

# CHAPTER 24

## RACIALIZATION *How To Do Races With Bodies*

*Didier Fassin*

“It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this two-ness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps from being torn asunder.”

(W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*)

In the late 1990s, France discovered the existence of racial discrimination. Racism was indeed not a novelty in the post-colonial Republic, but until then it was considered to be a cognitive issue (prejudices) circumscribed to ideological margins (the far right) and violent extremes (hate crimes). Racial discrimination by contrast represented an objective fact that did not need intention, concerned society as a whole, and occurred in ordinary contexts (Fassin 2002). This late discovery led the Socialist government to develop policies for the prevention, measurement, and sanctioning of racial discrimination. A new legislation was passed to make it easier for victims of unequal treatment to be recognized as such in courts. A national commission was created to develop expertise and propose recommendations, but also to provide concrete responses to these victims. In particular, a telephone hotline collected their testimonies and informed them about their rights.

During the first two years of its functioning, the “listeners” who had been recruited specifically to receive the complaints handled 86,000 phone calls. From the interviews I conducted with them, I learned that they had been trained to answer the victims with discernment but also sympathy, which meant that they were supposed to explore the evidence of racial discrimination without ever seeming to dispute its reality. Even if the listeners had doubts about the stories they were told, they were expected not to

express them but rather to display a form of empathetic understanding. This was the deontological foundation of their “listening” to the frustrations and sufferings of presumed victims of racial discrimination. Actually, quite often, when requested to explain why they interpreted having been refused an apartment, a job, or a career progression as a consequence of racial discrimination, these victims fell short of arguments and would simply reply: “I can’t tell you, I just feel it.” Asked what they thought about these situations, the listeners gave me two sorts of answers. Some admitted that, although they did not want to indicate it to the person calling, they were not convinced of the existence of discrimination: “Maybe the same thing could have happened to someone else, independently of the color of the skin.” Conversely, others asserted that, when hearing such assertions, they were intimately persuaded that their interlocutors on the phone had been treated unfavorably because of their racial ascription: “I believe them, because I know what they experienced.” The two groups were significantly different. The first one was exclusively composed of listeners whom one could reasonably guess from their appearance and biography that they had never been victims of discrimination, whereas in the second one all had histories and phenotypes that made a previous confrontation with racism very likely.

My point is not to ascertain who was right and whether the acts for which individuals expressed subjective certainties rather than objective proofs did correspond to racial discrimination, but to acknowledge the fact that some listeners shared with these callers a common comprehension of the social world while others did not. This difference of interpretation is not merely intellectual. It is not easily accessible to rational demonstration: one cannot determine who was right or wrong, whether in a specific case racial discrimination was constituted or not. Rather, it is deeply embedded in a bodily experience: we can call it racial embodiment. But a crucial point must be underlined here, as there is often misinterpretation. Racial embodiment does not only concern those who had the intimate conviction of the reality of the discrimination. It also affects those who did not believe in it. To use more explicit language, it is about blackness as much as it is about whiteness. Whether made visible (in the case of Blacks) or kept invisible (in the case of Whites), the body is the site of the racial experience.

However, associating “body” and “race” is not self-evident. It is all the more problematic since it seems to be taken for granted that they are intricately linked. From at least the second half of the 19th century – but some would go back to the end of the Middle Ages – to almost the end of the 20th century – many would probably say even until now – there has been a sometimes explicitly racist (in the French and English theories of biological races or in the North American and South African politics of racial segregation) but more often implicitly racialist (in the everyday language) view that assimilated racial differentiation to physical or biological differences (Guillaumin 1995). The body was therefore apparently the obvious signifier of race as well as its ultimate evidence – attested by science and the state. Of course, real life was more complex and there remained disquieting moments of indistinctiveness, when an individual was assigned a new racial identity, interestingly on a social rather than phenotypical basis (Posel 2001), or when an entire group was categorized under a novel racial qualification, such as the Jews or the Irish in the United States (Brodin 2006 and Ignatiev 1995). But these hesitations hardly impacted the general and vague assumption that made racialization rely on bodily attributes.

Yet, as is frequently the case with commonsense certainties, science introduced various complications to this racial order of things. On the one hand, social scientists, particularly sociologists, argued that race was no more than a social construction to justify power relations (Omi and Winant 1986), even if this construction of imagined categories had practical consequences on the production of real groups (Bonilla-Silva 1999). On the other hand, natural scientists, including physical anthropologists, asserted that there could be biological differences between so-called races that could only be interpreted as social (Dressler et al. 2005), even going so far as demanding a repudiation of racial classification in medicine (Root 2001). From this multiple questioning of the association between body and race, and of the assimilation of racial differentiation to physical or biological differences, it emerges that it is not just the relation that is seen as problematic, but also its very elements. Both body and race have become suspect of reification – of being considered as given. Suspicion has indeed a distinct orientation for the two entities: whereas races would not exist, the body would have a too obvious presence. But in the end, for both of them, it is the risk of essentialization that is underlined, some authors even calling for their elimination from our conceptual toolbox. A question remains however: can we do without them?

Can we merely disintegrate the notion of the body when it is through its materiality that we apprehend the world? And can we completely abandon the language of race when people are stigmatized or even killed on this basis all over the globe? One way of accepting the critiques without getting rid of the ideas is to think in terms of process. Instead of considering the body, one may analyze embodiment (Csordas 1994). Rather than talking about race, one may study racialization (Miles 1989). This is the venue I will follow in this text, attempting to account for the processes through which races are embodied and bodies are racialized. These processes may be brutal or subtle, destructive or reconstructive. They may result in genocides (Hinton 2002) or everyday racism (Essed 1991), but also in consciousness (Gilroy 1993) and empowerment (Collins 1990). I chose the anecdote of the hotline to introduce the discussion because it contains a hidden violence (the banality of racial discrimination, the racial divide among the listeners) as well as revealing a remarkable tension (the shared negative experience of racial stigmatization being reversed into a form of positive racial recognition). A final remark about this anecdote: to keep a certain degree of indetermination that is part of the process under study, I did not mention the color or origin of the listeners (it appears in the end that some may be socially closer to their interlocutors than to their colleagues). Thus, what seemed to be a simple objectification of subjective complaints through telephone interviews (is the interlocutor racially discriminated?) becomes a collective ordeal, which symmetrically produces a complex subjectivation of objective situations expressed in social interactions (the history and position of the listener influences its recognition of racial discrimination). Needless to say, the anthropologist himself cannot elude his own bodily presence in this game of racial unveiling: he is entirely part of it.

In the following pages, I will explore the links between embodiment and racialization in two distinct and complementary ways. First, I will analyze via a sociological conjugation how bodies become racialized. Second, I will propose an anthropological interpretation of how races become embodied. Having shown the plurality and thickness of these phenomena I will suggest that recognizing not only their social complexity but also their moral ambivalence is the only way to repoliticize the production of identity and otherness.

## HOW BODIES BECOME RACIALIZED: A THREE-PERSONS APPROACH

How does racialization come to human beings? To this question, answers have recently been proposed from phylogenetic as well as psychogenetic perspectives. The former have attempted to explain through evolutionary biology how racial categories emerged among ancient populations (Andreasen 2000), while the latter have tried to analyze through cognitive psychology how children developed racial thinking at an early age (Hirschfeld 1997). My contribution to this debate is more modestly, and in a less positivist way, to propose a sort of sociogenetic interpretation based on a grammatical model. To give a sense of it, one could recall the first lines of Frantz Fanon's famous text "The Fact of Blackness" (1967: 109), the original title of which, literally "The Lived Experience of the Black Man," reflects more adequately his intention. The Caribbean-born French psychiatrist evokes the discovery of his racial identity: "'Dirty nigger!' Or simply, 'Look, a Negro!' I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects (...) 'Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!' Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible." Thus Fanon's self-identification as a "Black Man" derives from his encounter with "White folks," and more specifically from this primitive scene in a train when a White boy designates him as a "Negro," that is, not only an exotic curiosity but also a frightening creature.

Paraphrasing Jean-Paul Sartre's famous formulation about the killing of a colonizer in his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 2004), one could say that the ascription to one's skin color produces two racial subjects with one sentence: the one who is assigned to his blackness and the one who, by assigning, reveals his whiteness. "My body was given back to me sprawled out, distorted, recolored, clad in mourning in that white winter day." At this very moment, it becomes racialized. "Assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema. In the train it was no longer a question of being aware of my body in the third person but in a triple person." Somewhat diverting this enigmatic final expression. I would like to seriously consider the three persons paradigmatically present on the racial scene (Fassin 2010): on the first person (the speaker), *I* ascribe a racial qualification. On the second person (the addressee), *you* recognize yourself as racialized. On the third person (the observer), *he* accounts for the racial interaction. Let us examine the three figures in more detail.

Ascription is the foundational act through which racialization is produced. It is the imposition of difference. "I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance," explains Frantz Fanon. In his hospital, he is not just a psychiatrist: "Our doctor is colored. He is very gentle," comment his patients. Fanon is viewed as Black before being seen as doctor. He does not have the choice of who he would like to be or how he would like to be seen by others: he is taken back to his skin color, his ancestors, his "race." A physician is not expected to be Black (Essed 2005). Racial ascription thus supposes that I identify you as other – racially other. It could be assumed that this identification is only very marginally a problem: everyone should be able to differentiate a Black individual from a White individual, one would think. Interestingly, not only is this not always the case, but it appears that racial qualification significantly depends on social status: when

considering how people are classified by interviewers in repeated surveys conducted in the United States, it has been established that “individuals who are unemployed, incarcerated or impoverished are more likely to be seen and identify as Black and less likely to be seen and identify as White, regardless of how they were classified or identified previously” (Penner and Saperstein 2008), which indicates that racialization integrates physical features and social characteristics.

The general implications of this observation are important. First, it is not a natural process: it is naturalized only a posteriori. Second, it is not fixed once and for all: on the contrary it is fluid. Surely what is true in formal situations such as coding “race” in a survey is even truer in informal situations such as interactions with other individuals in everyday life. Racial ascription is always also a social assignation: the youth in Brixton, south London, have to face prejudices against blackness – even when they are not Black (Howarth 2002). Similarly the rich Kuwaiti shopping on the Champs-Élysées is not identified as an Arab in the same way as the young man of Algerian descent in a disadvantaged neighborhood of Paris. And this difference is not only a question of representation: it has serious concrete consequences, for instance in terms of police harassment. In other words, both the possibility and the meaning of racial ascription vary according to status and context.

This process of racial assignation always exerts a form of symbolic violence upon those who are ascribed (Bourdieu 2000). “I wanted to be a man, nothing but a man,” writes Frantz Fanon. Instead he finds himself reduced to the color of his skin and to the attributes associated with it. “I was walled in: No exception was made for my refined manners, or my knowledge of literature, or my understanding of the quantum theory.” Ascribing someone racially is therefore not only imposing an identity upon him: it is also depriving him of possible alternative identifications, including the mere possibility of multiple belongings:

The same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a schoolteacher, a novelist, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights, a theater lover, an environmental activist, a tennis fan, a jazz musician, and someone who is deeply committed to the view that there are intelligent beings in outer space with whom it is extremely urgent to talk (preferably in English) (Sen 2006, p. xii).

The moral meaning of identity imposition is, however, not univocal. Although it is an act of authority – I know who you are better than you do – racial assignation does not necessarily imply a hierarchy or an evaluation: racialization can be a mere description (Hacking 2005). Yet it is very frequently the case that racial ascription involves a judgment upon the racialized other. This moral evaluation usually takes a negative form: disqualification and stigmatization may serve to justify discrimination, exploitation, oppression, or even extermination (Bauman 1992). But it can also adopt a positive expression: valorization of difference may then result in paternalistic attitudes and sometimes segregation policies (Fassin 2011). Whatever moral orientation it follows, ascription is always an abuse of power: in this sense, it is political.

Recognition is a response to ascription: you identify through the assignation I am imposing on you. Being called a Negro, Frantz Fanon recognized himself as what he was ascribed to: “I resolved, since it was impossible for me to get away from an inborn

complex, to assert myself as black man.” But the process is contradictory: “Since I was not satisfied to be racialized, by a lucky turn of fate I was humanized. I joined the Jew, my brother in misery.” Here, recognition becomes resistance. Recognizing oneself as Black means resisting racial ascription. Hence Fanon’s rejection of Leopold Sédar Senghor’s and Aimé Césaire’s *negritude* which, according to him, contributes to the essentialization of difference and the reproduction of inequality. From this perspective, Black is no longer a phenotypical feature (the color of the skin) but a political qualification (shared by all minorities).

Actually, the Black movements in Britain and South Africa included so-called “Asians” and “Indians,” respectively, because they were suffering from the same racial discrimination as the people of African descent: the “master-signifier ‘Black’ “was a “bridging term that promoted vernacular cosmopolitan conversation and synchronized action among the victimized” (Gilroy 1987: 14). Without underestimating the divisions within these movements and the ambiguities of the claims of blackness, one should therefore be attentive to the potential challenge it offers to the contradiction often described within the politics of justice: fighting for cultural identities would imply requesting a right to difference and thus the abandonment of the universalist ambition of social equality; this contradiction has been coined as the “redistribution-recognition dilemma” (Frazer 1997: 13). The risk does exist. But for minorities, insisting on the common victimization through discrimination and exploitation, self-identification as “Black” can simultaneously promote difference and equality. Rather, it founds a political project on recognition through universal rights. This is the paradox of all minority struggles: they must use the weapon of the enemy to denounce its violence and reject its relevance (Scott 1996). From this perspective, claiming blackness is paradoxically challenging race.

These tensions within the political realm are also present in daily life, although they are probably less evident. If “the Jew is one whom others consider a Jew” and if “it is the anti-Semite who makes the Jew” (Sartre 1995: 69), then three attitudes can theoretically be expected for those ascribed to “Jewishness” or to any form of racial assignation accompanied by prejudices: to ignore or pretend to ignore the ascription; to reject it and adopt the stigma as an instrument of combat; to internalize it and even to overplay the role that is imposed. The three options do not necessarily correspond to a real choice. First, they are often associated. Second, they are context-dependent. In the interviews I conducted and situations I observed with French people of African or Arab origin in France, I have always been struck by their apparently rapid change of position from claims of color-blindness to claims of color-consciousness, from denouncing racial assignation to affirming racial identity. Like the author of a humorous essay that became a best seller (Kelman 2003), they could accuse someone of discrimination for essentializing their difference and, a moment later, proudly assert this difference. In fact there was no – at least no necessary – contradiction. They simply wanted to decide for themselves who they were and to choose when they would identify and to whom. This could lead to self-ascription as a minority (“I’m Black and I’m proud”) or sometimes as belonging to the majority (“I’m White whatever you think I am”). Thus, in spite of their being physically and culturally very close to the other peoples of Lebanon, the Maronites allege that they are White, and stigmatize the Druze on the basis of “racial fantasies” (Hage 2005). Symmetrically, processes of “deracialization” have been described, for instance among African American boxers in

a Chicago gym (Wacquant 2005). Recognition can therefore occupy a wide moral range from the reversal of the stigma to the reinforcement of discrimination or the repudiation of racialization.

Ascription and recognition are therefore intimately linked in what Anthony Appiah (1996) analyzes as “identification.” The existence of racial categories and racist prejudices as well as the production of racialized rules, laws, customs, surveys has profound consequences on the sociology and psychology of minorities – and of majorities – providing them a concrete existence not as racial entities but as social groups which are identified by others but also self-identified. Drawing on Ian Hacking’s dynamic nominalism (1991), this theoretical model is an attempt to articulate the constructionist and realist positions, the interpretation of race as a social construct with the acknowledgement of the social effects of such construction.

Going further, one can consider how ascription and recognition work in a dialectic way. On the one hand, ascription is a form of subjection: it imposes a truth on someone who does not have his word to say about it. It is a symbolic subordination. Louis Althusser (1971) proposes to interpret ideology through the image of the “interpellation”: the individual anonymously hailed by the police turns around, thus acknowledging his being the person hailed. “Thus ideology interpellates individuals as subjects.” In the same way, Fanon is hailed by the child – as well as a series of others – and, although he initially attempts to dismiss his assignation by laughing, he cannot avoid becoming a passively racialized subject. Ascription is an act of domination. But on the other hand, recognition works as a form of subjectivation: even under conditions of oppression, there is the formation of a subject. It is a political advent. Michel Foucault (1982) suggests that power not only constraints action but also produces “subjectivities”: although it was the case in Ancient Greece and in Medieval Christianity, it is even truer in modern biopolitics where resistance may emerge from the new forms of the exercise of power. In the citation herein, Fanon seizes from his racial assignation the moral resource to defend a conception of blackness that rejects the color line and develops an emancipatory condition with other victims of discrimination. Recognition becomes an act of liberation. This tension between subjection and subjectivation (Butler 1997) is at the heart of the racialization process at the first and second person. But there is a third one.

Objectification is a third term complementing subjection and subjectivation. It supposes the existence of a third party who observes, comments, narrates, analyzes or measures the racial scene. He is the witness. He can be a journalist or a sociologist, a statistician or a politician. Although often forgotten by most works on racialization, he plays a crucial role in qualifying the process and giving it a public life. If it is possible “to do things with words” (Austin 1962) – one could add “and also with figures” – racialization usually comes into being in the public sphere through this third party. A critique frequently aimed at social scientists is that they produce race by naming it, defining it, classifying people according to it, and in the end proposing means to combat it (Webster 1992). In France, over the past decades, it is surprisingly not racism or racial discrimination that has caused controversies, but racial statistics, in other words the possibility of using racial characteristics to analyze and eventually correct social inequalities based on racial prejudices (Fassin (Eric) 2010). Beyond the polemical arguments exchanged, these debates underline the fact that objectification is part of the process of subject production, both as subjection and as subjectivation.

On the one hand, it can impose categories on individuals, sometimes provoking embarrassed or hostile responses: examples have been numerous with census (Prewitt 2005). On the other hand, it can reveal realities until then unseen even by the victims of discrimination or stigmatization, all the more by the beneficiaries of the racial order: evidence also comes from literature (Morrison 1992). Objectification is therefore performative (it makes racialization exist), but it is not univocal: it contributes to this process in potentially contradictory ways (reinforcing divisions as well as empowering individuals). There is thus no neutrality in objectifying racialized interactions or conditions – not even when pretending to ignore them.

### HOW RACES BECOME EMBODIED: A TWO-DIMENSIONAL READING

How do racial differentiations and constructions make it into human bodies? This interrogation was at the heart of John Howard Griffin's famous social experiment (1961): adopting the appearance of a Black individual through an artificial pigmentation of his skin, he tried to comprehend the experience of being Black in the American South. The journalist assumed – or at least seemed to – that the superficial change would give a sense of a more profound reality: that of racism. Recently the same idea served as the inspiration for a 2007 French documentary by Renaud Le Van Kim under the same title as the French translation of Griffin's book: *Dans la peau d'un noir* (literally: Within the skin of a Black man). The film follows two couples, one White and the other Black, who reverse their identities in order to demonstrate the banality of racial discrimination: "racism, you don't talk about it, you live it," comments the director. Using makeup, they alter their physical appearance and face a series of situations including renting an apartment, searching for a job and being stopped by the police; every evening they get together and compare their experiences, two of which deserve special attention.

The first scene involves a conversation between the four adults: the White man and woman who pass as a Black couple are indignant; they have spent part of the day within a small organization of people of color who meet regularly to discuss their experience of discrimination. Initially, one thinks they are exasperated as they realize the level of racism that exists in French society; but soon, one understands that in fact they are angry at the members of the group for what they consider a caricature of White people and even a paradoxical expression of Black racism. The second scene takes place at a dinner in a high-class restaurant in Paris: the White woman made up as a colored one and her real Black counterpart request a table on the ground floor near the terrace; although the restaurant seems empty, they are informed that all tables are reserved and are placed alone in a small room on the second floor. The Black woman comments to her companion that this response is undoubtedly due to their skin color; the White woman replies that she is being paranoid, that the first floor is certainly booked and that there is no reason to interpret the situation in terms of discrimination; as they go out of the restaurant a little later, they discover two White males from the film crew sitting at a table on the ground floor despite not having a reservation; the White woman is deeply shocked and expresses her indignation, but her Black companion calms her: "it would do nothing, but you see, this is what we are used to, for us it's always like that." This scene is inserted at the end of



the documentary as the crowning piece of this unveiling of racial discrimination and unmasking of its denial.

Beyond the anecdote, this film – as well as the public success it had at a moment when France was finally admitting the existence of racial discrimination, which President Jacques Chirac had two years earlier called “the poison of the Republic” – illustrates important issues of the embodiment of racialization. The seminal idea of Griffin’s book and of Le Van Kim’s documentary is that one can share and comprehend the experience of Black people by making up as Black: race would thus be a question of skin color. The apparent naïveté of this idea is revealed in the film when the false Black persons dissociate themselves from the real ones of the organization by inverting the accusation of racism on to them (first scene), and when the real Black woman comments to the false one that she should not get angry because what she just experienced is for her simply discrimination as usual (second scene). The denial in the first case underlines that embodiment is not the superficial experience of the disguise: not only does the makeup not give access to the understanding of racism, it can even participate in its dismissal. Following Freud’s distinction between “disavowal” (the refusal to embrace the consequences of something perceived as disagreeable) and “negation” (the formulation of an unconscious wish in a negative form), one could say that racial denial oscillates between the two: from mere repudiation of reality (“I know Black people are treated differently, but this is not discrimination”) to its recognition in a negative form (“you are going to think that we White people discriminate against you, but you are wrong”); this dual interpretation can be generalized to French society (Fassin 2006). The acknowledgement in the second case demonstrates that embodiment does not proceed from isolated external events: it is their accumulation and their internalization over time that give a sense of discrimination. Following Dilthey’s distinction between “experience” (the passive endurance of events) and “an experience” (the singular events rising above the everyday), one could say that the recognition of discrimination derives alternately from the flow of time and from moments of revelation: the ordinary experience gets crystallized in specific events (Turner 1986). In light of the two scenes, it becomes clear that racial embodiment cannot be reduced to skin color: it involves the thickness of the body.

But is there an ultimate truth to racism and discrimination? In the case of this documentary, the question becomes even more relevant when one takes into account that the White couple later took a legal action against the film director: they accused him of having selected the most negative scenes while ignoring the positive reactions of people, and of having pushed them to exaggerate and even provoke their interlocutors in order to create violent interactions; these accusations are, however, biased and even suspect, since the lawsuit relied precisely on the claim that they were used as actors but not paid as such. In its complexity and artificiality, this configuration – the film, its success, its contestations, and its political background – is a useful reminder of the multiple layering of the empirical material on which social scientists work (Bruner 1986): on a first level, there is the “reality” of what happened and why (was there actual discrimination?); on a second level, there is the “experience” of what people perceived of the reality (did they feel discriminated?); on a third level, there are the “expressions” that translate this reality and this experience into words, images or actions (did they depict themselves and react as victims of discrimination?). The judge who has to decide on a case of presumed discrimination is only interested in the

“reality.” The person who is confronted with discriminatory practices against minorities is primarily concerned with his “experience.” The film-maker who attempts to sensitize the public to the problem of discrimination is essentially working on “expressions.” But the social scientist does not choose. He tries to articulate the three levels: constructionist, he must not forget yet that discrimination is also an effective means of domination; realist, he should however recall that experience is not merely a mirror reflecting facts; empiricist, he has nevertheless to consider that most of the time reality and experience are communicated through performances, whether a complaint, a narrative or a movie.

The body is precisely where the three dimensions are articulated: the violence of racialization is exerted, experienced and performed through the body. How to account for it? How to make sense of the top-ranked South African official who, at the end of a heated discussion on a public health issue with a specialist of the domain, short of arguments, angrily shouts at her: “You cannot understand because you are white”? Does this mean that there are different ways of apprehending the world according to one’s color or origin, but then also to one’s class, sex, profession, cultural capital, etc.? These interrogations are at the heart of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s thought (2004: 73, 76 and 93). “The world is not what I think, but what I live through,” he writes, further adding – against Sartre: “Because we are in the world, we are condemned to meaning and we cannot do or say anything without its acquiring a name in history.” In other terms, the world is not exterior to me: it is what I perceive of it and this perception is embedded in history but also constitutes history. What makes the world exist is therefore the body, which is the site through which the world comes into being within its spatial and temporal frame: “The body is the vehicle of being in the world, and having a body is, for a living creature, to be intervolved in a definite environment, to identify oneself with certain projects and be continuously committed to them.” From Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962), I would like to import two crucial elements into my discussion of embodiment and racialization. First, the intertwining of the objective and subjective body: against a purely objectivist view, one must recall that the apprehension of the world is always the fact of a subject; against a merely subjectivist vision, one should bear in mind that the physicality of the body is what makes perception possible. Second, the inscription of the body in time: the present of the world is informed by the past of previous states of the world; perception is always remembrance.

In his last writings, collected by his disciple Claude Lefort and published under the title *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), Merleau-Ponty further expands his reflection through the themes of the “flesh” and the “chiasm” which are ultimate attempts to articulate the subjective experience and the objective existence, the present and past of the body. However, one should not misinterpret – or over-interpret – his thought. The Husserlian approach he remained faithful to all his life is more concerned with the immediacy of perception than with the *longue durée* of human history, with sensory facts (tactile or musical experiences, in particular) than with social forces (oppression or exploitation, for instance). In this sense, his philosophy is more accurate when applied to the understanding of the experience of Christian charismatic movements (Csordas 1990) than when translated into the issues of embodiment and racialization. Rather than a mere translation, I would therefore like to suggest a free extrapolation from Merleau-Ponty’s theories. My work published under the title *When Bodies*

*Remember* (Fassin 2007) is definitely not an exercise in phenomenology. It should rather be read as a tentative political anthropology. South African contemporary history, and more specifically the issue of AIDS, is in effect a textbook case to understand what I suggest to analyze as a two-dimensional interpretation of racial embodiment (Fassin 2008). The controversy raised by the heterodox statements of former president Thabo Mbeki about poverty rather than a virus being the cause of the epidemic has highlighted the necessity of anthropological analyses going beyond mere denunciations.

The first dimension may be called the social condition of race. The use of the word “condition” can be seen as a legacy of Hannah Arendt’s book (1958) on the “human condition,” especially for its articulation of labor, work and action in the *vita activa*, but by contrast with her theoretical frame, I want to insist here on the social differentiation of conditions rather than on what they have in common. The social condition of race relates to the inscription of social structures of racialization on and in bodies, that is, to the physical traces left by centuries of domination, segregation, and stigmatization – from the early colonial period in the 17th century to the imposition of the apartheid regime in the second half of the 20th century. The epidemiology of HIV provides a tragic illustration of this reality as the so-called African population is affected by seroprevalence rates up to ten times higher than the Whites, Colored or Indians, to use local categories. This substantial difference has been both naturalized and culturalized: sexual promiscuity and sexual violence have been considered as typical African features alternately interpreted as inscribed in the genes or in the traditions of “native” populations.

In fact, ethnographical as well as historical studies have established that the epidemic should rather be understood in terms of “political economy” and “structural violence,” as it was the case in other contexts such as Haiti (Farmer 2004). So-called sexual promiscuity and sexual violence form part of an historical process in which inequality and poverty, oppression and discrimination have relegated Africans to living under conditions of extreme economic and social constraints. The organization of the mine, industrial and agricultural system has been based not only on the brutal exploitation of African people, but also on the concentration of the work force in hostels and barracks combined with the installation of alcohol and prostitution facilities. The impoverishment of the countryside and the separation of families based on racial criteria have simultaneously led to the development of socioeconomic strategies among young African women which include their migration to the cities and their involvement in what is sometimes described as survival sex. Neither the African men nor the African women in these settings were simply choosing their lives, or “behaving as Africans”: they were acting under profound structural constraints, which reveal the “intersectionality” (Crenshaw 1993) of race, class and gender.

The second dimension can be designated as the historical experience of race. However, my interpretation of the concept of “experience” is somewhat different from John Dewey’s (1998), whether one considers its psychological or aesthetic version. Although I recognize as he does the introspective as well as performative meaning of experience, I am not so much interested in the individual aspect as I am in the inextricable relation between the individual and the collective. The historical experience of race corresponds to the way people, both individually and collectively, make sense of and give shape to events and situations through which they are racialized and racialize

others. Again, the AIDS epidemic has revealed the gap between the remarkable efforts to move the nation beyond its racist past and the depth of the frustrations left by the unfinished business of justice to sanction crimes committed and repair harm done. Whereas most Whites, both liberal and conservative, plead, although for different reasons, for oblivion and turn their eyes toward the future, a great majority of Africans remain in demand of memory and look back into the past. This racially divided relation to time, between forgetfulness on the one hand and resentment on the other, is revealing of the persisting significance of race in South Africa beyond the proclamation of the rainbow nation.

The heretical statements of the President and his Health Minister have been mostly interpreted in psychological and pathological terms (from cynicism to paranoia). But these interpretations are in no way sufficient to account for the fact that several years after the beginning of the controversy, as the government was discredited among the White national elite and the Western international community, a majority of Africans remained not only faithful to their leaders but also satisfied by their AIDS policy. Actually, the grievances of history are all the more painful and enduring because the racist past remains alive in the present, as it is also the case for the cholera epidemic in Venezuela (Briggs 2003). Conversely to what is often stated or believed, resentment is not only engendered from the morbid remembrance of things past, but from the present experience of racism and discrimination. The advent of a small wealthy and arrogant African upper class should not occult the overwhelming reality of an African underclass whose numbers are increasing. The bodily experience of racialization, which produces “communities of resentment” (Das 2007: 211), is therefore both the psychic wound of past violence and the physical expression of a tragic present.

Certainly, the South African situation is unique. But rather than considering its exceptionality, we should be concerned by its exemplarity. It is a useful national paradigm to think about the embodiment of racialization. My analytical proposition of a two-dimensional phenomenon is a tentative articulation between Merleau-Ponty’s objective and the subjective bodies (what I formulate as condition and experience, respectively), but it moves beyond his phenomenology on two crucial elements. Firstly, I consider the role of social structures to be central in embodiment. The “habitus,” which Pierre Bourdieu (1977: 72) defines as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures,” provides a concept to understand how what is naturalized or culturalized as behaviors, is in fact deeply influenced by embodied dispositions that make conducts appear as natural or cultural when they are, to a great extent, socially determined. Secondly, I underline the importance of historical memories in bodily constructions. The “space of experience,” which, according to Reinhart Koselleck (2004: 272), is “present past, whose events have been incorporated and can be remembered,” allowing “a rational reworking together with unconscious modes of conduct,” proves helpful to comprehend how what seems not to make sense and was psychologized or even pathologized, can find a signification in the light of history, especially from the perspective of the vanquished.

Considering racialization in both its objective and subjective dimensions thus provides a “thick description” (Geertz 1973: 6) of the body now embedded in social structures and historical legacies. As I have shown in the South African case, what I mean by thickness has to do with more than conducts and actions, representations

and interpretations: it involves the materiality of bodies. The racial epidemiology of HIV in South Africa affects individuals physically at risk, it involves infected and suffering bodies. Similarly, the racial ideology of AIDS mobilizes not only an imaginary about the past but the continuation of yesterday's oppression and domination in today's marginalized and stigmatized bodies often left untreated and finally abandoned. This is an important point: Black people invoking the trauma of the slave trade in America or colonial exploitation in Africa are often dismissed, especially when they request reparation, on the argument that the past is passed and their demands do not make sense several generations after these events. This is to forget or neglect the fact that in most cases the disadvantaged of today's social order are the heirs of the victims of yesterday's racial violence. The embodiment of racial memory is not a metaphor.

## CONCLUSION

A century after their publication, W. E. B. Du Bois' illuminating observations (1994: 2) about "double-consciousness," cited in the epigraph of this chapter, remain a remarkable entry into the question of embodiment and racialization, recalling how social relations – in particular the way people look at, talk to, behave with, treat others – shape racial identities. But no less remarkable is the fact that this question continues to be both sensitive and complex. It is sensitive, especially among anthropologists who often consider with understandable suspicion but excessive precaution the rare scientific efforts to conceptualize racialization as a social phenomenon (Cowlshaw 2000). It is complex, since it implies to articulate obvious biological and physical features with less evident cultural and political issues, thus countering the expansive interpretations from sociobiology, physical anthropology and evolutionary psychology (Wade 2004). I believe that in spite of – or rather because of – its sensitivity and complexity the question of embodiment and racialization must be dealt with by the social sciences. My theoretical proposition to approach it by asking how bodies become racialized and how races become embodied paves the way to what could be seen as the elementary structures of racial embodiment. On the one hand, the attention granted to social interactions from the perspective of the three grammatical persons underscores the dialectic of subjection and subjectivation which is at stake in the dynamic processes of ascription and recognition, but complicates it with the introduction of the third party involved in the act of objectification. On the other hand, the two-dimensional analysis in terms of condition and experience inscribes these processes within social forces and historical legacies and therefore provides not just a contextual background but, more crucially, the structural and temporal depth that a merely interactional reading necessarily underestimates.

To the questions "Has racialization always existed?" which has recently re-emerged, and "Is it not time to get rid of racialization?" that is sometimes optimistically asked, I have not responded: to the first because it is speculative about the past, and to the second because it is speculative about the future. I prefer to consider what can be said of the present from a reasonably scientific perspective. This choice does not ignore the past, as I have shown how profoundly it is related to the present, no more than it eludes the future, which I believe can only be invented on the foundations of a lucid view of the present.

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