

Fall 2019

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### Recommended Citation

Arora, Anupama, and Sandrine Sanos. 2020. "Ouvrir La Voix (Speak Up/Make Your Way): A Conversation with Amandine Gay." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 16 (Fall): 17-38. 10.23860/jfs.2019.16.02.

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# Ouvrir La Voix (Speak Up/Make Your Way): A Conversation with Amandine Gay

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Amandine Gay

Photo by Christin Bela of CFL Group Photography

## Introduction and Commentary

“I’m French and I’m staying here ... My kids will stay here too, and we’ll be here a while ... I’m not going anywhere.” Afro-feminist French filmmaker Amandine Gay’s 2017 documentary film *Ouvrir La Voix (Speak Up/Make you Way)* ends with this unequivocal assertion, this claiming of French-ness and France as home, by one of the Black-French interviewees in the film. This may seem a banal statement to many, yet it is a powerful one in the French context where blackness and Frenchness are not understood to belong together. In this two-hour documentary, Black-French female interviewees reflect on a host of topics: colonial legacies, what Frantz Fanon called the “fact of blackness,” labels such as Afrodescendant and Afropean, generational differences, pan-African masculinist politics, Eurocentric beauty standards, the construction of black female sexuality, and the French concept of *laïcité* [secularism]. The interviewees – who come from different religious, regional, and educational backgrounds – share their understanding of intersectional feminism, as the camera zooms close, allowing viewers to be privy to a

conversation rather than a collection of testimonies one might watch from afar. The film offers a meditation on the lack of representation and visibility of Afro-French women's voices and their "reclaiming of the narrative" (Gay 2018b). It is also and most importantly a bold feminist manifesto of Black diasporic cultural and political expression and lives – the first of its kind in France. When it was first released in Paris in 2017, it quickly became one of the most successful documentaries of the year.

As the film illustrates, in the postimperial French body politic, these Afro-French subjects constitute the diaspora of empire, the "remainders and reminders of the nation's historical past" (Mercer 1994, 7). As Black subjects, the interviewees are both invisible and hyper visible. They are subjected to racism and not seen as legitimate French citizens despite the purported colorblindness of the French concept of republican universalism, which, as a political principle, promises equality before the law for all citizens. The history of twentieth century France is the history of a colonial and postcolonial nation that waged two wars to preserve its colonies, first in what was named then "Indochina" (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) from 1945 to 1954 and, most infamously, in Algeria from 1954 to 1962. As Amandine Gay herself explains in the interview, France is a country that has been engaged in slavery, held a colonial empire, and participated in the Holocaust (Gay 2015a). These historical events have shaped generations and haunt French political imagination as they remain marginal to official histories and political culture.

*Speak Up* centers the voices, of those who are not heard and "are too often silenced," that the French political imaginary refuses to acknowledge (Gay 2018b). That, too, is the historical and political legacy of French republican universalism – a political regime that has characterized France since the 1789 French revolution. According to historian Joan W. Scott, it "rests on a notion of politics that takes the abstract individual to be the representative not only of citizens but also of the nation. It rests, as well, on the assumption that all citizens, whatever their origins, must assimilate to a singular standard in order to be fully French" (2005, 1). This abstract individual is "presumed to be shorn of any particular form of identity and belonging" (Scott 1). While universalism promises equality, it prevents the recognition of how difference is produced in French politics. That particular conception has led to a uniquely French paradox: how to claim recognition, rights, and redress when one is not to embody any particular (and historical) form of identity and experience? What of those then – women, black, Muslim, among others—whose lives are shaped by discrimination and inequities, who have been made second-class citizens, or are perceived as not fully French? When the citizen is presumed male, how to call for recognition in politics? If heterosexuality is presumed to anchor the nation, how to ask for recognition of same-sex rights? If one is racialized and always suspect, how to speak and undo the effects and structures of racism? How to speak of the aftereffects of empire when its colonial legacies remain unacknowledged? How does one address inequalities of gender, race, and sexuality when the political is premised upon the disavowal of difference and its promise of universal equality has failed? These questions have been at the heart of controversies, demands, and mobilization in the late twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Amandine Gay's documentary tackles these questions.

While she was an undergraduate and graduate student in sociology and drama, Gay worked as an actress (and was also briefly a burlesque dancer). However, she was limited as a working actress by a racist imagination that could only conceive of Black actors as "drug addicts, prostitutes or criminals." As one actress interviewed in *Speak Up* explains, the range of roles for Black women is narrow and stereotypical: "I feel like I can't refuse roles that I'm offered, because otherwise I change jobs or direct my own films." That is exactly the choice Gay made. She began writing scripts and plays and decided to become a filmmaker. As Gay explains in her interview, her engagement with critical race, queer, and disability studies while a student abroad, first in Australia and later in London, led her to reflect on the French film canon and history she had always found limiting. In 2014, she began writing *Speak Up*. The film is testament to her work as academic, activist, and filmmaker.<sup>2</sup>

Amandine Gay's film belongs to a new generation of "Afrofeminists" contesting the legacies of slavery and empire while challenging the tenets of republican universalism. Gay's film – along with other important Afro-French cultural productions by Kaytie Nielsen and Niang Mame-Fatou, Maimouna Doucoure, Alain Gomis, Euzhan Palcy, Isabelle Boni-Claverie, Collectif Afroféministe, and the collective "Afro Fiction" – is part of the outpouring of the creative and cultural expressions of the Afro-French diaspora that confronts the lack of diversity in French art and cinema. These cinematographic creations are only part of the political work that is being undertaken in France at the moment. The Comité Vérité et Justice pour Adama (Committee Truth and Justice for Adama), which is named after the 2015 untimely death of Adama Traoré at the hands of the police, has been mobilizing to denounce French society's structural racism and police violence (Comité Vérité pour Adama). In 2016, artist Kader Attia founded ~~La Colonie~~ *La Colonie* (The Colony), a multidisciplinary art and cultural center dedicated to engagement and dissemination of decolonial thought and to "fight against fascism and obscurantism" (Luquet-Gad 2016). French Afrofeminists call for intersectional emancipatory politics – "radical social change through collective struggle" – to combat the after effects of empire and racism (MWASI 2014). In 2014, some came together to create MWASI, an Afrofeminist collective, open only to "[B]lack women and people assigned female at birth." Afrofeminism is explained as:

a political and collective response to the racist, hetero-patriarchal and capitalist system, borne of the history and legacies of black women and feminists who have fought for emancipation and liberation by making significant contributions to feminist thinking in France, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean or the African diaspora. (MWASI 2014)

MWASI has been at the forefront of such discussions and some of its founding members are interviewed by Gay in *Speak Up*.

*Speak Up* features long interviews with twenty-four women of different ages and different backgrounds who speak of their experience of race, gender, sexuality, and intimacy. They discuss the ways in which racism structures school, employment, home, nation, and citizenship. At the same time, they each tell their own story of subverting and reclaiming spaces, narratives, and identities. These performances and portraits challenge mainstream and hegemonic visual representations of Black people in France, as stereotypical objects of representation. In this way, *Speak Up* constitutes an act of resistance and self-representation, individual and collective, a wresting of the "means and modes of representation" to speak of the lived experiences of Black women in France, an act that transforms the dominant regimes of representation (Hall 1996, 164). In the interview that follows, Gay discusses her wide range of influences for the aesthetic choices she made in the film in order to craft this "political portrait of black women in francophone Europe." As she reimagines the "talking heads" genre of documentary, aesthetic choices – close-ups, choice of interviewees, inclusion of performances, chapters, use of interiors and outdoor space – all contribute to a complex and evocative portrait of contemporary Afro-French women in the film. She also speaks about the challenges and strategies deployed to imagine and especially fund, film, produce, and distribute such a documentary.

*Speak Up* is a powerful film. Gay did not want to simply follow the codes of "talking-heads documentary" instead choosing to frame and film her interviewees in extreme close-ups, edited so that they might appear to have a conversation or might be speaking to one another. Viewers cannot escape the voices and gazes of these women as they explain the profound ways in which race and racism has shaped their lives and their experience and understanding of blackness. As one woman says, "The word 'race' has to be spoken, because it exists, it's materialized in our lives, in our bodies, in our perceptions of our bodies, in our relations with people, so I think it's hypocrisy to ban it from the [French] Constitution [...] Race is truly a reality."<sup>3</sup> Another adds, "The word 'race' describes a social reality;" yet another says, "We don't name things because that way we don't have to struggle with them . . . Saying that

race doesn't exist in France means not wanting to tackle racial problems." The word "race," one participant adds, is a crucial tool "to discuss our oppression clearly and concretely." These close-ups interpellate us; voices linger in our minds. The absence of musical background, as much a deliberate choice as one dictated by limited funding, forces us to pay attention and listen.

Even more so as Gay chose to intersperse those with brief quiet moments where viewers watch some of the interviewees – actresses, burlesque dancers, choreographer, and performer –reclaim their bodies on stage. As their bodies move, occupy space, remake those spaces, they are reclaiming not only narrative but agency. They are undoing the canon by performing the celebrated seventeenth century playwright Jean Racine (that every French child would have read in school). They are subverting the assumed relation between the aesthetic and the political with a rehearsal of punk feminist Virginie Despentes' 2011 manifesto *King Kong Theory*, or staging their own avant-garde queer feminist performances as did Rébecca Chaillon.<sup>4</sup> The film lingers on faces, skin tones, hair, and voices of the Afro-French interviewees that establishes an intimacy between these women and the viewer. Gay has made voices, bodies, and skin the center of her film's aesthetics, which is another act of political resistance and a counter-response to being told year after year that Black bodies and skin cannot be filmed because they do not "light" well. In the interview, however, Gay explains how her work as artist and filmmaker has been ignored, and how, too often, the film has been seen as a political text without aesthetic force, and its content separate from its form.

The film's narrative is, as Gay writes, "born out of [her] desire" to "explain why the intersection of discriminations faced by black women in France and Belgium is as problematic as it is political" while celebrating their diversity and resistance (2018b). The film is divided into "chapters," each of which deals with a specific issue that thematically anchors these women's conversations. Each chapter, in turn, borrows its title from an interviewee's comment. What may, at first, appear baffling ("there are no black swans") is later given context, shape, and meaning as we listen to the women speak. In the chapter titled, "It's like a layer cake," different interviewees engage the topic of naming, self-naming, labels, and categories. A common thread that runs through all their responses is how they don't feel "confined to a single identity" even as they are perceived as such by the dominant French society. One of them says, "I'm a French woman with multiple identities." Another one says that because she grew up in Brittany, she feels like a Breton, even though her "influences are Afro" and she's very proud to be a "Bantu." Another interviewee (with two names Zina and Amelie) reflects on her multidimensional intersectional identity, "I'm Rwandan, Congolese, Belgian, French, Amélie... That's who I am today. It's like a layer cake." She claims that all of this contributes to her "complexity, beyond just Zina, the Black girl." These interviewees proudly claim a hybrid Afro-French identity. In this same chapter, the interviewees self-identity as Afropean or Afrodescendant. While one interviewee prefers Afropean, another finds Afrodescendant more "encompassing." Taiye Selasi has suggested the term Afropolitan—a term that does not resonate with Gay who sees Afrodescendant as the most accurate because it encompasses a consciousness of diasporic identity. As Gay explains in her interview, the diversity of self-naming speaks to the political desire to properly name life and experience and claim that space that was once marginalized or erased from French history and society. The film is Gay's, yet, it is also at the same time a collaboration with those that accepted to speak on screen and helped carry the film to the success, prizes, and acclaim it has garnered in France and abroad. As Gay herself notes, "This film is for those who fought before us and a testimony to those who will come after us."

## Speak Up/Make Your Way

**Anupama Arora and Sandrine Sanos (JFS):** Thank you for making the time to talk with us. How's the U.S. college tour going? Is this your first college tour? How has *Ouvrir la Voix (Speak Up/Make Your Way)* been translating in the US context? What has been surprising to you or revealing to you about the film's reception here?<sup>5</sup>

**Amandine Gay (AG):** It's great, but it's tiring! Right now, I'm visiting the fifth university [Davidson University, North Carolina] on the tour, out of nine universities. I'm starting to feel the burn, just like when you train. This has been a full week where I taught two classes on average per day, plus a screening of the film, a workshop, and a faculty meeting where we were discussing diversity in the classroom. It's been pretty intense. This week is brutal, but starting from next week, it's going to be easier because I'm only doing film screenings with Q&A. I've done such a tour before, in November 2018. In November, the film premiered at the Indie Memphis Film Festival and then I went do a master class at Columbia University and a screening with Q&A. I also did a screening with Q&A and a meeting with students at SUNY-Purchase.

I've been touring with the film a lot – to the UK, Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland – lots of places where there are Black minorities; and people identify with so much in the film, except for the part about “communitarianism” [and] sectarianism, because that's the thing that's really French.<sup>6</sup> I would say that maybe Islamophobia is less an issue for Black people in the US because there are fewer Black Muslims in the US than in France and wearing a headscarf is less of a debate. That would be the two main differences.

People identify with issues about Black womanhood and intimacy issues, like hair, sexual fetishization, Black motherhood, mental health. For example, when I showed the film at Indie Memphis, there were lots of Black folks from Memphis who were neither scholars nor activists, so they were quite surprised to discover how similar the situation was in France. US college students, especially Black students, have said that they didn't realize the similarities of experiences; they're like, “we could say the exact same thing here ... we have the same problems here.” I've said to them, “yeah I know!” [laughs] So, I would say the reception has been more people noticing the similarities than the differences.

**JFS:** That's interesting. We can see the similarities but we imagined that people would have been a lot more baffled by the arguments, especially, the ideas of “communitarianism,” *laïcité* [secularism], “ethnic statistics” –that is so different –and what it means to have republican universalism in France.

**AG:** There have been conversations about that. But I think that, because there are many issues in the film that have more to do with intimacy, family, personal identity, that the differences are not what have stood out. When students ask me about the differences between the United States and France, that's when I talk to them about republicanism. I talk to them about the fact that we, in France, have a history of slavery *and* a history of colonization, and that most of the French state violence has been conducted overseas. While, in the US, there's a shared history of genocide against the indigenous people and then slavery. Everybody is still living in the place where all these things took place. For instance, at a place like Davidson, it's really easy to make them understand this idea because the campus was built by slaves, and it was only integrated in the 1970s; and when they integrated the campus, they had African students coming because they were still not ready to admit African Americans.

## Aesthetics and the Making of a Film

**JFS:** We were wondering whether we could talk about the aesthetic choices you made in the film. We especially wanted to talk about it because it's not been covered as much in other interviews.

**AG:** I'd say that one of the things that's interesting from a feminist perspective is how the aesthetic aspects of the film have not, or almost not, been discussed by the press in France, and how, actually, I've had to impose aesthetic questions during interviews. At some point, during the press tour, I had to say that I would not give an interview if they were not going to ask me questions about the film. I also had to ask that the film not be discussed only in the "society" pages or, worse, in the "Africa" pages. The first reviews were in *Le Monde Afrique* because a Black journalist asked to interview me, and I wanted her to be able to interview me but, then, *Le Point Afrique* came, then *L'Express Afrique*, and so on.<sup>7</sup> And I had to say: "No, you have cinema pages, and I am a French filmmaker. So, you either chronicle my film in the cinema pages or I'm not giving you the interview." There's been a huge fight around this.

I had a big argument on Twitter with a *Télérama* journalist; *Télérama* is this hugely important newspaper on culture in France.<sup>8</sup> Actually, if your film is reviewed in this venue, and it's a positive review the week before your film is released, then you are likely to have 20-30% more people showing up in independent theaters to watch the film. That's how powerful the magazine is. I knew *Télérama* [had known] about my film for a year and, yet, they hadn't reviewed it. I got into an argument with a *Télérama* journalist on Twitter. What happened is my film was released at the same time as Kathryn Bigelow's film, *Detroit*. Many media outlets would invite me to discuss *Detroit* as well as what it means in terms of racial issues but they were not discussing my film. The irony was that I am a French filmmaker and I was releasing a film on the same day. So, I got a couple of these invitations to discuss *Detroit*, and I declined them privately. But, then, a journalist from *Télérama* – the same outlet that had been ignoring me for a year – wrote to me because another Black guy had made a video against the Centre National du Cinéma (National Center for Cinematography). This *Télérama* journalist wrote to me asking me if I'd email the other guy. And I got really angry because I thought:

So, you have my contact, and you think that I'm here to be the phone book for Black people in the industry, or that I can give you insights on race. But none of you are promoting my film. And, on top of it, you're stupid enough to let me know that you know about me; you can email to ask me for my services, but you're not going to talk about my movie. That's not OK.

And I made that public on Twitter. [Actually] the *Télérama* journalist who got in touch with me was a Black guy. Because, of course, those newsrooms usually send Black people to reach out to Black artists because they think that it's more likely that I will say yes to them. But I'm going to say no to Black people who do that. And, after I said no, I got into an argument with another white journalist from *Télérama* and he told me I should be more "humble" and that, maybe, they would discuss my film. Then, an Afrofeminist activist on Twitter created a hashtag that was called #FuckHumility where a lot of Black women and women of color would share about their experience of success in whatever industry they were in; and [how] they were told to be, to remain, "humble." By the end of the day, the thing got so big because I also shared the email I had received to talk about Bigelow's film in other media outlets. Then, that evening, I finally heard from the Editor-in-Chief of *Télérama* who wrote to me to say that they had loved the film and wanted to interview me. Of course, I said "yes." I ended having a little blurb in *Télérama* the week of the film's release. So, there's been a huge issue about me being a filmmaker or an author.

And what I've often said is that *Speak Up* is a really daring talking heads documentary and, had I been a white male, I would have been called a genius! But what's happened is that, because I'm a Black woman, the film has not even been discussed aesthetically. But, it's starting to happen. And the only media who actually did so is *Diacritik*, even before Richard Brody's review in the *New Yorker*. The *Diacritik* reviewer is a gay guy of color, and he reviewed extensively the aesthetics of the film (Speno 2018).<sup>9</sup> But, these are exceptions. Even when the film was reviewed in *Le Monde de la Culture*, etcetera, all the reviews were about the film's issues and not the film's aesthetics.

**JFS:** That's surprising. To us, the content of the film is framed by the filmmaking choices you made. We were wondering whether you could tell us about what inspired you, your choice of close-ups and portraits, not having names of interviewees, and your choice to have these voices speak to us, straight, with no distractions, and so on.<sup>10</sup>

**AG:** Yes, there were many aesthetic choices because the idea was that the concept of the film is a conversation between Black women. The best form to translate the concept is to go for a talking heads documentary because that's a conversational genre. But, it's true in general, and especially in France, that the talking heads documentary genre is frowned upon in the independent filmmaking community because it's a genre that's used widely in TV and in TV news reports. There are a lot of codes in TV talking heads documentary setting that are, for instance, the names of people, the little tag that appears on someone's face with their name, age, what they do, etc. Then there are [also] things that people are told in film and TV school: that the public needs a visual stimulus every twenty-five seconds, so you're going to have someone speak and, then, you see them walking in the streets. It cuts to them in their kitchen and it cuts to a show of their hands and so on. Then, you'll also have a lot of camera moves because usually, cameras are on a stand and, you're going to have zooms and pans and tilts up and down so that people feel [this] visual stimulus.

When I made my film, I was aware of these aspects of the talking heads genre. So I made other conscious choices. I've been working with Enrico Bartolucci, who's the Director of Photography and editor of the film; and, in life, he's my partner. When we decided to work together on the film (because he's a photographer [by training]), we discussed what would make the film a *cinematic film*. To make sure it would be an art house film and not a TV documentary especially because political films tend to forget about aesthetics. We were thoughtful about aesthetic choices because it was about creating a new type of aesthetics if you aim for emancipation. We were going to get rid of all those tropes, like the little signs with the names and other stuff like that.

I had been working as an actress for a long time and had not been given roles. One of the industry's excuses was that "it's really hard to light Black people" [laughs] because it makes the DP's life a difficult one: Like: "dark skin doesn't take the light as well" (see, Latif 2017; Nicholls 2017). The issue, however, is not that Black skin doesn't take the light well. It's just that DPs are not trained to light Black people like they light white people, so, of course, it makes their life harder! But it's not because Black people don't take the light properly. The idea was therefore also to make a movie in natural light so that this conversation would be dealt with *once and for all*; that someone's incompetency has nothing to do with how photogenic Black skin is.

One of the other reasons to do what we did is that, when we realized we would have no money to make the film, we thought about the whole phenomenon of privileged white men who have to make things difficult for themselves. In fact, our film could qualify as a *Dogme 95* film because there's no added music.<sup>11</sup> Well, we didn't have money for the music. But the only music you hear is in from the burlesque performance. It's in natural light. Still, there are no extra things that are added for dramatic purposes. All the drama comes from what's being said in the film. One of the approaches to the film was to think of our

money limitations not as constraints but as new guidelines or rules, just like what had been done with *Dogme*. We wanted to try to make a film that is bare but still really powerful visually.

The issue of using natural light was also important because, especially with dark-skinned Black women, there is the whole issue of not being considered beautiful. I wanted to see how close we could get to the interviewees without it being uncomfortable for them. We wanted to make sure that we do get all this light reflection because we are so close to their skin. Enrico did a lot of try outs, to try out optics. We had already decided that we would use a Blackmagic Pocket camera because it has this nice crisp image, like the Canon 5D, but better. Enrico has been a photographer for decades, so he has all these types of optics—old-school optics. We did try outs with some friends of mine to see how close we could get. There was also the issue that we could not afford music in the film, but we needed to create rhythm. To be that close to women and especially with a hand-held camera, Enrico built like a homemade steady-cam and put weights on the back of them. Then, he created a little platform at the front where he could put the Blackmagic Pocket. This way, it was resting on their shoulders. One-third of the interviews were shot by Coralie Chalon; she's a camerawoman friend of mine who works in TV. And two-thirds of the interviews that were artistic performances were shot by Enrico because he's worked as a photographer for live artistic performances; you can really see that in the way he moves around artists on the set. He's really good at being close but not disturbing them from his experience as photographer working with dancers and circus people. The idea was that [the camera] would be stable but since it was not a camera on a stand, it had to be focused when the girls move and follow them to create a "fluid" and organic movement. It was really tiring because the interviews would last between two-three hours; even with breaks for Enrico and Coralie, it was a really tough job. But, [in the end, there's] an organic type of movement on screen because the camera follows the women when they move, when they speak, without this thing of moving from left to right... It was about trying to stay in focus as they spoke. That was one way of creating rhythm.

The other way of creating rhythm was the jump-cut style of editing, and that's something we borrowed from Errol Morris' *The Fog of War* (2003). Errol Morris has done quite a lot of documentaries that are really lengthy interviews. And his documentary, called *The Fog of War*, is a really lengthy interview of Robert McNamara, who was [President John F.] Kennedy's Minister of Defense. We wondered if the jump-cut style would work for us, that is cutting right through in the middle of a sentence and pasting it without any dissolve or anything of the kind, to create some sort of rhythm. Would it work with different people and with a camera that's not on a stand? We first shot four interviews and did some mock or quick editing to see if it was working. It did work as long as we kept the same frame of how we were shooting them; and if we changed the angle of the camera, alternate [it], so that we would not have two hours of the women looking in the same direction. If you want it to look like they're having a conversation, it's better if they respond to one another from a different angle.

Another aesthetic choice is related to the chapters. The film's been written the way it's been edited. When I wrote it in 2013, the film started with the question, "How did you realize you're Black?" and it finished with "France, love it or leave it" because I started working on the film when I decided to move to Canada. This is also how the chapters or themes are organized in the film. It is how I wrote it originally. But then, we remembered that in the TV show, *The Wire*, every episode starts with something that's going to be said in the episode. It creates a little tension, a little suspense, so we decided to take that idea from *The Wire* and apply it to the documentary. People realize after a while that [the title] is something that's said during the chapter: sometimes you don't understand what it's about. For instance, "I love red-head people" makes no sense until you get to the women speaking about this. Then, when we were two weeks into editing the film, we had the idea of using the old-school lettering we used in the chapter titles or thematic sections because we were in Montréal where the houses and restaurants still

have this old-school way of lettering. Enrico got on eBay and he realized it was possible to buy a Specials board [with its letters]. We bought a Specials board and we made the chapter titles that way, in the manner of US cinema aesthetics. And it was also a cheap way of making the chapters nicer than writing using the editing software.

Overall, a lot of work has been put into the aesthetics of the film. It is actually really hard to make a two-hour long talking-heads documentary without music, especially for cinema theaters, for viewers who are not independent filmgoers. We had a lot of people of color watching this film. And no one fell asleep. People told me: “Oh, for a film that is an hour-and-a-half long, it goes fast.” I’m like, “well, it’s two hours. I’m glad you enjoyed it!” So even just *that*, nobody’s done that! It’s the first time. And, again, in terms of results, the film had ten thousand ticket admissions in about six weeks. Most French films (about eighty documentaries that are released every year), about 80% of them that make less than 7,000-10,000 admissions. We’ve broken every possible record that exists. This sort of thing never happens for a first film.

I co-founded Bras de Fer Production company with Enrico Bartolucci and we changed it to a production-distribution one because we could not find a distributor. I distributed the film in old-school fashion, calling cinemas on the phone, sending them a private link to the film and so on. We had eleven cinemas in France to start with that showed the film, and three copies of the film. In 2017, in three months, we made the biggest rate of cinemagoers per copies. The film’s been a public success because people have been talking about it so much on social networks because every time we had sold-out houses. But the media and the French cinema industry have really snubbed and overlooked what has been one of the biggest documentary successes, in terms of proportion, in French history. Not in terms of admissions because there have been films like *Etre et Avoir (To Be and To Have)* (Philibert 2002) and all the documentaries about penguins; sometimes even a million people go and see them. This could never happen for my kind of film, still we killed it in theaters. And, aesthetically, it is a really powerful film. To me, it was amazing that people would still not discuss the film’s aesthetics much. I often talk about this with Enrico because he’s a white man; and I’ve said to him that if he had authored this film [himself], we would still be hearing about it [laughs]. It was a political choice to not co-author the film, even though we ended up working together. I had the original idea, and this is a project about Black women reclaiming their narrative. It will be the same thing for my next film. Enrico and I will still work together; but the film’s going to be about transnational adoption and since this comes from my personal past and it’s my writing, I will be authoring it on my own. So, yes, the art history and the cinematic scope of the film does get completely overlooked, and ignored even.

**JFS:** There’s a long history of that; for instance, even if you look back and see how Albert Memmi was always seen as a documentarian of experience as opposed to a novelist. Not paying attention to the aesthetics of the film seems to be a way of denying the force of the film. To go back to the aesthetics, we also thought that the choice of extreme close-ups, the voices, and the speaking, as well as a focus on performance and bodies and movement – that were quieter, but no less moving moments – was very purposeful and powerful.

**AG:** The film is about *reclaiming narrative*. It’s also very personal; a film is always about the person making it. In my personal life, art has always been a way to escape *assignments* (social categorizations) that were forced upon me.<sup>12</sup> I think that, even if it was a difficult time, one of the times in my life when I felt the freest was when I was at the drama conservatory because I was free to do all the parts I wanted to. It was strange because I was already working professionally at the same time and I was only auditioning for “Black parts.” But, in drama school, I could do anything. I loved Racine, I loved Shakespeare, and I loved contemporary theatre. Those were the only moments where I could escape who I was and I could be someone else. That is the part I love the most about acting or about performing. While

you're on stage, you are no longer you. There's a book, *La Passion d'Être un Sutre (Passion for Being Someone Else)* (Pierre Legendre 1978), which is about dancers, but it works for actors. Having artistic performances in the film was incredibly important, because you have such an unstoppable flow of thoughts and of trauma. It was important to balance it with something like healing. To me, art is like a healing process.

So, having artistic performances was a way to balance the narrative and it was also a way of showing [these women] reclaiming [their] narrative. One of the things that we, Black actresses, are told is that it's not easy to cast a Black person in a classical piece. But, then it also becomes *this thing* that, because we are never seen in those classical [drama] pieces, it's assumed that we could not do them. But we're *already* doing these sorts of performances. We're just doing it on our own, or on our spare time. We do exist. I used to be a burlesque performer and we were, at the time, [only] two Black burlesque performers in Paris: Loulou and I. We are doing these things; we've been ignored, but we do exist. Rebecca, who's in the film, was doing this performance where she was throwing tomato. I'd seen her perform a year before, and I was mesmerized—just doing this thing where she would wrap herself in transparent plastic foil, and then throw paint on it; and she would throw glitter on top of the paint, and after having wrapped her leg(s), she would be like: “oouh, I'm a mermaid” [laughs]. I remember watching this and thinking, I want to do something with this person. And, then, Marie-Julie, who was rehearsing the Virginie Despentes essay [*King Kong Théorie*] (2006) that they turned into a play and those were also performers I like; and I do like Virginie Despentes.<sup>13</sup> I was seeing Black women around me exploring all these forms, and being daring, aesthetically speaking, in the things they were creating. But we were not being given the opportunities to do this professionally. And, when I made my movie, I thought: “Let's put everything I like into this, all these amazing women, because who knows if I will ever make another movie. This way, at least there will be a documentary archive of what we were doing in the years 2013-14.” So, that's the true reason why there are artistic performances in the film.

**JFS:** And it really works in the film. To return to the question about influences: you spoke about *The Wire* and *the Fog of War*. Are there other authors, thinkers, filmmakers in the black diaspora that have been influential?

**AG:** Well, one of the films that I really liked was *Sisters in the Struggle* because it had an interesting use of music and it was one of the only films I found about Black feminism in a non-US context. It's a 1991 documentary about black feminists in Canada by Ginny Stikeman and Dionne Brand. Dionne Brand is also an amazing poet. In the documentary, there's an a capella group and you can see them rehearse. And the music is from the a capella group. And I liked that. It's a Black women's a capella group, of course. Or Black people. (I don't know if it's only women). But, that was one film that really inspired me in the making of *Speak Up*.

And I would say that this idea that lighting Black people doesn't work was completely untrue. Look at [Senegalese filmmaker] Ousmane Sembène's work, Euzhan Palcy, Spike Lee, Julie Dash. I just don't even understand the argument. I also think that when I was younger, I was oblivious to the level of ignorance there is in France, because we have this whole narrative about our country, the country of lights, the Enlightenment, and all that crap. Of the New Wave too. But the New Wave is from a long time ago; it was in the 1960s! Since then, there have not been so many interesting things happening aesthetically in France. The New Wave was just a bunch of privileged white men. It's interesting, but the genre also has its limits. And, I think that when I was younger, I was sort of in a submissive position, especially in terms of class. I come from a working-class background. For a really long time, I had this admiration and fear of what is the dominant or normative culture in France. I really thought “they” knew everything about the arts! But, then, when I was twenty-one, I went to Australia for a study abroad during my last year at Sciences Po. And, that's when I really started to think of filmmaking.

Because, in my second year [at Sciences-Po], I did my internship at Les États Généraux du Film Documentaire (The Estates General of Documentary Film), a big documentary film festival. As well as with *Ardèche Images* in Lussas [as] they have a master's degree in filmmaking and the biggest documentary film library in Europe. So, I started going there. But, in my second semester of my study abroad first year, I took film studies; only film studies. The first semester I did journalism and aboriginal studies. And the second, I took only three classes in film studies. I started watching a lot of films. I was living in a shared house and my housemate said: "Oh, you must love Spike Lee." When I'd seen *Do the Right Thing* (1989) in France, I was around eighteen and I was still really assimilationist and a "nice" French Black girl. My thoughts of the film were: "Oh this is so American, and why can't there be racial reconciliation?" I did not "get" that movie the first time I saw it. I was shocked. I thought it was "extremist." But, now, I was twenty-one and I'd already written my master's thesis on the stakes of French colonization; I'd read [Frantz] Fanon. And, I was not the same person I was at eighteen. So, when my housemate said that I should try Spike Lee's films again, I watched all of his movies and I thought: "Oh my god. I really didn't get it!" I've also building my own set of knowledge: reading Black Feminism, Queer Theory, and so on. So, by the time I went back to France, (because I stayed in Australia for a year), I had had nine months of classes, I was changed.

Before returning to France, I worked for a month, then I went for a month to New Zealand. Then I returned to Australia, and from there, to Thailand. I came back to France for a couple of months; and I left again for London for the Notting Hill Carnival. I ended up staying for six months. I found a job as a waitress. By that time, I had read and been around people, and a whole world had opened up before me. I realized, how narrow-minded and ignorant French people were, because we don't have Critical Race Theory or Cultural Studies or Queer Studies or Disability Studies. Especially in terms of art, because we are so self-centered about our French cinema, we have no idea what happens elsewhere. In the meantime, amazing things were happening in the US, the UK, Africa, India. For instance, I discovered Bollywood when I was in Australia and I was like: "Oh my god, I love musicals! I did not know there were musicals outside of the US! To me, there was this realization about how limited French people are when it comes to aesthetics or references. I love movies in costumes. In fact, my pseudonym on social networks is Orpheia Negra because of the film, *Orfeu Negro* (Camus 1959). To me, it was like: "WOOO, they are making movies in costumes with Black people!" More recently, in the U.K, you have Amma Asante directing *Belle* (2013), a romcom in costumes with a Black female lead. And, in France, we're still having to play convicts. So much is happening in terms of representation, in terms of directors of photography. James Laxton's work on *Moonlight* (2016) is amazing. Ava Du Vernay's show, *Queen Sugar* (2016-present), is beautiful. I like the photography of Issa Rae's *Insecure* (2016-present). There is some serious work being done in the US right now and, if you go back in time, you look at works like *Touti Bouki* (Mambéty 1991), as there are also strong aesthetics going on in Africa.

**JFS:** As we watched your film and now, as we are hearing you talk, we can't help but think of Black British filmmakers and thinkers, and the conversations happening in Britain since the 1970s about controlling the means and mode of representation and self-representing. We're thinking of people such as Stuart Hall, Kobena Mercer, Gurinder Chadha, Jackie Kay, and so many others.

**AG:** I love Jackie Kay because she's adopted and because, I don't know how to say it, but I identify a lot with her work. Also, Jeanette Winterson. We, adoptees, have to know anybody who's adopted and is writing books, making films! There aren't so many [adoptees or works featuring adoptees] so we're kind of craving for them.

**JFS:** In the US, there's been some good work on Asian American adoptees.

**AG:** Yes, I think that Koreans are the largest diaspora of adoptees. There are around 250,000 of them, scattered around the world, but mostly in the US. They've really been laying the groundwork in

critical thinking and activism about adoptees, in general and in art. In 2018, in the US, Canada, and England, there were at least twenty books by adoptees that were published and there are more and more every year. Even in France, there were at least three or four.

**JFS:** One of our questions for you was also related to the fact that you're both a filmmaker and you also write academically. So, we wanted to ask, how do you see your academic work in relation to your filmmaking?

**AG:** I would say that academic work is the way to do research... for free [laughs]! Not "for free" but you know what I mean. My first master's thesis while at Sciences Po was on the stakes of colonization in contemporary France. A lot of the readings I did for this MA went into the film. For example, the working title for the second theme (or chapter) in the film, the clichés of the exotic woman, comes from a book by Jennifer Yee (2000). It's a book that examines French literature in the nineteenth century. This research, along with my activism, has really provided the basis for all the political questions that are raised in *Speak Up*. I like the idea of being able to do my own research, and, really, it's also a way of distancing myself from the subject. Academic work requires that from you, even if it is subjective; however, I always give my personal location in my work. I don't believe in objectivity. You still have to do rigorous research work and it's not about expressing your feelings. It's about research.

I also see [research] as a good first step, before creation. It's not just that you do an autobiographical visual essay. One of the tropes of documentary filmmaking is often autobiographical personal essay and I find that a bit annoying. I think it's good to do research, and it's good to see a therapist; and what's left, you create with [laughs]. For instance, I don't like to watch therapy on screen; I should be paid to be the person you do therapy with! That's what I like about research; it's another way of looking at issues and you have more time. My second master's degree is in sociology from UQUAM (Université du Québec à Montréal), and I've been doing it on transnational and transracial adoption because I already had in the back of my mind that the next film would be about [this topic]. I think that [it is] one of the reasons why that also helps me, especially for documentary. I believe in research, even in fiction.

Essentially, why [research] is also useful for me, especially for political issues, is that I'm going to get attacked. My legitimacy is always questioned: I can't just make a film. I have to be a specialist in my field. When the media tour and discussions around *Speak Up* started, I had prepared talking points because I was used to being both an academic and an activist. I prepared in the same way I would prepare a campaign when I was part of [the feminist activist group founded in 2009] Osez Le Féminisme (Dare Feminism). I would prepare responses for all the questions that I anticipated were going to be asked; for instance: "Is this an anti-white film because there are only Black women?" "What about race in the US?" I would have index cards with dates and numbers and stuff, because I was worried about getting my dates or other facts wrong. And I recorded my interviews with the media when I was doing them. Because if they didn't transcribe what I said properly, then I would attack them publicly. I had to do all this so that I would not be dismissed or delegitimized as being inaccurate or unserious. If I were a white man, I wouldn't have to worry about all of this. But that's not what happens for me: people have high expectations from me and, if I don't perform, they destroy my artistic work.

And, when you're Black or just a minority, you are always expected to represent your group; and I get asked questions like, "So, is the film representative of all Black women in France because they seem to be really educated?" And I say: "First, the premise of your question is racist because why would you assume that Black women in France are not educated." Then, "Do we ask that of every white movie, whether it's representative or not?" Because, if that's the case, I don't think everybody lives in one hundred and twenty square meters, or five hundred square meters apartments in Paris, enjoying the turpitudes of white French bourgeoisie of the ninth arrondissement (district). Nobody wonders if those

films are representative. I had to build all those arguments just so that my work could be discussed as a *creative* work.

**JFS:** You've had to, all at once, open up the space, defend, and constantly monitor how people relate to the film.

**AG:** Yes. At least, for a long time I had to do that. Now, I'm ok. There have been enough articles and coverage. But, I would say, at first, and because I knew it, the first three to six months were critical. Had there been just one article that called the film "anti-white," "extreme racist film..." that would have been it. We would have been done in the theaters... Someone would have picked it up and they would just have talked about that. When the film was released, my greatest fear was that some newspaper would take it in that direction and, then on, the film would disappear. It would just be a conversation about racial issues in France.

### **Reception: Home**

**JFS:** And that could have happened. For instance, in 2016, a MWASI representative organized "Les journées d'été non-mixtes" (summer workshop designed to be open to people of color) and there was an uproar about it; the academic political magazine *Mouvements* (2019) has just published a whole special issue on intersectionality and people are still getting enraged. We were wondering if you think the reception in France has changed now that people know your film is circulating and has won both popular and critical acclaim outside of France. Do you think that made a difference in France?

**AG:** No. Because I think what's made a difference in France is that people were flooding to the theaters, like the time the film was screened at the MK2-Beaubourg. Beaubourg is really critical; it's the place that makes or breaks independent films in Paris. The film ran for eight weeks, which never happens for this type of film. I think that, for the first three months, all the *Speak Up* screenings were sold out. So, I think that's what made the film. What also made the film is the fact that I'm very skilled at using social networks. Since I was being snubbed by the mainstream media, I organized this huge campaign on social networks. There are twenty-four women interviewees in my film, which means that everything I'm going to share is going to be shared by these twenty-four women; and many of them were already really big on social networks: Mrs Roots (<https://mrsroots.fr/> & @mrsxroots), Kiyemis (<https://lesbavardagesdekiyemis.wordpress.com/> & @Thisiskiyemis), for instance. #ouvrirelavoix [*Speak Up*] was a top tweet on Twitter the day the film was released. That's what these women did; they got together and organized so that they would put *Speak Up* as a top tweet. And because it would be the top tweet, then the newspapers would have to pick it up.

This was an organized campaign. The first step was the crowdfunding: we got some press for the crowdfunding because we raised the money quite quickly. People were curious about this Afrofeminist documentary that was raising so much money so quickly. They were curious about the documentary that was filling up theaters from Paris to Montpellier to the countryside. Because the film was a success, in theaters, it started being discussed a lot. So, by the time we had reached this point, then, I got interviews everywhere. Then, I had a portrait in *Libération*.<sup>14</sup> In 2014, when I started working on the film, I had made a conscious choice to publicize myself. That's when I started my blog; then, I started working for *Slate*, going to conferences, putting the links to them on my YouTube page, and organizing events.

The first event we organized around *Speak Up* was in February 2015. We had shot the film from June-December 2014. In February 2015, I organized an evening in a bar. It was packed. After that, there were always a lot of people at everything that I would organize. That night was called: "La Parole des Afrodescendantes: Entre Confiscation, Réappropriation, et Paternalisme" (Afrodescendent Women

Speak: Between Appropriation, Reappropriation, and Paternalism). The idea was to have five women from the film on stage with me—a Black women-only pane. We talked about how Black women had been erased from French history and related issues. During that evening, we also showed a few extracts of the film's rushes. That's when the community around the film started coming together. In 2015, people were asking when the film was going to be finished. By the time it was finished, people were sharing the info about the crowdfunding and gave money. We raised about fifteen thousand Euros (seventeen thousand dollars) from the crowdfunding to pay for the post-production of the film. Almost 500 people gave money, which is a lot of people for France. We got publicity for that too. Yes, I've done a lot of work on the film. I've been hustling like crazy since 2015 on social networks. I've done a lot of events, speaking gigs, organizing events with the women in the film. I met forty-five women for the interviews and twenty-four wanted to be in the film once I detailed all the chapters of the film and what I wanted them to respond to.

In 2014, Sharone, who's in the film, had started MWASI with two other women and now you can see how it has become this really important Afrofeminist collective. Sandra, who's in the film, is a choreographer; in the film, there's also Annie, a costume designer. Both created Trente Nuances de Noir (Thirty Shades of Black), an Afrofeminist marching band. Mrs. Roots has published one novel, a children's book, *Comme un Million de Papillons Noirs (Like a Million Black Butterflies)* (2018). In less than a year, it's been re-edited [several times]. It's in the seventh edition right now. Kiyemis has published a poem collection, *A Nos Humanités Révoltées (To Our Rebellious Humanities)*, (2018). Many of the women in the film also have speaking careers because we had a secret Facebook page where we would organize things: the idea was that if I could not go to an event, then I would give my seat to someone else. The idea was that if everybody started doing this, we could make sure we didn't just have one person that's identified, but many others. Then it would become: "Who are the Afrofeminists?" What do they want?" [laughs] "What is their agenda?" We started being perceived as a big group but it was only twelve or fifteen of us who were really active.

I would say that one of the other reasons I'm not leaving academia is that it's a way for me to exist in France. It did not start that with this film. I started that with a Stanford peer-reviewed article and conferences in the US so that, as soon as I have an existence in academia overseas, it's harder for the French to deny me. Because, if I am publishing in prestigious universities in the US, then you can't say that I'm just making up things or being a "racial extremist." Many of us are using this strategy: that's what [journalist, author, and activist] Rokhaya Diallo does in the Washington Post or in the UN. We're both members of the new Center for Intersectional Justice in Germany.<sup>15</sup> That's also why I do a lot of conferences and other things in Belgium, Switzerland, the UK, and North America. This is all to make sure that I have this really long résumé, with speaking gigs in different countries, publications, and other things; so, then, are you really going to come and tell me I don't have big enough résumé and that's why I wasn't invited! Because, usually when we are not invited, we're told that we don't have a high enough profile.

On the same issue: I don't know if you know Claire Simon's film, *Le Concours (The Graduation)* (2016). It's about La Fémis.<sup>16</sup> The film shows how the French cinema industry reproduces itself because of the way the admission competition is organized to get into the Fémis. It's just a machine to homogenize people and the way they look at film. [New Yorker writer] Richard Brody wrote a great review and critique of this documentary. He titled it something like "The Dearth of Innovation in Young French Cinema." French people in the cinema industry lost their shit. There were indignant articles in *Les Inrocks* and *Télérama* about "how dare this American criticize our great cinema." And I was so happy. I wrote to Richard Brody on Twitter with a message to the effect: "Thank you so much for this piece! I highly agree with you. Except for one point." I said: "I hope you're going to do a follow-up article about how this is not true for cinema of color in France; that's the place where there's the most innovation, but

it's just that nobody sees us!" You may know Claire Diao; she curates a cycle of short films called *Quartiers Lointains* (*Faraway Neighborhoods*) (2010-present); she's a journalist and film critic. Her idea was to promote mostly filmmakers from the banlieues, mostly Black and North African filmmakers with their short films. And now *Quartiers Lointains* is travelling, to the US, France, to many other places. She also wrote *Double Vague* (*Double Wave*) (2017), about how there was another New Wave happening in France since the 2000s or the end of the 1990s, but it was completely disregarded.

I created this thread on Twitter addressed to Richard Brody with a reference to this book. And, because, he's American, he answered! He said he would read it. And, I said, "while I have your attention, I made a film, so if you want to look at it, you know, I'll be happy to send it to you. And he gave me his email address." I sent him *Speak Up* by mail. He answered a few days later, saying, "I find the film really interesting. Let me know when you have a distributor in the US and I'll make a review." That was maybe July 2017. Then, I did not have a distributor in the US; and I hadn't been picked up for Young French Cinema. In 2018, the French parliament banned the word "race" from the constitution; it was also around the same time that there was this whole mess with the French ambassador who clashed with Trevor Noah because, after France won the football World Cup, Noah joked that "Africa won the football World Cup." So, in July 2018, Richard Brody took the opportunity of the banning of the word "race" from the French constitution to write a rave review of *Speak Up*.

### What's in a Name?

**JFS:** Both of us read that review, and it's indeed a good review of the film. In the review, Brody explains the French title as translating to "open your voice." We were wondering about what's lost and what's gained in the English translation?

**AG:** Yeah, it was tough because, first, you can't translate the play on words, so that's why the title is: *Speak Up/Make Your Way*. But, it's also too long [laughs]. Then, at some point, I thought it could be "Raise your voice." But I thought that "Speak Up" was more powerful, more dynamic than "raise your voice." I also couldn't call it "Raise your voice" because I couldn't get the song from *Sister Act Musical* with the same title out of my head; and I felt like I couldn't take that title. You just have to let it go. I think that one of the good things about not having any money is that I've had to let go of so many things in the process of making *Speak Up* [laughs]. I wanted to use bits music, but then we didn't have money so there was no music. The film needed to go overseas and it needed to have a title, and it wasn't going to take forever, so we settled on *Speak Up*. It works and that's it. That's often my approach; it's also about what works at the time.

Now I'm trying to find a title for the next film, find a title that works in English from the get-go. We don't have a title yet, and I might settle for one that I don't really like but one that works in both languages, such as "Adoptees." Actually, we can write, "adopté.e.s" in inclusive language in French [both feminine and masculine], and it translates straight away to "adoptees" in English. I don't like the idea that it's a simple title, it's about adoption, and then it translates into adoptees: I think that's a bit lazy. I'm hoping someone doing the interviews is going to say something really interesting that could be the title of the film. But, if not, that might be the title. And, well be it! [laughs] And I feel there's no point in being sad about something you can no longer change.

**JFS:** Well, it creates an opportunity for discussion: how the title refers to the film. It's so hard to capture *Ouvrir la Voix*, and all the multiple meanings that it conveys, in English. In this context, regarding language and translation, we were also thinking about the ways in which the interviewees in the film refer to themselves as Afropean, Afrodescendant, Afrofeminist. The writer Taiye Selasi (2005) has

used the term “Afropolitan” elsewhere and there’s been a lot of conversation among African writers about that term. So, we’re wondering, what’s in a name?

**AG:** Well, the first title of *Speak Up* was “Nous Sommes la Somme de Nos Différences” (We are the Sum of Our Differences) because I was tired of Black women being represented as a monolith, as a type, as a single identity. In France, they even say, “les noirs de France” (the Blacks of France). That doesn’t mean a thing. Black communities in France are so diverse: between first-generation migrants, people who’ve been French for centuries because of slavery, those with mixed ancestry, and so on.

My idea was to show Black women’s plurality. The vision of the film as a *conversation* was how I wanted to show how diverse opinions are, even amongst people that would identify broadly as Afrofeminists. For instance, in the film, Maboula [Soumahoro], who’s older, doesn’t identify as Afrofeminist. That’s also a generational thing. The women in the film are between twenty-three and forty-seven years old. Rachel [Khan] is in her forties; she’s the one in the film who talks about the US and the Afro-Jewish experience, etcetera. Ndella is from Senegal, so she has even another identity. I’m thirty-four, and I would say that, in France, from thirty-five and younger, it’s a whole different generation. For the younger generation, I think that there’s a move towards finding some kind of Black French identity. The words or labels are not fixed yet. But the fact that there so many debates at the moment on how to identify ourselves is interesting because, for a long time, people would say, for instance: I am Senegalese, or I am Guadelupean, even when they were second or third generation French. But now, there is a new generation that is trying to find a term about the fact that they are Afro-French, so to speak. That’s not something, however, we can use easily because our relationship to France is so complex and we are denied our Frenchness – so it’s not a title we can easily claim. I think the fact that we are using “Afro” more than “Black” tends to [emphasize] (there would be a need for sociological research on this) what is a diasporic perspective.

I think that, in the African American experience, in the Black identity in the US, there is something that is really *American*. Even if there are African or Caribbean immigrants now, the history of the African American community is the history of a homogeneous group and they are quite American in that sense. I often talk about Africa American imperialism in that regard. Now they are more open. But, for a long time, for instance, in 2014, we would have clashed with African American tweeters because they were so self-centered. I felt that they knew nothing about what was happening in Europe, but we knew everything about their history. And I think that, people older than me tend to be of that generation that was really looking to the United States. I’m part of a generation that’s made a lot of apprenticeship on racial issues and Black feminism in English, but I want to have access to that, or create resources, in French. I think that the big thing that’s happening in France right now is that there’s a generation that’s producing knowledge, creating content, creating artistic content, that’s trying to frame a space in which we can exist within our specific European history. Because that’s the thing I often tell the students here: we don’t just have slavery in France. We have slavery *and* colonization. And I would even add: we have slavery, colonization, *and* the Shoah. Those are three elements, especially in the French context, that you cannot *not* link together (Gay 2015a). Those three specific things, I discussed in my article (ibid.): they go together and that’s a very French history and I think we’re in this the moment where there’s a lot of fight around words like “racisés” (racialized), “do we say “racization” or “racialization” (racialization)?<sup>17</sup> We are trying. The multicultural model is not close to being accepted in France. But what’s happening is that minorities now are really actively refusing the assimilationist model and are trying to frame a space for themselves in French society. To me, that goes with this whole shifting of words at the moment; the labels haven’t been settled. And that’s why I’ve left everyone’s opinions in the film.

I have my own opinion: I will say I’m an Afrodescendant and Black, for instance. I don’t like Afropean; I don’t like Afropolitan. But I like Afrodescendant because it makes me feel like I belong to

both; it's more of a diasporic term. I'm part of those Black people in France who are interested in a diasporic perspective; to me, it's sort of a way to get Black internationalism back. It did exist in the 1970s when you had the Black Panthers going to Algeria. And with social networks, we can actually do that. There was this important Black Women's conference in Brazil and everybody went. I could not go, but German Black women, French ones, Canadian, US, Brazilian... everybody went and now there's also a Black women's conference in Europe that was started by Akwugo Emejulu. Akwugo is a US scholar who is now teaching in the UK. But she started the Black Feminism, Womanism, and the Politics of Women of Color in Europe Conference. I was at its first instance in Edinburgh in 2016. So, there's all these things happening. She also organized Fugitive Feminism (2018) and there were films and artists from all over Europe. We're trying to organize.

**JFS:** Thank you so much for this conversation, Amandine, and we hope that the rest of this college tour goes well.

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## Notes

1. For an overview of reflections from both American and French vantage points on French society, see Marker and Pichichero (2019).
2. See Amandine Gay's (2020) blog for the many facets of her political and artistic work.
3. The word "race" was taken out and erased from the French constitution in 2018, substituted with the word sex.
4. Rebecca Chaillon continues that work; most recently, she participated in an evening of feminist performances and art, titled "Patriarchy is Burning," at the contemporary art museum, Palais de Tokyo (June 15-16, 2019).
5. This interview was conducted through skype on February 15, 2019.
6. "Communitarianism" (or "ethnic separatism," according to the film's English translation) is typically a characterization that claims that "identity-based groups" are calling for recognition in ways that violate and undo the promise of republican universalism and would threaten the unity of the nation. For context and explanation, see Beaman (2019).
7. *Le Monde* is a daily newspaper, akin to the *New York Times*. *L'Express*, and *Le Point* are weekly magazines. All three are widely read and respected in France.
8. *Télérama* is a weekly cultural and arts magazine, akin to the *New Yorker*, yet more widely for its reviews of cinema, TV, art, and culture.
9. *Diacritik* is an online cultural magazine, founded in 2015 and devoted to engaged cultural critique.
10. The names of the interviewees are included on the DVD cover: Aïss Berg; Amélia Ewu; Fania Noël; Fanny Aka ThisisKiyémis; Laura Aka MrsRoots; Maboula Soumahoro; Many Chroniques; Marie Léda; Marie-Julie Chalu; Merci Michel; Nass; Ndella Paye; Ornella Aka Loulou; Po B.K. Lomami; Rachel Khan; Rébecca Chaillon; Sabine Pakora; Sandra; Sandra Sainte Rose Fanchine; Sharone; Taïna; Thara; and Zina.

11. The *Dogme 95* manifesto was released in 1995 by Danish filmmakers Thomas Vinterberg and Lars von Trier who argue against the use of any special effects, technical additions, or post-production modifications (such as music or lighting).

12. The French term “assignation” refers to the ways individuals are summoned into already determined social, cultural, and political categories to which they are disciplined into.

13. Feminist novelist and essayist Virginie Despentes’s (2006) essay was translated into English in 2010.

14. *Libération* is a widely-read leftist daily newspaper and its “Portrait” series are especially significant.

15. The Center for Intersectional Justice is a non-profit organization founded in 2017 and based in Berlin.

16. La Fémis is a prestigious film and television school in Paris; and the film documents its rigorous admissions process.

17. Both French nouns are translated as “racialization” yet imply different political emphasis, that is also framed by a debate on whether to “import” English terms or coin distinctively French ones.

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