Black Beauty Politics and the Afro-modern French Figure

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Abstract

In post-2005 France, blackness has finally become visible. Faces of blackness now appear on television, in the press and in ads covering the walls of Paris underground. Former Miss France, Sonia Rolland today sides with historical figures such as Marianne to encapsulate the multicultural nature of the "*black-blanc-beur*" country. Black populations take this momentum in French history to represent blackness in their own terms. Not only do they complement the national narrative with a multiracial background or document on the long-lasting black presence in France but they also create images due to synthesize their past (French, African and/or Caribbean) and what is being black and French today. This joint objective is particularly visible in the contemporary construction of a black form of beauty. Crossing their multiple cultures with influences from the African and black diasporas, black French mold pictures of a French Afro-modern figure. Beauty turns into an instrument to invent positive images of a black self "*à la française*". Creating, promoting or defending *black beauty* – used in English - is a militant action. It not only means fighting against past representations of black bodies exposed in colonial exhibitions, as they were in 1930, or the failures of the French model of "*intégration*" but it means empowerment. It means critiquing, resisting and challenging paradigms. Models like Noémie Lenoir then become the icons of the "*black cause*" that display a "black aesthetic" in which the body represents a new black French consciousness.

Based on recent groundwork conducted in Paris, this presentation seeks to understand how beauty becomes a political argument for black French. It also explores the meaning of black beauty in a transnational perspective, stressing how the global circulation of images influences a community ascription.

Keywords: black beauty, France, aesthetic, politics, African and black diasporas, consciousness.

In January 2012, the former Miss France, the French-Rwandese Sonia Rolland and the international model, the Reunionese Noemi Lenoir, called the French leading female magazine, *Elle*, a 'racist' magazine. Both criticized comments made by a journalist, Nathalie Dolivo who rejoiced that the '*black-geoisie has integrated white [aesthetic] codes*', leaving aside what Dolivo considered as traditional black fashion: streetwear. Dolivo mentioned Michelle Obama, Beyoncé and Nikki Mimaj as examples of this 'black-geoisie' that opted for 'white dressing codes' and therefore became the egerias of what she defined as 'black fashion power'. Not only Dolivo seemed to consider that African Americans – and black people at large - didn't have any sense of fashion and beauty before Michelle Obama, Beyoncé or Nikki Minaj came to the forefront, but she also exhumed clichés about the African American history, talking about 1920s roaring Harlem as the 'last era of a 'black chic", symbolized by the Cotton Club. Dolivo sadly revived those clichés and proposed what she considered to be a positive image of black fashion and beauty.

Along with other publications such as the yearly special issue of *Femme Actuelle* - the second largest female magazine - on 'black beauty' and the development of a black female press since 2001, Dolivo's and Rolland's articles reveal that the definition of beauty in black French terms has become a social and political issue mimicking the process of minority

identification currently at work among black French. Defining a black form of beauty goes beyond the analysis of aesthetic standards, usually derived from a eurocentric perspective, but it shows that beauty critically illustrates the tensions at play when defining some Afro-Frenchness, articulating French founding myths and multiple black ascriptions. Two questions emerge. First, how and why do black French use beauty to shape Afro-Frenchness and empower themselves politically, socially and economically? Secondly, how does this black French form of beauty lead to the invention of body ideals which originate from the French context as much as from the circulation of images from Europe to Africa and the Americas?

The point of this paper, here presented in a few notes, is to show that defining a black beautifulness contribute to racialize Afro-French identities (African, Caribbean, etc) whose cultural, political and historical specificities are shadowed by the experience of a race-based discrimination. Secondly, it is to show that black people use this racialization to invent aesthetic models for Afro-Frenchness which stem from exchanges between global and local, dominant and minority aesthetic codes and minority and from the circulation of images between France, Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States.

I. Ethnic visibility and the racializing Afro-Frenchness

In 1998, as the national soccer team won the world cup, French people praised their model of integration and a French multicultural model named '*black-blanc-beur*' (black-white-Arabic). For the first time, France represented itself as a multiracial nation whose success depended on its ethnic diversity. More than twenty years later and seven years after the riots in the *banlieues*, multiculturalism has faded away and was turned into a matter of ethnic visibility for which faces of blackness were to answer anti-discrimination cries. Political debates revolve around the existence of 'ethnic' communities in the French society or, as it is defined by conservatives fearing any change in the French social order is based on, '*communautarism*'[1]. Local activists, associations but also scholars capture this notion, calling for a better representation of French '[ethnic] diversity'[2] in the media and upscale public services. Faces of blackness appear in the media, in political and institutional milieus to represent blackness. The UMP Rama Yade became Minister for human rights, the Caribbean journalists Harry Roselmack and Audrey Pulvar hosted the evening news while Afro-descent actors like Omar Sy and Aïssa Maïga appeared in blockbuster films like *Intouchables*. The struggle for Afro-French visibility primarily has focused on the instruments of popular culture (the media, the arts, etc) confronting French people with images of themselves on a daily basis. As the writer Calixthe Beyala, mentioned in her premising book *Letter from an Afro-*

1 *In France, communautarism is defined as the transformation of the French society from a national community to juxtaposition of communities gathered following a shared ethnic, religious, sex identity.*

2 *'Diversity' has become a commonly used and supposedly positive term to talk about non-white populations in France.*

French[3], the objective is first to fight against the representational absence of "diversity" and counter enduring images of uncivilized and exotic blacks as former President, Nicolas Sarkozy, reiterated in his 2007 speech in Dakar[4]. Reversing unending images of black immigrant families packed in slums or of socially disruptive rioters singled out as of *'noirs'*, these visual role models represented black social uplift whose physicality (skin color, facial features) emphasize the necessary and inevitable articulation of blackness and Frenchness.

Afro-French also use these sometimes highly formal calls for 'diversity' to insert blackness in the French narrative. Black political and cultural figures like the Chevalier de St George, Alexandre Dumas or Aimé Césaire are called upon to emphasize three centuries of black presence in mainland France. Films like Abdelatif Kechiche's *Venus noire*, books like Claude Ribbe's *Les nègres de la République*, essays like Pap Ndiaye's *La condition noire* or Patrick Lozès's *Noirs de France*, exhibitions and conferences complement this new visibility of black people by exploring slavery, colonial imagery and driving perspectives regularly inspired by Post-Colonial Studies and critical race theory. For most, these authors are away from the academy but attempt to deconstruct the myth of a color-blind French society by analyzing on the representations of blackness throughout history. A relevant example of this movement is the recent exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly, "L'invention du Sauvage", curated by the former soccer player Lilian Thuram, Quai Branly Nanette Jacomijn Snoep and the independent scholar, Pascal Blanchard. Relying on Blanchard's studies on the colonial representations of the 'Other', the exhibition displays films and posters from the 1900s to 1930s and draws the origins of persisting racial discrimination in the French society. Despite several methodological tropes and the problematic association between people with physical infirmities deemed "abnormal" and colonized people discriminated on the basis of race, this exhibition exemplifies how blackness gradually enters mainstream culture thanks to visual deconstruction of past images of blackness. Though such events do not often examine racism in contemporary times but push this notion into a remote past, they symbolize a breakthrough from black French who reverse images shaped through a slaveholder or colonial lenses and confront French people with discrimination that they, for most, ignore. Racial discrimination is depicted as the common denominator to Afro-French experiences commodified as a unique black trajectory.

This racial emphasis is a contentious point since, like other nations, France is founded on a set of myths. The most important one is our national motto ("*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*"), one can see on the facades of public buildings. It ideally means that all citizens

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3 Calixthe Beyala, *Lettre d'une afro-française à ses compatriotes*, Paris, Mango, 2000.

4 The tragedy of Africa is that the African man [sic] had not fully entered history. Never does [the African] man stretch to the future. Never would he think of escaping repetition to invent his destiny. The problem of Africa, and allow a friend of Africa to say it, [is that] Africa's challenge is to enter to a greater extent into history.[…]', *speech at the University of Dakar, 26 July 2007. Personal translation.*

are born equal, should be treated fairly. It also means that the Republic does not differentiate people on the basis of race, religion or gender, as written in the preamble of the Constitution. On legal and political grounds, race is referred as an intrinsically discriminatory factor that the state and its people should not mention. Following those principles, France sees itself as a nation in which race is proscribed. Consequently and as Didier Fassin mentioned in *Questions sociales, question raciales*, talking about race, even as a historical & social construct. It is considered as a way of reassessing it & therefore forming a racist discourse. Then, Afro-French's emphasis on a racial self-ascription and the national identity appear as irreconcilable identifications.

When beauty intersects race and culture

However, Afro-French continue to articulate an ethnic identity on the one side with a national one. Beauty intersects politics as a new black press appeared in 2001, proposing role models, body types, products due to visually invent Afro-Frenchness.

The black press appeared in France in the early 1970s as a niche for a limited audience: African and Caribbean populations. Only 2 magazines were available: *Jeune Afrique* (for political issues) and *Amina* (for women and social questions). Both were created in Africa for francophone readers and were later available for migrant populations in France. It gradually addressed African and Caribbean communities who came to France during the "Glorious Thirties" (1940s-1970s) and who were willing to retain the particularities of their original cultures (customs, local fashion, food, etc). Their self-representation was not yet that of an Afro-French population but that of immigrant ones whose images showed the multiplicity of their identities. Beauty was used as a political tool which revealed a geographical, cultural and ethnic anchoring (Congo, Bakongo ; Cameroon, Basaa, etc). People talked about Senegalese or Ivorian fashion or beauty to emphasize of the aesthetic codes developed by newly independent peoples who refused the Western and French influences.

The point was not yet to construct a visual identity for black people but to represent blacks by blacks and for blacks. It was to reassess Africans' political, social & cultural agency. The images selected also emphasized a cut with the past and the opening to a new era. *Amina* for instance proposed articles on female role models whose beauty caused as much admiration as their performance: athletes proudly representing the Communist-oriented regimes at the Olympics or artists praising the achievements of the 'fathers of the nations' were congratulated as they represented the 'natural African beauty'. All represented a generation ready to build and personify the future of Africa. *Amina* remained the only black female magazine in France from 1972 to 2001 and consequently epitomized blackness in France. Though it is African-oriented, it contributed to define visual standards among black Francophone populations (what does a role model look like? What cosmetics does she use? etc). *Amina* is based on storytelling: it focuses on the trajectories of ordinary women whose lives look like the

readers'. Beauty appears as a day-to-day enhancement of your natural body. It therefore seems accessible. One can buy the same lipstick at a local store or at the market or have the same hair-do as the makossa singer Mbilia Bel. Beauty seems simple, affordable and achievable.

The perception of beauty and its political role changed in the early 2000s, as new magazines appeared to counterbalance *Amina*'s monopoly. As Rolland and Lenoir's article partly encapsulates, Black French decided to 're-present' themselves and mold images of blacks and celebrate the 'Afro' part of their identity. *Miss Ebène*, *Première Dame*, *Brune* and *Black Beauty* appeared in newsstands nationwide, promoted by Afro-French entrepreneurs explicitly willing to increase black self-representation. Unlike *Amina* and its Senegalese founder, Simon Kiba, these magazines are not designed for African middle-aged women from the lower to the middle classes but for teenagers and young adults, interested in fashion, former readers of *Elle* and other mainstream magazines who could not find images reflecting their experiences. Beauty is constructed as a paradigm meant to challenge white-based vision of Frenchness. Stylized bodies (elongated and skinny bodies wearing sophisticated hairdos and make up, trendy clothing) fill in the pages *Black Beauty* and *Brune*. *Miss Ebène* refers to the 1960s-1970s Afro chic and recalls how another black community, African Americans, has used beauty as a political tool. French music and cinema stars like Inna Moja exemplify a black pride cutting from *Amina*'s past celebrations of African identities. The now old "Black is beautiful" slogan is revived to articulate beauty politics in French terms: being Afro-French means being proud of this hyphenated identity and connecting to other black communities. For many readers[5], beauty empowers Afro-Frenchness, built as a minority ascription in a multicultural society. It not only assesses the existence of a black French community - though in process - but it enables them to shape their bodies following models and ideals they select. Customers tend to think that wearing Rihanna's high heels or Beyoncé's lace participates in a black self-affirmation: French people have to notice them. They believe in a black form of beauty whose aesthetic provides them with a sense of belonging to a national and then a transnational community: black people[6].

This identification shows how race gradually prevails upon geographically and culturally-based definitions of beauty to become a common ground shadowing black cultural diversity. Race defines beauty and beauty becomes a prism to represent Afro-Frenchness. Then, shaping images of a black beautifulness not only means fighting racial stereotypes and blacks' political invisibility but it means promoting a visual agency. Afro-French collect pieces of blackness from all over the world, using beauty to bridge their experience to other communities'. Primarily focused on African Americans, who long developed a black beauty market, Afro-

5 *Interviews conducted at the black beauty fair*, Beauty Color, Paris, December 12, 2011.

6 *Ibid.*

French capture images and names turned as symbols of a transnational black beauty they could adhere to.

Molding a French Afro-modern figure

The racialization of Afro-Frenchness has led to the sedimentation of beauty codes defining black beauty. Though it is a social and economic construction which owes a lot to the fashion industry and international cosmetic firms like L'Oréal and Carson, Afro-French have appropriated their aesthetic criteria to shape black beauty. In their ads, the body becomes a blank space that must be modified, molded, turned into a sophisticated being which represents a modern figure. From laces, wigs or fake lashes, all the images of black beauty tell us about this supposedly necessary transformation. In December 2011, the first fair dedicated to black beauty confirmed this process. Located in a remote exhibition hall in the 13th arrondissement in Paris, *Beauty Color* was all-black event that displayed images and products enabling the common black women become this Afro-modern figure. Facial and body creams, Indian hair ponies and wigs appeared as tools to piece together this new body for a few hundred euros only. Beyond the framing of a black beauty market in which Afro-French entrepreneurs compete with international trademarks like *Mixa*, *Black Up* or *Dark & Lovely*, two points are interesting. The first one is a constant effort to downplay references to colorism while a number of Afro-French continue to bleach their skin to get closer to a Euro-centered model of beauty promoted by the same international trademarks. Color is not talked about but it is euphemized through metaphors referring to the hair texture (wavy, curly, smooth, etc) or to make up shades (chocolate, caramel, hazelnut, sand, etc). However, the models are usually fair complexioned as in the 2011 True Colors ads. Moreover, each body part transformed is one which crystallized discrimination (hair, skin color) whose modification turns customers closer to a white body. Second, black entrepreneurs articulate a discourse on the specificity of black beauty while promoting a uniform vision of beauty. They do not question dominant aesthetic norms derived from Euro-centered vision of beauty (skinny models with thin body and facial features) but force them upon Afro-French and interpret them in black terms. Then, black beauty is a black variation of an unchallenged white standard. L'Oréal and ads are telling examples. For hair color or make up, L'Oréal presents several models, each present a different shade of the same lipstick or foundation power. They share similar facial features (thin lips, almond eyes, large forehead, long chin). The same goes with black-owned companies like Revlon whose models look like Halle Berry.

Today's advocates of Afro-French do not question traditional euro-centered construction of beauty born out of economic motives but choose to reverse its meaning. Developing a black beautifulness does not mean deconstructing dominant aesthetic codes to shape a new paradigm but reinterpreting them. Then, defending an Afro-French modern

identity celebrating the beauty of black people, paradoxically means conforming to global standards read locally as positive to support social and political demands. Agency then means choosing to adhere to global standards and not remaining an outsider. The Afro-modern figure then is the result of interactions between global representations of beauty and local ascriptions.

Afro-French's contemporary interest in beautifulness comes from a new type of circulation. While in the 1960s and 1970s, images of black beauty migrated to France along with Africans and Caribbean populations, Afro-French are engaged in an aesthetic dialogue with black minorities experiencing a similar racial discrimination. In the following years, their challenge would be to invent a composite Afro-Frenchness gathering African and Caribbean heritages, a French ascription and a global black self they now adhere to.

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