

#BeyondTalkingBack I: Françoise Vergès

David Theo Goldberg and yourself at some point came up with the idea of periodically bringing together scholars/activists/thinkers like the one we just had in Paris. What brought on this idea – has the set up/focus changed over time – how do you understand the stakes in these conversations?



I have adopted that format for a while now. For each event I organize for my Chair “Global South(s)” at the Collège d’études mondiales, I carefully think of the ways in which I will be able to provoke an exchange between people engaged in different practices and disciplines but sharing similar concerns: social justice, radical feminism, decolonial objectives...

Before getting to the work I have done with David Theo Glodberg (in 2015, we met around “The Re-Turn of Religion in the Public Space”), I will explain why /insist on this kind of format. It was not at the university that I discovered colonialism, racism, racial capitalism, or women’s oppression nor when I arrived in France. I observed and experienced all this in Reunion Island (Indian Ocean) where I grew up, a French slaves’ colony now a French department. They never were abstraction, nor a “personal” experience, but concrete, material realities. I looked around me and saw injustice and racism. My parents were anticolonial, feminist, avid readers – there were always books at home – of literature from everywhere and essays.

When I left Reunion, it was to go to Algeria – I was sixteen, I had not finished high school, I took my baccalauréat in Algiers– to experience what it was to live in a country that had freed itself from French colonialism. It was a crucial experience of postcolonialism. Many other things followed these experiences, but what I mean is that I need to grasp the concrete experiences of women and men, I do not like pose, any kind of posturing. I have seen a lot of it, everywhere. I know the cost.

It is not enough of course to bring people from different disciplines together to have a rich conversation, but when you know the people you have invited, their work, their commitment to justice, it’s already a plus.

With David, we always have wanted to set a conversation, to avoid a series of presentations, certainly very interesting and worthwhile, but which could end up being an accumulation of words. In a way, that format is a critique of the economy of accumulation pervasive in academia, the name-dropping, the ego, the narcissism. We know the people we have invited have read what needs to be read, have done fantastic research in their field. We respect them and their work, they are comrades, friends, companions. We ask them to avoid the presentation followed by Q&A, but rather to fully engage, to have a collective conversation, a debate among friends, in trust and conviviality, which does not mean not having different views or analysis.

For “Race after the PostRacial,” I really wanted scholars to have the opportunity to listen to French antiracist activists, groups and associations which speak of “political antiracism” and are critical of “moral antiracism”, the rhetoric based on the analysis of racism as remnants of backwardness and lack of education whereas these activists speak of State racism, structural, institutional racism. So I organize this encounter where they will speak of their work against police violence, Negrophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Asian racism, racism in the medias... I did not want them to be mere “informants,” and the meeting had to be outside of academic setting.

For this format to succeed, we need a personal *and* a collective effort. It is important to create an atmosphere of trust, to have the pleasure of being together. It is about the possibility of creating a community in two days. I also think this kind of format is well suited for current debates, so much is going on, there are so many things to absorb. One of the consequences of the global counter-revolution, the violent assault on social justice, freedom, and equality, rights of women, indigenous peoples, workers, peasants, minorities, LGBTBI... may be a feeling of powerlessness. The success of the two sentences, “There is no alternative” and “There is no such things as society, there are only individuals,” warns us about the capacity of fabricating ideological consent. So when “there is no alternative” has become a “truth,” it is fundamental to tear apart the lie, and this can be done in a setting that bring together scholars, thinkers and activists.

It is relatively rare that Francophone and Anglophone academia meet in a context like this one, nor formal scholars and activists, nor scholars(hip) beyond (the geographical) hegemonic west finding centre stage. Where (if at all) do you see the challenges and advantages of making these bridges?

In academia, we often talk of trans-disciplinarity, cross-disciplinarity, etc., yet the current tendency is greater specialization and let's not forget that humanities and

social sciences are under attack. So it's important to organize this kind of gathering as a counter-hegemonic strategy. In France, after the 2015 attacks, the socialist prime minister declared that trying to explain why young men were killing people in Paris was akin to making excuses. In other words, explaining was justifying murder, it was a threat against research. In our workshop, Ghassan Hage spoke of the necessity to become a "scholar-warrior," not taking arms, but being conscious that those in power are determined to weaken, destroy, erase any kind of critical expression. We know that in the USA and Europe, as early as the late 1940s, think tanks were created to develop a global counter-revolution, with the ideas of Friedrich Hayek, Milton Freeman and especially of Ayn Rand whom we do not know well but who has inspired all these counter-revolutionaries. They hired smart people, they studied how propaganda works, they were very determined. We need to take the measure of our adversaries. They have as much passion as we do, but theirs is the passion of the individual. But, back to your question, for my part, I feel a deep urgency to think harder and harder about what we are witnessing and I do think that in the "South-s," all these "south" created by finance economy and neo liberal globalization, there are practices and ideas that are being developed and tested to imagine new emancipatory utopias.

With these bridges I also want each of us to be "disturbed," to get out of our comfort zone, to say to ourselves "ah yes, I did not think of that!" To provoke a mental step aside, whose effect may become clear long after the moment itself but it is there. To create the unexpected, the unforeseen. And again, the sheer joy of meeting each other, of discovering

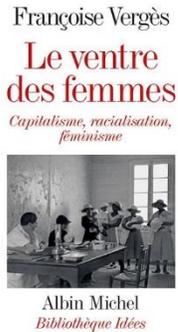
What would be the most important insights that you take away for this year's conversation? What are we to take with us/ where should we (continue/start to) turn our attention to in the fight against racism in the contemporary context?

I loved the energy we created. It was magic. And to see a room full of young people who came to listen to all of you!

Otherwise, I feel we need to continue to work on the boomerang-effect of colonialism and imperialism that Aimé Césaire analyzed in *Discourse on Colonialism*, on the meaning of defeat and betrayal but also on emancipatory utopias. Though we need to analyze what's different today, we also need to look at the long process of distilling reactionary and racist ideas, at "progressive racism". It's very important to continue to critique of the blindness of progressive movements in the West to the intersection between race, gender, class, disability, sexualities, racialized police violence... And if we fight to impose an intersectional methodology, that means we should apply to our own struggles. One of the areas

to study is race in new technology and new fields of science, we need to make a huge effort there.

- **Latest publication :** "Le ventre des femmes. Capitalisme, racialisation, féminisme" (Éditions Albin Michel, 2017)



Françoise Vergès is an internationally acclaimed political scientist, feminist and author of Reunionese heritage. She is Chair of Global South(s) at the Collège d'études mondiales, Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme, Paris. She worked as a journalist and editor as part of the French feminist movement from the mid-1970s, then settled in the United States in 1983 where she received a double bachelor degree in Political Science and Women's Studies with summa cum laude from the University of California, in San Diego, and a PhD in Political Sciences from Berkeley University in 1995. Her thesis *Monsters and Revolutionaries. Colonial Family Romance* was published in 1999 by Duke University Press. From 1996 to 2007 Françoise Vergès lectured at Sussex University and Goldsmiths College. She worked on a project of 21st-century postcolonial museum between 2007 and 2010, and acted as president for France's Committee for the Memory and History of Slavery from 2009 to 2012.

She is the author of numerous books on postcolonial theory, creolisation, psychoanalysis, slavery and the economy of predation, Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire. She has directed two movies on seminal Caribbean authors Aimé Césaire and Maryse Condé, and has collaborated with filmmakers and artists Isaac Julien and Yinka Shonibare MBE. Vergès was also a project advisor for Documenta 11 in 2002, and has contributed to the 2012 Paris Triennial which catalogue includes her essay *Lives That Matter*. In 2013, she curated "L'Esclave au Louvre : une humanité invisible" (Slave at the Louvre: an invisible humanity) <https://eyonart.org/2016/09/16/lecture-francoise-verges/>