

## Worldmaking through Dissonance: A Discussion with Françoise Vergès

This interview with Françoise Vergès was conducted on June 28, 2025, at the café *Au soleil d'Austerlitz* in Paris, during the Historical Materialism Paris Conference<sup>1</sup>. The conversation unfolded amidst a convergence of the recent Greek translation of *A Feminist Theory of Violence* and urgent political contexts: the ongoing genocide in Palestine and a controversy surrounding censorship<sup>2</sup> during the conference's organization. These events shaped the dialogue, which extended beyond the immediate circumstances to engage with broader theoretical and political concerns.

Currently engaged in pro-Palestine solidarity, Françoise Vergès is a decolonial feminist intellectual whose work spans political theory, cultural criticism, curatorial practice, and activist engagement. Vergès's scholarship critically interrogates racial capitalism, patriarchal violence, and the enduring legacies of colonialism, while public interventions across media, institutions, and grassroots collectives contribute to a broader project of emancipatory worldmaking. This interdisciplinary approach bridges academic inquiry and militant activism, the local and the transnational, as well as historical analysis and urgent political realities.

Critical perspectives of her/their work on white carceral feminism and racial capitalism (2020; 2021; 2022) have been consistently foregrounded, alongside sustained engagement with the memory and afterlives of slavery and colonialism (1999; 2010; 2015). These contributions continue to shape contemporary debates in feminist theory, decolonial critique, and global solidarity movements. The conversation that follows reflects on present-day social struggles as both sites of inspiration and as grounds for incisive critique

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<sup>1</sup> The Historical Materialism (HM) conference series is an academic and activist forum rooted in critical Marxist theory. Each year, various events are held in different parts of the world, including Paris, London, Athens, Istanbul, New Delhi, New York, Sydney, and Toronto. For more information about HM Paris, see <https://hm-paris.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Statement by the editorial team of HM Paris 2025 addressing the censorship incident during the conference. For more details, see: <https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/statement-by-the-editorial-board-of-historical-materialism/>

of authoritarian formations within the French state, the European Union, and the United States.

**VP: In June 2025, you were scheduled to participate in a panel at the HM Paris 2025 conference. During the event, a case of censorship emerged involving Dauphine University, alongside external pressures targeting Houria Bouteldja<sup>3</sup> and the collectives Earth Uprisings<sup>4</sup> and Antifascist Action Paris-Banlieue<sup>5</sup>. What are your thoughts on this case?**

**FV:** On my way to a public meeting in Brussels on Thursday, 26 June 2025, I read online that Houria Bouteldja was no longer welcome at a HM panel. Initially, Houria was scheduled to speak on a panel at Paris Dauphine University, alongside other panels, but the university opposed her presence. The organisers then asked the Bourse du Travail to host these panels, and it agreed. However, the Bourse du Travail later refused to allow Houria to be present. I immediately wrote on my social media accounts that, in solidarity, I would not be joining the scheduled panel. I also refused to go in order to take the opportunity to talk about censorship, as some had suggested. But I did not call for a boycott; I simply said that I would not go in solidarity with Houria. This was my own decision; I did not consult anyone. It was a matter of principle for me. I categorically reject the demonisation of Houria.

I wrote to Sebastian Bugden<sup>6</sup>, who is a comrade and very active in HM, to inform him that I would not be coming. One or two days later, Mathieu Rigouste, whose book we were going to discuss at the panel<sup>7</sup>, announced that he would not be attending, followed by the third panelist. Although I am not a member of French academia, I have noticed that there are no postcolonial,

<sup>3</sup> Houria Bouteldja is a Franco-Algerian political activist and author involved in decolonial struggles in France. For a representative sample of her writing in English, see Bouteldja 2017. Her views on race and colonialism, which challenge established leftist and academic orthodoxies, are linked to the censorship that occurred during the organization of the HM Paris Conference.

<sup>4</sup> Earth Uprisings (Les Soulèvements de la Terre) is a radical environmental collective founded in January 2021 within the former ZAD (Zone à Défendre) of Notre-Dame-des-Landes (France).

<sup>5</sup> Antifascist Action Paris-Banlieu (Action Antifasciste Paris-Banlieue, also known as AF-APB) is an autonomous antifascist organization that emerged in the 2010s and gained national media attention in 2013 during the Clément Méric affair. On June 5, 2013, Clément Méric, a young left-wing antifascist activist, died following a violent altercation with far-right skinheads in Paris. Méric was an 18-year-old student, a member of AFAPB and was closely associated with radical left and antifascist circles. The incident prompted a government crackdown on violent extremist groups, and the far-right organization Troisième Voie was dissolved shortly afterward.

<sup>6</sup> Sebastian Bugden is a British Marxist editor and scholar, serving as a Senior Editor at the radical publishing house Verso Books, a contributing editor for Jacobin magazine, and a member of the editorial board of the HM journal and conference series.

<sup>7</sup> The reference concerns Mathieu Rigouste's book "The Global War Against the People: Imperial Mechanics of the Security Order" ("La guerre globale contre les peuples: Mécanique impériale de l'ordre sécuritaire"), originally published in French in April 2025 by La Fabrique éditions.

African studies, or decolonial theory departments in universities. It is up to individual professors to teach postcolonial or decolonial theory, and some are doing so, supervising PhDs and Master's degrees on these topics.

**VP: Who are those collectives and individuals involved in these actions? Do they also identify with or belong to the political Left?**

**FV:** There are different forces at play within the Left and within the CGT<sup>8</sup>, the union that manages the Bourse du Travail. The members of the CGT who refused Houria's presence may have thought she was too radical. Within unions, there is often a rejection of the decolonial movement, and within the institutional Left, we see the weaponization of antisemitism. We are accused of being pro-Hamas or anti-Semitic, we supposedly reject the notion of class, we are said to be class blind, focusing only on racialization and racism. *They don't understand that it's not one or the other. Class is informed by race. In Europe, the working class has, of course, been affected by racism.* France was a major colonial empire, which means racism permeated the whole of society, including the working class. Racism has historically existed even when workers came from Italy or Spain. But it has been much stronger against workers from the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa; the anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and anti-Black racism is very strong. Migrant workers fought to have their specific struggles recognized and in the 1960s and 1970s they led formidable and radical movements, supported by leftist organizations. However, it took time for the leadership of the major unions to acknowledge their presence and their contributions to the broader working-class struggle. In her latest book, *Beaufs et barbares*, Houria argues for the formation of a coalition between poor white people (the *Beaufs*) and the non-white, racialized poor (the *Barbares*), as they share comparable experiences of humiliation and exploitation.

For me, coming from Réunion Island and having grown up within the anti-colonial communist struggle, where my father and mother were very active, *I must say that I have too often witnessed the betrayal of the colonized by the Left. It still does not fully get what is colonization, it still believes that the French Republic, once reformed, offers the best social/political organization for all.* We have to understand that it is not enough to be against slavery, imperialism. Whites could be against slavery, but they were not truly anti-racist; they could be anti-colonialist but not spontaneously anti-racist. They could support Algeria's independence but could not accept full Algerian sovereignty and believed they could dictate how the struggle should be fought. There is often a hint of white savior syndrome. In his 1956 letter of resignation to Maurice Thorez<sup>9</sup>, leader of the French Communist Party, Aimé Césaire wrote

<sup>8</sup> The CGT, or General Confederation of Labour (Confédération Générale du Travail), established in 1895, is one of the oldest and most prominent trade union confederations in France. It has played a central role in representing workers across various sectors and shaping labor movements throughout the country's modern history.

<sup>9</sup> For the full version of this foundational text of decolonial and radical left thought, see Césaire (2010).

that while French communists could accept his communism, they could not accept that he was a Black man and that he belonged to a Blackness constructed by colonial racist slavery.

He wrote, in essence, that he had been made “Black” by Europe, by the West. He added that Black peoples have the right to decide for themselves how they will fight and what their liberation will be. “You speak of fraternity,” he said (I paraphrase), “but as long as you remain the big brother, that is not fraternity.” His letter was one of the earliest decolonial critiques of the French Communist Left, at a time when the French Communist Party was very strong. However, it was ignored for a long time.

My father, who was a communist anti-colonial leader, and the Communist Party of Réunion had to constantly assert their autonomy from the French Left. It is important to insist on the fact that *we, in the former French colonies, in the Global South, must do our own analyses. Speaking of Réunion: it is a tropical island in the southwest Indian Ocean, where the French State established slavery and colonization, and we are still under French power. But we are not merely a region of France like Brittany or Limousin. We have our own history, culture, and language that cannot be reduced to mere folklore. Within the French Left, many believed in the colonial civilizing mission. Of course, there were exceptions, French anticolonial activists who fully embraced the anticolonial, antiracist struggle for liberation. But the sense of superiority that Césaire and Fanon denounced, and was present even in moments of solidarity, has not entirely disappeared.* The decolonization of the French Left is still to be done, especially when it concerns the so-called French overseas territories: Martinique, Guadeloupe, Mayotte, Guiana, La Réunion, Kanaky–New Caledonia, and the Pacific islands. Anti-imperialism must be revived.

**VP: Your scholarship is often situated within the framework of decolonial feminist thought, engaging substantively with both decolonial and feminist theoretical paradigms. In addition, you have made some references to Marxism. To what extent would you characterize your work as being aligned with, or shaped by, the Marxist tradition?**

**FV:** I have nothing against Marx, and I would certainly never say, “I don’t read Marx because he was a white man.” No piece of writing should be forbidden. However, I learned quite early on that one should not have a master – any master of any kind. It’s like having one book and considering it the only book. The world is too diverse and rich to be reduced to just one text. I read Fanon alongside Césaire, Césaire alongside Marx, Lenin alongside Angela Davis, Gramsci alongside Malcolm X, and so on.

I grew up with a deep understanding that Asia, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas matter. I realised quite early on, through what I heard and read at home, that the struggle is international. Internationalism, solidarity, and transnational coalitions have always been very important to me. I grew up with that awareness. You have to learn from people how they are fighting and if they ask for your solidarity, you must offer it on their terms. If

they make mistakes, they will learn from them. We learn through setbacks, errors, and defeats. It is through practice that we learn. Practice makes a difference. I acknowledge the power of words like “liberty,” “dignity,” and “equality”, words for which people rise up and are willing to die. When you engage in practice, you confront difference, and you are transformed by it.

**VP: Earlier, you mentioned, “*I refuse to have one master,*” which I believe touches on a crucial point. While Marxist thought has often operated within structured hierarchies of theoretical authority, radical feminisms and decolonial theory tend to embrace multiplicity and decentralised knowledge production. Your work, which could be seen as a form of *travelling theory*, is currently being translated into multiple languages, including Greek. I’m curious – do you see your work within this framework of *travelling theories*, and what significance does this dimension hold for you?**

**FV:** How do you make a local issue resonate with people elsewhere? When I wrote about cleaning women and their struggles in France, I knew it could resonate with cleaners in Beirut, Johannesburg, Mexico City, New York, Athens, and Rome, because they experience a similar economy of exhaustion and similar processes of racialisation and exploitation. Critical thinking and analysis involve studying a situation to understand how it is shaped by social forces that are not purely local. Situations rooted in specific places and anchored in local conditions are also shaped by external factors, such as the IMF<sup>10</sup>, the World Bank, armed interventions, sanctions, and blockades.

Starting with the question, “Why is it like this?”, I trace the threads that connect the situation to the history of local social forces and struggles. Then I follow other threads to see how it is linked to multinationals, the Western banking system, and the global politics of extraction. I observe the presence of various actors: experts in PR, economics, banking, and academia, all bringing with them their ideological formation and the vocabulary of development, democracy, and voting. You can trace a cartography of all the actors conspiring together to create that situation: secret service agents, journalists, photographers and soldiers. And everywhere, I find practices of resistance. Everywhere, and every day.

**VP: You have mentioned in the past that since a young age you have been denying to follow the educational system that was implied to you and began to read about the struggles in Latin America, in Asia or elsewhere. You also define yourself as a public educator. How do you imagine this knowledge production that comes out of the traditional hegemonic**

<sup>10</sup> The International Monetary Fund (IMF), headquartered in Washington, D.C., is a global financial institution established in 1944 to promote international monetary cooperation and financial stability. In decolonial critiques, the IMF is frequently regarded as an instrument of neocolonial influence, implementing economic policies – such as structural adjustment and austerity – that perpetuate financial dependence and undermine the autonomy of postcolonial states.

**institutions and how can we build spaces that radicalize our knowledge or create mechanisms of undoing the pre-existing forms of, let's say, violent norms of knowledge?**

**FV:** As I have said, I was helped by the fact that I was born into and grew up in a very political family. My parents were communist, anticolonial and feminist activists who took their children to meetings, demonstrations, encounters and events. We were not forbidden from listening to debates and conversations. They explained to us why people were imprisoned, defamed and killed.

From a very young age, I always wanted to accompany them, and I met people from all walks of life in Réunion, different classes, religions and origins. I witnessed racism and poverty. My father, whose mother was Vietnamese, was called "devious and a liar", as "Asians are". His comrades of African or Indian descent were racially insulted; the entire society was racist. At home, I was reading journals that my father had received from Cuba, Mozambique, Vietnam, India and the Soviet Union, in other words, I had access to sources of information other than those available at school or via the French media. This made me feel that we were part of an incredibly large struggle.

I received two types of education: the education at school and the education outside school. The latter was the most important. Even if I could not put into words everything I witnessed, it entered my consciousness, it shaped me. At school, I learned to read and write, and there were things I liked (literature, theatre, geography and history, even though they were strictly French), but it was the political and cultural education I received outside school that was truly formative. I realised this year after year through the different practices of activism in which I was involved. I have had an interesting childhood: playing, reading, listening in a country which was beautiful and fascinating, with a long history of resistance.

Last year, when I was in Réunion, I went to the archives to read police reports on anticolonial activists from 1950 to 1980. There was practically an entry related to my father every week, detailing what he was doing, with whom, and where. Even as a child, I noticed that we were being followed and that our house was being searched, but reading these reports made me realise just how deeply the State was invested in surveillance. The police must have had nearly five officers assigned to follow my father. As I was looking through file after file, I found one on me. I had not even turned 15! The report described me as someone of interest because I was very active and the police had to keep an eye on me. I realised quite early that France was not just a country of literature and art, but a State whose objective is to hinder dissent and repress. The State will use the police, the media and the tribunal to repress and censor, and it will do everything to hinder a movement of decolonisation.

Theories travel, they circulate, and though I did not know the language or culture of India or Cuba, for instance, I could read about their struggles. Literature has always played an important role. Novels taught me a lot about

Central and South America – about the United Fruit Company<sup>11</sup>, for instance – but there was also the sheer pleasure of reading, of being transported to other worlds through words. Cinema has also been important. I do not learn from theory alone. I often say that although I learn a lot from history books about slavery, literature brings me something that a history book cannot.

**VP: La Réunion, I think, is a very particular case. Most people perceive France as the “Hexagon”<sup>12</sup> – or Metropolitan France – and tend to ignore the existence of Overseas France<sup>13</sup>. What was it like for you to come from a place such as Réunion?**

**FV:** I have French citizenship. But I didn’t grow up as “French.” I grew up as a girl on Réunion Island, with anticolonial communist parents and their comrades. Réunion is a tropical island with an active volcano, it had no native population when the French state decided to make it a colony and brought enslaved people from Madagascar and East Africa, as well as from India and other parts of the Indian Ocean world; later came indentured workers from China and India. Many religions co-exist: Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Hinduism, Buddhism. This is my world. I did not grow up with apples and pears. I grew up with lychees and mangos. I grew up with a year around the sun, the ocean and hurricanes. I grew up with a landscape that lives in my mind; it shaped me, as a child and as a teenager. And I grew up with the Creole language and the international anticolonial struggle.

When I left Réunion, I ended up – for various reasons – in Algiers in the early 1970s. I did my final year of high school there. Algeria taught me a lot. I was living in a country that had freed itself from the French colonial yoke. Once I got my high school diploma, I went to France for higher education, but I left after two months – I couldn’t stand it. I returned to Algeria and, at the time, I wanted to settle there. I started learning Arabic. But I had Algerian friends who wanted to leave and go to France, so I followed them. I start-

<sup>11</sup> Founded in 1899, the United Fruit Company was a major American corporation specializing in the production and export of tropical fruits – particularly bananas – from Latin America to markets in the United States and Europe. Throughout the 20th century, it had a profound impact on the economic and political landscape of various Central American and Caribbean nations. The phrase “Banana Republic” emerged from the company’s dominance and refers to politically unstable countries whose economies rely heavily on a single export commodity, often controlled by foreign corporations.

<sup>12</sup> The «Hexagon» or Metropolitan France refers to the European part of France, primarily comprising the mainland, Corsica, and nearby French islands in the Atlantic Ocean, the English Channel, and the Mediterranean Sea. There is often a lack of awareness that France and the French state are not limited to these geographic areas; they also include Overseas France – territories located outside of Europe, which together with Metropolitan France constitute the French Republic.

<sup>13</sup> Overseas France (France d’outre-mer) refers to the French territories located outside the European continent, most of which are former colonies. These include overseas departments and regions (DROM) like La Réunion, Martinique, and Guadeloupe, as well as overseas collectivities (COM). Françoise Vergès, among other decolonial thinkers, critically examines how the legacy of colonialism continues to shape political power, identity, and social struggles within these territories and their ongoing complex relationship with the French state.

ed university again, but soon joined leftist and migrant activist groups and abandoned my studies. I did small jobs, but I also got my journalist card and worked as a journalist for a feminist weekly and for small anti-imperialist journals. In Paris, during my first years, I lived in a commune with people from Réunion, Martinique, Algeria, and France.

If I had not come to France, I am not sure I would have longed for it, I would have been curious, for sure, but not in a melancholic way – not as if I had missed something, or lacked something essential. I live here now, and I have dear friends, and the decolonial movement is growing stronger. But for a long time, I took every opportunity to travel away from France.

Things have happened because the road took me here or there – something or someone came up, and I changed worlds. When I went to the USA in 1983, it was supposed to be for just a week, but I stayed for 12 years. It was not planned. After two years without proper papers, I finally got them and decided to go back to school. I earned my BA, MA, and Ph.D. When I lived in the States, I decided I would try to understand what this country was. I did not look for French people, but for communities that would teach me something – whose struggles were anchored in that country. And when I lived in England, I was interested in England and the English; when in Mexico, in Mexicans – and so on.

I have lived more or less permanently in France since 2010, and for several years now, I have been increasingly involved in the decolonial and anti-imperialist movements in France.

**VP: This is a particularly intriguing point in your theoretical and political engagement. How challenging must it be to be both a public intellectual and an activist without holding a fixed position within a French institution?**

**FV:** When I came back from the States in 1996, I applied for jobs in French academia. I had a PhD from Berkeley and had already published articles and books in both French and English. Each time I was shortlisted and went for interviews, I was rejected. A friend even told me I would never get a job in France. Immediately after, I was offered a job in England (1996-2007), and later visiting positions in the US, Spain, and the United Arab Emirates. I have learned to live with that. It has been frustrating at times, but at the end of the day, it's okay. The French university system certainly has its reasons. Years ago, I decided not to let it affect me, otherwise I would spend all my time ruminating.

**VP: You referred to the United States. How do you perceive the current hostile socio-political climate against Latinx, Black, queer, and trans communities?**

**FV:** The patriarchs and wealthy capitalists, the predatory class, are enraged by social movements against racism, for Free Palestine, for land and water rights, for indigenous rights, Black Lives Matter, the Standing Rock movement, the Gilets Jaunes in France, Queers for Palestine, movements against police violence and gentrification, indigenous struggles for land and water, feminist movements in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, the youth movement against corruption in Africa, and what was called the “Arab Spring.”

The predatory class, whose objective has always been to roll back social protections and restore total domination, is now panicking. I see the current counter-revolution as a clear sign of this panic. This class lacks imagination; it harbors technological fantasies and desires to secede from society while exploiting humanity and the environment – but it has no imagination. All it knows is how to kill, beat, criminalize, massacre, and imprison. Their only response is cruelty and brutality. That’s all they know.

The new scramble for Africa’s riches, the imperialist fracturing of West Asia, the genocide in Gaza, the Israeli bombings of southern Lebanon and Syria, the effort to partition Congo and break postcolonial nation-states into smaller, more controllable pieces – all of this requires mobilization. The predatory imperialist class is witnessing a changing world where its hegemony is being challenged. China, India, and the Gulf oil monarchies<sup>14</sup> want a seat at the table. The post-World War II order dominated by the USA is crumbling. White men and women still cling to the illusion of their importance to the world – that what they say, do, think, and how they understand women’s and human rights are “universal truths and notions.” But it’s over. We are not yet living in a world of peace, freedom, and equality, but the post-World War II order is collapsing. In the Indian Ocean, it’s no longer just the old imperialist powers – the British, French, and the postwar one, the USA – that are present; they have to deal with new actors: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, India, and China. The world is shifting. The imperialist patriarchs are panicking because they’re scared of losing their rule and domination. They fear they won’t have access anymore to all the resources that feed their unlimited thirst for control and their so-called “good life.”

It has always been through dispossession, extraction, exploitation, and military presence that imperialists have preserved their domination. They are once again facing a deep challenge to their world, based on private property, devastation, permanent war, dreams of total domination. They know they have lost the ideological battle, so they turn to murder, torture, and genocide. The predator class is racist and fascist. They still have some economic and military power, but they are afraid and mad. Mad as hell.

The counter-revolution takes different faces: Javier Milei<sup>15</sup> in Argentina, Narendra Modi<sup>16</sup> in India, Bolsonaro in Brazil, Orbán, or Macron – but they all

<sup>14</sup> Gulf oil monarchies are the monarchic states located along the Persian Gulf – specifically the member countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – that possess vast oil reserves and derive significant economic wealth and political influence from their petroleum resources.

<sup>15</sup> Javier Milei has been serving as the President of Argentina since December 10, 2023, following his victory in the presidential runoff held on November 19, 2023, where he defeated Sergio Massa with 55.7% of the vote. Milei is a libertarian economist and the leader of the conservative and right-wing La Libertad Avanza coalition. Milei’s tenure has been widely criticized for implementing harsh austerity measures, including significant public sector layoffs, severe cuts to social and educational funding, proposals to dollarize the economy and dismantle the central bank, and tax policies favoring wealthy investors – factors which collectively exacerbated social inequality and provoked widespread public protests.

<sup>16</sup> Narendra Modi, a member of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has been the Prime Minister of India since May 2014, winning consecutive general elections in 2014,

adopt the policies of the fascist, authoritarian counter-revolution. But peoples are fighting back; their aspiration for liberty, justice, and liberation never dies. Imperialism has always been about stopping movements for freedom, justice, and peace. Coups d'état, assassinations, CIA support for military dictatorships, structural adjustment programs – for centuries, imperialists have done everything to block the road to freedom and peace.

Remember that the French State, with the complicity of Western powers, imposed sanctions and a blockade on the young Republic of Haiti because they could not tolerate the military defeat of Napoleonic armies by a Black army of formerly enslaved people! It was inconceivable – a direct challenge to the very idea of the West as the cradle of human rights. Independence was supposed to be given, not won! The French State imposed a huge ransom on the Republic of Haiti, which later became impoverished, and chaos was deliberately fostered. The ransom was followed by armed US occupation. This is imperialist rule: sanctions, blockade, assassinations, military coups, military occupation... Imperialist interventions in Africa, South America, Central America, Oceania, and Asia have always had the same goal: “You will have the freedom we give you, on our terms and conditions.” The struggle is going on.

What Gaza is showing us is that settler colonialism<sup>17</sup> is not just a 19th-century phenomenon but very much a 21st-century reality, inseparable from imperialism and Western liberal democracy. The link between liberal democracy and settler colonialism (hence genocide, massacre, and dispossession) is wide open.

The USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, these 19th-century Western democracies, all rested on the genocide of Indigenous peoples, dispossession, tearing families apart, forbidding Indigenous languages and cultures, enslavement, and the privatization of land and water. The claim that “all men (sic) are created equal” rings hollow; only the struggle of the colonized, of the oppressed, has been able to challenge racism. What is the so-called “leader of the free world,” the “home of the brave and the land of the free” (the USA), if not a liberal society founded on genocide, slavery, dispossession, imperialist wars, and racism?

Five years ago, most people would not have known what “Nakba”<sup>18</sup> referred to. Now, “Nakba,” “from the river to the sea,” “Free Palestine,” and “Glob-

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2019, and 2024. His leadership is marked by economic reforms and a strong nationalist agenda, but also faces criticism for its impact on religious minorities and social inclusion.

<sup>17</sup> Settler colonialism is a distinct form of colonialism characterized by the permanent settlement of colonizers who seek to replace and displace indigenous populations to assert sovereignty over the land. Unlike other forms of colonialism focused primarily on resource extraction or trade, settler colonialism involves the ongoing elimination – through displacement, assimilation, or violence – of indigenous peoples and their structures to establish a new societal order controlled by settlers. For further analyses, see Veracini 2021 and Wolfe 2016.

<sup>18</sup> [18](#). Nakba («catastrophe» in Arabic) refers to the forced expulsion and dispossession of approximately 750,000 Palestinians during the 1947–1949 Zionist colonization and the establishment of the State of Israel. This event constitutes a foundational rupture in Palestinian collective memory and remains central to critiques of settler colonialism, displacement, and the ongoing Palestinian struggle for return, justice, and liberation. For further analyses, see Allan 2021 and Masalha 2012.

al Intifada” have become rallying cries. There is a rapid politicization and a quickly acquired political consciousness and activism rooted in past struggles but also connected to new conditions. The weaponization of antisemitism has not stopped solidarity with Palestine; there is a growing understanding that “Free Palestine” is a global goal.

**VP: You have highlighted various contexts of struggle and social justice movements that require our engagement. Earlier, you referred to Houria’s recent work on coalition building. Although this is a broad inquiry, from your perspective, what strategies might be most effective in fostering connections between diverse struggles – such as those involving LGBTQ+, racialized communities, and the working class – to promote collective solidarity and transformative social change?**

**FV:** We learn through practice. We work with and across differences. We overcome years of soft multiculturalism and the liberal politics of “inclusion and diversity”, the inclusion for the few and exclusion for the many. Capitalism is highly dynamic; it knows how to cannibalize even its critics, turning dissent into a new commodity.

We fight through action our decolonial, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, feminist, and LGBTQ+ struggle. We learn to be humble, to listen to people. Education, education, education. Political education. Do the work, educate yourself, and join collectives. Develop a burning desire to understand and to learn every day and every night. Understand that the world around us is not “natural”; it has been shaped by social forces, and thus, it can be undone. That it could be made otherwise. That is very liberating. Because otherwise, we may feel that nothing will ever change, that the odds against liberation are too great. We must unlearn in order to learn – unlearning everything that normalizes exploitation and domination, and learning again and again, by listening, by paying attention.

When I joined the picket line of the women on strike at the Ibis hotel<sup>19</sup> in Paris, their struggle was not immediately recognized as a decolonial, anti-racist, feminist struggle. Their demands, including better working conditions, fair wages, access to toilets when needed, and so on, might have seemed “modest.” But they brought to public attention an understanding of the inner workings of an industry whose mechanisms of domination and exploitation had long remained invisible. White feminism had denounced domesticity, but treated it as an individual issue. Racialized women cleaners revealed how white bourgeois women had been “liberated” from the drudgery of domestic work by exploiting non-white women. These cleaners held their picket line

<sup>19</sup> Earlier this year, cleaning staff at Ibis Hotels in France, particularly at the Ibis Batignolles in Paris, engaged in significant protests and strikes to demand better working conditions and fairer treatment. These workers, employed by the subcontractor STN, faced challenging conditions, including excessive workloads and inadequate compensation. Similar mobilizations had taken place previously through a social movement that began in July 2019 and ended in May 2021, primarily organized by the chambermaids working at the Ibis Batignolles hotel in Paris, part of the Accor group.

every day, despite long commutes, despite rain or snow, they showed up. It was, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore<sup>20</sup> has argued, a rehearsal of freedom, a rehearsal of what could be.

**VP: Your reference to the Ibis cleaning workers evokes broader reflections on the intersectionality of struggles. On the one hand, we observe queer spaces that often remain predominantly white and, in some cases, reproduce forms of structural racism. On the other, migrant or racialized spaces may at times exhibit homophobic or transphobic attitudes. How might we move beyond this dichotomous framing? What strategies can be employed to dismantle both racist structures within queer communities and homo/transphobic structures within migrant or racialized communities, fostering coalitional forms of resistance?**

**FV:** You do have collectives of gay, queer, and trans people in Africa who are not following the white bourgeois ideology of gayness. Look at the very strong queer and lesbian community in South Africa<sup>21</sup> who fought against “corrective rape” – where men claimed that rape would make Black women heterosexual. That movement wasn’t NGO-based. Racialized queer and trans people have their own voices, and the way they fight belongs to them. White gays who show up saying, “It’s terrible what’s happening to you, we’ll teach you how to fight,” are rejected. People are aware of pinkwashing – like in Israel, where gay-friendly policies are built on anti-Muslim racism.

**VP: Your work engages with concepts such as art washing and pinkwashing. Could you elaborate on the relationship between oppressed communities and institutional funding? Given that many of these communities require financial support, visibility, and space, how do you reconcile the tension between the necessity of such support and the perception that radical critique might be considered a luxury?**

**FV:** Private foundations have realized they can offer residencies and exhibitions to racialized artists without threatening their own interests. It’s understandable that racialized artists, often precarious and seeking recognition, would accept these opportunities. While the art world is changing, for every artist who gains entry, thousands remain excluded. Art school budgets are being cut, curricula often remain Eurocentric, and the art market favors the “discovery” of singular artists – bearing in mind the problematic role that “discovery” has played in colonialism. Galleries and museums are frequently complicit in imperialism and genocide. Looting continues.

<sup>20</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore is a Black American scholar and activist whose work focuses on abolitionist theory, racial capitalism, and carceral geography. For indicative examples of her work, see Gilmore (2007, 2022).

<sup>21</sup> For an extended analysis on gender-based violence in South Africa, see Gqola 2015 and Lewis & Baderoon 2021. Additionally and more precisely for the corrective rape against lesbians, see Gaitho 2022 and Koraan & Geduld 2015. Furthermore, for an empowering archival project dedicated to the politics of exclusion and the LGBTQI+ struggles in South Africa, see Muholi 2018.

I understand everyone needs to eat, so, okay. But are we opening the door for others? Are we creating collectives? Do we truly understand how capitalism works? Do we realize why capitalism relies on the inclusion of a few and the exclusion of the many? How is it that, at the same time, a racialized artist is accepted while barbed wire is placed around refugee camps? How do we work with that contradiction? This is not a moral question; it's a political one. We started this conversation with Houria's exclusion from the HM conference. I was not excluded – I could have gone, right?

But I'm not going to accept my inclusion when a political comrade, a friend, is excluded. I don't think there is *one* single answer, but I do believe we must analyze the political economy at work. We need to understand why the systemic destruction of museums, historical, and archaeological sites in Gaza has not sparked outcry from major Western museums; why looting of African, Asian, and Islamic art continues; and why billionaires are creating art foundations.

I have said to friends that with our work (the broader work on representation, arts, and politics around the world) we have opened the door for fifty years of curating, that curators can launch careers, write books, and organize shows about decolonial artists and hidden histories, but it will be without us, and mostly without the oppressed. We've laid out ideas for fifty years of curating. That's that. A more important question for me is: What now? We know their game – some women, some queer folks, some racialized people will be invited to participate. Okay, that's that. But what do we do now? Isn't it time to imagine something else? To free ourselves from that hegemonic model? What should we try to build? I'm not focusing on those who accept the money and why not take the money and run, and do whatever you have to do with it. The most urgent question, I argue, especially in a context of genocide, is: What next?

For me, what matters is imagining the abolition of the museum<sup>22</sup> – an institution born in the colonial West of the 18th century and solidified during the age of imperialism. I want to return to an analysis of the political economy of art. Where is the money coming from? How does this private foundation fund itself? Through oil? Weapons? Plantations? We must study the economy of that world – how it operates. *We live in an extremely brutal, deeply cruel world, and we must constantly ask ourselves: how do we create solidarity?*

For a fellowship I received, I proposed the topic of the “post-museum.” What would its architecture look like? How would bodies enter and move through its space? What would its collection include, how would it function, and where would its funding come from? When we say we want a non-binary space, what does that actually look like? In what kind of space does my body enter and circulate?

As part of this fellowship, I curated a workshop in London with architects, where we developed three prototypes of the post-museum. In Paris, I

<sup>22</sup> See Vergès 2006; 2008; 2024.

brought together 40 young artists and activists and proposed that we create and stage a street theater performance around the theme: “The anticapitalist object of the museum.”<sup>23</sup> We had two days to produce it, using the principles of street theater – because street theater carries a strong history of political activism. We had to make explicit the difference between an object within an economy of exchange and affective relations, and an object within the market economy – shaped by speculation, private property, and the patriarchal law of inheritance.

One group represented the women and men who traffic in ideas and objects through an extractive economy. They were not to be portrayed as caricatures – the audience needed to see how they manipulate the language of inclusion and diversity. Another group represented those who produce the object, but held differing views: some wanted to sell it, some argued it should not be sold, and others insisted the knowledge and practices should be hidden to avoid being looted. Finally, there was the anti-capitalist group. They all wore black t-shirts with slogans I had written by hand: “Down with the capitalist merchant society!”, “Under the museum, history,” and other anti-capitalist messages.

Each group had to imagine and produce their part of the performance. I moved between them, reminding everyone what street theater is, what its historical importance has been, and how our performance could be staged in a market, on the street, or in a public square. The message needed to be immediately clear – people had to understand what we were addressing, right away. We had to be very explicit.

The public performance was beautiful. People who did not know each other, who came from different artistic practices, connected, laughed, reflected, and created an extraordinary piece of street theater. I could have organized a conference on the same topic and some of them would have come, but would they have intervened? There, they went on stage and spoke. How do we build autonomy?

**VP: You have offered a strong critique of state feminism, white feminism, and carceral feminism. However, I would like to bring attention to the perspectives of the families of victims. In some cases, abolitionist feminist approaches may propose alternatives to the prison system, yet the victims’ families often seek punishment or even revenge. How do you engage with this complexity? And, as a final and more hopeful reflection, how do you understand abolition as a political project rooted in hope?**

**FV:** Yeah, well, I understand revenge – the desire for revenge. Tragedies have been written around that feeling, which can be very strong. I cannot tell you exactly what kind of “punishment” that is not carceral punishment. In some societies, when someone committed what the community perceived as

<sup>23</sup> For further information on the performance “The anticapitalist object of the museum”, see <https://www.citedesartsparis.net/en/restitution-atelier-et-performance-lanticapitalisme-et-lobjet-du-musee>.

a crime – an attack on the community – they were expelled. The idea was that, alone, they couldn't survive. If you attack the community, you attack yourself. I will not survive by myself.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls “rehearsals of life,” these collective moments when a space of freedom is created in a world of unfreedom, an autonomous space where to find solidarity, mutual aid, rest, discussion, joy. *The aspiration for liberation, peace, and justice never dies*. Never, ever, ever, ever, ever. It's always there. Every day, I wake up and learn that somewhere in the world, in many parts of the world, people are standing up and fighting back. This is the politics of hope, of radical hope.

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