

CHAPTER 5

Gentrified, Euro-Mediterranean, Arabic?

Situating Mediterranean Locations along a Street in Marseille

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Abstract

In scientific literature and public discourse, Marseille is regularly depicted as fundamentally Mediterranean. While this is not grounds for assuming Marseille is Mediterranean, I argue that evocations of the Mediterranean in relation to Marseille need to be taken seriously. I suggest that examining urban dynamics in Marseille through a relational ‘Mediterranean lens’ can offer new perspectives on the production of socio-spatial difference in that city. To make my case, I draw on observations of three eateries situated along one long street that joins the docks to the city centre. By grounding the analysis along this diverse street, it is possible to move beyond sweeping generalisations about people or places, while allowing the processes shaping unequal socio-spatial relations in Marseille – including ones that can be associated with ‘gentrifying’, ‘Euro-Mediterranean’, and ‘Arabic’ Mediterranean identities – to come more sharply into focus.

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Setting the scene

People who travel to Marseille on the Mediterranean line of the French high-speed TGV (*Train à Grande Vitesse*) arrive at the impressive terminus Gare Saint-Charles.¹ Built in the mid-19th century when Marseille was France's premier port of empire, the construction of the station was seen by some as transforming Marseille into a central pivot of a 'Mediterranean system' linking 'Europe' and 'the Orient' (Planchenault 2017, 21). Most leave the station by the front exit, generally stopping on the esplanade to absorb an arresting view of a dense urban landscape heading towards the Mediterranean Sea before heading down some monumental steps lined with statues to representing France's former colonies.

It is also possible to leave by the back entrance, taking a road that follows the railway lines, until one arrives at Boulevard National, a two-kilometre street laid out at the same time as Gare Saint-Charles (see [Image 5.1](#)). In one direction, Boulevard National cuts south-east through a dark, noisy, exhaust-fumed tunnel underneath the railway tracks and then continues until it joins the grand Boulevard Longchamp. This part of the street original formed part of Marseille's 'opulent quarters' (Sewell 1985), as is reflected by its Hausmannian architecture built for and by a growing bourgeoisie with wealth closely linked to the city's colonial-based economy. Today, while there are some more recent buildings, a multi-storey car park and a huge gated residential complex, the 19th-century street layout is largely unchanged. The façades of the town houses have been recently cleaned and the retail units that line the street include recently-opened grocery stores selling organic goods, social enterprise co-working spaces, bars, and restaurants. Exchanges between pedestrians are generally quiet and restrained, reflecting an increasingly middle-class *bobo* (hipster) ambience.²

If instead one follows Boulevard National in a north-easterly direction the feel of the street is much more workaday. This part of the street was laid out to connect the docks and the station. As with the other side of the tunnel, commercial units line the street, but on this side, warehouses and offices of former shipping companies intersperse five and six-storey tenements. In the 2020s, a few shops have their shutters down. Aside from this, numerous bakeries, *snacks* (fast-food restaurants), cafés, bar *tabacs*, *shisha* bars, halal butchers and grocery stores,

ing initiatives in Southern Europe: the state-led ‘Euro-Mediterranean Urban Development Programme’ (Euro-Med).⁴ From the 2010s, a number of industrial and residential properties were knocked down; others are boarded up, awaiting demolition. Commercial activity continues to take place, yet the garages, convenience stores and Islamic bookshops operating out of the foot of pollution-stained 19th- and early 20th-century buildings seem increasingly out of place in the face of encroaching bright and ‘modern’ apartment blocks, office towers, and ‘international’ hotel chains. Official publicity campaigns that describe this Euro-Med programme do so in simple terms: the aim is to ‘change Marseille’. A key focus has been to attract ‘professional classes’ to the city; in much policy discourse, there is a more or less overt desire/assumption that the new arrivals will be northern Europeans or Americans. Sometimes this urban repositioning effort has been described as making Marseille the ‘capital of the Mediterranean’ (see Bertonecello and Rodriguez-Malta 2003).

Locating Marseille, and the Mediterranean

This quick purview along Boulevard National serves to give a sense of some of the socio-spatial diversity present in Marseille in the 2020s, a place often represented as the most diverse city in France. It is in part because of this association with social diversity that Marseille has incited research interest over the last century, in ways that are comparable with Chicago (Bouillon and Sevin 2007). Like the US city, Marseille is regularly presented as *the* archetypal city of immigration in France and/or France’s capital of numerous social problems (Roncayolo 1996). Both contentions are disputable (Peraldi, Duport, and Samson 2015). However, with poverty statistics regularly above the national average and with a reputation as a place with *particularly* high levels of immigration and an *especially* corrupt system of governance, Marseille continues to be researched and written about as the most ethnically mixed city in France, and France’s urban *enfant terrible par excellence* (Biass and Fabiani 2011; Peraldi, Duport, and Samson 2015).

Research into socio-spatial difference in Marseille has tended to mirror issues problematised in the media or by policymakers (Zalio 1996),⁵ with particular weight paid to marginalised or stigmatised groups associated with different immigration pathways, notably from France’s former colonies. Many studies concentrate on the poor, *popu-*

laire, 'ethnically marked' and racialised *quartiers* (suburban districts) or *cités* (housing estates) in the impoverished city centre and to the north of the city.⁶ And, as is common in urban ethnography more generally (Blokland 2012), the values, understandings, and interactions of individuals and groups in better-off parts of the city are often missing. Consequently, myriad connections within and *beyond* different groups and different parts of the city can be overlooked (see Glick Schiller and Çağlar 2013). A further consequence of treating Marseille as an exception within France (see Pinson 2006), is that the significance of multi-scalar symbolic and material links and separations can escape analyse. For example, paying attention to specificities *within* particular neighbourhoods can elide the role of colonial, decolonialising and neocolonialising social systems in the production of diverse social-spatial relations in the city.⁷ I argue that this is where a street like Boulevard National can be useful to think with.⁸

The 'street' has gained in popularity as an object of research in recent years. Sometimes serving as sites for micro-sociological analyses of urban socialities from civility and solidarity to fear and violence (Anderson 1999; Roulleau-Berger 2004), urban thoroughfares are also taken places from where to tease out the complexity of urban life without being bound to the official modes of carving up the city (e.g. administrative boundaries, housing tenure, census data or socio-economic profiling), helping thus to avoid getting lost in pinning down those slippery notions of 'neighbourhood' or 'community' (see Fournier and Mazzela 2004; Hall 2015; Miller 2005). Boulevard National certainly works in this respect. Intersecting two *arrondissements*, (urban districts) with distinct socio-spatial positions (the more 'central' 1st *arrondissement* and more 'marginalised' 3rd one), bordering six *quartiers* with varying socio-economic profiles, and with different sections managed by diverse urban policies, the two-kilometre length of Boulevard National helps challenge bounded socio-spatial thinking. While the long, dark tunnel under the railway tracks is often represented as a frontier between very different social places, this street has nevertheless operated as an infrastructure that has been connecting actors, spaces, and processes within and across diverse spatial scales for over 150 years. These have contributed to changing meanings and values accorded to some of the different social geographies along the street, some of which are couched in Mediterranean terms.

My attention to this Mediterranean idiom could seem misplaced. Notwithstanding the proliferation of ‘Euro-Mediterranean’ research programmes supported by EU and national funding programmes since the 1990s, relatively few studies have attempted to probe the meaning and value of the Mediterranean in Marseille (although see Bertoncetto and Rodriguez-Malta 2003; Bullen 2012; Francez 2017b; Maisetti 2012). Reluctance to engage with this notion is perhaps understandable. Definitions of the cultural characteristics and geographical limits of a Mediterranean region have been intricately wound up with processes of 19th-century European colonial expansion and subsequent neocolonial policies (see [Chapter 1](#) in this volume). Four decades of critical scholarship has highlighted Eurocentric and essentialising assumptions often underlying analysis of social dynamics in these terms (Herzfeld 2005; Pina-Cabral 1989). But it is not sufficient to stop there. Much continues to be written about the ‘Mediterranean region’, and within this work ‘Mediterranean cities’ have a significant place.

As a rule, research on Mediterranean cities begins on the basis that these are *particularly* diverse milieu (Driessen 2005). This work tends to be inflected with a certain nostalgia for a supposed foregone cosmopolitanism, sometimes reifying and romanticising ethnic and cultural difference (Ben-Yehoyada 2014, 115–16). Alternatively, the Mediterranean qualifier connotes cities or parts of cities deemed *too* marked by immigration and associated with chaos, degradation, or dereliction. Both modes of framing are used in Marseille.

Whether understood as an expanse of water, an idea, an imagined social space, and/or a geopolitical system, the Mediterranean has and continues to play a significant role in how Marseille and different parts of Marseille have been valorised and/or stigmatised. Often depicted as fundamentally Mediterranean, in cultural terms, the city’s social position – or relative location – can be represented as part of a region that is somewhere between Africa and Europe (see Soto Bermant, [Chapter 3](#) in this volume). As in other places associated with the Mediterranean, the meaning and value accorded to this, shifts in and out of focus in Marseille, in relation to geopolitics and the situated location of the actor doing the evaluating (elhariry and Talbayev 2017). In Marseille, the trope has become increasingly buoyant in the city over the last 30 years, heard in the mouths of urban policymakers, within the media and ‘ordinary’ urban dwellers (Bullen 2012; Maisetti 2012). While not

grounds for assuming Marseille *is* Mediterranean, this suggests that the use of the term needs to be taken seriously.

Drawing on critical regional studies, 'the Mediterranean' is explored here as a multiplicity of open, discontinuous social spaces, social systems and/or imaginaries situated differently within social, cultural, political, and economic spheres (Allen, Massey, and Cochrane 1998). Moreover, in this chapter, I borrow from scholarship on food studies in order to shed light on how these different social spaces, systems and imaginaries are produced within power relations (see Hyde 2014; Mintz and Du Bois 2002). Observations from three eateries found along Boulevard National serve as a means to think through both variations in socio-spatial value creation, and the diverse opportunities of different social actors whose paths cross this street to take part within city-making processes.⁹

Mediterranean Locations in/of Marseille

Gentrifying Mediterraneity?

The first eatery I focus on is a Syrian restaurant found along the southernmost section of Boulevard National, where Boulevard National joins the elegant Boulevard Longchamp. The restaurant facade comprises a stylishly designed signboard in black and white presenting the establishment's name, named after an ancient Assyrian Empire, and indicating that 'traditional Syrian food' is served. During opening hours, well-cared-for plants and small tables are set out on the pavement area. Inside, the dining area is furnished with wooden and brass tables. Posters on the wood-clad walls represent Syrian cities and regions and provide descriptions of various regional produce. The eating area is softly lit by ironwork lattice lamps and Arabic music plays quietly in the background.

On arrival, customers are greeted and shown to tables by waiters, all young men, with Arabic as their first language and varying degrees of competence in French. (Sometimes, during an interaction with customers, waiters would seek help from colleagues more fluent in French; an indication of their recent arrival to France.) Customers are brought leather-bound menus at their tables, with items including familiar exports from south and south-east Mediterranean shores (kebabs, falafels), along with less well known 'home-made' Syrian

dishes and some vegetarian ‘reinterpretations’ of dishes from northern Mediterranean shores (such as ‘ratatouille mousaka’). For customers unfamiliar with this fare, the waiters politely provide explanations; on one occasion, the dish of the day was shown on a smartphone. Both alcoholic beverages and halal meat are served, appealing to both practising Muslims and non-Muslim clientele. When it arrives, food is carefully presented, prioritising quality rather than quantity. Food is available to take away, presented in recycled brown paper bags, indicating a concern with sustainable business practices.

On TripAdvisor the restaurant is in the category ‘Lebanese/Mediterranean/Middle Eastern/Arabic’ and rated five out of five for quality of food, ambience, and services. Comments have been posed by customers from Syria, France, Europe, and North America, indicating the reach of this establishment within tourist circuits beyond the immediate locality. Observations at both midday and in the evening corroborate this. The majority of customers observed were Francophone, but some spoke with the waiters in Arabic or English. The smart and casual clothing styles and behaviour indicated most were highly-educated with relatively high social status. Prices are more expensive than the average eatery in Marseille (€15–20 for a main course).

In terms of appearances and manners, there is little to distinguish the waiters from the majority of their middle-class clients; the well-kempt beards of some male staff feel ‘hipster’ rather than ‘Islamic’. The open-plan kitchen at the back of the restaurant also helps blur the line between customers and staff. In contrast with the ‘ethno-cultural’ aesthetic front of house, the stand-alone island unit and grey work surfaces provides a middle-class ‘modern’ backdrop that could be found in the pages of a Sunday supplement or, one imagines, in some of the customers’ homes. In combining imaginaries of an ‘authentic’ and ‘modern’ middle-class ‘Mediterranean’ lifestyle (Francez 2017b, 194–99), the restaurant owners distinguish this culinary experience from any association with ‘*populaire*’, ‘Arabic’ eateries further north along the street.

The antecedents for a growing attraction of a form of middle-class Mediterraneanity can be dated back to the 1980s, when Marseille’s urban systems and the city’s relative location within local, national and transnational scales were undergoing tumultuous change. On the one hand, two decades of decolonisation and the restructuring of the global economy had deeply weakened the city’s mainstream port-based

economy, at a time of significant inward labour migration of workers from southern Europe, the Maghreb and West Africa and the arrival of ‘*Pied noirs*’, European settlers who were ‘repatriated’ from Algeria in the early 60s around the time of Independence. Together, this surge in population exacerbated the city’s existing housing crisis (Nasiali 2016, 90). On the other hand, impoverished city-centre neighbourhoods had become the hub of informal, essentially Maghreb commercial networks linking the southern, eastern, and northern shores of the Mediterranean (see Peraldi 1999; Tarrus 1987). This trade was estimated to generate millions, but in a context of growing racism and xenophobia across the country,¹⁰ Marseille’s local leadership sought to displace this ‘foreign’ ‘Arabic’ or ‘North African’ activity from the city centre, seen as driving away the ‘real’ (for which read ‘white’) Marseille population and putting off new residents of higher socio-economic profiles (ditto) (Manry 2002; Peraldi and Samson 2005).

Successive local and national state-led urban renewal initiatives floundered in attempts to renovate the ‘historic’ part of the city and to attract – and to keep – populations of higher socio-economic backgrounds. Many city-centre districts remain impoverished and associated with the individuals and groups who are ethnically and racially marked as ‘of immigrant origin’ or as ‘Arabs’ (Escobar 2017). But the combined on-going effects of major state-led policies since the 2000s has started to make their mark, notably the extension of the ‘Mediterranean’ line of the TGV in 2001 (making Paris accessible by train in three and a half hours), the laying out of new tramway across the city centre (including up Boulevard Longchamp), Marseille’s designation as European Capital of Culture in 2013 and the Euro-Med waterfront regeneration which began in 1995 and was extended in 2007 to cover 480 hectares of the city centre. One consequence is the increased presence of the ‘*néo-Marseillais*’ (neo-Marseille people) in certain city-centre districts.

Néo-Marseillais is a term that began to circulate in the early 2000s. It refers to recent arrivals to Marseille who are relatively young (under 40 years old), middle or upper middle class, and French or European, who might have a certain economic precarity but are generally more qualified and with greater cultural capital than the average city resident (Gasquet-Cyrus and Trimaille 2017).¹¹ In the study by Gasquet-Cyrus and Trimaille, the ‘*Mediterranean life-style*, social diversity and the cultural offer’ of Marseille were considered significant factors affecting the

choice to move to Marseille (84, my emphasis).¹² Some of those who fall within this neo-Marseille category have been active as volunteers and activists to support the arrival of other newcomers to Marseille, those categorised – and sometimes racialised – as ‘*migrants*’ or ‘*primo-arrivants*’.¹³ But, generally speaking, aspirations to the Mediterranean lifestyle tend to be associated with a vibrant café culture, with relatively little contact with ethnically marked, impoverished city-centre dwellers of visible migrant background (Francez 2017a; Gasquet-Cyrus and Trimaille 2017; Manry 2002). This end of Boulevard National is on the periphery of parts of city-centre districts popular with the *néo-Marseillais* demographic.

The restaurant in question was opened in 2017 by a family who left Syria following the onset of civil war. At that time, local authorities expressed concern that ‘waves’ of Syrians refugees would arrive in Marseille (Castelly 2015). Fewer arrived than expected, in part because of understandings and experiences of the restrictive immigration and asylum systems in France. Those who did make it to Marseille were faced with local public authorities unable or unwilling to meet the basic needs of the *primo-arrivants* (Dahdah, Audren, and Bouillon 2018). Those without private resources to draw upon had to struggle to access resources, often living hand-to-mouth in economically impoverished, racially stigmatised areas, associated with the Maghreb or ‘the Arabs’.

In this case of the restaurant, the owners had the economic, social, and cultural resources to facilitate their incorporation into a part of the city undergoing upscaling in the last 20 years. With the choice of locality, in close vicinity to two bar/restaurants highly popular with Marseille’s ‘creative classes’, just around the corner from an upmarket Egyptian café and cultural centre. Learning from the success of this Egyptian café, and benefiting from the relative upscale social position of urban location, the owners were able to present an aesthetic that is at once ‘international’, Syrian and ‘Mediterranean’. Their culinary offer was able to attract high-status consumers who are environmentally and health conscious and interested in an ‘alternative’ yet ‘high-quality’ food experience. This, and their pricing policies, function as markers of difference from lower-status ‘Arabic’ eateries located further along the street.



Image 5.2: Café, central Boulevard National.

Photo: Abed Abidat.

Populaire, 'Arabic' Mediterraneanity?

Over a quarter of the small businesses located along the middle stretch of Boulevard National are eateries of some kind (see [Image 5.2](#)). Of these, approximately one fifth are bakeries, selling pizza slices and 'mahjoubas' (an Algerian flatbread filled with tomato and onion sauce) alongside baguettes and croissants. Most of the others are fast-food 'snacks', with a growing number (four in a 200 metre stretch) offering 'Tunisian' specialities. Almost exclusively, they are run by people coming from the south and south-east Mediterranean, be they long-term French residents or more recent arrivals.

The restaurant I focus on was established by Turkish owners¹⁴ and occupied the ground-floor of a block of late-20th-century flats, next to a discount furniture store and just up the street from a car repair workshop. As with other eateries here, this establishment was not on TripAdvisor. The restaurant was identified by a white, plastic, age-worn signboard with the name of a Turkish city alongside an image of a doner kebab. Custom was largely won in terms of proximity, rapid-

ity of service, the lateness of opening hours, price, and, in this case, a large dining area at the back. Inside, the front area, lit by bright white overhead lighting, was functional in design. To one side was a glass-fronted counter behind which food was cooked and where orders and payment taken. Food choices and prices were simply displayed on a board behind the counter next to photographs of dishes; items no longer available were simply crossed out in pen. The menu was mainly meat-based (halal), grilled or cooked on a griddle, or sliced off the doner kebab. Behind the counter, industrial falafels lay touching the meat, a sign that little attention had been given to potential vegetarian clients. On the customer side of the counter, salads, rice, bulgur wheat, and the 'dish of the day' were displayed uncovered in a buffet unit and there was glass-fronted fridge, where customers could help themselves to cans of soda or bottles of water. No alcohol was sold.

Most of the time, the owner, dressed informally in jeans and a T-shirt, worked alone, or with one male colleague, preparing food, taking money, wrapping up the take away items in plastic bags, or carrying out plates of food to tables in the back. Sometimes the owner's wife and/or mother worked behind the counter, dressed in a dark-coloured kaftan dress and a headscarf. The women seemed less at ease at speaking French than the male workers, so worked mainly on non-customer focused tasks, packing up food to take away in polystyrene boxes and plastic bags, or clearing tables.¹⁵

During the day, the majority of customers were men, who came individually or in groups of two or three. Paint-splattered clothes or embroidered logos on sweatshirts and jackets indicated many were involved in manual labour in the construction sector. Sometimes groups of teenagers came in, using the restaurant served as a school canteen. In school holidays, long summer evenings and weekends, the restaurant was frequented by families of with young children. Generally, the majority of customers were of Maghreb, sub-Saharan African or Turkish origin. On weekday lunchtimes, however, the seating area at the back of the restaurant and the possibility of salad dishes and the falafel 'vegetarian' option in the falafel – enabled the restaurant to attract a more diverse customer base than other eateries down the street, including *néo-Marseillais* who lived in the city centre and came to this part of Boulevard National to work some of the social and cultural associations operating within the vicinity. This eatery thus offers

as an interesting place from where to think through the relational production of material and symbolic social spaces here.

For a number of years now, several policies have sought to transform the social composition of this stretch of Boulevard National, to incorporate it within an expanding city centre (designated the '*hyper city centre*'). Initiatives include a short-term arts project funded through the European Capital of Culture programme where an international artist was paid to come up with a short-term installation in the dark tunnel; the opening of centre of contemporary dance further along the street, a number of different private student accommodation and a new cycle path (although often this is blocked by cars or rubbish bins) was painted along the pavements. The regular if minority presence of *néo-Marseille* pedestrians or bicyclists travelling up and down the street can be linked in part to these interventions.¹⁶ However, relatively few stop to use the food services down the road. This restaurant was one of the few that was mentioned by those asked about their consumption choices.

When speaking to people about their decision about whether to purchase food along this part of the street, some jokingly spoke of the food on offer as *pourri*, literally 'rotten' or dirty. While said in jest, the association of the culinary offer with rotteness or dirt resonates symbolically with ideas of 'otherness' and 'foreignness' (Roulleau-Berger 2004, 96). Unlike the restaurant described above, the migration trajectory of the business owners and their *populaire* status robs these food establishments of their value, symbolic or otherwise, in classed and racialised terms.

Yet observations indicate the multiple values that eateries such as this one have in shaping possibilities for incorporation within diverse domains along the street. For example, in a part of the city that is revenue-poor, where a third of the population are under 20, the informal social norms, affordable meals, and space for pushchairs and children to move around make this restaurant accessible for lower socio-economic recent migrants with new aspirations to leisure practices.

Within economic terms, eateries along this stretch of Boulevard National change hands with great regularity. No doubt an indication of the toughness of the sector and often gruelling hours, this rapid turnover of business is also an indication that the catering sector is a relatively accessible mode of incorporation into the urban economy. This is a highly valuable opportunity structure in a neighbourhood

where 40 per cent of the population are without formal employment in the neighbourhood (AGAM 2020). Further, in places, as here, where rental costs are relatively low and traffic is high, there is potential for considerable returns on time and financial investment (see Bouillon 2004). For the current owner who had previously worked in the construction industry, this recent new venture, which like many of the business owners was made possible because of resources transferred through kinship ties that stretch across the Mediterranean, was an opportunity for social advancement and more sociable hours.

In aesthetic terms, the look of this restaurant and other *snacks* down the street many not fit with the Western elite imaginary of the 'traditional' or 'middle-class' Mediterraneity, as offered by the Syrian establishment, neither, the form of café-culture desired by some urban planners in Marseille (see below). However, it could be argued that the 'modern' aesthetic (bright monochrome colours and lighting, loud music, or the presence of a television on the wall), the low-status fare and informal sociability of these establishments can be found in cities all around the Mediterranean Sea. Some establishments underscore such connections, choosing names that index themselves to urban places south and east of the Mediterranean (in Tunisia, Turkey, Algeria). In the Turkish restaurant, a form of Mediterranean modernity was valorised by the new owners through the commissioning of a huge fresco of Istanbul by night, depicting a glittering scene dominated by the dome of the Blue Mosque and a multitude of lit-up skyscrapers.

Without wishing to force this Mediterranean optic onto the street, I suggest that this part of the road can be usefully understood as offering a form of Mediterraneity often invisible for urban planners: an '*Arabic Mediterraneity*'. By choosing to describe this part of the street in terms of its 'Arabic-ness', I am influenced by recent scholarship on the 'Black Mediterranean' (Hawthorne 2021). The notion of Black Mediterranean was conceived as a way consider to at once explore the subjectivities of racialised immigrants seeking incorporation within Europe and to challenge Eurocentric accounts of Mediterranean crossings (Proglío 2018). Similarly, I suggest that by changing the gaze, and examining from the symbolic and physical spaces often stigmatised in Marseille as *populaire* and *Arabic*, from the perspectives of many of those shaping these spaces through their daily practices, we can better understand their use value, and can make visible a form of city-making

often unseen or disparaged by urban elites with a Eurocentric vision of desirable forms of Mediterranean living.

Euro-Mediterraneity

The third and final outlet I examine is situated in huge ‘mixed-use development’ at the northernmost end of Boulevard National. Built on a 19th-century warehouse complex, it now consists of private and social flats, student accommodation, and an apartment-hotel, organised around a gated courtyard. It lies at the edge of the Euro-Med urban development area. During opening hours – 8am to 3pm on weekdays – bright pink tables are set out on the pavement, in front of plate-glass window and doors, which appear incongruous in one of the most impoverished neighbourhoods in France, 200 metres from one of the most highly stigmatised high-rise social housing estates in the city (see [Image 5.3](#)).

If the student accommodation over this eatery has been labelled with the ‘Euro-Mediterranean’ nomenclature, the minimalist décor



Image 5.3: Demolition and reconstruction, north Boulevard National.

Photo: Abed Abidat.

of this national food franchise feels placeless; there are no indications of any geographical anchorage. Inside, the décor is predominately in white and grey. Music played in the background is easy-listening Anglo-American pop. The menu in this establishment follows international trends of an environmental and health-conscious consumer. Food is promoted for its organic and health credentials (soups, quinoa salads, gluten-free muffins). Items are described with internationalising Anglicisms (*les super foods*, *les poke bowls*, etc.). A lunchtime menu costs over 11 euros and the coffee, which includes organic and decaffeinated options, is 50 cents more than the average coffee in nearby cafés, a steep economic barrier in a neighbourhood where most people live below the poverty threshold. Meat here is not halal, in a neighbourhood where the majority of residents are Muslim.

The café was staffed by two people, a middle-aged male manager and a younger female assistant, wearing a company T-shirt and jeans. Both are 'white' French, in a neighbourhood where official statistics give the percentage of foreigners as 20 per cent but observations suggest that the figure is much higher, the majority with origins in former French colonies. Likewise, the majority of customers were 'white'. Based on ID badges and snippets of conversation heard, most customers work for different urban and social services and associative structures operating in the neighbourhood. Most took their food back to the office in brown paper bags; a few used the café for meetings or working lunches. Some of those living in the student flats purchased food in the eatery on their way to or from their accommodation. From their accents, some came from the Maghreb. However, their sartorial style and behaviour identified them more as of 'international' middle-class backgrounds rather than 'ethnically marked' low-status migrants.

Overall, there is a marked separation between the majority of the clientele and the busy traffic of people walking between Métro National, the bus stop and the high-rise flats 200 yards away, although the tracksuit-wearing young men collecting food for Uber Eats-style delivery services could easily have come from the neighbouring housing estate. This social distance was starkly pointed out the first time I walked past the food outlet. As I stopped to take a photo of the 'Euro-Mediterranean' student apartments, one of the staff members who was folding up the terrace tables told me – in English – to be careful. When I asked why, he gestured in the direction of the high-rise subsidised housing.

This ‘international’, ‘modern’, rather ‘placeless’ site offers a good place to think about how the Mediterranean has been understood, produced and located within this part of the city. As mentioned above, Marseille’s ‘Euro-Mediterranean’ antecedents date to the 1990s, when local and national leaders were casting around for solutions to deal with Marseille’s different urban ‘crises’. Different experts came up with propositions for a central business district along Marseille’s waterfront that could reposition Marseille within the city region and internationally (Pinson 2002), drawing on well-used scripts for remodelling deindustrialised port cities (Baltimore, Barcelona, etc.). One specificity of Marseille’s urban restructuring project was its designation as an Operation of National Interest and its ‘Mediterranean’ dimension, fitting in with French ambitions to keep a strategic presence in the Mediterranean basin, as negotiations were under way to establish a free trade zone around the Mediterranean (the ‘Euro-Mediterranean partnership’).

These national and transnational dimensions shifted how Marseille was understood for some national and local leaders. Marseille became reimagined as a base from where a ‘Marshall Plan for Africa’ could be launched by international organisations. The Euro-Med waterfront development was an overt part of state efforts to reposition Marseille as one 21st-century ‘Mediterranean system.’¹⁷ Yet, for some local partners of the Euro-Med programme, the ‘Mediterranean’ association added substance to Marseille’s reputation as France’s ‘Arabic city’. This was seen as prejudicial for local voters and repelling middle-class residents and international investors from coming to the city. This helps to explain why the Mediterranean appellation was largely emptied of content in the first years of the programme (Tiano 2010). For Tiano, the ‘Euro-Mediterranean theme could have been the bearer of values of contacts, contrasts, multiculturalism, etc ...’ yet, in practice, little emerged from ‘the project’s speeches and actions apart from the very concrete value of property speculation’.

Ten years after this critical assessment, one staff member within the Euro-Med Development Agency noted that the Mediterranean was far from a *mot d’ordre* (‘watchword’) within the programme. Some of the young urban planners and architects I spoke to who worked on this or other urban restructuring programmes regretted this, asserting that Marseille’s Euro-Med development is not ‘Mediterranean enough’. Here Marseille was compared negatively with ‘more Mediterranean’ cities,

such as Barcelona, Valencia, Rome, where there was a vibrant café-culture. New planning guidelines are being developed by staff within the Euromed agency have the objective to transform Marseille's Euro-Mediterranean district into the model 'sustainable Mediterranean city of tomorrow'. In these 'European' or 'international' aspirations to promote Mediterranean urbanity, the implication is that Marseille is not quite Mediterranean enough, or, alternatively, not Mediterranean in the right way. Somewhat ironically, the role-model cities presented within these guidelines hail from far away from the Mediterranean shore (Germany, Sweden, Singapore...).

Either way, policies that promote national chains, such as the food outlet evoked above, have undoubtedly displaced small, locally run businesses, displacing 'ethnically marked' residents and small businesses with direct links across the Mediterranean Sea (Borja et al. 2010) and contributing to create what Alain Tarrus (1992) evocatively described nearly 30 years ago as an identity for Marseille as 'international', 'white and clean'. However, even a massive, state-led project like the Euro-Med development extending over three decades has not been completely successful in imposing a uniform vision on Marseille's urban form (Beauregard and Haila 1997). While huge amounts of money have been poured into making Marseille 'attractive' to certain populations, the numbers of 'néo-Marseillais' arrivals has not met expectations, and a significant proportion of those who come do not settle (Escobar 2017). Buy-to-let owners continue to rent out property to low-income, often ethnically marked renters in the city centre at increasingly high rents. In the major Euro-Med housing developments like that at the bottom of Boulevard National, social accommodation is included alongside private apartments in lines with national housing regulations.¹⁸

This complex and sometimes contradictory entanglement of diverse projects and policies, and the relations and overlaps between different historically situated 'Mediterranean' locations in Marseille helps explain why today the socio-spatial configurations in this Euro-Mediterranean part of the street remain, for the moment, so diverse.

The Mediterranean as Epistemic Lens: Some Concluding Thoughts

The material presented here comes from the early stages of a larger research project exploring social networks around the Mediterranean. The argument being made is that studying urban dynamics in Marseille with a relational ‘Mediterranean lens’ can shed light on the production of socio-spatial difference in ways that can transcend classic binaries (north/south, centre/periphery, migrant/non-migrant, rich/poor, etc.), notably in relation to the mesh of historically situated colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial connections that stretch across and shape social spaces around the Mediterranean Sea. Drawing on some initial observations, this chapter sought to show how understandings of historically situated socio-spatial diversity in Marseille could be deepened by linking these to ideas of multiple Mediterranean systems. The first eatery offered an example of deliberate use of aesthetic representation of Mediterranean connections to feed into the discursive norms of middle-class *néo-Marseillais* urban dwellers. Here, restaurant owners with a recent south/north migration trajectory had the social status to permit them to transcend ethnic categorisation and to contribute alongside other recently arrived middle-classes entrepreneurs – though mainly from mainland France - to ongoing processes of gentrification in Marseille’s city centre, supported by multi-scalar public policies. In the second case, the streetscape was produced materially and symbolically produced through the coming together of south/north symbolic, social and economic systems, particularly from the Maghreb. However, the social, cultural, aesthetic, and economic practices that make up this *populaire* Arabic Mediterraneanity have been rendered invisible or actively discouraged from city-branding and repositioning policies over the last decades.¹⁹ The last case speaks of the way that in this city the register of the Euro-Mediterranean has been wrapped up in state-led ‘white’ internationalisation and commodification of Marseille’s former industrial docks, and the processes of social and spatial displacement that have ensued. The juxtaposition of these instances illustrates vividly how different Mediterranean imaginaries situated variously within social, cultural, political, and economic spheres affect opportunity structures for different people living and working in Marseille. As a case in point: at different times, the owners of the Syrian ‘Lebanese/Mediterranean/Middle Eastern/Arabic’ res-

restaurant were invited to cater for events organised by the city's political and business elite. Conversely, restaurants such as the Turkish one are regularly pilloried by city officials for breaking hygiene standards, encouraging an undesirable customer base, and giving an 'Arabic colour' to the feel of the city (Bouillon 2004).

In methodological terms, these observations from the different eateries could be considered as going no further than 'apt illustrations'. However, when considered together – a gesture that is encouraged by considering the street as a whole – I suggest we can better seize some of how connections between the different parts shaped value-laden material and symbolic forms associated with the Mediterranean in Marseille in ways that could strengthen critical urban theory.

To date, most scholarship on the Mediterranean in Marseille comes from a policy perspective. There is surprisingly little understanding about how different understandings of the Mediterranean works within the contemporary vernacular in Marseille. Much of the analysis of Marseille separates the city into different sections or draws lines between *néo-Marseillais*, urban planners, and *populaire* populations, arguably obfuscating the multiplicity of relations involved in producing 'the urban' and 'the Mediterranean'. Beginning with an ethnographic analysis of different locations along this boulevard and tracing the social networks that extend beyond it allows us to capture the microsociology of interactions on pavements and to consider how the social positioning of different spaces in Marseille, and of Marseille within France and the world, are indexed in hierarchical relations of value. Locating this street ethnography within historically-situated Mediterranean spaces, systems and imaginaries, allows links between the colonial capitalism of Marseille's 19th century portside economy and efforts to reposition Marseille at the hub of a 21st-century 'Mediterranean system' to become more visible. In short, by starting from the street, and embedding and interpreting within these frames of gentrifying, Euro-Mediterranean and Arabic Mediterraneanities, it becomes possible to point to unequal relations of class, culture, capital, and processes of colonisation without falling into sweeping generalisations about people or places.

Notes

- 1 My thanks to Carl Rommel and Joseph John Viscomi for their input and advice at various stages of this article, and to the anonymous reviewers for some good advice about how to make this stronger. This project has benefited from stimulating discussions with members of UNKUT at the University of Tübingen. I am also grateful to Abed Abidat, Heather Bullen, Othmane Djebbar, Muriel Girard, Franck Lamiot, Nadja Monnet, and Amel Zerourou, who have helped me to develop my ideas about the street as the research progresses.
- 2 *Bobo* is the abbreviate form of *bohemian-bourgeois*. As with ‘hipster’, it is a social category with very fuzzy edges (Authier et al. 2018) but can be taken as being more or less synonymous with those other very contingent social categories, ‘hipsters’ or the ‘cultural classes’.
- 3 If, previously, cultural practices, social groups, or social spaces described by *populaire* in French could be translated in English by the term ‘working class’, this term is increasingly understood to mean areas or practices that are impoverished and ethnically marked (see Pasquier 2005).
- 4 <https://euromediterranee.fr>. Accessed 13 June 2020.
- 5 Of course as Wright Mills (1959) pointed out long ago, this is far from unique to Marseille.
- 6 In France, the debate about whether individuals and groups should be categorised in terms of ethnicity rages fiercely. Here the terms ethnically or racially marked to draw out hierarchical relations indexed against a privileged and unmarked ‘white’ Frenchness (see Mazouz 2017).
- 7 This is not to dismiss urban studies that do explore Marseille’s position within broader political and economic systems (France, the European Union, the Euro-Mediterranean region, the world). However, this work tends to be quantitative and take the city as a whole. Less attention tends to be given to how people negotiate and attribute meaning to these structures and systems in their everyday lives.
- 8 To date, Boulevard National has received very little scholarly attention. This could be because, although parts of it have ‘central qualities’ and parts of are often considered to match the characteristics of the part of the notorious *quartiers nord*, it is not *quite* central enough nor *north* enough to fit with research imaginaries.
- 9 These sections draw on observations that began in 2014 when I moved to Boulevard National. Since October 2021, these have been added to as part of a new project, ‘Networks, Streets and Socio-spatial Difference: Comparing Social Relations in Urban Settings around the Mediterranean’, funded by the Excellence Strategy of the German Federal and State Governments.
- 10 The 1980s was a period of increasingly visible and violent racism and xenophobia across France and Europe, when the presence of migrants from the former colonies was being blamed for growing unemployment. Racism was particularly vicious in the south of the country, where many ‘*pied noirs*’ settled. Their presence has been linked to strong support for the extreme right-wing *Front National*.
- 11 People like me, in fact. I analyse my own social position within different social systems along Boulevard National elsewhere. Of note, following ‘lockdown’

policies during 2020, this *néo-Marseille* category has been significantly reconfigured by the arrival of ‘Parisians’ seeking cheaper, more spacious accommodation.

- 12 These new arrivals added to artists and other archetypal ‘figures’ of urban gentrification who had begun moving to the city in the 1980s, profiting from industrial buildings available for low rents and new openings created by urban cultural policies, as urban leaders tried to reinvent the city.
- 13 Primo-arrivant is an administrative category that has emerged in the last decade to ‘manage’ newly arrived foreign immigrants who are assumed to be settling in France for the long-term, as part of governmental responses to manage the ‘crisis’ of integrating ‘foreigners’ (Goudeau 2018).
- 14 I use the past tense as the eatery has not opened its doors following the enforced closure as part of the anti-Covid-19 measures.
- 15 An in-depth discussion of the gendered production and division of socio-spatial relations along the street will be explored further, following the analysis semi-structured questionnaires carried out in 2021/2022. Initial observations suggest that the majority of business owners and workers in this stretch are men, but a growing number of food and retail businesses are headed up by women or by married couples, and women are often active in family-run businesses in this sector.
- 16 People fitting the *néo-Marseille* category do live along this section (including me), almost exclusively, those questioned during this research came to the boulevard during working hours and returned to residences south of the tunnel in the evening.
- 17 That Marseille was Europe’s principal gateway for submarine communication cables from Africa and Asia increased its value within national and European international policies.
- 18 Law No. 2000-1208 of 13 December 2000 on urban solidarity and renewal.
- 19 Since June 2020, and the election of the left-wing *Printemps Marseille* party to the City Hall there has been a significant change to a far more inclusive narrative about the diversity of Marseille’s population and connections with the southern Mediterranean shores. The fieldwork for this chapter predate this.

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