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23 August 2009
Honors Thesis Proposal

What She Said:

Gender, Race, and Discourses on Difference at the *Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration*

For my honors thesis, I want to examine and analyze the discourses on difference, diversity, and Nation at *la Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration* in Paris, the first museum dedicated to the history of immigration in France. In particular, I want to examine how human difference and diversity is constructed in a paradox of inclusion and exclusion that seems to characterize the CNHI. My critique and analysis will be inspired by an intersectional feminist/queer-of-color critical perspective, and especially by colonized and postcolonial immigrant women and minority feminists of the third world, taking an approach that seeks to rethink how difference and human diversity function in discourses of equality, one of the French Republican values in crisis.

La Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration is charged with integrating the past two centuries of France's history of immigration into its national history, an idea that has found much more support than its controversial application. I've identified two problematic aspects of the CNHI which interest me and merit analysis. The first is the institutionalization of a space dedicated to a marginalized, stigmatized, and diverse history so as to recognize it as a veritable part of French national history, and to integrate it into that national history. Although the CNHI represents a "lieu de mémoire" ('place of memory') which recognizes the existence, the history and the participation of an often alienated and marginalized population in France's history, the museum simultaneously and paradoxically affirms the existence of a significant distinction between the "native," which is to say authentic, and the "immigrant," or not-quite French. This paradox becomes even more troubling given the partnership between the CNHI and the new controversial and deeply criticized ministry developed by President Nicolas Sarkozy, the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Development in Solidarity, the very title of which sets up a problematic relationship between immigration and national identity. Are there traces of the Republican nationalist ideology that motivates this ministry? Does the museum address questions of national identity, and how? For example, brochures from the grand opening proclaim "their history is our history!", a formula that clearly reinforces the us/them dichotomy that exists at the heart of Western notions of difference that justify often racist, sexist, classist, etc. power hierarchies, notably those pushed during colonization. Is there other evidence of this dichotomous categorization and thinking present in the museum? Is it an organizing principle of certain aspects of the museum, and to what effect? What else is there in the museum that implies the impossibility of a true recognition of the equality of immigrants and of immigration's histories as an integral part—a part that is not problematic or added after the fact—of France's national history. Does the CNHI challenge the assimilationist Republican model of integration as out of date and maladapted to recognize the pluralism of contemporary French society?

The second aspect is the way the history is presented and organized at the CNHI, particularly in the permanent exhibition, "Repères" ("benchmarks"), a central element of the museum which "avoids a strictly chronological approach and above all an approach determined by country or community of origin," (my translation) according to Patricia Sitruk, the general Director at the CNHI. The objective of a so-called thematic organization is to "make evident the similarities and go beyond differences related to origins and time periods" (my translation). Here I see another paradox in the effort to unify histories, experiences, and cultures at the expense of finding ways of relating to each other through difference, rather than above difference. So, how does such an approach keep from decontextualizing and homogenizing the diverse experiences of immigration—experiences that are often, though not essentially, related to cultures of origin and different time periods? Does this approach inhibit the

recognition of intersecting differences, as of race, gender, age, sexuality, cultural heritage, class and religion, in the lived experiences of the diverse range of immigrants in France? Does the CNHI imply that these differences between us are obstacles or insurmountable barriers to equality in France? Does the museum refuse outright to recognize difference and examine how distortions of difference contribute to behavior and expectations?

I want to explore these questions in a postcolonial feminist critical analysis by examining how the CNHI recounts the plural and richly diverse histories of immigrants from former French colonies. I spent four weeks in Paris at the CNHI doing observational field research, where I explored in detail each aspect of the museum and its programming. In addition to a comprehensive analysis of the varied immigrant populations, I also want to focus on how the museum treats the history, or plural histories, of women immigrants from former French colonies. First of all, I need to know if their history is even told. Simone de Beauvoir remarks how male is almost always conceived as a neutral and positive category, from which female deviates and is thus understood as a negative. "A man never starts by positing himself as an individual of a certain sex: that he is a man is self-evident." Men have been thought to represent all of humanity, and the history of men the sole history. But women, and especially women of color, have lived a different history from men, who have always had more of a choice in immigration than women. It hasn't been until recently that women have been able to leave their countries and families, and in migration, they face obstacles and problems that uniquely concern women in their roles as daughters, wives, mothers, and single independent women. I am in touch with a network of women activists and scholars who work extensively with women immigrants in France and, in their research, with questions of race and gender, as well as women who worked on the museum at the CNHI. In addition, during my time in Paris, I picked up many books on the question of immigration right now in France, the relationship between colonialism and immigration, and what it means to integrate the history of (postcolonial) immigration into France's national history.

This is an original project on a controversial museum that has attracted the praise and critiques of scholars and politicians alike, and a project that I'm very passionate about.

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