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"VA T'FAIRE INTÉGRER !": THE *APPEL DES FÉMINISTES INDIGÈNES* AND THE CHALLENGE TO "REPUBLICAN VALUES" IN POSTCOLONIAL FRANCE

Kiran Grewal

In January 2007, a new collaborative movement of French feminist and anti-racist activists calling themselves *les féministes indigènes* issued an online *appel* (petition/manifesto) asserting an independent anti-racist feminist agenda and demanding a reinvestigation of Republican values in the context of the colonial violence perpetrated in their name. It was the formalization of a network that had existed for a number of years and was closely tied to another movement, *les indigènes de la République*, launched in 2004, which, through marches and public manifestoes, had been attempting to force France to confront its colonial past.

In light of the relative dearth of work done in "postcolonial studies" in France, this movement presents a potentially interesting and exciting development in both activism and theory in France. Through their challenging of traditional feminist and anti-racist discourses, *les féministes indigènes* provide an opportunity to interrogate issues that lie at the heart of current debates regarding women's rights, ethnic relations, immigration, and racism in France. They also represent a promising alternative to the highly publicized but problematic *banlieue*[1] women's association, *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, by identifying the importance of linking anti-racist and feminist discourses.

In order to investigate the value of *les féministes indigènes*, this article will provide an overview of the current dominant rhetoric

employed in promoting the rights of women of immigrant/ethnic minorities within France. In particular, it will look at how *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* has attempted to negotiate a position on this issue within the language of Republican feminism and the problematic contradictions that have been exposed as a result. This article will then investigate how *les féministes indigènes* have sought to overcome this problem by exposing the less than positive historical and political context within which the Republican language of women's rights must be situated.

Background

While Republican values remain the cornerstone of French political discourse, these values – and particularly Republican universalism and egalitarianism – have increasingly come under challenge in recent times. Through various campaigns the ethnic, gender and sexual identity of the supposedly neutral, abstract, universal, French citizen has been called into question.

Since the emergence of the *Beur* movement in the 1980s there has been a steady increase in the visibility of "non-white" French public figures. From popular music (with the popularity of artists such as Khaled, Cheb Mami, and MC Solaar), sport (embodied in footballer and national hero Zinedine Zidane), literature (including popular and celebrated authors such as Calixtha Beyala, Azouz Begag, and Tahar Ben Jelloun), cinema (an example being the success of *banlieue* cinema, which provides a very multi-ethnic image of France) and politics (with the appointment of two women of North African origin – Rachida Dati and Fadela Amara – to Sarkozy's cabinet), France's multi-ethnic reality has become increasingly difficult to ignore. Even back in 1996, David McMurray noted "a very high level of Arab content in all aspects of French popular culture" (27). Furthermore, through new hybrid cuisines and linguistic additions, the influence of different ethnic minorities – especially those from the former French colonies – have increasingly made themselves felt in contemporary French society.

So too, through the actions of both male and female postcolonial French and Francophone subjects, the 1990s and early 2000s have been marked by an increasing pressure on France to face its colonial and racist legacy. Describing an incident at *La Nuit des Césars*[2] in 2000 when Cameroonian author Calixthe Beyala and Caribbean playwright Luc Saint-Eloy interrupted the live broadcast to read a statement critiquing the limited representation of ethnic minorities in French media, Mireille Rosello writes that "the whole episode generated a French discussion about a type of identity politics that theorizes ethnicity and race as components of the Republican subject" (99). For a nation that has constituted its identity on an abstract universalism, this represents a major challenge to dominant conceptions of the French nation.[3]

However, it is not only in terms of ethnicity and race that the concept of the abstract, universal citizen has come under attack. Both women's rights (through the *parité* movement) and gay rights activists (centered around the *Pacte civil de solidarité* or *PaCS* debate) have sought to highlight that, far from being neutral, the abstract citizen is in fact a heterosexist and gendered construction. In the introduction to their collection of essays exploring new developments in French feminism, Roger Célestin, Éliane DalMolin, and Isabelle de Courtivron note an increased recognition within French feminist literature of the need to challenge the uncritical acceptance of the Republican myths of universalism and equality.

In a seven year campaign under the banner of "*Liberté, Egalité, Parité ou les femmes ne sont pas des hommes comme les autres*," the *Parité* movement ultimately led to a constitutional amendment in March 1999, which came into force in March 2001. Joan Scott, in explaining the approach adopted by the movement explains:

> Unlike those earlier movements, which took French republicanism to be immutable, the parité movement sought to change the terms of republicanism by addressing the very problem I thought was intractable: the problem of sexual difference. [...]

> [...] [S]ex had to be included in any conception of abstract individualism for genuine equality to prevail. The abstract individual, that neutral figure upon which universalism depended – without religion, occupation, social position, race, or ethnicity – had to be reconceived of as sexed. Here was the innovation: unlike previous feminisms, women were no longer being made to fit a neutral figure (historically imagined as male), nor were they reaching for separate incarnation of femininity; instead, the abstract individual itself was being refigured to accommodate women. (4)

However, while this campaign reflected an innovative approach to re-imagining the abstract French citizen, commentators have pointed to a general failure within the various social movements working on race or gender issues in France to engage with each other.[4] For example, advocates of the *parité* strategically adopted an unracialized image of universalism to set their cause apart from other, "multicultural" agendas which have been generally considered within French public and intellectual discourse as an unacceptable step towards Anglo-Saxon communitarian chaos. This is exemplified by feminist philosopher Sylviane Agacinski in her essay on *parité*, where she describes an essential, "truly universal" difference of sex while dismissing other concerns of ethnicity, religion, amongst other things, as "muddying the waters" (18).

By staging "sexual difference" as the only truly universal and therefore recognizable difference, the *Parité* movement not only reinforced heterosexual order it also allowed for the pitting of feminist discourses against anti-racist discourses, a fact attested to by much of the public debate surrounding the 2004 *affaire du foulard*. Using Pierre Bourdieu's expression, *les affaires du foulard* served to "place the prophecies of liberation at the service of new forms of domination" (23), by putting Republican feminism in direct conflict with other forms of resistance to dominant hegemonic order.

Ni Putes Ni Soumises & the Discourse of Integration

Ni Putes Ni Soumises entered the public sphere in 2003 following a nationwide march entitled, "*Marche des femmes contre les ghettos et pour l'égalité.*" While the association started out with a general anti-racist, anti-sexist agenda identifying practical issues such as education, employment, and support services, in reality it has come to represent an association focused on sexist violence within the *banlieue*. This is not incidental. As one of the association's spokespersons, Loubna Méliane, explained in an interview on the television program, *Arrêt sur images*.[5] while they had been seeking public funding and support for years, it was only following the emergence of public debate around the phenomenon of *les tournantes*[6] and the highly mediatized death of Sohane Benziane[7], that the movement attracted sufficient support.

At the same time, due to the fact that many of its most prominent members are of North African origin, *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* is frequently presented within mainstream French public discourse as representing "Muslim women," even though many of its members have been vocally anti-Islam.[8] They therefore played a pivotal role in the public debate surrounding the controversial 2004 law banning all "conspicuous religious symbols" from public schools. In December 2003, the president of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, Fadela Amara, along with many other prominent members of the association, joined a petition signed by Republican feminists and published in *Elle* magazine supporting the proposed law banning the *hijab* from schools. The petition was framed around the idea that the *hijab* was primarily a symbol of the submission of women, which had no place in a Republican institution that promoted equality.[9]

This is somewhat ironic in light of Amara's comments in her book, *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, regarding the lack of equality she felt afforded in school due to her ethnic origins: "[C]'est dans le creuset de la République – l'école de mon enfance –, que j'ai véritablement senti pour la première fois que j'étais une étrangère, le jour où une institutrice voulant recenser les élèves étrangers, et

pensant certainement bien faire, m'a demandé de lever la main. Et pourtant, selon la loi issue des accord d'Évian, j'avais la nationalité française" (19). Furthermore, Amara's childhood experience would appear to directly challenge the myth of the Republican school as the site for the creation of French citizens by demonstrating a denied but ever-present ethnicity within Republican citizenship. Yet even as she expresses cynicism regarding one of the central institutions of the Republic, Amara nevertheless continually situates her political position within the Republican model: a point her response to the 2004 *affaire du foulard* exemplifies.

By way of contrast, the paradox of integration, which seeks to both efface and yet cannot ignore ethnic difference, is maintained as a central concern of MIR and *les féministes indigènes*. As spokesperson for both movements, Houria Bouteldja asserts:

> '[L]'issu de l'immigration', ça suffit, ça fait quatre générations et on est toujours l'issus de l'immigration [. . .] la réalité, c'est qu'on ne sera jamais français, puisque être français, c'est appartenir à une espèce de caste. C'est une espèce d'honneur et n'est pas français qui veut. Et comme l'a très bien dit Le Pen, être français, ça se mérite! C'est Le Pen qui le dit mais c'est toute la société qui le pense. Nous, on ne peut pas y prétendre parce qu'on est trop basanés et on ne sera jamais assez blancs pour être français, quoi qu'on dise et quoi qu'on fasse. Donc on est systématiquement obligés de faire nos preuves qu'on est bien civilisés, qu'on mérite d'être français, etc. etc. Rien n'y fera et on peut avoir toutes les cartes nationales qu'on pourra, on aura toujours un corps, un visage qui nous stigmatisera, et cela parce que la Nation française est ethnique. Elle est ethnique. Donc, tant qu'on ne reviendra pas de manière radicale sur ce qu'est la Nation et tant que la Nation et la République ne seront pas redéfinies, ça ne sert à rien pour nous de nous prétendre français. (Bonfilglioni)

In rejecting the expression "of immigrant origin," used to define even those who families have been French for multiple generations, Bouteldja highlights the disparity between the language of integration and the reality of exclusion on ethnic, racial and/or religious grounds. This seems to reinforce Alec Hargreaves's observation that France's rhetoric of civic rather than ethnic citizenship has not avoided the division in France between "*les Français de souche*" and "*les étrangers*," a distinction largely drawn on somatic differences and intricately tied up with France's colonial past (32). Equally, Bouteldja in an article published on the MIR website nicely juxtaposes the position of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* on the *hijab* against the 1958 "unveiling ceremonies" conducted around Algeria by the colonial authorities to highlight problematic ideological assumptions of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*.

It is also for this reason, Bouteldja goes on to explain, that the name *Indigènes* was chosen by her movement. The reappropriation of a term referring to colonized French subjects and traditionally considered pejorative serves two purposes. It contextualizes contemporary ethnic relations in France by constantly reiterating its unresolved colonial legacy. So too it demonstrates a complete rejection of the myths of French universalism and *droit du sol* citizenship, arguing that integration will never be possible until France confronts its own racist colonial history. It is here that the fundamental limitation of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* becomes clear. In attempting to appeal to Republican values as the basis for their claims, *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* legitimates these values, which are in themselves paradoxical and require interrogation. While *les féministes indigènes* reject dominant French ideals as untenable and fundamentally flawed when considered within their historical and social context, *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* appears only to try harder to comply. As a result, while *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* started out as an organization with broader ambitions in relation to addressing the discrimination and violence experienced by women in the *banlieue*, it has increasingly been criticized for failing to attack the structural inequalities that limit the lives of women of immigrant origin in France. Instead, the association has unfortunately resulted in the

further stigmatization and demonization of the *banlieue* and its immigrant (usually represented as male) population.[10]

A telling example of this can be found in the March 2004 manifesto published by *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* on their website to accompany their nationwide demonstration:

> Le 6 mars 2004 est l'occasion, à Paris et dans toute la France, de voir défiler fraternellement toutes celles et tous ceux qui veulent dire haut et fort que sans égalité entre femmes et hommes, c'est tout l'esprit républicain qui est en danger. Tolérer les inégalités entre sexes, c'est abdiquer devant ceux qui veulent faire basculer la France dans le morcellement et le repli communautaire. Il faut plus que jamais continuer le combat pour l'égalité parce que nous voulons vivre ensemble ! Vivre ensemble n'est possible que si nous obtenons le respect de ce droit fondamental, dont dispose chaque être humain, femme ou homme, de vivre dans l'égalité, la dignité et le respect. Nous dénonçons toutes les formes d'oppression et de discrimination faites aux femmes. Dès lors, notre combat féministe est aussi un combat laïque : l'égalité femme/homme ne peut pas progresser si la laïcité recule. Notre mouvement, partout en France, essaye depuis plus d'un an d'organiser la résistance à toute forme de machisme, de violences faites aux femmes, d'obscurantisme, d'intégrisme, que la précarité et l'exclusion favorisent. Que le samedi 6 mars prochain, Paris soit la capitale des Lumières, du féminisme, de la laïcité et du progrès des consciences.

Equality becomes limited to "equality between the sexes," the threat to "communautarianise" – the ultimate act of treachery – is displaced from the feminist agenda onto the question of ethnicity and race in France and feminism is inextricably tied up with French Enlightenment, modernity, and secularism. The parallels between

this discourse and that of the "civilizing mission" discourse central to the French colonial project are striking.

Republican Feminism and the Civilizing Mission

The implication of Western feminism within imperialist discourses, while long ignored, has been increasingly identified and explored within postcolonial feminist scholarship.[11] Feminism as an export of the West has been highlighted as a central feature of the "civilizing mission" used to justify the colonial enterprise, and nowhere was this more evident than in French imperialist discourse. As Alice Conklin has argued, "[c]ivilization is a particularly French concept," with the *mission civilisatrice* providing not just a corollary discourse to France's colonial projects but in fact its *raison d'être*: "Of course all European powers at the end of the nineteenth century claimed to be carrying out the work of civilization in their overseas territories; but only in republican France was this claim elevated to the realm of official imperial doctrine" (1).

Conklin suggests that an essential reason for the pre-eminence of civilizing discourses is the very language of Republicanism on which French national identity (particularly since the Third Republic) has been built. On the one hand, the principles asserted by the Revolution served to demonstrate France's advanced position of civilization, which, it was argued, must be spread throughout the world.[12] However, these principles also imposed a set of values, which at first glance seemed to be in direct opposition to aggressive imperialism.[13] As a result, there was a much stronger need to justify colonial expansion within a democratic framework. It is precisely the benevolent spreading of civilization, progress, and development that provided the language within which to reconcile these two opposing but essential aspects of French nationalism:

> [R]epublican France invested the notion of a civilizing mission with a fairly specific set of meanings that set limits on what the government could and could not do in the colonies. By offi-

> cially acting within these limits, the French managed to obscure the fundamental contradiction between democracy and the forcible acquisition of an empire. (Conklin, 2) [14]

At the center of this *mission civilisatrice*, as Julia Clancy-Smith demonstrates, was the situation of colonized women: "By 1900 issues of sex and gender, particularly the status of Arab women, came to be privileged in debates over Algerian male suffrage. Manipulated as a political and rhetorical strategy, female status was marshaled to refute the notion that the Arabs' assimilation to France was desirable or even possible" (155-156).

For example, in 1935 a bill was proposed seeking to extend citizenship rights to Algerians even if they maintained their Muslim affiliations (which up until this point were considered incompatible with the French Civil Code). However, the Blum-Viollette bill as it was called faced great opposition and was ultimately rejected on the basis that this would legitimize what the majority of French considered to be atrocious Muslim gender relations. As Paul Cuttoli, mayor of Constantine and a leading opponent of the bill asserted, "the indigenous woman must see the end of this shocking inequality that exists between the man, the male, the lord, and his companion" before the indigenous man could be considered sufficiently civilized to hold French citizenship (Bowlan, 184).

This was of course highly hypocritical in the context of the continued denial of French women's right to vote. Yet, it was the general consensus among the French population that their own Christian tradition provided for more civilized and advanced gender relations that those of their Muslim counterparts. Moreover, while colonial authorities used the discourse of "women's rights" to justify the denial of full citizenship rights to colonized populations, French feminists wholeheartedly embraced imperialist discourses in their expressions of concern for their Muslim/Algerian sisters. As Sara Kimble explains, French feminists were critical of the colonial administrators, not for their racist attitudes towards the local

populations under their control but rather for their failure to fully enact the civilizing mission. Indeed, the feminists themselves often adopted highly racist and imperialist language in their description of the plight of colonized women. It was a point of unwavering agreement between feminists and colonists that only through the increased secularization and westernization of colonized peoples could they be seen as fit to be considered French.

Thus, when placed in France's colonial historical context the popularity and public support afforded to *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* can be read in a very different light. In framing their demands in the language of Republican feminism *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, however unconsciously, has promoted a discourse alarmingly similar to that used throughout the French colonial era. As the colonial experience demonstrated, far from providing a means of liberation, this brand of feminism traditionally served to obscure other claims to equality and justified dominant hierarchies of power. Alternatively, by rebelling against the accepted language of Republicanism, *les féministes indigènes* potentially represent a new and exciting shift in French political and social activism.

Towards a New (Postcolonial) Republican Order? *Les féministes indigènes*

Even prior to the issuing of the *appel* a feminist, anti-colonialist movement had been emerging in France in recent times. According to spokesperson for both *le mouvement des indigènes de la République* (MIR) and *les féministes indigènes*, Houria Bouteldja, it had always been intended that MIR would adopt a feminist perspective in its anti-colonial and anti-racist activism. Indeed, throughout the 2005 petition/manifesto, there were references to the interrelationship between sexism and racism and how MIR intended to address both. However, the *appel des féministes indigènes* goes further. It is a highly sophisticated document that articulates a rejection of traditional anti-racism and feminist movements in France in favor of an approach that sees the inter-connectedness of ethnicity, race, class, and gender in structures of oppression and discrimination.

Most notably, the *appel* expressly rejects an appeal to Republican Values and "*les Lumières*" arguing that these supposedly neutral and highly mythologized values are in sharp contrast with the very real history of colonial oppression and violence and their ongoing legacy. By using "*va t'faire intégrer*" as a play on the insult, "*va t'faire foutre*," the movement completely discards the rhetoric of integration and equality through citizenship which has largely dominated French discourses across the political spectrum.

In many ways *les féministes indigènes* reflect another step forward in an emerging recognition within French public and academic spheres of the hybrid reality of postcolonial France. Alongside, or perhaps as a consequence of, the increased visibility of diversely racialized / ethnicized and sexualized Republican subjects within the French public sphere, there has also been an increasing shift within French academic scholarship towards considering the interrelating power structures of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality and class.[15] However, for a movement which asserts its activist rather than intellectual base (Bonfiglioli), *les féministes indigènes* presents a highly sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the issues as their manifesto demonstrates:

> Dans notre société, racisme et sexisme sont intimement imbriqués. Nous subissons des oppressions de classe, de genre et de néo-indigénat qui se renforcent mutuellement. Notre parole est seule légitime pour faire état de la réalité de ces oppressions croisées. Cette parole est radicalement anti-raciste et anti-sexiste. Nous n'établissons pas de priorité entre ces luttes intrinsèquement liées. Nous dénonçons catégoriquement toutes les violences sexistes et racistes que nous subissons quelles qu'elles soient et d'où qu'elles viennent. Nous ne tairons pas notre combat féministe sous prétexte que la lutte anti-raciste est prioritaire. De la même façon nous ne tairons pas notre combat anti-raciste pour servir de relais, au nom d'un pseudo-féminisme à la diabolisation des noir-e-s, des arabes, des musulman-e-s et d'autres populations stigmatisées racialement.

Through their ironic adoption of the image of the helpless "Third World Woman," *les féministes indigènes* not only assert their own agency but also highlight the collusion between Republican feminist discourses of liberation and the reinforcement of hegemonic order:

> Personnalités politiques, intellectuel-le-s, féministes, représentants institutionnels [. . .] en France, se penchent avec humanisme et compassion sur le sort des femmes issues de l'immigration postcoloniale que NOUS sommes.
>
> Ils nous encouragent à nous émanciper, à nous défaire de notre état de nature, ou, pour les plus évoluées d'entre nous, de notre état de sous-culture. Ils nous protègent contre nos maris, nos pères et nos frères supposés culturellement violents, violeurs et voileurs. Ils sont les boucliers sans lesquels nous sommes vouées à demeurer soumises, mariées de force à des brutes, excisées..., et peut-être même lapidées. De leur vigilance zélée dépend notre libération. Ils parlent en notre nom. Pour notre bien. [. . .]
>
> Messieurs-Dames, le Collectif des Féministes Indigènes a le plaisir de vous annoncer la fin de la comédie. Il vous prie de ravaler vos larmes et de remballer vos bons sentiments.

Thus they reject the appropriation of their voice, which they declare to be both paternalistic and neo-colonial. Instead, they continuously refer to the long history of resistance and agency of non-Western women to demonstrate that it is not through adopting Western models of feminism that they will be "saved." Within the *appel* itself they draw upon both French feminist tradition[16] and the rhetoric of anti-colonialist resistance[17] to construct a complex,

hybrid identity that embraces both their immigrant/ethnic origins and demands recognition of their status as French or Francophone subjects. Moreover, by demonstrating the manner in which colonial ideology continues to have an impact in the postcolonial context, *les féministes indigènes* assist with the problematizing of the discourse about the "clash of civilizations" that has dominated many Western encounters with Islam.

The manner in which *les féministes indigènes* seek to convey their message is also interesting. As already demonstrated above (and in the title of this article), they make extensive use of parody and satire. In doing this they caricaturize not only the racist, right wing discourses in France but also the supposedly "liberal" well meaning discourses of the Left. A particularly interesting example is a communication entitled, "La République doit protéger les jeunes femmes d'origine chrétienne" posted on their website in November 2006, in which *les féministes indigènes* caricature the links drawn within popular media between violence against women and Islam by reappropriating this rhetoric to refer to "Christians." Drawing on the publicized death of television presenter Evelyne Thomas in November 2006 at the hands of her partner, and citing statistics on domestic violence committed within France, *Ni Potes Ni Soumises* [sic] calls for a national march, "d'alerter l'opinion publique et inciter les autorités républicaines à prendre toutes les mesures qui s'imposent pour protéger la sécurité des femmes d'origine chrétienne qui tiennent à rentrer dans la modernité sans subir la violence innée des jeunes chrétiens."

Clearly parodying *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (hence the ironic choice of name) and other feminist organizations that have adopted highly anti-Islamic discourses, *Ni Potes Ni Soumises* goes on to declare:

> Nous ne confondons certes pas la religion chrétienne avec le fanatisme religieux de ces jeunes mais il serait temps d'arrêter de se voiler la face. Le nombre particulièrement élevé de violences conjugales dans les quartiers chrétiens nous interpelle. Cela serait-il sans rapports, comme le proclament les christiano-gauchistes, avec la culture patriarcale et misogyne que propage depuis deux millénaires le Nouveau Testament, un texte qui consacre la supériorité masculine, incite au mépris de la femme et prône la violence à leur égard.

In identifying evidence of patriarchal culture and misogyny within Christian religious ideology, *Ni Potes Ni Soumises* demonstrates the limitation of any feminist discourse that seeks to problematize and critique only one particular cultural or religious tradition. Furthermore, they satirize the left-wing discourse that asserts the need to develop a more "moderate" version of religious/cultural practices in order to achieve the civilizing features of modernity:

> Heureusement, quelques chrétiens véritablement modernistes ont su proposer une nouvelle lecture de leur foi en rupture avec ces préceptes archaïques. Sans rompre avec leur communauté religieuse, ils ont traduit les valeurs de la modernité et du "vivre ensemble" citoyen dans le lexique de la chrétienté. Mais, malgré les apparences, leur influence est restée trop faible et il nous nous appartient à nous, Noires, Arabes et musulmanes, de soutenir les intellectuels chrétiens modérés qui veulent réformer et moderniser la chrétienté.

The suggestion that those Christians who have been able to effectively "modernize" their religious beliefs and practices are a minority parodies the persistent placing of Islam in opposition with Western modernity. So too, their description of the young women as being of "origine chrétienne" highlights the extent to which Islam has been used as an ethnic and racial marker rather than a religious faith within mainstream French discourses. As a result, even those who are not practicing Muslims are nonetheless considered eternally linked to Islam based purely on their ethnic origins. Finally, their conclusion demonstrates the inherent racism contained within

many of the discourses that seek to problematize Islam in the name of "protecting women's rights":

> En attendant, cessons d'être angéliques. Les mesures démagogiques (comme celles qui consistent à placer pendant quinze jours les jeunes chrétiens violents dans un foyer où ils sont tenus de participer à des groupes de parole ou, comme le fait le parquet de Bordeaux, de leur proposer des "stages de citoyenneté") ne sauveront pas les jeunes femmes d'origine chrétienne des violences qu'elles subissent. Cette sorte de prévention a posteriori ne saurait mettre un terme à l'insécurité des jeunes femmes chrétiennes si elle n'est pas accompagnée d'une politique de la fermeté républicaine. Il est intolérable que la République féministe et laïque continue d'accepter sur son territoire des jeunes garçons chrétiens qui menacent ses valeurs fondatrices et mettent en péril le "vivre ensemble." S'ils n'aiment pas la France féministe et républicaine, il faut les rapatrier au Vatican.

The ironic suggestion that Christians who do not appreciate French feminism or Republicanism, "should go back to the Vatican" reflects the unsupportable position of minorities in France, who, while feeling connected to France and having nowhere else to go, are nevertheless constantly forced to demonstrate an uncritical loyalty to the Republic and seen as potentially expellable. It is also important that this statement should be framed in the language of "women's rights." Just as the oppressive status of the colonized woman was sufficient to demonstrate the backwardness of the colonized peoples, in contemporary discourses it is the West's sexual equality which is often invoked to justify its cultural superiority. As Éric Fassin explains:

> [S]i "nous" sommes définis par la démocratie, et d'abord dans sa dimension sexuelle, "eux" se définissent en miroir, comme l'envers sombre de nos lumières. Les "autres" de nos sociétés, barbares menaçant la civilisation démocratique, apparaissent donc logiquement comme polygames, violents voire violeurs, prisonniers d'une culture où ils emprisonnent leurs femmes, entre voile imposé, mariages forcés et mutilations génitales subie: leur sexisme justifierait presque le racisme. (7)

While this co-option of the language of "women's rights" in response to the West's relationship with Islam and Muslims within and outside of Western nations is not specific to France,[18] the manner in which this discourse is framed relies heavily on the specificities of the French Republican tradition. Fassin notes this when he identifies the shifting understanding of the Republican value of *l'égalité*, which is arguably no longer associated with questions of equality of race or class but specifically, "l'égalité républicaine, c'est devenu l'égalité entre les sexes" (8). This sexual equality, or *"démocratie sexuelle,"* as he calls it, has become central to *l'exception française*: a form of "exemplary democracy" (9) that must be defended at all costs. *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, as demonstrated above, has uncritically accepted this rhetoric that serves to pit feminist discourse against anti-racist discourses (ultimately to the detriment of non-white/immigrant women).

It is therefore significant that Lila Benzid-Basset, one of *les féministes indigènes*, is quick to reject what she identifies as the appropriation and instrumentalization of the language of "women's rights" to promote other, less "feminist" agendas. "Ce que Le Pen n'a pas réussi," she comments, "nos 'amis et protecteurs' anciens, vont le réussir. Nous allons passer d'un racisme respectable à un racisme salvateur pour atteindre un racisme de bon ton." Benzid-Basset perfectly captures the point, also made by Nacira Guénif-Souilamas in her article, "The Other French Exception: Virtuous Racism and the War of the Sexes in Postcolonial France" published in the same year. In reviewing mainstream discourse in France on the situation of non-white/immigrant women, Guénif-Souilamas identifies the

emergence of what she calls a form of "virtuous racism." She argues that by using the language of women's rights, old French colonial hierarchies have been reinforced through the control of formerly colonized subjects' bodies. The demonized figure of the "*garçon arabe*" is juxtaposed against the idealized figure of the "*beurette*" who is seen as the model of successful integration, whose only obstacle to full modern Enlightenment is the patriarchal and misogynist traditions of her culture of origin.

This idea is developed further by Christelle Hamel when she writes that "beurette" sexuality has become the site of battle between conflicting patriarchal orders: on the one hand this woman is an object of control within "her own" ethnic community. Her sexuality and her body reflect the boundaries of the community and must therefore be policed and guarded. On the other, her "sexual liberation" (best demonstrated by her choosing a white French partner) provides proof of the superiority of dominant white French society. Her rejection of the man of immigrant/minority ethnic origin becomes symbolic of his lesser value when compared with the white man.

It is exactly this gendered language of integration, used to justify the social exclusion and economic marginalization of *banlieue* immigrant populations, that *les féministes indigènes* seek to challenge, as Benzid-Basset (2006) explains: "Comment savourer sa réussite quand elle est instrumentalisée, mise en lumière, en relief dans des discourse pour démontrer que réussir dans les pires conditions est possible, alors pourquoi les changer ! On exhibe l'exception qui confirme la règle, celle qui veut que l'immigration Afro-Maghrébine ne fait rien pour s'intégrer." In refusing to accept to be the "exception that confirms the rule," *les féministes indigènes* seek to avoid the very trap that *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* seems to fall into. They reject the creation of opposition between their status as women and as postcolonial subjects. They refuse the position of "ideal victims" and the granting of agency on the condition that it places an emphasis on specific forms of violence and discrimination (being that committed by "their own" men). Thus, in their manifesto they express solidarity with male victims of racism, while

re-asserting the very specific concerns associated with the lives of non-white/immigrant women in France:

> Dans une société "francepaysdesdroits-del'homme", structurellement inégalitaire et patriarcale, NOUS, descendantes de colonisé-e-s et d'immigré-e-s lançons un appel aux femmes et aux féministes qui s'estiment victimes de violences sexistes et racistes à nous rejoindre en vue de contribuer à l'émergence et à la construction d'une parole FEMINISTE POLITIQUE, égalitaire et autonome qui interpelle l'ensemble de la société française dans sa gestion des questions concernant les femmes venues ou vivant dans les pays du sud.

They also express a strong sense of agency, refusing to be used as the site of battle between dominant and dominated patriarchies ("Nous refusons d'être l'enjeu de la concurrence et de la bataille que se livrent le patriarcat des dominés et celui des dominants"). Not only does this directly address Hamel's point regarding the manipulation of the sexuality of young women of immigrant/ethnic minority origin, it also reflects a consciousness of the pitfalls often encountered by women in anti-racist struggles. As prominent feminist critical race scholar bell hooks has documented in relation to the Black civil rights movement, all too often women become symbolic but ancillary to a battle which is ultimately about reclaiming (for the dominated) or reasserting (for the dominant) patriarchal power.

Les féministes indigènes also make interesting use of the language of embodiment to situate their claims. This is not only in relation to the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender on the body but also through references back to colonial control of the bodies of colonized subjects. This language is not only vivid in its visualizing effect, it taps into an incredibly rich theoretical area in terms of the inter-relationship of sex, gender and colonial discourses; areas about which scholars such as Ann Laura Stoler and Anne McClintock have written extensively. Furthermore, it has also has potential in

terms to reflect a post-structuralist problematization of the mind/body split which is at the core of French abstract constructions of citizenship and universalism. This has radical implications for the Western project of modernity, a project to which France has been particularly tied.

Whether or not the movement will develop these ideas remains to be seen. However, what is certain is that while *les féministes indigènes* remains a relatively small movement, it has produced a proliferation of highly sophisticated and nuanced articles on the subject of violence against women, racism and Islamophobia in France and how these affect the lives of women of immigrant backgrounds. Furthermore, in a France still haunted by the repressed trauma of the Algerian War, MIR and *les féministes indigènes* should be credited with further opening public debate in France on the question of colonial memory and for introducing postcolonial theory into contemporary political and social activism. If we bear in mind that the most problematised group in France are the Algerians[19] and that France's relationship with Islam is inextricably tied up with the use of Islam as a symbol of resistance in colonial French North Africa,[20] the importance of recourse to French colonial history to understand current race relations in France becomes clear.

Criticisms of MIR

As *les féministes indigènes* is closely connected to MIR, it has been argued that it is limited by the same issues which have been criticisms of MIR. These have predominantly been that MIR is, "anti-white," overly aggressive and unhelpfully provocative. This response, along with the suggestion that those that are that unhappy should leave France seems to only reinforce the movement's central argument: without revisiting the apparent civic nature of French citizenship and recognizing its underlying racialized and ethnicized foundation the possibility of integration remains a myth.

Furthermore, it is interesting to interrogate this criticism in light of the fact that (as discussed above) much of their work revolves

around parodying existing dominant discourses. For example, in the comments section following the *Ni Potes Ni Soumises* communiqué detailed in the previous section, many people expressed anger at the equating of Christianity with violence against women. It was asserted that this was in "poor taste," "did little to further the debate" and that of course everyone was aware that there were "good Christians and bad Christians" just as there were "good Muslims and bad Muslims." These reactions appear to miss the central point of the communiqué: while these statements appear ridiculous and over-the-top when used to describe the dominant majority, the fact is that they are frequently employed quite unselfconsciously to describe other ethnic and religious minority groups. In seeking to provoke a reaction MIR and *les féministes indigènes* provide the first step towards challenging the underlying assumptions within mainstream French discourses, whether of the conservative right or the "tolerant," "liberal" left.

Another major criticism specific to *les féministes indigènes* is their embracing of US feminist scholarship, which has been argued, by Fassin, for example, to be inappropriate to the French context. Yet interestingly, *les féministes indigènes* have not shied away from this label. Instead, they seem very eager to draw on the work of major Chicana feminists and black critical race feminists. This represents another radical shift. As Fassin writes, the constant need for French feminist movements to set themselves in opposition to the US, has been unhelpful and at times counterproductive (32).

Of course, as *les féministes indigènes* seek to engage not only in a theoretical manner but also as activists, the effect that this endorsement of US feminist approaches will have on their ability to demonstrate its translatability into the French context is as yet untested. So far they have had nowhere near the mainstream exposure or success that *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* has had. Yet, from the point of view of challenging the very fundamental basis on which race, gender and sexual relations are built in France, its complete rejec-

tion of Republicanism is a very interesting development in French political and academic discourse.

Conclusion

How much of an impact *les féministes indigènes* will have remains to be seen. As noted above, there has always been a great resistance in France to "*anglo-saxon*" concepts seen as inappropriate to the French context and *les féministes indigènes* are open about the fact that they have drawn much of their inspiration from Chicana, black critical race feminism, and postcolonial studies. However, the challenging of French colonial memory, the injection of postcolonial theory into French political and public life and the identification of the hypocrisy hidden within recourse to Republican values can only enrich debate on issues of race, ethnicity and gender in France.

As noted above, *les féministes indigènes* have demonstrated a remarkable sensitivity to the complexities contained within anti-racist and feminist discourses and the vital importance of seeing the two as inter-linked. In doing this they provide a fresh approach to social and political activism enacted in the name of women of immigrant/ethnic minority origin. Unlike *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* – the current popular "voice of *banlieue* women" within French mainstream public discourse – *les féministes indigènes* appear to remain ever conscious of the need to avoid allowing their demand for justice against sexist violence to be appropriated to assist other, less "noble" causes. While *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* seems to fall into a trap where anti-racist and feminist discourses are presented as oppositional and fundamentally irreconcilable, *les féministes indigènes* seeks to adopt a more radical approach that challenges the very foundation of French Republican values by exposing their sexism and racism.

Furthermore, the fact that this challenge is not coming solely from within the academy but an attempt is being made to convert this into political and social action makes it all the more exciting. In this sense *les féministes indigènes* presents a unique model not only for France but also for other nations to rearticulate a national identity that provides space for a plurality of identities and voices.

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NOTES

[1] It is noted here that the term *banlieue* is used consciously as shorthand for immigrant/ethnic minority and often Muslim populations – this reflects the manner in which these various identifiers are conflated within much of mainstream popular discourse in France.

[2] The French equivalent of the American Oscars.

[3] So too, it is noteworthy that a film about French colonial soldiers in WWII, featuring a cast of almost only postcolonial French actors and pointing to a less than glorious track record of human rights and equality on the part of the French military (*Indigènes*) emerged as a major commercial success in France and internationally in 2004. The most recent indication that France is beginning to face its colonial past is the opening in 2007 of the *Cité de l'Immigration*, a museum dedicated to showcasing and celebrating the contributions made to the nation by its various waves of immigrant populations.

[4] See Fassin; Raissigieur (1999 and 2002).

[5] *France 5*, 27 March 2005.

[6] A slang term used by the French media to refer to gang rapes committed in the *banlieue*. This issue became the source of intense public interest and outrage following the release of the film *La Squale* in 2000 and the publication of the autobiography of gang rape survivor Samira Bellil in 2003.

[7] A young woman burnt alive by a group of young men in the basement of a block of apartments in a Parisian *banlieue*.

[8] In one of many examples, a discussion on Muslim women's sexuality on the French television channel *Arte* on 8 February 2005 featured representatives from *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* as *banlieue*/Muslim women.

[9] See Lichfield.

[10] See Grewal; Guénif-Souilamas and Macé.

[11] See, for example, Clancy-Smith and Gouda; Mohanty, Russo and Torres; Conklin; Kimble.

[12] Rogers Brubaker, in examining the development of French post-revolutionary citizenship cites prominent public figures of the time to conclude, "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity were to be France's gifts to the world: 'it is not for ourselves alone, it is not for that part of the globe than [sic] one calls France that we have conquered Liberty'" (44). Similarly, Napolean Bonaparte declared in 1798, "The genie of Liberty, which has rendered the Republic – since its birth – the arbiter of all Europe, wishes to see it mistress of faraway seas and foreign lands" cited in Conklin ([11]).

[13] For example, in 1790 the National Assembly declared: "The French nation renounces to undertake any war of conquest and will never use its force against the liberty of any people" cited in Conklin ([11]).

[14] See also Dubois.

[15] By way of example, explicitly citing the influence of Latina, Black and postcolonial feminism, Patricia Roux, Lavinia Gianettoni and Céline Perrin state in the introduction to a recent article in *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, "nous concevons le genre, l'hétérosexualité, la classe sociale, la race et la nationalité comme des systèmes sociaux et politiques structurés par des rapports de pouvoir" and go on to stress the interconnected nature of these systems and structures of power; "les mécanismes par lesquels les rapports de sexe, de race et de classe se renforcent mutuellement." Similarly, it is precisely the eurocentric/white/classist/heterosexist understandings of power relations and experiences of domination expressed by Republican feminism and typified by Agacinski's essay, that veteran French feminist theorist Christine Delphy has increasingly sought to problematize. As Delphy writes in her 2001 book, *L'ennemi principal*: "The smallest common denominator, the 'universal' feminine condition on which the feminist movement based its analyses, has too often been that of the prototypical woman who was often implicitly white, explicitly heterosexual, and some would add 'bourgeois'" (Rosello, 97).

[16] The reference to one not being born a woman drawn of course from the pioneering text, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, by one of the *grandes dames* of French and indeed Western feminism, Simone de Beauvoir.

[17] The symbolic mothers of the movement are identified in the *appel* as Solitude, Guadeloupean slave and member of the 1803 slave revolt and Algerian resistance fighter Jamila Bouhired.

[18] For a discussion of the US and Australian contexts, for example, see Bahramitash; Ho.

[19] See Derderian; Hargreaves; Stora.

[20] See Khedimellah; Mas.

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