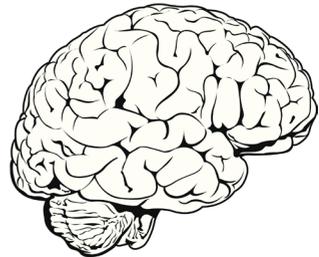


**BOUTELDJA,  
HER «SISTERS»  
AND US**

**MÉLUSINE (2016)**

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*Tout mais pas l'indifférence*  
tmpli@riseup.net



# BOUTELDJA, HER «SISTERS» AND US

**H**ouria Bouteldja's latest book[1] has incited fervent support as well as fervent criticism, but both have largely ignored the pages on "indigenous women" and their role in the anti-racist struggle. This text wishes to address this lacuna, by refusing the call for "communautaire"[2] allegiance and by proposing a resolutely feminist antiracism.

*Whites, Jews and Us* provided everyone with the opportunity to react strongly, and that was the goal of its author: to create a divide between, on one side, the traditional, universalist Left and their institutional anti-racism, and, on the other side, autonomous anti-racists movements and their proclaimed allies. Bouteldja knows that she crystalizes the debate and she anticipates the outraged, racist, and stupid attacks that she subsequently received. She knows that it would be difficult to talk about her book without completely condemning it or firmly defending it. She counts on the pragmatism of anti-racist activists – whether or not they have sympathy for her and her movement, they can't accept that she'd be attacked for "racialism" or "anti-white racism" and they'll take her side even it means closing their eyes to the details of her politics – the decolonial label suffices in itself.

Some have attempted the perilous exercise of taking her political analysis seriously enough to criticize it. Most, though, have resolutely ignored the chapter that Bouteldja devotes to "indigenous women" – doubtlessly with the idea that she is better positioned than them to speak on the subject. Others, who call themselves feminists, are fine with denying the sexist character of her text under the excuse that this is a part of the decolonial struggle. It was, in fact, when I was reading author and actress Océanrosemarie's support for this book in the newspaper *Libération* on May 30th that I decided to write this text. Because while it's out of the question to ignore Bouteldja's anti-feminist attack in *Whites, Jews and Us*, it is *also* out of the question to leave this feminist critique to those reactionaries (whether they be right-wing or left) who only rediscover their vague anti-sexist impulses when racialized people or groups are on the chopping block.

You can't avoid tasting the irony of Bouteldja's rhetoric in the chapter "Us, the indigenous women". We know this argument well, it's the same as the one the traditional, communist Left has used against feminists for over a century: the battle with patriarchy is no more than a distraction produced and encouraged by capital in order to divide the working class – women of the proletariat must stay in line and remain focused on the true enemy. This over-used scam is the same capitulation that Bouteldja suggests to women of color in the name of "revolutionary love".

[1] Houria Bouteldja, *Whites, Jews, and Us – Towards a Politics of Revolutionary Love* (Semiotexte/Smart Art, 2017).

[2] In French, "communautaire" is a pejorative word referring to "pertaining to (racial, ethnic) community," which is perceived as counter to the French Republican model. For example, racial minorities are often accused of "communautarisme" - e.g., of self-segregating, resisting assimilation to French (read: white, bourgeois) norms, or creating a separate community from the "rest" of dominant French society. Interestingly, although bourgeois whites also live in homogenous enclaves with group-specific codes, language and norms, they are rarely accused of "communautarisme".

She does not deny the existence of patriarchy nor the fact that women are reduced to minority status, particularly women of color. She recognizes these phenomena and deplors them, but asks her “sisters” to practice a sort of resigned pragmatism faced with “indigenous patriarchy”: men of color are “macho”, she writes, as a reaction to the violence of white hegemony which wants to destroy them by denying their virility. For Bouteldja, they become all the more violent with “their” women as their male pride – their “mustache”, as Bouteldja so safely refers to it – suffers.

It’s surprising to find, under Bouteldja’s decolonial pen, an image similar to that described by Daoud and just as categorical as a poll in the (newspaper) *Le Point*: men of color are, in France, more misogynistic than white men, and with a specifically black, Arab, Muslim misogyny. It’s not just the expression of their aggressive masculinity which is different, but the very nature of it: some attribute this to biology, others to culture; for Bouteldja, this is because the “indigenous patriarchy” is the violent reaction of men of color against a racist system. It is certainly not a structural character of the society in which they live and from which some originate. We need to refuse the simplicity of this analysis and the revolting political conclusions that it leads to: that since these forms of “indigenous” patriarchy are defense mechanisms and forms of resistance against racism, women of color, even if they are the primary victims, should be understanding to and indulgent of it. “It’s important to see in the testosterone-driven virility of indigenous men, the part which resists white supremacy”, writes Bouteldja. Otherwise said: distinguish, accept, and preserve the part of this male violence which resists white power – regardless of the eventual collateral victims, “because it’s not so much the reality of male domination, but his de-humanization, which causes the problem”. Those who suffer daily from this reality will appreciate her analysis: does a slap have a different feel than an authentically indigenous one?

As for me, I cannot absolve “our men”. I am the woman of no one and I reclaim my individuality against the force of racist ideology which attempts to deny it, which attempts to reduce me to my blood, my community, my race and my household. I am not deaf to the call of blood ties: it just does not call. It cannot call because we have destroyed the lie of race – the old, biological, genetic, hereditary race – and we have exposed it to show how it is imposed upon us: as a social structure, as constructed categories that we are assigned to by force, as a mark which determines our social positions and our material resources, our interactions, and our daily lives. Race does not *exist* - it acts, it imposes itself, it aggresses. How can the racial categories in which we have been confined become familiar and comfortable refuges when they are, in reality, holes, traps, dug through slavery and colonialism and barbed with white supremacy?

Bouteldja pretends to use the category of “indigenous” as a socio-historical construction and to refuse all biological determinism. She prudently states this in the preface to her book, but she doesn’t stick to it. Contrary to what she thinks, it is neither blood, nor identity, nor culture which brings together people of color – it’s a shared condition: a material condition, because the processes of

racialization that constitute us as a group do not care about our individualities. These processes homogenize us by assigning us similar behaviors, practices, and characteristics, which are supposed to be timeless and natural. These processes turn race into a social reality, justified by an essentializing fantasy, which explains the hierarchical distribution of positions as nature itself. What brings us together is not “authentic” roots to re-conquer, but common experiences of racism, whatever form they may take according to our gender or class. However, when Bouteldja lauds the authenticity of “our” men, as a “nature” which resists against the white injunction of sexual equality, she enthusiastically participates in the racist essentialism which she is supposed to combat. By opposing the “formidable and insolent Islamic virility” with the “conversion” of indigenous homosexuals who deny their masculinity and thus collaborate with the white project, what does she do aside from taking on the age-old belief in an Arab essence or a black essence, which necessarily distinguishes men of color from white men? Bouteldja writes, “I’ve started to prefer the good old machos who own it. I’m telling you, sisters, you need to take sides. When our men reform themselves according to white injunctions, it’s not good for us. Because, in fact, they don’t reform. They pretend to.” There’s no leeway possible for men of color faced with their masculinity: if they drift from the model of an exacerbated virility, they cede to white influence by denying their innermost identity. Men of color don’t have a choice; they just *are the way they are* by nature.

Bouteldja’s analysis tries to be subversive and yet accepts the terms of dominant ideology by fighting the decolonial struggle on the battleground and with the weapons that her enemies have chosen in her place. She easily falls into the trap of using the rhetoric of a “shock of civilizations”, opposing a hegemonic white group to a homogenous – and necessarily imaginary – “indigenous world”. What “indigenous people” is Bouteldja talking about? All of them: Iranians, Muslims, immigrants in France, descendants of French immigrants, all the people of color in the world, or more like all those she chooses to call brothers. She accepts this amalgamation that reactionaries of all types adore by carefully tracing a line between them and “us” – the indigenous, especially those with roots in former colonies, who are supposed to create a “community” notably through shared religion. We thought we had to battle the racist essentialism which assumes that every dark-skinned person is a Muslim by blood, and now here we have to accept this assumption complacently.

Bouteldja doesn’t do anything else when she particularizes an abstract “indigenous patriarchy” that she separates from any social reality, which is entirely produced by colonization and racist violence and yet still a persistent sign of some authentic indigenous nature, a last holdout against virile white supremacy. For women of color, feminism is “chocolate”, Bouteldja writes: “To reproach us for not being feminist, is like reproaching a poor person for not eating caviar.” It’s a luxury for whites, a whim of those comfortable and privileged enough to allow themselves the treat. As if refusing physical violence, insults, and rape was not a vital necessity, as if demanding the freedom to control your own body, money, and time was only an extravagant wish – a “vice of the bourgeoisie”, as Jeannette Vermeersch said in

her time. As if women in color in France lived locked in their homes and didn't have the daily experience of an ever-present and shape-shifting patriarchy: in the family sphere, of course, but also at work, in the street, and at school. "The radical critique of the indigenous patriarchy is a luxury. If a responsible feminist must see the day, it...will necessarily come about through a "communautaire" allegiance. At least for as long as racism exists." This is what Bouteldja writes – she, who calls herself my sister and asks me to concede, to give my body and my individuality to my clan in the name of some higher logic of the fight against racism. I refuse the idea that my body is a commodity, jealously protected by "my own" against the covetousness of white virility. I own my body faced with men and faced with whites: it's neither the respite for an indigenous warrior, nor a exotic hunting trophy. I own my individuality faced with racial categorization and the injunction to belong. "We don't have the duty to be this, or be that", wrote Fanon: to fight against the racist system is also to recognize your condition as racialized and to refuse to be locked into that category.

Bouteldja calls on her sisters to surrender by suggesting them a shady alternative: to negotiate compromises with the indigenous patriarchy rather than cede to negotiations with the seductive, lying white patriarchy. "I share my inner-most organs of life with (my mother), and with my whole tribe. In any case, if I had taken them out, I would have given them to Whites. I'd rather die." Conscious of the vise in which women of color are trapped, "between the dominant white patriarchy and our "own", indigenous and dominated, one", she asks us to choose between our loyalty to the community and a sort of individualist treason. This dilemma is a scam and Bouteldja maintains the idea that anti-racism and feminism are incompatible because of natural differences between cultures – an idea that she shares with reactionary feminist movements to boot. Women of color don't need to accept this role as the battleground, the canon fodder for a struggle between two exalted patriarchies. Women of color don't need to search for their own redemption in the rediscovered virility of men, nor to shelter their dignity under the "mustache" of their father. Bouteldja's "revolutionary love" is a scam, and this scam isn't even daring or original, it's the ordinary "call to order" to women: you don't belong to yourself, you are ours – for us, men, for us, the family, for us, the people, for us, the nation. This ordinary call to order imposed on women, women who hold the dignity of the clan between their thighs, with all the responsibility and the guilt that goes with it. Women reduced to the eternal suspicion of carnal warfare in which the enemy plants their flag of conquest. Bouteldja demands patience and sacrifice of women of color: help your men and God will help you. She tries to sell us the rip-off of the century: "Men must learn how to respect us and to understand our sacrifice as we understand the necessity to protect them." Inciting respect by self-sacrifice and silent endurance, that's the only reward a woman loyal to her blood can expect. How to concede to a scam so obvious, so clear, so frank? Women of color are not taught to say "I need", or even say "I", or say "non", or go it alone. Instead of encouraging us, Bouteldja tells us it's not worth it and she threatens us with shame: it's dangerous to cede to the white sirens of liberty, safety is only amongst our own – in an imaginary indigenous world of unearthed roots and bits and pieces of racist orientalist imagery. Bouteldja, who

seems to believe that the only thing susceptible of attracting women of color outside of their supposedly closed community is the seduction of a white man, warns us to watch out for the threat. Because, she who risks such a seduction “whatever happens, (will suffer) opprobrium[3]. So why take such a risk?” Once outside the bounds of collective approval, there is no salvation for the woman of color.

Bouteldja wants to turn us away from the pipe dreams of feminism, the mantras which were not composed for mouths such as ours: “My body does not belong to me. No moral magistrate will make me endorse a watchword created by and for white feminists.” She should, instead, suggest that we take our bodies into our own hands, make our bodies our own without permission. A woman of color who owns her body, that’s the spoils of the war our enslaved and colonized grandmothers fought. “For me, feminism is a European export”. There’s no White Reason, affirms Fanon, there is also no White Freedom: I don’t need permission from history, or my race, to seize the tools of my choice to liberate myself. I grew up in French society, like many women of color in France. Unless you consider that I don’t necessarily and innately belong to it, I can arbitrarily decide to use any of the ideas that are developed here.

“Read Bouteldja!” writes Océanrosemarie. Don’t be scared! See what *Jews, Whites, and Us* is: an opportunity for the progressive left, who claims to be allied with anti-racist movements, to buy a few shivers of subversion for cheap. Bouteldja writes things that they are horrified to think, but which they applaud because the reason of the decolonial struggle requires it. They ignore her problematic politics (which they would normally combat) in the name of the authenticity of her indigenous anger. By doing this, they are not doing Bouteldja any favors; they are refusing her a true political voice and they are not recognizing her as a legitimate speaker. Instead of their regular critical engagement, they observe her in curiosity. By pretending to recognize a plurality of feminism, they make Bouteldja a voice of exception: the wounded voice of the indigenous, which has the value of opening our eyes, of moving us, of aggraving us. I don’t think that Bouteldja needs this type of benevolent, knee-jerk, “get out of jail free” card. I don’t think any of us need that. I think that what we need is for debate to be moved to another grounds: we need to stop waiting for the enlightenment of this or that subset of the radical progressive left, whose good will is often just stifling, and finally open the debate amongst ourselves, as women of color. We need to look together for a third path, between the scam of Bouteldja’s blood allegiance and the illusion of universalist white liberators. Sisterhood cannot be decreed in the name of blood, it is constructed politically.

June 2016,  
Mélusine

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[3] In French, Bouteldja says “opprobre”. The direct translation, “Opprobrium”, means scorn, censure, disgrace or shame.

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