

**Overflowing the Black Mediterranean.
Creations, cultures and identities across the Euro-African borders**

**Marseille,
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Abstract

This call invites presenters to reflect on the concept of the Black Mediterranean and explore the identity and cultural formations emerging from real or imaginary circulations between Africa and Europe. We identify the Black Mediterranean as a border space marked by inequalities, racialization processes and (im)mobilities, colonial and postcolonial memory dynamics, but also as a matrix of cultural and identity creativity. Starting from the study of artistic practices, we will examine how this concept can renew and offer a heuristic overflow in studies on Blackness, Afro-diasporic identities, or migrations between Africa and Europe.

Rationale

Since the mid-2010s, a series of publications have opened an emerging field of research around a new concept: the Black Mediterranean. Fostered by English-speaking studies on Southern European countries, and stemming from geography, literature or Migration Studies (Di Maio 2014, Smythe 2018, Grimaldi 2019, Hawthorne 2023, Raeymakers 2014, Proglia et al. 2021), this current has grown following previous studies which showed that Afrodiasporic identifications and social movements thrive in transnational mobilities (Gilroy 1993). Among those referring to the Black Mediterranean, some insist on the transformation of this maritime space into a zone of racial violence, imposed by immigration restriction policies (like the European FRONTEX program), but also part of a longer history of exploitation and racial capitalism (Proglia et al. 2021; Gilroy 2021; Raeymakers 2024). Other works focus on the experiences of African migrants or Afro-descendants in Europe, from their political and social mobilizations to their artistic and literary productions (Sanchez-Pardo 2011, Ziethen 2019, Di Maio 2021, Murray 2021, Aterianus-Owanga 2024).

Beyond differences, a large majority of these works highlight the fragmented experience of citizenship and Afro-descendant identities in Europe (Miano 2020). They stimulate us to think about the making of Black identities by deviating from the universalizing stories, centered “exclusively on the geographies of slavery and racist plantation” (Hawthorne, 2023). These studies produce a twofold definition of the Mediterranean: it appears both as the macabre theater of a policy of closing borders and postcolonial exploitation of Black subjectivities, and as an area of passage and inventiveness.

In resonance with these works, we propose to apprehend the Black Mediterranean as it is lived, imagined and recomposed in artistic and cultural practices developed between countries of Africa and Europe. We assume that, beside an abstract conceptual reflection, the Black Mediterranean manifests itself in a variety of artistic and cultural phenomena which prove to be particularly relevant to understand the histories, societies and the specifics of this memorial and trans-maritime matrix. Thus, when African writers reimagine the relationships between Europe and Africa from the perspective of counterfactual history (Waberi 2008, Ziethen, 2016); when museum pieces are boxed to be sent to the lands where they were stolen a century earlier (Diop 2024); when hip-hop artists sonically translate the liminal landscapes of Afropeanity (Niang 2023, Pitts 2024); when dance movements circulate from

the Ivorian, Angolan, or Senegalese capitals to the French dance studios and night clubs (Steil 2019; Aterianus-Owanga 2024); or when magazines created in Paris, London, or Brussels redraw aesthetics and Afro-futurist utopias by feeding on Pan-African archives. The list of productions invented in the circulations binding Africa and Europe could be extended at leisure. Beyond their stylistic heterogeneity and the plural representations of Africa, Europe and the diaspora they offer, these creations show how the Black Mediterranean is not only a South-North migrational space. Rather, it represents a space of real or imaginary dialogues and cultural production, whose meanings and stakes vary according to the spaces we are located in.

We invite the participants of this conference to consider the trajectories of artists, amateurs or intermediaries in the worlds of art and culture as entry points to grasp these plural dimensions of the Black Mediterranean. We encourage them to observe artistic practices for what they produce and say about the social world, and to question their entanglements with political ideologies, markets, or structures of social relations.

We propose the notion of overflow as a prism for analyzing the Black Mediterranean. We understand it following two acceptations.

The overflow we conceive first is epistemological. It consists in thinking outside the contours drawn up by area studies and by some *studies* to grasp phenomena, circuits, or thoughts navigating between Africa and Europe. These cultural, artistic, cultural or ideological formations overcome geographical borders and run along maritime, migratory, digital, memorial, sound routes, plugging in and unplugging to draw the Black Mediterranean beyond its geographical borders.

This transnational approach has long been explored by historians or anthropologists of the Mediterranean (Lorcin and Sheperd 2016; Ben-Yehoyada, Silverstein, 2022; Calafat and Grenet 2023), and in Migration Studies (Glick-Schiller, Basch and Szanton-Blanc 1994; Portes, Guarnizo and Landolt 1999; Dahinden, 2011; D'Angelo 2021). While broadening this approach, our project aims to emphasize connections with Africa which bring this Black Mediterranean into existence, though they often remain marginalized. In so doing, we move away from perspectives produced from Europe, which sometimes, implicitly renew a representation of the Mediterranean as a crossing zone, going from Africa to Europe, rather than as a polycentric whole traversed by multidirectional movements.

Moreover, overflowing means complementing theoretical approaches on race which mainly observe the Mediterranean for what makes it Black (Smythe 2018), and re-examining the notion of Blackness. The latter has become a global prism for many political, social and artistic actors in the Americas and Europe to analyze the Black condition. Today, debates about its operability outside an English-speaking context are developing, particularly in Europe (El-Tayeb 2018, Williams 2020, Cases rebels 2023, Barontini *et al.* 2023). Some, in the artistic worlds, participate in such debates from the Mediterranean. They seize the notion, question it and sometimes contrast it with others, such as pan-Africanism and Black cosmopolitanism, or with other registers of identification such as Africanness and Afropeanness. These discussions urge us to go beyond Anglophone and American readings of Blackness (Marable and Agar-Jones 2008) and think of it as a hybrid container that takes on situated meanings (Clark and Thomas 2009, Fouquet and Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2014; Wright 2025). They also invite us to examine who mobilize Blackness, and in which spaces of this Black Mediterranean. Couldn't overflowing the Black Mediterranean lead us to think in terms of Afro-Mediterranean affiliations?

The two types of overflowing proposed here obviously resonate with previous studies on the transnational formation of Afrodiasporic identities, and in particular with Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993). However, our approach does not simply transpose the paradigm of the British sociologist to another space, but questions how the Mediterranean Sea and the exchanges it hosts allow us to rethink this model, occasionally criticized for its Atlantic-centric nature and its omission of Africa (Zezeza, 2005; Edwards 2001; Piot 2001). For instance, while

the memory of the Transatlantic slave trade, slavery and the plantation system constitutes a fundamental marker of the identity formations described by Gilroy, the Black Mediterranean is a matrix infused by multiple other traces and legacies where the more or less audible memory of slavery is entangled, combined or supplanted by colonial traces, stories of postcolonial migrations, and by the repercussions of contemporary necropolitics.

While a significant body of literature on the Black Mediterranean has been written in English and has focused on Southern Europe, our conference aims to comprehend the benefits of this concept in other spaces, notably in the interstices between French-speaking Europe and Africa. We will document how these circuits of the Black Mediterranean involve European and African cities, and unfold through connections to other territories and social worlds. To broaden and decenter our understanding of the Black Mediterranean, we also invite participants to look at spaces other than the large metropolises of Western Europe, to examine the memory and identity dynamics, for instance, visible in the Anatolian space, Eastern Europe or the Maghreb. Finally, the studies brought together in this conference can be used to understand the way in which the Mediterranean overflows towards the Black Atlantic but also towards the English Channel, the Baltic, the Pacific Ocean or the Indian Ocean.

Papers may be carried out by researchers from various disciplines (social sciences, literature and arts), and deal with case studies or discuss issues and methodological challenges posed by these overflows. The discussions will be in French.

Submission terms

Please send a 500-word abstract to: Alice Aterianus-Owanga (alice.aterianus-owanga@unine.ch) and Sarah Fila-Bakabadio (sarah.fila-bakabadio@cyu.fr) by December 15, 2025.

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