‘Too many Africans’

Racialising Urban Peripheries in the Face of Tunisia’s Economic Precarity

Shreya Parikh

Yvonne, who ‘came on a plane’

‘I came on a plane to vacation here with a *frère* [a fellow Ivorian man]’, Yvonne tells me, ‘but then, he died and I didn’t have any money and so I stayed’. Yvonne has lived in the Bhar Lazreg neighbourhood of Greater Tunis since she came here in 2018, finding comfort in the presence of other Ivorian migrants like her. Sitting before her, next to where her table selling so-called African products is spread out, I wonder if ‘vacation’ is a form of euphemism for transit or guestworker migration? Yvonne’s insistence that she ‘came on a plane’, unlike other Ivorian migrants in the neighbourhood who arrived via land from Côte d’Ivoire, may reflect symbolic class differences within the migrant community – those who can afford a flight ticket versus those who cannot! It may also represent an attempt at regaining dignity while their collective status as undocumented migrants implies continuous marginalisation and humiliation in Tunisian society. When I speak to her in October 2022, Yvonne is 34, a practicing Christian, and has little formal education. She worked as a domestic worker until recently when she gave birth, making it physically impossible for her to continue working while caring for an infant. She inherited a stock of so-called African products from another Ivorian woman who left Tunisia recently– food items and toiletries brought in from Côte d’Ivoire. She sits on the pavement of the main road in Bhar Lazreg almost every day, from 11 am to around 4 pm, selling her merchandise to other Sub-Saharan migrant women and men. The neighbourhood of Bhar Lazreg, around 15 kilometres away from Tunis city centre, is described often, in popular narratives, as a working-class neighbourhood increasingly inhabited by Sub-Saharan migrants mostly from Côte d’Ivoire.

Like Yvonne, many other Sub-Saharan women also sell products, brought in from their home countries, on tables set up informally around the main crossroad of Bhar Lazreg. Yvonne tells me that she earns around 20 Dinars (or around six Euro) a day, after accounting for the cost of the products. Most of her clients are Ivorian women; over the afternoon I spent with her, four women and a young man from different Sub-Saharan communities pass by her table, asking for spices, dried fish, and plastic

sandals. Over the months that I spent walking around Bhar Lazreg (February-November 2022), never once did I see a Tunisian stopping at one of these tables. I do not spot Yvonne's baby and ask her where she leaves them. She tells me that there is an Ivorian-run place where women leave children and pick them up after work. I suspect that this might be a part of the network of day-care centres that are informally run by and for the Sub-Saharan migrant community in Bhar Lazreg. I ask her where she plans to send her baby to school in the future, and she tells me that the schools teaching in French are private and expensive, while the public schools in Tunisia only teach in Arabic. Children of migrants end up without schooling because of this linguistic gap; most Sub-Saharan migrants do not speak Arabic and see no incentive in educating their children in Arabic because of the assumed temporariness of their stay in Tunisia. Yvonne hopes to have left Tunisia by the time her child is old enough to go to school. I ask her if she hopes to go to Europe, implicitly implying her taking a clandestine boat, and I find myself facing silence. I ask her what she wants to do later? She tells me that she does not really know what she will do; she might stay in Tunis because her family in Côte d'Ivoire does not have money, neither to pay for her to return nor to pay for her to go on a boat to Europe. She tells me that she is *en penalite* (in penalty), meaning that she has undocumented status and would need to pay the penalty charges of staying in Tunisian 'illegally' before being allowed to leave the country; Tunisian border police levy a charge of 20 Dinar (around six Euro) per week of overstay, or around 310 Euro per year. This penalty is a part of Tunisian state's migration control policies enacted under pressure from the European Union in return for economic support. I asked Yvonne if she has faced racism, either at or outside work. She tells me that she has had no problems either while doing domestic work or while selling her products. I sense that maybe the term 'racism' that I used in the question is too negatively connoted to induce the desired response – the recounting of experiences of racism. So, I ask her what she does in her free time. She tells me that she works and then she goes back home because she is scared that the Tunisian men on the streets will 'snatch her bag or bring out a knife'. She tells me that there are always cases of aggression against migrants like her.

Yaya, who 'came by land'

Yaya is 22 years old and came to Tunis in March 2022 via land from Algeria where he had spent around six months. He fled Algeria because of 'too many problems with the police', he tells me. From Côte d'Ivoire, his home country, he had made his way by land to Algeria with neither passport nor other identity papers with him. Bhar Lazreg has been his home for most of his time in Tunisia. Yaya wears short dreadlocks with white sea shells braided in and a goatee that has been coloured blonde. I meet him in October 2022 while waiting in a queue in front of a Tunisian fast-food stand in Bhar Lazreg. Throughout our interaction, Tunisian men gaze us at with suspicion. I have known this gaze before; every time I walk around with a Black Tunisian or Sub-Saharan man (both assumed to be non-Tunisian by society), I (as a brown Indian woman) am assumed to be a Tunisian woman involved in a romantic relationship with them. The gaze over my body reflects an accusation of being a race-traitor – of having refused Tunisian men by having accepted a romantic relationship with a foreign Black person.

Before we leave the fast-food stand, around four young Tunisian men corner Yaya; I sense a beginning of a fight, which, fortunately, dissipates. I invite Yaya for coffee, and he takes me to an almost empty café. Like most cafés across Tunisia, this café is *shaabi* implying that its clients are working-class men. After we sit down and order sodas, Yaya tells me that he left Côte d'Ivoire after the death of his father, because he felt 'bizarre'. Back there, he never finished secondary school and had never worked before arriving in Algeria. He tells me that his mother is aging and his two siblings do not work. I ask if he is the one financially supporting his family and he says no. For the first four months that he was in Tunis, Yaya worked for a *patron* (boss) whom he had met through a fellow Ivorian man and for whom he painted and repaired walls with putty. His Tunisian boss abruptly announced that he no longer had work for Yaya and that he would call him in case he needed a hand. The call never came!

Since then, Yaya has struggled to find work and does day jobs whenever he finds them. He has an injury that he doesn't fully disclose to me, but adds that he cannot do physically straining work that is asked for at the construction sites that are scattered all around Bhar Lazreg and its neighbouring region. Working-class Tunisian men, many from the neighbourhood, work on these sites along with Sub-Saharan migrant men; yet, the former group is paid more than the latter. Yaya tells me that he is paid 30 Dinars (around nine Euro) for a day of work, while wages are higher for Tunisian men. I ask him if he knows the amount, and he responds saying that discussions among Tunisians happen in Arabic, which he doesn't understand. He doesn't know the exact amount.

I ask him what his future goals are and he mumbles something that I cannot decipher. I reframe and repeat my question, thinking that maybe the question itself was not clear. Yaya mumbles again. I feel a bit anxious about directly asking him whether he is trying to go to Europe on a clandestine boat like every other Sub-Saharan migrant I know, because I am aware that the claim itself is enough for the Tunisian police to put anyone (including Tunisians) in prison. He nods a yes when I whisper a question about taking the boat. I also ask Yaya if he has faced any form of racism in Bhar Lazreg, and he tells me that while 'there is always a lot of harassment on the streets', he has personally never faced any. In the many conversations I have had with Sub-Saharan migrants, I have noticed that most start by saying that they have not faced any problems but have heard of fellow migrants facing problems. Later, Yaya tells me that he has faced 'a lot of provocations' from Tunisian men on the street, the goal of which are to anger him and to get him to act violently. For example, a Tunisian man would come up to him on the street and ask '*mon ami, donne-moi un Dinar!*' (my friend [a term used to refer to Sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia], give me one Dinar) and a refusal to give money would result in a fight. Yaya tells me, repeatedly, that there are many *bagarres* (brawls) all the time between Tunisians and Sub-Saharan migrants, and that he tries to avoid them by not going to cafés or walking around in the streets; he goes out to eat or do groceries, and stays in his rented studio for the rest of the time.

I ask Yaya if he gets support from the significantly large Ivorian community that lives in Bhar Lazreg. He tells me that there is a difference between those who came '*par vol*' (by plane) and those like him who came to Tunisia by land. Unlike him, Yaya adds, they (like Yvonne) have stamped passports. He does not specify if this potential class difference between migrants implies that there is little intra-community solidarity.

On a late afternoon in March 2022, Aymen and I are walking around Bhar Lazreg, his neighbourhood of birth and residence, when we spot two young Sub-Saharan men walking in the opposite direction. He points to them and tells me 'they are everywhere'. He adds that, usually, two migrants rent a room somewhere in the area and 'then, suddenly, eight of them show up' from their country of origin. Aymen, in his early 30s, makes pastries for private hotels and runs a small tour company. He tells me with pride that his family is one of the oldest families living in Bhar Lazreg, having farmed on its land since the 1940s when the neighbourhood was still an agricultural village. As we walk, he describes the dilapidation of urban infrastructures in his neighbourhood, like all over Tunisia, because there are 'too many *Africains* [Africans] everywhere in Tunisia now: in Tunis, as well as in Sousse, Sfax, and Monastir'. Africans, in Tunisian vernacular, refers to the Sub-Saharan populations; it reflects the racial othering of Blackness and Africa, both seen as synonymous, in a country that is a part of the African continent.

When I started my fieldwork in Tunisia, the neighbourhood of Bhar Lazreg often came up during informal discussions when I presented the topic of my dissertation research – the study of Blackness in Tunisia. During my conversations with residents of Tunis, I was often told that in '*Bhar Lazreg … il y a beaucoup d'Africains qui sont là!*' (Bhar Lazreg … there are many Africans there!). For quite some Tunisians living in and outside Bhar Lazreg, Sub-Saharan migrants like Yvonne and Yaya are a part of the 'too many Africans' who have come to reside in the urban peripheries of Tunisia; this includes Ariana, Aouina, and Bousalsala neighbourhoods in Greater Tunis, and El Ain, Gremda, and Sakiet Eddaier neighbourhoods in Sfax.

This chapter takes as its object of study the description of 'too many Africans' employed by Tunisians to refer to certain neighbourhoods in the periphery of Tunisian cities, hence racialising (or giving racial meaning) to urban space. I do so by focusing on the racialising discourses that construct Bhar Lazreg neighbourhood as a uniformly black 'African neighbourhood'. I patch together site observations, in/formal interviews, and media reports that I collected in Tunisia between September 2020 and December 2022 to analyse the socio-economic context and the content of these discourses. I point to two interlinked structural processes that re/produce these racialising discourses: on the one hand to the shifting national and international migration regimes and on the other hand to the increasing economic inequalities that worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic. I show that the designation of a neighbourhood as 'African' is negatively connoted, and is discursively presented and framed as a 'problem'. In addition, while the discourse of 'too many Africans' reflects racial prejudices against Sub-Saharan migrants, it also reflects the latent sentiment of labour-market competition among working-class Tunisians in relation to Sub-Saharan migrants. In many urban peripheries like Bhar Lazreg, working-class Tunisians and Sub-Saharan migrants work the same jobs, leading to a feeling among the Tunisians that the migrants are taking away Tunisians' jobs. The narrowing of labour market opportunities exacerbates the feeling of dislike towards 'Africans' – a dislike that reinforces the already existing racist stigma towards people classified as black.

In the context of this chapter, I choose to use the term 'racialisation' to name the process by which a body and/or space 'come[s] to be seen as 'having' a racial identity' (Ahmed 2002: 46). Bhar Lazreg is not homogenously populated by black migrants as the

discourses of 'too many Africans' or 'African neighbourhood' portray. At the same time, it is precisely the study of these discourses that allows us to capture the mechanisms of racialisation and stigmatization of working-class neighbourhoods like Bhar Lazreg. The local case highlights a broader process occurring in southern and eastern Mediterranean coastal cities, where transiting migrants have settled in such neighbourhoods on the urban peripheries; this settlement process contributes to fuel a discourse of 'urban blackening' in the context of Sub-Saharan migration.

Bhar Lazreg as an Urban Periphery

Bhar Lazreg is a part of La Marsa municipality, which itself is a part of the Greater Tunis region (cf. Kahloun/ Frische, this volume). The district of Bhar Lazreg was set up as an official entity in 2018, hence no official district-level data for the neighbourhood exists in the last census conducted in 2014. Given the presence of informal housing and undocumented Sub-Saharan migrants, the local public institutions have faced challenges in enumerating the total population. According to a journalistic estimate, there are about 50,000 inhabitants in Bhar Lazreg which account for half of the La Marsa municipality's population (Galtier 2020). The name 'Bhar Lazreg' in Arabic translates to 'blue sea'. During my fieldwork in the neighbourhood, its Tunisian residents noted that the name refers to a metaphorical sea of blue flowers of *gnaouia* (*okra* in Tunisian Arabic) historically grown in the agricultural plains that surrounded the area. Unequal urbanisation meant that the neighbourhood of La Marsa (that later became La Marsa city centre) developed as a residential site for the French during French colonisation of Tunisia (1881–1956). Meanwhile, Bhar Lazreg remained largely agricultural.

Like in the case of many agricultural lands located in or around the growing urban centres, Bhar Lazreg witnessed drastic demographic changes after Tunisia's independence in 1956. In this period, many families began to migrate from south and northwest Tunisia to Tunis in search of work, and settled in agricultural lands around Greater Tunis. These informal settlements were a response to lack of accessible housing in the city, and often developed close to urban centres where human labour was needed (Chabbi 1988). Tourist-attracting neighbourhoods along the coast of La Marsa and Carthage became sites of employment for these internal migrants settling in Bhar Lazreg. Over time, differences in socio-political histories of its inhabitants have translated into differences in urban development of Bhar Lazreg in relation to La Marsa city centre. During my fieldwork, inhabitants of Bhar Lazreg often complained of roads filled with potholes, flooding after rainfall, lack of a local police station and post office, and absence of public parks; they contrasted these with the relative abundance of resources in La Marsa city, less than two kilometres away from Bhar Lazreg. They also talked often about the absence of reliable public transportation; most residents depend on a clandestine network of transportation (called *grand-taxi*) to get to La Marsa city centre from where they take shared taxis or light rail to Tunis city centre.

In the public imagination, La Marsa city centre, which faces the sea, is constructed as white and European, while Bhar Lazreg, which is more inland, is constructed as 'African' and Black. Parts of this imagination come from the fact that a significant area of the city

centre in La Marsa is occupied by the French ambassador's residence, and is surrounded by villas inhabited by European-origin migrants. In addition, one regularly sees white Global North migrants and tourists walking around and sitting in La Marsa's restaurants and cafés; one rarely sees Sub-Saharan African-origin individuals in these spaces, except as servers or cleaners. In Bhar Lazreg, Sub-Saharan migrants are hyper-visible in public spaces – in cafés, in markets, and on the streets. Tunisians regularly describe La Marsa by words like 'chic' and 'classy' while Bhar Lazreg is depicted as 'dangerous'. While they often talk about the 'many' Europeans living in La Marsa with pride, associating their presence in the neighbourhood with Eurocentric ideas of modernity, they refer to the 'too many Africans' in Bhar Lazreg as a problem, associating the presence of Sub-Saharan migrants with 'criminality'.

Who are the 'Africans' in Tunisia?

In the Tunisian vernacular language, *les Africains* (the Africans) is a French-derived term used in both French as well as Arabic-only conversations to refer to Sub-Saharan African migrants. In contrast to Tunisia's location in the African continent, this terminology reflects the racial othering of Blackness and Africanness (both of which are seen as synonymous). When asked about what Tunisianness refers to, many of my non-Black Tunisian interlocutors would mention ethnic, religious, and regional identities like Arab, Muslim, Mediterranean, and Maghrebi, with negligible mention of African or Black identities.

According to the Tunisian National Institute of Statistics (INS) data on 'resident foreigners', Sub-Saharan migrants numbered 21,466 in 2020–2021. This figure does not fully take into account those migrants who are undocumented, necessitating a reliance on estimates that seek to account for this undocumented population (cf. Ben Media, this volume). According to estimates by United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), there are currently around 57,000 Sub-Saharan migrants living in Tunisia; a majority are undocumented guestworkers, and around 7,000 are students (Ayadi 2021; Boukhayatia 2022). There exists a small number of Sub-Saharan guest workers with work permits, but they remain a minority compared to those who are undocumented (Nasraoui 2017). Most Sub-Saharan migrants come from francophone countries in western or central regions of Africa, with a majority coming from Cote d'Ivoire. Since the start of the war in Sudan in 2023, there has also been a growing Sudanese migration to Tunisia.

Before Tunisia's independence in 1956, Sub-Saharan migration to the region took various forms; many were brought there as enslaved migrants, and others arrived as merchants or political refugees, or moved to North Africa looking for work. Since Tunisia's independence, and over the last two decades, there has been a visual and numerical shift in migration flows from Sub-Saharan Africa. In year 2003, the African Development Bank (AfDB) moved its headquarters to Tunis because of civil war in Côte d'Ivoire, its primary location. This prompted migration of its employees and their families, most of whom were socio-economically privileged Sub-Saharan citizens. Their socio-economically privileged position, as visible from the chauffeured cars they moved in, contrasted with the popular Tunisian imagination of 'Africans' as uniformly poor (Mazzella 2012).

After the bank's departure in 2014, the Sub-Saharan student population became more visible across Tunisia's urban centres that host universities. The increase in their numbers from the early 2000s was attributed to the rise in private higher education institutions that provided internationally recognised diplomas (Mazzella 2009); this private sector flourished partly because of the high tuition fees paid by these international students. The growth in student population corresponded to the growth in civil-society organisations run by and for these students; the Association of African Students and Trainees in Tunisia (AESAT) set up in 1993 is one key example. These organisations and associated individuals became vocal about the racialised violence faced by the Sub-Saharan student communities, calling for political changes to protect their rights. For example, the mobilisation around the near fatal attack on three Congolese students in Tunis in December 2016 prompted the then-Prime Minister Youssef Chahed to publicly support the passing of a law criminalising racial discrimination; the law was passed in 2018 (Parikh 2021).

Since the 2011 revolution, the image of an 'African' has shifted from being associated with AfDB staff and students to being linked to poor and undocumented black migrants on the move. The contemporary increase in the presence of Sub-Saharan African migrant communities across Tunisia is linked to two factors: firstly, the easing of visa regulations for citizens of many Sub-Saharan countries in the early 2000s (Msakni 2020), and secondly, the externalization of European Union's border in the Greater Mediterranean region (cf. Sh'ath, this volume). Since early 2000s, citizens from Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Senegal, and Niger (among others) benefit from a 90-day visa-free policy in Tunisia. Yet, this ease in entry requirements was not accompanied by changes in regulations governing access to residence or work permits. Tunisian lawyer Ahmed Messedi, who works on cases involving Sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia, noted during a personal communication that most im/migration laws date from 1968 and are unable to respond to changing contemporary migration patterns. At the same time, contemporary practices of migration governance in Tunisia, like those across the Mediterranean region, have come to be dictated by policies and politics of European Union's border externalisation. This includes the 2013 decree that penalises undocumented stay in Tunisia, which many, like Yvonne, experience as an additional burden in an already precarious legal and economic situation.

The externalisation of European borders onto the southern and eastern coasts around the Mediterranean has led to a dramatic halting of migrant flows originating and transiting through these coastal countries (see Garnaoui, this volume). Externalisation refers to the process of outsourcing border control and migration management to non-EU countries by EU countries, starting early 2000s. As scholars like Casas et al. (2011) note, an increase in internal mobility within the EU ran in parallel with the moving of border control to the edge of this area and, later, outside it. According to them, the border externalisation process 'involves the emergence of a series of new border practices, border actors and institutional arrangements in these neighbouring countries: from detention centres; to funds for police training; to establishing programs of circular temporary labour migration' (ibid. 77).

The drastic immobilisation of migration into Europe has led to a form of transitory settling of migrant communities in 'border countries', often in cities and towns where they begin to reside over longer periods, building and forming diaspora communities.

These include Syrian, Afghan, and Pakistani migrants in Istanbul; Ivorian, Malian, and Senegalese migrants in Tunis and Rabat; or Sudanese and Eritrean migrants in Cairo. In many cases, they come to reside in neighbourhoods of the urban periphery with close proximity to urban centres hosting employment opportunities. This is the case of Bhar Lazreg.

Hyper-Visibility of Sub-Saharan Migrants in Bhar Lazreg

The majority of Sub-Saharan African migrants I met here during my fieldwork come from Côte d'Ivoire. The length of their stay in Tunisia varies; some have been in Tunisia for less than two months, while others have been here for four years or more. Deteriorating political and economic conditions in countries like Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Republic of Guinea, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have pushed many to take land or air routes to arrive in North Africa, with hopes of seeking refuge in the region and/or traveling on to Europe through clandestine routes.

Bhar Lazreg is not the only neighbourhood in Greater Tunis where Sub-Saharan migrants live in larger numbers; a significant number also reside in Aouina, Ariana, Bousalsala, Lafayette, and Soukra. However, the migration status of the majority of Sub-Saharan migrants living in Bhar Lazreg is different from that of those in more middle-class neighbourhoods like Soukra, Ariana, and Lafayette; in the former, most of them are irregular (or undocumented) migrants while in the latter, a large proportion of migrants are students, which relates to the proximity to universities or professionalising institutes in these neighbourhoods. Migration status differences overlap differences in socio-economic and legal status; most Sub-Saharan students come from socio-economically more privileged backgrounds and have more transparent paths to procuring residence permits compared with that of guestworkers or transit migrants.

As in the case of Bhar Lazreg, the presence of Sub-Saharan migrants in these neighbourhoods is visible in the public space. Yet, the stigmatising appellation of '*quartier des Africains*' (an African neighbourhood) is carried most intensely by Bhar Lazreg. This is linked to Sub-Saharan migrants being hyper visible in Bhar Lazreg compared with other neighbourhoods, which are socio-economically more privileged than the former. This difference is partly linked to differences in urban infrastructure that determines the population density of public spaces. Almost all neighbourhood activities of importance in Bhar Lazreg are concentrated in a rather narrow space – along Rue Charles de Gaulle starting at the main crossroads to the intersection with Rue Amilcar. The cafés, grocery stores, butcher, public primary school, and the large vegetable market are all concentrated along a 400-meter-long strip of this road. The road is barely wide enough to let two vans pass simultaneously, and pedestrians compete with formal and informal stores (like Yvonne's table shop) as well as vehicles for space to move. In contrast, the population density in public spaces is less in more middle-class neighbourhoods like Aouina and Soukra, since residences and cafés are spread out, and roads and pedestrian streets are wide.

During my walks around Greater Tunis neighbourhoods hosting significant Sub-Saharan migrant populations, I noticed three socio-urban structures in Bhar Lazreg that I

found either absent or comparatively rare in other neighbourhoods: firstly, informal table-shops, like the one set up by Yvonne, which sell so-called African products on pedestrian streets; secondly, Tunisian and Sub-Saharan men occupying café chairs laid out on café terraces that extend into pedestrian streets; and finally, restaurants or hair salons run by Sub-Saharan migrants, which display posters of trending hair-styles or foods from their countries of origin. The visible presence of these structures contributes to the hyper visibility of Sub-Saharan migrants in Bhar Lazreg. While *shaabi* or working class cafés serve as legitimate sites of social leisure for both Tunisian and Sub-Saharan men, there are no such socially legitimate leisure sites for women in Bhar Lazreg. To fill this gap, Sub-Saharan women in the neighbourhood use table-shops (like Yvonne's) set up along the pavements as well as 'African' hair salons as sites for socialisation and leisure.

In Bhar Lazreg, informal stands selling 'African products' are concentrated along the 400-meter strip of Rue Charles de Gaulle (where I spotted four during peak week hours); a few can also be found along Rue Amilcar. These stands are composed of plastic tables, an umbrella to shelter from the sun, and an assortment of herbs, teas, peanut butter, dried chillies, and broth cubes. The hair and beauty salons that are run by and which cater to Sub-Saharan women are concentrated along Rue Amilcar; there are also Sub-Saharan men-only salons but in lesser frequency). In addition to table-shops and hair salons, I spotted two Ivorian-run restaurants that serve as visible gathering space for Sub-Saharan migrants. There are no official churches in the area, but I recurrently heard stories of attempts by a Sub-Saharan man to set up a church in his apartment in Bhar Lazreg. While not being visible, these stories and rumours about Sub-Saharan migrants' religious practices (which stand out in a majority Muslim country) contribute to the feeling of there being 'too many Africans'.

The presence of these formal and informal institutions, which are run by and for Sub-Saharan migrants, points to a degree of integration of these communities in the socio-urban fabric of Bhar Lazreg. As they integrate, they create socio-spatial structures that extend onto or around those already present; for example, informal table-shops like Yvonne's imitate those run by Tunisians along Rue Charles de Gaulle.

Yet, the integration of these communities is not complete, as reflected in the rarity of interactions between Tunisian and Sub-Saharan inhabitants of Bhar Lazreg. The only occasions during which I noticed intergroup interactions was when Sub-Saharan migrants were buying groceries from Tunisian grocers or ordering food from Tunisian cafés or restaurants. While many Sub-Saharan men hang out in cafés that line Rue Charles de Gaulle and which are frequented by Tunisian men, both groups sit around tables among themselves; never during my fieldwork did I notice two groups sharing a table. Both Tunisian and Sub-Saharan men move around each other in these cafés in a way that avoids verbal interactions or possible brushing of arms while navigating through packed tables. Both groups move through the same space without acknowledging the presence of the other. The tensions between Tunisian men and Yaya that I witnessed while speaking with him point to the fact that my interaction with Yaya in front of a fast-food store broke two norms that govern socio-spatial behaviour in Bhar Lazreg – first, I (assumed to be Tunisian) interacted with a Sub-Saharan migrant, and, second, I (a woman) interacted with a male stranger. My spending time at Yvonne's table also resulted in curious gazes from passing Tunisians but did not escalate into tensions.

Economic Precarity: Motivating Discourses of 'Too many Africans'

In urban peripheries like Bhar Lazreg with relatively cheap rent compared to that in urban centres like La Marsa city or Tunis city, Sub-Saharan migrants rent homes and build visible community infrastructures like restaurants and stores selling 'African' products or services from their countries of origin. This increasing visibility of Sub-Saharan communities has led to a sentiment among local populations of being *envahie* (invaded) by 'too many Africans'. For example, one comment (in French) under an article describing the precarious situation of Sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia notes that 'one should not be manipulated by these migrants who can work in their own country instead of invading North Africa, which is experiencing its own health and economic crises' (see comments section in Business News 2021).

The sense of competition felt by the Tunisian residents of Bhar Lazreg towards their Sub-Saharan neighbours manifests in the discourses among Tunisian residents that portray migrants as willing to take any job and for less pay than Tunisians, making it more profitable to employ Sub-Saharan migrants over Tunisians. As in the case of Yaya, Sub-Saharan migrants are employed for lower salaries and with more insecure contracts than those given to their Tunisian colleagues. In another case, one Tunisian man in his 60s, who had worked for most of his life as a 'day labourer' in local factories around Bhar Lazreg, said to me that Sub-Saharan migrants accept 15 Dinar (around five Euro) for jobs that Tunisians would not do even for 25 Dinar (around eight Euro). In addition, commercial activities by Sub-Saharan migrant communities are seen with suspicion, which is justified using racial tropes present in Tunisian discourses about Black and Sub-Saharan individuals. For example, Imen, a Tunisian woman in her thirties who sells dried peppers, indicated that the overpriced 'African' peppers that the Sub-Saharan woman on the other side of the street was selling were Tunisian. Imen noted that she felt cheated by the commercial activities of her Sub-Saharan neighbours, reflecting the larger discourse describing Sub-Saharan migrants as 'criminal' and prone to cheating (see Draouil/Jmel 2022 for more details). In another case, a Tunisian colleague and I visited the table-shop held by Mireille (in her thirties) from Côte d'Ivoire; she explained to us that the herbs in different plastic sachets cure stomach problems, as well as 'ejaculation issues', and can also be used 'for cutting pregnancy' or abortion. My Tunisian colleague, a young middle-class woman, looked at Mireille and her activities with suspicion and noted that she corresponds to the trope of a Black witch in the Tunisian imagination.

Beyond the gendered trope of 'Black witch' associated with Sub-Saharan women, other racialised discourses about Sub-Saharan migrants are present among Tunisians living in Bhar Lazreg (as among Tunisians elsewhere). One such discourse is that which constructs all Sub-Saharan migrants are 'uncivilised'. During the time I spent in Bhar Lazreg, Tunisian residents would often complain that Sub-Saharan migrants did not know how to use a kitchen or a toilet, or that they have bodily odours. For example, Mokhtar, a Tunisian man in his 60s, used these tropes to justify his decision to never rent an apartment to Sub-Saharan migrants (Draouil/Jmel 2022). I also noted contradictory discourses about the financial status of Sub-Saharan migrants – while many Tunisians told me that the migrants would do any job for meagre pay, they would later add that the migrants get money from international organisations or other richer

Sub-Saharan migrants. In addition, like Aymen (presented in the introduction), many Tunisians mentioned that 'too many Africans' live in rooms made for two or three people. Tunisians use these discourses to justify the comparatively elevated rents charged on migrants. Overall, the structural precarities that the residents of Bhar Lazreg, like in other 'African' neighbourhoods, face are interpreted by their Tunisian residents as being a result of their neighbourhoods being 'invaded by Africans' rather than reflecting a failure of the Tunisian state to address inequalities. This discourse often justifies acts of aggression like the kind noted by both Yvonne and Yaya.

The 'too many Africans' discourse would take a violent political turn in early 2023. On 21 February 2023, President Kais Saied made an anti-Sub-Saharan migrant statement that politically legitimised vernacular discourses like the discourse of 'too many Africans': He stated that Tunisia was being 'invaded by hordes of illegal migrants' who seek to 'change the demographic structure of Tunisia and make it African', implying an imminent social, racial, and moral degradation of the Tunisian society (see Parikh 2023). Saied's statement was followed by state- and civilian-supported violence against Sub-Saharan migrants, including police harassment and arrest, deportation and expulsion into the desertic borders that Tunisia shares with Algeria and Libya, sexual harassment and rape, as well as refusal of emergency medical services. While there is no quantitative data about these violent occurrences, anecdotal data suggests that violence was more elevated in neighbourhoods like Bhar Lazreg that are discursively constructed as '*quartiers des Africains*' or 'African neighbourhood', compared to other urban neighbourhoods not seen as 'African' despite hosting significant Sub-Saharan populations. Following Saied's statement, many Tunisians took it upon themselves to follow his call to rid Tunisia of Sub-Saharan migrants (see Matri/Zuntz, this volume). In the months following the statement, my Facebook feed was filled with videos of Tunisian men in mobs looking for Sub-Saharan migrants in 'African' neighbourhoods of Tunis and Sfax, beating and robbing those they found hiding, leading (in a few cases) to the death of these migrants. It is true that the neighbourhoods that come to carry the vernacular appellation of 'African' tend to be working-class; the stigmatisation of 'African' neighbourhoods, as well as the experiences of violence against migrants who live in these spaces, are governed by the entanglements of class and race. While it is difficult, with current data, to disentangle class and race, I hope that this chapter will motivate future research to expand the study of these discourses that link race, class, and migrant/citizen inequalities to space.

Conclusion

With the externalisation of European Union's borders onto the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean, potential onward migrants like Yvonne and Yaya find themselves spending more time than planned in these regions where European border control is now outsourced. As these migrants stay longer periods in Tunisia, Morocco, Turkey or Egypt, they also create visible communities in urban peripheries like Bhar Lazreg, which offer cheaper housing options and access to urban centres where jobs are concentrated. They take up jobs similar to those held by working class citizens of their host countries.

While racialising and inferiorising stereotypes associated with Blackness remain the basis for a general dislike and non-tolerance of Sub-Saharan migrant populations, the already-precarious economic conditions in southern and eastern Mediterranean countries add to the sentiment of labour-market competition and resulting dislike for the black migrants. This dislike itself manifests in and is justified through racialising discourses. Although Sub-Saharan migrants share sites of employment, as well as experiences of unemployment and financial precarity, with working-class Tunisians living in Bhar Lazreg, this has not created class-based solidarities across the two groups. For example, both groups work as cooks or cleaners in cafés and restaurants, as domestic workers (usually women), or as construction workers (usually men) in and around the neighbourhood. Yet, the increasing presence of Sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisian's mostly informal 'low-skilled' labour market has generated a sentiment of competition among many working-class Tunisians who fear that these migrants are taking away their jobs. This sentiment is fuelled by the collapsing economic conditions in Tunisia, as manifested by the decreasing number of employment opportunities. For example, over June 2021 as well as following Saied's 2023 statement, Tunisians living in the city of Sfax (south of Tunis) organised protests against migrants for 'taking away [Tunisian] jobs' (see Matri/Zuntz, this volume) The discourse of 'too many Africans' living in urban peripheral neighbourhoods like Bhar Lazreg is used as evidence for larger conspiracy theories – claiming that Black migrants will replace the Tunisian population. In January 2023, an ex-minister interviewed on a popular television channel IFMTV said that 'if the migration of Tunisians [to Europe] continues, Africans will come and marry [Tunisians] and replace [Tunisians]' (Papillon [@Papiillon] 2023). According to such conspiracy theories, the racial blackening of Bhar Lazreg and other 'African' neighbourhoods is expected to spread all over Tunisia. With a worsening economic and political climate in Tunisia, these kind of stereotypes and prejudices will unfortunately become more popular and fuel increasing violence against Sub-Saharan migrants.