

From *Bande de filles* à *Mariannes noires*: Universalism and Decolonization of Imagination

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Translator's note: This is an edited down version of a chapter from Mame-Fatou Niang's 2020 book *Identités Françaises: Banlieues, Féminités et Universalisme (French Identities: Banlieues, Feminities and Universalism)*. By centering the Afro-French community and their critical reception of Céline Sciamma's film, the editorial choice was to have the piece focus on Blackness in France through issues of representation, universalism and national belonging.

In 2014, Céline Sciamma surprised everyone with her latest film, *Bande de filles*, a modern initiation story about the adventures of four teenage girls from banlieue. Sciamma innovates by casting non-professional actresses recruited in the streets of Paris and its outskirts. The film quickly found itself at the center of a true media storm, because all its heroines are Black. Yet Sciamma insists that this production is not an account to the Black experience in France's poorest neighborhoods, but rather a story about the universal issues surrounding teenage life. The director is no stranger to examining teenage angst, having previously made two successful films on the subject. *Bande de filles* is the final part of a trilogy that began with *Naissance des Pieuvres* (2007), a tale of teenage lesbian exploration, and *Tomboy* (2011), the story of a little girl who passes for a boy. This third opus is the story of Marieme, a 16-year-old Afro-French girl from a poor banlieue of Paris. Marieme is a shy girl who lives in an oppressive family environment where her older brother reigns supreme. The teenager is about to undergo a metamorphosis when she joins a group of three independent girls who like to fight, pilfer, dance to Rihanna and rebel against the diktats of their environment. In a series of interviews, Sciamma says she wanted to create a work where the universal would be Black. The adventures and tribulations of her four heroines, Marieme, Lady, Fily and Adiatou, would be

universal, and “every French girl [should] be able to recognize herself in one of these girls.”¹ On the news TV channel LCI, the director defends herself from having made a film about girls from banlieue, because “a corseted Victorian character could have the same type of identity impasse as [her] heroine.”² In the same vein, Sciamma justifies her choice of cast by her desire to respond to the disturbing absence of Black women characters in French cinema, and by her desire to rectify the most commonly held stereotypes of banlieue youth. This vision of banlieue (Black) femininity will be contrasted with the perspective given in the film *Mariannes noires*, which we produced and co-directed in 2016 with American director Kaytie Nielsen.

Mariannes noires examines the concepts of memory, belonging and citizenship in 21st century France.³ The release of *Bande de filles*, its critical and public acclaim, and the deep discomfort that Sciamma’s film caused among many Afro-French people highlighted the urgency of a work by “those who are talked about, but who never talk about themselves.” The documentary interweaves the stories of seven Afro-French women artists, entrepreneurs and intellectuals who share their daily lives and aspirations. These women are French. Naturally. Without question. However, their Frenchness bathes, is born and flourishes in cultural and aesthetic differences that France struggles to integrate. These seven stories echo each other and reveal a multicultural France that is no longer to be imagined, a France that doubts, jolts and blossoms in the lives of young women whose paths are both atypical and ordinary. By evoking themes as diverse as family, sexuality, beauty, entrepreneurship and the place of minorities in cultural production, this documentary lifts a part of the veil on Black experiences in France. Blackness remains unknown in France. It is still a place of mysteries and of many representations. If Black men today occupy a public space with problematic characteristics, women are still confined in an anonymity tinged with fantasies. *Bande de filles* and *Mariannes noires* are two works that unfold the complexity and reality of postcolonial bodies in contemporary France. Their analysis will allow to reveal the processes of representation of Black women, in relation to the notions of identity and inclusion in the French national community.

This piece seeks to answer several questions: How can we understand the interest generated by *Bande de filles* before its release? How should we interpret the critical and commercial success of a film considered “iconoclastic” and “avant-garde”? Apart from its cast, what really sets Sciamma’s work apart from other productions on urban peripheries? How can we explain the very virulent reception of the film by a significant part of the Afro-French community? In the face of works such as Sciamma’s, what avenues do Black French women from working-class neighborhoods offer in order to escape from the peripheries to which their bodies and their productions are still confined? To what extent do works such as *Bande de filles* force us to confront existing notions of universalism and representation, to reshape them so that they are in line with contemporary French society?

In this edited translation the analysis of the documentary *Mariannes noires* will allow us to formulate avenues of reflection for arts that are authentically humanist and representative of the sensibilities that make up 21st century France. The study of reactions from the Afro-French community will allow us to analyze the visibility of this group in the national space, while formulating a reflection on the issues of universalism raised by Sciamma’s film. In order to understand their rejection of a work that was initially highly anticipated, we will identify the elements that place *Bande de filles* in the continuity of a colonial tradition of exoticism and of the displaying of the Other. By evoking themes as diverse as representations, citizenship, links with the Black diaspora, beauty or access to the means of production of wealth and knowledge, *Mariannes noires* will allow us to formulate a reflection around the notions of representations, inclusion and universalism. The director Alice Diop will give an account of the difficulty to access means of cultural production and the lack of visibility of artists from diversity. This situation effectively raises the question of access to universality when these directors, producers or actors find themselves confined to themes closely linked to their real or supposed social backgrounds. The work done since the beginning of the 2000s on social media and the Afro-French blogosphere and the actions of groups such as the collective *Décoloniser les arts* will serve as a conclusion and as examples of initiatives aimed at normalizing bodies from diversity in the national landscape.

Decolonization of imagination and exhortations of universalism

Initially highly anticipated, Céline Sciamma's film was met with harsh critiques from a particularly active segment of the Afro-French community. This rejection appears in the denunciation of a work that conveys many stereotypes and in the emphasis on the impossibility for minorities to be the authors of their own stories. Afro-Parisian circles were at the forefront of this movement, notably through exchanges on social media, but also through the contributions of artists and intellectuals. Disappointment quickly gave way to analyses that undermine the universalist aim of a film praised "for the wrong reasons."⁴ The posts and opinions that flourished also served as platforms to address several issues, such as the push for truly inclusive arts, and accessibility of minorities to the means of cultural production.

In *Mariannes noires*, several members of this community speak out about their reality. Isabelle Boni-Claverie speaks of a "group of minority people who share common experiences and difficulties." Director Alice Diop speaks of a group of people who are not united by their skin color, as Pap Ndiaye maintains, but rather, by "the common experience of being Black [in] France." According to Maboula Soumahoro, "although there are Black people in France, there is no community per se." Soumahoro notes, however, that the debate on this notion of community has accelerated since 2005, with the initiatives of young Afro-descendants born and raised in France.⁵ The entrepreneur Fati Niang speaks of a "new modern and committed generation," similar to the Afro-French bloggers who denounce the symbols hidden behind the critical and popular success of *Bande de filles*. For Aline Tacite, a specialist of Afro hair, the evolution noted by Maboula Soumahoro has given birth to an ultra-contemporary movement of young dynamic Afro-descendants who are planting the seeds of a solidly rooted Black community in France.

Blogs and social media play an essential role in the affirmation of these Afro-French identities, as they become the spaces where tangible signs of community and identity constructions are manifested. The bloggers who quickly took the lead in the opposition to *Bande de filles* are part of the movement outlined by Soumahoro, Niang and Tacite. They belong to a generation born of

African or Caribbean parents, shaped by the fusion of cultures and who find in this patchwork the outlines of new mixed identities. They are almost exclusively young women, between twenty and thirty years old, usually Parisian and who prevail as true prophetesses of fashion, beauty, but also cultural and political issues that affect Afro-descendants. Afro blogs appeared in the mid 2000s with veterans such as garancedore, blackbeautybag, MyAfroWeek or Betty. Although there are very few studies on these digital communities, they are undoubtedly one of the most visible examples of this Black, transethnic and transdiasporic French community at the forefront of 21st century activism. These spaces gather young Afro-French and Afro-descendants around a variety of topics centered on the Black reality in the West. Navarette and Huerta highlighted how the Internet allows immigrant groups to create and maintain virtual spaces that carry the characteristics of their countries of origin.⁶ In France, this role is still clearly visible in the parents' generation who remain connected to their native country through the media, local shows, and multiple connections with family. For the generations born in France, the Internet and digital resources truly revolutionize identity practices and the relationship to the native country.

In a context of self (re)discovery, blogs become laboratories where advices and theories are shared in order to revitalize unknown, repressed and erased identity components. Forgotten care practices are rediscovered. Individual awareness is animated by exchanges of skills and techniques that create a real collective consciousness around hair, cloth, accessories, in short around a collective identity. This intervention on social media and the sisterhood it promotes, gradually move these actions from a virtual field to real life. Between activism and associative activities, blogs give birth to real communities which constitute the hyper-connected generation that Chayet Chiénin calls the "Black Millenials." In her blog, Chiénin, who is the editor of the *Nothing But The Wax* platform, defines the contours of this group:

"In a world where we want to affirm more than ever what we are, without complexes and with no need for any form of external validation, it is up to us to reclaim the narrative, to reinvent and invest new spaces, forms of narration and public expression."⁷

Like Chiénin, blogger Fatou Ndiaye discusses the developments that are driving her generation to create and claim civic spaces that their parents, constantly torn between the “here” and the “there,” never openly reclaimed. Ndiaye speaks of a consciousness-raising process led by a generation tired of enduring the attacks of stereotyping and marginalization:

“In our parents’ time, they could afford these things. They arrived in France with a different approach. For them, it was about working, being able to send money back home, but for us, it’s different, we’re French, we want to feel fulfilled and create things. We don’t let ourselves be taken advantage of. The things that our parents would have allowed because they were not here for that, we’re saying no.”

In this post, Ndiaye emphasizes the need to see these paths as told by those who live them. Fatou Ndiaye insists on the “pejorative, marginalized and always cliché side” of a coverage of the Black community approached from the outside by artists and journalists who struggle to measure the stakes of their productions. For these young women, blogs have been at the forefront of reclaiming an under-valued or lost heritage and aesthetic expertise. More than fingernails and scarves, it was a matter of identity, given that the suppression and expression of these aesthetic forms have historically been linked to the stifling and reclaiming of a Black identity.

In an interview with American journalist Zeba Blay, Céline Sciamma seemed aware of these issues. In the interview, Blay compared the contrasting receptions of the film by Black women on both sides of the Atlantic. While African American women were delighted to see four young, beautiful, carefree Black girls on the screen, their French sisters condemned yet another banlieue movie about girls they couldn’t identify with. According to Sciamma:

“[Viewers] want good representations, [especially] when you’re dealing with a group that has very little visibility. I totally understand that anger. It touches on the larger issue of the scarcity of Black women directors, especially in France. I have the privilege and the power to tell this story the way I want to, and they don’t have it.”

Beyond the question of the absence of minorities on the screen and the ways in which they are represented, Sciamma raises the

issue of the accessibility to the means of representation. For the academic Maboula Soumahoro, the “privilege” mentioned by Sciamma and access to production money are indeed at the core of the issues of artistic representations for minorities. According to Régis Dubois, Céline Sciamma’s naive surprise at the outcry over her film reflects the growing gap between “those who have the right to speak (journalists, directors or politicians from wealthy backgrounds) and French people from the working classes.”⁸ It is indeed astonishing to see the ease with which the director deals with this subject, which she addresses “without any particular research or reading” (DP), as well as her approach of bodies loaded with histories that she considers as “blank pages” that her imagination would blacken as she pleases. In the same way that Luc Bondy’s whitewashing of *Othello* ignores the racial issues central to Shakespeare’s work and turns it into a drama about jealousy, Sciamma invokes her artistic freedom to defend her work. In their critiques of the casting of Bondy’s *Othello* and Nebbou’s *Dumas*, Léonora Miano, Nathalie Etoke, and all the organizations and individuals who denounced these choices emphasized missed opportunities to shed light on an unrecognized history and to showcase faces masked in everyday society. In the same way, the Afro-Parisian blogosphere will speak of a “missed opportunity” when speaking of Sciamma’s film and its ability to present an unrecognized facet of these Black or banlieue populations. In *Madmoizelle*, Clémence Bodoc talks about a film “praised for the wrong reasons” that simply recycles the “same clichés that have already been widely exploited” that reinforce the beliefs of those “who only have the image of the banlieue that fiction, television news and ‘investigative’ magazines are willing to show.” In *mycho-latemag*, the blogger KME denounces a “rehash” and the recycling of negative images that make the bed of minority representations. Drawing on her personal experience, the blogger writes:

“Clichés, yes! Because my friends (Chérifa, Salima, Mélanie, Laëtitia, Fatma etc.) are all accomplished women today: bank, insurance, product manager, project manager etc. . . in short, the logical result of their studies because they were also all good students, just like me. In our group, it was the competition of the one who will get ‘honors’ or ‘distinctions at the end of the term.’ But this kind of girls . . . we never show them on TV. It’s not enough to sell it?”⁹

KME's argument highlights the disappointment caused by a film that initially carried many hopes. With this first all-Black and all-women film, these young women had dreamed of seeing their daily lives, their doubts and their successes on screen. Like her peers, KME is one of the countless Black and/or girls from banlieue who didn't recognize themselves in Sciamma's portraits. In a *Libération* article about a screening of the film in Rosny-sous-Bois, Rachid Laïreche describes a brief encounter between three young Black girls and the actresses Karidja Touré and Assa Sylla. The viewers shared their thoughts after the screening and the feeling of having watched "a film about the girls of Gare du Nord, [the] kind of film [for which they] appear on Envoyé Spécial or BFMTV." For these viewers "we never see a positive film about the banlieue," and despite its promises, *Bande de filles* was no exception to the rule. The disappointment is also reinforced by the feeling that positive or simply "normal" backgrounds are once again ignored in favor of exotic profiles that match both the viewer's expectations and the director's visions. In *BlackBeautyBag*, Fatou Ndiaye adds:

"I grew up and lived in a housing project for almost 18 years of my life, and there are plenty of Black girls who express themselves correctly, who have a school education and diplomas and a good job, and this is true for all girls from banlieue, regardless of color or religion [. . .] So, I don't know what kind of project, but especially what kind of girls this film is about, but once again, we take particular cases to make generalizations and we forget the essential point. . ." ¹⁰

For Ndiaye, this suppression of the "essential," of what constitutes normality and daily life, in favor of "highlighting the bad eggs, the specific cases" constitutes an additional factor of frustration. These women question a problematic film which does not speak to them, which does not understand them, which looks at them in order to better cover them with clichés, and which, far from echoing their preoccupations and their aspirations, encloses them in a prison of negative representations.

Two months before the release of *Bande de filles*, a report broadcast on M6 sparked anger on social media. Entitled "Beyoncé or Rihanna generation," the *66Minutes* report followed a group of young Afro-descendants living in the Parisian banlieue.

These young women were presented as being part of the new generation of young Black and mixed girls obsessed with African American celebrities. In particular, the documentary followed two young women who were willing to make every sacrifice to look like their idols “with lightened skin, blond wigs [and] round booties.” The report triggered many reactions on social media. In a post published on August 31, 2014, blogger Vivi-B expressed her frustration with a caricature in which she did not recognize her background or those around her. While acknowledging the influence of these Black American icons, Vivi-B challenged the angle of a program that intended to highlight the contemporary Black French girl:

“Our life is not about having beautiful weaves and being as light as possible, or being a copy. We work hard to succeed, and long before the Beyoncé and Rihanna media phenomenon.”¹¹

Drawing from her own experience as a woman from banlieue, “5 years of business school in management and marketing, 4 hours of commute between my home and my internship, reviewing my classes on the train,” the blogger points out the generalizing tendencies that push to treat this space under a sensationalizing angle and to ignore its normality or the features it shares with the rest of society. Far from taking her case as an exception, Vivi-B gives examples of entrepreneurial successes by Black and French women in the arts, fashion and communication. Regretting that the TV program did not try to showcase these women, she calls the producer of the show as a witness:

“They are educated, they have studied, they know how to make business plans. They are photographers, models, writers, directors, bosses, TV hosts, radio commentators, public figures. They are in France, under your window. All you had to do was open it and look. . . You had plenty of options to show young Black girls who are watching you, that they can, by working hard, harder than others that’s for sure, that they will succeed, but no, on this eve of the new school year you preferred a spectacle, a very reductive and a bit humiliating entertainment. . .”

Like Vivi-B, the women filmed in *Mariannes noires* speak out about one of the negative effects of these sterile representations,

namely the impossibility for younger generations to find valued and valorizing role models. Maboula Soumahoro speaks about the appeal that Black American culture strongly exerts on a whole section of Afro-French people who look across the Atlantic in order to project themselves in the paths of certain African Americans. Soumahoro recalls the tendency, well established in Afro circles, to evacuate American racial issues, as illustrated by the Ferguson protests and the wave of police killings of young Black people, in favor of valorizing elements of the culture that highlight Black people in this country. Thus, in the face of the absence of Afro-French role models, director Alice Diop admits to having sought refuge behind a Nina Simone made into a mentoring mother. As a teenager, in order to build a positive image of herself as a Black woman, Fati Niang was fascinated by the appearances of Halle Berry, Whoopi Goldberg and Whitney Houston. Aline Tacitus raved about *The Cosby Show*, one of the first shows to feature a Black family in the 1980s. The little girl she was then saw herself in the guise of the Huxtable girls, whose father, a doctor, was an early example of professional and social success for a Black man on the small screen. This impossibility of having positive role models or seeing normal life stories on the screen makes it essential to open a debate on the access of minorities to true universalism: when will we see a film or a work of art that features people from minorities, without their color being an essential element of the story? When will we see Black people playing a school teacher, a lawyer, a divorced mother, a patient dying of cancer? When will a director from a minority or from banlieue bring to the screen the everyday life, the questions and aspirations that all people face, regardless of their social status or religion? When will we see arts that are truly inclusive, humanistic and that no longer make a segment of the population feel like they are eternally on the margins, on the edge of normality?

A review of the extremely active minority form that is post-2005 banlieue cinema shows that individuals and narratives are present. It is thus a matter of uncovering the reasons for their invisibility on the national level. These questions really call for a societal debate to break down the barriers of the arts and the imaginary that groups like the collective *Décoloniser les arts* calls for. The formation in December 2015 of the association *Décoloniser les arts* is part of this desire to expose the absence of actors

from minorities in the French cultural landscape, but also to question the modalities of their presence. The collective's founders include writer Françoise Vergès, actor and director Jalil Leclaire and playwright Gerty Dambury. In a blog hosted by the information site *Médiapart*, the group describes itself as follows:

“*Décoloniser les arts* is an association composed of actors, authors, directors, choreographers, audiovisual professionals, cultural journalists from minorities, and artists born and living in all regions of France. They have chosen to question the cultural milieu in France about the microscopic presence of artists from minority populations on theater and dance stages, on television, in cinema and in the fine arts. They also wish to question the dominant narratives in theaters and to contribute to a better representation of entire areas of our country's history, be it from past centuries or the contemporary.”¹²

The collective aims to highlight the lack of diversity on the stages and in the management teams of the cultural sector, but also to re-establish the national narratives conveyed and reinforced by artistic representations. According to their charter, this “reappropriation of the narrative of memorial, postcolonial and slavery-related issues” is a necessary condition for the “decolonization of the imaginary” and the recognition of the universality of the singular paths and aesthetics of minority populations. From its conception, the association wants to be a space that will articulate artistic projects that are more representative of the current French society. On February 1, 2016, the collective sent an open letter to several directors of theaters, festivals and cultural centers in France. The missive is organized around one question: “Where are Black, North African, Asian, Latinx people, and French people from minority cultures, in the theaters of France?” The letter is accompanied by an awareness-raising questionnaire, a lexicon designed to “decolonize” language and a five-point action plan. The collective questions the adequacy between contemporary French society and the arts world:

“Reality invites us to reflect deeply on our practices: can we continue to uphold a Culture that no longer reflects the French population of today? If Culture is the means to fight against identity closures, a Culture that excludes and does not include takes the risk of contributing to the rise of certain

identity-based exclusions, nationalisms or religious extremism of all kinds.”¹³

The manifesto takes the issue of representation head on, inviting those in charge of cultural venues to question the images that are conveyed and validated in the events they put on. It urges them “to make sure that everyone can recognize themselves on the stage [and] that the populations connected to immigration can feel represented, included and respected.” The text calls for the generalization of initiatives that take into account the intersectionality of experiences related to gender, race, religion or sex. The group also advocates for a proactive approach by offering a questionnaire through which directors of cultural venues can measure discrimination in the makeup of their technical teams as well as in their programming. The list includes 33 questions such as: “If there are Black, North African, Latinx, and Asian people in the shows you program, what roles do they have? *Combat de nègres et de chiens* by Koltès, *Les Nègres* by Genet, *Chocolat clown nègre*, are these in your opinion the only plays that allow a Black person to play a role in France?” In a February 2016 interview with France Culture, Gerty Dambury states:

“It is a text that concretely and clearly asks the question: ‘Look around you, what do you see? Who do you see? It’s not just about the people on stage. We are also talking about the people who work in theaters, and we realize that there is no director of a national dramatic center, or a national stage, or a national theater who is from a minority background . . . there are barely 4% of these people who are part of the teams [..].”

Dambury gives the example of the French actor and director of Burkinabe origin Hassan Kassi Kouyaté. After having long and unsuccessfully applied for positions in Ile-de-France, Kouyaté was appointed as director of a national stage in Martinique. For Dambury, the invisibility of difference on these stages and labels managed by the Ministry of Culture and by the State and his rejection onto overseas stages attest to a desire to contain bodies and aesthetics that are not considered to belong to the national culture.

At the end of its charter, the collective suggests a lexicon to be used in discussions on identity in order to deconstruct the language

barriers in the shadow of which the rejection of difference prevails. The lexicon underlines the importance of naming, in order to avoid circulatory dances around words, their meaning and their scope. In this sense, the collective advocates for the use of the term “noir” to replace the commonly used word “Black.” It advises (not without humor) the abandonment of the expression “person of color” which is better suited to “M&M’s” than to human beings. The members of the collective advocate replacing the term “positive discrimination” with “affirmative action against discrimination,” which they consider less off-putting and more likely to unite people who do not feel directly concerned by these issues. To this end, the manifesto also sheds light on the issue of “racism of omission,” the eradication of which requires an awareness of the universality of these issues and a questioning of the moulding firmly anchored in language and habitus. The charter ends with a five-point action plan offered on a voluntary basis. This plan should allow cultural venues directors to take action in the most effective way possible. Addressing programming, production, training, employment, and the content of art works, this plan should eventually allow for the inclusion of voices and narratives that have been obscured in the French mainstream repertoire. For these men and women, products of a colonial history, we cannot claim to be truly universal if entire sections of this history are concealed because they are considered too painful or insignificant. As an instrument of social representation, the arts have an essential role to play in this undertaking.

The stances taken by young Afro-French women on Céline Sciamma’s film and the birth of the *Décoloniser les arts* collective are part of the development of a Black community which, according to Nathalie Etoke, is born of “an essentially reactive community consciousness [as opposed to a] reactive diasporic consciousness.”¹⁴ In *La Condition noire*, Pap Ndiaye laid the groundwork for a community based on a “balanced public policy [of] both fighting poverty in general and reducing disparities between groups resulting from illegitimate treatment.”¹⁵ For Etoke, Ndiaye’s definition establishes this group on a default solidarity praxis that only exists in opposition to the majority and in a relationship of dependence to the State. Etoke does not deny the importance of the external gaze in the constitution of the Black community, nor the need to correct socio-economic injustices, but the scholar argues that this praxis only makes sense when opposed to the structural forces ¹⁶

This analytical grid accounts for the way in which Africans and Afro-descendants are required to move beyond the traumas and nonsense born out of the original encounter between Africa and Europe (slave trade, slavery, colonization and neo-colonization). This process can only take place once the cycle of victimhood imposed by a dominant/dominated relationship has been overcome, where the dominated posits the recognition of their suffering as a *sine qua non* condition for their identity construction. In the French context, this would be, for example, the fact that an Afro-French person believes that it is impossible to exist if society refuses to validate their specificities. For Etoke, the dominant's realization of the inegalitarian system they have put in place cannot be the cornerstone of the construction of the minority being. Faced with the dominant's refusal to accept the burden and the legacies of a common past, the minority being has the obligation to find within themselves the means to break free from this dialectic.

A film like *Bande de filles* epitomizes the attitudes, voluntary or not, that alienate, distinguish, distance and restrain part of the national group to the peripheries. In *Mariannes noires*, seven French women from these margins lay down the individual, national and diasporic grounds of their construction. At the individual level, their paths highlight the creation of an identity that becomes, by willpower, a matrix of dreams and ideals. At the national level, they underline the characteristics of a Frenchness "coming from," as well as the particularities of this construction in a minority context. How to build oneself in a national space codified and haunted by the pattern of absence? How can you project yourself in a mirror unable to reflect your image back to you? The *Melancolia Africana* of these seven women translates into the creation of a singular space between loss, mourning, reconstruction and hope. It is firmly rooted in the past, open to the present, while projecting itself into the future. These women refuse to be limited to a color and to see their singularities, their identity plurality disappear behind the adjective "Black." They refuse to be limited by the views, ideas, preconceptions, fantasies and fears that their society has of them. At the diasporic level, they lead us to think beyond the single "color" category. In addition to masking the diversity of geographic origins, color quickly becomes a limiting factor of analysis that does not allow to think within the categories of gender, class, and to reflect on personal histories and paths. Instead, their interventions invite us

to think in terms of diasporic identities. This analytical grid is essential to understand the trajectory of these Afro-descendant women linked in the creation of consciousnesses that bring together and cross their differences of origin. Their paths push back the dialectic of suffering in order to anchor diasporic roots into mainland France. These stories are the fulfillment of the “overcoming of the Black condition:” “I am not just my skin!” Far from wanting to erase the past, the women who express themselves in *Mariannes noires* use African roots infused in Afro-French, multicultural and mixed consciousness that they wish to develop, have recognized and pass on. Their trajectories highlight the different channels of African and Afro-descendant identities by illuminating both the many commonalities, as well as the vast differences in class, philosophy, and culture that disappear behind the racial banner.

These Mariannes tell us that we should not expect anything from the outside, but create meaning within ourselves that will then be projected onto the Other (Afrodescendant or otherwise). This is what Etoke suggests when she writes that “in the African and diasporic context, the internalization of loss does not remain fixed on itself. It finds coherence in its ability to reinvest the external space.”¹⁷ Further on, Etoke elaborates:

“In order to exist freely, the contemporary Black man must accept himself as an aporetic self born out of the destruction caused by the encounter with the Other. Destruction which immediately caused a reconstruction, a reinvention of self from what was annihilated.”¹⁸

In the face of the imposition of new codes and repeated rejections by society, these women have developed cultural, philosophical and artistic models that embody a capacity to transform marginality into discourse. Loss and rejection cease to be symbols of a second-class citizenship, to assert themselves as sources of new individualities.

Our society is governed by an epistemic colonization. This backwards universalization makes its bed on the marginalization of knowledges, experiences, bodies and beings from elsewhere. The rehabilitation and the reintegration of these peripheries involves, more than ever, taking into account our epistemological diversity.

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Notes

¹ Please see the press kit of the film published by Pyramide Films. Any further reference to this document will bear the mention (DP): http://distrib.pyramide-films.com/sites/distrib.pyramide-films.com/files/BDF_DP2_LD.pdf.

² Métronews, “‘Bande de filles’: Céline Sciamma peut dire merci à Rihanna,” *Metronews* (2014). <http://www.lci.fr/festival-de-cannes/bande-de-filles-celine-sciamma-peut-dire-merci-a-rihanna-1549836.html>

³ The trailer of the documentary is available at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GzMgy7QMcGU>. A short excerpt is also available online at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPavLHIZEQM>.

⁴ Clémence Bodoc, “‘Bande de filles’: Un film encensé pour de mauvaises raisons,” *Madmoizelle* (2016). <http://www.madmoizelle.com/bande-de-filles-probleme-294696> (accessed March 21, 2017).

⁵ Soumahoro insists on the fact that this trans-ethnic micro-community is also a strongly Parisian phenomenon, with less vigorous activity in the provinces. The researcher underlines the problematic character of this concentration and the tendency to generalize movements and evolutions that are for the moment centered around the Parisian region to the rest of France.

⁶ Celene Navarrete, and Esperanza Huerta, “Building Virtual Bridges to Home: The Use of the Internet by Transnational Communities of Immigrants,” *International Journal of Communications, Law and Policy* 11 (2006): 1–20.

⁷ Chiénin Chayet, *NothingButTheWax*. <http://nothingbutthewax.com/editors-note/>. (accessed March 20, 2017).

⁸ Régis Dubois, “Safari sur la croisette,” 2016. <http://www.lesensdesimages.com/2014/. . /bande-de-filles-safari-sur-la-croisette/>. (accessed March 13, 2016.)

⁹ KME, “‘Bande de filles,’ un film cliché ?” (2014). <http://mychocolatomag.overblog.com/2014/10/cinema-bande-de-fille-un-film-cliche.html>. (accessed March 21, 2017).

¹⁰ Fatou Ndiaye, “Je m’appelle Fatou, ça vous pose un problème ?” *Black-BeautyBag* (2016). http://www.blackbeautybag.com/2016_06_01_archive.html. (accessed March 20, 2017).

¹¹ *Vivi-B*, “Génération Rihanna et Beyonce: 66 minutes, une occasion ratée.” (2014). <http://www.vivi-b.com/beaute/generation-rihanna-et-beyonce-66-minutes-vous-avez-tout-faux/>. (accessed March 20, 2017)

¹² Décoloniser les arts. “Biographie du collectif.” *Médiapart* (2017). <https://blogs.mediapart.fr/decoloniser-les-arts>. (accessed March 20, 2017)

¹³ Décoloniser les arts, (2016). <https://www.facebook.com/decoloniserlesarts/posts/1751631001725050>. (accessed March 23, 2017).

¹⁴ Nathalie Etoke, *Melancholia Africana: The Indispensable Overcoming of the Black Condition* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019): 9.

¹⁵ Ndiaye, 111.

¹⁶ Etoke, 19.

¹⁷ Etoke, 29.

¹⁸ Etoke, 35.