

FORMS OF

CÉCILE BISHOP

RACE *and* VISIBILITY IN THE
FRENCH-SPEAKING WORLD

BLACKNESS



FORMS OF BLACKNESS



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*Race and Visibility in the French-
Speaking World* · CÉCILE BISHOP

BLACKNESS

DUKE

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To Alex and Théodore

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PREFACE

It occurs to me that I must not know altogether what I am, either, and that others know certain things about me better than I do, though I think I ought to know all there is to know and I proceed as if I do. Even once I see this, however, I have no choice but to continue to proceed as if I know altogether what I am, though I may also try to guess, from time to time, just what it is that others know that I do not know. —LYDIA DAVIS, “A Friend of Mine” (1997)

PARIS, GARE DU NORD, 2008

It is late and the train is delayed. Headphones in, eyes down, I am trying hard to avoid engaging with my environment. But then a man walks up to me and says:

“Hi. Are you a *quarteronne* (quadroon)?”

At first, I do not recognize the word. I am not sure I heard it right.

“No,” I say, instinctively.

The man walks away but his word lingers. I can feel myself slowly, involuntarily, understanding it. Then I do something that I still find hard to explain, even to myself: I walk up to him and apologize. He gives me a smug, unpleasant smile: “I knew it. I could see it straight away!” He is from Martinique, he adds, as if to explain.

NEW YORK, MANHATTAN, JANUARY 2018

The doctor walks in with the results of my prenatal blood work—a battery of genetic tests designed to detect a wide range of mutations. She gives me a quick, distracted glance, stares at my file for a minute, and

announces that I am a carrier for a blood disease. But then she stops and looks up, visibly confused: “Um. Remind me what your *ethnicity* is, exactly?”

At home, I research the disease on the internet. I learn that the trait I carry “is seen most frequently among African Americans and people of African ancestry.” Apparently, I have no business looking that white if my blood is this black.

A CAFÉ IN CENTRAL LONDON, 2008

The café is light and airy, filled with minimalist Scandinavian chairs. I am meeting up with a new friend. The discussion falls on the topic of our mothers. She asks a lot of questions about mine and what she looks like. I end up showing her a photo, which I carry in my wallet. “I would never have imagined that your mother was so light-skinned,” she says. “I mean, for you to look the way you do, I thought she must be African or something!”

LONDON, AT HOME, 2010

As I open the door, I cannot help but notice that the boiler technician looks a lot like Idris Elba. I briefly wonder if that’s racist, but mostly, I worry that there might be something stuck between my teeth. We start talking. After a while, he asks: “Where are you from?” I say, “France.” He continues:

“Ah, OK. So where are your parents from?”

“France.”

“Where are your grandparents from?”

Technically, the answer is still the same, but I know that’s not what he is asking. After he has left, I notice he’s scribbled his personal phone number on the bill.

OXFORD, 2007

“I thought you were Irish!”

LONDON, 2012

“You’re some kind of albino, right?”

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“It’s funny that thing with your face, because once you’ve seen it, you really can’t unsee it.”

.....

I am not sure exactly when or why I started documenting these kinds of encounters. Some (but not all) of my experiences confirm well-established cultural and taxonomic differences. In the United States, where I wrote part of this book, I was occasionally encouraged to correct people’s “misconceptions” and even once exhorted by an African American colleague to “come out as Black” and “stop passing.” There, I could one day be asked to justify my decision to write about Fanon “as a white woman” and the next be encouraged to join an event for “faculty of color.” In France, by contrast, people sometimes ask about my “origins” or inquire about whether I might be *métisse* (mixed-race), but as far as I know, nobody has ever called me *noire* (black). There, accounts of my American experiences are typically met with bemused dismay.

Perhaps I hoped these notes might reveal some pattern, either about myself or my interlocutors. After all, it would be helpful to know who sees what when they look at me, and with what degree of certainty. Sadly, that never happened. Instead, I was left with a puzzling question: What does blackness look like?

Obviously, as a foundation for research, the question is marred by a fundamental ambiguity. On the one hand, it could be asking about blackness as a racialized identity. In that sense, it would be inquiring about the visible traits or cultural conventions that lead some people to be perceived as “black.” But on the other hand, it could also be asking about the qualities of the color black itself. Understood in this way, it might be dismissed as purely nonsensical: In strictly physical terms, blackness is often described as the absence of light and, by definition, does not look like anything. If we stay closer to everyday speech and instead consider black as a color, the question might relate to the material and aesthetic attributes that can characterize it, such as its depth, density, texture, shade, or transparency.

Furthermore, the meanings of “what does blackness look like?” are distinct yet not fully separable. Their entanglement cannot easily be resolved by distinguishing between the literal and the figural. Blackness as

a racial category is rooted in the visual perception of color and claims to refer to, among other things, the physical shade of one's skin.

Despite its equivocal character, the more I considered the question, the more it seemed that the uneasy polysemy of "what does blackness look like?" might be the key to some crucial aspect of the visual economy of race—and maybe to my own place within it. By revealing the intertwining as well as the difference between two ways of seeing—the aesthetic perception of the color black and the socially produced perception of race—it opened a gap in the discourses that connect race and the visible by interrogating the very nature of that visibility and its connection with language. What do we see when we see race? And how do we see it? These questions are the starting point of the present book.

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PREFACE



INTRODUCTION

Let's start with the black-and-white portrait of the jazz saxophonist John Coltrane by William Claxton shown in figure I.1. The photograph was taken at the then-brand-new Guggenheim Museum in New York, in 1960. Dressed in a striped jacket, Coltrane stands in profile, gazing thoughtfully toward the left. Claxton's photograph captures him at a moment of transition in his career. The year before, as a member of Miles Davis's group, he had contributed to *Kind of Blue*, one of the most significant jazz albums ever released. The year after, he would enjoy his first big personal success with his recording of *My Favorite Things*. Behind him, a monumental abstract painting, consisting of dynamic, bold brushstrokes against a white background, occupies two-thirds of the image. It is a work by the French painter Pierre Soulages, titled *Peinture, 20 novembre 1956* (Painting, November 20, 1956). Looking more closely at the painting, we can discern, as Ananda Shankar Chakrabarty points out, "textural striations of variable intensity . . . , derived from the passage of hard brush fibers through wet impasto paint."¹ That

I.1 William Claxton, *John Coltrane at the Guggenheim Museum*, New York, 1960.

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technique, with its exploration of the variable, textural aspects of black paint, anticipates elements of the *outrénoir* (ultrablack) paintings, for which Soulages became famous in the 1970s.

Claxton's shot focuses on the opposition between black and white. The composition turns around a visual rhyme: The contrast between the dark tones of Coltrane's skin and the white walls of the modern museum echoes that between Soulages's dark brushstrokes and the whiteness of his background (at least, as the colors appear on the photograph).²

The image, however, also stages a less obvious opposition: that between two meanings, uses, and histories of blackness. On the one hand, there is Coltrane's blackness. In the segregated United States of 1960, it is an embodied social and political condition. Black, in this case, is an identity, historically defined as a race. On the other hand, the photograph also features Soulages's blackness: This time, black is the vehicle through which modern art has expressed its desire for abstraction and aesthetic autonomy. The piece's title, which simply records the date the painting was made, emphasizes the self-referential intent of the work. Here, blackness is pure form, pure materiality. It is a means of emancipating art from precisely the kind of social and political issues that define the experience of blackness as race. For Soulages, according to his famous 1948 statement, a painting is "un tout organisé, un ensemble de formes (lignes, surfaces colorées . . .) sur lequel viennent se faire et se défaire les sens qu'on lui prête"³ (an organized whole, a set of forms [lines, colored surfaces . . .] on which the meanings attributed to it come together and unravel). In his long pictorial exploration of black, the vast symbolic field associated with the color—including, implicitly, its conventional association with race—does not belong to the aesthetic realm of his work: "Le noir est ici signe de deuil, de malheur, ailleurs c'est le blanc. . . . L'art vit à l'écart de ce type de signification"⁴ (Black here is a sign of mourning, of misfortune; elsewhere, it is white. . . . Art lives apart from this kind of meaning). Thus, the photograph illustrates a tension between two values and two histories of blackness: the racial blackness projected onto Coltrane and the modernist, formal blackness of Soulages. This divide, as we will see, extends well beyond the realm of modern abstract art and influences a wide range of cultural and intellectual productions.

This book seeks to put these two kinds of blackness into dialogue. It explores the interpretive possibilities that have been obscured by the separation between blackness as race and blackness as form. Its aim is to examine both how race disrupts the concept of artistic autonomy and how

attention to aesthetics may challenge the racialized codes and symbols that have historically produced race as a self-evident visual phenomenon.

BLACK AND ITS SOCIAL LIFE

The dialogue I propose builds on a rich history of efforts to bring race and form into conversation. Let's consider, for now, one example. The second section of Fred Moten's famous essay on blackness, ontology, and the discourse of pathology, "The Case of Blackness," contains a detailed discussion of a 1967 debate, organized by *Arts/Canada* magazine. The topic is "black," and the conversation features the abstract painter Ad Reinhardt and the jazz pianist Cecil Taylor, along with other artists: Aldo Tambellini, Michael Snow, Arnold Rockman, Stu Broomer, and Harvey Cowan.

The exchange between Reinhardt and Taylor reveals two incommensurate understandings of the color black. Throughout the encounter, Reinhardt tries to contain the discussion. He hopes to keep it focused at what he calls "an intellectual level," "an aesthetic level," or "the highest possible discussion."⁵ For him, such a discussion requires the exclusion of social and political meanings from the conversation in favor of an exclusive focus on aesthetic concerns. He thus begins with a broad clearing gesture, setting aside the entire symbolic (and implicitly, political) baggage of black in Western culture: "As an artist and painter I would eliminate the symbolic pretty much, for black is interesting not as a color but as a non-color and as the absence of color."⁶

Moten, however, carefully reinstates what he describes as Taylor's musical "counterpoint" to Reinhardt's fascination with the "negativeness of black" as noncolor.⁷ Reinhardt anxiously tries to erect boundaries: between "human being" and artist, between art and "day-to-day problems," between black as "aesthetic" and "the color of skin," between "aesthetic emotion" and "any other kind of emotion," between the artist and the community.⁸ Taylor, in turn, repeatedly protests against these dichotomies and refuses Reinhardt's severing of black as aesthetic form from its social existence as a racialized sign and a lived experience. "Of course," he quips, "Reinhardt visualizes blackness as some kind of technical problem. I visualize it as the quality that shapes my life."⁹ Taylor thus brings up a wide array of issues, including black dignity and the material conditions of working as a black artist, arguing ultimately that "the nature of [artists'] involvement is not separate from the nature of their existence."¹⁰

Moten's method here is as significant as his argument. He does not just summarize Reinhardt's and Taylor's positions. Instead, by poring over the detailed transcript of their exchange, Moten includes their tones, attitudes, and emotions. If, on the surface, Reinhardt's language of containment and Taylor's resistance to that language present themselves as a conceptual disagreement, they also operate on another, affective level, which constitutes the very texture of their interaction. Moten's observation of "Reinhardt's palpable inability to take Taylor seriously" is, in that regard, critical.¹¹ It shows that blackness as race is deeply entangled in the very structure of their conversation about blackness as form. Thus, the conversation itself performs the entanglements of blackness and race and blackness as form that Taylor seeks to demonstrate.

Through his discussion of the Reinhardt–Taylor encounter, and later of Piet Mondrian's painting *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943), Moten explores the "social chromaticism of the color black"; that is to say, the ways the experiences and culture of the people deemed black "color" the noncolor black.¹² Drawing from the ambiguous properties of black as simultaneously absorptive and reflective, Moten reveals the futility of Reinhardt's attempt to insulate blackness from its racialized connotations. His reading of the conversation brings to the surface the "internal, social life" of black: "The many colors that are absorbed and reflected in the color black, and in and as black social life."¹³

RACE AS MEDIUM

By emphasizing the structuring role of race in shaping Reinhardt's and Taylor's contrasting experiences of the color black, Moten's argument intersects with a broader scholarly field that has explored the role of race in shaping visual perceptions. Shawn Michelle Smith's *At the Edge of Sight* (2013), for example, explored how race produces invisibility. In one case study, she examines Roland Barthes's canonical text on photography, *La chambre claire*, highlighting moments where issues of race create unexpected blind spots in his perception of photographic content.¹⁴ These inquiries have highlighted not only how differently positioned subjects may see differently but also, more generally, how racial codes shape perception.

The interactions between discourses of race and visual arts are, comparably, central to Martin Berger's exploration of whiteness in *Sight Unseen*.

Berger takes a particularly strong stance in asserting the precedence of discourse over vision: “Images do not persuade us to internalize racial values embedded within them, so much as they confirm meanings for which the discourses and structures of our society have predisposed us. Instead of selling us on racial systems we do not already own, the visual field powerfully confirms previously internalized beliefs.”¹⁵ In his view, it is not so much visual culture that shapes collective racial representations, but rather the discourses of race that shape our ways of seeing, even for visual content that does not openly engage with race. Race, in that understanding, belongs to what Hal Foster calls “visuality”; namely, the social practices and cultural values underpinning visual experiences.¹⁶

Focusing more specifically on blackness and visual culture, works such as W. J. T. Mitchell’s *Seeing Through Race* (2012), Alessandra Raengo’s *On the Sleeve of the Visual* (2013), and Paul C. Taylor’s *Black Is Beautiful* (2016) have similarly explored the racial logics and dynamics shaping visual perception. While these contributions differ significantly in their approaches and arguments, they share a common thread. Together, they approach race not as an inherent characteristic of certain bodies nor as a mere fantasy or discursive construct, but as something that exists in the space between the racialized body and the perceiving subject. Beyond the visual representation of race, their work, as Raengo puts it, probes the way race “acts as a form of the articulation of the visual,” or as Taylor phrases it in his investigation of the types of invisibility to which black people are subjected, “as an integral part of modernity’s screen of signs.”¹⁷ W. J. T. Mitchell’s description of race as “a medium” encapsulates this idea. For Mitchell, race is “something we see through, like a frame, a window, a screen, or a lens, rather than something we look at. It is a repertoire of cognitive and conceptual filters through which forms of human otherness are mediated.”¹⁸ My own inquiry engages closely with this scholarship, particularly in exploring what Taylor calls the “aesthesis” of race—that is, race as it is perceived through the senses, from a phenomenological perspective.¹⁹ Chapter 1, for instance, looks closely at this literal and etymological sense of aesthesis.

Forms of Blackness, however, adopts a different direction by turning explicitly to aesthetics to explore these entanglements. While thinking about race as a *medium*—a perspective I adopt in parts of this book—frames race as a filter that structures perception, I shift the focus to race *as form*. Focusing on form provides us with a tool to investigate how race is rendered visible and tangible. It explores race not just as an

ideological lens but as a space of concrete, material encounters. Form is thus not a means of isolating blackness from race. Rather, the point of starting with form is to focus on the material substrate that turns race into a phenomenon that can be experienced as sensory perception. Thus, my exploration of the interactions and interconnections between blackness as race and blackness as form starts not from the distance that separates them but from the analogies between the two. Exploring race as form, however, requires reckoning with the fraught relationship between race and aesthetic theory—in which these two concepts have often been treated as antithetical.

RACE AND THE AESTHETIC

The relationship between race and the aesthetic has been the object of numerous inquiries. In 2001, Robert Bernasconi claimed that Immanuel Kant invented the modern concept of race, and Simon Gikandi argued that “race was at the center of debates about the order of art and aesthetic judgments in the modern period.”²⁰ In his book *Ape to Apollo* (2002), the art historian David Bindman extended these discussions by demonstrating that Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment was, despite its emphasis on autonomy, connected to Kant’s racist views about “human variety.”²¹ In her 2014 book *The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, Monique Roelofs went further, arguing that aestheticization and racialization have constantly implicated each other. Going back to Kant as well as to David Hume, she pointed out that both thinkers construed the aesthetic through the exclusion of racialized subjects, defined by their alleged inability to have proper aesthetic experiences.²²

More recently, in his 2019 book *Under Representation*, David Lloyd issued a complete indictment of the aesthetic, denouncing “the constitutive rather than contingent role that race thinking has played in the formulation of aesthetic thought since Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, contaminating the ideal disinterest of that sphere with its very material role in determining the hierarchies of human being.”²³ For Lloyd, the periodic returns to the aesthetic in humanities scholarship are symptomatic of the discipline’s dependence on the ideological function of the aesthetic; namely, “its claim to compensate for the fragmentation of humans by the division of labor and social conflicts with an exemplary experience of wholeness and harmonization.”²⁴

Such work has unfolded within a broader intellectual context marked by a widespread suspicion of the aesthetic. Since the latter half of the twentieth century, the aesthetic has been accused of seducing and comforting spectators into apolitical acquiescence, of reinforcing cultural capital among the bourgeoisie, of perpetuating exclusively Eurocentric aesthetic values as universal, and of marginalizing noncanonical cultural productions. Moreover, the aesthetic faces accusations of enabling the propagation of racist, sexist, and heteronormative ideas under the guise of artistic or literary autonomy.

At the same time, despite the complicities of the aesthetic with racism, artists, theorists, and thinkers have persistently revisited the concept, not only to affirm the expressive power of black cultures, but also as a conceptual resource against the discourse of race. In her essay “Race as Technology,” for example, Beth Coleman explicitly advocated a reengagement with race through the tradition of the aesthetic, arguing that Kant’s concepts of disinterestedness and delight could provide valuable tools to reconsider race outside its history as a biological “fact.”²⁵ For Coleman, doing so would not mean abandoning the notion of race altogether but turning it into a source of increased agency, that is, a “technology.” Meanwhile, Taylor’s *Black Is Beautiful* explicitly revisits aesthetic theory in his effort to demonstrate the existence of a black aesthetics.

Similarly, despite her critique of the racist genealogy of European aesthetics, Monique Roelofs shows how Frantz Fanon, Jamaica Kincaid, Audre Lorde, Billie Holiday, and Miles Davis have recalibrated aesthetic experiences and discourses to explore alternative configurations of existence. Finally, aesthetics and aesthetic theory—particularly through the figure of Theodor Adorno—have been central to Fred Moten’s writings on blackness, especially *In the Break* (2003) and *Black and Blur* (2017). In Moten’s thought, blackness constantly slips through the social, aesthetic, ontological, and political registers. It is simultaneously a race, a chromatic perception, an aesthetic form, a lived experience, and the name of an ever-shifting range of improvisational practices and performances that can be neither captured nor erased by established aesthetic and political structures. Moten’s aesthetic engagement is often drawn to the potentialities of the sonic—from which he elaborates categories such as “the break” and “the groove”—as a site of interruption that resists verbal meanings and visually grounded epistemologies as well as a model for a nonlinear, lyrical, and anti-disciplinary mode of writing.

The primary aim of *Forms of Blackness*, however, is neither to investigate the racism of aesthetics nor to explore black aesthetics. Rather, I will use the aesthetic as a heuristic comparison for understanding the workings of race.²⁶ Among the numerous philosophical questions aesthetic theory has generated, a few keep coming back: Are aesthetic experiences triggered by properties of objects (such as their form), or are aesthetic properties a result of adopting a certain attitude (for example, the suspension of our search for pleasure and knowledge that Kant named “disinterestedness”)? If so, does adopting an attitude enable us to bestow aesthetic qualities onto any kind of object, regardless of its physical qualities? Are aesthetic perceptions universal, or do they stem from contingent, culturally conditioned assumptions and values? At the core of these questions lies the deeper issue of whether aesthetic forms are objective or belong to the realm of subjective perception and social construction.

These inquiries mirror contemporary discussions of race, which, in everyday language, seem to exist in a similar middle ground between the objective and the subjective. Contemporary understandings of the ontological status of race are marked by a central tension, which can be broadly summarized as follows: Is race mostly a social construct, an ideological projection, or an inescapable political reality and therefore, even if indirectly, a physical reality?²⁷ The answer makes surprisingly little difference to the everyday workings of racism. Ultimately, regardless of the various proclamations of its demise and resurrection, race continues its paradoxical existence as both imaginary biology and persistent political reality.

For this reason, I take the ontological indeterminacy and paradoxical existence of race in our everyday experiences as a starting point. Race appears to work simultaneously as a toxic fiction and as an inescapable reality, as a figment of the racist imagination and as an embodied experience. But how do we come to perceive something that we believe not to be real? To navigate these contradictions, I propose to explore the analogies between race and form. Like aesthetic judgments, everyday utterances about race present themselves as referential, describing someone as “black,” just as we might call a painting “vivid” or a poem “beautiful.”²⁸ At the same time, the common (and commonly derided) assertion that some people “do not see” race implies an internalized belief that racial perceptions are fundamentally subjective (otherwise one would simply be declaring a visual impairment).

The homologies between the phenomenology of race and that of the aesthetic offer a tool for understanding the paradoxical relationship

between race and the visual. In her book *Contingencies of Value*, Barbara Herrnstein-Smith suggests that the aesthetic, as it emerged from the tradition initiated by thinkers like Alexander Baumgarten and Immanuel Kant, rests on a series of circular definitions. “Aesthetic,” she writes, can “indicate a certain type of cognitive activity and/or sensory experience,” which may be triggered either specifically by works of art or by other things. At the same time, it can indicate “a certain type of property of any object,” especially formal ones.²⁹ The result is comically tautological: “A combination or conflation of these . . . senses issues in the familiar recursive use of the term to name certain types of experience and certain types of objects and certain types of properties of objects, so that ‘aesthetic’ comes to be roughly equivalent to ‘relating to certain cognitive/sensory experiences,’ these being the ones elicited by objects that have certain formal properties, these being the ones that identify objects as artworks, these being the kinds of work that elicit certain cognitive/sensory experiences, these being . . .,” and so forth around again.³⁰

It seems to me, however, that you could use a transposed version of the last part to describe the way race works: “Race” comes to be roughly equivalent to the “result of certain cognitive judgments, these being the ones elicited by bodies that have certain formal properties, these being the ones that identify bodies as racialized, these being the kinds of bodies that elicit certain cognitive judgments, these being . . .,” and so forth around again. Race and aesthetic forms share a circularity that continually activates, without ever resolving, the opposition between perceptual construction and material property. Although Herrnstein-Smith’s account is a parody, I have argued elsewhere that it nevertheless aptly captures the experiential dimension of the aesthetic. The aesthetic is suspended somewhere between the properties of the object and the viewer’s subjective, culturally constructed response.³¹ Similarly, despite the widespread acceptance of the idea that race is socially constructed, we inevitably locate it in the bodies of racialized people.

FORMS OF BLACKNESS

I began this introduction by distinguishing between blackness as race and blackness as form. In so doing, I engaged with modernist notions of aesthetic autonomy as envisioned by figures like Ad Reinhardt and Pierre

Soulages. Rather than addressing the question of aesthetic autonomy or the relationship between blackness as form and blackness as race head-on, I have first sought to redefine the terms of the debate, emphasizing the parallels between race and form. I even suggested that the aesthetic might provide a valuable framework for understanding the ontological complexities of race. Within such a framework, how does blackness as form interact with blackness as race? Does approaching race through the aesthetic uphold or challenge the distinction between blackness as race versus blackness as form?

Like the aesthetic, form has a bad reputation—a reputation that is also frequently traced to Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and particularly to its role in his definition of the “pure judgement of taste”: “A judgement of taste on which charm and emotion have no influence (even though these may be combined with the satisfaction in the beautiful), which thus has for its determining ground merely the purposiveness of the form, is a pure judgement of taste.”³² As Angela Leighton argues, “Kant lets ‘form’ accept the burden of that disinterested judgement which is not confused by the muddling emotionalism of charm or ornament. He thus finds in it a word through which to assert the impersonal, purist claims of his whole aesthetic theory.”³³ This understanding of form rests on a long-established opposition to matter, as form plays a key role in distinguishing the pleasure of aesthetic judgment from the sensory or sensual pleasures afforded by matter.³⁴ It is through form that the object judged to be beautiful enters into conformity with the free play of our cognitive faculties. Furthermore, the evacuation of sensory gratification permitted by this account of form paves the way for Kant’s paradoxical elimination of singular, subjective pleasures in favor of a judgment of taste experienced as universally valid:

That object the form of which (not the material aspect of its representation, as sensation) in mere reflection on it (without any intention of acquiring a concept from it) is judged as the ground of a pleasure in the representation of such an object—with its representation this pleasure is also judged to be necessarily combined, consequently not merely for the subject who apprehends this form but for everyone who judges at all. The object is then called beautiful; and the faculty for judging through such a pleasure (consequently also with universal validity) is called taste.³⁵

Considering this cumbersome legacy, the concept of form may sound like an odd choice for exploring race. *Formalism*, despite various attempts at rehabilitation, continues to evoke a kind of irresponsible aestheticism that indulges in the illusion of art's autonomy. Conversely, race is often regarded as the content of literary or aesthetic representations, a subject matter of obvious urgency, or a context to which the text must answer. The notion of form I propose, however, is not specifically derived from Kantian aesthetics.³⁶ By invoking the contested and protean word *form*, I aim to redirect our attention to the means by which race becomes an object of representation and perception. Treating race as form thus means examining how it “takes form” and materializes in representations.³⁷ Using the capacious label *form* in this way, furthermore, allows me to bring together insights from a variety of previous scholarly works.

First, *Forms of Blackness* builds on works from the late 1980s and early 1990s in both the United States and the United Kingdom. During this period, a more critical, postmodern view of racial labels—and of the concept of race itself—began to take shape, challenging the perceived essentialism of anticolonial rhetoric. In the United Kingdom, artists and critics, drawing from the insights of cultural studies figures like Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, interrogated what Kobena Mercer termed the “burden of representation” placed on black artists.³⁸ In a shift epitomized by Alan Read's 1996 edited collection *The Fact of Blackness: Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, their work marked a departure from the assumption that blackness was a stable visual phenomenon.³⁹

In the United States, a similar cultural moment emerged in visual and performance studies, partly through the transatlantic influence of Hall as well as under the tutelage of figures like Henry Louis Gates Jr.⁴⁰ The period saw a particular interest in blackface and boundary-crossing practices like passing. Works such as Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* spurred a broader focus on how blackness circulated in culture as a set of signifiers—forms that could be appropriated, mimicked, and commodified, often with ambiguous or contradictory meanings.⁴¹ In much of this work, racial meanings were analyzed using the semiotic concept of the signifier rather than the term *form*. Although the two terms differ and carry distinct disciplinary inflections, they also overlap in crucial ways: The signifier, as the material or physical element of the sign, can be described as its

form as opposed to the concept it evokes (that is, the signified). My own use of *form* thus builds on a central insight of this scholarship, which Cherise Smith articulated in *Enacting Others*: “the fact that blackness is a sign separate from, and sometimes but not always related to, African Americans and African American culture.”⁴² The following chapters similarly emphasize the ability of black forms to circulate in a state of suspended connection to the racialized condition of blackness.

Second, I draw from a rich body of research in art history—a discipline where the concept of form is more obviously present. In the 1960s, the collectors Dominique and John de Menil organized and funded the constitution of a vast archive and research project known as The Image of the Black in Western Art. Under the academic leadership of Ladislav Bugner, Hugh Honour, and later David Bindman, the resulting ten volumes have become central references for any examination of the formal, iconographic, and ideological aspects of representations of blackness. My own interpretations in this book are in dialogue with the many art historians who have extended this exploration, notably Helen Weston, Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, James Smalls, Adrienne Childs, Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, Mechthild Fend, Kay Dian Kriz, and Anne Lafont.⁴³ It is also informed by research on black, African American, and Caribbean art, which offers a vital counterpoint to the representation of black subjects in a European culture that has consistently othered and racialized them. Scholars like Huey Copeland, Darby English, and Krista Thompson have been pivotal in this regard.⁴⁴

Collectively, these scholars have demonstrated that formal choices are intricately connected not only to social discourses of race but also to shifting ideas about the relationship between blackness and selfhood. They have explored the representation of black subjects as a contested aesthetic space where formal and iconographic aspects have constantly intersected with debates about the humanity, subjectivity, and citizenship of racialized people.

Finally, my understanding of the role of form in shaping the workings of race builds on the insight of a large body of scholarship in visual studies, starting with the seminal collection of essays *Only Skin Deep*, published by Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis in 2003. More recently, scholars in that field have developed new ways to approach the links between race and aesthetics. This development is perhaps best exemplified by the Liquid Blackness research group, begun in 2013 under the leadership of Alesandra Raengo. Like me, Raengo identifies the aesthetic less as a means of

exploring how race has been represented than as a means for considering the articulation of race and visual perception. On the one hand, therefore, Raengo acknowledges that figurations of race in some sense appear independent of racial blackness, existing in a state of disjunction from the people to which they refer. At the same time, however, she argues that “blackness cannot be distilled apart from the sociality that nevertheless sticks to it: the fact that ‘black’ describes people as well.”⁴⁵ It is this combination of fluidity and stickiness that led Raengo to adopt the phrase “liquid blackness” to capture the “productive tension between experience and expression, between people and sensorial or aesthetic regimes.”⁴⁶

It is in this sense that I intend to discuss the forms of blackness—neither as the disembodied and unconstrained aesthetic form idealized by figures such as Kant, nor as the racialized sign that acts only as a discursive shorthand for the racialized body. Instead, I use the term to establish an open-ended discussion that makes use of the space between those two poles. This is the space where we can find out how race becomes perceptible. And it is also in this space where we can most clearly distinguish, to borrow Raengo’s phrase, the “productive tension” between blackness as form and blackness as race. Here, indeed, we may find a space in which to imagine different ways of configuring the interrelationships between racialized bodies and our perceptual expectations.

THE NONCOINCIDENCE OF RACE AND FORM

For a flavor of how such an approach may work in practice, let us return one last time to the contrast between the reception of Soulages’s art and that of Coltrane’s music. Following Soulages’s own lead, the reception of his work has emphasized its nonreferential, nonmimetic quality. You may read, for example: “There is no other presence in Soulages’s paintings than that of the paintings themselves.”⁴⁷ “Le tableau ‘noir sur noir’ de Soulages ne peint *rien*, ne donne *rien* à voir: il donne le ‘voir’”⁴⁸ (Soulages’s “black on black” painting does not depict *anything*, does not give *anything* to see: It gives the act of “seeing”). Soulages’s work has virtually never been associated with questions of race, or with social questions more generally.⁴⁹ Even when the art historian and Soulages specialist Pierre Encrevé judiciously notes that in *Peinture 162 × 127 cm, 14 avril 1979*, the use of black pigment “acquires the appearance of a living skin, with thousands of pores made upon it by exploding bubbles of air,” he

never suggests any connection to black—in the sense of racialized—skin.⁵⁰ This absence is not a blind spot in Encrevé’s work, but rather a reflection of the broader reception of Soulages’s work as abstract and modern, where such a connection would be seen as interpretive heresy. In Soulages’s work, blackness has been allowed to exist purely as aesthetic form.

With its melodic complexity, the density of its theoretical foundation, and later its experiments outside harmonic conventions, Coltrane’s jazz is widely regarded as formally ambitious and uncompromisingly modern. Nevertheless, Coltrane’s music was, throughout the 1960s, often interpreted in reference to the civil rights and black power movements. Such interpretations often circulated despite Coltrane’s reticence. Although some of his compositions, such as “The Song of the Underground Railroad,” clearly referenced black history, Coltrane aspired to a universal, even cosmic relevance, resisting any strict association between his music and black identity.⁵¹ Coltrane was indeed much more hesitant than Paul Taylor when it came to connecting art—in his case, music—to the specific social condition of being African American. For example, when interviewed by the jazz critic Frank Kofsky in 1966, Coltrane was reluctant to even endorse the term *black* as a description of his music, despite Kofsky’s insistence on a direct political connection between Coltrane’s free jazz and Malcolm X’s ideas:

KOFSKY: What do you think about the phrase, the new black music, as a description of some of the newer styles in jazz?

COLTRANE: Phrases, I don’t know. They don’t mean much to me, because usually I don’t make the phrases, so I don’t react too much. It makes no difference to me one way or the other what it’s called.

KOFSKY: If you did make the phrases, could you think of one?

COLTRANE: I don’t think there’s a phrase for it, that I could make.

KOFSKY: The people who use that phrase argue that jazz is particularly closely related to the black community and it is an expression of what’s happening there. That’s why I asked you about your reaction to Malcolm X.

COLTRANE: Well, I think it’s up to the individual musician, call it what you may, for any reason you may. Myself, I recognize the artist.

I recognize an individual when I see his contribution; and when I know a man's sound, well, to me that's him, that's this man. That's the way I look at it. Labels, I don't bother with.⁵²

Coltrane is remarkably cagey in this exchange. The strange use of topicalization (“Phrases, I don't know”; “Labels, I don't bother with”) and the vagueness of his responses suggest discomfort with the idea that his music is primarily about black identity. Even when pressed on political engagement, he sidesteps, acknowledging that political concerns are “definitely important,” but shifting focus to his artistic process: “I make a conscious attempt . . . I have tried to make a conscious attempt to change what I've found in music.”⁵³

Coltrane, however, is not claiming the kind of autonomy or aesthetic purity for his music that Soulages seemed to desire. Rather, he seeks to encompass even more of the world in it. Coltrane suggests that “music, being an expression of the human heart, or of the human being itself, does express just what is happening. I feel it expresses the whole thing—the whole of human experience at the particular time that it is being expressed.”⁵⁴ While Coltrane admires figures like Malcolm X and acknowledges the importance of civil rights, these figures and events seem to be only part of what his music strives to express: “Oh they're definitely important; and as I said, the issues are *part of what is* at this time. So naturally, as musicians, we express whatever is.”⁵⁵ Like Reinhardt, Coltrane wants the conversation to operate at a “higher level,” except this time it is not about severing art from life but, rather, about making it more broadly inclusive, more universal, beyond the political-racial meanings of blackness.

This tendency to project onto the formal complexity and increasing difficulty of Coltrane's jazz music a racialized social meaning is reminiscent of what the art critic Darby English calls “the black representational space.” This phrase refers to the set of critical conventions by which the work of black artists is interpreted as representative of the “black experience,” even when it eschews referentiality.⁵⁶ This draws our attention toward another angle of the Reinhardt–Taylor debate cited at the start of this introduction. If Moten subtly reveals the denial that must be deployed to make oneself blind to the political, social, racial, and cultural meanings that black carries, his point is not to close the gap between them entirely, to conflate these different uses and understandings of blackness. Later in the essay, Moten invites us to consider “the unstable zone between the lived experience of the black and the fact

of blackness, between the color black and what it absorbs and reflects, what it takes in and pours out.”⁵⁷

In fact, Taylor’s reminders about the social life of the color black testify to the oppressive weight that a certain idea of blackness puts on the work of artists deemed black. Taylor’s eloquent description of black as “the quality that shapes my life” intervenes in a sentence where he describes how the weight of blackness prevents him from inhabiting the same fantasy of aesthetic autonomy as Reinhardt: “Of course Reinhardt visualizes blackness as some kind of technical problem. I visualize it as the quality that shapes my life, in terms of the quality of the acceptance that my work gets or does not get based on the fact that it is from the Afro-American community.”⁵⁸ What Taylor points out here is not just Reinhardt’s blindness to the social experience of blackness but also the hypocrisy of the discourse of aesthetic purity: The notion of black as pure pictorial form is not available to him, as an artist whose work is systematically interpreted as “black music.” What Taylor rejects in this dialogue is the demand that he should consent not only to see black severed from black social life, but implicitly that he should accept that such severing is a privilege that will only ever be granted to white artists. Or to put it more bluntly: Taylor is rejecting something that was, in any case, never offered to him.

Forms of Blackness takes up the challenge of exploring the connections between blackness as form and blackness as race, while refusing to conflate them. It is inspired in this task by other efforts, such as the exhibition *Blackness in Abstraction*, curated by Adrienne Edwards at the Pace Gallery in New York, in 2016. Seeking to bring together blackness as abstraction and blackness as racialized experience without conflating them, Edwards defined her agenda as follows: “Blackness in abstraction shifts analysis away from the black artist as subject and instead emphasizes blackness as material, method and mode, insisting on blackness as a multiplicity. In this sense, we can think of what it does in the world without conflating it—and those who understand blackness from within a system that deems them black, that is, black people—with a singular historical narrative or monolithic subjectivity.”⁵⁹ I extend this investigation by considering blackness as form not just in the realm of modernist abstraction, but also in a field where abstraction is a lot less obvious—the depiction of racialized subjects.

Approaching blackness as form thus challenges the stability of racialized meanings and their grounding in visual experience. It invites readers to turn their attention to the ideological, historical, and perceptual logics

that tend to obscure the distance and contradictions that organize the relationship between blackness as it appears in aesthetic forms and the identities it invokes. In other words, distinguishing between blackness as form and blackness as race exposes and undermines the processes through which racialized perception has been naturalized.

In another precedent for this effort, film scholar Michael Gillespie compellingly articulates the gap between blackness as aesthetic form and blackness as sociopolitical phenomenon through the concept of “film blackness,” distinguishing “the rendering of race in the arts from the social categories of race.”⁶⁰ Gillespie thus emphasizes aesthetic representation as a realm connected to, yet distinct from, its context, even when it engages directly with the signifiers of blackness. By attending to the forms of blackness, I similarly place them in a state of noncoincidence with the sociopolitical meanings of blackness.

To expand this conceptual framework in new directions, I propose a series of perceptual experiments. These experiments will consist of detecting spaces adjacent to the framework of race where the connections between blackness as form and blackness as identity can be put back into play. In the following chapters I will therefore invite readers to revisit a selection of visual and written materials where blackness may redefine its own meanings.

FORMS AND POLITICAL IMAGINATION

By attending to the gap between aesthetic blackness and blackness as race, I explore the relationship between them as both flexible and contested. In their classic discussion of the formation of racial categories, Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that race is an “unstable and ‘decentered’ complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle.”⁶¹ To this, I would like to add other practices, such as symbolic contestation, literary representation, and artistic figuration. Thus, while not presenting a linear historical narrative, *Forms of Blackness* offers historical snapshots focused on specific works that reveal discontinuities in the contexts and meanings of blackness. The subsequent chapters illustrate that the articulation of racialized meanings and signs is a product of historical, political, and social change.

The book, however, explores not only the malleability of what Stuart Hall famously called “the floating signifier” of race, but also uses

experiments with the aim of defamiliarizing the perceptual habits that, for many people, constitute race as an unavoidable visual fact.⁶² Rather than taking the connections between blackness and visibility, or representation and experience, as givens, it leaves room for what Omi and Winant describe as a “struggle” over meaning. The works under consideration are not approached simply as representations of a certain identity, but rather as devices that construct the relationship between identity and representation by creating aesthetic articulations between visibility and invisibility, surface and depth, or sameness and difference. I thus chart the emergence of formal relationships that organize these terms in strikingly different ways, exploring opacity (chapter 2), formlessness (chapter 3), and duplication (chapter 4).

While acknowledging the grip of race as a medium, I examine how the forms of blackness can help us call into question racialized perceptions. They direct our attention to the creative, shifting, and multifaceted ways in which blackness materializes in art and culture, both within and beyond the framework of racial discourse. I thus follow the direction of works such as Nicole Fleetwood’s *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (2011), which explores the troubled processes by which black subjectivity is perceived (or erased) in visual culture. In addition to probing the position of black bodies in the visual field, Fleetwood demonstrates that blackness also creates challenges for dominant visual modes—especially the dichotomy of objecthood and subjecthood. Investigating the works of various artists and moving through diverse cultural forms, her book seeks to track alternative visual relationships, allowing for “a reformulation of blackness.”⁶³ In the same spirit, I move from the exploration of the aesthesis, or perception, of race to the possibility of its refiguration.

When discussing the analogies between the aesthetic of blackness and race, I pointed out the circularity of both. A more generous word for this could be *relationality*. Roelofs emphasizes relationality throughout her discussion of aesthetic experience, while Raengo explores the “relationality of race.”⁶⁴ Although neither provides a clear definition of relationality, the term signals an intent to focus on the ambiguous zone of contact between subject and object, where my inquiry into race and the aesthetic is situated. In the upcoming chapters, I therefore engage openly with the subjective, situated position of the critic as well as with their agency. In that regard, my approach is sympathetic to Tina Campt’s groundbreaking work in *Image Matters* (2012) and *Listening*

to *Images* (2017), which proposes a new exploration of visual archives through a multisensory and affective response.

These explorations challenge not only color-blind attitudes but also representational approaches that seek to remedy racism through increased “visibility.” By interrogating the racialized processes underpinning such visibility, I aim instead to ask what it would feel like to perceive blackness beside the paradigm of race. In this way, my project grapples with the possibility of change, transformation, and reimagination. In chapter 4 and the conclusion, for example, I openly explore the potential for a reparative visuality of blackness through the works of Samuel Fosso, Alexis Peskine, and Shirley Rufin.⁶⁵ I show that, in very different ways, these artists intervene into the oppositions of subject and object as well as into the individual and racial identities that recur throughout the book and that are central to the experience of racialization articulated by thinkers like Fanon.

The experiments I either conduct or document in this book, however, do not aim to offer a solution or a redemption to the objects I study. Their attempts to break from existing structures of intelligibility, and to explore different articulations of blackness and identity, are ambiguous, partial, and provisional. While their primary function is to bring to light the sedimented meanings and perceptions from which they try to break, these experiments also invite readers to encounter discomfort in certain aesthetic experiences as well as moments of pleasure and power in others.⁶⁶ They are designed to offer a vantage point from which the connections between blackness, identity, and subjectivity might be brought back into motion. What the following chapters suggest is that blackness is not simply an excluded, racialized position to be reintegrated into dominant notions of liberal personhood but a site from which new modes of selfhood and agency may be imagined and experienced.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter 1 starts by interrogating the racialized forms that shape our perception of photography’s denoted content. Although colonial troops formed the majority of Charles de Gaulle’s Free French Army, the photographs of the liberation of Paris in 1944 feature mostly white-looking soldiers. This was no coincidence; France’s allies insisted that Paris should

be liberated by white troops only. So far, the response to this erasure has consisted in unearthing alternative images demonstrating the contribution of black soldiers. Despite its obvious rhetorical value, this approach leaves intact the alignment between photographic indexicality and race that permitted the exclusion of blackness in the first place.

Chapter 1, by contrast, builds on reflections concerning photography and the ethics of spectatorship by Ariella Azoulay and Jacques Rancière, in order to question the forms of invisibility that are produced not just by leaving things out of the frame but by race itself. In addition to exploring the symbolic work performed by both blackness and whiteness in the images, I focus on the relationship between language and vision that sustains the visuality of race. One of the key ideas of *Forms of Blackness* is indeed that, far from being empirical, the visibility of race relies on the literalization of a metaphorical and rhetorical edifice in which terms such as *black* and *white* are imposed upon bodies. Furthermore, the example of the liberation of Paris reveals that the production of racial visuality is both historically and culturally contingent: The notions of blackness and whiteness that informed the allies' demands differed from the colonial lexicon and visual economy of French colonialism.

To make these points, I propose a form of criticism that is both interpretative and performative, building not only on the methods of criticism but also on the representational techniques of contemporary art. I thus reveal not only the role of photographic representations in naturalizing race but also the way form shapes the racial content of photographic representations. By opening a space between the social meanings of race and the concrete means of its representation, this chapter shows how blackness—understood as a shifting complex of signs and devices—exceeds the identities it is meant to signify. This investigation does not seek to contest or deny the referential link between race and the formal means of its representation. Rather, it operates within it, looking for moments where the forms of blackness may point beyond racialized and racist meanings.

While chapter 1 makes the process of racial visuality perceptible, chapter 2 examines the alternative possibilities located in the space between blackness as race and the forms of its aesthetic figuration. As I have argued in this introduction, thinking about blackness through the aesthetic poses a challenge to the subject/object dichotomy that structures discourses about race. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 explore the consequences of this challenge for our understanding of subjectivity (chapter 2), experience (chapter 3), and individuality (chapter 4).

Portrait d'une femme noire, exhibited in 1800, is a rare portrait of a black woman from the brief period between France's abolition and reinstatement of slavery. Existing critiques either celebrate the sitter's individuality or lament the objectification of her body. In contrast, chapter 2 explores how the painting, positioned at the intersection of gender and race, challenges both slavery-era and current concepts of subjectivity. Focusing on the opacity of the subject's skin, I argue that the portrait disrupts contemporary norms of female legibility, which linked skin transparency to subjective knowability and associated blackness with deficient subjectivity. Instead of debating whether blackness conforms to individuality in portraiture, I show that its presence alters the very norms through which individuality is perceived. Drawing on Édouard Glissant's ideas on opacity, I suggest that emphasizing opacity over transparency in interpreting the portrait opens new possibilities for understanding selfhood and identity, building on the critical reflection from chapter 1 on the ethical role of the critic.

Chapter 3 turns from the visualization of race to the experience of being seen as racialized. For that purpose, I turn to what is probably the most influential account of this experience, Frantz Fanon's influential chapter "L'expérience vécue du Noir" ("The Lived Experience of the Black Man") from *Peau noire, masques blancs* (*Black Skin, White Masks*) (1952). My chapter reinterprets Fanon's concept of epidermalization, which describes how the racialized subject internalizes race. Fanon's visceral account of a Caribbean man interpellated as black in French society is often analyzed conceptually, but I argue that understanding Fanon's literary style is essential to grasping blackness in his text.

Chapter 3 highlights the figural and metaphorical nature of the body in Fanon's writing, showing how it becomes an imaginary, even fantastical object. I reveal the presence of a nonhuman figure—an insect—that haunts Fanon's text, suggesting it is more than a literalization of racist language. By linking Fanon's insect to other figures such as Audre Lorde's engagement with the cockroach, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and the Haitian Maroon Makandal, I argue that this creature transcends the forms imposed by racism and even bodily form itself. Fanon's chapter, I propose, offers a path to understanding the forms of blackness beyond racial objectification, moving into the realm of shape-shifting and formlessness.

Chapter 4 revisits the concept of positive black visibility and its relation to political identification from a diasporic perspective. It focuses on Samuel Fosso's *African Spirits* (2008), a series of self-portraits in

which Fosso embodies fourteen iconic black figures of the twentieth century. While the series celebrates collective identity through racialized visibility, the selves it produces challenge liberal notions of individuality. Fosso's work exists in a visual economy where images of blackness circulate as commodified symbols, often detached from the lived experiences of racialized people.

Drawing on Oliver Wendell Holmes's idea of form, which refers to photography's ability to separate surfaces from matter, the chapter links Fosso's portraits to a history of commodifying blackness while devaluing black bodies. However, I argue that Fosso's series not only reflects this decorporealization but also responds to it through a process of recorporealization, evoking distinctly West African photographic codes and spiritual practices like twin photographs, masquerades, and possession. Ultimately, *African Spirits* explores what happens when two bodies inhabit the same image, addressing the dislocation and doubleness of the racialized self described by Fanon's concept of epidermalization. In Fosso's work, however, blackness operates as a positive potential, transcending individuality and creating a diasporic political identity. This chapter, therefore, offers a vision of blackness that transforms the opposition between individual and racial embodiment, proposing instead a transpersonal, transnational view of the self.

SEEING RACE IN FRANCE

Before closing this introduction, I would like to address an important aspect of this project, namely its status as a work written in English but dealing mostly with either French or French-speaking contexts and materials. The first two chapters of this book, in particular, are deeply embedded in the French context and its specific relationship to the concept of race. I would therefore like to provide a brief overview of this context for readers who may not be familiar with it. Although *Forms of Blackness* intervenes in scholarly discussions beyond the question of race in France, the issues it raises around the relationship between blackness and the visual have a particular resonance for what is often described as France's "color blindness."

When it is discussed in other cultural contexts, particularly in the United States, the French context is often treated as an oddity or a limit case of extreme denial. I believe, however, that some of the equivocations at work in French discourses are not uniquely French,

but instead emblematic of the ontological uncertainties surrounding the concept of race more generally. At any rate, the French case offers a powerful illustration for the challenges of any attempt to engage with antiracism without reactivating a biological concept of race.

Since the end of the Second World War, the French Republic has based its model of citizenship on a form of universalism, hostile to community identities based on religion, gender, sexuality, or race.⁶⁷ The concept of race was regarded with particular suspicion in the aftermath of the war because of its role in the Holocaust and in the ideology that led the Vichy government to collaborate with the Nazis. The postwar period saw important intellectual efforts to delegitimize race, exemplified by the publication of works such as Jean-Paul Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946), Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Race et histoire* (1952) and Michel Leiris's *Race et civilisation: La question raciale devant la science moderne* (1955).⁶⁸ In that period, France adopted what the political scientist Erik Bleich has described as a model of "anti-racism without race," designed primarily as a tool against anti-Semitism.⁶⁹ As a result, in political discourse, in the media, and in some intellectual circles, race is a category that many find illegitimate and even intrinsically racist.

The influence of this idea on French policies found a powerful illustration in 2018, when the French parliament voted to eliminate the word *race* from the preamble to the 1958 constitution. Strikingly, in the current version of the text, the word is not used in the context of a racist statement, but in a declaration of the Republic's rejection of racism: "[La France] assure l'égalité devant la loi de tous les citoyens sans distinction d'origine, de race ou de religion" ([France] shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of origin, race, or religion). That statement is to be replaced with the following: "[La France] assure l'égalité devant la loi de tous les citoyens sans distinction de sexe, d'origine ou de religion" ([France] shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction of sex, origin, or religion). This constitutional revision, passed in 2018 under Emmanuel Macron's center-right government, followed a similar vote in 2013, under François Hollande's center-left government.⁷⁰ In both 2013 and 2018, the erasure of the word *race* from the constitution garnered strong support from members of parliament representing Martinique, Guadeloupe, and La Réunion. Among the advocates for the move were figures such as Serge Letchimy (from the socialist and anticolonialist Parti progressiste martiniquais) and Christiane Taubira (a member of the liberal socialist Parti

radical de gauche), both known for their commitment to antiracism, and in Taubira's case, for having been the target of very public racist attacks.

Since the mid-2000s, however, France's race-neutral universalism has faced growing challenges from a new generation of intellectuals, artists, and activists. The year 2005 was, as Nicolas Bancel argues, a watershed moment in the emergence of a new brand of antiracism, in which racial categories are no longer taboo.⁷¹ That one year witnessed three significant events. First, Jacques Chirac's right-wing government proposed a law requiring the school curriculum to highlight France's "positive role" as a colonial power. Although eventually dropped, the proposal and the ensuing scandal exposed France's struggle to reckon with its colonial history. Second, new antiracist organizations, the CRAN (Conseil représentatif des associations noires [Representative council of black associations]) and the Mouvement des Indigènes de la République (Movement of the Indigenous of the Republic) emerged, both promoting new interpretations of French society through the lens of its colonial legacy and advocating for a more direct engagement with race.⁷² Third, riots broke out in low-income areas surrounding Paris and other major French cities following the death by electrocution of two boys, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré (ages seventeen and fifteen), during a police chase. The riots were widely interpreted as resulting from the marginalization of racialized populations and as a symptom of racist colonial structures persisting into the present.⁷³

Since 2005 a considerable amount of research on the topic of race in France has reflected this renewed concern, particularly in the fields of history, sociology, and political thought.⁷⁴ The title of an influential volume edited by Didier and Eric Fassin in 2006 neatly encapsulates the discussions: *De la question sociale à la question raciale?* (From the social question to the racial question?). A few years later, a wave of documentaries and films addressing the situation of black French individuals gained significant attention.⁷⁵ For a growing number of academics and activists engaged in these discussions as well as for many observers of France in the United States and the United Kingdom, French universalism is a failed model. Its official distrust toward the notion of race makes it illegal to use racial categories in gathering statistics on poverty, education, crime, or health, which hinders the measurement of racial discrimination and the structural effects of racism.⁷⁶ This approach to public policy, however, has not stopped racial categories from influencing everyday life. Ultimately, many argue, what it makes invisible is not race but racism.⁷⁷

Surprisingly, even in discussions that have sought to challenge the French notion of universalism, the ontological status of race and the nature of its relationship to visual perceptions has remained largely unexamined. It could even be argued that, paradoxically, in the French context visibility has offered a means of discussing race without quite naming it. This tendency is evident in early critiques of the French media's lack of representativity. Blackness already featured prominently in the actions of the Collectif égalité (Equality collective), formed in the late 1990s and led by the Cameroonian writer Calixthe Beyala, to promote more diversity in the French media. Yet the group did not refer openly to race but used instead the euphemistic notion *minorités visibles* (visible minorities), borrowed from Canadian terminology, to denote racialized groups. This phrase was later adopted by the Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel (Superior audiovisual council), or CSA, the institution in charge of media regulation in France. In 2000, the CSA conducted a landmark study authored by the sociologist Marie-France Malonga, titled *Présence et représentation des minorités visibles à la télévision française* (Presence and representation of visible minorities in French television). The study confirmed the lack of representation of black individuals on French television except in music shows, sports, and American series as well as the near-absence of people from the Maghreb in all contexts.

In this study, *visible minorities* were defined as “les minorités ethniques d'origine non-européenne et dont l'aspect physique, différent de celui de la majorité française ‘*blanche*,’ les rend visibles”⁷⁸ (ethnic minorities of non-European origin whose physical appearance, differing from that of the “*white*” French majority, makes them visible). Strikingly, the ideological role of race in turning physical characteristics into an index of ethnicity was entirely omitted. Similarly, racism and its impact were left out of the discussion. The difficulty in explicitly addressing race becomes even more apparent when we consider that the study's three main categories—“les Noirs, les Maghrébins/Arabes et les Asiatiques” (Black, Maghrebi/Arab, and Asian)—are evidently racial terms. The visibility of these groups as “different,” however, is treated as a basic fact, contrasting sharply with the distancing from the term *white* in the report. The latter is not only placed in quotation marks but also italicized, implying that it is not a genuine identity or, at the very least, not visible in the same manner.

The unresolved relationship between race, visibility, and perception has continued to haunt the scholarship published after 2005. The

landmark study *La condition noire*, published by the prominent historian and former minister for education, Pap Ndiaye, in 2007, is a striking example. *La condition noire* played a significant role in bringing the question of blackness to the center of public and academic debates in France. It provided not only a masterful overview of the history of black people in France, but also proposed tools for the creation of a new field of studies, which Ndiaye named “*Black Studies* à la française.”⁷⁹ The transfer of the English “Black Studies” into French gestures both to the powerful intellectual baggage already attached to that field in the anglophone academic world and to its institutionalization—two elements that would be absent from the somewhat ominous-sounding *Etudes noires*. The avoidance of the French phrase also has to do with the very possibility of constituting a field of study around a racial term, which would not only mean bringing together social groups that had often thought of themselves as distinct, such as Francophone Caribbean populations and West African immigrants, but also breaking a taboo around the legitimacy of race as an object of study. The addition of “à la française,” however, signals the need to amend this project and its vocabularies to accommodate a more diverse, uneven, and transnational understanding of blackness.

La condition noire accomplished a remarkable feat in addressing the challenge of writing a book about “the black condition” within an officially color-blind context. To do so, Ndiaye adapted some of the concepts he had encountered both as a specialist of US history and during a stay at the University of Virginia. One of the key concepts he adapted was blackness itself. Ndiaye applied Clifford Geertz’s distinction between “thick” identities, grounded on a shared culture, history, and language, and “thin” identities, where individuals primarily share the experience of being ascribed an identity.⁸⁰ Unlike in US society, Ndiaye showed that in France blackness is mainly a “thin” identity assigned by society, rather than a shared culture. In making this argument, Ndiaye was explicitly trying to avoid relying on a biological concept of race to define his object of study, while addressing the cultural diversity of those he defined as black:

À la question ‘qui est noir?’ il convient de ne répondre ni par des arguments de nature (qui renverraient à une conception biologisante de la ‘race’) ni par des arguments de culture (qui renverraient à l’infinie variété des différences culturelles entre les hommes et des identités qui

leur sont attachées), mais par des arguments sociopolitiques: dans les sociétés où ils sont minorés, sont noirs celles et ceux qui sont réputés tels; est noire, a minima, une population d'hommes et de femmes dont l'expérience sociale partagée est d'être considérés comme noirs. Il y a donc des Noirs (des Blancs aussi) par accord social tacite. . . . Pour paraphraser les propos de Sartre concernant les Juifs, un Noir est un homme que les autres hommes tiennent pour noir.⁸¹

(To the question "Who is black?" we should answer neither with arguments about nature [which would refer to a biological conception of "race"] nor with arguments of culture [which would refer to the infinite variety of cultural differences between men and of the identities attached to them], but with sociopolitical arguments: In the societies where black people are minoritized, to be black is to be deemed as such; black, in this minimal sense, refers to a population of men and women whose shared social experience is that of being considered black. There are therefore Blacks [and Whites as well] because of a tacit social agreement. . . . To paraphrase Sartre's comments about the Jews, the Black is one whom other men consider black.)

With this definition, Ndiaye deftly sidestepped the problem of race. The choice of the canonical French thinker Jean-Paul Sartre as a legitimating reference may also be a means of assuaging critics who would inevitably see his work as importing American theories.⁸² Here, Ndiaye carefully pointed out his rejection of biological or physiological criteria. For him, race does not exist as a *biological fact* but as a *social experience*. What makes somebody black is not their physical features but the *perception* others have of those features. Although Ndiaye is responding to a specifically French set of discursive constraints, this move resonates well beyond that context. Scholarship on race and blackness (including this book) abounds with terms such as *racialized* or *raced* (which are translated, with different political nuances, as *racialisé* or *racisé* in French), or periphrases such as "people positioned/regarded as black." These all similarly emphasize the process by which race is projected onto people, rather than being an inherent characteristic.

Such wording also runs into the same contradictions as Ndiaye's effort. Through his repeated use of passive constructions ("sont minorés," "sont réputés," "être considérés" [are minoritized, are reputed, being considered]) and his vague reference, via Sartre, to "les autres hommes"

(other men), Ndiaye's definition of blackness skirted a crucial question: Where do these perceptions come from? For his book, Ndiaye interviewed people whom he considered black. Many of them readily described themselves as black, but a number refused the term, preferring for example *métis* (mixed-race) or just "French."⁸³ For Ndiaye, however, race is not a matter of self-identification, and for him these people are nonetheless black:

Certains réfutent le qualificatif de 'noir,' au motif que leur identité n'est pas celle-là, ou qu'elle ne se réduit pas à cela. . . . C'est bien le droit de ces personnes, en vérité. Il n'empêche qu'elles sont souvent considérées comme noires. Il y a ceci de particulier avec la condition noire qu'on ne s'en échappe pas, qu'il est difficile de s'affranchir de son apparence noire, que celle-ci vous rattrape par le collet au moment où vous n'y pensez plus.⁸⁴

(Some refuse the term "black," on the grounds that their identity is not that, or that it cannot be reduced to that. . . . It is, of course, their right. Nevertheless, these people are often considered black. What is special about the black condition is that you cannot escape from it, that it is difficult to free yourself from your black appearance, that it catches you by the collar as soon as you forget about it.)

At this point, however, Ndiaye's approach reveals a form of circular reasoning. After all, what elements enable him to know immediately and with certainty that an individual in front of him is considered black by the rest of society? The only clue he has is, in fact, the person's appearance. Tellingly, the "black appearance" of the subjects is personified and endowed with a powerful agency, obscuring Ndiaye's own role in the process of racialization. In reality, Ndiaye infers society's perception from the bodily features of his subjects—the very criterion he sought to avoid. He relies on what Ariela Gross calls "the common sense of race," the assumption that race is a self-evident visual fact, which everyone else will perceive in the same way.⁸⁵

These contradictions do not undermine Ndiaye's argument, but they do reveal an unavoidable difficulty: Ultimately, an engagement with racial categories cannot fully avoid being implicated in the biological discourse from which racial concepts originate. Ndiaye cannot help but reproduce the very racializing gaze his book criticizes. Similarly,

even though many people in France and elsewhere don't believe that race really exists as a biological fact, they are still perfectly capable of categorizing most people they meet as "black," "Asian," or "white." In other words, even if the perceiving subject does not subscribe to racist judgments, they can never remain separate from race. This inescapable position of what Michael Rothberg calls, in another context, "implication," which consists in this case in being "entangled" or "folded into" the visibility of race, is what *Forms of Blackness* seeks to explore.⁸⁶ For this reason, although much of the book attempts to denaturalize the connection between race and vision, I will nevertheless use the term black without quotation marks, as a means of acknowledging my own implication in the production and reproduction of race as visible.⁸⁷

UNTRANSLATING BLACKNESS

I started this overview of the French context by highlighting the skepticism it generates abroad, especially among American cultural commentators. Conversely, growing concerns about race and racism in France are often dismissed as yet another deplorable American import, like fast food and Disneyland. As Audrey Célestine writes, such claims are embedded in representations that often exaggerate the differences between a supposed French model and an American one. Viewed from France, the opposition sounds something like this:

Un 'modèle français' de coexistence paisible entre les groupes sociaux, marqué par l'universalisme abstrait de valeurs partagées, se trouverait aux prises avec des catégories 'communautaristes' ou 'séparatistes,' et dans tous les cas 'extrémistes,' qui 'morcellent,' 'divisent,' 'fracturent' la société française et proviennent d'une société états-unienne qui serait marquée, elle, par un racisme (ou un sexisme) virulent.⁸⁸

(A "French model" of peaceful coexistence between social groups, enabled by the abstract universalism of shared values, would find itself grappling with "communitarian" or "separatist" categories. These categories—which are always "extremist"—"fragment," "divide," "fracture" French society and come from an American society which is marked by virulent racism [or sexism].)

Many recent works on French and US histories of racism have shown that such an opposition has little basis in reality, highlighting the mythical aspect of France's universalist color blindness.⁸⁹ Claims that "race" has simply been imported into the French debate are, in other words, mostly a rhetorical shield against the new forms of antiracism that have emerged since the mid-2000s and an obfuscation of France's own history of racism.

There are, nevertheless, legitimate questions to be asked about what is lost in translation when one decides to write in English about race in a French-speaking context. Lia Brozgal, for example, reminds us that the very term *color-blind*, widely used to describe France's race-neutral universalism, is a metaphor with no direct equivalent in French: "the term for the same ocular dysfunction, *le daltonisme*, is not linguistically linked to the difficulty of seeing or distinguishing color, and thus cannot be made to function as an analogous trope."⁹⁰ *Blackness* itself has no direct equivalent in French, and its meanings fluctuate even within various anglophone contexts. In the United States, for example, *black* commonly refers to the descendants of enslaved Africans, whereas in the United Kingdom, it used to include populations of both West African and South Asian origin. In French, *black* works as an imperfect translation for a variety of words, including *noir* and *nègre*, whose meanings are themselves unstable and contested. These have evolved in different ways across history and contexts, including metropolitan France, the French-speaking Caribbean, and West Africa. They have worked with and against each other, at times being racial slurs and at other times terms of pride, political mobilization, and affiliation.

The English word *black* itself has been integrated into French everyday usage, acquiring new meanings in the process, as Grégory Pierrot notes:

When it first entered common French usage in the 1980s, the word *Black* carried with it decades of African American radical politics and culture. At one level, using it in a French context extended this label of pride to Black French people. Its usage quickly became widespread and has remained so. With the anglophone political connotations and related defiance it once carried now essentially diluted to the point of triviality, saying *Black* has become a convenient way to avoid saying *noir* and to ignore in the process the heavy French baggage *noir* carries.⁹¹

Blackness, in other words, is not just a term that allows certain commonalities to come to the fore but a site of constant, transatlantic displacements. As Brent Hayes Edwards puts it, the word *black* is also an index of “misunderstanding, bad faith, unhappy translation,” refracting the different contexts in which race operates.⁹² The chapters of this book emerge within that contested semantic space, and I have tried, as much as possible, to highlight its effects. They start from the recognition that, as Kaiama Glover puts it, “there is no such thing as a global ‘black experience,’” but rather “heterogeneous black geographies, epistemologies, cultures, and languages, rendering black peoples in many ways illegible to one another.”⁹³ Chapter 1, for example, highlights the erasures that US-centric notions of blackness and whiteness have imposed on the French colonial context. Chapter 4, by contrast, explores the forms of diasporic identification as well as the identitarian commodification enabled by a globalized concept of blackness. Throughout the book, I have included and analyzed quotations in the original French in order to let readers engage with the French terms and their sometimes untransferable connotations.

If the use of the English words *black* and *blackness* carries with it the risk of obscuring some of the differences between interconnected yet distinct histories of racialization and racism, it has also presented some opportunities for my project. Here, I am not only referring to the institutional and economic constraints that shape the international marketplace of academic productions, which have partly determined the making of this book. I also have in mind the things that *black* makes it possible to think and say. Pierrot is right to point out that for many French people, *black* has become a euphemism to avoid saying *noir* in a context where simply acknowledging race may be considered racist.

There is, however, a more significant point to be teased out of this: In the everyday existence of race in France, the English word *black* indexes a gap between what one sees and what one says. It has become a way of naming the visual perception of race in a context where the conventions of universalist antiracism deny such visual experiences and their effects. It is an attempt at what Alessandra Raengo calls a “suture between seeing and saying.”⁹⁴ At the same time, the foreignness and the obvious redundancy of *black* in a context where the word *noir* is already available, keeps pointing to the noncoincidence of seeing and saying. This gap between seeing and saying, between the verbal and the visual, is central to this book. It operates not only in the difficulty of expressing

linguistically the thought processes triggered by visual experiences, but also, conversely, in the role of discursive and rhetorical devices in shaping visibility. In the context of this study, the term *black* has allowed me to account for a range of visual perceptions, while allowing them to exist in a suspended relation with France's racialized language (*noir*, *nègre*, and so on). This suspension is crucial to the exploration of new meanings and concepts: It carries within it the possibility that visual experiences may not simply repeat existing discourses.

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INTRODUCTION