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Heterolinguistic embroideries

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I am not francophone; I don't make French sounds naturally but due to education. When I sing to myself, alone in the streets, far from the ears of my parents, my children, my sisters, far from the French, incomprehensible sounds come out and fall to the floor, maybe wrapped up in Russian or Mediterranean suffixes, languages where women end in *A*. Women are *A*s, overtures that pull the consonants of Mediterranean languages together, forcing them to love. During that time, my family, French for generations, stands vigilant: don't display yourself, don't think you are a foreigner, you are French and you will always be French. You were colonized and in the language of the Other you must shine. A very good student, an excellent one, a nearly perfect submissive. In that nearly lies the small difference, not the sexual difference but the difference of domination, of extermination by right or, rather the difference revolting against that extermination, the difference at the entrance of the *Tout-monde*[1] so dear to Edouard Glissant, where all languages are sisters and equals, ready to dance with each other: heterolinguality or heterolinguism.

The workshop held in September at the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers by Stefan Nowotny, Birgit Mennel and Boris Buden

on heterolinguality could seem, at first sight, heteroclite; segments of French society brought together by a concept without common practices. We could have fallen into the abstraction of convergent lines that extract different practices of supposedly common concepts, giving supposed subjects' central knowledge a surplus value of code to export into other terrains. Here, two factors have worked to thwart this frequent failure of academic meetings: on one hand, the two coordinators' desire to listen and not project prefabricated hypotheses; on the other hand, the pre-existing and unknown relations among the participant, linked in pairs by other previous relations that were apt to live beyond the present moment. The star turned into a "rhizome", to use Deleuze and Guattari's concept, i.e. arrangement on multiple and more or less underground levels that increased what was at stake during this meeting and prevented it from coagulating into a readymade definition. These questions are still open now at the end of this event.

Identity trembles

When we address immigrants in France, heterolinguality does not only derive from the incomprehension of the language that they speak and our incapacity to speak in their language. She resides also in the fact that, in our own supposed language, we are brought expressions that we would like to forget when we hear them uttered, finding ourselves invested by generations of colonial relationships and incapable of getting rid of them. The more we relate to immigrants, the more we find ourselves being made responsible for a mediation that evidently doesn't mean getting rid of our belonging to a society that puts us in this situation. It's an infernal spiral of service and submission that we can only overcome through a nearly total historical rupture. It's an infernal spiral of

translation that cannot defeat the asymptote of betrayal toward which it extends.

Facing a foreign subject in transit, be it a national foreigner or interior foreigner, facing the subject trembling to be recognized in his or her alterity, the interpellation by the police, by capital or by literature, proposes a rooting, an attachment to a stake called identity. The subject is transformed into a goat or a sheep. The agents of such a transformation, to all to whom such power has been delegated, they themselves are victim of this trembling, of a more or less perceptible, a rarely perceptible trembling; perceptible only in those who transform this trembling into literature or art.

Interpellation is primarily a gesture

Interpellation is not homolingual, it is always heterolingual, on both sides of the power line. One asks if the foreignness of the other will allow him/her to understand and the other quickly evaluates the few chances that he/she will have to get out without giving themselves up. Maybe, on the scales of capital, the speed of this evaluation measures the economic value of that person. But I am more sensitive to the multiplicity of these scales than reducing them to a measure of speed or money. I don't believe that the interpellated, like the interpellant, are in a situation of translation, transporting the language of one into the language of the other. Interpellation is primarily a universal gesture without words, where domination takes the initiative, with menacing tones more than the explicit content. Belonging to an institution with authority incites, above all, to handle this interpellation since we are being made responsible. But certain activists, in more or less humorous ways, don't hesitate to flip the situation, resulting as we all know in flight or mischievousness.

Exit heterolinguality, *enter* heterosociality

In the little group brought together in Aubervilliers, everyone spoke in French, even the Austrians from the eipcp. Strictly speaking, there was no heterolinguality, even if numerous languages of the world stimulated the group as shadow puppets: Arab – of which we know the multiplicity of its real forms –, languages from Latin America, African languages, but curiously Asian languages were not present in the experiences brought together. These languages remained behind, beyond the walls that surround the group like tent clothes. The question was heterolinguality present in the *banlieue*:[2] multiple immigrant communities live there, certain members of which are supposedly non-francophone, especially women. But the two groups of Aubervilliers youths, *Les Engraineurs* and *Musik à venir*, are groups of francophone expression, attentive to the culture of their countries of origin, rather in moral terms, in terms of social customs than in linguistic terms. *Les Engraineurs* attempt, through numerous films, to show that the cultures here and there don't treat the same problems in the same ways. The example that most struck me was a young boy disciplined for his bad work. His instructor demands he look into his eyes when he is spoken to, while his father demands he look down when he is scolded. A typical example of the cognitive dissonance, so dear to sociologists, that explains many misunderstandings, blocks and delays. The collective practice to film these differences in culture, not in documentaries to be used by teachers and other social workers but in fictional short films, showing the capacity of these youths to express their observations, educate aspiring filmmakers to observe and to render differences visible. The viewers, through laughter, become aware of these differences, of a heterosociality that explains many of their setbacks. But it is not only about heterosociality;

inequalities have been historically accumulated through painful and badly documented events. The film about the repression against Algerian demonstrations in Paris in 1961, for example, restitutes the memory of that community, giving it its dignity back.[3]

Music à Venir also gathers youths from Aubervilliers but for musical expression and singing. It is a runway that leads to the greater Parisian slam and rap scenes, a possibility for advancement parallel to scholastic and professional channels that so often are at an impasse. The common language of expression of youth from different immigrations is French, and it is in the contents expressed in this common language that different experiences are declined, whether they trace familial or social experiences or demonstrate the stigmatization and discrimination that they need to defend themselves against. The social workers-coordinators also propose educational themes like prevention against substance addiction. *Musik à venir* insists, beyond the task of writing per se, on the performance of texts, on the capacity of public expression, of facing concrete heterolingual situations, of multiple and unknown references, even if the language of expression is French. This problem of the unknown in a linguistic expression in transition between domination and freedom is strongly highlighted by the Martinique poet Edouard Glissant.[4] He uses a different word than heterolinguality, preferring "creolization" to stress the becoming character of language, in the same sense affirmed in *Musik à venir*'s [the be-coming music] name: there is creolization in linguistic activity between many languages when, being a poetic activity, it produces the unexpected, a creation. Contrarily, heterolinguality and metissage are, according to Edouard Glissant, objective facts, quantifiable and stripped of the unexpected. The demand for metissage has no other end than in realizing a

proportionally perfect mix that would be anything but an invitation to desire.

The banlieue, a place of aesthetic heterolingual attempts

Heterolinguality is only transformed into creolization, into the singular production of a common "all-world", through artistic work, be it professional or amateur, by entering into the production of a trajectory of particular life, whatever the materials used for that expression may be. In contemporary societies with populations of the most diverse migration histories, the emergence of expressive, non-representative and artistic heterolingual practices is evermore probable and even desirable in order to signify the place of these groups in society. It is in these neighborhoods in big metropolises where the population's heterogeneity is the highest that these new artistic practices of orality and images meet. It is only in France that we call them *banlieues* or popular neighborhoods. How can the subjective space formed by the hiatus between the common language of domination or of survival and the full, fantastic worlds evoked by the memories of relatives or the bedtime stories told in infancy flourish? How can we take the dominant language out of its oppressive function, out of its tradition of suffering? Bend it to make it show what it carries, what it holds, what it oppresses, is in the common interest of the youth and the teachers and elected. The *banlieue* is thus no longer a place of solitude and retreat but the theater of humor. This is the feeling we get when we see *Les Engraineurs*' films.

The dignity of these young musicians and filmmakers makes us forget that the *banlieue* is also a territory of non-rights, of non-citizenship for the parents who's foreign nationality deprives them from their first democratic right, the right to choose their own government. A right that – due to oblivion – tends to be ignored

by the youth, because politicians have moved so far away from their communities. Expressing oneself as an artist doesn't replace democratic participation and, with the aid of the financial crisis, abstention can on the contrary legitimize failing support for activities of artistic expression. Does heterolinguality make participation difficult? Do youth and politicians live on different planets? On different social planets, certainly, as different as incomes of €1000 on one side and €5000 on the other, and all that this supposes. Different linguistic planets, no: like a slammer once said, if we speak *verlan*,[5] it is because we can speak French, and if we can twist French around so quickly, it's because we know it really well. Maybe not those who have just arrived, but on the heterolingual planet, in the practices of song and image, one learns quickly. The French government also takes care of its heterolingual planet by selecting migrants from its ex-colonies, even if it means to impoverish heterolinguism.

Using minor and major language

In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*,[6] Deleuze and Guattari evoke the very impossibility of writing, or expressing oneself, in a language other than the major language of the colonial empire. As we see in the *banlieue* youth, it isn't a question of public or market, but a need of distancing oneself from one's country of origin to better valorize it, sing it, express it. Through artistic activity, we produce solidarity, even if imaginary, with people facing the powers that want to destroy them. And this solidarity uses the language of the other, it has more power. Is that why we should today write in English facing a Europe that forces us in the scientific and technical domains to use this language? No, says Glissant, because writing and words are first of all a question of place, of emission from a place and the heterolingual work of that place. The places of Europe are still marked by national languages. It is only in the

actual European places – the European Commission, the European Parliament and all of the European networks – that heterlinguality between European languages is realized. The cost of translation makes equality among languages impossible and, like in the U.N., a handful of major languages are imposed. This isn't artistic production but the tricky negotiations that allow for a common market. English has imposed itself as the language of business and science, but German-Austrian defends itself with the 14 countries of the Salzburg group and the German of Germany too, while Mediterranean languages defend themselves differently through taking up certain topics. These games are being played outside of the literary or musical domains.

Toward shimmering languages?

European countries, and notably France, are still, imaginarily, monolingual countries, blocs of national monolinguisms to be negotiated as a whole. Only the natives have the job of representing their country, including in the languages of others or in a common language. Paradoxically, the European Union has reinforced the bond between the right to expression and the position of representation, barring the road to transversal lingual and artistic creations, hindering weavings that could have been made between national cultures and between minorities, and indicating possible paths of construction at the same time. Right now, Europe is rather the breeding of languages, discovering the cracks in this more or less bulletproof lingual system, recomposing borders, discovering great domains of interlocution. Transmigrants, migrants that move between European countries along commercial paths instead of along the lines of ex-colonies to the metropolis, will probably be interesting pilot fish in this new European reality. They, or rather their children, put themselves in the place of their mothers, and tell their histories in the new places of common

spaces, the possibly split places in their country of origin where they will construct new communities of migrant children from Europe. It is probably in Morocco, Tunisia, China, in the Philippines, in Brazil, in the Caribbean or in New York that we will hear songs about what Europe really is.

At the edge of the great evolutionary trends of the European population, a stich is made, sewn and woven, making each place the possible emergence of a song or a new image, composing all the linguistic dimensions of Europe in a singular way. A stitch shimmering like the quilts of the women who have been there.

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[1] This is a reference to one of Edouard Glissant's latest writings, namely Tout-Monde (Paris, Gallimard, 1995) and Traité du Tout-Monde (Paris, Gallimard, 1997). Glissant together with others created also the "All-world Institution" which aims to "make the phenomena and processes of creolization known and to contribute to spreading the extraordinary diversity of different peoples' imaginations expressed through the multiplicity of languages, the plurality of artistic expression and unknown lives". For more information (in French), see http://www.tout-monde.com [translator's note].

[2] *Banlieues* are translated as "suburbs", as these are also residential areas on the outer edge of a city, but the connotations of the term "*banlieue*" in France can be different from those in English-speaking countries. The "suburbs" in the United States, for instance, are generally associated with low population density, detached or semi-detached housing and middle and upper class inhabitants. On the other hand, in France *banlieues* are more frequently areas of low-income apartments and social housing. Thus, the equivalent of *banlieues* in the United States would be

"the projects". In the UK, the equivalent would be a "council estate". The term *banlieue* itself comes from the two French words *ban* and *lieue* ("league", or roughly four kilometers) [translator's note].

[3] *Mémoire du 17 Octobre 1961*, a short documentary film by *Faïza* Guène and Bernard Richard. Under orders from the head of the Parisian police, Maurice Papon, the French police attacked a demonstration of some 30,000 pro-FLN Algerians, which was held in Paris on 17 October 1961, during the Algerian War (1954–62). After 37 years of denial, the French government acknowledged 40 deaths in 1998, although there are estimates of over 200 [translator's note].

[4] See, for example, Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, Michigan, University of Michigan Press, 1997 and Edouard Glissant, Tout-monde, Paris, Gallimard, 1997.

[5] *Verlan* is an argot in the French language, featuring inversion of syllables in a word, and is common in slang and youth language. It rests on a long French tradition of transposing syllables of individual words to create slang words. The name *verlan* is an example: it is derived from inverting the syllables in *l'envers* ("the inverse," pronounced *lan-ver*) [translator's note].

[6] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.