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# Sub-Saharan African Immigrant Activists in Europe: Transcultural Capital and Transcultural Community Building [please note slight change in new proposed title]

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**Active Civic Participation among Sub-Saharan Africans in Europe.  
Transcultural Capital and Transcultural Community Building**

Anna Triandafyllidou

FOR PEER REVIEW ONLY

## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that immigrant civic activism which may at first glance seem to focus on diasporic ties and ethnic community building, becomes often a lever for transcultural capital and transcultural community building. The study is explorative of new repertoires and forms of transnationalism among sub Saharan African immigrant activists in Europe. The findings suggest that immigrant civic activism even if limited in size proposes new types of transcultural societal networks and new forms of transcultural expression. In the first part of the study I discuss the theoretical background of transnationalism in migration studies and propose the notions of transcultural capital and transcultural community as working concepts. The second part of the study concentrates on the qualitative analysis of life story interviews with sixteen sub Saharan African immigrants in Europe.

Keywords: migration, transnationalism, civic activism, social capital, Europe, Africa.

## 1. Introduction

There is a wealth of literature discussing immigrant civic and political activism, especially in European countries with a long experience as receiving societies, like the Netherlands and Germany (for an overview, see Cyrus and Vogel 2005; ter Wal 2007). A question frequently investigated in these studies is whether immigrant activism contributes to immigrant integration in the country of settlement or whether it is mainly ethnic community oriented, concerned with immigrant problems only and/or geared towards homeland politics and issues. The scholarly and often the policy debate concentrates on the country of origin vs. country of settlement dilemma. It is my contention that the dominance of this dilemma reflects a problem of methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002). A more fruitful approach would be to look at the ways in which immigrant civic or political engagement contributes to new types of social and cultural capital (Meinhof and Triandafyllidou 2006) and to new forms of community building.

In this paper, I argue that immigrant civic activism which may at first glance seem to focus on diasporic ties and ethnic community building, becomes often a lever for the development of transcultural capital and the building of transcultural communities. The bi-focal attachment to the country of origin and the country of settlement gives rise to transcultural narratives that immigrant activists adopt to make sense of themselves and of their civic activism in the country of settlement. The migrant activist presents her/himself as somebody with fluency in two cultural idioms, feeling at home in both the society of origin and that of settlement, and promotes this transcultural quality of hers/his as a form of transcultural capital. These transcultural

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repertoires may originate initially from external categorizations (the foreigner, the outsider, the different) that are later internalized and transformed into a new layer of identity (the pivotal person, the transcultural community builder). Such repertoires are embedded in the power relations of the country of settlement. The quality of being an immigrant is transformed from a disadvantaged position (someone who does not belong) to an asset (someone who has fluency in different cultural or linguistic idioms and who has social networks both *here*, in the country of settlement, and *there*, in the country of origin).

For the purposes of this study I propose the following definition of the terms transcultural capital and transcultural community. Transcultural capital involves the strategic use of knowledge, skills, and networks acquired by migrants through connections with their country and cultures of origin which are made active at their new places of residence. The notion of transcultural community is proposed to make sense of the informants' accounts of the community-building aspects of their civic activism. I use the term transcultural instead of transnational to point to the fact that the immigrants' discourses and actions need not involve more than one countries but may involve people of different nationalities (e.g. Nigerian immigrants and Slovenian natives), or people of the same nationality but of different cultural affiliations (e.g. native Portuguese and Angolan Portuguese).

I have chosen the case of sub-Saharan Africans to illustrate how immigrant civic activism develops in and through transcultural capital and community building for a number of reasons. First, because several among the sub-Saharan African informants of this study used the categorical distinction between Africa and Europe (African/*our* culture, European/Western culture). Second, because sub-Saharan African immigrants in Europe tend to be subsumed under the 'black' race category

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3 imposing thus on them a common pan-African categorisation. In the case of our  
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5 interviewees, this pan-African dimension is turned on its head and the racial  
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7 disadvantage and prejudice faced by our informants is transformed into (trans)cultural  
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9 capital. The interviews analysed here include seven different countries of origin  
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11 (Angola, Burundi, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissao, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Somalia)  
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13 and seven countries of settlement (Finland, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Portugal,  
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15 Slovenia).  
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20 Although the informants were recruited on the basis of their civic activism,  
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22 their demographic and socio-economic profile suggests that they belong to an  
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24 immigrant elite (see table 1): all of them came to the country of settlement to study or  
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26 as internal movers within a colonial regime (Angolans in Portugal). They are perfectly  
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28 integrated in that they have been established in the country of settlement for over 15  
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30 years, have raised families (several are married with natives) and have naturalised.  
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32 This type of human and social capital appears a necessary even if not satisfactory  
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34 condition for developing transcultural capital and aspiring towards building a  
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36 transcultural community.  
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43 Table 1 about here  
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49 This study investigates whether immigrant civic activism even if limited in  
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51 size compared to natives' civic activism (Triandafyllidou and Vogel 2006) may  
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53 become a form of revitalization of citizen participation in public life because it  
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55 proposes new types of cultural expression and community building (see also Putnam  
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57 2000). The study is qualitative in nature. I try to gain a better insight into the  
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59 meanings involved in immigrant transcultural civic activism through the analysis of  
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3 the informants' ways of speaking, their selection and narrativisation of their  
4 experiences and their own ways of making sense of their lives. This construction of  
5 meaning however is considered important in that it can provide for new dimensions  
6 for transcultural identification not only for elites but also for first and second  
7 generation immigrant youth in that it captures the fluid and dynamic nature of  
8 European societies and migrant populations in the twenty first century.  
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11 In the following section I discuss briefly the two main approaches to migrant  
12 transnationalism (diaspora nationalism and cosmopolitanism) and introduce my  
13 working definitions of transcultural capital and transcultural community. The third  
14 section presents the methodology and data used in this study. Section four  
15 concentrates on the analysis of the interviews. In the concluding section the relevance  
16 of the findings of this study for further research on immigrant activism and  
17 transnationalism is discussed.  
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## 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 **2. Transcultural capital and transcultural community: theoretical reflections** 38 39 40

41 There is a growing literature on immigrant transnationalism focusing not only on the  
42 bi-focal position of migrants between two countries and cultures but also on new  
43 cultural identities that emerge from the synthesis of the two. Although an overview of  
44 this literature goes beyond the scope of this paper, I shall discuss here briefly the two  
45 main theoretical perspectives for studying migration-related transnational phenomena:  
46 diaspora nationalism and cosmopolitanism (for a more comprehensive discussion see  
47 Meinhof and Triandafyllidou 2006).  
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57 Robin Cohen (1997: 2) points to the transformation of the concept of diaspora  
58 from the original meaning of a victims' predicament (the biblical reference to the  
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3 scattering of the Jews) to its contemporary use as a way of making sense of cultural  
4 difference and identity politics. Currently the diaspora nationalism perspective is  
5 based on a national vision of reality assuming that nations and ethnic groups are  
6 primary points of reference for both immigrants and natives and hence structure the  
7 lives of either as well as their mutual contact. It focuses on the collective realities of  
8 diasporas, their institutions and networks, the society and state institutions at the  
9 country of origin, paying less attention to internal diversity within diasporas, the  
10 ambivalence of the links between immigrants and their country of origin, the possible  
11 variation in the practices and views of individual immigrants.  
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25 Diaspora nationalism points to the continuing relevance of national identities  
26 in the everyday lives of both natives and immigrants. Indeed, immigrant politicians  
27 may have a long-distance albeit significant involvement in homeland politics and may  
28 have ties to political parties in the country of origin (Itzigsohn 2000; Smith 2003).  
29 Emigrant remittances are an important development factor for the economy of the  
30 sending country both in terms of supporting the livelihoods of the immigrants' families  
31 left behind but also determining the socio-economic and educational prospects of entire  
32 communities (Guarnizo 2003). Immigrants, at least the first generation, hold onto the  
33 idea of returning to the country of origin and hence aim at maintaining and developing  
34 their social and economic position there (Goldring 1998).  
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49 Recent research has highlighted the dual nature of diaspora national identity, its  
50 status of neither here nor there and its double point of reference: in the country of  
51 settlement, usually experienced as actual *home* and the country of origin, often imagined  
52 as a *homeland* too but also as often experienced as an *alien* culture and place (Christou  
53 2006). Such ethnographic accounts that highlight the complexity of dual or multiple  
54 identifications among immigrants is an element that I wish to retain from this  
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3 perspective. In this paper, I shall highlight how immigrant (diasporic) identity develops  
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6 in new directions through civic activism and leads to the development of transcultural  
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9 repertoires that transform the immigrant disadvantage into a new form of transcultural  
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11 capital.

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13 By contrast to diaspora nationalism perspectives, cosmopolitanism pays more  
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15 attention to the individual level. For cosmopolitanism group realities are less relevant  
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17 in a world marked by economic, social and cultural globalization. Immigrants  
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19 construct their individualized identities out of their social and cultural ties with the  
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21 country of origin as well as their actual experiences and affiliations in the country of  
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23 settlement.  
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27 The cosmopolitan perspective is predicated on the overall processes of social  
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29 transformation in the late modern period. Theorists of late or post modernity (for  
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31 instance Giddens 1991) argued that contemporary individuals may chose from  
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33 different cultural repertoires that are available to them so as to create their own  
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35 individualized identities. Migration scholars (Papastergiadis 2000 for instance) have  
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37 noted the importance of globalisation processes for labour migration phenomena. In  
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39 this approach, the emphasis is on the individual rather than on the collective reality of  
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41 a group. Contemporary migrants living in a mobile world of culturally open societies,  
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43 adapt to multiple social settings and to ethnically mixed contexts, develop cross-  
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45 cultural competences and no longer have a sense of primary loyalty to one place or  
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47 community (Pecoud 2004). This is not seen as contradictory to the need of members  
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49 of transnational networks and communities for 'political stability, economic  
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51 prosperity and social well-being in their places of residence, just like anybody else'  
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58 (Castles 2002: 1159).  
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3 In my view, multiple identities are constructed out of a whole range of  
4 possibilities made available by the cultural diversity in countries of origin as well as  
5 settlement which cannot be retained within narrow conceptions of national cultures as  
6 closed containers. In that sense cosmopolitan repertoires are a reality, and especially  
7 so in large city environments. But the context in which migrants move very often  
8 includes kinship and ethnic networks which cannot be disregarded assuming that  
9 individuals are free floating agents in a global world.  
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Diaspora nationalism and cosmopolitanism offer complementary repertoires of  
identification for migrants in diverse cultural settings and different every-day life  
situations. In this paper I take the case of sub-Saharan immigrant activists in Europe –  
by definition an immigrant elite – to show how they use and combine diasporic and  
cosmopolitan repertoires in making sense of their actions and experiences. My  
analysis is organised along two working concepts that have been both inductively and  
deductively developed: the notion of transcultural capital proposed in the work of  
Meinhof and Triandafyllidou (2006), and the concept of transcultural community that  
stems from existing literature on transnational communities.

Meinhof and Triandafyllidou (2006) have coined the term transcultural capital  
by adapting Bourdieu's well known remark that 'capital presents itself under three  
fundamental species (each with its own subtypes), namely economic capital, cultural  
capital, and social capital' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 119). The notion of  
transcultural capital highlights the strategic use of knowledge, skills, networks  
acquired by migrants through connections with their country and cultures of origin  
which are made active at their new places of residence. Transcultural capital includes  
forms of all three types of capital identified by Bourdieu (economic, social and  
cultural). Meinhof and Triandafyllidou use this notion to analyse ethnographically the

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3 narratives and everyday life practices of first generation immigrant musicians from  
4 francophone Africa living and working in Paris and other major European cities. They  
5 examine those artists' strategic possibilities of strong local and transnational ties  
6 within and across migrant communities (social capital), of widespread bi- or  
7 multilingualism, bi- or multiculturalism (cultural capital), and of retaining vibrant  
8 artistic roots in originating cultures but blending these with new local and global  
9 influences (transcultural capital combinations).

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20 The notion of transcultural capital is useful to describe and explore the  
21 transnational lives of first generation immigrant activists from sub-Saharan Africa  
22 who develop ethnic networks within and between the society of settlement and the  
23 society of origin, are immersed in the mainstream culture and civic life in the country  
24 of settlement and feel ultimately ambivalent or bi/multi-focal in their national and  
25 cultural identifications.

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34 Transcultural capital is useful as a theoretical notion in that it seeks to  
35 supersede the oppositional discourses of diasporic communities on the one hand and  
36 cosmopolitan flows on the other by underlining the potential arising from a repertoire  
37 of options drawn from across the spectrum (Meinhof and Triandafyllidou 2006;  
38 Castles 2002: 1158). Compared to the term transnational networks or transnational  
39 communities as discussed in Portes (1997), the notion of transcultural capital  
40 emphasizes the fact that such networks, ties and indeed transnational/transcultural  
41 skills that immigrants acquire become a form of social and cultural capital for them.  
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3 than the accrued transnational human capital useful for doing business. Nonetheless,  
4  
5 the two terms should be seen as connected, casting light to different aspects of  
6  
7 transcultural or transnational capital building: Vanhonacker et al (2005) look into the  
8  
9 potential benefits of such capital for returning migrant business people, while this  
10  
11 study concentrates on the use of such capital for civic (non-profit) activism in the  
12  
13 country of settlement. Naturally, transcultural capital is inter-related with the human  
14  
15 and economic capital that people may have. However, the exploration of such links  
16  
17 goes beyond the scope of this paper.  
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22 The notion of transcultural community is proposed to make sense of the  
23  
24 informants' accounts of their networks and the community-building aspects of their  
25  
26 civic activism. I use the term transcultural instead of transnational to point to the fact  
27  
28 that the immigrants' discourses and actions need not involve more than one countries  
29  
30 but may involve people of different nationalities (e.g. Nigerian immigrants and Irish  
31  
32 natives), or people of the same nationality but of different cultural affiliations (e.g.  
33  
34 native Portuguese and Angolan Portuguese). In agreement with Olwig (2003: 808) I  
35  
36 try to avoid methodological nationalism and seek to emphasise how the activities and  
37  
38 narratives of my informants point to complex and also ambivalent and fluid patterns  
39  
40 of transnational socio-cultural practices. Their activities do not generally involve the  
41  
42 crossing of national boundaries although they do involve the crossing of boundaries  
43  
44 between cultures and the (potential) overcoming of ethnic and racial markers. The  
45  
46 notion of transcultural community points to their actions and discourses bringing  
47  
48 together different cultures (not nations) to create a new synthesis. This cultural  
49  
50 synthesis of different traditions or artistic forms provides the basis for building a  
51  
52 transcultural community.  
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4 The notion of community here is intended in its late modern definition rather  
5  
6 than its pre-modern or early modern one. Sub-Saharan African activists in Europe  
7  
8 cannot base their ideas of transcultural community on physical proximity with Africa  
9  
10 (locality and residence) nor on structural constraints (kinship, religious or customary  
11  
12 obligations) as their fellow nationals probably do in their countries of origin. But they  
13  
14 can adopt late modern repertoires of community building based on the creation and  
15  
16 development of social trust relations (Giddens 1994: 186) and the voluntary  
17  
18 involvement of individuals (Lash 1994: 161). Their communities mobilise cultural  
19  
20 resources and goals but do not embrace all aspects of life. They may overlap with  
21  
22 other community attachments (Beck 2000: 164), they need not command the primary  
23  
24 loyalty of their members, and they may change in time (Kennedy and Roudometof  
25  
26 2001: 12-13).  
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### 34 **3. Methodology and data**

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37  
38 This study is based on sixteen qualitative interviews<sup>1</sup> with sub-Saharan African  
39  
40 activists who are first generation immigrants in Europe. For the purposes of this  
41  
42 paper, I define civic activities as different forms of political participation and  
43  
44 community engagement (such as engaging in local or national politics, participating in  
45  
46 cultural associations, migrant lobby organisations or neighbourhood groups, see  
47  
48 Triandafyllidou and Vogel 2006 for a discussion) that involve some form of durable  
49  
50 participation, and require considerable and continuous effort and time on the part of  
51  
52 the activist.  
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57  
58 The interviews analysed were conducted by graduate students who are third  
59  
60 country nationals living and studying in the EU. In most cases, interviewer and

1  
2  
3 interviewee came from the same country and/or spoke the same language. Interviews  
4  
5 lasted between 45' and 60'. The transcripts and/or the translated texts have been  
6  
7 faithful to the oral conversation. The abbreviations I1, I2,... I16 have been used to  
8  
9 protect the anonymity of the interviewees and names of associations and political  
10  
11 parties are also omitted where possible. The interviews followed a basic interview  
12  
13 guide that helped stir the conversation so as to concentrate on the interviewee's life  
14  
15 and activities (socio-economic and demographic profile, how did s/he become active  
16  
17 initially, type of first activity, development of the interviewee's civic activism, main  
18  
19 conditions or factors that had encouraged or discouraged the interviewee from  
20  
21 starting/continuing her/his activities).  
22  
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26  
27 The interviews analysed here include seven different countries of origin  
28  
29 (Angola, Burundi, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissao, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Somalia)  
30  
31 and seven countries of settlement (Finland, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Malta, Portugal,  
32  
33 Slovenia) (see also table 1 above). These sixteen interviews were selected from a  
34  
35 larger set of 30 interviews with sub-Saharan African immigrants that were part of the  
36  
37 POLITIS project interview database.<sup>2</sup> The selection process was done manually  
38  
39 through reading carefully the interview transcripts of the initial set of 30 interviews  
40  
41 with a view to identifying those that included spontaneous references to transnational  
42  
43 or transcultural ties and network or community building.  
44  
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48  
49 It is worth noting that among the seven countries of settlement where our  
50  
51 selected informants are settled, only one is a country with a long past as a migrant  
52  
53 receiving country, notably Germany. Three are new immigration countries (Portugal,  
54  
55 Ireland and Finland), while another three (Latvia, Slovenia and Malta) are countries  
56  
57 that have not yet experienced immigration as hosts, or only to a very limited extent.  
58  
59 The absence from our sample of countries like the Netherlands, the UK or Sweden  
60

1  
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3 (where some among our initial 30 sub-Saharan African interviewees were located) is  
4  
5 surprising. Empirical research on transnational activities and identities of immigrants  
6  
7 in Europe documents the existence of such phenomena mainly in countries of the  
8  
9 latter type (e.g. Britain, France or the Netherlands, see for instance Meinhof and  
10  
11 Triandafyllidou, 2006b). This finding indeed raises the question of whether the  
12  
13 specific host country or the specific country of origin play a role in fostering the  
14  
15 immigrant's transcultural repertoires. This question will be explored qualitatively in  
16  
17 the following section of this paper.  
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### 25 **3. Transcultural Capital and Transcultural Community Repertoires**

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29 In analysing the interviews, I have looked for the ways in which the informants make  
30  
31 sense of their transnational/transcultural attachments and activities. Adopting a  
32  
33 qualitative discourse analysis perspective, I have examined the informants' use of  
34  
35 pronouns like 'I', 'we', 'they' and identified those paragraphs where they elaborated,  
36  
37 more or less explicitly, on the relationship between the three. My aim has been to  
38  
39 explore how they define the in-group, the 'we' and the out-group, the 'they', whether  
40  
41 these definitions change or are ambivalent, how they position the 'I' by reference to  
42  
43 the 'we' and the 'they' and whether they consciously construct the 'I' as standing in  
44  
45 between or belonging to both the ingroup and the outgroup, or belonging to a different  
46  
47 transnational or transcultural identity space that stands in-between. This bottom-up  
48  
49 approach has led me to the identification of two main transculturalism repertoires: the  
50  
51 *cultural pivots* and the *cultural activists*.  
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### Cultural Pivots

Some informants (notably interviewees I8, I9, I11 and I12) emphasised their activity and role as those standing at a pivotal position between cultures and societies. They emphasised that they were insiders to both countries but also outsiders in either country, if compared with other natives. They saw themselves as privileged because they had the cultural knowledge and the communication skills necessary to act as channels of communication and exchange, cultural or economic, between the two societies. They emphasised their feeling of belonging to both countries and cultures despite racism or discrimination experienced in the country of settlement. However, they also noted that at times they suffered double exclusion because of their transnational ties, they were aliens everywhere.

Below I cite three excerpts from the interviews with three sub-Saharan African activists, one from Guinea Bissao based in Ljubljana, Slovenia, a Nigerian in Malta and an Angolan in Lisbon, Portugal. The last two have naturalised in the countries of settlement. They all have lived in the destination countries for over fifteen years. The first two are married with natives and only the third with a co-national (i.e. an Angolan). All three have been civically active for many years and are relatively well known public figures in their countries of settlement.

I8 is male, in his late 30s. He comes from Guinea Bissao and has migrated to Slovenia twenty years ago. He migrated to study at the University of Ljubljana and soon became civically active in an international student association of which he soon became president. He later founded another African cultural association. He is in a stable relationship with a Slovenian and has one child.

I think they [Slovenians] don't see this potential [of migration] at all. I believe everybody only see the negative things. They just don't see the potential and this makes it much harder. [...]

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3 They take [migration] as a negative thing. And not something you can use. Or maybe they  
4  
5 don't have an idea, because they don't know the immigrants and they don't know other  
6  
7 cultures. This is a common obstacle. I think, that any entrepreneur who wishes to be successful  
8  
9 has to be open. I don't see why I wouldn't go to a Slovenian company and say that I'm coming  
10  
11 from there and there, I want to help you to export there and let's see what I can do. I don't see  
12  
13 the obstacle.

14  
15 [...] The ones who do not approve of me are more careful when expressing this disapproval.  
16  
17 Because they know I know a lot about Slovenian society, I have been here for so long, I speak  
18  
19 the language. And I know a lot of things connected with Slovenian culture.. (emphasis added)  
20  
21

22  
23 I8 distances himself from Slovenians and Slovenian society to which he refers  
24  
25 always as 'they', or 'the ones', the 'Slovenian society'. In his narrative there are two  
26  
27 out-groups: the Slovenians – both as customers and as suppliers – and the African  
28  
29 entrepreneur(s). He does not identify however with the latter either. Rather he  
30  
31 constructs a sense of 'we' the people with transcultural skills, who can and are willing  
32  
33 to act as cultural links bringing closer Slovenian and African business people. The  
34  
35 emphasis in the narrative is in his transcultural capital that is expressed in terms of  
36  
37 both inter-cultural communication skills and transnational networks. The informant  
38  
39 makes little reference to his economic capital. His emphasis is on his networks and  
40  
41 the business opportunities he sees in them rather than his economic capital to start a  
42  
43 business. I8 sees himself as embedded in Slovenian society but not part of it.  
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49  
50 I9 is also male in his mid 40s. He comes from Nigeria but has acquired  
51  
52 Maltese nationality. His spouse is Maltese and they have two children. He initially  
53  
54 came to Malta to study. He has now been in the country for sixteen years and is the  
55  
56 FIFA representative in Malta and hence is very well known locally. He has also run  
57  
58 the European Parliament elections as an independent candidate. He is active in several  
59  
60 African organisations in Malta. I9 presents himself as a pivotal person both culturally

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3 and economically, between Africa and his country of settlement, particularly in  
4  
5 relation to football but not only.  
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10 Basically the whole idea of coming out to run [for European Parliamentary elections] was to  
11 create an awareness in Malta and far beyond Malta, that, you know, in today's interdependent  
12 world, erm it's something which is natural that, we just have to accept that we, we, we live for  
13 each other, we have to accept it that people like me do exist in Malta today, I am a citizen, I  
14 started to raise a family, I do have every right like you, like every other person to participate  
15 in all social you know life, politics, whatever, and that was the main reason why I did come  
16 out to speak for, yeah, if you like, the minority people like me to make the, the majority of the  
17 Maltese aware that people like us are also now existing in Malta.  
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26 [...] I can take you now, we walk in Valletta. You won't believe that I am a black person. You  
27 see people coming to shake me, you know sometimes bow for me, shake me with two hands.  
28  
29

30 Yeah, because of what I have in a way established in Malta, these associations, because of  
31 football as well, you see me on the newspapers, they know my social and economic standing,  
32 that could be one of the reasons why I am you know respected the way I am respected but that  
33 is not the same for the as I said the sort of newer immigrants (...) [other immigrants] they melt  
34 because they are white as well, even the Russians. (emphasis added)  
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42 I9's definitions of the in-group and the out-group are shifting. His narrative  
43 positions him as part of the Maltese society, that he defines as an in-group. Contrary  
44 to I8 above, I9 identifies as Maltese. But he clarifies that he is a minority within Malta  
45 because of his skin colour. His definition of 'minority people like me' refers to  
46 'black' Africans rather than to all immigrants although the statement about race  
47 comes a few sentences later. This 'minority' is differentiated from other immigrants  
48 who are white and more numerous than sub-Saharan Africans. I9 emphasises his  
49 transcultural political activism and his wish to act as a link between cultures and as a  
50 transcultural pivot, to make people aware that the world is becoming increasingly  
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3 multi-ethnic and multi-racial. His repertoire of identity and his emphasis on his  
4  
5 transcultural social skills may be characterized as individualist and cosmopolitan  
6  
7 although references to race remain important.  
8  
9

10 I12 is male in his early 40s. He is Angolan-Portuguese and so is his wife. They  
11  
12 have two children. He has lived in Lisbon for thirty years and is an employee of the  
13  
14 Portuguese public administration. He is active as member of several Angolan  
15  
16 associations. He is also representative of a Portuguese party in the City of Lisbon's  
17  
18 Municipal Assembly and Head of the Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Municipal  
19  
20 Council of the City of Lisbon.  
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27 [...] And the tendency will be to grow even more, more Portuguese going to our countries: to  
28  
29 Cape Verde, to Guinea, to Mozambique, to Sao Tome, and so on. It's a pity that Portugal has  
30  
31 been losing, we'll say, control of integration, even in their own business dealings, because  
32  
33 Portugal and the Portuguese are today already seen as a second and third plan in our countries.  
34  
35 And that is bad. Why is it bad? Because when I go to Angola, I identify with Portugal. I  
36  
37 identify with the Portuguese. Because my children are Portuguese, my wife is Portuguese,  
38  
39 because I'm Portuguese. That means it doesn't look good on me, nor do I feel minimally good  
40  
41 when it's the Chinese that own the construction sites and public works in Luanda, for  
42  
43 example. And I ask, where's Portugal? (..) A lot of times when I arrive in Angola with my  
44  
45 family they say to me: Look it's the Portuguese! With a mocking attitude, they no longer call  
46  
47 me by my name. So this means, this is to say that a climate is being created that we need to  
48  
49 think about today. And we need to think about it in a very serious way. Portugal has people  
50  
51 that can help Portugal take a step forward. They are black! It is us! Portugal cannot abandon  
52  
53 us. Portugal will need us. Internally it will need us and it will thank us. (emphasis added)  
54  
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56

57 While I8 clearly positions himself as a sub Saharan African in Slovenia but not  
58  
59 of Slovenia, I9 identifies with Malta noting that however he is a minority Maltese, I12  
60  
adopts an ambivalent identity repertoire. He identifies with Portuguese speaking

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2  
3 African countries (they are 'our countries' in his narrative) but also states clearly a  
4  
5 few sentences later: 'my children are Portuguese, my wife is Portuguese, I am  
6  
7 Portuguese'. Similarly to I9 he defines himself as 'black' Portuguese. His narrative  
8  
9 emphasises his transcultural capital which includes his personal and family networks  
10  
11 as well as his inter-cultural skills and knowledge of both Portugal and Angola. He  
12  
13 proposes himself as a pivotal actor between Portugal and Portuguese-speaking  
14  
15 African countries, Angola in particular. He offers to use his transnational and  
16  
17 transcultural capital and networks to expand the economic and political exchange  
18  
19 between his country of origin and his country of settlement.  
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24  
25 These three distinct and rich biographies illustrate how transcultural capital is  
26  
27 developed and used for economic and political purposes by sub-Saharan African  
28  
29 immigrant activists who live in different European countries. The informants  
30  
31 highlight their role as transcultural and transnational capital brokers who develop  
32  
33 actively networks within and between the country of origin and the country of  
34  
35 settlement with a view to improving their own lives but also to contribute to public  
36  
37 and civic life in their country of settlement. There is a distinct African dimension in  
38  
39 the building of these transcultural networks related to the colour of the skin of the  
40  
41 informants (all three note the importance of race in being accepted as full and equal  
42  
43 members in the society of settlement). I12 emphasises the colonial relations between  
44  
45 Portugal and Angola, while this is not the case for the informants in Slovenia and  
46  
47 Malta where past relations between the country of origin (Sierra Leone and Nigeria  
48  
49 respectively) and the countries of settlement are non-existent. In those cases, race is  
50  
51 the most important marker while in the case of Angola-Portugal race is mediated by  
52  
53 the post-colonial legacy that is presented as both an advantage (Portugal should have  
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3 a leading role in investments in Angola) and as a drawback (with a mocking attitude,  
4 they say Look here comes the Portuguese).  
5  
6

7  
8 Informants I8 and I9 frame their role as transcultural capital brokers as a  
9 feature of their exceptional position as sub-Saharan Africans settled and successfully  
10 integrated in their respective countries of settlement which have no prior experience,  
11 nor important historical relationship with the country of origin or with sub-Saharan  
12 Africa in general. By contrast, I12 points to the part that he and other people from  
13 former colonies can play as pivotal actors between the countries of origin and the  
14 country of settlement because of the historical relationship and deep political,  
15 economic and cultural ties that exist between the two societies. In other words, while  
16 the narratives are personalized, pointing to the individual position and skills of the  
17 informants as well as their specific transcultural and transnational experiences, they  
18 reflect also the structural historical factors that characterize the relationship between  
19 the country of origin and the country of settlement.  
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### 39 Cultural activists

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41 Our sub-Saharan African informants emphasised the role of culture, African folklore,  
42 dances and music in particular, as a channel of communication and exchange with the  
43 natives in their societies of settlement and as a means for building a sense of  
44 transcultural community. Music and theatre or other cultural activities were used as  
45 vehicles to promote transcultural activities and networks. These were networks built  
46 within the society of settlement to promote knowledge about the country and  
47 continent of origin and become a means of *intermingling* as one informant put it.  
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57 Informant I8 (Sierra Leonean in Slovenia) has been active in this field:  
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3 Yes, we have one group that runs parallel with the association... Drums... They perform at  
4 different occasions and they play the drums. Dancing... They teach people how to dance  
5 African dances. I, for example, four, five years ago invited groups from Senegal. During the  
6 'Trnfest' [a festival organised every year in Ljubljana]...

7  
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10  
11 [...] If we want to start a programme, then we spread the word (...) We go to school and present  
12 this and we invite a would-be member to go with us and see how we do it. For instance, I  
13 decide I'll talk about traditional African wedding. (...) These are the things that people are  
14 interested in. Actually Slovenes want to know what they can find out about other cultures.  
15 And if you tell them something different that they already know or are used to, then they are  
16 prepared to come and listen. Then they want to see it again. [...] Most of the members [of the  
17 association] are Slovene.. (emphasis added)  
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27 I8 here identifies with the association he has set up, this is his 'in-group',  
28 while Slovenes but also African artists, musicians and other transcultural associations  
29 are part of the 'they', the out-group. He constructs his narrative as a cultural activist,  
30 somebody who uses his transcultural and transnational networks to promote cultural  
31 exchange and also to make sub-Saharan African culture in general (not the culture of  
32 his country or region of origin in particular but that of different sub-Saharan  
33 countries) known in Slovenia. He emphasises his transcultural activism that brings to  
34 existence a transcultural community between Slovenians and sub-Saharan Africans.  
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46 I11 is Nigerian, male in his mid-30s. He has lived in Riga, Latvia for 13 years  
47 and he is married to a Latvian and has two children. He initially migrated to Latvia to  
48 study. He is the founder of an African cultural association but has also been active  
49 during his school years in Nigeria.  
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58 Well, you see that [the association] is not basically; is not just about ethnic background really.  
59 Because I mean, look at our activities, let's say, and our visit this weekend, I think we had  
60 about 70% of people from, who are not Afrolat members and I mean. I mean it had nothing to

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2  
3 do with Africa except that we had some sort of cultural activities. It was... is a way of  
4 intermingling really. So, yes. I think that for example, when I was at school, I was active in  
5 the debating society; for example, I was also a serious member of the Boy Scouts. (...) And I  
6 think I found it interesting and if I have the opportunity to continue in that direction, I will still  
7 be happy to do that. And in fact I think that the most important thing for me probably (...) is  
8 that for the first time I find that I have friends or acquaintances, who share almost the same  
9 ideas, who are also socially active, who are also active in the civic society and people, who are  
10 encouraging. (...) And I think I'm happy to have these people around me, really in fact, to have  
11 people that I don't consider boring, that I find encouraging, that they know what I am doing,  
12 people, with whom we can find new areas of cooperation, really. (emphasis added)  
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25 Similarly to I8, interviewee I11 emphasises the cultural, intellectual and social  
26 aspects of the transcultural activities he is involved in. African culture becomes a  
27 mean to an end, the end being both to feel fulfilled as a person, as I11 particularly  
28 emphasizes, but also to make one's culture known to the society of settlement and  
29 build a new in-group that transcends cultural and national boundaries, bringing  
30 together people who are interested in the same forms of cultural expression.  
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39 Neither informant distinguishes between their specific country/culture of  
40 origin and African culture, writ large. Of course such generalizing categorization is  
41 probably due to the way Africa is perceived by people in the countries of settlement,  
42 that is categorizing all together sub-Saharan Africa as a common culture and folklore  
43 tradition. At the same time sub-Saharan African culture and arts are used on purpose  
44 by our informants to build a sense of transcultural community (Not just people I  
45 know, but people whom I have met through our various activities. And I think I'm  
46 happy to have these people around me) that encompasses both natives and sub-  
47 Saharan Africans of different ethnic or national background.  
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3 African culture is an important theme in the interview with another informant  
4 who lives in Portugal. I15 is male in his early 50s. He comes from Cape Verde and  
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8 has lived in Lisbon for over 30 years. He is married to a woman from Sao Tome and  
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10  
11 has two children. He is a public sector employee, has been active in trade unions and  
12  
13 has recently founded the Cape Verdean association. He emphasizes that cultural  
14  
15 exchange makes a culture stronger.  
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20 We have to prove through our way of living with our education, with our qualification; show,  
21  
22 therefore, that we have a culture that is extremely strong capable of making us stand. Today in  
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24 Portugal crioulo (the dialect of Cape Verde and Guinea Bissau) is spoken much more, (..) you  
25  
26 find gypsies speaking a bit of crioulo, you find Portuguese speaking crioulo, you find  
27  
28 Angolans speaking crioulo; therefore, we have a culture that is extremely strong which needs  
29  
30 to be valued, needs to be imposed so long as with respect and with dignity and, hence, a  
31  
32 culture that is, therefore, able to transpose us into a social integration perspective that is very  
33  
34 important for our community.

35  
36 [..] We are always learning from one another, [..] I feel a partnership either with the  
37  
38 Portuguese society or with the African societies or others, other associations of immigrants  
39  
40 that are here in Portugal: Moldavians, Ukrainians and Russians are welcome. We need to  
41  
42 show that our culture (..) at this time is becoming exposed and we need to be able to give  
43  
44 continuation to that, that consistency of matter because it is we are all to gain with that. The  
45  
46 Portuguese society will gain with that, we as immigrants will also gain with that, and let us not  
47  
48 forget to work with the second generation. (emphasis added)  
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52 This interviewee notes the importance of creole culture (*crioulo*), that is the  
53  
54 hybrid culture that blends together the former colonies and the mother country. His  
55  
56 narrative is transcultural in that it brings together not only sub-Saharan Africans from  
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58 different Portuguese speaking countries and Portugal but also Eastern European  
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3 immigrants who have settled more recently in the country. The in-group he constructs  
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6 in his narrative is transnational and transcultural.  
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8 The three informants discussed above present their transcultural capital that is  
9  
10 specifically (sub-Saharan) African in that it refers to African culture in general. They  
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12 appeal both to the strength of their culture but also to its role as a means of creating a  
13  
14 transcultural community with other immigrants of African or European origin and  
15  
16 with natives (Portuguese, Slovenians or Latvians for instance). They propose new  
17  
18 forms of cultural expression that bring together different cultural influences and that  
19  
20 call for the participation of people from different countries and cultures. They thus  
21  
22 build a sense of transcultural community that finds its origin in sub-Saharan Africa  
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24 but that is formed and experienced in the country of settlement and that embraces and  
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26 mobilises both immigrants and natives in an open and dynamic way.  
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#### 34 **4. Concluding Remarks**

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38 The aim of this paper has been to show how immigrant civic activism that originally  
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40 may stem from objectives of ethnic networking, usually analysed through diaspora  
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42 nationalism approaches, develops into transcultural capital and transcultural  
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44 community building repertoires. Our findings suggest that immigrants engage  
45  
46 consciously and purposefully in transnational modes of behaviour and thinking,  
47  
48 combining diasporic and cosmopolitan understandings of their experiences and  
49  
50 activities. Immigrant activism assumes forms of advanced transnationalism and  
51  
52 transculturalism, involving different cultures within the same state boundaries and  
53  
54 engaging with both natives and other immigrant groups. These transcultural activities,  
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58 exemplified by the case of sub-Saharan Africans in this study, are based on  
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3 transnational livelihoods (Olwig and Sorensen, 2002) rather than on national  
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5 affiliations. However, this transcultural activism and repertoires are developed by a  
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7 small segment of elite immigrants – our informants are part of an immigrant elite not  
8  
9 only because of their civic activism but also because of their background (they moved  
10  
11 to the country to study or as part of a colonial regime) and have integrated perfectly  
12  
13 into it (naturalised, married with a native, settled for 15 years). This suggests that  
14  
15 transculturalism is linked to individual social capital, perhaps more than in structural  
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17 conditions in the country of origin or settlement.  
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22 The relevance of countries of origin and countries of settlement appears  
23  
24 limited in our findings. Actually the specific countries of origin do not play an  
25  
26 important part in the immigrants' narratives. On the contrary, emergent forms of Pan-  
27  
28 Africanism acquire special significance in the national context and may become even  
29  
30 more important as the socio-political space of the European Union becomes  
31  
32 increasingly integrated. It is noteworthy though that countries of settlement include  
33  
34 none of the traditional host countries of Western Europe. Rather transcultural capital  
35  
36 and transcultural community repertoires flourish in new hosts (Portugal) or in  
37  
38 countries with very limited immigration such as Latvia or Slovenia. In Portugal, the  
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40 informants' narratives are impregnated with the legacy of post-colonial relations. In  
41  
42 the other countries, the emphasis is on being an 'exception', somebody who is  
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44 integrated but who is always also seen as 'different' from the 'majority'. Thus, it  
45  
46 appears as if the transcultural capital and transcultural community ideas and forms of  
47  
48 identity-building are necessary for these informants to create their own place in  
49  
50 society. Moreover, in these societies there is probably scope for such repertoires  
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52 because immigrant integration and an awareness of transnational livelihoods is still  
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54 very limited among the native population. By contrast, in societies with a long  
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3 experience as hosts, such repertoires are already formalised, institutionalised and  
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5 leave less room for immigrants' own initiative and improvisation in proposing pan-  
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7 African transcultural communities and networks.  
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10 Although limited in size, immigrant civic activism can be very important for  
11  
12 both sending and receiving societies because it opens new channels and new areas of  
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14 cultural exchange and socio-economic cooperation. It is also important because the  
15  
16 new forms of (trans)cultural capital and community developed by immigrant activists  
17  
18 may revitalize the civic life of the host countries in novel ways, creating again new  
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20 opportunities for engagement with public life for natives and immigrants (naturalized  
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22 citizens or residents) alike.  
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27 This study points to new areas of research that combine the study of civic and  
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29 political activism of immigrants with the investigation of transnationalism. The  
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31 notions of transcultural capital and transcultural community proposed here as working  
32  
33 concepts may be useful tools for further empirical research and for the development  
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35 of more appropriate analytical categories that capture better the complex realities of  
36  
37 international migration in the twenty first century. The connection between human,  
38  
39 economic and transcultural capital is one of the aspects that is worth exploring further.  
40  
41 This study focuses on immigrants who become civically active in their country of  
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43 settlement and as such may be seen as complementary to research that investigates the  
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45 transnational capital of immigrants who engage in business in either the country of  
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47 settlement or upon return in the country of origin (Smith, 2001; Vanhonacker et al.,  
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53 2005).  
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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> See Note 1 about the POLITIS database.

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Table 1

Interview no.	Gender	Age	Nationality of origin	Current citizenship	Country of residence	Length of stay (years)	Family situation	Current employment	Civic activity	Reasons for emigrating
I1	Female	36	Nigerian	Nigerian	Germany	24	Married to a German, one step son	Self employed in business finances	Kwanzaa cultural activity to promote the Black Diaspora in Germany	Family reunification (with parents)
I2	male	35	Somali	Finnish	Finland	15	Married to a Finnish Russian, three children	Project coordinator (in business)	Political activist	Asylum
I3	Male	35	Somali	Somali	Finland	4	Married to a Finn, one child	Cook	Student (??)	Asylum
I4	Male	28	Burundian	Burundian	Ireland	6.5	Partnered with a Rwandan	Driving instructor	Secretary of the Burundian and Rwandan Community Association	Asylum

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									and Secretary of the African Refugee Network	
I5	Male	N/A	Nigerian	Nigerian	Ireland	5	Married to a Nigerian, three children	Self employed	Local councilor and intercultural communication consultant	Asylum (?)
I6	Female	35	Nigerian	Nigerian	Ireland	5	Married to a Nigerian, five children	Self employed	Member of the Irish Labour party	
I7	Male		Nigerian	Nigerian	Ireland	5	Married to a Nigerian	Self employed as journalist/publisher	First multicultural award in Ireland	
I8	Male	39	Guinea Bissao	Guinea Bissao	Slovenia	20	Partnered with a Slovene, one child	Self employed business person	President of the African Centre	Studies
I9	Male	45	Nigerian	Maltese	Malta	16	Married to a Maltese	Librarian		Studies
I10	Female	34	Sierra Leone	Sierra Leone	Malta	3	Widow of a	Student and part-		Asylum

							Sierra Leonean, two children	time nurse		
I11	male	34	Nigerian	Nigerian	Latvia	13	Married to a Latvian, two children	Teacher of English	Chairman of Afrolat	Studies
I12	Male	42	Angolan	Portuguese	Portugal	30	Married to an Angolan Portuguese, two children	Public servant	Public servant at Lisbon City Hall's Municipal Assembly	Refugee
I13	Female	60	Cape Verde	Portuguese	Portugal	28	Married to a Portuguese, no children	Government worker	To promote the empowerment of inhabitants of Cova da Moura district	By chance, wanted to go to Brazil
I14	Female	61	Cape Verde	Portuguese	Portugal	21	Married to a Portuguese, three children	Retired	President of Lisbon Capeverdean Association	To work in the Embassy of Cape Verde in

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										Portugal
I15	Male	52	Cape Verde	Portuguese	Portugal	33	Married to a Sao Tome Portuguese, two children	Employee at the post-office	President of the Cape Verde Association, CTT's National Trade Union representative	Work
I16	Male	30	Angola	Angolan	Portugal	13	Single	Self-employed, musician	Musical director of the multi ethnic and ecumenical choir Coral Gospel 100 Vozes	Studies

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