

NOIRE.S

In the following pages I unravel myself.

The observer becomes the observed. I bring you life as I live it
and not as it is seen.

I allow myself to speak up, to say that I exist, and through the
interviews below, to say that my sisters exist too.

My text comes out of this body-braid of three strands:
a Guadeloupean, Cameroonian black woman born as European but
seen as a foreigner. I give voice to myself in the complexity of the
multicultural to answer Awa Thiam's question

“But who are the negresses?”¹

I join with Awa Thiam, a Senegalese writer, anthropologist and
feminist politician, when she says “It is up to the negresses
to re-establish the truth.”

Let me tell you my truth.

¹ Awa Thiam, *La parole aux négresses*, 1978

I became Black in a White world before I was born.

1993

Paris, France

My older brother is born. My parents consciously choose to give him two surnames: the African name of my father and the French name of my mother.

This practice is not yet legal in France. It is only twelve years later that a law² is passed.

1996

Paris, France

I am born. Like my brother, I am declared with the last name of my two parents. I am Roxane Mbanga-Auteuil. Historically, "Auteuil" was a name given to my enslaved ancestors³ by the White masters.¹

My parents chose to add "Auteuil" because this name is associated with French whiteness. They are aware that they are giving birth to Black babies in a White country. In this country where racism does not exist, to be admitted to job interviews, my father had to remove his picture from his resume and use the last name of his French parent.

Twenty-seven years later, history repeats itself. My brother recently joined an IT service company in Paris. On his first working day, he is stunned – is he? – to find out that he is registered in the company under the name of Martin Auteuil. "Mbanga" is deliberately removed from his name, from his identity.

1999

Le-Perreux-sur-Marne, France

As a three-year-old girl, I do not understand when my father says I am Black while I see my skin as brown. Sitting on the hill that is his belly, I repeat, "I am not Black. I am Brown!"

2002–2006

Nogent-sur-Marne, France

I grow up in a predominantly White and wealthy neighborhood. In the private catholic school where I received most of my education, ninety-nine percent of the students and faculty members are White. In the school playground, I hear things such as "I do not want to play with you because you are Black", "Go back to your own country!", "Were you born with those (my braids) on your head?", "My grandparents don't want me to watch That's So Raven because she is Black" and so on.

It is at school that for the first time, I discover what it means to be Black. I face racism without even knowing what it is. I go back home crying and feeling hurt. My family comforts me. However, my deepest wish is to look like my friends. I want to be beautiful, I want to be White, I want to be blonde with straight hair and blue eyes: I want to be the perfect Barbie.

2010

Madrid, Spain

I am going on a two-week trip to Madrid to improve my Spanish. Quickly, I get along with a group of young adults. Among them is a French girl. She is Black and five years older than me. She sees me as her little sister. When we go out together, she dresses me up and does my make-up. I follow her lead. In her, I discover the beauty and the freedom expressed in her singularity.

2012

Nogent-sur-Marne, France

I am fourteen years old. Before going to Madrid, I was like every other teenager. I wore the same clothes as my friends, spoke the same language, listened to the same music, and adopted the same hairstyles, even though my hair was not naturally straight. Coming back from Madrid, I feel different. Being surrounded by these older people made me wonder who I want to be.

I detach myself from the group to become more aware of my uniqueness. I stop straightening my hair, take ownership of my curls, and grow an afro. I begin to discover my musical and cinematographic tastes. In this momentum, I am gifted with my first camera. I find my own style of clothing and, finally, I taste the freedom of being Myself.

2015

Copenhagen, Denmark

My first boyfriend is a White, blond, Danish guy. One weekend I go to Copenhagen to visit him. As we are walking in the street, he points out that people are looking at us. I tell him that they look at us because we are beautiful. "No, they are looking at us because they are happy to see a mixed couple," he says. "Happy to see a mixed couple?" I faze.

Naively, I see in our couple a Danish guy and a French girl. But suddenly, I am brought back to reality: my skin color.

² Law n° 2002-304 from March 4, 2002 on the reform of family name. Art. 311-22. - Art. 311-21. - Where the parentage of a child has been established with regard to his two parents at the latest on the day of declaration of his birth or afterwards but simultaneously, the parents shall choose the family name which devolves upon him: either the father's name, or the mother's name, or both names coupled in the order they choose within the limit of one family name for each of them. Failing a joint declaration to the officer of civil status mentioning the choice of the name of the child, the latter shall take the name of the parent with regard to whom his parentage has first been established and the father's name where his parentage has been established simultaneously with regard to both.

³ Attribution of the name Auteuil, registres des nouveaux libres (the new free men's register), 1848. "Citizen Michaux (my great great great great grandfather) aged about 47, born in Trois Rivières previously entered in the register under number 2628 residing on the Moulin à Eau plantation to which citizen Michaux gave the patronymic name of Neully." For more on this, see: http://www.anchoukaj.org/nomination_guadeloupeens.php

“Persistent tendency of “othering” anyone who does not fit the image of main-stream White Dutchness.”

M. De Witte, *Heritage, blackness and Afro-cool: styling Africanness in Amsterdam*, 2014

2014 Paris, France

I meet men who strangely look at me. I can not define this gaze that bothers me. I have the strange impression they admire me for no particular reason. They see me as something, not as someone. While talking to me, they fantasize me.

In France, I face racism. However, I do not understand yet how deeply rooted it is in people’s minds, how embedded it is in the society I grew up in.

I am about to move to Amsterdam, a cosmopolitan city with canals, large parks, coffee shops, and freedom. I enrolled in one of the best art schools in Europe, the one I dreamed of.

“Joyce is a fashion designer, born in Amsterdam of Ghanaian parents: “I can be Dutch and Ghanaian at the same time and both things are true. But inside, I am African; my parents gave me that... even if I didn’t feel African until I was 22.”

M. De Witte, *Heritage, blackness and Afro-cool: styling Africanness in Amsterdam*, 2014

2016 Amsterdam, The Netherlands

I have been living in Amsterdam for more than a year. For the first time in my life, I feel my blackness piercing my skin, tinting my flesh. I work in the cloakroom of the trendiest techno club in the city. A big part of my work is to chat with customers. They often want to know where I am from. Coming from France is never good enough of an answer, so a second question always follows: “No, but where are you really from?”

In Amsterdam, I become aware that being Black is being a stranger in the eyes of others. So, on that day, when I meet this stranger on the streets, and he asks me the usual “Where are you from?” I burst into tears, unable to answer. Being asked over and over this question makes me feel like I do not have a hold on my own identity. I feel obliged to answer their curiosity, by telling them about my life, my parents’ lives, my grandparents’ lives.

2017 Paris, France

I perform with dozens of other afro-descendant Black artists for the brand *Marché Noir*. This grand parade highlights different aspects of Black cultures. We parade on the rooftop and the alleys of the famous Parisian department store *Galeries Lafayette*. The energy is incredible. It is the first time I am surrounded by so many artists who look like me. I am proud to be part of a project where French afro-descendant artists tell and portray themselves as they have decided.

2017 Paris, France

I come specially from Amsterdam to go see *Ouvrir la voix*⁴. My mother loves the movie and suggests we go together, with my brother. This experience truly affects me. I feel moved to see women who look like me on a big screen, telling stories that I have lived. In this dark room, I share this experience with my sisters and aunts.

2018 Amsterdam, The Netherlands

I am angry. I have the unfair feeling that something has been taken from me. I feel incomplete, like an unfinished puzzle.

Why, after all these years of education, I still do not know the history of my ancestors? Why are history classes not limited to facts? Why are we still learning about French history from the French colonial perspective?

I am invisible. Like my ancestors, I have no place in the national narrative. Despite the persistent anger, I do not want to be part of these “legions of the lost and hordes of bloodthirsty madmen.”⁵

⁴ The documentary *Ouvrir La Voix* (the title, which means ‘opening the voice’, is also a homonym for *ouvrir la voie*, ‘opening the path’) addresses the country’s struggle toward acknowledging its multiculturalism through a vision of sorority. It confronts a political and historical paradox: the illusion of color blindness that’s central to the French national self-image.” From the Article “ouvrir la voix: a radically frank documentary about the experience of Black women in France” written by Richard Brody for the *New Yorker* in 2018.

⁵ From *Les Identités Meurtrières* (The Deadly identities) written by the Lebanese French writer Amin Maalouf in 1998.

⁶ “After slavery ended in 1848, authorities attempted to eliminate [Creole language] banning it from schools and removing it from the public space.” It was completely forbidden to speak the language at school until 1946. Article, *Le Créole à la Réunion: au-delà des enjeux linguistiques*, Carole Dieterich, 2013.

⁷ *Tableau vivant: souvenir ramené dans la ville* in collaboration with Juliette Delarue.

2018 Capesterre–Belle–Eau, Guadeloupe

I am having lunch with my maternal grandparents, my parents, and my brother.

I ask my father why he never taught us Douala or Bakoko when we were kids. He says he does not speak these languages well enough to teach them to us. I then ask my mother the same question about Creole. She says she barely knows the language. My grandfather speaks up and tells us how during his days, children were forbidden to speak Creole⁶. His generation grew up thinking of Creole as a second-class language that should not be spoken with children, especially if they were growing up in mainland France.

Three generations are sitting around this table. Although we have lived in different times and places, we share this sense of loss. Something has been taken from our identity.

2019 Amsterdam, The Netherlands

I am working on a performative art installation⁷ questioning the notion of identity using my own body, memories and voice. It is then that I discover *The Deadly identities*.⁸ This book fits perfectly in this period of my life. Amin Maalouf moves me. His truth penetrates me. Through the pages, I discover myself. Finally, I understand my pain. I understand where this struggle of never truly belonging comes from. When he writes “it is our gaze that often imprisons Others in their close affiliations, and it is our gaze again that can free them,” his words resonate.

“Subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour, whereas otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart. In so far as difference spells inferiority, it acquires both essentialist and lethal connotations for people who get branded as ‘others’. These are the sexualised, racialized, and naturalized others, who are reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies.”

Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, 2013

“Senghor made acquaintance of Césaire and the Guyanese Leon-Gontran Damas, the third voice of this poetic trilogy, thus setting the stage for their collective exploration of their conflicting identities, the ‘tormenting question’, in the words of Senghor, of ‘Who am I?’ their experiences of being black, African and African-diasporic, and French.”

T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black feminist research, Femme négritude, Jane Nardal, La Dépêche africaine, and the francophone New Negro*, 2000

⁸ *Les Identités Meurtrières* written by the Lebanese French writer Amin Maalouf in 1998.

⁹ “There is no such thing as coincidence, there are only appointments.” Paul Eluard, French poet.

¹⁰ How to use clothing to assert yourself? A series of videos that suggest women to take power over their bodies in public spaces.

2019 Paris, France

I am going alone to the cross-disciplinary festival “Identifié-es?” This event organized by the “Chkoun is it?” and “Filles de blédards” collectives, highlights identities of immigration. Two days of exhibitions, theater performances, round tables, screenings, concerts, and DJ sets. I discover and appreciate the work of inspiring artists such as, among others: Alice Diop, Crystallmess, Kengné Tégua, Johanna Makabi, Maty Biayenda, and Rozyckine. There, I meet people who, without knowing it, have been present at crucial moments in my life. “Il n’y a pas de hasard, il n’y a que des rendez-vous.”⁹ I feel like I fully belong: I am surrounded by people like me who have access to a multitude of dimensions. We are the Chameleon Club.

2019 Brussels, Belgium

I am invited to pose for two painters in Brussels. In the studio, I make myself comfortable to hold a long pose. I observe them from afar. With their brush, they measure the size of my head resting on my hand. I am now an object with contours, composed of full and empty areas. Here my nudity is no longer sexual. It is a symbol of beauty. After the session, I feel extremely beautiful. I understand that being seen as I truly am, without being contemplated as an object of desire, is what I need. I somehow deeply reconnect to my femininity. I almost feel like I am in love with myself.

The idea of the *Naked underneath*¹⁰ project is born from this desire to offer to my sisters an experience that would give them that same feeling.

“Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a ‘pro-duction’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.”

Stuart Hall, *Cultural identity and diaspora*, 1990

2019 Sibiu, Roumania

I enter a bar with an Asian friend when this elderly French man stops me. Very quickly, he asks me the usual: “Where are you from?” Of course, not satisfied with my answer, he specifies: “No, but I mean your roots!”. Although I tell him that I do not want to answer, he insists. He even goes as far as to advise me not to be ashamed of who I am. He continues telling me about his humanitarian trips to Africa.

He is un-bearable! Tired of being polite, I leave. The disrespectful behavior of this man shocks my friend. I am angry. Why did this man’s curiosity make him blind to my discomfort? Why did he not accept my answer? Why do these encounters affect me so much? These questions that will never be answered run through my head. Sitting in front of my glass of wine, I can not fully enjoy the time I am spending with my friend.

Later, I relate this story to my light, my dear, White, French sister Violette. She invites me to find a way to deal with these situations that only I come out being hurt. She suggests either accepting these encounters or acting and finding the strength to start a constructive dialogue. She is right. I must use my talents to try to educate and enrich the collective imaginaries.

In Europe, when strangers allow themselves to ask me about my ancestors, my intimate life, I become something public. When they want to touch my hair, I become an object of curiosity.

I am neither of these things. I am a person. The intimacy of my body belongs to me, myself, and I.

Surrounding myself with people with whom I share the same struggles and the same interrogations makes me feel like I belong.

I am a Black woman’s body braided with three strands: Guadeloupean, Cameroonian, and French. I have lived my entire life in Europe. It is time for me to let go and reveal myself. I need to open myself up to places that might nourish me. I decide to take a gap year to work and travel around Nigeria, Benin Republic, Ivory Coast, and Senegal. Before I leave, my dad gives me a last piece of advice: “Every time you are on the African soil, take off your shoes, walk barefoot and connect with your ancestors to receive their energy.”

2019 Lagos, Nigeria

In Lagos, Nigerians think I am mixed. They assume one of my parents is Nigerian, and the other is White. Here, people ask me where I am from to know what ethnic group my ancestors are from, to know how we are related to each other, whereas, in Europe, people ask to know what separates me from them.

Like the rest of my family, I am light-skinned. Coming from Guadeloupe, my mother’s genes are very mixed. As for my father, he is Métis: one of his parents is White and the other is Black. Yet, he fully identifies as Black and Cameroonian. In Lagos, I fit the beauty criteria two hundred percent. Here, like in a lot of West African countries, being light-skinned is seen as beautiful. This explains the multitude of cosmetic creams sold to lighten the skin, to whitewash yourself. Caro Lave, Teint Clair, Dream Skin, Plus Claire, Pour Te Plaire!, Perfect White, Metisse Express, Teint Choco, Glow & White... Seventy-seven percent of Nigerian women are using these creams¹¹ even though they can be extremely dangerous for the skin.

Living in Nigeria, more than ever before, I find myself stuck in the male gaze. In the eyes of Nigerian men, I am the embodiment of beauty, sex, and sin. Their gaze reflects the growing desire to satisfy a drive. I feel insecure in front of these gazes, dispossessed of my body. I cannot hide my female body. I cannot escape the reality of my Self by hiding my curves, my breasts, my bum, the swing of my hips. By accepting my feminine forms, I am condemned to defy the male desire. Yet I want to be the subject of my own desire. I want to live in my body and have the power not to attract attention.

How my skin color stands out in Europe is brutally replaced by the way my womanhood is seen here. I am not a Black woman in Lagos; I am only a woman. Here, the *Naked Underneath* project starts.

As a child, I grew up surrounded by White people; I was seen as Black. As a teenager, I lived in a more mixed environment where people referred to me as Métis. At the time I thought I might have become paler! Today, in Lagos, Nigerians describe me as “Yellow”. I find it funny that my skin color changes from place to place, or should I say, from viewer to viewer.

“Racism is based on the rejection, the failure to take complexity, individuality into account. Black women are seen as interchangeable, equivalent.”

Maboula Soumahoro, interview with Mediapart, 2020

2020 Porokhane, Senegal

During the Porokhane Magal¹², I borrow clothes from a Yaye Fall friend to blend in better. I put on a mid-length hooded poncho, a saroual¹³ and a cloth to cover my hair. The day after the rally for Mame Diarra, I go for a walk alone in the city. I need a break from the looks and the conversations. Strangers’ curiosity troubles me. I decide to place the fabric covering my hair differently: I bring it a little bit down on my forehead and back up under my eyes. I want to wander quietly in the streets. I hide my persona: a European woman, seen as mixed-race and beautiful. I veil my face in Porokhane, the holy city of the Mourides¹⁴ and Baye Fall¹⁵.

I do not exist as myself but rather as another person whose culture and morals are similar to those of the people I meet. For the first time during my stay, I don’t feel any insistent gaze on me. Like a magic tool, the veil I cover my face with brings me the silence, the respite, and the rest of anonymity.

What tools could I use in Europe to find the peace and tranquility that is so important to me? Should I straighten my hair? Wear a weave or a wig? Dress classically? Is it truly possible to blend in as a Black woman in Europe?

June 2020 Instagram, The Internet

During the Black Lives Matter movement, a photographer, who I collaborated with six years ago, took the liberty of sharing on social media, without my consent, one of the portraits we shot together. He adds under it: #BlackLivesMatter. I send him this message:

“I just saw the photo you posted of me with #blacklives-matter. It makes me uncomfortable.”

My discomfort comes from the fact that a photo of me, a Black woman, is being used for political purposes today, whereas six years ago this photoshoot was purely aesthetic.

My discomfort comes from this sensation of being used as a black square when “Black” has once again become temporarily trendy.

My discomfort is caused by the fact that you did not ask for my permission before posting THIS photo, to show that you support THIS cause.

It is a queasy discomfort that I hope you can understand. Or just hear. So thank you for removing this photo.”

He decides not to remove the picture.

I take screenshots of our conversation to publicly denounce his action on my Instagram story and send him a second message:

“I laid myself bare in front of you. I have shown my vulnerable self. I took the time to choose the words that could most accurately and sincerely describe how I am feeling.

I have been feeling for the past few days unbearable nausea that makes me sway. I keep feeling the tears rising, but I am holding them back out of pride.

They ran down when you allowed yourself to post this picture.

You have no right to use my body, my Black woman’s body, my body that you are objectifying to chant that you care about what is happening on the other side of the Atlantic. You don’t even bother to worry about my mental health, about me as I live racism in my life, in my family, and through my body.

I, Roxane Mbanga, a twenty-four-year-old parisian “bourgeois” woman living in Amsterdam, having the privilege to travel for more than a year outside of Europe with her only French passport and being able at any moment to be repatriated home, how could I, Roxane Mbanga, be a symbol of what is happening in the United States? How?”

Finally, he deletes the picture, and ignores the fact that he is part of the problem.”

In France, more and more Black women are listened to. They make me extremely proud. Being in Senegal, I am closely following what I think is a great shift.

Louise Thurin, a student at l’école du Louvre, writes an open letter addressed to the French museum institutions. She deplores the silence of museums in front of the anti-racist struggles which shake up the world. In her letter, Louise asks to raise awareness and educate the public about racism, she writes: “Dear museum, Educate me on racism. What is your worth if you do not talk to me? Why these empty black squares and these prolonged silences? (...) sharing your content massively will make us collectively resilient! We cultivate a taste for truth by disseminating it.”

¹¹ Article *Le prix de la couleur : les crèmes éclaircissantes, une menace sérieuse pour la santé*, written by Swaminathan Natarajan for BBC News Afrique in July 2019.

¹² This is an annual pilgrimage site where hundreds of thousands of people – especially women – pay homage to Mame Diarra Bousso, the mother of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba, the founder of Mouridism.

¹³ A form of baggy trousers predating the Christian era.

¹⁴ Mouridism is a Sufi brotherhood. It was founded at the end of the 19th century by Ahmadou Bamba.

¹⁵ Baye Fall is, in Senegal, a branch of the Mourides brotherhood founded by Cheikh Ibrahima Fall.

“It is therefore essential for us to strengthen Afro-feminist thought in the French context, starting from the experiences of black women living in France to produce collective political strategies and analyses. Fight against our invisibilization as political subjects, by putting black women at the center of our action and by organizing ourselves around the specificity of the racialization of gender, of black women.”

Mwasi collectif afrofeministe, AFROFEM, 2018

Assa Traoré, an anti-racist activist, has still not obtained justice for the murder of her little brother Adama Traoré by police officers in 2016¹⁶. She organizes with her collective Comité Vérité et Justice pour Adama demonstrations throughout France. Assa reminds us that police violence does not just happen in the USA; it is a French reality too. When the media tries to tarnish her to minimize her fight, she remains upright and proud.

Rokhaya Diallo, a journalist, writer, and activist, participates in powerful and lively debates on national television. She intervenes in front of White French people who remain in denial. Rokhaya is always the only Black person around the table, and she is constantly interrupted. I admire her way of stating facts with incredible repartee. After the demonstrations in support of Adama Traoré, Virginie Despentes, a famous White writer, known for her poignant texts and her position statements, wrote a “Letter addressed to [her] White friends who do not see what the problem is...”¹⁷. In this letter, Virginie denounces the denial of racism and explains how “being White” is a privilege.

Black women are talking about race and police brutality in mainstream French media. I am witnessing a historic time. Despite the persistent denial, we were having a conversation about systemic racism in France. As tongues gradually loosen, we are having our own #metoo. These events, as deplorable as they are, give me a lot of strength. I am finally ready to come back to Europe. I find a meaning to this return: being part of this movement by telling my story.

2020 Paris, France

I explain for the first time my graduation project to my dad. He doesn't quite understand this absolute necessity to talk about racism, and my need to converse about the way I am perceived in public spaces.

Apart from belonging to a different generation, I think this misunderstanding comes from the fact that he did not grow up with racism. Because he arrived in France at the age of thirteen, racism did not shape him the way it shaped my mother, my brother, and me.

¹⁶ Article [Le prix de la couleur : les crèmes éclaircissantes, une menace sérieuse pour la santé](#), written by Swaminathan Natarajan for BBC News Afrique in July 2019.

¹⁷ Virginie Despentes, [Lettre adressée à mes amis blancs qui ne voient pas où est le problème...](#)

¹⁸ Youtube, [1979: Vivre avec le racisme](#), Archive INA, Les Visiteurs Du Mercredi, sur TF1 (21/11/1979), INA société, June 24th 2020.

“Previously the more assimilated Blacks looked arrogantly upon they brothers of color, believing themselves to be clearly from another species; on the other hand, those Blacks who had never experienced slavery, looked upon those who had at the whim of Whites been enslaved, then freed, then modelled into the imago of the White as vile cattle.”

Jane Nardal, [Internationalisme noir](#), *La Dépêche africaine*, February 15th, 1928

2020 Verneuil-l'Étang, France

At a family lunch, my Black Guadeloupean aunt makes a racist remark to my African cousin. I am not shocked. I understand that going to French schools, living her entire life in France, she has learned to see Africans through the colonial lens: she imagines Africa and Africans as savages and uneducated people. An insidious battle exists between Caribbeans and Africans¹⁹: who is the most savage versus who is the most whitewashed. Caribbeans tend to be perceived by Africans as “White”, while Africans are perceived as savages by Caribbeans.

Is it true that Caribbeans are more civilized, more assimilated than Africans?

From my own experience, I could say that it is not uncommon to hear some Guadeloupeans being proud of their light skin. Colorism²⁰ is a reality in the Caribbean. In my grandparents' time, it was normal for parents to invest more in the lighter-skinned son. “Pô chapé” (“Peau Échappée” which means “escaped skin”) and “Peau Sauvée” (which means “saved skin”) are terms still in use to describe light-skinned people. These terms literally mean that the skin escaped being Black.

2021 Instagram, The Internet

Yseult, a Black and fat French singer, as she defines herself, wins the Victoires de la Musique²¹. In her music and her performance, Yseult lays bare. She gives us a part of herself, her vulnerability, and most of all her strength. Around her, on stage, she accompanies herself by dozens of artists who look like her and who understand her. Together, they all raise their fists. For long minutes, with the power and truth of their beings, they take my breath away.

Trophy in her hand, in her speech, Yseult tells me: “Success is a duty. It is not over. The road is long as a Black woman. The road is long as a fat woman, as a woman forgotten by society, forgotten by culture. (...) if they do not let us take the elevator, no worries, we are enduring; we will take the stairs, we are strong. (...) Our anger is legitimate, and I would like all of France to hear it tonight. (...) Let us be united.” I get chills.

She ends her speech by reminding us: “Our freedom, our independence, we went to snatch it. We went to grab this place, and we deserve it!” She makes me want to be more daring and dream much bigger. Her words still resonate with me.

“She highlighted that her “focus on the interactions of race and gender only highlight the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed.”

Kimberlé Crenshaw, [Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color](#), 1991

¹⁹ Article [Ironically enough, the Windrush scandal has brought the British African and Caribbean communities together for the first time](#), Funmi Olutoye, *The Independent*, April 2018. In this article Funmi Olutoye uses the Windrush scandal (British political scandal concerning people who were wrongly detained, denied legal rights, threatened with deportation and in at least 83 cases wrongly deported from the UK.) to tell the story of the “unspoken separation [between] those of a Caribbean background and those of an African background in the UK”. What is true of the UK, where there is “the race to prove who is more British, in some minds meaning more refined and ultimately having higher status, still has echoes in the Black British community today” is also of France.

²⁰ Oxford Dictionary: prejudice or discrimination against individuals with a dark skin tone, typically among people of the same ethnic or racial group.

²¹ French music awards.

“To decolonize minds, to decolonize imaginaries, is to be able to project oneself into the Other. And that’s something that people of color do. When we watch a movie, we identify with the hero and the white heroines because, otherwise, we don’t identify with anyone. And to question: “Are we then in a world today where white people are able to identify with us?”

Amandine Gay, in her documentary Ouvrir la voix, 2017

“When mentioning invisibility, I am not referring to it in the literal sense, but rather, the trapped meaning of it in relation to identity politics. It refers to the type of privilege owned by those, whose body lends favor to a comfortable and respected anonymity; to which they are immune from being flagged, moulded, managed and misrepresented.”

Jade Blackstock, Marked Body and Freedom, 2016



Interviews

Lisa Moukori

Lisa I understood I was Black when seeking not to be anymore. I was born in France in the nineties. As a six-year-old girl, my icons were Lory and Priscilla. At that time, Priscilla was wearing bangs. I wanted bangs too, but the kids made me understand it was impossible because I am Black. That is when I started asking my mom questions like, "Why do they say we are Black while we are Brown?" I realized that there was a dominant mentality and, very quickly, I began to develop complexes. The girls who were considered beautiful were White, blond, and had bangs. At first, it shocked me, then it saddened me and, after some time it became the norm. My role was quickly defined, I was the "Black girlfriend".

How did you grow up, as a young Black woman discovering her femininity and love?

L When I was eleven years old, I decided not to reveal my feelings to the White boy I loved. I knew I did not fit in with the beauty criteria and therefore had no chance of pleasing him. In middle school, my friends pressured me to date the 'other Black guy'. They saw us as 'beautiful' and 'cool'. This was a result of their imaginaries built around African American culture. At that time, I was defining myself according to the image my friends had of me. Around the age of fourteen or fifteen, an outsider's gaze came in: older men started to approach me. I was approached for a whole host of reasons surrounding the fact that I was a Black girl. I needed to feel like I existed so much that I found it flattering to be approached by this kind of guy: the one who, in 2002, dated a Burkinabé girl and has since been convinced that he knows all of Africa!

Ségolène Okoko

Ségolène I did not have a specific moment like Lilian Thuram²² who, as soon as he arrived in France as a nine-year-old, understood that he was Black. I have always evolved in a very White environment. Since the age of reason, I have been aware that I am Black. In elementary school, we used to have "weddings". I was six or seven years old, and already I was thinking "You are not going to get a boyfriend because you are Black, they are not going to want to date you."

It was insidious. I always intellectualized that because I was Black and therefore different. I was less pretty.

How did you grow up, as a young Black woman discovering her femininity and love?

S When I was younger, I locked myself in the thought "given that I am a Black girl evolving in a world, I am considered less pretty." I did not have any self-confidence. As a teenager, if a White guy said to me "You are beautiful for a Black girl" and I would take it for a compliment: I have been told things like "I have never slept with a Black girl, I would like to try" or "I like exotic girls". When I was sixteen, seventeen, I did not understand these approaches as problematic and when it started to really bother me, I did not know how to react. My awakening came about three years ago when I discovered a lot of intersectional feminist Instagram accounts like @tétionsmarrons, @sansblancderien, @moifilledimmigres, @histoires, crepues, @quotifienderacisees, @decolonisonsleféminisme, @kiffetarace, and @decolonisonsnous. Reading testimonials from other women, I could finally put words on what I have been through and structure my thinking.

How do you feel as a black woman walking down the street?

L I have encountered Black men who thought there would be sparks between us because we had the same skin color. These men would approach me, talk to me and sometimes even touch me. They were not mean or violent. I think they were never told that they were not allowed to put their hand on a woman's shoulder, hip or wrist without her consent. While working for NGOs on the street, I was sometimes assaulted. Those who put their hands on my buttocks while I was wearing the Red Cross uniform were white. One day, one of them told me about his safari in Africa and asked me if I wanted to have a drink with him later. I don't get it: when did inviting me for a drink become the next logical step in the sentence? I think we do not talk enough, but those who have colonial smells are by far the worst!

What do you think of the representation of Black women in the public media space in France?

L Black women are completely invisible. It is not surprising that there are initiatives like *Noire n'est pas mon métier* or *Tout simplement noir*²⁴. I dreamed of being an actress for a long time, but as a Black woman in France, I knew there was no possibility of a career progression. In France, there is a big problem with representation. Neither the shades of Black nor the variety of Black cultures is represented. I have the impression that today there is a double dynamic nowadays: either we are invisibilized, or we are over-represented, over-idealized, or even completely disguised with a certain image of Black, especially in social media.

Michèle De Chacus

Michèle It is in the eyes of others that you notice your difference. The first time it happened, I was twelve years old. I had just arrived in France. I was going to boarding school and, during the weekend, my sister and I were sleeping in the home of a host family. The first day we met the family, they showed us around the house, and when they told us about what we were going to have for dinner, the mother apologetically said: "I am sorry, but I could not have any bananas for dessert."

I did not realize right away that she was saying this because of the way my sister and I look. Later I understood that some people in France have a false idea of what being Black means.

However, because I grew up in the Benin Republic, I already had a certain image of myself before coming to France. I did not encounter racism at home, but experiencing it did not break me in my flesh: the representation I had of my identity was unalterable.

How did you grow up, as a young Black woman discovering her femininity and love?

M Two years ago, I dated a Greek-Albanian man. While I was curious about his culture, he made no effort to appreciate mine. For example, when I was cooking Beninese dishes, he would smell it with an air of disgust and would not eat it: I would find myself changing my ways and my being, trying to adapt myself to his taste. When one day he pointed out to me that he did not like to see me with my natural hair and that he preferred me with weaves, it became extremely problematic. I understood that for him, I was a better "Black version" with a weave on.

How do you feel as a Black woman walking down the street?

M Where I used to work in Notting Hill, a very White and rich area, people's gaze in the streets would make me uncomfortable.

Do you think that if you wore a wig and high heels you would feel different?

M I think the looks would be different. I would be more confident walking among them because I would think that I look like them. Right now, I feel really visible. I am aware that when I walk by, people notice me. Yet, I have no desire to make an effort to blend in. I have reached a point where I say to myself: "Take me as I am or else just fuck off" (laughs).

What do you think of the representation of Black women in the public media space in France?

M I feel like it is a bit of a pity that they give us a Black Miss France every five years and a Black Miss Universe every ten years. The representation of Black women in the media does not look like me at all and will never represent me. The Black women that are portrayed have a delicate face with fine features and big curly hair that falls out. My hair does not fall out! It grows and remains up! (laughs) You will never see Black women with Negroid features: big nose, big lips, and a big face.

²² (Black is not my job) essay anthology, co-written by sixteen Black actresses, in which each details the casual racism she has repeatedly experienced from French casting agents and directors.

²⁴ A politically incorrect comedy, about the role of Black people in French society written by Jean-Pascal Zadi.

²² Former prestigious international soccer player from Guadeloupe. Politically engaged, he takes a public stand on issues related to equality, immigration and racism. In 2009, he wrote *My Black Stars: From Lucy to Barack OBAMA*, a captivating story of key Black historical figures.

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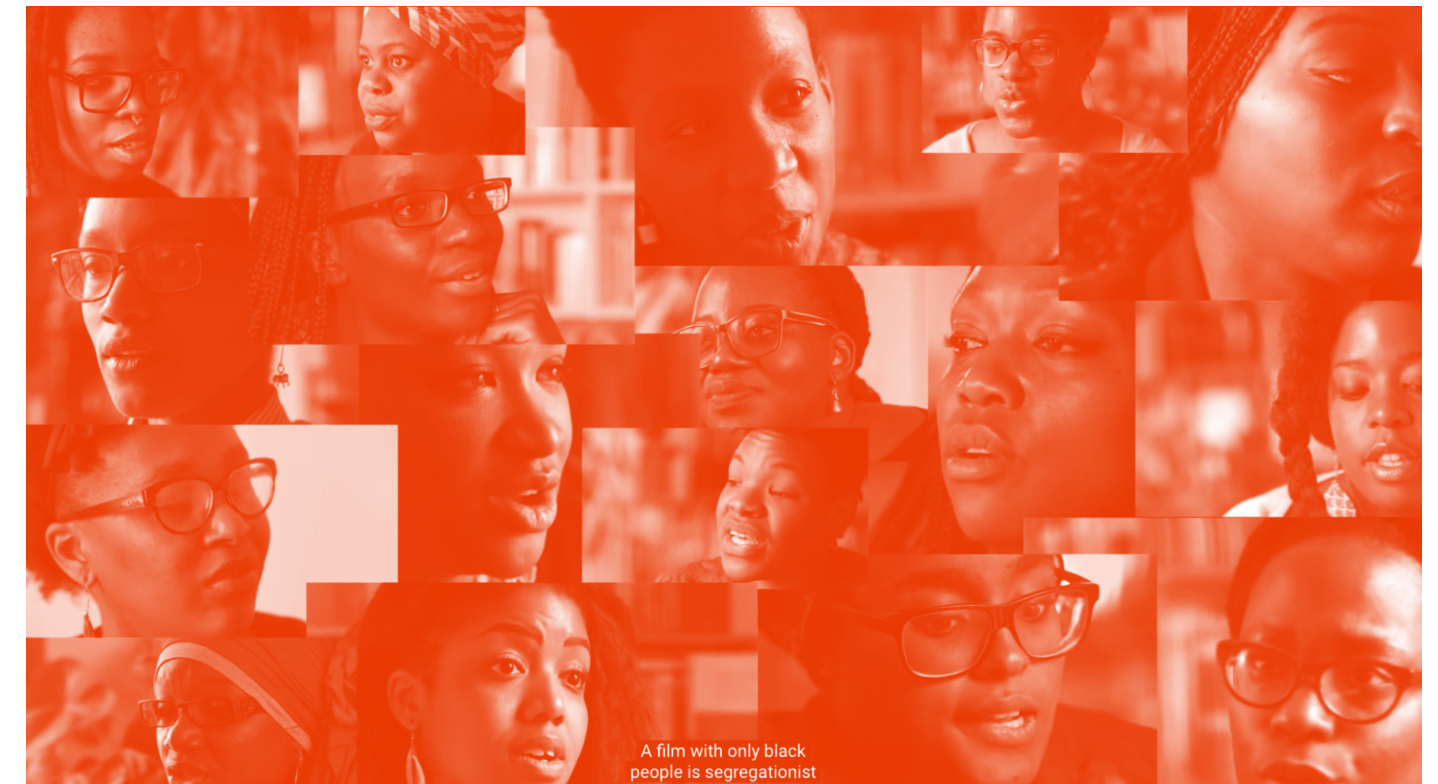
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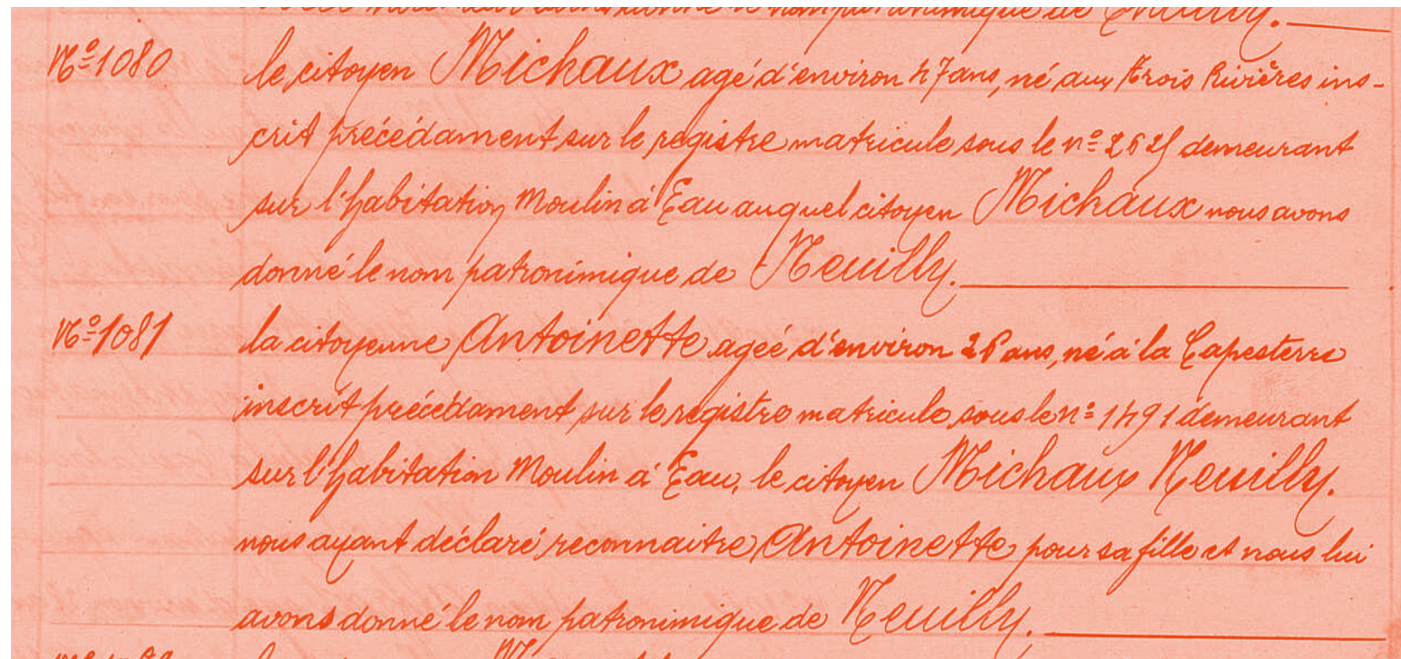
2017
Paris, France



2017
Paris, France



A film with only black
people is segregationist

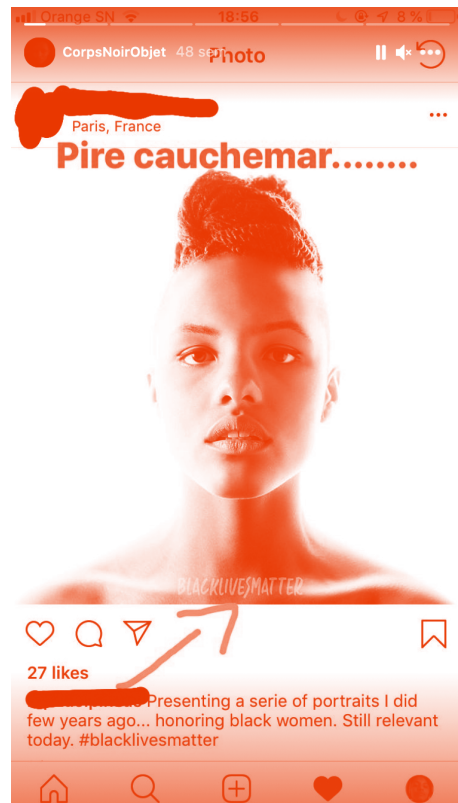
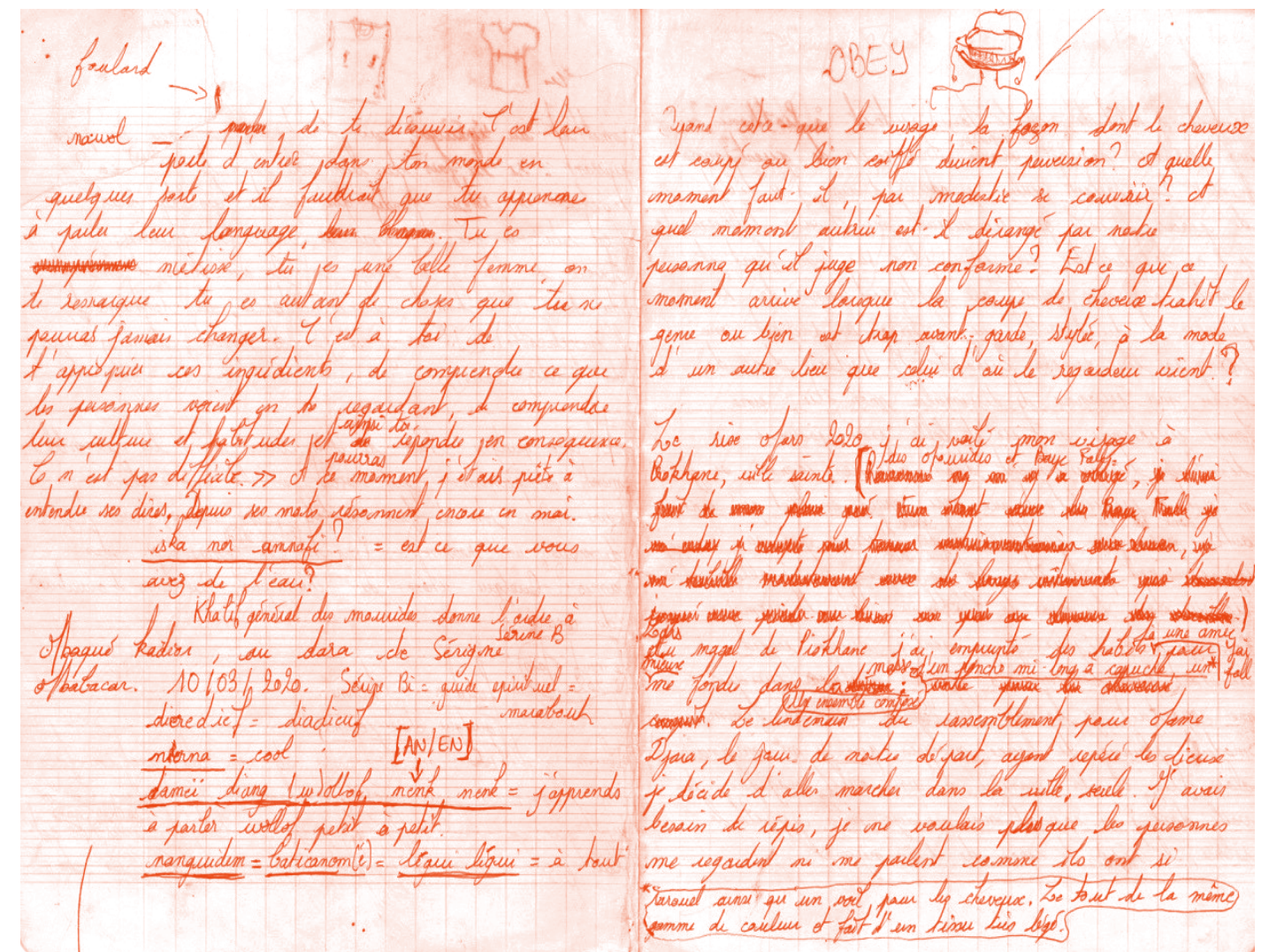


1996
Paris, France

2021
Instagram, The Internet



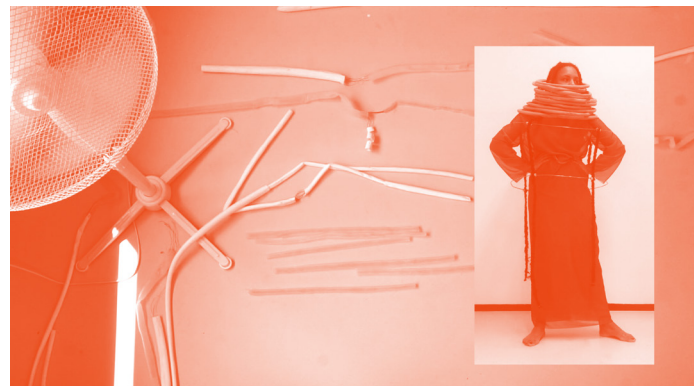
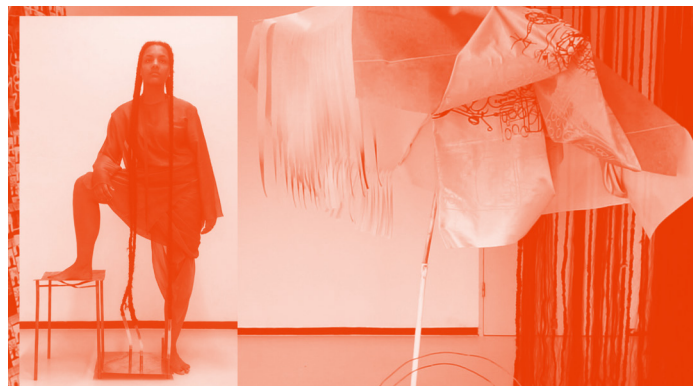
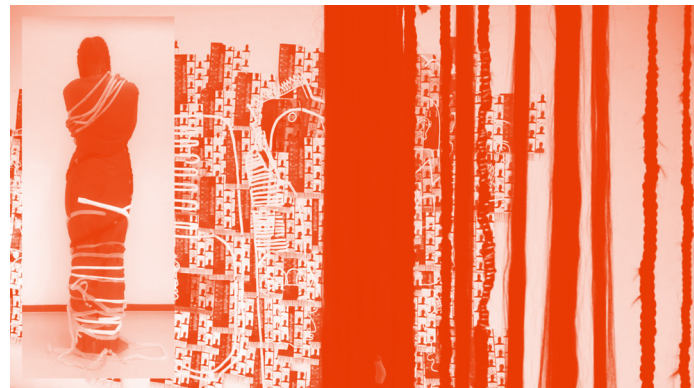
2020
Porokhane, Senegal



June 2020
Instagram, The Internet



2019
Amsterdam, The Netherlands



This thesis tells the story of Black French women of today through the lens of intersectionality²⁵. It explores the different identities that make up the lives of Black women and how we are multiple: races, genders, nationalities, ethnic backgrounds, skin color, educations... Our identity and where we grow up affect how people see us and how we see ourselves.

Stereotypes about Black women lock us in and erase our individuality. It is in the heavy silence of accustomedness that we live the reality of racism, since childhood. Arm yourself with empathy and become our allies! The installation NOIRES that supports this text invites this public into my “home”, and offers you tools for reflection on the place of Black women in public spaces.

The ambition of NOIRES is to evolve towards the creation of a cultural place. A place that tries to create bridges between Afro-descendants of the five continents. A place of knowledge that would bring together expertise about their true history. A place of sharing that would highlight the richness and diversity of Black cultures. A place that takes the complexity of individualities into account.

Amin Maalouf writes in The Deadly identities: “(...) those among them who will be able to fully assume their diversity will serve as “relays” between the various communities, the various cultures, and will in a way play the role of “cement” within the societies where they live.”

I want to be one of those people.

²⁵ The Afro-feminist academic Kimberlé Crenshaw theorized in 1989 in her paper *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* the notion of intersectionality as a sociological observation tool that names the crossing between several types of discrimination or domination over a group which is at the intersection of several social categories.