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# Inclusive Writing: Tracing the Transnational History of a French Controversy

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## Introduction

The expression ‘inclusive writing’ (*écriture inclusive*) started to be commonly used in France since the mid-2010s, as a highly controversial expression in media, activist, scientific and political areas. The expression encompasses nowadays all feminist practices of language. In this article, I propose to take a critical historical point of view to analyse how the notion of ‘inclusive writing’ - and the controversies it triggers - developed within a specific political framework. I do not focus here on feminist practices in French as linguistic uses (an exhaustive inventory of current contemporary practices of human denomination in global French remains to be done) but on the expression ‘inclusive writing’ and its circulation.

This article argues that the rise of inclusive writing in France has several roots. It is a traveling notion (Said 1983; Möser 2013), first appearing in Anglophone North American religious feminism in the 1970s, and then crossing languages, continents, and conceptual frameworks. The development of inclusive writing in French stems indeed from a transnational and even transcontinental (United States, Canada, France), interlingual (English, French) paradigm, which passes through several disciplinary realms (theology, social work, pedagogy, linguistics), intellectual spaces (struggles for women's visibility, movements for parity, intersectional turn), and periods of ideological reconfiguration (the Quiet Revolution in 1960s' Quebec, the weakening of the moral order in the 1970s in various countries, the republican revival in France in the 2000s, etc.). The paradigm of inclusion, established more than 40 years ago, is thus at the crossroad between religious community dynamics, political demands for parity, a reconfiguration of the discursive formation of republicanism and a liberalization of feminism.

In France, the controversies around inclusive writing testify a two-folded change in gender representations: 1) a paradigmatic change in the way of gender, and thus feminism are conceptualised, 2) articulated to a change in the regime of visibility for these issues. It is necessary to understand why this inclusive paradigm suddenly becomes audible - and successful - in this context.

This article thus aims to make a triple contribution to 1) a sociology of language through the study of a linguistic controversy, 2) to sociolinguistics, by refining the social meaning of inclusive writing, and 3) to discourse analysis and gender studies, by tracing the discursive evolution of the notion of inclusion at a global scale. In the first part, I will document the controversy that sprout out in France since 2017. In the second section, I situate socio-historically this controversy, by presenting the uses of this expression in a broader temporal, geographical and disciplinary span: we will see that the notion of inclusive language is first used in the space of English-speaking feminist theology, especially Protestant, and then in the academic space. It arrived shortly after in the North American Francophone space, but took much longer to spread into the European Francophonie. The last section of the article tracks, beyond the notion of *inclusive writing*, the meaning of the notion of *inclusion* itself in France and Quebec. This ideological genealogy reveals that *inclusion* does not have the same meaning in either space, referring at times to the republican model, at other times to the intersectional model, thus explaining the differentiated development of the notion in these two spaces. I conclude with a feminist assessment of the critical power of the French notion of inclusion.

## 1. A French controversy

I am interested in this paper in inclusive writing as a *formula*. Krieg-Planq (2009) defines a formula as a peculiar use of a certain word with the following criteria: (1) it is a fixed lexical unit (simple or complex); (2) it has a discursive dimension; (3) it works as a social referent, i.e. the expression is largely known, and evokes something for everyone (even if not the same thing), as such it is often used in the presuppositional mode; (4) it has a polemical aspect. I assume that *écriture inclusive* meets all these criteria, being a fixed expression, in discourse, being polemical and acting as a social referent. This last aspect is crucial to understand that «*écriture inclusive*» does not univocally refer to specific linguistic uses. Instead it could be used by some people as a synonym of feminisation, by others to challenge the masculine agreement for generic terms. Some others define it as the use of a specific typographic sign, the mid-dot, etc. In the following the reader is invited to not presuppose any fixed linguistic practices that would be referred to by *inclusive writing*.

On March 8, 2017, on the International Women's Rights Day, the Hatier Press published a new textbook, *Questionner Le Monde*, which contained abbreviated masculine and feminine forms, such as *artisan.e.s* or *savant.e.s*. ('artisan(MASC).FEM.PL', 'scholar(MASC).FEM.PL'). The publication first goes unnoticed. In September, at the beginning of the school year, it suddenly became abundantly discussed in many media and social networks. The initiative, called 'inclusive writing', was presented as unprecedented and highly controversial. A deputy from the conservative right-wing party called for banning it from schools and the Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer declared himself against *écriture inclusive*, while adding: 'I consider myself a feminist'.<sup>1</sup> However, he did not take any measures against this practice. On November 9, the State Secretary for Equality between Women and Men, Marlène Schiappa, also gave her opinion on the radio: 'I am favorable to feminize the language, to not invisibilize women in the language. But I am not in favor of the obligation to teach inclusive writing at school'. Finally, ending this political-media sequence, on November 21, 2017, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe filed a bill requiring official texts to use the generic masculine, in order to 'close the controversy'. He then spoke of 'the so-called inclusive writing'. The term 'inclusive writing' has not ceased to be controversial in France since, arousing an important media coverage, as illustrates the deposit, in February 2021, of a new bill n° 3922 to the National Assembly 'carrying prohibition of the use of the inclusive writing for the legal persons in charge of a mission of public service'.<sup>2</sup> Valérie Pécresse, the head of the Ile-de-France region (where Paris is located), on February 28, 2021, claimed to have banned inclusive writing in her region, which would have set an interesting precedent in the French republican language policy holding hard to the fiction of linguistic unity as the guarantor of the nation. But she did not have to break the linguistic unicity of the nation, as inclusive writing was already banned by Philippe's 2017 bill.<sup>3</sup> Finally, on March 23, 2021, another bill is filed 'to prohibit and penalize the use of inclusive writing in public administrations and organizations in charge of a public service or receiving public subsidies' (n° 4003).<sup>4</sup> The threat of penalization targeted especially teachers in primary, secondary or higher education. By inclusive writing, the bill specifies: 'editorial and typographical practices aimed at substituting the use of the masculine form, when used in a generic sense, with a spelling that highlights the existence of a feminine form'.

Let's go back to the textbook. Following the media controversy, on September 26, 2017 Hatier issues a 'publisher's clarification', in which the process is named 'inclusive writing' and wherein the publisher claims to apply 'the recommendations of the High Council for Equality between Women and Men'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in 2015, the High Council for Equality between Women and Men published a guide entitled *Towards a public communication without gender stereotypes*. Among other things, the guide includes the following recommendation, applied by the textbook: 'The dot can be used alternatively by composing the word as follows: word root + masculine suffix + dot + feminine suffix' (2015:27). The end of the guide displays tables of examples, using the dot (see Figure 4).

#### Figure 4

The publication of this guide did not trigger the slightest controversy, and was even adopted by over a hundred of local, regional or even national authorities (including the National Assembly, and several ministries<sup>6</sup>). So, what happened between 2015 and 2017 to make the term and the forms it designates such a sensitive topic?

In 2016, a communication agency, Mots-Clés (meaning 'key words'), published a *Handbook of inclusive writing*. The publication of the 30-pages handbook was simultaneous with the registration of a verbal patent, on September 23, 2016, about the term 'inclusive writing', enregistered at the National Institute of Industrial Property. Following the publication of the handbook and the patent, the agency sold (and still sells)

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2017/10/16/finalement-jean-michel-blanquer-est-contre-lecriture-inclusive-dans-les-manuels-scolaires\\_a\\_23244490/](https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2017/10/16/finalement-jean-michel-blanquer-est-contre-lecriture-inclusive-dans-les-manuels-scolaires_a_23244490/)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/textes/115b3922\\_proposition-loi#](https://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/dyn/15/textes/115b3922_proposition-loi#)

<sup>3</sup> <https://francais.rt.com/france/84316-valerie-pecresse-se-dit-contre-ecriture-inclusive-interdire-region-idf>

<sup>4</sup> These two bills are not voted at the time this paper is written.

<sup>5</sup> [https://pdf.editions-hatier.fr/Manuel\\_Magellan\\_CE2\\_.pdf](https://pdf.editions-hatier.fr/Manuel_Magellan_CE2_.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.haut-conseil-egalite.gouv.fr/stereotypes-et-roles-sociaux/actualites/article/liste-des-signataires-de-la-convention-d-engagement-pour-une-communication>

training and professional support about inclusive writing for business companies in the form of introductory workshops or editorial content writing.

In its preamble, the handbook defines inclusive writing as the feminization of job titles (mainly based on the proposals made by the linguist Anne-Marie Houdebine in the 1980s), and the avoidance of the generic masculine. The handbook also promotes the typographic use of the mid-dot (*point médian*). The mid-dot is a typographic sign: · that has been used in French feminist circles for a long time. While it is difficult to track its precise origin in French, traces of it can be found as early as the 2000s (Author a). Speakers interviewed in 2008 said that they use it because it is legible, discreet, and dedicated to this use, unlike the hyphen or the standard dot (Author c).

The agency's choice of the expression 'inclusive writing', among a broad range of existing expressions referring to feminist and queer language practices<sup>7</sup>, seeks to diminish the activist/political meaning of a feminist intervention, and the choice of the mid-dot allows to promote a form perceived as new, and therefore likely to be polemical<sup>8</sup>. It is thus paradoxically with a term intended to be 'non-political' that the polemic was triggered.

One month after the Hatier textbook fuss, in October 2017, the Mots-Clés agency commissioned an opinion poll from the company Harris interactive, entitled 'Does the French population know about inclusive writing? What opinion does it have?'. The survey seems to consecrate the success of the controversy: 41% of respondents say they have heard of it, and among them 75% say they are in favor of it.

As we can see, the controversy is not spontaneous and can be explained - at least partially - by a communication effort from the world of marketing, in a context of gender liberalization (Boltanski and Chiappello 2011; Ahmed 2012; Author b).

However, this explanation may attribute too much influence to a sole agency communication, and hide other sociopolitical factors. Indeed, in 2017 the right-wing liberal party La République en Marche both won the Presidency of Republic and the majority in the Parliament, initiating a new ideological sequence, mixing liberal and conservative positions, including about gender and sexualities issues. Above all, the main political turn consisted in the elaboration of a new nationalist-liberal discursive formation, based on the narrative of *La République*.

Before focusing on this republican turn and its consequences for feminist issues, we need to situate the meaning of *inclusive writing* and *inclusion* in a broader socio-historical frame.

## 2. Genealogy of inclusive writing: A transnational itinerary

The first scientific reference mobilizing the notion of inclusion that I can track is published in 1976, in English. It is a research report reviewing the new terminological tools proposed by the US Department of Labor for job titles, entitled 'Sexism and Social Change', by Berger and Kachuck<sup>9</sup>. The term *inclusive writing* or *language* does not appear as such. The authors speak of a *term* as being inclusive or not for women: 'From the feminist perspective, not only is the generic term man not inclusive of women on an equal plane with men but the frequency with which jobs are listed as male forms, such as foreman and master intentionally excluded women in fact as well as form' (Berger and Kachuk 1976:4). The term inclusion, related to language, later appears in three publications (DeStefano 1979; Todd-Mancillas and Meyers 1980; Flanagan and Todd-Mancillas 1982).

So far, 'inclusive' is one of the possible feminist variations to name the issue of linguistic representation of gender, discussed by linguists and feminists since the late 1970s and 1980s. But this specific term was not coined by linguists, but theologians. In 1978, *Theology Today* published a paper entitled 'An Inclusive Biblical Anthropology' (Collins 1978). Here again, the expression 'inclusive language' or 'inclusive writing' does not appear as such. It was not until 1983, with the publication of *The Inclusive Language Lectionary*, published by the National Council of Churches, that brings together Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, African

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<sup>7</sup> To give a few examples in French: *antisexisme linguistique* ; *démasculinisation* ; *féminisation* ; *langage inclusif* ; *neutralisation* ; *parité linguistique* ; *rédaction épïcène* ; *rédaction non-sexiste*, etc.

<sup>8</sup> France's French speakers have a very conservative relation to language. This feeling is fed by the authoritative voices about language (Académie Française, media, school, some grammarians) explaining why anything new regarding language is potentially polemical in French.

<sup>9</sup> In order to recount the circulation of inclusive writing, I did a systematic search on Google Scholar, with the quote-marked keyword: « écriture inclusive », and its derivative (« langage inclusif »), in French and English. I did the search yearly, starting in 1970. I checked if the occurrence concerned gender inclusion. This methodology limits the results to whatever Google considers as scholar literature. However this is the more precise method I found.

American and Evangelical churches in the United States.<sup>10</sup> It is a reformed lectionary, that is, a liturgical book that contains passages from religious texts, intended to be read in religious ceremonies. It is the first one of a long series of inclusive texts, recommendations, reflections, or commentaries on inclusiveness in religious language, for example:

Withers, B. A. (1985). Inclusive Language and Religious Education. *Religious Education*, 80(4).

Schreck, N. and Leach, M. (compilers). (1986). *Psalms Anew: In Inclusive Language*. Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press.

Hardesty, N. (1987). *Inclusive Language in the Church*. Louisville: John Knox Press.

In 1992, a new *Revised Standard Version of the Bible* was published under the supervision of Reverend Bruce M. Metzger. The central questions raised by this discussion are, for example, in Nancy Hardesty (1987):

- Is God male?
- Did God become man or human in Christ
- Is Jesus a man's man?
- Can a male savior save women?
- If Christianity is a sexist religion, do women have a place in it?
- Should the gospel be inclusive?
- Who are the scriptures for?
- Whose god is god?

Some evangelists also link the notion of inclusion to that of diversity: 'the diversity that is evident in God's miraculous creation' (*Policy of Inclusive Language in the Life and Ministry of the Community of Christ* 2008). Inclusion primarily concerns women, but also any minority. Hardesty lists: 'On a human level, an effort to use more inclusive language makes us aware not only of our sexism, but also of our racism, elitism, nationalism, classism, ageism, homophobia, and all our other prejudices' (1987:15). It should be noted that while Hardesty mentions homophobia here, this is rarely the case. Most texts expand inclusion beyond gender to class, race, and sometimes even family patterns (e.g., childless couples), but sexuality is, for the most part, the main absentee of this inclusion.

This Protestant enthusiasm for inclusive language is thus reflected in the academic production in theology, as well as in a large number of books, press articles or religious bulletins in the 1980s. At the same time, feminists and/or English-speaking linguists were also debating female designation and female speech, but not necessarily in terms of inclusion.

This protestant origin of inclusive writing is confirmed by the data of Daniel Elmiger (2020), who collected nearly 1,200 gender-fair language guides in nearly 30 languages. Of the English guides, three of the first four guides using 'inclusive language' are from the religious (Protestant) field (1981, 1989 and 1997).

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The 2008 *Policy of Inclusive Language in the Life and Ministry of the Community of Christ*, which has large tables full of examples and is quite well documented from a linguistic perspective, is a good example of this production. Recommendations to make language more inclusive are:

- Change the designation of human referents (*person* or *human* instead of *man*, neutral pronoun, *woman* instead of *girl* for an adult, etc. ) ;
- Avoid stereotypes in metaphors;
- Avoid masculine references to believers and God: 'References to God need not be limited to "Father" and "Lord".' 152 alternative terminology proposals for naming God are provided in the appendix, including for example *Rainbow God* and *Technicolor God*;
- Avoid substantivisation. For example, say *a person who uses a wheelchair* or *a person with a learning disability*, not *a disabled person*;
- Eliminate words or expressions that perpetuate 'isms' (ageism, sexism, nationalism . . . ) ;
- Avoid manly images and metaphors of God: 'the overuse of the 'language of domination' (e.g., Master and King) limits the infinite nature of God.

North American English-speaking Protestant theology has thus been an important ground for the promotion and dissemination of the notion of inclusive language.

These issues of gender representation in religious texts are also present in Jewish and Muslim theology. Judith Plaskow, a Jewish feminist theologian, testifies that this issue was discussed in Judaism at the same period: 'A packed session in 1975 "The feminist Transformation of Religious studies" [... examined] the paradigm shift from an androcentric to an inclusive model of humanity' (2014:30). This question of in-

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<sup>10</sup> Some texts mention a *Policy of Inclusive Language* published by The World Church in 1978, but I did not find it

clusion has been discussed since the constitution of liberal Judaism in the eighteenth century in the United States and Canada, and since the very beginning of the twentieth century in France (interview with Pauline Bebe, the first woman to become a rabbi in France), with legal, grammatical and discursive aspects. For the legal aspect, theologian scholar Noémie Benchimol writes:

Judaism, as a juridical religion whose canonical text is written in casuistic form, constantly raises the issue of the scope of the laws: who is included in such and such a rule and who is not. Insofar as it is also a religion which, in its rabbinic form, developed as a religion of interpretation, the question of language is obviously central. This means that one of the questions par excellence of rabbinic Judaism will be to know whether a plural formulation of the biblical text includes women, children, intersex persons (*androgynos*) or persons of indeterminate sex (*tumtum*), whether a masculine formulation can in fact include women, etc. (...). In a sense, the matter of inclusion, because it is a matter of ethics and of law, has always been at the heart of Judaism. (interview with Noémie Benchimol)

The grammatical issue comes from the consonantal character of Hebrew and the vocalization of the grammatical gender: 'In the Sephardic liturgy, the prayer book speaks of God and to God both in the feminine and in the masculine' (interview with Noémie Benchimol). Finally, from a discursive point of view, Bebe highlights two major Jewish feminist issues: the inclusion of matriarchs alongside patriarchs, and attention to the place of women in the language of prayer (interview with Pauline Bebe). In this sense, the use of the most neutral language possible is important to address God in the most neutral way possible. These questions are very similar to those raised by Nancy Hardesty in Protestantism.

For Islam, feminist analyses of theology, such as those of the Malaysian *Sisters in Islam* in the 1980, developed an inclusive Islam, able to take into account the difficulties of all Muslims. Amina Wadud (2009) developed a *Gender Inclusive Qur'anic Analysis* to 'supports the Muslim gay and lesbian and progressive movements that have developed first in the United States, Canada, and South Africa since the late 1990s' (Latte Abdallah 2013:226). Stéphanie Latte Abdallah shows that 'in European and American democracies, the issues at stake was to put at the center minorities and the fight against discrimination, either "racial"<sup>11</sup> in the United States, immigration in Europe, or sexual. The question of sexuality, and particularly of minority sexualities and sexual identities (homosexuality, transidentity), has given rise to the intellectual and militant concept of inclusiveness' (Latte Abdallah 2013: 226).

Furthermore, critical theologians have investigate the correlation between authoritarianism and Islamic legal norm setting, (Latte Abdallah, 2013:224). This 'liberation theology' (Latte Abdallah 2013) takes shape through hermeneutics (Riyani and Ismael 2017). Authors such as Asma Barlas (2002) or Wadud (2009) show that Muslim feminist hermeneutics discusses the meaning of *Tawhid* (the oneness of God) and from there, applies *ijtihad* (the effort of interpretation) on the equality of humans among themselves (interview with Hanane Karimi). While the discussion is not formulated for Islamic feminist theology in terms of 'inclusive language', we see that the notion of inclusion is at its center, as does the matter of text interpretation re-appropriation.

Catholicism is the only monotheism to resist inclusion through language. In the United States, the Catholic Church tried to address the issue of inclusion that was agitating the Protestant world. In 1992, the U.S. Church submitted to the Vatican its *New Lectionary*, with inclusive language. As with other Christians, inclusion should serve to include on the basis of gender, but also on the basis of race, ethnic background, age and personal abilities. While they clearly distance themselves from feminism, the challenge of inclusive language for these bishops was fourfold:

1. Following Vatican 2 and the shift to the vernacular liturgy, it was a matter of developing a more integrated Catholicism: 'Inclusive language is simply a recognition of contemporary culture and the changes in the English language'. (Bishop Donald Trautman, quoted in *Word on Worship* 1997:1).<sup>12</sup>
2. There is also a propaganda issue: 'When women are not named specifically, they are excluded from full participation. This diminishes the church. It is a problem for the whole church' (*Word on Worship* 1997:6).
3. It is as well to keep control of the texts: 'The longer the confirmation of the new Lectionary is delayed, the greater difficulty we will have in preventing people from changing biblical texts on the basis of their own personal likes and dislikes' (*Word on Worship* 1997:6).
4. Finally, mentioning women is a guarantee of heterosexuality: "Called to consecrate themselves with undivided heart to the Lord and to the affairs of the Lord, they (the ordained ministers of the Latin

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<sup>11</sup> The quotation marks are from the original text. Here racial and immigration issues are named according to the respective terminology within which the discussion took roots in the different national contexts and languages.

<sup>12</sup> *Word on Worship* is the Archdiocese of Newark (New Jersey) bulletin. Quotations are from the special issue 15(1) about inclusive language.

church) give themselves entirely to God and to men.” This is a most unfortunate translation in view of pedophile behavior in our society. This is not the language to promote celibacy in the contemporary culture of the United States.’ (*Word on Worship* 1997:6). In a usual confusion for the Church between pedophilia and homosexuality, using inclusive writing and thus integrating women also keep away the possibility of male-to-male relationships.

This US’s use of the Bible in inclusive language was first accepted by the Vatican in 1992, before being rejected in 1994, notably by to-be Pope Benedict 16<sup>th</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

Garbagnoli and Prearo (2017) have clearly shown how the Vatican changed its argumentative repertoire in recent decades, to adapt to contemporary discursive formations. But in spite of this argumentative rebranding, and in spite of the discursive softening of homophobia that Pope Francis is carrying out, the Catholic Church as a political institution keeps a strong tendency towards misogyny and a particularly virulent homophobia, as well as a control of texts and vocabulary that prevent the adoption of an inclusive language.<sup>13</sup>

Note, nevertheless, that since November 2020, the Vatican allows inclusive writing in the new French translation (from France) of the missal, the prayer book, by replacing *mes frères* (‘my brothers’) by *mes frères et sœurs* (‘my brothers and sisters’) and that the Catholic Church of Quebec pursues ‘an effort to awaken all Christians and more particularly priests, to inclusive language and that, on occasion, they propose formulations that respect both the French language and the inclusive style for diocesan publications’.<sup>14</sup>

The first reference I found in French for the expression ‘langage inclusif’ is in Canadian theology (Gourgues 1987).<sup>15</sup> Two years later, Canadians Dumais and Roy published a book of feminist theology (1989), including a chapter on inclusive language. The following year, in 1990, three references appeared mentioning inclusive language, all of which were from Quebec theology. In 1991, a theological article is published in France.

The first non-theologian occurrence in French I found is an article by the Quebec feminist linguist Hélène Dumais, ‘For a gender of its own’ in *Recherches féministes* (1992). She discusses the profusion of terms, testifying that in the early 1990s Canada, the debates were already vivid: ‘How does one come to facilitate gender-neutral writing workshops? Workshops on what? feminizing texts? writing with both genders? inclusive language? desexing? These are some of the questions that frequently arise on the subject.’ (Dumais 1992:169).

However, in France, the use of the term remained very marginal until mid-2010s. A search of Daniel Elmiger’s collection of French-language guides (2020) confirms the theological trend. Similar to English, the first appearance of a guide for ‘inclusive language’ in French comes from the Swiss Protestant Aid: *Principes pour l’utilisation du langage inclusif à l’EPER* (Entraide Protestante Suisse 1999).

It is only since 2016 that non-religious French-speaking guides start using the inclusive paradigm. But inclusion remains poorly represented: of the 71 Canadian guides, only 4 speak of inclusive language or writing. And of the 146 French-speaking guides from all years and all countries, only 28 choose the notion of inclusiveness (less than 1 in 5). Except two, they are all published since 2016.

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The main points of this analysis are:

1. The term was first anchored in English, then quickly moved on to French-speaking Canada, and then to the North Francophonie.
2. Despite a constant use in French and Swiss theology, inclusive writing did not have the same echo in the European Francophonie than in the American Francophonie or in English.
3. There is a very little prescriptive use of « inclusive writing » through language guides.
- 4.

### 3. The inclusion paradigm

To understand this differentiation in spreading and why inclusive writing was little used in France at first, and then became highly controversial, I propose to discuss the broader ideological paradigm of inclusion.

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<sup>13</sup> There are, however, Catholic associations that claim to be inclusive. Most of the time, they are LGBT Christian associations.

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ecdq.org/pastorale/solidarite/condition-des-femmes/le-langage-inclusif/>

<sup>15</sup> For this section, I conducted an exhaustive Google Scholar search of the terms ‘inclusive writing’ and ‘inclusive language’, year by year, between 1978 and 2020. I collected 148 references, which I sorted by discipline, year, and place of publication.

### 3.1 Incompatible inclusions

In Quebec, the history of inclusion is connected to the Fédération des femmes du Québec, that has a tradition of interfaith collaboration and solidarity between Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish middle and upper class women (Ricci 2017:105). Prior to the Quiet Revolution<sup>16</sup>, faith-based organizations were major venues for women's meetings and organizing (*ibid*). This vision of religions as communities made it possible, on the one hand, to think of social categories as communities and, on the other hand, to reproach the Women's Federation with the criticism of not representing equally all communities.

With the 1970s, and the diversification of immigration, the debate was rephrased in terms of integration, and diversity, in a pluralist vocabulary: “ ‘respect for differences’, ‘equality and solidarity among all members of society’, and the ‘double oppression’ that Indigenous women were suffering. This inclusive discourse reconnected with the origins of the FFQ [Fédération des Femmes du Québec], which wanted to bring together all Quebec women regardless of ethnic, religious, or linguistic origin’ (Ricci 2017:117).

Quebec inclusion is therefore about including diversity in representation; it is a pluralism. Inclusion is not only about women, but about all racialized communities, and to a lesser extent about minorities of class, sexuality, rurality and indigenous women.

Contemporary developments of the notion of inclusion in Quebec feminism make it almost tantamount to intersectionality. Lépinard speaks of ‘intersectional inclusion’ (2015:153). Feminism as an activism must be inclusive of minorities of race, class, sexualities, Indigenous and rural people, but also sex workers, and trans women (Fourment, 2021). Combining Foucauldian and materialist conceptions of power, materialist queer feminists operate an equivalence between included/excluded and dominant/dominated:

‘The excluded are the minority pole of several oppressions (categories used by activists):

- patriarchy (male/female)
- heteronormativity (heterosexual/homosexual)
- cis-sexism (cisgender/trans)
- capitalism (bourgeois/popular)
- racism (white/racial)
- colonialism (non-native/indigenous)
- capability (without / with physical or mental disability)
- grossophobia (thin/fat, voluptuous)’ (Fourment, 2021: 378-379)

In France, the notion of *inclusion* is ‘very compatible with the republican model of integration’ (Vadot 2017:174). The notion is first found in the field of disability, and then ‘was “imported” into the field of migration’ (interview with Vadot), especially regarding education. The opposition of inclusion is *discrimination*, but never *exclusion*. This inclusion without exclusion reveals a republican discourse: it is an inclusion without outside, where everyone must be included *as individual*. If there is exclusion, it is then through the attribution of a non-status, as described by Butler in her work on stateless people (Butler and Spivak 2007).

In the history of French feminism, inclusion has mainly meant ‘the political inclusion of women’. In the early 1990s, claims for inclusion take the shape of parity. The context was an undermined republican universalism, a crisis of political legitimacy, and simultaneously a hardening of the discourse on the republic. As Bereni showed (2007), parity partisans reclaimed for the inclusion of women in the abstract figure of the citizen, and as such opened the Pandora's box of particular claims. Therefore, to include women, the pro-parity feminists presented their claim not as a derogation but as a reinforcement of universalism. For this purpose, they distinguished gender from other social relations, based on three arguments:

- a statistical argument: women are not a minority group but half of humanity;
- a technical argument: the boundaries of the group are clearly defined by permanent characteristics;
- an anthropological argument: sexual bi-categorization is a universal characteristic of humanity

By defining gender not as a social relationship but as a category, they made it the only acceptable distinction in universalism (Bereni 2007). This worked because the French republican model operates on a paradox combining universalism and differentialism:

On the one hand, the French political model, based on a constructivist view of the community of citizens (created in part through the Republican public school), was presumed to be opposed to the tradition of individualistic liberalism, in which the State plays a minimal role. On the other hand, the French model was allegedly contrary to “communitarianism” (“communautarisme”) and “mul-

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<sup>16</sup> The Quiet Revolution is a political period in Quebec that spans the 1960s. It was a time of political, cultural, intellectual and economic change. The Quebec government began a liberal-democratic turn, during which it developed a public education and hospital system, nationalized energy, etc. Ideologically, a left-wing sovereigntism spread, coexisting with an important critical production in the artistic and intellectual fields.



ticulturalism”, since it is based on a strict separation between “society” and “politics”, and recognizes only citizens in the abstract. (Bereni 2007).

This republican paradoxical definition of *community* enlightens the success of the notion of inclusion, which consists of including women as women in a community of abstract (universalist) male figures:

By calling for the inclusion of sex at the very heart of the definition of citizenship [the gendering of abstract individuals], paritarians would escape the ‘dilemma of difference’: they distinguish themselves, on one hand, from the traditional universalist conception that does not recognize sex as a political category, and, on the other hand, from a ‘participatory’ vision of inclusion, which would consist in calling for the representation of women *as* women (Scott, quoted by Bereni 2005:222).

We see in these arguments that inclusion is not an inclusion to the republic, nor to a particular community, but inclusion to universalism, to the abstract subject of universalism.

Eléonore Lépinard sums up the French and Quebec readings:

The official Canadian policy of multiculturalism (...) has meant the rejection of assimilation and the valorization of cultural diversity. In contrast, the French ‘republican model’ promotes a philosophy of integration, emphasizing a shared, national culture rather than pluralism, an abstract concept of citizenship, indifference to color, and the civic and cultural assimilation of migrants as well as religious minorities (Lépinard 2015:154-155).

However, in France, the republican claim for inclusion to the universal citizen was fiercely contradicted by another republican narrative.

### **3.2. The gender-language-nation nexus**

The study of linguistic ideologies has largely shown how political, linguistic and sometimes nationalistic identities are constantly overlapping (Laroussi 2003; Duchêne 2008; Jaffe 2008; among others). Empires and ex-empires frequently rely on language as a nationalist argument. This association between language and nation is particularly vivid in France where speakers are impregnated with the narrative of the language as a vector of national unity since the French Revolution, contributing to link the idea of the French language with that of the French nation. Thus, speaking French would mean being French, and being French would mean speaking French. Nowadays, this linguistic nationalism takes the form of a linguistic republicanism, anchored by legislative measures, such as the Molière clause (2017), which made the use of French compulsory for construction workers, or, earlier, the Toubon law (1994), intended to ‘protect the French linguistic heritage’. The French linguistic republicanism is also regularly illustrated by language-related moral panics – about SMS language, or the decrease of orthography skills – which sparkle in the media and social networks. Interestingly, these moral panics overstep the border, as in 2018, when Belgium proposed to abandon an absurdly complicated grammatical rules of agreement (mainly concerning the written word<sup>17</sup>). A certain number of French politicians and media were outraged that another country could rule about what written French could be, revealing their perception of France, as the political authority responsible of the French language.

In addition, work on gender and postcolonialism has largely shown how the colonial order, the nationalist order, and the gender order lean against each other (see Ranchod-Nilsson and Tetreault 2000; Puar 2007; Nandy 2009; Stoler 2010, Singh 2017 among others), in an entanglement between blood and sex (Haraway 1995). Speaking of postcolonialism should not obscure the fact that this endorsement takes place not only in so-called postcolonial spaces in the sense of formerly colonized places, but in a postcolonial world as a whole, in the sense that every national space is now shaped by the global history of colonialism.

This association between gender and colonialism has been well-documented by the critical scholars working on orientalism. Shepard (2018) shows how the colonial gaze has hypersexualised colonised Arabic men. The partisans of French Algeria described Algerian independence, a political event, through sexuality: Algerian hypervirility was opposed to a crisis of French masculinity, thought to be the cause of the defeat in Algeria. The extreme right then presents itself as the possibility of restoring a virile authority, while May 68 presented as an « effeminate farce » led by « pretty boys » or « dandies ». The connection allowed the far-right to link their racist fight against the « Arab invasion » with their fight against the « leftists ». (Gobin 2018).

In 2010s Hong Kong, double narratives emerge in the context of a double colonisation (from the British Empire and the Popular Republic of China). In these discourses, Chinese women crossing the border to give birth in Hong Kong are represented as invading locusts, evoking a biblical scourge destroying the territory. Women, and especially women as breeder, are described as standard-bearer of the Chinese government

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<sup>17</sup> The proposal was to abandon the gender and number agreement of the past participle in the cases where the participle’s object is placed ahead of the «avoir » (have) auxiliary

carrying in their bellies the coloniser-to-come. Women as responsible of filiation are held responsible of cultural impurity (Author b).

This gender-nation nexus is also at stake in dynamics of femnationalism, as described by Farris (2017). U.S. wars on Irak and Afghanistan are regularly given as paradigmatic examples of wars « in the name of women ». In France, recurring controversies about the ban of hijab (which almost systematically occurred simultaneously with pension reforms) arise in the name of « women liberation » according to French values, and a more recent polemics erupted about the ban of crop-top for girls at high school, with the Minister of Education calling for a Republican outfits, connecting again the control of women's body to the Republic.

These two nexus, respectively language-nation and gender-nation, activate a new gender-nation-language nexus, within which language is expected to war nationalism and gender (moral) order. This explains why the French government considers useful to take position about the naming of women. The bills mentioned above aiming at banning inclusive writing are a good example of opposing feminist practices in the name of the nation. In the second paragraph, the text of the first bill reminds us that, according to the French Constitution, 'the language of the Republic is French'. Given that it is impossible to affirm that inclusive writing is another language than French, this deputy means here that inclusive writing is not 'good French', making a connection, which is by no means obvious, between linguistic standard and political sovereignty, but also drawing a link with gender, mentioned here as 'the existence of a feminine form'. We find another illustration of this linkage in a column by Robert Redecker in *FigaroVox*, the forum of the right-wing newspaper *Le Figaro*: 'Inclusive writing intends to make invisible what language makes visible: the nation'.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Education Minister Blanquer tweeted in 2017 (with an unfortunate echo): 'There is one French language, one grammar, one Republic' in order to oppose inclusive writing.

The advertising campaign #LaFrancophonieAvecElles of the International Organisation of Francophonie illustrates another pole of this gender-language-nation yoke (see Figure 7). This is an example of feminist diplomacy articulating gender and language, in a femnationalist way. If the nationalist dimension is less explicit at first glance, one must think of the strong postcolonial dimension of the Francophonie (Barneth-Nouailhetas 2010; Moura 2014). Francophonie – as a tool for France's influence on its former empire through language – resorts to the issue of women, which then serves as an instrument for evaluating the domestic policies of the various countries where France may intervene. This is an illustration of the gender narratives of neoliberal humanitarianism (Giametta 2016).

### Figure 7

This contemporary linguistic nationalism is shaped by the revival of republican ideology in 1980s and 1990s France. Bereni (2007:12) identifies various geopolitical, socio-ideological, cultural, and situational dimensions involved in this revival:

- the collapse of the Soviet bloc,
- the decline of left-wing ideologies,
- the bicentennial of the French revolution,
- the decline of national sovereignty in a context of economic globalization and the construction of Europe,
- the crisis of the French 'integration model',
- and the rise of the far right.

Inclusion is then both a republican claim by paritarian feminists and a threat for the nationalist republicanism, blurring the social meaning of inclusive writing. If inclusive writing indexes left-wing stance and activism (Burnett and Pozniak 2021), it also keeps a tumultuous relation with the Republic itself and universalism, because the gender-language-nation nexus has both a conservative and a liberal version.

## Conclusions: A Queer Feminist Materialist Critique of Inclusion

In the interlanguage (English/French) and transatlantic (North America/Europe) movement, several meanings of inclusion circulate and collide, from theological inclusion of female believers to queer materialist intersectionality, to republican inclusion to the universalist subject and to contemporary accusations of inclusive writing as exclusive. The controversy is thus to be understood as mobilising these different (and sometimes contradictory) meanings, more or less overtly.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/redeker-d-un-point-de-vue-civilisationnel-l-ecriture-inclusive-est-comparable-a-la-destruction-des-paysages-20210413>

Feminist linguistic practices of all kinds have existed since the 1970s, and inclusion is originally its religious version. The notion then made its way into the English-speaking world alongside related notions such as *gender-fair language* or *gender-neutral language*. In the American French-speaking world, it slowly spread alongside ‘feminization’ or ‘non-sexist language’ etc. and eventually met the claims for intersectionality. In Europe, however, the arrival of inclusive writing has been far more dramatic. In order to understand the successes and failures of the notion of inclusive writing in France, it is necessary to scrutinize *the political paradigm of inclusion*, and the ideological nexus it implies, such as the link between exclusion and domination in Quebec, or the rehabilitation of republicanism, linking gender, language and nation in France.

Indeed, while in Quebec, the term is a quasi-synonym of intersectionality, in France, the political paradigm of inclusion - through demands for parity - has sought to include women in the notion of universal citizenship. More broadly, inclusion involves an association between the subjects to be included: the women, the disabled, and sometimes the foreigners, enlightening the paradoxes of universalism.

The bet taken by a communications agency to bank on this term illustrates that the notion of inclusiveness is audible in the contemporary French political space, although or because a republican revival. But if this inclusion *à la française* is part of a republican reading, the republic does not necessarily return the favour. The fierce opposition to inclusive writing on the part of Republicans from the conservative right as well as sometimes the liberal right (but also from the sovereigntist left and the extreme right), shows two things: on the one hand, these questions (and more broadly gender issues) are nowadays sufficiently audible for it to be necessary to take a stand on them, and on the other hand, the republican origins of inclusion are no longer audible, or at least are in some way blurred by the circulation of meanings. *Écriture inclusive* is indeed a *formula*.

However, inclusion seems to fail in all respects to challenge relations of domination. We have seen how its republican anchoring has become opaque. Moreover, the French field of inclusion, as well as diversity, is a place of commodification of gender issues. In 1990, Butler already warned about the commodification of queer: ‘subversive performances always run the risk of becoming deadening clichés through their repetition and, most importantly, through their repetition within commodity culture where “subversion” carries market value’ (1990: xxi). More recently, Sara Ahmed writes about diversity: ‘The rising use of diversity language reflects the spread of a US managerial discourse (...) The shift to the language of diversity could thus be interpreted in market terms: diversity has a commercial value and can be used not only as a way to sell the university, but also to turn it into a market’ (Ahmed 2012). Inclusion in its ‘inclusive writing’ form is an easily marketable product. Feminist practices of language have therefore been commodified through inclusive writing.

The debates around inclusive writing in France thus reflect a paradoxical liberal-conservative political moment, which sees both a strengthening of Republicanism and a commodification of gender issues. In a global market of meanings, and just like diversity, inclusivity has a commercial value, not only to sell the storytelling of liberal progressivism, but also to directly sell the techniques of inclusive writing (the patent on *écriture inclusive* being a striking illustration of this). Some republican discourses try to appropriate it while others strongly reject it in the name of the republic.

This debate around inclusive writing is then extremely sensitive:

- 1) Because it relies on the gender-language-nation nexus
- 2) Because it occurs in a paradoxical ideological moment,
- 3) Because it touches on the republican question
- 4) Even though its critical power is almost nil.

It seems then that a materialist and queer feminist critique must abandon the notion of inclusion and inclusive writing. Faced with a republican conservatism hostile to the modification of the order of language as of the order of the world, and faced with a liberalization of gender that invests the linguistic signs of feminism to empty them of their emancipatory force, it remains perhaps then for feminism, as often, to come back to the disruption, to the turmoil and to the eccentricity in order to produce the unreadable as a political practice of grammar. If emancipation means abandoning the status of minority (Rancière 2008), then it is necessary to emancipate ourselves much more than to be included.

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Author b  
Author c

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