Photography, Race and Invisibility: The Liberation of Paris, in Black and White

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Abstract

Although colonial troops formed the majority of Charles de Gaulle’s Free French Army, the photographs of the liberation of Paris in 1944 feature mostly white-looking soldiers. This was no coincidence: France’s allies insisted that Paris should be liberated by white troops only. The absence of blackness is particularly significant because the liberation has been an iconic object of national collective memory since 1945. So far, the response to this erasure has consisted in unearthing alternative images demonstrating the contribution of black soldiers. Despite its obvious rhetorical value, this approach leaves intact the alignment between photographic indexicality and race that presided over the exclusion of blackness. This article, by contrast, builds on recent reflections concerning photography and the ethics of spectatorship to question the forms of invisibility that are produced not just by leaving things out of the frame, but by race itself. By exploring the formal and aesthetic constructs that sustain the visuality of race, I explore the symbolic work performed by both blackness and whiteness in these photographs. Ultimately, I propose a form of criticism that is both interpretative and performative, in order to reveal not only the role of photographic representations in naturalizing race, but also the way race shapes photographic representations.
A black and white shot of a woman kissing a soldier. The woman is seen from the back, at a three-quarter angle. The soldier sits on a tank, above her. Her left hand brings his face towards hers, while her right hand clutches a pair of sunglasses. Her clothes, a light-coloured puff-sleeved blouse and a pleated check skirt, look typical of the period: Paris, August 1944. His uniform is hard to identify, but another photograph taken by the same photographer on the same day, in front of the same background of leafy shadows, reveals that the tank belongs to the 2nd Armoured Division of the Free French Army. If you have never seen this picture before, you have probably seen another one just like it: the liberation of Paris in 1944 was among the most photographed events of the twentieth century (see Figure 2).
Despite their apparent spontaneity, the many photographs showing Parisian crowds enthusiastically welcoming the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Armoured Division in 1944 were the result of tense negotiation. As is well-known, it took all de Gaulle’s obstinacy to convince his British and American allies that the French should be the first to enter Paris: he meant to show that despite the allies’ intervention, the French had liberated themselves. Until recently, however, few knew that those negotiations had a racial component. While historians estimate that the majority of de Gaulle’s resistance army was
composed of colonial troops, the allies insisted that those who marched into Paris should be white.¹ The most explicit statement of this policy may be found in a letter written by US General Bedell Smith in January 1944: “It is most desirable that the division [...] consist of white personnel and this would indicate the 2nd Armoured Division which, with only one fourth native personnel, is the only French division operationally available that could be made 100 percent white.”² In a recent book on the history of colonial troops, Ruth Ginio suggests that the order suited de Gaulle’s own policy: “From the colonial perspective, having African subjects as part of the heroic forces of liberation to which the civilian metropolitan population owed its gratitude was mostly disadvantageous. This was the main motive behind de Gaulle’s order to “whiten” the liberating forces entering Paris in August 1944.”³ This article revisits the meaning of the photographs of the liberation of Paris in relation to the erasure of blackness.

Photography played a major role in constructing the liberation as a symbol of France’s restored freedom and national unity after the German occupation. Since 1945, these images have been intensely circulated, becoming a key site of collective memory.⁴ The discovery that the liberation of Paris was constructed as a “white” event has therefore provoked comment in academic circles and the press. These interventions have framed the absence of black soldiers as a gap in the visual archive, to be remedied by restoring the visibility of their participation, that is to say by finding and publishing alternative photographic evidence featuring black soldiers. In 2014, for example, the national left-wing newspaper Libération published an article entitled “Liberation of Paris: Why There Are (Virtually) No Blacks on the Photos”. The article features a photograph of a young man wearing a uniform, leaning against a self-propelled gun in a relaxed, confident pose (Figure 3).⁵ The young man is identified as Claude Mademba Sy, who was born of a Senegalese father in Versailles and, according to the historian Christine Levisse-Touzé, was the only black soldier
allowed to stay with the 2nd Armoured Division. While recognizing the rhetorical and political value of this approach, I argue that by placing the burden of proving the contribution of black soldiers onto the photographs, they fail to acknowledge the relationality of race and our ethical responsibility as viewers.

Figure 3. Anonymous. Claude Mademba Sy next to the self-propelled gun Pantagruel. Germany, 1945. Silver print 12,5 cm x17,5 cm. © Musée du général Leclerc de Hauteclouque et de la Libération de Paris - Musée Jean Moulin, Paris Musées.
Rather than just contest the invisibility of blackness, this article revisits the alignment between race and photographic realism that shapes both the visibility and the invisibility of identities. Although the subject at hand is clearly historical, my argument is grounded in the aesthetic, relying on a form of criticism that is both interpretative and performative. Rather than add more photographic evidence of black soldiers’ involvement in the liberation, this article seeks to question the racialized system of cognition surrounding the production and reception of the images, and the symbolic work performed by both blackness and whiteness. Building on recent critical interventions concerning the political and ethical dimensions of spectatorship, I shall probe not only the role of photography in representing and naturalizing race, but also, more fundamentally, the role of race in shaping and structuring photographic representations.

The Limits of Visibility

The exclusion of blackness from the photographs of the liberation resonates strongly with contemporary French debates on race and visibility. The current response to the photographs reflects the main strategy promoted by antiracist activists and academics: increasing the positive visibility of “visible minorities” [minorités visibles] in the public sphere, against the (still prevalent) doctrine of universalist colour-blindness. Although this approach has fostered productive debate, this article seeks to question the unexamined equivalence between visibility and political recognition that sustains it. Through my examination of the liberation of Paris, I argue that the current emphasis on visibility has not been accompanied by a sufficient reflection on the ‘visuality’ of race: the cultural practices and ideological structures that underpin its visibility.
Let’s consider a recent effort to restore the visibility of black soldiers: the catalogue of the 2014 exhibition at the Musée Carnavalet “Paris Libéré”, which was itself a reappraisal of the museum’s first exhibition of photographs of the liberation in 1944. The catalogue includes a double page, with the title “Black soldiers” (Figure 4). Running over three quarters of the page, a black and white photograph represents a crowd of men, photographed from a high angle. In the middle section of the image, German officers are walking with their hands above their heads. They are surrounded by men in civilian clothes, wearing arm bands from the Forces Françaises de l’Intérieur (FFI), and by a few soldiers in uniform. The photograph documents the surrender of the German Kommandantur on 25 August 1944. According to the caption next to it, it also features “one of the few black soldiers to have got around the American demands for a ‘white’ liberation army.” The caption, however, does not situate the “black soldier” in the photograph. Instead, it implicitly invites us to scan the image in order to locate and recognize racial blackness, the visibility of which is assumed to be self-evident.
Figure 4. Presse Libération FFI. The Surrender of the Kommandantur: German prisoners escorted by resistance fighters and soldiers of the Second Armoured Division, Avenue de l’Opéra, 9th arrondissement. 25 August 1944. 29.7 x 39.4 cm © Agence Presse Libération FFI.

If viewers take up the invitation to identify blackness, they may notice, in the middle-ground of the photograph, a soldier with binoculars, whose skin is darker than that of the other men. In my experience of discussing this image with various academic and non-academic audiences, however, the equivalence between the dark skin of the soldier and his putative racial identity has often been disputed. Some viewers have suggested that the soldier may be tanned or covered in grime as a result of military action. On occasion, the discussion has even led to uneasy speculations about the shape of the soldier’s facial features. I have no interest in solving these ambiguities. Rather, I see these discussions as revealing complex and uncertain cognitive operations. Indeed, although it
seeks to challenge the racist ways of looking that shaped the photographic record, the caption reconfirms them in two different ways: first, it prompts the viewer to engage in objectifying acts of racialized interpretation. Second, it obscures its own interpretative intervention by constructing the photograph as a piece of evidence, presenting race as an unproblematic visual fact. By claiming to simply name the referent of the photograph, the caption mobilizes the same evidentiary structure that led to the exclusion of historical actors because they were considered black. It constructs a continuity between the indexicality of the body as a marker of identity and the indexicality of photography as a trace of the real, while leaving the perceiving subject out of the discussion.¹¹

Here, the curators probe the limits of the photographic evidence but their reflection only deals with what has been left out of the frame. It does not address the cultural, cognitive and conceptual frames of interpretation that shape our perception of the content of the images and produce their own kinds of invisibility. Yet, as Shawn Michelle Smith suggests in her exploration of the role of the invisible in photography, photographic content is shaped and limited by cultural dynamics that blur the boundary between seeing and not seeing.¹² In this case, the caption paradoxically reinforces the asymmetrical racial visuality at work in the images: while inviting us to track down the one black body the photograph supposedly contains, it leaves the whiteness of all the other protagonists unmentioned, and indeed invisible as a racial sign. The absence of blackness is rightly presented as the result of racist political intentions. Assuming the visibility of blackness without addressing the symbolic work performed by whiteness, however, they inadvertently reinforce the normativity of the latter.¹³

If exposing the exclusion of black soldiers is highly necessary, it is thus equally crucial to deconstruct the photographic visibility of whiteness. Bedell Smith’s description of the 2nd
Armoured Division as “100% white” should not blind us to the actual diversity of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Armoured Division, which included many European nationalities and a number of North African soldiers. This fact was highlighted in other parts of the 2014 Carnavalet exhibition, for example through the inclusion of a little-known image of Tunisian soldiers walking across the Place Maubert, with what appears to be a French flag floating in the top left corner of the image (Figure 7).\textsuperscript{14} In this image, the soldiers can easily be identified through their uniforms. However, one should not forget that a number of Algerian, Moroccan or Tunisian soldiers may have less recognisable uniforms, and indeed lighter skin than some French people, thus making it difficult to identify them photographically. Yet although North-African soldiers could be considered “white” in the US segregationist terminology that informed Bedell Smith, these categories do not match France’s own history of racial discrimination. The perceived ethnicity of North African subjects, which is often treated as an index of their supposed Muslim identity, has been central to France’s colonial visual culture, and remains omnipresent in recent attempts to define Frenchness as an essentially “white” identity.\textsuperscript{15} The failure to see beyond the whiteness on display in the images would thus end up producing a new form of racialized erasure.
Likewise, if considering whiteness as that which is unmarked and invisible may reinforce existing hierarchies, the promotion of racialized forms of visibility creates its own blind spots. The *Libération* article I discussed above alludes to a series of photographs featuring the Gabonese resistance fighter Georges Dukson (Figure 5) as further evidence for the role of black troops. These images are perhaps all the more striking since Dukson is present in one of the most iconic scenes of the liberation: de Gaulle’s walk down the Champs Elysées on 26 August 1944. While de Gaulle stands at the centre of the image, in the foreground, Dukson appears at the edge of the photograph,
on the right. Drawing on the work of Eric Lafon, a curator at the Musée d’histoire vivante, the article suggests that Dukson was trying to get too close to de Gaulle and was pushed away by members of the General’s entourage. Based on this interpretation, it could be tempting to turn these photographs into a symbol of the broader process of black erasure, and into a unique opportunity to counter it. Matthew Cobb, however, has shown that Dukson was probably ensuring the security of the cortege and was merely being escorted back to his position. Furthermore, the celebration of Dukson’s photographic visibility fails to consider the connections between visibility and invisibility in what we know of him. Indeed, Dukson’s hypervisibility as a racialized subject is inextricable from his relative invisibility as an individual and a person: little is known about him, and what we know is marred by racial stereotypes.
Figure 5. De Gaulle walking down the Champs Elysées on 26 August 1944.

Source: Fondation de la résistance, accessed 1 November 2017,

In addition to the surviving visual records, the main source on Dukson is a brief chapter from a 1945 memoir by René Dunan.¹⁸ Dunan’s first description already reveals how, despite his fondness for Dukson, his perception is marked by the trope of racial blackness:

Dukson was a negro, a real one. His skin was so black that light reflected off it. It was so smooth that sometimes, you could have seen your own reflection in it. When he appeared
in front of me in the foggy glimmer of the little bar on Chéroy street, the only part of him I could see was the white of his eyes.

[Dukson était un nègre, un vrai. Sa peau était si noire que la lumière s’y reflétait. On aurait pu, parfois, tellement elle était lisse, s’y mirer. Quand il m’apparut dans le halo brumeux du petit bar de la rue de Chéroy, je ne vis tout d’abord de lui que le blanc des yeux.]

Here, Dunan’s description of Dukson turns the cultural and linguistic trope associating African bodies with the term “black” into a literal, physical perception – a merging of the figural and the literal that establishes Dukson as a “real negro”. Dukson’s body is endowed with all the physical properties of the colour black, and subsumed into an imaginary perception of blackness as a shiny, opaque and reflective surface. Indeed, Dunan’s use of the past conditional “on aurait pu” [you could have], combined with the qualifier “parfois” [sometimes], underlines that he is not describing an actual experience but a potentiality, a fantasized vision of race. Like his alleged inability to see anything of Dukson’s body other than the white of his eyes, it is an extension of the catachresis that consists in calling African people “black”, and a prime example of the formal constructs and figures of speech that produce both the visibility of race and the invisibility of the racialized individual.

The elision of Dukson’s presence is then repeated throughout Dunan’s account. According to Dunan, Dukson was born in Gabon, the son of a colonial school-teacher, who instilled in him a devotion to France. Dukson volunteered into the army in 1939 and was taken prisoner in 1940, but mysteriously escaped in 1943 to join the Parisian resistance, where he earned fame and admiration during the liberation. Dunan suggests, however, that Dukson was incapable of moving on, developing an insatiable need for women and hero-worship. The narrative ends with Dukson’s
descent into criminality, his arrest by the FFI, and his death following an attempted escape. Although official certificates confirm the date and location of Dukson’s death, it is difficult to establish how much of Dunan’s account is credible: his recollections follow a familiar arc of moral decline, shaped by racialized assumptions.21 He writes, for example, that Dukson’s final demise results from his falling “victim, like all negroes, of an entourage whose intentions he cannot understand” [victime comme tous les nègres d’un entourage dont il ne sait discerner les intentions], and explains his behaviour by “that inferiority complex that has always agitated and will always agitate the men of colour who live among the whites” [“ce complexe d’infériorité qui agite depuis toujours et qui agitera toujours les hommes de couleur vivant parmi les blancs”].22 In both cases, the fetishization of blackness obscures the intelligibility of Dukson’s motivations and feelings. Interestingly, Dunan reports that Dukson sold signed photographs of himself for one hundred francs, whereas de Gaulle’s portrait fetched only fifteen.23 Far from being censored or repressed, Dukson’s blackness was, according to this anecdote, commodified as an object of curiosity and consumed through photography. But in this case, it is the exorbitant value of blackness, and not its invisibility, that marginalizes Dukson from the national visual economy, for which de Gaulle provides the ultimate standard.

Rather than merely enhancing the visibility of blackness, responding to the photographs of the liberation requires us to interrogate what has been rendered invisible by our own ways of (not) seeing. In particular, we need to consider how whiteness intersects with two other forms of identity in the corpus – nationalism and gender – to create political and ethical meanings. Indeed, if colonial soldiers are invisible in the photographs, women, by contrast, are ubiquitous.24 As illustrated by the photographs with which this article began (Figures 1 and 2), the images of the liberation are replete with women jumping on tanks, cheering soldiers or throwing themselves at their liberators.
This celebratory gendering finds its disturbing counterpart in the infamous photographs representing “shorn women” [femmes tondues], who had been accused of collaborating with the occupiers. Soon after the liberation, these photographs were produced throughout France. Historians have shown that, against a widespread belief, most of these women were not actually accused of having sexual relations with Germans. Nevertheless, the mise en scène of their humiliation and punishment was clearly sexualized. In addition to shaving the women’s heads, the perpetrators would force their victims to walk naked or partially undressed on the street, inscribe the swastika on their face or body, smear mud over their breasts and genitals. In some cases, women were sexually abused or even killed. Many of these “shearings” were photographed and documented by the perpetrators themselves, suggesting that the production of images was an integral part of the violence and humiliation. As Alison Moore and Fabrice Virgili have argued, collaboration was thus both feminized and sexualized, and the national purification symbolized by the shearing was accompanied by a brutal reinforcement of masculinist norms.
The shorn women were soon considered a regrettable aspect of the liberation, and their photographs have usually been absent from official commemorations. Thus, in the vast corpus of materials in which photographs of the liberation have been circulated, the two sets of gendered images – the cheerful mobilization of the female body as a reward for soldiers and its brutal humiliation in the nationalistic ritual of the shearings – have rarely been brought together. Yet they rely on the same trope: women as metaphors of the national community. Indeed, these images follow closely the
classic rhetoric of nationalism, in which women typically feature as “the symbolic bearers of the nation.” In the photographic thematization of the “heroes’ welcome”, women appear both as symbolic signifiers of national identity, embodying France’s gratefulness, and as biological reproducers of the national community – the affective and sexual dimension of the images promising regeneration. Likewise, the shearing photographs illustrate how women’s bodies were used to symbolize France’s complicity with the Nazis, as well as the purging of collaboration.

The gendered imagery of the liberation intersects with racialized codes in important ways. If women are metaphors of the nation, men, as Elleke Boehmer points out, function as its metonyms, operating in a relationship of contiguity with one another and with the nation as a whole. In the photographs of the liberation, this metonymic relation was framed by race. The ethical system of “rewards,” “retaliations” and “punishments” constructed through the transformation of female bodies into metaphors of the nation was limited to whiteness. Meanwhile the mobilization and exploitation of non-white people, in spite of their key contribution to the Liberation, was for a long time left outside the ethical, political and visual scope of the national narrative. We can only imagine that if the photographs had featured African soldiers being cheered and kissed by Parisian women, the political meaning of the corpus in national collective memory – and perhaps the notion of Frenchness that emerged from it – would have been vastly different.

**Race and the ethics of spectatorship**

So far, this article has explored the limits of responding to black erasure by striving to make blackness more visible. My aim, however, is not just to diagnose or deconstruct existing meanings, it is to examine our own responsibilities as spectators, and especially as critics, as we encounter
and recirculate these images. The act of looking at the photographs, of identifying, recognising, and naming their content is more than a culturally situated practice revealing assumptions and prejudices. It is an ethical intervention into the visuality of the images that creates new meanings. In making this point, I am extending some of the reflections put forward by Ariella Azoulay in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, and particularly in her discussion of the ‘spectatorial act’. Azoulay, however, takes a rather critical stance towards the aesthetic. Her account of the spectatorial act emerges in response to Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes’s critique of photography. Both Sontag and Barthes insist on the anaesthetizing effects of our repeated encounters with photographs of atrocity, on their failure to ‘shock’ us and generate an ethical response. Azoulay, by contrast, rejects the assumption that the responsibility for this indifference should rest on the photographs. In her discussion of Barthes, Azoulay thus equates his passive desire to be moved by photographs with an “aesthetic” attitude toward photography, arguing that his “insensitivity” should not be imputed to the photograph, but to himself.

Yet it is at the level of the aesthetic that I situate my own intervention. My use of the term does not just refer to art objects as in Kant’s definition, but corresponds to the etymological meaning of “aesthetic”, namely what is perceived through the senses – in this case, sight. I do not, however, consider the act of perception to be a natural, purely physical or spontaneous act. Instead, I am interested in how it is shaped by what Jacques Rancière has described as “the distribution of the sensible”, that is to say the forms and categories that shape our sensory perceptions, and determine, for example, what is speech and what is noise, what is visible and what is invisible. For Rancière, this is where aesthetics and politics intersect: the distribution of the sensible determines who is a part of the political community and who can be a citizen. The kind of spectatorial act I wish to
perform thus questions, to use Rancière’s phrasing, the “system of sensible evidence” that makes race visible by allocating meanings and identities to the bodies in the photographs.

To do so, I would like to bring the photographs of the liberation of Paris in dialogue with another corpus of images: a series of cut-outs by Caribbean-American artist Andrea Chung, entitled “May Day” (2008). In this work, Chung sought to comment on the commercialization of a picturesque past to promote the Caribbean as a desirable touristic destination. She appropriated nineteenth-century photographs representing plantation life, but cut out the figures of the black workers who featured on it. This process allowed her to question the kinds of memory promoted by the photographs, and to comment on the obscuring of Caribbean labour underpinning this imagery:

I find that, unmanipulated, the images I use are accepted as representational. They match the way the Caribbean is remembered. When I give the figures a well-earned holiday, it puts the setting on naked display and forces the viewer to confront the circumstances from which the subject has taken a temporary leave of absence.

In addition to exposing the commodification of the Caribbean past, the absences created by Chung take on a new meaning in relation to slavery. The art historian Krista Thompson has thus read Chung’s work as the production of an archive for the absent figure of the Caribbean slave. For her, “Chung’s vacant silhouettes not only produce and call attention to photographic absence but also give absence figurative form.”
Chung’s technique, however, raises questions concerning the visuality of race that go beyond both the artist’s own statements of intent and the interpretations her work has received. In addition to revealing interconnections between presence and absence, her cut-outs destabilize the indexicality of whiteness and blackness as racial signs, and their alignment with photographic realism. Indeed, in Chung’s cut-outs, the photographic idiom of race is entirely disrupted: the absent Jamaican figures are signified by white silhouettes, white gaps. This reconfiguration of racialized imagery has obvious implications for the representation of slaves and their descendants: they are no longer
figured through the colour black, which played such an important part in justifying, organizing and legislating their exploitation. Crucially, this technique also works as a visual commentary on whiteness. The juxtaposition of the white gaps figuring the absent “black” workers with the photographed bodies of the “white” plantation owners exposes the latter’s whiteness for what it really is: a political construct and a rhetorical figure (Figures 9 and 10). The cut-outs reveal all the formal and rhetorical work that goes into naming the photographic referent as “black” workers and “white” owners: here, racial whiteness is, literally, some kind of greyness, while racialized blackness appears as white. The cut-outs thus render palpable the catachresis that is central not only to Dunan’s depiction of Dukson, but to most of our conversations about race.

It is with this additional meaning in mind that I would like to transpose Chung’s technique to the photographs of the Liberation of Paris. It could look something like Figure 11. Here, the soldier from Gaston Paris’s photograph in Figure 1 is replaced with a white silhouette. The silhouette draws attention to the absence of colonial troops behind the visible presence of supposedly “white” soldiers. This device not only avoids reproducing the alignment of colonial troops with the sign of blackness, but also questions the whiteness of the people represented, revealing the rhetorical and constructed nature of its visuality. We could also imagine proceeding in the opposite direction, this time by blackening the soldier’s silhouette (Figure 12). There, the woman looks as if she is holding on to a shadow, or an empty spot. The use of blackness works as a reminder of the colonial and racial dimension that has been excluded from these images, but also signifies, partly by reproducing
it, the violence of the erasure that results from assimilating certain subjects to the category of blackness. Both transformations direct our attention towards what has been ignored both in the collective memorialization of the corpus of photographs, and in the recent attempts to recover the visibility of colonial troops: race is not just something we see or recognise, but rather, to use W.J.T. Mitchell’s phrase, a medium that organizes our vision. Instead of examining once more how race has been represented through photography, it is time to turn our attention to how race organizes the forms visibility enabled by photography.

Figure 11. Photoshop montage by the author, after Gaston Paris. 2017.
With these images, I am making a self-consciously aesthetic intervention, and indeed proposing a form of criticism that borrows directly from the formal and conceptual vocabulary of contemporary art. However, I do not see this approach as a break from the usual practice of criticism, but perhaps as a more honest version of it. Many of us spend a lot of time investing the works we study with various kinds of “subversive” or “transgressive” potential – a potential that is partly the reflection of our own critical desires. Over the years, this tendency has been the object of wide-ranging scepticism. Some scholars have pointed out the disconnection between the elaborate interpretations of critics and the actual effects of the works they study, suggesting that we cannot understand the
efficacy of a work without retracing the history of its reception.\textsuperscript{40} Understanding how works of art and literature affect specific audiences would probably entail a move away from the practice of interpretation in favour of sociological, historical, or psychological investigations. More recently, others have challenged the very project of criticality, dismissing its ambition to effect political change by exposing ideological domination through the interpretation of literary texts and artistic artefacts.\textsuperscript{41} The answer proposed in some versions of this argument is an ethos of “minimal critical agency” that would instead be attentive to what “the text itself” says – a meaning that is imagined to be available at its very surface.\textsuperscript{42}

Although I share many of these misgivings towards the oppositional posture of much literary and cultural criticism, and the reified modes of interpretation it tends to produce, the path I follow here is the opposite of critical self-effacement. Instead, I suggest that critics could own up to their position as interpreters, and indeed, to use Debarati Sanyal’s phrase, as “co-creators” of the works they study.\textsuperscript{43} At a first level, my adaptation of Chung’s cut-outs calls for a closer engagement with the formal and aesthetic dimensions of race in current debates about French national identity. These elements, I have argued, are too often ignored in favour of an apparently unproblematic binary: the critique of minorities’ hypervisibility in a supposedly colour-blind nation on the one hand, and demands for more positive visibility on the other hand. At a second level, however, I would like to propose these cut-outs as an acknowledgment of the creative role of the critic, and particularly of our responsibility in shaping, and potentially altering, meanings. Much of the study of photography is moving towards anthropology, media studies and material culture, focusing on the circulation and consumption of images rather than their formal and iconic content. Yet the interpretative approaches associated with literary criticism, and with the critical practice of “reading” images,
still have an important role to play when it comes to grappling with our ethical relationship to photographs: we too often forget that seeing is, already, an act of interpretation.


4 On the circulation of the photographs of the Liberation of Paris and its role in constructing the significance of the event, see Catherine Clark, “Capturing the Moment, Picturing History: The Liberation of Paris and Photographs,” *American Historical Review* 121, no. 3 (June 2016): 824-860. On the persistent representation of France as its own liberator, see Susan Keith, “Collective Memory and the End of Occupation: Remembering (and Forgetting) the Liberation of Paris in Images,” *Visual Communication Quarterly* 17, no.3 (July-September 2010): 134-146.


The slightly different description on the website of the Carnavalet museum describes him as a “black American” soldier. However, badge on the soldier’s helmet strongly resembles that of the 2nd Armoured Division. Paris Musées, accessed 17 November 2017. [http://parismuseescollections.paris.fr/fr/musee-carnavalet/oeuvres/liberation-de-paris-25-aout-1944-reddition-de-la-kommandatur-prisonniers#infos-secondaires-detail](http://parismuseescollections.paris.fr/fr/musee-carnavalet/oeuvres/liberation-de-paris-25-aout-1944-reddition-de-la-kommandatur-prisonniers#infos-secondaires-detail)

*Libération’s* article offers an even more striking example of the affective and political investments shaping the photographic visuality of race, as well as that of gender. Under the photograph of a seemingly male soldier, whose hat suggests an affiliation to the French *Régiment de Marche du Tchad*, a caption claims that we are looking at an “Afro-American female soldier”. The journalists themselves note that “this photograph is highly surprising when one considers the policy at work during the period.” Briand and Deraedt, “Libération de Paris.”

For a broader discussion of this connection between invisibility and normativity, see Richard Dyer, *White* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).


See for example the controversy following former Minister Nadine Morano’s declaration that France is a “country of white race” in September 2015. Crucially, Morano claimed to be merely referencing De Gaulle’s memoirs, showing how central his legacy remains in today’s debates over France’s identity.


Ibid., 250. My translation.

I am building on the figurality of blackness explored by Henry Louis Gates: “In literature, blackness is produced in the text only through a complex process of signification. There can be no transcendent blackness, for it cannot and does not exist beyond manifestations of it in specific figures.” Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 237. My understanding of blackness as catachresis is also indebted to Alessandra Raengo. Alessandra Raengo, “Shadowboxing: Lee

21 According to Dukson’s death certificate, he was born in Port Gentil (Gabon) in 1923 and died on 11 November 1944 in the 17th arrondissement of Paris. The names of his parents are declared unknown. His profession is described as “stallholder” [marchand forain]. On this document, his name is spelled “Duckson”.

22 Ibid., 262-263 and 257. My translation.

23 Ibid., 262


30 Rachid Bouchareb’s 2006 film *Indigènes* brought attention to the lack of recognition of former soldiers from Algeria. Similar debates have emerged concerning former soldiers from Africa and the Caribbean. On the latter, see Chloé Glotin’s 2011 documentary, *Gros sur mon cœur*.


34 Ibid.

35 On these aspects of Chung’s work, see Marsha Pearse, “Ready for Takeoff? Lacerated Fantasies of Caribbean Paradise in the Décollage Art of Andrea Chung” in *Travel and Imagination*, eds. Garth Lean, Russell Staiff and Emma Waterton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 197-211.


Best and Marcus, *Surface Reading*, 17 and 8.