

Boundaries of Difference

Cultural Citizenship and Transnational Blackness

“Dirty nigger!” Or simply, “Look, a Negro!”

—FRANTZ FANON, *BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS*

One sometimes has the strange impression of upsetting others by being black in a country that thinks of itself as white.

—RAMA YADE, *NOIRS DE FRANCE*¹

Of Antillean origin, he has lived in Bordeaux for many years, so he’s a European. But he is black; so he is a Negro. There is a conflict. He does not understand his own race, and whites do not understand him.

—FRANTZ FANON, *BLACK SKIN, WHITE MASKS*

After a long discussion in a Starbucks with Nasar, a thirty-two-year-old of Algerian origin who works for the French Soccer Federation, he asked me some of the same questions I had posed to him. How do I see my identity? I said I identify as black American or African American. “But what does that actually mean to you?” he asked. “Why not just say you’re American?” I answered that, for me, being African American implies a link to the African diaspora, especially the forced migration of West Africans to the United States for enslavement.

“But what if I put you in the same room with a white American, a white person from Tanzania, and a black person from Tanzania,” he challenged. “Who do you think you’d have the most in common with?” Before I could respond, he answered for me: “You’d have the most in common with the white American, not anyone in Tanzania or anywhere else in Africa. That is because you are American.”

As Nasar points out even if I am not always treated as an American or as American as any other American, I would still have the most in common with white Americans because we share a national identity. In the same discussion,

Nasar acknowledges that he has been treated differently from others because he is not white and is a racial and ethnic minority, but it does not make him less French. He does not negate being French, even if that identity can be difficult to assert, for he is denied cultural citizenship. He is not ashamed of his Algerian origins, and in his mind, they do not make him less French than others. Even if French identity has racial and ethnic underpinnings, Nasar and his counterparts, though marked as different and treated differently because of their race and ethnic origin, still identify as French. Nasar sees me in the same light. He knows I am a racial and ethnic minority in the United States, but that doesn't make me any less an American.

While my conversation with Nasar, including his hypothetical scenario, was a bit jarring, it was also illustrative of how the middle-class maghrébin second generation thinks about the relationship between nation-based identity and racial and ethnic identity, and more specifically the relationship between race and the nation. For Nasar, his lower rank in a racial and ethnic hierarchy does not negate his attachment to his nation-based identity.

In this chapter, I discuss the varied ways respondents marshal blackness, including a transnational blackness connecting them to black populations elsewhere, and the experiences of racial and ethnic minorities in other societies, to understand, and sometimes challenge, the racial and ethnic hierarchy of which they are a part. Most of these individuals see their interests and experiences as aligned with black populations, even if they do not want a French reclamation of an American or other model of identity politics.

Beyond demonstrating how race functions as a basis for the marginalization of and denial of cultural citizenship to the North African second generation, I argue that the connections made by French racial and ethnic minorities with other racial and ethnic minority populations worldwide, including black Americans and Palestinians, are part of France's racial project. Such ties allow respondents to make sense of their social locations. In a society that does not recognize racial and ethnic difference, identification with others contributes to the consciousness of their ethnic minority status. It is also a "diasporic consciousness" (Smith 2014), in that they see themselves as sharing the struggles against racial and ethnic inequalities that other populations confront. Such connections are especially valuable to respondents in a nation where there is no accepted and legitimate language for discussing race and ethnicity in society, a nation that purports colorblindness yet exhibits racial and ethnic consciousness (Keaton 2010). In the absence of such language, respondents look to other societies, including the United States, to understand the racism and exclusion they face.

Blackness operates as a socially constructed vessel of otherness. Respondents develop a consciousness of what it means to be subsumed in this vessel, and use it to make sense of their position on the margins of French society. That consciousness connects them to black and other minority populations across the globe.

I argue that the conception of blackness they invoke builds upon French historian Pap Ndiaye's (2008) notion of "transnational blackness" and Tommie Shelby's (2002) notion of "thin blackness." For members of the maghrébin second generation, the diaspora and transnational blackness apply to them as well.

SHARED EXPERIENCES, SHARED OPPRESSIONS

Abdelkrim, a journalist of Algerian origin, believes his own experience parallels that of Malcolm X, whose autobiography he has read (X and Haley 1965). He is inspired by accounts of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Panthers and how they responded to racial oppression. Even as a young student, he wanted to be a journalist. He remembers a white teacher who told him as an adolescent that he would never be good enough to realize this aspiration. It is one of his earliest memories of being treated differently because of his maghrébin origin.

"Maybe it wasn't false at the time," Abdelkrim says. "Maybe I didn't have the grades that would have allowed me to follow that path. . . . But it reminds me of the day of when Malcolm X said to his teacher that he wanted to be a lawyer and his teacher responded that "you are a negro and you will never be anything but a carpenter." Here, Abdelkrim accesses the framework of another marginalized population—African Americans—to make sense of his own experiences and position in an ethnoracial hierarchy. It brings to mind another respondent, Nadir, who in chapter 3 expresses his solidarity with blacks and Palestinians because of his experience in Seine-Saint-Denis and as the only nonwhite person in his office.

But the connections he makes to black Americans are not just historical. "The media here always encourages negative portrayals of blacks and Maghrébins," he says. "It's the same thing the media does to blacks in the United States." He gestures in my direction, assuming I immediately understood the reference. When he and I discuss the 2005 banlieue uprisings, he again draws a parallel between maghrébin-origin individuals and black Americans and other racial and ethnic minorities: "The problems of the police in the banlieues are like the problems between the police and blacks, African Americans. . . . These uprisings involved all of France, because we share a common destiny . . . being a minority, being a child of an immigrant . . . [and they are] just like uprisings throughout the world." Abdelkrim and other children of North African immigrants make sense of being a racial and ethnic minority in France by viewing their experiences in a broader context.

Respondents closely followed the 2008 presidential campaign in the United States and wondered what Barack Obama's election might mean for them. In October 2008, there was a *débat* (panel discussion) entitled "Barack Obama: Un modèle pour les minorités dites visibles en France?" (Barack Obama: A model for so-called visible minorities in France?) at the Nanterre Association. Many in attendance were of North African and sub-Saharan African origin. Mamadou, a

thirty-six-year-old of Algerian origin and association director, was enthusiastic about the new president: “We are all really excited about Obama. It’s such a good symbol for minorities here, especially because his father is African.” The general sentiment of that evening’s *débat* was that Obama’s election would be a positive and encouraging symbol for minorities in France and throughout the world, and that it would also serve to change perceptions of African-origin individuals everywhere. Almost every time I visited the Nanterre Association that fall, Mamadou or someone else would ask me about Obama. What did I think of him? What did I know about him? Was I going to vote for him? Did I think he could win? As an African American from Chicago, I was expected to respond positively and say I was happy he was running for president and hopeful that he would win. The prospect of the first black president often led to discussions about such a prospect in France and what would have to change to make that a reality. If it could happen in the United States, could it happen here in France? Many saw the civil rights movement in the United States as leading to Obama’s election and wondered if France needed its own civil rights movement to produce its version of Obama.

In January 2009, I watched the president’s inauguration on a television at the Nanterre Association. Several of the children could barely focus on their homework—much to Mamadou’s chagrin—because they were so captivated by watching him being sworn in, with his wife, Michelle, by his side. At one point, Mamadou said, somewhat jokingly, “Obama is more my president than Sarkozy!” Clearly, he identified far more with the black American president than with his own. Obama’s story resonates not just because of his African-born father, but also because of his life story and upward mobility: he grew up with a single mother and was elected to the highest post in American government. His extraordinary move up the social ladder was really striking to many interlocutors.

At one point, Hafid, another director at the Nanterre Association, who is thirty-six years old and also of Algerian origin, told me, “While it’d be great to have [a black president] in France, it’s much easier . . . in the United States. . . . There are more possibilities for blacks there.” Though my respondents share with their American counterparts a history of racial oppression and hope to follow their lead and overcome it, like them, they are not necessarily sanguine about the prospect of a minority president in France.

ARE MAGHRÉBIN-ORIGIN INDIVIDUALS BLACK? DIASPORIC CONNECTIONS AND TRANSNATIONAL BLACKNESS

This was a question often posed to me, either literally or rhetorically, when I discussed my research with others.² It is useful, therefore, to consider the meaning of *black* and *blackness* in France and Europe more generally.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (1967), the Martinique-born psychoanalyst who would later support the Algerian Revolution through his involvement in the National Liberation Front, writes about French colonialism's codification of different statuses for whites and nonwhites: colonizing whites are superior; colonized blacks are inferior. Fanon details how his blackness and skin color are more important to others than any other facet of his identity. He is not viewed by whites as a doctor but as a black man who is a doctor. His visible otherness always comes first. Blackness, he writes, is "overdetermined from without." And "France is a racist country, for the myth of the bad nigger is part of the collective unconsciousness" (92). To be seen as black—as a "Negro"—contrasts with being French, or even European. This is an opposition with which the North African second generation is all too familiar.

Moreover, blackness functions as a "social uniform," setting individuals racialized as black apart from others or from mainstream society. The assignment of racialized identity experienced by maghrébin-origin individuals in France connects them to black populations elsewhere. Historian Tyler Stovall (2009) points to the convergence of black lives in the United States and France. Fanon himself makes this connection: "In America, Negroes are segregated. In South America, Negroes are whipped in the streets, and Negro strikers are cut down by machine-guns. In West Africa, the Negro is an animal" (1967, p. 113). Blackness is defined as otherness, outside the norm, an identity forced upon or assigned to individuals rather than chosen. Even if maghrébin-origin individuals do not identify as black, they nonetheless reflect a consciousness situated in and informed by blackness. This is a blackness defined as a vessel of otherness or of not belonging, or having a rightful place, in mainstream society. Blackness has historically been framed as a permanent otherness and inferiority in Western society (Wright 2004).

Children of North African immigrants in France are engaged in a transnational project allowing them to connect to the past and present realities of black populations worldwide, including black Americans. This is an important distinction between identifying *as* black and identifying *with* the black American experience or experiences of other black populations. In her ethnography of second-generation South Asian Americans, Sharma (2010) discusses the diasporic sensibility of these "desis," which reflects a "racialized consciousness that emphasizes commonality formed in the negotiation of difference among people of color" (3–4). Minority and marginalized populations may thus feel a sustained and genuine connection to blackness through, among other commonalities, similar experiences of inequality, without self-identifying as black. In the case of the North African second generation, this connection to blackness is an expression of their position at the bottom of the ethnoracial hierarchy in French society. "Othered," marginalized, and excluded because of their racial and ethnic status, and without

a language or discourse to discuss it, they look elsewhere to make sense of their lives: “With their national belonging perpetually in question, blacks in Europe often seek out diasporic resources that originate in other parts of the black world” (Brown 2009, 13).

Sharma’s (2010) theory of “making race,” and the global race consciousness of her respondents, is also instructive here, for it conceptualizes how individuals reject and incorporate the language of other racial and ethnic groups.³ Children of North African immigrants grow up as racial and ethnic minorities in a society that does not recognize that status. As a result, in effect they “make race” through their experiences of racialization. The consciousness thus gained allows them to connect to black populations and other racial and ethnic minorities.

North African–origin individuals’ self-identification *as* black is less relevant than the assignment of blackness to them as a category, one forcing them to continually justify themselves as legitimate members of society. Fanon writes of this as well: “The European has a fixed concept of the Negro, and there is nothing more exasperating than to be asked: ‘How long have you been in France? You speak French so well’ ” (1967, 35). Blacks in France are not considered *of* France. “French” identity is positioned as nonracial, but they—and members of the North African generation—are considered neither as white nor French. Most respondents understand being a racial and ethnic minority in France through an understanding of, or reckoning with, blackness. This connection is particularly valuable in a context that does not recognize minorities based on race and ethnicity. Such blackness “continues to constitute not just a historical but also a contemporary otherness” (Smith 2006, 423).

The question of what blackness means to the maghrébin second generation is situated in a larger discourse concerning black France, black Europe, and black Paris (Boittin 2012; Boittin and Stovall 2010; Germain 2016; Stovall 1996, 2003, 2006; Thomas 2007). Such a question has emerged in recent decades in conversation with existing notions of the African diaspora. As such, black Europe is based upon colonialism and postwar migrations, whereas for African Americans, the emphasis is on the Middle Passage (Wright 2006).

Yet existing notions of black France or black Europe (Hine et al. 2009) have failed to focus on North African–origin individuals, who though they may not present phenotypically as black or self-identify as black, nonetheless reference blackness in making sense of their social locations.⁴ In view of the transnational connections made by the North African second generation, I argue for using a more expansive definition of blackness, one that encompasses individuals racialized as black or other and subject to oppression or marginalization. As Keaton (2010) puts it, blacks in France constitute a “community-in-formation,” as blackness in France has “transformed common oppression into shared outlook and

shared ways of being” (2010, 116). That is, a politics of identity has developed in spite of Republican ideology because of the marginalization and racism experienced by blacks in France.

In *La condition noire: Essai sur une minorité française*, Pap Ndiaye (2008) conversely argues that there is no strong black community in France, but that a transnational blackness connects sub-Saharan blacks to black populations elsewhere. Rather than an essentialist notion of blackness or who is black, this transnational blackness is a product of social relations and interactions. Shelby’s (2002) conception of “thin” versus “thick” blackness is also useful for considering the transnational connections the North African second generation makes with black populations outside of France. Thin blackness is a “vague and socially imposed category of difference based on certain visible, inherited physical characteristics” (2002, 239), such as having darker skin in the case of the United States. Thick blackness has a narrower social meaning and comprises racialist, ethnic, cultural, and kinship aspects. Shelby argues for a black solidarity that does not privilege black identity, but rather is based upon the shared experience of oppression and the commitment to resist it. I argue that Ndiaye’s transnational blackness and Shelby’s thin blackness also extend to maghrébin-origin individuals who, in the absence of discourse about race and blackness in France, invoke notions of blackness from other societies. Blacks in France must continually assert their Frenchness, as it is often the first thing that is questioned by others. Maghrébin-origin individuals, of course, must do the same.

Though respondents make transnational connections with black Americans and other black populations, they still consider themselves French. Abdelkrim’s identification with Malcolm X is a case in point. But in a nation that excludes him from mainstream society, he nevertheless feels closer to marginalized populations around the globe. The same can be said of the enthusiasm generated by Barack Obama’s narrative among French racial and ethnic minorities in France. Outsiders recognize those who are like them. Children of maghrébin immigrants develop a sense of blackness, or a black consciousness, which reaches beyond national borders.

Nasar, like Abdelkrim, defines himself as French. He found it difficult to understand my identification as an African American, privileging my connection to the African diaspora above my ties to nationality. Karim asserted he was more French than former president Sarkozy, stating that, as a child of Algerian immigrants and a product of French colonial history, he has closer ties to France than the Hungarian-immigrant politician. To see himself as anything but French would be absurd.⁵

Elisa Joy White (2012) describes the African diaspora as the shared experiences of individuals who are racialized as black. Like their black counterparts, my respondents have been marginalized, and their nation-state identities are considered illegitimate. This is not to reify an essentialism regarding black identity.

Instead, I position children of maghrébin immigrants as part of a diasporic project connecting them to other populations positioned on the margins of society. Blackness in this context refers to a vessel of otherness, a container of those not included in the definition of French. By connecting to other racialized populations, they construct a sense of solidarity and community.

Moreover, even though a French identity is supposedly open to all citizens, the experiences of the North African second generation reveal that it is a racialized identity unavailable to many. This has implications for considering the relationship among race, ethnicity, and nation for other black diasporic populations. In *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, Paul Gilroy (1981) argues that “British” and “black” have been historically positioned in opposition to each other and that “Britishness” itself is defined by race and ethnicity, an argument to which the North African second generation can relate. Colonialism in the Maghreb, and the silence with which its brutality is met in present-day French society, unites children of North African immigrants despite distinctions among the former French colonies of Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco and mirrors the centering effect of the transatlantic slave trade or the Black Atlantic for black populations in the diaspora, as articulated by Gilroy.” The shared connections formed by children of maghrébin immigrants are a direct response to their experiences of exclusion from mainstream society. Resisting a distinction between black and British opens up the category of black or blackness and rejects an essentialist formation. Diasporic connections reveal how individuals imagine race and ethnicity beyond the boundaries of their nation-state (Edwards 2003). Diasporic connections are practiced and repracticed as the middle-class North African second generation uses languages and discourses from other contexts to make sense of their own social locations. The way in which respondents interacted with me and made assumptions about my life in the United States was further exemplification of this.

To answer the question of whether maghrébin-origin individuals are black requires broadening the definition of that term to encompass shared experiences of otherness and exclusion from the nation-state. Their connection to black populations is a product of their exclusion from national belonging. As British and black are perceived as in opposition to each other, so, too, are French and black. When kept out of state projects determining who belongs in the nation, they are forced to connect to populations with shared experiences elsewhere (Brown 2009).⁶ In turn, these diasporic and transnational connections help them make sense of their present circumstances.

Differential treatment experienced by respondents because of their North African origins force them to come to grips with the salience of their racial and ethnic status. And they make sense of their marginalization by connecting with others who themselves are subject to it, such as Abdelkrim’s identification with Bruce Lee or with Malcolm X. Ndiaye’s (2008) theory of transnational blackness

in France applies to the North African second generation, which is engaged in a transnational project of its own. Both populations share experiences of stigma and discrimination.

RACE MATTERS, BLACKNESS MATTERS

Children of North African immigrants assert a French identity, but because of the ethnicized and racialized nature of French identity, they are viewed only as North African or *maghrébin*. France does not explicitly recognize distinct racial and ethnic categories, but French identity is a category inaccessible to minorities of color. If, on the face of it, race and ethnicity are not measured or quantified in French society, they nevertheless operate in everyday life, as the ethnoracially marked experiences of respondents reveal. Consciousness of race exists simultaneously with a denial of race and ethnicity. At the bottom of a racial and ethnic hierarchy, children of North African immigrants feel a connection to black populations worldwide. African American culture and identity resonate with these individuals and provide a way to make sense of their own marginalized social locations. But whatever their identification with other racial and ethnic minorities, they see themselves as French.

Clearly, transnational blackness applies not only to blacks in France but to North African–origin minorities there as well. While *maghrébin*–origin individuals are generally excluded from our notions of the African diaspora, they nonetheless make diasporic connections. In a context where Republican ideology does not acknowledge their own racialization, middle-class North African–origin individuals invoke the experiences and vocabulary of other racialized minority populations to identify and frame their own experience. The connections they make reveal the portability of blackness.