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/ TRAPS OF REPRESENTATION

My Body, My Rules. ‘Carte noire nommée désir’ by Rébecca Chaillon in the Context of French Colonial History and Culture

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The article proposes an analysis of the performance *Carte noire nommée désir* (*A Black Card Named Desire*) by the Afro-French artist Rébecca Chaillon and situates it both in the sociohistorical context of France and in the intersectional theories of such scholars as Elsa Dorlin, Sander L. Gilman and Patricia Hill Collins. It demonstrates how Rébecca Chaillon highlights the overlap of oppressive systems, such as racism, sexism and heterosexism, and uses her own body to dismantle sexist and racist clichés. In her performance the body becomes not only a topic, but also a tool in the fight of black French women for their subjectivity and right to self-determination. The article also draws attention to other black French theatre directors and choreographers whose artistic works have been noticed on the French stage in the last 15 years. This permits the author to consider an emergence of a new type of spectacle of blackness in which race is not an ideological category (biological and unchanging) as it was in the case of the colonial spectacle, but a political and identity category (referring to a common history and experience of discrimination).

Keywords: postcolonial theater; blackness; Chaillon; intersectionality; race

The most hotly debated event at the 2023 Avignon Theatre Festival was

Carte Noire nommée désir (*A Black Card Named Desire*) by Rébecca Chaillon, a black director of Martinican origin. The performance, which addresses stereotypes about black women and their place in French society, provoked from the festival audience violent reactions which were considered racist; the dispute moved from the theatre to the streets and social media, and the festival organisers issued a statement taking the artist's side[1]. Six months after the Avignon screening, the work was presented at one of the most important French theatres: the Parisian national Théâtre de l'Odéon, where it achieved great success.

The staging at the Odéon is in this case a gesture of symbolic significance. *A Black Card…*premiered four years ago, and the play has been presented several times at the Mc93 Bobigny near Paris[2]. This is a theatre in the suburbs, where combining activism and art is a frequent curatorial strategy these days. Yet at the Théâtre de l'Odéon, performances as committed, provocative and uncompromising as *A Black Card…* are rarely seen. This venue generally respects the universalist ideal, whereas Chaillon's play focuses on a French minority experience. The performers, unconstrained by propriety, express their rage, their experience of exclusion, and loudly articulate their own right to self-determination. The show at the Odéon not only builds Chaillon's stature as a director, allowing her onto the mainstream artistic circuit, but above all presents the importance of the subject matter – the exclusion of black women, and a double exclusion at that – as black women and as women.

In this essay, I will refer to the history and culture of colonial France, as well as to historians and philosophers who have taken up the subject of race and gender, to show how the body becomes a space of the political in *A Black Card…*– a terrain of struggle for the right to self-definition, to agency, to be

seen and listened to. How does Rébecca Chaillon try to break the colonial and patriarchal bonds? And by exposing differences, is she not creating a new spectacle, no longer race understood as an ideological category (referring to supposedly innate and immutable traits), but a political and identity category (referring to a shared history and experience of discrimination)? In other words, are we not dealing with a new type of representation of blackness – a spectacle of racialisation? This is the word that is commonly used in France: a racialised person is a person subjected to discrimination because of the colour of their skin.

Frantz Fanon, the father of postcolonial studies, wrote in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* that the experience of being black is subordinated to the white gaze, which crushes the black person with its weight, enslaves the appearance, making 'the Black no longer black, but rather black in relation to the White' (2020, p. 121). As a result, 'the coloured person encounters difficulties in developing a schema of his body. Knowledge of the body is only negation. It is a knowledge in the third person. There is an atmosphere of uncertainty around the body' (p. 122). In Fanon's analysis, the gaze appears as an oppressive gesture, alienating the black body, because it defines the filter through which the black subject looks at themself and evaluates themself. How to reflect this appropriating gaze of the white man, to take over the gesture of violence, and liberate the body? This question determines Rébecca Chaillon's artistic path. 'I reclaim violence,' says the director, 'I make it mine, I exercise power over it, filtering and sublimating it' (2018, p. 21).

The artist points this out at the very beginning of *A Black Card…*: in the foyer, where the audience is waiting for the performance, an offstage voice invites all those who are Afro-American, non-heteronormative or transsexual

to take comfortable seats on sofas at the back of the stage; the rest of the audience is asked to take traditional seats in the audience, set up on the other side of the stage, on the principle of reflection. This solution deprives the white audience of their sense of self-confidence and puts them in a situation in which they feel watched. At the same time, allies are gained: the viewers sitting on the sofas become co-protagonists of the performance. The actors, performing under their own names and surnames and recalling their own experiences, speak out on their own cases. What is more, they formulate accusations from the safe position of the victim, which makes it impossible to offer criticism without risking being accused of racism. White viewers are thus deprived not only of the protection of theatrical illusion, but also of the possibility of reaction and defense, which, as the reception of the performance in Avignon showed, can provoke resistance and anger. In three of the five performances performed, white viewers showed the actresses the middle finger, shouted that they were at home, that the performance was a 'denial of democracy' (see Magnaudeix, 2023). In turn, Eric Zemour, the right-wing presidential candidate, and the right-wing media cited the division into two audiences as an example of a new form of apartheid[3].

Meanwhile, the entire performance is essentially a subversive reversal of the balance of power. Its very title suggests this. *A Black Card…* was an advertising slogan used in the 1990s by a corporation producing Carte Noire coffee, popular in France (besides, coffee was one of the main colonial goods). In Polish, the performance could therefore be titled *Coffee called Desire*. It can also be read as a play on the term *carte blanche*, which means the possibility of acting freely in a certain area. In the performance, black female performers gave themselves a kind of *carte noire* in expressing the socio-cultural situation of black French women, and in liberating themselves from the white male gaze that has subjugated the black female body since

colonial times. Male and female black bodies have been subject to different stereotyping. In the case of women, it was primarily associated with brutal eroticisation.

As the American cultural historian Sander L. Gilman writes, black skin has been associated with lust since the Middle Ages (1985, p. 79). Until the 19th century, however, painting and literature eroticised black women in a gentle way in creating their virtual image. The 19th century made this idea a reality through exhibitions available to the general public, where naked or semi-naked people were presented under the guise of science. Saartjie Baartman is considered to be one of the first black women to be publicly displayed in such a way, presented as the Hottentot Venus (Hottentots were the Khoekhoe people in the colonial period)[4].

She was presented first in London, then in Paris in 1810 and 1815, as an example of a different body, a departure from the norm – Baartman was characterised by steatopygia and hypertrophy of the labia minora, once called ‘the Hottentot apron’, because this feature was attributed to women of the Khoekhoe and Sān peoples (referred to in colonial times as ‘Bushmen’). Georges Cuvier, zoologist and founder of palaeontology, included drawings of her body in his *Natural History of Mammals* in 1815 as an example of a state between animal and human. Cuvier also dissected Baartman's body, carefully analysing the Hottentot apron that she had hidden from him during her life. The woman’s body was reproduced in a wax cast, body parts, including the genitals, were preserved, the skeleton was cleaned and the whole specimen was presented at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. (In 1937 it was moved to the newly established Museum of Man, where it was part of the permanent exhibition until the 1970s.)[5]

Baartman's body was presented in life and after death as an example of a

primitive and pathological body. As the French philosopher, Elsa Dorlin, emphasises in her book *La Matrice de la Race. Généalogie Sexuelle et Coloniale de la Nation Française*, the ideologisation of colonial domination was based on medical categories of health and disease – the same ones that theorised about sexual difference (Dorlin, 2009). In the 17th century, the need grew in the colonies to recognise differences between peoples (previously explained by religion, morality, customs, climate) as innate (ibid.). According to the philosopher, this became possible thanks to the concept of temperament, which had been used to justify the superiority of men over women since antiquity: the female temperament, cold and moist, is worse, and even pathological, compared to the male temperament – warm and dry. Prostitutes and lesbians were treated as exceptions to the rule; as overly masculinised, they served to construct the norm.

In the 18th century, the 'medical' conceptualisation of sexual difference became a theoretical vehicle for scientists of racial variety: it triggered the process of naturalisation of anthropological differences, which lay at the basis of the 19th-century ideology of race (for example, according to Linnaeus, Africans were phlegmatic, with a feminine temperament, and therefore abnormal, inferior[6]). Although the female body (the maternal, white and healthy body) was already beginning to be associated with the body of the French nation, valorising its reproductive and maternal potential[7], femininity itself was still perceived in opposition to masculinity and associated with, among other things, impulsiveness, irrationality, lack of self-control and with a sexuality that easily veers into pathology, as exemplified by prostitutes (Gilman, 1985, p. 107; Mosse, 1985; Mosse, 1999). Black women, just like prostitutes, were attributed with pathological sexuality – exuberant, uncontrolled and in this sense morbid – which was presented as evidence of their primitivism (a lower stage of development,

closer to nature and animality). This allowed for depriving black women of the symbolic benefits resulting from the role assigned to women, of mothers, wives, guardians of the hearth, and also for legitimising colonial rapes (Dorlin, 2009, p. 13). As Winthrop Jordan, who studied the attitudes of white people towards blacks in the period 1550–1812, wrote:

> By calling the black woman fiery, [men] provided themselves with the best possible justification for their own passions. The Negro woman's hotness not only logically explained the white man's infidelity, but, more importantly, it shifted the responsibility from him to her. If she was so wanton — well, one could hardly blame a man for giving in to something he had no chance of winning. Moreover, this image of the Negro woman was consistent with the ancient association of hot climates with sexual activity (Jordan, 1968, p. 15).

Confirmation of the hypersexuality of black women was sought in their physiology, which can already be seen in the texts of 18th-century British travellers to southern Africa, fascinated by the physical structure of women of the Khoekhoe and Sān peoples (Gilman, 1985, pp. 83-85). In the person of Baartman, this fascination transformed into an iconic image of erotic excitement. Under ethnographic and medical pretexts, not only could Cuvier draw Baartman naked, but so too could others, sometimes in an almost pornographic way, in an era when corporeality was hidden from view and sexuality was taboo (Peiretti-Courtis, 2019, pp. 257–266). The preserved paintings show Saartjie Baartman in the image of Venus Kallipygos: almost naked, with wide hips and shapely, ample buttocks. In the exhibitions, the woman was dressed in body-tight clothes, similar in colour to her skin, so as

to give the impression of nudity. The nickname ‘Hottentot Venus’ itself is a combination of a symbol of beauty and eroticism with exoticism, or even barbarism, because that is what the Khoekhoe people were associated with at the time. Saartjie Baartman appeared as wild, unfeminine and exciting at the same time.

Anna Wieczorkiewicz emphasises this complexity and ambiguity of Baartman's image in the article ‘The Second Life of Saartjie Baartman’, pointing out that the iconic image of erotic fascination and colonial exploitation, which functions today in the collective memory of the Hottentot Venus, is too unambiguous. According to the researcher, this is the effect of the 20th-century (feminist, anthropological or sociological) ideologisation of her history, which was regularly invoked because it ‘connoted certain expressive meanings, allowing the symbolic charge to be combined with the emotional’ (2012, p. 251). Meanwhile, even her blackness was not ‘objective’ at the beginning of the 19th century, because the Khoekhoe people were not yet automatically perceived as black (the above-mentioned Linnaeus instead classified them as a group separate from the African peoples).

Nevertheless, it is precisely as a symbol of racist and sexist objectification that Baartman has become the subject of many works of visual and performing arts in recent decades. In France, she has been referred to on stage by Bintou Dembelé in the performance *Z.H.* (2014), which directly referred to the phenomenon of the human zoo (*zoo humains* in French), as well as Latifa Labissi in *Self portrait Camouflage* (2006) and Chantal Loial in *On t’appelle Venus* (2015). In *Carte noire…* Rébecca Chaillon evokes her image in a scene in which she smokes a joint naked — Baartman’s attribute on stage, in posters advertising shows, and in other illustrations at the time was precisely a type of cigarette. The Hottentot Venus easily submits to

artistic practices of restoring dignity both to herself and to what she represents today: the black woman reduced to an erotic object.

Even if the reception of Baartman's exposed body was not limited to erotic fascination, it is a fact that in the 19th century nudity effectively broke through the fear of otherness and ethical dilemmas about the right to dignity, disrupting the norms of European sociality, which required women's bodies to be hidden. Under the pretext of being scientific, it became the norm at colonial or universal exhibitions (which featured exotic pavilions), which became popular in the second half of the 19th century. They were organised in Amsterdam (1883), Paris (1889, 1900), Barcelona (1896), Brussels and Vienna (1897), Hamburg (1907) and other European cities, as well as in Chicago (1893), St Louis (1904) and Osaka (1903). In this type of colonial spectacle, the distance between the presented and the spectators that characterised the shows of the beginning of the century was minimised (Bancel; Blanchard, 2019, pp. 409–410). African women (and, to a lesser extent, Indonesian women) appeared naked or semi-naked, in full view, becoming objects of a desire that could be realistically satisfied. The availability of their naked bodies, together with the myth of their sexual openness, were used in colonial propaganda, tempting future settlers with the promise of commitment-free sexual adventures.

These fantasies were reinforced by interracial pornography, which had been developing since the mid-19th century and additionally subjected naked bodies to sexist and racist domination (Boittin, Taraud, 2019, p. 399). In the interwar period, the book *L'Art d'aimer aux Colonies* (1927) became particularly popular. It contained sixteen photographs of women, naked and in erotic positions. They were accompanied by descriptions in which the author informed readers about sexual practices in individual colonies, giving

advice on how to behave and what to avoid. The book was translated into many languages, and successive editions sold out at lightning speed. The 1920s were the apogee of colonial culture in France. Numerous illustrated journals published photographs and articles depicting the lives of black people in the colonies, and adult novels described African or Antillean women as predatory females subordinated to sexual desire, and therefore easily tamed. Books and games for children and young people were also published, as well as postcards (often featuring naked women). The huge international colonial exhibition in Paris (specifically in Vincennes, near Paris) was visited by eight million people in 1931 (thirty-three million tickets were sold, as many people returned to the exhibition several times) (Bancel; Blanchard, 2019, p. 410; also: Coutelet, 2019, pp. 441–450). Western metropolises were also visited by private groups presenting 'exotic' villages. It was also a time of great dance performances – a new kind of colonial spectacle – such as *Nu, Nu… Nunette* (at the Concert Mayol, 1926), *Black Birds* (at the Ambassadeurs, 1926), *Black Flowers* (at the Porte-Saint-Martin, 1930) or *Revue Nègre* (at the Champs-Elysées, 1925 and the Folies-Bergère, 1926) with Josephine Baker hailed as the 'queen of the colonies'. As Lisa Gail Collins, an American art historian, points out:

> Baartman and Baker are, surprisingly, the two black women who appear undressed the most often in the archives of Western visual culture. The 'Hottentot Venus' and the 'Black Venus' were therefore the women whose bodies were most fetishised by Europeans. […] Both were supposed to be embodiments of exoticism and eroticism, and both were paid to prove their supposed otherness (2002, p. 112).

Baker, dressed in a banana skirt, entered the stage on all fours, jumped on the stage prop branches, moved her hips, made ‘lewd’ movements, shaking her buttocks. Reviewers compared her to an agile monkey, gazelle or panther, ascribing to her no longer the early-19th century notions of barbarism, but a passionate, wild sexuality (Bancel; Blanchard, 2019, pp. 415–416). At the same time, dancing the Charleston, Baker symbolised modernity, breaking the physical taboo and liberating the body. For the first time, a black woman became an independent star imposing her physicality and her own movement on the metropolis and the artistic community. However, this could only happen on the principles defined by the dominant, white and male gaze. Baker played it skilfully, creating an exotic and sensual aura around herself. Unlike Baartman, she had an influence on her own life; she was buried with military honours in Monaco, and in 2021 her remains were transferred to the Panthéon in Paris – the mausoleum of distinguished French women and men.

The medical categories of healthy/sick thus served to differentiate and naturalise power relations. They made it possible to ideologise colonial domination, while at the same time legitimising public nudity, making it a characteristic feature of colonial culture that exoticised and eroticised the black female body. It is to this culture that Rébecca Chaillon refers. Already in the very first scene of *A Black Card Named Desire*, the director compulsively, in an increasingly frenetic gesture, washes the floor with a detergent. First, she uses a cloth, and then her clothes, which she removes one by one, until she is completely naked. This initial sequence is long, devoid of lighting effects, of words, and without a soundtrack. There is nothing aesthetic about it. It is raw, simple, real, like the body of Chaillon herself, who is the only actress to function on stage naked from the

beginning to the end of the performance. Her full body is exposed in all its reality and organicity — lushness, abundance of folds, and sweat. The image of the stereotypical erotic icon is also disarmed by her face, deformed by white lenses and whitened lips. We see a body that undermines not only colonial clichés of the black female body, but also the female body in general, not fitting into the perfect frame imposed by the rulers of the contemporary iconosphere.

In the next scene, the actress washes Chaillon's body and begins to braid her hair, attaching long, rope-like extensions to it. More actresses join them, creating one braid out of many – so large and heavy that Chaillon will need a hospital IV pole (on which to hang the braid) to be able to move around the stage. In the finale of the performance, the braids woven at the beginning are attached to an installation of ropes, suspended high above, creating the crown of a tree, the trunk of which is the directo's body. One of the actresses enters this 'crown', naked, defenceless, fragile, as if seeking shelter there. The other women sit around the trunk, creating a community of women – mothers, daughters – connected by the experience of violence stemming from the colonial past. Chaillon assumes the position of a guardian of their dignity. The black body, long reduced to a pure object of desire, objectified and discriminated against, appears here as the Tree of Life; the Palaeolithic Venus, Mother Earth, a powerful force that carries a promise of renewal. The final image imposes itself on the audience in all its metaphorical and visual power.

The casting off of erotic clichés and the reclaiming of the body also takes place in the performance through words. After the first long sequence, when the performers weave a braid from Chaillon's hair, the director reads small ads from a magazine, all similar: a white man seeks a partner, preferably a

black one, with specific physical conditions, which reveals the erotic ideas about the black female body that still function in French society. The performers respond to this white male voice with their own ads: one by one they introduce themselves by name as black women, mostly homosexual, who are looking for partners (because they can, but do not have to), and ask (because they want to, but do not have to) people who meet their criteria to leave a message in the theatre café. The actors appear in this scene as a group, and at the same time as independent individuals, united by their experience of functioning outside the norm established on racist, binary, sexist and heterosexual principles. As Chaillon says, 'I weave my Creole memories into French, narrating bulimically the violence in the world of a fat young black bisexual woman from Picardy.' In this statement, the director points to the overlapping experiences of violence within her individual identity and the impossibility of separating them into single experiences. In the performance itself, discrimination based on race is also not treated monolithically, but intersectionally, together with discrimination based not only on gender (which, as Dorlin shows, are genetically linked) but also on sexual orientation and obesity. We are dealing here with a 'specific matrix of domination', to use the formulation of the American feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins (2009, 1st edition 1990), who is one of the pioneers of the theory of intersectionality. In her research, 'The term matrix of domination describes the overall societal organisation within which different forms of oppression arise, develop, and intersect' (ibid., p. 227).

After a long, silent introduction, the announcement scene in *A Black Card…* brings to life the audience, evoking laughter that compromises the sexist stereotype and subversively intercepts it. The 'scatological' meal scene functions similarly in the play, in which feelings of humiliation are transformed into an absurd wordplay on 'poop', evoking bursts of laughter

on stage and in the audience. This begins with a sequence that exposes (through mocking and hyperbolising the phrases of white employers) the white hypocrisy hidden in praises that make black women feel like ‘pieces of shit’.

The scene of a game of charades between two teams of cleaners is also conducted in a comic tone. This game is an ‘fun’. The slogans shown, often in a comical manner, include: *Bounty* (the word means someone who is black on the outside but white on the inside), *black friend* (a term referring to the sentence: ‘I am not a racist, I have a black friend’), *Mediterranean syndrome* (the belief that people of African descent exaggerate their ailments, which is why they are harder to treat), *white tears* (these are tears of white people suffering from revealing privileges they were not aware of before) … ‘You don't know what this is?’ asks the MC, ‘Well, check it out!’ The entries also include Saartjie Baartman, a wet nurse, the Brazilian Butt Lift, Josephine Baker and others. Although everyone tries to guess the riddles, the minority among the audience are in the lead. Once again, we feel that the balance of power has been reversed.

In Chaillon’s performance, it is not only white French society that is lambasted by the actors. Its black part is criticised for, among other things, their constant comparisons to whites, their patriarchal approach to women, and for skin lightening. The very beginning can be interpreted in this context: in the first scene, Chaillon is smeared white, in white clothes, which she slowly takes off; the white paint washed off her by another actor, as if to cleanse her body of ‘whiteness’. In one of the later scenes, coffee is served in excess, it spills out of cups, even gushes onto the stage. The performer immerses herself in whipped cream, makes hip movements which simulate a sexual act, pours milk into another woman's open mouth. The exposure and

interception of stereotypes is most often done in an exaggerated, grotesque way. However, there are moments of calm in the performance, subtle, even melancholic, such as the scene of the Caribbean *zouk*, danced and sung to the music played on the harp by actor Makeda Monnet, and the poetry scene, as well as the final image of the feminine 'tree'. They also challenge stereotypes, both of the sexually objectified black woman and the excessively angry one. Also moving is the text by Fatou Siba, an actor who withdrew from the performance after the events in Avignon. It was she who had had her wrist sprained by an audience member, whom another had shoved in the arm. During the day, when the actress was walking with her little son, a man ran up to her, shouting that this was *his* home where he was, and would file a complaint with the festival management. After the festival organisers published the statement in support of the artists, a wave of hatred poured out on social media. Traditional media also circulated photos of Fatou Siba with child dolls impaled on a stick attached to her chest and back, as if piercing her. The scene, which depicted a black nanny overburdened with childcare and commented on the statements of the white women who employed her, served as evidence of the murderous intentions of black artists. Éric Zemmour, a right-wing candidate in the 2023 presidential election, wrote, among other things, about the 'desire to genocide whites, starting with their children', about the new apartheid that can be seen in the division of an audience into two groups[8]. Two hundred posters against the performance appeared on the streets of Avignon. The case was commented on by right-wing mainstream media, including CNews, Vincent Bolloré's popular television channel. Fatou Siba was even singled out in her hometown.

Chaillon speaks openly about the reasons for the actor's absence, announcing a guest performance by black artists who, in a gesture of

solidarity, read part of Fatou Siba's text at the Odéon (each evening it was a different person, including writer Léonora Miano, journalist Rokyaha Diallo, professor Maboula Soumahoro, and film director Alice Diop). In this way, Fatou Siba's absence took on a symbolic dimension, and the events in Avignon were inscribed into the performance, confirming their relevance.

Does the fact that the actors focus on their blackness mean that we are dealing with a new display of blackness, or more precisely, a play about racialisation? As I wrote in my previous article in the 'Afro-peanicity' series, in France the word 'race' does not function in public discourse; it was even removed from Article One of the French Constitution, which talks about discrimination based on, among other things, origin or gender (Semenowicz, 2023). While the word 'race' refers to racist ideology, 'racialisation' points to race as 'a social construct, not a biological reality' (Fassin, 2012, p. 155). It is a concept that emphasises the cultural and social process of shaping race, accentuating the mechanisms that make people behave as if a biological race existed.

The question about a new kind of spectacle of blackness is worth asking, especially since many other directors and choreographers of the French African diaspora have appeared on the French stage deconstructing colonial fantasies about the female body. They are united by the subject matter and the use of body language. One of the most famous artists on the French stage today is Bintou Dembélé, a choreographer of Senegalese roots, the author of the aforementioned show *Zoo Humains*. In S/T/R/A/T/E/S (2016), built from broken sequences, she clashes together two urban dances that are examples of urban 'movements' of resistance against racism — the soft movement of hip hop and the aggressive expression of *krumping*. To a polyphony of jazz, blues and African sounds played and sung live, two

dancers, first one after the other and then together, move between yesterday and today, between tension and relief, rage and tenderness, revealing the body as a carrier of memory and a tool of liberation.

In 2019, Dembélé choreographed Jean-Philippe Rameau's opera *Les Indes Galantes* at the Opéra Bastille in Paris. Director Clément Cogitore read the French Baroque masterpiece in the context of European attitudes towards other peoples, and the choreographer introduced street and club dances such as voguing, house, break and flexing to the stage of the national opera. The staging celebrated the 350th anniversary of the Opéra national de Paris. Another example is the Ivorian Nadia Beugré, who combines themes of black and queer identity in her choreographic practice, presenting her performances at renowned European festivals; from the younger generation, the Afro-Brazilian Ana Pi, who lives and works in France; or Eva Doumbia in the theatrical field. By exposing their bodies, do not actresses, performers and dancers display their own uniqueness? In one of the scenes of *A Black Card…*, the performer, with a loudspeaker in her hand playing Aya Nakamura's hit song *Pookie*, invites people sitting on sofas to dance, clap, sing. Do they not feel like they are once again being put on display, to expose their differences?

In all the above-mentioned performances, although in different ways, the body is at the centre of the performance — the viewer's gaze is not limited to it, however. It is not the physical difference that is the subject here, but the social inequalities and historical injustices related to the black female body, which over the centuries was supposed to work, feed white children with its milk, reproduce slaves for work, constitute entertainment. A body disembodied, stigmatised and silenced, deprived even of the right to self-defence, as Elsa Dorlin writes in her book *Se défendre* (2017), the

completely alienated body has now become a tool for exorcising the past and restoring dignity. It serves to empower and regain agency over its own representation. The black female directors and choreographers mentioned above, in Lisa Gail Collins' words describing the work of African-American female visual artists:

> … allow the audience to reflect on the economies of the body and, equally importantly, propose a visual language that is still focused on the legacy of the past, but that gives the black body the possibility of defining its presence for itself (2002, p. 122).

In *A Black Card…* the body functions as an archive of cultural memory, but also as a tool for producing knowledge, as a space for critical, intersectional exploration, an engine of creation and transgression. Rébecca Chaillon reverses the traditional balance of power, imposes her black and female perspective on the white audience, intercepts stereotypes through laughter, making the white audience feel defenceless, ashamed or ridiculed. It is she who defines herself in relation to blackness, not the other way around. What is more, Chaillon does not flaunt suffering, does not evoke sympathy in the white audience that might allow them to feel 'better'. The director's strategy is harder to accept, because it uses various forms of comedy, kitsch, grotesque, irony, parody, and throws difficult experiences straight in the faces of the white audience. Some French reviewers have criticised the play for this confrontational approach, and even for its literalism and the patronising tone of the text (see e.g. Commeaux, 2023).

It is indeed difficult to find, in Chaillon's performance, analyses of the processes shaping racism or considerations of the epistemology of feminism,

although race clearly appears here as a cultural and social construct. However, what this is, is an emotional manifesto, based mainly on simple language, affective and visual impact, and the actors' own experiences. Their conviction about the rightness and significance of what they are doing and what they are saying gives their stage actions performative power. The actresses formulate their experiences in a way independent of the acceptance of the white and patriarchal rulers of the norm, in spite of universality, which values what is general but also ambiguous (open to a multitude of interpretations) and considers as irrelevant that which concerns too narrow a group of people. As I wrote in the article 'From Universality to Diversity', universality is no longer an idea defining the socio-cultural policy of the French state, or at least universalism in the old, hegemonising, unifying sense (Semenowicz, 2023). There is a dispute about its redefinition: as Aimé Césaire wrote almost eighty years ago, 'My conception of the universal contains the richness of everything that is individual, the richness of all particularisms. It is the deepening and coexistence of everything that is particular' (Césaire, 1956). Understood in this way, the new universality is often met with accusations of immigrants and their children creating closed communities ('communitarianism'), and thus dividing the French Republic. The presentation at the Odéon is an acknowledgment that even a minority part of French society, speaking about experiences inaccessible to white men and women, expressing itself directly, in its own aesthetic language, has the right to its representation in a national institution. This example clearly shows how aesthetics and politics are related. In the view of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, politics:

> … consists in reconfiguring the division of the sensual that defines what is common to a given community, in introducing new subjects

> and objects there, in making visible what was not visible, and in recognising as speaking beings those who were perceived as noisy animals (2007, p. 25).

A show in a national, mainstream institution allows us to draw attention to particularisms in opposition to totalising, normative narratives, to introduce a minority into the sphere of visibility and audibility. Of course, we can see in it evidence of protest taken over by consumer culture and capitalism. A theatrical performance is, after all, a product, which also becomes the subject it addresses – in this case, resistance, exclusion, black identity increasingly associated with the avant-garde and the independent. Only in this sense could we say that we are dealing with a new spectacle of racialisation — with a subject and artistic language assigned to it — entering the main European stages; a Debordian image-commodity, desired (because we see in it the authenticity we long for) and passively consumed (Debord, 2006).

However, everything depends on the position from which we look. Resistance in the world of capitalism and consumption will always be intercepted, which is why we have to be vigilant and reinvent it all the time. In my opinion, the most important thing today is that *A Black Card…* becomes a source of power for its actors, symbolised by the last image of the black female body: beautiful, strong and independent; freed from the colonial past, from the phantasms associated with it and from everyday, humiliating social practices. As if we heard the words ‘this is my body, which I will not allow to be colonised, submitting to the oppression of someone else’s gaze and someone else’s assessment’ (Krakowska, Duniec, 2014, p. 205). The performance serves their cause, while colonial performances served to entertain the white audience. For black women, *A Black Card…* is

a personal form of expression, not just aesthetics or an image. It is an expression of their being in the world. The actresses talk about experiences with which some of the French audience can identify today, even if it is a smaller part. The theatre audience in France is no longer homogeneously white. This is the result of changes taking place in the socio-cultural policy of France, which has begun to give voice to previously marginalised groups, to research and speak out about their long-repressed colonial past (Semenowicz, 2023).

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Footnotes

1. The statement appeared in the news on the festival’s website, on its Facebook profile and was circulated to the French press.
2. Mc93 Bobigny is not located in the administrative area of Paris, but it is served by the Paris Métro, so, in practice, it is referred to as a theatre in Paris.
3. Éric Zemmour’s post on his X profile: https://twitter.com/ZemmourEric/status/1684184220099309569 [accessed: 20.02.2024].
4. Exotic people were also shown in the 16th–18th centuries. However, these shows were not public. Saartjie Baartman's performances gave such shows a new dynamic. See Bancel; Blanchard, 2019, p. 407.
5. For more on the history of Saartije Baartman, see Wieczorkiewicz, 2011, pp. 253-273; Wieczorkiewicz, 2012, pp. 233-252.
6. According to Linnaeus, Europeans are sanguine, Asians melancholic, Americans choleric. To these four main groups Linnaeus added a fifth, in which he included all the ‘monsters’ including the Hottentots. See Dorlin, 2009, p. 229.
7. As Elsa Dorlin writes, in the 18th century, people began to realise that the population was decreasing, which influenced the change in attitudes towards the female body. It became a point of reference for this emerging idea of the nation: it appeared as the maternal body. This was connected with taking control over female reproduction and sexuality, Dorlin, 2009.
8. Éric Zemmour’s post on his X profile: https://twitter.com/ZemmourEric/status/1684184220099309569 [accessed: 20.02.2024].

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