of race in France. Circling back to the first chapter, in *La Noire de...*, Ousmane Sembene focused the camera's attention to the hypervisible surface of objects and images in order to analogize structural forms of anti-Black racism and its creation of visible, aural, and material Blackness. Following Diouana's death, the white French family re-establishes the white domestic space by ensuring the expulsion of "raced" peoples to the (post)colony and the maintenance of "racelessness" in the Metropole.

This racial segregation echoes through the second chapter, in Virginie Despentes's nearly all-white contemporary French social portrait. The *Vernon Subutex* trilogy is temporally anchored in the period after Alexandre Bleach's death, differently from how Sembene's chooses to end both the short story and the film *La Noire de...* with Diouana's suicide. Bleach has already moved from the state of hypervisibility to invisibility. The drama of the novel coalesces around what happens after and in some ways thanks to the fact that he is now gone. He is responsible for the miraculous discovery of sound gateways through time and space that create new formations of society and the survival of (supposedly nearly all-white) humanity, even as his own autonomy and life has been stripped away. After his death, his voice lingers just outside of reach via the transcription of lost tape recordings. Bleach's body, like Diouana's, is subjected to racialized, capitalized commodification and a torturously unfinished operation of erasure, transforming him into a missing, aural body. The aural bodies of both Diouana and Alex Bleach are pre-acousmatized specters, destined to "wander the [racialized] surface," to modify Chion's (1999,

27) formulation—Diouana through voiceover, Alex Bleach through a transcribed voice recording.

Finally, Marie NDiaye's *Ladivine* exploits the spectral asynchronicity of racialized aural bodies by embedding her mixed-race characters into landscapes founded on the fantasy of racelessness, despite the characters' acute experiences of racism. Clarisse/Malinka attempts to fuse and lose her physical and psychological self within colonial institutional mechanisms, willfully deadening her sense of perception so as to blank out the knowledge of racism in France, of French colonialism in West Africa, and of a racially ordered social world. Clarisse/Malinka's blankness is a product of colonialism that strategically turns back on itself to erase not only the history of non-white colonized subjects, but its own past as well. *Ladivine* inherits this state of suspended un-knowing from her mother, even though fragments of colonial and racial memory push their way up to the surface now and again. It would then seem appropriate that, by way of conclusion, I should turn back to a familiar object made strange in Marie NDiaye's writing: *Ladivine's* lost suitcase.

Marie NDiaye depicts *Ladivine's* stay in an unknown West African country as a transitional stage during which she moves from colonial unknowing towards half-formed awareness. She experiences moments of déjà vu (e.g., at the mango juice stall) and encounters some strangers whom she thinks she recognizes and others who recognize her from a wedding she never attended. For the most part, the only way to understand these encounters with strangers is to characterize them as anomalies. Without a frame of reference in which to house these relationships or lost memories, *Ladivine's* experiences translate nearer to madness and absurdity than to ancestral anchors or colonial consciousness—the fact that she cannot explain any of this to her German husband Marko troubles her greatly.

When Ladivine, Marko, and the two children arrive at their destination airport, two of their suitcases have gone missing. It is not a big deal, Ladivine thinks to herself, but she sees Marko's face fall dramatically: "The cracks in his face went deep, the bones as if shattered with a hammer" (2017, 168).<sup>126</sup> Later on, when the family is walking through a market, they see their clothes laid out for sale by a woman wearing Ladivine's yellow gingham dress. Marko reacts with hostile irritation, Annika (their daughter) expresses resigned acceptance that "the clothes on display were hers no more" [acceptant le fait que ces vêtements exposés n'étaient plus les siens], and Ladivine is overcome with feeling of guilt (2017: 182-183, 2013: 228). She wonders to herself, "Was it because, unable to explain it, she nonetheless found it neither surprising nor frightening?" [Était-ce parce que, ne sachant l'expliquer, elle n'en éprouvait pourtant ni stupéfaction ni effroi ?] (2017: 183, 2013: 229). Amid the various items of clothing, there is a pair of trousers and a navy-blue blouse that Ladivine distinctly remembers not having packed, due to the outfit's cold-weather appeal and bleach-stained spot. Yet when Annika points out this fact, Ladivine lies in denial, "not to protect her [daughter] from some hard truth but only to separate herself from the family she nonetheless so loved, from that husband and those children she couldn't or wouldn't let into her new life" (2017: 184).<sup>127</sup>

NDiaye laces the scene with pain and loss as they push their way up to a numbed surface. The luggage lost in transit parallels Ladivine's own transitional state, illuminating diasporic sensitivities, even leading her to detach herself from her "immediate" family. Additionally, the lost-and-found (but never repossessed) clothing symbolizes just the surface of things lost—what

---

<sup>126</sup> NDiaye 2013, 210. "Ses traits s'était défaits en profondeur, les os du visage comme brisés d'un coup de marteau [...]"

<sup>127</sup> NDiaye 2013, 230. "sans que ce fût pour la protéger d'une vérité difficile mais uniquement pour se garder, elle Ladivine, en retrait de sa famille pourtant tellement chérie, de ce mari et de ces enfants qu'elle ne pouvait, qu'elle ne voulait associer à sa nouvelle approche de l'existence."

deeper forces shatter Marko's bones? What undercurrent of unknown trauma caught these objects in its force, carried them away, and returned them again slightly changed?

Without any definitive points of reference for these transitory objects in the novel, the imagery of emptied suitcases, flattened clothing, and dispossessed possessors reaches back for previous iterations and other archetypes. These objects find an uncanny echo in the memory of Sembene's "original" *Black Girl* and in his use of dresses and suitcases as metaphors for colonial capital. In the absence of historical and social understandings of the ways that race and colonialism shape the present, these kinds of aesthetic—textual and textural—linkages can offer frameworks for apprehending racial formations structuring French and francophone literature and film. These frameworks are critical for their attention to the spectral and can help us to attune our awareness to structures of race and racism that thrive in their elusions of easy perception.

## Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. 2012. *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham ; London: Duke University Press.
- Armstrong, Joshua. 2019. *Maps and Territories: Global Positioning in the Contemporary French Novel*. Contemporary French and Francophone Cultures 61. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Asava, Zélie. 2017. *Mixed Race Cinemas: Multiracial Dynamics in America and France*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Asibong, Andrew. 2013a. *Marie NDiaye: Blankness and Recognition*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- . 2013b. “The Spectacle of Marie NDiaye’s *Trois Femmes Puissantes*.” *Australian Journal of French Studies* 50, no. 3 (September): 385–98. <https://doi.org/10.3828/AJFS.2013.28>.
- . 2015. “Three Is the Loneliest Number: Marie Vieux Chauvet, Marie NDiaye, and the Traumatized Triptych.” *Yale French Studies*, Revisiting Marie Vieux Chauvet: Paradoxes of the Postcolonial Feminine, 128: 146–60.
- Asibong, Andrew, and Shirley Ann Jordan, eds. 2009. *Marie NDiaye: l'étrangeté à l'œuvre*. Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires de Septentrion.
- Battersby, Eileen. 2018. “Vernon Subutex 2 by Virginie Despentes: More Vicious Wit and Stark Insight.” *The Irish Times*, July 14, 2018. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/vernon-subutex-2-by-virginie-despentes-more-vicious-wit-and-stark-insight-1.3559120>.
- Beaman, Jean. 2019. “Are French People White?: Towards an Understanding of Whiteness in Republican France.” *Identities* 26, no. 5 (September): 546–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2018.1543831>.
- Beaman, Jean, and Amy Petts. 2020. “Towards a Global Theory of Colorblindness: Comparing Colorblind Racial Ideology in France and the United States.” *Sociology Compass* 14, no. 4 (April): 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12774>.
- Beaumont, Gustave de. 1840 [1835]. *Marie, ou l'esclavage aux Etats-Unis, tableau de mœurs américaines*. Paris: C. Gosselin. 4<sup>th</sup> edition.
- Behar, Clarissa. 2011. *Writing Race in Marie NDiaye*. Dissertation Abstracts International.
- . 2013. “Écrire en pays à majorité blanche : *En famille* de Marie NDiaye.” In *Une femme puissante: L'œuvre de Marie NDiaye*, edited by Daniel Bengsch and Cornelia Ruhe, 125–40. Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401209700>.

- Bellan, Lucille. 2018. "Plus de dix ans après « King Kong Théorie », on n'a guère avancé (et c'est désespérant)." *Slate.fr*, October 10, 2018. <http://www.slate.fr/story/168359/king-kong-theorie-virginie-despentent-theatre-atelier>.
- Berenstein, Rhona J. 1996. *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality, and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinema*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bernasconi, Robert. 2020a. "Frantz Fanon and Psychopathology: The Progressive Infrastructure of *Black Skin, White Masks*." In *Race, Rage and Resistance: Philosophy, Psychology and the Perils of Individualism*, edited by David M. Goodman, Eric R. Severson, and Heather Macdonald, 34–45. New York: Routledge.
- . 2020b. "Frantz Fanon's Engagement with Phenomenology: Unlocking the Temporal Architecture of *Black Skin, White Masks*." *Research in Phenomenology* 50, no. 3 (October): 386–406. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15691640-12341458>.
- Bernasconi, Robert, and Tommy Lee Lott, eds. 2000. *The Idea of Race*. Hackett Readings in Philosophy. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.
- Bishop, Cécile, and Zoë Roth. 2019. "Introduction: Race and the Aesthetic in French and Francophone Cultures." *L'Esprit Créateur* 59, no. 2: 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2019.0012>.
- Brassard, Léonore. 2018. "Les Damnées de Virginie Despentent." *Rocky Mountain Review*, Special Issue on Virginie Despentent, 72, no. 1: 36–58.
- Bricco, Elisa. 2019. "Considérations sur *Vernon Subutex* de Virginie Despentent : « formes de vie », implication et engagement oblique." *CONTEXTES*, no. 22 (February). <https://doi.org/10.4000/contextes.7087>.
- Burnautzki, Sarah. 2013. "Jeux de visibilité et d'invisibilité : la production romanesque de Marie NDiaye à la lumière de la crise du républicanisme français." In *Une femme puissante: l'œuvre de Marie NDiaye*, edited by Daniel Bengsch and Cornelia Ruhe, 141–57. Brill-Rodopi. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401209700>.
- . 2017. *Les Frontières Racialisées de La Littérature Française: Contrôle Au Faciès et Stratégies de Passage*. Francophonies 8. Paris: Honoré Champion éditeur.
- Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge.
- . 2006. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Third. New York: Routledge.
- Camiscioli, Elisa. 2009. *Reproducing the French Race: Immigration, Intimacy, and Embodiment in the Early Twentieth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Camus, Renaud. 2011. *Le grand remplacement: introduction au remplacisme global*. 6e éd. Dans l'arène. Paris: la Nouvelle librairie éditions.

- Césaire, Aimé. 1962. “Y a-t-il une civilisation africaine?” In . l’Associazione Culturale Italiana.
- . 2004. *Discours sur le colonialisme*. Paris: Présence Africaine.
- Cham, Mbye Boubacar. 1984. “Art and Ideology in the Work of Sembène Ousmane and Haïlé Gerima.” *Présence Africaine* 129, no. 81: 79–91.
- Chanda, Tirthankar. 2013. “Marie NDiaye: « Je cherche la musique des phrases ».” *RFI*, February 14, 2013. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20130212-Ladivine-marie-diaye-cherche-musique-phrases-faulkner-proust>.
- Chapman, Herrick, and Laura Levine Frader, eds. 2004. *Race in France: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Politics of Difference*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Cheng, Anne Anlin. 2011. *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chion, Michel. 1999. *The Voice in Cinema*. Translated by Claudia Gorbman. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Chrisafis, Angelique. 2018. “Virginie Despentes: ‘What Is Going on in Men’s Heads When Women’s Pleasure Has Become a Problem?’” *The Guardian*, August 31, 2018, sec. Books. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/31/virginie-despentes-interview-baise-moi-vernon-subutex>.
- Cohen, Mathilde, and Sarah Mazouz. 2021. “Introduction: A White Republic? Whites and Whiteness in France.” *French Politics, Culture & Society* 39, no. 2 (June): 1–25. <https://doi.org/10.3167/fpcs.2021.390201>.
- Cook, Mercer. 1934. *Le Noir: Morceaux Choisis de Vingt-Neuf Français Célèbres*. New York: American Book Company.
- Cooper, Anna J. 2006. *Slavery and the French and Haitian Revolutionists: L’attitude de La France à l’égard de l’esclavage Pendant La Révolution*. Edited by Frances Richardson Keller. New ed. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Delphy, Christine, ed. 2011. *Un Troussage de Domestique*. Nouvelles Questions Féministes. Paris: Syllepse.
- Despentes, Virginie. 2010. *King Kong Theory*. Translated by Stéphanie Benson. London: The Feminist Press.
- . 2013. *King Kong théorie*. Paris: Grasset.
- . 2016a. *Vernon Subutex: Tome 1*. Le livre de poche. Paris: Grasset.
- . 2016b. *Vernon Subutex: Tome 2*. Le livre de poche. Paris: Grasset.
- . 2018. *Vernon Subutex: Tome 3*. Texte intégral. Le livre de poche. Paris: Grasset.

- . 2019. *Vernon Subutex 1*. Translated by Frank Wynne. First American edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- . 2020. *Vernon Subutex 2*. Translated by Frank Wynne. First American edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- . 2021a. *King Kong Theory*. Translated by Frank Wynne. First American edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- . 2021b. *Vernon Subutex 3*. Translated by Frank Wynne. First American edition. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Dima, Vlad. 2014. "Ousmane Sembene's 'La Noire de...': Melancholia in Photo, Text, and Film." *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 26, no. 1: 56–68.
- . 2020. *The Beautiful Skin: Football, Fantasy, and Cinematic Bodies in Africa*. African Humanities and the Arts. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Doane, Mary Ann. 1980. "The Voice in the Cinema: The Articulation of Body and Space." *Yale French Studies*, no. 60: 33–50. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930003>.
- Douglass, Patrice, Selamawit D. Terrefe, and Frank B. Wilderson. 2018. "Afro-Pessimism." Oxford Bibliographies. August 28, 2018. <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780190280024/obo-9780190280024-0056.xml>.
- Drabinski, John. 2019. "Frantz Fanon." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Spring 2019. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/frantz-fanon/>.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1998. *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860 - 1880*. 1. ed. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 2003. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Edited by Farah Jasmine Griffin. New York: Barnes & Noble Classics.
- Duncombe, Stephen, and Maxwell Tremblay, eds. 2011. *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race*. New York: Verso.
- Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White*. Twentieth Anniversary Edition. New York: Routledge.
- El-Tayeb, Fatima. 2011. *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*. Difference Incorporated. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Erb, Cynthia Marie. 2009. *Tracking King Kong: A Hollywood Icon in World Culture*. 2nd ed. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

- Fanon, Frantz. 2000. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. Pluto Classics. London: Pluto Press.
- . 2002. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove.
- Fayard, Nicole. 2006. “The Rebellious Body as Parody: *Baise-Moi* by Virginie Despentes.” *French Studies* 60, no. 1 (January): 63–77. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kni287>.
- feministkilljoys. 2015. “Institutional Habits.” *Feministkilljoys* (blog). February 2, 2015. <https://feministkilljoys.com/2015/02/02/institutional-habits/>.
- Fielder, Brigitte. 2020. *Relative Races: Genealogies of Interracial Kinship in Nineteenth-Century America*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Fleming, Crystal Marie. 2017. *Resurrecting Slavery: Racial Legacies and White Supremacy in France*. Philadelphia Rome Tokyo: Temple University Press.
- Forsdick, Charles, and Jennifer Yee. 2018. “Towards a Postcolonial Nineteenth Century: Introduction.” *French Studies* 72, no. 2 (April): 167–75. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fs/kny005>.
- Frankenberg, Ruth. 1993. *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Goergen, Maxime. 2018. “Vernon Subutex et le roman « balzacien ».” *Rocky Mountain Review, Special Issue on Virginie Despentes*, 72, no. 1: 165–82.
- Harper, Frances E. W. 2010 [1892]. *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*. Penguin Classics.
- . 2021 [1869]. *Minnie’s Sacrifice*. West Margin Press.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Race and American Culture. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Helton, Laura, Justin Leroy, Max A. Mishler, Samantha Seeley, and Shauna Sweeney. 2015. “The Question of Recovery: An Introduction.” *Social Text, The Question of Recovery: Slavery, Freedom, and the Archive*, 33, no. 4 125 (December): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-3315766>.
- Hennebelle, Guy. 1969. “Ousmane Sembène: ‘Pour moi, le cinéma est un moyen d’action politique, mais...’” *L’Afrique littéraire et artistique* 7: 73–82.
- Hertzman, Marc A. 2017. “Fatal Differences: Suicide, Race, and Forced Labor in the Americas.” *The American Historical Review* 122, no. 2 (April): 317–45. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/122.2.317>.

- Herzog, Nina. 2021. "Community as Protagonist: Talking with Virginie Despentes." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 27, 2021. <https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/community-as-protagonist-talking-with-virginie-despentes/>.
- Hill, Leslie. 2000. "From Order to Adventure: Women's Fiction since 1970." In *A History of Women's Writing in France*, edited by Sonya Stephens, 168–84. Albany: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511554025.010>.
- Hollister, Lucas. 2019. "Virginie Despentes et le domaine du genre." *Études de la littérature française des XXe et XXIe siècles*, Extension du domaine de la littérature, , no. 8 (May): en ligne. <https://doi.org/10.4000/elfe.888>.
- Hughes, Sarah. 2020. "Virginie Despentes: 'If You Are a Lesbian, You Really Are Less Restricted by Life.'" *Inews.Co.Uk*, July 3, 2020. <https://inews.co.uk/culture/books/virginie-despentes-vernon-subutex-3-man-booker-prize-lesbian-loneliness-interview-463909>.
- Hugo, Victor. 2022 [1826]. *Bug-Jargal*. Hachette Livre.
- James, C. L. R. 1989. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint l'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. Second edition, Revised. New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, Inc.
- Jensen, Laura Bea. 2017. *Writing Race and Universalism in Contemporary France: Marie NDiaye and Bessora*. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Jérusalem, Christine. 2009. "Des larmes de sang au sang épuisé dans l'œuvre de Marie NDiaye (*hoc est enim corpus meum*)."  
*La Revue des Sciences Humaines*, Marie NDiaye : l'étrangeté à l'œuvre, 293: 83–91.
- Jordan, Shirley. 2017. *Marie NDiaye: Inhospitable Fictions*. Cambridge: Legenda.
- Kapriélian, Nelly. 2015. "Nos années 2010, 2015. Naissance de *Vernon Subutex* : Despentes raconte." *Les Inrockuptibles*, February 1, 2015. <https://www.lesinrocks.com/livres/dans-vernon-subutex-virginie-despentes-cartographie-la-societe-102778-01-02-2015/>.
- Keaton, Trica Danielle. 2010. "The Politics of Race-Blindness: (Anti)Blackness and Category-Blindness in Contemporary France." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 7, no. 1: 103–31. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X10000202>.
- Keaton, Trica Danielle, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Tyler Edward Stovall, eds. 2012. *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kennedy, Gerrick. 2022. *Didn't We Almost Have It All: In Defense of Whitney Houston*. Abrams Press.

- Langford, Rachael. 2001. "Black and White in Black and White: Identity and Cinematography in Ousmane Sembène's 'La Noire de.../Black Girl' (1966)." *Studies in French Cinema* 1, no. 1 (January): 13–21. <https://doi.org/10.1386/sfci.1.1.13>.
- Le Pen, Marine. 2022. "Manifeste: La France, mon projet présidentiel." <https://mlafrance.fr/pdfs/manifeste-m-la-france-programme-presidentiel.pdf>.
- Lépinard, Éléonore. 2005. "Malaise dans le concept: Différence, identité et théorie féministe." *Cahiers du Genre* 39, no. 2: 107–35. <https://doi.org/10.3917/cdge.039.0107>.
- . 2014. "Impossible Intersectionality? French Feminists and the Struggle for Inclusion." *Politics & Gender* 10, no. 01 (March): 124–30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X13000585>.
- . 2020. *Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Postsecular Times*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- "'Lettre adressée à mes amis blancs qui ne voient pas où est le problème...' - Virginie Despentes." n.d. Accessed June 4, 2020. <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/lettres-d-interieur/lettres-d-interieur-04-juin-2020>.
- Leyris, Raphaëlle. 2017. "Avec « Vernon Subutex 3 », Virginie Despentes achève sa trilogie sur la France." *Le Monde*, May 24, 2017. <http://www.proquest.com/docview/1901662028/citation/D23907BBAA3478FPQ/1>.
- Librairie Mollat, dir. 2015. *Virginie Despentes - Vernon Subutex Volume 1*. Bordeaux. <https://vimeo.com/122455383>.
- Lloyd, Cathie. 1998. "Rendez-vous Manqués: Feminisms and Anti-racisms in France." *Modern & Contemporary France* 6, no. 1 (February): 61–73. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489808456412>.
- Louar, Nadia. 2018. "'Deux Cents Mots et Un Gros Marteau.' Virginie Despentes's Skillful Construction of an Authorial Posture." *Rocky Mountain Review*, Special Issue on Virginie Despentes, 72, no. 1: 125–45.
- Lucey, Michael. 2018. "Ethnographers of Ourselves." *Public Books* (blog). June 6, 2018. <https://www.publicbooks.org/ethnographers-of-ourselves/>.
- Marker, Emily, and Christy Pichichero, eds. 2019. "Race, Racism, and the Study of France and the Francophone World Today." *H-France Salon* 11, no. 2.
- Marriott, David. 2011. "Inventions of Existence: Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, Sociogeny, and 'the Damned.'" *CR: The New Centennial Review* 11, no. 3: 45–89. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ncr.2012.0020>.

- Mbembe, Achille. 2005. "La République et l'impensé de la « race »." In *La Fracture coloniale: La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial*, edited by Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Sandrine Lemaire, 143–57. La Découverte.
- . 2017. *Critique of Black Reason*. Translated by Laurent Dubois. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2019. *Necropolitics*. Translated by Steven Corcoran. Theory in Forms. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Miron, Ronny. 2012. "Historicity." In *Karl Jaspers: From Selfhood to Being*, 127–39. Brill. [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401208062\\_009](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401208062_009).
- Moudileno, Lydie. 2009. "L'excellent français de Marie NDiaye." Edited by Andrew Asibong and Shirley Jordan. *Revue des sciences humaines*, Marie NDiaye : l'étrangeté à l'œuvre, 293: 25–38.
- . 2013. "Marie NDiaye : entre visibilité et réserve." In *Une femme puissante: l'œuvre de Marie NDiaye*, edited by Cornelia Ruhe and Daniel Bengsch, 159–75. Brill-Rodopi.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. 1988. *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*. African Systems of Thought. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Murphy, David. 2000. *Sembène: Imagining Alternatives in Film & Fiction*. Oxford: Currey.
- Nash, Jennifer C. 2017. "Intersectionality and Its Discontents (Review)." *American Quarterly* 69, no. 1: 117–29.
- . 2019. *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. Next Wave: New Directions in Women's Studies. Durham: Duke University Press.
- . 2020. "Citational Desires: On Black Feminism's Institutional Longings." *Diacritics* 48, no. 3: 76–91. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2020.0020>.
- NDiaye, Marie. 1990. *En famille*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit.
- . 1992. "Lettre Marie NDiaye," January 2, 1992. University of Western Australia. <https://aflit.arts.uwa.edu.au/LettreNdiayeM.html>.
- . 1997a. *Among Family*. Translated by Heather Doyal. Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Angela Royal Pub.
- . 1997b. "Mon quatrième roman." In *Tombeau du cœur de François II; Adeline; Un voyage*, edited by Thierry Fourneau, Marie-Thérèse Humbert, and Marie NDiaye. Vendôme: Centre régional du livre.
- . 2003. *Papa doit manger*. Paris: Minuit.

- . 2008. “Les sœurs.” In *La condition noire : Essay sur une minorité française*, 9–15. Calmann-Lévy.
- . 2013. *Ladivine*. Paris: Gallimard.
- . 2017. *Ladivine*. Translated by Jordan Stump. Paperback. London: MacLehose Press.
- Ndiaye, Pap. 2009. *La condition noire: essai sur une minorité française*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Nunn, Tessa Ashlin. 2019. “The Screaming Mother and Silent Subaltern in Ousmane Sembene’s *La Noire De...*” *Women in French Studies Special Conference Issue*, 192–202.
- Oyler, Lauren. 2015. “Behind the Scenes With Virginie Despentes.” *Vice*, August 7, 2015. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/evgg8a/behind-the-scenes-with-virginie-despentes>.
- Peabody, Sue. 1996. *There Are No Slaves in France: The Political Culture of Race and Slavery in the Ancien Régime*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pfaff, Françoise. 1984. *The Cinema of Ousmane Sembene, a Pioneer of African Film*. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, no. 79. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press.
- Ravindranathan, Thangam. 2020. *Behold an Animal: Four Exorbitant Readings*. Flashpoints. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Raya, Aurélie. 2009. “Marie NDiaye, l’exilée volontaire.” *Paris Match*, September 17, 2009. <https://www.parismatch.com/Culture/Livres/marie-ndiaye-trois-femmes-puissantes-142711>.
- Repinecz, Jonathon. 2016. “‘This Is Not a Pipe’?: Reflexivity, Fictionality and Dialogism in Sembène’s Films.” *Journal of African Cinemas* 8, no. 2 (October): 181–97. [https://doi.org/10.1386/jac.8.2.181\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jac.8.2.181_1).
- Roca i Escoda, Marta, Farinaz Fassa, and Éléonore Lépinard, eds. 2016. *L’Intersectionnalité: enjeux théoriques et politiques*. Le genre du monde. Paris: La Dispute.
- Rose, Steve. 2018. “‘Not Black Enough’: The Identity Crisis That Haunted Whitney Houston.” *The Guardian*, July 7, 2018, sec. Music. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/jul/07/not-black-enough-the-identity-crisis-that-haunted-whitney-houston>.
- Rosello, Mireille. 2001. *Postcolonial Hospitality: The Immigrant as Guest*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.
- Said, Edward W. 1977. “Orientalism.” *The Georgia Review* 31, no. 1: 162–206.
- . 1979. *Orientalism*. 1st Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage Books.

- Sauzon, Virginie. 2012. "Virginie Despentès et les récits de la violence sexuelle : une déconstruction littéraire et féministe des rhétoriques de la racialisation." *Genre, sexualité et société*, no. 7 (June). <https://doi.org/10.4000/gss.2328>.
- Schaal, Michèle A. 2011. "Virginie Despentès or a French Third Wave of Feminism?" In *Cherchez La Femme : Women and Values in the Francophone World*, edited by Erika Fülöp and Adrienne Angelo, 39–55. Cambridge Scholars.
- . 2017. *Une troisième vague féministe et littéraire: les femmes de lettres de la nouvelle génération*. Leiden ; Boston: Brill.
- . 2018. "Introduction to Special Issue on Virginie Despentès. From Margins to Center (?)." *Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association*, Special Issue on Virginie Despentès, 72, no. 1: 14–35.
- . 2018. "L'Univers affectif féminin dans *Vernon Subutex* de Virginie Despentès." *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 22, no. 4 (August): 475–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2018.1545733>.
- Schuller, Kyla. 2018. *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*. Anima. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Schultheis, Emily. 2017. "Marine Le Pen's Real Victory." *The Atlantic*, May 7, 2017, sec. Global. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/le-pen-national-front-macron-france-election/525759/>.
- Sembène, Ousmane. 1997. "Black Girl." In *Under African Skies: Modern African Stories*, edited by Charles Larson, translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy, 42–54. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- . 2013. *Voltaïque: la noire de... ; nouvelles*. Paris: Présence Africaine.
- Sembène, Ousmane, Annett Busch, and Max Annas. 2008. *Ousmane Sembène: Interviews*. Conversations with Filmmakers Series. Jackson: University of Mississippi.
- Sharkey, Alix. 2002. "Scandale! The Story behind Baise-Moi." *The Guardian*, April 14, 2002, sec. Film. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2002/apr/14/filmcensorship.features>.
- Sharpe, Christina Elizabeth. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Silva, Denise Ferreira da. 2007. *Toward a Global Idea of Race*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Smith, Anna Marie. 2015. "Subjectivity and Subjectivation." In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, edited by Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth, 1:1–19. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.013.46>.

- Sontag, Susan. 2005. *On Photography*. New York: Rosetta Books.
- Soumahoro, Maboula. 2020. *Le triangle et l'hexagone: réflexions sur une identité noire*. Paris: La Découverte.
- . 2021. *Black Is the Journey, Africana the Name*. Translated by Kaiama L. Glover. English edition. Critical South. Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1985. "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives." *History and Theory* 24, no. 3: 247–72. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2505169>.
- . 1993. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Edited by Patrick Williams and Chrisman, Laura. *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, 66–111.
- . 1999. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2016. *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Stovall, Tyler Edward. 2003. "National Identity and Shifting Imperial Frontiers: Whiteness and the Exclusion of Colonial Labor After World War I." *Representations* 84, no. 1 (November): 52–72. <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2003.84.1.52>.
- Thomas, Dominic Richard David. 2007. *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism*. African Expressive Cultures. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 2015. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press.
- Tuaille, Victoire. n.d. "Virginie Despentès: Meuf King Kong." Les Couilles sur la table. Accessed June 29, 2021. <https://www.binge.audio/podcast/les-couilles-sur-la-table/virginie-despentès-meuf-king-kong>.
- Vergès, Françoise. 2020. *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism*. Translated by Kaiama L. Glover. Theory in Forms. Durham: Duke University Press.
- "Vernon Subutex." n.d. US Macmillan Publishers. Accessed June 6, 2021. <https://us.macmillan.com/series/>.
- "Vernon Subutex 1." 2018. The Booker Prizes. 2018. <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/books/vernon-subutex-1>.
- Vimalassery, Manu, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein. 2016. "Introduction: On Colonial Unknowing." *Theory & Event* 19, no. 4. <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/633283>.
- Virtue, Nancy. 2014. "'Le Film de...' Self-Adaptation in the Film Version of Ousmane Sembène's 'La Noire De...'" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 42, no. 3 (January): 557–67.

- Wampole, Christy. 2020. *Degenerative Realism: Novel and Nation in Twenty-First-Century France*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Watt, Emily. 2021. "The Stinging Provocations of Virginie Despentès." *The New Yorker*, May 19, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/the-stinging-provocations-of-virginie-despentès>.
- Weiss, Gail. 2013. *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.
- Williams, Russell. 2020. "The Writer and the Terrorist: On Michel Houellebecq." *Textual Practice* 34, no. 9 (September): 1599–1622. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1808302>.
- Yao, Xine. 2021. *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America*. Perverse Modernities. Durham: Duke University Press.