

NEGROPHILIA, DIASPORA, AND MOMENTS OF CRISIS

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How can my Muse want subject to invent,
While thou dost breathe, that pour'st into my verse
Thine own sweet argument, too excellent
For every vulgar paper to rehearse?

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 38

Under the title *Le Paradis des Nègres* or *Black Paradise*, photographs of two young women are juxtaposed in typical Surrealist fashion.¹ The first, a young woman from the Congo, is posed naked against a backdrop of the forest's long grass. Although her genitalia are available to us, we sense her shyness in the way her body angles itself away from the camera and how she raises her arm to shield herself from our intrusive gaze. By contrast, the second image shows a confident, stylishly dressed woman seated at a typewriter, surrounded by the trappings of urban life. Its caption, *The Next Year in Harlem*, completes this shocking diptych contrasting primitive existence and civilisation.² The viewer is asked to believe that these women are one and the same, and that the first model has somehow been transformed into the second, via the Atlantic and modernity.

That we can decode these images so easily signals the immutable nature of their provocative vocabulary; the way that a visual lexicon related to the black body and race has become engrained in our psyches; and also the fact that deconstruction has become part of our way of seeing and thinking. What is less easy to unpack is the powerful space conjoining them, which requires a move beyond Surrealist ideas of metamorphosis towards an understanding of the [diaspora](#) itself as a discursive form related to scattering, difference and multiplicity. The painful passage between the bodies of these two women leads us in many directions, all of which are valid markers of [diaspora](#) existence and identity.

It is their relationship to each other that makes our reading of these pictures so potent and disturbing. Combined, they convey the sense of awe and curiosity many Europeans felt when first confronted with the reality of black people who made their way into their cities, mainly after the First World War. In the case of these images that moment was 1929, when stage shows such as the Black Birds were 'all the rage' and when discharged African-American soldiers, rebelling against the prospect of returning to American segregation, opted to stay in Europe and survive by their skills in singing and dancing, and by their wits.³ We can thank the Belgian Surrealists for having the audacity to document this moment and for employing this strategy of juxtaposition that conveys the complexity of black identity and its relationship to modernity during that time.

Published in the topical Belgian magazine *Variétés* that circulated in Paris in 1929,⁴ this image formed part of a more complex photographic layout that allowed coupled photographs to relate to others.⁵ The intention was probably that this image be read dialectically, presenting Surrealist ideas about beauty in a synthesised statement that pitted the African savage state against conventional bourgeois values. Today, our postmodern eyes see much more and our questions are multiple. Why are both women smiling? What is the significance of the books and abstract paintings in the background? Is the nakedness of our dusty-footed model gratuitous, and ought we to place a judgment on the smooth stockinged legs of the other? Is this a critique of the harshness of Belgian colonial rule in the Congo in contrast to that of the French?⁶ Is this transformation positive or an indictment of civilisation and the modern condition? Whether binary or multivalent, past or present, our reading of these women is all the more vexed because we also know that we are being manipulated. We sense the Surrealist game that points our curiosity beyond their frames. The power of their juxtaposition rests not so much in their comparison but in what is left unsaid about the incongruity of blackness and modernity.⁷

In many ways, it is the 'distance' between our Congo and Harlem models that lies at the heart of [Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic](#), since this exhibition uses as its starting point Paul Gilroy's view that diasporic Africans' experience of trans-shipment and relocation was an entirely modern one that transformed them. Forcibly removed from Africa and re-birthed in the Atlantic on the most modern vessels, [diaspora](#) blacks were crucial to capitalist enterprise and plantation economies that relied on their labour to produce sugar, cotton, tobacco and more. The contingency of their New World lives shaped their formation of imagined communities and identities based on transposed cultural forms and a forced consciousness of race and its restrictions. In turn, these identities were fashioned in contact with, and in contrast with, other black [transnational](#) formations according to their colonial contexts and the continued mobilisation and emigration of these peoples. Gilroy tells us that the 'history of the [Black Atlantic](#) yields a course of lessons as to the instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade'.⁸ He further notes that, as a result of this rupture, return is impossible. [Diaspora](#) blacks can no longer trace a straight line to an African past via ritual and tradition. Instead, they must acknowledge and embrace a global citizenship that is syncretic and culturally diverse.

This history of the [Black Atlantic](#) is not about the African [diaspora](#) alone, since it was the European slave trade that set in motion this scattering of African peoples and their subsequent cultural dislocation and hybridisation. The restless migratory patterns of [diaspora](#) blacks since their removal from Africa have left their communities in constant motion, peoples of the sea, forever looping back to points of entanglement rather than to their origins. As 'black Westerners',⁹ their movement into the metropolis of their long-time masters has meant that their host cultures too have absorbed and been absorbed by this process of syncretism. In this sense, Malcolm Bailey's *Hold, Separate but Equal* 1969 is poignant. Fashioned after abolitionist tract illustrations, the diagrammatic bare bones of a slave ship float against a stark glossy polymer azure sea. Deep inside the womb of this vessel, black

and white bodies crouch. Although separated, both groups are equally bent low under the weight of slavery, suggesting that we are all implicated in this history of the [Middle Passage](#) and that, in turn, we must all bear the burden of its consequences.¹⁰

Yet this acknowledgement of a shared history is only recent, and what is ultimately disconcerting about the photograph *Le Paradis des Nègres* is that its authors are undeclared, silent, but complicit in their presentation of a [diaspora](#) identity. The image itself is telling: its fetishisation, ribald nakedness and split-screen shock value reveal how Surrealism's most radical aspirations for Africans influenced the shaping of their double identity. Our models smile as if to remind us that any project that recuperates the ambivalence of contemporary black identity in 1920s' Paris must also take account of the identity crisis of the European avant-garde in the same period.

Referencing a handful of books and articles, including Paul Gilroy's [Black Atlantic](#), my own *Negrophilia*,¹¹ and the Surrealist journal *Documents*,¹² this essay explores how the ambivalent (and multivalent) nature of the black model as muse was deployed by the Parisian vanguard to promote their ideas of the primitive, and how their fascination with African sculpture was transferred to the black body using fetishised and coded imagery that was pejorative but fashionable. Conversely, this text also considers how African-American artists such as Hayden Palmer, in their desire to be viewed as modern, responded to this vogue for blackness, painting in ways that reinforced mischaracterisations and favoured humour. Finally, I track the ways in which the racial signifiers embedded in this *genre noir*, usually ignored by art historians, are currently being undermined by contemporary artists prepared to exploit their own black bodies. By looking at the images of Paris's vanguard artists alongside contemporary artworks such as Sonia Boyce's *From Tarzan to Rambo* 1987, Chris Ofili's *Captain Shit* 1998, or Ellen Gallagher's *DeLuxe* 2004–5, we can consider the high stakes involved in exposing such racialised imagery today.

AMUSEMENT

Why 1920s' Paris should be our starting point as the city where a conjunction of creativity, racial identity, and an infatuation with difference emerged requires an understanding of its bohemian communities, their post-war anxieties and France's historical attitudes towards black people and Africa. Since the French Revolution, *liberté, égalité, fraternité* had helped to support a response to 'others' that stressed assimilation and accommodation (albeit a stifling one) within France's own sense of imperial destiny. French interest in France's colonised subjects, especially Africans, went beyond economic considerations. In addition to mainstream patronage and a colonial mission to 'improve' black people, the avant-garde's admiration and borrowing of black forms, which they called les fetishes, satisfied their need for a sense of the magical and spiritual that had been lost in their increasingly materialistic and mechanised society. The assimilation of black forms into the subculture of Paris was remedial and therapeutic, especially after the First World War decimated the city's youth and left its survivors disillusioned and militant.

The avant-garde's first encounters with Africa and black culture came via their admiration for African sculptures, which, as a result of colonial trade and pillaging, found their way into the hands of collectors and museums at the beginning of the new century. Initially, these objets d'art went under the generic labels *l'art nègre*, indicating a general ignorance about their origins, and *les fetishes*, another term suggesting their magical potency. That the fascination they exerted was a mere flirtation with 'otherness' is reflected in the cover illustration for *La Vie Parisienne* from 25 October 1919. A skimpily dressed flapper stares coyly back at a highly embellished sculpture of a life-size female form. The carving is animated, alert and fecund, while our flapper, despite her best efforts at mimicry, is – as the cover's title suggests – a 'pale imitation' of the object she admires. Her backward glance might even denote the way in which the avant-garde viewed these *objets d'art* as part of an ill-defined primitive past.

This flapper's infatuation has come to be labelled '[negrophilia](#)', from the French *négrophilie*, a term used by avant-garde artists themselves to affirm a passion for things African that was temporary and defiant. Their love of black culture paralleled the innovations and cultural borrowing reflected in modernist art as well as the rebellious postures associated with their 'outsider' status. African objects were considered sources of divine inspiration, and by musing on them modern artists believed they could tap into new dimensions of creativity. Both these sentiments are evident in Picasso's recollection of his first encounter with *l'art nègre* after stumbling across African items in the Trocadéro. He recalled:

Those masks weren't just pieces of sculptures like the rest, not in the least, they were magic things ... those negroes were intercessors, that's a word I've known in French since then. They were against everything, against unknown threatening spirits ... I kept on staring at the fetishes. Then it came to me, I too was against everything ... I too felt everything was unknown, hostile! The All ...¹³

Man Ray's *Noire et Blanche* photographs echo this empathy and embodiment of blackness. The head of Kiki de Montparnasse is placed alongside an inanimate mask in a set of compositions that introduce Man Ray's solarisation techniques. Reversed, the mask appears white and Kiki's face is blackened. The objectification and isolation of both images and the removal of any context allows them to be viewed as equal, to trade each other's differences and enhance their similarities.

Man Ray's choice of a Baule mask also reflected the *vogue nègre* and the growing discernment of artists and collectors as their knowledge of African art increased and the collection of ethnographic objects became more fashionable.¹⁴ The legitimisation of *l'art nègre* came out of a mutual exchange of ideas and activities between ethnographers and artists in the post-war years. An interdisciplinary network of researchers, collectors and connoisseurs involved in the research and promotion of 'primitive' art and cultures developed between Europe and North America, including aestheticians such as Paul Guillaume, Henry Clouzot and André Level in Paris, Carl Einstein and Eckart von Sydow in Germany, Roger Fry in London and Marius de Zayas, Thomas Munro and Albert C. Barnes in New York

and Philadelphia. Academic theories about origin, function and meaning merged with avant-garde Surrealist thinking that aestheticised ethnographic objects and promoted the 'primitive' as central to modern life.

After the war, this interest in *l'art nègre* was reinforced by the popularity of African-American stage revues that introduced contemporary black culture to vanguard Paris. These spectacles featured the new sound of jazz and comic skits overlain with coded conventions related to minstrelsy that had operated in white American and European cities since the nineteenth century, and had been present in Western mythology since its inspirational Greek muses fell from grace, formed a band, and became sources of amusement. Even before black people began performing for white audiences, whites blackened their own faces to provide entertainment in circuses and theatres. The black-faced banjo-playing minstrels allowed whites to laugh at their negative characteristics under the guise of blackness. Black people's mimicry of these acts in vaudeville and European music halls continued their roles as jesters and entertainers. Later, shows such as *La Revue nègre*, including performances by Josephine Baker with her facial contortions and goofing around, allowed whites to laugh at human frailty without having to compromise their own identities.

In many ways, the European avant-garde's adoption of [negrophilia](#) was a form of minstrelsy that allowed them to call each other '*nègriers*', acquire alter egos and act out fantasies that they perceived as African. Their pranks were viewed in pathological terms, referencing malady or mental illness such as *virus noir*, *melanomania*, *l'épidémie*, *négropathie* and *la rage* that suggested a contagion but also allowed those who suffered its sickness to disclaim responsibility and divorce themselves from their normal identities. The caricature of Josephine Baker's biographer Marcel Sauvage wearing the infamous banana skirt that shot her to stardom in her revue perfectly (if crassly) captures his sense of black possession and also confirms the avant-garde's self-identification with [negrophilia](#)'s madness.¹⁵ Baker's more erotically charged and frenzied gyrations led artists to think that they had rediscovered Baudelaire's *Vénus Noire*, an erotic black muse who could open the doorway to their inner souls.

Although it may have suited Parisians to believe that the blacks with whom they 'hung out' were authentic Africans and spiritual intercessors, this was far from the case. African-Americans eager to enter white society accentuated the more entertaining aspects of their culture by exploiting their talents and commodifying primitivist stereotypes to meet the needs of their white audiences. They found that white interest in dances such as the Charleston, the Lindy Hop, the Black Bottom and the Shimmy could earn them a significant income. Their blackness qualified them for modernity, but to participate in it they had to negotiate, straddle, distort and deny their identities and accommodate a European taste for vitality, sexual potency and Africa.

Cultural analyst Brent Hayes Edwards, discussing [negrophilia](#) and its relationship to [diaspora](#) blacks in Paris, questions its appropriateness as a theoretical

construct. Although the city's [negrophilia](#) represented a passion for black culture, its preoccupations were still those of the white avant-garde that skewed the experience of blackness. Hayes Edwards uses the term *crise nègre*, also employed by ethnographer Michel Leiris as a negative commentary on Paris's infatuation with African culture,¹⁶ to show that the real crisis was that experienced by blacks as a result of their cultural dislocation and their inability to communicate their own sense of being modern to their white vanguard colleagues.¹⁷ African-Americans saw their use of African idioms as a compliment to their [New Negro](#) ideals and modernity. Contemporary cultural expressions such as jazz were meant to counter racist stereotypes and position the culture of [diaspora](#) Africans as contemporary. But the white avant-garde's preoccupation with [primitivism](#) and atavistic transgression closed down this sense of modernity in favour of a black identity that was misunderstood and misrepresented. Hayes Edwards redefines *crise nègre* as 'a crisis of representation: the modernity of black performance [is] an expression [that] clashes with the mirage of a silent, distant "ethnic" primitive'. For Hayes Edwards, the ultimate crisis for African-Americans was the difficulty of articulating their very existence as part of a modern experience.

Understandably, the [diaspora](#) blacks who made a second crossing of the Atlantic to Europe viewed themselves as pioneers and as modern. Their arrival in Paris was a continuation of their journey towards self-improvement and racial equality initiated by their urban migrations to cities such as Chicago, Washington and New York a century before. After the war, Paris became the European hub for blacks from all over the [diaspora](#), including Africa, the Antilles and America, where they discovered their commonality with each other in ways that had not been possible in the United States. Guided by thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, this intelligentsia used the city as a base for the promotion of a [pan-African](#) unity and the establishment of political movements: the Pan-African Congress was first convened in Paris in 1919. Additionally, in the arts, the transatlantic crossings of artists such as Palmer Hayden, Augusta Savage, Henry O. Tanner and Lois Mailou Jones, writers Countee Cullen and Joel Rogers, and intellectuals such as Alain Locke laid a network for cultural exchange between Europe's avant-garde and the vanguard of New York's [Harlem Renaissance](#). In Paris's poorer quarters such as Montmartre, [diaspora](#) blacks also mingled easily with other immigrants, developing their own sense of being part of a wider [diaspora](#) that was creative and cosmopolitan.

Images of this immigrant community painted by black artists at the time are few. So it is not surprising that much has been written about Palmer Hayden's *We Four in Paris (Nous Quatre à Paris)* c.1930, which captures the artist and friends relaxing over a game of cards in a Montmartre café. More crucially, that discussion has been contentious because of the style of the painting. Although the card players face each other around the table, their heads are angled sharply outwards, emphasising their exaggeratedly negroid physiognomies: big lips, flared nostrils and minstrelised features. For this rare and intimate insight into immigrant life to be depicted by Hayden in a stylised and pejorative vernacular that mimics the

primitivist vogue is troubling. Is this parody, or a crisis of self-representation peculiar to this moment?

Iris Schmeisser generously views Hayden's work as 'strikingly and self-consciously ironical', although she believes that it was not actually created in 1930 but painted from memory in the artist's later illustrative style.¹⁸ But comparison of this work with another, *Bal Jeuneuse*, from around 1927, might suggest otherwise. *Bal Jeuneuse* again features blacks in a Montmartre haunt, but this time they are creoles performing the *biguine*, a courtly dance favoured by the more 'colonial' Caribbeans. Hayden depicts these Antillians and their setting with greater sensitivity and little use of caricature. Considered alongside *Nous Quatre à Paris*, and even *Variétés's Le Paradis des Nègres*, it is possible to frame another equally surreal juxtaposition that speaks of the temporal and cultural differences between the two distinct [diaspora](#) communities. Is it possible that Hayden's detailing of this club, with its old-world chandelier and swirling backdrop, is a reflection on the Antillians' colonial charm and gentility, as opposed to his jazzy comic-book-like illustration of African-Americans that negatively reflects an aberrant modernity? This disparity in Hayden's work could be read positively as an indication of the cultural diversity he encountered within the [diaspora](#), or more negatively as a commentary on the distortions he saw reflected in his fellow African-Americans.

Although contemporaries of Hayden, such as Harlem intellectual Alain Locke, were wary of this type of racial essentialising as part of black thinking about cultural reconstruction, their French hosts' passion for *l'art nègre* made such distortions inevitable. As we have seen, the black vanguard relied on European ethnographic sources for their understanding of African arts, and were indebted to vogue noire for their sense of modernity. As a result, their black [diaspora](#) identities hinged on a [negrophilia](#) that misrepresented both Africa and contemporary blackness. This is the crisis embedded in depictions of black people during this time that makes images such as *Nous Quatre à Paris* or *Le Paradis des Nègres* and other Surrealist photography so troubling, and that makes a return to Surrealism in 1929, and an understanding of the rivalry and dissident discourse behind its imagery, so critical.

VULGAR PAPER

Le Paradis des Nègres appeared in the March 1929 issue of *Variétés*, a periodical that was not strictly a Surrealist magazine but a current affairs monthly that featured Surrealism among its other topical interests. That summer, *Variétés* published a special issue devoted to Surrealism titled *Surrealisme 1929*, edited by André Breton and featuring significant artists and writers including Freud, Eluard, Péret, Sadoul, Aragon and Mesens. Tellingly, despite its avowed intention of presenting Surrealism in all its manifestations, this special publication did not list among its contributors the fringe group of Surrealists led by Georges Bataille, who launched their own publication, called *Documents*, in the same year. Bataille's part-Surrealist, part-ethnographic preoccupations would be more fully expressed in this dissident magazine, which pushed even further the subversive quality of visual essays such as *Le Paradis des Nègres*. *Documents* remastered the Surrealist art of disquiet by

combining even more disparate and decontextualised images in photographic compositions that bled at their edges and silently ruptured their frames.

Art historians Fiona Bradley and Dawn Ades, offering a comparative summary of Surrealist publications from 1929, clearly nominate *Documents* as the most provocative, specialising in visual manipulation and strategies of subversion. They argue that 'whereas *Variétés* made a game, very simply decoded, of comparing or contrasting pairs of images ... *Documents*' use of "resemblance" drew visual and thematic parallels, hilarious and shocking, that undermined categories and the search for meaning'. They also recognise the rivalry between *Documents* and other Surrealist publications, and Bataille's method of critiquing other magazines by rehashing their pages and re-presenting imagery in even more outrageous ways: 'Not infrequently, *Documents* picked the same topic as one just discussed in another magazine but wholly subverted the spirit of the original article'.¹⁹

So perhaps it is no accident that the fourth issue of *Documents*, published in September 1929, added the subject of '*variétés*' to its own content and introduced the young but budding ethnographer Michel Leiris in the role of cultural analyst, commenting on current events, jazz, music-hall stars, cinema and photography, alongside art, archaeology and ethnographic issues.²⁰ This new feature, combined with André Schaeffer's music column *Phonographie*, and Bataille's 'key words', *Chronique: Dictionnaire*, revealed *Documents*' developing interest in black culture and in the current popular revue *Black Birds*, whose subject matter was thematically interwoven into many areas of the journal.

This preoccupation also reflected the fact that all three men had become frequent visitors to nightclubs such as Le Grand Duc, Bricktops and other black haunts in Montmartre, where they could interact with actual black people and listen to live jazz. Leiris, describing his feelings after viewing the *Black Birds* show, wistfully summarised such encounters as his *moments de crise* – sudden revelatory experiences that collapsed the real and surreal worlds, 'when the outside seems abruptly to respond to a call from within, when the exterior world opens itself and a sudden communication forms between it and our heart'.²¹

In contrast, Bataille's evaluation of black culture was less romanticised. Unlike other Surrealists, Bataille did not primitivise African-Americans. Instead, he recognised their cultural expression as modern and he theorised about it in uncompromising, realistic and critical terms. Rather than valorising the [diaspora](#) experience, he considered African-Americans equally afflicted by the scourge of white civilisation. He described their contemporary culture with its jazz, spirituals and other forms of expression as an aberrant and necessary detritus resulting from their arrested development and their [diaspora](#) existence within civilisation's wasteland. Refusing idealism, Bataille challenged most notions of Surrealism and was a controversial advocate of black culture.

Subjecting black people to his concept of formlessness (*l'informe*), Bataille juxtaposed images and ideas in pairs, guided by resemblance and an absence of

predictability or bourgeois sensibility. In this way, photographs of Bessie Love's dance troupe could be posed alongside a regimented group of African teenaged soldiers, or a young girl in Harlem could resemble a pygmy. But unlike the other Surrealists, Bataille did not contrast images for the sake of arriving at a synthesis. Instead, he worked with and between images – within the non-tangible spaces related to their meanings – to create new forms of articulation. *Le Paradis des Nègres* and *Documents*' photographic compositions related to blackness echoed the same style. Bataille understood that the relationship between the African and the African-American existence resembled an aching gap that is painful but also productive – a creative energy that emanates from both their difference and their misunderstanding. In spite of its visual crudeness, Bataille's imagery opened up a whole other way to reference the [diaspora](#)'s black body, a way that inheres not so much in its form but in its signifiers. A closer reading of Bataille's juxtapositions can deepen our understanding of racial discourse and these hidden meanings.²²

THINE OWN SWEET ARGUMENT

Beyond art history, the task of examining these constructs has been taken up by contemporary [diaspora](#) artists prepared to explore the fictions and frictions around the black body to understand what and how they signify. They have embraced the stereotypes of blackness in their own work in order to dismantle them from the inside out, using what Stuart Hall has theorised as a 'turn' – a strategy that calls for a risky journey into the morass of their origins.²³ He describes how these artists are using the black body as a moving signifier 'on which to conduct an exploration into the inner landscapes of black subjectivity', and understanding the body 'as a point of convergence for the materialization of intersecting planes of difference – the gendered body, the sexual body, the body as subject, rather than simply the object of looking and desire'.

This strategy obviously has its ironies, notably the fact that the black [diaspora](#)'s postmodern artists are challenging representations of blackness using dissident Surrealism's strategies of inversion and subversion. They deploy methods similar to those of Bataille to shock contemporary sensibilities towards new moments of crisis and recognition. Think, for instance, about the big lips, bulging eyes and golliwogs in Sonia Boyce's *Tarzan to Rambo* 1987, or consider the intersection of beautiful black bodies with flora and masks in the poignant work of Rotimi-Fani Kayode.²⁴ Sometimes these interventions speak to a particular 'moment' that can be healed by their re-presentation, as in Ellen Gallagher's squiggly curls and wigs for *DeLuxe* 2004–5. Sometimes the wounds of misrepresentation are still too raw, so that they register laughter as a sign of avoidance, embarrassment, disgust or self-hate, as with the elephant dung and use of parody in Chris Ofili's *Captain Shit* 1997.

In so many different ways, these [diaspora](#) artists make the very precarious return journey into the belly of the floating beast, crouching low to disembowel its fetid fictions and tease out new meanings for their work. Sometimes, like the characters in a minstrel show, they are predictable and pathetic in the way they

unwittingly repeat the same abject history and racial discourse. But often that recovery is complete, so that we cannot think of one stereotype without its subversive other. Remember Aunt Jemima's tight grip on a tiny hand-grenade in Betty Saar's *Imitation of Life* 1973, or Renée Cox's Jesus standing brazenly bare-breasted in her *Yo Mama's Last Supper* 1996? Both prove it is possible to be liberated from the womb of the [Middle Passage](#), slavery and the white shadows of worn Western parody.

The multiplicity of forms taken by these contemporary artworks and their numerous meanings show the ways in which artists of the African [diaspora](#) are filling the painful gaps once inhabited by muses, minstrels and maniacs with their own narratives and bodies of meaning. No longer the static and fixed objects of avant-garde scrutiny and desire, they are swimming in the margins, moving, morphing, re-creating and changing, changing, changing. . .

¹ See *Variétés*, 11, 15 March 1929, between pp. 612 and 613. The translation *Black Paradise* is mine; the literal translation is 'Paradise of the Blacks', which has an even more pejorative tone.

² I owe a debt of gratitude to Tate curator Matthew Gale, who first brought this image to my attention about twenty years ago. He has since suggested that this image may have led to the refusal of *Variétés'* distributors to handle the issue, which was later made available directly from its Brussels office: 'Presumably it was the frank pose more than her nudity that caused the difficulty, as other Congolese photos showing scarification appeared in earlier issues. Interesting that there was no direct defence, but, instead, an offer to distribute the issue directly' (letter to author, 5 October 2009).

³ Lew Leslie's *Black Birds*, with female star Florence Mills, first performed in Paris in 1927. They returned in 1929 with a new star, Adelaide Hall, and a show based on Du Bois Heyward's *Porgy* (New York, 1925), which proved a big success.

⁴ Although the Brussels-based *Variétés* was not a Surrealist review, it had strong ties with Surrealism and accepted contributions from the movement's Belgian and French artists. Profusely illustrated, *Variétés* featured artworks by Dufy, Picasso, Arp and Magritte, and photographs by Man Ray and Atget. The Belgian E.L.T. Mesens acted as a link between the two groups; he selected articles and did the layouts for illustrations.

⁵ The sequence was titled *Beautés* and included the following pairings: a modern beauty salon next to women in a palm court, titled *A quoi rêvent les dactylos?*; actress Sophie Tucker and a typist in an image titled *Chant de la Remington*, above *Le Paradis des Nègres*; and finally *Les mélisandes*, *Coiffure japonaise* and *La permanente*, an Eli Lothar photograph of heat curlers approaching a woman's head (as described by Matthew Gale; letter to the author, 5 October 2009)

⁶ The atrocities that resulted from Belgian rule in the Congo Free State under the rule of King Leopold were well known by this time. The Surrealists' stance against colonialism and especially the atrocities in Annam, the Lebanon, Morocco and Central Africa would be formally set out in their tract *Ne Visitez Pas L'Exposition Coloniale*, Paris, 1931.

⁷ With these concerns related to Paris in 1929, I follow scholars such as David Scott and Stuart Hall in supporting the notion of a 'problem space' where a complex conjunction of questions creates a significant and instructive moment that informs, and is also informed by, the present. See interview between Stuart Hall and David Scott, published in *Bomb*, 90, winter 2004/5; and David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*, Durham, nc, and London, Duke University Press, 2004.

⁸ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and [Double Consciousness](#)*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993, p. xi.

⁹ A term first employed by James Baldwin.

¹⁰ I thank my colleague and fellow teacher Cheryl Finley for this reading of how the slave ship has been used as an icon in contemporary black diaspora art. Without her scholarly work on

mnemonic aesthetics my understanding would be severely limited. See Cheryl Finley *Committed to Memory: the Slave Ship Icon in the Black Atlantic Imagination*, Princeton University Press (forthcoming 2010).

¹¹ Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture*, London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000.

¹² Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris and Carl Einstein (eds.), *Documents*, Paris, 1929–31.

¹³ This statement of ‘discovery’ is questionable because it was made to André Malraux some time after the event; originally published in French in Malraux, *La Tête d’obsidienne*, Paris, 1936, p. 17, and later translated into English in Malraux, *Picasso’s Masks*, trans. J. Guicharnaud, Paris, 1974, pp. 1–11.

¹⁴ The new sense of an African aesthetic that many artists and collectors brought to these objects was reflected in the growing level of discernment in their selection of items for display, and the use of ethnographic details to reflect their knowledge and connoisseurship, when possible.

¹⁵ ‘Marcel Sauvage’, in Marcel Sauvage, *Voyages et aventures de Josephine Baker*, Paris, M. Seheur, 1932. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris.

¹⁶ Michel Leiris, *Afrique Noire: La création plastique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967.

¹⁷ Brent Hayes Edwards, ‘The Ethnics of Surrealism’, *Transition*, 78, 1999, p. 85.

¹⁸ Iris Schmeisser, *Transatlantic Crossings between Paris and New York*, Heidelberg, Universitäts-verlag Heidelberg, American Studies Monograph Series, vol. 133, 2006, p. 149.

¹⁹ Dawn Ades and Fiona Bradley, ‘A Playful Surrealism’, *Guardian*, 6 May 2006, ‘Features and Reviews’ section, p. 14.

²⁰ The relationship between Bataille and Leiris pre-dated the former’s association with the Surrealists. They met in 1924, the same year that Leiris met Bréton and joined the Surrealists. But Bataille always remained on the periphery of that group and at odds with Bréton. Together, Bataille and Leiris attended the lectures of ethnologist Marcel Mauss, and later assisted in the reorganisation of the Trocadéro under the supervision of the ethnographers Georges-Henri Rivière and Paul Rivet.

²¹ In his article ‘Civilisation’ reflecting on the *Black Birds* and *Porgy*; *Documents*, 4, 1929.

²² Despite *Documents*’ recent popularity as the focus of exhibitions and critical discourse, art historians and curators have avoided tackling Bataille’s peculiar heterology that allowed him to equate blackness with the aberrant and subversive. These issues of race related to this moment in art history remain relatively silent, rarely tackled or deconstructed. Although Bataille’s use of the black image has been labelled ‘hilarious’ or ‘shocking’ (as by Ades and Bradley in ‘A Playful Surrealism’), in general the subject has been avoided, perhaps for fear of discovering or confronting his perversity and racism. This avoidance of [ethnography](#) and [primitivism](#) as they relate to dissident Surrealism has previously been noted by Brent Hayes Edwards in his evaluation of Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss’s *Formless: A User’s Guide*, New York, Zone Books, 1997. Reviewing this text, Edwards states that it ‘reinstates by omission that old treacherous distinction between “high” and “primitive” art – and worse, it defers to some of those “neat boundaries” between form and content’; ‘The Ethnics of Surrealism’, p. 108. More specifically, Simon Baker’s discussion of *Documents* and *Variétés*, in which he mentions but does not elaborate on the glaringly problematic imagery of *Le Paradis de Nègres*, underscores this type of omission. See *Undercover Surrealism*, exh. cat., Hayward Gallery, London, 2006, p. 67. My own earlier reading of Bataille in relationship to [negrophilia](#) (see *Negrophilia*, pp. 142–57) has been critical but insufficiently perceptive in teasing out his relationship to the black image. It is hoped that this essay goes some way to re-examining Bataille’s agenda, especially in light of current discourse related to the black diaspora body and contemporary art.

²³ Stuart Hall, ‘Black Diaspora Artists in Britain: Three “Moments” in Post-war History’, *History Workshop Journal*, 61.1, 2006, p. 20; ‘Negotiating Caribbean Identities’, *New Left Review*, 1/209, January–February 1995, p. 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.