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Boucan! Mouvements bruyants contre l'invisibilité dans la France postcoloniale

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In the late 2000s, young French black people, practicing different African popular dance genres, use the term *boucan* (loud noise) to describe forms of bodily expressivity that are mostly inaudible. *Boucan*, to them, is predominantly visual and is produced through ingenuity, boldness and flamboyance in competitive performances relying on dance, appearance and conspicuous consumption, taking place in public spaces. This article looks at the ways in which both sonic and visual 'noises' are used to negotiate presence and circulation in urban spaces that are only *virtually* open to all. Examining a moral panic around Black female 'gangs' at the end of the 2000s, this paper focuses on the role of Black youth culture in articulating the 'politics of appropriateness' to which young French Black women are subjected in public space. It asks how these women make their presences felt, occupy space and claim a 'place', navigating between the trope of the (loud) 'angry black woman' and that of the (silent) 'traditional' woman. This discussion of *boucan* puts into perspective the rhetorical linkage, long established in scholarship on race and gender, of dominated and racialized groups with the body, danger and 'noise'. It relates the aesthetics of loudness developed by *danseurs/danseuses afros* to the in/visibility of blackness in France.

Keywords: Black women; visibility; *danse afro*; noise; African diaspora

À la fin des années 2000, les jeunes français noirs qui pratiquent différents types de danse africaine populaire, emploient le terme *boucan* pour décrire des formes d'expressivité corporelle inaudibles. Le *boucan*, pour eux, est essentiellement visuel, et est produit par l'ingéniosité, l'assurance et la flamboyance dans des manifestations compétitives s'appuyant sur la danse, l'apparence et la consommation ostentatoire dans des espaces publics. Cet article s'intéresse aux façons dont les « bruits » aussi bien soniques que visuels sont employés pour négocier la présence et la circulation dans des espaces urbains qui ne sont ouverts à tous qu'en théorie. Il examine une croisade morale autour de « gangs » de femmes noires à la fin des années 2000, et se concentre sur le rôle de la culture des jeunes noirs dans l'articulation de « politiques de bienséance » dont font l'objet les jeunes françaises noires dans l'espace public. Il interroge comment ces femmes manifestent leur présence, occupent l'espace et revendiquent une « place », en naviguant entre la figure de la « Fatou fâchée » (bruyante) et celle de la femme « traditionnelle » (silencieuse). Cette discussion du *boucan* met en perspective le lien rhétorique, depuis longtemps bien établi dans la littérature scientifique sur la race et le genre, de groupes

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dominés et racisés avec le corps, le danger et le « bruit ». Il relie l'esthétique du bruit développé par les *danseurs/danseuses afros* à l'in/visibilité des populations noires en France.

Mots-clés: femme noire; visibilité; *danse afro*; bruit; diaspora africaine

At the end of 2011, French rapper of Malian descent Mokobé released the video *Rihannon*, a catchy track infused with African flavours featured on his *Africa Forever* album. It starts off with layered synth and djembe drum sounds, before a bouncy rhythm typical of Ivoirian coupé-décalé kicks in. Female voices join in a chorus mocking a young woman aspiring to look like US pop star Rihanna. The video is cast around a group of young Black and Maghrebi women in alluring outfits who go by the names of Rihannon, Naomi Campboule, Krari Hilson, Beyonce Coulibaly, Kelly Groland and Rachida Beckam. By these thoughtful and comical alterations of names, appearing as captions under footages of each character, Mokobé points to the young women's fascination with American and British stars.[1]

These names also suggest that the young women remain obscene copies, despite their obstinacy. Referring to their vain efforts, their curvy behinds and their inescapable Africanity, they bear 'a racialized sense of aesthetics that position blackness in terms of grotesquerie' (Hobson 2003, 88).[2] Mokobé compares the women's eyebrows to moustaches, mocks the artificial alteration of their skin colour, scoffs at the 'gardeners' boots' – in fact black horse-riding boots, in fashion at the time – they wear to go clubbing, and ridicules their colourful wigs and weaves. He further describes them as 'pouncing' on successful First League football players, as fighting in the corridors of metro stations and tearing out each other's weaves, and as eating fried chicken on the street, dropping bones as they walk.[3]

The video proved controversial among young French people of African descent. Ferocious arguments across and within genders accumulated under the music video. When I interviewed him, Mokobé explained that there were 'debates between older sisters and younger sisters … people started to insult each other and all that'.[4] At the heart of the controversy was Mokobé's association of commonplace Black female aesthetic practices, such as elaborate make-up, hair extensions and skin lightening, with vulgarity and violence, and with an overall 'loudness', both visible and audible.[5] In fact, the entire second verse hinted at a moral panic, generously fed by news media, around the emergence of female 'gangs' composed of young Black women. Within a few days, Mokobé deactivated comments on his YouTube account, and soon thereafter removed the video.

In its brief existence, *Rihannon* provided a catalyst for discussions among young Black people on femininity, beauty, morality, civility and social mobility in French society. The controversy shed light on the role of Black youth culture in articulating the 'politics of appropriateness' (Heath 1994, 88) to which young French Black women are subjected in public space. These politics draw on different and often conflicting models that inform how young women, at once Black, French and 'African',[6] ought to look and act like (Hancock 2017). By crossing perspectives on race, gender, visibility and 'noise',[7] I wish to address these women's particular 'place' and representation in postcolonial French society. I argue that what might appear as a micro-event in French Black popular culture – the short life of a controversial music video and the discussions it engendered within a cultural niche – in fact powerfully evokes and relates to broader issues that concern French populations of African descent.

This paper draws from a larger research project, which explores the prestige economy of young Black people in the Paris region involved in the *milieu afro*, a scene organized around African urban dance and music genres.[8] In France, in the 2000s, 'afro' is used in a broad sense, as alternative to 'Black', but also in a more restricted one, as a synonym of 'African' – as it is in most of this paper.[9] I conducted extended periods of fieldwork between 2004 and

2014, using participant-observation or 'deep hanging out' (Geertz 2000) in afro nightclubs (*boîtes afro*), at afro dance (*danse afro*) rehearsals and performances, and at other events such as talent shows or dance battles. Most importantly, I participated in everyday forms of sociability with young male and female dancers aspiring to become professionals.

In the late 2000s, the Internet became an increasingly important channel of communication between artists and fans, as well as a political tool for negotiating voice and visibility. I therefore included online sociabilities in my study, looking at them not in opposition but in continuity with face-to-face sociabilities. While this paper relies on a considerable amount of secondary data such as news media, YouTube and social media content, it is anchored in a long-term ethnographic, as well as personal, engagement 'of flesh and blood' (Wacquant 2015). This engagement allowed me not only to study the reception of popular culture but also to gain access to, and interview, well-established artists, such as rapper Mokobé, whose music I discuss.

Fatous fâchées or appropriateness in public spaces

In the aftermath of the 2005 uprisings in the low-income *banlieues* (outer-city neighbourhoods), juvenile violence was tied, in the French collective imagination, to the 'failed integration' of children of postcolonial immigrants, especially those of West African descent. At the end of 2009, Brice Hortefeux, the Minister of Interior and former Minister of Immigration, National Identity and Integration announced the creation of new legislation to tackle the double, and in his opinion, interrelated, problem of *les bandes* ('the hordes') and *le communautarisme. Communautarisme* refers to the tendency to seek and prefer the company of 'one's own people' – something that poor Black and Brown people supposedly 'enjoy' more than wealthy white people – and was the chimera of French nationalism under Nicolas Sarkozy's rule (Noiriel 2007).

The *plan anti-bandes*, which included the creation of a new offense – that of belonging to a *bande violente* – was implemented in the summer of 2010. It was followed by the publication of a government study by the National Observatory of Delinquency and Penal Responses reporting that female teenage criminality was dangerously on the rise. When Mokobé released *Rihannon*, a moral panic about Black female 'gangs' had already taken hold – journalists published numbers of assaults and arrests, produced infographics that mapped out the connections between emerging female 'gangs' and convicted male criminals, and used social media to seek out interviews with 'young furies' (*Marie Claire* 2012).

The behaviours and dangers presented by *les classes dangereuses* (the dangerous classes) – working-class populations from the French urban peripheries which, since the 1970s, have gotten increasingly Black and Brown – have historically been a cash cow for the French press. What is both surprising and new is the use of the term 'gang' to describe clusters of (female) youth involved in 'loud' and violent behaviours, especially since they actually seem *less* organized and *less* delinquent than the (male) *bandes*.[10] What does distinguish them, however, is gender. Some press articles insist on how scandalous, saddening and menacing it is for girls to 'employ the methods of boys' (Laurent and Williams, 2011 in *Elle* magazine), and worse, to actually 'do without boys' (*Le Parisien*, 2010).[11] Furthermore, while *bandes* were mostly read through the lens of class (not devoid of racial undertones), the 'gang' phenomenon is explicitly racialized: it is *un problème avec les filles black* (a problem with Black girls) (Laurent and Williams, 2011 in *Elle* magazine).[12]

Media representations of *les crapuleuses* or 'riff-raffs' (Rubi 2005) focus on their demographics: teenage girls of West and Central African (and to some extent, Northern African) descent between the ages of 13 and 20. Described as roaming through Paris, especially in the capital's public transit stations, and getting involved in fights and theft, these girls are also said to engage in a kind of sexual 'hustle' by which they obtain money and gifts from men.[13] Daily newspapers,

women's magazines and television reports insist on their aesthetic and behavioural transgressions: their main characteristics are to be 'loud' and (therefore) menacing.[14] Paradoxically, journalists also recognize that they resemble, to some extent, other girls their age. They therefore insist that what might appear as banal, if loud, girlhood constitutes in fact a serious threat to public order.[15]

The moral panic about Black female presence in public spaces directs the audiences' attention to, and draws 'information' from, social media and YouTube content. Social media accounts on which groups of Black teenage girls boast about their beauty, insolence and superiority, and magnify their antagonistic relationships with 'haters', are perceived to be the gangs' 'recruiting websites'.[16] Amateur videos portraying Black girls fighting in shopping malls and public transit stations are taken as illustrations of their 'activities'. Both are embedded as illustrations in newspaper and magazine articles, which often have online versions, and television reports. In *Rihannon*, Mokobé scolds these digital avatars – which he presents as 'little sisters' who misbehave rather than 'gang members' – for their 'angry faces' (*têtes fâchées*), their loudness and their aggressiveness in public spaces. 'You seem to be going to war', the rapper tells them, 'everybody is scared of you in the suburban trains'.

Rather than resenting the media for (further) stigmatizing Black (female) youth, Mokobé felt ashamed and held these young women accountable for it. *C'était la honte! La honte!* ('it was shameful! Shameful!'), Mokobé exclaimed when we met. Despite the controversy surrounding the video, many young Black people in Mokobé's audience actually agreed that the 'little sisters' behaviour was inappropriate. What they did not understand, however, was why an artist like Mokobé decided to further shed light on these teenagers: not only did he add to the publicity that they seemed to be looking for, he also reinforced negative stereotypes about African womanhood. As a well-established rapper, his audience went well beyond the afro scene and included people who had little contact with Black urban youth. Two vloggers, Solly and Nimissa, responded to Mokobé in a YouTube video in which they question the title of the rapper's first solo album: '*Mon Afrique*? Which Africa? You're bringing Africa down!'.[17]

Commentators under the *Rihannon* video debated about what to do with these *Fatous Fâchées*, and whether or not Mokobé was right in shaming them. The derogatory label *Fatou* – actually a common West African name – is used by Black and non-Black *banlieue* youth, to refer to Black women who step too far away from the idealized figure of the dignified African woman: 'loud' instead of discreet, unattached instead of loyal, promiscuous instead of family-oriented, 'gold-digging' rather than 'living simply'.[18] The *Fatou Fâchée* is a 'controlling image' (Hill Collins 1990, 72), similar to that of the *Angry Black Woman* in the US context, that distorts the way French Black women see themselves and each other, provoking a process of 'unmirroring' (O'Grady 1992, 14).[19] Rather than dismissing the figure as a (racist) construct, female commentators attempted to distance themselves from it by imposing it on others – teenage girls (rather than young women), of Congolese origin (rather than of West African or Antillian origin), born and raised in Africa (rather than in Europe), etc. – which immediately provoked virulent responses by those who fitted this description.

Although the term *Fatou* never appeared in *Rihannon*'s lyrics, Mokobé had to defend himself against allegations that his song presented *all* young women of African descent as loud and angry *Fatous*. In a video uploaded after the removal of *Rihannon* and entitled 'message to the sisters (Rihannon)',[20] Mokobé insisted that he would never use *Fatou* as an insult, and that he never intended to criticize 'African women' in general. He shows the back cover of his album, which features a picture of a Black woman in traditional West African dress and head wrap, pounding cereals with a baby attached to her back: 'it's the African woman in all her splendor', he says.[21] While this picture is supposed to illustrate how much respect and love he has for his 'African sisters', one cannot help but notice the striking contrast with the young women seen in his video.

This controversy reveals that Black commentators deem visual and sonic 'loudness' incompatible with notions of 'traditional' femininity, propriety and respectability derived from a variety of 'African' but also 'French' cultural models available to young Black people in France (see Figure 1) – models that are constantly renegotiated in the multi-ethnic, low-income *banlieues*. For example, an interviewee explained to journalists from *Elle* magazine that girls now get involved in fights because they have 'become feminists' and, hence, refute male's prerogative to fight (Laurent and Williams, 2011 in *Elle* magazine).[22] Unsurprisingly, pious young women of West African parentage who don modest clothing and hijabs or headwraps and act quietly in public spaces offer strong comparative figures. These abiding Muslims are presented as closer to 'African tradition' by the media and young Black people themselves.

They are, in fact, partially a product of French identity politics, deeply rooted in the history of French colonialism in Northern and Western Africa. As Frantz Fanon (1965) has shown, the Islamic veil was 'the bone of contention in a grandiose battle, on account of which the occupation
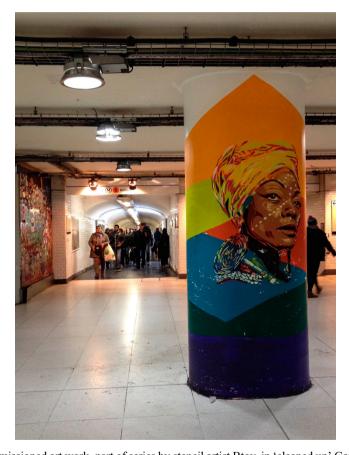

Figure 1.   Commissioned art work, part of series by stencil artist Btoy, in 'cleaned up' Gare du Nord, representing a Black woman with a headwrap (Authorization given by the artist. Photographed by author in 2015). Note: The series was featured in one of the stations in which the female 'gangs' supposedly caused havoc. The 'clean up' included closing down the Foot Locker in front of which Black people hung out, reinforcing the gates that separate the suburban train platforms (taking people back and forth from the *banlieue*) from those of the Parisian metro, and introducing loud classical music in the corridors. This space used to hold an informal West African 'market' where one could buy grilled peanuts, boiled corn and telephone cards (as I am reviewing this paper, in 2018, this market has come to life again).

forces were to mobilize their most powerful and most varied resources, and in the course of which the colonized were to display a surprising force of inertia' (pp. 36–37). The French officially portrayed their efforts as attempts to defend 'humiliated, sequestered, cloistered' women in the colonies, when they hoped in fact to destabilize these societies' core structures, in which women were central. Fanon described the ways social workers and women directing charitable works 'besieged' and 'infiltrated' Arab quarters in Algeria to distribute semolina and express indignation against the veil, while convincing indigent women to play a role in the 'transformation of their own lot' (p. 38).

In the contemporary period, a French brand of secularism (*laïcité*) with exclusionary consequences on minorities, and Muslims in particular, has continued to conflate 'tradition' with women's oppression (Hancock 2017, 640–641). The 'headscarf ban' in public schools from 2004 has reinforced the representation of veiled girls as the 'quintessential other vis-à-vis French culture' (Keaton 2006, 4). There were in fact few documented cases of veiled school girls in the 1990s when educational policies started to tackle the issue. The legislation is likely to have increased their number, and has led to some dramatic exclusions from the public school system of students reluctant to unveil. As such, French 'State feminism' has fed the very 'tradition' it is seeking to bring down in the name of gender inequality.[23]

When I interviewed him, Mokobé said he wanted to tell the Rihanna-look-alikes: 'sister, you are beautiful, stay true to your identity'.[24] The rapper's intention was to respond to French Black girls' lack of self-confidence, illustrated both by how desperate their efforts seemed, and who they were imitating: wealthy First World stars. Mokobé has been offering alternatives to this mimicry ever since he switched from producing *rap français* to what may be called *afro rap*. Most of his music videos and social media publications portray 'African tradition' as a positive force, providing guidance, structure and identity to diasporic young people. Rather than being divorced from, or opposed to, French urban life and 'modernity', 'African tradition' – in the form of dress, food, language, symbols and ritual – is presented as integrated, negotiated and reinvented in the urban everyday of young people living in the diaspora.

The rapper confided that what truly spurred his decision to produce more Africa-centred music was the television film *Fatou la Malienne* (Vigne 2001), broadcast on one of the main national channels in prime time, capturing the attention of 8 million viewers. Despite the film's title, it is not Fatou but her parents who are Malian. The film describes an ordinary French high-school goer who dreams of becoming a hairdresser. Against her will, her parents instead arrange her marriage to an older Malian man, who locks her up and rapes her – scenes viewers can see in explicit detail. While the film was inspired from a true story, it presented Malian 'tradition' in an extremely disturbing light. The High Council of Malians in France rightly complained that no Malian representative was associated with the film's writing, and tried, unsuccessfully, to get the film removed from the television schedule.[25]

This television film illustrates the role of the mainstream media in feeding anxieties about the forceful imposition of 'tradition' upon daughters of African immigrants. The television reports about female 'gangs' almost seem to be a sequel to the film, presenting audiences with Fatou's 'emancipation' gone awry, devoid of any cultural backbone. One journalist quotes a community worker from Saint-Denis, a *banlieue* with a large immigrant population: 'there is a problem of education. Families, such as those coming from West Africa, have a greater problem of deculturation than others. In their country of origin, they have stricter education rules, but upon arriving here, these don't hold anymore' (Laurent and Williams 2011 in *Elle* magazine).[26] In *Fatou la Malienne*, salvation/acculturation is incarnated by Gaëlle, Fatou's white best friend, who drags her to the police station to file a complaint for rape, and then takes her to her native Bretagne, to recover in a tranquil and very white little town.[27]

This tension between too much tradition and not enough tradition was already used by the media to explain the 2005 uprisings. According to the right-wing newspaper *Le Figaro* (2005), West African families have too many children, due to polygamy and poor family planning, but are unable, in the French context, to exert on them the necessary traditional parental authority, leading to a situation in which Black (and/or Muslim) male youth take control of the *banlieues*, especially its public spaces. Violent behaviours by Black girls at the turn of the decade were primarily read as a response to this 'territorial' domination by young Black (and/or Muslim) males, of which they extracted themselves temporarily by hanging out 'in hordes' in the centre of Paris, outside of their *banlieues* of residence.

This is essentially the thesis of the acclaimed *Bande de Filles* (Sciamma 2014), a film reflecting on the female 'gangs' phenomenon. In the first scenes, lively and confident Black and Brown teenage girls, coming back from American football practice, suddenly fall silent and lower their heads as they hasten past a group of boys their age, barely daring to say hello at the entrance of the *cités* (social housing estates) in which they reside. While the film was praised by critics and nominated for four awards at the Césars ceremony, many young Black people I talked to, themselves residents of social housing estates, condemned it. They deemed this dramatic scene to be quite improbable, since greeting neighbours is such an important part of *cités* sociability, and they found Sciamma's portrayal of male–female interactions deeply upsetting.

An (in)visible Black youth culture?

In an era characterized by 'State xenophobia' (Beaud and Guimard 2011, 16), I argue that it is 'willful white mishearings and auditory imaginings of blackness – often State sanctioned' (Stoever 2016, 1) that explain the leap from isolated cases of female teenage delinquency to a full-blown moral panic around networked female 'gangs'.[28] More than their incivilities, what is indeed distinctive of the young women sought out for interviews and described by journalists as gang members, is their interest in African urban music and dance genres, such as Ivorian coupé-décalé and Congolese n'dombolo. In *Rihannon*, the young women materialize at the onset of the second verse through shouts that usually rhythm *danse afro* rehearsals, to which both female and male dancers participate: 'hey, hey, katchoo, katchoo, hey, hey, katchoo, katchoo!'.

The girls' dancing and chanting in public spaces might have been what got them noticed in the first place. Similar chanting appears in television reports about female 'gangs', but the journalists are seemingly oblivious to the music and dance culture the girls are immersed in – they hear only noise. As one journalist comments, in dramatic voiceover: 'the girls who shout are the founders of the gang […] their specialty: *faire du boucan*, that is, heckle in public spaces'.[29] In fact, it is more likely that the girls said *faire le boucan* (make/manufacture *boucan*), which carries a different meaning from *faire du boucan* (do *boucan*, i.e. loud noise). While ostensibly about noise, *boucan* is in fact used by young Black people to designate broader forms of visibility (rather than audibility), self-presentation and performativity.[30]

This understanding of *boucan* was popularized in France in the early 2000s, under the influence of popular dance and music called coupé-décalé. Its artists, Ivoirian immigrants illegally settled in Paris while Côte d'Ivoire was in the midst of civil war, made a name for themselves by performing in Parisian *afro* night clubs (Newell 2009, 175). *Boucan* was produced through ingenuity, boldness, swagger and flamboyance in performances relying on dance, dress and various forms of conspicuous consumption, taking place in public or semi-public spaces (night clubs, streets, sport stadiums, etc.). In their music videos, self-proclaimed *boucantiers* (*boucan*-makers) performed dance steps that emphasized the designer clothing they wore, the expensive cigars and liquor they consumed, and the cars and motorbikes they drove.[31]

Coupé-décalé immediately appealed to French Black people who incorporated its aesthetics, language, music and dance into their youth culture. They related to these artists who projected an appearance of success, sang in a language they could understand – *nouchi*, a French-based slang – and were just slightly older than them. Coupé-décalé artists represented an alternative modernity that was different from the 'traditional' modernity of Frenchness (Newell 2009, 179) that French Black people felt pressured to integrate without ever being granted this integration. Coupe-décalé's aesthetics and name itself – 'scam' and 'scram' in *nouchi* – celebrated a transcendence of 'the system', a circumvention of the structures that economically and socially marginalized young people in cosmopolitan cities like Abidjan and Paris.

D*anseurs* and *danseuses afro* however quickly interpreted coupé-décalé to be accelerated and electronically-mimicked n'dombolo, an established genre of orchestra music produced in the two Congos, and rooted in even more established rumba congolaise. Furthermore, *boucan*'s organiz-ation around bluff, shine and swagger was perceived to be inspired by the Congolese movement of *la sape* (elegant clothing), to which many n'dombolo artists have been associated. The move-ment, which emerged between Europe and the two Congos in the 1960s, revolves around the acquisition of expensive designer suits in Europe, *descentes* (literally meaning 'raids' but actually referring to returns to the home country), and 'clothing duels' which locate *sapeurs* (dandies) in highly elaborated hierarchies (Friedman 1994, 178–179; Newell 2012, 17).[32]

Both *boucan* and *sape* conveyed, in different ways, an African authenticity that was inscribed in urbanity, cosmopolitanism and transnationalism. These aesthetics disrupted the conflation between Africanness and 'tradition', rurality, and conservatism which saturated journalistic and political discourse. That French Black youth so readily adopted *boucan* (and *sape* only after that) may be explained by physical, linguistic and generational proximities. But it also raises ques-tions about the articulation of inaudibility and invisibility, particularly in relation to the 'prevailing discourse of colorblind indivisibility in French society, designating nonetheless an unmarked nor-mative whiteness' (Keaton, Denean, and Edward 2012, 2). Indeed, the double-entendre of *boucan* was not lost upon young Black Parisians who proudly claimed to *faire le boucan*.

Danse afro rehearsals, which often took place in public spaces, such as public transport stations and shopping malls, in fact projected both types of *boucan*, visible and audible. Dancers demonstrated their prowess and style on recorded music played from portable speakers, always accompanied by rhythmic chanting as well as exclamations of praise and enthusiasm. This appropriation of public spaces for dance practice built on a tradition established by hip-hop dancers as early as the 1980s.[33] Over the 2000s, iconic rehearsal sites such as Chatelet-les-Halles were banned, resulting in the criminalization of their practitioners: mostly Black and Brown young people of low-income neighbourhoods. *Danse afro* was thus not the only juvenile cultural expression interpreted as menacing 'noise'.

New sites of practice emerged and stabilized, increasingly in authorized spaces specifically designed for 'street' dance under Ministry of Culture funding and chaperonage. This dis-placement and containment paralleled the institutionalization of hip-hop dance, with an increasing number of experienced dancers turning professional, and hip-hop dance gaining widespread recognition as a legitimate art form (Shapiro 2004; Kauffmann 2004). While *danse afro* also appeared in those new rehearsal spaces, it continued to be regarded at best as entertainment, at worse as 'noise'. Professional opportunities for *danseurs* and *danseuses afro* remained rare.[34]

What further distinguished *afro* from hip-hop dancers, professionalization aside, was the way women gradually inscribed their presence in public spaces. *Danse afro* groups were at first struc-tured in a manner typical of contemporary Congolese music bands. This followed from n'dom-bolo's ultimate centrality in French Black youth culture, and the instrumental role young people of Congolese origin ended up playing in *danse afro's* development. While *afro* groups were often

Figure 2. *Danse afro* rehearsal in a youth club in a *banlieue* in the north of Paris (photo taken by author in 2006).

mixed in terms of gender, their leaders were invariably male: they were the real 'stars' in the French *afro* scene, especially after most groups turned to singing in the second half of the 2000s. On stage, female dancers gravitated around male singers but rehearsals showed a different pattern. Women could take the lead in choreographic development or practice with no men in sight (Figure 2).

Nevertheless, inequalities remained, as in Congolese music bands: while male dancers could, and often did become, singers, women generally remained (voiceless) dancers.[35] They were the object of (male) desire and (female) admiration, inspiring other young women to practice dancing. At the time of the news coverage of female 'gangs', female-only danse afro groups, breaking away from the male-led structure, were starting to emerge. The 'gang members' interviewed by the media actually presented themselves in a manner alike to male-led groups on their social media accounts, and gave themselves names that mimicked those of these groups[36] – 'Bana Danger', 'Black Boukantes', 'Masta dinguerie', 'Les Boucantières' or 'Bana Massacreuzes' – combining terms derived from Lingala, spoken in both Congos, and Nouchi, the French-based slang of Abidjan, Ivory Coast.[37] While male-managed female dancers rarely generated adverse reactions, these independent female dancers, who became (hyper)visible and (hyper)audible on social media and the television, were subjected to moral judgements (Braun 2014, 56).[38]

Women's cultural expressions, and dances in particular, have often been the locus of struggles for control, especially when they are perceived to transgress conservative norms of propriety (Cooper 1995, 11) and include sexually suggestive or 'risqué movements' (Heath 1994, 89). While these women did break away from gendered expectations concerning appropriateness in public space,[39] this breach might have been located less in their sexual suggestiveness and 'loud' aesthetics than in the visibility and recognition they yielded and gained, one that men coveted too. Some male afro dancers expressed resentment, even jealousy, that female 'wannabes' gained exposure in the mainstream media by making *boucan*, while they, established artists within the afro scene, remained invisible.

Conclusion: Being reduced to silence/noise

> "Être quelqu'un en vue" c'est avant tout une sensation: la sensation spéciale d'être regardé. Elle inten-sifie le "sentiment d'exister". (Heinich 2012, 461)

Being visible is crucially important to young Black people in French society. In fact, many construct 'making it' as a process of becoming visible, not the least because they suffer from a kind of invisibility that resembles very much that described by Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* (Ndiaye 2008, 21; Fassin, Fassin, and Beaud 2009, 6; Boubeker 2009, 70-1). Ellison presents invisibility as the physical materialization and the metaphor of the political inaudibility of the main character. He becomes invisible when he realizes that he will always be perceived through racial fantasies: 'You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. Say, a figure in a nightmare which the sleeper tries with all his strength to destroy' (1995, 3–4). The 'invisible man' hopes to have his presence recognized – to exist outside of people's imaginaries – by making them feel his body's materiality. He beats people up and insults them; alas he remains invisible. Can *boucan*, both visual and sonic, be interpreted as an analogous effort?

In this paper, I considered 'noise' and loudness not only as sonic but also as visual, and looked at the ways in which 'noise' is used to negotiate presence and circulation in spaces, including digital ones, that are only *virtually* open to all. I tried to show how disenfranchised young people can be 'loud' all the while being silent, or how they can be silenced – or as we say in French, 'reduced to silence' – by being reduced to noise. It may seem that little has changed since former French president Jacques Chirac's infamous diatribe in 1991 on the 'noise and smell' of immigrants and their kids.[40] (Young) French Black people continue to be subjected to a sonic colourline which defends and legitimizes the sensibilities, sensitivities and tastes of *les français* (whiteness and 'Gaul' origins implied), and "their implicit, sometimes violent, control over the soundscape of an ostensibly 'open', 'free', 'public' space" (Stoever 2016, 2).

The last verse of Mokobé's song ultimately ties the 'loud' aesthetics and behaviours of the *Rihannons* to poverty and exclusion, revealing the conditions from which their 'loud' flaunting and bluffing – or in Mokobé's words, their *pretending* – emerges. The artist mocks the young women for displaying pictures of their holidays on their social media accounts, pretending they went to Miami when they actually went to a holiday village in France and shared a single room between the six of them. This particular sentence highlights the importance of mobility, and the role of social media as a stage and arena for status production in relation to multiple publics. It also illustrates how what is visible is manipulated in such a way that digital space expands and reinvents physical space.

In contrast to Ellison's invisible man, *boucan* in both the French and Ivoirian senses allowed young Black women to become visible and make their presence felt in public and digital spaces in ways they had not before. However, this visibility was not exactly a sign that they had 'made it' in

French society; their short-lived fame in fact contributed to reinforcing the controlling images that stigmatized them – some Black men (and women) publicly expressed feeling ashamed because of them (cf. Mokobé's interview, 4 December 2012). Bakhtin has insisted on the power of the grotesque and the carnivalesque to subvert social hierarchies and normalcy (1981, 159). In the present case, however, it seems that the grotesque did not subvert representations, but rather, further distorted them, like a 'carnival' funhouse mirror (Hobson 2003, 89).

Because of the way they were portrayed, these young women were firmly relegated to the extraordinary and the abnormal. Their involvement in transactional sexuality and male-coded delinquent behaviours was presented by mainstream media as a response to pervasive sexism and machismo, supposedly more characteristic of their immigrant neighbourhoods than of France as a whole. This explanation conveniently helped back up discourses about the 'Islamization' of France and the criminalization of *banlieue* youth (Keaton 2006; Hancock 2017). In their assertiveness, strong presence, Rihanna-like aesthetics, the 'loud' women presented as gang members contrasted with the submissive, 'traditional', veiled women of West African descent commonly constructed by journalists, politicians, film directors or rappers like Mokobé, as the quintessential 'African women'.

On the other hand, the way these young women imposed their presence in public space felt 'culturally intimate' to French Black people because it invoked different kinds of 'loud' visibility central to urban African dance and music cultures – Congolese *sape*, Ivoirian *boucan*, etc. They carved out a space within popular culture that registered both as 'African' and as 'modern' *pour le meilleur et pour le pire*. By deploying behaviours and aesthetics registering *le bled* (the 'home' country or Africa in general), they demonstrated a 'degree of creative irreverence' even if they also reinforced 'the effectiveness of intimidation' (Herzfeld 2005, 3). Through interventions in public space, through dress, dance and *boucan*, Black girls evidenced their agency and asserted their right to the city, while also exposing 'various forms of power relations that link resistance, complicity and structures of domination' (Heath 1994, 88; Caldeira 2012, 385; Secor 2004, 353).

Disclosure statement

Notes

1. Rihanna, Naomi Campbell, Keri Hilson, Beyonce Knowles, Kelly Rowland, and Victoria Beckam.
2. *krari*: to pretend, *non*: no, *gros*: fat, *boule:* buttocks, Rachida and Coulibaly: common first and last African names.
3. « Rihannon, ce qu'elle veut c'est un footeux
      Et pas moyen si tu joues en Ligue 2,
      Elle c'est la Ligue 1, oui elle a faim,
      Elle veut son sac Louis Vi', ses Louboutins
      Tu tombes bien, t'es le parfait larbin,
      T'es un loupnon pour elle, t'es un lapin
      Trop parler peut tuer donc elle agit,
      Si t'as la maille qu'il faut, là elle surgit »
      "Rihannon, what she wants is a football player
      And no way if you are in Second League
      She wants First League, yes she is hungry
      She wants her Louis Vuitton, her Louboutins
      You're timely, you are the perfect schmuck
      You are a wolf? No, for her you are a rabbit

    Talking too much is useless so she takes action
    If you have the dough, she pounces"

4. « Il y avait des débats entre les grandes sœurs et les petites sœurs … ça commencait à s'insulter et tout ça »

5. His previous album included another track, *Beyonce Coulibaly*, offering a similar satire of young Afro-Parisian women's aesthetics and behaviours, without linking them to violent and unlawful activities.

6. By seemingly innocent questions such as 'where are you from?' (in a country which doesn't use and/or recognize 'hyphenated identities'), French children of immigrants are often reminded of their (parent's) extraneous origin and taught to identify with the nationality of their parents, only to be accused of being unwilling to "integrate" when they do so.

7. Composer Murray Schafer (1993, 4) defined noises as 'the sounds we have learned to ignore'. I would say, rather, that noises are the sounds we have learned *to notice*. Noise is both that 'which is excluded' – often forcefully – and that which is 'taken as interference' (Attali 1985, 28).

8. *Boucan: Devenir quelqu'un dans le milieu afro* (forthcoming).

9. The Black population in France mostly comes from former African colonies and from 'ultra-marine' French departments and territories located in the Carribean and Indian Ocean.

10. While the violence of male bandes is linked to various traffics in the parallel economy (drugs, stolen goods, etc.), that of female gangs, arises because of 'stolen boyfriends', 'dirty looks' and 'teeth-sucking' by rival girls (Marie Claire, 2012). Furthermore, female gang members are mostly involved in 'subsistence offenses' (they steal food, clothes and occasionally hand bags), while males *bandes* members are involved in armed robbery (Le Figaro, 2010). Lastly, female gangs lack hierarchy and have no leaders, in contrast with male *bandes* (Le Parisien, 2010).

11. « S'approprier les 'méthodes des garçons' » / « savent se passer des garçons »

12. Race, as a system of classification, tabooed in France in the aftermath of World War II, surfaced again in political discourse during the mid-2000s.

13. The sexual 'hustle' described by mainstream media, and by young Black people discussing Mokobé's musical treatment of the 'female gangs' problem, seems to be a variant of 'transactional sex', described in public health and anthropological scholarship (see Cole and Thomas 2009, for example). Yet the hustle precisely resides in making men believe they will obtain sexual favours, then retreat and not give into their desires – a 'tour de main' some girls bragged about when they were interviewed by journalists. While young women withholding sex may be valorized among *banlieue* teenagers, they are not when it follows active seduction. Furthermore, many young Black people suspect the girls do, in fact, give in, and only act as if they were not 'easy lays'. This is considered worse than actually having sex (Steil 2015).

14. A 2012 article in the women's magazine *Marie Claire* alternatively described the girls as 'short', 'dry' and 'masculine', 'like lianas', and as 'curvy' with 'aggressive' cleavages and make-up. These descriptions, accompanied by the illustrating picture of two Black and two Maghrebi girls given West African and Northern African sounding pseudonyms, easily conjure colonial and orientalist fantasies about 'jungle people' and 'belly dancers'.

15. See for example the television show *Reporters* by France 24, September 2, 2011 http://www.france24.com/fr/20110902-reporters-gang-filles-nice-paris-banlieues-agression-insecurite-caids. Last accessed July 22, 2018.

16. See for example http://bana-swagga.skyrock.com. Last accessed July 22, 2018.

17. Mon Afrique?Quelle Afrique?Tu descends l'Afrique !.

18. To the vloggers quoted above, the *Fatou* figure illustrates Black people's 'auto-racism', their adherence to a representation of Black people as 'all that is dirty, all that is loud, all that is embarrassing'.

19. Depicted in blackface performances then found in African American comedy, the 'Angry Black Woman' is portrayed as disloyal, greedy and hypersexual, trying hard to be desirable but grotesque rather than beautiful. She acts loudly and inappropriately in otherwise genteel, public spaces, demonstrating all the ways she is different from white women (Hobson 2003).

20. On a French website (Jukebox.fr 2011).

21. C'est la femme africaine dans toute sa splendeur. Avec le vêtement traditionel et tout. Et dans cet album justement y a un hommage à la femme Africaine … .

22. C'est parce qu'on est devenues féministes, madame !

23. Since 2014, there has been a splintering of the 8 March demonstrations on Women's Day: the official march which federates most mainstream feminist movements and many politicians; and the alternative one ('8 mars pour touTEs') which includes groups marginalized by the official movement –

transgender people, sexual minorities, sex workers and devout Muslims booed in the mainstream demonstrations of earlier years (Hancock 2017, 640).

24. Ma soeur, t'es belle, garde ton identité.
25. The film's title also appeared in a number of rap songs, to illustrate the stigma African populations are subjected to. See for example Al Peco (2008) 'Hey Marianne', 2008 in the album *Colonizason*.
26. Sonia Imloul, interviewed by Caroline Laurent & Patrick Williams.
27. Gaëlle might even help to save/acculturate Fatou's brother by engaging in a romantic relationship with him, a possibility suggested in the film's very last scenes.
28. In 2011, there were only 80 'problematic' girls in a country of 65 billion people, and 10 cases of collective delinquent acts (out of 326) that were attributed to female *bandes* (Marie-Claire, 2012).
29. Les jeunes filles qui donnent de la voix sont les fondatrices du gang […] Leur spécialité : faire du boucan, c'est-à-dire chahuter dans les endroits publics
30. The interview transcriptions illustrate how far the journalists are from the reality of young Black people in France, leading them to misunderstand their most common vocabulary : 'type' (pronounced 'tip' in French) when it was probably 'tchip' (teeth-sucking) or 'bull' (pronounced 'bool' in French) when it certainly was 'boule' (ass).
31. See *Le Boucan* by artist Molare (2003).
32. Congolese artists do not earn a living in Africa by selling their music in the form of audio or video records, but rather by giving live performances and engaging in *libanga* (remunerated praise) for wealthy patrons (White, 2008: 10). For n'dombolo artists, Europe has therefore always played an important role, as a place where more privileged fans and patrons are located, but also as a place of *aventure* and renewal.
33. See Luc Riolon and Rachel Seddoh's documentary *Hip-Hop Fusion* (2001).
34. Around 2016, afro dancers started to be actively recruited to teach in Parisian dance schools that offered classes in other urban dance styles (hip-hop, house, dancehall).
35. Dancer-turned-singer Jessy Matador's signature to a big music label in 2008 triggered a cascade of dance-to-song conversions and further signatures of male artists, but mostly to smaller, independent music labels.
36. One such group is Bana C4 – a name that uses the Lingala word of 'children' and refers to explosives, as implied by 'C4'. At first a dance group, it became famous when it turned to singing. The group was signed in 2014 to an independent label directed by French rapper of Senegalese and Congolese origin, Youssoupha.
37. *Bana* and *masta* are Lingala words meaning 'children' and 'friend'. The references to *boucan*, *dingue* (crazy), *danger* (danger) and *massacre* (massacre) derive from coupé-décalé.
38. Congolese *danseuses* visible in public and virtual space, mostly through YouTube videos of concerts, are condemned as hypersexual and 'non-virtuous', which leads them to remain unmarried (Braun, 2014: 54).
39. On one blog, commenters debate about the 'gang' members being, or not being, 'Congolese' (i.e. French of Congolese parentage). Their origin is inferred from their dress, hair and make-up styles, but commenters disagree on whether these styles are indeed stylish or just over the top. The young women's vulgarity and attitude to men are used as further clues to determine their ethnic origin.
40. In a speech he gave in 1991, as he was mayor of Paris and not yet president, he justified the 'French worker's' resentment towards his immigrant neighbour by declaring: 'You have to understand the French worker […] who works with his wife, who earn together about 15,000 French francs, and who sees on the same floor as him, in his social housing project, a piled-up family with a father, three or four wives and twenty children, earning 50,000 French francs of social benefits, without even working … If you add to this the noise and the smell, well, the French worker, he goes crazy. He goes crazy, and you have to understand him. And if you were in his place, you would go crazy too. And it is not being racist to say this'.

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