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READING GAYATRI CHAKRAVORTY SPIVAK IN RURAL QUÉBEC, OR SAVING
“EXOTIC” WOMEN FROM “EXOTIC MEN”: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE RELIGIOUS
SUBALTERN IN LIGHT OF THE 2007 HÉROUXVILLE INCIDENT

In January 2007 the town council of Hérouxville (165 kilometers northwest of Montréal) adopted a declaration of “accepted societal norms” directed towards all future immigrants. The five pages document initially titled “ *The Hérouxville standards for prospective immigrants*” and later on *Mode de vie du Québec/Way of Life in Québec* was designed to be a systematic and non-negotiable affirmation of Q Québécoisité, described as strong collective and individual identity, forged around a shared history and around a common framework of belonging. The other side of this document may be described a sum of all stereotypes associated mainly to Islam, but also to Judaism and Hinduism. Almost immediately, Hérouxville has become in the public sphere the hot spot on the map of the province, an alleged prime locus of xenophobia, racism and intolerance, and the battleground between nationalist and multiculturalist discursive orders. It produced a heated debate in Québec society and eventually led to the creation of the Bouchard- Taylor Commission for Reasonable Accommodation in February 2007.

This article does not seek to lay the foundations for a phenomenology of cultural or religious fear in Québec, not even as an analytical sketch. I do not intend to forge a new framework for the canonical battle between nationalism and multiculturalism or to use the Hérouxville incident as an argument for the thesis of the alleged backwardness of rural Québec society. My objective is to deconstruct these notorious pages through a pivotal yet highly controversial concept from the field of post-colonial studies: the voiceless subaltern. I will argue that the *Hérouxville Standards* could be understood as a seminal example of a benevolent appropriation of the silenced Other, justified by an alleged monopoly over master words such as progress, gender equality, democracy and freedom. Moreover, a reading of the *Hérouxville scandal* through Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s framework will

render visible a perennial mechanism of subject construction which tends to arbitrarily unify the otherness and emphatically speak on its behalf.¹

Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci coined the concept of subaltern, first as a camouflage word for proletariat and then as denoting a non-hegemonic group insufficiently structured and lacking political class-consciousness.² Later on, *The Subaltern Studies Collective*, founded by Ranajit Guha, reinterpreted the term in the 80's and employed it in a critique of a narrow Marxist interpretation of Indian history. At this level, subaltern represents an umbrella term for all non-represented social actors involved in anti-colonial resistance, which fall outside the Marxist model. In this context, the employment of the concept of subaltern in the case of Québec might be regarded more as a rhetorical stretch than as a valid analytical choice. However, as I will try to demonstrate, the word "immigrant"- as employed in the Hérouxville document - and the concept of subaltern might be in effect interchangeable. Moreover, as Spivak repeatedly emphasized, the epistemological value of the concept of subaltern resides in its openness and inclusiveness. "I like the word 'subaltern' for one reason. It is truly situational. That word, used under duress, has been transformed into the description of everything that doesn't fall under strict class analysis. I like that, because it has no theoretical rigor."³

Finding themselves essentially in an in-between-fluid space, immigrants are considered to be in what, following Pierre Bourdieu and Victor Turner, might be called a condition of cultural and identitary *liminality*⁴ In other words, they are viewed as not localized and in an acute need to be grounded and represented. The Hérouxville document is in this respect a political discursive order dominated by what could be called the locative obsession, producing a stable subaltern subject, reified and represented as a powerless and oppressed category. That is why the subaltern, as an analytically vague concept, could function better than other theoretical constructions in the case of multicultural, plural spaces.

In her famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argued brilliantly against the pernicious, yet camouflaged, reintroduction of the sovereign and constitutive subject, at the same time as Subject of power and desire, and as an almost self-identical subject of the oppressed. Hidden under the surface of the emancipatory theoretical architecture employed by Gilles Deleuze or Michel Foucault, the traditional temptation of European intelligentsia to speak in the name of an imagined and silent Other re-appears.

¹ A similar connection between the Hérouxville document and Spivak's concept of subaltern was made by Diana Brydon in an unpublished paper titled "Negotiating Citizenship in Global Times: the Hérouxville Debates."

² Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

³ Stephen Morton: *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, (Routledge, 2002), 46 and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, Sarah Harasym (ed.), (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 141.

⁴ Joan Wallach Scott, *Politics of the Veil* (Princeton University Press, 2007), 68 and Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), 99.

The transparency of the modern intellectual is rendered visible by the implicit or explicit resistance of the critique of ideology. Moreover, this systemic - and in many cases self-congratulatory - intellectual *cécité* ends up building a conceptual iron cage, continuously reducing alterity to a comfortable and ethically rewarding similarity.

Here Spivak's argues that a theoretical preoccupation for the subaltern's repressed knowledge often camouflages the intellectual's hubris of representing the silent and silenced other. In the light of such argument it can be claimed that the Hérouxville document is at an obviously low discursive level a canonical expression of silencing the other by speaking in the name of him/her. Of course that the municipal council of Hérouxville is not even by far comparable to theoretical sophistication and conceptual depths of Foucault's philosophical construction, but the hubris of representing the Other in a monological fashion remains basically unaltered. Here we do not have a "*first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent non-representer who lets the oppressed speak for themselves*"⁵, but a first-world community which hijacked the right of self-representation of an entire category of subalterns by practicing a condescending rhetoric of integration and liberation. Spivak's application of Derrida's concept of the *violence of writing* as an intrinsic part of the ethnocentric practice of the European Subject, a mechanism designed to produce a fix, stable and eventually silent non-European subject might be useful here. The deep complicity between writing, civil society, power and the conquest of the Other, which is one of the basic presupposition of Derrida's "*De la Grammatologie*" is in many respects present in Hérouxville *Declaration of Norms*, which seems to be a codification of the colonialist epistemic violence re-transplanted within the Western space (where it originates) and directed once again towards the non-Western subjects.

If English authorities constructed via legislative and educational instruments an entire class of subaltern colonized subjects, at the end of the nineteenth century, and notably in Québec as well, after the conquest, the society norms emphatically postulated by Hérouxville municipal council repeat the same colonialist scenario and forged a genuine arithmetic of exclusion. Probably the most interesting feature rendered visible by the Hérouxville incident is the fluidity of subaltern dynamics. As Florencia Mallon points out "*no subaltern identity can be pure and transparent, most subalterns are both dominated and dominating subjects.*" What is "subaltern" in one political and historical context could be hegemonic and oppressive in others.⁶

At this point it should be stressed that the Hérouxville declaration is not a second-rank textual production, an embarrassing rant floating on the virtual space of the Internet or an inscribed on tourist booklets. It is an official document authored by one of the town

⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 292.

⁶ Florencia Mallon, "The promise and the dilemma of subaltern studies", in *American Historical Review*, 99, 1994, 1511.

councilman Andre Drouin and approved by the entire town council. The strictly normative and non-negotiable dimension of the document is rendered visible by the authors' declaration before Bouchard-Taylor commission: the "Way of life in Québec" document strongly affirms the identity that one must seek when wishing to become part of the Québécois Nation." The *Québécoisité* is proclaimed as the only emancipatory and "normal" identity formula that is able to restore humanity in the non-Western subjects by grounding their new ontology in a democratic, egalitarian and modern framework of belonging.

"We consider that men and women are of the same value. Having said this, we consider that a woman can; drive a car, vote, sign checks, dance, decide for herself, speak her peace, dress as she sees fit respecting of course the democratic decency, walk alone in public places, study, have a job, have her own belongings and anything else that a man can do. These are our standards and our way of life."⁷

The logical implication of this affirmation is of course that the Other brings along a completely different conceptualization of womanhood which is not only *de prima facie* suspect but must be a priori considered impossible to be integrated within Québec society.

"Furthermore, in our schools, certified men and women teach. Men and women can teach to boys and girls without sexual discrimination. Male and female teachers carry out their functions with their face uncovered and adopt a decent dress code. Male or female teachers may assess their pupils. Students are prohibited from carrying weapons or imitations of such, loaded or unloaded, real or fake, symbolic or not."⁸

The implicit assumption at play here is that outside the Western world, sexual discrimination is not an exception but a normative idea which is enforced at all levels of society: in education, family life or healthcare: "In our hospitals and CLSC's woman doctors can treat men and women and the same for the men doctors. This same principle applies for nurses, firemen and women, ambulance technicians."⁹

It should be stressed that the Hérouxville document is in effect a monologue directed to an *alter* who is not present and has no voice. He/she is the object of the discourse not a subject with equal rights, self-representation or agency. The Other is re-colonized by discursive instruments under an all encompassing gaze of the sovereign and unified Western subject. The subaltern cannot speak because he/ (but mainly) she lacks the necessary exercise of freedom, the basic lexicon of modernity and was conditioned by a backwarded and oppressive religious tradition. His/her inner world must be rationalized and sanitized

⁷ Municipalité Hérouxville (2007) *The Standards*, Avis public online version at <http://municipalite.herouxville.qc.ca/avispublic.htm>, 1.

⁸ *The Standards*, 1.

⁹ *The Standards*, 2.

through the contact with the advanced and liberal principles deeply encrusted into the local form of life. Then, and only then, the possibility of dialogue could be imagined. There will be a dialogue between identical subjects devoid of any traces of difference, but that was the definition of the colonialist dialogical encounter to begin with: a conversation with a slightly deformed mirror. The Hérouxville model of encountering alterity follows the same pattern in a different time frame. As John B. Thompson points out, the lack of means to express oneself in a legitimate language, scientific or otherwise, condemns those placed at the exterior of the field of the official language to a perpetual state of silence. “*They do not speak, but are spoken to.*”¹⁰

One of the most salient outcomes of Spivak’s analysis is her conceptualization of the “sati” ritual as an exemplary model for the colonial and post-colonial subject-constitution. Crushed between two radically different yet equally toxic structures: the imperialist “white man saving the brown women from brown men” and the nationalist frightened fascination for the “feminine courage and dedication” – the *sati*-widows are perpetually manipulated objectified and finally completely silenced.

“Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness but into a violent shutting which is the displaced figuration of the “third-world woman” caught between tradition and modernization.”¹¹

Spivak’s explanatory model could be successfully employed in the case discussed in this paper because the same reductionist dynamics of silencing the woman subaltern appears at the surface of the Hérouxville document. The subaltern woman is conceptualized exclusively in terms of *sati*, *hijab* and oppression. Consequently, *la mission civilisatrice* of Hérouxville legislators is to save oppressed women from their male oppressors. Therefore, after proclaiming the absolute equality between men and women as the pillar of gender relations, the authors feel obliged to add the following warning:

“Consequently... we consider as undesirable and prohibit any action or gesture that would be contrary to the above statement such as: killing women by lapidation or burning them alive in public places, burning them with acid, excising them, infibulating them or treating them as slaves.”¹²

The fragment above might serve as a strong argument for the thesis that postulates that “*saving brown women from brown men*” should not be regarded as an outdated reminiscence of the colonialist history, but a perennial model of framing the subaltern non-Western female subject. In the context where Muslim woman becomes progressively the

¹⁰ John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge Polity Press, 1984), 46.

¹¹ “Can the Subaltern Speak”?, 306.

¹² *The Standards*, 1.

recognizable face of otherness in the Western culture, saving veiled Muslim woman from Muslim men replaces the traditional justification for the construction of the woman-subaltern. As in the French *affaire des fullards* (1999-2003) – which could be considered the main, yet occulted referential term for Hérouxville document – the *hijab* is not for a moment interpreted as a potential expression of a self-assumed religious identity. The presence of the *hijab* is seen as the irrefutable mark of women oppression in Islam and occupies a preeminent position within the Hérouxville veritable modern “*Summa contra gentiles*”.

If we understand *le mode de vie du Québec* not just as a repository of racial and religious stereotypes but as a self proclaimed living archive of Québec identity – the authors’ claim is to represent the entire Québec way of life, and not a mere local system of customs. Jacques Derrida’s text “*Archive Fever*” might offer an interesting alternative reading of this perception of the *hijab*. For Derrida, the archive is organized as a *topos* of authority created and preserved by an *archontic power* invested with hermeneutical monopoly. This power is structured around three distinct functions: identification, classification and unification. The essential power of an archive is consignation where all disparate elements are forged together in a synchronic “ideal configuration” in our case the organic unity of Québec society and culture. Furthermore, Derrida points out the strong monolithical drive behind any archive: “In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity, or secret which can separate (*secernere*), or partition, in an absolute manner.”¹³ In this framework, the *hijab* represents the ultimate challenge for any living archive because it is perceived as the epitome of secrecy, the expression of the impenetrable and incomprehensible stranger. What we encounter here is a profound ambiguity brought by the presence of the *Hijab*, or should I say its virtual presence, since there are no Muslim, veiled women living in Hérouxville, as there are no immigrants of any extractions there. Put in a different way, the immigrant otherness could be regarded under the term hostile *spectrality*. Religious alterity is essentially *imagined* to such extent that it becomes almost a fictional category, the sum of all fears. The *Hijab* is viewed as a strident affirmation of counter-modernity and becomes a polarizing space where a radical aesthetics of public transparency is fully enforced.¹⁴

On the one hand, the veil is perceived as the instrument of cultural and religious oppression from which women should be rescued, and on the other, the same piece of cloth is viewed as a symbol of political Islam and as fifth column of Fundamentalism, endangering all the conquests of the Silent Revolution¹⁵. Put it differently, the veil is caught between Bernard

¹³ Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression”, *Diacritics*, 25:2,1995, 9.

¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the newly elected Prime Minister of Québec, Pauline Marois stated that her government will soon enforce a “New Secularism Charter”, to ban all religious symbols in the work places, with the exception of the cross, an intrinsic part of Québec identity.

¹⁵ The final report of the Bouchard-Taylor commission identifies the fear of Islamic fundamentalism as one of the most important sources of social anxiety in rural Québec.

Stasi's¹⁶ verdict "objectively the veil stands for the alienation of women" and Andre Gluksmann's poignant pitch phrase "the veil is a terrorist operation".¹⁷ *Hijab* reveals and at the same times obscures. It is interpreted as the sign of a visible minority with a hidden and potentially dangerous agenda. Put it in Islamic terms, it allegedly vacillates between *da'wa* and *taqiyya*, between a defiant open refusal of gender equality in the name of Islamic triumphalist moral superiority complex and the dissimulation of a conquest vocation.

The solution provided by the Hérouxville municipal council to this unbearable ambiguity of the *Hijab* has the advantage of absolute clarity and simplicity: a total and non-negotiable interdiction of the veil in all public spaces, thus restoring the complete transparency of the social space.

*"Il est aussi à propos de se montrer à visage découvert, en tout temps, dans les lieux publics pour mieux faciliter notre identification. La seule exemption possible à cette règle se produit à l'Halloween. Pour respecter les lois votées démocratiquement nous acceptons d'avoir notre photo sur les passeports, carte d'assurance maladie et permis de conduire."*¹⁸

Furthermore, since no "prayer room" is made available for prayer or any other form of incantation in any public schools, the controversy related to the right to religious difference within the educational institutions has been also *de facto* and *de jure* finally solved. By rejecting all religious symbols in the public space – notably the Christian ones are excepted as important elements of Québec identity – Hérouxville could become a privileged locus of social harmony and a model community designed to offer a safe heaven for all subalterns of the world. Any dangers are eliminated, because, as *Standards* Andre Drouin postulated: "*Il faut s'assurer que le gens qui viennent ici veulent vivre comme nous. Les musulmans qui voulaient imposer la charia, s'ils avaient su qu'ici on ne lapide pas des femmes, ils ne seraient peut-être pas venus.*"¹⁹

In sum, the Hérouxville incident could be the perfect indicator that the reassuring epistemology professed by some of the students of neo-colonialism, who read the construction of the subaltern as a geographically and historically dated phenomenon, is in effect highly problematic. The *Hérouxville Standards* render visible the perennial dimension of the subject-construction of alterity as a power mechanism present in all past and present human societies. Unless a deeper orientalism is conceptualized (following and augmenting Sheldon Pollock's analytical sketch), the inner structure of the construction of the non-

¹⁶ Bernard Stasi is the high-rank French politician appointed by de Jacques Chirac as the president of the commission investigating the application of the principle of *laïcité* in France.

¹⁷ Joan Wallach Scott, *Politics of the Veil* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 84.

¹⁸ *The Standards*, 3.

¹⁹ Andre Drouin, quoted in Katia Gagnon "*Il est interdit de lapider les femmes!*", Jan. 26, 2007. <http://www.cyberpresse.ca/>

Western otherness, this time within the Western context might remain elusive.²⁰ The massive presence of the “stranger”, within the boundaries of the Western civilization combined with the postmodern dynamics of deterritorialization and reterritorialization make necessary the expansion of the classical conceptualizations of orientalism and subalternity by forging an alternative analytical grammar. Spivak’s conclusion: “if in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow...”²¹ was often criticized as too pessimistic and bearing a fatalistic view about a perpetually colonized other.²² The subaltern would always be equated with non-agency and will remain silent and suffocated under the weight of a continuously reified and essentialized structure of religious and cultural stereotypes.

Against this imposed silence, in the aftermath of Hérouxville incident, some subalterns decided to directly speak without the mediation of post-colonial intellectuals. In Spivak’s terms, the Muslim female subalterns *synecdochise themselves* and reclaim their right to self-representation. On February 10, 2007, a group of Muslim women went to Hérouxville to meet with the town council. As a result, direct references to stoning women in public and genital mutilation were removed from the document. Consequently, it appeared that the voice of the subaltern was finally able to break the silence and in the context of face-to-face dialogue, the personal agency was reaffirmed and premises for mutual respect were created. A visit to the Hérouxville town council official internet site will show that the warning against “tuer les femmes par lapidation sur la place publique, les faisant brûler vives, de les brûler avec de l’acide, de les exciser, de les infibuler ou de les traiter en esclaves” reappeared on the first page of the document and remains inscribed in the official and definitive version of the “*Way of Life in Québec*”. It seems to me that in multicultural societies, dominated by a cacophony of voices and perspectives, today’s subaltern is allowed to speak. However, in the end, what truly matters is how this voice is received; what cultural and social effects generates, and most importantly if other voices join in, to construct a genuine social polyglossia. After all, if a subaltern speaks and nobody hears him/her, does the subaltern really exist?

²⁰ Pollock proposes a wider perspective, starting from a basic definition of orientalism as “a species of a larger discourse of power that divides the world into “betters and lessers” and thus facilitates the domination (or “orientalization” or “colonization”) of any group” in Sheldon Pollack: *Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power beyond the Raj* in Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, eds., *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 78.

²¹ “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 315.

²² One of the most poignant of these critical responses was delivered by Terry Eagleton in his review “In The Gaudi Supermarket”, *London Review of Books* 13, May 1999.

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