

H-France Forum

Volume 18 (2023), Issue 8, #3

Laura Steil, *Boucan! Devenir quelqu'un dans le milieu afro*. Toulouse : Presses universitaires du Midi, 2021. 358 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and filmography. €22.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2810707546.

Review Essay by Charles Tshimanga, University of Nevada, Reno

In *Boucan! Devenir quelqu'un dans le milieu afro*, Laura Steil analyzes the ways in which African dance and music at Parisian night clubs—including Starter, S-Kart, Scène, Atlantis, Palacio, X'trèm Tropical, Alizé, Gibus, Coulisses, and Acropole—are spaces where Africanness, which is too often disqualified, is valued. In so doing, she walks the reader through ongoing debates in contemporary France about post-colonial identities. The book is composed of nine chapters and lies at the intersection of popular culture, notably dance and music, the Black noise that has emigrated from Africa into the heart of the French capital, the African Diaspora, transnationalism, post-colonialism, and identities. *Boucan! Devenir quelqu'un dans le milieu afro* is an important contribution to these fields because it thoughtfully engages with scholarship that grapples with questions of transnationalism, Blackness, and post-colonial identities.[1]

France sees itself as a color-blind or race-neutral nation in which ethnic, racial, religious, or other particularisms have no place. This view is closely associated with the idea of French universalism as well as the republican principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In other words, French individuals are thought to be citizens with equal political rights and responsibilities. French universalism argues that any individual presents themselves to the nation exclusively as a citizen and not on the basis of their particular identity. In the abstract, French universalism sounds like a great idea that allows all French people, regardless of their race, religion, etc., to feel welcomed and at home in the French republic. However, as demonstrated by Laura Steil, the reality is far from rosy, especially for members of the African Diaspora, who are regularly defined by their race.

The visibility of ethnic minorities, and more particularly of young people from the African Diaspora, in France, and the discrimination to which they are subjected, increasingly challenge French universalism and the concept of a color-blind nation. Although most African Diaspora youth are born in France and are French citizens, they are still seen as immigrants. They are often discriminated against in the job market and in the housing and education sectors, while facing countless instances of police brutality and racial profiling. Steil identifies another layer of discrimination by showing that these young people are also denied access to certain nightclubs in Paris.

Since at least the early 1980s and the electoral successes of Jean-Marie Le Pen's far-right party, the Front National, which has now become the Rassemblement National (led by his daughter Marine Le Pen), French lawmakers have passed an arsenal of anti-immigration, asylum, and nationality laws. According to Marianne Skorpis, between the Charles Pasqua Law of September 9, 1986, and the Gérard Collomb Law of September 10, 2018, every eighteen months, an anti-

immigration law has been passed in France.[2] These laws weaken the rights of young French people whose parents are from Africa or the French West Indies, and who are themselves considered immigrants or French people of foreign origin. During the 2005 riots, which are analyzed in my co-edited volume, *Frenchness and the African Diaspora* (2009), Nicolas Sarkozy, who was then Minister of the Interior, threatened to “remove the French nationality of ‘young people of foreign origin’ involved in attacks on police officers or any other representative of public authority” (p.31). Let us examine Sarkozy’s proposition. Since France claims to be a color-blind nation and that all citizens are equal before the republic, why did Sarkozy threaten to take away French citizenship for a category of his fellow citizens, notably young people of the African Diaspora that he calls “French of foreign origin”? More recently, during the 2018 Yellow Vest Protests in France, some protesters defaced the Arc de Triomphe and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, looted shops, vandalized buildings, and even attacked police.[3] Despite the violence against the police, not a single French politician suggested taking away the French citizenship of white protesters of the Yellow Vest movement. This example shows the inequality among citizens of a nation claiming to be color-blind and to cherish its universal values.

This political context is important for understanding the situation of members of the African Diaspora in France. Although the vast majority of them were born in France and are French, they are not seen as French citizens. On the contrary, they are represented as immigrants, as French of foreign origin, or simply as Blacks. In doing so, intellectuals and politicians such as Alain Finkielkraut, Nicolas Sarkozy, Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine Le Pen, Eric Zemmour, and many others lock members of the African Diaspora into a stable, racial, ethnic, and essentialist identity that is contrary to the idea of a color-blind nation. Diaspora members are represented by the mainstream as populations who refuse to integrate, which is to say to assimilate, into French culture, and who favor communitarianism in France. Laura Steil shows how the otherness imposed on members of the African Diaspora becomes a source of pride that leads them to rediscover their Black identity and consciousness.

W.E.B. Du Bois examines this process of identification in *Strivings of the Negro People* (1897) and in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), where he introduces the concept of “double consciousness,” which he explains as “the double life every American Negro must live, as a Negro and as an American” [3]; i.e., “two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”[4] Du Bois reminds us that the African American is simultaneously Black and American, and navigates the two entities of his identity. Seeing the African American exclusively as a Black is a reduction of his consciousness or identity. This concept of “double consciousness” was reviewed and examined by Paul Gilroy in *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993). Gilroy argues that “The contemporary black English, like the Anglo-Africans of earlier generations and perhaps, like all blacks in the West, stand between (at least) two great cultural assemblages, both of which have mutated through the course of the modern world that formed them and assumed new configurations.”[5] “Faced with racism and discrimination, Diaspora members have rediscovered their double consciousness. Stuart Hall adds another layer to the concept of Diasporic identity, contending that identity cannot be reduced to race, ethnicity, sexuality, or class. Instead, Diasporic identities are socially and historically constituted, reconstituted, and reproduced. They are a constantly shifting production that is never complete. They are always in process, always constituted within, not outside, representation.[6]

The stereotyping of young Black French people has a negative impact on their representation in France, where they are often seen as a danger to French society. Steil points out that politicians, journalists, law enforcement, and teachers regularly associate them with the “noise they make in public spaces, noise perceived as an indication of a threat to public and social order” (pp. 264–267). The police, for example, associate the noise made by young Black French women with fights on the streets, the theft of cellphones, or the use of weapons such as baseball bats. As for journalists, they associate this noise with “gang leaders,” even with the sexuality of these young women, the majority of whom are teenagers (pp. 268–274). Steil argues that the French media, police, and politicians do not understand the meaning of the “noise” of young Black French people.

Through their *boucan*, young Black men and women are part of the context of an economy of performance, analyzed by Steil, through which they articulate their identity. Music and dance introduce Africa (and the Developing World) to France. The artist Mokobe explains this artistic choice: “Artistically, I always felt the need to highlight Africa in my music [...] I really wanted to take a tour of the African continent [...] to explain to my audience—an audience that does not necessarily know African music— [...] that there is a lot of richness from a musical point of view and everything” (p. 149). The incorporation of dances such as *Ndombolo* or *Coupé-décalé*, “African tones,” and African artists in hip hop songs and videos blur the lines between Africa, Blackness, and France. Africa seems to belong to the French suburbs and seems to be less threatening from a French perspective (p. 147–148). In the process, young Black French people not only rediscover their Blackness/Africanness, they also destabilize and deconstruct the binary opposition between so-called French high culture and African low culture, and between white and Black. Stuart Hall’s “What Is This Black in ‘Black’ Popular Culture?” helps us understand this process.[7] He argues that to be Black:

was not the embodiment of an already known essence. It was produced through representation. Its meaning changed in relationship to whiteness and was mediated by shifts in politics and culture. In the 1960s, Black served to unify diverse groups—responding to the racism of a white culture that equated Black with not being white. This essentialist perspective (associated with the Black power movement) simply inverted white racism: being Black was equated with being good. The political benefits of this move proved enormous. The costs were the suppression of ethnic and gender differences.[8]

Steil’s book is a welcome contribution that focuses on the little-studied sound dimension, namely popular music, dance music, etc. Her study adds to recent publications on this topic, including Edwin Hill’s *Black Soundscapes*.^[9] Her book sheds new light on the plight of Black French youth in contemporary France, a country that claims to be a color-blind nation.

NOTES

[1] To name only a few: Charles Tshimanga, Didier Gondola, and Peter Bloom, eds., *Frenchness and the African Diaspora: Identity and Uprising in Contemporary France* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Dominic Thomas, *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Trica Danielle Keaton, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Tyler Stovall, eds., *Black France / France Noire: The History and Politics of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Edwin Hill, *Black Soundscapes White Stages: The Meaning of Francophone Sound in the Black Atlantic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Etienne Achille and Lydie Moudileno, eds., *Mythologies postcoloniales: Pour une décolonisation du quotidien* (Paris: Champion, 2018).

[2] Marianne Skorpis, “Trente ans de lois françaises sur l’immigration. Un débat sans fin,” [www.arte.tv](https://www.arte.tv/sites/story/reportage/trente-ans-de-lois-francaises-sur-limmigration/), 7 October 2019. <https://www.arte.tv/sites/story/reportage/trente-ans-de-lois-francaises-sur-limmigration/>, accessed 5 January 2023.

[3] Jack Cigainero, “Who Are France’s Yellow Vest Protesters, And What Do They Want?” NPR, 3 December 2018. <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/03/672862353/who-are-frances-yellow-vest-protesters-and-what-do-they-want>, accessed 2 January 2023.

[4] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Boston: Bedford Book, 1997 [1903]), pp. 155-156.

[5] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 1.

[6] Stuart Hall, “Minimal Selves,” in *Identity*, ed. Lissa Appignanesi (London: Institute for Contemporary Arts, 1987); “The Meaning of New Times,” in *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, ed. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989).

[7] Stuart Hall, “What Is This Black in ‘Black’ Popular Culture?” *Social Justice Social Justice*, 20.1/2 (1993): 104–114.

[8] I am indebted to Dennis Dworkin’s analysis in *Class Struggles* (Harlow: Person Education Limited, 2007) p. 68.

[9] Edwin C. Hill Jr., *Black Soundscapes White Stages: The Meaning of Francophone Sound in the Black Atlantic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

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