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Anthropologies in/of the Black Mediterranean

Popular Culture, Identity and Creativity
across the Afro-European matrix

Abstract: This article draws on ethnographic elements collected in the heterogeneous field of African music and dance in France and French-speaking Switzerland, as well as on a previous literature on popular travelling music and dance genres between African and European cities. It participates in an ongoing conversation about the concept of the Black Mediterranean, and insists on its relevance to analyse migrations, cross-cultural formations and postcolonial conversations taking place between some European countries and their former colonies through popular music and dance productions. Ethnography and history of travelling music and dance genres leads to approach the Black Mediterranean as both a borderland of racial violence and inequalities, and a web of cultural signs, transactions, and practices that connect the African continent and European cities. This transcontinental matrix participates in reconfiguring the representations of Africanity, Blackness and Afropenianity in ambiguous and multifaceted ways.

Keywords: Black Mediterranean, identity, migration, popular music and dance, sabar, Senegal

A Saturday afternoon at a dancing studio in the quiet city of Lausanne. Located in a former factory, the large and sober room is decorated with three wooden benches and a few yoga mats covered by wax-print fabrics. Two dozen people of different ages have taken off their shoes and are sitting waiting for the performance to begin. The duet performing that day unites two female dancers (Kudy and R.), both of Congolese origin, with a Swiss music producer (Themrok). The piece is called 'Kosakana' – from a lingala word meaning 'having fun' – and addresses the issues of games and childhood memories stored in the body. From kids' tricks to adult competition, both dancers' movements represent the pleasure of ball games, double-dutch, dressing up, hide and seek, or hopscotch, while progressively revealing the hazardous growth to adulthood and the entrance into a world of anxiety, alienation, competition and judgement.

Kosakana is a contemporary dance piece. Yet as the performance goes on, the dancers include gestures stemming from different African repertoires that they incorporate or alternate with their own favourite style: contemporary on the one hand, house and hip-hop on the other. In the first part of their duet, they perform *ndombolo* waist movements to refer to the ludic and playful time of childhood. Later on, Kudy executes several turns and wide arm motions, recalling sabar Senegalese dance.



Previously characterised as a female circle dance, sabar is now taught in several cities of Europe and Switzerland as part of the market for 'African dances'. Kudy has been practising this dance over the last four years through weekly classes with a Senegalese instructor named Mbaye Sall. It is at these sessions where we met, and where she became a friend and research participant, as I was myself conducting a four-year research project on sabar migrations.

In the contemporary creation I discover that day, Kudy partly diverges from the traditional codes of sabar and from what Mbaye Sall and other sabar artists teach during dance classes. For instance, she dissociates gestures from the musical rhythms typically associated with sabar and integrates them into this original piece, alongside other African and urban dance movements she has encountered along her journey.

In the last part of their performance, deliverance from the constraints and alienation of adulthood is sonically shaped through the appearance of a famous music track named 'Likolo'.¹ This song is actually the product of a collaboration between Fally Ipupa, the Congolese international icon of the new rumba generation, and Ninho, a famous French hip-hop artist born in France but also of Congolese descent. Emblematic of the current tendency among French rappers to assert their African origins and to introduce African music, dance and languages into their beats, music videos and lyrics, the song contrasts with the rest of the musical design of Kosakana: it is not an original piece composed for the duet, but a mainstream track that immediately evokes its roots in urban Congolese and Afro-diasporic popular music currently in vogue among French 'urban' music.² It loops in the dancers' expressions and gestures as a moment of release, pleasurable fun and memory, accompanied by *ndombolo* step tricks and pelvis rotations.

This short description of an event that took place in an urban Swiss dance studio aggregates several signs, sounds, gestures, emotions, images and experiences travelling over the transnational space that I intend to address in this article through the idea of the Black Mediterranean. Initially coined by literature scholar Alessandra Di Maio in 2012, the notion of a Black Mediterranean was recently underpinned by a number of academics working on Southern European societies, particularly in the domain of literature and geography (Di Maio 2021; Gilroy 2021; Hawthorne 2022; Proglione et al 2021). This literature – which I survey in the first part of my article – has allowed to envisage the long-length cultural proximities between Southern European and African societies, the atrocities encountered by migrants in their journeys across the Mediterranean, the necropolitics (Mbembe 2019) of European borders, and the fragmented experience of Blackness and citizenship in Europe.

My article participates in an ongoing conversation about the heuristic power of this concept and its possible redefinition to analyse migrations, cross-cultural formations and postcolonial conversations taking place between some European countries and their former colonies through popular music and dance productions. By drawing on the example of sabar and other music and dance genres travelling between Africa and Europe, I show how these genres all testify and contribute to a common Afro-European matrix of (im)mobilities, attempts to reverse postcolonial inequalities, and requalify Blackness, Africanity and ethnicity.

My understanding of this matrix, which I address with the concept of the Black Mediterranean, furthers the notion of the 'Black Atlantic' elaborated by Paul Gilroy

(1993) to discuss travelling identity-making in the Black diaspora and its connection with a history of triangular mobilities inherited from slavery and transatlantic Middle-Passage. One of Paul Gilroy's seminal insights in *The Black Atlantic* was his critique of both essentialist and anti-essentialist views on Black diasporic identity formations as well as the way in which he opened a breach for considerations of the making of Black identities through transnational exchanges, memories and mobilities, while underlining the importance of music in this process. Nevertheless, this concept has been criticised for its blindness to Africa's contemporary role in making the Black Atlantic, and for the obliviousness of this Atlantic-centred vision to other spaces of Black identities (Chrisman 2003; Piot 2001; Zeleza 2005).

In this article, I elaborate on this perspective in order to build an anthropological comprehension of Black *and* African matrixes of identifications created through the consumption and production of popular culture over the Black Mediterranean by following the trans-local anchoring of these practices in both African and European socio-political contexts (Aterianus-Owanga et al 2022; Greiner and Sakdapolrak 2013). By doing so, I expand on a rich anthropological literature which underlined the interest of investigating maritime and oceanic spaces to challenge area studies and understand the discrete formation of travelling imaginaries, memories, cultural networks and identifications (Bromberger 2006; Mahieddin 2018; Sykes & Byl 2023). Focusing on maritime spaces then serves as a means to complement the existing rich literature that has approached Afro-diasporic formations in terms of 'Black Europe' (Hine et al 2009) – or in a more circumscribed way 'Black France' (Keaton et al 2012) – or Afropeanity (Pitts 2019). By emphasising in-betweenness and borderland rather than tying identity to a specific continent, country or city, this conceptual lens highlights the inseparable connections linking certain 'Black' or 'Afropean' formations in Europe to contemporary African societies. This approach avoids limiting the analysis to one side of the spectrum and positing Europe as the node of construction of these identity formations.

While opening this discussion, it's important to clarify that I do not endorse any problematic association between Blackness and Africanity, which is often exploited by racist and right-wing parties in Europe. Instead, by discussing the heuristic scope of the 'Black Mediterranean', I emphasise the significance of including African heterogeneous cities and societies in our understanding of some Afro-European transnational circuits and the cultural identities they shape. In essence, it is about reintegrating Africa into our understanding of Afro-diasporic formations, Afropeanity and Black Europe. In addition, conceptualising this transnational and postcolonial space within the framework of the 'Mediterranean' serves as a reminder that these cultural Afro-European formations are partly shaped through dialogue, reactions to and tensions with increasingly punitive border policies and exclusionary politics, whose most acute manifestations currently occur along the shores and depths of the Mediterranean.

As I will demonstrate in the following sections, popular music and dance serve as powerful lenses through which to approach this topic. The various music and dance genres explored in my article underscore how the Black Mediterranean embodies a complex network of cultural symbols and practices that contribute to reshaping representations of Africanity, Blackness and/or Afropeanity by fostering alternative imagi-

naries, economies and geographies. Before delving into this discussion, it is necessary to revisit the discussions developed over the past years about the concept of the Black Mediterranean and its various interpretations in existing literature.

Coining Both Sides of the Black Mediterranean

Although the expression “Black Mediterranean” may have been used before her, most current analyses acknowledge that this term was coined by the literature scholar Alessandra Di Maio, who presented it at a public lecture given at UCLA in 2012.³ Di Maio’s understanding of the Black Mediterranean built on an extended reflection on old and new forms of interaction between African and Italian cultures as unveiled through literature and media. She was particularly inspired by the case of Sicily, an island long regarded as neither fully European nor African, whose capital, Palermo, boasted a multicultural, multiconfessional and multilinguistic population in the sixteenth century, including approximately 10 percent black slaves. Recalling Sicily’s Black and African history was in the meantime a reply to the context of the so-called ‘migrant crisis’, and the exacerbation of exclusionary policies, closure of territorial boundaries and stigmatisation of Black bodies in European mainstream media and political discourses (Di Maio 2021). Di Maio’s impulse was then to revisit the knowledge of the Mediterranean and to contradict Eurocentric views on the making of European nations, cultures and citizenships by creating a dialogue with Gilroy’s seminal concept.

Di Maio’s scholarship was furthered by a body of events and publications developed over the second half of the 2010s and early 2020s (Otele 2022; Proglione et al 2021; Soyinka and Di Maio 2021), particularly among scholars working on Italy and other Southern European countries. Those discussions generally shared the same attempt to produce a counter-discourse to the cliché of Europe as a white continent and to previous literature on the Mediterranean that omitted the crucial role of colonisation and the experience of peoples affected by imperial domination in their understanding.

Different perspectives can be identified within this corpus. The first part of discussions developed Di Maio’s ideas on literature and the arts to unveil the existence of long-lasting fertilisations between Africa and Southern European countries such as Italy and Spain. The conference *ReSignifications: The Black Mediterranean* held in Palermo in 2018 linked, for instance, ‘classical and popular representations of African bodies in European art, culture and history’⁴ by exploring the work of contemporary artists. This trans-historical perspective connecting past and present experiences of mobility, inequality and cultural exchanges across the Black Mediterranean was explained in these terms:

The sea divides and unites its voices, while the coasts share ancient and new stories: that of Black Athena; of the Moors once conquerors and later conquered; of Black Saints, Madonnas, and Prophets; and of the young migrants who criss-cross the waters searching for freedoms in adverse conditions reminiscent of the Atlantic slave trade.⁵

Literature scholars developed other documented analyses of how African-descent writers construct subjectivities, communities and alternative representations of Europe

through words and narrations. Drawing on the works of artists such as the writer Abdourahman Waberi or film-maker Silvestre Assoumou, Antje Ziethen employed the conceptual frame of the Black Mediterranean to consider how Francophone literature and cinema ‘erode conventional geographies and migration patterns through a counterfactual lens, depicting African countries either as imperial powers that have conquered European territories or as revolutionary forces that put an end to European interference’ (2019: np).

Moreover, some of this literature has interestingly highlighted how subjectivities, identity formations and cultural processes at play in this travelling literature exceed the lenses of hybridity, or Afropeanity, as often advanced in literature and music over the last years (Dechaufour and Chalaye 2015). According to Sanchez-Pardo’s analysis, contrary to situations described in Latin America, ‘Mestizaje has nothing to do with the situation of the Afro-Hispanic residents in Spain since the blending alluded to never occurred’ (Sánchez-Pardo 2011: 108). The investigation over different aesthetics, discourses and modes of perception of Europe uncovers how the paradigm of hybridity that was often advanced by a first generation of postcolonial scholars to conceptualise identity blurs more than it reveals the number of nuances and experiences of Africanity in Europe.

Another spectrum of publications dealing with the concept of Black Mediterranean was generated by studies undertaken in Italy and Southern Europe, but focused instead on questions of citizenship, migration policies and their effects on the making of ethnicities, and mobilisations against racism and anti-Blackness. Giuseppe Grimaldi’s research in the diasporic neighbourhood of Porta Venezia in Milano highlighted how children of Eritrean and Ethiopian immigrants reconfigured their identification to *Habesha* ethnicity and Italianness while engaging in the Milanese management of refugees (Grimaldi 2019). Grimaldi unveiled how identifications and positionings of Italian citizens – evolving alongside public discourses on the Mediterranean routes – changed, and how a hegemonic and anti-African conception of Italianness was reasserted after the Operation Mare Nostrum.

The geographer Camilla Hawthorne also developed a reflection drawing on pathways of second generations of African migrations in Italy and on their mobilisations against racism and Italian ethnic absolutism to analyse ‘the co-constitutive relationship between race and citizenship in the construction of the Italian nation-state’ (2022: 17). She understood the Black Mediterranean as ‘a framework that characterizes the dense relations of cultural contact and racist violence linking southern Europe and Africa’ and an ‘antidote to the whitewashed vision of Mediterranean mixing’ (2022: 22). Meanwhile, she challenged the idea of a unified Black subject in Italy to underline the variety of experiences that Blackness covers. Finally, a critical understanding of this notion was proposed by the collective Black Mediterranean through an edited book published in 2021 (Proglia et al 2021). Mainly based on Italy’s case, it exposed the entangled histories of racial capitalism, enslavement and dispossession that have characterised African mobilities across the Mediterranean, and the lived experiences of Black populations in those spaces infused by colonial legacies, differentiation and imaginaries.

As formulated by Grimaldi (2019), a double definition of the Black Mediterranean emerges from these studies: on the one hand, they have made visible ‘the nexus

between racial violence and the emergence of European modernity as a discrete racial unit' (2019: 2). This scholarship has underlined how the Mediterranean, its borders, policies and controls contribute to creating a 'hegemonic European space and citizenship' (Grimaldi 2019: 416; Raeymaekers 2014). On the other hand, this transnational space made of asymmetries, violence and unequal mobilities 'is continuously reproducing a fluid space of connection between different cultures, nations, continents, and subjectivities' (Grimaldi 2019: 416).

The present discussion anchors its reflection at the nexus of these intricate dimensions of the Black Mediterranean. However, I argue that we might deepen the anthropological comprehension of social practices, cultural products and identifications at play in this transnational space by reconnecting the Black Mediterranean to its African rhizomes, and by considering its ramifications in countries and cities that have apparently no immediate interface with the Mediterranean shores.

It may indeed come as a surprise that I invoke this concept to analyse a scene set in a Swiss city (as in my introduction), given that Switzerland is not only geographically distant from any maritime borders but also markedly different from postcolonial metropolises like Brussels or Paris. However, it is clear to migration experts and other observers that the fortress system erected to 'safeguard' Europe's borders extends far beyond the southern European states, particularly throughout the Schengen area. This is evident in the prevalence of surveillance institutions, detention centre systems and border policies, which are particularly conspicuous in the Alps and in Switzerland.

Moreover, even if the percentage of the population of African descent in Switzerland appears lower and less longstanding than in Belgium or France, Switzerland has witnessed a growing mobilisation around issues of Afro-descendance and visibility of Black populations. Particularly since the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, the discourse on anti-racism and the recognition of the experiences of Black individuals have gained prominence in public spaces and debates. This has materialised in initiatives such as the Afro-feminist festival Black Helvetia, the establishment of an 'Afropean' cultural centre in the city of Lausanne,⁶ and the release of books and films shedding light on the experiences of Black people in Switzerland.⁷

Furthermore, it is important to note that while Switzerland did not directly possess a colonial empire in Africa, it played a significant role in economic exchanges, development programmes, mobility within the continent, and consumption of goods, images and spectacles that contributed to Europe's colonial domination, and its invention of Africa (Mudimbe 1988). This history has led several scholars to describe Switzerland as a colonial 'margin' that endorsed colonialism without holding colonies (Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné 2015).

All these factors urge us to broaden our understanding of European spaces that inform our knowledge of the Black Mediterranean, beyond its initial Southern European fields. Reconsidering the scope of the Black Mediterranean would allow us to think of places like Switzerland, Belgium or Baltic European countries as locations of African and Black culture that are importantly shaped by the geography, politics and history of this watery intercontinental border. The realms of popular music and dance markets offer a particularly insightful perspective to achieve this aim and appreciate

the epistemological shift that the Black Mediterranean engenders, as I will describe in the following sections of this article.

Musical Fertilisations across Maritime Spaces

A series of popular music genres and social worlds have emerged through the migration of African citizens to European metropolises and their back-and-forth mobilities across the two continents over the twentieth century. Studies developed on the topic have provided a fruitful foundation for the discussion outlined in this article, particularly within the field of mobilities and cultural circulations built between French-speaking African cities and their former metropole.

A first emblematic example lies in the figure of Congolese rumba, *sapologie* and (imagined and real) mobilities between Kinshasa, Paris and other emblematic cities of Europe that they drew on. SAPE (Society of Ambianceurs and Elegant People) is a phenomenon that took over Kinshasa and Brazzaville youth during the colonial period, and consists of the display of expensive clothing and 'griffes' from luxury and haute-couture brands (Gandoulou 1989). According to Didier Gondola, by transforming bodies and fashion, SAPE was part of an oniric journey and a step of the migration journey to Paris and other European capitals, which were 'endowed with a magical quality' (1999: 28). Reaching European cities and coming back home with Western merchandise represented for Congolese youth 'spaces of flight and refuge, places of dreamlike reincarnation of the self and the society' (Gondola 1999: 24–25). As described later by Joseph Trapido (2011), rumba music became a crucial medium of exhibition for the culture of SAPE, and rumba singers turned into SAPE ambassadors. Meanwhile, Congolese migrants who made it to Europe – the so-called *mikilistes*⁸ – situated themselves as patrons for famous singers' shows (Trapido 2011), and as main economic supports for the music economy through the system of *mabanga*, a patrimonial practice involving the quotation of patrons, political figures and wealthy entrepreneurs.

If rumba's evolution is often known to be the creative result of transatlantic circulations and Afro-Caribbean crossovers, in the second half of the century it was also highly influenced by the mobilities of orchestras, musicians and their patrons in European capitals. While *mikilistes*' sartorial practices and adventures to Europe constituted a core means of production for this prestige economy, rumba music spread all over the African continent and its diaspora to become a Pan-African 'musica franca' (White 2002) while bringing its conspicuous economy, sartorial practices and nightlife habits into other spaces.

Partly following this inspiration, *coupé-décalé* was created at the beginning of the 2000s by Ivorian artists travelling between Europe and Abidjan in the midst of the Ivorian political crisis (Kohlhagen 2005). Popularised through artists such as Douk Saga and his theatrical music videos shot in Paris, this genre borrowed from previous local and globalised music genres, such as Ivorian *zouglou* and Congolese rumba, to produce a new music and dance whose aesthetics symbolise the ethics of 'cutting' ('*coupé*', i.e. stealing money) and 'leaving' ('*décalé*', running away). *Coupé-décalé* thus celebrated 'the ones who go abroad, make a fortune without any great scruples

and return home to “work”, going to nightclubs to party, dressing in designer clothes, offering champagne and handing out banknotes to prove their success’ (Kohlhagen 2005: 92; translation mine). Just as rumba singers were *patroned* by *mikilistes* and wealthy benefactors, coupé-décalé artists and their work ethics were intimately tied to the so-called ‘brouteurs’ of Abidjan, cyber-scammers who are locally seen ‘as Robin Hood figures who take from the global rich to give to the people, eventually reaping the benefits of celebrity and a luxurious lifestyle’ (Newell 2022, np; see also Champy 2023).

Although stemming from different aesthetics, political contexts and economies of patronage and prestige, both rumba and coupé-décalé appear as products of complicated appropriations of colonial commodities, aesthetics, things, wealth and attitudes circulating through unequal mobilities between African and European cities, broadly apprehended as ‘the West’. These entangled mobilities between Paris (or incidentally other European capitals), Brazzaville or Kinshasa, and Abidjan, contributed, at least in the domain of dreams and symbols, to the appropriation of the power of the white man and coloniser.

Interestingly enough, both genres not only transformed Kinshasa and Abidjan’s youth practices, sartorial attitudes, values and economies, but also crucially impacted Paris and other European capitals’ music scenes and industries. Indeed, a trend for African urban sounds and dance was recently taken on by French cultural industries and contributed to the requalifying of the value of Africanity among young citizens of Afro-Caribbean and African descent. This is the topic of Laura Steil’s book, called *Boucan!* as a reference to the loud forms of presence that French Black youth create in Paris and its suburbs through Afro-diasporic music and dance (Steil 2021), such as zouk, coupé-décalé, *kuduro* and *ndombolo*. From the middle of the 2000s, these practices attracted the attention of young people from different neighbourhoods of Paris’s suburbs who descend from Afro-Caribbean and African origins. The context of post-2005 France was a period of urban revolts (linked to the death of two *banlieue* youths at the hands of police officers), marking a breaking point in exacerbating a racial language to address minorities in France. Laura Steil shows how, from that moment, the sociabilities, dance practices and exchanges that take place in this Parisian ‘Afro milieu’ allowed for the reconnection of some of these second-generation migrant youths to the African continent and for requalifying Africanity in a French society that often excludes these people from full citizenship. Physicality, flamboyance and ostentation used for prestige in the Afro-dance milieu responded to a context of invisibilisation to gain presence and recognition in French society.

The continuities of these phenomena have become increasingly visible recently through the trend for African aesthetics, sonorities, collaborations and mobilities among French hip-hop industries. It peaked with the massive success of Aya Nakamura in 2018 and with the growth of collaboration and mobilities between rappers and African artists, which I mentioned in my introduction through the example of Ninho and Fally Ipupa’s song ‘Likolo’. The recent controversy surrounding Aya Nakamura, who became the target of racist comments in France after rumours suggested she would perform a Piaf song at the Olympics, underscores the paradox inherent in the new-found appreciation for Afro-diasporic aesthetics. On one hand, racist stereotypes and

remarks persist, excluding young black individuals in France from full recognition as integral members of French society. On the other hand, both industries and political figures often use these musical genres as a showcase for French multiculturalism, diversity and hybridity.

The ambivalent reception of hip-hop and 'urban music' artists mirrors processes that hip-hop scholars have previously described in France as 'paradoxical legitimization' (Guillard and Sonnette-Manouguian 2020; Hammou and Sonnette-Manouguian 2022). Despite their increasing presence in the media and their participation in recognised festivals, these music artists remain subject to 'ethno-racialized illegitimation based on class and race relations' (Guillard and Sonnette-Manouguian 2020: 14).

From Kinshasa to Paris, passing by Abidjan (and vice versa), these art worlds represent spaces for the redefinition of power relationships both in African and French cities, for the construction of aesthetics and identities over different periods, sounds, spaces and cultures, and for the (more or less imaginary) reversal of postcolonial power relationships. Although they are the product of specific socio-spatial assemblages and should not be considered mere equivalences, those popular culture formations share similitudes that help to outline some features of the Black Mediterranean as tackled in this article. The Black Mediterranean hereby appears as a reticular matrix of back-and-forth mobilities between Africa and Europe, impacted at different levels by the experience of (colonial and postcolonial) Northern domination, race capitalism and everyday processes of racialisation, where music and dance contribute to revert and contradict the assignation to a subaltern identity while adjusting to industries of commodification infused by postcolonial imaginaries.

The field of encounters and exchanges developed through the transmission of Senegalese dances in French and Swiss cities sheds another light on the identity formations at play through mobilities within the Black Mediterranean, the (post)colonial configurations of migratory circuits it reflects and the forms of repolarisation towards Africa they shelter.

Mapping Sabar Dance Circuits in the Black Mediterranean

Sabar was initially associated with a female dance repertoire performed at baptisms, weddings, self-help groups and other events (Neveu Kringelbach 2013; Penna-Diaw 2005; Seye 2014).⁹ Yet from the 1990s it also became a favourite channel of expression, fame achievement and self-recognition for male and female youngsters in Senegalese cities. While the crisis hit Senegal and unemployed among the youth soared, an economy of prestige, fame and recognition rose through the participation in street performances, renewing a profession that used to be mainly occupied by griots (Tang 2007). Inspired by the consumption of travelling genres (e.g. Bollywood videos, hip-hop, Michael Jackson dances) or local bodily performances (namely wrestling), new generations of sabar dancers mixed sabar traditional repertoires with other genres and progressively added further steps and rhythms to existing genres (Seye 2016). While cultural industries grew around music genres, such as *mbalax* mixing local instruments with amplified orchestras, sabar dancers and musicians became key collaborators

of new famous musicians (Mangin 2013). Exchanges with *mbalax* figures became a means of professionalisation, fame achievement and income through the participation in video clips and local concerts, but also an excuse for travelling and trying their luck abroad after music tours, mainly in Western countries. Therefore, while sabar metamorphosis in Senegal was influenced by the consumption of global flows, it also became tightly entangled with artists' moves in and out of Senegal (Neveu Kringelbach 2013; Tang 2008).

From the 1980s onwards, a growing number of dancers and musicians left Senegal to settle in the USA, Asia and European cities, leading a musician whom I met during one of my periods of fieldwork in Senegal to tell me that 'Dakar emptied out'. By the middle of the 2000s, the number of artists fleeing Senegal rose, partly at the same time that migration became more and more criminalised in the Mediterranean and that networks of illegal migration through pirogues increased, resulting in unfortunately well-known tragedies (Diop 2008).

Even if Senegalese artists who travel to Europe do so through very different channels than illegal migrants, the reinforcement of boundaries has engendered several effects on sabar mobilities. Since the late 1980s, European governments have been tightening immigration policies, including in France and Switzerland, where I conducted my research.¹⁰ In both countries, albeit differently, access to visas for artistic activities became more complex in the 1990s, thanks in particular to the joint implementation of the Schengen system, to the point that short-term mobilities became almost unaffordable for artists working outside institutions or for those without privileged contacts with associations or promoters based in Europe. Consequently, family reunification and marriage became one of the few ways for foreigners from Southern countries and African artists to remain in Europe long term.¹¹

Alongside these transformations of migration policies, Senegalese artists still often travel through dance and music tours, but generally secure their stay in Europe through family rapprochement or marriage migration. This is the case of Babacar, one of the dancers with whom I regularly worked during my fieldwork. He first came to France for a short trip as part of a tour with a singer and then decided to take the chance to stay in Europe. He travelled to Italy, where he had family and dance friends and could give dance classes, before 'going up' to Switzerland, where job opportunities and life are often better than in Italy. Initially undocumented, he met a Swiss woman who became his wife, developed with her an association for the promotion of African dance classes in his locality, and found a complementary job as a waiter that allowed him to earn a living (something that dance courses do not always ensure). He has maintained tight connections and exchanges with his relatives and dance mates from his home city, whether they have stayed in Senegal or have migrated to Europe. For that purpose, he organises regular workshops and festivals of sabar in Switzerland, France and Italy, and returns annually to Senegal, where he orchestrates workshops for European students.

As in the case of this dancer, the settlement of these artists and their search for a better life and career in Europe is made of several steps and stopovers across European cities and countries, and relies on a multidimensional network of exchanges and mobilities. Sabar musicians and dancers recompose their music and dance career through different means: they occasionally perform sabar music and dances at the occasion of

Senegalese association meetings and community gatherings that reproduce in European cities the performance ceremonies that enliven Dakar's nightlife; they participate in some collaborative works with contemporary dance institutions (for those who have such a training) or with world music groups (for musicians); and above all, they contribute in African dance classes, workshops and festivals, which constitute their most regular means of maintaining their artistic activity and career. In addition to weekly classes in their locality, sabar musicians and dancers are connected to a broader trans-European network of Senegalese artists and sabar enthusiasts distributed over different cities and countries with which they collaborate and reunite on the occasion of festivals and workshops. Music, migration, kinship and love intertwine in various ways within the dance community woven between Dakar and European cities. Unlike institutionalised music and dance realms, such as the field of African contemporary dance (Despres 2016), sabar networks primarily operate through associations and interpersonal connections, existing outside formal institutions and industries. Interpersonal bonds of kinship, solidarity among members of dance groups originating from Senegal, and romantic or friendly relationships with their students serve as the primary support for establishing their activities in new cities. Consequently, the interactions revolving around sabar in Europe are highly gendered: predominantly men pursue careers in Europe, partly because sabar classes are predominantly attended by women who also travel to Senegal to learn these dances and (sometimes) engage in relationships with them.

These students are – for the cases of sabar dance classes in the cities where I undertook my fieldwork (Geneva, Lausanne, Yverdon in French-speaking Switzerland, Lyon in France) – white middle-class women. Many have been involved for years in the African dance scene, travel regularly to Senegal, have been married to African artists and have children of both origins: they have negotiated their involvement and engagement in sabar through an array of transactions with their instructors, and are included in a transnational community of sabar enthusiasts. Among students of sabar, I also met a smaller number of second-generation migrants from Senegalese or Western African origins for whom sabar was often a way to reconnect to their origins. Kudy, mentioned in my introduction, is not related to Senegal or West Africa (she is originally from Congo) but she has used her practice of sabar as a means of reconnecting with her African origins, as she left the continent when she was very young. While Kudy incorporates sabar gestures into contemporary projects, others learn sabar as part of their interest in hip-hop and urban dance. A larger group of students seeks out the more 'traditional' aspects of sabar in their learning.

Based on these observations, should we consider sabar as a repertoire that is becoming increasingly flexible, open to multiple interpretations and appropriations? As described by Kasinitz and Martiniello's study on urban music and migration in Belgium, does this field of encounters between sabar artists and their students in Europe 'become a means of communication and dialogue between different groups to build some form of shared local citizenship' (2019: 861)?

Admittedly, Senegalese artists commonly promote an ethos of 'open Africanity' (Aterianus-Owanga 2019) or a universalist understanding of sabar for their students, and many sabar artists engaged in workshops with international participants (in Senegal

or in Europe) express delight and pride that Europeans, Americans or non-Senegalese Africans learn *sabar* and demonstrate a genuine effort to grasp this intricate dance form. However, presenting these interactions as fostering a 'shared local citizenship' and serving as a 'means of communication' risks oversimplifying the misunderstandings, negotiations and power imbalances inherent in such encounters, and somewhat mirrors the rhetoric of multiculturalism, hybridity and 'métissage' that has been critiqued by previous studies on Black Europe and the Black Mediterranean.

In fact, *sabar* networks and performances bring together individuals who possess unequal rights to urban spaces due to factors such as citizenship status, economic resources, property access or experiences of racialisation in public spheres and daily life. Most importantly, emphasising 'shared citizenships' obscures these artists' commitment to maintaining the roots of *sabar* and the economic networks it sustains in their hometowns and Senegal. Indeed, for first-generation immigrants like Babacar, there is a strong attachment to contributing the proceeds of their migration back to their homeland.

One method of reinforcing territorial ties is through workshops and return trips organised by Senegalese artists residing in Europe, often annually returning to Dakar with their students. Particularly during winter holiday periods, several groups of students join their instructors in Dakar to participate in intensive boot camps, visit touristic sites, attend *sabar* ceremonies and night-time events and experience dance in its original context.

These trips serve multiple purposes. First, they align with the notion commonly conveyed in dance classes and courses that true understanding of *sabar* can only be achieved through first-hand experience in Senegal. Travelling to Senegal is deemed essential for students committed to earnestly pursuing their *sabar* apprenticeship. Moreover, according to several artists I spoke with, Senegal is where new rhythms, musical phrases and choreographic innovations in the repertoire originate, reaffirming its status as the dance's authentic birthplace. Finally, these trips reflect the artists' deep-rooted commitment to supporting their home country with the earnings from their migration, as well as their desire to share opportunities and bridges to Europe with those who have stayed behind.

Beyond the many returns to Dakar developed by artists to re-root *sabar* in its Senegalese crucible, maintaining the Senegalese essence of *sabar* also involves European students assimilating into a certain idea of Senegalese identity. This includes learning elements of the Wolof language, cooking Senegalese dishes, becoming acquainted with Senegalese social customs and cultural knowledge, all of which, in some cases, overlap with marriage or romantic relationships,¹² as they contribute to the process of drawing closer to 'Senegalese way of life'.

Therefore, it appears in these dance encounters and circulations that if *sabar* can be embraced by individuals from any background, the challenge clearly lies in enhancing its Senegalese essence. Those who seek to learn it must become Senegalese, or at least strive to.

As we see here, the circulation of *sabar* does not lead to its dilution into a cosmopolitan amalgamation, nor does it annihilate these artists' agency in defining and negotiating the methods of transmitting this dance. Instead, these interactions and

exchanges foster a continual reaffirmation of these practices' African and Senegalese roots, positioning Dakar as the focal point of this Black Mediterranean network. These artists' relationship to Africanity, nationhood, citizenship and cultural property do not merge either within a struggle for a generic Blackness. The overlapping or disjunction of these components appears as a situational arrangement depending on interactional dynamics rather than a fixed set of identity markers travelling with music and dance.

Conclusion

By tracing some of the itineraries of music, dance, artists and imaginaries between French and African cities, we can infer how closely these circuits articulate macrosystemic migratory dynamics and cultural industries anchored in specific localities, states and socio-historical contexts. These circuits link artistic worlds that are both deeply rooted in the texture of African cities such as Kinshasa and Brazzaville, Abidjan or Dakar, and also shaped by transnational mobilities (real or imagined) towards European cities. Congolese rumba and its sartorial practices, Ivorian coupé-décalé, its conspicuous consumption and contemporary legacies in French afrotrap, and Senegalese sabar are obviously the product of specific histories, political configurations, cultural systems, postcolonial politics and migratory imaginaries. Yet they were all shaped and produced within the same transnational space which for centuries has connected European and African societies.

Why are music and dance helpful in approaching these Black Mediterranean identity productions? Although not always central to the development of political claims of citizenship, decolonial discourses, racial justice and social rights, these spaces nevertheless participate in shaping powerful forms of cross-Mediterranean exchange and weave a web of interactions and collaborations that shape spaces of expression, identification and eventually conviviality (Gilroy 2004; Nyamnjoh 2017) in Europe. Approaching the Black Mediterranean through this perspective sheds light on the multiple actors and forces contributing to these mobilities, encounters and identity productions, as well as their complex negotiation between the transgression of colonial legacies generated by these performances and the exoticising representations of the markets and audiences that they become part of.

In 1971, French anthropologist Georges Balandier asserted that 'liberation is first and foremost liberation in the imagination' (1971: 163). The musico-choreographic practices explored in this article underscore the extent to which the realms of music and dance have served as significant crucibles for this liberating work of imagination. These images, sounds and aesthetics are inseparable from the tangible domains of sensorial experience, aesthetics, attire, as well as from commodity exchange, music markets and money transactions. Most of these popular artists operate outside institutional frameworks, using their performances to reimagine, sometimes within a dreamlike realm, their positions within social space and their right to self-definition. However, in doing so, they also give rise to new economies and ventures of accumulation, existing somewhere between the informal economy and the cultural industries.

The networks, identifications and creations described in this article as part of the Black Mediterranean can hardly be defined only in terms of Blackness, and the transnational circuits that I apprehend through that lens could also, depending on situations, be considered as part of a postcolonial, Afro-European, African or Afropolitan Mediterranean. More than the qualifying adjective appended to this word, which remains open to discussion since it is flexible, situational and relational, the aim of my epistemological reflection is, above all, to highlight the entanglements of these cultural and identity productions in broader postcolonial policies, economies and regimes of (im)mobility that the watery borderland of the Mediterranean strongly embodies. Apprehending the nature of these cultural productions and interactions requires overcoming the closure of academic discussions within bounded regional ensembles and area studies. Other scholars have previously called for remapping Mediterranean anthropologies and apprehending the multiples pasts and presents they conglomerate (Ben-Yehoyada et al 2020). Continuing on this attempt, this article hopefully confirms the importance of making sense through ethnographic and historically informed methods of the trans-local worlds and multifaceted, plastic and versatile production of identities generated within this Mediterranean matrix. Meanwhile, it stresses the need not to overshadow the realness of connections to the African societies upon which they drawn, and the requalification of Black bodies they host.

Finally, while current discussions on Black identity and the issue of race in France question the possibility of an exit from the geometries of the transatlantic triangle and the hexagonal republic to complicate understandings of postcolonial racialisation (Soumahoro 2021), the circuits of music and dance formed in the Black Mediterranean offer heuristic examples of polycentric circulatory matrices where exchanges between Africa and Europe are reflected, transgressed and reinvented.

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Notes

1. The music video of this song can be watched at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IG-klvI4yzI&ab_channel=FallyIpupa (accessed 7 July 2023).
2. Regarding the category “urban music” in France, refer to Karim Hammou and Marie Sonnette-Manouguian’s work (Hammou and Sonnette-Manouguian 2022).
3. ‘The Black Mediterranean: Migration and Revolution in the Global Millennium’, A public lecture by Alessandra Di Maio (University of Palermo), English, 7 May 2012, <https://international.ucla.edu/africa/event/9457> (accessed 29 September 2022).
4. https://www.unipa.it/redazioneweb/.content/documenti/Programma_ReSignificacions-conference.pdf (accessed 5 October 2022).
5. See online: https://www.unipa.it/dipartimenti/scienzeumanistiche/.content/documenti/AQ-17_03_2018RIVISTOEAAPPROVATO.pdf, p. 12 (accessed 6 July 2023).

6. In September 2023, the cultural centre 'Afropea' was launched in Lausanne, with the aim of documenting 'the richness of Afrodescendant cultures and the impact of black artists in Europe'. See <https://ccafropea.org/> (accessed 13 May 2024).
7. For instance, Julianna Fanjul and Rachel Mbon's 2022 documentary film 'Je suis noires', produced by Akka films and the Swiss Television RTS.
8. Stemming from the Lingala word *mokolo* (plural *mikili*), which means 'world', this term is used to qualify Congolese in Europe, particularly in the field of music and SAPE.
9. As a warning toward readers searching for a thick ethnographic description, this article represents the substratum of reflections developed in a series of already published articles that dived deeper into the ethnographic material, methods and issues of positionality (Aterianus-Owanga 2024a, 2024b). My interest here is to widen the scope of this scholarship by offering conceptual dialogues and perspectives, the reason why I will not spend as long as previously on the exhibition of ethnographic materials.
10. In France, these legal restrictions led – among other things – to the end of labour immigration in 1974, the Pasqua law against 'illegal immigration' and the introduction of 'selective immigration' by Sarkozy in 2006 (Quiminal and Timéra 2002). In neighbouring Switzerland, these policies have caused the transition from massive labour immigration at the end of the war and a policy of the right of asylum to immigration by 'circles', which distinguishes the member countries of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) from the rest of the world.
11. Conversely, mixed marriages have also become increasingly regulated and monitored (see Le Bail et al 2018; Maskens 2013; Neveu-Kringelbach 2015).
12. During the four-year period of my research, just in the area of French-speaking Switzerland, I observed the marriages of five Senegalese artists of my acquaintance with Swiss women. Three were men who had recently arrived from Senegal, and two were dancers who had been living for several years in France, Switzerland and Italy.

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Les anthropologies en/de la Méditerranée Noire: La culture populaire, l'identité et la créativité à travers la matrice afro-européenne

Résumé : Cet article s'appuie sur des éléments ethnographiques tirés du le champ hétérogène des musiques et des danses africaines en France et en Suisse francophone, ainsi que sur une littérature précédente concernant les genres de la musique et danse populaires qui circulaient entre des villes africaines et européennes. L'article participe aux conversations actuelles sur le concept de la Méditerranée Noire. Il affirme que ce concept est pertinent pour analyser les migrations, les formations interculturelles et les conversations post-coloniales qui sont en cours entre quelques pays européens et leurs anciennes colonies à travers des productions de musique et danse populaires. L'ethnographie et l'histoire de genres musicaux ou chorégraphiques en circulation nous amènent à appréhender la Méditerranée Noire comme une zone-frontière, caractérisée par la violence raciale et les inégalités, et aussi comme un réseau de signes culturels, de transactions et de pratiques qui connectent l'Afrique aux villes européennes. Cette matrice intercontinentale participe à une reconfiguration des représentations des identités africaines, noires et afro-européennes de façon ambiguë et complexe.

Mots-clés : identité, Méditerranée Noire, migration, musique et danse populaire, sabar, Sénégal