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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.

Response by Laura Steil, University of Luxembourg

I am grateful to the three reviewers who graciously gave their time and critical attention to *Boucan! Devenir quelqu'un dans le milieu afro*: Didier Gondola, Katelyn E. Knox, and Charles Tshimanga. It is inspiring and enriching to discover how my work is read, understood, and critiqued by esteemed colleagues investigating similar questions, locations, and populations. Their respective positionalities are not an insignificant detail: it is humbling and tremendously valuable to read the perspectives of Didier Gondola and Charles Tshimanga, two diasporic scholars of Congolese origin, as both my interlocutors and their cultural references were often tied to the Congo(s), both real and imagined, and much of my book tried to make sense of their diasporic cultural worlds. I am equally enlightened by Katelyn E. Knox's generous review: her research interests intersect with mine very closely and she also carried out fieldwork in Afro-Caribbean nightclubs in the Paris region. While their three reviews reveal an infinity of potential threads to pull, I will limit myself to only a few here.

I would like to begin by clarifying my choice of the phrase “jeunes post-migrants noirs” to describe my interlocutors. The concept of postmigration “emerge[d] from multiple genealogies, all circulating simultaneously...both distinct and overlapping.”[1] Kira Kosnick's deployment of the term appealed to me because, like her, I was interested in European club scenes. As the leader of the four-year research project, “New Migrant Socialities: Ethnic Club Cultures in Urban Europe” (2009–2013), funded by the European Research Council, Kosnick aimed to investigate “what young people actually do, as opposed to how they identify.” She argued that “much effort has been spent on analyzing cultural identifications without paying equal attention to the complexity of social practices in which such identifications are embedded.”[2] In accordance with Kathryn Kleppinger and Laura Reeck in *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France* (2018; see endnote 6 for full reference), she used the concept of postmigration as a marker for a specific generational experience. This experience is characterized by “the continued importance of transnational affiliations and cross-border orientations as well as migration histories in the lives of people *who have not migrated themselves*.”[3] The concept of postmigration allowed her to avoid “resorting to the problematic categories of second-, third- etc. generation immigrants or describing them simply as ethnic minorities” [3], from which I was also trying to move away.

My interlocutors used a different terminology to refer to themselves: ethnic and racial markers that both resonated with and diverged from republican categorizations. They would use labels of different categorial scales, generally referring to their parents' national/territorial origins or nationalities before their migration to France, or to their skin color/race: *Antillais*, *Malien*, *Beninois*, *Kainf* (Africain), *Renoi* (Noir), etc. Yet, as I explain in my chapter “Origines,” in France, and as Gérard Noiriel has written, from an administrative perspective, “les jeunes

d'origine immigrée n'existent pas.”[4] Ethnic and racial statistics are forbidden by law and all that can be counted is the number of foreigners who do not hold French nationality. In everyday discourse, however, “d'origine immigrée” or “(immigré) de seconde-génération” are abundantly used to describe my interlocutors. Hiro Le Coq, a twenty-one-year-old afro dancer and singer who had never visited the Congo, his parents' country of origin, shared his painful sentiment of being “uprooted” (*déraciné*) when I interviewed him in 2014: “quelqu'un qui vient du Congo, il va t'appeler 'français,' toi quand tu vis en France, t'es un 'enfant issu de l'immigration' donc c'est pas facile...” (p. 127). What he described is the condition of being “le cul entre deux chaises,” to quote the title of a track by rapper collective Bisso a Bisso also mentioned by Didier Gondola in his review.[5] Drawing on Kira Kosnick's conceptualization of “post-migrant” allowed me to hold together both the existence and non-existence of migration as a defining experience for my interlocutors' sense of self. Kleppinger and Reeck use postmigration to designate populations that “may have familial origins with links to other regions of the world but...are French and expect to be seen as such.”[6] My interlocutors' discourses and attitudes towards their own Frenchness were more ambiguous and, especially, situational and relational. Only on some occasions would they insist on and perform their Frenchness: for example, when Jessy Matador represented France at the Eurovision contest (p. 118) or when VegeDream chanted “Ramenez la coupe à la maison” in an eponymous track during the 2018 football World Cup (p. 318).

Kleppinger and Reeck further emphasize the “the combined status of post-migratory postcolonial populations”[7], while among my interlocutors, discourses only rarely referred to the way colonialism and colonial history shaped their lives. In fact, according to some political perspectives, overseas territories, where some of my interlocutors' families came from, were technically still under colonial rule, even if those territories had acquired departmental status. Discourses and claims about (de)colonialism widely infused public debates at the onset of my research, in the early 2000s, but they reverberated less in youth culture and everyday interactions than those around migration or race. As I explain in the introduction of *Boucan*, a critical mass of scholars, journalists, and activists began to mobilize at that time around the lack of political attention to (and critique of) French colonialism. Colonialism's ongoing impact on power relations, societal structures, and identity formation, in former colonial territories and in metropolitan France, was barely recognized or, worse, denied—as when a controversial law decreed that high-schoolers in the public education system be taught the “positive role” of colonialism in their history classes.[8] During the important revolts against police brutality that took place in 2005, the activist collective Indigènes de la République (which has since become a political party) argued that the *banlieues* were managed colonially and that their populations of immigrant descent (which mostly came from former colonies) were treated like *indigènes* (literally “natives,” a term that was used to refer to colonial subjects under French rule).[9] But analyses such as these remained the province of activists (who also happened to be older and, often, university-educated) such as the aforementioned Indigènes or the Conseil Représentatif des Association Noires (CRAN) (pp. 37–38).[10]

It was not easy to avoid falling into the trap of the “ornières essentialisantes et émiques,” to borrow Didier Gondola's formulation, and it was a perilous exercise to recognize the self-essentializing stances and discourses of my interlocutors while trying to avoid confirming “des poncifs familiers sur 'les Noirs'” that their stances and discourses were in fact responding to. This exercise was especially difficult due to the intimate position I acquired within the social

networks in which I was carrying out my research, and because I remained acutely aware of my privilege of race, class, and education. Gondola suggests that I was “à la fois *insider* et *outsider*, viveuse et voyeuse, observée et observant,” an ambiguous position that allowed me to “osciller entre un rendu étique et une approche émique.” In retrospect, I realize that in writing *Boucan* I was walking the fine line between trying to avoid “voicing-over” my interlocutors while attempting to proceed to a “translation” of their categories for an imagined audience of outsiders. This led me, more or less convincingly, to suggest parallels between cultural references, such as the *phaseur* of Paris, the *shegue* of Kinshasa, and the *hustler* of New York. In this instance, I was following rapper of Congolese origin Gradur, who named his artistic collective and clothing apparel brand “Sheguez Squaad” (p. 194) and was asked by the television channel Trace Urban to “expliquer ce que shegue veut dire.”[11] In the interview, the rapper lays out the similarities between his experience as a young Black man in France and that of the *shegue*: both “fight” and “make do” (*se débrouillent*) “to survive.” Congolese n’dombolo megastar Fally Ipupa, beloved by young post-migrants, nicknamed himself “Trois-Fois hustler” as his career gained international (and North Atlantic) fame. An American journalist, interviewing him in French for the online media Afropop Worldwide, asks, “Ici à New York, on connaît le *hustle* de New York, mais je voulais savoir, comment c’était votre *hustle* quand vous étiez jeunes, à Kinshasa?” Ipupa recalls: “Comme à New York, ... c’était dur quand même. On a travaillé dur pour devenir les artistes connus aujourd’hui. On a commencé à Bandal, c’était du vrai *hustling*, parce que bon, à cette époque-là, il n’y avait pas d’internet, il fallait travailler, et c’était compliqué pour passer à la télévision, il fallait donner à fond. Voilà, donc, aujourd’hui, grâce à Dieu, voilà, on essaie de faire des choses ici à New York, en France, en Afrique. C’est du *hustling*, mais du mode Kin, quoi.”[12] Important figures of the afro scene who adopted translations and contextual transpositions were operating in line with the way social media and video-sharing platforms of the time connected distant parts of the world, creating new proximities and new publics, but also forms of “context-collapse.”[13]

My discussion of the Congolese-born concepts of *débrouillardise* and *phase*, central to my interlocutors’ cultural world, could nevertheless have been informed by a more consistent and exhaustive literature review. As Gondola rightly points out, these concepts have been discussed by several scholars who have studied youth in Kinshasa. I was cautious not to fall into a culturalist trap, especially since the *milieu afro* brought together young people of a variety of cultural origins and upbringings. Furthermore, in the 2000s, my interlocutors were only gradually making sense of such concepts for themselves. YouTube (2005), Dailymotion (2005), Facebook (2006), and Instagram (2010), launched in the second half of the 2000s, allowed for more elaborate cultural exegeses by young people whose parents had lived in the Congo(s) (or elsewhere in Africa and the Caribbean), but where they, personally, had never been. Centered on user-driven content, these platforms gave young people with Internet access (and the required digital devices) the opportunity to exchange, debate, and even argue over the use and meaning of concepts (see for example, Jessy Matador’s and DJ Arafat’s conflict around *coupé-décalé*, pp. 155–158). References to *débrouillardise* and *phase* were adopted by young people with no Congolese (or even African) origins, as was the equally central Ivorian-born concept of *boucan*. In fact, it was not always clear who among my interlocutors had grown up in a familial context where they were common and used such concepts intentionally and who had picked them up as they circulated among their peers. What was clear, as Nicolas Sarkozy threatened French-born and -raised youth from being deposed of their French nationality if they dared revolt against

police brutality, a behavior deemed “unpatriotic” (pp. 31–33), was that young people of African origin were African *tout court* and had to learn to behave and speak as such.

The playful mastery of various accents and the practice of code-switching between accents, linguistic registers and languages played an important role in my interlocutors’ presentation and sense of self. This subject has already been studied by scholars of youth in other European contexts.[14] In the *milieu afro*, in the 2000s, an African accent (whichever one, but a convincing one) gave young people a “cultural advantage” if it was deployed and displayed at just the right moment.[15] Often, it was only one sentence, a fragment of a sentence, or even a single word, that would be switched, contextually, to the adequate African accent (whether it be Congolese, Ivorian, Cameroonian, Senegalese, etc.). As Bonnie Erickson explains, distancing herself from Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, “those who have many cultural weapons can find one to suit the battle at hand [...]. Thus the most widely useful form of cultural resource is cultural variety plus the (equally cultural) understanding of the rules of relevance.”[16] African accents, in the plural, indexed *le bled* (“the country of origin”) and the parents’ generation, as well as a cultural and affective attachment to both. Accents had an important political significance in the French climate of the 2000s, when *la question noire* and *l’identité nationale* were debated by politicians and in the press.

Such accents (or just specific accented phrases and words) started to be used increasingly by rappers and comedians of African origin, sometimes with a comedic intent that nevertheless signalled that one belonged to a “culturally-intimate” community.[17] In the second half of the 2000s, the boundaries between the genres of rap and comedy became thin and blurred, not the least because rappers invited comedians to appear in their videos (see p. 208). For example, the video (pp. 144–148) of a successful track by the rap group 113, “Un gaou à Oran” (2004), featured Ivorian comedian Michel Gohou (in a white suit and crocodile leather shoes, “mais sans chaussettes, ça c’est grave!”), famous for his role in the Ivorian sitcom *Ma Famille* (2002–2007).[18] It doesn’t matter whether he was included humorously or as an important cultural figure in post-migrants’ domestic spheres, similar to Ivoirian megastars Magic System who sing on the track. It is likely that it is for both reasons, not the least because in *Ma Famille* he incarnates an endearing *gaou* (an impressionable idiot) who runs after and gets tricked by women, precisely the topic of Magic System’s breaking hit “Premier Gaou.” A *mélange des genres*, but also a multi-layered chef d’oeuvre of intertextuality and intermediality, the track combines *rai* instrumentation on a *coupé-décalé* rhythm, verses in French and *banlieue* slang, and choruses in Algerian Arabic.[19] The surrealist and brightly coloured videoclip features a silver teapot transforming into a ghetto blaster, brown girls wearing baggy pants and dashikis performing a hybrid n’dombolo and *coupé-décalé* choreography, a young man with an Algerian football jersey watching a game in his living room, and a joyous, transgenerational, and multi-ethnic dance party on the roof of a social housing building.[20] The linguistic compositions of my interlocutors, borrowing from a variety of African (but also Caribbean, French regional, and other) accents, resonated and reverberated with the pluricultural world they were immersed in, similar “Un Gaou à Oran” in sound and images.[21]

In a highly heterogenous *milieu afro*, which also included “non-afros” and was increasingly observed by outsiders, in school playgrounds, on social media, and on television, the difference that often mattered most was not between African accents but between those who could display one (or any) and those who could not. Dycosh, a French comedian of Congolese origin, whose

sketches on *la sapologie* went viral in 2015 [22], asked in a YouTube video, “Et pourquoi les Blancs quand ils essayent de faire l’accent africain, ils parlent comme des Québécois?”[23] *Faire l’accent africain*, in this context, is thought in the singular and distinguishes those who cannot from those who can. Redouane Béhache, a French comedian of Algerian origin and one of Dycosch’s acolytes, belongs to the latter category, and is said to rarely step out of his Congolese *sapeur* character, including in his professional email address, ouaiscestbon@gmail.com, meant to be read with a Congolese accent.[24] He exemplifies how much Congolese cultural references have permeated French popular culture since the early 2000s and are nowadays clearly identifiable, even by outsiders. A 2015 article in *Le Monde* titled “Quand le rap français prend l’accent congolais,” explains that “entrecouper ses textes d’un refrain en lingala (la langue la plus parlée au Congo-Kinshasa), entremêler des riffs de guitare rumba sur des *beat* urbains ou raconter son quotidien avec le regard d’un jeune immigré congolais en France est devenu l’apanage de cette nouvelle génération de rappers en ‘*conversation permanente*’ avec leur pays d’origine.”[25] Multiple blog and press articles assert that rappers of Congolese origin have “taken over” the Francophone rap scene [26]: not only language and accent, but prosody, “flow” and body language reflect a process of so-called *congolisation*. [27] This was not yet the case when I was carrying out my fieldwork: putting on (an) African accent(s) was often a way for my interlocutors to perform their Africanity humorously, to signal tender attachment and belonging but also distancing themselves from the *bled* and from *les bledards*, i.e., their parents’ generation (see my discussion of the *tantines* incarnated by post-migrants in online sketches pp. 255–257).

The sketches and videos produced and circulated in the digital sphere by young post-migrants offered valuable emic representations of their everyday lives.[28] They contrasted, nuanced, and often preceded other film representations, such as Céline Sciamma’s critically acclaimed *Bande de filles* (2014), which I discuss in another publication.[29]. My discussion of the moral panic around “female gangs” in the national press around 2010 (see pp. 267–274), which forms the backdrop of Sciamma’s film, draws mostly upon an analysis of media sources: daily newspapers, a video and associated comments on YouTube, and an interview of artist Mokobe whose video I discuss (pp. 274–282). While this section is anchored less in an ethnographic approach, I did ask some of my interlocutors for their opinions. Several of them found the opening scene dissonant with their experience. I suspect that many of my interlocutors at the time had not seen the film [30], as Sciamma’s queer and feminist cinema and her questioning of gender and sexual identities and orientations in particular, didn’t cater to the political and cultural sensibilities of the young people that I was spending time with.[31] I preferred to discuss the cultural productions that my interlocutors were producing themselves or that they consumed, not the least because they were much less visible beyond the networks in which they circulated, and therefore, they were overlooked, when they in fact offered tremendous insights into French popular and youth culture of the early 2000s.

NOTES

[1] Anna Meera Gaonkar et al, “Introduction” in *Postmigration* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2021), p 11. The concept appeared in British academic publications in the mid-1990s, applied by scholars who were directly influenced by Stuart Hall’s critique of “ethnic absolutism”: the idea that ethnicity is static and ahistorical. It then resurfaced in the mid-2000s in Germany among artists, activists and cultural practitioners who labeled their work “postmigrant.”

[2] Kira Kosnick, “Ethnic Club Cultures: Postmigrant Leisure Socialities and Music in Urban Europe” in Dietrich Helms and Thomas Phleps (eds.) *Speaking in Tongues. Pop Lokal Global* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015), pp. 200, 201.

[3] Kosnick, *ibid.*, p. 199, my emphasis.

[4] Gérard Noiriel, *Le Creuset français: Histoire de l'immigration XIXe-XXe siècle* (Paris: Points, 1988), p. 211.

[5] On the album *Racines* (1999, V2, Isaap Productions), in “Le cul entre deux chaises,” the collective of Congolese origin Bisso na Bisso raps: “Brazza, Paris, des 2 côtés je suis bloqué; Là-bas, ici, toujours le même qui va te croquer; Le cul entre 2 chaises, l’exil presse mon pas; Et tu le sais, vers quelle terre vont se diriger nos pas.... Je ne sais plus où mourir, ou pourrir, effacer mon sourire; Souffrir dans mon de-blé ou lâcher en France mon dernier soupir; Souffrir du mal qu’il ya ici, ici ou là-bas c'est pareil.”

[6] Kathryn Kleppinger and Laura Reeck, *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), p. 2.

[7] Kleppinger and Reeck, *ibid.*, p. 2.

[8] Loi n° 2005-158 du 23 février 2005. Légifrance.
<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000000444898/> Accessed 10 October 2023.

[9] *Appel des Indigènes de la République*, January 2005. Accessed 10 October 2023.

[10] “Patrick Lozès,” CRAN: Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires.
<https://www.lecran.org/patrick-lozes/>. Accessed 10 October 2023.

[11] “Gradur explique ce que shegue veut dire,” 29 January 2015. In 2019, Gradur appeared in a short documentary film by Kombini entitled “Avec Gradur et les Shegueys en RDC”.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXsqYv6Tc4I>. Accessed 12 November 2023.

[12] “Fally Ipupa: ‘Trois-Fois Hustler,’ le Libanga, et la Démocratie,” *Afropop Worldwide*. 10 November 2016. <https://afropop.org/articles/fally-ipupa-francais>. Last opened 10 October 2023.

[13] Kyra Gaunt, “YouTube, Twerking and You: Context Collapse and the Handheld Co-Presence of Black Girls and Miley Cyrus,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 27/3 (2015): 244–273.

[14] Roger Hewitt, *White Talk, Black Talk. Inter-racial Friendship and Communication amongst Adolescents* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[15] Bonnie Erickson, “Culture, Class, and Connections,” *American Journal of Sociology* 102/1 (1996): 217-251.

[16] Erickson, *Ibid.* p. 219.

[17] Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics of the Nation-State* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 3-4.

[18] 113, Magic System, and Mohamed Lamine, “Un Gaou à Oran,” single, Artop Records, Sony Music Entertainment; *Ma Famille* (2002–2007), Akissi Delta, Lad Productions.

[19] Another example of a *mélange des genres* is of course Jessy Matador’s “Décalé Gwada,” discussed on pages 152–159 and p. 221.

[20] With their recognizable “Angelina” print, adopted and popularized by the civil rights and Black Panther movements of the 1960s and early 1970s.

[21] See for example, Dycosh’s sketch “Des étrangers posent enfin de vraies questions à la France,” DycoshTV, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHSUerxsCQo>. Accessed 10 October 2023.

[22] “La Sapologie #1 – Il garde ses chaussures dans un frigo,” DycoshTV, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwvB5EDq9y4>. Accessed 10 October 2023.

[23] “Dycosh Bêtisier 2015,” DycoshTV, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ub_3T4i1Z8M, see 4:21 min. Accessed 10 October 2023.

[24] See for example, “Rédouane BH – Dans l’intimité de Pitchou de Castelbajac,” NotSoBad Promo, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SAWOHSTWb14>. Accessed 10 October 2023.

[25] Amanda Winnie Kabuiku, “Quand le rap français prend l’accent congolais,” *Le Monde*, 18 September 2015. https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2015/09/18/quand-le-rap-francais-prend-l-accent-congolais_4762857_3212.html. Accessed 10 October 2023.

[26] See for example, rap blog Booska-p and Yerim Sar’s article “Le Congo dans le rap français,” 9 May 2018, <https://www.booska-p.com/musique/actualites/le-congo-dans-le-rap-francais/>. Accessed 10 October 2023. Or the short documentary by Marc Bettinelli, Alain Mbouche, and Adrien Sahli at *Le Monde*, “‘Rap Business’: pourquoi les rappeurs d’origine congolaise dominant le rap français,” 25 September 2022, https://www.lemonde.fr/musiques/video/2022/09/25/rap-business-pourquoi-les-rappeurs-d-origine-congolaise-dominent-le-rap-francais_6143114_1654986.html. Accessed 10 October 2023.

[27] On the syncopated “African” prosody of Végédream in “Ramenez la coupe à la maison,” see Gêrôme Guibert and Emmanuel Parent, “Tous égaux! French popular music: local characteristics, Universalist ideal and colonial past,” in Simone Krueger (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Global Popular Music*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

[28] See, for example, the YouTube video series “dans le kartier” (DLK) (2007–2017) <https://www.youtube.com/@danslekartier/videos> or the collection of “vines” (short videos) and longer videos of the collective Meight, distributed on a variety of YouTube and other social

media accounts, for example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aK7Xd7TEiss>. Accessed 10 October 2023.

[29] Laura Steil, “Boucan! Loud moves against invisibility in postcolonial France,” *Critical African Studies* 11/1 (2019): 121–135.

[30] This cannot be confirmed without interviewing former interlocutors.

[31] See Isabelle McNeill, “‘Shine Bright Like a Diamond’: Music, Performance and Digitextuality in Céline Sciamma’s *Bande de filles* (2014),” *Studies in French Cinema* 18/4 (2018): 326–340; Cristina Johnston, “The Queer Circulation of Objects in the Films of Céline Sciamma,” *French Screen Studies* 22/4 (2022): 287–303.

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