

**From the Atlantic to the Mediterranean:
Fréjus and Marseilles as alternative capitals of Black France?**

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Over the past few decades, much has been written about Paris as the prime site of encounter between Africans and Blacks from the diaspora in the first half of the twentieth century.¹ More recently, however, pioneering work, most notably by French historians associated with the ACHAC collective, as well as by cultural and literary scholars, not least Lydie Moudileno and Kate Marsh,² has slowly begun to shift the critical focus towards what is often termed the ‘postcolonial provinces’: although Black Paris may have played a pivotal role in the development of what we might term a Black French Atlantic, there were, in fact, significant black populations in many French port cities, including Le Havre, Bordeaux and Marseilles. This essay will focus on the latter city as well as, perhaps more surprisingly for some readers, its near neighbour, the small Mediterranean town of Fréjus. If Marseilles, as a major Mediterranean port, is already well known as an ‘immigrant’ city, long host to populations from North and sub-Saharan Africa (and further afield), the role of Fréjus in the history of Black France is somewhat obscured. This small seaside town might, however, lay claim to having served as the true capital of Black France in the first half of the twentieth century, for it was there, during the First World War, that the French Army created a major military base for its black African troops, the *tirailleurs sénégalais* (a base that remained in service until the 1960s).

¹ See, for example, Bennetta Jules-Rosette, *Black Paris: The African Writers’ Landscape*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2000. Pascal Blanchard, Eric Deroo, Gilles Manceron, *Le Paris noir*, Paris, Hazan, 2001.

² Lydie Moudileno, ‘The Postcolonial Provinces’, *Francosphères*, 1.1 (2012), p.53-68; Kate Marsh, ‘Regions/Province’, in *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France*, edited by Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick and Lydie Moudileno, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, p. 73-84. See also the collection of *beaux livres* by the ACHAC collective, for example: *Marseille, porte sud*, edited by Pascal Blanchard and Gilles Boëtsch, Paris, La Découverte, 2005; *Lyon, capitale des outre-mers*, edited by Nicolas Bancel, Léla Bencharif and Pascal Blanchard, Paris, La Découverte, 2007.

This essay will examine two texts from the 1920s, which illustrate the importance of the Mediterranean coast to our understanding of the literary geography of a transatlantic memory. In *Des inconnus chez moi* (1920), the painter Lucie Cousturier relates her encounters with a wide range of *tirailleurs* from the military camp in Fréjus.³ These are men who have undertaken a journey from the south to the north Atlantic, a journey often overlooked in Atlantic Studies, which has perhaps understandably privileged east-west transatlantic travel. The second text, *Banjo* (1929), the celebrated novel by the Jamaican writer, Claude McKay, through its simultaneously boisterous and contemplative evocation of the black community in Marseilles—which includes Africans, Antilleans and North Americans—reminds us that the *ville phocéenne* is not only the French gateway to North Africa but is also in its own right a site of transatlantic memory.⁴

The essay builds on research conducted for two previous publications: in an article comparing *Banjo* with Ousmane Sembene's first novel, *Le Docker noir* (1956), I argued that the black experience in Marseilles is typically represented as resolutely working-class, in stark contrast to dominant explorations of the alienated existence of black students from the colonies in Paris;⁵ in a second article, I examined *Banjo* and *Des Inconnus chez moi* in terms of what they might reveal to us about the complex interplay between race and sexuality both during and in the immediate aftermath of the First World War.⁶ The present essay revisits this earlier research and reframes the focus of the comparison to explore the context of their Mediterranean settings: why are these southern French sites such powerful loci for an

³ Lucie Cousturier, *Des inconnus chez moi* [1920], présentation par Roger Little, Paris, L'Harmattan, Collection 'Autrement mêmes', 2001. For an overview of different aspects of Cousturier's engagement with the *tirailleurs* in the context of early twentieth-century French colonialism, see Roger Little, ed., *Lucie Cousturier, les tirailleurs sénégalais et la question coloniale*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008.

⁴ Claude McKay, *Banjo: A Story without a Plot* [1929], NY and London: Harcourt Brace, 1957. McKay later revisited his experience in Marseilles in his memoir, *A Long Way from Home*, shedding new light on the fictionalized account contained in *Banjo: A Long Way from Home* [1937], New Brunswick, NJ, & London, Rutgers University Press, 2007. McKay's manuscript *Romance in Marseille* (finally published in 2020) also provides an important account of the black community in the city.

⁵ David Murphy, 'Love, Trauma and War: the *tirailleurs sénégalais* and sexual-racial politics in 1920s France', *Irish Journal of French Studies*, 13 (2013), p.111-28.

⁶ David Murphy, 'La Danse et la parole: l'exil et l'identité chez les Noirs de Marseille dans *Banjo* de Claude McKay et *Le Docker noir* d'Ousmane Sembene', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 27.3 (September 2000), p.462-79.

exploration of the experience of black soldiers and workers in the aftermath of the First World War?

Lucie Cousturier: Des inconnus chez moi

Marc Michel, in his authoritative account of African participation in the war, states that over 200,000 sub-Saharan African troops were raised during the war: 130,000 saw active service in France with 34,000 killed.⁷ The debate still rages between historians regarding the extent to which African soldiers may have been used as ‘shock troops’ in order to spare French lives. Pap Ndiaye succinctly and convincingly summarizes the case of those who believe that black lives were used to save white ones:

Les pertes françaises furent les plus terribles lors des vingt-deux premiers mois de la guerre, puis elles déclinèrent globalement, tandis que celles des tirailleurs suivirent une trajectoire inverse pour atteindre leur maximum en 1918. A ce moment, l’utilisation intensive des tirailleurs avaient clairement pour objectif de sauver les vies françaises.⁸

Whatever view one takes about how they were used, there is no doubt that, as the war progressed, the *tirailleurs* were an increasingly significant element of French military strategy. In the period covered by Lucie Cousturier’s memoir, *Des inconnus chez moi*, sub-Saharan African troops suffered very heavy casualties, and this fact shapes the nature of her encounter with them. The text is one of the most invaluable sources that we possess regarding the preoccupations and attitudes of *tirailleurs sénégalais* during the Great War. We know about the military exploits of the thousands of African soldiers who travelled to France between 1914-18 but we know little of what they thought or felt about that experience. Far from the front lines in Fréjus, they could reflect on their experiences and how they had been affected by them.

⁷ Marc Michel, *Les Africains et la grande guerre: l’appel à l’Afrique (1914-1918)*, Paris, Karthala, 2003.

⁸ Pap Ndiaye, *La Condition noire: Essai sur une minorité française*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2008, p.133.

Cousturier was a minor neo-impressionist painter who had expressed no particular interest either in colonialism or in Africa until, in the spring of 1916, the French Army chose to build its main metropolitan base for the *tirailleurs* on the doorstep of her country retreat in the small Mediterranean town of Fréjus. Although sub-Saharan African soldiers were generally deemed ‘natural’ warriors, the French army considered that they were unsuited to the rigours of winter warfare in Europe and, from 1916 until the end of the war, the *tirailleurs* were sent to Fréjus for the duration of the winter. In fact, the main pressure on the war government to exclude African troops from winter combat came from Blaise Diagne, the first black Senegalese deputy to the French parliament. Diagne saw the war as an opportunity to further the quest of Senegal’s tiny minority of ‘citoyens’ to gain greater equality and, in the process, he managed to secure some small concessions for all African troops. Already the site of a small, military base, Fréjus was chosen to host a vast contingent of *tirailleurs sénégalais*, the sunny climate of this Mediterranean resort, deemed a conducive setting for West African soldiers seeking respite from the harsh winters of the western front in the north of the country.

At first, Cousturier was as fearful as her neighbours at the arrival of thousands of these potentially savage ‘inconnus’ (as her knowing title suggests). In the first signs of impending change, the beautiful wooded landscape near her holiday home, a refuge from the bustle of city life in Paris, was cleared in early 1916 to make way for the extension of the camp. Reflecting on this period from her contemporary vantage point several years later, she remarks: ‘en avril et mai 1916, nous faisons à nos futurs amis un large crédit d’horreur. Tous les paysans l’ouvraient avec nous. Il n’était pas de crime qu’on ne leur avancât’ (DICM, p. 8). The locals already ‘knew’ Africa through the prism of a racialized colonial discourse that presented Africans as brutes and animals:

—Qu’allons nous devenir? gémissaient les fermières, nous ne pourrons plus laisser courir la volaille près de ces charpateurs, ni faire sécher notre linge sur les haies, ni laisser mûrir les fruits sur nos arbres. Nous ne pourrons plus laisser nos petites filles

aller sur les chemins, parmi ces sauvages. Nous n'oserons plus sortir seules, nous-mêmes, pour faire de l'herbe ou du bois. Pensez! si l'on était prises par ces gorilles!
(DICM, p. 8-9)

However, Cousturier's initial concerns were quickly overcome as she got to know many individual *tirailleurs* and she soon established an informal school for them in her home, where she gave classes in basic reading and writing skills. Cousturier's book provides a general picture of the *tirailleurs* as a group, but focuses in particular on specific soldiers with whom she enjoyed a close relationship. In the quiet, peaceful surroundings of her country house on the Mediterranean, these African soldiers could open up to her in a temporary respite from the violence of the front lines, and the surveillance of their colonial commanders.

The identity that Cousturier is most keen to project through her narrative is that of a 'marraine de guerre' to all of her *tirailleurs*: when the camp in Fréjus was opened, Cousturier was in her mid-40s, a married woman with an adult son, and would have been at least twenty years older than most of the *tirailleurs* whom she meets. Her attitude is primarily maternal, looking after her 'boys' and giving them the education that the colonial system denies them. In the process, she becomes a firm advocate of a type of colonial reformism, then gaining ground, particularly on the French left, that viewed full assimilation of the colonies as the route to progress. Her memoir is remarkable for the period in its attempt to draw out the individual nature of those *tirailleurs* whom she grew to know and love best, but the reader must always remain attentive to the potential extent to which these individuals constitute projections of her general view of the 'African mind', which were still largely framed by contemporary notions of the simplicity and naivety of Africans.⁹

At pains to show the French reader the 'positive' side of her African students, Cousturier largely steers clear of potentially controversial issues such as sex, although as I

⁹ For two other contemporaneous representations of the *tirailleurs*, both fictional and non-fictional, see *Avec les tirailleurs sénégalais 1917-1919: lettres inédites du front d'Orient*, by Raymond Escholier, Paris, L'Harmattan, 'Autrement Mêmes', 2013, and the episodic novel based on the life of one of the *tirailleurs* he encountered, the eponymous *Mahmadou Fofana* [1928], Paris, L'Harmattan, Collection 'Autrement mêmes', 2013.

have shown elsewhere a close reading of the text reveals ample evidence of sexual encounters.¹⁰ *Des Inconnus chez moi* also deals with two specific instances of *tirailleurs* falling in love, which reveals the extent to which the presence of so many young African men on French soil inevitably led to emotional and sexual encounters with local women. In the first of these instances, Cousturier correctly surmises that due to his dreamy demeanour and inability to concentrate in class, the *tirailleur* Damba Dia must have a girlfriend (love is very much presented within the frame of early twentieth-century literary conventions). Damba Dia's account of his initial encounter with this young woman from the nearby town of Saint-Raphaël is eloquent regarding the mix of naivety and curiosity that must have formed the basis for many such relationships:

Un jour, elle m'a demandé : « C'est vrai qu'est-ce qu'on dit que les hommes et les femmes de ton pays ne savent pas embrasser ? » J'ai dit : « Oui, c'est vrai que dans les pays beaucoup plus loin, il y a des personnes qui ne savent pas, mais, chez nous, il y a pas beaucoup qui ne connaissent pas ».

Alors, elle a embrassé sur sa main, mais ça faisait trop de bruit ! Après elle m'a donné sa main pour faire essayer, moi aussi, parce qu'elle a dit que je pouvais pas faire la même chose. C'est vrai que je savais pas si bien tout à fait, et ça nous amusait beaucoup. (*DICM*, 188)

However, despite the initially light-hearted tone, this is a doomed relationship and Damba Dia's account emphasizes the pressures to which the young couple are subjected. The unnamed 'petite amie' visits Damba at the camp in Fréjus with another female friend to take him for a drive in their car, which leads to harsh words from his superiors: 'Oh! tout ce qu'ils m'ont dit des mots, les gradés européens! tout ce qu'ils m'ont crié quand ils m'ont vu que je partais avec les deux dames! Oh! la, la, la, la! C'est trop, tout ça!' (*DICM*, 186).

¹⁰ See my 2013 article for a full exploration of the discussion of sex and sexual relations in the book.

He later tells Cousturier that he has been to Saint-Raphaël to talk to his girlfriend but learns on arrival there that she has already departed for Nice, where she is engaged to be married to a French officer. This account of Damba Dia's story concludes with his declaration: 'Mais que voulez-vous, Madame, c'est pas longtemps, en France, qu'un Sénégalais il peut rester content dans son cœur' (*DICM*, 190). Once again, the remark is not commented upon by Cousturier: in the careful *mise-en-scène*, she allows Damba Dia to tell his own story of heartbreak, seemingly in order to highlight his lived humanity which is denied by the injustices of a racist colonial system. It is the sense of restful repose in Fréjus from the trauma of the front lines that allows Damba Dia to reveal his true feelings.

The most intriguing and oblique exploration of strong emotional attachments involves Cousturier herself: the fact that the reader cannot be wholly certain that this is yet another case of a lovestruck *tirailleur* reinforces the point. At the very end of the war, during a period when her husband and son are away, she encounters Macoudia M'Baye whom she quickly grows to appreciate. However, Macoudia is depressed because he has just learned that he is soon to be repatriated to Senegal. He is disappointed with Cousturier when she does not show him the love that he wants from her, or rather the love that she as narrator claims he wants from her:

Il devait être attristé de ma bêtise, et sans doute se disait-il que, si les rôles étaient inversés et qu'il eût à me recevoir, il m'aurait fait offert de l'amour, aussi simplement qu'une boisson fraîche. Je comprendrai que Macoudia m'attendît quand je me rappellerai son regard attaché sur moi comme sur un objet attirant, mais énigmatique.
(*DICM*, 210)

Essentially, Macoudia is presented as a fragile 'soul' in a world of brutality who displays none of the sexual vulgarity of the common soldier (no trips to the 'bordel' for him). Even when in another class exercise, he is asked to draw a 'chien de bronze antique', 'il inventa un

sexe de forme si élégante qu'on dirait une fleur' (*DICM*, 210). It is never entirely made clear why Cousturier does not reciprocate his love (certainly, there is no standard defence that she is a married woman) but the chapter dealing with Macoudia concludes with both parties in tears, sharing a moment of spiritual communion (the physical is limited purely to the holding of hands). It is as though love between them is not possible largely because she cannot imagine this African Muslim soldier as someone capable of offering or receiving love.

The space of repose and reflection opened up by the location of the winter camp in Fréjus opens up the possibility of genuine communication, but this sense of possibility remains constrained by the logic of colonialism. In affairs of the heart, the African is fated to remain unfulfilled due to the imaginative grip exerted by a dominant racialized imaginary (even on an enlightened, liberal figure, such as Cousturier) and the often unspoken pressures of the colonial context.

Claude McKay: Banjo

A fascinating perspective on the black community in Marseilles is offered by the writer Claude McKay, one of the great, maverick figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Born in Jamaica, McKay emigrated to the US in 1912, roaming around the southern states, before making his way to New York and the emerging black cultural scene of the Harlem Renaissance. He initially made his name as a poet, gaining great renown in particular for the fiery poem, 'If we must die', his embattled response to the violent racial attacks on African Americans that scarred the summer of 1919. McKay was from a peasant farming background, and had trained as a woodworker. Proud of his African roots, he was also shaped by a clear class-consciousness and he was never entirely comfortable amongst the emerging African-American bourgeoisie in Harlem. By the early 1920s, he had left for Europe where he travelled widely — including a celebrated trip to the Soviet Union — before settling in Marseilles, which constituted for McKay a vibrant, earthy, working-class city that he greatly preferred to the cold, grey, bourgeois confines of the intellectual milieu in Paris. A

ferociously independent thinker — verging at times on the contrarian — McKay deliberately shied away from the black intellectual elite in Paris, just as he had done in Harlem, and immersed himself in the small, black community in Marseilles, working various manual jobs to support himself. Like Camus' Meursault who dismissed a Paris that was grey and overrun with pigeons, McKay found the bright, sun-kissed Mediterranean, where life is lived primarily in the open air, far more to his liking.

It is by now a well-worn truth that, in the period immediately before and after the First World War, African Americans found France to be far more welcoming than an openly segregated United States. This vision was not solely the preserve of the cultural elite of the Harlem Renaissance who made the pilgrimage to Paris. During the First World War, approximately 200,000 African-American soldiers had been sent to France where they were able to perceive for themselves the vast difference between the racial attitudes of French and US military commanders. The racist mind-set of American generals led them to assume that African Americans would make for poor soldiers; it was only under the command of the French military that they would eventually distinguish themselves in combat. In a war fought largely on French soil, the contribution of foreign soldiers — black or white — who might liberate the nation from German occupation was welcomed by the French public.

African American soldiers also brought jazz with them to France and it would soon become wildly popular. Indeed, the 1920s would come to be the highpoint of a negrophilia in France that spanned popular and high culture.¹¹ For many African American artists and writers, France constituted a refuge where they could escape from the racialized brutality of American society. This idealized vision of France is perhaps best summarised in Countee Cullen's poem, 'To France':

There might I only breathe my latest days,
With those rich accents falling on my ear

¹¹ Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s*, London, Thames & Hudson, 2000.

That most have made me feel that freedom's rays
Still have a shrine where they may leap and sear.¹²

For Cullen and many other figures of the Harlem Renaissance, France was the true home of the rights of man, a country where all men, irrespective of race, could enjoy genuine equality.

Claude McKay did not deny that France was more tolerant than the US but he refused to idealize it. He would not turn a blind eye to French colonialism and the racial hierarchies that underpinned it. He was only too conscious that, as an African American, he occupied a social position far superior to his black African brothers. For Michel Fabre, it is this awareness of the distinctions between different black groups in France and their relations with the white French that is central to the distinctiveness of McKay's vision in *Banjo*.¹³ McKay depicts the reality of white French racism towards black people but also renders problematic the notion of a single, homogenous black community.

Above all, Marseilles was for McKay a city in which a genuine black, working-class identity existed. From the very start of the novel, the city is presented as the site of teeming possibilities: '[I]t was the port that seamen talked about — the marvellous, dangerous, attractive, big, wide-open port' (*Banjo*, p. 12). Writing in his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, almost a decade later, McKay describes the feeling of well being generated by the sense of belonging that he felt while in Marseilles: 'it was good to feel the strength and distinction of a group and the assurance of belonging to it' (p. 277). His celebration of this community and the sense of collective black identity shared by his characters are at the heart of the novel. The main protagonist, the freewheeling North American musician and professional vagabond, the eponymous Banjo of the title, embodies an ideal of the black man (and McKay's vision is almost exclusively masculine) as instinctive, carefree and sensual.

¹² Countee Cullen, 'To France', *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. by David Levering Lewis, London, Penguin, 1994, p. 250.

¹³ Michel Fabre, *La Rive noire: de Harlem à la Seine*, Paris, Lieu Commun, 1985, p.12.

Banjo was quickly translated into French and, as many commentators have noted, its vision of black identity was a major influence on the work of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire and the other writers involved in the creation of the Negritude movement in 1930s Paris.¹⁴ Negritude has long been recognized as a cultural and political gambit by a black colonized elite who wanted to reclaim their blackness in a world dominated by their white colonial masters. Just as Negritude arose from the encounter between Africa and its diaspora in Paris, McKay's celebration of a vibrant black community in Marseilles was centred on lived encounters between the African motherland and diasporic communities, which overturned some of the more monolithic visions of a timeless, authentic Africa that one finds elsewhere in the work of Harlem Renaissance writers.

The semi-autobiographical figure of Ray, the writer, expresses the diasporic longing for connection to the motherland of Africa, what Frantz Fanon called their 'besoin de se raccrocher à une matrice culturelle'.¹⁵ In 'The Ditch', home to the black community in Marseilles, Ray takes comfort in the more 'solid' identity of the African men he encounters:

The Africans gave him a positive feeling of wholesome contact with social roots [...]. They inspired him with confidence in them. Short of extermination by the Europeans, they were a safe people, protected by their own indigenous culture [...]. He did not feel that confidence about Afra-Americans who, long-deracinated, were still rootless among phantoms and pale shadows and enfeebled by self-effacement before condescending patronage, social negativism, and miscegenation. (*Banjo*, p.320)

¹⁴ *Banjo* was translated into French, within two years of its original publication, by the French communist, Paul Vaillant-Couturier and his American spouse, Ida Treat (Rieder, 1931). In the postcolonial era, the translation was criticized for many of its lexical choices, until a new translation was published by the eminent literary critic, Michel Fabre, *Banjo, une histoire sans intrigue*, Paris, Editions de l'Olivier, 2015. On *Banjo* and Negritude, see Fabre, p. 14-15.

¹⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris, Seuil, 1952, p. 261.

In 'The Ditch', Ray feels a sense of wholeness that is presented as something more than an individual's quest for belonging; it is rather a diasporic African quest for home, a home that he finds in Marseilles of all places.

Ray attempts to forge a new identity out of the contradictions of his existence as a black artist in a white world. Although a deep and complex thinker, Ray believes in the power of instinct, living by the motto: 'Rather than lose his soul, let intellect go to hell and live instinct' (p. 165). The picaresque structure of the novel reflects this celebration of instinct, as Banjo and the other members of the black community live day to day, taking every opportunity afforded to them to enjoy the sensual pleasures of a life that is often harsh and unforgiving. Banjo lives this sensual, instinctive life to the full while Ray, somewhat paradoxically, spends much of his time thinking through the significance of an instinctive, sensual life.

The picaresque novel has a long lineage in American fiction, most readily associated with white protagonists who set off on adventures that are part spiritual quest and part exploration of identity, that quintessential American journey of the 'self-made man'. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) is, in many respects, the quintessential African American picaresque novel of the twentieth century. The anti-hero of Ellison's novel goes through a process of constant transformation: he begins as the model African American student who does not question the structures of white domination, and is later transformed into a militant communist seeking to overthrow the capitalist system. But, whatever identity he seeks to adopt, he fundamentally remains a prisoner of white society, which imposes its own vision on him. Eventually, unable to cope with a world in which he enjoys no control over his own identity, he hides himself away from the world, becoming the 'invisible man' of the title.

In *Banjo*, McKay transforms the rootlessness of the African American into a positive. For the wandering Banjo, movement is integral to his self-identity as he declares in his oft-repeated motto: 'Don't care how I fall, may be evah so long a drop, but it's always on mah feets' (*Banjo*, p. 17). Banjo is true to his word and always seems to act according to his latest

whim. He travels to France and settles in Marseilles for no particular reason other than to discover what life in the city has to offer. He is a deeply masculine, and often macho, character who has various sexual encounters, but who seems to vastly prefer the company of men, and who wants nothing to do with what he perceives as the sentimental, bourgeois ties of domesticity. It is primarily through Banjo's desire to roam the streets of 'The Ditch', embracing everything that the city can throw at him, that McKay allows us to discover the black community of the city. If Paris acted for the Negritude writers as the site of intellectual and cultural encounter, then the great port city of Marseilles with its host of migrants from around the world, and its sun-filled outdoor living, provides the setting for something quite different: the dynamic creation of a vibrant black communal life in metropolitan France.

The Senegalese café is one of the main locations in which the reader can see this sense of a black community in action, although in line with McKay's keen awareness of the differences between black groups it is also the site of numerous disputes between Africans and various diasporic groups. As the critic Brent Hayes Edwards has noted, *Banjo* is a novel in which the expression of a sense of black community constitutes an act of translation. For the black movement of the interwar period was resolutely transnational and imagining unity involved the translation of what blackness meant from one context to another. This may often appear to be a process of "mistranslation" but, for Edwards, it is both paradoxical and inevitable that the transnational practice of diasporic imagining reveals the differences between black communities in the very process of imagining their unity.¹⁶

It is through music and dance that divisions within the black community are temporarily overcome in the novel. As his nickname suggests, Banjo is a musician whose instrument is almost literally a part of his being, for it is his work as a musician that permits him to wander from one place to another, meeting new people and picking up work as and when he wishes. At the heart of the novel, there are several scenes in which Banjo and his friends stage impromptu concerts marked by a sense of joy and exuberance: these are the

¹⁶ Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

passages that had such a profound influence on Césaire, Senghor and the other young Negritude writers in Paris. In one, lyrical passage, the narrator describes dance as the expression of a profoundly “African” sense of rhythm and sensuality:

“Beguin”, “jelly roll”, “burru”, “bombé”, no matter what the name may be, Negroes are never so beautiful and magical as when they do that gorgeous sublimation of the primitive sex feeling. In its thousand varied patterns, depending so much on individual rhythm, so little on formal movement, this dance is the key to the African rhythm of life... (*Banjo*, p. 105)

As a character, Banjo thus serves as a catalyst to facilitate the expression of this essential “African” identity. The picaresque structure of the novel seeks to reflect the rhythms of jazz, that quintessential diasporic cultural expression of blackness in the 1920s, a process that is taken to another level in some of the concert scenes when the prose adopts a frenzied, staccato style:

Shake That Thing! That jelly-roll Thing!

Shake to the loud music of life playing to the primeval round of life. Rough rhythm of darkly carnal life. Strong surging flux of profound currents forced into shallow channels. Play that thing! One movement of the thousand movements of the eternal life-flow. Shake that thing! In the face of the shadow of Death. Treacherous hand of murderous Death, lurking in sinister alleys, where the shadows of life dance, nevertheless, to their music of life. Death over there! Life over here! Shake down Death and forget his commerce, his purpose, his haunting presence in a great shaking orgy. Dance down the Death of these days, the Death of these ways in shaking that thing. Jungle jazzing, Orient wriggling, civilised stepping. Shake that thing! Sweet dancing thing of primitive joy, perverse pleasure, prostitute ways, many-colored

variations of the rhythm, savage, barbaric, refined — eternal rhythm of the mysterious, magical, magnificent — the dance divine of life ... Oh, Shake That Thing! (*Banjo*, p. 57-58)

The syncopated rhythms of jazz — approximated here in McKay's prose — are presented as an existential affirmation of black identity. The frenzied music, the wild movement of the dance and the sensual proximity that they create act as a life force that overpower death itself. Through music and dance, Africa and its diaspora become locked in a profound unity.

Conclusion

This essay has examined the representation of black communities in the Mediterranean locations of Fréjus and Marseilles through a reading of two very different texts. Lucie Cousturier's *Des Inconnus chez moi* adopts the seemingly transparent, neutral form of the memoir to record the author's changing perceptions of her "surprising" new neighbours in this sleepy Mediterranean town. In reality, the text is a carefully constructed humanist critique of the racist, dehumanising forces at work in French colonialism. In the process, Fréjus is no longer simply a calm refuge for cosmopolitan Parisians but a site of cultural encounter in which the African presence on French soil is seen to play a positive role in the transformation of French attitudes and perceptions, as Cousturier and her family discover the humanity of these "inconnus".

For its part, *Banjo* is a novel in which Marseilles plays host to a vibrant black community drawn from Africa and the diaspora. As was mentioned above, France's most significant port, Marseilles, has long been seen as the gateway to North Africa. In reality, however, the city's longstanding status as host to multiple immigrant communities has made it a welcoming home to black populations from around the world. The city's very diversity allows Banjo, Ray and their friends to forge a community that can, at least temporarily, keep the violent agents of the white world, not least the police, at bay.

Marseilles' location on the Mediterranean, like that of nearby Fréjus, might understandably give us pause in seeking to include it within a discussion of the literary geography of transatlantic memory. However, the cultural-political understanding of the Atlantic in recent critical discussion has never been concerned solely with physical geography, but rather with tracing those spaces where there resides a memory of the complex transatlantic encounters of the past five centuries. Marseilles' status as an immigrant city and its favourable southern climate — which, we will recall, was central to the decision to create a base for the *tirailleurs sénégalais* in nearby Fréjus — made it an important site of black cultural and social activity in the first half of the twentieth century. As this essay has sought to illustrate, these two Mediterranean sites are thus crucial landmarks for those seeking to map a literary geography of transatlantic memory in France.