The Politics of Blackness and Citizenship in Post-1980s France

Omar Dieng
History, Humanities in Leadership and Learning Series Program
Case Western Reserve University
10900 Euclid Avenue, Cleveland, OH 44106, USA
Email: Oxd61@case.edu

Abstract:

In France, since race is constitutionally and legally not recognized as a category, Blackness and Frenchness remain approached as mutually exclusive categories. The term "Noir," the linguistic equivalent of the term "Black" in English, is not compatible with the French national identity. It is not as common as a means of identification as the term "Black" is in the United States. The status quo that the French Republican universalism established makes identifying with term "Noir" self-isolating and "communautariste". Despite the huge Black population in France, "France Noire" or "Black France" is still mentioned with critical interrogation (Mudimbe-Boyi 2012, 27). In this article, I use Sami Tchak's *Place des Fêtes* (2001) and Rokhaya Diallo's activist voice to examine how French-born children of immigrants claim belonging in their land of birth. In doing so, I reflect on their relationship with both Africa (Africanness) and France (Frenchness).

Keywords: World Literature, Negritude, National Identity, Blackness, Citizenship, Belonging, Race, Culture

In France, since race is constitutionally and legally not recognized as a category, Blackness and Frenchness remain approached as mutually exclusive categories.[1] The term "Noir," the linguistic equivalent of the term "Black" in English, is not compatible with the French national identity. It is not as common as a means of identification as the term "Black" is in the United States. The status quo that the French Republican universalism established makes identifying with term "Noir" self-isolating and "communautariste". Despite the huge Black population in France, "France Noire" or "Black France" is still mentioned with critical interrogation (Mudimbe-Boyi 2012, 27). In this article, I use Sami Tchak's *Place des Fêtes* (2001) and Rokhaya Diallo's activist voice to examine how French-born children of immigrants claim belonging in their land of birth. In doing so, I reflect on their relationship with both Africa (Africanness) and France (Frenchness).

To my knowledge, of all the fictional works produced in this period by West African African writers, only *Place des Fêtes* centers on a French-born protagonist to African parents. Tchak's *Place des Fêtes* is about an unnamed young man who looks with disdain at the African immigrant community and who constantly criticizes his parents for keeping ties with Africa despite their French nationality. In this novel, Africanness and Frenchness are completely antagonized. The

protagonist refuses to acknowledge his African origins and finds it hard to live his Frenchness self-assuredly but blames his condition on his African origins.

Unlike Tchak who was born in Togo in 1960 and arrived in France only in the 1980s, Diallo was born in France. She is a journalist and author of a few documentaries and numerous creative non-fiction books including *Racismes: mode d'emploi* (2011), *Moi raciste? Jamais!* (2015), *La France tu l'aimes ou tu la fermes* (2019), and *Ne reste pas à ta place* (2019). In addition to her media appearances and conferences, most of the analysis I make in this essay will be focused on *Ne reste pas à ta place*, Diallo's autobiographical book that retraces her activist career and covers her general work. In her works and media appearances, she is known for addressing issues of identity, race, racism, and sexism in France. Diallo is also the founder of *Les indivisibles*, a movement which offers a new narrative about how to fight against the separation of skin color and geographical origin from French identity. As a Black French activist, Diallo offers an insider perspective on how Blackness and Frenchness should be normalized as opposed to embracing a universalist discourse that overshadows the "race question".

A Critique of Negritude

These brief biographic notes show that I am comparing the works of two writers of different positionalities and literary agenda. Tchak's generation of writers disclaim negritude militantism for writing autonomy. They reject this Negritudist positionality in which they are always already placed. As for Diallo, she does not claim allegiance to any literary paradigm neither is she defensive about the prospect of being imposed a way of writing. These two positionalities are important to understand as they determine the way these authors' protagonists choose to navigate Blackness and Frenchness in their writings

In his text on "Immigration, 'Littérature-Monde', and Universality," Alain Mabanckou lays out what he refers to as "the Strange Fate of the African Writer" in the following passage:

> African writers were [thus] expected to speak in the name of Africa, in defense of the African people: they had a *mission*, which was not the case for French writers. Today two contrasting attitudes toward that mission assigned to Francophone African authors create the clearest of dividing lines between those writers who proclaim their roots in the African continent and those who opt to seek openings in other realms. (2011, 75)

The thematic homogeneity which was rooted in the "mission to speak in the name of Africa" that bound earlier generation of African writers seems to have loosened up because of a new generation of Francophone African writers' desire to "seek openings in other realms". According to Mabanckou, one of the leading figures of this new paradigm, this choice is usually associated with a betrayal and an allegiance to the West's literary demands.

This claim for a dissociation from the "auteur engagé" paradigm is mainly characterized in the literature of this new generation by their protagonists' rejection of group identity, their ambivalence

in political issues, and the change of subject matter and literary landscape through which the image of Africa as it was previously conceived vanishes little by little. As Papa Samba Diop puts it, "the idyllic poetry of childhood that had informed earlier writings ceased to illuminate a literature now impatient to mark its distance from an increasingly obscure past" (2011, 18). This new generation's positionality is often interpreted by some critics "as a way of escaping from the periphery and fitting into the mold of a global literature, more prestigious and validating, by erasing all outward signs of African-ness" (Mabanckou 2011, 83). Indeed, there has been a widespread assumption that this positionality is motivated by a search for a more promising career in writing. As Diop says,

> Confronted by the indistinct boundaries of a Francophone sub-Saharan African literary sphere, and often by the vagaries of its publishing and distribution operations, an ever-increasing cohort of authors has chosen to write outside Africa, arguing for the real international world that ensures their livelihood and striving, by means resolutely transgressive prose, to integrate their work into a more structured and, as they see it, more consistent realm. (2011, 21)

Mabanckou argues that there is no relation of causality between the rejection of the label "auteur engagé" and their willingness to be inserted into the "mold of a global literature." In fact, Mabanckou is one among forty-four writers of diverse backgrounds who signed the 2007 manifesto: "Pour une 'littérature-monde' en Français" [Toward a World Literature in French] (lemonde.fr). For these Francophone African writers, this manifesto was inscribed into a refusal of the center-periphery paradigm in which the French publishing institutions puts them. In this sense, the epithet "francophone" marks their attachment to the French literary sphere according to their response to norms deemed conventional, while at the same time differentiating them from metropolitan French writers (Diop 2011, 15). This anti-label positionality is, for Mabanckou, an attempt at achieving universality through which they would not have to speak in the name of any nation or people (83). Thus, to achieve this universality is to not only "jettison the collective impulse—Africa's supposedly glorious past exemplified by Negritude movement" (Mabanckou 2011, 78), but also "to refuse the "orders" whispered in the ear of African writers to get them to say or write what they are expected to say or write and thus close off any avenues to the exploration of their own diversity" (Mabanckou 2011, 85-6). Thus, the World Literature paradigm is both a reaction against the literary tradition of earlier generation of African writers and against the hegemony of the French literary sphere.

However, the Parisian publishing industry continues to have an influence on Francophone writers. As Holly Collins argues "despite the independence that the *Littérature-monde* has announced, affirmed and defended, the French literary institution does not seem to fully recognize it." Another reality is that Parisian publishing institutions remain the places where Francophone African writers go to for a successful career as these institutions remain "as much of a judge of who will be successful as the readership itself" (2015, 498-499). In other words, "Paris and its agencies world-wide are far better able to create a reputation or open up future prospects for an author than Dakar or Lomé, Abidjan or Yaoundé, all African cities with their own publishing houses"

(Diop, 2011 22). This is a reality that even Sami Tchak, the author of *Place des Fêtes*, the novel under study, recognizes when he says:

> True, the rise of a literature is often tied to the history of a nation. Frankly, for many writers to write is to dream of being taken in by one of the great nations. African writers, for example, dream - and I believe we are all aware of this - of being taken in by France, perhaps exclusively, but it is certainly important. Because in the present circumstances our own countries are incapable of nurturing an autonomous literature. (...) The great writers of the great nations impose themselves or are imposed as the great writers of the world. Naturally, they are indeed great writers, but their worldwide aura depends largely on the nations that they have behind them. As for us, we are at present nationless orphans. As I write I am painfully aware of this. (qtd. in Diop 2011, 21)

The desire for a literary success and both the feeling and claim for "nationless-ness" help explain the lack of militancy of these Francophone African writers resulting consequently in their obsession with individualism. Does the transition of Francophone literature in the diaspora with an individualist subjectivity necessarily reflect a Black French subjectivity? Are their discourses on identity or their positionality representative of French-born Black people, for instance?

Place des Fêtes

My reading of Tchak's *Place des Fêtes* suggests that these varying positionalities are governed by an obsession with individualism in the French literary space; a literary individualism which ultimately translate itself into a way of life that leads to claiming Frenchness as it is universally dictated by the Republic. Referring to Tchak's novel, Mabanckou says that it "is the kind of introspection that typifies the discourse of the new generation, and it implies a willingness to confront Africans with their own shortcomings and so risk contradicting the Negritude movement with its great hostility to self- criticism" (2011, 81). In this respect, it would be interesting to see how Tchak's protagonist constructs a counternarrative to this stated cultural nationalism.

According to Michelle Wright, there are two extremes that "Black subjectivity" must negotiate in its shaping in the West:

> Seeking to determine Black subjectivity in the African diaspora means constantly negotiating between two extremes. On the one hand stands the 'blackness that shallows', the hypercollective essentialist identity, which provides the comfort of absolutist assertion in exchange for the total annihilation of the self. On the other stands the hyperindividual identity, most commonly found in poststructuralist critiques of racism and colonialism, which grants a wholly individualized (and somewhat fragmented) self in exchange for the annihilation of 'blackness' as a collective term. (2004, 2)

Sami Tchak's protagonist shows complete allegiance to a "hyperindividual" mode of subjectivity as he rejects collective identity.

If the "hypercollective" identity is characterized by the discourse of return and idealization of Africa through the voice of the father of Tchak's narrator, the "hyperindividual" identity is to be seen in the narrator's "unsympathetic, even hostile, handling of the roots motif" (Adesanmi 2004, 238) as exemplified by his harsh relationship with his parents and other African immigrants. The "hyperindividual" identity is also to be seen in the narrator's denial of race and racism and the claiming of France as it is universally perceived. This "hyperindividual" positionality is what shapes Tchak's protagonist's subjective self-making and sense of belonging in France. With his father, he perpetuates the same feeling of rejection that Tckak's generation of writers has toward Negritude generation.

It is such a lack of militancy, the indifference to, and the shunning of the "roots motif" that marks the limit of this "hyperindividual" positionality as it pertains to the Black French subjects. His state of Otherness in France and his African origin are two realities that Tchak's narrator overlooks and repulses. He reacts against his Otherness (the position he is placed in as a Black) by attempting to shake off his African origin, thus defending France against his fellow Afro-descendants and Africans. In that sense, his African origin and the stereotypes attached to it appear to be of deep concern to Tchak's unnamed protagonist and consequently threatens his Frenchness. As Allison Van Deventer says, "his belonging is demonstrated not only in terms of his social location as a citizen of France, but also in terms of his emotional attachment to an idea of France as a bastion of individual freedoms" (2014, 68). This "attachment to the idea of France as a bastion of individual freedoms" is made possible by the narrator's harsh criticism towards his parents and African immigrants. His sense of belonging is expressed through this antagonistic and repetitive rhetoric, "mes parents sont nés là-bas... moi je suis né ici" [my parents were born there...I was born here] (Tchak 2000, 9). In other words, his identification with "here" (France) is validated by his dissociation from "there" (Africa). Furthermore, the "born here" rhetoric is not antagonized with the exclusionary rhetoric of the French state but with his parents' sense of pride in their African-ness exemplified by his father's yearning for return to and the idealization of Africa. In this process of dissociation from the "roots motif", the narrator falls into, and embodies the republican assimilationism rhetoric around which he builds his individualism.

Tchak's protagonist's reinforcement of stereotypes and cliché attached to the Black African subject denotes his internalization of the universalizing discourses that are meant to dissociate Blackness and French-ness. In that sense, the French republic is defended against his racial group. In the chapter entitled "Putain de quartier!" [fucking banlieue] he states, "j'avoue que ça ne me plait pas du tout, ce coin, il y a trop de regroupement racial là-bas. Et la où il y a regroupement racial, il y a toujours tendance ethnique et c'est un peu comme si la République réculait" [I admit that I don't like it in this corner, there is too much racial gathering there. And where there is racial gathering, there is always an ethnic tendency, and it is kind of like the Republic is moving backward] (2000, 165-7). According to Crystal Marie Fleming, the ban on racial categories in France is evidence of the practice of white supremacy. She argues that "French white supremacy functions in at least

three features: anti-racialism, asymmetric racialization, and anti-communitarianism." Grounded in the French republican universalism, these three features obfuscate white supremacy. For Fleming, anti-racialism refers to "the vague references to 'racism'" or to "the denial of race as an extant phenomenon," which "tend to obscure the dominant group". In France, it is not uncommon to see "the stigmatization and moral censure of people who use racial categories in the public sphere," however as Fleming notes, "minorities are more frequently racialized than the majority population," a phenomenon she refers to as "asymmetric racialism." Finally, "anti-communitarianism" refers to the rejection of group membership (Fleming 2017, 37). Tchak's protagonist's hypothetical response to the label "communautariste" would be siding with the universalist principle of anti-communitarianism and thus perpetuating the other two features of white supremacy in France (anti-racialism and asymmetric racialization). In that respect, French Republican universalism vilifies and makes unavailable the terms through which racial particularity could be asserted.

Thus, Tchak's protagonist is "Français dans les manières" [French in the manners], which, according to him, means "prendre conscience" [being conscious], not to be "archaic" like the "nés-là-bas" (168-9) etc. He accepts to be French according to the way it is prescribed by the Republic. In contrast, Van Devanter sees it in a different way. As she argues, "What I wish to highlight by reading *Place des Fêtes* as an Afropean text—and not only a francophone African or a Togolese text—is the narrator's subversive performance of an innate belonging to France that is continually threatened by his enforced association with Africa" (2014, 69). But why is it that his sense of belonging to France is threatened by his racial association with Africa? If his belonging to France is threatened by his racial association with Blackness and Africanness, where does its subversiveness lie? Does he really embrace his Blackness if his association with Africa is *enforced*? Van Daventer explains the narrator's "subversive performance of an innate belonging to France" through this following passage she considers a "sharp criticism of French Republican ideals":

> Mais, je suis né français, papa. Je suis français, même si je ne suis pas vraiment Français, parce que ma peau ne colle pas avec mes papiers. Mais je sais que je ne suis pas de la-bàs non plus, parce que je n'ai rien à voir vraiment avec là-bas, [...] Je veux dire que la France c'est mon pays natal, mais ce n'est pas ma patrie. Je veux dire que je n'ai pas vraiment de patrie. Les gens croient qu'il suffit de naitre quelque part pour avoir une patrie. Mais non! Une patrie c'est autre chose que la nationalité, une patrie c'est dans le sang. (Tchak 2000, 22)

> But I was born French, dad. I am French, even though I am not really French because my skin does not match my papers. But I know I am not from there either, because I have nothing to do with there really, [...] I want to say that France is my native country, but it is not my *patrie* I want to say that I don't really have a *patrie*. People believe that being born somewhere is enough to have a *patrie*. But no! A *patrie* is not the same as nationality, a *patrie* is in the blood.

My reading of this passage suggests, however, that it is both ventriloquism of French

republicanism if one considers the influence of republican assimilationism on the narrator, and an acceptance of French republicanism, if one considers the sense of individualistic agency offered by France's so-called "liberté multicolore" [multicolor freedom] he asserts. The latter refutes any possibility of activist militancy and of racial, cultural, and communitarian particularism. Even when he mentions the "precariousness of his place in French society" (Van Deventer 2014, 69), he does so with an attitude of indifference and does not seem to claim his Blackness as a response to it: "j'ai déja eu à *essuyer* ma couleur comme une insulte. J'ai déja eu à voir les portes se fermer au nez de ma couleur. C'est aussi simple que ça" (33) [I have already had to wipe my color off like an insult. I have already had doors shut on my nose because of my color. It is as simple as that]. The attitude of Tchak's narrator in *Places des Fêtes* denotes what Fleming calls the "minimization of racism and trivialization of antiblackness" as a problem in literature on race in France (2017, 31).

His subversiveness lies instead in the charge against the "Black community" in France. He sees this "Black community" as the roots for his not being a "vrai Français" [real French] against which he builds his individualism. Consequently, he accepts his not being a "vrai Français" but does not blame the French Republic for it and says this instead:

> Si moi, j'avais été un vrai français, si ma couleur n'avait pas été trop tendance, j'aurais voté Front National[2] à cause des conneries de ce genre[3] [...]. C'est nous les nés-ici avec la couleur tendance, qui aurions du voté FN. Vous savez pourquoi? C'est parce qu'il y a trop de Noirs n'importe comment dans ce pays que les gens, ne sachant plus que faire pour nous distinguer, nous foutent tous dans le même sac. (Tckak 2000, 175-6)

> If I had been a real French, if my color was not trendy, I would have voted National Front because of some craziness like this [...]. It is us the born-here with the trendy color who should have voted for NF. You know why? It's because there are so many Blacks in this country that people, not knowing how to distinguish us, put us all in one bag.

The presence of the native-born is praised and elevated above the non-native-born. The narrator claims that he is owed privilege for the fact that he is native born, but also for the idea that he is "French in the manners". It is in this sense of assimilationist Afro-Europeanness that he rejects Blackness altogether with its heterogeneity as well. "Although France will never be his 'patrie', he will live as though it were, inventing his own form of belonging in this country where his 'couleur tordue' provides a visible reminder of its broken promises" (Van Devanter 76). The Republican universalism expects him to live as if France were his "patrie," a tendency that favors meekness and avoids tension or conflict between who he is and who he is expected to be.

Where Adesanmi explains the narrator's "psychic/identitarian impasse" as rooted in a "lack of a place to return, an African way of being" (2004, 237), Mabanckou sees it as the narrator's deliberate expression of freedom as he "feels no need to comprehend African ways and finds it cumbersome to pay them respect" (2011, 81). To follow Mabanckou's observation, what Tchak's narrator demonstrates is less a performance of "lack" than an expression of freedom from the

"hypercollective" identity. Furthermore, while the father in Tchak's narrative might have an idealistic view of Africa, by looking at Africa from the "reportage télévisé," (20) Tchak's narrator holds an extremely stereotypic view of Africa as his "single story" (Adiche). It is such rhetoric of dissociation from the "roots motif" that shapes Tchak's narrator's individualism, his belonging in France, his assimilationist sense of Afro-Europeanness, and his freedom "que [lui] confère la nation" [which the nation bestows upon him]. His sense of Afro-Europeanness is grounded on the fact that, as a Black, he performs "an innate belonging to France," as Deventer puts it, while accepting to be invisible, not to be a real French, and consequently pleading allegiance to French universalism. He refuses to acknowledge the "roots motif" as part of his identity. In that way, all ethnic and racial identifications are completely shunned in favor of the French Republican universalist values.

Tchak's narrator's anti-label and "hyperindividualist" positionality makes him shun all ethno-racial particularity, deny racism, and consequently perpetuates the way in which French-ness is universally conceived. Ethno-racial identification is tied to isolation in the French Republic and to belong usually means to reject your ethnicity or cultural particularity. Other than "I was born here," Tchak's protagonist does not make use of any identifying lexicon to self-assuredly name his ethno-racial difference in France**.** He focuses more on freeing himself from the "hypercollective" identity than questioning the Republican universalism which is manifested in "anti-racialism, asymmetric racialism, and anti-communitarianism". In what follows, I question Tchak's narrator's subjectivity through the work of Rokhaya Diallo.

Rokhaya Diallo: An Alternative to Black Diasporic Conformity

Rokhaya Diallo is a Black French journalist, writer, and filmmaker. Her overtness in the French public space about race and racism owed her international recognition. She was appointed to the Executive board of the Center for International Justice; an organization "based in Berlin dedicated to advancing equality and justice for all by combating intersecting forms of structural inequality and discrimination in Europe" (intersectionaljustice.org). She joined the Washington Post and The Guardian as contributor writing monthly on issues related to race, racism, and sexism in France (washingtonpost.com). Being a contributor to these widely read popular media, Diallo's voice provides a way in which Black Frenchness can both be imagined and articulated without the influence and control of French universalism. Her articles in these online journals highlight the lived experiences of current Black people in Europe. She articulates a 21st century global diasporic and Afro-diasporic linkage around race and injustice. In addition to that, her voice across these Western spaces exposes French approach to race and racism to the rest of the Black diaspora and particularly to Afro-European diaspora.

Talks on race and practice of racism are traditionally approached as accidental, external, and circumstantial issues in France. However, Diallo's approach on these racial issues challenges the French republican universalism's rhetorical principles. Such rhetorical principles deny racism as

constitutive in the making of France. Because of her approach and her contribution to British and American popular media, she has been accused of being influenced by Anglo-American ideology on race relation issues (Diallo 97). The reality is that external spaces seem to give Diallo more opportunity to voice her concerns in the French society. She clearly acknowledges that "C'est aux États-Unis que j'ai appris à prendre conscience de ma valeur" [I learned to be conscious about my worth in The United States] (2019, 92). Occupying a positionality where one could talk about race in France is no easy task. That is why Diallo understands that "associating her with a foreign power is to deny the anchoring nature of the racial issues I raise in French soil" (263 my translation). With her insistence on the racial debate, it is the French Republic that is threatened. Thus, in return, Diallo has to resist the invalidation and the de-legitimation of her Black French positionality.

Diallo's speaking up about racism has led to her removal from national digital council, a commission created by the French government for a "more inclusive digital policy" (theguardian.com). In the letter that triggered this dismissal procedure written by a right-wing MP and addressed to French prime minister, Diallo was disapprovingly described as "decolonial feminist" and a "divisive figure." After this incident, the questions raised by the Black French scholar, Maboula Soumahoro, are then "Who has access to the highest level of the public life, and on what terms?" (theguardian.com). What is clear about this dismissal is that Diallo's only fault is speaking up publicly, with facts at hand, about racism in France. It seems that for the Black subject in France, censure is the price to pay for occupying a place outside meekness and docility.

Despite the difficulty of speaking up about racism in France, Diallo consistently refuses to espouse the French republican universalist discourse in her works, on television, and radio shows. Diallo's sense of universalism is one that challenges the norm of French republican universalism which is rooted in denying racial and cultural differences. As she argues in her autobiographical book, *Ne reste pas à ta place*,

> Ce n'est pas à nous de nous adapter au monde, c'est au monde de tenir compte des spécificités de chacun (45) .... Quand on est minoritaire, le défi est de parvenir à rester soi-même, de ne pas tenter de gommer ce qui nous caractérise pour se fondre dans la norme (57). S'adapter en présupposant ce que veulent voir les spectateurs ou en copiant l'image que l'on associe à sa fonction est une négation de soi, de son intégrité. (2019, 69-70)

> It is not up to us to adapt to the world; it is the world that has to take the specificities of everyone into account (45) .... When you are a minority, the challenge is to be able to stay true to yourself, not to attempt at erasing what characterizes you in order to lose yourself in the norm (57). To fit in by presupposing what others want to see or by copying how you are expected to be is a self-negation, a negation of one's integrity.

These rhetorical phrases that I put here together from different pages are recurrent in Diallo's work. They refer to her refusal to be invisible. This positionality is subversively different from that

of the older generation (born overseas in the 1940s and 1950s) of highly qualified professionals that Fred Constant interviewed in France (2012, 131-135). Constant's interviewees blame the Black youth social immobility on their refusal "to conform to the principles, customs, or ways of this country; in short, to French culture" (2012, 134). They have internalized the republican principles, so much so that they believe hard work, sense of "discipline," and submission to the dominant culture are the secret to social mobility, and thus dismiss any reference to race. In that sense, docility, meekness, and alienation are not problematized; they are overlooked for the sake of success and acceptance.

Diallo's subjectivity shows the gap between older generation of immigrants and the post-1980s generation. Not only does this subjectivity reveal her self-assured sense of self amid the dismissive republican universalism, but also, it sends a message to the children of immigrants who are uncomfortable with the thought of being associated with their parents' foreign accent, "strange clothes," and "strange food" (2019, 37-8). In *Ne reste pas à ta place*, under the subtitle "je suis d'ici," [I am from here] Diallo states that "on doit prouver que l'on est pleinement français, sans que cela contredise que l'on soit également à l'aise avec ce que l'on a hérité de ses parents" [we have to prove that we are fully French without contradicting the fact that we are at ease with what we inherited from our parents] (Tchak 2000, 40). Thus, unlike Tchak's narrator who accepts that he is not a "vrai français," [real French] Diallo questions what she refers to as "une francité conditionnée par un comportement consensuel" [a French-ness that is conditioned by a consensual behavior] (32). It is the consent to such conditional French-ness that explains Tchak's narrator's rejection of the "roots motif" and his embrace of the Republican universalism.

This positionality is frequent in Black writing published by the French conventional literary institutions. Blinded by the ideals of Republican universalism, some writers such as Fatou Diome[4] and Alain Mabanckou[5] choose to be politically correct by praising universalism and consequently obfuscating inherent anti-black racism in France. With a moralist tone, they focus more on how to avoid the reality (racism) than how to deal with it realistically. From "sociéte de romanciers coloniaux" [society of colonial writers] (1924), "association des écrivains de langue française" [Association of French Language Writers] (1968) to "organization internationale de la Francophonie" [Francophonie international organization] (1970), Black writing in France has been partly shaped or influenced by these institutions' assimilationist and universalist agenda.[6]

Diallo's voice, however, is subversive and revolutionary in that she fights against racism from an anti-conformist perspective. She clearly states, "Je n'entrerai jamais dans les cases.... Je ne crains pas de déranger l'establishment" [I will never enter boxes.... I am not scared to disturb the establishment] (2019, 41). Along with her dissident voice, Diallo's diction is mixed with English expressions. Just to name a few, "Establishment" and "unapologetic" (2019, 99) are English terms that she uses in her French text without quotation, translation, and italics. The impossibility or difficulty of translating these words, as she notes with the term "unapologetic," for example, raises questions about whether Black French subjects have linguistic tools with which to challenge not

only "anti-racialism" and "asymmetric racialism," but also "une francité conditionée par un comportement consensuel" [a French-ness that is conditioned by a consensual behavior]. Thus, Diallo questions, "Comment s'assumer quand on appartient à une catégorie dont la présence est si rarement mentionnée?" [How to self-assuredly assert oneself when we belong to a category whose presence is rarely mentioned?] (2019, 361). She suggests, "pour que l'on cesse de nous ranger dans des cases, nous devons dire avec assurance qui nous sommes vraiment" [To break out from boxes, we must say self-assuredly who we really are] (58). In that sense, she clearly states, "Je suis effectivement une Noire (inutile de m'appeler « Black », « Noire » n'est pas un gros mot) très sympa mais je n'ai jamais eu l'intention de devenir un alibi" [I am truly *Noire* (useless calling me "Black", "Noire" is not a vulgar word) very sympathetic, but I never intended to be an alibi] (2019, 249). She claims the word "Noire" which is perceived as a vulgar word in accordance with the principle of French Republican universalism.

To sound less offensive to the Republican universalism's principles, "Noire" tends to be replaced by its English translation "Black" or the continental referent "African" (Mudimbe-Boyi. 2012, 19). If these two terms (Black and African) are politically correct in the French Republican universalism ideology, it is because of their foreign connotation. The term "Black" is thought of as a circumstantially borrowed lexicon that is just used to mimic an Anglo-American means of identification and therefore has no ground in French context. The term "African" gives a geographical imagery which is to be located outside France as well. As Maboula Soumaoro puts it,

> Les gens vont parler de nous [les Noir(e)s] en France en parlant d'immigration alors qu'on est pas des immigrés, on va parler de noir ou de race en s'appuyant sur les États-Unis alors qu'on est pas des Américains. Donc si t'es noir et français, noir et de couleur, noir et non-blanc, tu n'as pas tellement de place (le monde.fr).
>
> People talk about us [Blacks] in France by talking about immigration whereas we are not immigrants, they talk about blackness or race by focusing on the United States whereas we are not Americans. So, if you are black and French, black and colored, black and nonwhite, you don't have a place.

For Diallo, to fail using the local equivalent of "Black," which is "Noire," is to accept its denial by the French Republican universalism. Thus, Diallo's claim of the term "Noire" is subversive in that she calls the French Republic to come to terms with the underlying presence of the Black Other in the making of France.

Diallo is not the only French subject who sees the urgency and importance of claiming the racial identification, "Noir". In the interviews that Pap Ndiaye had with some Black individuals in France, a lot of young people claimed their racial identity by self-identifying as "français noir" or "française noire". Others claim that they are French, but do not fail to incorporate their parents' national origin as in terms such as "franco-sénégalais," "franco-congolais" etc. (2009, 47-52). Nevertheless, although born to Senegalese parents, an ethnic background that she embraces,

Diallo refers to herself as "française" and "noire" or "française noire," just like many other Black youths in France. According to Ndiaye, cognizant of the fact that they are implicitly considered and looked at as "noir," young Black people in France are more and more inclined in identifying as "noir" along with insistence that they are French regardless of their multiple identities (2009, 52). In other words, Ndiaye's sociological research suggests that nowadays there are more people identifying as "noir" in France than there were in the past "comme si un tabou avait été levé, une gêne, une honte parfois, qu'il y a à dire que l'on est noir" [as if a taboo has been broken, a discomfort, an embarrassment sometimes, to say one is *noir*] (2009, 53). Currently, it is very common to hear young Black French people using the term "renoi" in their informal street language which is called "verlan"[7]. Diallo's approach is to normalize terms and expressions that are conceived of as offensive or inappropriate. For Diallo, failing to use these terms leaves Black French subjects unnamed, thus invisible.

She proposes and reenacts a Negritudist positionality in her assertion and practice of Black Frenchness (2019, 294). While the Negritude generation claimed the humiliating term "nègre" for racial solidarity in the 1930s as opposed to the politically correct terms of the time: "noir" and "homme de couleur" (Edwards 2003, 28-33), the current Black French generation claim the term "noir" for visibility and practice of rootedness. Identifying with the term "noir" as French is a subversive practice in that the French republican universalism denies it on the grounds that it is divisive while still not indifferent to it.

To challenge this French society's isolating rhetoric and system, Diallo also created the movement *Les Indivisibles* with a group of friends. For Diallo the creation of the movement was a way to raise her voice against prejudices that tied French-ness to physical characteristics and religious culture. It was also a way to find an empowering means to reflect on the stigmatizing rhetoric in media across France (2019, 133). Diallo acknowledged that she was inspired by another Afro-European subject from Germany. Her name is Noah Sow; she initiated a movement called *Der Braune Mob* ("Mobilisation Brune", "Brown Mobilization") to show that Blackness is not incompatible with Germanness. This is an Afro-European connection that Diallo thinks the European continent should be thankful for. As she says "J'ai la conviction que c'est une bénédiction pour le continent européen de compter autant de TCK [Third Culture Kids] parmi ses citoyens, car nous nourrissons et enrichissons son identité" [I have the conviction that it is a blessing for the European continent to count as many Third Culture Kids among its citizens because we nourish and enrich its identity] (2019, 45). *Third Culture Kid* is an expression that Diallo borrowed from two American sociologists, David C. Pollock and Ruth Van Reken, to designate people like her and Noah Sow. They are children who were raised in a culture that is different from their parents' who, across time, create a third culture as a result of a mixture of their parents' culture and that of the host country (Diallo 2019, 43-44). Being Afro-European equals to embodying this third culture positionality. The post 1980s Afro-European is somehow different from both their parents and the national conception of the country they were born into.

Diallo's movement helps normalize a more inclusive conception of French-ness. Unlike Tchak's narrator, she believes that there is no such thing as "vrai Français" [real French]. Actually, the term "indivisible" takes its sense from the French republican philosophy which professes the indivisibility of the Republic (2019, 136). If Tchak's protagonist advocates for a more conformist Black positionality in France, Diallo questions the notion of racial authenticity monolithically tied to French-ness. As she says, "on n'est pas plus français ou mieux français parce qu'on est issu d'une vieille famille « bien » Française. L'« authenticité », c'est bon pour le marketing, pas pour parler d'identité (...) il n'existe pas de souche gauloise « pure » dont seraient issus les vrai Francais" [we are not more French or better French because we are from "very" French old family. Authenticity is good for marketing, not for speaking about identity ... there is no such thing as a "pure" *souche gauloise* where real French would come from] (2019, 134-5). In this way, she not only racializes and ethnicizes whiteness, but also, she detaches it from the essence of French-ness just as Stuart Hall ethnicized whiteness and Englishness and differentiated them from Britishness.

Unlike Tchak's narrator, Diallo claims her transcultural identity against the monolithic conception of Frenchness in all French public spaces that are known for their lack of inclusion. She engaged in cinema to address the lack of diversity on French screens (Aljazeera.com). She produced and directed a number of documentaries such as "Les Marches de la liberté," [The Steps to Liberty] (2013), "De Paris à Ferguson: coupables d'être noirs," [Not yo Mama's Movement] (2016), and "Où sont les noirs" [Acting while Black: Blackness on French screens]" (2020). Not only do her films and documentaries contribute to a better representation of Black actors in French cinema, but also, they expose issues pertaining to Black people in the French media. In a similar vein, the French rap artist Abdel Malik, same generation as Diallo, made his contribution in this domain as well. At the *Théâtre du Chatelet*, Malik helped his Black actors and actresses perform "The Just Assassin" of Camus as the first play to be directed by a Black artist at this 257-year-old theater (nytimes.com). It Featured artists from poor Paris suburbs who occupied this theatric space from which Black people are usually excluded.

Literary critics tend to subsume potential Black French diasporic subjectivities and voices within the France-based African writing paradigm which either frames the question of identity within an immigrant experience or within a neoliberal individualist subjectivity as a practice of universalism. Diallo's works fill the gap in African or Black Francophone "conventional" or mainstream literature. Such literary production does not facilitate the contact with radical and realistic voices about race and racism in France. Recently Max Lobe has argued that Parisian publishing institutions colonize the African thought by imposing on France-based Francophone writers some writing criteria that are disconnected to the African continent's realities for the benefit of the French readership and Parisian book market (letemps.ch). If this assimilatory and universalizing practice does not help decolonize African literature and African thought, it also does not have positive impact on Blacks in France because it obfuscates direct reference to anti-blackness. However, Diallo's overt reference to race resembles what is seen in Anglo-American context. Her

work and public appearances heavily address the denial of the racial category in France. Diallo's positionality is also rooted in the awareness that overlooking the racial category in France contributes to Black invisibility and Black conformity. As Mudimbe-Boyi puts it,

> In a political world where the Black finds himself- or herself in a subaltern position, and in the context of a colonizing France, subalternity is a consequence of the political and the cultural. How then can one be located in the political and the cultural without a reference to that other component, which is racial or pertaining to skin color? (2012, 25)

This is a question that rhetorically comes constantly in Diallo's work. For Diallo, there is no such thing as neutral position as Tchak's protagonist claims (2019, 151). The actions that Diallo takes in her writing and in her activism provide compelling responses to the needs and sensibilities of Black French subjects. Thus, she embodies what Mudimbe-Boyi refers to as the essence of Black French-ness because her positionality "goes well beyond a simple physical presence in France," it is also "a claim for the right to speak, the contestation of dominance, marginalization, and invisibility within French society where these exclusionary practices contradict republican ideals" (2012, 21). Diallo's frame of reference is to be found outside the French republican universalism.

Endnotes:

1. Recent scholarly works, however, have attempted to theorize Black-Frenchness. See *Black France/France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness* (2012*)* edited by Trica Danielle Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Tyler Stovall; Pap Ndiaye's *La condition noire: essai sur une minorité française* (2008); Felix Germain, "Mercer Cook and the Origin of Black French Studies" (Spring 2016) etc.
2. The "National Front," a far-right political party in France.
3. The narrator argues that people are doing the promotion of paper-less immigrants by protesting on their behalf. He thus defends France for fighting against immigrants.
4. See *Mariane porte Plainte,* 2017.
5. See *Le sanglot de l'homme noir*, 2012 and *Black Bazar*, 2010.
6. See Ruth Bush and Claire Ducournau, "La literature Africaine de langue française, à quel(s) prix? Histoire d'une instance de légitimation littéraire méconnue (1924-2012)" 3/219 Cahiers D'études Africaines, 2015.
7. In verlan French words are reversed. For instance, noir(e) (*renoi)*; bonjour (*jourbon*) l'envers [the inverse] (*verlan).*

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