Whose Representation, Whose Rights ?

Committed Media and the Possibility of a *sensus communus*

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Résumé : This article is based on a conference the author co-organized at CELSA-Sorbonne in 2018 entitled, "Médias indépendants et droits de l'homme : la tension entre 'reporting' et 'reportage' ? Enquête et démocratie" ("The Independent Media and Human Rights : Tension between "reporting" and "reportage" ? Investigation and Democracy"). The conference featured presentations by independent photographers Nno-Man Cadoret and Yann Levy and *Le Monde* reporter Rémi Barroux. It focused on how independent and "traditional" photographers and journalists represent human rights issues including police violence and discrimination based on race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation and how they cover activist movements such as "Truth and Justice for Adama," the movement formed after the suspicious death of Adama Traoré in 2016 while in police custody and the ZAD (*zone à défendre*, a play on the land's official designation as a *zone d'aménagement différée*, designated development area), an autonomous zone in Northwestern France that has had a historically tense relationship to the French state. This article takes as its central questions those posed at the 2018 conference : How do independent photojournalists and journalists, those working for "traditional" outlets and independent cultural producers contribute to investigative and democratic practices ? How do these groups represent and, in the case of independent photographers in France, sometimes *themselves* embody precarious and vulnerable lives ? What complementary knowledge can they provide to the academy and to scholarship ? Describing the ways in which Cadoret's and Levy's documentation of what they call "a permanent social emergency : the migrant crisis, institutional racism, the destruction of the environment, liberal reforms" (Levy 2017) is a form of social and political engagement, the article details their conceptualization of and commitment to representing under-represented and misrepresented vulnerable populations such as residents of the *quartiers populaires* (working class neighborhoods), migrants and residents of the ZAD. Explicating the distinct ways in which their interpretative community (Hymes 1980 ; Zelizer 1993 ; Nichols 1991) as committed independent photographers differs from that of *Le Monde* journalist Barroux, this article addresses both how these independent and "traditional" media producers conceptualize what Ryfe (Ryfe 2019) has called the single greatest challenge facing Western journalism today : its ontology (Ryfe 2019). Cadoret's and Levy's work is then analyzed in the context of the independent American documentary "Whose Streets" (2017), about the killing of Michael Brown and the Ferguson uprisings. To what extent independent photographers and cultural producers creating counter-hegemonic representations could be considered a *sensus communis* (Rancière 2009) is one of the concluding questions of this work as is the challenge to self-reflexivity and self-critique in the academy concerning questions of representation and precarity.

Mots-clés : photojournalism, protest, precarity, human rights, independent media, media representation, state of emergency

1 Introduction : États d'Urgence

États d'Urgence (States of Emergency) : the title of this journal of social documentary photography edited by independent French photographer Yann Levy could not be more apposite at the present moment. When this article was first written, in January 2019, the global proliferation of states of emergency and the threat of new ones continued. In early December 2018, after the third week of the *gilets jaunes* protests, President Emmanuel Macron stated that he would not rule out using his emergency powers as President to re-institute a state of emergency in France, while some have argued that the more than 4, 500 arrests and police violence against *gilets jaunes* protesters show that an undeclared state of emergency already exists. "It is a state of emergency that does not say its name," stated an attorney who defends many *gilets jaunes* who have been arrested, "a misuse of power to benefit the judiciary." [1]

In the US, 31 declared national emergencies are still active, including the declaration of emergency "by Reason of Certain Terrorist Attacks" made by George W. Bush after 9/11. [2] "Emergency protests" and "emergency town halls" took place across the country during 2018 to protest the US Supreme Court's partial upholding of President Trump's Travel Ban, which prohibits the entry into the US of the citizens of several Muslim majority countries. The ongoing child separations and other human rights abuses at the US-Mexico border have been described as a "national emergency" and even as "a moral state of emergency." [3] And shortly after the longest government shutdown in US history, President Donald Trump stated in late January 2019 that he might declare a national state of emergency to secure funding for the border wall.

As this collection goes to press in 2020, the US has seen a national state of emergency declared in March 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic where as of this writing in July 2020, almost 150,000 have died of the virus. During what are ongoing, nationwide protests against the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and numerous other African Americans, many states, cities and counties declared states of emergency and curfews in May, June and July. In July, 2020 Trump deployed federal agents to Portland, Oregon ostensibly in response to protests against Floyd's murder and police brutality. As summarized by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), these federal agents, "...including those from Trump's Departments of Homeland Security and Justice, are terrorizing the community, threatening lives, and relentlessly attacking protesters demonstrating against police brutality...Militarized federal agents have flouted court orders protecting the rights of protesters from local law enforcement attacks, used sharpshooters to maim people, and deployed military tools and tactics — including sonic weapons and tear gas. Black Lives Matter protesters in Portland have been shot in the head with kinetic impact munitions, swept

1. Jérôme Hourdeaux, Jade Lindgaard, Dan Israel and Matthieu Suc, "Les "arrestations préventives" ou la fin du droit de manifester", Mediapart, 10 December 2018.

2. See "Presidents Have Declared 58 States of Emergency Since 1979. 31 Are Ongoing" Fortune 10 January 2019 and "Declared National Emergencies Under the National Emergencies Act, 1978-2019" Brennan Center for Justice, New York University https://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/analysis/NEA\%20Declarations.pdf

3. David Smith and Tom Phillips, "Child separations : Trump faces extreme backlash from public and his own party" 19 June 2018 *Guardian* and Nylah Burton, "We're in a Moral State of Emergency" 18 June 2018 *Forward*

away in unmarked cars, and repeatedly tear gassed by federal agents" (Brown 2020). The deployment of federal agents is also planned for Chicago, Illinois during July 2020.

These contemporary socio-political emergency states (both officially declared and unofficially already existing) include, one could argue, emergency *states of being*. Like Michael Taussig's conceptualization of the Nervous System as a system that subsists on "illusions of order congealed by fear" (Taussig 1992 :4), emergency states produce and depend upon the consistent production of emotional and physiological emergency states of being.

In response and resistance to these political and affective states of emergency and states of being, individuals and collectives have created new media, artistic and activist projects. The independent photographers represented in the first (2017) volume of *États d'Urgence* are working both for exposure of these states of emergency and against their normalization as rules rather than as exceptions to the rule. It is, Walter Benjamin wrote in *On the Concept of History* (1940), "the tradition of the oppressed" that teaches us otherwise, that "... that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule." (Benjamin 1940/1968 :255).

The introductory volume of *États d'Urgence* focuses on work by six independent photographers (Yann Levy, Vincent Palmier, Valentina Camu, Julien Pitinome, Valérie Dubois, NnoMan Cadoret) documenting "a permanent social emergency : the migrant crisis, institutional racism, the destruction of the environment, liberal reforms" (Levy 2017 :3) and the restrictions on the right to protest in France, instituted after a state of emergency was declared in November 2015. "Our work is committed but that does not mean it is not objective," Levy writes. "There is no neutral photography just as there is no neutral journalism. Objectivity is not the absence of having a position" (Levy 2017 :3).

In the age of social media and "continuous information," Levy and the other photographers whose work is represented, are convinced, by contrast, that long-term immersion in their subjects and subject matter – the 2016 protests against the "*loi du travail*" and Nuit Debout, daily acts of building and resistance at the ZAD (*zone à défendre*, an autonomous zone in Notre-Dame-des-Landes), the "jungle" of Calais, refugees and undocumented workers in Paris, the "Truth and Justice for Adama" ("*Vérité et Justice pour Adama*") collective – is necessary to produce "qualitative information" (Levy 2017 :3).

Their immersive, socially and politically committed approach to photography and their call for attention to the particular dangers and restricted rights independent photographers face, inspired an invitation to Yann Levy and NnoMan Cadoret to CELSA-Sorbonne to the 30 May 2018 conference, "Médias indépendants et droits de l'homme : la tension entre 'reporting' et 'reportage' ? Enquête et démocratie." The title reflects the potential tension between the type of engaged reporting on human rights issues Levy and Cadoret do and "traditional" reporting. How do independent journalists, journalists, working for established "mainstream" and "traditional" outlets and cultural producers, contribute to investigative and democratic practices ? What

role do activist groups such as "Truth and Justice for Adama" occupy and cultivate in allowing these principles to thrive, and might they have the potential to surpass the capacities and will of the state by taking investigative and democratic praxis into their own hands ? How does each of these groups represent and even themselves embody precarious and vulnerable lives ?

To address these questions from the perspective of "traditional" journalism, we also invited *Le Monde* journalist Rémi Barroux, a specialist in environmental issues, conflicts and disasters who has covered the ZAD intensively for the past several years, and who has been outspoken about the dangers journalists have historically faced covering demonstrations in France. Our keynote was to be Assa Traoré, founder of the activist collective "Truth and Justice for Adama" and author of the 2017 epistolary memoir *Lettre à Adama* ("Letter to Adama"), addressed to her brother Adama who died suspiciously in police custody in 2016. [4] Very unfortunately Traoré could not attend due to circumstances that she has written and spoken about widely, the ongoing struggle for justice after her brother's death. The same day of our colloquium, one of Traoré's other brothers, Samba Traoré, was sentenced to prison, about a year after another brother, Bagui, was sentenced for violence against the police, which included charges for protesting against a deliberation related to Adama Traoré's death. [5] Assa Traoré's work, read by Professor Joëlle Le Marec and the circumstances of her absence as explained by NnoMan Cadoret, who has photographed Traoré and the collective extensively, were powerful and poignant reminders of the very issues we had come together to discuss. Gaspard Glanz, journalist with the independent online news outlet Taranis News, participated in the discussion that followed the formal presentations.

2 Representation as Political Commitment

"I am not a photographer embedded with a rescue team, I am a rescuer whose job is to photograph the mission," Levy writes in his first-person account of three weeks as part of the Search and Rescue team for the NGO "SOS Mediterranean," aboard the Aquarius, the organization's hospital ship, during a rotation during which the Search and Rescue team saved 292 people. At CELSA, Levy showed us his work from that period of 13 March until 4 April 2018 patrolling at sea in the Libyan territorial waters near Sicily and then on the ground in Sicily, a visual narrative of the rescue process of men, women and children. "I am trying not to feel like a voyeur," he explains in an article he wrote about the experience published on the Website of the NGO "SOS Mediterranean." "I am not in search of a scoop... I am trying to fully communicate information about our rescue action." Levy published his photographs and wrote accompanying texts for three quite different outlets (the NGO's Website, the independent publication *Mediapart* and *Vice*, what could be considered as a mainstream "alternative" news outlet) and the project is also featured in another form in the second volume of the journal *États d'Urgence* (2018). [6]

4. All of the translations from the book cited in this article are the author' own.

5. See *AFP/Le Monde* "Un frère d'Adama Traoré condamné en appel à six mois de prison pour des violences" 6 June 2018

6. Like many independent journalists, he may have published different versions of the same material to reach a diversity of audiences and for economic reasons. See, for example, Örnebring, Henrik, "Journa-



FIGURE 1 – From the series aboard the Aquarius entitled "Against All Odds" Photo credit : Yann Levy

In his piece for *Vice*, Levy explains that he sees the purpose of his photographic work, especially through the journal *États d'Urgence*, as highlighting vulnerable people, many of the same the "wasted lives" and "disposable people" that Zygmunt Bauman described in his work about modernity's systematic production and discarding of "redundant" people (Bauman 2003). Levy describes his photography as "committed, militant and social" and the physical proximity and emotional intensity of his images as well as their informative, communicative power reveal his mission, as do the impassioned narratives that accompany them. "I spent only three weeks on the Aquarius," he writes in *Vice*, "but it was enough to realize the urgency to intervene to save lives. The Mediterranean, like the jungle of Calais, or the Alps, is the visible face of the drama. Instead of trying to solve the problem, we build walls, we pay authoritarian regimes to manage the crisis, we send police to harass migrants and the people in solidarity with them."[7]

In his essay about the experience for the Website of the NGO "SOS Mediterranean," Levy describes it in even more complex and wrenching detail, imagining the likely perilous futures of those who could not be rescued : "And I photograph the faces and inevitably their condemnation to return to an uncertain port, to a detention center ? To torture ? To slavery ... ? And I take my photos with all that in mind, the cold logic of action, because it is essential to do it... So I photograph... and when I come back on board to process my photos, I am again facing those people we have left, there they are again in front of me, with me inside my computer. Has my hard drive also become a graveyard ?"[8]

Independent photojournalist NnoMan Cadoret also self-identifies as politically committed, partially a result of personal experience. When he was in high school, he

lists Thinking about Precarity : Making Sense of the 'new normal.'" *International Symposium of Online Journalism* vol. 8, No. 1 Spring 2018 p. 109-127

7. Yann Levy, "À bord de l'Aquarius, le bateau qui porte secours aux migrants" *Vice* 28 May 2018

8. Yann Levy, "Nous n'avions pas le droit de sauver des vies" 25 April 2018 http://www.sosmediterranee.fr/journal-de-bord/nous-n-avions-pas-le-droit-de-sauver-des-vies



Figure 2 – From the series aboard the Aquarius entitled "Against All Odds" Photo credit : Yann Levy

began taking photographs. Around that period, he was also beaten by the police one evening without provocation. "I told myself that I couldn't overlook these types of violence because the newspapers and the media wasn't reporting the thousands of people in the *banlieue* who experience this [police violence]." He chose journalism for reasons similar to Levy : "to give voice to those who don't have it or who cannot have it," recalling what is a common motivation for alternative media creators (McMillian, 2011 ; Atton 2012 ; Kessler, 1984). People in the *quartiers populaires*, he says, at first often ask journalists with cameras to leave because they know that what he terms the "traditional media" does not respect them and has never respected them. [9] Cadoret is also co-founder of the photography collective Œil and part of the editorial team of the print and online "politically committed, positive, independent and citizen" magazine *Fumigène* ("smoke bomb"), whose mission is "to affirm living together, to highlight solidarity initiatives in our *quartiers populaires* and their initiators, the rebels of the street, the mixers of this Republic, those who break from clichés, xenophobic speech. . . " [10]

At CELSA, Cadoret presented a range of his work, including the image that opens the section of *États d'Urgence* entitled, "Au nom du frère" ("In the name of the brother"), a black and white photograph of Assa Traoré impassionedly speaking at a protest. The sheer strength and force of her voice seems to resonate through and from out of her image. Next to it is Cadoret's powerfully punctuated text : "The 19th of July 2016, the terrible news dropped and hit me in the heart : a young person died in the hands of the police in Beaumont-sur-Oise. This young person is Adama Traoré. His name was just added to the already too long list of those who have died in the hands of the police. The importance to make the family members visible through their fight for justice and truth was a moral obligation for me. . . when a family suffers and struggles to obtain truth and justice from the police, it's a daily struggle, often far from cameras."

9. See "NnoMan Cadoret : photoreporter engagé" 19 October 2018 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bt_R8o-FdbI

10. https://www.fumigene.org/



Figure 3 – Assa Traoré Photo credit : NnoMan Cadoret

As Cadoret expressed after the CELSA conference, part of his mission there was to critically provoke the audience, made up of journalism students, communications doctoral students, and professors. "I deliberately wanted to stir up these future journalists [at CELSA] a little by emphasizing certain journalistic approaches that really harm those of us living in *quartiers populaires*... the question of [media] representations seem central when I speak to young people who will have this role [of journalist] later. It's necessary that media training and media students hear how and why the residents of the *quartiers populaires* are facing a complete break with [their] media coverage." [11] He and other audience members criticized what they identified as stereotypical portrayals of residents of the *quartiers populaires* and at the ZAD in the "traditional" media.

Others have argued similarly : in her 2015 article, "Media in the *banlieue*, the other side of the mirror" independent journalist Faïza Zeroula, a writer for Bondy Blog (self-described as "the media that tells the story of the *quartiers* since 2005") details the dividing lines between the mainstream French media and residents of the *banlieue* in her analysis of "caricatured... sensational" (Zeroula 2015 :32) reporting on the *banlieue* by three mainstream outlets : Arte, *Le Point* and *France2*. In the case of *France2*, a collective from the neighborhood launched a formal complaint against the station, charging that its reporting was "stigmatizing and did not conform to reality" (Zeroula 2015 :32). Some scholars have even argued that the media and popular usage of the word *banlieue* has been so associated with "urban deprivation, illiteracy, segregation, poverty, drugs and crime" (Body-Gendrot 2010 :658-659) that the term shouldn't even be used. [12] Examining the period of 1986-1992, from the death of Malik Oussekine

11. Email correspondence with author, June 2, 2018"Et la question des représentations, elle me paraît centrale lorsque je prends la parole en public, face à des jeunes qui auront ce rôle plus tard. Il faut que dans les formations média, les étudiant.es entendent comment et pourquoi les habitant.es se quartiers populaires sont en véritable rupture avec le traitement médiatique."

12. See Sophie Body-Gendrot (2010) "Police marginality, racial logics and discrimination in the banlieues of France," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 33 :4, 656-674. Body-Gendrot uses the term "ZUS" (urban sensitive zones).

during the 1986 student demonstrations to the death in police custody of Aïssa Ihich in 1991 to the 1992 shooting of a youth by police guards in Sartouville, Body-Gendrot details the ways in which the French media promoted the idea that "rampant, wild violence, emanating from those idle, very visible males, threatened the peace of local communities and of French society in general and that French cities suffered problems on par with "ghettos" in the US when the reality was that "documented offenses, gangs, weapons possession and homicides were far less frequent than those occurring in large cities in the US" (Body-Gendrot 2010 :660-661).

3 Interpretative communities, Engagement and Precarity

In his classic work *Representing Reality* (1991), Bill Nichols argued that "unlike activists, filmmakers, like anthropologists, must retain a measure of remove, no matter how compassionate or dedicated they may be. Their loyalty remains divided : between making representations and taking on the issues represented... their ritual compulsion is to repeat the act of representations and forge it into a profession" (Nichols 1994 :186). This representational practice and profession making is infused with institutional and personal bonds that arise out of their struggles and dilemmas in both realms (Nichols 1991), and coalesce in an interpretative community (Hymes 1980 ; Zelizer 1993 ; Nichols 1991).

The different interpretative communities of which Levy, Cadoret and Barroux are a part and their diverse conceptualizations of photography and journalism as professions provide generative contrasts and complements. At our conference, Cadoret expressed alienation from his journalists and photographers who, for example, do an in-depth investigation of the Black Bloc one day, and Le Pen supporters the next. For him, the very choice of subject matter is an ideological and political choice. *Le Monde* reporter Barroux opened his remarks by defining journalistic identity as a professional identity : "Being a journalist is a profession," he stated, and the profession's main mission, he argued, is to gather and transmit "information that disturbs, that clarifies" and to report independently of anyone who dictates what should be said and shown. One can still be an activist in one's private life, he said, but journalism is about the clear transmission of verified information. There is no inherent conflict, he asserted, in reporting on such politically divergent groups as the Black Bloc and LePen supporters, as reporting is not an endorsement. "The question I always ask myself at the ZAD and elsewhere," he explained, "is how I can I tell this story in the most independent, clearest and most informative way possible ?" This must include giving a full picture of the circumstances being reported on. He gave the example of the violent expulsions at the ZAD on April 9, 2018 : some of the ZAD residents, he told the audience, had catapults and told Barroux not to photograph them. [13] This was an example, he told us, of information important to understanding the context of the ZAD at that period in time, vital to include in reporting to show the complete picture of the events.

13. Aside from being potentially physically perilous, the April 2018 ZAD expulsions brought new restrictions for coverage. On April 8, the day before the raid, the Ministry of the Interior made an unprecedented move : it sent out a communiqué offering journalists its own photographs and videos of the operations (the statement was released online by Glanz's Taranis news) warning journalists not to disturb the movements of the national police, and advising them to stay within a special press zone established by the local prefecture. The police blocked access to the ZAD, stating this was necessary for security reasons.

"Reality is complex," he said. "Every aspect of reality needs to be represented." In this sense, he described an ethnographic approach to reporting such as that outlined in Lila Abu-Lughod's seminal essay, "Writing Against Culture" (1991), in which she argues that ethnographers must engage the "contradictions, conflicts of interest, and doubts and arguments. . . changing motivations and circumstances" of their interlocutors, an approach crucial to representing "how. . . people contest interpretations of what is happening, strategize, feel pain and live their lives" (Abu Lughod 1996 :475). Barroux's own approach to representing the complexity of reality at the ZAD took shape as a long form multimedia piece, "Notre-Dame-des-Landes, une vie « hors la loi »" ("Notre-Dame-des-Landes, a life "beyond the law") centered around textual and visual portraits of five ZAD residents and their lives at the ZAD.



Figure 4 – At the Dôme, the ZAD Photo credit : Romain Etienne for *Le Monde*

Levy, Cadoret and Barroux's different interpretative communities are also of course informed by differences in precarity and protection. Independent journalists Levy, Cadoret and Glanz emphasized the advantages that journalists possessing a press card (such as *Le Monde* journalists) have as compared with independent journalists, who rarely hold a press card and scoffed at Barroux's criticism of demonstrators and some journalists going to protests in France wearing helmets and other protective gear. "There is no bond," Glanz asserted, "between the older journalists with press cards, with salaries, with protection, and the younger journalists without press cards, without protection, without social security or legal support." Independent journalists without the press card, Cadoret explained, are sometimes looked down upon by journalists who do hold the press card. During demonstrations, independent journalists and photographers without the card often find themselves caught between the police and "official" journalists, he said.

"The degradation of our work conditions does not come from demonstrators, but from the police force itself," Levy, Pitinome and Cadoret write in an essay in *États d'Urgence*, one that was also published by the independent news outlet *Mediapart*.[14] "Over the course of the social movement [Nuit Debout] and the violence around it, our work

14. Published in *Mediapart* 23 June 2016

has become more and more risky, difficult, and sometimes impossible... today the police force systematically ask for a press card to permit us to work... Since the beginning of the movement, from the evacuation of the University of Tolbiac to the demonstration of the 26 May 2016 and 14 June 2016, we have been experiencing a deliberate will to prevent us from working, from documenting, from witnessing... the "*loi travail*" is already our everyday reality, precarity, competition, dumping, irregular working hours, split shifts... the great majority of us are precarious and we cannot obtain the press card despite publishing our work regularly in major French and international publications." (Levy 2017 : 48-49). These conditions only compound the broader international context of increasing professional and financial precarity for photographers and photojournalists worldwide (Gürsel 2016).

The heighted vulnerability of "traditional," independent and activist journalists covering demonstrations has been well documented by scholars and by international organizations such as Reporters without Borders (RSF) and Amnesty International, which sent international observers to monitor Nuit Debout because of the recurrent and excessive use of police force against demonstrators and journalists (Feigenbaum and McCurdy 2018 :1898). Police routinely prevented journalists from filming them by pointing flashlights at recording devices and aiming at journalists with flash-ball guns and controlled protest spaces to exert both physical and psychological force (Weizman 2015 cited in Brown, Feigenbaum, Frenzel and McCurdy 2018 :1897). [15] Reporters without Borders explained that because many independent photojournalists do not have official press cards, they were therefore left outside of designated security cordons set up by the police at protests and were injured this way. [16] The organization's ongoing concern about police violence against journalists covering protests in France was recently reiterated in December 2018 when they asked the French ombudsman to investigate the "many reports of serious targeted police violence against journalists, especially photographers, while they were covering the *gilets jaunes* protests on December 8 calling for Macron's resignation." [17] On January 28, 2019 the Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner Dunja Mijatović came to Paris to discuss police violence during the *gilets jaunes* protests with French officials, describing herself as "seriously worried" about "the great number of people hurt, some gravely" by the French riot police. [18]

During his talk at CELSA, Barroux urged the audience and his fellow presenters to contextualize the roots of contemporary violence at demonstrations in France with the Algerian War and the 1968 revolts. Levy asked us a pointed question, also urging a shift in perspective on the contemporary moment : "Seen from the outside – the violence in France against students [occupying], the violence against journalists, the

15. See also David Perrotin, *Buzzfeed France* 3 May 2016 "Nuit Debout » : les journalistes indépendants, autres victims collatérales de la police"

16. Author interview with RSF Head of the European Union and Balkans section Pauline Adès-Mével August 14, 2018

17. Reporters without Borders, 11 December 2018 "Police violence against reporters during "yellow vest" protests in Paris" \url{https://rsf.org/en/news/police-violence-against-reporters-during-yellow-vest-protests-paris}

18. Jean-Jacques Régibier, 30 January 2019 L'Humanité "VIOLENCES POLICIÈRES EN FRANCE : LE CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE « GRAVEMENT PRÉOCCUPÉ »"

repression of social movements – how would the mainstream media in France represent this violence if it were in another country ?"



Figure 5 – Photo credit : Yanis Megal, 3 April 2018 photograph of photographer from the LaMeute collective beaten by the police while he took photos during demonstrations in Paris, early April 2018

4 Seeking Truth and Justice

On July 19, 2016, the day of his 24th birthday, Adama Traoré was riding his bike in the small town north of Paris, Beaumont-sur-Oise, when he was stopped by the police. Traoré, a French citizen of Malian descent, did not have his ID with him and was taken into police custody. Several hours later, he was dead. Almost immediately after his death, his friends and community members created the collective called "Vérité et Justice pour Adama" (Truth and Justice for Adama) to find out the facts about how and why he died and to bring those responsible to justice. For the past several years, the collective, led by Assa Traoré, has been a vital movement in France for raising awareness of police violence, of state repression and of disregard and bias on the part of the mainstream media in reporting on the *quartiers populaires*. As of this writing in early 2019, his case has still not been resolved. [19]

The collective (which in recent months has been publicly supporting the *gilets jaunes* movement) has also inspired others to form family and community-based collectives that seek to uncover the facts of how their family members died in police custody or were killed by the police, as in the case of 26-year-old Gaye Camera, killed by the police in January 2018. The investigation into his killing and seeking of accountability has been led by the collective "Vérité et Justice pour Gaye" ("Truth and Justice for Gaye"). This movement of collectives has radically challenged the "sophisticated common sense" (Brown 2015) that neoliberalism cultivates, often in multiple, invisible and volatile ways. It has done so by exposing the market, colonial and racially biased functioning of the state and has also critiqued mainstream "truth regimes." The way in which neoliberalism isolates and 'separates the individual, breaks his links with others

19. See for example, Nicolas Chapuis, "Adama Traoré : une plainte déposée contre la médecin responsable de la première expertise" *Le Monde* 26 November 2018

[and] splits up community life' (Foucault 1982 : 211-2) is opposed by the "Truth and Justice for Adama" collective, made up of family and community members, and in the words of Assa Traoré, comprised of a widespread network of other supporters who are "soldiers" in their fight for the facts of and accountability for her brother's death. It has created a vital form of defense and resistance against the state's neoliberal rationality and practice of "vigorous deployment of the police, the courts, and the prison" (Wacquant 2010 :118) seeking to replace it with an inclusive, care and solidarity-based rationality. At the same time, the collective's core goal of truth seeking and investigation into the factual verification of the circumstances of Traoré's death parallel journalism's own defining norms of truth seeking, transparency and public accountability (Singer 2007) essential to democratic process (Gans 2004). "Our family wants the truth for you, [Adama]," Traoré writes in *Lettre à Adama*. "And justice for all. Your name travels and the world sees us through you. It discovers that France hides behind words too great for it. Equality, Freedom, Brotherhood. For whom are these fundamental principles finally reserved ?" (Traoré 2017 :57).

Its work is also vital for both creating a differentiated representation of Adama Traoré's life and death and for galvanizing independent journalists and photojournalists in particular to cover the case, and others like it, with the goal of developing a non-stereotypical, nuanced and investigative reporting on the banlieue and *quartiers populaires*. Assa Traoré wrote *Lettre à Adama* to expose the effects of police violence in her community and to "write the story [of Adama] ourselves." The extended letter that forms the book is "the daily record of the fight we lead for you. [It is] the exposure of a system organized to dismiss people like us to invisibility." (Traoré 2017 :10).

Part of the collective's work is to challenge the mainstream, and, one could argue, neoliberal media's representation of Traoré's death and the deaths of other working class and young people of color who face police violence. This has included building solidarity internationally with those seeking more accurate representations of police and state violence, such as Sabaah Folayan, director of the documentary "Whose Streets" (2017), about the 2014 killing of the unarmed Michael Brown and the Ferguson uprisings.

5 A Convergence of Struggles

On the evening of December 1, 2017, the majestic Max Linder Panorama cinema in Paris was packed and the standing-room-only audience palpably excited with anticipation for the French premier of the American independent documentary about the Ferguson uprisings, "Whose Streets" (2017). [20] We were waiting not only for the critically acclaimed film but for its director Sabaah Folayan, who was introducing the work that she and her co-director Damon Davis described as "more than a documentary. . . a story we personally lived. . . This is our story to tell."

A few minutes later, speaking in French dotted with English, Folayan explained that she went to Ferguson after the uprisings with a sense of duty : it was a calling to witness rather than a calculated choice. "I went there because I had to," she explaining

20. "Whose Streets" was screened privately in late November at CELSA-Sorbonne as part of the seminar I taught there, "Visual Media, Politics and the Practice of Witnessing" in the fall semester of 2017.

that her original mission there was to study how post-traumatic stress was affecting the community after Brown's killing. Joining her on stage was Assa Traoré. Traoré emphasized in her remarks that night that the "Verité et Justice pour Adama" movement is firstly a local movement that possesses profound resonance and relevance both nationally and internationally. "[“Vérité et Justice pour Adama”] is a local fight and force – before coming to Paris, before becoming national, before becoming international – it is the friends of Adama who came together in this fight…" At that moment, about 15 members of the committee wearing the signature t-shirts printed with "Justice for Adama ; without justice, you will never have peace" came onto the stage and encircled her. Traoré continued : "The fight for Adama is a fight that goes beyond the Traoré family. Adama is representative of a very widespread *malaise* in France, of French youth. And when we fight, we fight for everyone, we fight for many of these young men – because unfortunately it is these young men who are killed – who are "the wrong color." In France, when you are 'the wrong color' and you're stopped by the police, you need to be careful, because you could die."



Figure 6 – Assa Traoré at the "Whose Streets ?" screening in Paris, author photo

In the mere ten minutes or so that Folayan and Traoré shared the stage together, the oft-spoken and heard phrase, "*la convergence des luttes*" (the convergence of struggles) seemed to be embodied and emboldened, much more than just a ritualized and rousing slogan. Folayan and Traoré together, along with members of the "Truth and Justice for Adama" collective, represented the shared solidarity of individuals who had and still are actively transforming grief and struggle into new forms of inquiry and political action. Both take as vital the question Judith Butler poses in *Precarious Life : The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004) : "Who counts as human ? Whose lives count as lives ?" (Butler 2004 :20). And both have lived the dire consequences of contexts of extreme injustice : in a report published in 2017, the French ombudsman found that Black or Arab men in France were 20 times more likely than others to be stopped by the police for identity checks, and were often stopped without reason. [21] One of the

21. "Contrôles au faciès : Les jeunes hommes perçus comme noirs ou maghrébins ont 20 fois plus de risqué d'être contrôlés" 11 April 2018 20 Minutes

central findings in the Department of Justice investigation launched in Ferguson after the uprisings found "clear racial disparities" in the operation of the county's police and courts and an "approach to law enforcement [that] both reflects and reinforces racial bias, including stereotyping... African Americans account for 85% of vehicles stops... [and]are twice as likely as white drivers to be searched during vehicle stops." [22] At the recent "Act VII" *gilets jaunes* demonstration against police and state violence Traoré connected the police violence long faced in her own community in a statement of solidarity : "... In terms of precarity and police violence, the '*quartiers*' have been on the front lines for 40 years," she stated. "So yes, we are *gilets jaunes*." [23]

It was also the coming together of two women dedicated to alternative and accurate media portrayals of race, community and racial violence. Discussing their documentary "Whose Streets," Folayan described the mainstream media coverage of Michael Brown's murder and the Ferguson uprisings as compounding the violence done to Brown when police officer Darren Wilson shot him on August 9, 2014. "It was really important to me and to Damon not only that we tell the story of what did happen [in Ferguson], but that we let people know that the narrative they were initially given was not the whole story. The dehumanization of Mike Brown was perpetrated by his murderer, perpetuated by the media, and reinforced by violent police repression of his community. This was a modern-day lynching." [24]

6 Whose Streets/Whose Rights/Whose Recognition ?

In 2014 Sabaah Folayan, then a pre-med student at Columbia University, went to Ferguson with cinematographer Lucas Alvarado-Farrar to try to learn "the truth about the dramatic scenes playing out on the news." Organically, Folayan says, the pair began talking to people and filming, and soon met and began to collaborate with St. Louis interdisciplinary artist, Damon Davis, who would become the film's co-director. The Black Lives Matter activism and citizen, activist and independent media that reported on the police murder of Michael Brown and especially the four days that Ferguson was under a state of emergency form the focus of the almost two-hour long documentary.

Incorporating approximately 35-40 pieces of footage from citizen and activist journalists, tweets and images shared on twitter, as well as clips from news outlets ranging from local and national networks and from *FoxNews* to the independent *Democracy Now !*, Folayan and Davis conceived of the film as a "war movie" that seeks to understand and portray the trauma caused to the Ferguson community by Brown's murder and the imposed state of emergency, and to "correct the narrative about what happened [in Ferguson] and who [the activists] were." They have expressed that the film also seeks to unravel and explain the institutional and structural causes of Brown's murder, which they argue form an emergency violation of the most basic human right,

22. United States Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division "Investigation of the Ferguson Police Department", March 4, 2015 https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf

23. Laury-Anne Cholez et Nnoman *Reporterre* "Je viens manifester pour le pouvoir de vivre. Vous comprenez, le pouvoir de vivre !" 4 February 2019

24. Sabah Folayan and Damon Davis, Directors' Notes, Press Kit for "Whose Streets" (2017), supplied to author.

"the right to be alive." "This is no longer a civil rights movement," Folayan said. "The right to vote is a civil right. The right to be alive is a human right." [25] :



FIGURE 7 – Tweet used in the film by activist and musician Tef Poe showing a photograph of Michael Brown's father holding a sign that reads "Ferguson Police Just Executed My Unarmed Son!!!"

As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam write, the sensitivity to representation exists "on a continuum with other presentations and with everyday life, where the 'burden' of representation can indeed become almost unbearable" (Shohat and Stam 1994 :183). Without the recognition of another as possessing rights and deserving care, what Taylor (Taylor 1994) described as the "vital human need" that recognition embodies is denied. What they argue resonates with our 2018 conference : media representation exists as just one aspect of a much broader spectrum of the lived experience of neglected and violated human rights, inequality, invisibility and potentially highly problematic visibility.

Studies showing that African Americans are more likely to experience police brutality are well documented and at this writing, police killings are increasing in the US. [26] Since Ferguson, at least 2,902 people in the US have been killed by the police and 102 people in the US have been shot and killed by the police less than two months into 2019. [27] After the murders of African Americans Philando Castile, Alton Sterling and Korryn Gaines within the span of about a month in the summer of 2016, there was a proliferation of reactions in the media and in public discourse in the US about

25. Ford Foundation, "'Whose Streets ?' filmmaker Sabaah Folayan on Ferguson and human rights" 27 January 2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A1vaYHHh6CQ

26. See Angela Helm, "More Americans Killed by Police in 2017, but Trump Dominates Headlines," *The Root* 3/04/17, http://www.killedbypolice.net and Timothy Williams, "Study Supports Suspicion That Police Are More Likely to Use Force on Blacks" *New York Times* July 7, 2016

27. "Fatal Force" *Washington Post* last accessed 10 February 2019

what Elizabeth Alexander described more than ten years earlier in "Can You Be Black and Look at This : Reading the Rodney King Video(s)" as "Black bodies in pain for public consumption [that] have been an American spectacle for centuries" and social media's role in increasing the consumption of "death of Blackness bodies" (Alexander 1994 :78-79). Debord's spectacle has special relevance for what Alexander described as the normalization, consumptive potential and mundanity of the "enslaved, chained or dead black body to gaze upon or to hear about or to position a self against..." (Alexander 1994 :79). These reactions echo those around the image of Michael Brown's dead body lying in the street in Ferguson, a photo shared widely on social media and that Brown's family publicly asked to be removed from social media users sharing the image. [28] In this sense, specific types of media and social media *visibility* become highly problematic ; representation's burden extends both to the mediated visibility of the event and to the ways in which alternative representations are underprivileged and effectively rendered invisible.

In its mission to correct media narratives, the film consciously incorporates a twitter hashtag that started trending and quickly went viral two days after Michael Brown was killed, #Iftheygunnedmedown. Users tweeted photographs of individuals of color with one photograph showing an image that might stereotypically be interpreted as "positive" or "safe" and the other that could be interpreted as "negative," "dangerous" in response to the use of a photo of Brown by many media outlets of him standing on a porch, appearing to throw a gang sign (Jackson 2016 :316). [29] In complicating and humanizing the Ferguson community members and Black Lives Matter activists the film portrays, it consciously engages the race and representational politics that galvanized #iftheygunnedmedown.

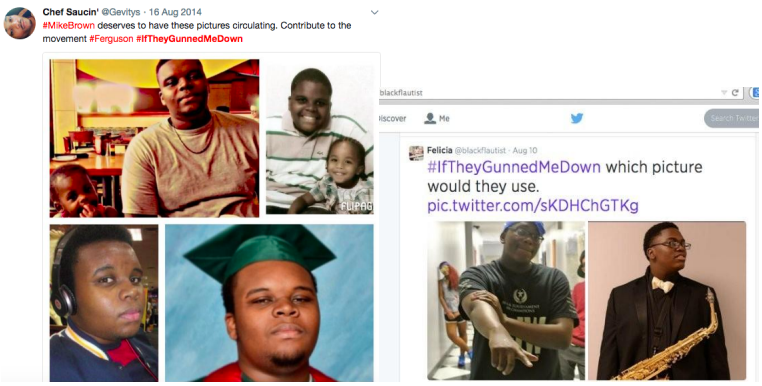


Figure 8 – Tweets and photographs shared with the hashtag #IfTheyGunnedMeDown in August 2014

The film's distribution method was carefully crafted : in the first couple of months of the film's release, the directors organized and encouraged community screenings of

28. Lauren Walker, Truthout "From Lynching Photos to Michael Brown's Body : Commodifying Black Death" 16 January 2015

29. The issue of which photograph media outlets choose to use of young men and women of color killed by the police has a much longer history ; see, for example Alicia Shepard, Poynter.org "The iconic photos of Trayvon Martin & George Zimmerman & why you may not see the others" March 30, 2012

the film at independent theaters, community centers and schools and universities at which one of the directors would appear and where there would be the opportunity for dialogue after the screening. The film eventually went to the Sundance Festival and the filmmakers eventually sold it to a major company, Magnolia Pictures. "We wanted this film to be discussed and talked about in the very space in which [the mainstream media] lied about us," its producer Jennifer McArthur explained.

One could read "Whose Streets" as a sort of filmic equivalent of a Kerner-like commission report on the Ferguson coverage – if one existed. [30] But like Traoré's *Letter to Adama,* "Whose Streets" itself is also a type of memorial : it is dedicated to Michael Brown and was released in the US on August 11, 2017 in commemoration of Michael Brown's killing in early August, 2014. [31] Its function as a memorial to Brown is all the more significant considering the fact that the film itself details the memorial made up of stuffed animals, balloons, flowers and candles that was spontaneously created after Brown's killing and was removed by the city of Ferguson in May 2015. [32]

Their film is finally the broader story of vulnerability that scholar and journalist Marc Lamont Hill details in his 2016 book, *Nobody : Casualties of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond.* "... The discourse of race is at once indispensable and insufficient when telling the story of Ferguson and other sites of State-sanctioned violence against Black bodies," he writes. "Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Jordan Davis, and Trayvon Martin were not killed simply because they were Black, although it is entirely reasonable to presume that they would still be alive if they were White. They were killed because they belong to a disposable class for which one of the strongest correlates is being Black." (Hill 2016 :28). While his book focuses on three declared states of emergency – Ferguson, Missouri after the killing of Michael Brown, Baltimore, Maryland after the protests against the death of African American Freddie Brown and Flint, Michigan during the water crisis, the overarching emphasis in the work is on the underlying causes for a more widespread state of emergency. The neoliberal takeover of public services such as schools, the military, prisons and policing ; the privileging of self over community and of moneyed interests over democratic principles ; the systematic silencing of radical voices and visions "necessary to resist this dark neoliberal moment" (Hill 2016 : 29) all form the state of emergency already in existence in the US, one that could be described as "unofficially official."

7 Conclusion : Emergency énoncés

Levy writes in *États d'Urgence* that their work was born out of the emergency conditions they document (Levy 2017 :6), many of which arise from the complete disavowal

30. The Kerner Commission Report was ordered by President Lyndon B. Johnson and created by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders to investigate the causes of the 1967 race riots and included extensive evidence of racialized media bias in their reporting. See too Darren Walker *Columbia Journalism Review* "Five decades after Kerner Report, representation remains an issue in media" 5 March 2018

31. Brown was killed on August 9, 2014

32. A permanent memorial in the form of a commemorative plaque was put up in the area where the makeshift memorial stood. See Trymaine Lee "Iconic Michael Brown memorial taken down" MSNBC 20 May 2015

of the premise embodied within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) that 'all people matter' and a moral commitment to overcoming the culture of 'othering' permeating everyday life around the globe. (Allen 2007). As Traoré writes in her book, echoing others who have argued similarly in the US and globally, the ideals of a nation or of an international agreement such as the UDHR are often left unrealized in praxis – and the ideal itself ends up a mere cruel hypocrisy.

What then is the next step for the socially and politically charged images that Levy and NnoMan Cadoret create ? Are they part of not only an expanded ecology of images, but also part of a new form of independent media ecosystem ? And if so, do the forms in which they distribute their work – online, in print, for NGOs, for independent news outlets – have the impact of what Ariella Azoulay has called an "emergency claim," an affective response that evolves into political awareness and action ? Azoulay (2008) argues that photography is by necessity a civic contract that does not depend upon allegiance to or citizenship with a state, but that comes into existence for anyone who participates in what she calls the ethical watching of photographs. If one were to extend this idea to journalism (as have scholars such as Clemencia Rodriguez) – alternative, "traditional" and other forms along the spectrum – and film as well, the implications for an alternative type of citizenry would only expand. Such an expanded sense of a civic contract and citizenship recalls Rancière's "communities of sense," able to create "new trajectories between what can be seen, what can be said, and what can be. . . " (Rancière 2009).

The work of Yann Levy, NnoMan Cadoret, Rémi Barroux and the "Truth and Justice for Adama" collective led by Assa Traoré addresses the issue of precarious knowledge production and producers from vital perspectives. What imaginary of a livable and just world is created by these photojournalists, journalists and activists who are representing and reporting conditions of _un_livability and of injustice ? What complementary knowledge are they providing to the academy and scholarship, and what types of generative interrelationships might be built and sustained between independent and "traditional" journalists, between journalists and activists, and between all of these groups and the academy ?

These questions are particularly relevant as Communications and journalism as fields re-assess themselves with respect to representation, precarity and social reproduction. The recent *Journal of Communication* article entitled #CommunicationSoWhite (2018), for example, reported troubling research findings from a New York University study led by NYU Media, Culture and Communication Professor Paula Chakravartty about race, gender and representation in the field of Communications. Outlining the field's "pervasive white masculinity" the article begins by systematically detailing the ways in which women and most especially women of color's labor and scholarship is devalued, particularly through the type of academic labor the majority does (increasingly adjunct or contingent labor) and citational practices that systematically favors the scholarship of white males in the field. Their research shows clearly that non-White scholars are significantly underrepresented as published authors and under-cited as producers of value in the field of communication (Chakravartty et al, 2018).

The colloquium we organized started from the premise that independent knowledge producers, activists and "traditional" knowledge producers such as academics and journalists working for mainstream publications would benefit from each other's knowledge and in turn that dialogue would open new ideas and new conversations for the future journalists and communications scholars in the audience at CELSA-Sorbonne. The discussion generated was engaged, informed, thoughtful, provocative and provoking. Two years later, the issues debated remain as urgent as ever.

8 Acknowledgements

The author would like to greatly thank Professor Joëlle LeMarec and Professor Valérie Jeanne-Perrier for inviting this contribution and Professor Marie Doezema for her continual encouragement. Their engaged participation, great enthusiasm, impassioned commitment and invaluable support made the conference that inspired this article possible. Much appreciation and many thanks to all of the conference speakers : Rémi Barroux, NnoMan Cadoret and Yann Levy and to Gaspard Glanz for his contribution to the conversation, and to NnoMan Cadoret, Romain Etienne, Yann Levy and Yanis Megal for the use of their photographs in this article. Finally, heartfelt thanks to all of my students who contributed very inspired and inspiring conversations throughout the fall semester in the seminar "Visual Media, Politics and the Practice of Witnessing" that I designed and taught at CELSA-Sorbonne as a Teaching Fellow in 2017-2018.

9 Author Biography

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