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For an Anti-Colonial Reading of the Racist Polemic on Miss France[1]

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There are an infinite number of reactions to the election of Alicia Aylies, but let's focus on two in particular. The first one, often from people of right- or far-right-leaning sensibilities, tends to see this election as a catastrophe because a Black and Guyanese Miss France would demonstrate their theories on the "great replacement," in other words, the belief that France would no longer belong to whites. These people also say that "French Guiana is not France" or not "the real France."

Conversely, mainly left-wing people consider this election a victory for "progress" and "diversity," and are delighted that a Miss France can be Black and Guyanese. Likewise, in response to the argument of the former that "French Guiana is not France," these left-wing people answer that no, "French Guiana IS France." And this "inclusion" is seen as evidence of anti-racism.

For me, both discourses are Eurocentric and racist; they simply come from two different political traditions: the reactionary right and far-right and the republican left. The racism of the former manifests itself by explicitly stating that the colonized are of a radically different essence, while the racism of the latter consists in assimilating the colonized, that is, believing that they can be transformed by the "beautiful values of the Republic," in short, that they can be civilized. Despite precautionary language, this is what it is all about. Diving into the history of the administration of the colonies allows us to see these ideological differences between right-wing colonialism and left-wing colonialism.

Basically, when speaking of French Guyana, whether one says "it is not France" or that "it is France," there is in both cases a negation of French Guyana as such—that is, as a territory and a people existing for itself (but colonized by France). And despite the blatant racist dimension that emanates from the idea that "French Guiana is not France" coming out of a far-right racist's mouth, the other idea according to which "French Guiana

is France" nonetheless constitutes an abnormality, from an anti-colonial standpoint at least. (So to be sure, this standpoint has to be shared for this idea to seem disturbing).

The right or far-right-wing person who says that "French Guiana is not France" says so because for them "French Guiana belongs to France" (the assumed idea of French Guiana as French property) and therefore cannot be France; it is obvious this argument is motivated by a rejection of the right to sovereignty of the French Guianese. On the other hand, the left-wing person who says "French Guiana is France" says so because for them, "French Guiana has become/should become France" (a process of assimilation, at once past, present, and future, in continuous renewal). This discourse is opposed to the right-wing one in regard to the management of the French neo-colonial reality, but the underlying logic remains unchanged; in both cases, it is considered normal that France possesses territories, albeit truly ill-gotten. Worse, the left-wing person, with their supposedly good intentions, has the impression that they're doing us the honor of "including" us...

It is surely because we would apparently need to put the past behind us... Why not, but in that case, it is necessary to redistribute the wealth accumulated during this supposedly "ended" history, from which some are still profiting. In other words, if we Afro-descendants have to put the history of slavery and colonization "behind us," the non-negotiable condition is that (at least in our particular case) the békés and other colonists must put the monopolies they have wrongfully constituted "behind them."[2] Because it is not only the horrors that occurred during slavery and that have thus passed that mobilize us today, but also and especially the unequal present in which the descendants of slaveholders enjoy fortunes to this day, and have an Afro-descendant population, among others, working for them. And beyond the békés, it is also the present and the reality of neo-colonialism that still impoverishes Africa. Should Africans put colonization "behind them?" Why not, but in that case France should—among other issues—"put behind" its CFA franc, a true colonial currency of subjugation. So we are certainly not dealing with the "past" and issues of memory, but with an unequal "present" against which we must fight.

Let's go back to Miss France. To the racists for whom France has elected a "foreigner," other disturbing reactions respond by

saying that since the Guyanese are born French on paper, one cannot consider the election of a Miss Guyana as an illegitimate Miss France. This argument bothers me because it implies that a Black winner of Senegalese or Malian origin, the child of an immigrant, could be questioned about her legitimacy, her "starting" status being different from that of a Guyanese woman. Here we clearly see the symbolic role this farce called *DOM-TOM* plays in the neo-colonial imaginary of France today: a means of constructing different types of legitimacy between peoples of the colonies, and in doing so, of creating divergent political interests, making it more difficult to unite against racism and neo-colonialism.[3]

Divide and conquer is not out of date... Therefore, defending a Black woman "but" from the West Indies, from Guyana or from Reunion Island, costs much less to our so-called left-wing friends than defending a Black woman of African descent. And when we see what is happening to the Traoré family, as to so many others from working-class neighborhoods, talking to us about a happy "France of diversity" is simply indecent. It is to politically coopt the result of this election. So I am not saying that it is the election itself that has this function—to conceal the deeper racism of the country in the social system itself. Basically, those who use the result of this election want to sell us a dream: Here's a Black miss, so France is not racist. As if defeating racism involved things as superficial as representation. Even a Black president did not change the Black working-class condition in the United States. . .

Another very important thing for me is that it is unacceptable to see "proof" of French progressivism in the election of a Black Guyanese miss when France continues to flout (among other examples) the rights of Indigenous peoples (who are not referred to as such) living in French Guiana. Do those who celebrate "diversity" through this election know that the issue of indigenous peoples living in deplorable conditions does not only apply to the United States or Canada but also to France?

Conclusion: Re-asserting an independent anticolonial thinking

In the end, my point of view is that we don't have to limit ourselves to the sad claim that "French Guiana is France" to respond to the racists who say that it is not. There is a third option that

consists of clearly rejecting the racism directed against the new Miss France, while reaffirming that if a Miss France can be from French Guiana, it is precisely because French Guiana is a country that does not belong to itself and that is not normal. It is the result of a violent history and a present based on assimilation, of an organized and unnatural economic dependence, of a social project that stifles any possibility of contemplating ourselves apart from France. And it seems important that French people be aware that in what is called *DOM-TOM*, there is not only the discourse of "let's remain under French domination because otherwise we will perish." There are still anti-colonialists who are very conscious of the economic issues and who are working on designing a viable social project, economically, socially, and culturally.

In this polemic as in others, in order to challenge the racist right-wing discourses, we can treasure the ambition of having our own discourse, and not adopt or become one with the assimilationist discourses of the left. Decolonizing our political imagination is an emergency. It is not because the right doesn't want us that we should say "thank you" to the left for considering it normal for countries and peoples to belong to France or to be France—that is, be prevented from being what they are in order to conform to a project of perpetual assimilation (and for which, paradoxically, we will always be told that in the end we don't quite achieve that—to be truly French—the game being rigged from the start). We must therefore wrest the idea that "French Guiana is not France" (as well as Guadeloupe, Martinique, etc.) from the mouths of the far-right-wing racists. For this idea—"it's not France"—said by other mouths and, in this case, by ourselves, has a powerful anti-colonial dimension that we must not abandon. **No, we are not France**. Beyond this assertion, our social, cultural, economic, and political realities speak for themselves. We are Caribbeans, South Americans, and not Europeans (unless we live and/or have been socialized in France, of course). When we say that "we are not France," it is not for the same reasons as the far-right, it is to affirm our right to self-determination, to take sides with ourselves, to exist according to our own realities. To refuse to allow ourselves to be dissolved by an assimilationist policy, and to leave our lands, labor forces, and maritime spaces exploited by a "metropole" to which we have been bound through violence. In other words, we, who come from the French colonies that are now organized in

departments, can fight for other perspectives that we can only conceive within the framework of French tutelage. This is an ambitious project, especially since France has always wanted to make those who have escaped its domination pay the price, but it is a totally legitimate project. With the inevitability and increasing strength of the radical challenge to Western domination by the peoples of the South, let us leave this ship which we had not originally chosen to embark.

Notes

[1] Originally published in 2016 on Joao Gabriel's blog, *Le blog de Joao*, under the title "Pour une lecture anticoloniale de la polémique raciste sur Miss France."

[2] In the French West Indies (Antilles françaises), "békés" refers to the descendants of white colonizers and plantation owners. Though population constitutes about 1% of the total population, they still hold most of social power and own most of the land.

[3] *DOM-TOM* (Overseas France) refers to the territories outside of mainland France, still under French rule, which in most cases are also former colonies.