

21ST CENTURY BLACK BEAUTY RESISTANCE: COLLECTIVISM, INDIVIDUALITY,
AND IN/VISIBILITY IN BLACK WOMEN'S WRITING

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean to think beyond white supremacy, to consider its limits, to transcend them? How do Black women-centered gazes illuminate its borders and unseat it? I respond to these questions by examining the experiences and perspectives of Black women via representations of their bodies and hair in Francophone autobiographical, sociocultural, and literary texts written by 21st century Black women. Building upon the legacies of post-colonial, critical race, and afropessimist theory, I look beyond how they survive everyday traumas of the white male gaze and historical traumas of slavery and colonialism to consider how they exercise power, self-determination, and self-definition. My work looks specifically at representations of Black bodies and hair with sustained attention to the relationship(s) between collectivism, individuality, and in/visibility therein to elucidate the conceptual attributes of Black women-centered gazes and its power.

It is the objective of my dissertation to bring light to the possibility of Black presents and futures that are not constructed under the white gaze, and that surpass the bounds of white supremacy by showcasing the power of a Black women-centered gaze to reify those bounds as they realize new worlds. While my focus is on Black women in the hexagonal French context, this work has implications for a global Diasporic community in the aftermaths of colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, and chattel slavery. I argue that within the autobiographical, sociocultural, and literary texts I examine, Black women-centered gazes are making the world beyond the hegemonic forces of the white male gaze and white supremacy and creating space there for the fullness of Black beauty, Black creativity, Black joy, Black freedom, and ultimately, Black life.

The first two chapters, “Individuating the Collective Body,” and “Styling, Shame, Disalienation, and Apolitics of Hair,” analyze three autobiographical/sociocultural texts: *Afrofem*, authored in 2018 by the Mwasi Collectif Afroféministe, and *Noire n’est pas mon métier*, published in 2018 by a group of Black French actresses, and *Trop noire pour être française*, an autobiographical text by Ivorian-born Black French screenwriter and director, Isabelle Boni-Claverie. In these texts, I consider the themes of

collective resistance to violence and the ungendering of Black French women's bodies, corporeal performance of belonging and individuality, the bodily inscription of celebration of Diasporic connectedness, as well as Christina Sharpe's notion of Black redaction as resistance against corporeal and aesthetic devaluation. I employ the scholarship of Shirley Tate and Juliette Smeralda to tease out the relationship between hair choice and social in/visibility, alongside the external and internal political inscription of hair choice as it relates to the white male gaze and Black women-centered gazes. I claim that the positive recognition of variability in Black beauty aesthetics related to hair decenters whiteness as the norm from which to be different. I also note these authors' creation of space for the apolitics of hair where the "depoliticizing" of hair choice disregards whiteness as an icon to which Blackness must respond.

In the third and final chapter, "Aesthetics and Corporeality in Black French Women's Fiction," I analyze both the representations of Black women's hair and body in two literary texts: Laura Nsamenang's 2018 novel, *À mains nues*, and Léonora Miano's 2010 novel, *Blues pour Élise*. These texts foregrounds dynamics of power at the intersections of race, gender, and class, and semiotic relationships between aesthetics, corporeality, horizontal connectedness, and self-determination. In this chapter, I argue that the aforementioned conceptual attributes and functional strategies of Black women-centered gazes demonstrated by my analyses in the first two chapters are no less present in the narrative worlds created by these authors, and that these spaces of creative expression both connect and distinguish Black women while depicting ontological possibilities beyond the limits of white supremacy.

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“If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn’t love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal...Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love.”

1 Corinthians 13: 1, 13 (NLT)

Many times I’ve been asked, “How are you doing this with a family?” I often thought to myself, “I don’t know how anyone does this without one.” No one has been a greater supporter to me in this pursuit than my husband, Kevin. The love, care, kindness, gentleness, and encouragement that he showered upon me as I did this work were unmatched, and our children offered up an endless supply of joy, laughter, unconditional acceptance, and cuddles. You all are my favorites.

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To Black Women

Then, Now, Always

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INTRODUCTION

My dissertation examines the experiences and perspectives of Black women via the representation of their bodies and hair in Francophone texts written by Black women of the 21st century. It employs Black Feminist theory born out of the American and European contexts as a theoretical basis to illustrate how this minoritized group exercises power, self-determination, and self-definition. I explore three autobiographical/sociocultural texts, *Afrofem* by the Mwasi-Collectif, *Trop noire pour être française*, by Isabelle Boni-Claverie, and *Noire n'est pas mon métier*, a collection of short stories written by various Black women actresses in France, and two literary texts, *Blues pour Élise*, by Léonora Miano, and *À mains nues*, by Laura Nsafou. My work examines the representation of Black bodies and hair in Francophone texts through the lens of two sets of dichotomies: individuality/collectivism, and visibility/invisibility.

My project and other works on Blackness in France are important and have remained timely, for the debate over the sheer legality of racial and ethnic statistics in France now spans several decades.¹ In 2021, the French government announced a desire to “launch an investigation into academic research” that promotes “Islamism,” “corruptive,” “radical,” and “activist” ideologies, largely within the fields of postcolonial, intersectional, and gender studies,² seen as a threat to the dearly held French republican value of universalism. As Felisa Reynolds writes, the notion of universalism has “seemingly benign origins,” tracing its genealogy from its enshrinement into the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* as an effort to ensure “equality of French citizens before the eyes of the law,” to its reinforcement through Article 8 of Law n° 78–17 which bans the collection of racial, ethnic, and religious statistics as a supposed protection

¹ Simon, Patrick. "The Choice of Ignorance: The Debate on Ethnic and Racial Statistics in France," in *Social Statistics and Ethnic Diversity: Cross-National Perspectives in Classifications and Identity Politics* (2015).

² Onishi, Norimitsu and Constant Meheut, "Heating Up Culture Wars, France to Scour Universities for Ideas That 'Corrupt Society'," *New York Times*, 18 Feb. 2021.

against a Holocaust-style genocide. Unfortunately, as Reynolds goes on to explain, “One cannot simply declare all races equal, ban the collection of race-based data, and proclaim “mission accomplished.”³ The iterative officialization of French universalism and its quotidian application makes room for a homogenous French ideal citizen, erasing the experiences and often even the existence of minoritized individuals.⁴

The attack on so-called “Islamism” is but one instance of the devolution of the French republican value of universalism and the resultant attempts at silencing of “disruptive” scholarship to the detriment of its historically and currently othered communities. In fact, the universalist dismissal of race as a social category has been an impediment to my own research; this project relies in large part on literature and theory born of African-American and non-French scholars and activists, because their French counterparts have long gone unacknowledged, unresearched, unpublished, and generally devalored in French academe,⁵ and are seemingly only now beginning to gain traction in French academic and media spaces. While the list of French Studies scholars is long, there is comparatively little to find on the subject of Black Frenchness or French Blackness, and even less so on Black French women; what has been published very often cites those same African-American scholars and activists as foundational to their works.⁶ While Macron’s investigation may or may not ever take place, the state’s stance on the American brand of multiculturalism, its problematic commitment to the impossible notion of “colorblindness,” and its delegitimization of major currents in the social sciences amplify the

³ Reynolds, Felisa Vergara. “Minority identities amidst an oppressive universalism: The role of the podcast *Kiffe ta race* in France.” *CFC Intersections*, vol. 2, no. 1, 22 July 2023. pp. 33-35.

⁴ This has been taken up by many Black French women scholars and media figures such as, Rokhaya Diallo, Maboula Soumahoro, Amandine Gay, Sibeth Ndiaye, and Mame Fatou-Niang.

⁵ Norman Ajari’s blog post entitled “Black Issues in Philosophy: Africana Philosophy in France Today,” highlights this phenomenon in the field of philosophy as an example.

⁶ This includes works like Maria-Gratias Simon’s “In/Visibility Crises: Transnational Correctives and the Happiness of Black Women in Francophone Prose Fiction and Dramatic Film,” and Katelyn Knox’s *Race on Display in the 20th and 21st Century France*.

need for scholarly focus on the impacts on and of France's marginalized communities. By focusing on invisibility, visibility, collectivism, and individuality, I highlight these impacts and underline their ability to create change.

Negative In/Visibilities and the White Male Gaze/r

In/visibility can be both negative and positive, a notion I discuss in more detail throughout this project. Negative invisibility, that is, among other things, a disregard that negatively affects, is largely the direct consequence of French republican universalism.⁷ As Rokhaya Diallo and Grace Ly note in their 2022 book, *Kiffe ta race*, attempts to open conversations around race in the contemporary French context are met with hostility or diminution— “Les races? Il n’y a que les racistes qui y croient!”⁸ As evidenced by this quote and corroborated by Alzouma Gado, French universalist politics has spawned the rock and the hard place for Black people and other French minority groups: “they can either lay claim to their ‘ethnic’ identity and risk being accused of ‘communautarisme’ ...or they can go along with the prevailing inertia with no way to statistically document discrimination.”⁹ Plainly, minorities in France currently have the choice of being accused of racism or abused by it. As relayed by Tricia Keaton, the “lived experience of race—more saliently, anti-Blackness—belies the colorblind principle...upon which the republic was forged.”¹⁰ It is in response to this invisibilized lived

⁷ Universalism refers to a commitment to the French republican values of “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité,” and a rejection of particularism or any personal affiliation on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religious beliefs, and the like. This notion traces its roots to the French Revolution of 1789. In practical application, universalism often manifests as colorblindness, lack of recognition or downplaying of diversity, and the marginalization and suppression of non-normative groups. Universalism is also cited as the major argument against collecting ethnic and racial statistics in France, and pitted against the idea of “communautarisme,” sentiments of belonging to a group, usually on the basis of race or ethnicity, which is largely characterized as anti-French or anti-white racism.

⁸ Diallo, Rokhaya and Grace Ly. *Kiffe ta race*. 2022, pp. 24.

⁹ Gado, Alzouma. "Ethnic Statistics and Social Classifications in France: How the 'Black Community' Was Born," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 4, no. 1 (2011), pp. 59.

¹⁰ Keaton, Tricia. "Black Matters: Blackness Made to Matter," in *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, ed. Tricia Danielle Keaton et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 2.

experience that Black people in France have developed a “trans-ethnic consciousness,” harnessing the power of collective strength in numbers.¹¹

One manifestation of this trans-ethnic consciousness is the founding of the Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires (CRAN), which advocates for collecting ethnic statistics in France and coalitions betwixt Black organizations, among other things. Lozès, former president of the CRAN, argues that the negative invisibilization of Black people in the public sphere “frequently leads to situations of tension, or even riots (as in 2005).”¹² He remarks that even certain prominent leftist French intellectuals have theorized a position that any recognition of difference is a step toward differentialism and would support the interests of Far-Right groups, that minorities have a right to “indifference.”¹³ Not only is this word “indifference” akin to invisibility, but it comprises the implicit existence of a norm from which to be different, affirming whiteness as *the* reference point. The CRAN advocates for the use of the term “diversity” as opposed to “difference” and its correlate “indifference,” and for a move from negative invisibility to positive invisibility,¹⁴ which I discuss in further detail in this project.

Abdoulaye Gueye’s work supports the idea of a trans-ethnic consciousness in France that has facilitated the rise of a collective Black voice in the Hexagon¹⁵ beginning in the early 21st century, a phenomenon that still requires much research.¹⁶ Gueye emphasizes the scientific

¹¹ Gado, Alzouma. "Ethnic Statistics and Social Classifications in France: How the 'Black Community' Was Born," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 4, no. 1 (2011), pp. 69.

¹² Lozès, Patrick. "The Invention of Blacks in France," in *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, ed. Tricia Danielle Keaton et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 105.

¹³ Lozès, Patrick. "The Invention of Blacks in France," in *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, ed. Tricia Danielle Keaton et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 104.

¹⁴ Lozès, Patrick. "The Invention of Blacks in France," in *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, ed. Tricia Danielle Keaton et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 109.

¹⁵ Hexagon refers to the hexagonal-shaped mainland France located on the European continent, distinguishing this area from other parts of the world officially considered to be French, known as the DROM-COM.

¹⁶ Gueye, Abdoulaye. “BREAKING THE SILENCE: The Emergence of a Collective Black Voice in France.” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 7, no. 1, (2010), pp. 82.

invisibility¹⁷ of Blackness in France, citing a “nearly complete absence of Black Studies” in French social science literature.¹⁸ Gueye goes on to note that most anthropologists have tended to focus on ethnicity when studying the Black French community, which has obfuscated the community’s intrinsic racial ties and trans-ethnic connections, and that Black political action of the 20th century has been largely overlooked in social movement literature.¹⁹ Additionally, Black people have been historically underrepresented in French government and politics. Visible minorities made up 6.18% of the French National Assembly²⁰ in 2017, with only 26 of the 577 (4.5%) *députés*²¹ being of African origin, an increase from 2007 and 2012 where only visible minorities made up .54% and 2% respectively. This scientific and political invisibility has various effects, including a devalorization of Black French political activism and exclusion from the realm of French political life. Exclusion from two major tenets of biopolitical existence, as well as the delegitimization of Black epistemologies, is reinforced by the state’s 2021 threats toward leftist academic research.

Gueye writes in another article, entitled “The Colony Strikes Back: African Protest Movements in Postcolonial France,” that the majority of Sub-Saharan African immigrants pursue post-secondary education in France, but are not represented as such in the media.²² This is what Fred Constant would refer to as “invisibility in the media” within his articulation of the multiple

¹⁷ Constant, Fred. “Les Noirs En France : Anatomie D'un Groupe Invisible.” Bondamanjak, 12 Sept. 2008.

¹⁸ Gueye, Abdoulaye. “BREAKING THE SILENCE: The Emergence of a Collective Back Voice in France.” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 7, no. 1, (2010), pp. 83.

¹⁹ Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s work on silencing the past can help to explain the origins of this historical omission.

²⁰ According to Eric Keslassy, in “Une assemblée plus représentative mandature 2017-2022,” visible minorities made up 6.18% of the French National Assembly. Moreover, according to JeuneAfrique, only 26 of the 577 deputies are of African descent.

²¹ Diallo, Fatoumata et al. “En France, ils sont 26 députés sur 577 : Enquête sur les Africains de la République – Jeune Afrique.” JeuneAfrique.com, 27 Nov. 2019.

²² Rokhaya Diallo’s documentary “Ou sont les noirs ?” speaks at length to the lack of representation in general of Black people in French media, film, and television, the reductionism and the typecasting of Black characters and actors in French film and television.

invisibilities Black people face in France.²³ While Blacks are over-represented in news coverage, a form of negative visibility also addressed in this project, they are under-represented in entertainment programs. Their representations “oscillate between reductionism and stigmatization...the definitive *Other*, impossible to be assimilated to the values, ideals, and the mores of the French nation.”²⁴ The reductionism of Black people in the media serves to invisibilize Black intellectuality, and is incongruent with the statistical fact that migrants tend to pursue higher education.

While each of these studies focus predominantly on a non-gendered Black community, Black French women are implicitly included and affected by each of these various invisibilities. The fact that these studies are largely non-gendered, and that some foreground almost exclusively the Black male community highlights the effects of what Amanda Sesko and Monica Biernat have termed the “non-prototypicality” of Black women. “The majority of research investigates Black men as targets of racism, and White women as targets of sexism, disregarding members of groups belonging to multiple-subordinate-group identities, such as Black women.”²⁵ Thus, Black women face invisibility even in scholarly literature that focuses on the invisibilities of Black people in France. This is all the more reason to focus specifically on Black women’s scholarly and literary works, and their own representations of themselves and their experiences. Shirley Tate notes that the devalorization of Black feminist theory results in Black feminism not being respected as a discipline “with a history, distinguished scholars and rigorous

²³ Constant, Fred. “Les Noirs En France : Anatomie D'un Groupe Invisible.” Bondamanjak, 12 Sept. 2008.

²⁴ Gueye, Abdoulaye. “The Colony Strikes Back: African Protest Movements in Postcolonial France.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 26, no. 2, (2006), pp. 238.

²⁵ Amanda Sesko and Monica Biernat. “Prototypes of Race and Gender: The Invisibility of Black Women.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 46, no. 2, (2010), pp. 356.

scholarship.”²⁶ This is a longstanding theme in Black feminist theory, central to the works of bell hooks²⁷ and Angela Davis.²⁸ More recently, Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach write that Black women contend with “intersectional invisibility”, making it more difficult for their voices to be heard and legitimized.²⁹ In response to this intersectional invisibility, my project amplifies the voices of Black French women. While Black French women are affected by each of the varying invisibilities mentioned above, focusing on Black French women’s counter-representations of their bodies and hair as a strategy that combats their cultural invisibility, political invisibility, and invisibility in the media is a means to that end, and serves also to valorize the application of simultaneously Afrocentric and women-centric paradigms and perspectives to these representations, in lieu of viewing them through theories rooted in implicitly racist or sexist ideologies extrinsic to this demographic.

Nonetheless, it is necessary to consider the effects of these ideologies on the construction of aesthetic norms that dominate the stylings and representations of hair and body and the invisibilization of Black beauty aesthetics so that I can later demonstrate the efficacy with which these women reject, subvert, disrupt, and even disregard normative standards. These forms of resistance move beyond aesthetics and have the power to affect cultural, social, and political change. Mercer points out that the universalizing of dominant ideologies like white bias invisibilize diversity, create norms and efface, erase, ignore, and ostracize anyone who does not conform.³⁰ In a similar vein, Shirley Tate speaks to the “iconicity” of whiteness in the realm of

²⁶ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 2.

²⁷ bell hooks. *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. Routledge, 2015.

²⁸ Davis, Angela Y.. *Women, Race & Class*. Women's Press, 1982.

²⁹ Purdie-Vaughns, Valerie and Richard P. Eibach. “Intersectional Invisibility: The Distinctive Advantages and Disadvantages of Multiple Subordinate-Group Identities.” *Sex Roles*, vol. 59, no. 5-6, 2008), pp. 377–391.

³⁰ Mercer, Kobena. “BLACK HAIR/STYLE POLITICS.” *BLACK BRITISH CULTURE AND SOCIETY*, (1987), pp. 36-7.

aesthetics, the resultant alienation and Black beauty shame, an idea that this project revisits several times.³¹ According to Tate, this “iconicity” or white ideal beauty erases possibilities of Black beauty and therefore invisibilizes Black aesthetics, and even silences from a biopolitical perspective as the political significance of these aesthetic choices is often mis-encoded.

With the myriad of negative outcomes related to Black women’s invisibility, it would be logical then to expect visibility to be the obvious foil. Unfortunately, the visibility that accompanies Black bodies and hair from Occidental perspectives generally only compounds the issue. While Black women’s subjecthood and personhood are broadly invisibilized, their bodies are made hyper-visible, hyper-sexualized, commodified, and objectified. As Robin Mitchell notes, the historical case of Sarah Baartman in the early 1800s exemplifies this poignantly, as does the case of banana-clad Josephine Baker in the early 20th century, and the racist depictions of Christiane Taubira in the 21st century.

Scholars agree that while French universalist politics are largely the cause of the invisibilization of Black subjectivities in the media, politics, etc., these same politics create negative hypervisibilities of Blackness, as they tend to emphasize its alterity to the white French norm.³² As such Blackness in the media is associated with violence, hypersexuality, negative social and economic outcomes, civil disobedience, exoticization, and aesthetic devaluation, notions this project takes up in within the first two chapters. Likewise, scholars and the Black women authors of this project’s primary texts point to the colonial roots of these mediatic representations, Mercer for instance noting the conflation of race and beauty stemming from

³¹ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 20.

³² These scholars include Tricia Keaton, Abdoulaye Gueye, and Alec Hargreaves.

Enlightenment era thinking.³³ Mainstream media often attaches these negative visibilities to Black bodies in the French context. Additionally, Mercer notes that hair, “the most tangible sign of racial difference...is burdened with a range of ‘negative’ connotation,” when race is so inextricably linked to power.”³⁴ This underlines the pertinence of study on Black women’s hair, and on Black women’s aesthetics in general, in understanding the longstanding power relationships at play and the history of negative hyper/visibilities of Black women in France.

Positive In/Visibilities and Black Women-Centered Gazes

However, the story does not end here. My project examines the forms of positive in/visibility that counterbalance, outweigh, and overturn the aforementioned negative in/visibilities. These positive in/visibilities are the result of and result in Black women’s expressions of collectivism and individualism via their hair and body, and literary representations thereof. While many scholars, including those referenced in this work, consider various manifestations or effects of in/visibility, or expressions of collectivism and/or individuality in Black populations more generally, there has not been a full excavation of their combined mechanisms and the promise of progress in positive in/visibility, collectivism, and individuality as resistance against the universalizing of dominant norms. Furthermore, likely due to the non-prototypicality of Black women, as explained by Sesko and Biernat,³⁵ and also due to French censorship/suppression of ethnicized and racialized scholarship in the name of

³³ Mercer, Kobena. “BLACK HAIR/STYLE POLITICS.” *BLACK BRITISH CULTURE AND SOCIETY*, (1987), pp. 111–121.

Katelyn Knox, too, cites France’s imperial history as the origin of white ideal beauty.

³⁴ Mercer, Kobena. “BLACK HAIR/STYLE POLITICS.” *BLACK BRITISH CULTURE AND SOCIETY*, (1987), pp. 35.

³⁵ Amanda Sesko and Monica Biernat point out the invisibility that is created for Black women as the prototype of neither the category “women” nor the category “Black,” in “Prototypes of Race and Gender: The Invisibility of Black Women.”

universalism, no such study has considered these notions in combination with respect to Black women in France.

Of these notions, the most under-researched is Black women's individuality. According to Merriam-Webster, to "individualize" is "to make individual in character," "to adapt to the needs or special circumstances of an individual," or "to treat or notice individually". With this definition in mind, the type of individualizing of Black women that is taken up by dominant narratives is rather an alterity. This alterity with which Black women are characterized within white-French-created representations and narratives renders Black women different from their white and male counterparts, but not unique unto themselves. In fact, while Occidental narratives generally differentiate Black women from the white population, positioning them as the antipole to white women, and the beauty and sexual purity with which white women are synonymous, they also largely homogenize Black women, caricaturizing a singular exotic, over-sexed Black woman and especially effacing ethnic heterogeneity, differences in class, and the complexities of Black women's identities. This overgeneralization of Black women seems a kind of weaponized collectivism. What can be ascertained from these representations is that Black women are different from the preferred norm within white French society, and that they are all the same.

As such, alterity has an opposing relationship with the notion of individuality. The othering of Black women by dominant white narratives serves as a kind of correlative foil, working in the negative space of individualism. It attempts not to individualize Black women as a step toward their humanization, but instead seeks to individuate "the Black woman" as something akin to a separate species, a potential subhuman, to separate her from the whole of a collective humanity to be further minoritized. Moreover, the homogeneity with which Black women are referenced interacts with the notion of collectivism in a similar fashion; it serves less

to speak to the belonging of individual Black women within a larger Afro-descended group, and more to eliminate any variance that is humanly expected. The alterity and homogeneity typical of normative Occidental representations of Black women works to obfuscate their very humanity.³⁶

As opposed to the homogeneity and alterity of these normative depictions, Black women position themselves in their own narratives using a combination of individuality and collectivism, uniqueness and belonging. Further, they tend to inscribe these attributes onto their aesthetic representations within the texts that they create. Many scholars who focus on aesthetics suggest that individualism is expressed via the styling choices of the body and hair.³⁷ My project enriches the corpus of work in the field of aesthetics by bringing attention to Black women's expressions of individuality in hair and body styling practices and their representations as acts of resistance against their negative in/visibility in dominant depictions as a homogenous group. The aesthetics of Black women's expressions of individuality as resistance is understudied, and this project seeks to draw attention to its absence.

While study on Black women's aesthetic and representational individualism is currently limited, there is no dearth of scholarship on collectivism in various social science fields, focusing on a range of topics from politics to media representation to aesthetic cultural practices. Across these topics, expressions of collectivism amongst Black people in general and Black women in

³⁶ This notion can be placed in conversation with what Christina Sharpe terms the "afterlife of property," (15) a phrase she coined in response to Saidiya Hartman's reference to the "afterlife of slavery." Although Sharpe is specifically referring to slavery and the Black American experience, this notion and her introduction of the notion of a global "wake" or "afterlife", are useful in considering the afterlife of colonization for Black people living in France and speaks to the legitimacy of a global understanding of the Occidental perspective as it regards Black people throughout the African Diaspora. Sharpe explains that "living in/the wake of slavery is living 'the afterlife of property' and living the afterlife of *partus sequitur ventrem*...in which the Black child inherits the non/status, the non/being of the mother," (14). The othering and homogenizing of Black women anywhere, and specifically in France, as is the subject of this essay, is therefore an ongoing ontological attack, a nod to their "non/being," a relegation of Black women to the "non/status" of property.

³⁷ This includes Sibyl Rosado and Jacques Salilba, as outlined in Chapter 1.

particular are highlighted as acts of resistance and conduits for reclamation of authority, self-determination, and other positive change. From a sociopolitical perspective, Gado highlights and advocates for the development of a “trans-ethnic consciousness,”³⁸ as previously mentioned. From a similar vantage point, Lozès argues that a cohesive Black community had not existed in France due to the fact that most Black French had received the same republican universalist education as other French people, which was both an impetus and impediment for the founding of CRAN.³⁹ However, the founding of this organization, and others like the Mwasi-Collectif SciencesCurls, SOS Racisme, Collectif Égalité, Sawtche, and Africagora speak to collective organizing as a value held by Black people and Black women and a method of resistance and progress-making, reinforcing Lozès’ statement that “the fight against discrimination rests upon a collective...approach.”⁴⁰ In a similar vein, one of the primary foci in Gueye’s work is the existence and efficacy of a collective Black voice in France to augment positive visibility of the Black French community in the public sphere, specifically in the media and in academe. He argues that Black organization is driven by “the defense of group identity and the will to take part in the shaping of the group’s existence in French society,”⁴¹ noting that the focus of many Black French social movements shifts overtime from the defense of an individual or a local identity to the defense and legitimization of Black French citizenship⁴². Gueye writes, “the high

³⁸ Gado, Alzouma. “Ethnic Statistics and Social Classifications in France: How the ‘Black Community’ Was Born.” *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, (2011), pp. 69.

³⁹ Lozès, Patrick. “The Invention of Blacks in France.” *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, by Tricia Danielle Keaton et al., (Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 103.

⁴⁰ Lozès, Patrick. “The Invention of Blacks in France.” *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, by Tricia Danielle Keaton et al., (Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 106.

⁴¹ Gueye, Abdoulaye. “The Colony Strikes Back: African Protest Movements in Postcolonial France.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 26, no. 2, (2006), pp. 243.

⁴² Gueye, Abdoulaye. “The Colony Strikes Back: African Protest Movements in Postcolonial France.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 26, no. 2, (2006), pp. 243. A good example of this shift can be found in consideration of the Black Lives Matter movement in France, where there was a strong focus on the murder of Adama Traoré that preceded a call for legitimization of Blackness in French society. Black Lives Matter in America followed a similar initial trajectory.

visibility of political activism among postcolonial African-descended people has hastened an entirely new literature that could be called provisionally ‘Black French Studies’,”⁴³ alluding to the success of collectivism in creating positive visibility in French academe where there is generally negative invisibility.

Black Beauty Aesthetics: Body & Hair

There are similar arguments considering the expression of collectivism and the tension and interaction between collectivism and individuality in the study of aesthetics, as it relates specifically to body and hair styling. This interaction is implicit in Rosado’s notion of hair polyvocality; she conceptualizes a “symbolic grammar of hair,”⁴⁴ that is, the exteriorization of political, social, and sexual beliefs and values, which conveys both the shared culture and group identity of the collective, and the individual nuances that highlight its heterogeneity.⁴⁵ Saliba also notes the individual and collective significances of the body, functioning to speak an a priori language within a larger community, while also representing inextricability from the individual and their lived experience. Both scholars turn toward a linguistics lexicon to describe the function of hair and body styling, highlighting the legibility of aesthetic practices as a way to more profoundly understand the individuals and cultures to which they are attached, in the case of this project, Black French women.

In keeping with the notion of body and hair styling practices as symbolic and encoded with social and political significance, Juliette Smeralda considers the hair-straightening practices

⁴³ Gueye, Abdoulaye. “BREAKING THE SILENCE: The Emergence of a Collective Back Voice in France.” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 7, no. 1, (2010), pp. 85.

⁴⁴ Rosado, Sybil Dione. “No Nubian Knots or Nappy Locks: Discussing the Politics of Hair Among Women of African Decent in the Diaspora. A Report on Research in Progress.” *Transforming Anthropology*, vol. 11, no. 2, (2003), pp. 61.

⁴⁵ Rosado also emphasizes the importance of interpreting these embodied signifiers (hair and hairstyle choice) “within the context of the specific culture” (60). This speaks to the importance of using an Afrocentric women-centric paradigm when studying Black women’s hair and body styling choices, and further valorizes the merit of this project.

of Black French and Francophone women, arguing that the act of straightening hair is socially and historically determined and serves as a material signifier of an inferiority complex born out of the colonial era⁴⁶-- “the subjectivation of the [devaluating rapport with “natural” hair and black skin] which is individual does not operate outside of its objectivation which is collective, and vice versa.”⁴⁷ Further, she frames the journey from straight hair to “natural” hair that many Black women undertake as an act of “disalienation,” moving from rejection to acceptance of the self, and movements toward “transculturality”⁴⁸ a resistance of the everyday racism that alienates them from their hair.⁴⁹ This echoes Shirley Tate’s ideas on the connection between racism, alienation, and Black beauty shame, and on disalienation practices that affirm multiple forms of Black beauty as a method of resistance. While Smeralda and Tate focus heavily on the psychological derivations of Black women’s aesthetic choices,⁵⁰ Mercer calls for a “de-psychologizing” of these choices, recognizing them as a specific cultural activity and practice, as opposed to a “diseased state of Black consciousness.”⁵¹ He takes a dualistic perspective, considering these choices as “both individual expressions of the self and as embodiments of society’s norms, conventions, and expectations.”⁵² My project builds from Smeralda, Tate, and Mercer, taking Black women’s aesthetic choices as interacting with an interiorization of dominant value systems, as individual expressions of the self, and as resistant expressions of group solidarity and collectivism. In this way, my project seeks to highlight the authority and

⁴⁶ Sméralda, Juliette. *Du cheveu défrisé au cheveu crépu*. (Publibook, 2012), pp.12.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 16.

⁴⁸ Juliette Smeralda. *Peau noire, cheveu crépu: L'histoire d'une aliénation*. (Édition Jasor, 2017), pp. 292.

⁴⁹ Sméralda, Juliette. *Du cheveu défrisé au cheveu crépu*. (Publibook, 2012), pp. 15.

⁵⁰ The rhetoric surrounding Tate’s Black beauty shame and Smeralda’s inferiority complex are reminiscent of Fanon’s *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*. They focus heavily on the interiorization of dominant value systems as it relates to aesthetic practices and the externalization of the interiorized effect.

⁵¹ Mercer, Kobena. “BLACK HAIR/STYLE POLITICS.” *BLACK BRITISH CULTURE AND SOCIETY*, (1987), pp. 34.

⁵² Mercer, Kobena. “BLACK HAIR/STYLE POLITICS.” *BLACK BRITISH CULTURE AND SOCIETY*, (1987), pp. 34.

agency of Black French women by making space for their aesthetic choices to be both political and apolitical,⁵³ extricable from the oppressive white male gaze, and combative toward the white male gaze.⁵⁴ I limit my study to representations of Black French women's body and hair depicted by Black French women to understand their interaction with the white male gaze, their expressions of self and solidarity, their counter-gazes, both toward the white male gaze and toward themselves, with consideration of their value systems, focusing on Afrocentric⁵⁵ and women-centric theoretical approaches that originate with Black women to analyze the meaning and intention of their works.

CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

Chapter 1: Individuating the Collective Body

My dissertation consists of three chapters. The first focuses on the dichotomies of individuality/collectivism and visibility/invisibility as it relates to Black women's bodies as they are inscribed in autobiographical/sociocultural texts. These texts include *Afrofem* by the Mwasi-Collectif Afroféministe in 2018, and *Noire n'est pas mon métier*, co-authored by a group of Black actresses in France in 2018, respectively. In these texts, I consider the depictions of Black

⁵³ This is salient because of the heavy politicization and psychologization of Black women's hair, especially in comparison to that of other hair types, such as their white counterparts, whose hair styling is seldom interpreted as anything akin to self-hatred or love of community. This double-standard places undue restriction on Black women's hair choices. Thus, the de-politicizing and de-psychologizing of Black aesthetic choices is liberatory for Black women.

⁵⁴ My use of the phrase "white male gaze" is intended to describe the regard that has been historically typical of white, middle-to-upper-class, cis-gender, heterosexual men in the Global North and West to whom the Global North and West owes its conceptions of normativity.

⁵⁵ My use of the term Afrocentric in this work generally refers to epistemological and cultural productions created by Black people, whether in Africa or its Diaspora, that center the lived experiences and values of Black people as the primary perspective by which they interpret Blackness and the world around them. While this definition departs in part from Molefi Asante's definition, which focuses mostly on locating African people at the center of their history and is frequently prioritized in academic spaces, it does hold to the values defined by various scholars of Afrocentricity, such as the importance of "cultivating a consciousness of victory," as Azama writes, maintaining a positive disposition toward Black identity, predicated upon honoring ourselves and our ancestors, as Modupe contends, and the aim of liberation through, among other things, the generation and promulgation of "emancipatory knowledge" as Kershaw suggests. My definition also incorporates aspects of Ezinwanne Odozor's love ethic, which figures heavily in the third chapter of this work.

women's corporealities and their decentering of the white male gaze. These works originate in the hexagonal French context. In my analysis, I attend to current and historical attempts at the exclusion of Black women from social personhood and their ability to claim control of their own image, while emphasizing notions of individuality, collectivism, and in/visibility as integral attributes of Black women-centered gazes. I frame my analysis with Fred Constant's delineation of multiple invisibilities, Gueye's work on interactions between visibility and collectivism, several works that speak to the aesthetic expression of individuality and collectivism,⁵⁶ and Tate's work on Black beauty shame and disalienation, among others, in an effort to highlight Black French women's renegotiation of normative standards, their inversion and subversion of the white male gaze and its afterlives, as well, to consider how individuality/collectivism and visibility/invisibility interact in the lived experiences of Black women as represented by these texts.

The autobiographical/sociocultural texts of the first and second chapter represent a varied selection in terms of genre. The corpus includes a social, cultural, and political manifesto, *Afrofem*, assembled by the Mwasi-Collectif Afroféministe, a "non-mixed" collective of "womxn of all gender experiences, femmes, and gender-marginalized people of African and Caribbean origin and descent," aimed at "Black liberation" via "the overthrowing of anti-blackness, hetero-patriarchy and capitalism". Acute attention to the relationship between invisibility and visibility, and the relationship between individuality and collectivism reveals the shared perspective of the Black women of the collective. The text underlines discrepancies in valuation of Black women's bodies against other bodies, examining their sexualization, misinterpretation, and brutalization. In the chapter entitled "Qui nous protège de la police?", the Mwasi-Collectif highlights the

⁵⁶ Sybil Dione Rosado's "No Nubian Knots or Nappy Locks," and Kobena Mercer's "Black Hair/Style Politics" are examples.

invisibility of Black women's subjecthood in the police protection space and as it relates to state violence, illuminating these Black women's feelings of being devalued and invisibilized by the state. Further, in a chapter entitled "La Flamboyance," the text rejects the invisibilization of Black women's aesthetics within the context of white beauty discourse, and asserts or "exclaims," as the first chapter puts forth, an alternative hypervisibility which they refer to as flamboyance. In so doing, the Mwasi-Collectif turns the hypervisibility of Black women's bodies that is typical of the white male gaze/r on its head, decentering the white male gaze/r as authoritative over the significance and value of their aesthetic practices.

At the same time, the Mwasi-Collectif instrumentalizes an invisibilization of the individual via the anonymous authorship of the text. Excepting Laura Nsafou's preface, the entirety of the book is published under the name of the collective, as a whole, with no individual author differentiated from the group, a strategy that is reinforced by other exemplifications of collectivism throughout the book. Attention to this interaction between the two relationships, invisibility/visibility and individuality/collectivism, in the first chapter of this project reveals the complexity of socio-political strategy employed in the crafting of this manifesto. In this case, the visibility of the individual is effaced to the advantage of the visibility of the collective for the sake of a greater common goal, which is "Black liberation."

The second text in my corpus is a collection of short non-fiction stories by various Black actresses in France, entitled *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. As the book itself reflects the relationship between individuality and collectivism, with each installation recounting the experience of the individual, connected to the whole of the group by their problematization of notions of visibility, access, and perception. Blackness, Afropeanness, and womanhood are shown as nuanced with the foregrounding of their bodies serving as a unifying motif. In

“BalancetonPoulpe,” Mata Gabin evokes the notions of in/visibility by noting the immense imbalance of attention paid to her versus a famous white actor with whom she went on a date, and her perceived change in status vis-à-vis the public because of her association with him, whom she anonymizes, typifies, homogenizes, and animalizes as the Octopus. When the date devolves into an event bordering sexual assault, the reader recognizes the vestiges of the colonial mindset that remains present in French mainstream media industries, tying Gabin’s installment to others within the book as well as other works featured in this project, such as *Afrofem*, and Boni-Claverie’s *Trop noire pour être française* which figures in the second chapter. An inversion of this colonial mindset becomes apparent when the story is analyzed within the framework of in/visibility, collectivism, and individuality.

Her short story not only makes visible her invisibility in the media, to use Constant’s term, but also sheds light on the hypervisibility of her body in the eyes of the white male. In this way, the object of her gaze is not only the white male who gazes at her, but the white male gaze itself. The white male gaze and the white male gazer are both objectified, while Gabin, a Black woman, becomes the active subject and center from which emanates the predominant perspective of the narrative, thereby subverting dominant hegemonic norms by occupying the position of power.

Chapter 2: Power and the Hair Story of the Self

In the second chapter, I explore how hair choice reflects a performance of individuality and collectivism, and the relationship between hair choice and social in/visibility, alongside the external and internal political inscription of hair choice as it relates to the white male gaze and Black-women-centered counter gazes in *Trop noire pour être française*, and *Noire n’est pas mon métier*, respectively. I frame my analysis by building on the scholarship referenced in the first

chapter, with a heavier emphasis on Shirley Tate's works,⁵⁷ in addition to Juliette Smeralda's scholarship around Black women's hair in French/Francophone contexts⁵⁸ and Emma Dabiri's work on the many significances and historical connections of Black hair for Black people.⁵⁹ As it relates to the latter two works, I am specifically interested in Black women's deliberate decisions with regard to hair choice, their perception and depiction of the racial categorization and stigmatization of Black women's hair, and their responses to that categorization and stigmatization, especially as they are rooted in persistent historical practices and ideologies that connect them with a larger collective of Black women that exists beyond western conceptualizations of time and space.

In *Trop noire pour être française*, Boni-Claverie considers her origins in the Ivory Coast, her experiences as a Black girl and Black woman in Paris. She explores her relationship with her hair and the significance of her various hair choices as an expression of individuality and collectivism, power disparities within the audiovisual world that result in an invisibility of Black women's subjectivity, their homogenization and eroticization. She begins her chapter entitled "De bons cheveux," by questioning the balance between hair symbolism and pragmatics. Her acknowledgement of the pragmatism of hairstyle choice places her on the side of Mercer in the debate on (de)psychologizing hairstyle choice on the one hand, although from another vantage point, her hair damage was caused by straightening and "discipline"⁶⁰ practices, which reflect an interiorization of dominant normative standards and the white male gaze, according to Smeralda. Nonetheless, Boni-Claverie's assertion that her choice to cut off her hair was void of symbolism

⁵⁷ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018). & Tate, Shirley Anne. *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*. Routledge, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).

⁵⁸ Juliette Smeralda. *Peau noire, cheveu crépu: L'histoire d'une aliénation*. Édition Jasor, 2017. & Smeralda, Juliette. *Du cheveu défrisé au cheveu crépu*. Publibook, 2012.

⁵⁹ Dabiri, Emma. *Don't Touch My Hair*. (Allen Lane Publishing, 2019).

⁶⁰ Boni-Claverie, Isabelle. *Trop noire pour être française*. (Tallandier, 2017), pp. 19.

affirms her consciousness of hair as a signifier for various values and beliefs, and likely her consciousness of the school of thought that likens hair straightening to self-hatred—a school that often uses a wide brush to paint Black people as generally always attempting to somehow attain whiteness.⁶¹ In this way, her rejection of that notion can be read as a turn toward individuality. Meanwhile, she highlights what Rosado calls the polyvocality of hair by noting the various meanings attributed to her shaved head, the ways that it and other hairstyles rendered her more or less visible to various gazers. She offers her personal hair experiences while inscribing them into a global hair narrative, touching on the subjects of slavery and colonialism, and making several references to Black women as a collective, employing the use of first-person plural pronouns. In this way, she inscribes herself within a transnational and transtemporal collective of Black women. She closes the chapter by expressing her desire for what I refer to as the apolitics of hair choice in saying that she hopes that Black women who straighten their hair do it increasingly for recreational purposes, further pointing to the tension between the grammar and legibility of hairstyle choice as well as the need for new kinds of understanding related to the significance of Black women's hair.

In *Noire n'est pas mon métier*, the first short story in the text foregrounds Black women's hair as it relates to the French media space. Nadège Beausson-Diagne, an actress, describes herself as someone who frequently changes the styling of her hair “like she changes her shoes”⁶² and who was more neutral on the subject of natural hair styling practices, thereby rejecting the over-politicization and psychologizing of hair similarly to Boni-Claverie. She describes a chain of events that ensued following her choice to remove her extensions and wear her “natural” hair,

⁶¹ Fanon's *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* is a perfect example of this.

⁶² Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions du seuil, 2018), pp. 15.

an “uncomplicated” choice for her.⁶³ This installment features a phone call from an Assistant Artistic Director who responded using various methods to otherize, homogenize, and exoticize the actress. In this way, Beausson-Diagne demonstrates the response of the dominant group triggered by the depiction of Black women’s “natural” hair in the production. This installment constitutes Beausson-Diagne’s examination of the white male gaze/r. In my analysis, I note her sarcasm, contempt, and disdain for the industry’s commitment to the status quo of a homogenized, exoticized, othered depiction of Black women. She explicitly refuses to straighten her hair, a choice that signals disalienation. Furthermore, Beausson-Diagne’s Black women-centered gaze toward the white male gaze is in keeping with other installments in the book, including “L’imaginaire colonial” which considers the durability of the colonial imaginary in the media space, as it relates to Black women’s hair, noting discrepancies in visibility and pay related to its textures and styling.

Like the other two authors featured in this chapter, Sabine Pakora echoes the distance between the grammar and legibility of her hair, and notes the negative in/visibilities of Black women in the media space, thematically connecting herself to Mata Gabin and Aïssa Maïga featured in the first chapter. She notes a “surreprésentation physique” and a stratification of Black hair types in the film industry with effects on the level of Black women’s overall visibility, the relative exoticization of kinky textures, and ultimately economic opportunity. She emphasizes a turn toward the collective which functions as a method of subjectivation through disalienation, following Tate’s logic, and demonstrates a dynamic conceptualization of the “past that is not past,” as well as a hope for the Afropean future.

⁶³ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions du seuil, 2018), pp. 15.

Chapter 3: Black Women-Centered Gazes in Black Women's Fiction

Finally, the third chapter applies the findings of the first two chapters to two literary texts in order to illustrate the extent to which these trends permeate both literary and nonliterary genres of written production, and manifest even in creative literary expression of Black women. The literary portion of this project consists of two novels: *Blues pour Elise*, by Léonora Miano, and *À mains nues*, by Laura Nsafou. These two works reflect the dichotomies of individualism/collectivism and visibility/invisibility and bring attention to identity-making via body and hair choices. Miano's text is an intricate interweaving of the lives of her four Black women protagonists, alongside their relationships with various interspersed secondary characters, altogether offering up a microcosm wherein interact several types in Paris. Traditional notions of Blackness, Frenchness, and womanhood are challenged constantly by the inclusion of nuanced identities. The third chapter takes a deeper look at two scenes within the novel, one that emphasizes that meticulously valorizes the body of the paramount matriarchal figure of the novel, Élise's ancestor, and another that articulates the many grammars and legibilities of Black women's hair, as well as practices of care, love, and intimacy embedded into Black women's collective hair care practices. Each of the women in the scene are unique from the others, be it via origin, via profession, or ideology. A third-person omniscient narrator guides the reader through the perspectives and motivations of each individual and puts these perspectives in conversation with one another articulating both belonging and difference in this collective of Black women, offering a window into the quotidian lives of those who identify as Afropean. She further legitimizes the notion of Afropeanness by inscribing this identity on the body, creating a physical "space" for what Miano has referred to as a "territoire mentale."⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Miano, Léonora. *Habiter la frontière*. 2012, pp. 86.

Nsafou's novel focuses on the slow liberation of a haphephobic (having a fear of touching or being touched) young Black woman from her body. Sybille's phobia often renders her material existence highly visible, but often with a desexualizing effect, especially in the first half of the novel. The severity of her phobia in the first half and her self-liberation from it in the second half consistently position her in the position of power over her body and its interactions with other bodies throughout the novel. As she overcomes her phobia, she also becomes the conqueror of her own body, countering a racist, imperialist, and sexist narrative of domination by white men. Further, subsequent to the overcoming of her phobia, her sexual arrival places her in the dominant position over white men. This sexual domination works in tandem with Nsafou's valorization of Sibylle's aesthetics and her place as the most romantically desirable woman in the novel, over and above its two prominent white women characters. Nsafou also engages notions of Black futurity as she closes the novel with the depiction of a potential future for Sibylle as mother of a female child, and legitimizes the Afropean identity by rendering Sibylle the only explicitly authentic Swedish woman in the entire novel.

The inclusion of both literary and non-literary texts is important, as the two types of texts function differently. Non-fiction allows an author to express their dissatisfaction and challenge the racialized and gendered status quo by shifting the locus of power over the narrative, writing from their own perspectives, gazing upon themselves and countering occidental representations of themselves, while also looking back at gazers that tend to misrepresent them. On the other hand, fiction authors are not bound by the constraints of reality and engage in narrative world-making, and their inclusion in this chapter allows for an examination of the worlds they create.

In many ways, the white male-dominated Occident largely engaged in world-making against the interests and wellbeing of Black and Brown people throughout the world, from the

conception of the “new” and “old” worlds, to the ontological exclusion of Black and Brown peoples and their relegation to chattel or property, to the carving of Africa at the Berlin Conference of 1885, to contemporary standards of decorum and beauty, as well as the epistemological hierarchies of academia. Contemporary French media sources continue to construct representations of Black and Brown worlds within the Hexagonal French context as other and elsewhere, mimicking images that « hantent la une des journaux et des reportages d’investigation...des individus et des évènements qui sont arrimés dans la conscience collective ou ils figurent telle une épine dans le corps national ».⁶⁵ Fiction puts the power to create worlds in the hands of the author, which is particularly important for minoritized and marginalized people. Authors of fiction can use this world-making power to subvert and undermine traditional occidental narratives, representations, and structures of power, which is strikingly apparent in Nsafou’s novel where the Black woman protagonist is largely the most powerful player. Fiction also allows Miano and Nsafou to question, complicate, and counter dominant racial categorizations and norms, and highlight nuanced identity formations.

CONCLUSIONS

In the chapters that follow, I show that the interplay of individuality, collectivism and in/visibility are present in each of the texts analyzed in this work, while underlining their prevalence in the lived experiences of Black women in France and their importance in identity formation and the elucidation of Black women-centered gazes. Considering their manifestations in autobiographical and sociocultural texts, alongside their literary counterparts allows for a better understanding of how these Black women internalize and externalize these dominant

⁶⁵ Niang, Mame-Fatou. “De Bande des Filles à Mariannes Noires: universalisme et décolonisation des imaginaires.” *Identités françaises: Banlieues, féminités et universalisme*. Brill. 2022. 232. My translation: “haunt the front page of newspapers and investigation reports...individuals and events that are fixed in the collective conscience where they show up like a thorn in the national body.”

narratives, as well as how they renegotiate and replace them, placing themselves in positions of power and reclaiming authority over their representations.

As it relates to the texts I explore, these attributes allow me to tease out Black women's counterarguments against the traditional occidental white male-dominated narratives and their representation within it. Black women across the African Diaspora have been historically homogenized, eroticized, and exoticized by these narratives, as is reflected by Knox⁶⁶ and Gratias-Sinon.⁶⁷ I show that these narratives have commonly instrumentalized invisibility, visibility, alterity (against which is situated individualism), and homogeneity (against which is situated collectivism) as fundamentals of their representations of Black women to the detriment thereof. The invisibility of Black women's subjecthood and, at times, of their sheer existence, as Gueye shows, the hypervisibility of their bodies, the "otherness," and conversely, the selfsameness with which they are depicted—these attributes reveal the construction of the white male gaze and the white, middle-to-upper-class, heterosexual, cis-gender male as the center from which this perspective emanates⁶⁸. They serve to reinforce the status quo, the straight white male dominated capitalist world where straight white men wield the power to define, disenfranchise, and dehumanize Black women.

However, attention to the aforementioned attributes in these primary texts highlights the positionality of these works as largely antithetical to the white male gaze so pervasive in dominant narratives. As a minoritized group confronted with a double and often triple oppression, Black women use several strategies to distinguish themselves and destabilize existing racial categories. For instance, a white male gaze tends to efface the subjecthood of

⁶⁶ Knox, Katelyn E.. *Race on Display in 20th- and 21st-Century France*. (Liverpool University Press, 2016).

⁶⁷ Sinon, Maria-Gratias. "In/Visibility Crises: Transnational Correctives and the Happiness of Black Women in Francophone Prose Fiction and Dramatic Film." *University of New York at Buffalo*, 2020. ProQuest.

⁶⁸ While this figure is centered from the perspective of the white male gaze, this gaze can be performed and perpetuated by non-whites and non-males.

Black women in favor of a hyper-visible, hypersexualized, objectified body. On the other hand, the perspective of the authors I analyze tends to favor Black women's subjectivity in a way that tempers their physical representations and tends to center the locus of power over Black women's bodies with Black women via reclamation of sexual subjecthood, and the renegotiation of semiotic relationships with material signifiers like body and hairstyling. To this end, as evidenced by Smeralda and Tate, Black beauty aesthetics are a practical form of quotidian activism against Black women's subalternation in France. Recent academic trends toward the study of Black women's body and hair politics, like what has been written by Tate, Smeralda, Mercer, and Knox demonstrate the viability and pertinence of this study for Afropean and Black French women.⁶⁹

Likewise, these authors also tend to carefully individualize their representations of Black women while placing them within a collective system of belonging with other Black women, while a transverse gaze tends more toward alterity instead of belonging, and toward homogeneity instead of individuality. To this end, they take part in a semiotic process of identity-making, using cultural signifiers of belonging and difference, the hybridity of which creates a space where they can challenge traditional dominant narratives. Many of them also explicitly advocate for a "de-psychologizing" of hair choice, in line with Mercer, while also citing symbolism in their hair practices, in line with Smeralda and Tate—a dilemma that speaks to the need for continued research on this topic, and a focus on the multiplicitous value systems intrinsic to Black women and specifically Black French women.

⁶⁹ Shirley Tate's *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame* and *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics* concern themselves with this subject, as do Kobena Mercer's "Black Hair/Style Politics," Juliette Smeralda's *Peau Noire, Cheveu Crépu*, and *Du cheveu defrisé au cheveu crépu*, and Katelyn Knox's *Race on Display in 20th- and 21st-Century France*.

In sum, the analysis of these attributes and their antitheses as they are articulated together following the tendencies of a white male gaze makes for a representation of Black women whose subjecthood is invisible, whose alterity is underlined, whose homogeneity is suggested, and whose body and sexuality are hyper-visible—an objectified, homogenous, other Black woman, antithetical to the representation of the white male produced by the white male gaze. Conversely, the authors featured in the pages that follow offer an opposite representation where Black women’s subjecthood is foregrounded, their individuality highlighted, their collectivism underlined, and their bodies autonomous, not tempered by an external observer. These representations are particularly important as means of resistant disalienation against Black beauty shame and toward the general liberation of Black bodies, Black hair, and ultimately, of Black women in France and globally. These Black French women’s works ultimately stand against the French brand of universalist politics that works so hard to keep them down.

CHAPTER 1: INDIVIDUATING THE COLLECTIVE BODY

Introduction

“As we stand in our skin we must recognize both its beauty and its simultaneous ugliness brought about by ‘racial’ norms,” writes Shirley Tate in *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*,⁷⁰ a book that focuses on the racialization of Black women’s bodies as it relates to normative standards of beauty and white iconicity in the world of aesthetics, particularly in the Americas, the Caribbean and the UK. This chapter of my dissertation considers Black French women’s assertions of aesthetic and corporeal value as practices of disalienation that confront and disempower the white male gaze and the various forms of “ugliness” and devaluation with which it tends to depict Black women’s bodies as a result of their racialization. At the very heart of this chapter is a desire to emphasize the reclamation or rather the *exclamation* of Black beauty, creativity, and power expressed through various degrees of corporeality in Black women’s writing. “Exclamation” is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a vehement expression of protest or complaint,” while reclamation implies that Black beauty, joy, and power were/are housed exteriorly to Black women. While I agree there is neither a present nor historical dearth of Black suffering (and accompanying persistent and enduring ways of Black survival), as noted by many scholars, particularly in the field of Afropessimism, such as Christina Sharpe,⁷¹ the true potency of the concepts of Black beauty, creativity, and power, has also persistently endured. These notions help us to descry the world that exists/has existed within and beyond the hegemonic constraints of white supremacy and the white male gaze. Therefore, the focus of this chapter is on Black women’s vehement expressions of beauty, creativity, and power, both as

⁷⁰ Tate, Shirley Anne. *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*. (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), pp. 54.

⁷¹ Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Duke University Press, 2016).

forms of protest against the white male gaze and the notion of white supremacy, and also to highlight and challenge the limit of hegemonic restrictions and definitions.

To this end, this chapter focuses on the nexus of interrelations among individuality, collectivism, visibility, and invisibility, as they relate to Black women's bodies as these are inscribed in autobiographical/sociocultural texts. Attention to these four key factors helps to distinguish the conceptual attributes of a Black women-centered gaze, and to highlight individual nuances between them. With this in mind, I analyze the representations of Black women's bodies and experiences, their conceptions of power, their awareness of the white male gaze, and their methods of countering it, in *Afrofem*, published by the Mwasi-Collectif Afroféministe in 2018, and *Noire n'est pas mon métier*, co-authored by a group of Black actresses in France in 2018, respectively. Each of these works are authored by Black women in a hexagonal French context. Along the way, I offer up comparisons and connections of these two works to other works, literary and otherwise, produced throughout the Diaspora, to highlight far-reaching trends and an inter/intra-group connectedness, and to contribute to the elucidation of a global Black women's truth. I pay special attention to the current and historical struggle of Black women for control of their own image, their exclusion from social personhood, and the present and historical treatment of Black women's bodies in France and globally, while highlighting their perceptions of negative in/visibility as a function of the white male gaze. Furthermore, I emphasize their persistent articulations of collectivism with other Black women across space and time, and of individuality as a distinguishing and resistant force creating positive (in)visibilities that make room for the fullness of Black life and Black creativity operating beyond the white male gaze.

My interdisciplinary analysis uses a plurality of scholarly tools and concepts, including political scientist Fred Constant's delineation of multiple invisibilities,⁷² sociologist Abdoulaye Gueye's work on interactions between visibility and collectivism,⁷³ several works in anthropology and art history that speak to the aesthetic expression of individuality and collectivism,⁷⁴ Krystal Small's work on emphatic Blackness,⁷⁵ Tate's Gender Studies work on Black beauty shame and disalienation,⁷⁶ among others, and Sharpe's Black Studies wake work,⁷⁷ in an effort to highlight Black French women's renegotiation of normative standards, their inversion and subversion of the white male gaze and its afterlives, as well, to consider how individuality/collectivism and visibility/invisibility interact in the lived experiences of Black women as represented by these texts. I argue that, in this way, the various authors of these texts construct and showcase a Black women-centered gaze⁷⁸ that gazes back at the past, back at the white male gaze, and at themselves as they participate in a world-making of their own, not only in opposition to but at times with purposeful disregard to the white male gaze and its present and historical world-making. These authors create worlds that transcend the bounds of the white male gaze, as this chapter demonstrates by offering up and insisting upon their own perspectives and intrinsic value systems, in which is often found a combination of celebrated individuality as well as meaning-making through collectivism, community, and connectedness with other Black women throughout the Diaspora and the ages. Therefore, my objective is to build on the work of

⁷² Constant, Fred. "Les noirs en France : Anatomie d'un groupe invisible." *Bondamanjak*, 12 Sept. 2008.

⁷³ Gueye, Abdoulaye. "BREAKING THE SILENCE: The Emergence of a Collective Back Voice in France." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 7, no. 1, (2010).

⁷⁴ Sybil Dione Rosado's "No Nubian Knots or Nappy Locks," and Kobena Mercer's "Black Hair/Style Politics" are examples.

⁷⁵ Smalls, Krystal A. "Languages of Liberation: Digital Discourses of Emphatic Blackness." *Language and Social Justice in Practice*, 12 Dec. 2018, pp. 52–60.

⁷⁶ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018).

⁷⁷ Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Duke University Press, 2016).

⁷⁸ This term is used in its singular construction here to emphasize the fact that as much as these gazes are individually nuanced, they are also collectively forged.

the aforementioned scholars, while maintaining an alternative focus that is concerned with not just the possibility of survival and ways of surviving the lasting heritages of slavery and colonialism but of acknowledging the possibilities of worlds and ways of living beyond the limits of white supremacy.

Theoretical Framing

This chapter finds its theoretical foundations largely in social science and anthropological literature, and focuses on applying these scholarly tools to sociocultural, autobiographical, and literary texts in order to illuminate the ways in which Black women's writing, particularly in the French context, is representative of and sometimes deviates from current trends and patterns studied within that body of scholarship. This chapter also seeks to marry social sciences, and Africana social sciences specifically, with literary studies by highlighting notions that are germane to both fields and noting new ways that social science theory can be applied to Black women's written self-expression to demonstrate the reciprocal benefits to both fields through this coupling.

As this chapter considers the combination of forces of individuality, collectivism, and (in)visibility, it looks to Fred Constant's outlining of the multiple invisibilities⁷⁹ that face Black people in France, and by extension and sometimes in even more unique/specific ways, Black women.⁸⁰ In his 2008 article, "Les noirs en France: anatomie d'une groupe invisible," Constant posits that there are five forms of mutually constitutive invisibilities that participate together in

⁷⁹ Constant, Fred. "Les noirs en France : Anatomie d'un groupe invisible." Bondamanjak, 12 Sept. 2008.

⁸⁰ Much research suggests that Black women face oppression that is unique from the oppression of white women and Black men at the intersection of both race and gender. Sesko and Biernat refer to this phenomenon as an effect of the "non-prototypicality" of Black women, while Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach contend Black women's "intersectional invisibility," and Claudia Jones theorized the possibility of a "triple oppression" for Black women at the intersection race, gender, and class, to name a few.

the larger invisibilization of Black French people. They are “historical invisibility” (a silenced and silencing French historical perspective), “scientific invisibility” (marginal research and injurious conclusions), “cultural invisibility/invisibility in the media” (racial relegation, reductionism, and exclusion), “economic invisibility” (racial exclusion from professional careers) and “political invisibility” (the near absence of Black French political representation). Because of their interconnectedness and reciprocal reinforcement, each of these forms are at play and are confronted and often subverted by Black women in France in various ways, and as such appear in this chapter.

Being that the heart of this chapter is Black French women’s written representations of their bodies and aesthetic practices, it is important to consider forms of negative invisibility as it relates specifically to this aspect of Black womanhood. Shirley Tate, in *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*, engages with the invisibilization of Black women in the beauty industry.⁸¹ She highlights the prevalence and power of “white iconicity,” that “beauty” has always been inscribed on white bodies and not on Black bodies via the media, books, etc., keeping with Constant’s notion of the exclusionary “invisibility in the media,” so that the embodiment of beauty is always white.⁸² Mainstream media and pop culture did not permit the inscription of “beauty” on Black bodies—only other terms, such as “erotic,” “exotic,” “sexual,” or “ugly.”⁸³

⁸¹ Tate, Shirley Anne. *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*. (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016). Although Tate focuses on a Black British population, many of her findings are relevant to Black women in France, and throughout the Diaspora. A striking piece evidence supporting the applicability of her conclusions to other Black diasporic populations is the advent of children’s books and other children’s media created for young Black girls that both critically frame and resist white iconicity. An American example is “Hair Love,” translated in France as *Nos boucles au naturel* both a book and short film by Matthew Cherry, and a French example is Laura Nsafou’s *Comme un million de papillons noirs*. *Skin Like Mine*, translated as *Un teint comme le mien* by Latashia M Perry is an additional example.

⁸² Tate, Shirley Anne. *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*. (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).

⁸³ Krystal Smalls speaks to this at in her article “Fat, Black, and Ugly: The Semiotic Production of Prodigious Feminities”.

This exclusion foreclosed the very real possibilities of Black beauty by leaving them uninscribed, and therefore rendered illegible and invisible in the mainstream; this exclusion is targeted in “La Flamboyance” in *Afrofem*, and in various short stories in *Noire n’est pas mon métier*, as this chapter will discuss in detail, as well as in Léonora Miano’s *Blues Pour Élise*, and Laura Nsamenang’s *À mains nues*, as will be discussed in the third chapter. Tate also addresses the notion she refers to as “Black beauty shame” in her book, *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame: Discourse, Iconicity, and Resistance*, as an affect produced by the resultant alienation of the aesthetic iconicity of whiteness—“an affect that silences, is silenced, and produces silencing around questions of beauty, ugliness, and racialization.”⁸⁴ Tate writes that the “promise of white ideal beauty continues to resonate negatively in Black and Black-white ‘mixed race’ women’s lives as it makes their beauties un-narratable by erasing their possibility for representation.”⁸⁵ Applying Foucault’s theories on governmentality, Tate demonstrates how the internalization of white bias, as it relates to aesthetic norms, breeds Black beauty shame that can influence Black women’s aesthetic choices.⁸⁶ Incorporating necropolitics,⁸⁷ she explains that, because corporeality is constructed in relation to others, and non-normative categories of being are foreclosed, all that is permitted is “Black ugliness and shame” and the possibilities of Black

⁸⁴ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 20.

⁸⁵ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 65.

⁸⁶ This is demonstrated in Lupita Nyong’o’s *Sulwe*, whereby a young Black girl, although not yet a woman, attempts various methods of becoming lighter, including attempting to erase layers of her Blackness, and putting on her mother’s lighter colored makeup.

⁸⁷ “Necropolitics” is a term first theorized by Achille Mbembe in “Necropolitics” in 2003. The concept behind necropolitics is that contemporary dynamics of power, including hegemonic systems’ “subjugation of life” and the right to kill or “the power of death” create bodies that exist somewhere between life and death (20). These systems dictate who and how some may live, and who and how some must die, and considers not only physical, but also social and political death. Here, Tate explains that the normative aesthetic ideal is constructed in relation to its other, in this case, representations of Black women. The hegemonic system of normative beauty, thus, does not allow for representations of Black beauty, only Black ugliness, which is likened to social death.

beauty are erased.⁸⁸ Because aesthetic practices also bear political significance⁸⁹ by symbolizing group membership and/or the choice to reject it, erasing the possibilities of Black beauty also functions to invisibilize Black women from a biopolitical perspective, by silencing, ignoring, and/or wrongly encoding the political significance of their aesthetic choices and constraining them to bare life existence.⁹⁰

Alongside Tate's notions of white iconicity and Black beauty shame as silencing and invisibilizing forces that attempt to relegate Black women to realms of the exotic, erotic, and ugly, there is also Hortense Spillers' notion of the ungendering of Black female flesh, whereby Black women's bodies become ungendered under the violent abuses of chattel slavery and the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans due to the lack of protection that the categorization as "woman" in western society would generally call forth. This "materialized scene of unprotected female flesh"⁹¹ symptomizes the invisibilization of the femininity or womanhood of Black women's bodies in the western world, affecting the diaspora as a whole as it carries on "in the wake,"⁹² as Sharpe would put it, of chattel slavery, the transatlantic trade, and the atrocities of

⁸⁸ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 66.

⁸⁹ That there is political significance in aesthetic practices is agreed upon by many in the field, including Kobena Mercer in "Black Hair/Style Politics," Anthony Synnott in "Shame & Glory: A Sociology of Hair," Abdoulaye Gueye in *The Colony Strikes Back*, and Sybil Dione Rosado in "No Nubian Locks".

⁹⁰ Following the logics of Biopolitics, exclusion from the *bios*, or the foreclosure of access to political life relegates one to *zoē* or bare life. Weheliye considers a Black feminist approach to Biopolitics in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*.

⁹¹ Spillers, Hortense J.. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, (1987).

⁹² Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2016).

One of Sharpe's many manifestations of the wake includes the ways in which the historical atrocities committed against Black people in the United States, and throughout the diaspora, structure and precondition future atrocities and adverse conditions that affect the everyday lives of Black people and require them to create new ways to survive that are specific to them and different from the society at large.

colonialism—“an ongoing present of subjection and resistance”⁹³. This concept is crucial to this chapter’s understanding of “Qui nous protège de la police?”⁹⁴ in *Afrofem*, as well as this project’s analysis of Laura Nsamenang’s *A mains nues* in the third chapter.

Up until this point, this chapter has focused predominantly on negative invisibility, to which one could conceivably posit visibility as the obvious foil. However, as discussed in the introduction to this project, the warped visibility of Black women from the perspective of many Occidental representations and narratives is equally prejudiced and problematic. Tricia Keaton highlights the fact that while Blackness and its plight are largely invisibilized by French universalist politics, it is these same universalist politics that render Blackness negatively hypervisible “as a conspicuous body antithetical to a universal norm,”⁹⁵ and connect representations of Blackness with negative life outcomes, social strife, hypersexuality, and violence. Likewise, Abdoulaye Gueye agrees with Keaton and Alec Hargreaves in pointing out that the representation of Blacks in France tends toward a negative visibility, that Black people are “over-represented in news and current affairs coverage (where the main emphasis is on socially conflicting phenomena),”⁹⁶ and that their representations in French-made programs often appear to be “antagonistic” to France’s purported political and moral value systems.⁹⁷ Echoing Stuart Hall⁹⁸ and Paul Gilroy,⁹⁹ Gueye also highlights the media’s power to socially construct perspectives on race and gender for the society at large. The kind of negative visibility Black

⁹³Sharpe, Christina. “The Weather.” *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2016), pp. 21.

⁹⁴ Translation: “Who Protects Us from the Police?”

⁹⁵ Keaton, Tricia. “Black Matters: Blackness Made to Matter.” *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, by Tricia Danielle Keaton et al., (Duke University Press, 2012).

⁹⁶ Gueye, Abdoulaye. *The Colony Strikes Back: African Protest Movements in Postcolonial France*, pp. 238.

⁹⁷ Gueye, Abdoulaye. *The Colony Strikes Back: African Protest Movements in Postcolonial France*, pp. 238. Gueye articulates this point via his analysis of the French-made television series “Fatou la malienne.”

⁹⁸ Daniel Chandler. *Marxist Media Theory*, (Dec. 2020).

⁹⁹ Gilroy, Paul. *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*. (Taylor and Francis, 2013), pp. 65.

people experience in dominant French media programming forecloses possibilities for this community to self-define. Thus, negative hyper/visibility begets negative invisibility, as the two are complementary.

Hyper/visibility of the Black community is also gendered, and hyper/visibility of Black women comes largely in a few forms: hypersexualization, exoticization, and aesthetic devaluation, as addressed by Tate¹⁰⁰ and Mitchell.¹⁰¹ Many scholars agree that these kinds of negative visibilities have their roots in France's imperial history. Mercer cites Enlightenment era thinking as the birthplace of beauty standards based on bipolar racial designations.¹⁰² Knox focuses on colonial exhibitions that took place throughout Europe, and specifically the Colonial Exhibition of 1931 in Paris¹⁰³ to make the case that these negative visibilities are just as historical as contemporary. Likewise, Robin Mitchell's analysis of the (after)life of Sarah Baartman in *Venus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth Century France* illuminates this quite clearly. The coercion, if not kidnapping, exhibition, dissection, posthumous exhibition, effigy, and grossly delayed burial of Sarah Baartman during the early 19th century exemplifies the Occidental tendency toward erasure of Black women's humanity in favor of their eroticization and exoticization in various attempts to shore up racial and gender hierarchies. As Mitchell writes, "Sarah Baartman served as a foil, establishing and regulating normative French behaviors to reverse what was seen as the degeneration of white French male virility and increasingly inappropriate behavior of white French women and to help white Frenchmen regain

¹⁰⁰Tate, Shirley Anne. *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*. (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016).

¹⁰¹ Mitchell, Robin. *Venus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France*. (The University of Georgia Press, 2018).

¹⁰² Mercer, Kobena. "BLACK HAIR/STYLE POLITICS." *BLACK BRITISH CULTURE AND SOCIETY*, 1987.

¹⁰³ Knox, Katelyn E.. "Display on Display: Migrating Identities in Contemporary Francophone Literature and Music." PhD dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 2013.

a sense of control”¹⁰⁴ in response to a nationalistic identity crisis following their defeat in Haiti. French acceptance of American-born and later French-naturalized Black woman entertainer, Josephine Baker, in the 1920s further illuminates this latent Occidental bias toward an eroticized, exoticized image of Black women’s bodies. Likewise, the racial slurs and apelike caricatures of Christiane Taubira¹⁰⁵ during her time as the French Minister of Justice offers a 21st century example, underlining the endurance of this phenomenon.

Interestingly, these hyper/visibilities are also what reinforce the disruptive nature of the “Black femme aesthetic.”¹⁰⁶ Again, while one might presume that the desirability of these aesthetics—their appropriation by the mainstream—would prevail against the aforementioned negative invisibilities, Imhotep and Feldman point out that the “commercial viability” of these aesthetic practices is separate from the “Black bodies that initially make them visible.”¹⁰⁷ Imhotep and Feldman demonstrate that in reifying Black femme aesthetics, the body itself gets tossed aside, another example of the complementary relationship between negative hyper/visibility and invisibility.¹⁰⁸ This signals a potential transformation of the “ungendering” of Black female flesh that Spillers highlights within the context of chattel slavery—a separation

¹⁰⁴ Mitchell, Robin. *Vénus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France*. (The University of Georgia Press, 2018), pp. 109.

¹⁰⁵ AFP. “Taubira comparée à un singe: La condamnation annulée.” *Libération*, www.liberation.fr/france/2015/06/22/taubira-comparee-a-un-singe-la-condamnation-d-une-ex-candidate-fn-annulee_1335002/.

¹⁰⁶ Imhotep, Malika, and Keith Feldman. “#OnFleek: Authorship, Interpellation, and the Black Femme Prowess of Black Twitter.” *#Identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation*, edited by Abigail De Kosnik, pp. 39.

¹⁰⁷ Imhotep, Malika, and Keith Feldman. “#OnFleek: Authorship, Interpellation, and the Black Femme Prowess of Black Twitter.” *#Identity: Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation*, edited by Abigail De Kosnik, pp. 50.

¹⁰⁸ This separation of Black women’s bodies from their aesthetics brings to mind the “ungendering” of the Black women’s bodies to which Hortense Spillers refers in *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book*. The subjective being represented in the performativity of aesthetics is separated from the Black women’s bodies that bore those aesthetics, much in the way that the womanhood of Black women, past and present, who have been brutalized in the United States has been stripped away from their “unprotected female flesh” (68).

of Black women from their femininity/womanhood, in this case as showcased by their aesthetics, and a lack of protection from this borne out of capitalism, in this case not the buying and selling of physical bodies but of representations. This hyper/visibility of Black women's bodies at the expense of their subjecthood serves to distance Black women from normative Occidental prescriptions of womanhood and humanity, including prescriptions of beauty and aesthetic acceptability. It is an exclusory tool for the othering of Black women, an instrument for their subalternation.

However, to note the negative (in)visibilities of Black women within these hegemonic contexts, while extremely relevant to this chapter, is not its endgame. Equally if not more important to this chapter is that it bring to bear the existence of forms of positive (in)visibility that confront both negative invisibility and negative visibility, and the ways that individuality and collectivism are employed by Black people, and specifically Black women, to resist hegemonic systems of power, self-define, make change, and ultimately live beyond the bounds of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, and capitalism. Writing in 2011, Alzouma Gado speaks to the formation of a “trans-ethnic consciousness” forged by Black people in France, a form of collectivism that has brought with it a certain strength in numbers.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Abdoulaye Gueye in his 2010 article “Breaking the Silence: The Emergence of a Black Collective,” also affirms the formation of a trans-ethnic consciousness, highlighting a numerical, attitudinal, and educational transformation within the Black French community that facilitated the “emergence of a collective Black voice in the French public sphere” at the turn of the 21st century.¹¹⁰ The relationship between collectivism and positive visibility is notable, and expressions of

¹⁰⁹ Gado, Alzouma. “Ethnic Statistics and Social Classifications in France: How the ‘Black Community’ Was Born.” *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, (2011), pp. 69.

¹¹⁰ Gueye, Abdoulaye. “BREAKING THE SILENCE: The Emergence of a Collective Black Voice in France.” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2010, pp. 82.

collectivism are often highlighted as acts of resistance and conduits for reclamation of authority, self-determination, and other positive change, and can be seen in the arguments of Gado,¹¹¹ Lozès,¹¹² and Gueye.¹¹³

Of equal significance, although much under-researched in comparison to collectivism, are Black women's expressions of individuality. In response to the homogenous alterity with which Black women are depicted in dominant narratives, Black women tend to find ways to individualize themselves, expressing their unique identities, while also expressing collective membership or group solidarity. While individuality seems to be the least studied, the field of aesthetics tends to ascribe more importance to its expression and function. Sybil Rosado posits the "polyvocality" of hair styling in communicating social and political determinants, and while although targeting hair directly can be reasonably expanded to include the way bodily stylings and aesthetic choices function similarly to demonstrate "marital status, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs" for instance.¹¹⁴ While demonstrations of these determinants serve to individualize their wearers on the one hand, the determinants are always already socially constructed; therefore, these styling choices symbolize group membership and belonging on the other hand. Jacques Saliba attends to this duality in suggesting that the body is both "indissociable from the individual, from the exterior of his image, and from the interior of his

¹¹¹ Gado, Alzouma. "Ethnic Statistics and Social Classifications in France: How the 'Black Community' Was Born." *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, vol. 4, no. 1, (2011).

¹¹² Lozès, Patrick. "The Invention of Blacks in France." *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*, by Tricia Danielle Keaton et al., (Duke University Press, 2012).

¹¹³ Gueye, Abdoulaye. "The Colony Strikes Back: African Protest Movements in Postcolonial France." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 26, no. 2, (2006).

¹¹⁴ Rosado, Sybil Dione. "No Nubian Knots or Nappy Locks: Discussing the Politics of Hair Among Women of African Decent in the Diaspora. A Report on Research in Progress." *Transforming Anthropology*, vol. 11, no. 2, (2003), pp. 60.

lived experience,”¹¹⁵ and highlighting the idea that the body carries with it various signifiers that communicate an individual culture, and therefore a “sociological object” in its individual sense, as well as an “anthropological object,” inscribed in an a priori language constructed less by its functions and more by cultural and institutional practice.¹¹⁶ In a similar vein, Mercer takes a dualistic perspective, considering these choices as “both individual expressions of the self and as embodiments of society’s norms, conventions, and expectations.”¹¹⁷ While Mercer’s focus is on Black women’s hair styling, I argue for the expansion of Mercer’s findings to be applied to Black women’s aesthetic choices, as well as their stylings and representations of their bodies. Specifically, I argue that white bias is equally at play in the creation of norms, as well as the erasure and marginalization of nonconformance, and that the Enlightenment era framed beauty standards based on bipolar racial designations that encoded both racialized hair and racialized bodies with negative connotations. Further, I show that aesthetic choices are three-fold: individual and resistant expressions of the self, embodiments of society’s norms, and resistant expressions of collectivism and group membership. Additionally, I argue that there must be a perspective that “de-psychologizes,” as Mercer puts it, and de-politicizes the aesthetic choices and bodily stylings of Black women, leaving space for their creativity and artistic innovation to be legible beyond the lexicon of the hegemonic power of global white supremacy and increasing their positive visibility.

¹¹⁵ My translation. Saliba, Jacques. “Le corps et les constructions symboliques.” *Socio-Anthropologie*, no. 5, (1999).

¹¹⁶ The idea of a sociological object is in contrast with the “anthropological object” relative to a culture writ large, for which Saliba also makes the case.

¹¹⁷ Mercer, Kobena. “BLACK HAIR/STYLE POLITICS.” *BLACK BRITISH CULTURE AND SOCIETY*, 1987, pp. 34.

Afrofem:

Collective gazing toward invisible/-izing state violence

The Mwasi-Collectif Afroféministe is a Paris-based activist group founded in 2014 that emphasizes its membership as a non-mixed group of Black women that professes a combination of feminist, Afrocentric, postcolonial, Pan-Africanist, and anti-capitalist ideologies. In the chapter, « Qui nous protège de la police ? », in their manifesto, *Afrofem*, the question is asked, « Quelles catégories sociales de femmes verront leurs plaintes entendues »?¹¹⁸ The text continues by mentioning and questioning the outcomes of sexual assault interactions as they relate to various social categorizers, such as race, gender, and class, elucidating a hierarchical valorization of bodies based on these signifiers. The text specifically notes several forms of sexual harassment endured by Black women, such as touching of hair and animalizing expressions, and questions whether they will be recognized by police, suggesting the invisibility of Black women in the police protection space. Because police protection is a right to which all citizens, and moreover, all people, should have access, their invisibility in this space can be read as denial of citizenship and personhood. The text further highlights the fact that not only do Black women have unequal access to and/or are denied police protection, but that they are, in fact, brutalized and harassed by police.¹¹⁹ This withholding of police protection and the brutalization of Black women's bodies reminds of the “materialized scene of unprotected female flesh” that Hortense Spillers describes and represents what she coined the “ungendering”¹²⁰ of Black female flesh that

¹¹⁸ *Afrofem*. (Éditions Syllepse, 2018), pp. 54.

Translation: “What social categories of women will see their complaints heard?”

¹¹⁹ *Afrofem*. (Éditions Syllepse, 2018), pp. 54.

Original text: “Et puis, qui verbalisera le policier qui harcèlera sexuellement ? » and *Afrofem*, 56, where is mentioned the assault of Marie-Reine by police.

¹²⁰ Spillers, Hortense J.. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics*, vol. 17, no. 2, (1987), pp. 68.

is the product of the transatlantic slave trade and American chattel slavery, thereby exemplifying the denial and invisibility of the womanhood of Black women in the French context, specifically as it relates to state violence. This “ungendering” of Black women is also understood as a stripping of gender itself in a move that transforms humans into property, Black women into objects. This application of Spillers work becomes even more appropriate when considered in conjunction with France’s historical involvement with the transatlantic slave trade, and the presence of enslaved Black people both in the French colonies and in France itself, which often goes unacknowledged by mainstream French media and politics, spaces that continue to be major conduits for the “national myth of liberty.”¹²¹ Spillers notion of ungendering can be understood alongside Sharpe’s position that “the repetition of visual, discursive, state, and other quotidian and extraordinary cruel and unusual violences enacted on Black people...often work to solidify and make continuous the colonial project of violence,”¹²² to clarify the ways that these repetitions of state violence against Black women in France are a continuation of historical violence against Black women by the French state that seek to perpetually invisibilize their femininity, womanhood, and humanity in the wake of the French colonial project. Sharpe would likely call this a “singularity of antiblackness,”¹²³ a point of tension that “produces Black resistances and refusals”¹²⁴ within the overarching climate of antiBlackness in France.

¹²¹ Chatman, Samuel. ““There are no Slaves in France”: A Re-Examination of Slave Laws in Eighteenth Century France”. *The Journal of Negro History*. (Summer, 2000), pp. 147.

¹²² Sharpe, Christina. “The Weather.” *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2016), pp. 83.

¹²³ Sharpe, Christina. “The Weather.” *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2016), 76. Sharpe defines singularity as “a weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances.” For Sharpe, brutality is “a singularity of antiBlackness”.

¹²⁴ Sharpe, Christina. “The Weather.” *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2016), pp. 88.

From this singularity is born this clear statement of resistance from the Mwasi Collectif:

“To the question, ‘who protects us from the police?’ the response can only be political organization.”¹²⁵

The response to the negative invisibility that Black women face in regard to their ignored complaints of sexual assault, the brutalization and “ungendering” of their bodies, and the invisibilization of their femininity, womanhood, and humanity in the police protection space, is collectivism. This is in line with Gueye’s work on the positive relationship between collective organizing and positive visibility, as he hypothesizes the “emergence of a Black collective voice”¹²⁶ to function as various visible and disruptive “interventions in a body of meanings and norms---which have been created for them by others”¹²⁷ that replace negative (in)visibilities with positive ones to restructure the legibility of the group and its individuals.

The replacement of these negative (in)visibilities unseats the white, cis-hetero-male, capitalist, patriarch archetype as the gazing eye through which the world is perceived and Black women’s bodies are regarded and codified. This appeal to collectivism on the part of the Mwasi-Collectif represents a strategy to decenter the white male gaze and shift the narrative to reflect the regard of Black women on their own bodies and the value thereof, as well as on the hegemonic systems of power that attack them and support whiteness and maleness as the prime vantage point. In this way, they resist and subvert these systems, by occupying the position of power as gazer and offering a glimpse of perspective from beyond the limits of the world as defined by white supremacy and patriarchy.

¹²⁵ *Afrofem*. Éditions Syllepse, 2018, pp. 54-5.

¹²⁶ Gueye, Abdoulaye. “BREAKING THE SILENCE: The Emergence of a Collective Back Voice in France.” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 7, no. 1, (2010), pp. 81.

¹²⁷ Gueye, Abdoulaye. “The Colony Strikes Back: African Protest Movements in Postcolonial France.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 26, no. 2, (2006), pp. 221.

The focus of the text transfigures from, in this chapter, explicitly rejecting the devalorization of Black women's bodies, resisting the hierarchization of various bodies, denouncing state institutions and systems, and defiantly gazing back at the system that attributes to them the aforementioned negative (in)visibilities to, in "La Flamboyance", regarding themselves with this Black women-centered gaze that emphatically re-ascribes value to Black beauty aesthetics, highlighting their legibility in a way that esteems them, and practicing resistant disalienation to counter white iconicity in the French context. This movement from scrutiny toward oppressors to admiration of self, or put otherwise this out-group to in-group observational arc, is mirrored in contemporary literary texts written by Black women in France and throughout the diaspora, such as is demonstrated by Sybille's journey in Laura Nsafou's *A mains nues* (2017),¹²⁸ in Ade's reckoning with her natural hair in Nsafou's children's book, *Comme un million de papillons noirs* (2018),¹²⁹ and in Queenie's story in Candace Carty-Williams' *Queenie* (2019). This arc is also echoed in several short stories from *Noire n'est pas mon métier* (2018), such as "Vous allez bien ensemble avec le bamboula," and can be seen elsewhere in other instances of Black women's creativity, such as Wangechi Mutu's print art collection, *Histology* (2006)¹³⁰ as highlighted by Zakiyyah Jackson.¹³¹

Collectivism and Individuality to make Visible Black Beauty

Moving along the cline of this observational arc toward more in-group observation and admiration of self, "La Flamboyance," emphasizes a rejection of the invisibility of Black women's natural beauty aesthetics in the landscape of dominant white beauty discourse, and

¹²⁸ Translation: "With Bare Hands."

¹²⁹ Translation: "Like a Million Black Butterflies."

¹³⁰ Mutu, Wangechi. *Histology of the Different Classes of Uterine Tumors*. (2006). Mixed media drawing.

¹³¹ Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. "Organs of War." *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*, (New York University Press, New York, 2020).

claims an alternative flamboyance, or hypervisibility. The Mwasi-Collectif reappropriates the disempowering hypervisibility of Black women's bodies into a productive tool to be instrumentalized for Black social and political progress. Attention to the interplay between collectivism and individuality helps to delineate the nature of this alternative flamboyance and its purpose as it relates to the collective's goal of "Black liberation." The chapter opens with the following:

"Flamboyantes sont les mamans et les tantines en pagnes colorés, les *sistas* swagguées des cités, flamboyants les frères flambeurs, les tontons sapés. Flamboyante.es celles et ceux qui s'affichent sans complexe et avec insolence, qui tchipent avec désinvolture au nez des oppressions, du « bon goût », de la bonne image, de tout ce que la langue, la société et l'image d'eux-mêmes essaient de leur imposer."

In these two opening sentences alone, the insistence on collectivism and individuality, the rejection of negative invisibility—the "good taste" and "good image," or respectability politics that has been historically imposed upon Black women, and the invention of a new kind of positive visibility, an "emphatic Blackness," as Smalls might put it, can be noted.¹³² The words "flamboyant," "parade around (s'afficher)," "flashy (flambeurs)," and "colored" create a lexical field of hypervisibility, while the family vocabulary—"mothers," "aunts," "sistas," "brothers," and "uncles"—references to traditionally African clothing and styling, such as the "pagnes" or the tradition of "la sape" and the use of the verb "tchiper" underline a sense of Black collectivism, and a connectedness or linked fate¹³³ amongst Afro-descended peoples. Drawing

¹³² See Krystal Small's "Languages of Liberation: Digital Discourses of Emphatic Blackness."

¹³³ Dawson, Michael C.. "Models of African-American Racial and Economic Group Interests." *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African-American Politics*, (Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 77.

The concept of "linked fate" is posited by Michael Dawson to refer to the idea that African-Americans see their own self-interests as inextricably linked to the interests of the racialized group to which they belong, and

from Smalls work on performative acts of emphatic Blackness, the use of the verb “tchipper” is exemplary of a “stigmatized/marginalized/othered language variet[y]” that is widely recognizable as Black in the French context and typically rendered “unrespectable,” following a “rubric of antiBlackness.”¹³⁴ Its usage here functions to reinforce the collective’s politics of “anti-respectability” that builds throughout the chapter. Further, the emphasis on being “without complex (sans complexe)” simultaneously conjures and rejects the notion of an immutable Black inferiority complex and its deleterious effects on Black individuality and social and psychological complexity. Likewise, these varied representations of Black men and women, the generational and sociocultural differentiation between the “mothers and aunts in their brightly colored printed dresses and skirts (pagnes)” and the “swagged out sistas of the cité,” or the “dapper uncles” and the “flashy brothers”¹³⁵ highlight the individuality of Black people in general and Black women in particular, and the nuances of the Black French and ultimately Black diasporic collective.

Meanwhile, the “nonchalant” rejection of “oppressions, good taste and good image, of all that the language the society and the image themselves tried to impose upon them” further reflects a recognition of the invisibilizing nature of respectability politics and societal and

vice versa. This concept has been applied to many social categorizations since its inception in 1994, including gendered groups, LGBTQIAX and LatinX populations, and I argue that it is applicable to afro-descended peoples across ethnic bounds.

¹³⁴ Smalls, Krystal A. “Languages of Liberation: Digital Discourses of Emphatic Blackness,” pp. 56.

¹³⁵ In English, “dapper” and “flashy” are considered translations for “sapé” and “flambeur,” however, “la sape,” and “la sapologie” represent an African (mostly Congolese) social and aesthetic movement to reappropriate Occidental high fashion born out of early-to-mid-20th century anticolonial sentiment. SAPE is also an acronym for the Congolese Société des ambassadeurs et des personnes élégantes. Although the translations “dapper” and “flashy” may seem almost synonymous, the word “sapé” has its roots in this resistant aesthetic practice with a distinct temporal and geographical component that is distinguishable from “flambeur.” This distinction seems to be acknowledged by the generational separation between the two words to which they are paired, “uncle” and “brother” respectively. “Sapé” therefore evokes a collectivism with Black Africans and a perspective that acknowledges connectedness across the African Diaspora, while the precursory relationship between “uncle” and “brother” and the tradition of “la sape” and the flashiness and big-spending of some members of the successive generation evokes a generational connectedness or collectivism.

linguistic oppressions, and a counter-gaze toward the Occidental narratives that created them. This reflects the focus of the chapter to promote a kind of flamboyance as a method of resistance toward and rejection of dominant occidental portrayals, flamboyance as a rejection of oppressive respectability politics,¹³⁶ and flamboyance as an individual habitus of creativity.¹³⁷ This resistance and rejection is constituted by their distancing themselves from dominant ideologies of bipolar politics and by their push toward creating a general politic and a body politic based on their own intrinsic value systems.

The very use of the term “flamboyance” reflects the counter gaze of the women of the Mwasi-Collectif. They note that it is a refashioning of the term, which “at first glance, evokes an observable quality, ‘gazable’¹³⁸ by an exterior regard,”¹³⁹ highlighting the French language as being “tirelessly constructed against” them, and thereby necessitating this reappropriation or redefinition of the term. Likewise, the reappropriation of additional terms like “anti-exemplarité,” and “prendre soin,” reflect a mastering and remastering of the French language that works alongside the remastering and reappropriation of Black women’s historical negative hypervisibility in French society.

Alongside this reappropriation is their explicit non-response to invisibilizing Eurocentric beauty norms that deny Black women’s beauty aesthetics and that call for their denial of self,¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ In the chapter, this is evoked by the terms “bon goût” and “bonne image.” Given that the Mwasi-Collectif avidly and explicitly advocates for and valorizes Black queerness and Black queer aesthetics, as well, a consideration of the notion of flamboyance as it relates to acts and representations of queer resistance in France and beyond would prove particularly generative, especially in further uniting this global community around varying degrees of shared intersectional oppressions, and thus facilitating their further subjectivation, as in their capacity to act as subjects. The productive nature of such an examination makes it suitable as the point of departure for another complete project entirely.

¹³⁷ Framing flamboyance as an individual habitus of creativity seems a potential step toward the apoliticization of Black women’s aesthetics.

¹³⁸ The word used in the chapter is “*contemplable*.”

¹³⁹ *Afrofem*. (Éditions Syllepse, 2018), pp. 101.

¹⁴⁰ *Afrofem*. (Éditions Syllepse, 2018), pp. 101.

what Tate and Smeralda refer to as alienation. This explicit insistence on “non-response” can be likened to the practices of the “emphatically Black agitators” to which Smalls refers, that are “simply refusing to translate themselves.”¹⁴¹ On the other hand, this “non-response,” ironically draws attention to, or makes hypervisible, their invisibilizing of dominant beauty norms, like Tate’s white iconicity, that historically and currently seek to erase, reduce, and stigmatize Black women’s beauty aesthetics.¹⁴² Subsequently, they claim a transcendence of hegemonic aesthetic categorizations through a redefinition of “flamboyance,” via an “anti-exemplarité noire”¹⁴³ that stands in opposition to these norms.

The introduction continues with the words “notre flamboyance,” followed immediately by “nos flamboyances.”¹⁴⁴ The juxtaposition of these two terms in sequence can be read as an explicit correction for the sake of the reader, a shift from the singular form which in some ways homogenizes the “flamboyance” or cultivated positive hypervisibility to the plural form which accounts for a variety of these positive hypervisibilities. However, this project interprets the use of both “notre” and “nos” successively here to emphasize a collective (notre) hypervisibility and individual (nos) positive hypervisibilities that operate simultaneously to create and valorize horizontal connections amongst Black women in France, to recognize and make visible a

¹⁴¹ Smalls, Krystal A. “Languages of Liberation: Digital Discourses of Emphatic Blackness.” pp. 58.

¹⁴² On the other hand, it is important to consider that this non-response to Eurocentric beauty norms can be read as a non-acknowledgment of the beauty of Black women who dawn so-called European-styled artifices, such as straight hair, extensions, or make-up that makes their noses appear skinnier or more European, for instance, and this artifice as a method of resistance to those same norms via hybridization, re-appropriation, and a blurring of the lines of difference

¹⁴³ *Afrofem*. (Éditions Syllepse, 2018), pp. 101.

This idea of anti-exemplarity is particularly interesting in conversation with Sesko’s and Biernat’s work on non-prototypicality, wherein the non-prototypicality of Black women is often shown to render them invisible in various fields. Here, the Black women of the Mwasi-Collectif are repositioning this notion as a tool for resistance of hegemonic norms.

¹⁴⁴ *Afrofem*. (Éditions Syllepse, 2018), pp. 102.

“Notre” is a singular possessive pronoun, while “nos” is a plural possessive pronoun. The object of “notre” is a singular hypervisibility, while the object of “nos” is plural hypervisibilities.

community of fate amongst Black women in France, the importance of which is underlined by Gueye,¹⁴⁵ and to value difference within the collective in opposition to the homogenization of dominant narratives. This exists alongside the subsequent stress on the diversity of individuals within this community discovering possibilities « d'exister pleinement » and representing themselves authentically, while « participant à une lutte commune contre des oppressions polymorphes », further emphasizing the connection between individuality, collectivism, and visibility, their combined effect to counter oppressions, and to constitute a Black women-centered counter gaze toward “celles et ceux qui en bénéficient.”¹⁴⁶

This emphasis on both individual and collective hypervisibilities and their power to affect change is further corroborated by the mention of « la creation personnelle et collective d'une conscience noire » —thus simultaneously individual (personal) and collective—that is both “émancipée et émancipatrice” and “transgressif.”¹⁴⁷ The use of the word « émancipatrice » reflects their stance that this combination of an individual and collective consciousness with this aesthetic hypervisibility or flamboyance is actively liberating Black women by transgressing, and

¹⁴⁵ Gueye, Abdoulaye. “BREAKING THE SILENCE: The Emergence of a Collective Back Voice in France.” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 7, no. 1, (2010).

Gueye notes that anthropology's focus on ethnicity among other things has made it difficult to establish a community of fate amongst Black people in France to the detriment of community-building along racial lines. However, as collective political action by Black people in France continues to become more visible, so to does the valorization of this community and the individuals it includes.

¹⁴⁶ *Afrofem*. (Éditions Syllepse, 2018), pp. 102.

The original text: « Voilà tout ce que notre flamboyance, nos flamboyances, peuvent porter de potentiel disruptif, constructif et re-constructif, se déclinant dans autant de formes et de couleurs, de sons et d'odeurs, que d'individu.es découvrant la possibilité d'exister pleinement tout en participant à une lutte commune contre des oppressions polymorphes et celles et ceux qui en bénéficient ». My translation : “Here is what our flamboyance, our flamboyances, can bring that is potentially disruptive, constructive, re-constructive, appearing in as many forms and colors, sounds and smells, as individuals discovering the possibility of existing fully, all the while participating in a common struggle against polymorphic oppressions, and those who benefit from them.”

¹⁴⁷ *Afrofem*. (Éditions Syllepse, 2018), pp. 102. The original text: « la création personnelle et collective d'une conscience noire émancipée et émancipatrice, d'une beauté créative, transgressive et d'un nouveau rapport au 'prendre soin' dans une contexte de sororité politique ». My translation : “the personal and collective fashioning of a Black consciousness that is emancipated and emancipating, of a creative beauty, transgressive and bringing new meaning to ‘taking care’ in the context of political sorority.”

thereby resisting « des discours coloristes, grossophobes, validistes, âgistes et transphobes »¹⁴⁸ and creating a new significance to the notion of « prendre soin »¹⁴⁹ that is rooted in « sororité politique » amongst Black women in France.¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, the inclusion here of a quote from Maya Angelou's 1978 poem "And Still I Rise," immediately followed by the sub-header "#BlackGirlMagic" seems to reflect a more far-reaching political sorority that includes Black women in the United States and throughout the diaspora, as well as Black women of the current era and Black foremothers like Maya Angelou.

This is further reinforced by their use of the term "sistas" throughout *Afrofem*, beginning with its use in Nsafou's preface, "a discussion with Sharone Omankoy, cofounder of Mwasi" . The use of this afro-anglicism, more specifically of Black Vernacular English, reflects an acknowledgement of, if not a unity with Black women in the United States. In saying that she is "rich and nourished by the flamboyance of other sistas,"¹⁵¹ Omankoy expresses feelings of sorority with Black women that transcend ethnic and national boundaries, largely invalidating divisive categorizations set up by the dominant group. The preface reads "her power and her thirst for justice for all Black women, be they mothers, unemployed, lesbian, handicapped, HIV-positive, entrepreneurs, Catholic, believing in African spiritualities, Muslim, locked , veiled, braided, or nappy." In uniting these categorizations as Mwasi-Collectif, horizontality as a site of value and meaning-making stands against dominant heteronormative identity groupings and

¹⁴⁸ *Afrofem*. (Éditions Syllepse, 2018), pp. 102.

The original text: « Nos réalités transcendent et dépassent le cadre étroit, hégémonique d'un 'Beau' qui ne produit que des discours coloristes, grossophobes, validistes, âgistes et transphobes. » My translation : "Our realities transcend and exceed the narrow, hegemonic framework of "Attractive" that produces nothing but colorist, fatist, ableist, ageist, and transphobic discourses."

¹⁴⁹ Sharpe takes up this notion in *In the Wake*, too.

¹⁵⁰ The notion that this kind of "political sorority" is transgressive to dominant aesthetic discourses reinforces the connection between politics and aesthetics, particularly the political legibility of Black women's aesthetic practices.

¹⁵¹ *Afrofem*. (Éditions Syllepse, 2018), pp. 102. Original text : « Je suis riche et aussi nourrie de la flamboyance d'autres sistas. »

emphasizes a valorization of “Black” and “womxn” as designations of identity to which they have the highest level of attachment.

Given that the white male gaze tends to offer up homogenized, one-size-fits-all depictions of Black women, the declaration of non-mixedness by Mwasi-Collectif, especially when considered alongside the manifesto’s emphasis on individuality, can seem paradoxical and incongruent. The view of this project is that it highlights the complexity of this relationship between collectivism and individuality and the complexity of Black women themselves as active subjects with multiple layers. Their insistence on non-mixedness is a response to the so-called advocacy for Black women, colorblindness, or “inclusive feminism”¹⁵² taken on by white feminist movements, as is emphasized in their “Lettre au féminisme blanc.”¹⁵³ It is also congruent with the call for “safe-spaces” from other antiracist groups, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement,¹⁵⁴ which signals, at the very least, similar ideologies around Blackness and trauma if not collectivism in the sense of direct engagement with this movement.

The chapter emphasizes and advocates for the non-mixedness of the collective to include all Afro-descended women. In this way, their non-mixedness feels both inclusive and exclusive—exclusive in that it excludes all women who are not of African descent and all people of African descent who are not women, but inclusive in that it includes all women of African descent, regardless of age, life and style choices, sexuality, ability, morphology, etc. While their stance arguably reinforces the alterity with which Black women are depicted under the white male gaze, it also reinforces the notion of an established collective community of Black women in France.

¹⁵² *Afrofem*. Éditions Syllepse, 2018, pp. 43.

¹⁵³ *Afrofem*. Éditions Syllepse, 2018, pp. 42.

¹⁵⁴ Moini, Nina. “Minneapolis Church Holds 'Safe Space' to Deal with Trauma after Death of George Floyd.” *MPR News*, MPR News, <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2021/03/18/minneapolis-church-holds-safe-space-to-deal-with-trauma-after-the-death-of-george-floyd>.

Pairing this notion of collectivism with their emphasis on heterogeneity or individuality within this collective community via their recognition of various differentiating categories de-emphasizes racialization as the primary category of difference and decenters whiteness as the norm to which all must be compared. Other categories of difference, such as of religion, ability, or hair-styling are introduced—differentiations afforded to the human, thereby having a humanizing effect in lieu of an animalizing or exoticizing effect, as is typical of the white male gaze. Furthermore, many of these categorizations include the possibility for corporeal expression or inscription. As Tate suggests:

“Black women are different from themselves because of practices on/of the body as well as from white beauty. This difference is normalized so that it becomes a part of a racializing Black beauty repertoire in which beauty ideals can be questioned and brought into crisis. This troubles the very notion of difference because there is no clear other which we want to become as a totality.”¹⁵⁵

The use of this rhetoric that combines notions of collectivism and individuality by the Mwasi-Collectif destabilizes difference itself, while also setting fire to the strawman caricature of homogenous, exotic, erotic, savage, and violent Blackness that is perpetually produced and attacked by the white male gaze. This approach counters the white male gaze by reducing the pertinence of whiteness and white iconicity, marginalizing whiteness both rhetorically and theoretically. When whiteness is decentered as the normative reference from which to be different, its social capital becomes deflated, destabilizing the hegemonic power of white supremacy itself, highlighting its limits and signaling the existence of possibilities for Black beauty, creativity, and fullness of life beyond its bounds.

¹⁵⁵ Tate, Shirley Anne. *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*. (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), pp. 25.

However, it should be noted that the text does little to affirm its inclusion of lighter-skinned Black women, or women that choose hybridized aesthetic practices, or practices that incorporate mainstream stylings, into their everyday routines, and their contributions to this aesthetic resistance movement. While their accented non-mixedness is inclusive, the text does not explicitly valorize the aesthetics of lighter-skinned Black women in the way that it seems to do to those of darker-skinned women. The chapter barely touches on colorism, mentioning it only once, although arguably a choice for inclusion rather than ostracization of lighter-skinned Black women, as colorism is sometimes invoked to deny the authenticity of lighter-skinned Blackness because of its closer proximity to whiteness and the privilege that often accompanies it. On the other hand, while the text states its inclusion of all Black women, it does nothing to valorize lighter-skinned aesthetics or hybridized aesthetic practices, explicitly positively references the afro (twice in this chapter) and seems to favor darker-skinned aesthetics.¹⁵⁶ Tate notes that in the racialized aesthetic of non-mixed Black communities, aesthetic value is often closely tied to the degree of authenticity ascribed to various bodies and their stylizations. “A politics of skin, facial features and hair which, allied with Black anti-racist politics, performatively produce the authenticity of the Black body.”¹⁵⁷ Being that the inclusivity proclaimed in *Afrofem* does not explicitly extend to lighter-skinned women or those who choose hybridized beauty aesthetics while it explicitly valorizes stylizations that are more closely tied to the African continent and to darker-skinned women, it becomes reasonable to question to what extent tropes of authenticity are produced and are shaming, marginalizing, or invisibilizing to some forms of Black beauty within their construction of a multifaceted Black beauty or the existence of multiple Black beauties. Nevertheless, it is important to note that while less present in the text, the Mwasi-

¹⁵⁶ The text mentions the cultural contributions of Sub-Saharan Africans on page 105 and wearing an afro on page 107.

¹⁵⁷ Tate, Shirley. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame: Discourse, Iconicity, and Resistance*. pp. 107.

Collectif does explicitly state their inclusion of métisse-afrodescendantes on their Facebook page,¹⁵⁸ which can be read as a strategy for inclusion that also decenters the historical valorization of mixed-race aesthetics.

The Legibility and Grammar of Bodily Aesthetics

Under the #BlackGirlMagic subheader, the text argues against respectability politics, regarding it as a “tool of social domination, of control of bodies, and of their free expression.” “Respectability politics describes a self-presentation strategy...to reject White stereotypes by promoting morality while de-emphasizing sexuality,” according to Pitcan, Marwick and Boyd¹⁵⁹, and is defined by Kali Gross more widely as “a deliberate concession to mainstream societal values.”¹⁶⁰ Respectability politics suppress or downplay certain cultural attributes that are legible to the white gaze as “unrespectable” for the purposes of social gain and upward mobility or for the purpose of advancing a social movement. The Mwasi-Collectif’s rejection of them in this chapter highlights the way that the collective sees the body as deeply tied to cultural practices, aesthetic and otherwise, and that they see Black women’s bodies as culturally, socially, and politically legible to freely express themselves, which is reminiscent of Rosado’s symbolic grammar of hair, if we were to extend this concept to include Black women’s bodies and aesthetic practices more generally.¹⁶¹ Furthermore, it highlights respectability politics as an arm

¹⁵⁸ MWASI- Collectif Afroféministe. Community Description in the About section. Facebook. 04/01/2021. https://m.facebook.com/mwasiafrofemparis/?locale2=fr_FR.

¹⁵⁹ Pitcan, Mikaela et al. “Performing a Vanilla Self: Respectability Politics, Social Class, and the Digital World.” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 23, no. 3, (2018).

This concept in and of itself is problematic as it creates a binary between morality and sexuality as if the two are mutually exclusive.

¹⁶⁰ Gross, Kali. “Examining the Politics of Respectability in African American Studies.” 4/1/97, *Politics of Respectability in African American Studies - Almanac*, Vol. 43, No. 28.

¹⁶¹ *Afrofem*, pp. 103. The original text : ”Produits de consommation pour le grand public, non-noir et occidental, nos corps sont encore aujourd’hui utilisés, exposés, caricaturés, emprisonnés, au nom d’une culture, d’un patrimoine, d’une histoire esthétique et politique dont nous restons exclu.es ».

of the white male gaze that gives value to certain cultural practices that mimic those of the dominant group, offering them positive in/visibilities, while devaluing practices that differ from those of the dominant group, offering them negative in/visibilities.¹⁶² The resultant invisibilization via respectability politics is but one oppressive force acting on the bodies of Black women that is confronted in this chapter. The chapter continues by noting their negative hypervisibilities— « exotisés, ridiculisés, tantôt fascinants, tantôt douteux »¹⁶³—due in part to their relegation to a predetermined social space,¹⁶⁴ which can be read as a homogenizing force that ignores their free self-expression whilst respectability politics attempts to totally suppress it.

From there, the text moves on to offer its considerations on aesthetic consumption and the beauty industry that uses, exposes, caricaturizes and imprisons¹⁶⁵ Black women's bodies. The text emphasizes Black women's invisibility and exclusion from dominant beauty norms, further corroborating Tate's notion of white iconicity, while also advocating for practices of disalienation by reiterating the possibility of a « conscience dédoublée » , a « conscience noire » , that is simultaneously « individuelle et émancipée mais aussi porteuse de l'intuition d'un enjeu collectif ». ¹⁶⁶ In this way, we can understand that the potential solution offered by the Mwasi-

¹⁶² These practices are generally only attributed negative in/visibility when they are performed by non-dominant group members. Imhotep and Feldman show that when cultural practices of subordinate groups are performed by dominant group members, they are often attributed positive hypervisibilities

¹⁶³ *Afrofem*, pp. 103.

The original text : « ...exotisés, ridiculisés, tantôt fascinants, tantôt douteux ».

¹⁶⁴ *Afrofem*, pp. 103.

The original text : « Nos corps sont assignés par la violence à »

¹⁶⁵ *Afrofem*, pp. 103.

The original text : "Produits de consommation pour le grand public, non-noir et occidental, nos corps sont encore aujourd'hui utilisés, exposés, caricaturés, emprisonnés, au nom d'une culture, d'un patrimoine, d'une histoire esthétique et politique dont nous restons exclu.es ». My translation : "Products for consumption by the larger public, non-black and occidental, our bodies are still used, exposed, caricatured, and imprisoned today, in the name of an aesthetic and political culture, homeland, and history from which we remain excluded."

¹⁶⁶ *Afrofem*, pp. 103.

The original text : « Hors de ce corpus esthétique, le mirage s'évanouit, justifiant la méfiance individuelle et la violence sociale mais déclenchant aussi l'éveil potentiel d'une conscience dédoublée : individuelle et émancipée mais aussi porteuse de l'intuition d'un enjeu collectif, d'une conscience noire. » My translation :

Collectif here is the forming of individualized but also collectively-instantiated aesthetic practices that work to disalienate Black women from their bodies while creating a resistant and collective Black beauty canon that stands in opposition to longstanding dominant white beauty norms. According to Tate, “Racialization means that there is an inscription of beauty on some bodies and not others so that beauty is always embodied as white.”¹⁶⁷ By subscribing to this idea of a Black consciousness that allows for individual freedom of expression and performed relationality with the collective via these flamboyant aesthetic practices, the Mwasi-Collectif is making space for the inscription of beauty on Black women’s bodies and countering racialization in the mainstream beauty canon.

Noire n’est pas mon métier

Collectivism, Individuality, and (In)visibility in Maïga’s Prologue

Noire n’est pas mon métier is a collectively authored compilation of short stories written in 2018 by a group of Black French actresses to raise awareness about racial discrimination and stereotyping in the French film industry. *The* structure of *Noire n’est pas mon métier* parallels the tension between individuality and collectivism which has been the partial focus of this chapter. Each testimony is reflective of the individual woman’s unique perspective, while questions of visibility, access, and perception frame the entire work and connect the installments to create a collective oeuvre with nuanced accounts of antiBlackness, overcoming (in)visibility, and celebrated Blackness, thus thematically similar to *Afrofem*. Blackness, Afropeanness, and womanhood are articulated as multifaceted with discussion of the body being one of several

“Outside of this aesthetic corpus, the mirage vanishes, justifying the individual mistrust and the social violence but also inspiring the awakening of a double consciousness: individual and emancipated but also carrying with it an intuition of collective gain, a black consciousness.”

¹⁶⁷ Tate, Shirley Anne. *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*. (Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), pp. 18.

unifying factors. From the very beginning, the prologue of this work, written by Aïssa Maïga, engages with notions of invisibility, visibility, collectivism, and individuality, all while introducing the notion of counter-gazing, a major through line of the collection. Maïga begins by problematizing her position as one of very few Black actresses in a country « pourtant métissé qu'est la France ». ¹⁶⁸ Already, she notes her visibility as an actress against the negative invisibility of Black women in French media, while inscribing her Blackness into the larger diversity of the French population and offering the collection's first example of a Black women-centered counter-gaze, the object of which being the French cinema, television, and theatre industries. This counter-gaze is established on the foundations of Maïga's attention to the interplay of invisibility and visibility as it relates to industry practices and the experiences of Black women in the media, and individuality and collectivism as it relates to the racializing, objectifying, and invisibilizing objectives of these industries, of dominant French society, and their historical origins in colonialism.

Within the first few paragraphs, Maïga builds a lexical field around invisibility and hypervisibility that includes, on the one hand, words and phrases like « rares », « rejet », « irrémédiablement invisibles, ignorées », « exclues », ¹⁶⁹ and « invisibilité quasi-totale » ¹⁷⁰ evoking negative invisibility through the invisibilization of Black women's creative mastery and artistic contributions, and, on the other, « stigmatisée », « stereotype », « caricatures », ¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Maïga Aïssa, et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 7. Original text : « dans ce pays pourtant métissé qu'est la France ». My translation : "in this country that is yet so mixed as is France."

¹⁶⁹ Maïga Aïssa, et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 7. My translations : "rare," "rejection," "irremediably invisible, ignored," "excluded."

¹⁷⁰ Maïga Aïssa, et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 8. Original text : « Cette assignation au carrefour du racisme et du sexisme s'accompagne d'une invisibilité quasi-totale ». My translation : "This positioning at the intersection of racism and sexism is accompanied by a quasi-total invisibility." Maïga seems to acknowledge the invisibility that Sesko and Biernat suggest is due to Black women's non-prototypicality as neither a Black man nor a white woman.

¹⁷¹ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 8-9.

evoking a negative hypervisibility of Black women on the part of the white male gaze that dominates French media. Meanwhile, interweaved into these paragraphs are references to individuality and collectivism. Maïga creates a community of fate amongst « noire » and « métisse » women in France linked to the legibility and interpretation of their bodies by the white male gaze: « l'expérience amère d'un regard à la fois sexiste et raciste posé sur son corps ».¹⁷² This echoes Dawson's conception of the notion of linked fate as a force that strengthens feelings of community and solidarity or entanglement of self and group interests and its foundational relationship to social, political, and economic inequalities.

References to collectivism are enmeshed with references to France's colonial history, which allow for the creation of a larger diverse community that expands to include « Noires, Arabes, Asiatiques », ¹⁷³ founded upon a common experience of discrimination among actresses with ethnic origins in the French colonial world, and the shaping of a countergaze whose object is French colonial history and its ramifications for today's social landscape in France's neocolonial present, reminiscent of Sharpe's description of the wake of the transatlantic slave trade, and European colonial projects, in both of which France had its hand. According to Maïga, these ramifications include: « discrimination à l'embauche, invisibilité, plafond de verre, ¹⁷⁴ déficit de crédibilité lorsqu'elles ou ils accèdent à des postes à responsabilité, quand ils ne sont pas tout simplement exposés de façon stratégique, trophées d'entreprises qui veulent apparaître vertueuses en termes de diversité », strategic exhibition, and tokenism,¹⁷⁵ all of which

My translations : "stigmatized," "stereotyped," "caricatures."

¹⁷² Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 8.

My translation : "the bitter experience of a simultaneously sexist and racist gaze toward one's body."

¹⁷³ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 9.

My translation : "Blacks, Arabs, and Asians."

¹⁷⁴ The imagery of the glass-ceiling evokes its own unique interplay between visibility and invisibility—the glass that is unseen but allows visibility of those on either side of it, while those below it still experience negative (in)visibilities that reinforce the ceiling itself.

¹⁷⁵ Maïga, Aïssa, et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 9.

seem to echo Constant's framework of multiple invisibilities. The explicit mention of invisibility alongside her allusions to visual objectification in this catalog reinforces her acknowledgement of both negative invisibility and negative visibility as manifestations of the white male gaze and its direct effect on the experiences of Black women and women of color in France. This Black women-centered countergaze on France's colonial history and neocolonial present also addresses the corporeality of the white male gaze on Black women, noting the historical « barbarie coloniale, les massacres tus,...les héros assassinés, les viols systématisés... »¹⁷⁶ and contemporary Black French actresses' « expérience amère d'un regard à la fois sexiste et raciste posé sur son corps », ¹⁷⁷ as was previously mentioned. Maïga also makes the case that it is the corporeal inscription of blackness or non-whiteness that bridges gaps in socioeconomic and professional status as well as gender in saying that “ce que nous éprouvons en tant que femmes noires dans les industries du spectacle, d'autres femmes et hommes non blancs le vivent dans tous les secteurs professionnels.”¹⁷⁸ This rhetoric forges a racialized community based on the negative visibilities inscribed onto non-white bodies, coupled with their negative invisibility in the professional space.

At the same time, Maïga acknowledges and affirms the heterogeneity of the group of Black women who have contributed to *Noire n'est pas mon métier*, and of Black women in general:

Original text : « discrimination à l'embauche, invisibilité, plafond de verre, déficit de crédibilité lorsqu'elles ou ils accèdent à des postes à responsabilité, quand ils ne sont pas tout simplement exposés de façon stratégique, trophées d'entreprises qui veulent apparaître vertueuses en termes de diversité . » My translation :

“discrimination at work, invisibility, glass-ceiling, deficits in credibility in management positions, when they are not simply exhibited in a strategic fashion, trophies of companies that wish to appear virtuous in terms of diversity.”

¹⁷⁶ Maïga Aïssa, et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 10.

My translation : “colonial barbary, suppressed massacres... assassinated heroes, systematized rape..”

¹⁷⁷ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 8.

¹⁷⁸ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 9.

My translation : “what we suffer as Black women in the entertainment industry, other women and non-white men live in every professional sector.”

« Nous sommes seize femmes, seize actrices noires ou métisses du cinéma français, et voici nos seize témoignages (panorama non exhaustif, ce livre ne prétend pas être une encyclopédie).»¹⁷⁹

The numerical qualifier, “seize”, draws attention to the individuality of each woman by evoking a certain mental imagery in the reader of sixteen different women, which is further enhanced by the styling of the cover of the book: another “non-exhaustive panorama” of sorts, a group photo of thirteen of the sixteen contributors, all with various styles of dress and body, some seated in chairs, some standing, and some seated on the floor. The parenthesis here is particularly important in coming against the homogenous depictions of Black women in the French film industry and beyond. The label “non-exhaustive” acknowledges a wide range of variance among the larger collective of Black actresses specifically, and Black women in general and makes space for individuality within this community. Furthermore, the phrase “ce livre ne prétend pas être une encyclopédie, » could be read both literally and sarcastically, and in these ways, as simultaneously confronting the burden the white gaze places on any and/or every single Black person to speak for or represent the entirety of Blackness and all those to whom the term is applied, as well as Europe’s 18th century obsession with categorizing by way of encyclopedias that attempted to codify Black bodies and minds as naturally and inherently inferior, primitive, sexual, and savage in comparison to white ones. This analysis is congruent with Maïga’s constant insistence upon the influence of France’s colonial past on the contemporary treatment of Black women and people of color in general.

Similar to the catalog of identity-signifiers used to underline the individuality of Black women in *Afrofem*, Maïga’s prologue goes on to highlight the heterogeneity of the book’s

¹⁷⁹ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 11.

My translation : “We are sixteen women, sixteen Black or mixed actresses of French cinema and here are our sixteen testimonies (non-exhaustive panorama, this book does not claim to be an encyclopedia.”

contributors. They are « nommées aux César...novices, confirmées, jeunes, vieilles, maigres, grosses, nées ici ou ailleurs ».¹⁸⁰ This listing of various differences in identity indeed creates a non-exhaustive but nuanced panorama of Black women in France and throughout the diaspora, while also placing particular importance on corporeality by highlighting differences in age and morphology which are visually legible.¹⁸¹ Nevertheless, these nuanced identities share a collective ideology, according to Maïga, as they each make the same assessment that « l’imaginaire des productions françaises est encore empreint de clichés hérités d’un autre temps ».¹⁸² Combining these nuanced identities connected by this collective ideology to augment positive (in)visibilities for Black women and other marginalized groups « pour une représentation plus juste de la société française » and « un monde plus ouvert, plus juste, plus inclusive »¹⁸³ is Maïga’s vision for the work.

Reversing the Gaze in Gabin’s “BalancetonPoulpe”

While Maïga focuses on augmented positive visibility for Black women in France, Mata Gabin fights fire with fire, negative (in)visibility with negative visibility. She does much to turn her own Black women-centered gaze toward the white male and the white male gaze by highlighting the effects of that gaze on her experiences as an actress and by reappropriating many of those mainstream tactics that are weaponized against Black women to depict the

¹⁸⁰ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 11.

My translation: “nominated for Caesars...novices, experienced, young, old, thin, fat, born here or elsewhere.”

¹⁸¹ This is a direct parallel with *Afrofem*, as many of the signifiers used in a similar catalogue in that work to which this chapter refers are also visually legible and inscribed on the body.

¹⁸² Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp.11.

My translation: “The imaginary of French productions is still imprinted with stereotypes inherited from another time.”

¹⁸³ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 12.

My translation: “For more just representation of French society” and “a more open, more just, more inclusive world.”

misbehavior of the male actor/assailant by whom she was ultimately sexually assaulted¹⁸⁴.

Gabin's first-person narrative offers a glimpse into her mental processes before, during, and after a series of encounters with a famous actor to whom she refers only as the "le Poulpe."¹⁸⁵

Writing in the first-person not only offers her authority over the narrative, but also places the reader alongside Gabin to observe the world and le Poulpe in the same way that she does, allowing her to come into community with the reader, creating a "we" of sorts, while the observed becomes a "they," an other. Notably, one such intellection draws attention to the invisibility that Gabin faces as an actress by juxtaposing her lack of celebrity and acknowledgement while performing in a show at a particular theatre a few months prior and the people who manifested their joy to see her as she stood next to le Poulpe at their theatre outing in the same place.¹⁸⁶ The fact that she only became visible to those people when attached to le Poulpe underlines the social capital of whiteness and maleness of which she has neither. Additionally, Gabin notes that she was unable to pose any questions to le Poulpe because of his incessant talking; his disinterest in ceding the floor to Gabin underlines his dismissal or invisibilization of her personhood. Finally, Gabin also notes her distaste for questions surrounding her origin as if she were not and could not be French. This « présomption de non-appartenance »¹⁸⁷ that she notes emphasizes the alterity and exoticism with which Black people

¹⁸⁴ Note the thematic similarity here between Maïga's "Balancetonpoulpe" and "Qui nous protège de la police" in *Afrofem* related to assault of the body.

¹⁸⁵ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 25. My translation : "Le Poulpe."

¹⁸⁶ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 27. Original text : « Certains qui ne m'avaient jamais dit bonjour quand je jouais Lucrèce Borgia, dans cette même salle quelques mois auparavant, ce soir-là, parce qu'il y a le Poulpe avec moi, manifestent à présent leur joie de me revoir. »

My translation : Certain people who never said "hello" to me when I played Lucrèce Borgia in this same room a few months ago, tonight, because the Octopus is with me, are now jumping for joy to see me again."

¹⁸⁷ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 27. My translation : "presumption of non-belonging."

in general and specifically Black women, as is the focus of this project, are depicted and understood.

Furthermore, not only does Gabin point out several observable qualities of the white male gaze and her interactions with it, but she goes further to counter it, responding in kind by using many of the same strategies it tends to use to invisibilize, hypervisibilize, eroticize, and exoticize Black women. Sharpe's concept of redaction¹⁸⁸ is useful in framing Gabin's rhetorical treatment of le Poulpe and her experience with him. Sharpe uses the following definition of "redaction" from the Oxford English Dictionary:

"Redaction: a: The action of bringing or *putting into a definite form*; (now) spec. the working or drafting of source material into a distinct, esp. written, form...b: The action or process of revising or editing text, esp. in preparation for publication; (also) an act of editorial revision. Obs. The action of driving back; *resistance*, reaction." ¹⁸⁹

Firstly, the nick-naming of the Octopus, while it offers her assailant the undue covering of anonymity on the one hand, insistently anonymizes him on the other—a strategy that denies le Poulpe the attention or hypervisibility to which he has likely habituated as a prominent white male actor. In lieu of using his name or any other descriptive adjective or phrasing, Gabin calls him the Octopus, making it impossible for his name to eclipse the animality of his actions. This functions to homogenize le Poulpe as it becomes possible for him to be any and therefore every white French male actor, thereby creating an animalistic archetype which stands in opposition to the animality with which she is framed by the Octopus, who refers to her as "panthère" and

¹⁸⁸ Sharpe, Christina. "The Weather". *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁸⁹ My emphasis. Sharpe, Christina. "The Weather". *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 81.

“gazelle,”¹⁹⁰ and with which Black women are historically and contemporarily framed in mainstream French media and beyond as a function of the white male gaze.¹⁹¹ Consequently, this naming allows Gabin to create “spaces of agency” for herself “where she can “interrogate the gaze of the Other” and name what she sees, as described in bell hooks’ “The Oppositional Gaze,”¹⁹² to occupy the place of the one who names and has the power to name—the place of the gazer—which has historically been occupied by white men. Following Sharpe’s definition, this nick-naming is an act of redaction in the very literal sense as (a) an act of putting this archetype represented by the actor into a definite form for the reader—one that evokes the slimy and uncomfortable imagery of eight flailing tentacles, and therefore a negative visibility, and the drafting of this archetype into a “distinct,” “written” form, and (b) as “an act of editorial revision” that authoritatively bars the name, and therefore the prominence or positive visibility to which this actor has been privileged by mainstream French media. Moreover, it precludes the actor’s celebrity from overshadowing and invisibilizing Gabin’s experience, perspective, and presence, as it did while they were in public together;¹⁹³ her act of redaction makes her more visible in this short story, which is the function of Black redaction according to Sharpe—“to

¹⁹⁰ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 31.

Original text: “Oh ma gazelle bla-bla-bla, ma panthère, j’entends les tamtams de l’Afrique, la chaleur de la savane, ma tigresse bla-bla-bla, je serai ton lion, ton taureau et ton nue, oh l’odeur de la jungle africaine, toi la callipyge, oh tu me fais rugir, oh ma gazelle africaine bla-bla-bla. » My translation: “ Oh, my gazelle bla-bla-bla, my panther, I hear the tam-tams of Africa, the heat of the savannah, my tigress bla-bla-bla, I will be your lion, your bull, and your naked art, oh the odor of the African jungle, you the callipyge, oh you make me blush, my African gazelle bla-bla-bla.” What is additionally remarkable here is the Octopus’ attribution of the types of animals to himself and Gabin. He offers himself only predatorial animals, while Gabin is once referred to as a gazelle, highlighting a power dynamic at work that is both racialized and gendered in this context.

¹⁹¹ Mame-Fatou Niang discusses this fetishization of Black women and girls’ bodies in connection with a lingering colonial imaginary in her analysis of the reception of Celine Sciamma’s *Bande des Filles* (Girlhood) in her book *Identités françaises*.

¹⁹² bell hooks. “The Oppositional Gaze.” *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. (Boston: South End Press, 1992), pp. 116.

¹⁹³ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 27.

Original text: « On s’installe dans la salle, j’ai gardé ma question pour moi, il parle trop, je ne peux pas en placer une. »

My translation: “We take our seats, I keep my question to myself, he talks to much, I can’t get a word in.” Gabin finds it difficult to talk to le Poulpe, as he talked at length without ceding the floor to others.

make Black life visible, if only momentarily.”¹⁹⁴ Additionally, Gabin’s strategy serves as an act of redaction in the more figurative definition, an act of “driving back” or “resistance” against the white male gaze by plucking this white male from his seat as “namer” and “gazer.”

Likewise, Gabin redacts the discourse of le Poulpe by replacing parts of his speech with the phrase “bla-bla-bla” to both devalue his act of speaking and to exclude and disempower what one can only imagine are an overflow of additional rhetorical violences towards her body and the bodies of other Black women. This redaction controls the tone of the story, which, written differently, could conceivably have bordered the pornographic or become titillating to an audience that fetishizes the abuse of Black bodies: it offers “the breath, the pause” in the rhythm of the story and in the “circulation, production, and reception of images of Black suffering and, importantly, the pleasure in them”¹⁹⁵ to which Sharpe refers in writing about Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1992). This redaction also sarcastically undermines and obfuscates the Octopus’ message and banalizes his speech, rendering his comments hackneyed and commonplace, thereby representing him as every other white male who tends to make similar comments. It serves as a generalization that homogenizes the white male and reinforces the typification of the Octopus. In tandem, these two forms of redaction on the part of Gabin function to homogenize and invisibilize the Octopus’ personhood, simultaneously rendering his words less than important, and his being less than human, bringing her presence and her gaze into prominence.

Of additional interest is Gabin’s manipulation of time in this installation. She begins this installment with the words « J’ai ouvert la portiere de sa voiture et je suis presque tombée par

¹⁹⁴ Sharpe, Christina. “The Weather.” *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2016).

¹⁹⁵ Sharpe, Christina. “The Weather.” *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2016).

terre », ¹⁹⁶ which recur at the end of the story ¹⁹⁷. She puts the end of the encounter with le Poulpe at the beginning. This does several things, including hooking the reader by slightly disorienting them to pique their curiosity, offering the reader a sense of peace in knowing that Gabin ends up safe, although not unscathed, in the end, as there is no “trigger-warning” for an account that is undoubtedly triggering for some, and disrupting the linear flow of time. The repetition of the end at the beginning of the story renders her experience cyclical, ending potentially to begin again for her in another similar encounter, and/or for other Black women working in the French film and television industries, and perhaps even acknowledging the cycle of abuse of Black women’s bodies across time periods and throughout the diaspora. In this way, while her story focuses on an individualized experience, there is an invocation of collectivism and shared experiences that is further reinforced by the typification of le Poulpe as any white male and echoed throughout the compilation, starting, as described earlier, in Maïga’s prologue.

This disruption of time reminds of Sharpe’s analysis of a prominent scene in Abderrahmane Sissako’s *Timbuktu* (2014) where Zabou ¹⁹⁸ tells a group of men that she was essentially teleported to Timbuktu as a result of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. The men argue the impossibility of this event to which Zabou replies “What is time? Time doesn’t matter...I am cracked. Sweetpea, you and I are alike. We’re both cracked. Cracked everywhere.” ¹⁹⁹ Zabou does not subscribe to the notion of linear time because she is “cracked” like the ground in Haiti. In fact, she explains that “the earthquake is [her] body, the cracks, it’s [her]. According to

¹⁹⁶ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 23. My translation : “I opened his car door and almost fell to the ground.”

¹⁹⁷ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 31. Original text : «Je tends la main pour trouver la poignée de la portière de sa voiture et je tombe presque par terre » . My translation: “I reach out to find the car door handle and I almost fall to the ground.”

¹⁹⁸ Zabou is an important character in the film because she is the only woman who refuses to cover her heads, hands, and face with no reprisal.

¹⁹⁹ Abderrahmane Sis, director. *Timbuktu*. Arches Films, 15 May 2014.

Sharpe, Zabou lives in “trans*Atlantic time,”²⁰⁰ a time that connects the diaspora that is “cracked everywhere.” Zabou disregards linear time to valorize the connection between other members of the larger diasporic community that is founded upon the collective experience of “cracked,” of Black suffering, of the enduring heritages of the slave trade and European colonial projects, of the “so many aftershocks, as so many wakes.”²⁰¹ Gabin is cracked, too—she similarly disrupts time to valorize the connection between herself and other Black women that is founded upon the collective experience of mistreatment and abuse under the white male gaze. She rhetorically depicts Sharpe’s notion that “There is a before and after to the earthquake: but there is no before the ongoing event of disaster.”²⁰²

Conclusions

As this chapter has demonstrated, both *Afrofem* by the Mwasi-Collectif and *Noire n’est pas mon métier*, co-authored by the collective of Black French actresses, exemplify the cultural, social and political legibility of the body as well as the potential applicability of Diasporic theory conceptualized by Black women outside of the Hexagon, such as Sharpe and Spillers, to consider Black women’s experiences and choices in France. This in and of itself reinforces the notion of connectedness amongst women throughout the Diaspora. Additionally, it is important to note in these two works a replacement of the white male gaze by a Black women-centered counter gaze founded upon expressions of collectivism as it relates to a larger community of Black women and individuality to emphasize the heterogeneity of this community. The establishment of collectivism comes at various junctures throughout the texts, such as in *Afrofem*’s political

²⁰⁰Sharpe, Christina. “The Weather.” *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2016).

²⁰¹ Sharpe, Christina. “The Weather.” *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2016).

²⁰² Sharpe, Christina. “The Weather.” *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, (Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2016).

organization in France, and potentially across the Diaspora, as resistance against antiBlackness, state violence, and the invisibilization of their femininity and humanity, linking collectivism and positive visibility as is suggested by Gueye, as well as in Maïga's establishment of a community of fate between actresses who identify as "noire" or "métisse" and beyond, and in Gabin's community making across space and time, as is echoed by Sharpe. Collectivism and individuality are often inscribed on the body, as evidenced in both *Afrofem* and *Noire n'est pas mon métier*, each depicting corporal experiences and/or aesthetic signifiers that symbolize connection throughout the Diaspora and throughout history while highlighting various aesthetic and morphological differences within the collective. In *Afrofem*, for instance, flamboyance(s) is/are both collectively and individually constructed, corporeally expressed, and parallel(s) « la création personnelle et collective d'une conscience noire », ²⁰³ and while the racial and gendered non-mixedness of the collective is emphasized, so are the various social categorizers that mark distinguishing characteristics of its members. Likewise, in *Noire n'est pas mon métier*, Maïga's prologue relays a connection between Black actresses based on the experience of a « regard à la fois sexiste et raciste posé sur son corps » ²⁰⁴ while offering a similar recognition of variance by explicitly highlighting the fact that the work is non-exhaustive and creating a catalog that is reminiscent of what is seen in *Afrofem* to include various morphological and aesthetic determinants among Black actresses.

The Black women-centered gaze found in these texts often follows an observational arc that moves from outgroup to ingroup observation, as is previously mentioned. Specifically, this gaze moves from attributing negative in/visibilities to the hegemonic power and regard of the

²⁰³ *Afrofem*. (Éditions Syllepse, 2018), pp. 102. My translation : "a collective and personal Black consciousness."

²⁰⁴ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 8. My translation : "The simultaneously racist and sexist regard toward one's body."

outgroup, rejecting negative in/visibilities ascribed to Black women by the gaze including corporeal and aesthetic devaluation, to attributing positive in/visibilities to the ingroup via admiration of self, valuation of Black women's bodies and of their aesthetic choices that simultaneously recognizes a connectedness across the Diaspora and celebrates the heterogeneity of this collective. In so doing, these Black women are able to decenter the white male gaze as the perspective of power and inhabit that space of gazer themselves. Their forging of a Black women-centered gaze deemphasizes the hegemonic power of white supremacy and illuminates possible realities beyond its limits. Ultimately, therefore, the stakes of these works are the attainment, or rather, the assertion of various aspects of freedom for Black women. It is this realization that moves us into the second chapter of this dissertation, where I consider this assertion of freedom as it relates to Black women's hair in the French context.

CHAPTER 2: POWER AND THE HAIR STORY OF THE SELF

Introduction

The previous chapter demonstrated the operationalization of collectivism and individuality incorporated into aesthetic representations to increase Black women's positive (in)visibility, the existence of an outgroup to ingroup observational arc as a narrative structure, and a powerful decentering of the white male gaze on the part of Black women writers. Building on the conclusions of the first chapter, this chapter considers Black French women's hair representations in autobiographical texts. Specifically, it examines the way that a Black women centered gaze is expressed through written representations of Black women's hair, as well as through written accounts of situations and experiences related to their hair choice, or "hair stories" as this project refers to them. The chapter examines three texts: Isabelle Boni-Claverie's *Trop noire pour être française*, a socially, politically, and culturally reflective autobiography, Nadège Beausson-Diagne's "Vous allez bien avec le bamboula," and Sabine Pakora's « L'imaginaire colonial, » two autobiographical installments in the short story compilation by Black French actresses entitled *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. Within these texts, each of the authors foregrounds their hair and hair stories in a way that combines collectivism and individuality to positively (in)visibilize themselves and their hair, showcasing a Black women-centered gaze that centers on their own endogenous value systems, thereby unseating the white male gaze(r) as an authority over their hair representations.

The goals of this chapter are to demonstrate the validity of hair and hair stories as a topic of study in the context of Black women and power, to highlight the integrality of Black women's hair in their representations of self, and to reinforce the importance of Afrocentric perspectives in interpreting the symbolism or nonsymbolism of Black women's hair. This research on Black

women's hair is important because, as a primary signifier of race, Black women's hair is heavily stigmatized and scrutinized, invested with countless external meanings, from "good hair" to "bad hair" to being considered unprofessional²⁰⁵ in its unmanipulated state to being considered inauthentic in its straightened state. This chapter reveals the importance of considering Black women's hair using a Black women-centered perspective to deconstruct the representations of their hair vis-à-vis the white male gaze, and how Black women-centered interpretations of hair stories and hairstyle choice can delineate the limits of white supremacy.

This chapter holds that Black women-centered interpretations of hair stories and hairstyle choice foreground the ways that Black women's representations shape a global Black collective and a global Black collective consciousness by mentioning, including, and emulating other Black women across space and time, in the present and past moments and throughout the Diaspora, and by interweaving their own hair stories with those of other Black women and within the larger, collective Black hair story. These forms of collectivism not only lend credibility to their hair stories by bolstering them through strength in numbers with the potentiality to proliferate minds within and beyond the global Black population through sheer plurality of representation, but also function to decenter dominant interpretations of Black hair.

²⁰⁵ The CROWN Act which stands for the "Creating a Respectful and Open Workplace for Natural Hair" Act, was finally enacted in California in 2019. It was introduced by California State Senator Holly Mitchell with the goal of ending hair discrimination against Black women and girls in the workplace and in schools. By January 2023, versions of the law had since been enacted in Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Louisiana, Maine, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Tennessee, New York, New Jersey, Virginia, and Washington, and extended to municipalities Cincinnati as well as Montgomery County. The passage of such legislation demonstrates Black hair textures being designated as unprofessional. Furthermore, a similar law was proposed to the National Assembly in France by Député Liot Olivier Serva in September of 2023 that would illegalize "la discrimination capillaire" (discrimination based on hair) in France by modifying the General Code of Public Function, The Code of Labor, and the Penal Code. This demonstrates a far-reaching bias against Black hair in the western world, and the importance of the subject matter of this project to the state of contemporary France.

In revealing apolitical impetuses for hairstyle choices, Black women-centered representations of hairstyle choice also deconstruct certain tropes of Black authenticity, such as the equation of the afro with Black Power or self-love,²⁰⁶ and the equation of straight styles with self-loathing, “Uncle-Tomming,” or psychological disconnection from Blackness. These equivocations exemplify moments when, as Margo Crawford writes, “the past over-determines the black present and makes black life the afterlife of trauma that already happened.”²⁰⁷ These equivocations devalue the creativity in styling of Black hair as well as many Black-invented technologies created for styling Black hair, and are rooted in a perspective that originates Black history in the era of slavery and colonialism, and Black aesthetics as a mere response to whiteness. This is similar to Michelle Wright’s critique of the Middle Passage Epistemology that tends to portray the Middle Passage as the origin of Blackness, consequently rendering Blackness as exogenously determined, a chain of events that react to various encounters with white people and white racism. The conflation of Black hair and politics becomes particularly apparent in the era of Black Power, when the afro was adopted to symbolize revolution in the beauty industry as well as in the political sphere across the United States, and internationally in places like Brazil, Senegal, and the Antilles, to name a few. As a replacement of straight styles, the afro represented a break from dominant ideologies related to beautiful, respectable, and appropriate hairstyling for Black women and articulated a denouncement of the prominence and exclusivity of the white beauty ideal, a practice of disalienation. While the political semiotics of Black hair on the part of many afro wearers is undeniable, as they have themselves declared

²⁰⁶ Interestingly, while the afro bore/s these associations, it was traditionally atypical of most African societies to see the afro as a viable hair style. Leaving the hair in an afro was usually interpreted as a sign that a person was mentally or physically unwell. Emma Dabiri’s book *Don’t Touch my Hair* historicizes various hairstyles including the afro, as well as more intricate and traditional styles, such as fractal braiding.

²⁰⁷ Margo Natalie Crawford. “What Time Is It When You’re Black?” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 121, no. 1, (2022), pp. 155.

political symbolism in their hairstyle choices,²⁰⁸ it is important not to overgeneralize these invested meanings. By default, straight styles were increasingly understood as manifestations of aesthetic Black self-hate, echoing the notion of an inferiority complex evoked in the work of Frantz Fanon²⁰⁹ and Albert Memmi²¹⁰ in the 1950's. Kobena Mercer's 1987 "Black Hair/Style Politics" notes the endurance of this interpretation of straight Black hairstyles calling for the possibility of alternatives. Juliette Smeralda's 2005 *Peau noire, cheveu crépu: L'histoire d'une alienation* corroborates this interpretation which demonstrates the persistence of exclusively political interpretations of Black hair into the 21st century. An exclusively political reading of Black hair, and especially the reading of straight(ened) Black hair as indicative of an inferiority complex, frames Black hairstyle choice as always already responding to whiteness, responding to experiences of deportation, enslavement, and colonialism. In this way, these readings reduce and limit Black being to the other, to merely the subordinated party within the dialectic of power. These readings define Blackness by the moment it comes in contact with whiteness under the terms of slavery and colonialism, instead of understanding slavery and colonialism as a point in a much longer African(a) history that substantially predates the 15th century. Like this, Black futures are predetermined by a relationship with whiteness. In recognizing apolitical interpretations of Black women's hair, specifically those defined by Black women thus reflective of a Black women-centered gaze, this project holds space for Black women to define themselves, not by their relationship with whiteness and white beauty ideals, but instead as inheriting a vast an enduring African(a) "hairitage," and opens possibilities of Black futures that are not foreclosed by an always omnipresent subordination.

²⁰⁸ This is an important note as this project is not seeking to place this symbolism upon afro wearers such as Angela Davis, but to reflect what they have stated their hair means to them, such as a "politics of liberation" as Davis is quoted as saying in the newspaper, *The Baltimore Sun*.

²⁰⁹ Fanon, Frantz. *Peau noire, masques blancs*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 1952).

²¹⁰ Memmi, Albert. *Portrait du colonisé*. (L'Étincelle, 1972).

Additionally, this project shows that Black women-centered gazes highlight possibilities of Black futurity through demonstrations of Africana temporalities. In manifesting more cyclical constructions of time, Black women showcase an alternative to the western conception of time as linear. Following the logic of Michelle Wright, this insistence upon cyclical time works to offer an alternative construct of Blackness: “Our constructs of Blackness are largely historical and more specifically based on a notion of spacetime that is commonly fitted into a linear progress narrative.”²¹¹ This chapter demonstrates how the static view of Black history proffered by the white male gaze that defines Blackness by its contact with whiteness, and specifically the static view of colonialism or enduring colonial imaginary, is decentered and dismantled by a Black women-centered structuring of time. By centering an imagining of the world that aligns with their own value systems, and decentering the white male gaze, the Black women authors featured in this chapter illustrate new possibilities of organizing and understanding the Black past and present, and by extension new possibilities of Black futurity.

This chapter grounds itself in the theoretical approach and much of the academic literature of the previous chapter, building from existing social science and anthropological scholarship, such as Shirley Tate’s *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame* and Kobena Mercer’s “Black Hair/Style Politics,” while foregrounding the subject of Black women’s hair representations by Black women in lieu of the intense focus on Black women’s bodily representations of the previous chapter. As Anthony Synnott notes, « hair is perhaps our most powerful symbol of individual and group identity—powerful first because it is physical and therefore extremely personal, and second because although personal, it is also public rather than

²¹¹ Wright, Michelle M.. *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology*.(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.)

private.”²¹² Likewise, Eock Laïfa states that the various possible stylings of Black hair “participent de la construction d’une identité individuelle et sociale...aboutissent à la construction sociale et collective d’une ‘identité noire’.”²¹³ This makes hair a perfect topic of study within this project, as its argument rests on the power of a Black women-centered gaze that is comprised of both attributes of collectivism, which is akin to group identity, and attributes of individuality. Black women’s hair style choices and hair stories communicate this Black-women centered gaze by emphasizing these attributes in a way that positively (in)visibilizes Black women and their hair while negatively (in)visibilizing the white male gaze(r). In this way, Black women’s hair style choices and hair stories articulate their individual and collective value systems and expose a cultural, political, and aesthetic world beyond white supremacy.

Theoretical Framing

Sybil Dione Rosado argues that there exists a symbolic grammar and a polyvocality of hair that allows hair to bear different significances as interpreted by different cultures.²¹⁴ This reminds us of Kobena Mercer’s argument that hair is a “raw material,” that is “always shaped or reshaped by social convention and symbolic intervention.”²¹⁵ This means that Black women’s hair style choices can be communicative of their social, cultural, and political values, among others, a claim that is sustained within this chapter. However, while Mercer calls for a “de-psychologization” of hair, he allows no room for Black hair to be without social, cultural, or

²¹² Synnott, Anthony. “Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair.” *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 38, no. 3, (1987), pp. 381.

²¹³ Laïfa, Eock. *Le traitement des cheveux crepus dans les processus de socialisation et d’intégration en France et au Cameroun*. 2016. My translation: « participate in the construction of a social and individual identity culminating in the social and collective construction of a Black identity.”

²¹⁴ Rosado, Sybil Dione. “No Nubian Knots or Nappy Locks: Discussing the Politics of Hair among Women of African Decent in the Diaspora. A Report on Research in Progress.” *Transforming Anthropology*, vol. 11, no. 2, (2003).

²¹⁵ Mercer, Kobena. “BLACK HAIR/STYLE POLITICS.” *BLACK BRITISH CULTURE AND SOCIETY*, (1987), pp. 38.

political symbolic value on the part of the wearer. This project holds that there must exist possibilities of Black women's hair choices to be apolitical and devoid of this kind of intrinsic symbolism on behalf of the wearer, as the possibility exists for women who belong to the dominant demographic, who embody the white beauty ideal. Because Eurocentric beauty ideals, such as lighter hair colors and straight textures, have been valorized over Afrocentric beauty ideals in western societies, whiteness has been constructed as the normative referent to which Black beauty practices, as a minoritized cultural aesthetic,²¹⁶ must respond. This has created space for readings of Black hair as always already communicative, speaking a response to white hair, and foreclosed pragmatic readings of Black hair, while constructing white hair, specifically long, straight, blonde or brown hair on white women, as uncommunicative. White women's hair as it naturally springs forth from the scalp is afforded the ontological possibility of neutrality sans legible significance; white hair can just be and mean nothing. To deny Black hair the possibility of this same apolitical ontology only shores up Eurocentric beauty ideals as the norm by reinforcing the dialectical dynamic of power in the beauty world and placing Black hair in a state of perpetual devalorization and subordination. More plainly, if Black women's hair choice is always necessarily a political response to race, racialization, or injustice in some form, the construction of whiteness as dominant and/or superior becomes a priori. This project holds space for pragmatism—the apolitical ontology—in Black women's hair choices, a phenomenon that is exhibited in two of the three works on which this chapter focuses.

This distance between the significance of various hair choices for the wearer and the interpretation of those choices by external observers is reflected in the use of the terms “personal” and “public” by Synnott in his aforementioned quote. The personal significance of

²¹⁶ And alongside other minoritized cultural aesthetics such as Indian, Asian, and Latinx hair practices.

Black women's hair choices are paramount in this chapter, and the reason why this project chooses to examine representations of Black women's hair created exclusively by Black women. In this way, the project maintains an Afrocentric perspective, looking to Black women to invest their own meaning into their hair, and to be the definitive power over their representations. Juliette Smeralda emphasizes the importance of this Afrocentric approach in writing that while Blackness is aesthetically and socially stigmatized : “‘il est urgent de déconstruire les ‘pseudo-savoirs’...afin de faire émerger une vision de l’intérieur, entérinée par une connaissance à la fois matérielle et subjective de leur histoire, par les descendants d’Africains, d’esclaves et anciens colonisés, encore coupés de leurs héritages.”²¹⁷ This project does, however, additionally consider the external legibility of Black hair, as it is manifested by Black women in their works and is often an integral component to their depiction of the white male gaze(r). This is evident in all three of the works included in this chapter.

To understand this component, this project turns to the work of Shirley Tate on overcoming the governmentality of Black beauty shame produced by white iconicity, or normalization of the Eurocentric beauty ideal. In analyzing talk-in-interaction²¹⁸ with Black women, Tate delineates a rhetorical transition from subjectification to subjectivation through critique of shame scripts. This subjectivation hinges on “identity repositioning,” whereby women “reposition themselves as not ashamed or shameful through the use of critique.”²¹⁹ In the works referenced in this chapter, the critique of the shame script typically involves a highlighting of the

²¹⁷ Sméralda, Juliette. *Du cheveu défrisé au cheveu crépu*. (Publibook, 2012), pp. 89. My translation: “Deconstructing pseudo-knowledge is urgent...to the end of revealing a vision from the interior, validated by a knowing that is both material and subjective of their history, by descendants of Africans, of slaves, of the formerly colonized, still separated from their heritages.”

²¹⁸ This term refers to a kind the kind of discourse that Tate analyzes in her book—talk within conversational interactions. She describes her choice of methodologies on page 36 of *Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame: Discourse, Iconicity, and Resistance*.

²¹⁹ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 33.

alterity and homogenization by which the white male gazer negatively (in)visibilizes Black women and their hair style choices and functions to objectify the white male gaze(r). Following this critique in each of the works this chapter references, the authors explicitly position their identities following their own value systems, which include aspects of individuality and collectivism. This functions to positively (in)visibilize themselves, their hair, their backgrounds, their intellect, and more. Tate declares this the first step to disalienation for Black women.. The term disalienation as it has generally been theorized requires black women to be always already alienated from their bodies and hair; I posit that Black women must be able to subjectivate without being first alienated to be completely free of the dialectic of power. In this way, disalienation is used in this project as a term to describe one's definition of self by the self, as one perceive attempts to subjectify them. This project chooses to see this term differently to the end that this kind of paradigmatic shift be a particularly beneficial, liberatory, and timely evolution of thought within the global Black collective. Much like Eock Laïfa states in response to Juliette Smeralda's relegation of all straightening processes to a manifestation of self-hatred amongst Black women: "si nous admettons..que l'habitus dépend du contexte social, historique, et culturel pour un groupe donné, alors nous admettons également que les pratiques changent, lentement, mais inexorablement."²²⁰

Smeralda's work on Black hair in the French context is extensive. This project builds on this work²²¹ while positing alternatives to some of Smeralda's conclusions. In line with this project, Smeralda claims that "rien n'est plus collectif—et donc culturel, et donc social—que

²²⁰ Laïfa, Eock. *Le traitement des cheveux crépus dans les processus de socialisation et d'intégration en France et au Cameroun*. (2016), pp. 57. My translation : "If we admit that the habitus depends on the social, historical, and cultural context for a given group, then we also admit that practices change, slowly but inevitably."

²²¹ Such as *Du cheveu défrisé au cheveu crépu* (2012) and *Peaux noires, cheveux crépus : l'histoire d'une aliénation* (2014).

l'esthétique précisément, car c'est à travers des pratiques caractéristiques qu'un groupe culturel affirme ses spécificités en ces domaines. »²²² Smeralda also constructs hair practice as being a sociohistorically formed phenomenon. However, Smeralda seems to see hair choice in Black women, especially hair straightening practices as largely predetermined, and often as exteriorizations of the interiorization of exogenous value systems. Hair choice then, especially the choice to straighten hair, is, for Smeralda, a manifestation of unconsciously internalized racist schema and a denaturation of Blackness, “une illusion bien-fondée,”²²³ as she puts it. Black hair is arguably the most versatile hair type, in that it can be styled as kinky, curly, wavy, and straight without any chemical processing. This interpretation of hair straightening amongst Black people as a form of alienation does not allow for the realization of the full spectrum of Black beauty in simultaneity with the realization of the full spectrum of Black power. Further, it makes no room for the hypothetical possibility that Black women could have chosen straight styles at some point in history in the absence of contact with white people via colonialism and slavery. In this way, this interpretation of hair straightening practices downplays Black hair innovation by reducing it to a response to white iconicity and upholds whiteness as the standard. It also reinforces tropes of authenticity related to the conflation of Blackness and kinky hair, excluding a small but existent fraction of the global Black population in which straight hair naturally occurs.

Picking up on the notion of Afrocentric temporalities from the first chapter, considering cyclical time and challenges to the order of linear time within the discussion of Black women's

²²² Sméralda, Juliette. *Du cheveu défrisé au cheveu crépu*. (Publibook, 2012), pp. 85-86. My translation: “Nothing is more collective—and therefore cultural and therefore social—than precisely the aesthetic, because it's through these characteristic practices that a cultural group affirms its specificities in these domains.” This is echoed by Anthony Synnott, Eock Laïfa, Shirley Tate, Sybil Dione Rosado, and Dabiri, Emma.

²²³ Sméralda, Juliette. *Du cheveu défrisé au cheveu crépu*. (Publibook, 2012), pp. 79. My translation : “A well-founded illusion.”

hair, and building on Christina Sharpe’s work on disruptions of time and historical connectedness in the wake of chattel slavery and colonialism, a concept that is foregrounded in the first chapter of this project, but within the context of Black women’s bodily representations—this chapter explores notions of historical connectedness and fluid views of time, and alternatives to linear and static constructions of time are examined in light of Black women’s hair stories and hair representations. Emma Dabiri notes the « profound difference between a Eurocentric concept of ‘history’ and Afrocentric engagements with time,” going further to say that “it is precisely the kind of investigation necessary if we are to respond with any seriousness to imperatives to ‘decolonize’.”²²⁴ These “Afrocentric engagements with time “ are evidenced in various Black art forms, such as the Yoruba literary and performative tradition of Oriki, as Dabiri notes. In thinking hair as an art form, she writes that the “hairstyles that we observe from Africa across the Atlantic can thus be a thread that leads back into an otherwise irrecoverable social history.” Afrocentric temporalities related to Black women’s hair can be found in each of the three primary texts referenced in this chapter.

Trop noire pour être française

Hair and Collectivism Across Time and Space

Isabelle Boni-Claverie is an author, screenwriter, director, and documentarian, born in the Ivory Coast in a mixed French and Ivorian home, and spending a large portion of her childhood and adult life living in Paris. Her autobiography, *Trop noire pour être française*,²²⁵ considers the social, political, and cultural contexts of Blackness in France, set in front of the backdrop of snapshots of her life’s story. Boni-Claverie’s work showcases particular dualisms that speak to

²²⁴ Dabiri, Emma. *Don’t Touch My Hair*. (Allen Lane Publishing, 2019), pp. 37.

²²⁵ Translation: *Too Black to Be French*.

the complexity of the topic of Black women's hair in the French context and in the world as a whole, as well as the complexities of Black women's relationships to their hair. In her chapter, "De bons cheveux," ("Good Hair") she manifests dualisms of time and space, dualisms of collectivism and individuality, of visibility and invisibility, of inclusivity and exclusivity, and of expression and legibility as it relates to hair and hair style (non)choice that allow for a rich and profound analysis of the expansive topic of Black women's hair from various angles. Furthermore, her apportionment of an entire chapter to this topic alongside her repetition of the term "cheveu" more than one hundred times in this work, emphasizes its importance to the work and to her experience as a Black woman in France.

Boni-Claverie acknowledges various points of horizontal connectedness throughout the African Diaspora all through its history such as the transnational mobility of Black hair technologies and practices (like the conk and the jheri curl/curly) and the internationality of various Black movements and figures at various periods and in the present moment of the book, showcasing both spatial and temporal collectivisms amongst Black people everywhere. While she remarks that "toutes les femmes ont un rapport compliqué à leurs cheveux, » noting a general sense of community with all women, she goes on to say that « il n'est aucun peuple, aucun sexe qui déteste ses cheveux autant qu'une femme noire, »²²⁶ highlighting the particularism of Black women's hair experience. She thereby distinguishes Black women from the larger group of « toutes les femmes, » and connects them, albeit negatively, by shared experiences surrounding their hair.²²⁷ The use of the singular "une" in lieu of the plural "des" here seems also to serve the

²²⁶ Boni-Claverie, Isabelle. *Trop noire pour être française*. (Tallandier, 2017), pp. 184. My translations : "All women have a complicated relationship with their hair"... "there is no people, no sex that hates their hair as much as a Black woman."

²²⁷ The chapter goes on to include the use of "notre" (our) frequently which links Black women throughout the Diaspora based on common experiences that she outlines in detail. It is interesting to note that attention to the use of the singular in "une femme noire" (a Black woman) speaks to Boni-Claverie's creating space for

purpose of unifying this distinctly racialized and gendered community from the whole of women, in general. This is similar in form to the non-mixed spaces that are advocated for by Rokhaya Diallo²²⁸ and by the Mwasi-Collectif in *Afrofem*, and created by the Mwasi-Collectif at the Nyansapo Festival. It also reminds of Gueye's work on the power of the collective voice in "Emergence of a Black Collective Voice" and "The Colony Strikes Back". Gueye asserts that, as is the case with Black people in the Americas, "number fuels agency," in Black French populations.²²⁹ In building this collective, which as she states Black women are entered into as soon as birth, she is gaining power, demonstrating Black agency, and fortifying her voice with a strength-in-numbers approach.

Highlighting yet again a collectivism amongst Black women that begins as early as birth, she writes:

"Dès notre plus tendre enfance, des regards anxieux se posent sur notre crâne, cherchant à évaluer à l'aune de nos premières frisures la texture définitive de nos cheveux. Les espoirs suscités sont en général déçus : les enfants noirs ou métis naissent avec une peau plus claire et des cheveux plus lisses que ce qu'ils auront par la suite. Telle qui s'enorgueillissait des délicates bouclettes de son bébé doit, quand il atteint l'âge d'un an, se rendre à l'évidence : la frisure s'est resserrée, le c est devenu z, l'enfant ne sera pas

individuality here: one meaning *not all* Black women. This illuminates one of the complex nuances of the interplay between collectivism and individuality, one of the primary focuses of this research.

²²⁸ See Diallo's "When an Afro-feminist festival defies white supremacy" in *Aljazeera*, and "Nyansapo: Black Feminism and the French Republic" by Annette Joseph-Gabriel, an article published by the African American Intellectual History Society.

²²⁹ Gueye, Abdoulaye. "BREAKING THE SILENCE: The Emergence of a Collective Back Voice in France." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 7, no. 1, (2010), pp. 89.

sauvé, il aura le cheveu crépu comme ses ancêtres et, avant lui, les ancêtres de ses ancêtres.»²³⁰

Her use of the first-person plural, as seen in “notre” and “nos,” underscores a connectedness between Black women based again on a shared experience of their hair being evaluated and subsequently valorized based on the tightness or looseness with which it curls, dictating whether they would be “saved” or conversely damned to the life of their kinky-haired “ancestors.” While the evaluative process described by Boni-Claverie gives credence to Smeralda’s notion of the internalization of the stigmatization of Black hair that causes Black women to turn to practices of défrisage/straightening which Smeralda sees as a denaturation of the self, this project, as previously mentioned, tends to agree more with Laïfa in that the situation of kinky Black hair in the psyche of Black women is much more complex, with many Black women throughout the world choosing natural hairstyles, straight styles, wigs, weaves, etc. either exclusively or interchangeably. This being the case, the belief in damnation to kinky hair and salvation of straight hair, and straightening as purposeful or subconscious denaturation of self is not generalizable to the whole of the global population of Black women nor any of its subsets, although its legibility in this manner may be. To reinforce the connectedness instantiated by her use of the first-person plural, Boni-Claverie not only invokes the ancestors but also references various moments within the hair stories of present-day cultural icons and activists such as American celebrities, Solange Knowles, Beyoncé, and Erykah Badu, American activist, Angela Davis, Kenyan actress, Lupita Nyong’o, Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the two

²³⁰ Boni-Claverie, Isabelle. *Trop noire pour être française*. (Tallandier, 2017), pp. 184. My translation: “Since our most tender infancy, anxious regards fixed themselves on our heads, looking to evaluate at the root of our first curls the definitive texture of our hair. The hopes aroused are generally disappointed: the Black or mixed children are born with a lighter skin tone and a straighter hair texture than what they will have later. Those who boast of the child’s delicate curls must, when he is a year old, face reality: the curl tightens, the c becomes z, the child will not be saved, he will have kinky hair like his ancestors and, before him, the ancestors of his ancestors.”

Antillean sisters who co-founded *Boucles d'ébène*,²³¹ as well as international movements such as Black Power, and the nappy hair movement. In this way, this connectedness surpasses the present moment, reaching back into the hair-story of chattel slavery and colonialism and the impression it has left on Black women's hair experiences in the current moment and spans a large portion of the African Diaspora. This represents a collectivism that is dualistic in nature, incorporating a geographical connectedness as she references Blackness in Africa, the Antilles, the United States, as well as Brazil²³² while also foregrounding a historical connectedness with the ancestors. In transgressing these national and temporal boundaries, Boni-Claverie offers up an alternative form of citizenship that disregards the nation-state and is potentially atemporal, a citizenship that is global and Black and goes beyond the geographical boundaries of the Hexagon and DROM-COM. Calling in these figures demonstrates her recognition of and participation in a global Black collective that transcends the notion of western nationalism, and is in this way reminiscent of the generational and geographical collectivism seen in "La Flamboyance" in *Afrofem*, and of the spatial and temporal connectedness created by Gabin's disruption of time in "Balancetonpoulpe,"²³³ and echoes Sharpe's demonstrations of connectedness in the wake based on shared history, heritage, and experiences of perpetual overcoming.

Interestingly, Boni-Claverie creates her own disruption of time, much like what can be seen in these other works, beginning the chapter with discussion of the significance to her and to others of her shaved adult head before discussing this evaluation of hair at birth, a backward movement in time, then moving on to discuss what she recognizes as the onset of the "detestation du cheveu crépu" in Black women, being the contact with whites in the context of

²³¹ Their names are Aline and Marina Tacite.

²³² Boni-Claverie, Isabelle. *Trop noire pour être française*. (Tallandier, 2017), pp. 184-5.

²³³ See Chapter 1 of this work for more information on Gabin's circular formation of time within her narrative.

colonization and chattel slavery, and moving through the history of Black hair around the world to reunite once again with the present moment, a forward movement in time. Her non-adherence to linear time challenges the Western conception of time itself,²³⁴ bringing together a community of Black women that is timeless. In this way, they live outside of the western gaze in a space that disregards and refuses to be governed by the construct of linear time, demonstrating a notion of a more cyclical understanding of time in a move toward self-governance and autonomy through an imagining of the world that follows their own value systems. This echoes Smeralda's insistence on the necessity of a "vision de l'intérieur," to understand the issues surrounding Black women's hair and to deconstruct their stigmatization, and her notion that only Black people can fully understand Black histories and practices,²³⁵ as well, as McDougall's explanation of Afrocentric perspectives.²³⁶ Additionally, the structuring of her chapter in this way is in keeping with the spirit of Sankofa, an Akan tradition that has become a Diasporic phenomenon, and can also in this way be read as reflective of an Afrocentric value system and a Black women-centered gaze.

An Individual Hair Story

While Boni-Claverie emphasizes spatial and temporal collectivism amongst Black women on the one hand, she simultaneously asserts her individuality on the other. When she writes about her choice to shave her head,²³⁷ she relies largely on first-person singular pronouns

²³⁴ Fuchs, Thomas. "The Cyclical Time of the Body and its Relation to Linear Time. *In Defence of the Human Being*, (2021), pp. 47-8.

²³⁵ Sméralda, Juliette. *Du cheveu défrisé au cheveu crépu*. (Publibook, 2012), pp. 89.

²³⁶ In this instance, Boni-Claverie exemplifies McDougall's shaping of Afrocentricity being grounded in "knowledge of history and experience of the African world," oriented to the "concerns of people of African descent" and having a perspective that "seeks to identify ways to emancipate and empower" Black people, while also exhibiting a "victorious consciousness" that recognizes historical Black victories and the possibility of future Black victories. Her transgressions of western linear time in favor of a more cyclical construction in her individual and collective hair-story telling that is more in line with non-western and traditionally African constructions also demonstrates a "basic assumption of the Afrocentric paradigm" according to McDougall that "The best way to understand African people is first and foremost from their own perspective." (37)

²³⁷ Boni-Claverie, Isabelle. *Trop noire pour être française*. (Tallandier, 2017), pp. 183.

to describe her own motivations and experiences. This grammatical choice positions her to speak only for herself, excluding even those who might consider themselves part of a “we” of Black women who have made the choice to be bald. She also incorporates her corporeal experience of baldness, expressing the psychological experience of an “extraordinaire sentiment de liberté,” as well as the somatic experiences of “l’air du dehors passer sur [son] crane, chaque variation de temperature,”²³⁸ that are uniquely hers, emphasizing an individuality that distinguishes her from the larger group of Black women connected through shared experiences related to their hair. She also expresses a desire to define femininity for herself,²³⁹ stating that cutting her hair off after completing her film, *La génie d’Abou*, allowed her to “affirmer [sa] force nouvelle,” and establish her “propres critères” of what it meant to be “femme et féminine.”²⁴⁰ This desire reflects a move toward individuality and interiority and a valorization and prioritization of the individualization of semiotic codes, originating the significance of aesthetic expression from the value system of the self, as opposed to from the perspective of society or other external forces. This is reinforced by her subsequent recounting of her self-questioning journey centered around her adolescent choice to straighten her hair and to maintain her hair in straightened styles up until the point when she chose to shave her head.

According to Boni-Claverie, the choice to shave her head stemmed from several motivations which she fluidly weaves into her own hair-story and the hair-story of Black women

²³⁸ Boni-Claverie, Isabelle. *Trop noire pour être française*. (Tallandier, 2017), pp. 183-4. My translations : “Extraordinary felling of liberty”... “the outside air pass over [her] head, each variation of temperature.”

²³⁹ “C’est peut-être ce je recherchais au fond, affirmer autrement ma féminité. » pp. 183. Boni-Claverie. My translation: “This is maybe what I was looking for deep down, affirm my femininity otherwise.”

²⁴⁰ Boni-Claverie, Isabelle. *Trop noire pour être française*. (Tallandier, 2017), pp. 184. My translations: “own criteria”... “woman and feminine.” This consideration of femininity and baldness is particularly relevant to Synnott’s “Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair” where he notes a transcultural separation between femininity and baldness, as well as to Laïfa’s “Le traitement des cheveux crépus dans les processus de socialization et integration en France et au Cameroun” where she too notes the importance of length of hair in expressing/reading Black masculinity and Black femininity, and further that Black women are the subject of most hair stigmatization while Black men are much less so.

throughout their experiences with colonialism and chattel slavery. As previously mentioned, the interweaving of these two hair-stories strengthens her representation of a spatial and temporal collectivism between Black women. We continue to see echoes of this collectivism throughout the whole of the chapter, including a connectedness with her targeted readers, presumably Black women with similar experiences, to whom she frequently refers as “vous”: “Quand vous avez passé vingt minutes devant votre miroir à donner forme à vos cheveux, vous ne gâchez pas tous vos efforts en allant faire la maligne sur le dancefloor.”²⁴¹ The use of “vous” can be read as to denote the plurality of Black women, as well as to speak directly to and connect herself with a community of Black women through shared experiences, in this case of “défrisage” or hair-straightening, while also allowing room for her own individuality.²⁴² It also potentially puts non-Black readers in a place of empathy and calls for a new understanding and validation of the experience of having processed Black hair. In this way, this “vous” is complex and relational, speaking directly to an in-group of Black women, while targeting the humanity of an out-group of non-Black and even non-minoritized readers.

Possibilities of Pragmatism in Hair Choice

There is a fair amount of interchange between third person fact offering, personal story in the first person, and connection making in the second person. Creating these various forms of

²⁴¹ Boni-Claverie, Isabelle. *Trop noire pour être française*. (Tallandier, 2017), pp. 190. My translation : « When you have spent twenty minutes in front of your mirror styling your hair, you’re not going to waste all your efforts by being a smart-ass on the dancefloor.”

²⁴² Conversely and interestingly, this can be juxtaposed with her use of the term “nous” on page 199 in “Maintenant, il va falloir compter avec qui nous sommes, telles que nous sommes, sans le masque que nous portions pour tenter de nous faire accepter. Nous cessons de vous donner le pouvoir de définir qui nous sommes. » The evolution from « vous » which connects her with the reader under the shared experience of hair straightening, to “nous”, a first person plural comprised of the author and those who choose to no longer choose to subscribe to “les règles tacites définies par la majorité blanche,” seems to express an evolution of the reader that structurally parallels her explicit her change of mind related to the relationship between rejection of self and hair straightening, while also conceptually countering this change of mind which adds to the complexity of this topic and of her writing.

connectedness while pairing them with the multiplicity of her motivations, speaks to the complexity of the topic of hair for Black women, and its importance as the subject of scholarly analysis, specifically in its ability to act as both a political expression and apolitical expression of the self. The overarching consensus in western mainstream media is that Black hair is political; this is evident in the many internet headlines on Black hair.²⁴³ Likewise, scholarly works on Black hair reveal a similar perspective.²⁴⁴ Conversely, Boni-Claverie's chapter opens with the suggestion that Boni-Claverie's choice was less "un geste symbolique" and more prosaic and pragmatic:

"À force de défrisages, de colorations intempestives et de brushings, mes cheveux étaient très abimés. Une amie m'a conseillé de tout raser pour les refaire pousser »."²⁴⁵

Due to extreme damage caused by her styling choices, she chose to cut her hair off and start over to grow healthier hair; this choice is much less an act of symbolic and/or political expression more than it is a practical change. In light of the fact that Black hair is so imbued with meanings external to the wearer—tropes of Black authenticity that exclude non-"natural" hair wearers²⁴⁶ and synonymize kinky hair with radicality and straight hair with self-loathing, as well as the afore-mentioned dominant perspectives on Black hair as unprofessional, her provision of her own meaning for the act of shaving her head becomes significant, especially as her struggle

²⁴³ Such as, "The politics of black hair: an Australian perspective" (2018) published in *The Conversation*, "Black Hair is political" (2022) in *The St. Louis American*, "Why is black hair so political?" on BBC's Radio 1x, "Afro: quand la coiffure est politique" (2020) in *Elle Quebec*, and "Comment les cheveux sont devenus une arme politique" (2017) from Les Inrocks.

²⁴⁴ Such as Smeralda's *Du cheveu défrisé au cheveu crépu*, Byron Orey and Yu Zhang's "Melanated Millennials and the Politics of Black Hair," and Gino Canella's "#BlackIsBeautiful: the radical politics of black hair"

²⁴⁵ Boni-Claverie, Isabelle. *Trop noire pour être française*. (Tallandier, 2017), pp. 183. My translation: "Due to straightening treatments, harsh coloring treatments, and blowouts, my hair was really damaged. A friend advised me to cut it all off to regrow it."

²⁴⁶ Shirley Tate considers this at length in "The Shame of 'Mixed-ness': Black Exclusion and Dis/Alienation," a chapter within *Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame: Discourse, Iconicity, and Resistance of Black Beauty Shame*.

with these various meanings in defining the formation of her current relationship with her hair creates a tension that is maintained throughout the chapter. Her explicit interpretation of this action and her motivations is similar to what Shirley Tate refers to as “subjectivity repositioning,”²⁴⁷ the final step toward subjectivation from the subjectification and silencing that is produced by Black beauty shame. In this case, and following Tate’s model, subjectification is produced by the societal construction of the significance of Black women choosing to shave their heads—which is later reinforced by her inclusion of the various responses she received from external observers. Subsequently, Boni-Claverie’s critique of this external “identity positioning”²⁴⁸ in her questioning the necessity of her actions’ legibility as a symbolic gesture is an example of what Tate calls “translation as reflexivity,” which signals the “beginning of disalienation.”²⁴⁹ Her choice to define the significance of her shaved head following her own intrinsic system of values allows her to reposition herself as the authority over this process of semiotic encoding, displacing external observations and societal constructions that functioned to alienate her from her somatic and aesthetic expressions of self. This represents a move away from submitting to subjectification, “the government of others which, through the discipline of the gaze of self or other, reduces us to objects,”²⁵⁰ closely related to Césaire’s ideas of “chosification,” toward subjectivation which Tate describes as “resistance to prevailing relations

²⁴⁷ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 37.

²⁴⁸ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 37.

²⁴⁹ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 37.

²⁵⁰ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 34.

of racialized power through self-fashioning and autonomy, speaking back to power, critique and problematizing the world in which one finds oneself.”²⁵¹

On one hand, Boni-Claverie does cite evidence of a political agenda as a potential subconscious impetus²⁵² for shaving her head. Following Smeralda’s research on Black women’s hair and défrisage practices, this can be interpreted as a move towards disalienation, as she is cutting off her processed hair that for Smeralda is a symbol of alienation from kinky hair and the Black body and self, and an internalization of white beauty norms. However, Boni-Claverie also writes against the pervading perspective on Black women’s hair as being always political and chooses to overtly define apolitical motivations for this aesthetic choice and highlight the need for a legibility of Black women’s aesthetic choice that leaves room for both politicization and pragmatism, or an apolitical interpretation of these choices for this very real subjectivation through disalienation to be recognized. A uniquely political approach to analyzing Black women’s hair choice is not only neglectful but oppressive to Black women’s subjectivity.

Unfortunately, the uniquely political approach is pervasive and while Boni-Claverie leaves room for pragmatism in her own expression of self through hair, it seems she struggles to afford this space for other Black women, wrestling with this up until the end of the chapter where she acknowledges and calls for the increased presence of women who style their hair with purely stylistic and practical aesthetical motivations—“afin de changer d’apparence épisodiquement, comme l’on change à certains moments de style vestimentaire, plutôt que par rejet de leur part

²⁵¹ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 35.

²⁵² This is reflected by the sentence, “C’est peut-être ce que je recherchais au fond, affirmer autrement ma féminité, » on page 183 of *Trop noire pour être française*. My translation : "This is maybe what I was searching for deep down, to affirm my femininity otherwise."

nègre.”²⁵³ While she tends toward depsychologization and apoliticism of her own aesthetic expression, which is largely tied to her individuality as reinforced by the use of first-person pronouns, in the larger part of the chapter she tends toward psychologization and politicization of the hair styling choices of other Black women and Black women at large. This demonstrates the preeminence of psychological and political interpretations of Black women’s hair choice by the mainstream,²⁵⁴ as well as in scholarship on Black women’s hair. However, Boni-Claverie’s call to the Black collective to express more practical motivations for their hair choice reiterate the notion that the political and psychological narratives around Black women’s hair choice only uphold whiteness and impede the devalorization of the white beauty ideal.

Noire n’est pas mon métier, « Vous allez bien avec le bamboula »

Speaking Back to Power as Subjectivation

Following the out-group to in-group observational arc mentioned in the first chapter, Beausson-Diagne, a Black French actress, columnist, and singer, writes her hair story “Vous allez bien ensemble avec la bamboula” “(You Look Good Together with the Bamboula)”²⁵⁵ to objectify and overcome the white male gaze(r), and enact her authority and power over her own representation. She begins her story with a list of homogenizing, stereotyping, and reductionist comments she has heard made about her by nameless external observers, presumably white,

²⁵³ Boni-Claverie, Isabelle. *Trop noire pour être française*. (Tallandier, 2017), pp. 201. My translation: “To the end of episodically changing one’s appearance, the way one changes clothing styles at certain moments, more than as a rejection of their Blackness.”

²⁵⁴ Headlines that equivocate Black hair and politics, such as “The Politics of Black Hair” from the Zoe Report, “Why is black hair so political?” from BBC, and “8 Reasons Why Black Hair will Always be Political” from 21 Ninety, “Comment les cheveux sont devenus une arme politique” from Les Inrocks, “Derrière le cheveu crépu, la revendication politique” from Imaz Press, and “Cheveux crépus, coupe afro, dreadlocks: ils se révoltent” from TF1 Info, proliferate search engine results on Black hair.

²⁵⁵ My translation. The word “bamboula” is multi-signifying. While it can refer to a drum used in West African cultures, sometimes made from rum barrels which also evokes the sugar/sugar cane economy in the Caribbean and the triangular trade, as well as a style of music and accompanying dance, it is also a racial slur and could be translated into English as something akin to “coon” or “jiggaboo.”

regarding her skin, facial features, buttocks, and expectations around her language, intellect, and sexuality based on their interpretation of phenotypical signifiers. The first three comments she lists are the following:

« ‘Trop noire pour une métisse.’

‘Pas assez africaine pour une Africaine.’

‘Heureusement que vous avez les traits fins, je veux dire pas négroïdes, enfin vous faites pas trop noire ça va !’ »²⁵⁶

The inclusion of these quotes without the names of their speakers erases the original speakers, removing their authority over their speech,²⁵⁷ and introduces the white male gaze as homogenous, inverting the homogenization of Blackness by the white male gaze. As an amalgamation of many nameless voices, the gaze becomes a character in the story, personified in being given voice by Beausson-Diagne who is the effective authority over its presentation. Like this, Beausson-Diagne not only renders herself powerful over the white male gaze but creates a way for her to literally speak back to power, represented by the white male gaze from even the first words of her story.

These quoted statements reflect the notion of phenotypical stereotypes of Blackness and mixedness based on hue and facial traits, homogenizing mixedness and Blackness by invisibilizing phenotypical variations. In maintaining these stereotypes, these comments on the part of the white male gaze attempt to write Beausson-Diagne’s identity on her behalf, excluding her from mixedness for being “too Black” and from Africanity by being “not African enough.” In

²⁵⁶ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 13. My translation: “Too black for a mixed woman. Not African enough for an African woman. Fortunately you have fine traits, I mean to say not negroid, well, you’re not too Black, it’ll work!”

²⁵⁷ This is akin to Sharpe’s Black redaction.

juxtaposing these phrases on the page, she highlights the functioning of these mainstream stereotypes to render invisible the many Black people in the French context and beyond that are simultaneously of mixed race and darker-skinned. Her Black-women centered gaze makes this group visible. Just as phenotypical variations are flattened within these mainstream stereotypes, so are linguistic and intellectual variations, as demonstrated by the comments “Vous parlez africain?,” and “Pour une noire, vous êtes vraiment intelligente, vous auriez mérité d’être blanche!”²⁵⁸ Thus, we can note a superior valuation of the “fine traits” of whiteness and the framing of whiteness as a coveted position to be attained by only those of superior aesthetic and/or intellectual “merit” from the perspective of the white male gaze.

The list continues in kind with more stereotypical, reductionist comments, including a reference to Josephine Baker which evokes exoticism, eroticism, hypersexuality and a general hypervisibility of Black women’s corporeal aesthetics, among other things, as well as a reference to “Banania,” the French chocolate drink brand,²⁵⁹ which evokes further eroticism and commodification of Black bodies and Black aesthetics.²⁶⁰ In listing these comments, she underscores an interplay between negative visibility and negative invisibility,²⁶¹ as well as the

²⁵⁸ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 13. My translation: “Do you speak African?” and “For a Black woman, you are truly intelligent, you would have been worthy of being white.”

²⁵⁹ This brand has been criticized by many, including Léopold Senghor and Frantz Fanon, for their objectification and commodification of the image of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais, whose likeness is still present on the packaging. He is displayed as friendly and complacent, and was accompanied by the phrase “y’a bon” until 1977. “Y’a bon” is an imaginary grammatically incorrect phrase made to depict the Black tirailleurs as unintelligent.

²⁶⁰ In this case, the brand commodifies the Black aesthetics of the tirailleurs sénégalais to sell their product, while also relying on the colonial imagery of the friendly, not-so-smart African. This kind of commodification (and reductionism) of the Black bodies and aesthetics is intertwined with the goals of capitalism. Imhotep and Feldman discuss this commodification in the beauty industry. Recognition of these problematic advertising and marketing practices has led to the recent removal of branding images such as the well-known Aunt Jemima syrup brand in the US.

²⁶¹ Negative visibility such as in the comment, « Oh la chance d’avoir des fesses comme ça, vous devez être chaude au lit non ? » (My translation : “Oh the luck of having an ass like that, you must be hot in bed, no?”).

homogenization that tends to characterize the depiction of Black women and Black people in general from the white male gazer. In demonstrating this interplay, she prioritizes her own perspective and decenters the white male gazer.

Because this chapter constitutes an “assemblage of life episodes” as Shirley Tate puts it, it is particularly fitting to apply Tate’s theory on “translation as reflexivity” in Black beauty shame scripts to better understand how Beausson-Diagne “see[s] [her]self and speaks [her] understanding of social life.”²⁶² As previously mentioned, according to Tate, “women position themselves as being made to feel shame but reposition themselves as not ashamed or shameful through the use of critique,” moving from subjectification to subjectivation. This critique, which she refers to as “translation as reflexivity”, is “involved in (de)construction, (re)assembling, and (de)application of Black beauty shame discourses,” and what she considers to mark “the beginning of disalienation.”²⁶³ The various comments included by Beausson-Diagne in her chapter constitute a form of subjectification via “discursive Black beauty shame identity positioning.”²⁶⁴ Beausson-Diagne’s rhetorical strategy to list these comments, what Tate would label a “shame script”, preceded only by the phrase, “J’ai tout entendu lors de castings,”²⁶⁵ can be read as her critique of this positioning of various pieces of her identity by external observers.

Negative invisibility such as in the comment, “Ben non... Vous ne pouvez pas être le personnage, c’est une avocate...” (My translation : “Well, no... you can’t be that character, they’re a lawyer...”).

²⁶² Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 37. It is also particularly fitting because the chapter features a fair amount of dialog which echoes the talk-in-interaction on which Tate bases her research in *Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame: Discourse, Iconicity, and Resistance*.

²⁶³ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 37. See the section of Theoretical Framework for this project’s definition of disalienation.

²⁶⁴ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 37.

²⁶⁵ My translation: “I’ve heard it all during castings.”

Furthermore, the paragraph immediately succeeding the list of comments can be described as an abbreviated autobiography:²⁶⁶

“Cette année, je fête mes vingt-cinq ans de carrière. Je suis comédienne, auteure-compositrice, chanteuse et danseuse. J’ai appris mes arts au Conservatoire, lieu dans lequel j’ai passé les trois quarts de mon enfance. Mon père est sénégalais, ma mère est métisse, ivoirienne-bretonne, je suis née à Paris, une vraie Afro-Armoricaine ! »

In it, she articulates her positioning as an expert of the arts in both formation and practice, and her ethnic identity as being of Senegalese, Ivorian, and Breton (a region in northwestern France) heritage. She writes “a true Afro-Armoricaine” which speaks to her Blackness and her roots in Breton, as well as being a potential nod to Black Americans given the hyphenation and the similarities in pronunciation between Afro-Armoricaine and Afro-American thus a manifestation of collectivism. By repositioning her identity as educated, individually distinct, and belonging in the Black collective, Beausson-Diagne moves from a critique of subjectification immediately to subjectivation. Tate asserts that the “integral aspects of subjectivation are resistance to prevailing relations of racialized power through self-fashioning and autonomy, speaking back to power, critique and problematizing the world in which one finds oneself.”²⁶⁷ By repositioning her identity on her own terms, such as she does in a phone-call with an artistic director of a film in which she was selected for a role discussed in the next section of this chapter, Beausson-Diagne is participating in self-fashioning, while her critique of the white male gaze here and in the

²⁶⁶ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 13. The paragraph gives information about her formation in the arts, and her ethnic background, and is included here for reference: My translation: “This year, I celebrate 25 years in my career. I am an actress, director-composer, singer, and dancer. I learned the arts at the Conservatory, the place where I spent three quarters of my childhood. My father is Senegalese, my mother is mixed, Ivorian-Breton, I was born in Paris a true Afro-Armoricaine.”

²⁶⁷ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 35.

episodes she shares in the remainder of her chapter represents a form of speaking back to power and problematizing the racialization that pervades the French media. In positioning herself in the seat of power at the center looking out on the world around her, she extricates herself from the world where white supremacy dominates, moving beyond the sphere of power into a world where she is most powerful.

Speaking Over Power by Controlling the Narrative

The first television-related encounter she recounts focuses squarely on her hair, juxtaposing its racialized legibility in the eyes of the external observer against its apolitical signification for Beausson-Diagne. She transcribes a conversation with an artistic director including her thoughts in parentheses throughout the dialog, for instance:

»Elle: “Ma petite Nadege.”

(Ben... je suis une adulte de 1,72 m, mais pourquoi pas.) »²⁶⁸

The extra-dialogical information within the conversation allows her the ability to exercise power and control over the interaction by becoming both a voice within the conversation as an interlocutor in the dialog, and a voice over the dialog—a narrator of sorts. It also creates a rapport with the reader with whom she shares her unvoiced thoughts, an intimate connection that invites the reader to become part of the collective, aligning themselves with her values, embodying her experience, similar in this way to Boni-Claverie’s aforementioned use of the second person. The extra-dialogical information critiques at every turn the words of the artistic director, highlighting an awareness on the part of Beausson-Diagne of a distinct interplay between negative in/visibility, alterity, and homogenization.

²⁶⁸ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 15. My translation : “ Her : ‘My little Nadège.’ (Well... I am an adult standing at 1.72 meters, but why not.)”

An analysis of the remarks of the artistic director transcribed by Beausson-Diagne illuminates a perspective on Beausson-Diagne and by extension, on Black women in the film industry, that is marked by homogenization, reductionism, and alterity, beginning with her belittling salutation of Beausson-Diagne as “ma petite Nadège.”²⁶⁹ The use of the first-person singular possessive pronoun “ma” in the director’s speech rhetorically challenges Beausson-Diagne’s autonomy, and thereby her authority over her appearance, specifically her performance of self through hair choice, as is the subject of their conversation. Further, her use of the possessive is an attempt to render Beausson-Diagne an object to be owned, a commodity to be watched on a screen under the white male gaze and is in this way an attempt at thingification²⁷⁰ in the Césairian sense in that it reduces her to property for white capitalist gain. This conversation serves then as allegory to France’s history of imperialism. In this way, Beausson-Diagne’s identity repositioning here in her parenthetical retorts becomes part of a discursive decolonizing mission. Likewise, the use of the term “petite” is both literally and figuratively reductionist as well as infantilizing, rendering Beausson-Diagne as both childlike and unimportant. This reductionism is highlighted and countered by Beausson-Diagne in the parentheses that immediately follows—“Je suis une adulte de 1,72 mais pourquoi pas.”²⁷¹ . Structuring of the dialog in this way also echoes the “translation as reflexivity” practices found in her opening paragraph.²⁷² The artistic director’s comments are shaming, and the entry of the dialog constitutes a shame script. However, the extradialogical information in the parentheses allows for a frank and satirizing critique of the artistic director’s attempt to shame her and signals

²⁶⁹ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 15. My Translation : “My little Nadège.”

²⁷⁰ See page 23-25 of Césaire *Discours sur le colonialisme*.

²⁷¹ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp.15. My translation: “... I am an adult standing at 1.72 meters, but why not.”

²⁷² See the in-text citation on page 24 of this document.

a move toward disalienation and a repositioning of her identity through the articulation that she is, in fact, neither physically small being “1,72 meters tall,” nor small in age or childlike being an “adult.” Beausson-Diagne is in this way exerting power over the narrative, making hers the controlling perspective over the dialog, thus decentering the external gaze onto herself, her body, and her hair, and placing herself at the center of power from which emanates the decisive regard on the world around her.

Within this dialog, is evidenced the homogeneity and alterity that tends to color representations of Blackness under the white male gaze, a manifestation of an enduring colonial imaginary,²⁷³ alongside these reductionist tactics, such as in the artistic director’s use of the second person plural possessive pronoun “vos” to describe the “salons de coiffure à Strasbourg-Saint-Denis.”²⁷⁴ In using the term “your” instead of a definitive article which is equally if not more grammatically appropriate, the artistic director does two things. The first is that she presumptuously assumes that Beausson-Diagne visits these salons, based solely on the fact that she is a Black woman. This assumption reflects the homogenizing perspective that all Black French women frequent the hair salons in the neighborhood surrounding metro-station Strasbourg-Saint-Denis, in the 10th arrondissement of Paris. The second is that she creates a binary that functions between “you” and “me/us”, a binary that underlines her perception of Beausson-Diagne, and by extension, Black women, whom she portrays as a homogenous group, and as “other.” This is not lost on Beausson-Diagne who writes the following in parentheses:

²⁷³ Katelyn Knox considers this from several angles in her book, *Race on Display in 20th and 21st Century France*, including the foreignness and homogeneity with which the “sans-papiers” population is depicted, and the origins of Afropea as it relates to the colonial gaze. She also considers French sociologist, Saïd Boumama, and French rapper Saïdou’s text *Devoir d’Insolence* that addresses the equivocation of racialized people with foreigners.

²⁷⁴ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 15. My translation : “hair salons at Strasbourg-Saint-Denis.”

« (Elle me vouvoie et pense que je suis propriétaire desdits salons ou parle de « nous les Noirs » comme d’une seule personne ?) »²⁷⁵

In this parenthetical aside, she not only makes known her awareness of the implications of the artistic director’s choice of pronouns but calls attention to the perspective of the white gaze at large by posing the reader a somewhat humorous question—what is the artistic director’s perspective that it leads her to use “vos” in this context? The question is humorous because the reader likely already knows the answer: it is improbable that the artistic director believes that the salons are owned by one individual and that this individual happens to be on the other end of the phone during this conversation. Therefore, logic moves the reader toward the other option—her use of the term “vos” reflects the homogeneity and alterity with which the white gaze tends to be colored, that she means “we Blacks,” as Beausson-Diagne writes, “as if we are one person.”²⁷⁶ The critique of this homogenization and othering of Blackness by the white gaze signals Beausson-Diagne’s disalienation; satirizing this perspective allows her to return to herself within the conversation and take off the representation that the artistic director is attempting to make for her. Like this, she continues to participate in this practice of “translation as reflexivity” that Tate describes, as a method of subjectivation.

Claiming Power by Defining One’s Own Crown

The “othering” perspective of the artistic director is further underlined by her attempt to inauthentically connect with Beausson-Diagne on the basis of their both having “les cheveux

²⁷⁵ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 15. My translation: “She uses the term ‘vos’ with me and thinks that I am the owner of these salons, or talks of ‘we, the Blacks’ as if of one person?”

²⁷⁶ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 15. My translation. This comment on her part reminds of the famous “Chant des Africains”, specifically the version sung in 1943 whose refrain begins “C’est nous les africains...”.

frisés.”²⁷⁷ Her attempt to build this proverbial bridge with Beausson-Diagne through the shared experience of having curly hair, frequenting Black salons, and wearing braids at least one time,²⁷⁸ instead of other commonalities that they might share, such as being women in the film industry, or working on the same television show, minimizes these attributes of her identity and human experience, making her hair her most important, most visible attribute, thus reducing her humanity to her “cheveux frisés,” a practice that reminds of the colonial tendency to reduce Black women to various aspects of their corporeality, as is evidenced in the colonial exhibitions that took place in France and across Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. In response to this reductionism that Beausson-Diagne refers to as “projection pour personnalisation du propos,”²⁷⁹ she again repositions her identity highlighting the artifice of her braids and the validity of her natural hair, with all of its visible texture, in its un-manipulated state:

“Non, c’est juste que j’avais envie de laisser mes cheveux naturels, je veux dire que je ne suis pas née comme ça avec des tresses longues jusqu’aux fesses...”²⁸⁰

However, the artistic director continues by asking if viewers will be able to recognize Beausson-Diagne now that she has changed her hair, further reducing Beausson-Diagne to her braids and Black women to their differing hairstyles which she apparently sees as their only defining feature, the only way that they are distinguishable from the homogenized mass of other Black women. The artistic director’s words erase morphological differences in height, weight, shape,

²⁷⁷ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 15. My translation : « Frizzy hair ».

²⁷⁸ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 15. « J’adore vos salons de coiffure à Strasbourg-Saint-Denis, une fois je me suis fait faire des tresses ! »

²⁷⁹ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 15. My translation: “projection to personalize her words.” This naming of the artistic director’s tactic also places Beausson-Diagne in the seat of namer, where she has authority over the representation of the artistic director’s dialogical choices.

²⁸⁰ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 15. My translation: “No, it’s just that I wanted to leave my hair natural, I mean I was not born like that with braids down to my butt.”

facial features, skin tone, etc. between Black women, respecting only differences of hair. This kind of reductionism brings a new, externally-grounded and much more negative twist to the notions expressed by Synnott,²⁸¹ Mercer,²⁸² and Gordien²⁸³ that hair is one of if not the most principal bodily signifier of race. Beausson-Diagne counters this reductionism, retorting that she had not undergone plastic surgery to change her face,²⁸⁴ thereby making again visible the morphological differences that were invisibilized by the artistic director's line of questioning. She also counters hair as her defining physical trait at various points by employing the term "juste" as seen above. In saying that she "just" wanted to wear her natural hair, and she "just" wanted to change her hairstyle,²⁸⁵ she frames hair as one of her many physical attributes and racial signifiers as opposed to something quintessential.

When pressed, the artistic director explains that in a film-related meeting, Beausson-Diagne's hair was a topic of conversation of which the consensus was that upon looking at Beausson-Diagne, the scent of monoï oil evidently erupted from thin air,²⁸⁶ a comment that not only highlights the primacy the group placed on Black women's hair styling to have called a meeting to address it, but exemplifies the homogeneity and alterity via exoticism in this case that pervades the reading of Black women's hair under the white male gaze, which reflects an extension of the reductionist, self-same, and foreign colonial fantasy of the Black woman that

²⁸¹ In « Shame and Glory : a sociology of hair », Synnott asserts that "Hair is perhaps our most powerful symbol of individual and group identity," on page 381.

²⁸² In « Black Hair/Style Politics," Mercer states on page 35 that "Where race structures social relations of power, hair- as visible as skin colour, but also the most tangible sign of racial difference- takes on another forcefully symbolic dimension."

²⁸³ Ary Gordien, "The Afro: More than a Hairstyle." *Semantic Scholar*, 19 Sept. (2019).

²⁸⁴ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 16. « Dans la mesure où je n'ai pas fait de chirurgie esthétique pour me refaire le visage, que j'ai juste changé de coiffure je pense que ça va aller... » My translation : To the extent that I did not have plastic surgery to remake my face, and that I just changed my hair, I think it'll be fine."

²⁸⁵ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 16. « J'ai juste change de coiffure. ». My translation : "I just changed my hair."

²⁸⁶ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 16. « C'est que quand on te regarde ça sent le monoï. » My translation : "It's that when we look at you, it smells like monoï oil."

Robin Mitchell describes in *Venus-Noire: Black Women and the Colonial Fantasies in 19th Century France*. Monoï is an oil used on hair and skin that originates from the historically French-colonized Polynesian island of Tahiti and is not in any way intrinsically connected to Beausson-Diagne's hair or ethnic make-up which includes Senegalese, Ivorian, and French components, and not Polynesian components. The evocation of the scent of monoï oil here is an exoticization of Beausson-Diagne's natural hair that ties her to an island in the middle of the Pacific, although she was born in Paris. The artistic director goes on to state frankly that her natural hair as it grows unmanipulated from her scalp is "bizarre,"²⁸⁷ a statement that marks Black women's hair as naturally other.

In Beausson-Diagne's final response to the homogenizing and othering of Black women's hair by the artistic director, she invokes the notion of global Black collectivism, positioning herself not as other but as one with/of many, mentioning the likely similarity of the hair of Black American celebrity, Beyonce, and Barbadian celebrity, Rihanna, to her own hair, as well as her own use of African shea butter, instead of monoï oil. Her informing the artistic director that she had indeed tried monoï oil only to find that it dried out her hair reflects a simultaneous collectivism and individuality, as the oil is included in some Black hair products but that while this product was beneficial to some Black hair types, hers was not one of them. Thus, she is both part of the large group of Black people that use Black hair products but separate from the group that uses monoï oil. Her response also counters the primacy which the other members of the cast and crew had placed on her hair, saying that she was "émue"²⁸⁸ by their having had a meeting to

²⁸⁷ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 16.

²⁸⁸ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 16. « Je suis émue que vous ayez fait une réunion a Noel pour parler de moi et que vous en ayez conclu que mes cheveux sentent le monoï... ». Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 16. My translation : "I'm touched that you've had a Christmas meeting to talk about me and that you've concluded that my hair smells like monoï oil."

discuss it, thereby highlighting the frivolity and absurdity of such a meeting, as well as declaring that she would film with her natural hair and that the viewers would recognize her, thereby deemphasizing hair as *the* distinctive corporeal trait.

This deemphasis of Black women's hair by Beausson-Diagne, as is reflected in her last response, as well as in her repetition of the word "juste" as mentioned above, is reminiscent of the apoliticism and depsychologization of hair that is seen in Boni-Claverie's book and called for in Mercer's research.²⁸⁹ Just as Boni-Claverie emphasizes the pragmatism of her hairstyle choices, despite their social, cultural, and political legibility, Beausson-Diagne expresses a certain level of practicality and at times even frippery related to her hairstyle choice, offering a Black women-centered alternative to the mainstream media's claims that Black women's hairstyle choices must be political. According to Beausson-Diagne, she tends to change her hairstyle as frequently as she changes her shoes.²⁹⁰ Additionally, she informs that she is not an activist for natural hair:

« Je ne milite pas spécialement pour les cheveux naturels, je déplore juste le manque d'imagination de certains qui vont mettre des perruques sur de magnifiques cheveux ! »²⁹¹

In rejecting the notion of campaigning for natural hair specifically, she is distancing herself from political signification of her own natural hair, and positioning her hairstyle choice as more of a purely aesthetic practice in line with her shoe choice, as she mentions earlier in the chapter, and

²⁸⁹ See Mercer's « Black Hair/Style Politics. »

²⁹⁰ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp.15. « Ceux qui me connaissent savent que je change de coiffure comme de chaussures. » 15. Ibid. My translation : « Those that know me know that I change my hair like I change my shoes. » This echoes Boni-Claverie's phrase « afin de changer d'apparence épisodiquement, comme l'on change à certains moments de style vestimentaire » on page 201 of *Trop noire pour être française*.

²⁹¹ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp.16-17. My translation : "I'm not an activist for natural hair. I just deplore the lack of imagination of certain people who want to put wigs on such magnificent hair."

calls for an increased imagination when styling Black women's hair that she calls "magnificent", leaning more in the direction then of flamboyance, like the celebration of Black womanhood via positive aesthetic hypervisibility which is emphasized by the Mwasi-Collectif and discussed in the first chapter of this project.

In analyzing this dialog, it becomes evident that this back-and-forth subjectification on the part of the artistic director and subjectivation on the part of Beausson-Diagne is pervasive. Each time that the artistic director negatively in/visibilizes Beausson-Diagne, whether through homogenizing, othering, or eroticizing her hair, Beausson-Diagne asserts her voice by repositioning her identity either to the reader through her parenthetical asides or to the reader and the artistic director within the dialog.

Noire n'est pas mon métier, « L'imaginaire colonial »

The Legibility of Blackness and Black Hair

In "L'imaginaire colonial," Sabine Pakora, a French-Ivorian actress, author, and director, explores the way the past continues to inflect representations of Black women in French media in the present. Focusing on the interplay between hypervisibility and invisibility, homogenization and alterity, and static and fluid views of time, Pakora argues for a step outside of the binary restrictions of the white male gaze, ascribing to herself an identity beyond white supremacy.

She begins her chapter by highlighting a separation between the significance of her Blackness for herself and its legibility in the French film and theatre industries. Pakora's work, too, follows the out-group to in-group observational arc referenced earlier in this project. Turning her eyes toward the white male gazer, she explains that while she had never defined herself by

her skin color,²⁹² her Blackness was always “systematiquement soulignée,”²⁹³ This experience is echoed in other accounts from Black women in the French film, television, and theatre industries featured in this project²⁹⁴ and is reinforced in pertinent research.²⁹⁵ Pakora notes the various readings of Blackness that she encountered, a “reification acharnée,”²⁹⁶ as she puts it:

“On me renvoyait vers des références aux peuples primitifs, à l’Afrique (continent dans lequel je n’avais pas vécu), on imaginait que j’avais forcément le rythme dans la peau, on me prêtait une agilité et des aptitudes physiques et corporelles particulières... »²⁹⁷

The roles she was suggested to take reflect a homogenization and an alterization, which I posit is a form of othering, on the part of the white male gazer. The depiction of Blackness as primitive is colored with white supremacy; the suggestions that she play characters from and in Africa is reductionist of the diversity of the African diaspora; the beliefs of enhanced physical ability are reminiscent of the enduring beliefs stemming from the onset of slavery and colonialism that Black people are beasts of burden and/or feel less pain, subhuman in intellect and superhuman in

²⁹² Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp.77. « Je ne m’étais jamais définie par ma couleur du peau. » My translation : “I never defined myself by skin color.”

²⁹³ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp.77. My translation : “systematically highlighted. “

²⁹⁴ Such as Mata Gabin in “Balancetonpoulpe”, Nadège Beausson-Diagne in “Vous allez bien avec le bamboula”, and Isabelle Boni-Claverie in *Trop noire pour être française*

²⁹⁵ For instance, in “The Colony Strikes Back: African Protest Movements in Postcolonial France,” Gueye discusses, among other things, how French programs seek to stigmatize Blackness. Additionally, in “Les noirs en France : Anatomie d’une groupe invisible, » Constant highlights the invisibility of Black people generally and Black humanity even more specifically in the media, as well as an emphasis on corporeality when Black people are presented in the media that connects bestiality and Blackness as a concept in the French collective imaginary.

²⁹⁶ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 77. My translation : “stubborn reification.”

²⁹⁷ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 77. My translation: “They classified me with references to primitive people, to Africa (a continent in which I’ve never lived), they imagined that I necessarily have rhythm in my skin, they attribute to me an agility and particular physical and corporeal aptitudes.”

physicality. She speaks of a “surreprésentation physique” ²⁹⁸where Blackness is painted with “couleurs flashy, coiffures exubérants, explosives,”²⁹⁹ while the humanity of Black people is not present, and “on ne sait pas grande chose d’eux, de leur histoire.”³⁰⁰ This reminds of the reduction of Black people to their various hairstyles by the artistic director in Beausson-Diagne’s story, in that while their hair is the focal point, and a prime signifier for race and racialization, their stories, their background, and their collective history beyond the white male gaze is eclipsed. This erasure alongside the legibility of Blackness as analogous with both primitivity and physical aptitude in Pakora’s account reflects an invisibilization of the humanity of Black people as thinking subjects in the eyes of the white male gazer, likening them to a more animal class, while rendering their bodies hypervisible, something that was also evidenced in the chapter of *Afrofem* entitled “Qui nous protège de la police?” as well as Mata Gabin’s “Balancetonpoulpe” in which she is referred to as a panther, a gazelle, etc. This speaks to the awareness on the part of these Black French women of the white male gaze toward them, as well as their choice to empower themselves by defining, objectifying, and criticizing it.

The External Stratification of Black Hair

The role of hair in this interplay that Pakora highlights between hypervisibility, invisibility, legibility, and alterity is also reflected in her account of an experience working on a set for a film in which she had a small role. While the party scene was supposed to take place in

²⁹⁸Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp.78. My translation: “Physical overrepresentation.”

²⁹⁹Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp.78. My translation: “flashy colors, exuberant hairstyles, explosive even.” The use of the term “flashy” which was also used in by the Mwasi-Collectif in *Afrofem*, as well as the use of the term “exuberants” and “explosives” become particularly interesting in light of the chapter in *Afrofem* entitled “La Flamboyance.” In Pakora’s sketching the representations of Black women created by the white male gaze in these terms, the exclamation of flamboyance, flashiness, exuberance, etc. on the part of Black people becomes that much more powerful in demonstrating endogenous values. For reference, the *Afrofem* chapter is discussed in the first chapter of this project.

³⁰⁰ My translation: “We don’t know a lot about them, about their story.”

Africa, the scene was being shot in France, and Black women were placed on the set based on their hair textures and hair style choices:

“Celles qui avaient des cheveux crépus ou avaient des tresses devaient porter des vêtements en tissu africain et incarner des personnages au capital économique moins élevé : elles étaient reléguées en arrière-plan. Mais surtout, elles percevaient également une rémunération moindre par rapport aux comédiennes avec les cheveux lissés ou affublées de perruques aux cheveux raides. »³⁰¹

Because kinky Black hair is rendered hypervisible in the French context due to the alterity with which Blackness and Black women are considered and represented, everything else about these women, including their capacity to convincingly act out a role was subordinated to the legibility of their hair. Their placement on set was determined solely by the extent to which their hair conformed to the mainstream white icon of beauty, as was their monetary compensation. The women with kinky hair were relegated to the background, invisibilized by the white male gaze, and this not only had the immediate invisibilizing effect of their not being seen as much by the audience, but potentially invisibilizing effects on their ability to be autonomous and have agency and a voice in our capitalist world. In fact, women who wore straight wigs to cover their kinky hair, invisibilize this racial signifier, and conform to the white beauty ideal were more highly remunerated and given more visibility in the film, potentially leading to acquisition of more roles, thus more visibility, more access to capital through higher pay, thus a more facilitated

³⁰¹ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 81. My translation: “Those that had kinky hair or had braids had to wear clothes made of African fabrics and play characters with less economic capital: they were relegated to the background. But most importantly, they received a lesser payment in comparison to actresses with straight hair or dressed in straight-haired wigs.”

ability to be autonomous within a capitalist economic system.³⁰² The women who presented with kinky hair were also exoticized and made to wear more stereotypically traditional styles of African dress, which functioned to otherize kinky hair from whiteness on set; placing these women in the background then further communicated an unimportance of Blackness as a whole and foregrounded white aesthetics, even in a film that was set to take place in Africa.

Subjectivation via Collectivism

In light of her experience of being “sans arret alterisée,”³⁰³ she endeavors to better understand the origins of her Blackness, by taking classes in African dance, studying anthropology, and finally journeying to Côte d’Ivoire, where she originates ethnically, although born in Montpellier. In opposition to this marginalization, she turns toward collectivism, reinforcing her connection to global Blackness. This turn toward collectivism within the Black world, which constitutes an investigation into her specific ethnic background, also functions as a method of positioning her identity for herself in this particular moment in her life, and within the narrative of the story. When confronted with attempts at her subjectification vis-a-vis negative in/visibilities of herself, her body, and her hair produced by the white male gaze, she responds to feelings of alienation from herself, such as “la sensation d’avoir du mal à exister en dehors d’un imaginaire occidental,”³⁰⁴ and “l’impression de renoncer à [s]oi-meme, de renier [s]on identité contemporaine,”³⁰⁵ by positioning her identity for herself in the real world (investigating her

³⁰² This is reiterated in Dabiri’s work on page 41: “Until recently, we just did not see natural hair on our screens. There were a handful of Black women represented, but in the few instances they were granted visibility they would either have ‘good hair’ or would be wearing a weave.”

³⁰³ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 78. My translation : “alterized/otherized nonstop.”

³⁰⁴ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 79. My translation: “the feeling of having trouble existing outside of an occidental imaginary.”

³⁰⁵ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp 80. My translation : “The impression of renouncing [her]self, of denying [her] contemporary identity.”

origins and turning toward a global Black collective) and for the reader within the story. In the real world, this positioning is similar to what we see in *Afrofem* by the Mwasi-Collectif as they exclaim an anti-exemplarité noire, a celebration of flamboyance as well as a Black consciousness that is both collective and individual. Pakora's positioning of self functions to express a sense of belonging as opposed to the alterity with which she has been presented under the white male gaze, and to express her individuality in being from Côte d'Ivoire as opposed to the homogenization of the "roles stéréotypés"³⁰⁶ that acquiesce to "un imaginaire entremêlés de fantasmes et de préjugés [qu'elle] qualifierai[t] de 'colonial'."³⁰⁷ Robin Mitchell's account of the influence of the colonial fantasy on Black women's depiction within the collective French imaginary in *Venus Noire*, as well as Christina Sharpe's work on the lasting influences or "afterlife" of slavery and colonialism on today's world in *In the Wake* corroborate her description of an enduring colonial imaginary.

Afrofuturity and Afrocentric Temporalities

The insistence upon the enduring colonial perspective that colors the white male gaze brings to question the notion of time itself, a tendency that is evident in the works of other Black women examined in this dissertation, namely Mata Gabin's disruptions of linear time in "Balancetonpoulpe," and Christina Sharpe's trans*Atlantic time in *In the Wake*. Pakora points to a particularly static view of history on the part of the white male gazer, one that sees Blackness

³⁰⁶ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp 78. My translation : "stereotypical roles."

³⁰⁷ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp 78. My translation: "an imaginary intertwined with fantasies and prejudices that [she] would qualify as colonial." This can be related to Boni-Claverie's weaving the history of slavery and colonialism into her own hair story, however Boni-Claverie does this following an endogenous value system that prioritizes historical collectivism as well as a cyclical temporality, while Pakora speaks of the white male gazer's static view of time: a perfect example of what Emma Dabiri notes as the "profound difference between the European concept of "history" and Afrocentric engagements with time," on page 37 of *Don't Touch My Hair*.

as unchanging over time, an “imaginaire colonial” as is the title of her chapter that endures in the larger white French population. She describes her uneasiness in film showings when the white crowd erupts in laughter, “comme un relent d’un certain ‘humour colonial’...comme un rire qui me précède et me ramène dans un passé plutôt douloureux, un passé qui n’est pas passé.”³⁰⁸ This statement emphasizes that static view of history on the part of the white male gaze that seeks to foreclose all possibilities of Black futurity following the logic of Elizabeth Grosz who argues that fixation on the past creates the impossibility of acting the future.³⁰⁹ Pakora expresses a different view of time on her part from that of the white male gazer: the notion of a fluid and dynamic past that interjects itself into the present, a “past that is not past,” as she says. Pakora also mentions her “identité contemporaine,” which is in direct contrast to the stereotypically Black, colonially linked roles she is offered within the “imaginaire occidental.”³¹⁰ She suggests “une identité ‘afropéenne’,”³¹¹ that corresponds with the “société d’aujourd’hui,”³¹² and an “avenir proche,”³¹³ that includes the opportunity to play “une pluralité de personnages sans être enfermée dans une boîte.”³¹⁴ Per her Black-women centered temporal perspective, the past is not static but fluid, inflecting the present at times without completely determining it, allowing for heterogeneity in Blackness, as well as depth and complication, and a future of Blackness that is

³⁰⁸ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp 79. My translation : “like a trace of a certain ‘colonial humor’... like a laugh that preceded me and brought me back to a more dolorous past, a past that is not past.”

³⁰⁹ See page 116 in Grosz’s *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely*.

³¹⁰ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 79. My translation : “contemporary identity”... “occidental imaginary.”

³¹¹ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 79. This identity is depicted in and advocated for in many of the works of Léonora Miano, such as *Blues pour Élise*, to be discussed in Chapter 3 of this work, as well as *Afropea: utopie post-occidentale et post-raciste*. This identity category reflects a possibility for the future of Blackness in Europe as a blended identity that is both Afrodiasporic and European, referring according to Miano, to those who were born in Europe of African descent.

³¹² Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 79. My translation: “Today’s society.”

³¹³ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 79. My translation: “Near future.”

³¹⁴ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 82. My translation: “A plurality of characters without being placed in a box.”

not foreclosed, where “la communauté afro-diasporique” can propose new heroes “qui transcendent les clivages sociaux et raciaux habituels.”³¹⁵ In this way, she not only repositions herself and her aesthetics—she repositions time itself following her own value system, again unseating, or in her words, “transcending” the white male gazer and centering her perspective as the regard and voice of power.

Conclusions

As this chapter has demonstrated, the notion of an out-group to in-group observational arc examined in the first chapter of this project was reinforced in this chapter, as it was apparent in the installments of both Beausson-Diagne and Pakora. This arc functions to create space for Black women to critique, problematize, and objectify the white male gaze(r) at the beginning of their story before positioning their own identities, usually in contrast to their representations as depicted by the white male gazer, as prescribed by their own systems of values, aesthetic, social, political, cultural, and otherwise. Likewise, the Black women-centered gaze is present in the works featured in this chapter and functions within the context of hair and hair stories in a similar fashion to what was observed in the first chapter. Boni-Claverie, Beausson-Diagne, and Pakora each choose to prioritize their own perspective and decenter the white male gazer, placing themselves in the seat of power. In so doing, they tend to illuminate the distance between expression and legibility as it relates to their hair, much in the same way that this distance was evident in the works referenced in the first chapter of this project, particularly *Afrofem* by the Mwasi-Collectif.

³¹⁵ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 82. My translation: “The afro-diasporic community,”... “the usual social and racial separations.”

Highlighting this distance helps to delineate the separation between Black women-centered gazes and the white male gaze, and allows for the reification of the white male gaze. In Beausson-Diagne's "Vous allez bien avec le bamboula » for example, Beausson-Diagne writes from a perspective that is beyond white supremacy in that she reduces the various external observers to a personification of the white male gaze via an inversion of the homogenization with which Blackness is typically depicted by the white male gazer. In this way, she is powerful over the white male gaze, controlling its presentation in her story, before following an observational arc from out-group to in-group, as we have seen done frequently by Black women authors, and defining herself according to her own social, cultural, and aesthetic value systems. In her conversation with the artistic director, she continues to define herself for herself while objectifying the white male gaze, countering the attempted thingification of herself and her hair, as well as the primacy that is placed on her hair by the artistic director as her most defining feature, emphasizing the heterogeneity of Black women, Black hair, and Black morphologies in general. She finally defines her hair following her own value system and as the final point on the external-to-internal observational arc, giving her own voice the most power and primacy over the legibility of her representation, disregarding the perspective of the white male gaze, thus disempowering white supremacy.

Furthermore, it becomes evident in this chapter that Black women's hair choice as defined in their own words, following their own value systems shows that a versatility in styling is not a manifestation of a state of Black self-hatred but rather a manifestation of Black futurity. This manifestation of Black futurity is reinforced by the presence of Afrocentric temporalities in the featured works of this chapter. This is crucial; as Emma Dabiri puts it, "Well-being requires a judicious mix of the historical and the ahistorical, the timely and the untimely, the past and the

future.”³¹⁶ The wellbeing of the global Black collective requires the possibilities of hope and empowered futures. To this end, Boni-Claverie dismantles the Occidental concept of time by moving backwards and forwards at will within her hair-story telling, expressing a temporal collectivism amongst Black people. Sabine Pakora’s installment reflects a rejection of static views of time for a much more fluid and dynamic perspective that frees up the possibilities of Black futures that are not mired in a colonial imaginary. The adherence to Afrocentric temporalities creates a collective among Afro-descended peoples across time and space, supporting this project’s argument that a Black women-centered gaze typically comprises elements of Black collectivism that delegitimize dominant depictions of Blackness colored with an overarching alterity.

While manifestations of collectivism are ever present in each of the works discussed in this chapter, so too are manifestations of individuality. From Boni-Claverie’s use of first-person pronouns to discuss the motivations behind her unique hair choices and her embodiment of the experience of baldness, to Beausson-Diagne’s explicit use of shea butter as opposed to monoï oil, these authors counter the homogenization of Black women by individualizing themselves from the collective while simultaneously reiterating their membership within it. This phenomenon was also observed in the first chapter of this project. In individuating themselves within the context of their hair choices and hair stories, they also highlight the need for interpretations of Black women’s hair that recognize the possibilities of pragmatism.

As revealed by an analysis of the works of Boni-Claverie and Beausson-Diagne, Black women’s hair choices are not always politically motivated and or/politically expressive. This is salient because of the heavy politicization and psychologization of Black women’s hair, especially in comparison to that of other hair types, such as their white counterparts whose hair

³¹⁶ Dabiri, Emma. *Don’t Touch My Hair*. (Allen Lane Publishing, 2019), pp. 37.

styling is seldom if ever interpreted as anything akin to self-hatred or love of community. This double standard places undue restriction on Black women's hair choices. Thus, the de-politicizing and de-psychologizing of Black aesthetic choices is liberatory for Black women. While there exists a symbolic grammar and polyvocality of hair, as noted by Rosado, Black women are not always choosing to make a statement when they are choosing their hair style. The versatility of Black hair allows for a great number of styling practices and combinations, and although these practices can be symbolic, they can also be practical, devoid of symbolism. The possibility of non-symbolic interpretation must be available to Black women's hair choices as much as to every other race of woman for Black women to be seen as fully women and fully human. The notion of apolitical hair choice for Black women erodes the structure of the dialectic of power, denies the primacy of the white male gaze(r), and in disregarding whiteness as a phenomenon that need be responded to, sets limits for and moves beyond the bounds of white supremacy, paving the way for unlimited Black futures.

CHAPTER 3: BLACK WOMEN-CENTERED GAZES IN BLACK WOMEN'S FICTION

Introduction

The previous chapters of this work focused on the operationalization of collectivism and individuality incorporated into aesthetic representations of Black French women's bodies and hair in autobiographical and sociocultural texts to increase positive in/visibility and displace the white male gaze(r). In analyzing these texts, certain patterns revealed themselves such as articulations of Black hair choice that were not politically motivated and/or politically expressive, and the rejection of static views of time.

Analyses of these non-fiction texts was beneficial to this project as it brought to light the ways that Black women authors critically engage with their realities and promote change in the French context. For example, Sabine Pakora's "L'imaginaire colonial" not only equates mainstream representations of Blackness with an enduring colonial imaginary but advocates for the legitimacy of an Afropean identity in France while the Mwasi-Collectif highlights the ungendering of Black French women via various forms of violence and non-protection and celebrates the flamboyance of Black aesthetics. By depicting the world following their own perspectives, these Black French women authors are centering their own gaze, displacing the white male gaze(r) and interpreting the world using their own value systems—creating their world anew. This is an act of power, as it serves to disempower whiteness as authoritative, as iconic, as standard, and as normative. This act of power rejects the notion of supremacy in whiteness, even at times disregarding whiteness entirely, which opens up a world of new Black possibilities, a plurality of new Black futures.

In this third and final chapter, this work turns to the realm of fiction to consider the ways that Black women practice these same strategies when they allow themselves to create beyond

the borders of reality. By examining the fiction works of two Black women, Cameroonian author, Léonora Miano, and Afropean French author of Martinican and Congolese descent, Laura Nsafou, writing within the context of Hexagonal France, this chapter argues the importance of demonstrations of collectivism and individuality as exemplified through the representations of Black women's aesthetics and aesthetic practices to offer positive in/visibility and empowerment to Black French and Afropean women.

This chapter also foregrounds and works to exhibit Ezinwanne Toochukwu Odozor's love ethic. Odozor discusses the importance of an ethic of love to the study of Black women's scholarly and cultural production and describes what that ethic entails as well as what it can accomplish related to the disempowerment of white supremacy. She advocates for Black feminisms as "lenses through which Black women can resist and re-exist under new emancipatory conditions," essentially tying Black feminisms to Black futurity. This ethic "is not Eurocentric," "insists that Black women are indomitable agents in the articulation of their lives as they are lived and as they should be lived," "works with the concept of space-time," and "insists that liberatory and liberated Black futures are possible," among other things.³¹⁷ She highlights the fact that ideas of "love and lovingness have been systematically divorced from conceptions of Blackness," and specifically set against representations of Black womanhood following the prescriptions of the white male gaze.³¹⁸ In demonstrating notions of love and lovingness within Black women's bodies, as well as in practicing an ethic of love in their writing, Miano and Nsafou underline the humanity of Black women, valorize the bodies and experiences

³¹⁷ Odozor, Ezinwanne Toochukwu. "A Love Ethic for Black Feminisms: The Necessity of Love in Black Feminist Discourses and Discoveries." *Hypatia*, vol. 37, no. 2, (2022).

³¹⁸ Odozor, Ezinwanne Toochukwu. "A Love Ethic for Black Feminisms: The Necessity of Love in Black Feminist Discourses and Discoveries." *Hypatia*, vol. 37, no. 2, (2022), pp. 246.

of Black women, render them worthy of loving and being loved and ultimately disempower the perspective of the white male gaze in their works.

Odozor states further that “the endurance of Black women is a challenge to white supremacy and a disruption to hegemony,” that Black women “are not meant to thrive or to imagine ourselves into the future.” In this way, the pathways to new futures demonstrated in these two novels also do the work of disempowering white supremacy and highlighting paths beyond it.

The Primary Texts and Their Authors

Leonora Miano is a Cameroonian-born author living in France for the greater part of her childhood and adult life. Her work has been well-engaged in scholarly works as well as in more mediatized forms of knowledge production, such as in interviews with television and radio networks and articles in major newspapers. Scholarship related to her oeuvre has focused on her advocacy for and illustrations of Afropea³¹⁹ and the various forms that Afropea can take on in both its mode and content of expression. Until more recently, media coverage of her work tended to focus on those works that featured African stories with African protagonists, with *Blues pour Élise* getting notably less attention:

³¹⁹ The term “Afropea” is used to describe a mental or virtual territory, as will be discussed further in this chapter, that gives place to an at once blended and altogether new identity category that is Afropean. This category of identity is blended in the sense that it is made of both African and European aspects, referring to Black people (of African descent, thus “Afro”) born in Europe and/or having spent a large portion of their lives there. However, in being a fully blended identity category, it is less a whole made of two halves as it is a completely new cohesive category of identity that gives place to the virtual territory that is Afropea. This notion is important to the argument of this chapter as it is connected to the valorization and legitimacy of the authors and characters as French and/or European, excepting Miano who does not claim to be Afropean because she left Cameroon and moved to Paris as an adult. It is also important as it unites the two authors, Miano and Nsafou together, along with other Black French women writers discussed in previous chapters, such as Sabine Pakora.

“*Blues pour Elise*, qui a pourtant touché bien des lecteurs, n’a pratiquement pas été commenté dans les journaux [...] ce qui ne se produit jamais avec mes romans *africains*. Ce sont les blogs qui ont assuré la promotion de cet ouvrage, et j’ai déjà dû imposer ce texte à mon éditeur, qui ne voulait pas accompagner un tel projet, au motif que les personnages présentés n’étaient pas universels. »³²⁰

The nod toward the power of the blogs in this statement reflects the strength of Black collectives to force change despite white mainstream adversity. Furthermore, if universality is based on those traits that connect people as human beings, and more specifically in the French context, that connect citizens as being French, then the French media’s dismissive attitude toward the 2010 novel depicts Afropeans as being neither: not human and certainly not French. On the contrary, the universality of the characters in the novel is arguably what is most foregrounded. In operationalizing collectivism and individuality in these characters, Miano constructs a heterogenous Afropean collective that provides the underlying structure into which their Black French humanity is anchored.

Laura Nsafou is a contemporary politically and socially engaged self-proclaimed Afropean author of Congolese and Martinican descent who explicitly writes to combat the white gaze and the male gaze and its effects on the representations of Black women as a novelist, author of children’s fiction, and as an activist blogger, “dangereusement afroféministe,” (dangerously afrofeminist) by the name of Mrs. Roots.³²¹ In this way, her work fits well within the scope of this dissertation. Furthermore, her ascription to an Afropean identity links her with

³²⁰ Miano, Léonora. *Habiter la frontière*. 2012. 73.

³²¹ See Marie Zafimehy’s 2018 article, “Mrs. Roots: une dose d’afro féminisme dans la littérature française » from *RTL* . See also Nsafou’s eponymously named blog, “Mrs. Roots.”

both Léonora Miano, who is credited with the wider expansion of this term,³²² although not Afropean herself, and with Sabine Pakora, whose work on the enduring features of the colonial imaginary is featured in the second chapter of this project and who, too, avows an Afropean identity. Interestingly, Nsafou's choice to publish *À mains nues* was in part due to a call to arms issued by Miano in an interview between the two authors. When Nsafou asked why Afropean literature was not typically found in bookstores, Miano responded that it was up to them to change that. "L'histoire de Sybille, écrite quatre ans auparavant, est exhumée."³²³ In addition, she is the author responsible for the foreword of *Afrofem* by the Mwasi-Collectif, featured in the first chapter of this project. In this way, Nsafou's inclusion in this work also helps to demonstrate the existence and connectedness of a collective network of Black French women working toward a common goal of Black liberation.

Nsafou's work, while popular in the Black French blogosphere and beyond, has yet to receive much scholarly attention—with *À mains nues* receiving none at all; this project begins the work of filling this gap. As a result, this project relies heavily on adjacent scholarship in the fields of sociology and anthropology, to critically engage Nsafou's novel, as well as her own words in various interviews, and online blog entries written by her lectorate. In this way, this chapter is a manifestation of Odozor's ethic of love as it relates to Black feminisms in that it respects Nsafou's articulation of her objectives as a writer as legitimate and generative, and in that it "trusts in and seeks out, the theorizing of Black women in its many forms and believes that a multitude of forms exists and is valid."³²⁴

³²² And whom Nsafou mentions in the postface of *À mains nues* as one of four "grandes auteures."

³²³ Le Gall, Pauline. "Laura Nsafou veut ajouter sa voix à la littérature afropéenne. » *Cheek Magazine*. April 4, 2017.

³²⁴ Odozor, Ezinwanne Tooohukwu. "A Love Ethic for Black Feminisms: The Necessity of Love in Black Feminist Discourses and Discoveries." *Hypatia*, vol. 37, no. 2, (2022), 243.

Theoretical Framework

As previously mentioned, Miano's work has been the subject of quite a few scholarly texts, most focusing on how her writing explains and illustrates the notion of Afropea and the Afropean identity, and specifically how this identity functions plurally in France. Marion Coste considers the backgrounded formation of Afropea in Miano's works. According to Coste, "the question of race is there but in the background [...] to avoid the miserable stereotypes to which the black characters in French novels are too often reduced."³²⁵ These "miserable stereotypes" are what this project refers to in Chapter 1 as negative visibility, including mediatic manipulations of Black bodies such as exoticization, eroticization, and their presentation as inherently violent and animalistic, for instance. Coste notes Miano's choice to focus on the love stories and the heterogeneity of the characters within Miano's *Blues pour Élise*, a focus that aligns Miano with the love ethic for which Odozor advocates in "A Love Ethic for Black Feminisms." Nsafou's *À mains nues*, equally figures love and lovingness while also empowering Sibylle as an "indomitable agent," to use Odozor's term, in directing her own life.

Additionally of interest to this chapter is Coste's analysis of Miano's use of the term "territoire mental" in her 2012 *Habiter la frontière*, and her application of the term to the 2010 novel. According to Coste, it is the creation of this territory that 'permet de comprendre l'engagement politique de Léonora Miano[...] un engagement profondément ancré dans une pratique littéraire puisqu'il s'agit de forger un imaginaire.'³²⁶ This concept of a new imaginary stands out against Pakora's insistence upon the endurance of the colonial imaginary as is

³²⁵ Coste, Marion. "Identités Afropéennes dans blues pour Elise de Miano, Léonora." *Philologia Hispalensis*, vol. 2, no. 34, (2020), pp. 17.

³²⁶ Coste, Marion. "Identités Afropéennes dans blues pour Elise de Miano, Léonora." *Philologia Hispalensis*, vol. 2, no. 34, (2020), pp. 21.

discussed in Chapter 2. This chapter builds on this idea of a new imaginary³²⁷ by demonstrating how its inscription on the bodies and hair of the characters renders it tangible, existing in the « real » world in France through its physical instantiation in Miano's diegetic world, an existence that functions to legitimize the place of the Afropean identity in French society.

Similarly, Malyoune Benoit explores the implications of the term Afropean vis-à-vis its relationship to Miano's novel, noting that the aesthetic aspect of this concept "dont les visées pratiques tant sur le plan social que politique sont explicites," has not been appropriately addressed in the existing scholarship on her work—a point that is also addressed in this chapter. Benoit argues that the term Afropean is unique in that it allows for relationality amongst different ethnic groups in France racialized as Black while simultaneously facilitating an escape from racial characterization. Quoting Miano, Benoit, too, notes the formation of a "terroir mental que se donne ceux qui ne peuvent faire valoir la souche française,"³²⁸ highlighting that this is at once originated by default as Black people in France "ne peuvent revendiquer une 'souche française'" and a rejection of the exclusion of Black people from French national identity.³²⁹ In agreement with Coste, Benoit underlines Miano's focus on the love lives of her characters who "présentent tous le visage d'une minorité ethnique qui assument à la fois un héritage culturel africain, antillais et française... dans un environnement exempt de clichés,"³³⁰ reinforcing Miano's alignment with an ethic of love as defined by Odozor. This alignment bolsters Miano's power to

³²⁷ This concept of a new imaginary stands out against Pakora's insistence upon the endurance of the colonial imaginary which is discussed in Chapter 2.

³²⁸ Miano, Léonora. *Habiter la frontière*. (2012), pp. 86.

³²⁹ Benoit, Malyoune. "L'ÉCRITURE IMPLIQUÉE: NOUVELLE FORME DE L'ENGAGEMENT LITTÉRAIRE CHEZ FATOU DIOME, LÉONORA MIANO ET MARIE NDIAYE." *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*, (2018), pp. 107.

³³⁰ Benoit, Malyoune. "L'ÉCRITURE IMPLIQUÉE: NOUVELLE FORME DE L'ENGAGEMENT LITTÉRAIRE CHEZ FATOU DIOME, LÉONORA MIANO ET MARIE NDIAYE." *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*, (2018), pp. 108.

instill a certain humanity into her characters, according to Benoit, by creating intimacy with the reader that places the question of race more so in the position of context as opposed to text.

In another vein, Katelyn Knox focuses on the notion of in/visibility and spectacularism as it relates to *Blues pour Élise*, using this lens to think through the effects of showcasing the Afropean community through everyday scenes. She notes various illustrations of Sankofa³³¹ in Miano's work as she chooses to name the past and build new futures upon it, as depicted in the actions of various characters in the novel but most notably in the character of Shale, a product of extramarital rape, who was named as such by father « pour qu'elle transforme la boue ». ³³² This chapter too highlights a practice of Sankofa in Miano's work, along with other forms of Africana temporalities that allow her to bring possibilities of new Black futures to bear by abandoning the structure of the linear progress narrative. While Miano's work has been thoroughly interrogated as it relates to the hybridized nature of the Afropean identity and its challenging relationship with France's applied universalism, this chapter focuses on the power of Miano's Black women-centered gaze to decenter the negative in/visibility with which the white male gaze treats Black women, and to create positive in/visibility for Black women in the French context through aesthetically-located representations of Afropeanness and Blackness. By combining the analyses of Coste and Benoit with a focus on positive in/visibility and valorization of Black aesthetics, this chapter argues that Miano disempowers the white male gaze(r), rendering new paths forward for Black women as it relates to Afropean identity, the legitimization of their French citizenship, and ultimately their humanity, opening up futures for Black women said to be foreclosed.

³³¹ Sankofa refers to the Akan tradition of "looking back to move forward," often illustrated by the symbol of a duck holding a golden egg, representing important lessons and stories from the past, and looking forward toward the future.

³³² Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. 2010., pp. 178.

The concept of futurity is important to both works as Nsafou, too, brings forth possibilities of Black women's power, overcoming, liberation, autonomy, and joy, with a nod to the future as the final equilibrium of the novel finds the protagonist to be pregnant with a baby that she instinctively knows is female. While the choice to end the novel with pregnancy could be seen as equating motherhood with attainment, a more compelling argument can be made that pregnancy represents the utmost form of overcoming the protagonist's fear of touch, and the next generation being female evokes a rebirth and the concept of new possibility, new Black life as opposed to ongoing Black death.

As previously discussed, Nsafou's works have received less attention from scholars than those of Miano's, demonstrating a gap in scholarship that this project works to fill. In the few scholarly works where her œuvre is the focus, attention tends to be unequally centered around her socially and politically engaged youth books more so than her adult novel. For instance, Élodie Malanda considers the aspects of Nsafou's children's book *Comme un million de papillons noirs* that contributed to its being "the catalyst to grow broad discussions about inclusive children's literature in France."³³³ While Malanda makes no mention of *À mains nues* which preceded the children's book by little more than a year, Malanda's engagement with the sociopolitical context of the children's book still offers some insight into and around Nsafou's adult novel and even the context of *Blues pour Elise*.

Malanda highlights the lack of Afro-French characters in French children's and Young Adult's literature, noting that "non-white characters mostly appeared in stories that were set in far-away countries,"—Black people in Africa, for instance, "conveying the colonial imaginary of

³³³ Malanda, Élodie. "Comme un million de papillons noirs by Laura Nsafou: How an afrofeminist picture book gave the impetus to a discussion about inclusive children's literature in France." *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 44, no. 2, Apr. 2020, pp. 165.

Africa.”³³⁴ This brings additional color to Miano’s claim that journalists chose not to cover *Blues pour Élise*, although they generally discussed her other works—the major difference being that *Blues pour Élise* centered Afropean characters as opposed to African characters positioned in Africa. Coupling this with Malanda’s observation speaks to the enduring nature of the colonial imaginary as well as its pervasiveness in French cultural production at all levels. In light of this, Malanda credits the success of Nsafou’s children’s book to her “narratological choice of writing a story with a character, who has a name, a personality and a wound, and who is struggling to overcome that wound throughout the story,”³³⁵ which contributes to readers’ ability to identify with the main character. This narratological choice is the same in *A mains nues*, as Sibylle’s character too is comprised similarly, including the fact that she has a “wound” of sorts in her fear of physical contact, which she overcomes throughout the arc of the story line. In speaking of the adult novel, Nsafou herself explains that “c’est un message important pour moi de dire aux femmes noires: on a le droit d’être vulnérables.”³³⁶ This very intentional choice then functions similarly in the novel to allow the reader to identify with Sibylle, to recognize and relate to her humanity, and therefore to underline the humanity of Black women.

On the other hand, Malanda also notes that the success of Nsafou’s children’s book is due in part to its explicit condemnation of race-based discrimination, making it more appropriately fitting to French culture contemporary political debate as a rejection of “the assimilatory doctrine

³³⁴ Malanda, Élodie. “Comme un million de papillons noirs by Laura Nsafou: How an afrofeminist picture book gave the impetus to a discussion about inclusive children’s literature in France.” *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 44, no. 2, Apr. 2020, pp. 166.

³³⁵ Malanda, Élodie. “Comme un million de papillons noirs by Laura Nsafou: How an afrofeminist picture book gave the impetus to a discussion about inclusive children’s literature in France.” *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 44, no. 2, Apr. 2020, pp. 170.

³³⁶ Le Gall, Pauline. “Laura Nsafou veut ajouter sa voix à la littérature afropéenne. » *Cheek Magazine*. April 4, 2017.

of French immigration policies,”³³⁷ in comparison to bell hooks’ translated children’s book *Happy to be Nappy/Frisettes en fêtes*. This logic may explain the comparative lack of notoriety received by Nsafou’s novel, as she positions race similarly there to its structural positioning in *Blues pour Élise*. However, the timing likely played a greater role, as the novel’s debut in March of 2017 preceded other highly mediatized events, such as the #MeToo movement and the wide success of Amandine Gay’s documentary, *Ouvrir la voix*, which helped to push discussion around women’s rights and Black rights toward the mainstream.

Malanda goes on to explain that Nsafou’s voice as an engaged Afro-French blogger helped “shape a sense of community among young Afro-French people,” in a country “where there is a diversity of Black communities who share neither a language nor a history.”³³⁸ This too is the role of Sibylle in *A mains nues*, as her Somali origins are mentioned but once near the middle of the novel. Sibylle’s ethnicity takes a back seat to her race. In downplaying ethnicity, an attribute that carries various stereotypes within the Black French population, any and every Black French woman can identify with Sibylle, and even more so given that the novel is set in Sweden in lieu of any particular region in France. Her character allows for a unification of the Black French community based on their Blackness, as opposed to the fractionation that is produced by a focus on ethnicity.

Building on the first two chapters, the analysis of the two works in this final chapter centers on aesthetic representations of collectivism and individuality, corporeal instantiations of horizontality across time and space, especially as was examined in Chapter 1, the grammar and

³³⁷ Malanda, Élodie. “Comme un million de papillons noirs by Laura Nsafou: How an afrofeminist picture book gave the impetus to a discussion about inclusive children’s literature in France.” *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 44, no. 2, Apr. 2020, pp. 171.

³³⁸ Malanda, Élodie. “Comme un million de papillons noirs by Laura Nsafou: How an afrofeminist picture book gave the impetus to a discussion about inclusive children’s literature in France.” *The Lion and the Unicorn*, vol. 44, no. 2, Apr. 2020, pp. 174.

legibility of hair as well as the need for and power of apolitical readings of Black hair as an expansion of this discussion from Chapter 2, the positive in/visibility of Black women and their bodies proffered by a Black women-centered gaze, and the displacement of the white male gaze(r) by a Black women-centered gaze that renders Black women both powerful and autonomous. As discussed in the two preceding chapters and relevant again to this chapter is Tate's discussion of tropes of Black authenticity and their ability to produce shame. In this chapter this concept relates to the analysis of Miano's chapter "Radiées de la douceur" ("Barred from Sweetness") where women come together in a Black hair salon. Additionally, Tate's model of translation as reflexivity as a method to move from subjectification to subjectivation, which this project found to be applicable to Boni-Claverie's explanation of her shaved head, and again to Beausson-Diagne's identity re-positioning as discussed in Chapter 2, provides a framework by which characters in Miano's novel, such as Kimmy and Élise can be better understood. The concept of Black redaction as mentioned in Chapter 1 of this work as it related to Mata Gabin's "Balancetonpoulpe" also becomes relevant in this chapter in thinking through the structure of Nsafou's novel and the placement and timing of its sexually explicit scenes, such as the one that characterizes Sibylle's orgasm.

Alongside this theoretical framing from the last two chapters, this chapter also applies the ethnographic work of Sweta Rajan-Rankin. In her 2021 "Material Intimacies and Black hair practice: Touch, texture, resistance," she "explores the socio-materiality of Black hair care practice as an affective surface through which we can understand Black women's experiences of intimacy and belonging."³³⁹ In considering the act of touch as central to Black hair care, Rajan-Rankin highlights the intimacy in Black grooming practices that makes space for the negotiation

³³⁹ Rajan-Rankin, Sweta. "Material intimacies and black hair practice: Touch, texture, resistance." *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 29, no. 3, (2021).

of “Black belonging,” and “black identity in diasporic contexts.”³⁴⁰ She makes the case for the “socio-historical and temporal relevance” of Black hair care as a vehicle by which Black identity is passed on intergenerationally, as well as for the “material emergence of Black hair as a collectively produced artefact.”³⁴¹ It is this relationship between intimacy and collectivism that is seen at play in the second chapter of Miano’s novel, “Radiées de la douceur.” It is via this relationship that the inclusive imaginary, as Coste puts it of a specific plurality of Black identities—Afropean identities—is formed.

Likewise, the work of Wilson et al. is employed to a similar end to consider the way that “hair is a phenom that may shape relational dynamics[...] and acts as a critical psychological variable in examining and understanding African American women’s gendered racial socialization and racial-gender identity development.”³⁴² While their article takes an ethnographic approach to understanding identity development related to hair within Black families in the US, this chapter applies their findings to Miano’s second chapter to construct “an understanding of experiences and meaning-making processes” used by her Black women characters to create a “narrative of self.”³⁴³

This chapter also employs the respective works of Emma Dabiri and Ron Eglash as it relates to the significance of the fractal to African and African diasporic cultural tradition. Ron Eglash notes the ubiquity of the fractal in African cultural production, noting that the “concepts in fractal geometry are fundamental to African knowledge systems: quantitative techniques,

³⁴⁰ Rajan-Rankin, Sweta. “Material intimacies and black hair practice: Touch, texture, resistance.” *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 29, no. 3, (2021), pp. 152.

³⁴¹ Rajan-Rankin, Sweta. “Material intimacies and black hair practice: Touch, texture, resistance.” *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 29, no. 3, (2021), pp. 153.

³⁴² Ingrid-Penelope Wilson et al. ““White Folks Ain’t Got Hair Like Us’: African American mother–daughter hair stories and racial socialization.” *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2018, pp. 228.

³⁴³ Ingrid-Penelope Wilson et al. ““White Folks Ain’t Got Hair Like Us’: African American mother–daughter hair stories and racial socialization.” *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2018, pp. 241.

symbolic systems, engineering, architecture, games, traditional hairstyling, textiles, sculpture, painting, carving, metalwork, and religion.”³⁴⁴ Emma Dabiri on the other hand delves specifically into the relationship between fractals and Black hair styling, noting in her chapter, “Ancient Futures: Maths, Mapping, Braiding, and Encoding” the recurrence and importance of the “concept of infinity” in “traditional African hairstyles.”³⁴⁵ Dabiri argues that Black hair cares practices are a vestige of the African past that permeates throughout the diaspora, “a thread that leads back into an otherwise irrecoverable social history,” similar in function, she says, to the Oriki oral tradition of the Yoruba culture.³⁴⁶ Further, she argues that there is a fundamental divergence between the “Eurocentric concept of ‘history’ and Afrocentric engagements with time”³⁴⁷ as this project discussed in Chapter 2 as it related to notions of Africana temporalities in Sabine Pakora’s “L’imaginaire colonial.” These concepts are of particular interest to this chapter as they relate to Miano’s work. Finally, echoing Odozor’s love ethic and reinforcing the approaches of these two authors as well as the goals of this project to operate from an Afrocentric perspective in considering the power and value of a Black women-centered gaze, Dabiri makes her own call for real decolonization as it relates to hair. “If we seek to decolonize, it is imperative that we explore how African people understood themselves and their own cultures, to gain a clearer understanding that is not warped through the biases of colonial documentation.”³⁴⁸ This project has provided evidence for the enduring nature of the colonial imaginary into the present mainstream representations and interpretations of Black women and their aesthetics. In considering the mainstream as an extension of the colonial imaginary into the

³⁴⁴ Eglash, Ron. *African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design*. Rutgers University Press, (2005), pp.165.

³⁴⁵ Dabiri, Emma. *Don’t Touch My Hair*. (Allen Lane Publishing, 2019), pp. 227.

³⁴⁶ Dabiri, Emma. *Don’t Touch My Hair*. (Allen Lane Publishing, 2019), pp. 36.

³⁴⁷ Dabiri, Emma. *Don’t Touch My Hair*. (Allen Lane Publishing, 2019), pp. 37.

³⁴⁸ Dabiri, Emma. *Don’t Touch My Hair*. (Allen Lane Publishing, 2019), pp. 36.

present, the current nature of decolonization is such that the imperative remains to explore Black women's understanding of themselves and their cultures to gain a more correct understanding.

This is the aim of this chapter through the medium of fictive narratives.

Literary Analysis

Blues pour Élise

Miano's 2010 novel *Blues pour Élise* centers around the lives of four individual Black women who make up a group of friends that call themselves "Bigger than Life," offering us snapshots into their everyday lives, their psyches, and via a third person omniscient narrator, the thoughts and feelings of others within their intertwining social networks.³⁴⁹ The structure of the novel underlines the interplay between collectivism and individuality, distinguishing each character through their intimate thoughts and moments, juxtaposing them in the narrative, but installing the four main characters into an explicitly named collective body. This collective body functions within a universe that demonstrates the causal relationality of human interactions at large as well as the interconnectedness of people of African descent, and Black women in particular.

Additionally, the characters are familiar and archetypal, representing aspects of larger swaths of the French population, and especially the Black French or Afropean population while also illustrating the diversity of this population. As Marion Coste notes, "La question de la race est présente, mais...ce sont les histoires d'amour des personnages qui occupent le récit, " : while the question of race unites the characters in various ways, the nuances of their individual stories also distinguishes them, insisting upon the heterogeneity of the Black population living in

³⁴⁹ The use of the phrase "Bigger than Life," in English in this French text exemplifies a unity with anglophone Black women in the Diaspora.

France.³⁵⁰ Moreover, this interplay of collectivism and individuality are inscribed upon and performed by the bodies of the Black women in the novel, demonstrating Miano's notion of Afropeanism as a "projet esthétique," as Benoit puts it.³⁵¹ The notion of Afropea inscribed on the body makes tangible an "espace mental" that Coste describes as a "lieu de rencontre des cultures africaines et européennes, lieu protéiforme aussi, qui ne cesse de se réinventer. »³⁵² Doing so brings this figurative mental territory onto the ground in Europe, and in the case of Miano's text, in France specifically, laying further claim to the physical territory of France and legitimacy to the Afropean population by consequence. The novel further builds on the notion of collectivism and interconnectedness through the demonstration of a horizontality across time and space in a way that is similar to what is done by Sabine Pakora in her essay "L'imaginaire colonial" in *Noire n'est pas mon métier* and by Isabelle Boni-Claverie in *Trop noire pour être française*, as discussed in the previous chapter.³⁵³

Horizontalities and Temporalities

Various portions of the diaspora are represented in the novel: Akasha has both Caribbean and Sub-Saharan African origins and Élise's grandmother's story takes place in Africa, and Black American pop culture references are several, for example, all the while the novel takes place

³⁵⁰ Coste, Marion. "Identités Afropéennes dans blues pour Elise de Miano, Léonora." *Philologia Hispalensis*, vol. 2, no. 34, (2020), pp. 17.

³⁵¹ Benoit, Malyoune. "L'ÉCRITURE IMPLIQUÉE: NOUVELLE FORME DE L'ENGAGEMENT LITTÉRAIRE CHEZ FATOU DIOME, LÉONORA MIANO ET MARIE NDIAYE." *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*, (2018), pp. 93.

³⁵² Marion, Coste. "Identités Afropéennes dans blues pour Elise de Miano, Léonora." *Philologia Hispalensis*, vol. 2, no. 34, (2020), pp. 31.

³⁵³ In Chapter 2, Boni-Claverie's engagement with Africana temporalities namely in her non-adherence to linear time was shown to open up possibilities of positive Black futures specifically as it relates to Black women's hair practices, thereby promoting the wellbeing of the global Black collective following the logic of Dabiri who states that this well-being requires the possibilities of hope and empowered futures. Sabine Pakora, too, rejects the view of time as static, juxtaposing this view to the endurance of the colonial imaginary in the mainstream, demonstrating a much more fluid and dynamic perspective that engages with Black futurity by separating colonial ideologies from Black values systems.

mostly in France with most characters having been born and raised in and around Paris. The characters of the novel are interlinked via a combination of social and familial ties.

Miano builds a temporal collectivism as well by moving backward and forward through time as she interweaves the stories of the various characters; the novel is less concerned with linear chronologies and more concerned with the relationships both known and unbeknownst to the characters that create the backbone of the story as opposed to a timeline to which the story is anchored. In this way, the narrative resists the linear temporalities that structure western conceptions of time, aligning with more nonlinear Afrocentric temporal constructions. This allows for a decoupling of the novel from the linear progress narrative that is prevalent in western ideologies, a move that points on the one hand to the notion that less racial progress has been made than one might think and as universalist French politics would purport, while on the other hand suggesting that regardless of how much racial progress has been made, Black people have always been practicing Afrocentrism by de-emphasizing the white perspective in favor of their own.

This is evidenced by the inclusion of two floating interludes entitled “Ton pied, mon pied” that detail one side of Bijou’s phone conversation with a friend in Cameroon, the existence of which are unmapped onto the chronology of the story and could easily be placed in other sections of the novel. These interludes feature the use of Camfranglais, a language that includes elements of various languages indigenous to Cameroon as well as French and English. The language thus encapsulates the history of Cameroon before, during, and after colonial occupation by the French and British states, while also embodying the possibilities of a blended future—a notion that lives at the heart of much of Miano’s work as she offers up models of Afropean identity.

The novel further illustrates Africana temporalities such as the tradition of Sankofa, much in the same way that Boni-Claverie's work seems to embody the term, as discussed in the second chapter of this work.³⁵⁴ In her chapter, "Blues pour Élise", the narrator tells a story from the perspective of Élise in which her great-grandfather purchases, frees, and subsequently marries an enslaved woman,³⁵⁵ a story that evokes trauma as well as humanity and connection, with the latter being the "golden egg"—the treasure hidden in the past that one takes into their brighter future following the Akan tradition. While members of Élise's husband's family use this story to inferiorize her bloodline, the narrator romanticizes the story, suggesting that this connectedness is radical and anachronistic if not perhaps futuristic, noting that her ancestor "s'était dressé contre les habitudes des siens, contre les pratiques de son temps, parce qu'il avait vu marcher une femme."³⁵⁶ This connectedness is apparent in the structure of the novel as well as the horizontal network that houses the characters as if to reiterate the importance of the collectivism evoked by this story. The originating force of collectivism, the power of resistance, and ultimately, the impetus of change in this anecdote is also gendered, founded upon the ability, humanity, and beauty of a Black woman.

« Il voulait voir marcher la femme, autrement que comme une chèvre attachée...La femme avait marché lentement, les yeux fixés sur l'homme qui avait demandé qu'on la libère de ses entraves. Une fois devant lui, elle ne les avait pas baissés...Elle était nue, mais se tenait comme si sa peau était une étoffe précieuse. »³⁵⁷

³⁵⁴ Boni-Claverie moves forward and backward through the chronology of her own life as well as through the history of the Diaspora that includes colonialism and slavery, topics that Miano broaches in her novel as well.

³⁵⁵ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 180.

³⁵⁶ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 182.

³⁵⁷ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 180-1.

In this quote, Miano underlines the humanity of the enslaved woman. The novel is not specific about the time period in which the anecdote takes place, other than the naming of Elise's ancestor as her "arrière grand père." The lack of specificity allows for the possibility of placing the story in the time period during or after the end of the transatlantic slave trade, and in this way unifies the global Black collective through its experience with slavery in its various forms, including chattel slavery and the ideology that supported it. This ideology is evoked and resisted in the text by the repetition of the word "femme" as well as its juxtaposition with the term "chèvre," as a decoupling of Black women with animals. Far from a goat, the text frames the woman as having an air of regality and power about her. This is demonstrated by her slow walk: a faster walk would suggest that she rushes to meet the demands of others whereas her choice to move slowly shows her command of time and power to make others wait. Likewise, her consistent eye contact reflects a high regard for herself, an unwillingness to be inferiorized. This is important because, as hooks points out, "Black slaves and later manumitted servants could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving as only a subject can observe or see. To be fully an object, then, was to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality."³⁵⁸ Although her eye contact is not directed toward a white man in this case, it demonstrates a fearless power to see as a subject, that when coupled with the description of her comportment and the description of her skin as "une étoffe précieuse," creates a lexicon of royalty around this naked Black woman's physical being. Precious fabrics tend to be associated with the elite in both western and non-western cultures. Moreover, the term "precious" connotes the notion of value, and valorizes this Black woman's aesthetic. Although she was naked, her nakedness gave visibility not to an oversexualized savage Black body, as is typical from the view of the white male gaze, but a Black woman beautifully clothed in her skin. As Odozor states,

³⁵⁸ hooks, bell. "Representing Whiteness in the Black Imagination." *Displacing Whiteness*, 1997, 168."

“Black women are confronted with coded images that have been stretched across our skins, so as to blanket and hide away our humanity, our diversity, and the validity and complexity of our experiences.”³⁵⁹ In offering up this description of bare Black skin clothed in a lexicon of royalty, Miano practices Odozor’s ethic of love as she showcases her Black women-centered gaze and its ability to displace the white male gazer as an authority over the value of Black aesthetics. Because, “under White supremacy, the idea of love and of lovingness... is juxtaposed against any presentation of Black womanhood,” Miano’s love ethic as demonstrated in this passage, especially as it marks the opening of an equitable and fruitful story of romantic love, unites the notions of love and Black womanhood, and places her in a position of overcoming white supremacy.

Additionally, Miano undergirds her Black women-centered perspective by giving primacy to Black women. She establishes the structure of the collective of characters upon the principle of matriarchy, with Élise, the eponymous character, being the founding mother of all, the central person to which each character relates. The relationship between the characters and Élise is also exclusively matrilineal with each of the male characters that are connected to Élise, the matriarch, through a female character.

The Fractalization of “Elles”

These effects are particularly showcased in Miano’s chapter, “Radiées de la douceur” (“Barred from Sweetness”). Within this chapter, Miano highlights both collectivism and individuality by developing the perspectives of four different Black women within the narrative around hair and hair styling. A conversation between the women takes place in a Black hair salon

³⁵⁹ Odozor, Ezinwanne Tooohukwu. “A Love Ethic for Black Feminisms: The Necessity of Love in Black Feminist Discourses and Discoveries.” *Hypatia*, vol. 37, no. 2, (2022), pp. 246.

near the boulevard de Strasbourg, a street known as a hub for Black hair salons and stores in Paris. The meeting of these women in this place suggests a functional collectivism at play amongst Black women in Paris, underscoring hair practices as a point of connection. Likewise, the structure she uses to introduce the scenario also reflects a desire to emphasize both collectivism and individuality, an effect that is created by her ambiguous use of the term “elles.” In her introduction to this chapter, three different groups of “elles” reveal themselves, each progressively smaller than the next, the first being “les femmes d’ascendance subsaharienne,” the largest of three groups given that this description encompasses more-or-less all Black women in the world.

“Les femmes d’ascendance subsaharienne sont les seules à avoir été radiées de la douceur. Elles ne l’entendent pas de cette oreille, se battent pour en acquérir leur part... La mère ausculte la tête du nourrisson. Il faut attendre des mois, parfois la fin de la première année, pour que les cheveux dévoilent leur nature, comme un oracle annonçant le cours d’une destinée. Les filles noires connaîtront les bains d’huile, le lissage à la vaseline, le lustrage à la brillante... »

In considering this passage in combination with Odozor’s love ethic, it becomes clear that Miano upholds this ethic by helping the reader to empathize and giving back a bit of that “douceur” from which Black women have been excluded. In evoking practices of care from mother to child, with many of which, as Miano notes, Black women are quite familiar, the text brings up both “explicit and implicit memories” in its Black women readership that Wilson et al. claims are “emotionally-charged,” and have “a lasting impact on women for years to come.”³⁶⁰ Further, in framing hair as the “oracle annonçant le cours d’une destinée,” this depiction of a mother’s anticipation also demonstrates a loving hope for the child’s future, that she might be

³⁶⁰ Ingrid-Penelope Wilson et al. “‘White Folks Ain’t Got Hair Like Us’: African American mother–daughter hair stories and racial socialization.” *Women, Gender, and Families of Color*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2018, 227.

blessed, in keeping with the religious lexicon, with this “douceur.” These hair experiences and memories, the practice of care, the loving hope, serve not only to unite the Black women to which Miano refers in this passage, but also to connect the reader, especially the Black woman reader to this collective through a sense of familiarity founded upon their own memories and experiences.

In considering this collective, there are three factors that unite this “elles”: (1) their sub-Saharan origins, (2) their disbelief in Eurocentric beauty standards, (3) their experiences surrounding the legibility and care of their hair. Interestingly, these factors are reminiscent of, nearly identical to, those unifying factors that Boni-Claverie describes in her chapter, “De bons cheveux,” as explored in Chapter 2 of this work. Boni-Claverie begins by grouping Black women based on the experience of aesthetic devalorization in the mainstream on the basis of hair, then describes the process of evaluating the first curls of Black babies using a lexicon of spirituality and/or prophecy (“l’enfant ne sera pas sauvé”),³⁶¹ in line with Miano’s use of the terms “oracle” and “destinée,” here. Likewise, she describes her experiences with hair straightening later in the chapter. The parallel building of a collective amongst Black women based on these factors by both Miano and Boni-Claverie reveals a potential pattern amongst Black French women, and gives additional credence to Benoit’s notion of Afropeanism as being at least in part an aesthetic project.

There is a distinct break in the text, with white space separating this paragraph from the next. The “elles” becomes a more specific group in the paragraph that follows, a rhetorical effect that demonstrates the interwoven aspects of both collectivism and individuality at play in this introduction. The narrator continues:

³⁶¹ Boni-Claverie, Isabelle. *Trop noire pour être française*. (Tallandier, 2017), pp. 184.

“ Ce matin, des cohortes de ces femmes arpentent les rues du 10^e arrondissement de Paris. Elles viennent régler leur compte aux minuscules spirales que le Créateur leur a plantées sur le crâne...Des jeunes hommes se précipitent vers elles...Ces femmes ne les voient plus. Elles savent où aller...Parfois, elles viennent avec leur pot de défrisant, des mèches naturelles qu’elles se feront poser. Les jeunes gens, voyant qu’elles ne les suivront pas pour se faire coiffer, leur proposent une manucure. D’un geste agacé de la main, qu’elles accompagnent d’un long tchiip !, elles chassent ces importuns.”³⁶²

The “elles” that was originally women of sub-Saharan descent has become the women of sub-Saharan descent that have come to Paris’ 10^e arrondissement to visit the hair salons there that morning and do so routinely—this routine rhythm reinforcing their identity as Afropean. This “ells” is united by their location, the texture of their hair, their belief in a higher power, and their status as targets of racial capitalism within the Black hair industry. They function within an ecosystem that, while linking them with the global Black population, represents a collective of Black French women that frequent the salons in this area, as well as the Black men who earn commission by attracting women into the various shops. The experience described on the boulevard de Strasbourg is specific to the Black people in the Paris region, and in this way, functions to differentiate this “elles” from the first “elles” of sub-Saharan descended women while establishing a second collective based on this set of circumstances that are unique to this area.

This reconfiguration of “elles” in the introduction to Miano’s chapter is trifold, and its process resembles a fractalization, which is particularly significant given that fractal patterns are particularly common throughout building design, textile creation, and other cultural production

³⁶² Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 40.

in various African cultures.³⁶³ These patterns are easily recognizable in Kente cloth, for instance. Additionally, given that Miano's chapter foregrounds hair, this illustration of fractalization becomes even more significant, as fractal braiding amongst Black women is an age-old tradition that has evolved with time into hairstyles that Black women continue to wear now, connecting Black women in the present moment to Black women of the past. As Emma Dabiri suggests and Sweta Raja-Rankin points out, the "art of braiding involves complex mathematical formula, binding rhythmic and polyrhythmic movements in a tapestry of textural belonging."³⁶⁴ In this case, the trifold fractal, which is in fact the very definition of a braid, overlays and binds the rhythms of Miano's introduction to this chapter—the cyclical lifetime arc represented with the first "elles," the habitual rhythms of routine with the second "elles," and the rhythm of the morning Miano describes in the plot of this chapter which begins in the next paragraph, signaled by the third "elles." She continues:

« Ce matin, elles sont là, chez Coco Prestige. La rythmique entraînant du Lé ou lov de Jean-Michel Rotin accueille ces quatre femmes : Élise, Kimmy, Akasha, Bijou. Les clientes régulières d'un petit salon où on vend aussi des crèmes pour la beauté des cheveux. »³⁶⁵

The third "elles" is the most specific. In these sentences, Miano refers to the women collectively as both "elles" and "les clientes régulières," emphasizing notions of coexistence and belonging based on their regularly occurring hair practices, while also giving space on the page to each individual name, distinguishing each within this four-Black-women collective and setting the stage for the introduction of each woman's particular viewpoint. Both their individual and

³⁶³ See Eglash's *African Fractals : Modern Computing and Indigenous Design*.

³⁶⁴ Raja-Rankin, Sweta. "Material intimacies and black hair practice: Touch, texture, resistance." *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 29, no. 3, (2021), pp. 153.

³⁶⁵ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 41.

collective aspects are continually underlined throughout the rest of the chapter. The structure of the interaction that follows is particularly salient as a schema onto which this simultaneous collectivism and individuality are mapped.

Intimacy and Belonging in Black Hair Care Practices

Coco, the salon manager, begins a conversation by advocating for a product she claims « permet de garder des cheveux naturels, tout en les rendant lisses et doux. »³⁶⁶ While such a product seems to satisfy a large swathe of the population of Black women, offering “natural” hair to “natural” hair wearers and straight hair to straight hair wearers, “ces dames ne s’y intéressent pas,” citing issues of quality, time, convenience, and money.³⁶⁷ In fact, the product suggestion incites an argument between the four women, which is divisive in the sense that each woman takes a different stance on the social politics related to Black hair practices, and which is unifying in the sense that it creates the point of juncture whereby these four women come together to discuss their Black hair ideologies.

Elise is the first to argue her perspective, stating that Miriam Makeba, a South African singer whom Coco cites as having been styled by the product’s makers, is not someone whose looks most women would want to emulate.³⁶⁸ The third person omniscient narrator subsequently

³⁶⁶ The capacity of this product to both preserve the user’s natural hair, which generally means to preserve the texture and curl pattern—the kinks and coils—of chemically unprocessed kinky or coily hair, and render it more smooth/straight is already somewhat paradoxical as kinky/coily is the opposite of smooth/straight. This product represents a diplomatic solution to unify two sides across an ideological divide related to Black women with textured Black hair: on the extremes, those who exclusively wear their hair in kinky or coily styles and believe, much like Juliette Smeralda claims, that straight hair wearing is a manifestation of conscious or subconscious Black self-denigration, and those who exclusively wear their hair straight, use relaxers to keep it from ever appearing kinky or coily and cite aesthetic preference as their impetus for doing so. There are innumerable individual ideological possibilities existing between these two extremes.

³⁶⁷ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 41.

³⁶⁸ She does however mention Diana Ross, Tina Turner, Chaka Khan as having more desirable aesthetics, being more “glamour,” “feline,” and “pétillante.” It is interesting to note that each of these women are American, suggesting both a collectivism with Black Americans specifically as well as potentially

informs the reader that Coco “connait la langue fourchue de sa cliente,” and decides not to respond, turning up the volume on the retro zouk music that was earlier said to welcome the four women³⁶⁹ and is now used to here to calm them, as Coco attempts to “trouver un sujet de conversation futile, fédérateur.”³⁷⁰ Coco’s familiarity with Elise’s disposition implies an ongoing and more intimate relationship between Coco and her clients than that which one has with a mere acquaintance, which is in line with Rajan-Rankin’s findings related to Black hair practice and intimacy.³⁷¹ Her choice not to argue with Elise, whose sarcasm throughout the conversation mimics the tone of an obstinate teenager, and, in her familiarity with the temperaments of each of the four Black women, to instead attempt to create an atmosphere of peace through music feels parental. The notion of Coco, salon manager and stylist, embodying the figure of mother in the salon with her clients replicates the practice of care and intergenerational transmission of culture and knowledge that Rajan-Rankin describes which is embedded into the age-old practice of Black mothers, grandmothers, and “aunties” styling the hair of young Black daughters and emphasizes hair styling as a collectively instantiated practice.³⁷² The notion of a replication of this relationship is supported by Miano’s nod to this relationship in the introduction of this

demonstrating a symptom of American cultural imperialism whose bi-product is a superior valuation of Black American aesthetics when compared to Black aesthetics originating in other places throughout Africa and the Diaspora.

³⁶⁹ See above in-text citation featuring Jean-Michel Rotin. The mention of zouk music here is of particular interest as a musical aesthetic for the scene described in this chapter in that it exemplifies, Diaspora, collectivism, and embodiment. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, zouk is “associated mainly with the Caribbean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique, as well as Saint Lucia, Dominica, and Haiti” and “blends a variety of Caribbean, African, and North American music styles,” manifesting both Diaspora, especially Francophone African Diaspora, with its origins in the French Antilles, and collectivism as a blend of several Black music styles. As a “popular dance music,” the zouk reference also invokes movement of the body.

³⁷⁰ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 42.

³⁷¹ See Rajan-Rankin’s “Material Intimacies and Black Hair Practice.”

³⁷² Rajan-Rankin, Sweta. “Material intimacies and black hair practice: Touch, texture, resistance.” *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 29, no. 3, (2021).158. “These are not individual memories, they are interlocked sensations of pain and pleasure, mother-child bonding, entangled histories that set apart her relationship with her hair as not only from her body, but one that spans generations of women’s hands and bodies linked together to bring together communities of hair care practice. Intergenerational intimacies involve intensely tactile memories.

chapter, noting that Black women's battle to stake their claim in the beauty world is "transmise à leurs filles dès le vagissement," before describing the time the mother spends waiting to see the curl pattern of the child's hair, much in the same way that Boni-Claverie describes it in the introduction to her chapter "De bons cheveux," as was discussed earlier in this chapter.

This replication of the mother/"auntie"-daughter relationship is further exemplified by the response of Kimmy, the second interlocuter in the scene to introduce her individual Black hair ideology, which can be described as an outburst:

« Excédée, elle déclare en avoir *ras-le-bol* qu'on culpabilise celles qui se défrisent les cheveux, assez qu'on les pointe du doigt, qu'on les dise honteuses de leur couleur comme si le noir disparaissait avec le défrisage, comme si les gens étaient tout à coup plus aimables, comme s'il était plus simple de trouver un logement. » ³⁷³

The narration of Kimmy's outburst begins with one ongoing sentence made up of sixty words, a cascade of dependent clauses that describe external judgements about her hairstyle choice with which Kimmy is "fed up." The structure of this single sentence mimics the way an upset child expresses themselves to their parent when they've reached their breaking point, a tantrum of sorts, which is in line with her description as "la plus jeune de la troupe."

In kind with the figure of mother, Coco "calme la fureur de sa jeune cliente" and "entraîne l'enragée à l'écart pour la coiffer elle-même." ³⁷⁴ Coco's response, to separate her from the group for some individualized care within the collective space, echoes the actions of a parent seeking to soothe an emotionally exceeded child, constituting a form of mothering. This interaction further corroborates the notion that hair as a collectively instantiated practice amongst

³⁷³ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 42-3.

³⁷⁴ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 43.

Black women is inextricably interweaved with a collective ethics of care as well as an intergenerational transmission of knowledge and cultural values that, in combination, work to heal the individual and collective traumas reflected in the pain Kimmy expresses connected to the various legibilities of her hair. Further, according to Rajan-Rankin, the touch involved in Black hair care “represents an important socio-cultural ritual through which collective belonging is experienced. It is through touch and touch biographies that collective belonging is established, by reinstating cultural practices that are not immediately present, evoking memories of intergenerational and transnational intimacies with black communities in another time and another place.”³⁷⁵ The representation of this socio-cultural ritual is then critical to Miano’s aesthetic forging of an Afropean imaginary, as well as its connection to both the past and the future.

Politics vs. Pragmatics of Black Hair Practices

Although Miano positions Kimmy’s character as the most infantile in this scene, she is careful not to infantilize her perspective, offering a substantial depth of information about the very adult circumstances from which derive Kimmy’s acute moment of frustration. While Elise’s hair ideology privileges aesthetic preference, Kimmy’s beliefs center survival within a racist and capitalist system. She cites a conversation with the Human Resources department of her job in which she was told not to be “trop ethnique,” and that “une coiffure conventionnelle convenait mieux à l’image de la société.”³⁷⁶ She talks about her desire to keep her job and her struggle to find one in the first place. The narrator also offers a view to the reader into Kimmy’s psyche as she negotiates a reconciliation between her choice to wear her hair straight and widely held tropes of Black authenticity: “Elle ne sent pas moins noire qu’une autre.” Her statements on

³⁷⁵ Rajan-Rankin, Sweta. “Material intimacies and black hair practice: Touch, texture, resistance.” *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 29, no. 3, (2021), pp. 162.

³⁷⁶ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp, 42-3.

shame and authenticity are reminiscent to what Shirley Tate describes in *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame* to be a “positioning of herself as undeniably Black irrespective of...hair texture based on her political positioning as Black because of African descent,”³⁷⁷ a practice Tate found her interlocuters to use to negotiate their feelings of exteriority in the liminal space created by being a Black woman with a non-kinky hair type. In modeling this perspective via Kimmy’s stream of consciousness, Miano not only helps the reader to understand the positioning of Black hair within the system of racial capitalism and vis-à-vis tropes of authenticity within the community of Black women, but she gives voice to an argument for the legitimization of the variety and versatility of Black hair, including straight styles as yet another embodiment of Blackness. She is doing the work of dismantling whiteness as the archetype and purveyor of straight hair, offering up an alternative to both the white male gaze as well as to some prevalent ideologies long held by members of the Black community.

Further, it is important to note that while politics and economics govern the capitalist state within which Kimmy operates, she is adamant that her choice of hairstyling, in her case, straight hair-styling, is not centered around making a political statement. The grammar of her hair as imbued by her, the wearer, is much more pragmatic than it is political. She wears her hair straight to facilitate her existence in the working class and her survival despite the capitalist machine. There is however a distance between the grammar of her hair, the meaning she imparts in styling it or rather the lack thereof, and the legibility of her hair of which she is aware. As she states, her straight styles are understood as evidence that she is “honteuse de [sa] couleur” and that she is “moins noire” than those who choose not to straighten their hair,³⁷⁸ even though she

³⁷⁷ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018). & Tate, Shirley Anne. *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*. Routledge, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), pp. 89.

³⁷⁸ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 43.

vigorously opposes this external interpretation of her hair practices. In this way, Miano is also working through the perspective of Kimmy's character to problematize exclusively political readings of Black women's hair practices and doing the work of extracting the legibility of Black women's hair from the racial dialectic of power, even if the pragmatics of Kimmy's hairstyle choice still operate within the socio-economic structures of racial capitalism.

Similarly, Miano's crafting of Elise's perspective also encourages criticism of exclusively political readings of Black hair style choices, as she strongly and directly opposes them:

“Pour elle, cette approche politique de la beauté vise, sans qu'on s'en aperçoive, à limiter l'épanouissement de femmes que l'Histoire a suffisamment entravées. C'est une régression à laquelle elle ne souscrit pas. Elle est venue ici, ce matin pour se faire poser un tissage Naomi : des mèches longues qui lui balaieront les épaules, feront se retourner les hommes sur son passage. Au diable les afro-terroristes, les activistes de la fierté raciale. Nul ne lui dictera les codes de sa liberté. ”³⁷⁹

Her allusion to Black British supermodel Naomi Campbell evokes, among other things³⁸⁰, the aestheticism of hairstyle choice, with her description of her hair style of choice emphasizing a desire for the attention of the opposite sex. While the connection between sexual attraction and straight hair is typically read as heritage of the prevailing colonial imaginary related to desirability and the Eurocentric beauty ideal, the desire to attract a mate is much less political than it is pragmatic. As a widow who spends a fair amount of time talking to herself, as

³⁷⁹ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 47-8.

³⁸⁰ This reference to the fashion modeling industry also evokes notions of sexism and capitalism, the commodification of bodies (disproportionately female bodies) for capitalist gain, as well as the exclusionary practices of the modelling industry related to racism, fatism/fat-phobia, and ableism.

is evidenced later in the novel,³⁸¹ she is seeking companionship and disagrees entirely with the notion that her hairstyling is an attempted performance of whiteness. Furthermore, while straight hair is a component of the Eurocentric beauty ideal, although naturally occurring in some Black people as well, and while the prevailing Black narrative has been that a desire of straighter hair in Black people is a lasting effect of a global history of imperialism and slavery, Elise's character sees this relegation of Black hair practices as antiquated—"une régression," that prevents Black women from thriving³⁸². She sees the exclusively political reading of Black hair as something of the past: "elle ne comprend pas qu'on discute encore tout cela aujourd'hui."³⁸³ Instead, for Elise, the ability to separate straight styles from political legibility is a thing of the future, a notion that is corroborated by her employment of a lexicon of time, including words such as "encore," "aujourd'hui," "modernité," and "Histoire,"³⁸⁴ as well as Miano's use of the future tense in narrating Elise's declaration that "nul ne lui dictera les codes de sa liberté."³⁸⁵ Through Elise, Miano offers the concept of a future that is not overdetermined by the past, that includes Black women's aesthetic liberty to choose from all hairstyles—kinky, straight, and in-between, and that in this way does not determine Blackness and Black aesthetics based on their proximity to whiteness. Through Elise's perspectives, Miano decenters whiteness as the referent, as is also reflected by Elise's statement that when Black women wear straight styles, "elles conservent leur propre esthétique, leur style unique,"³⁸⁶ asserting that while both Black and white women may wear straight hair styles, Black women do so differently. The notion of conservation of a Black

³⁸¹ On page 155-6 on the novel, the reader finds Élise « dans le silence de l'appartement où il n'y avait plus qu'elle. » «Élise avait, avec elle-même, les conversations qu'ils auraient dû avoir ensemble. » My translation : "in the silence of her apartment where there is no one but her," "Elise had, with herself, the conversations that they would have had together."

³⁸² As evidenced by the use of the term "l'épanouissement," (blossoming) in the aforementioned quote.

³⁸³ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 47.

³⁸⁴ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 47.

³⁸⁵ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 48.

³⁸⁶ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 47.

aesthetic is in line with the Kimmy's perspective, as she, too, lobbies for the fact that affirming Blackness and hair straightening are not mutually exclusive practices, as previously mentioned in this chapter.

A Family of Individuals

Miano's structuring of this scene with two Black women, Kimmy and Élise, who prefer straight styles and two Black women, Bijou and Akasha, who prefer traditionally African hairstyles³⁸⁷ in the care of the hairdresser-as-mother-figure, Coco, not only emphasizes a collective familial structure whereby the four women become sisters in front of the backdrop of Black hair practices and ideologies but emphasizes individuality by nuancing these ideologies through her detailed descriptions of their perspectives. In this way, the structure of the scene is analogous to a global community of Black women in the Diaspora, a family founded not only on phenotypical and genotypical traits but on a shared transatlantic past and present. While they are presently collective in navigating a worldwide beauty industry where whiteness has prevailed as the icon and Black features have been rejected until their appropriation on white bodies—Black hairstyles on white heads—they are also individual in curating their own Black aesthetics, choosing their own hair practices. In emphasizing both collective aspects, especially the aspects of family and collective care, and individual aspects of this conversation around Black women's hair choice, Miano makes visible and tangible the notions of Black belonging and Black heterogeneity in tandem, and ultimately brings Black women's humanity into view.

³⁸⁷ Akasha wears locs which, according to Victoria Sherrow, author of *Encyclopedia of Hair, A Cultural History*, originated in East Africa, with Ethiopian priests being some of the first to dawn this style around 500BCE, although the history of the style in this area may be even older as African hair textures lend themselves naturally to locking.

Disalienation through Apoliticism in All-Black Spaces

Like this, Miano's Black women-centered gaze operationalizes collectivism and individuality in this conversation in a way that is similar to their operationalization by the Mwasi-Collectif in their introduction of the notion of flamboyance within a lexicon of familial ties as discussed in Chapter 1 of this work, and by Boni-Claverie in her chapter "De bons cheveux" as she makes mention of the "ancêtres," and creates a global Black collective based on genotypical and phenotypical commonalities which this work analyzed in Chapter 2. Miano also houses the conversation in an all-Black-women's venue (Coco Prestige) on a nearly all-Black street mirroring the idea of exclusively Black safe spaces, an idea for which Mwasi-Collectif advocates in *Afrofem* and which they manifest at their recurring festival, Nyansapo, and an idea which is supported by other Black activist groups in the Diaspora, such as Black Lives Matter, and by prevalent Black French women in the media, such as Rokhaya Diallo.³⁸⁸

In depicting this conversation between these four Black women, Miano continues to lay bare the distance between the grammar and legibility of Black hair introduced by Kimmy. While Kimmy and Élise share a preference for straight styles, the origins of those feelings as expressed by each of the characters are dissimilar, thus individual; while Kimmy is concerned with survival through access to financial means, Élise is concerned with aesthetic expression and romantic companionship. The grammar—the meaning they embed into their hairstyle practices—is thus socioeconomic, pragmatic, and aesthetic. However, the legibility of these women's hairstyles by their sisters within this collective familial context, particularly by Akasha is political and psychological.

³⁸⁸ See Diallo's collection of Black French hair testimonies, *Afro* (2016), or her 2021 documentary, *La Parisienne démystifiée*.

“Akasha lance qu’on peut toujours dire ce qu’on veut : la quête d’une chevelure lisse est la marque de l’aliénation, de la détestation de soi...même les rajouts doivent être abandonnés. Il n’y a qu’à se faire tresser les cheveux ou les laisser tels quels. Courts. Ras. »³⁸⁹

As Miano’s novel functions as a microcosm of various archetypal French figures, Akasha’s viewpoint is representative of some Black French natural hair wearers, and is also a perspective that has been popularized in academia, in Black pop culture at large, and within some Black activist movements.³⁹⁰ Examples of this psychologization and politicization of straight Black hair can be found in the scholarly and theoretical works of Frantz Fanon³⁹¹ and Juliette Smeralda, for instance. The issue is also taken up by Shirley Tate in *Governmentality* where she considers the shame produced by tropes of Black authenticity related to straighter hair, particularly in women of mixed origins, a shame that she argues produces alienation in a similar fashion to the alienation produced by white iconicity.³⁹² Building on these concepts, it becomes apparent that Black women who choose straight styles can find themselves in a liminal space between white iconicity and Black authenticity, confronted with a double shame and a double silencing. In this liminal space, the choice to wear straight styles and actively profess the apolitical grammar of these straight styles becomes the most effective form of disalienation, as

³⁸⁹ Miano, Léonora. *Blues pour Élise*. (2010), pp. 45.

³⁹⁰ Such as the Black Power Movement in the 1960’s and 1970’s United States.

³⁹¹ In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon claims “It is because the Black woman feels inferior that she aspires to win admittance into the white world,” for instance. (59-60).

³⁹² Tate considers the positionality of mixed race Black women with lighter skin and straighter hair vis-à-vis their darker-skinned, kinkier-haired counterparts, demonstrating that tropes of Black authenticity are shame and silence producing for these women.

exemplified by the arguments of Kimmy and Élise, which conform to Tate's model of translation as reflexivity³⁹³ in a movement toward subjectivation.³⁹⁴

À mains nues

Nsafou's 2017 novel, *À mains nues*, has for its protagonist Sibylle, a Black Swedish woman in her twenties, building romantic and platonic relationships with people while working through an intense phobia of touching and being touched. Sibylle's phobia figuring so prominently within the novel engages this project's themes of corporeality, aesthetics, and embodiment. Additionally, in keeping with this project, her hair reveals a connectedness with Blackness although growing up and living in a country that has historically been rather ethnically homogenous, with white people being the majority.³⁹⁵

An Authentic Swedish Woman

At first glance, one might question the staging of this novel in Sweden, considering Nsafou's having grown up in and living currently in France. Nsafou notes that she spent some time there and was particularly struck by how her French identity was more readily accepted abroad than at home.³⁹⁶ However, France and Sweden share some very particular political and social attributes, specifically: 1) both France and Sweden were involved in the trade of enslaved Africans, a fact that is minimized in both countries' national histories, 2) both countries

³⁹³ According to Tate, "women position themselves as being made to feel shame but reposition themselves as not ashamed or shameful through the use of critique," on page 37 of *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame: Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*.

³⁹⁴ The importance of making room for apolitical legibility of Black hair practices is discussed in the second chapter of this project. Here the characters of Kimmy and Élise are calling on this legibility by explicitly highlighting an apolitical grammar—the meaning of their hairstyle choices for themselves.

³⁹⁵ See Katja Antoine's "The Swedish Disconnect" and Monica Miller's "Figuring Blackness in a Place without Race: Sweden, Recently."

³⁹⁶ Le Gall, Pauline. "Laura Nsafou veut ajouter sa voix à la littérature afropéenne. » *Cheek Magazine*. April 4, 2017.

participated in the European colonial enterprise, 3) both countries participated in scientific racism, 4) both countries have taken on a politics of color-blindness as it relates to race, removing race as a legal category of identity. Given Nsafou's political and social engagement and her work with Afrofeminist groups like Mwasi-Collectif, this choice of setting is not likely to be haphazard, and offers a lens by which aspects of French national politics and social life specifically relating to race can be critiqued in an alternate landscape.

This becomes particularly poignant when assessing the national heritage of the principal characters: Sibylle, Nikolaï, Matza, Majke, Kaïsa, and Saad. Of these six characters, only Sibylle is confirmed to actually be born and raised in Sweden, a fact that calls to question archetypes of Swedish, and by proxy, French, and European citizenship as exclusively and essentially white. Her Swedish childhood home offers the setting for several scenes within the plot, including the final scene, reinforcing her belonging and validity as a Swedish woman and her claim to the land. Furthermore, she is the first person to introduce the Swedish language into the text, and outside of Matza's repetition of her phrase "Jag älskar dig," ("I love you"), she is the only one in the entire novel to speak any Swedish. Her command of the Swedish language can be read as analogous of claims to the French language on the part of Black and brown people within and beyond the Hexagon. This recalls the perspective of Alain Mabanckou and Achille Mbembe in "Plaidoyer pour une langue-monde." They point out that French has become "une langue africaine, one that has been inflected with autochthonous African languages, and irreversibly so. Similarly, Swedish is Sibylle's language, and her claim to it challenges the legibility of Blackness as non-European or non-French. In fact, it connects Blackness and Europeanness/Frenchness, offering a linguistic depiction of what it means to be Afropean. Mabanckou and Mbembe explain that « dès qu'il s'agit de la langue, la distinction ethno-

nationalitaire entre « eux » et « nous », ou encore « nous » et « les étrangers » n'a plus aucune valeur. »³⁹⁷ In this same way, Sibylle's claim to the Swedish language alongside her presence in the novel as the sole confirmed Swede legitimizes Afropean belonging in France and throughout Europe.

Positive In/visibility, Femininity, and Humanity

Because the novel follows Sibylle on her journey to overcoming her haphephobia,³⁹⁸ the novel renders Sibylle's body hypervisible throughout but does so in keeping with a Black women-centered perspective. In the first part of her journey, approximately the first half of the book, Sibylle's feelings of phobia are acute, and her desire to understand and overcome them colors a large portion of Nsafou's discursive representation of her body, gestures, and internal dialogue. Nsafou's opening description of Sibylle provides a clear example of this bodily hypervisibility centered around emotions of both fear and overcoming. Sibylle is first encountered lying on her bathroom floor as is her ritual after she has had a "crise" upon coming into physical contact with another person. The hypervisibility of Sibylle's body and hair is immediately embedded within a lexicon of physiological emotionality. The tying of these attributes counterbalances typical representations of Black women's physical beings under the white male gaze as solely erotic, ugly, and/or inhuman. Words such as, "comprendre," "pensées," "honte," and "peur" emphasize an emotional and cerebral component of Sibylle's humanity that has tended to be invisibilized in the mainstream's monolithic representation of Black women. Her body and hair, including her body hair, while figuring prominently in the passage are less erotic figures and more a complex illustration of both beauty and physiological

³⁹⁷ Mbembe, Achille and Alain Mabanckou. « Plaidoyer pour une langue-monde. Abolir les frontières du français », *Revue du Crieur*, vol. 10, no. 2, (2018).

³⁹⁸ Fear of being touched and touching.

responses to fear and concern. While mentions of “ses doigts,” “ses lèvres,” “son visage,” “sa peau,” “ses genoux” as well as “ses mèches noires et frisées” and “les poils de ses bras” make up the larger part of the first page, the focus of the passage is the suspenseful introduction of her phobia, framed by the repetition of the word “pourquoi” until the paragraph comes to a close with the question “Pourquoi avait-elle peur qu’on la touche?” As this is the reader’s introduction to both the novel and its main character, this blending of Sibylle’s bodily aesthetic, thoughts, and emotions from the perspective of a Black women-centered gaze emphasizes her humanity and sets the tone for the rest of the narrative.

Not only does this contradict mainstream representations of Black women as purely sexual objects by emphasizing her humanity, but Nsafou’s representation furthermore encourages the reader to *connect* with Sibylle’s humanity and to experience beside and through her. The description of the prickling of the hairs on her arms, and her lips and hands which seem to move of their own volition as her thoughts are elsewhere, coupled with Nsafou’s use of terms like “frisson” and “crispée” help the reader to empathize with Sibylle, to feel what she feels. Meanwhile, the depiction of Sibylle’s wet hair creating an “auréole” suggests something of an angelic beauty about her, and affirms the “vagues épaisses” of her “mèches noires et frisées” as well as her “lèvres lippues,” as Nsafou foremostly associates Sibylle, although presumably naked, with a symbol of beauty and purity, attributes that were and tend to be exclusively associated with white women by the mainstream. Being that this description of Sibylle is the introduction to both the character and the novel, this chronological primacy elevates Sibylle’s Black beauty as the standard of beauty for the context of the entire novel, although set in Sweden, thus setting up Blackness as the standard of beauty in Sweden, and in Europe by proxy. Sibylle’s Black beauty as the standard is a notion that holds true throughout the novel as this

chapter later demonstrates Sibylle's desirability over and beyond that of the two white women that figure most prominently in the plot.

In keeping with this more or less desexualized yet hypervisible framing of Sibylle's body throughout the better part of the first half of the novel, Nsafou's depiction of Sibylle offers a representation that displaces the white male gazer by removing the attributes that typically accompany white representations of Black women's bodies from her descriptions. Instead, Nsafou centers the embodied experiences of Sibylle, an embodied experience largely of fear and vulnerability. This not only counters the stereotypical representation of the "strong Black woman," but also "re-genders" Black women, in the sense that it provides a remedy for the "ungendering" of Black female flesh to which Hortense Spillers refers in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." The violence of slavery and colonialism and their aftermaths, including police brutality against Black women such as what is mentioned in "Qui nous protège de la police?" in *Afrofem* and treated in the first chapter of this work, separate Black women from their femininity, rendering them non-women and non-human. When the reader experiences an acute moment of Sibylle's phobia for the first time, Saad, a childhood friend and future love interest places himself in front of her in a crowd of people so as to protect her from their impending touches.³⁹⁹ In illustrating the embodiments of fearfulness and vulnerability in Sibylle, as well as moments where she is protected by those around her, Nsafou is emphasizing Sibylle's femininity⁴⁰⁰ and affirming the femininity of Black women as a whole. Nsafou is also humanizing Sibylle, and by extension Black women, by offering a window into her psychology via her expressions of fear, anxiety, panic, and vulnerability, emotions that help

³⁹⁹ Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018).

⁴⁰⁰ I use femininity here in the traditional sense, although it is important to acknowledge the inherent cultural biases and cis-hetero-normativity embedded into the notions of femininity and masculinity.

to connect the reader to the humanity of her character by presenting her as a fully-developed character.

At the same time, Sibylle's phobia and its accompanying feelings of fear, anxiety, and panic require Sibylle to exert control over her physical interactions with others as she does with Saad when she tells him "ne bouge pas" as she caresses his fingers with her gloved hand,⁴⁰¹ when she ignores Matza's words upon meeting him in Paris quieting him in favor of a two-minute long embrace to allow herself to calm her social anxieties.⁴⁰² In Nsafou's holding space for this exertion of control, she demonstrates Sibylle's physical agency and autonomy and her capacity to make her own decisions about her body, who touches it, and how and when it can be touched. This depicts Black women as powerful over and owners of their own bodies, proverbially undoing the objectification of Black women under the white male gaze, as well as the commodification of Black women's bodies and aesthetics by the mainstream historically through the processes of the triangular trade, chattel slavery, and colonialism, and currently within the beauty industry and media and film industries, as is discussed in *Afrofem*, *Noire n'est pas mon métier*, and *Trop noire pour être française*, and explored in the first two chapters of this project. Consequential to her exertion of control over her body is her exertion of control over her relationships through physical and emotional boundary-setting. Paradoxically, while she expresses feelings of powerlessness at times in relation to her phobia, she tends to be quite powerful in her relationships. For example, when Sibylle's dress rips while bike-riding with Nikolai, her well-to-do Russian boyfriend and future ex-fiancé, and he offers to buy her a new one, she refuses: « Merci, dit-elle. Je sais très bien m'occuper de moi. » When Nikolai says that he does not understand why she constantly refuses his gifts, she continues « Venant de toi, ce ne

⁴⁰¹ Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018).

⁴⁰² Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018), pp. 105.

sont pas des cadeaux mais carrément un moyen de m’entretenir. »⁴⁰³ While Sibylle does accept some of these gifts at various points in their relationship, she makes it known in this moment that she cannot be bought and will not be controlled by his money.⁴⁰⁴ This is a particularly powerful move on her part, as Nikolaï is wealthy and accustomed to having his desires met by his financial means. She ultimately rejects his most significant gift, a *brudkrona* that is customarily worn by Swedish brides.

The symbol of the *brudkrona* is diegetically significant, but also significant in the real world as a claim to Swedish cultural heritage and by proxy, French and European cultural heritage, on the part of Black and Brown people. A google image search of “*brudkrona*” in September 2023 reveals absolutely no Black or Brown women donning the traditional wedding headdress. This tradition is represented as exclusively white. The marriage crown is generally passed on within a family from mother to daughter and so forth. However, with Sibylle’s mother being absent from the narrative, Nikolaï’s suggestion that “la tradition commencerait avec [Sibylle],” can be read as a call to usher in a new era of racially inclusive cultural tradition. Furthermore, though she never wears the crown before returning it to Nikolaï upon breaking up with him, the imagery of the crown—its “tiges,” “brindilles,” “métale” and “gravures”—is painstakingly detailed, allowing for the reader to clearly imagine its home on Sibylle’s “mèches frisées,” highlighted at various points throughout the narrative.⁴⁰⁵ Given the near exclusively white imagery of Swedish culture in general, this imagining is particularly striking. Tying Sibylle’s Swedishness to something that adorns her head and hair works to legitimize Black hair, as well as the plurality of racial and ethnic origins that ascribe to themselves a Swedish national

⁴⁰³ Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018), pp. 152.

⁴⁰⁴ One could argue that this is also a commentary against capitalist power and control as well as the quotidian functions of classism in social relationships.

⁴⁰⁵ Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018), pp. 361.

identity (and a French national identity by way of analogy), as hair is one of if not the most principal bodily racial signifier⁴⁰⁶ according to Synnott, Mercer, and Gordien. Furthermore, the symbol of the brudkrona being in essence a crown, and described in the novel as a “couronne” connotes both regality and power and connects them with Black hair and a Black aesthetic, in general, which again demonstrates the empowerment of Nsafou’s Black women-centered gaze.

As the novel centers the body, the organizing structure of the narrative is based upon the progression of Sibylle’s embodied experiences of being completely unwilling to touch and be touched and perpetually striving to be untouched to her experience in the final pages of the novel where she is ultimately pregnant, arguably the most absolute and total form of touching and being touched. Because of a near constant attention to Sibylle’s physiology and psychology on the part of Nsafou, each scene within the story is anchored on this continuum from completely touchless to completely touching with the climax being Sibylle’s climax—her first experience of orgasm. This is the first scene where Sibylle’s choice in controlling other’s encounters with the physical material of her body is not rejection but direction or domination. It takes place in her childhood home, a place that intrinsically grounds her with a certain amount of authority as the place is specific and known to her and to and of which Matza has no attachment or knowledge. The moments leading up to her physical climax are described as follows:

« Ses doigts glissèrent alors sur l’avant-bras de l’Allemand, effleurant ses poils drus. Ils suivirent la courbe de son poignet, dévalèrent les rides de ses phalanges avant de s’entremêler à ses doigts. La respiration lente du danseur brisait le silence. La main de Sibylle se referma sur la sienne, et la guida vers le bas de son ventre. Elle garda les yeux clos. Leurs mains glissèrent dans

⁴⁰⁶ In « Shame and Glory : a sociology of hair », Synnott asserts that “Hair is perhaps our most powerful symbol of individual and group identity,” on page 381. Likewise in « Black Hair/Style Politics,” Mercer states on page 35 that “Where race structures social relations of power, hair- as visible as skin colour, but also the most tangible sign of racial difference- takes on another forcefully symbolic dimension.” This is also in line with Ary Gordien’s perspective in “The Afro, more than a hairstyle.”

son sous-vêtement. Il ouvrit les yeux. Elle sentit ses doigts s'enfoncer lentement entre ses cuisses. » ⁴⁰⁷

The actions that initiate this first complete sexual encounter⁴⁰⁸ are all done by Sibylle. The first action made by “l’Allemand” (Matza) is to open his eyes, a passive gesture. It is Sibylle who touches his arm, whose fingers rush over his, whose hand guides his towards her underwear. The use of the term “dévaler” is particularly remarkable, as it expresses a complete lack of timidity. Sibylle is bold, resolute, and dominant⁴⁰⁹ in this moment—over her sexual encounter, over her body, over her white male partner. This inversion of the dialectic of power both sexually and generally contrasts with the historical power dynamic between white men and Black women in which Black women were subjugated and frequently sexually violated by white colonizers, as well as those who participated in the buying and selling of enslaved Africans. In this moment, the novel’s protagonist is sexualized, and although this depiction is typical of Black women under the white male gaze, this sexualization occurs on Nsafou’s terms. By positioning this encounter with a Black women-centered perspective, Sibylle is penetrated (digitally) but without violence. She maintains control of the encounter. Additionally, she is not presented as animalistic or monstrous. All in all, Nsafou offers a very different sexualization of Black women than what is typical of the white male gaze.

This representation of the sexual prowess of Black women is in this moment hypervisible, but not negatively so, as the structure of the novel, with Sibylle’s embodiment of fear and anxiety so present in its first half, serves to emphasize her humanity and femininity (in

⁴⁰⁷ Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018), pp. 234.

⁴⁰⁸ Complete in that it ends with orgasm as opposed to a rejection by Sibylle or an interruption by another character in the story.

⁴⁰⁹ In kink, someone who is dominant controls what takes place during a sexual encounter and often what the other party does. Although Sibylle is the one being penetrated (known as “bottoming” in opposition to “topping” which is Matza’s place in this encounter), Matza still plays the submissive role here.

the western traditional sense) and provides a certain level of balance. Furthermore, in that this scene occurs on page 233 of the novel, Nsafou practices a politics of care, akin to Sharpe's notion of Black redaction, that requires the reader to do the intellectual and emotional labor of acquainting themselves with and understanding Sibylle, whose psyche is made plain on the page throughout, before witnessing her orgasm—a scene which if placed earlier in the narrative would likely be read as pornographic, and thus would enact a certain level of violence on the humanity of Black women.

It is also worth noting that this scene does not include vaginal intercourse with Matza's penis, nor is there mention of the penis or an orgasm on his part. Only “ses doigts humides”⁴¹⁰ penetrate Sibylle guided by her own hands, and only Sibylle experiences climax, and several in fact. The choice to omit the symbol of the phallus, and specifically the white phallus, here can be read as a Black feminist redaction that downplays the virility of white men to emphasize the sexual power and control of Black women. This becomes particularly salient when paired with Robin Mitchell's *Venus Noire* in which she argues that the figure of the Black woman, such as was represented by the Hottentot Venus as well as in colonial exhibitions, functioned to shore up white male virility in France following the loss of the Haitian colony.⁴¹¹ In removing the white penis from view in this scene, she essentially flips this misuse of the real and imagined Black woman to shore up the sexual agency of Black women through the character of Sibylle. As Nsafou explains in an interview about the novel, “En général, la sexualité est dictée par le regard masculin. C'était un acte de réappropriation formidable de parler du plaisir féminin.”⁴¹²

⁴¹⁰ Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018), pp. 234.

⁴¹¹ Mitchell, Robin. *Venus Noire: Black Women and Colonial Fantasies in Nineteenth-Century France*. (The University of Georgia Press, 2018), pp. 109.

⁴¹² ⁴¹² Le Gall, Pauline. “Laura Nsafou veut ajouter sa voix à la littérature afropéenne. » *Cheek Magazine*. April 4, 2017.

Finally, assuming a linear construction of heterosexual sex—foreplay, intercourse, orgasm⁴¹³—that generally culminates in a male orgasm and penile ejaculation, it becomes significant that the final line in this scene depicts Sibylle’s orgasm instead of an orgasm by Matza or a mutual orgasm. This, too, is evidentiary of a Black women-centered gaze, wherein the white male orgasm is removed as the bearer of finality, the man is not due an orgasm, and, consequentially, it is not necessary that he have one for the scene to be complete and come to an end. In leaving out the white male orgasm in this scene, she disconnects the power to end the scene and to end the sexual encounter from the white male. Through the representation of Sibylle’s orgasm as the final note in the scene, it is her orgasm that in fact ends the scene; Nsafou places Sybille, and consequentially Black women, in the position of power over their bodies and their sexual encounters.

Alongside illustrating the power of Black women, Nsafou also elevates Sibylle as the most desirable woman in the novel. Furthermore, she does not derive this desirability from a purely sexual apperception of Black women. In fact, the relationship between Sibylle and Saad (the first man introduced in the novel) never becomes sexual, at all. Sibylle is the paramount romantic interest of each of the three men who figure prominently in the work, Saad, Matza, and Nikolaï. She is responsible for ending the relationship with each of them at various points throughout the narrative. Further, both Kaïsa (Saad’s partner following his breakup with Sibylle, and the former partner of Matza) and Majke (Matza’s partner following his breakup with Sibylle) express feelings of having been romantically subordinated to their partner’s desire for Sibylle. For instance, in a conversation with Sibylle upon her return to Stockholm after some years, Kaïsa

⁴¹³ Jackson, Stevi and Sue Scott. “Embodying Orgasm.” *Women & Therapy*, vol. 24, no. 1–2, (2002), pp. 104.

makes several comments related to her relationships with both Saad and Matza that speaks to a particular elevation of Sibylle in the eyes of these two men:

« Tu as toujours fasciné des gens comme Saad. Ou encore Matza, sans même t'en rendre compte[...]Entre lui et moi, ça n'a pas toujours été que platonique[...]Mais toi, il t'a toujours regardé différemment[...]vous vous êtes rapprochés et j'ai vu cette étrange attraction entre vous[...]J'étais quelqu'un d'insipide à côté de toi. » ⁴¹⁴

Nsafou's crafting of Kaïsa's language in this dialogue serves two purposes. The first is to express the diegetic fact that both of Kaïsa's lovers have been attracted to Sibylle and more interested in Sibylle than Kaïsa. The second is to depict a voyeuristic kind of fascination with an otherized Sibylle, marked by the words "fasciné," "regardé différemment," "étrange attraction," and "insipide," on the part of Kaïsa, a white woman, and perceived by Kaïsa as also on the part of Matza (a white man) and Saad (a Kuwaiti-American man). In simultaneously demonstrating both of these things within Sibylle's dialogue with Kaïsa, she valorizes Black women's desirability in a way that is not grounded in a sexual fetishization of the body as the body is not present in the dialogue, while also noting a fixation on Sibylle's perceived alterity on the part of the white and male gaze.⁴¹⁵

Sibylle's desirability is also highlighted by Majke's choice to hide letters that Sibylle wrote to Matza for fear that he would choose her over Majke, which he ultimately does upon finding the hidden letters. In the final scene between Majke and Matza, in the midst of an argument over Sibylle's letters that culminates in the end of their relationship, Majke expresses the extent to which Sibylle is more desirable to Matza than she is, even though Majke helped him learn to walk again after a bus accident left him paralyzed:

⁴¹⁴ Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018), pp. 279.

⁴¹⁵ The term "and" in "white and male gaze" is employed here to denote the fact that Kaïsa while white does not identify as male in this novel, and while Saad is male he is of color.

« Tu la regardes encore, alors qu'elle t'a lâchement abandonné au moment où tu en avais le plus besoin. S'est-elle excusée ? T'a-t-elle demandé pardon ? Pardon d'avoir raté ces semaines durant lesquelles tu réapprenais à marcher ? Où tu étais seul dans ta chambre ? Où était-elle quand je t'aidais à te relever dans la baignoire ? »⁴¹⁶

Although, of the two women, Majke has done the work to merit a continued relationship with Matza, and Sibylle has “spinelessly abandoned” him, Matza’s desire for Sibylle is still so strong that it is visually ascertainable by Majke. She continues:

« J’ai vu comment tu la regardais au dîner, tu sais ?...Tu crois que, derrière ces lettres cela ne l’empêchait pas de baiser avec son homme ?...J’étais là, moi, ça ne compte pas à tes yeux ? »⁴¹⁷

Even Sibylle’s sexual relationship with another man, albeit her fiancé, does not quell Matza’s desire for her, or make his current partner Majke more desirable than Sibylle, although she was physically, mentally, and emotionally available for Matza when Sibylle was wholly absent. In fact, Matza’s response to Majke’s question is a flat “non.”⁴¹⁸ When Majke explains her reason for having hid the letters, she admits that she was afraid and that she thought “qu’elle allait [le] reprendre.”⁴¹⁹ The act of taking inherent in the meaning of the verb “reprendre” disempowers both Majke and Matza, the white man and the white woman, and reifies the white man, rendering him a thing to be taken. Majke’s fear was that an all-powerful Sibylle would *take* him back, as if he were a pawn, an object even, with no say in his own romantic affairs, unable to resist her desirability, the level of which being so much higher than Majke’s that she stood no chance, had no power at all.

⁴¹⁶ Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018), pp. 369.

⁴¹⁷ Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018), pp. 370-1.

⁴¹⁸ Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018), pp. 371.

⁴¹⁹ Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018), pp. 373.

Ultimately, Matza chooses a romantic relationship with Sibylle, a Black woman, over a romantic relationship with Majke, a white woman, an event in the story that valorizes Black women in a way that they have not been historically. While sexual relationships with Black women, either voluntary or via rape, and typically or even exclusively the latter,⁴²⁰ were not uncommon, white men entering into romantic relationships with Black women, particularly within the contexts of slavery and colonialism, was much more so. In the contemporary moment, while representations of interracial relationships have become more common in mainstream media, white men's relationships with Black women tend to be more sexualized than romantic,⁴²¹ with Black women often playing the mistress engaged in a sexual affair with a white man married to a white woman. Instead of continuing this mainstream trope, Nsafou employs a Black women-centered perspective to offer up a representation of Sibylle as more desirable than both Majke and Kaïsa. In fact, Sibylle is so desirable that she has the power to "take" Matza, a white man, as her partner in a dynamic relationship that is just as romantic as it is sexual, being that their relationship was originally nonsexual as a function of Sibylle's phobia that impelled her control over the nature of their physical relationship. This representation stands in direct opposition to the static one-dimensional sexual relationships that have become both historically and contemporarily commonplace from the perspective of the white male gaze.

Not only is the desirability of Black women elevated as it relates to romantic relationships based on the testaments of both Kaïsa and Majke as well as Matza's choice to be with Sibylle, but so too is there a valorization of Black women's aesthetics echoed in Majke's and Matza's descriptions of Sybille's physical being. After Sibylle has dinner at their home,

⁴²⁰ One can argue that the dynamics of power inherent to slavery and colonialism make true consent impossible.

⁴²¹ Imani Cheers investigates this phenomenon in her book, *The Evolution of Black Women in Television: Mammies, Matriarchs and Mistresses*.

Majke states that Matza had not told her that Sibylle was “aussi belle.”⁴²² She goes on to say that Sibylle has “une sorte de prestance presque intimidante” and that she is “très jolie,” suggesting beauty, elegance, and power simultaneously. Meanwhile, Matza’s interior dialogue informs the reader of “des détails infimes à l’œil nu qui lui revenaient parfois, sans qu’il ne s’y attende,” including the way she puts on her lipstick, the way the sunlight illuminates her right eye, and the subtle curvature between her bottom lip and chin.⁴²³ The fact that his memories of these fine aesthetic details related to Sibylle surface unexpectedly further suggests that her beauty is so powerful as to dominate his mind even in absence of her physical being.

Nsafou’s Black women-centered gaze perpetually depicts Sibylle as a source of power and control, be it in moments when she struggles with her phobia as previously discussed, throughout her exploration of newfound sexuality as she overcomes her phobia, and finally as she dominates her relationships and the minds of her lovers towards the end of the novel. While feelings of fear and anxiety guide her setting of boundaries in the first part of the novel, her feelings gradually transition towards an acknowledgement, acceptance, and valorization of the self. In all cases, Sibylle is always ultimately in control.

Conclusions

As previously mentioned, this chapter does the work of beginning to fill gaps in scholarship on both Nsafou’s and Miano’s novels. While Miano’s work is the subject of a wide body of scholarship, *Blues pour Élise* has not been sufficiently examined as it relates to Black women’s aesthetics, as noted by Benoit, and Nsafou’s adult novel has received no scholarly attention at all. As a point of departure, this chapter builds upon the scholarship and findings of

⁴²² Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018), pp. 346.

⁴²³ Nsafou, Laura. *À mains nues*. (Éditions Synapse, 2018), pp. 346.

the two previous chapters in this project, demonstrating that patterns can be traced in both Black women's fiction and non-fiction writing as well as in Black women's theoretical texts and scholarship related to Black women in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and literature, such as a rejection of shame-producing tropes of Black authenticity, and the production of a love ethic via the practice of Black redaction. The focus on Black women's knowledge production in analyzing Black women's corporeal and aesthetic expression is a fundamental value that is crucial to this project, as it holds that this expression must be understood from the perspective of Black women centering their objectives and values to originate an accurate, ethical, and loving interpretation. As noted by both Odozor and Dabiri, this is integral to any true tentative at decolonization and is the premise of this chapter and project as a whole. Black women's fictional works as analyzed in this chapter pave the way for Black futurity that is plural in nature and where Black aesthetics are valorized, Black bodies are autonomous, and Black people are powerful.

While Miano's novel has received quite a bit of scholarly attention otherwise, the author points out that it has received very little media attention in comparison to her other works, a fact that reflects national sentiments around the non-universality of the Black French experience and the legitimacy of Black Frenchness as a French identity. This being the socio-political and cultural context of France, the work of these two novelists to employ their Black women-centered gazes to depict the Afropean experience as universal is changemaking to the French literary landscape.

As Coste points out, the presence of the issue of race in both novels figures more as context than text. Race and racialization in Miano's novel provides the transparent glue that links together the Afropean collective, binding together the set on which the everyday actions and

encounters of the characters take place. Likewise, while race figures in Nsafou's novel, it is subordinated in priority by Sibylle's love relationships. Nsafou shores this strategy up by writing Sibylle as the only authentically Swedish character in the novel, while Miano does this by pluralizing Frenchness to validate her characters' Afropean identities. Additionally, aesthetic and corporeal manifestations of Afropean identity in France concretize the Afropean imaginary the authors work to create and legitimize Black Frenchness and Afropeanness by connecting this imaginary to a physical territory from which it derives validity in French society. This strategy engages in a very specific interplay with the French deformation of universalist politics, such that it renders Black experience equally universal which has not been the case in mainstream French literature or media. While the two novels have some fundamental differences in structure, content, and approach, one taking a "day-in-the-life" approach to depicting a group of Black women while the other focusing on the healing journey of one Black woman, one set in France while the other set in Sweden, for instance, they each make a case for the necessity and validity of an Afropean identity, its corporeal instantiation, and beautiful Black futures.

A core focus of the previous two chapters was the Black women-centered gazes that positioned Black women authors in the seat of power over their narratives by foregrounding forms of positive in/visibility in their representations of themselves and other Black women. This chapter has shown that this practice is taken up by Black women fiction authors, as well. Both Miano and Nsafou resist forms of negative in/visibility attributed to Black women by the white male gaze in very explicit ways, such as the decoupling of Black women with animals that can be seen in this chapter's lexical analysis of the scene that describes Élise's ancestor, and in the depiction of Sibylle as the most romantically desirable woman in Nsafou's novel. Even when representations of Black women are sexualized in these works, as is typical under the white male

gaze(r), these Black women are still depicted as beautiful, autonomous, and human, such as in Nsafou's choice to sexualize Sibylle in the second half of the book while having her maintain control of her own body, as well as her the bodies and arguably the minds of her partners. Likewise, both authors center positive in/visibility of Black women. In Nsafou's novel, for instance, Sibylle's body is rendered hypervisible but in a way that emphasizes her humanity as depicted by her physiological emotionality, angelic beauty, and vulnerability in the beginning of the novel and then her desirability, sexual autonomy, and power in the end of the novel. Miano on the other hand chooses to valorize Black aesthetics in general, individual nuances in Black aesthetic choices, and corporeal instantiations of collective belonging. For example, in Miano's work, Black hair care practices demonstrate a sense of both intimacy and belonging amongst Black women as an aspect of the formation of a global Black identity.⁴²⁴ Black hair care practices help shape relational dynamics and racial-identity development, and vice versa, and is involved in the creation of Black women's narratives of self. In Miano's work, the Afropean imaginary is formed and tangibilized in part upon collectivism via Black hair care practices. The operationalization of collectivism and individuality as instantiated through the representations of Black women's aesthetics and aesthetic practices are integral to creating positive in/visibility and empowering Black French and Afropean women. In engaging the interplay of collectivism and individuality to create forms of positive in/visibility, both authors bring Black women's humanity into view.

Building on the previous two chapters, this final chapter also considers the presence of Africana temporalities and pathways of Black futurity by both Miano and Nsafou. The engagement with African temporalities is evident in both novels and reminiscent of what has

⁴²⁴ See Rajan-Rankin.

been examined in the autobiographical and sociocultural texts of the first two chapters, such as in Pakora's "L'imaginaire colonial," and Boni-Claverie's *Trop noire pour être française*. The abandonment of Eurocentric conceptions of time and "history" for more Afrocentric and/or cyclical engagements of time is a powerful act that displaces whiteness as authoritative over the regulation of time.

While both novels engage with Africana temporalities, Miano tends to do this in a way that constructs a temporal collectivism between her characters while Nsafou's engagement with time is less focused on collective network-building and more focused on futurity. This distinction is largely due to the fact that Miano's novel constructs a community amongst Black women of the past and the present, while Nsafou's focus is on a single Black woman. Miano's engagement with non-western time also reflects an acknowledgement of the tradition of Sankofa as demonstrated in the story of Élise's ancestor, an Akan principle that was evident in Boni-Claverie's work discussed in Chapter 2. Miano's chapter, "Radiées de la douceur," also demonstrates the fact that Black aesthetic practices related specifically to hair care are socio-historically constructed and socio-historically expressive, as can be seen in the formation of the fractal, for instance. These practices create connections between the Black past, present, and future, and make visible and tangible portions of an "irrecoverable social history."⁴²⁵ The adherence to Africana temporalities in both works shows a disregard for the white male gaze(r) by abandoning the structure of the linear progress narrative that is central to the western conception of time.

Furthermore, in staying true to their Black women-centered gazes as they illustrate the universality of their Afropean characters, they create "new emancipatory conditions" that pave

⁴²⁵ Dabiri, Emma. *Don't Touch My Hair*. (Allen Lane Publishing, 2019), pp. 36.

the way for new Black futures, disempowering white supremacy. As Black women imagine their way into the future, they open paths beyond white supremacy that were otherwise foreclosed to them.

In kind with the texts of the previous chapters, both novels valorize Black women's aesthetics in various ways. Miano employs a royal lexicon to describe Elise's ancestor as she stands naked, as well as by elevating each of the hairstyle choices of the women in Coco's hair salon. Nsafou too attaches references to royalty to Sibylle embedded in the symbol of the brudkrona. She also does this by depicting the desirability of Sibylle in the eyes of each of her love interests as well as by two of the prominent female figures in the novel. As this chapter has shown, Black women-centered perspectives in defining and describing Black women's aesthetic practices reunite love and lovingness with conceptions of Blackness with which they "have been systematically divorced," according to Odozor.⁴²⁶ Practicing an ethic of love in the treatment of Black women's aesthetic allows Miano and Nsafou to disempower the white male gaze in their works.

This chapter introduced Odozor's notion of an ethic of love as a viable framework for understanding the cultural production, especially the written cultural production, of Black women in the French context. Further, this chapter argued that Nsafou and Miano both demonstrate perspectives in their writing that conform to Odozor's love ethic. Creating intimacy between characters in the novels and between the protagonists and the reader allows for the marriage of Black women with love and lovingness in the imaginaries that are crafted by these two authors, intimacies such as these being central to both novels. This practice too counters the historical divorcement of Black women from love and lovingness to which Odozor refers,

⁴²⁶ Odozor, Ezinwanne Tooohukwu. "A Love Ethic for Black Feminisms: The Necessity of Love in Black Feminist Discourses and Discoveries." *Hypatia*, vol. 37, no. 2, (2022), pp. 246.

reinforces the humanity of Black women, and ultimately disempowers white supremacy as a voice that has consistently rendered Black women in/subhuman and unworthy of love. This chapter manifests an act of collectivism with these authors by responding in kind, honoring the love ethic that Odozor conceptualized as a crucial methodology for this chapter in establishing an ethical and socially-conscious study of these Black women's cultural production.

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction to Findings

This project is built upon a constellation of refusals at the sites of various singularities of antiBlackness--Black refusals that help to clarify the attributes of Black women-centered gazes. Demonstrating this has given further credence to the validity and applicability of Christina Sharpe's work on the wake and afterlives of slavery and colonialism to the situation of Black women writers in France and elsewhere,⁴²⁷ and points to the existence of a collective of Black women in France and beyond that finds strength in numbers and power in relationality. Work on this topic is timely within the context of applied French universalism that invisibilizes people of color in its ambition to be "colorblind."⁴²⁸ It is important in a world where critical frameworks and pedagogies, such as Critical Race Theory, that work to situate the historical, social, and political context of these singularities within larger systems of oppression have come under government attack.⁴²⁹ It is paramount for the agency, autonomy, and actualization of a global population of Black women who interact with a status quo that seeks to render them ugly, inhuman, and unworthy at every turn on the terms of the white male gaze/r. This project supports and elevates refusals of this status quo, looking to Black French women writers' treatment of Black women's hair and bodies as site of these refusals, noting integral ways that Black women-centered gazes distinguish themselves from the white male gaze/r on Black bodies and hair that is produced and reproduced in the mainstream.

⁴²⁷ See the discussion of Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

⁴²⁸ Abby Labreck's 2023 article "Color-Blind: Examining France's Approach to Race Policy," in the *Harvard International Review*, Keith Magee's 2023 opinion piece "The Myth of a Colorblind France," for *CNN*, Sarah Elzas' 2021 article, "Academics Under Fire for Studying Race and Racism in Colour-Blind France" for *RFI*, and Karina Piser's 2019 "France Doesn't See Race (Officially). A Blackface Performance Challenged That," in *The Atlantic*, offer insight into the ongoing public debate around discussing race in France.

⁴²⁹ Taifha Alexander delves into the data around anti-CRT measures in her article for *US News & World Reports*, "'Tracking the Attack on Critical Race Theory in Education.'"

As such, this work validates the study of hair, hair stories, and bodily aesthetics as a profoundly generative object of study, particularly within the context of Black women and power. While the study of Black bodies and Black hair expanded in the mid-twentieth century, due to globally connected independence and liberation movements as well as the founding of Black Studies programs in the United States, the field has continued to evolve as interdisciplinary approaches become more pervasive. The study of Black hair has garnered media attention as issues of discrimination at work and school come to the forefront, an example of the devaluation and rejection of Black aesthetics and resultant invisibilization of Black subjectivities.

As has been demonstrated in preceding scholarship,⁴³⁰ hair is integral to constructing individual representations of self. Further, as Anthony Synnott suggests, hair is one of, if not the most primary signifiers of race, and in this way can also signal belonging within a racialized collective. This duality places Black women's hair on fertile ground for considering the subjectivity repositioning that is so integral to Black women-centered gazes and conceptual attributes of these gazes as being wholly apart and often opposite that of the white male gaze.

Likewise, as Hortense Spillers and other scholars have shown,⁴³¹ Black women's bodies are devalued, rejected, eroticized, exoticized, and commodified simultaneously in mainstream ideologies depicted in media and beyond which generally reflects the value systems of the white male gaze/r, holding whiteness as normative, standard, and iconic. This gaze and the negative in/visibilities it attributes to Black women are problematized in each primary text included in this project's analysis. It is Black women-centered gazes on their bodies and hair, as well as on the

⁴³⁰ Anthony Synnott's "Shame and Glory: A Sociology of Hair," Sybil Dione Rosado's "No Nubian Knots or Nappy Locks: Discussing the Politics of Hair among Women of African Decent in the Diaspora. A Report on Research in Progress," and Kobena Mercer's "Black Hair/Style Politics" point to hair as participating in an economy of signifiers of the culture of an individual.

⁴³¹ Such as Christina Sharpe, Juliete Smeralda, Shirley Tate, Katelyn Knox, Eock Laïfa, Emma Dabiri, to name a few that were included in this work.

white male gaze/r and the mainstream that decenters the white male gaze/r as authoritative and norm-producing, a shift in the racial dialectic of power that undoes the foreclosure of Black beauty, creativity, joy, and ultimately Black life, and reveals possibilities for new Black futures outside of the afterlives of slavery and colonialism and beyond white supremacy.

Negative In/visibilities and the Enduring Colonial Imaginary

Nearly every work in this corpus points in some way, often quite explicitly, to the enduring nature of the colonial imaginary as a priori to the perspective of the white male gaze/r in France. According to Maïga in the prologue to *Noire n'est pas mon métier*, the imaginary from which springs forth mainstream French cultural production is “encore empreint de clichés hérités d'un autre temps.”⁴³² Likewise this imaginary is made evident in Gabin's experience of being animalized and sexualized by the Octopus in her installment “Balancetonpoulpe” in the collective work, *Noire n'est pas mon métier*, reminding of depictions of Black women in colonial propaganda, the Colonial Exhibitions throughout Europe in the early 20th century, and the figure of the Hottentot Venus and many abuses of Sarah Baartman. Boni-Claverie also takes up the issue in her explicit discussion of the connected histories of colonialism and the transatlantic trade in *Trop noire pour être française*. This imaginary also appears in the undertones of Beausson-Diagne's conversation with the artistic director in her installment “Vous allez bien avec le bamboula,” and in Miano's depiction of the experiences of Elise's ancestor in *Blues pour Élise*. In her installment “L'imaginaire colonial,” Pakora demonstrates an instance whereby this imaginary reproduces itself by foregrounding and incentivizing conforming practices to white beauty standards in the media and confounding Black aesthetics with lower socio-economic status to reinforce whiteness as the icon. Additionally, in *Afrofem*, there is Mwasi-Collectif's

⁴³² Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n'est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 11.

condemnation of police neglect and brutality that attempts to recolonize Black bodies in perpetuity. These and other instances as illuminated by this project, with the help of these Black women authors, show the hallmarks of the continuing presence of the colonial imaginary, specifically, homogenization and alterity in depictions of Black women in France. The presence of experiences of homogenization and alterity in their texts help reveal the figure of the white male gaze/r and signal their critiques of the persistence of this imaginary. Further, it is often these two aspects that these authors wield as weapons to disempower the white male gaze/r in their texts. However, many of these authors have made it a point, as in the case of the non-response of the Mwasi-Collectif, to shift the focus away from the white male gaze/r to create forms of positive in/visibility for Black women, moving along an observational arc from outgroup to ingroup gazing⁴³³ while elevating their own value systems. Likewise, this project has done the same—centering itself upon value systems that are endogenous to communities of Black women throughout the Diaspora as a commitment to Afrocentric paradigms,⁴³⁴ especially in considering their representations of their bodies and hair, shifting the focus from oppression(s) and oppressor(s) to resistance, hope, and futurity that are brought to bear through a Black women-centered gaze.

Decentering the White Male Gaze/r

In its commitment to elevating Black women-centered gazes, this project highlights the methods that these Black women authors employ to decenter the white male gaze/r and disempower and move beyond white supremacy. Applying theory generated by Black women in

⁴³³ The cline of this observational arc is particularly apparent in *Afrofem*, and *À mains nues*, as examined in the first and third chapters of this work.

⁴³⁴ According to Serie McDougall in “Research Methods for Africana Studies,” and Modupe’s “The Afrocentric Philosophical Perspective: A Narrative Outline,” Afrocentric paradigms are made up of three elements: grounding in Africana histories and experiences, orientation to Black people’s needs and concerns, and perspectives of analysis whose main objectives are the emancipation and empowerment of Black people.

various diasporic sites reveals these methods and situates them within the global movement of Black women's resistance with the ultimate end being Black liberation. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 3, Hortense Spiller's theorization of the "ungendering" of Black female flesh provides a productive framework by which to consider Sibylle's embodied experiences of vulnerability and fear in the first half of Nsafou's *À mains nues* as antithetical to the non-feminine and non-human depictions of Black women generated by the white male gaze/r through the violence of slavery and colonialism and their aftermaths. Similarly, the notion of the oppositional gaze, theorized by bell hooks, provides a lens for understanding Maïga's problematization of her heightened visibility as a Black actress in France among few, set against the invisibility of Black people in France more generally, and her countergaze on French cinema, television, and theatre. Additionally, Christina Sharpe's articulation of Black redaction is particularly fitting in analyzing Gabin's oppositional gaze toward the Octopus and the industry that reinforces his privilege at every turn. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, pursuant to the redaction of his name and his fame by proxy, as well as his language, he becomes a babbling animal, a mascot for a homogenized group of overly-privileged white men, and the epitome of the white male gaze/r. In these examples, it becomes apparent that in employing these methods observed in multiple diasporic sites, these authors are able to shift the white male gaze/r from center to periphery and occupy the center from which power emanates as gazer and authority over Black women's aesthetics and corporealities, disempowering the white male gazer and moving beyond white supremacy by replacing it and pushing its value systems into the margins.

Common Aspects of Black Women-Centered Gazes

This project has held a steady focus on four conceptual attributes shown to be consistently at play in Black women-centered gazes, especially within the realm of depicting

aesthetic choices and corporealities: collectivism, individuality, visibility, and invisibility. The underlying premise has been that Black women's representations of their aesthetic choices and corporealities operationalize these attributes to positively in/visibilize Black women's bodies and hair, and to individualize themselves and each other within a larger collective of Black women while also manifesting their belonging within this collective, with the interplay between these attributes being consistently inscribed on Black women's bodies and hair. These four conceptual attributes are integral to understanding Black women-centered gazes and their power to decenter the white male gaze/r.

Collectivism

The primary texts analyzed within this project, both sociocultural and literary alike, include the observable quality of the construction of Black women's communities of fate, based on experiences of racialization and on high esteem of Blackness, Black women, and their aesthetics. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 1, in *Afrofem*, the Mwasi-Collectif generated positive in/visibility for Black women and Blackness in general by advocating for the political sorority of the "sistas," as well as the aesthetic flamboyance of an entire Black French population brought together by the use of a familial lexicon, while incorporating Black Americans through references to Maya Angelou and #BlackGirlMagic. Further, the valorization of flamboyance creates a resistant and collective Black beauty canon that opposes white beauty norms, making space for the inscription of beauty onto Black bodies, something that Tate explains was foreclosed as a function of white iconicity under the white male gaze. Similarly, Miano creates several iterations of Black women collectives through the fractalization of "elles" discussed in the third chapter of this project, as well as through the depictions of intimacy and ethics of care in Coco's hair salon. Embedded into this community building on Miano's part is a valorization of

various hairstyle choices, including weaves, straight styles, braids, as well as locs. In this way, Miano offers up forms of positive visibilities for Black women's hair that supplant the negative stereotypes that surround Black hair throughout the world, decentering the white male gaze/r and placing herself in the position of power over narratives around Black aesthetics.

Similarly, in the case of Boni-Claverie's *Trop noire pour être française*, this author interweaves her own personal hair story into a larger collective of hair stories that includes other individual hair stories as well as important moments in the history of Black hair representation in general. As in the two previous examples, this connection-making to the larger Black collective creates a power in numbers effect, as "number fuels agency," according to Abdouleye Gueye,⁴³⁵ and also decenters dominant interpretations of Black hair by emphasizing hair legibilities based on endogenous value systems and foregrounds the grammar of hair as imbued by the wearer, in this case, Boni-Claverie. The generation of positive in/visibilities by Black women that deemphasize the negative in/visibilities resultant from the enduring colonial imaginary is born out of practices of identity repositioning, translation as reflexivity, disalienation, and subjectivation, all of which Shirley Tate underlines in the context of Black British women. This not only reinforces Tate's findings, but also points again to the existence and power of a global Black women's collective that uses similar methods for claiming their agency and autonomy and decentering the white male gaze/r.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁵ Gueye, Abdouleye. "BREAKING THE SILENCE: The Emergence of a Collective Back Voice in France." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 7, no. 1, (2010), pp. 89.

⁴³⁶ In fact, it is important to note that much of the theoretical framework of this project is grounded in work arising from other Diasporic sites outside of France, including the scholarship of Emma Dabiri, Hortense Spillers, Shirley Tate, and Christina Sharpe to name a few. The applicability of theory deriving from these other sites suggests the formation of a collectivism, connectedness, shared experience, and community of fate amongst Black women throughout the Diaspora.

Individuality

The potency of Black women-centered gazes to deemphasize the white male gaze/r stems from their tendency to infuse both collectivism and individuality into their work simultaneously, which functions as a foil against the homogeneity and alterity with which Black women tend to be depicted by the white male gaze/r. The authors included in this project find ways of individualizing themselves from the collective while reiterating their solidarity and membership therein at the same time. An example of this can be found by considering the structure of *Noire n'est pas mon métier*, as a collection of individual stories around common themes of resistance and experiences of racialization, as discussed and demonstrated in the first two chapters. It can also be seen in the individualization of practices of flamboyance and the valorization of various aesthetic and morphological difference within the collective in *Afrofem*, in Boni-Claverie's insistence upon the significance of her hair based on her own value systems at various points throughout her hair story, and in the differentiation of each character and the completeness with which each perspective is depicted in *Blues pour Élise*.

Africana Temporalities, Diasporic Collectivism, and Black Futurity

In addition to building collectivism across geographical space, there are several instances in which the Black women authors featured in this project create collectivism across time. Nsafou brings her novel to rest at a final equilibrium that depicts Sibylle's pregnancy with a baby that she instinctively knows is female, suggesting not only rebirth and Black futurity, but also a connection with Black posterity. In other primary texts in this corpus, temporal collectivism takes the form of various disruptions and manipulations of linear time. For instance, Gabin begins her story at the end, then repeats a version of the beginning to conclude the installment. This cyclical flow of time and events repeating themselves, presumably for her and/or other

women throughout the diaspora and the ages, creates a collectivism across time and space through the disruption of linear time as well as through shared experiences, a notion that is echoed in many stories within the compilation as well as many works within this project's corpus. In a similar vein, Boni-Claverie creates her own disruptions of time through narrative story-telling in *Trop Noire pour être française* by moving backward and forward through the chronology of her life and interweaving it with the hair story/ies of the global Black collective. Relying on more cyclical conceptualizations of time, these Black women authors illustrate new possibilities of organizing and understanding the Black past and present, and by extension new possibilities of Black futurity. Further, transgressions of time and space create an alternative form of belonging or citizenship that is atemporal and that disregards nation-state, the transient geographical boundaries of many such political entities, sometimes changing over time, and being externally imposed via colonialism and settler-colonialism. Like this, these transgressions reunite the living generations of Black women and people with those that have gone before, mediating the ruptures of forced imm-/emigrations (due to the transatlantic trade, colonialism, and political refugeeism, for example) and resisting geopolitical manipulations, both being weapons of a global system of white supremacy.

Non-mixed spaces

In showcasing forms of collectivism, support for non-mixed spaces appears in both the literary and sociocultural texts of the corpus, in Mwasi-Collectif's *Afrofem* and in Miano's *Blues pour Élise*. In *Afrofem*, this is illustrated by the Mwasi-Collectif's self-declaration as a non-mixed group of Black women, as well as in their rejection of white feminisms. For this group, non-mixedness is also a praxis as the Nyansapo Festival thrown by the group is also a mostly non-mixed space, with four-fifths of the festival being reserved for Black women, exclusively.

Similarly, as noted in Chapter 3, Coco's hair salon in Miano's novel too represents a non-mixed space where there are only Black women. These non-mixed spaces may seem to emphasize the alterity with which the white gaze tends to depict Black women, but following the perspective of a Black women-centered gaze, presents as collectivism, linking Black women of various ethnic origins together according to their racial orientation, a choice that also seems to materialize the notion of Afropean identity as an ethnically diverse but racially consistent identity grouping. These non-mixed spaces are not presented as homogenous by Mwasi-Collectif nor Miano. As noted in Chapter 1, other categories of difference are emphasized over race, such as religion, hairstyle choice, socio-economic status, and sexuality, de-emphasizing racialization as the premier mode of differentiation, "troubling the very notion of difference,"⁴³⁷ and decentering whiteness as normative. The fact that many of these differences can be and are often inscribed upon the body supports this project's focus on Black women's aesthetics and corporeality as a valid area of study.

While these non-mixed spaces are effective in decentering whiteness, this project raises a point of caution concerning the interaction of all-Black, non-mixed spaces and the perpetuation of tropes of authenticity within the Black community. Chapter 1 of this project briefly considers tropes of authenticity related to the exclusion of non-kinky hair and hair styles and lighter skinned aesthetics within the non-mixed Mwasi-Collectif. Similarly, in Chapter 3, this project examines the pitfalls of exclusively psychological and political readings of Black hair style choices in Coco's non-mixed hair salon. This project argues that truly inclusive non-mixed spaces function to do this aforementioned decentering of whiteness and transcendence of white supremacy. However, it also cautions against the caveat of excluding lighter-skinned Black

⁴³⁷ Tate, Shirley Anne. *Black Beauty: Aesthetics, Stylization, Politics*. Routledge, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), pp. 25.

women and of excluding, devalorizing, psychologizing, and politicizing hybridized aesthetic practices that incorporate mainstream stylings, such as straight hair, wigs, and weaves. The equivocation of these Black practices and Black people with inauthentic Blackness, particularly in non-mixed spaces, provides an entryway for dominant ideologies, resituating the white gaze as central and effectively re-mixing the space.

Apoliticism of Hair and Bodily Aesthetics

This project explicitly calls for the depsychologization and depoliticization of styling choices and aesthetics to separate these choices from the lexicon of hegemonic power and white supremacy, especially relating to the legibility of Black women's hair, referring to this theory and praxis as the apoliticism of hair and bodily aesthetics. First, this work holds that the situation of Black women's hair in the psyche of Black women is far too complex to be reduced to the binary opposition of two poles: Black authenticity/pride and self-loathing. As such, this project amplifies the voice of Shirley Tate in problematizing the reproduction of tropes of authenticity within the global Black collective, and pronounces a rejection of other invisibilizing intragroup forces such as respectability politics alongside the Mwasi-Collectif. Second, this project holds that there must be room for apolitical understandings of Black women's aesthetic choices around both body and hair styling. The recognition of apolitical impetuses for these choices de-emphasize whiteness as a referent and also deconstruct tropes of authenticity within the context of Black identity. Further, they redefine Black life as legible and livable beyond the traumas associated with its contact and ongoing with whiteness, divorcing Black innovation from whiteness survival strategies, and revitalizing Black creativity. Third, purely pragmatic readings of Black hair are necessary to afford Blackness the same apolitical ontology that is afforded to whiteness and to discontinue the cyclical reinforcement of white iconicity. These kinds of

readings are integral to understanding many of the works included in this project, such as *Trop noire pour être française*, “Vous allez bien avec le bamboula,” and *Blues pour Élise*. Finally, theorizing Black aesthetics as innately political affirms their political legibility as always present and valid, which renders the significance of Black aesthetics perpetually accessible to the white male gaze/r thereby undermining Black politics of refusal. Recognizing apolitical understandings of Black aesthetics in both theory and praxis, and specifically Black hair style choices as they are so ubiquitously politicized as demonstrated in Chapter 2, removes the significance of straight hair as a somatic marker of self-hatred and claims the versatility of Black women’s hair styling as a manifestation of Black futurity.

Hair Grammar and Legibility

In keeping with this call for apolitical readings of bodily aesthetics, this work has also underlined the distance between the legibility and grammar of hair choice as depicted in the primary texts in its corpus, a concept that can be generalized to include the legibility and grammar of bodily aesthetics altogether. This distance is clearly evidenced in Beausson-Diagne’s “Vous allez bien avec le bamboula,” as she reiterates that she is “just” wearing her hair in its unmanipulated state,⁴³⁸ an aesthetic change that is something akin to a change of fashion while the artistic director associates her with Polynesian hair oils that she does not use and begins replanning her entire scene to fit her new exotic look. Boni-Claverie also renders this distance particularly apparent as she details the various external readings of her newly shaved bald head, while she considers her personal choice to shave it much more pragmatic than symbolic.

Both Miano and Boni-Claverie offer up scenes in which the hair of Black newborns is depicted as an oracle of sorts, a crystal ball that renders gazable the fate of the child—a common

⁴³⁸ Maïga, Aïssa et al. *Noire n’est pas mon métier*. (Éditions Du Seuil, 2018), pp. 15.

experience that connects Black women across time and space in both works, and links both works together beyond their generic difference. These works advance the notion that as early as birth, Black hair enters into this realm of external legibilities. This means that there is no livable moment in the entire lifetimes of contemporary Black women where their hair does not carry with it the legacy of trauma and the history of contact with whiteness, nor where it is offered the space to be an exclusively aesthetic or pragmatic choice.

To emphasize the personal significance of Black women's hair and bodily style choices—the grammar imparted by the wearer—over their public legibility, the external legibilities of Black hair figure in this project only as they are manifested within the works of these Black women authors, as they are often key to their depiction of the white male gaze/r.. This is in keeping with the Afrocentric paradigm championed by McDougall, and Smeralda, and a practice of Odozor's love ethic as it looks to Black women to guidance in evaluating these choices. In highlighting the primacy that these authors place on the personal significance of their hair, this project argues that the situation of hair in these works is an example of subjectivity repositioning following the argument of Tate. This project also offers a reconsideration of certain theoretical terms such as “disalienation,” which requires that Black women be always already alienated from their corporeality to subjectivate by way of this process. Tate defines subjectivation as “resistance to prevailing relations of racialized power through self-fashioning and autonomy, speaking back to power, critique and problematizing the world in which one finds oneself.”⁴³⁹ I argue that for true liberation from the dialectic of power, Black women must be able to

⁴³⁹ Tate, Shirley Anne. *The Governmentality of Black Beauty Shame Discourse, Iconicity and Resistance*. (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2018), pp. 35.

subjectivate—to have “subjectness” or the “capacity to act” as opposed to “objectness” or “objectification”—outside of the context of alienation.⁴⁴⁰

The Importance of the Work

At the heart of this project is a deep-seated desire for the care and increased wellbeing of Black women and for the realization of better, brighter Black futures. Black wellbeing necessitates, as Dabiri puts it, a “judicious mix of the historical and the ahistorical, the timely and the untimely, the past and the future.”⁴⁴¹ While noting the ways that the past has inflected the present in the afterlives of slavery and colonialism, this project emphasizes hope for the future and underlines pathways forward, pathways sketched out by Black women authors through their commitment to employing Black women-centered gazes that decenter white beauty standards, the white male gaze/r, white supremacy, and whiteness more generally. This project also adds to current scholarship on the Afropean identity by illustrating how its inscription onto Black women’s bodies brings this concept into the physical world in France, connecting this “*territoire mentale*”⁴⁴² to a physical space and legitimizing the place of the Afropean identity in French society.⁴⁴³

⁴⁴⁰ Traue, Boris and Lisa Pfahl. “What is subjectivation? key concepts and proposals for future research.” *Following the Subject: Grundlagen Und Zugänge Empirischer Subjektivierungsforschung - Foundations and Approaches of Empirical Subjectivation Research*, (2022).

⁴⁴¹ Dabiri, Emma. *Don’t Touch My Hair*. (Allen Lane Publishing, 2019), pp. 37.

⁴⁴² Léonora Miano uses this term to describe Afropea in *Habiter la frontière* (2012), the analysis of which is taken up by Marion Coste in “Identités Afropéennes dans *Blues pour Elise* de Miano, Léonora.”

⁴⁴³ This scholarship includes the works of Josefina Bueno Alonso and of Diana Holmes on Miano’s focus on the everyday and the notion of urban romance in her work, Constance Vottero’s work that explores horizontal connection making at common intersections of identity within *Blues pour Elise*, and also compares the novel with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*, reinforcing the notion of collectivism and commonality across a global collective of Black women. Alongside the scholars most featured in my analysis of Miano’s work such as Malyoune Benoit and Marione Coste, there is also Charlotte MacKay’s consideration of the complexities of and challenges posed by various forms of cultural hybridity within Miano’s writing, and Marjolaine Unter Ecker’s 2016 book, *Questions identitaires dans les récits afropéens de Léonora Miano*, that delves deeply into questions of identity, Blackness, Africanness, and Afropeanness, to name a few, and to offer a nonexhaustive description of the scholarly conversation around both Afropeanness and Miano’s work.

As this project concerns itself with Black wellbeing, community building, and valorization of Black aesthetics and corporealities, it takes up the work of supporting and employing an ethic of love in the study of Black women following the prescriptions of Odozor who demonstrates the relationship between Black feminisms, love and lovingness, and new possibilities of Black futures. According to Odozor, the enduring existence of Black women is itself a challenge to white supremacy as we were and are never meant to imagine ourselves into the future, thus the authors in this project take this a step further in their disregard of white supremacy, their manipulations of time and space, and their exclamation of new Black futures through collectivism and individuality

Looking Forward

As demonstrated throughout this work, Black women in the French context are writing themselves into a larger collective of Black women both within and beyond the Hexagon, while highlighting their nuanced identities and the nuanced identities of other Black women throughout this collective. As they participate in horizontal connection-making as a strategy of both self and collective liberation of a global Black community, there is still work to be done to better define the nuances, connections, and interdependences between Black French women and Black women in other diasporic sites. For instance, the authors featured in this project have constructed various points of connection with Black women in the United States in both historical and contemporary moments and both explicitly and implicitly—the Mwasi-Collectif’s use of the term *sistas*, references to #BlackGirlMagic and Maya Angelou, Boni-Claverie’s many references to many Black American figures, including Michelle Obama, to name a few.

Historical figures, such as Josephine Baker who was recently Pantheonized, and the reciprocal support of contemporary Black women-led antiracist movements and organizations

such as Black Lives Matter in the US and Black women-led antiracist movements such as la Comité vérité et justice pour Adama in France exemplify these transnational and transethnic connections. Recent documentaries created by Black women film-makers and activists in France do the work of building out and narrating these forms of transnational Black collectivism. Rokhaya Diallo's 2016 documentary, *De Paris à Ferguson: coupables d'être noirs/ Not Yo Mama's Movement*, considers connections between Black France and Black America related to shared experiences of police violence, resistance, and revolt, topics introduced in this project's analysis of *Afrofem* in Chapter 1. More recently, Aïssa Maïga's and Isabelle Simeoni's 2021 documentary, *Regard noir*, examines representations of Black women in the media and film industries in France, Brazil, and the United States, including interviews with Black American actress, Stormi Reid, and Black American director and producer, Ava Duvernay, among others. This documentary illustrates a transnational and diasporic solidarity, a collectivism, amongst Black women around experiences of in/visibility in the media and pop culture, and the work they do to claim authority over their narratives and representations and decenter the white gaze through visual forms of story-telling. These documentaries as well as the aforementioned texts represent connection-building and horizontality within the context of a global Black collective by Black French women with Black American women.

However, differences in the history of Blackness in the United States (chattel slavery, Jim Crow, the classical Civil Rights and Black Power movements) and the history of Blackness in France (colonialism/slavery, independence movements, immigration) complicate the notion of global Black collectivism, as does the interaction of Blackness with universalist French politics relative to the interaction of Blackness with American multiculturalism. The concept of Afropeanness, for instance, is not generalizable to or arguably even legible in the |American

context. Adding further complexity to the construction of horizontal relationships within a global Black collective that includes Black French women, Black American women, and Black women at various other Diasporic sites, such as the Caribbean, the UK, and countries in Africa is the notion of American cultural imperialism and the United States as the most dominant world power. In looking to the future, if, as Gueye writes, “number fuels agency,”⁴⁴⁴ and global Black collectivism is indeed key to global Black liberation, scholarship must continue to delve into these complexities, such as the distinctions that complicate membership in a larger collective of Black women on the world stage, and how Black women emphasize these individualities and mediate these external factors, which are largely the result of western economic practices and social ideologies, while coming together for the betterment of the whole of this collective in a move to upend global white supremacy.

⁴⁴⁴ Gueye, Abdoulaye. “BREAKING THE SILENCE: The Emergence of a Collective Back Voice in France.” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, vol. 7, no. 1, (2010), pp. 89.

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