

H-France Forum

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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.

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Even the most cursory glance at the sheer abundance of cultural studies on Black France that have considered individual and collective notions of visibility through and in sartorial practices, Afrodiasporic and rap music, and hip hop dance, might lead researchers to conclude that most fertile scholarly terrain on these topics has already been cultivated. Yet Laura Steil's thorough and carefully researched ethnographic study, *Boucan! Devenir quelqu'un dans le milieu afro*, contributes impressive depth and breadth to these conversations. Drawing from more than ten years of participant observation and select interviews, Steil's *Boucan!* outwardly focuses on how one well-defined group—dancers and aspiring musicians inhabiting Parisian *banlieues* in the first two decades of the twenty-first century—navigate economies of prestige in the *milieu afro* through self-fashioning, performativity, and image curation. But telling the story of this milieu afro, a particular network of “jeunes post-migrants noirs” (p. 23), also necessarily involves weaving a rich tapestry of various Afrodiasporic cultural threads in twenty-first century France, from its geographical landmarks and forms of mobility connecting them, to the African popular music scene, to the ways regional and national identities intersect. For the purposes of this limited forum discussion, I focus on illustrating the productive possibilities of select topics, notably the *milieu afro* and *délires*, and highlighting *Boucan!*'s argumentative apex. Ultimately, however, *Boucan!* offers much to scholars of Black France and African popular culture in twenty-first-century France.

Carefully attuned to the tensions between individual and collective belonging, *Boucan!* first traces the contours of the milieu afro and the dancers and aspiring musicians who participate in it. Steil rightly points out that this milieu afro functions not as a community per se, but rather as a network (un “entre-soi,” p. 23) whose participants embrace similar *délires* within a larger constellation of Afrodiasporic *délires* (notably dancehall and hip hop). Over time, this milieu afro develops into a “véritable scène” (p. 26). Tracing the development of the milieu afro, Steil also engages the ways racial, regional, and national identities are not only expressed through the music itself (through rhythms, dance styles, and linguistic shout outs to origins like “Gwada” [Guadeloupean] or “Kainf” [African]), but also constructed and affirmed through personal musical preferences and associated comportments and activities. Like many of the terms at the core of *Boucan!*, *délire* becomes a flexible signifier, designating “aussi bien des moments d'effervescence émotionnelle, des systèmes de préférences et de sensibilités et des scènes” (p. 90). My own research—notably interviews I conducted with *coupé-décalé* musicians in Paris in 2006—confirms that the concept of *délires* proved central to how young people forged networks and organized their own cultural activities at the time. Remarkably, Lino Versace, one of the founding members of the *coupé-décalé* Jet Set, explained that *coupé-décalé* music did not originate as a music movement per se, but rather as a group of friends that coalesced through

repeated social interactions around *le même délire*: “Ce mouvement, c’est un groupe d’amis—de jeunes—qui se croisaient tous les week-ends, et qui avaient le même délire.”[1] Further, as a scholar who has always situated herself at the intersection of literary and musical studies and who, for some time, has been investigating the intermediality of Afropean literary works (notably the abundance of paratextual and diegetic soundtracks in novels by Alain Mabanckou, Insa Sané, Edgar Sekloka, Julien Delmaire, and Léonora Miano, to name just a few) I find the notion of *délires* as both an individual affective experience and as a participatory, belonging-affirming activity, to be full of productive possibilities for parsing literary-musical intersections.[2]

Boucan!’s study of how *jeunes post-migrants noirs* navigate economies of prestige in the *milieu afro* also intersects with and contributes much to our understanding of African and Afrodiasporic popular music scenes (notably *coupé-décalé*, *zouglou*, *ndombolo* and *zouk*, among others) in early 2000s Paris. Steil is particularly interested in the rise of post-migrant dancers and musicians such as Jessy Matador, Hiro le Coq, and Mokobé, yet as she rightly points out, the *scène afro* in Paris at the time was frequented both by “post-migrants” and by “migrants” (p. 163). Steil focuses especially on the ways in which the *jeunes post-migrants noirs* participating in the *milieu afro* adopt and remix African and Afrodiasporic linguistic, sartorial, dance, and musical practices, and she illustrates the porousness of boundaries between African and the Parisian *milieu afro* by centering intergenerational musical collaborations such as Mokobé’s collaboration with Magic System in the songs “Un Gaou à Oran” or “Bouger Bouger.” Having researched not the *milieu afro* among post-migrants noirs, but rather the *coupé-décalé* milieu and the club scene frequented by young Africans (Cameroonians and Ivorians, among others) at the time, I would be curious to hear more about the porousness of boundaries between African popular music practitioners and afro new style adherents at the time.

After sketching the contours of the *milieu afro* and the complex origins of the dances and musical styles at its center, Steil’s book then reaches its argumentative apex, turning to the visual and performative ways in which individual dancers and musicians accumulate prestige. *Boucan!* ultimately pinpoints a paradox at the heart of the economy of prestige: “La consommation ostentatoire ne sert pas uniquement à performer le prestige mais aussi à le générer” because the higher one rises in the economy of prestige, the more one finds oneself offered “cadeaux et services par des pairs *et des petits*” (p. 287, italics in the text). Critically, while this argument examines self-evident spending-oriented economic activities like conspicuous consumption, purchasing clothing, or extending non-monetary material benefits to one’s entourage, it also shows that garnering prestige transpires through activities one would hardly categorize as economic such as dancing and image management (whether through gossip or on social media). That said, Steil deftly takes these performances and appearances as real: “je n’ai pas forcément cherché la ‘réalité’ derrière les apparences, peu conviancue que c’est là qu’elle se trouvait” (p. 81).

Of particular import in these chapters (especially “Histoires” and “Phaseurs”) is the tension individuals experience between self-expression and communal identity. In this regard, dancers prove a particularly interesting case study. As one might expect, members of professional dance troupes must perform uniform choreographed routines; however, as Steil shows, individual members sometimes also seek to draw attention to themselves (thereby increasing their own performative capital or prestige) through individual flair performed with varying degrees of subtlety. These intentional departures from the standard choreography are known as “phases” and

troupe members police this practice through accusing the dancer of being a *phaseur*, an accusation that must always be denied since to draw attention to oneself necessarily implies doing so at the expense of the larger group. *Boucan!* also illustrates how jeunes post-migrants noirs in the milieu afro carefully curate their image through their participation in and responses to gossip, including but not limited to that which played out on social media platforms. Here, Steil shows how an accumulation of social capital can similarly create multiple paradoxes. First, as one gains prestige, one's ability to dismiss rumors increases; in fact, attacking the rumor-creator as "jaloux" reinforces one's status as *grand* and the other as *petit* (pp. 223–226). Second, one's increase in prestige often raises thorny questions about (in)authenticity; as Steil shows, those at the top of the social economy often develop and play the role of "authentic" character ("*personnage*"), giving others less and less access to their true self ("*personne*") over time (pp. 222–225). Steil's insights on image curation and ingroup policing—especially as they play out in patronage and gossip networks—can potentially illuminate new facets of well-studied Afropean literary works in which authenticity, gossip, and belonging play central roles. Alain Mabanckou's 2009 novel *Black Bazar*, in which the main characters accuse each other of being sellouts (*vendu, complice des esclavagistes*) and gossip about each other, while the main narrator-author Fessologue is both a *personnage* and read as a double for Mabanckou himself, functions as but one fruitful example.[3]

In addition to its highly convincing and insightful conclusions about how individuals navigate the economy of prestige in the milieu afro, *Boucan!* offers one of the most detailed analyses of how the intersection between race, origin, and gender coalesce. Namely, Steil's penultimate body chapter ("Femmes") considers how women's potential motherhood intersects with the notion of *respectabilité* to form particular logics that shape how men relate to them. Consumption, again, is a central concern: whereas "les hommes gagnent en prestige et en masculinité lorsqu'ils dépensent et délèguent la consommation," a paradox emerges for women, who "gagnent en prestige et féminité lorsqu'elles consomment" (p. 295). For women, becoming an "officielle"—that is, a recognized partner—garners them prestige and stability; however, their "potentiel de maternité" renders them dangerous for both men and for the women themselves (p. 253). Namely, as Steil traces, a pregnancy can allow women "de tirer d'avantage profit d'hommes qui construisent leur prestige autour de leur capacité à dépenser" but it can also cause a woman to become dependent on their male partner for their consumption needs, thereby rendering them "vulnérables" (p. 253). Again, though, far from reducing highly individualized experiences to a flat caricature, Steil's *Boucan!* offers its reader a range of concrete cases to illustrate how women navigate these complex dynamics—and to what effect.

In many ways, *Boucan!* ends where it begins. Its final body chapter, "Boucan," opens back out to consider the ways in which young, *post-migrants noirs* affirm individual and collective belonging and call into question images depicted in news media at the time, including seemingly ubiquitous reports on female gangs roaming Paris. Here, again, Steil's core terminology takes on multiple resonances: she concludes that both individually and collectively, the population under consideration reclaims and refashions the notion of *boucan* itself: "des jeunes Noirs post-migrants se réapproprient et donnent un sens différent à une étiquette péjorative dont ils sont souvent affublés, celle de jeunes turbulents qui font *du boucan* (sonore), plutôt que *le boucan* (visuel et relationnel)" (p. 298). On this point, I would be curious to hear Steil's thoughts on Céline Sciamma's enormously popular yet polarizing 2014 film *Bande de filles*, which

fictionalizes the ever-present specter of the female gangs that form the news media backdrop for this chapter and which centers questions of gender, belonging, music, dance, and intimacy.

In this short reflection, I have but only scratched the surface of Steil's rich and fascinating study. Her unique mix of positionalities marrying insider and outsider—from dancer-practitioner in the milieu afro, to ethnographer, to white Belgian woman living in France, to *banlieue* resident—offers her unprecedented access to the milieu afro and renders *Boucan!* an invaluable source for scholars curious about Black France and the Afrodiasporic music and cultural scenes in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Far from merely an auto-ethnography on the one hand or a series of thick descriptions on the other, Steil's monograph is both self-reflexive (Steil openly acknowledges and often interrogates her own positionality) and anchored in ethnographic, performance studies, and sociocultural theories. Overall, *Boucan!* adds new layers of understanding to the ways in which *jeunes post-migrants noirs* participating in the milieu afro individually and collectively navigate the paradoxical tension Pap Ndiaye notably pointed up between being invisible and hypervisible minorities.[4] Throughout, Steil carefully teases apart questions of positionality and identity, illustrating how race, nationality, colonial legacies, immigration statuses, networks of praxis and of preference (*délires*), and gender, among other dimensions, not only led to the creation of the afro scene in Paris, but also allowed its participants to navigate economies of prestige embedded within it. A final thread I thought might merit developing concerns the terminology Steil uses to describe the population under consideration—namely the extent to which participants themselves use the phrase *jeunes post-migrants noirs* and the degree to which the post-migrant designation Steil offers aligns with or departs from that proposed by Kathryn Kleppinger and Laura Reeck in *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France* (2018).[5] Again, though, no one book can do everything, and the questions and discussions I have raised above should be seen as opportunities to continue the fascinating discussion opened by the monograph itself.

NOTES

[1] Lino Versace, Unpublished Interview with Katelyn Knox (Paris: 6 July, 2006).

[2] Alain Mabanckou, *Black bazar* (Paris: Seuil, 2009); Léonora Miano, *Blues pour Élise* (Paris: Plon, 2010). Insa Sané, *Du plomb dans le crâne* (Paris: Éditions Sarbacanne, 2008). Insa Sané, *Daddy est mort... Retour à Sarcelles* (Paris: Éditions Sarbacanne, 2010). Julien Delmaire, *Rose-Pirogue* (Montréal: Mémoire d'encrier, 2016). Edgar Sekloka, *Coffee* (Paris: Éditions Sarbacanne, 2008).

[3] Mabanckou, *Ibid.*, p. 104.

[4] Pap Ndiaye, *La condition noire. Essai sur une minorité française* (Paris: Éditions Calmann-Lévy, 2008).

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

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