98 regimes of visibility: representing violence against women in the French *banlieue*

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abstract

Recent discussions about violence against women have shifted their attention to specific forms of violence in relation to migration and Islam. In this article, I consider different modes of representing women's experiences in French immigrant communities. These representations relate to the French feminist movement Ni Putes Ni Soumises (neither whore nor submissive), a movement that in the early 2000s deplored both the sustained degradation of certain banlieue neighborhoods and also the charges and restrictions that this entails, particularly for young women. Drawing on different narratives and images of women's painful experience, I consider, in a first step, how the question of representing violence against (post)migrant women is framed in terms of the tension between universality and particularity within French republicanism. In the next part of my argument, I bring into focus the question of how to access women's suffering. For a perspective on pain not as an interiorized, private experience but as an accessible complex of practices, articulations, memories, visions and social reconfigurations, I consider Smaïn Laacher's sociological study (2008) about written testimonies of violent experience that had been addressed by (post)migrant women to French women organizations such as Ni Putes Ni Soumises. I finally suggest reading women's accounts on violence not in relation to a universal discourse of rights, but as a political contestation of the naturalized order of representing violence, suffering and agency inside French banlieue communities. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's notion of dissensus, such a contestation can be staged through words by those who have no visibility in the representational order, words not to criticize the unaccomplished ideals of universal equality, but to create a universal community and a common language of experience in the mode of 'as-if'.

keywords

visibility; pain; violence against women; dissensus

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introduction

In February 2003, a small group of people started the '*marche des femmes des quartiers pour l'égalité et contre le ghetto*' (march of women from the banlieue for equality and against the ghetto) in various French cities. On 8 March, International Women's Day, a large demonstration was organized under the slogan '*Ni Putes Ni Soumises*' (Neither Whore Nor Submissive), a slogan that designated a new feminist movement engaged in the public denouncement of a new type of violence against women in immigrant neighbourhoods.

The mobilization and public attention for this movement relied on a new visibility of young women of migrant backgrounds and their representations of banlieue-specific forms of violence, sexism and repression. Emblematic of such representations was the death of 18-year-old Sohane Benziane who had been set on fire in a social housing block basement by a boy of her age, along with the personal account of gang rapes in the book by Samira Bellil, '*Dans l'enfer des tournantes*', published in 2003. Throughout the march, the '*Ni Putes Ni Soumises*' movement organized a series of meetings where women from the banlieue spoke about their suffering: about the violence and social pressure they endured from husbands, parents and young men in their neighbourhoods.

In the following article, I consider different ways of approaching suffering in the context of social marginalization. Rather than focus on the phenomena of physical violence, I read different forms of presenting witness accounts of violent experiences, and reflect on the conceptualization of suffering and agency that inform these modes of representation.

The most prominent voice to represent the violent experiences of women from the French banlieue is the '*Ni Putes Ni Soumises*' (NPNS) movement. It has been repeatedly criticized for its complicity with a politics based on a universal model of feminism and for stigmatizing representations of banlieue populations (see, for examples, Macé and Guénif-Souilamas, 2004; Dornhof, 2006). Here I do not want to follow a critical analysis of the NPNS politics in terms of its aims, strategies, reaches or effects, but rather to consider the movement as a symptom of a significant shift in the French discourse of feminism. This shift can be characterized by a reformulation of the issue of sexual and domestic violence in terms of race, culture and religion. Racialized sexuality has always been a constitutive element of colonial and post-colonial discourse. In addition, migrant communities have previously been an object of inquiry within the fields of gender relations and sexuality. But in the early 2000s, the perception of sexual violence among immigrant populations in France greatly intensified, becoming a public issue of national concern. Second, the new discourse on sexual violence in the banlieues is formulated by women who speak from personal experience, women like the founding members of NPNS. The construction of a social space 'banlieue' becomes, in this situation, expanded and intensified by the new visibility of

women who witness their painful reality in these neighbourhoods that are dominantly inhabited by immigrants and their descendents from North and West Africa. NPNS's representations of a new sexism explained in terms of culture and religion broaden existing images of the immigrant communities living in French housing projects by drawing the public attention not only to Islamism, criminality, homophobia and anti-Semitism, but especially to archaic gender roles and violence against women. NPNS has been a significant site of this representational shift as the movement gained great public and media attention for claims that they made in the name of women from the housing projects.

In this article I consider three different ways of representing women's experiences that are related to the NPNS movement. The first is Fadela Amara's book '*Ni Putes Ni Soumises*' (Breaking the Silence: French Women's Voices from the Ghetto) published in 2003. Fadela Amara is a co-founder and the former president of the NPNS movement. Since 2007, she has been part of the Sarkozy government as State Secretary under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs. Her book about the NPNS movement and the situation for women in French immigrant communities combines autobiographical elements, a totalizing, causal narrative of new forms of banlieue violence and sexism and a programmatic representation of the movement. Second, in close relation to Amara's account, I consider a photo exhibit that was organized in 2003 by NPNS, showing activists from the movement as '*Les Mariannes d'aujourd'hui*' (Today's Mariannes) on the front of the National Assembly building in Paris. For me, this photo exhibition serves as a visual commentary on Amara's written account. Although Amara's book about the NPNS movement offers an analysis of the situation of women living in the suburbs**,** the photographs offer a symbolic representation of these women. Drawing on Mayanthi Fernando (2009), I read these two aspects of representing violence in French banlieues as ways of gaining visibility that is inscribed within the dilemma between claims for universal equality and the particularity of identity constructions.

A different approach to understanding how women deal with suffering is offered by the sociological inquiry '*Les Femmes Invisibles*' (Invisible Women) by Smaïn Laacher (2008). Focusing on words and agency, this book explores (post)migrant women's writings about their experiences of violence that had been addressed in the form of letters and e-mails to the NPNS organization. I use this book to outline a different understanding of suffering – not as an inaccessible interiority of the self but instead as a social and thus sharable relationship (Dauphinée, 2007). This perspective on women's suffering – not as private experience but as a social relationship – undermines a clear differentiation between physical and symbolic violence because expressions of pain are understood as part of pain itself. Along with Fadela Amara, Smaïn Laacher has tackled the problem of symbolic violence – the imposition of categories of cognition on dominated groups and the naturalization of power relations that lead to social hierarchies

(see Bourdieu, 1992). In order to counter such misrecognition, both Laacher's and Amara's representations aim to give a voice to women who have articulated their experiences, but are not adequately heard. In contrast to Amara's claim for a collective voice, Laacher emphasizes the particularities of women's accounts and the concrete social contexts and histories in which distinguishable forms of violence find their meanings. He sees the act of writing as a mode of agency and a crucial moment in a history of suffering that allows for a personal reconstitution within social relations.

In analyzing these two approaches of representing marginalized subjects, I argue that they exemplify the two poles of a French discourse on universalism, one claiming to overcome differences and the other claiming to integrate differences, with both relying on a universal language of rights and justice. Both positions remain inscribed in the dilemma of universalist representation where either claims to transcend or account for differences finally rearticulate those differences and reinscribe them within the social hierarchy (see Scott, 1996). In the case of (post)migrant women in France either representation of women's suffering is thus bound to an identity of women from the banlieue, where 'banlieue' functions not only as a spatial category but especially as a matrix for social, religious, cultural and sexual identification. This does not mean that there is no possibility for political agency or change. On the contrary, as the examples of marginalized women's representations show, there has been a significant shift in the social representation of French banlieue neighbourhoods that radically question the victim-image of (post)migrant women. The point I want to stress here is the problematic way political claims merge with sociological representation in a paradoxical way.

As a way of thinking beyond this paradox, I propose reading women's narratives from an aesthetic perspective of politics. Drawing on Jacques Rancière's notion of dissensus, I argue that the letters written by marginalized women imply an equality of representation that is staged rather then claimed. The written accounts of women on suffering (as presented in Laacher's book) simultaneously present a common language of experience and its non-existence. From the aesthetic perspective women's words do not formulate political claims, but they manifest equality in the mode of the 'as if'. I thus suggest reading women's accounts on violent experiences not as critique but as excess – as a doubling of social representation that is realized through the simultaneous performance of unconditioned representation and the demonstration that such unconditioned and non-hierarchical representations do not exist. The simultaneous performance of equality to represent one's experience and its non-existence can interrupt the social order and manifest its contingency. I argue that women's letters have the potential to transform modes of perception and conditions of recognition by introducing a surplus of experience into the order of symbolic representations of

violence and by creating a 'common language of experience' as if anyone would have equal access to representation.

representing suffering in a context of marginalization

The public attention on French *banlieues* in the early 2000s not only focused on questions of security, Islamic fundamentalism and the headscarf, but also significantly on the problem of violence against women. The most prominent voice to claim the existence of a specific kind of *banlieue* violence was the NPNS movement. It argued that important transformations had taken place since the 1990s inside the social order of the banlieues, and in particular in its gender and generational positions.

Fadela Amara's book '*Ni Putes Ni Soumises*', published in 2003, re-edited and translated in various languages, was a crucial element in this process of problematization. It outlines a personal account of dramatic changes in the gender relations inside immigrant communities and on processes she attributes to ghettoisation. The book begins autobiographically describing her childhood as the daughter of Algerian immigrants and her personal way to political engagement. Amara then offers an analysis of the situation for women in the immigrant communities, a situation characterized by increasing oppression at the hands of the young men in the neighbourhood who control women's bodies and sexualities in the name of honour. According to Amara, constraints for young women of migrant backgrounds are now established by the elder brothers and to a lesser degree imposed by the tradition or the family as previously. These young men have taken the role of guardians over the community, controlling not only their sisters but also all young women of the neighbourhood (Amara, 2003: 37–39). Amara defines the constraints themselves in terms of gender separation, restrictions of personal liberties, an oppressed sexuality and the major importance of virginity coupled with the girl's reputation (*ibid*.: 51–59). Amara's critique addresses the failures of political measures that have led to a continual process of segregation and ghettoisation (*ibid*.: 60–64, 69–70). She then goes on to accuse Islamic fundamentalism, or what she calls a 'basement Islam' to furnish the theoretical framework for the oppression of young women (*ibid*.: 75). For Amara, the most visible sign of what she calls 'obscurantist' minority pressure is the headscarf (*ibid*.: 77), which she considers not simply a religious practice, but 'first of all a means of oppression, of alienation, of discrimination, an instrument of power over women used by men' (*ibid*.: 79).

This mixture of autobiographical elements and analytical propositions about the degrading conditions young women face in certain suburbs offers the background to the NPNS movement presented in the second part of the book. It reads as the

success story of a small initiative in the suburbs that gained, within only a few months, enormous nation-wide attention and support for the women from the immigrant communities. What is striking throughout the book, and in contrast to her initial critique of the failed state's politics, is Amara's strong and unquestioned affirmation of the secular values of the French state and the republican model of integration (*ibid*.: 77, 81). Her protest addresses on the one hand the minority pressure inside immigrant communities, and on the other society's ignorance about forms of oppression and sexism that are articulated in terms of different moral, cultural and religious values. To counter both the internal pressure and the external ignorance, Amara argues for a self-empowerment that begins with 'breaking the silence', and for the universality of French republican and feminist values.

Amara's autobiographical book can be read as a programmatic articulation of the NPNS discourse that states a new form of the paradox that Joan Wallach Scott described as the constitutive condition of feminism: the paradox that making claims on behalf of 'women' produces the 'sexual difference' it sought to eliminate (Scott, 1996: 3). For Scott, the paradox of feminism is a symptom of the contradictions in the political discourses that feminism challenges and appeals to at the same time; 'discourses of individualism, individual rights and social obligations as used by republicans to organize the institutions of democratic citizenship in France' (*ibid*.: 3). Democratic politics, to Scott, are based on the ambiguity of the notion of individuality; on a generalization about all humans (its universal definition) and the uniqueness of each individual. But the notion of individuality as unique still requires a relationship of difference, the very difference that the prototypical individual was meant to deny.

In this sense, Amara's protest in the name of women from immigrant communities exposes at least a double paradox, one that both counters and affirms sexual difference, as well as one that challenges and at the same time reinscribes racial, cultural and religious differences.

Her protest against the exclusion of women from the banlieue makes an appeal to women's rights irrespective of their ethnic origin, their skin colour and religion. Such a protest does not only denounce sexual difference in the name of women, it also denounces racial and religious difference in the name of (post)migrant and Muslim women.

today's mariannes

This double paradox found a visual expression in a photo exhibit entitled '*Les Mariannes d'aujourd'hui*' (Today's Mariannes). On 14 July (Bastille Day and a national holiday) 2003, on the facade of the National Assembly, the exhibition presented fourteen portraits of women who had participated in the 'march of

women for equality and against the ghetto'. The women in the photographs wore symbolic signs of the French Revolution such as the phrygian cap, which is attached to the figure of Marianne, the national emblem and an allegory of liberty (most famously represented in the picture of Eugène Delacroix '*La liberté guidant le peuple*' leading with bare breast the revolution of 1830). To the photographs, propositions are added that present the various ideas these women associate with Marianne such as 'For me she is a citizen. A woman we can all resemble. It is not a question of origin or of physical appearance, but of republican engagement', or 'Marianne, I hope she will more and more take on different faces'. 'Today's Mariannes', embodied by young women '*black-blanc-beur*' (Black–White–Arab) – a slogan originally applied to France's football team during the World Cup 1998 – can thus be read as a new form of feminist engagement that renounces the exclusion of women living in the immigrant communities from the achievements of feminist struggle in the history of France. It is an appeal to the universality of the Revolution's achievements. At the same time, such claims in the name of (post)migrant women depend on the visibility of their difference in order to make those claims meaningful.

From this perspective, one can portray the women representing NPNS as figures who perform and sustain the dual nature of republican citizenship: its historically generated particularism and its principle of universalism, its concurrently cultural and contractual basis (Fernando, 2009). Individuals who represent 'commensurable difference', like Fadela Amara and 'today's Mariannes', are effects of this duality of republican citizenship: 'it is only by marking the new Mariannes' difference – their race, their religion, their immigrant origins – from the purportedly universal norm that their adherence to the universal norm makes any sense as a narrative of transcendence to universality' (*ibid*.: 390). For Fernando, Amara and the photo portraits symbolize the 'exceptional citizen' in the figure of the secular Muslim women, a category of 'commensurable difference' that – interlinked with the category of the veiled Muslim woman that is beyond commensurability – is both the effect of and the condition for the promise of universalism.

I would like to suggest that the performance of difference in the universal claims of Fadela Amara and other women from NPNS is more complex, mixing visions of Islam with others of state responsibility, anti-racism, feminist emancipation, femininity, sexuality and so on. These women not only symbolize figures of difference, they also produce images at the intersection of gender, race, culture and religion, images that reinforce but also shift existing lines of exclusion and contribute to a reconfiguration of differentiations within social spaces, groups and practices. They are both articulations and formations of gendered categories such as Muslims, immigrant and *banlieue* populations: categories that are objects of shifting power relations. The question then is no longer if gender, racial, cultural or religious differences can ever be transcended by the universalism of a

secular republic, but rather how subjects – at the intersections of gender, race, culture and religion – interact in political discourses that continuously produce changing forms of inclusion, stigmatization and exclusion within specific social spheres.

The 'Today's Mariannes' exhibit could then, on the one hand, be interpreted as a performance that uses paradoxical images to question collective representations of universal values. As Scott suggests, a display of paradox within a political system that represents itself as universal can be read as a subversive power of a collective voice that lays in the 'disturbing spectacle presented by paradox' (Scott, 1996: 11). On the other, the photographs of 'Today's Mariannes' work to reaffirm the myth of France's universalism. According to Roland Barthes (1957), the myth turns an image into a symbolic sign that is emptied of its particular historic elements. On this level of myth, history has been eliminated and an abstract meaning has been naturalized. For the photo exhibit, this seems to be the case in the sense that a whole variety of feminist, (post)colonial, religious and other struggles that have formed, and continue to form, French nationality is either excluded or subsumed under the model of integration into a mythical coherent nation.

accessing the suffering of others

One difficulty with analyzing Amara and the photo exhibition 'Today's Mariannes' under the perspective of the dual nature of republican universalism, as presented by Fernando, lies in the paradoxical situation of representing suffering from a position of subjugated identity – a situation Wendy Brown describes as 'wounded attachment'. Speaking about politicized identities, she argues that protests against marginalization, based on *ressentiment*, participate to construct identity as bound to the history that produces its subordination. The painful past and the reproach to the present, which embodies that history can not be relieved as long as the identity bound to this past is retained, but in relinquishing that identity, politics of revenge are also abandoned and the pain itself remains perpetuated (Brown, 1995: 73). Politicized identity thus makes claims for itself only by restating and inscribing its pain in politics without the ability to establish an alternative future that triumphs over this pain (*ibid.*: 74). As a way to deal with such 'wounded attachment' that lies in the demand for recognition of an identity that is necessarily bound to a past and present of suffering, Brown suggests the rehabilitation of the memory of desire within identificatory processes, the moment in desire that precedes its wounding. Moments of desire 'to be' or 'to have' could then destabilize formulations of fixed identities, entrenched by history and linked to a moral politics of *ressentiment*. A shift from ontological claims to political ones, from a language of 'being' to a language of 'wanting', would 'seek to exploit politically a recovery of the more expansive moments in

the genealogy of identity formation, a recovery of the moment prior to its own foreclosure against its want, prior to the point at which its sovereign subjectivity is established through such foreclosure and through eternal repetition of its pain' (*ibid*.: 76).

At this point, it is important to recognize that the political claims of Fadela Amara and the women from NPNS correspond only in part to the process of politicizing identities that Wendy Brown has in mind when she speaks about politics of *ressentiment*. On the one hand, the suffering these women articulate is not primarily the effect of a history of marginalization as Franco-Maghrebians, Africans or Muslims; it is only in part grounded in a *ressentiment* caused by the failure of recognition of their identities. On the other, in naming themselves '*neither whore nor submissive*' they denounce misrepresentations. They claim self-representation of particular histories of suffering, but these histories remain bound to politicized identities as the legitimatizing ground for denouncing injustices and claiming rights. Thus, speaking in the name of a movement under this name points exactly to the paradox described by Brown as 'wounded attachment'. The personal stories and singular experiences women told, often for the first time, at public meetings became subsumed under symbolic categories to identify banlieue specific forms of violence. In the process of representation, the personal accounts were organized in relation to a narrative of culturally and religiously legitimated repression of women. At the same time, figures used to symbolize these categories also represented an individual responsibility to leave behind a history of pain by transcending the cultural and religious differences identified as the cause for violence. At the moment of public and symbolic visibility, figures such as Fadela Amara or the women depicted in the photo exhibit do not represent pain, but the overcoming of pain promised by the denial of subjugated identities. The particular suffering underneath these symbolic bodies is no longer heard and withdrawn to a depoliticized sphere of private, individual experience that can not be adequately expressed. Amara's account, in contrast, leads with an understanding of representation as capable of capturing and reproducing reality in an unmediated, transparent way.

Thinking about violence in relation to language, Elaine Scarry (1987) argues that pain remains inexpressible in words. For Scarry, language can counter or assist pain but never capture it because any representation of pain in language is shattered by pain. Judith Butler (1997) questions the opposition that Scarry draws between violence and language by asking about the specific kind of injury that language itself performs. Here, I want to question the opposition between language and violence from a perspective that conceptualizes pain as a complex social relationship inhabiting time, an intersubjective relation that contains expressions and behaviours of pain, as suggested by Elizabeth Dauphinée (2007). She argues against Scarry's position where pain is a private experience, itself inexpressible, and thus any representation of it is always a source of doubt and

distancing. Underlying such a position is the Cartesian conception of the subject-self as a bounded interiority, and of pain as an internal, unrepresentable ontology. From such a conception, any attempt to access pain transforms it into a visual image or a symbolic icon that merely stands in for pain and suffering. These representations, to Dauphinée, flatten the experience of pain because they can only capture the visible causes and expressions of pain that become located in the distant and disconnected bodies of others: 'The suffering of the other is emptied of its immanence, and reread back both to and by us in ways that work either to condemn or excuse – and in any event explain – the violent politics that caused the pain' (*ibid*.: 148). Drawing on Wittgenstein, she suggests that expressions of pain, including trauma, emotional distress, grief or mourning, should not be read as imperfect attempts to convey one's interior state, but rather as part of the experience of pain itself. Seeing expressions and behaviours of pain as part of the pain itself would cause a rupture in subjectivity and in politics and would thereby disclose a different engagement with pain. Dauphinée's approach seeks to refocus the question of pain itself by examining how pain acts in the body and in relationships that connect the self to other people. This approach opens up the possibility of pain as 'a shared and shareable phenomenon that is expressible and accessible in a fully social and intersubjective way' (*ibid*.: 153).

invisible women

One empirical study that allows us to read expressions of pain as a form of social relationship and agency is found in Smaïn Laacher's sociological inquiry '*Les femmes invisibles. Leurs mots contre la violence*'. He presents witness accounts of violent experiences of (post)migrant women, accounts that open up a perspective on the complex socio-cultural embeddedness of violence. In his book, Laacher cites and examines letters, e-mails and phone call scripts sent to women's organizations in France, namely to *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (NPNS) and *Voix de Femmes* (VDF). Both associations offer assistance to women living in situations of conjugal, familial or intra-community violence, the latter with respect, in particular, to forced marriage.

The book starts with a critique of the political and intellectual appropriation of the problematic of violence against (post)migrant women. Any appropriation, Laacher argues, tailors the suffering to a causally determined narrative, be it for anti-racist or liberal feminist motivated political aims, and thus perpetuates the invisibility of the women themselves. Laacher is concerned with the valorization and recognition of these women's 'micro-resistance', their ability to articulate a critical conscience of what they judge as inadmissible tort, to advocate acts of accusation and to demand legal compensation (Laacher, 2008: 15). His book can be read as an attempt to deny ideological representations of women's voices and to interpret their articulations from a perspective of rights and justice. In his

reading of these letters, he examines the accumulated violence that is *set into* a narrative and the language that is used to construct meaning. Underlying this approach is not merely the idea that telling one's suffering means to speak for oneself, but that the act of writing is itself a form of self-figuration. What is at stake is not the 'reality' of violence itself and adequate forms of representing it, but rather the specific history and contextualization of the act of expressing one's suffering. For Laacher, this act of writing mediates an urgent need to communicate suffering, where expression constitutes an active process to attain or regain a subject status. The process and experience of finding words is, Laacher argues, itself a moment of acting, reflecting and resisting, not a distant reflection on past painful events, but a means for re-engaging with one's history (*ibid*.: 70). These accounts communicate a perpetual work of reconditioning oneself and creating one's conceptions or visions about justice in relation to social, conjugal, familial and amorous relations. The act of addressing another person, then, is not an ordinary act, but intervenes in the very conjunctures of personal life in the moment the writing occurs (*ibid*.: 78).

In order to provide a sense of the mode of writing in this book, I will cite a passage from one of the letters that features centrally in Laacher's study:

> Mister Senior Public Prosecutor, I permit myself to address this letter to you in order to draw your attention to my situation. I am 23 years old and I was born in Paris. I am of African origin but of French nationality. Currently I am in great distress following a forced marriage. The reasons for this difficult situation are the following. (...) When I saw that my family wanted me to return to this man, this frightened me terribly, I did not sleep anymore, I could not eat but once a day in school. I was afraid of my family and I finally accepted the monsieur under the pressure of the whole family. Again I was raped within five days. This situation became so hard to endure that I confided my distress to the medical assistant and then to the social assistant of the school. Steps were taken so that I could leave the house of this man because I could not bear any longer the psychological pressure and the physical violence that he made me suffer. (...) I succeeded in getting a divorce in December 2004 after four years of endeavoring to do so. At the moment I work and I have my own place, but these events have traumatized me, and up to now, even though I am not in danger anymore, I cannot live a 'normal' life. Mister Prosecutor, today I address you to take charge against this man for rapes and sexual aggressions, that are the causes of my traumatization. (...) I hope that you can do what is necessary in order to improve the psychological state I am in and to redress [my trauma] as quickly as possible. (...) (Laacher, 2008: 179, my translation)

As the extract shows, these letters not only give a sense of the causes of suffering but also of ways to actively reconstitute oneself and to cope with trauma, including explicit demands for help and recompense. The extract also exposes how particular ideas of guilt, loyalty, recompense and the state's responsibility have been elaborated and changed over time.

Laacher emphasizes that in the moment of writing for help, these women live in situations of definitive rupture or urgency. They depend on the law to recognize any perpetrated violence (*ibid*.: 82). For Laacher, the dominant vocabulary in these written accounts addressed to NPNS or VDF is articulated in legal terms of emancipation and social injustice, whereas a vocabulary of family, religion or sexuality remains marginal (*ibid*.: 86–87). In most cases, women did not question their conjugal roles, family ties or religious traditions, but rather they challenged persistent violent excesses. The dominant concerns voiced in letters include the need to protect children, fears of forced marriage, sexual violence, being sent to another country or being deprived of education. Where a radical rupture with one's family occurred, it often was expressed as a significant part of the still ongoing painful situation and not as a desired solution. The dominantly juridical vocabulary employed in the written accounts also evokes the high responsibility that is supposed to be held by the state and its institutions for the well being of its subjects.

> I really want justice to be done, that they will be punished and that the punishment will set an example [for others]. Don't we live in a state of rights? I want them to understand that in France people don't apply justice on their own, they don't make their own law. … I would like to be defended by a (female) lawyer who is engaged against violence against women. This is why I rely a lot on the organization to help me. (*ibid*.: 183, my translation)

The state, the law, the police and the social worker were asked to recognize and respond to submitted complaints, a demand that often has not been heard or adequately responded to. Many women express feelings of deception upon discovering the lack of interest or engagement by French officials, which only reinforces an already distressing situation.

Reading Laacher's analysis of women's letters allows for accessing women's pain as a social relationship and as an active engagement with one's painful history of which the moment of writing constitutes an important element. But I want to question his attempt to read the narratives of individual painful experiences primarily as recognition of particularities to legitimize claims for rights and recompense. His representation of women's voices on violence finally relies, similar to Amara's account, on a universal conception of rights claims and republican attachment. Although Laacher devotes a lot of room to women's writings in his book, he leads his analysis with an understanding of universalism that emphasizes religiously and culturally diverse ways of living that should be recognized as private particularities within the political sphere of universal equality. His aim to recognize women's agency in the moment of writing thus remains limited to the private and depoliticized realm in which it remains one's individual responsibility to overcome a state of suffering. Although Laacher tends to strengthen the particularities of singular formulations of repression and injustice that he sees as micro-resistance, Amara represents collective claims that suggest self-responsibility for one's personal life on the basis of a liberal

model of emancipation. Both finally believe in the individual's autonomy to self-determine one's life. They share an understanding of equality that can be realized through an increasing knowledge about individual ways of living, beliefs, habits and desires to be recognized as an equal part of society.

Although I do not want to neglect the importance for women to appeal to the law and to the state's institutions for protection and recompense for sustained suffering, I do want to suggest that the letters addressed to NPNS articulate more than mere requests for an equal application of the law or for the recognition of particularities. The letters could also be read from a perspective that questions the type of politics that seeks to recognize and integrate differences. One central aspect of these women's accounts is that they see injustice within an unequal dealing with suffering that results from an identification of these painful experiences in terms of cultural and religious particularities. At the same time, these women claim justice, recognition of suffering and recompense through universalizing terms, as the second extract I have cited from Laacher's book shows. This problematic, I argue, can not be formulated from a point of critique that aims at changing or shifting representations, but remains within the order of social categories into which a diversity of identities and experiences is sought to be integrated as objects of sociological inquiry. Instead, I want to turn to Jacques Rancière's notion of dissensus through which he thinks about the political potential of words by those who have no part in the saturated order of representations. Rancière offers an understanding of equality that is not found in sociological representations but in an aesthetic realm of language.

The innovative potential of Rancière's aesthetic perspective of politics in view of (post)migrant women's writings might best be accentuated in relation to Gayatri Spivak's notion of subaltern speaking that she characterizes by a discursive double-bind. Spivak argues that 'between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-construction and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the "third world woman" caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development' (Spivak, 1988: 304). For Spivak, the question 'Can the subaltern speak?' is first of all a problem of representational practices by theorists who never have unmediated and full knowledge of 'others' and inevitably silence them as they center their own position. Spivak argues for an ethical responsibility in one's own representational practice that can be realized in the project of 'unlearning one's privileges', by which Spivak means the disclosure of one's own positionality in hegemonic discourses. No representation of the marginalized and oppressed other can ever claim to give a voice to that person, but it can speak in a way that this person would listen and not dismiss these words as yet another version of colonial discourse. About her example of the suicide of an Indian woman, Spivak underlines that she represented her,

reinscribed her, wrote her to be read, but did not give her a voice (Spivak, 1990 [1986]: 56). Spivak differentiates two types of representation: one in the aesthetic sense of to 'speak of' and the other in the political sense of to 'speak for'. In order to formulate a critique of existing inequalities, it might be necessary, Spivak argues, to use what she calls 'strategic essentialism' in which the two types of representation fall together.

It is crucial to note that Spivak writes about women for whom it is impossible to witness their lives. In her understanding, the subaltern can not participate in hegemonic representations and does not have access to foundational narratives of nationalism, internationalism, secularism and so on. She also underlines that subalternity never appears in pure form, but rather as crisis at the moment when the subaltern is already moving towards political activity and social mobility. In contrast to Spivak's subalterns, women living in French banlieues have publicly talked and written about their personal situation and experience. The question in this context is not if they can speak, but if they can ever fully (or in a non-paradoxical way) participate in hegemonic representation. Looking at the way women relate in their writings to narratives of the French nation – narratives of feminism and French secularism – opens up a gap between their words and representations of them. In these letters addressed to women's organizations one can find an appropriation of French secular and feminist discourse that hardly questions the appropriateness or convergence between such discourse and the writing subject. Yet in representations of banlieue violence this relation between discourse and subject takes on the paradoxical character that I described earlier.

Rancière, in contrast to Spivak, is not concerned with the intellectual's representation of the subaltern, but with the aesthetic dimension of words themselves in which he finds a political potential to interrupt the order of representation by manifesting equality in the mode of the as-if. He does not differentiate between political and aesthetic representation, but between the 'order of the police' – a stabilized social order of positions and functions – and politics, where equality is manifested in language and introduced as a surplus into the police order. For Rancière, politics lies in the aesthetic realm where the contingency of social order is performed, where consensual perceptions of subjects and objects are interrupted, and where the constructed and naturalized character of social hierarchies is disclosed. Political transformation, for Rancière, is possible not under the condition of critique of ideology, but through language performing equality.

dissenting words

The point I want to emphasize is the transformative potential that Rancière finds in language, and especially in writing. Thinking about letters addressed to

women's organizations in terms of Rancière's notion of politics as dissensus would lead to an interrogation of the status of words within women's writings that differs both from Amara's symbolic representations bound to political claims and also Laacher's emphasis on the act of writing as 'micro-resistance'. In his conception of dissensus, Rancière understands words not as substrata of meaning that hide some profound secret. Instead, he turns his attention to the potential effectiveness of speech acts as a way to reconfigure the 'partition of the sensible', the way things and words have their position and function within a stabilized social order. In his reading of Plato's critique of writing, Rancière underlines the literarity of the 'silent' words of writing that are equally available both to those entitled to use them and to those who are not, in opposition to the logic of 'the proper' that requires everyone to be in their proper place and to follow their proper social function (Rancière and Panagia, 2000: 115).

Literarity refers to an 'excess of words' available in relation to the common definitions of things, and in relation to modes of communication that legitimate the order of discourse itself. Such an excess of words allows for a 'poetics of knowledge' as an activity of reconfiguration of that which is given in the sensible in regard to the objects of debate and in regard to the legitimacy of the speakers (*ibid*.). Dissensus is a discordant understanding of both these objects and the speaking subjects, a disagreement that is brought to the level of a common language as an argumentation within a world in common (*ibid*.: 116). Dissensus is what disturbs the 'order of the police', which is characterized by the principle of saturation, as a totality in which every group performs a specific function and has a determined space: 'it means to challenge the distribution of parts, places and competences by linking a particular wrong done to a specific group with the wrong done to anyone by the police distribution – the police's denial of the capacity of the anyone' (Rancière, 2009: 11).

Reading the written accounts by women presented in Laacher's study as a manifestation of dissensus, and thus as a form of politics, in turn draws attention to the subject positions, the objects of debate and the modes of communication that are at stake in witnessing violence against marginalized women. Such an approach to women's writings might allow the reader to perceive and respond to an articulation of pain that implies complex and conflicting identity formations within the frame of social inequalities. This differs from reading witness accounts of suffering by individuals who are primarily identified as victim, Muslim, migrant or *banlieue* woman. Even if such a reading aims at criticizing non-adequate ascriptions, it is a critique of representation that remains inscribed in the social order, in what Rancière calls the 'order of the police'. In contrast to this turn against symbolic violence and claims for self-representation, a reading of women's writings from Rancière's aesthetic perspective of politics can evoke an interruption in representation itself. This means an interruption that is not equal to critique, but that introduces a surplus

of words in the mode of the 'as if'. Speaking in the mode of the as-if means 'the staging of a dissensus – of a conflict of sensory worlds – by subjects who act as if they were the people, which is made of the uncountable count of the anyone' (Rancière, 2009: 11). The as-if moment is not an illusion. It is the staging of equality within the world of inequality. It is 'the division of the same and the dismissal of difference. The aesthetic configuration replays the terms of the difference in such a way as to neutralize them and to make that neutralization the staging of a conflict that is in excess of consensual distribution' (*ibid*.: 6). In contrast to work by Amara and Laacher that seeks to counter and change representation in the context of violence, migration and Islam, a reading of women's accounts under an aesthetic perspective of politics could demonstrate the absence of equality in any representational order. The idea of equality that Rancière has in mind is one that is explicitly not found or realizable in the social world but that is staged in a universalizing language by those who have no part in the discursive construction of social communities and categories. This aesthetic understanding of equality has a transformative potential as it disturbs not particular representations, but the order of representation itself. For the reading of women's letters, this could mean interpreting them as articulations where differences in gender, culture, religion or social status are not evacuated, but neutralized in formulations of violent experiences, recompense and justice. I suggest that such a reading might allow these narratives to be shared from within a world of common experience, whereas simultaneously exposing how the discourses of French republicanism, secularism and feminism that frame these experiences perpetuate the representational categories that impede both equality and also the commonness of language and experience.

conclusion

Following different conceptions and approaches to expressions of pain exposes new perspectives on the problem of representation in a context of marginalization. I have shown how representations of women from the French banlieue reproduce a notion of republican universalism in which difference is either incorporated in a form of exception, as in the account of Fadela Amara or in the images of the 'Today's Mariannes' exhibition, or integrated as a form of diversity and particularity as in the book by Smaïn Laacher. As I have argued, both attempts – of accounting for the singularity and agency found in women's letters and of counting on the integrative force of French republicanism – remain inscribed in the paradox of universalism (see Scott, 1996), where the representation of pain is bound to social constructions of marginalized identity and experience. Both ways of representing violence against (post)migrant women share a critique of existing representations and the belief that sociological knowledge and representation of marginalized subjects can overcome existing inequalities.

Turning to Rancière's notion of dissensus I have suggested the possibility of a different reading of women's written accounts as expressions of subjects who speak as if they were equally and unconditionally belonging to the French people – as if their experiences, knowledge and views on fault and justice could be heard and shared by others. Reading women's letters not as representations, but as dissenting words – words that stage an equal part in representation whereas simultaneously manifesting that such equality does not exist – might disturb common perceptions and ideas of a national community and its constitutive discourses. This conception of dissenting words sheds a different light on the notion of republican universalism. It designates not an ideal universalism that realizes equality by incorporating differences as 'commensurable', or integrating them as part of the diversity of ways of living, but an aesthetic manifestation of a universalizing language in which excluded voices find an equal part in the political sphere where universal norms themselves are defined. By staging equality of representations, the words of (post)migrant women not only demonstrate the non-existence of such an equality and the violent effects of representations themselves, but they also create a common language of experience that allow new subjects and different objects to enter the scene of debate and to disturb, interrupt and eventually change the 'partition of the sensible'. This is, following Rancière, not an ethical but an aesthetic perspective, an understanding of politics not primarily as a matter of laws and constitutions, but rather as 'a matter of configuring the sensible texture of the community for which those laws and constitutions make sense' (2009: 8).

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