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The Languages of the "Banlieues"

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91, 92, 93, 94. — In the years before the formation of the independent state of Algeria, these numbers stood for the French *departements* (districts) of Alger, Oran, Constantine, and Territoires du Sud, which were situated in a region that had been continually colonized since 1830, and, unlike most of the other colonies, was considered an integral part of France. As part of an administrative reform in 1968, the numbers that had become "available" again in 1962 were (re)assigned to different departements within the greater metropolitan area of Paris: since that time, the number 91stands for Essonne, located in the south of the Parisian agglomeration and part of the so-called *grande couronne* ("large crown") of Paris, a ring of municipalities that separates the greater suburbs from the metropolitan area. The numbers 92, 93, and 94 form the *petite couronne* ("small crown"), which forms the inner ring of "banlieues," the suburbs that lie on the outskirts of the city. Today, 92, 93, and 94 stand for: Hauts-de-Seine (92) stretching from the north to the south and closely nestled to the western end of the capital city, Seine-Saint-Denis (93) in the north and north-east, and Val-de-Marne (94) in the south and south-east.

No overly hasty conclusions are to be drawn from the connection we have just made between French-Algerian colonial history and the present-day Parisian *banlieues*. For one, the numbers games of administrative reforms in and of themselves can hardly be considered evidence. In fact, even the pre-revolutionary "crown" of France has long found its place in the *banlieue*: today, Versailles, the palace that kings of absolutist monarchies called home in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and which is on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage list, is a municipality within the *departement* Yvelines, in Paris's *grande couronne*. Furthermore, Hauts-de-Seine (92), in Paris's *petite couronne*, is not only home to one of the wealthiest municipalities in all of France, Neuilly-sur-Seine, whose mayor from 1983 to 2002 was Nicolas Sarkozy, who later went on to become the French president; La Défense, a complex of high-rise and commercial buildings—and a prime example of megalomaniac urban planning--, is also located here, expanding into several *banlieue* municipalities (including Nanterre, once the epicenter of the social movements of 1968 in Paris) and triumphantly flaunting the "power vertical" of banks and insurance companies in its architecture.[i]

And yet, as a signifier, *banlieue* is encoded to mean something different, something more specific. The technical and purportedly neutral meaning of *banlieue* as “suburb” not only stands in stark contrast to the entire linguistic and political history of the word, but it also accentuates a number of values and meanings assigned to it within contemporary discourses

The word *banlieue* is derived from the French *lieue de ban*, which means "the place of the ban." (It originally comes from the Latin *bannum leucae*, *leucae* being related to *leuca/leuga* Fr. *lieue*, or En. league, a historical unit of measurement for various distances.) In feudal times, it was the name given to areas surrounding the cities,

which were connected to city life and subject to city legislation in order to prevent economically and socially undesirable activities from unfolding there. It is also worth mentioning that though *banlieue* has become the predominant term describing a specific kind of "suburb," there are indeed a number of alternative terms that have emerged in the history of the French language, for instance *faubourgs* (which comes from *foris burgum*, "outside the castle").

When *banlieues* are mentioned in France today, what is usually being referred to are so-called *zones sensibles*, peri-urban "social problem areas" with a great deal of unemployment, youth without prospects, violence, delinquency, and ill-reputed shadow economic activities, such as drug dealing. In the social sciences, notable attempts have been made to understand these “zones” as distinct from US American ghettos, for instance, as milieus of "advanced marginality" (Loïc Waquant) or as not yet entirely "decoupled" from society to the point of "exclusion" (Robert Castel).[ii] On the other hand, French blockbuster style films, such as *Banlieue 13* and the sequel *Banlieue 13: Ultimatum*[iii] take this image to the extreme, offering a cumulative portrayal of the predominant imaginaries about the *banlieues*. They show a world ruled by gangs, separated from Paris by an insurmountable wall. And even if gang brutality in these films is ultimately upstaged by the political elite on the other side of the wall, it is still a portrayal of a world that is desolate at first glance, a world that is not "white" and where difference is somewhat tribally organized along a spectrum ranging from "other" colors to tattooed "white" bodies; and a world that can only ever overcome its image as a place of violence by fighting for justice and for liberation from oppression, a struggle that makes it stronger and wiser, which also finally gives it a social and "humane" and social face of solidarity.[iv]

It is quite obvious that *Banlieue 13* was modeled after "93," not least because the usual French pronunciation of the number "93" (*quatre-vingt-treize*) emphasizes the end of the word, the number "13" (*treize*). As a matter of fact, in reality Seine-Saint-Denis or "93" is often ascribed the role of the *banlieue* par excellence. This not only refers to the fact that, among the *departements* of the *petite couronne* of Paris, "93" has the reputation, more or less, of being one big *zone sensible*. This was also the site where the *banlieue* riots—which quickly resulted in further riots across France—began in the fall of 2005 after two teenagers on the run from the police were electrocuted to death after taking refuge in an industrial electric transformer in Clichy-sous-Bois.

Quatre-Chemins

In 2011, thanks to collaboration between the eipcp project *Europe as a Translational Space. The Politics of Heterolinguality* and the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, we also had our own encounters with "93" during a series of long visits—totaling more than two months—to Aubervilliers[v]. An important aspect of these visits was the preparation and finally the realization of a week of workshops and events, which took place at the Laboratoires in September 2012. (The authors and interview partners included in this publication were participants in the workshop, as well as co-organizers and key actors during the workshop week.)[vi]

Quatre-Chemins is the name of the place we arrived at in Aubervilliers. It is also the name of a station on the Paris Metro Line 7 that links the center of Paris with Aubervilliers. It is also the name of a large intersection and the area surrounding it, near the border separating the *banlieue* from the "city." Along one axis of the "four pathways" (*quatre chemins*) that converge or, in any case, diverge from each other at this junction, Paris is on one end

and La Courneuve on the other (where one of the prototypes of *banlieue* housing complexes, the “Cité des 4000,” named after the 4000 flats apartments that make up the complex); the other axis goes, from following the inner *banlieue* ring, goes to nearby Pantin, or, in the other direction, toward the center of Aubervilliers and then further on to Saint-Denis.

One of the first things we were told upon our arrival is that there is an unbelievable array of "nationalities" that live side by side in Aubervilliers (a city of almost 80,000), and Quatre-Chemins is indeed a place that could serve as plausible proof. However, we were more interested in other expressions of multiplicities than those that could be categorized and counted in terms of "nationalities" or similar terms: we are interested in multiplicities that transgress rather than seek to categorize and contain multiple subjectivities and socialities; multiplicities which—though fraught with rifts—constantly seek ways to overcome or "repair" those rifts. From this perspective, a place like Quatre-Chemins initially feels like a vibrating force field where the most diverse socialities, economies, attitudes, colors, and sounds (or more precisely nuances of color and of sound), as well as "languages" (or more precisely ways of speaking) are intertwined: they cross over and flow into and stand apart from one another, but in such a way that it is never quite clear if the impression of them crossing over, flowing into or standing apart from one another isn’t, in fact, more an effect of one's own perception than an effect of what one is perceiving.

There are other phenomena that highlight the differences more distinctly—but this time they are rifts that do not reflect the uncertainty of standing apart, but rather the effects of specific *measures*: for instance, when regulations force cafés and bars in the *banlieue* to close by midnight, although the official closing time in Paris is two a.m. Or when the original structures of older

buildings, characteristic for certain neighborhoods in Aubervilliers, are suddenly demolished, abandoned, and left to deteriorate, or turned into construction sites, so that yet another piece of urban no-man's-land can be made available to high-rise housing plans, giving way to skyscrapers encompassing as many single housing units as possible. Or when (after all, Aubervilliers is one of the *banlieue* "neighborhoods close by Paris"), during our stay, a huge shopping mall opens in Aubervilliers, a university campus is in the process of being built, and there are plans to extend a second line of the Paris Metro to make these "points of interest" more accessible—despite the fact that the time it takes to travel between Paris and the less "well-connected" *banlieue* municipalities (such as Clichy-sous-Bois) is often longer than from Paris to Brussels.

We will not be able to explore each individual rift here, nor are we able to trace the innumerable multiplicities that had been our original focus of interest. However, what we can and must say is that we came to Quatre-Chemins with a question. This question concerned the relations between language and translation as an expression of social conditions in the so-called *banlieues*. It was formulated in a way that resembled the "intersection" itself: of the four pathways that that converged or rather diverged, one axis was between monolinguality and multilinguality; the other axis, which was more interesting for us, was between heterolinguality and homolinguality, or more precisely, to use Naoki Sakai's terms,[vii] between "heterolingual address" and the regimes of "homolingual address."

The Heterolinguality of the *Banlieues*

Here, we can only offer a sketch of Sakai's main ideas: Sakai is basically interested in the phenomenon of translation, which can only be understood by focusing on social relationality, in which

"languages"— codes with which the speakers can more or less communicate—are not merely preexisting. In other words, translation is not merely a necessary transfer of meaning from a "source language" to a "target language" by experts, where the conditions for "communication" through a shared language are not met. Instead, translation is based on what Sakai calls "heterolingual address," a linguistic relation that traverses the "one" or the "other" language(s), in which each form of address (of someone or something) is based on a virtual, differential, and somewhat confusing linguisticality that can never be reduced to the identity of the one or the other "language," the one or the other "linguistic community," or to the “communicated” meanings. Only when a certain *representation* of this process and the related *regimes* (of homolingual address) that influence, modulate and model this representation is given does the phenomenon of translation emerge as a peculiar and peripheral secondary phenomenon that stands in contrast to the supposedly already established unity of "languages," "language communities," etc.

"Heterolinguality" is therefore a name for an innumerable multiplicity. Only when considered together with its terminological counterpart, "homolinguality," are we able to identify unities or numerable multiplicities of "languages." Let us go back to Quatre-Chemins: whoever walks around this area may try to decipher what language is being spoken here or there, to count the languages that run through and across this place, or to categorize people according to "how many" languages they speak and with whom. But even the language that clearly stands out from all the others—French—is far from forming any kind of unity identical with itself; any attempt to count the many languages amounts to an attempt to count, for instance, the number of people at a party or a political demonstration, whose multiplicity

does not necessarily depend on the number of people present; and who would want—keeping with the same image—to count the literally countless networks of relations that give a party or a demonstration its specific character?

All of this we brought along as a question, as a proposal for a perspectivization rather than a hypothesis about the "languages of the *banlieue*s." Each proposal for a perspectivization is necessarily linked to one's own perspectives and to the specific situatedness of one's own interests. In the following, we will discuss two points related to the perspectives, situatedness and orientations of our interests.

The first point is about political articulation, more precisely the *banlieue* riots of autumn 2005 and the multitude of reactions that followed. It comes as little surprise that the right wing in France and elsewhere tried to reduce the riots either by making them out to be aimless violence that was not a statement of any particular kind, or to be a manifestation of ethnically or religiously founded "hatred of the West." However, it is indeed peculiar that even the leftist debates, perhaps especially outside of France, seemed to have gotten stuck in the extremely abstract alternative of either being annoyed by the protesting youth, or being mesmerized by something they did not quite understand, but nonetheless considered to be a political subject of resistance or even revolution. It quickly became clear that the second stance was nothing but a projection of a certain "truth" on to a given political-social articulation, without giving any further thought to the articulation itself. By contrast, the irritation in the first attitude was not solely —and presumably also primarily—due to the fact that this articulation appeared to mainly consist of setting cars on fire and, in one (heavily debated) case, also a school; instead, the irritation was more due to the fact that the protesters were not

"organized"—and that their articulation was not organized in the form of manifestos or lists of demands.

This brings us to our second point. In exaggerated terms, what this alternative amounts to is that the protest's articulation either already has a pre-existing meaning (which thus only needs to be "explained" in a more or less favorable manner); or, vice-versa, that it has no real meaning (or, if it has any meaning at all, then one that is suspicious) as long as it is not in a form through which political-social meaning is produced. In either case, there is no need to give any further thought to the articulation itself. That is what makes it even more peculiar, since especially French *banlieues* are characterized by their extraordinary abundance of articulations and "languages," or more precisely, ways of speaking—which, even apart from the question of political languages, does not come into view as long as there is a general suspicion that these languages and ways of speaking are not "proper" French at all or as long as they are reduced to other "proper" languages (along the axis of monolinguality vs. multilinguality).

On the one hand, this applies to *argot* and especially to *verlan*, a language that was created by inverting syllables and is constantly being reinvented, which first developed in the *banlieues* of Paris. We will cite only one example here: the word *babtou* is a common *Verlan* variation of the word *toubab*, which has been used since colonial times in parts of West Africa to designate "whites" or "Europeans." However, even establishing this as “the definition" of *toubab* may be too hasty. After all, for instance, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon recounts that during his time in the French army, another *tirailleurs sénégalais* who was also fighting for France had considered him a *toubab*, because, despite his skin color, he was an Antillian serving in a “white” regiment:

"I remember a day when, in the midst of combat, we had to wipe out a machine-gun nest. The Senegalese were ordered to attack three times, and each time they were forced back. Then one of them wanted to know why the toubabs did not go into action. At such times, on no longer knows whether one is toubab or "native."[viii]

Regarding the usage of *babtou* in France today, it is helpful to have a look at discussion forums on the Internet. While there is no debate about it meaning "white" (person), there is no clear-cut answer to the question of who else can be called it, in which situations, and what kind of values its use accentuates—after all, it is inextricably linked to the complex relations of address. *Babtou* is thus to some extent a “heterolingual” word. It is a word that does not belong to any one codified language. It cannot be translated from one codified language into another—not only because each term has its own specific and highly complex history inscribed within it, but also especially because, before it becomes codified in any way, it is already involved in a process of ongoing translation.

On the other hand, a very clear and rich political language emerged in certain rap contexts, which also entail quite a bit of the "public articulations," which some thought were missing during the events in autumn 2005. As a counterpart to the nationally codified *rap français* and the marketing interests of the music industry, the rap context we are referring to here is known as *rap de fils d'immigrés* (rap by the children of immigrants)[ix] and is associated with names like La Rumeur, Anfalsch, or Casey, who is also part of the Anfalsh posse.

A first important feature of this kind of rap is—aside from direct commentaries on current political events—that part of its program is thematizing issues of migration, colonialism, or more precisely

the "postcolonial situation," and the history of slavery, with explicit reference to anti-colonial authors such as Aimé Césaire or Frantz Fanon.[x] A second programmatic feature (which is more closely linked to the historical development of rap music than the first) is the reversal of the point of view.

> "The revolution of rap: the reversal of the point of view. It's no longer society and mainstream media that look at immigration or the kids from the neighborhoods, but it's the kids from these neighborhoods who look back at society and speak their mind about it. It's an incredible act of symbolic subversion."[xi]

This reversal of the point of view is also bound to a just as decisive contestation of what could be called the rules of discourse. In this context, the rap group's name La Rumeur (The Rumor) can almost be understood as a counterpoint to a "discourse" dictated by specific rules and conditions. It is precisely this alternative that is again connected to the history of rap as a form of articulation, which deals with linking and pluralizing articulations in the "first person singular"[xii]: therefore, it is not primarily about being convincing, or about wanting listeners to agree with the statements presented, but rather about confirming as a form of testimony, about creating forms of articulation that engender and link up with other articulations that might have emerged through other experiences.

The third feature we would like to mention is the question of what language actually "is." This question is not only connected to the use of *Argot* or *Verlan* expressions in the same breath as elaborately refined "French" (in the sense of the *Académie française*, the world's leading authority on the French language since 1635), to the unquestioned incorporation of other languages such as Arabic[xiii]

or to references to Creole languages, as can be found in Casey's rap. It also extends to references to the history of the French language. In 2009, Ministère des affaires populaires (Ministry for Popular Affairs), a rap group from Lille, brought out an album entitled *Les bronzés font du ch'ti* (depending on the association: "The brown/ sun-tanned do/run/learn ch'ti'): "ch'ti" is, in dominant linguistic terms, one of the numerous "dialects" that the homogenizing regime of national languages has repressed to the point that it has almost completely disappeared. The issue here, however, is not a politics of "recognition" or "conserving" what is, according to UNESCO, a "seriously endangered" language. Instead, in our opinion, it is more about defending heterolinguality, which on the one hand serves as a reminder of the linguistic-political processes of homolingualization and, on the other, affirms the becoming (as opposed to the "being") of languages.

Nothing but Words

"Words are important" is the header at the top of one of the interviews with Hamé cited above. That does not exclude, but (from the perspective of translation politics) rather includes the notion that words are sometimes "nothing but words." For this reason, we will close with a scene from a film by the Engraineurs, [xiv] which we spoke about on several occasions during the workshop
in Aubervilliers. It is the opening scene in the film called *Rien que des mots* (Nothing but words), which deals with a classical topos that is linked to both the theory and practice of translation: betrayal.

The scene shows a schoolgirl from an Algerian family who, together with her mother, is called into the teacher's office at a school (located in "93"), while her father is searching for a suitable

husband for her in Algeria. The mother does not speak a word of French, the teacher does not speak a word of Arabic, so the schoolgirl, stuck between these two authority figures, becomes indispensable as a translator, and at the same time discovers the liberties that translation opens up for her. She understands the game of address, which dictates more rules than it gives space to play, space she desperately seeks in her own life (in flirts, in a theater group, etc., as is revealed in later scenes of the film). So, she translates what each person wants to hear, betraying the actual meaning of each person's words. What is most important, however, is that by doing so, she clears the way—not in order to attack but rather to suspend the one or the other authority, and, most of all, to invent her own life.

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[i] It is not merely by chance that the Arc de Triomphe (monument of the Napoleonic wars) is directly linked to its contemporary counterpart, the Grand Arche at La Défense, along an axis of visibility and an axis of transportation.

[ii] Cf. Loïc Wacquant, *Parias urbains. Ghetto, banlieues, État*, Paris: La Découverte 2006; Robert Castel, *La discrimination négative*, Paris: Seuil 2007.

[iii] *Banlieue 13*, France 2004, Dir.: Pierre Morel; *Banlieue 13: Ultimatum*, France 2009, Dir.: Patrick Alessandrin.

[iv] This construction is reminiscent of the well-known imaginary of "progress": one must only recall Hegel's analysis of mastery and slavery.

[v] We would like to express our gratitude to the entire Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers team (at that time) for their collaboration and for their friendly welcome: first and foremost, we

would like to thank Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and Virginie Bobin, who were our direct contact persons, and also extend our thanks just as much to Grégory Castéra, Alice Cauchat, Barbara Coffy, Claire Harsany, Pauline Hurel, Anne Millet and Tanguy Nédélec for the various ways they were personally involved and for the numerous conversations, advice and support.

[vi] Cf. http://eipcp.net/projects/heterolingual/files/workshop1-en -- we would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to all workshop participants and contributors to this edition of *transversal*: on the one hand, we would like to thank them for their contributions as well as for their willingness -- which we do not take for granted -- to come together with us and our colleague Boris Buden, despite the differences that separate us, to form a "motley heap" (Anne Querrien), where among the many we had to find out what it was that we all had in common.

[vii] Cf. Naoki Sakai. *Translation and Subjectivity. On "Japan" and Cultural Nationalism.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

[viii] Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, 2008 [French original 1952; first English edition 1986], p. 15.

[ix] In an interview from 2010, Hamé, a member of the rap group La Rumeur said: "We have taken a clear position, we have clearly stated that we are not the "Beurs" or "Blacks" of the SOS racism era. Once someone asked me how I would describe my rap, and I said that it's *rap de fils d'immigré*, rap of a son of an immigrant worker. (cf. http://limi.net/Rap-de-fils-d-immigres, accessed 10 April 2013.)

[x] Cf. Especially Casey's albums *Tragédie d'une trajectoire* (2006) and *Libérez la bete* (2010) and La Rumeur's albums.

[xi] In Hamé's words: "*la révolution du rap: cette inversion du regard. Ce n'est plus la société et les médias dominants qui regardent l'immigration ou les jeunes de quartiers, ce sont les jeunes de ces quartiers qui regardent la société et qui donnent leur avis. C'est un renversement symbolique inouï.*" [Author's translation], cf.: http://www.mouvements.info/Hors-cadre-entretien-avec-Hame.html, accessed 10 April 2013.

[xii] Cf. Oxmo Puccino's rap song *Artiste*: "*Devenir la première personne des singuliers / Se passe rarement de facon de régulière*" (translated into English through a theoretical lens: "Becoming the first person singular / rarely ever happens in a regulated manner); further, see for instance the chapter "Ring Shout" in Christian Béthune's *Le Rap. Une esthétique hors la loi,* Paris: Éditions Autrement 2003, pp. 18–29.

[xiii] Cf. Amina Bensalah and Myriam Suchet's text in this edition of *transversal*.

[xiv] Cf. the conversation with Sonia Chikh in this issue of *transversal*.