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**INTRODUCTION**

My paper is a close study of two groups in France that were founded by French-Algerian women, both intending to call attention to and combat violence against Arab-Muslim women in the French Republic: Ni Putes Ni Soumises, or NPNS, and Le Mouvement des Indigènes de la République, or MIR. Ni Putes Ni Soumises is often translated into “Neither Whores Nor Doormats” or “Neither Whores Nor Submissive.” This name is meant to reject a double critique placed on these women, on the one hand by Arab communities for being too “French” (and therefore too sexual), and on the other by the Republic for being the oppressed puppets of Arab men. Le Mouvement des Indigènes de la République literally translates to “The Natives of the Republic Movement.”<sup>1</sup> The English term “Natives” does not convey the particular historical significance of “indigènes” in French, which

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<sup>1</sup> Gemie, *French Muslims*, 138; Bassel, “Contemporary Grammars of Resistance,” 542; Kipfer, “Decolonization in the Heart of Empire,” 1158.

refers to a native code called the *Code de l'Indigénat*. This French legislation was passed in 1881, during French colonization of Algeria, to codify the inferiority of the empire's Arab subjects, listing 33 infractions with extreme punishments; MIR, which largely comprises the descendants of these "indigènes," uses this term in a contemporary context to confront the myth of an egalitarian Republic. Despite these groups' common goal to contest violence against Arab-Muslim women, they have come to offer opposing responses, often engaging in intense critique with one another. My paper aims to better understand this divergence, specifically by exploring their relations to Arab men, their feminist methodologies, and the role of the State in silencing or co-opting their projects.<sup>2</sup>

## **BACKGROUND OF NPNS**

Fadela Amara founded NPNS in 2003 in response to rising physical violence against Arab women in the suburbs of large cities, where high numbers of North African communities (along with other immigrants) have consolidated since the end of World War I.<sup>3</sup> In one of these suburbs, in October 2002, a young man burned alive an 18-year-old Arab-Muslim woman named Sohane Benziane in the basement of a housing project.<sup>4</sup> In the wake of this highly mediatized murder, Amara led a march through France in

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<sup>2</sup> While I reject the conflation that all Muslims are Arabs and vice versa, I use the term "Arab-Muslim women" throughout my paper to refer to those who are usually only denoted as "Muslim women" in French mainstream discourse, under the assumption that they are also Arab (usually of North African descent).

<sup>3</sup> Amara and Zappi, *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, 13, 20 ; Gemie, *French Muslims*, 66. Selby, Jennifer A. *Questinoing French Secularism*, 29-30.

<sup>4</sup> Amara and Zappi, *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, 94-7.

February 2003 that, according to NPNS's official website, ended with a demonstration of 30,000 people.<sup>5</sup> After the march, Amara and her colleagues officially formed the association NPNS, with the goal of protecting women and their fundamental rights through free, anonymous aid to victims of violence, as well as school-based preventive interventions.<sup>6</sup>

Amara remained the president of NPNS until 2007, when she made the controversial decision to accept the position of Junior Minister for Foreign Policy for then-President Nicolas Sarkozy, who was notorious for his openly racist comments.<sup>7</sup> Although Amara's decision caused a rift in NPNS due to the administration's evidently anti-immigrant stance, NPNS has been given much media attention and public valorization.<sup>8</sup> This valorization will be discussed later in the presentation as a form of state cooptation, and a point of critique by MIR.

## **BACKGROUND OF MIR**

Houria Bouteldja founded MIR in 2005, a year after the veil bans were passed in France, effectively barring Muslim girls from wearing headscarves in public schools.<sup>9</sup> Bouteldja decried this policing of Muslim girls' bodies,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 101, 118 ; Fayard and Rocheron, "*Ni Putes Ni Soumises*," 1 ; Gemie, *French Muslims*, 75 ; Garcia, "Des féminismes aux prises avec l'intersectionnalité," 112.

<sup>6</sup> Amara and Zappi, *Breaking the Silence*, trans. Helen Harden Chenut, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Fayard and Rocheron, "*Ni Putes Ni Soumises*," 15 ; Garcia, "Des féminismes aux prises avec l'intersectionnalité," 112 ; Gemie, *French Muslims*, 82-3 ; Fernando, "Save the Muslim Woman," 148 ; Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves*, 91.

<sup>8</sup> Gemie, *French Muslims*, 83-84; Fernando, "Save the Muslim Woman," 148.

<sup>9</sup> Gemie, *French Muslims*, 134-37; Bouteldja, Hamel, and Delphy, "On vous a tant aimé-es!" 124; Garcia, "Des féminismes aux prises avec l'intersectionnalité," 119 ; Bassel, « Contemporary Grammars of Resistance » 541.

while also critiquing the parallel stigmatization of Muslim men.<sup>10</sup> She co-wrote a petition titled “We are the Natives of the Republic” to call out French discrimination against “‘people from the colonies’” and their descendants.<sup>11</sup> <sup>12</sup> The document also promoted a march for May 8, a hyper-charged date commemorating both the end of World War II and the massacre of tens of thousands of Algerian Arabs by the French military in Sétif, Algeria, again to challenge the myth of the Republic as a champion of equality.<sup>13</sup> Within one month, more than a thousand people had signed the document.<sup>14</sup>

MIR militants officially met up for the first time in June 2005, and in 2010, they created a political party called the Natives of the Republic Party (PIR).<sup>15</sup> <sup>16</sup> According to their website, PIR is for anyone who wants to “fight against racial inequalities that reduce Blacks, Arabs, and Muslims to the native status of the old colonies,”<sup>17</sup> again referring to the French empire’s colonial subjects. The effectiveness, or lack thereof, of this political party will be discussed later on.

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<sup>10</sup> Bassle, 541.

<sup>11</sup> Gemie, *French Muslims*, 142 ; Garcia, “Des féminismes aux prises avec l’intersectionnalité,” 112 ; Bancel, “France, 2005,” 213 ; “2005: ‘L’Appel des indigènes de la République.”

<sup>12</sup> “2005: ‘L’Appel des indigènes de la République” ; Gemie, *French Muslims*, 143-44 ; Bassel, “Contemporary Grammars of Resistance,” 541 ; Garcia, “Des féminismes aux prises avec l’intersectionnalité,” 112 ; Martin, “SOS Racisme,” 69 ; Bancel, “France, 2005,” 213.

<sup>13</sup> Gemie, *French Muslims*, 142, 144 ; “2005: ‘L’Appel des indigènes de la République.”

<sup>14</sup> Gemie, *French Muslims*, 145-6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-8.; Bassel, “Contemporary Grammars of Resistance,” 537.; Martin, “SOS Racisme,” 67.; Bancel, “France, 2005,” 214. ; Kipfer, “Decolonization in the Heart of Empire,” 1158.

<sup>16</sup> Gemie, *French Muslims*, 154; Kipfer, “Decolonization in the Heart of Empire,” 1158; “Qui sommes-nous?”

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

## **NPNS AND MIR: CONVERGENCES, DIVERGENCES, AND CRITIQUES**

Both NPNS and MIR initially rejected mainstream French feminism, dubbed “nativist feminism” by Anna Kemp.<sup>18</sup> Nativist feminism constructs a binary between modern, emancipated, secular French women and their veiled, oppressed, Muslim counterparts, who can only aspire to the French ideals of gender equality by abandoning their culture and community for the Republic, an ideal site for emancipation.<sup>19</sup> With Muslim women situated as submissive non-agents, Muslim men are located within the nativist feminist framework as the sole perpetrators of violence against these women. Both NPNS and MIR instead prioritized racial solidarity with Arab men, therefore functioning within an intersectional framework.

Amara initially portrayed violence against Arab women in the suburbs as a result of the deteriorating economic conditions of Arab men, as noted in her semi-autobiography, *Breaking the Silence*,<sup>20</sup> and NPNS also explicitly critiqued French nativist feminism on the basis that it was a fight against “their” men, or a war of the sexes.<sup>21</sup> MIR has likewise spoken on the topic of solidarity between Arab men and women in the suburbs, noting that any denunciation of the former by the latter is a maneuver that breaks down solidarity between “racialized” men and women.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Kemp, Anna. *Voices and Veils : Feminism and Islam in French Women’s Writing and Activism*, 42.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>20</sup> Garcia, “Des féminismes aux prises avec l’intersectionnalité,” 112.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 115-16 ; Fayard and Rocheron, “*Ni Putes Ni Soumises*,” 2.

<sup>22</sup> Garcia, “Des féminismes aux prises avec l’intersectionnalité,” 112-13.

While both groups initially worked against nativist feminism, NPNS and MIR came to defend Arab men to varying degrees. NPNS has stated that it explicitly defends only those men who “are potential allies” and who “respect women.”<sup>23</sup> At the forefront, then, is a project that places Arab-Muslim women at the center, which, while clearly a significant task, also ignores the structural issues that both men and women in the suburbs endure.

To demonstrate this move towards a nativist feminism that is closely affiliated with the Republic, NPNS affirms in an online text from 2006 that “‘feminism is a single fight regardless of the diverse contexts,’ and that their feminism...is capable of giving concrete and efficient responses to the most pressing and difficult situations.’”<sup>24</sup> These “concrete and efficient responses” include distributing guidebooks to men on respecting women, and calling for increased community policing. Both of these tactics demonstrate NPNS’s ties to carceral feminism as well, as they take attention away from socioeconomic structures that contribute to such violence, and instead blame individual deviant behavior that can only be corrected with carceral punishment.<sup>25</sup>

In stark contrast, MIR’s intersectional politics defend all “racialized” men, regardless of their “relation to women or sexism.”<sup>26</sup> Pushing directly against a Republican discourse, MIR’s use of the term “racialized” men

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 122. ; Fayard and Rocheron, “*Ni Putes Ni Soumises*,” 9.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Fernando, “Save the Muslim Woman,” 155.

<sup>26</sup> Garcia, “Des féminismes aux prises avec l’intersectionnalité,” 122.

emphasizes the marginalized groups that the French Republic willfully ignores and/or delegitimizes in the name of national unity.<sup>27</sup> Labeling itself “feminist” from the beginning, MIR has defined itself as advocating ““a paradoxical feminism of solidarity with men.””<sup>28</sup> The movement denounces white feminism specifically, arguing that white feminists obscure the struggles of “racialized” women (and men), because the formers don’t have to take race into account on their path to liberation.<sup>29</sup>

This approach indeed differs from NPNS, as Amara notes in her autobiography that she used white feminist texts to teach women in the suburbs about their own emancipation.<sup>30</sup> Drawing on such premises, NPNS has criticized MIR for taking a position that defends *all* men in the suburbs at the expense of women’s issues; in a text called *The Scum of the Republic*, co-written by Amara in 2006, she calls into question the tactics of MIR, critiquing their supposed refusal “to address ‘home-grown’ male violence against women.”<sup>31</sup>

However, NPNS’s reliance on the Republic and its reproduction of racism toward Arab men has likewise garnered much criticism.<sup>32</sup> The organization’s call for Republican legislation to save Arab-Muslim women in the suburbs rests on the pathologization of Arab men and boys on the basis of their “culture” (and on Islam); this reinforces the binary between an

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 120-21.

<sup>30</sup> Amara and Zappi, *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, 109.

<sup>31</sup> Kipfer, “Decolonization in the Heart of Empire,” 1168.

<sup>32</sup> Fernando, “Save the Muslim Woman,” 152-3.



inherently regressive Other and a progressive, egalitarian Republic, as well as *victimizing* Arab men and *victimized* Arab women.<sup>33</sup> The only solution within the NPNS framework for Arab-Muslim women to overcome this victimization is to leave the suburbs and find protection under the Republic.<sup>34</sup> Bouteldja provides an obvious counterpoint to this “solution,” noting that “leaving isn’t an option for everyone and not everyone wants to cut ties with their parents,” especially not for the very Republic that construes these women as outsiders.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, while NPNS depends on the Republic to improve the lives of women in the suburbs, MIR is working “against a ‘republican script.’”<sup>36</sup> These differing approaches are directly connected to the ensuing mediation and cooptation of NPNS, as well as the intense backlash directed towards MIR. Amara’s personal experience has been used to legitimize “Muslim culture” as being inherently sexist and thus in need of intense policing from the Republic.<sup>37</sup> Her autobiography was awarded the Political Book Prize in 2004 by the National Assembly, at least in part due to Amara’s claims that testify to a racialized sexual violence that depicts Arab men as the culprits of violence against Arab-Muslim women.<sup>38</sup> Additionally, Amara’s entrance into Sarkozy’s administration further demonstrates a cooptation of Amara’s cause by a party that had much to gain from a native informant.

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<sup>33</sup> Bassel, “Contemporary Grammars of Resistance,” 544; Fernando, “Save the Muslim Woman,” 152; Volpp, “Blaming Culture,” 90.

<sup>34</sup> Fernando, “Save the Muslim Woman,” 153.

<sup>35</sup> Bouteldja, Hamel, and Delphy, “On vous a tant aimé-e-s!” 127.

<sup>36</sup> Bassel, “Contemporary Grammars of Resistance,” 538, 540.

<sup>37</sup> Fernando, “Save the Muslim Woman,” 151.

<sup>38</sup> Fayard and Rocheron, “*Ni Putes Ni Soumises*,” 10 ; Fernando, “Save the Muslim Woman,” 153.

While NPNS has found much support in the mainstream, MIR has been a target of critique, largely due to the latter's clear rejection of the Republic and its supposed "equality." MIR's denunciation of "'representative institutions [as] instruments used to 'co-opt', 'assimilate' and 'clientilize' political activists'" has distanced the political party from lobbies, social movements, and other political parties.<sup>39</sup> It is thus not surprising that the corresponding political party has had difficulty in holding much weight at the legislative level, for which the movement has also been criticized; indeed, while their website is a lively forum for debate, the efficiency of the organization and its corresponding political party's ability to make any tangible changes in the lives of those it is supposed to represent have been called into question.<sup>40</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The opposing political projects of NPNS and MIR demonstrate only two responses to both sexualized and racialized violence against Arab-Muslim women in France. Amara and the NPNS organization advocate for Republican values of gender equality and secularism to curb violence against women within the suburbs; they have accordingly been criticized for essentializing Arab-Muslim men and women along a victimizer/victim binary, for advocating carceral tactics to effect change, and for Amara's affiliation with a political party that is evidently anti-immigrant. Bouteldja and MIR, on the other hand,

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<sup>39</sup> Bassel, "Contemporary Grammars of Resistance," 544.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 549.

relentlessly critique the Republic for its perpetuation of colonial tropes that essentialize Arab men as aggressors and Arab women as victims. However, the effectiveness of the movement has been questioned due to its unstable identity and inability to bring about real change at the political level.

The analysis of these starkly contrasting groups has also made apparent the Republic's stakes in movements that have been founded and populated by minorities. While MIR has been delegitimized by the State for connecting race, gender, and colonialism in a way that challenges the Republic, NPNS has been valorized for its prioritization of women's issues as an extension of the State's supposed values of secularism and equality. These differing approaches are significant beyond the sphere of France, as they speak to larger questions of both state cooptation, and the extent to which these minority militants can maneuver within such a framework.

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