

Redefining Margins and Center Through Intersectional Activism: Transatlantic Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a work in translation, borrowing insights from Latin American feminists to reflect on intersectional activists in a European metropolis, Paris. It also makes the case for producing an alternative to universalism by foregrounding marginal voices and treating their theoretical contribution as relevant and just as likely to ‘travel’ beyond their places of origin as contributions from the less marginalized. While written in English, it also makes the case that some shared experiences, such as “racism by denial”, do not translate adequately into Anglo frames of reference. French denial goes as far as denying the vocabulary, and the spaces, necessary for Afropean organizing, and leads to tactical use of virtual spaces for intersectional activism and inclusive feminist mobilizations. Reclaiming community has become a major aim in the Parisian context that both vilifies “communitarianism” and deploys policies favouring gentrification in the name of “mixité”. While the *Gilets Jaunes* movement makes the territorial component of grievances and calls for justice more clearly visible, the process of organizing a convergence between differently marginalized groups seems facilitated by common experiences of police repression. Urban subjectivities are thus shaped by global geographies while moral economies are deployed in localized ways.

Keywords

Paris, Afrofeminism, intersectional activism, gentrification, urban policy, margins

Introduction

We must take the “woman question” out of the ghetto and understand it as the basis and pedagogy for all other forms of power and subordination, be they racial, imperial, colonial, class-based, regional and center-periphery derived, or Eurocentric versus the rest of the world. (Segato, 2016, 620)

In November 2019, a form of feminist flashmob initiated in Chile went viral: “un violador en tu camino”, a song and choreography performed by the group *Las Tesis* in Valparaíso, was promptly imitated in many other protests in Latin American and European cities. Among these cities was Paris, though interestingly, the lyrics were adapted in French, which was not the case elsewhere. In the original Spanish version, the song, based on Rita Laura Segato’s work, describes how patriarchal violence operates in invisible ways through state institutions (police, judges, and governments) as well as in visible ways, such as rape, bodily harm and femicide. Performed by groups of blindfolded women singing in unison “you are the rapist” and “the oppressive state is a macho rapist”, it both captured the specific situation in Chile where police violence against protesters has been massive, and broadcast a message likely to resonate with many other feminist groups.

In her piece “Patriarchy from Margin to Center”, Rita Laura Segato points to the apparent paradox of violence against women being worse than ever, even as the policy apparatus purporting to protect their physical integrity and their rights is deployed ever more broadly: “There have never been more protective laws for women’s rights, training sessions for security forces, more published literature in circulation about women’s rights, more prizes and recognitions for accomplishments in the field of women’s rights, and yet we women continue dying” (Segato, 2016, 620). Victimization of women, she argues, is not an unfortunate by-product of the current phase of capitalism, but a necessary condition of its *modus operandi*. Segato’s work emphasizes the territorial dimensions of capitalism’s brutality in Latin America, in ways that need translating and re-interpreting to become relevant to European urban contexts—while the indictment of contradictions between protective public policy, and state-condoned violence, echoes worldwide.

In this piece, which mostly documents “a view from Paris”, I want to enter into dialogue with the writings of feminists of the Americas, whose work around the colonality of gendered violence and the spatial dynamics of racism, I argue, casts light on the French situation. I therefore engage in a work that is a work of translation, a work aiming to question the ways in which ideas travel and gain universal currency. I rely on Said’s reconsideration of the pitfalls of “traveling theory” (Said, 1994), and his call to consider “the geographical dispersion of which the theoretical motor is capable” and value “the possibility of actively different locales, sites, situations for theory, without facile universalism or over-general totalizing” (Said, 1994, 449). With the explicit objective of displacing work by white males writing from the North that is usually granted the privilege to travel throughout the world and become recognized as universal theory, I will rely mostly on the work of racialized female authors, mostly from the global South, and try and make the case that their ideas, too, should be allowed to travel. Sara Ahmed’s work on the “politics of citation” (2017), which spells out the different treatment given to different scholars’ work, is a major influence here.

I do not take lightly the dangers of cultural imperialism, and indeed it is a recurring theme of the work I engage with. Taking discussions of the relations between people of European descent and people of African or indigenous descent in settler colonies and applying them to a European city is a process rife with dangers. Still, I shall try and make clear as I go what, in this work, has helped me understand some characteristics of the spatial organization of French cities, Paris in particular. I consider the local context of public policies and discourses, the geographies of center and margins that they construct, and how intersectional feminist activism challenges these geographies. The empirical material I draw upon

comes from Afrofeminist manifestos published in recent years, blogs and activist media managed by Black women. I also reference the work of Black academics who have discussed this material and the forms of mobilization that come together with them. Movements struggling for women's/LGBTI+ rights or rights of migrants, and minorities generally, have structured themselves in common opposition to violence, and violent state repression. Riding the “feminism from the margins” wave rising from many peripheral parts of Paris (Hancock, 2017), these intersectional movements have claimed a place at the forefront of broader movements. Interestingly, many spatial claims are made by these movements protesting police violence, who assert the centrality of margins, and marginalized people, as crucial to progressive causes.

This paper focuses on the Parisian context to analyze these activist movements' spatial tactics in the face of public policies that claim to strive for inclusiveness but reassert some forms of oppression. Where public space or, as Segato puts it, the abstract, pseudo-universal “public sphere” (Segato, 2016) functions as exclusionary, the virtual space of the internet and social networks allow many formerly voiceless movements to speak up and coalesce. While underlining local tactics, considering for instance the coalitions that occurred with the very visible *Gilets Jaunes* movement, this piece also considers international networks, and how they enable challenges to the national scale in the definition of political and social centrality, and the constructions of marginality.

A Tale of Two Racisms

A non-imperialist feminism requires that you make a real space for our articulating, interpreting, theorizing and reflecting (...) Is it simply that the theories are flawed if meant to be universal but accurate so long as they are confined to your particular group(s)? Is it that the theories are not really flawed but need to be translated? Can they be translated? (Lugones and Spelman, 1983, 576)

I begin with a discussion of work by Black Brazilian feminist Lelia Gonzalez de Almeida, and one article in particular, which was translated into French in 2015, though initially published in 1988. I came across it by a happy coincidence (thanks to the French colleagues who translated it and to a Swiss student who picked it for a presentation) and it came at a point when I was trying to get my head around the difficulty of making the operation of French racism intelligible to colleagues in Anglo academia. Even though the discussion of the forms and impacts of racism I outline below may seem dated, and not very well supported by empirical data, it immediately made sense to me and accounted for my difficulty so well that I adopted it as one does with theoretical references: not always in ways that fully comprehend their embeddedness in specific contexts or times (indeed I am completely unfamiliar with the Brazilian context, or the movements of the 1980s that Gonzalez was part of), but in a way that foregrounds and values their contribution to the understanding of a completely different context, and how they allow to overcome an intellectual difficulty that is not the one the reference addressed initially. I would argue that if we can casually call on Bourdieu, Foucault, Derrida or Lefebvre to do all sorts of theoretical work on all sorts of themes and contexts, then we should be able to call on Latin American feminists just as casually and without feeling obligated to reinscribe their work in specific times and places—why would it be unnecessary for the former group of thinkers, but necessary for the latter?

I need to specify where I speak from and how my position affects my reading of Gonzalez and other (Latin) American thinkers. I am a white European ciswoman in a position of relative power at a French institution. Having been born in Britain, I spent a lot of my initial career struggling with differences, misunderstandings and not a little bloody-mindedness between Anglophone and French academia. Turning to Latin America, and Mexico in particular, after my PhD thesis, came as a relief and intellectual stimulation by allowing me to escape the stifling opposition between Anglo and Francophone versions of geography; it also allowed me to understand the dynamics of imperialism much better, and

read in Spanish, a language that for me is not caught up in a painful web of personal issues. It helped me understand how the intellectual development of the Anglosphere can be received both as emancipatory, because it articulates a strong critique of racism and imperialism, and as oppressive, because the critique is constructed entirely or primarily on a foregrounding of Anglo understandings of race and many other issues, and on relative ignorance of what goes on in many other parts of the world. It raises issues of responsibility fleshed out by Jazeel and McFarlane (2010), and pushed me to try and bypass Anglo theorizing completely in favour of Latin American theories, preferably from decolonial and feminist perspectives, and to see how they resonate with marginalized voices in France.

Decentering Anglo perspectives, and in particular US perspectives, and doing so in a journal based in North America, and in English, is no minor undertaking. I try here to show that, though familiar and reassuring references may be absent from this piece, something is gained, rather than lost, by not measuring margins by the standards of the center. I engage in this work inspired by the classic piece by Lugones and Spelman “Have we got a theory for you!”, and therefore aware that, as they write

(...) the power of white/Anglo women vis-à-vis Hispanas and Black women is in inverse proportion to their working knowledge of each other (...) If white/Anglo women and women of color are to do theory jointly, in helpful, respectful, illuminating and empowering ways, the task ahead of white/Anglo women because of this asymmetry, is a very hard task. (Lugones and Spelman, 1983, 580).

It seems important to emphasize the extent to which we, as academics, are part of what we describe: how we participate in the demonstrations we write about, how we live in and move about the cities we discuss in our work, and how our trade in ideas, and attempts to locate ourselves in uneven geographies, echo and replicate what activists outside academia do. If there is something to learn from standpoint theory and female academics of color’s efforts to talk of being in- and outside at the same time, it is the necessity to locate ourselves within, rather than outside, the issues that we seek to address. This is not to center ourselves, but to include discussions of academia as one of the arenas in which marginalizations are likely to occur. The institutions we work for are, after all, inscribed within urban and global geographies, and the violent policing of social movements has not spared our students and colleagues.

There is an ongoing struggle about terms and concepts as crucial to intellectual work today as “intersectionality”, and the sense that they are being wrenched from their rightful owners to become “whitened” (Bilge, 2015). As the Parisian Afrofeminist group Mwasi writes:

The fact that majority-white women and groups grab intersectionality further demonstrates how negrophobia operates: by stealing all the tools we create precisely because this world gives us nothing (...) The appropriation of intersectionality by white women is made easier in France because the concept was introduced by academics. Our Afrofeminism aims to reappropriate our history, but also the words that have been created for our struggles (Mwasi, 2018, 30).

The process whereby a vital instrument of struggle for women of color becomes the trendy buzzword for white women such as myself is rightfully experienced as dispossession and violence by the groups who initially coined the term and undertook the hard work of honing and wielding it. Recognizing that it belongs to the Black feminists whose lives were, and are, first and foremost, on the line, is a matter of basic decency. It is in the spirit of a tribute to the major contribution they have made to contemporary theory that I engage in a discussion that aims to demonstrate that their work is at least as able to claim universal reach as work by White male scholars—indeed that it proposes an alternative and improved universality “from below”, by providing other groups that are minoritized and oppressed with tools to

reflect on and organize against their own oppression—as the Chilean group *Las Tesis* did for feminist protests.

Gonzalez's piece (2015 (1988)) coins and fleshes out the category of "amefricanity" to assert the presence of people of African descent as constitutive of the nations of the Americas, and challenge the appropriation of the label "African-American" by residents of the United States of North America¹. While her arguments are deeply embedded within Brazilian reality, and Brazilian resentment of US imperialism and erasure of the rest of the continent, Gonzalez makes several points that speak more widely to the diverse forms of racism that operate throughout the world, or at least across the Atlantic. In particular, she distinguishes between forms of "open" racism characteristic, she says, of Anglo, German and Dutch societies, and "disguised" racism or "racism in denial" more likely to operate in "Latin" societies. This distinction makes absolute sense with regard to French society, and the difficulty we have accounting for our particular brand of racism when discussing racial issues with Anglo-American colleagues.

"Open" racism, for Gonzalez, idealizes race "purity" and therefore condemns miscegenation (a word for which no equivalent exists in French) and relies on segregation to maintain Black and white people separate. "Latin" versions of racism, as they developed in Latin America, inherited their racial hierarchies from the Iberian peninsula, and relied on the glorification of "cleansing" of blood by "whitening", making whiteness an objective for all and encouraging miscegenation; racial hierarchies become internalized and there is a denial of race as constitutive of separate identities or cultures in these contexts.

Conversely, "open" racism reinforces racial identities in ways that allow for the emergence of political organizing and mobilizing. In other words, separateness and spatial segregation do not necessarily contribute only to greater oppression, but can actually produce more protective environments in which political subjectivities may thrive, away from the overarching hegemony of whiteness. Gonzalez emphasizes the influential intellectual production that hails from Anglo Black communities, and the visibility and worldwide status that they have gained as spearheads of the struggle for rights of Black people everywhere. This stands in stark contrast with local Black intellectuals such as Abdias do Nascimento in Brazil or Fanon in France being hardly taught, and relatively little known, in their own countries: the process participates in locating "real" racism, in the minds of the French public, in countries such as the US or South Africa, which enables and reiterates "denial" of domestic racism.

A particular hallmark of French racism, which I see as akin to the Latin versions described by Gonzalez, is the insistence on "mixité" (a word for which no equivalent exists in English), the necessity of ensuring that urban neighbourhoods be not "mixed-income", as in the US, but actually "mixed-race" (Kirszbaum, 2008). The French public takes "mixité" as a proof that cities, and society generally, are not racist. It is, for instance, the way social housing provision in Marseilles, though strongly influenced by ethnic categorizations of applicants, is thought of as "colour-blind" (Sala Pala, 2013).

Gonzalez's insights therefore go a long way towards accounting for different experiences of racism and different public policies in Anglo and Latin countries; the phrase "racism by denial" seems particularly fitting in France, a country in which the very term "race" has become taboo and been removed from all legislation, and most recently from the preamble of the Constitution (where it was used to state that no discrimination on the basis of race, among other criteria, should exist). Arguably no country has gone further than France to maintain not only color-blindness, but the removal of the

¹ I use this phrase since the official name of Mexico is Estados Unidos Mexicanos, Mexican United States. Below I will use the abbreviation US for the United States of North America.

vocabulary pertaining to race and therefore the impossibility of articulating it as the source of a wrong. As Mwasi tersely notes: “The war on racism boils down to a war on the words of antiracism. People who talk of « Whites », « Blacks » or « races » are silenced by the simple argument that races do not exist and that talking about them is in itself racist” (Mwasi, 2018, 37).

Afropean Organizing

In this context, the necessity of organizing meetings among women concerned by racism has come under fierce attack: for instance, when in the summer 2017 the Afrofeminist organization Mwasi organized a festival, Nyansapo (figure 1), in which some sessions were “en non-mixité”, excluding people not exposed to racism, public outrage knew no bounds. The mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, who belongs to the Socialist party and leads a left-wing coalition, announced that she would prohibit the event from taking place (on the assumption that it was planned in a municipal venue, which it was not).



Figure 1: The announcement of Nyansapo festival in its 2017 version (another was held in 2019). Note the use of a slogan in English.

Discussing these events in their manifesto *Afrofem*, Mwasi commented:

“We are the new ‘racialists’. Behind this accusation, the affront that we were discussing race in France. Not in the US, where it was clear for everyone that there were white and non-white people (...) we are attacked because we organize non-mixed events (*en non-mixité*) (...) non-mixity is a vulgar pretext for not admitting that what makes them uncomfortable is our politics. If we had met in non-mixed groups to talk of Black men’s supposedly cultural specific violence, of how we were oppressed by Islam (for the Muslims among us), of genital mutilation, of forced marriages, we would have been praised, even subsidized” (Mwasi, 2018, 27-28).

In the face of such public smothering of political subjectivities in actual physical spaces, many activists have resorted to social networks and virtual space to organize and support each other. While there is, for obvious reasons, no such thing in France as “Black twitter”, other terms less likely to expose to racist harassment such as “la flamboyance” or “Black girl magic” were used (in English for the latter phrase) to identify and create online communities. Many adopted the term “afropéenne” (Afropean, person of Subsaharan or Caribbean descent and European culture) forged by writer Leonora Miano to define their identity, which echoes Gonzalez’s creative use of neotoponymy to challenge power relations inscribed in normative geographies. A number of blogs, facebook groups, associations allow Black French feminists to speak up for themselves and share experiences in safe “discursive spaces” (Bruneel and Gomes Silva, 2017) that no mayor can threaten to ban them from. As Mwasi explains: “we were

visible mainly on the internet, thanks to social networks and blogs that enabled many of us to analyze our experiences (...) we were virtual bubbles” (Mwasi, 2018, 26).

Attempts by angered white supremacists or “universalists” from the left or the right of the political spectrum to have them banned from their online fora are rife however, and protective strategies had to be deployed in order to voice public criticism of white racism on social networks without having to fear massive backlash: for instance Afrofeminists learned to substitute a blank (“blanc” in French, the same word as “white”) or space for the word “blanc” that could be searched by racist harassers and trolls; gradually this blank space was replaced by the word “espace”.

The dialogue with Anglophone Black feminism has been, as Gonzalez would have guessed, crucial to kickstart Afrofeminist cyberactivism in France, as Larcher’s work establishes:

Many interviewees talk of readings on blogs, trading translations of texts or books either with people they knew or in Afrofeminist discussion groups (either private groups on online fora or in cafés) (...) (they argue) the theoretical references of Black feminism, its grammar and body of arguments, allowed them to “put words” on lived experiences which in France are in no way objects of knowledge or public discourse (Larcher, 2017, 107)

However, there was a sense that Anglo references had their limitations and couldn’t account fully for experiences in France: as Sharone Omankoy, one of the co-founders of Mwasi explains: “to have one foot in the field is to know the limits of Anglo-saxon vocabulary, and of a focus on American productions” (Mwasi, 2018, 17). Fania Noël-Thomassaint also emphasizes this sense of US references taking the place of more local histories : “It is not mere coincidence that activists know by heart the lives of Malcolm X or Angela Davis, and the Black Panther Party, but have the greatest difficulties to recall Black struggles in France and their legacy” (Noël-Thomassaint, 2019, 26). In a beautiful image coined by Maboula Soumahoro, Black people in France have inherited the “triangle” of triangular trade, which makes the American continent, in particular its Anglophone northern part, a sort of inevitable third party to the self-definition of Afropeans. Soumahoro combines the triangle with the “hexagon” (the geometric figure supposed to represent the shape of metropolitan France) in her recent book (Soumahoro, 2020). Soumahoro is also part of an increasingly vocal number of French people who criticize the frequent use of the (English) word ‘Black’ in France to avoid saying ‘Noir’, as though the latter were offensive.

There is a sense in which the overbearing US reference actually overshadows even intimate experiences, for instance when it comes to images and representations of ‘Black love’: “This constant detour by African-American experiences to envision models of families, couples, groups or friends, contributes to making us invisible” (Mwasi, 2018, 70). Black families in French fiction, they argue, are always depicted in ways that support racist views of absent fathers or violent brothers; the fictional ideal is always a mixed-race family (Mwasi, 2018, 71). Noël-Thomassaint is equally critical of this “injunction to” or “propaganda in favour of *métissage*” (Noël-Thomassaint, 2019, 59, 64) and “discourse tending to make mixed-race couples brave and activist acts”, even as “war is being waged against Black families” (2019, 61).

A conscious effort has therefore been made to reclaim the erased history and figures of French Black feminism, such as the Nardal sisters who were part of the *négritude* movement, or the Coordination of Black women from the late 1970s. Not that the objective is to promote Francophone parochialism or nationalism, since, as Larcher emphasizes, the very term Afrofeminism, that is not hyphenated, “explicitly challenges a geography of feminism that would parade as universalist and abstract, defined along national, or nationalistic, frontiers” (Larcher, 2017, 106). Mwasi also develops international alliances, in Brazil and throughout Europe (Larcher, 2017, 120), and strikes up collaborations with other anti-racist, decolonial groups to organize events and gatherings. Importantly, the collective makes itself

physically present and visible in the “center” to protest marginalization in mainstream white feminism narratives; members are often highly educated professionals, living in Paris rather than the *banlieues*.

Larcher’s study also documents the variety of causes for which a group such as Mwasi has mobilized: protesting online, but also in the streets, against the opening of a bar called the “Bal nègre”, against sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and all forms of gender violence, against labour law reforms, armament trade fairs, police violence and for climate justice, among others. They have supported the strikes of hotel workers in Paris and Marseille, organized support systems for refugees, and demonstrated alongside, among others, asylum seekers, sex workers, trans and intersex people, i.e. groups that mainstream feminist movements tend to shun or ignore, which, Larcher writes, shows how they deploy a “feminism of the margins” (Larcher, 2017, 119), one that is thoughtfully inclusive and by no means centered on self-interest. French Afrofeminist scholar Maboula Soumahoro articulates this “universality” of Black women’s activism:

Being positioned on the margins is what gives a universal apprehension of problems. Whereas this marginalized position is always described as sectarian, communitarian, marginal, as the word itself implies, but the contrary is true! These very margins, these margins, include the centre. Peripheries take the centre into account, they can’t not do so (Soumahoro, 2019, 177).

Mwasi’s intersectional stance and wish to associate with other minorities was echoed in recent events protesting violence against women, for instance the November 24th, 2018 march “Nous Toutes” (All of Us), which was headed by an “intersectional feminist block” *Nous Aussi* (Us Too) including Afrofeminists, Muslims, the sex workers’ union STRASS, anti-sizist collectives, etc. It is a positive sign for feminism that these groups that were often excluded or relegated to the end of demonstrations were up front in this instance; similar foregroundings of minorities took place at the June 2018 Paris Pride (which began with a banner “Queer, trans, racialised against homonationalism”) or the May 26th “Marée Populaire” (People’s Tide) led by the Comité Adama, a collective formed after the death in police custody of a young Black inhabitant of Beaumont-sur-Oise, to which we will return in a later section.

Reclaiming Community

Seeing us in our communities will make clear and concrete to you how incomplete we really are in our relationships to you (Lugones and Spelman, 1983, 581)

Mwasi’s inclusive and intersectional feminism is in stark contrast to the femonationalism deployed by the Parisian municipality, exemplified by Hidalgo’s stance on the Nyansapo festival. Femonationalism, a term coined by Sara Farris, refers to the ways in which feminism has been enlisted by exclusionary, nationalistic and xenophobic political movements in several European countries, among which France, with consequences not only on migration policies but also on the treatment of migrant men and women (Farris, 2017). Programmes for the “emancipation” of women, in the Netherlands, Italy and France, tend to target immigrant women, Muslims in particular, implying they are the ones that need saving and protecting from their communities. Simultaneously, “integration” programmes purporting to help those women find jobs channel them toward care work and domestic work, facilitating white middle-class women’s access to paid work outside the home. There is therefore more than a little self-interest in the relative “kindness” shown to female migrants with respect to males, and the “feminist” critique of the Islamic veil operates effectively to keep a reserve army of overqualified and underpaid Muslim women at the service of white middle-class women for care work.

Lieber has shown how municipal policies in Paris are devised for the safety of “women”, but not all women: those not deemed “respectable” enough, for instance Chinese sex workers, are considered fair game for police harassment and violence (Lieber, 2018), as are visibly Muslim women (Hancock

and Mobillion, 2019). Research from other European locations has shown that the concern for the safety of women or children (Listerborn, 2016; Van den Berg, 2017) has often been put forward as part of processes of “cleansing” and re-packaging public space that accompany gentrification and speculative urban renewal projects.

Members of Mwasi are keenly aware of these processes. In a blog post entitled “Why is gentrification an Afrofeminist issue”, Mrs Roots points out that:

Gentrification is an Afrofeminist issue because it’s one of the factors that contributes, and will go on contributing, to the vulnerability of Black women in their access to housing and their relation to public space. Our individualities are exposed to ever more unequal housing markets and spatial organizations, and our Black bodies are criteria for an area being deemed “disreputable/unsafe” or “too communitarian”. In the Anglo world, Black feminist movements are discussing ways to counter (in the short term) these hostile evolutions via healing spaces. It would be interesting to see what strategies are possible in France, in the capital and outside of it².

A similar awareness of what is at stake in gentrification is to be found among contributors to the journal *AssiégéEs*, formed to carry the voices of people from “former” (their quote marks) European colonies that aim to articulate struggles against capitalism, systemic racism and patriarchy:

The organization of the Olympics is a booster to the Grand Paris planning project. But for whom is this Greater Paris being created? (...) the promotion of “mixité sociale” is a mere façade, since populations of deprived neighbourhoods are being *de facto* marginalized (...) (gentrification is) a process of colonization of spaces through real estate that particularly targets racialized, migrant, homeless people...” (Cheikh and Almeida, 2019, 21-23).

The name of the journal *AssiégéEs*, “under siege”, points to the sense of oppression, akin to a siege, of groups whose right to spaces of their own is being denied. The denial of spaces in which to regroup protected from the intrusion of oppressors has been a very potent mechanism, and the accusation of “communitarianism” operates to discredit any attempt to create such spaces. As sociologist and anti-racist activist Saïd Bouamama states “The constitution of our own spaces is essential: they allow for survival, for reinforcement, they help us resist and provide solidarity. And the discourse of communitarianism prevents the existence of such spaces” (Bouamama, 2019, 185-186).

The extension of Paris beyond its limits, to form the “Grand Paris”, is a constant preoccupation among people whose legitimacy to stay put is being challenged. As Alex Schafran and others have shown, racialized inhabitants of the *banlieues* are being designed out of the renovation projects of the Grand Paris (Schafran et al., 2017), with renderings whitewashing the futures of the petite *couronne*, the areas closest to Paris where gentrification is making its most massive inroads. Local inhabitants are often critical of the process, and when the Comité Adama took the lead in the “People’s Wave” demonstration (May 26th 2018), they did so with a sign inspired by rapper Médine’s song “C’est nous le Grand Paris” (we are the Greater Paris), reading “We’re the ones holding up Paris, we are the Greater Paris” and listing not just “colonial management of neighbourhoods, racisms, islamophobia, negrophobia” but also “gentrification, urban renewal” among their grievances (Fig.2).

² <https://mrsroots.fr/2018/04/23/pourquoi-la-gentrification-est-un-enjeu-afrofeministe/> accessed December 18th, 2019



Figure 2: Head of the “Marée populaire” (People’s Wave) marching in Paris, May 26th, 2018, picture by Madjid Messaoudène (elected official of Saint-Denis)

Reclaiming “community” is a central objective of the struggle: Fania Noël-Thomassaint, another Afrofeminist activist and editor of *AssiégéEs*, wrote a pamphlet entitled *Afro-communautaire: appartenir à nous-mêmes* (Afro-communitarian: belonging to ourselves, Noël-Thomassaint, 2019) to call for less emphasis on mimicking an idealized North-American Black activism. Her work underlines the need to address France’s specific rejection of “communitarianism” as a major threat to national unity, and to wield “community” as a weapon against neoliberal and individualistic forces at work to depoliticize Black issues. There are echoes here of Rita Segato’s work and the “communitarian fabric” she extolls as offering refuge from, and resistance to “colonial modernity” (Segato, 2016, 615). “(...) W[w]hat emerges as a promising path is rehearsing a mistrust of the public sphere for its barely concealed male lineage, and attempting a new transition capable of dismantling the universal One established by the public sphere so that a true plurality of spaces might emerge” (Segato, 2016, 618).

Spearheading Social Justice Movements

We didn't join the *Gilets Jaunes*. In the *banlieue* we have been *Gilets Jaunes* for forty years. Assa Traoré, (public speech July 21st, 2019, Beaumont-sur-Oise)

Lastly I want to consider the relations and possible overlap of the forms of activism by Parisian minorities with the far more visible, nationally and internationally, *Gilets Jaunes* movement, which took off in the autumn of 2018, initially as a protest against government measures to raise taxes on fuel. The *Gilets Jaunes* movements taking place throughout France, on roundabouts in the middle of nowhere as well as in the highly symbolic central areas of Paris, captured worldwide imaginations. If their claims, broadly defined, echo the grievances of parts of the country that experienced a growing sense of being left behind by globalization and the centralization of wealth, they failed to steer clear of reactionary identity politics and anti-migrant narratives.

As narrated by Youcef Brakhni, a spokesperson for the Comité Adama, there was a hustle to harness this leaderless protest movement between extreme-right, xenophobic parties, and leftist movements (Brakhni, 2019). Not that all leftist movements would necessarily have been sympathetic to the causes of non-white anti-racist activists. The French context offers specific resistances to the recognition of minorities, many of them to do with hostility to Anglo hegemony: from the point of view of several French left-wing organizations, identity politics and the recognition of differences other than class (e.g. gender or race) are not merely distractions, they are part and parcel of the onslaught of neoliberalism— two contemporary ills of Anglo origin and to be fought with equal determination. Samuel Hayat rightly underlines how many claims from the *Gilets Jaunes* are not merely anti-elite and anti-neoliberal, they also refer to an imagined pre-neoliberal idyllic past which, incidentally, was also a time in which minorities were less visible and silenced, or at least not as vocal as they are currently (Hayat, 2019). In spatial terms, the received wisdom, for the past few French governments, regardless of

political leanings, has been that the real *France périphérique*, the most deprived margins, were rural and suburban areas that turned to voting for the extreme right whereas the *banlieues* and their racialized inhabitants, sitting on the closest outskirts of powerful cities, and particularly the capital, had in fact been coddled and favoured by urban policy (Charmes, 2014; Gintrac and Mekdjian, 2014).

Importantly, the *Gilets Jaunes* embodied a new territoriality of social issues, staking claims based on everyday experiences of life and unequal access to resources in specific parts of the country, at home, in shops, cities (Gaudillière et al., 2019). They therefore carried a new way of speaking of class issues that did/does not emphasize salaried work but rather all sorts of work, and identities not just as workers but also as inhabitants, consumers, users of public services. The violence of police repression the *Gilets Jaunes* encountered when they made inroads into the privileged parts of central Paris contributed to the sense of a common condition, and common experiences, with inhabitants of the peripheries of the city, the *banlieues*, where such police action, maiming, repressing, and sometimes killing, has been the norm for decades. The possibilities for racialized *banlieue* youth to take part in the *Gilets Jaunes* were, however, strongly curtailed by their much greater vulnerability to police violence: activists from Pantin, a *banlieue* directly adjacent to north-east Paris, interviewed by Marie-Hélène Bacqué, expressed as much: “Basically, they didn’t feel they could come to demonstrations because they were bound to suffer most from the repression. Honestly, having seen the repression firsthand, I understand them” (Nadège, in Bacqué, 2019). The “image” of the *Gilets Jaunes* movement, they granted, was of “white people from rural or suburban areas”; as had been the case with the *Nuit Debout* occupation of République in 2016, inhabitants of the *banlieues* questioned why they should be expected to join a white-led movement and bear the brunt of police repression when white solidarity had been conspicuously absent during the 2005 revolts.

Brakhni commented:

The question is, were there Black people and Arabs among the *Gilets Jaunes*? Yes, there were. The one who started the petition (protesting the rise of taxes on fuel) was Priscillia Ludovsky, a Black woman, which isn’t nothing in a country like France. (...) but how could the *quartiers populaires* [working-class neighbourhoods] have identified massively with a movement led by white working-class people? (...) inhabitants of the *quartiers* did not go to the Champs-Élysées, but they participated where they live, in their own cities. (Brakhni, 2019, 37).

Brakhni also describes how the convergence between the Comité Adama and the *Gilets Jaunes* became possible as the harshness of police violence was increasingly felt by white *Gilets Jaunes* who had no previous experience of it. One victim became a symbol of the convergence: Zineb Redouane, an 80-year old woman who had been watching a *Gilets Jaunes* demonstration from her home in Marseille in December 2018 was hit by a tear gas canister and subsequently died in hospital. Her death became a unifying force for movements with very different claims, and hailing from different parts of the country: the banner on fig. 3 exemplifies the coming together of rural areas and working-class neighbourhoods, in later demonstrations.



Figure 3: Banner protesting police killings, featuring Zineb Redouane who was killed in her apartment in Marseille as she watched *Gilets Jaunes* demonstrations from her window, image posted by journalist Taha Bouhafs, February 2nd, 2019

The Comité Adama is led by Adama Traoré's twin sister, Assa (4th from left in fig.3), who has become a prominent figure of social justice struggles. The visible prominence of women among leaders of anti-police violence has been a firm rebuttal of allegations about women's intrinsically oppressed condition in deprived neighbourhoods and in racialized communities, as the 2015 Marche de la Dignité showed. It has also been one of the clearest retorts to public displays of concern for women's safety, and policies foregrounding white middle-class women at the expense of others (Hancock, 2017).

In July 2019 the *Gilets Jaunes* joined the commemoration of Adama's death which took place in Beaumont-sur-Oise, one hour outside Paris in the northern outer *banlieue*, signalling growing solidarities between forms of margins that dominant political discourse had tended to pit against one another.

Conclusions

We and you do not talk the same language. When we talk to you we use your language: the language of your experience and of your theories. We try to use it to communicate our world of experience (...) We cannot talk to you in our language because you do not understand it. So the brute facts that we understand your language and that the place where most theorizing about women is taking place, both combine to require that we either use your language and distort our experience (...) or that we remain silent (Lugones and Spelman, 1983, 575).

The asymmetry between languages, and linguistic abilities, weighs heavily on our profession and scholarship, and this bears repeating behalf of large number of people outside the Anglosphere. I want to insist here on the untranslatable: the negative connotations nearly always carried by the term "miscegenation" are totally absent from current uses of "métissage" in French or *mestizaje* in Spanish. Conversely, the term "mixité", usually connotated very positively, is a concept without equivalent in English: it could refer to co-ed schooling as well as mixed-income or mixed-race areas. These different ways of thinking and seeing translate into different types of urban policies: a relative neglect of the ghetto contrasts with French interventionism and drive to colonize the margins through well-meaning policies for *mixité sociale*, with gentrification being policy-led rather than merely market-led in many parts of the *banlieue* (Raad, 2014). Terms such as "center" and "margins" may seem transparent but are reinforced

by strong inequalities between central Paris and its closest surroundings: the opposition between a privileged center and deprived margins actually maps onto the social geography of the urban area, which is something hard to convey in English with the inappropriate connotations of “suburbs” (emphatically different from those of “banlieue”)—much in the same way as “community” carries opposite connotations to “communauté”.

As Lugones and Spelman insisted back in the 1980s, “(t)urf matters” (Lugones and Spelman, 1983, 579). To have one’s own national journals designated “international” operates much in the same way as having one’s country designated by a name that by rights belongs to the entire continent (even if that name refers an entire continent to the white male person of a European imperialist). It makes one’s understandings and theorizings of racism, for instance, the norm and default against which the rest of the world needs to define itself, forcing us to endlessly explain our “specific contexts”. It opens huge gaps in knowledge, with parts of the world which “international” Anglo theories fail to account for feeling marginalized, misunderstood, and having to explain themselves as always “specific”, deviant from a norm that does not acknowledge its own situatedness.

As Raewyn Connell, who has devoted much of her work to foregrounding “southern theory”, says “critique by itself is inadequate: one needs to show alternatives” (Connell, nd), and it is what I have attempted in this piece. It is important to express to Anglo audiences who may have no experience of it the disempowering effect of “racism by denial”, which denies many the very intellectual tools, and in France the very use of words, which elsewhere can be used to counter invisibility and racism. How does one discuss racial segregation, or the racial impact of gentrification, in a country in which it is legally prohibited to collect data on race, and in which the very suggestion that racial discrimination exists is decried as “racist discourse”?

As a conclusion to this piece, I want to set the points discussed above in a broader perspective relevant to the intercultural exchanges that take place in so-called international, and in fact massively Anglophone, journals. While I appreciate greatly the fact that journals such as *Acme* accept submissions in several languages, it is quite clear to me that were I to have written this in French, a large majority of Anglo geographers would never read it. It is important to emphasize that the international trade in ideas, while it may well have emancipatory effects, also sometimes oppresses, erases, mutilates—I speak here from experience of many anguished discussions on the margins of conference sessions on Anglo turf in which non-Anglo work is taken apart in less than benevolent ways. This is how we are taught to remain on the margins to the Anglo center. But as the domestic workers who know both their homes and the homes of their employers, like the Hispana who speaks Spanish as well as English, our knowledge is more complete than yours, and unlike us you lack an understanding of your own specificity and of the situatedness of your point of view.

Afrofeminists rightly insist on the very contextual nature of their experiences: Sharone Omankoy, for instance, reminds us that “the life of a Black woman in Paris is not the same as that of a Black woman who lives in Brest, for instance, or Pointe-à-Pitre” (Mwasi, 2018, 17), while Fania Noël-Thomassaint insists “Let’s stop doing these constant detours by US Black experience, which, though comparable, is embedded in a different context” (Noël-Thomassaint, 2019, 77). While transatlantic and national scales are levels on which marginality needs to be rethought, I would insist on daily experiences of cities as those that materialize power relations in all their poignancy. Work at the scale of the metropolis is needed to convey the everyday challenges of marginalization and displacement. Thus to Segato’s admittedly already broad brief, stated at the beginning of this paper, to use the “woman question” as key to all forms of power and subordination, from local to global scales, I would add the metropolitan scale, and its specific “territorial” challenges.

Lastly, why were the lyrics of *Las Tesis*'s performance translated into French? We touch here at the limits to the commonality of what is "Latin". After all, the notion of "Latin" America was promoted by political advisors to Napoléon III, to suggest France and former colonies of Spain and Portugal across the sea shared Catholicism and an enmity to all things Anglophone, and to serve France's imperialist aims over Mexico in particular. Thus the commonality of "Latin" is as much as of cover-up for imperialism as are many "imagined communities"; however, it does point to a form of oppression little discussed in Anglo journals, Anglo imperialism and the coalitions formed to resist it.

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