

# LIFE AMONG THE PEUL IN THE PARIS SUBURBS

CSWS research grant supports graduate student's research on gendered identities and associational life in this ethnic community.

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It is mid-morning on a Tuesday in July 2011. Today I am visiting Genaba, a first generation French woman of Mauritanian origin. She is on maternity leave from her job as an accountant, enjoying the break from her 40-minute commute from her home in the suburbs of Paris to her office in downtown Paris, and she has invited me to her house for an interview. Her apartment is small, yet elegant, with white sofas and armchairs, red-and-orange flower arrangements, and candles that match a red-and-orange African print on the glass-topped table. Dark wooden statues of reclining, long-limbed African women in red-and-orange wraps flank a small TV. Gold butterfly decals surround a framed photo of Genaba on the wall, bringing out the subtle gold of a square plaque with Arabic calligraphy on the adjacent wall. Genaba wears a delicate red-and-white skirt and matching top, discretely falling in soft folds over her pregnant stomach. Only she knows the gender of her child, which she is keeping as a secret from her husband, and she carries with her a poised, knowing excitement and happiness.

After a few hours of chatting, I asked her if she experienced discrimination when looking for a job and she told me: "Discrimination is hidden, but it's there.<sup>1</sup> Where I am working, I am one of five blacks among one hundred whites. But I can't feel discouraged: one needs to do everything one can to integrate, to succeed. Muñ, muñ, "be patient" in our language, is what our mothers always tell us. And thus, I am comfortable in both worlds. I wear pants to work, but back at home, I put on my pagne, my African wrap skirt. That is what is good about us, the Haalpulaar<sup>2</sup> (from Mauritania, West Africa) in France, we know how to behave in both milieus: among the Haalpulaar and among the French. And I want to pass these skills on to my children, too."

The French model for its national identity is called Secular Republicanism. It claims that race does not exist in France and that all its citizens are equal before the colorblind French state. It is forbidden to discuss race, ethnicity, or religion in public schools or in government offices. Statistics on race are forbidden by law. At the same time that government officials claim that race does not exist in France, conservative and liberal politicians worry that France is unable to "integrate" the French-born children of immigrants, as immigrants and their children



A young girl watches the performance of musicians at a meeting of an association of immigrants from Mauritania, West Africa, in Paris, France.

are highly concentrated in the outskirts of the city and face higher rates of unemployment than French in Paris proper. During the 1970s, the French government invited African immigrants to France to work in factories scattered around the city's suburbs. During this time, mostly men came; now, increasingly, they bring their wives to France and establish families.

Right-wing politicians, such as former president Sarkozy, often make inflammatory comments about how these immigrants and their children cling to their cultural practices and cannot "assimilate." Yet activists argue that immigrants and their children are not failing to assimilate, as many politicians say, but rather that they face discrimination. They point out that schools in the suburbs where many immigrants live do not receive the same resources as Paris proper schools. Students are more likely to be channeled to technical tracks rather than prepared for college and are therefore socially less mobile.

I was a Peace Corps volunteer in West Africa, and my ability to speak Pulaar, a language of

many West Africans in France, enabled me to carry out ethnographic research that sheds new light on both right-wing politicians' and activists' ideas of discrimination. I found, by working with Mauritanian immigrants and their French-born children during the summer of 2011, that neither the myopic viewpoint of the right-wing politicians nor the reactions of activists capture the complexities of discrimination in the context of France. Gender and generation influence differing experiences of discrimination: politicians mistrust immigrant women, blaming them for the supposed failure of the children of immigrants to assimilate. Yet, politicians see young French-born women as easily integrated, helping to "control" their unassimilated brothers. Indeed, first generation French women have fewer problems obtaining professional employment than French-born men.

Gender also impacts the relationships between immigrant parents and their children and the values that parents pass on to their

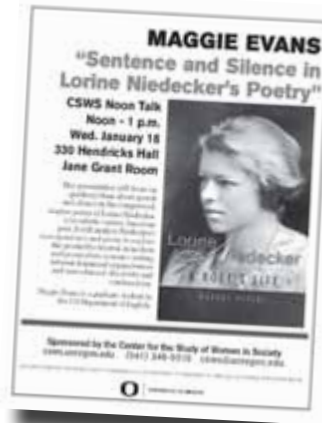
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<sup>1</sup> La discrimination est cachée, mais c'est là.

<sup>2</sup> In France, an alternate name is "Peul."

women have been the poetic object par excellence, explored by male subjectivity, Niedecker's silences have feminist implications: they are the tools of a protective poetics that seeks to represent without appropriating, refusing to transgress the boundaries of objects and insisting on the limits of the poet's power to dictate an object's meaning. Her quiet aesthetic of omission and its recognition of the otherness of its objects is a form of feminist resistance entirely distinct from a poetry of explosive blossoming.

My work on silence in Niedecker's poetry is part of a more wide-ranging project exploring how 20th-century American women use innova-



tive forms to manage conflicting desires for speech and silence. I argue that women poets often seek both to extend and to limit language, and I investigate how their poetic experiments allow them simultaneously to achieve these contradictory goals. My hope is that the finished work will be useful to literary scholars studying the complexities of form in American women's poetry. Further, I hope it will contribute to the growing conversation in women's studies seeking critical methods responsive to the variability and complexity of women's experiences and their ways of representing, or refusing to represent, those experiences. ■

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children. I observed that some first generation women see their heritage as a resource, a skill set for navigating "both worlds" of the ethnic community and mainstream France. Others, such as young women who resent the pressures of their parents' community and use marriage to escape it, mistrust their heritage.

The immigrant Mauritanian Pulaar-speaking (aka Haalpulaar) community has strict societal pressures for young French women of Haalpulaar origin. Immigrants have a mocking nickname, "mad cows," for girls and women of Haalpulaar origin who are born or raised in France, which makes reference to the mad cow epidemic that occurred in Europe when meat was improperly butchered and consumed and to the fact that Haalpulaar Mauritians were traditionally herders of cattle. The community uses this term in partial jest, but also as indirect communication and admonishment to young French women to behave in ways culturally appropriate to the Haalpulaar community. For example, one young woman told me that her mother calls her a *mad cow* when she says that she doesn't want to cook for her husband.

Gendered socialization and discrimination has profound effects on identity. Discrimination for these women comes from both mainstream French society, when searching for a job or while pursuing higher education, and from within the migrant community. Young women may feel frustrated with parents who hold them to standards and cultural values they don't feel that they share.

And yet, on the other hand, many first generation women expressed that when they grew older, they appreciated the cultural values their parents passed on to them through indirect communication. They found that these values were resources for them, enabling success in professional life, scholarship, or in overcoming discrimination with patience and grace. I



Large community gatherings such as this provide a support network for ethnic Peul in Paris.

witnessed many examples of first generation women embracing their bicultural and transnational identities in professional and personal life. Ameena, for example, is studying international diplomacy; Maimouna is studying hospitality, and is excited to develop tourism to Mauritania. French women of migrant descent in their mid- and late twenties often strongly embrace the immigrant community when they marry and have children; Genaba is one example of this evolving relationship to heritage and community. Community events, with free childcare, provide a support network and social network for women negotiating the delicate balance of working outside the home and childrearing.

The idea that heritage can be a resource gives voice to a new definition of women's empowerment grounded in their personal experiences. Mainstream France views immigrant women who cannot speak French to their children as dangerous to their children's possibilities for integration, and unable to empower them to succeed in mainstream French society. Yet successful first generation women revealed in their discussions with me that the cultural values and skills from their nonliterate mothers, who could only speak to them in Pulaar, empowered them to succeed in their professional pursuits.

Their insights also illustrate a more nuanced understanding of "assimilation" than that posed by Right-wing politicians or activists. Discrimination comes from both mainstream French society and from within migrant communities. Rather than conceptualizing "assimilation" as a certain type of identity formation and way of life, it is important for policymakers and politicians to understand the many ways that first generation women and men may make successful lives for themselves, using combinations of cultural identifications and knowledge from both migrant traditions and mainstream France. Indeed, the term "assimilation" may be entirely meaningless, as many women find success in this difficult context through bicultural identification and community building. ■

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