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# Being black but not Black? Diasporic identities in France, across the Atlantic, and across the Mediterranean

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## 1 Introduction

Through the concept of the Black Mediterranean, Camilla Hawthorne explores the ways in which the plantation and slavery are productive ways to think about the politics of Blackness in Europe and in Italy (2021, 2022). Which promises does this work hold for a European debate on Black Geographies and how does it extend or speak to decolonial and post-colonial debates? My engagement with the questions around the politics of Blackness shifts the geographical perspective from Italy to France. At the junction of southern and northern Europe, France has not been the main focus so far in considerations of the Black Mediterranean, but the centrality of the Mediterranean in the French colonial empire is a good reason to include it.<sup>1</sup> My perspective is informed by my extensive fieldwork in a marginalized social housing neighborhood of Grenoble. I carried out participatory action research as part of the Université Populaire, a community-based people's education initiative that organized a series of debates on the question: what is left of the colonial past (2016–2018)?

The Black Mediterranean is relevant to a French debate on Black Geographies because it provides counterarguments to the critique regularly heard not only in Italy, but also in France, that theories developed in the US to understand current racism and the afterlives of slavery are not relevant in Europe, because it does not share a similar history of racial segregation and slavery. The concept of the Black Mediterranean draws attention to a specific form of racism operative

in Europe, which is the racialized representation of European nations as white. Despite this relevance, there is little engagement with Black Studies in French academic literature and those who do engage with this strand of critical theory face strong resistance in academia and from politicians.<sup>2</sup> The latter is emblematic of the strong opposition against accepting race as a relevant category in social sciences in France (Ajari, 2019; Mbembe, 2010; Soumahoro, 2020), instead privileging class in order to explain the reproduction of inequalities in France.<sup>3</sup> An important impulse for the debate about Blackness and racism in Europe comes from activist circles in Paris, such as Mwasi, Cases Rebelles, the Brigade Anti-Nérophobie, and the Conseil Représentatif des Noirs.

While it is beyond doubt that Hawthorne's work has an important contribution to make to scholarly and activist debates about racism and citizenship in France, there is one aspect of her work that I found more difficult to articulate with the French context I am familiar with, which is the term "Black Italians". Blackness plays a central role in her analysis about

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<sup>2</sup>Key ministers in the Macron government have openly expressed their hostility to post- and decolonial theory and intersectionality, which they present as a danger for national unity and social cohesion. The debate that is taking place in France, and which can be seen as an equivalent of American and British Black Studies, is held at the margins of other disciplines in social sciences than geography (sociology) and in the humanities. People who lead the academic debate on French Black Studies from a position in French academia and publish in French are e.g., Pap Ndiaye (2008), Myriam Cottias (2007), Audrey Celestine (2017), and Maboula Soumahoro (2020). Examples of Afrofeminists who work in and/or outside of the academy are Alice Diop, Amandine Gay, Rokhaya Diallo, Laura Nsafou (Mrs. Roots), and Françoise Vergès.

<sup>3</sup>See Beaud and Noiriel (2021) for a recent publication defending that class should be privileged as an analytical category at the expense of race to understand the reproduction of inequality in France. See Ajari (2021) for a critique.

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<sup>1</sup>The country's southern borders even extended to the Sahara during the 19th century until 1962, when Algeria was a French province (*département*). French cities on the Mediterranean coast are still privileged locations of presidential discourse rearticulating (neo)colonial relations between France and its former colonies (Fabre, 2007).

diasporic identities but Hawthorne also admits that Blackness is not a unitary, self-evident category, and that one has to critically assess “who constitutes ‘Black Italy’, what work this category does, and who might it inadvertently leave out” (2021). Over the past years, the identification as Black person in France has increased, in particular in resonance with the Black Lives Matter movement. Nevertheless, the term “Black French” is only used by a small group of racialized activists, such as the ones named above. These are mainly based in the capital and although they are influential beyond Paris, I observed in the marginalized social housing neighborhoods of Grenoble that the shared political identities of racialized people are based on wider diasporic experiences than Blackness, e.g., the (hi)stories of French colonialism they have in common, the experience of racialization as Arabs and Muslims, and the experience of territorial stigmatization.

I am interested in the question how and why political identities are constructed differently in Italy and France. I explore the potential ways in which two sources of diasporic identities, the one based on Blackness and the other on a shared identity as formerly colonized, mutually reinforce each other and are productive of tensions. I set out with an explanation of the ways in which Camilla Hawthorne’s work is relevant for two different Black diaspora groups in France, respectively from the transatlantic French overseas territories, and (directly) from Africa. I then develop the argument that Black political identities are context specific and have different histories in France and Italy. I illustrate this with a vignette from my fieldwork in Grenoble, where participants turned to different forms of diasporic identities to denounce their second-class citizenship status in France. In the last section, I move from this local example to intersecting forms of political identification and struggle nationally, which developed in response to police violence, and draw attention to the intersecting factors of race, space, and class.

## 2 Colonial circulations across the Atlantic and across the Mediterranean

Hawthorne proposes the Black Mediterranean as a concept in resonance with the Black Atlantic in an effort to “provincialize the United States and the North Atlantic” with regard to global histories of racism and Black subjectivities (2021). Hence, the Black Atlantic – Gilroy’s concept (1993) to make sense of the triangular diasporic identity of Black British, across West Africa, the West Indies, and the UK – and the Black Mediterranean are understood as relational spaces that provide insight into the organization of the modern/colonial world from different geographical perspectives. Through these ocean and sea routes, “Black subjectivities are forged, lived, and contested”, and they are both productive of a Black diaspora, although differently constituted (Hawthorne, 2021). Just like in Italy, one part of the Black diaspora in France has no direct relationship to the middle

passage, because they arrived directly from Africa (e.g., as labor migrants from (former) colonies after WWII). However, another part of its diaspora has a direct relationship to the transatlantic slave trade, these are the people who originate from the French Caribbean and French Guyana, which are up until today still French territory.

Hawthorne’s work is relevant for French Black diaspora for different reasons. I start with the relevance for the diaspora who have a strong relationship to the transatlantic slave trade. Given that France was a major player in the transatlantic slave trade, looking into its racial politics, plantocratic ideas, economy, and spatialities is clearly relevant for understanding Blackness in France. Hawthorne’s inquiry can be used as a means to counter the systematic erasure of the French role in the transatlantic slave trade, which is made irrelevant through operating a temporal and geographical divide (Fleming, 2017). Slavery is generally associated with the United States and minimized as something that took place in other spaces, and is therefore not relevant for understanding anti-Black racism in France. Publications on the transatlantic slave trade and the plantation economy available in French are mostly historical (Ismard et al., 2021; Michel, 2020) and they do not develop in what ways the history of slavery is key to understanding the specific ways the continued power of racial differentiation continues to operate in France at the social, political, and economic level (Soumahoro, 2020). Michel (2020) is an exception and one of the few historians to allude to the connections between the plantation and slavery and the politics of Blackness in the Mediterranean. She draws attention to the fact that the French state (both monarchy and Republic) was a central actor in the slave trade: trading companies were created and financed by the king and his allies. Hence, France was not only a slave trading nation, but was a slave state (*Etat négrier*): its overseas companies were not created and financed by planters, but by the king and his allies, and this situation continued after the French Revolution (Michel, 2020). The analysis of the role of the French state in the slave colonies and the institutionalization of racial categories on the French mainland are two viable entry points for thinking about the afterlives of slavery and about systemic racism in France.<sup>4</sup> Hawthorne’s work is very useful to counter the resistance against Black Studies and Critical Race Theory in France. Hawthorne acknowledges that theoretical frameworks from the United States cannot be uncritically transposed from one context to another but also argues convincingly why and how these frameworks can be applicable to thinking about histories of racial capitalism, colonialism, immigration, and racism that are specific for the Mediterranean (both past and present).

<sup>4</sup>Malcom Ferdinand proposes another entry point to make the history of slavery and the plantation economy relevant to understanding the present. He points out the intersections between the environmental and racial/colonial crisis through the concept of decolonial ecology (2021).

Hawthorne's work is also relevant for the Black diaspora in France, who have no direct relation to the middle passage because they – or their families – arrived directly from Africa. Through her engagement with Black Italians, Hawthorne proposes new ways of approaching citizenship that challenge descent-based notions, and she proposes “rhizome” and “entangled space–time” as alternative ways of belonging (2021). During her fieldwork in Italy, Hawthorne observed that turning to the concept of Black diaspora and situating the experience of Black Italians within a much wider, global Black diasporic context creates possibilities for Black Italian (feminist) activists to contest the racialized representations of the nation. How Black Italians conceive these rhizomatic Black identities is influenced by their migration trajectories, Italy's colonial history, and neo-colonial engagement in Africa. This is also relevant for France. The representation of the French nation is racialized, to be French is associated with being white. As a result of racialized notions of citizenship, the lived experience of second-class citizenship is diametrically opposed to the much-celebrated idea of republicanism and its denial of structural differences in France. Although many immigrants from former colonies have obtained formal citizenship, they denounce that they still do not have substantial citizenship: they are still made to feel different and out of place in public space; are expected to assimilate, to adapt, and be grateful to be in France; and they lack the right to claim rights, following Isin and Nielsen's definition of substantive citizenship (2008). The fact that they are not considered French, because they are not considered as white, does not mean that Black people in France consider themselves as Black French. Niang and Soumahoro point out that one of the problems of transposing “the history and concepts belonging to the ‘Black community’ in the United States” to the French context is that “there is no Black community in France” (Niang and Soumahoro, 2018:3). For example, French Caribbean activist groups involved in slavery commemorations are divided about whether to use the term Black as a common denominator in political action (Fleming, 2017), although the term Black (*Noir*) in reference to people is obviously used in everyday speech. One explanation for this difference between political identification in France and Italy is that identities of Black and colonized may converge more easily in the Italian context than in the French case, as the French colonial empire in Africa was not only Black but also included large parts of North Africa and extended far beyond Africa. In this context, the experience of colonialism is relevant for a much larger group of people than the experience of Blackness. In the next section, I explain how research participants of the Université Populaire understand their marginalized position in France through references to the colonial past.

### 3 In which name to claim? Activist engagement of racialized people in Villeneuve

In Villeneuve, the marginalized social housing neighborhoods in Grenoble where I carried out my PhD research, people with very different (im)migration trajectories live in proximity, of whom many are from North and sub-Saharan Africa. Throughout my field research (2015–2018) with Black people and People of Color involved in community organizations in Villeneuve, the latter increasingly came to use the term “racialized” for people that share embodied experiences of difference. They are considered “not quite French”, they live in marginalized spaces, they face racism, and are confronted with police violence. In *Subaltern in France*, I describe the link inhabitants of Villeneuve draw between their condition as second-class citizens in France at present and the colonial past, a topic we explored collectively in the Université Populaire (Dijkema, 2021). The Université Populaire provides a space where participants tried to understand their subaltern position in society and where members of community organizations set the agenda for public debates (Dijkema, 2022). I was a member of its working group (2015–2018), and in that capacity I organized debates on neighborhood stigmatization, racism, Islamophobia, terrorism, and colonial legacies. For people in Villeneuve, it is obvious that different forms of racialization intersect with class through spatialized identities. The vignette below draws on a conversation between two people from Villeneuve in their early twenties. Majda\*, whose parents are from Algeria, and John\*, whose parents are from Cameroon, talk about whether John feels French.<sup>5</sup> The purpose of this story is to point to the intersections between political identity markers that regularly come back in discussions in Villeneuve.

John does not feel French and explains that one out of three “immigrants” do not identify as French. Among young people in marginalized social housing neighborhoods, this feeling is even more significant. For an explanation, he looks at the French colonial past and its neocolonial policies in Africa and the Middle-East. John identifies first as Muslim and then as Cameroonian, despite the fact that he was born in France, has French nationality, and is from a Christian family. At no point does he refer to himself as Black, though when he speaks of “the French”, he means “Whites”. For him, feeling French

means ... accepting to be a colonizer still in 2018. ... I'm not here to carry the responsibility for everything the French have done [in reference to colonialism]. How do you want me to feel French? Tomorrow, they may attack Cameroon, then what will I do? Immigrants who are today

<sup>5</sup>Names with an \* are pseudonyms. Majda and John were both active in the local collective Agir pour la Paix, of which I also was a member, and this is where we got to know each other. For more details, see Dijkema (2021).

in France come from countries that were colonized, [that were] hit [by France] in the past. . . . France has attacked all the countries whose people have migrated to them. How do you want me to feel French? You're waging war on my grandparents you know? Today that is how we view things. When I go back to Cameroon you see the traces of colonization [he refers to the presence of French multinationals in Cameroon and foreign policy]. The Algerians are in a similar situation, only 10 times worse, the Algerian war is still in everyone's head. . . . In addition, France is an Islamophobic country. In marginalized neighborhoods, people are mostly pro-Islam, rather than Muslims, and this in the most Islamophobic country in Europe. (Interview, 1 June 2017)

John's account is a good example of a diasporic identity that draws on the country of origin of his parents, the religion he converted to, and on a shared experience of colonization. In another part of the discussion, he also refers to the marginalized area where he lives as an important identity marker, more important than race.

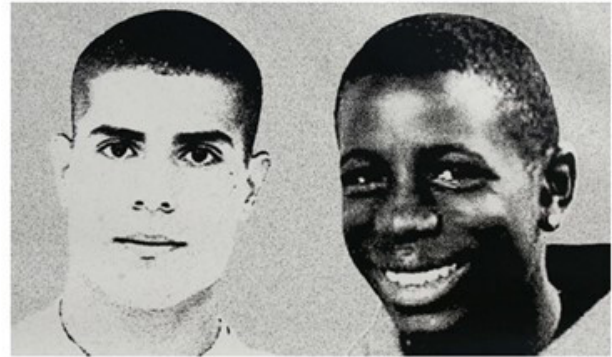
The White guy in the neighborhood is no different than the Black guy and the Arab guy in the [marginalized] neighborhood, it's the same thing. If you take a Chinese guy in a neighborhood, it's the same thing. If you grow up in a neighborhood, you have a neighborhood profile, no matter what color your skin is. (Interview, 1 June 2017)

My understanding is that this shared spatial identification is specific to France. Disappointed by the political limitations of the labor movement and unions in the 1980s, and as a result of rising unemployment at the end of the 1970s, immigrants started to make claims as inhabitants of marginalized social housing neighborhoods (Lussault, 2009). In the Université Populaire, people disagreed on which common identity they should make political claims from. Some still formulate their struggles in the name of spatialized identities (Forum Social des Quartiers Populaires), others articulate the intersection between spatial identities and their identity as immigrants (Front Uni des Immigration et des Quartiers Populaires), and again others choose to put forward the legacy of slavery (Comité Traite Négrière Esclavage), colonialism (Université Populaire), or the issue of Islamophobia (Coordination contre le Racisme et l' Islamophobie). These are but some of the examples of activist engagement of racialized people in Villeneuve. These activist groups articulate their struggles in their own terms but converge at times to denounce police violence, racism, and Islamophobia.<sup>6</sup> These

<sup>6</sup>Examples are the March for Dignity and Against Racism (Marche pour la dignité et contre le racisme), organized by a feminist collective of racialized women MAFED (Hancock, 2016) and

**PAS DE JUSTICE, PAS DE PAIX !**

**NON À LA JUSTICE À 2 VITESSES !**



**ZYED ET BOUNA 10 ANS APRÈS...**

**ON N'OUBLIE PAS !!**

**Rassemblement**  
**Vendredi 05 Juin 2015 à 18h30**  
**Place Félix POULAT**  
 (Tram A&B: "Victor Hugo")

Figure 1. Flyer for a demonstration to commemorate Zyed and Bouna in Grenoble (digital document, 15 May 2015).

different forms of building identities and of political organization are not mutually exclusive, but they co-exist empirically, sometimes with the same people being part of different groups depending on the context and political events.

#### 4 Police violence and politicizing political identities based on shared experience of colonialism

Over time, activists make claims in the name of shifting political identities: in the name of immigrants, inhabitants of marginalized neighborhoods, the formerly colonized and racialized, and, more recently, Blacks. Mobilizing against police violence is a red thread connecting these different forms of identification. Police violence in France is spatialized and the special treatment of racialized people in France concerns Blacks, Arabs, and White immigrants in marginalized social housing neighborhoods, as the emblematic case of the death of Thomas Claudio in 1990 in the banlieue of Lyon demonstrates. The joint political organizing and collective identity of (differently) racialized persons is evident in

the demonstrations under the banner of Black Lives Matter following the murder of George Floyd in 2021, denouncing police violence and racist immigration policy in France.

another emblematic case of police violence, which strengthened the identification as formerly colonized. In 2005, the deaths of Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, friends of respectively Tunisian and Mauritanian origin (see Fig. 1) led to nationwide revolts, which gave a particular sense of urgency to a text that had been published a couple of months earlier stating “*nous sommes des indigènes de la République*” (“we are the indigenous of the Republic”), and speaks in the name of a we-group that defines itself in relation to the colonial question in present-day France.<sup>7</sup> In French, the term *indigène* (indigenous) carries the emotional and political weight of former colonial institutions: it is a direct reference to the Code de l’Indigénat,<sup>8</sup> a specific regime for colonial subjects with their own set of rights, customs, and institutions, instituting a legal hierarchy of citizenship (Le Cour Grandmaison, 2010; Thénault, 2014). To be indigenized means, in this context, to continue to be associated with a former French colony where one would be “indigenous”, a place where one supposedly really belongs despite French nationality. The objective of the text was to open a debate about processes of segregation, racialization, and subalternization in the name of post-colonial immigrants in French society. Despite the fact that the manifesto has been the most audible political statement of a shared identity as formerly colonized, it is not the first to make a political statement about a “colonial continuum” between past and present. The Mouvement de l’Immigration et des Banlieues already denounced in 1997 the colonial management of the banlieue, referring to the social housing neighborhoods at the urban margins, and stated that “the banlieues are a heritage of colonialism” (in Abdallah 2012, 129). Characteristics of life in the banlieue that justify references to colonialism are that these spaces are racialized, stigmatized, and impoverished; and they receive a specific security treatment in relation to threats of urban violence. This treatment is based on exceptional measures outside of common law (Rigouste, 2011; Tchétché-Apéa, 2000). Political organizing in the name of a shared spatial and postcolonial identity fits with the specific spatial history of the struggles of mainly racialized immigrants in France. They mobilized around many issues of which police violence was, and still is, a key issue, also in Villeneuve and in other French cities.

<sup>7</sup>Parti des indigènes de la République, “*nous sommes des indigènes de la République*”: <http://indigenes-republique.fr/le-p-i-r/apel-des-indigenes-de-la-republique/>, last access: 10 March 2015. The manifesto was the founding moment of the Mouvement des Indigènes de la République, which formed into a political party in 2008 (Parti des Indigènes de la République).

<sup>8</sup>In the colonies and the provinces (départements) of French Algeria, a specific set of laws was applied in the period from 1887–1946 (1881 in Algeria), called the Code de l’indigénat (Urban, 2015). It defined a series of restrictions and special sanctions that were only applicable to the colonized (indigènes). This specific penal regime was not applied in France’s protectorates, mandates, nor in its “old colonies” (Saint-Louis, the Isle of Gorée in Senegal; Pondicherry and former slave colonies in the Antilles).

As a result of the worldwide solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement after the killing of George Floyd, police violence has become increasingly framed as a Black issue, but it is important to remain attentive to the ways this global struggle resonates with local struggles and genealogies of activism of racialized groups in specific spaces.

## 5 Conclusion

The type of rhizomatic political identities racialized people turn to in France goes beyond the shared experience of being Black. The identification with “we the [formerly] colonized” fits with the French history of colonialism that spanned across the globe, and that of racialized indigenous populations in different ways. Those with links to former colonies share the experience of being othered and being excluded from citizenship historically, and of being treated as second-class citizens nowadays. This form of identification has to be understood in relation to other forms of political identification that developed over the last decades among racialized inhabitants of social housing neighborhoods, as immigrants, residents of marginalized spaces, and more recently as Blacks.

**Data availability.** The data that support the findings of this study will be publicly available by the end of June 2023, at the end of the research project. In the meantime these data are available on request from the corresponding author.

**Competing interests.** The author has declared that there are no competing interests.

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