

“Sauvons les enfants de la loi Taubira”:

On the Anti-Blackness of French Anti-gender Politics

ON MARCH 24, 2013, the streets of Paris were overtaken by La Manif pour tous, a right-wing organization whose name translates to “Demonstration for all” – a play on the “Marriage for all” bill that had recently been introduced by Christiane Taubira, a former French Minister of Justice from French Guiana. Swarms of protestors – whose numbers were estimated by French police to be around 300,000, though La manif pour tous claimed 1.4 million – marched up the Champs-Élysées, carrying posters depicting Taubira and her law as a threat to the heterosexual nuclear family, and worse, a threat to the Child (AFP 2013). In one poster, a caricatured Taubira spansks a child with the Civil Code, while the caption implores us to “Save the children from the Taubira law” (“sauvons les enfants de la loi Taubira”). While the context of the protest would suggest that the “Taubira law” in question is the same-sex marriage bill, the most common referent of the “Taubira law,” in French political discourse, is actually another landmark bill, introduced by Taubira in 2001, which recognized the transatlantic and Indian ocean slave trades as crimes against humanity (Cottias 2021, 167). This essay suggests that the coincidence of these two “Taubira laws” may be more than merely coincidental; if we dwell on the surplus signification of this phrase, we might come to see racial slavery and its afterlife as constitu-

tive backdrops for the questions of marriage, kinship, and “gender ideology” that so preoccupy La Manif pour tous. Through a close reading of the posters’ anti-Black depictions of Taubira, who is represented as brute, enraged, and violent, I argue that the ungendering of Black women is essential to the understanding of gender that underwrites La manif pour tous’ politics – though they would prefer to speak of “sex” rather than gender. For La manif pour tous has increasingly pivoted toward joining the international “anti-gender” movement; in the wake of its failure to prevent same-sex marriage from being legalized in May 2013, the organization has become France’s chief representative in the global right-wing fight against “gender theory,” which they see as a radical ideological force that threatens to destroy traditional family structures as well as the very biological difference between the sexes (“L’idéologie du genre” 2013, 3). My larger hypothesis, then, is that the anti-Blackness of La Manif pour tous’ posters may tell us something fundamental about the racialization of anti-gender movements across the globe – if the ungendering of Blackness underpins anti-gender imaginaries of biological sex and of the “sexual indifferentiation” they so fear, then critiques of anti-Blackness should be central to critical feminist and queer responses to anti-gender forces (Le Roux 2014).¹

The 2013 posters already gesture toward the connection between gay marriage and gender ideology that has come to define La Manif pour tous’ politics; as they have put it elsewhere, “marriage for all = gender theory for all,” or “mariage pour tous = théorie du gender pour tous” (quoted in Fassin 2016, 180). Consider the organization’s slogan, which appears at the bottom of each poster: “Tous nés d’un homme et d’une femme”, or “Everyone comes from a man and a woman.” The slogan, which La Manif pour tous continues to use today, suggests that what is at stake, in the movement’s opposition to gay marriage, is the “proper” cisheterosexual relation between the male and female sexes. What’s ultimately at stake is the very structure of filiation and kinship at the center of Western civilization – that is, the nuclear family structure represented by La Manif pour tous’ icon, a cartoon image of a father, a mother, a son, and a daughter all joining hands. Filiation itself is imagined as

under threat by the “Taubira law,” as one poster dramatizes through its portrait of Taubira cutting down family trees with a chainsaw, leaving fallen hearts scattered like leaves on the ground. The poster’s caption elaborates: “Où Taubira passe, la filiation tréépasse”, or “Wherever Taubira passes, filiation passes away.”

Again, the “Taubira law” that protestors had in mind would seem to be the same-sex marriage bill, not the 2001 recognition of slavery bill – at least on a conscious level. It is clear that “mariage pour tous” was the central focus of the 2013 protests, which failed to prevent Taubira’s bill from passing on May 17, 2013. But same-sex marriage was not the only “Taubira law” that protestors depicted as a threat to traditional structures of sex, kinship, and “filiation.” On both visual and textual levels, the posters appear no less haunted by the *other* “Taubira law’s” recognition of racial slavery, insofar as they depict Taubira as the harbinger of the nuclear family’s death at the same time as they (re)produce an *ungendered* image of Taubira. For as Hortense Spillers has taught us, it is the long history of slavery that has constituted Blackness as antithetical to hegemonic norms of kinship and gender alike. This is to say that the ideal of white domesticity that is celebrated by La Manif pour tous’ icon is an ideal founded upon the exclusion of Blackness, which dates back to the slave trade’s production of Black flesh as a fungible object, not subject to the gendered familial relationships that differentiate fully human subjects (Spillers 1987, 66).

While Spillers’ canonical essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” is subtitled “An American Grammar Book,” La Manif pour tous’ posters illustrate the extent to which Black ungendering is equally a French *livre de grammaire*. In each poster, Taubira’s image appears largely void of the very typical feminine qualities that anti-gender protestors want to save from “gender theory.” For starters, Taubira’s hair is presented as short and spiky, while her shoulders are outlined as broad and square. And whereas Farida Belghoul, a prominent French anti-gender activist, has famously implored French women to don dresses and leave pants to men, Taubira is portrayed wearing pants and a suit (Greusard 2016). Her only potentially feminizing features – shoes that might resemble

heels in one poster, and earrings in another – appear almost out of place in relation to this masculinized figure, as though to play up the threat of “sexual indifferentiation” that she is imagined to pose. As Spillers already saw in her 1982 essay “Interstices,” “the prerogatives of sexuality are refused” to Black women, “because the concept of sexuality originates in, stays with, the dominative mode of culture and its elaborate strategies of thought and expression” (reprinted in Spillers 2003, 157). Not only is Taubira excluded from cisheteronormative ideals of womanhood, which La Manif pour tous and other anti-gender actors seek to uphold, but moreover, she apparently threatens the demise of such ideals. Far from a passive figure of femininity, Taubira appears enraged and even violent. In the poster where she spans a child with the Civil Code, her eyebrows slant and her lips part wide in a tremendous shout, as her muscular arms hold the child down. Beyond the common anti-gender allegation that “gender theory” and gay marriage corrupt (white) children,² the poster seems to evoke ungendered Blackness as equally threatening to the sacred child, particularly as Taubira’s racial difference may be inferred from her being outlined in black, in contrast to the child, who is outlined in red. And as the Civil Code is also red, it is almost as though it *ought* to belong to the child, as the two assume the same color. Yet the outline of the Civil Code encloses its red contents in black, and the law is wielded *against* the Child by a Blackened figure, Taubira, who – the poster presumes – *should* have no hold on the law. In like fashion, I am arguing that the anti-gender imaginary sees ungendered Black women as simultaneously excluded from the Law of proper sexual differentiation, *and* as usurping and perverting that very Law by means of “gender ideology.” The final step in this perverse and profoundly anti-Black fantasy of Blackness’ infiltration of the Law consists in the circumstance that this purported use of the Law remains, or “ought” to remain, outlawed – since all forms of corporal punishment are now illegal in France, Taubira would literally be breaking the law in using the law to beat the child.

All of this is to say that, while La Manif pour tous tends to frame “sexual indifferentiation” as a novel and essentially external threat posed by

“gender theory,” it turns out that the movement’s own ideals of the cisheterosexual complementarity of the sexes have always been constructed, and deconstructed, in relation to the indifferentiation, or undifferentiation, of Black gender/sex. Not only is their discourse on biological sex always already gendered, as we have known at least since Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, but the anti-gender imaginary of how sexual difference ought to be cultivated, culturally, presupposes the ungendering of Black flesh, marked as the lowest degree of sexual differentiation. As Jenny Andrine Madsen Evang has pointed out, “anti-gender discourse echoes a much longer history of racialized plasticity; indeed, anti-gender actors reinforce a hierarchy between civilized, plastic white bodies capable of cultivating proper sex/gender, and uncivilized, racialized bodies unable to live up to the same level of accumulated plasticity, only ever embodying lesser, ‘savage’ copies of the refined ways of Western sex/gender” (Evang 2022, 368). “Racialized plasticity” is a concept that Evang borrows from the work of Kyla Schuller and Jules Gill-Peterson, who study the civilizationist hierarchies through which modern (cishetero) sexuality was largely defined in relation to white bodies, marked by nineteenth- and twentieth-century sexologists as the most fully evolved and therefore most sexually differentiated. As *La Manif pour tous*’ posters attest, ungendered Black flesh continues to be positioned at the bottom of this racial hierarchy of sexual differentiation, in the afterlife of slavery. On the one hand, this sense of “racialized plasticity” would suggest that *white* bodies are privileged as the most “plastic,” or impressible; and in this sense, both *La Manif pour tous* and some “gender theorists” implicitly hold up white bodies (especially white *children’s* bodies) as the most capable of properly cultivating (cishetero) sexual norms, but also most susceptible to corruption by gender ideology, as we begin to see in the anti-Black depictions of how the Taubira law corrupts French children. (See Evang’s brilliant analysis in *TSQ* for more on the dual nature of racialized plasticity, which renders white children both the ultimate victims of “gender ideology” and the last vanguards against it.)

On the other hand, scholars like Zakiyyah Iman Jackson have proposed a very different sense of “racialized plasticity,” where ungendered

Black bodies would be the most “plastic” – and I would argue that this sense of “plasticity” is equally important for analyses of anti-gender politics. For Jackson, “plasticity” is the status imposed upon Black flesh when the captive African body becomes raw material for experimentation, made to embody both sub- and super-humanity: Blackness, for Jackson, “functions not simply as negative relation but as a plastic fleshly being that stabilizes and gives form to human and animal as categories” (Jackson 2020, 48). This Blackened sense of plasticity surfaces in Taubira’s ungendered representation, insofar as it is the spectacular abjection of Black femininity that “stabilizes and gives form” to the cisheterosexual norms of human gender/sexuality at the heart of *La Manif pour tous*’ political imaginary. While it would be far beyond the scope of this short piece to reconcile the different critical directions in which scholars have understood “plasticity,” I would note for our purposes here that both ways of theorizing converge in framing Blackness’ formlessness as a condition of possibility for the forms taken by human identity, including *gender* identity; and whether we call that formlessness “plastic” (with Jackson) or read it as just what bars Blackness from full access to properly – “plastically” – cultivated gender norms (with Schuller and Gill-Peterson), “racialized plasticity” should be central to our understandings of gender, ungendering, as well as anti-gender forces. *La Manif pour tous* and other anti-gender movements across the globe seek to repress the racialized plasticity of gender, in all its iterations; insisting on the God-given nature of sexual difference, they fear the plasticity of hegemonic gender/sexual norms (which were only stabilized over the course of this racialized history) *as well as* the plasticity of ungendered Black flesh (which underwrites that history). At the same time as a certain Black plasticity is abjected, the more evolved plasticity proper to the impressible white child calls for biopolitical protection – against Blackness.

Critically, anti-gender movements often project their fears for the corruption of (white) children onto transness, which is figured as a nascent threat to the biological integrity of sexual difference; under the sign of “gender ideology,” transness becomes the scapegoat for the

internal plasticity and instability of sexual difference long associated with Black ungendering. Anti-gender transphobia should therefore be read through this history of anti-Blackness; as C. Riley Snorton argues, “the ungendering of blackness is also the context for imagining gender as subject to rearrangement,” such that “captive flesh figures a critical genealogy for modern transness, as chattel persons gave rise to an understanding of gender as mutable” (Snorton 2017, 57). In addition to critiquing the transphobia of anti-gender movements, then, we need to understand how anti-gender fears of trans movement across sex/gender are inherently racialized – and racist. Further, attending to gender’s “racialized plasticity” allows us to see how anti-gender transphobia is *inextricable* from anti-Blackness; if, as Snorton’s “critical genealogy for modern transness” suggests, it was the ungendering of Blackness that first made sex/gender malleable, then anti-gender fears of “sexual indifferenciation” are always haunted (however unconsciously) by the specter of Black ungendering.

This would also begin to explain why the anti-Black racism of La Manif pour tous is far from unique among the international anti-gender front; from Poland’s Law and Justice party to Brazil’s Liberal party to the United States’ Republican Party, it is clear that anti-gender and anti-Black politics are almost always common travelers. To be sure, there are significant differences between national contexts; besides the fact La Manif pour tous has failed to become a political party, race, racism, and anti-Blackness undeniably operate in somewhat unique ways in France. Most notably, French politics are often distinguished by a strong resistance to racial identity categories, which are pejoratively associated with American “communitarianism,” so that “Black French” people have historically lacked a group-based minoritarian identification comparable to “African Americans” (Keaton, Sharpley-Whiting & Stovall 2012, 2). Yet numerous scholars have punctured this myth of French colorblindness by pointing to the ways in which the universalist ideology of French Republicanism masks the persistence of anti-Black violence in French society; in effect, “race” is no more an “American” importation to France than “gender” (Beaman 2022, 406). And while much of French society

remains averse to discussing racial “identity,” Black feminism reminds us that Blackness is less an “identity” than it is a structural *position* against which human sexual identity is shored up – and per Spillers, this position is global. In her words, Black women “became the focus of a cunning difference – visually, psychologically, ontologically – as the route by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between humanity and ‘other’” (Spillers 2003, 155). Spillers’ comments would prove prescient for understanding the Taubira case, as anti-gender politicians as well as other right-wing public figures in France have repeatedly compared her to a monkey (FRANCE 24, 2013). My analysis would suggest that these racist discourses are not linked to anti-gender forces by mere chance; because ungendered Blackness figures the “animal within the human,” as Jackson puts it (Jackson 2020, 20), anti-Blackness is inextricable from the humanist discourse deployed by anti-gender movements as they claim to restore the “place” of “man at the heart of the political project” (quoted in Robcis 2015, 894).

Ultimately, understanding the constitutive anti-Blackness of anti-gender movements is vital to queer and feminist resistance. By way of conclusion, I would caution that some common liberal responses to anti-gender movements risk falling back on much the same anti-Black economy of sex/gender, rather than effectively resisting its violence. French liberals have often countered La Manif pour tous, for instance, by asserting that the movement fights “a theory of gender that doesn’t exist. What does exist, on the other hand, is a distinction between ‘biological sex’ and ‘gender.’” (Huguet 2014). It is undoubtedly true that there is no such thing as “gender theory,” as imagined by La Manif pour tous and its peers; to be sure, “gender ideology” is a figment of right-wing imagination that bundles together anything and everything from gay marriage to “the intellectual trailblazers of the French Revolution” to Butlerian gender performativity to John Money’s experiments on intersex children (Kuby 2015, 51).³ However, it is not enough to simply recognize the intellectual incoherence of “gender ideology.” Anti-gender sentiments continue to thrive, well beyond the party lines of La Manif pour tous and beyond the national borders of France, because of libidi-

nal investments in anti-Blackness that run far deeper than rational discourse can gauge. That is, if anti-gender discourse is capacitated through anti-Black structures that have given rise to our very understandings of gender/sex and of subjectivity itself, then we are unlikely to defeat anti-gender movements by pointing out their logical fallacies. Moreover, if another of La Manif pour tous' slogans is "We want sex, not gender," then it cannot suffice to retort, "We want gender, not sex" ("L'idéologie du genre" 2013, 3). On the one hand, liberal feminist defenses of gender identity as a valid category that can and should remain firmly distinct from biological sex fail to grapple with the inevitably gendered nature of sex itself – and for this reason, they also leave the door open to TERF (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) arguments that while trans women may claim a feminine gender identity, they remain "biologically male." On the other hand, even the more radical Butlerian argument about the gendering of sex remains limited so long as it does not specifically take into account Black ungendering as constitutive of *both* gender and sex. In this light, we need to take seriously Snorton's reminder that gender could only ever be conceived as malleable against the backdrop of Black ungendering. It would also be worth returning to Jackson's and Schuller's analyses of "racialized plasticity," to understand how cultural understandings of sex evolved through nineteenth-century science that frequently took Black women's bodies as the zero degree of sexual differentiation and thus as raw material for experimentation. What does this mean for our own feminist and queer imaginaries of gender? At a minimum, I want to suggest that if anti-Blackness cuts across sex, gender, and "gender theory," then we cannot unproblematically return to a neat "distinction between 'biological sex' and 'gender,'" given the layers of racialized violence through which that distinction has been forged. In the final instance, clinging to such liberal distinctions can only yield a politics of state feminism, of which there is perhaps no finer representative than Vincent Peillon, the French Minister of Education who in 2014 issued the following response to La Manif pour tous: "What we are doing is not gender theory – I refuse that – it is to promote the values of the Republic and equality between men and women" (quoted in *Théorie*

du Genre 2014). Given how easily “equality between men and women” can be assimilated into “the values of the Republic,” countering anti-gender movements will require a far more radical response than equality feminism and femonationalism can offer. While continuing to call out the misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia of anti-gender movements, then, feminists and queers also need to attend to anti-Blackness as foundational for both “the values of the Republic” as well as transnational imaginaries of gender *and* sex.

MÍŠA STEKL is a PhD Candidate in the Program of Modern Thought and Literature at Stanford University, with PhD minors in Comparative Studies of Race and Ethnicity and in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Their research explores the fraught relationship between queerness/transness and anti-Black discourses of “race,” drawing on studies of sexology, queer/trans theory and history, and Black studies. Their work appears in *South Atlantic Review*, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, *Rhizomes*, and *Galactica Media: Journal of Media Studies*. They can be reached at mstekl@stanford.edu.

REFERENCES

- AFP. 2013. “Manif Pour Tous: Les Organisateurs Revendiquent 1,4 Million de Manifestants.” *Libération*. March 24, 2013. https://www.liberation.fr/societe/2013/03/24/manif-pour-tous-les-organisateur-revendiquent-14-million-de-manifestants_890891.
- Beaman, Jean. 2022. Racial Gaslighting in a Non-Racial France. *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 26 (4-5): 406–17. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2022.2107261>.
- Cottias, Myriam. 2021. Les Vingt Ans de La Loi Taubira. *Cahiers d’Histoire. Revue d’Histoire Critique* 151: 167–78. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.4000/chrhc.17969>.
- Evang, Jenny Andrine Madsen. 2022. Is ‘Gender Ideology’ Western Colonialism? Anti-Gender Rhetoric and the Misappropriation of Postcolonial Language. *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9 (3): 365–86. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9836036>.
- Fassin, Éric. 2016. Gender Is/in French. *Differences* 27 (2): 178–97. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-3621771>.

- FRANCE 24. 2013. Black Minister Compared to a Monkey - Again. *France 24*. November 13, 2013. <https://www.france24.com/en/20131113-france-racism-black-minister-taubira-monkey-banana-magazine-cover>.
- Gill-Peterson, Julian. 2018. *Histories of the Transgender Child*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Greusard, Renée. 2016. Les opposants aux études de genre, de plus en plus idiots. *L'Obs*. November 18, 2016. <https://www.nouvelobs.com/rue89/rue89-rue69/20140114-RUE1367/les-opposants-aux-etudes-de-genre-de-plus-en-plus-idiots.html>.
- Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Huguet, Pascal. 2014. La 'théorie du genre' pour les nuls. *Le HuffPost*. Accessed November 7, 2022. https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/pascal-huguet/explications-theorie-du-genre_b_4759264.html.
- Jackson, Zakiyyah Iman. 2020. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*. New York: New York University Press.
- Keaton, Trica Danielle, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting & Tyler Stovall (eds.). 2012. *Black France / France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kuby, Gabriele. 2015. *The Global Sexual Revolution: Destruction of Freedom in the Name of Freedom*. Translated by James Patrick Kirchner. Lifesite/Angelico Press.
- Le Roux, Gaëlle. 2014. La 'théorie du genre' fait mouche à la Manif pour tous. *France 24*. February 2, 2014. <https://www.france24.com/fr/20140202-france-manif-pour-tous-theorie-du-genre-ecole-musulmans-homosexualite>.
- L'idéologie du genre. 2013. La Manif Pour Tous. November 26, 2013. <https://www.lamanifpourtous.fr/publications/lideologie-du-genre>.
- Moten, Fred. 2003. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Riley, Snorton, C. 2017. *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Robcis, Camille. 2015. Catholics, the 'Theory of Gender,' and the Turn to the Human in France: A New Dreyfus Affair? *Journal of Modern History* 87 (4): 892–923. <https://doi.org/10.1086/683599>.
- Schuller, Kyla. 2018. *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Spillers, Hortense J. 1987. Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book. *Diacritics* 17 (2): 64. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.
- . 2003. *Black, White and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, Michael & Josselin Tricou. 2017. Resisting 'Gender Theory' in France: A Fulcrum for Religious Action in a Secular Society. In: *Anti-Gender*

Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality, edited by Roman Kuhar & David Paternotte (79–98). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Théorie Du Genre: Vincent Peillon S'inscrit En Faux Contre Les Folles Rumeurs. 2014. *Les Echos*. January 28, 2014. <https://www.lesechos.fr/2014/01/theorie-du-genre-vincent-peillon-sinscrit-en-faux-contre-les-folles-rumeurs-289588>.

NOTES

1. Please note that I will not reproduce these posters in *lambda nordica*, so as to avoid recirculating and potentially amplifying their anti-Black visual representations of Taubira. (On the one hand, I know such risks can never be cleanly avoided, since anti-Black violence suffuses all efforts to describe and resist it, as Fred Moten demonstrates in his deconstructive reading of Saidiya Hartman's refusal to reproduce the scene of Aunt Hester's beating in Frederick Douglass' narrative. On the other hand, I also take to heart Hartman's point that the easy recirculation of anti-Black images is as likely to lead to indifference as to indignation, and as Moten recognizes, this makes it all the more critical to carefully attend to the *ways* in which one seeks to describe and resist virulently anti-Black images.) I hope that my critical descriptions of La Manif pour tous' posters, when necessary to my argument, will suffice to guide readers toward an understanding of how they draw on familiar tropes of Black femininity, while alerting readers to the violence of these anti-Black tropes. Readers who find my descriptions insufficient can easily find images of the posters online.
2. For a more in-depth analysis of how La Manif pour tous sacralizes the child, imagined as the ultimate victim of gender ideology, please see Michael Stambolis-Ruhstorfer and Josselin Tricou's (2017) chapter Resisting 'Gender Theory' in France, especially pages 86–87, in the anthology *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe*.
3. I will here treat "gender theory" and "gender ideology" as synonyms, since La Manif pour tous tend to use the phrases interchangeably. It has been pointed out to me, however, that by referencing "gender theory" in this context, my argument could also be interpreted as indicting some versions of gender studies—namely, a history of scholarship in gender studies that does not sufficiently attend to the place of race in shaping (post)modern imaginaries of gender and sexuality. (I thank Erika Alm for this observation.) Indeed, as I suggest elsewhere in this piece, white feminist gender studies/theory often falls back on much the same functions of racialized plasticity as anti-gender movements, as both La Manif pour tous and some feminists more or less implicitly privilege white bodies as most impressive, while neglecting the long durée of Black ungendering. Evang, in her *TSQ* article, develops this point further than I am able to here.