

# UC Santa Barbara

## UC Santa Barbara Previously Published Works

**Title**

Are French people white?: Towards an understanding of whiteness in Republican France

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9wj0j77z>

**Journal**

Identities, 26(5)

**ISSN**

1070-289X

**Author**

Beaman, Jean

**Publication Date**

2019-09-03

**DOI**

10.1080/1070289x.2018.1543831

Peer reviewed

# Are French people white?: Towards an understanding of whiteness in Republican France

Jean Beaman

To cite this article: Jean Beaman (2019) Are French people white?: Towards an understanding of whiteness in Republican France, *Identities*, 26:5, 546-562, DOI: [10.1080/1070289X.2018.1543831](https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2018.1543831)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2018.1543831>



Published online: 07 Nov 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 361



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)



## Are French people white?: Towards an understanding of whiteness in Republican France

Jean Beaman 

Department of Sociology, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN, USA

### ABSTRACT

Based on ethnographic research of France's North African second-generation, I bring together literatures on racial formation, whiteness, and race and racism in Europe to discuss how whiteness operates in French society. I discuss how respondents must navigate a supposedly colorblind society in which whiteness is default. Because these individuals are racialized as non-white, they are not seen as French by others. I discuss how they wrestle with definitions of French identity as white and full belonging in French society as centered on whiteness. I argue that salience of whiteness is part of France's racial project in which differences among individuals are marked without explicit state-sanctioned racial and ethnic categories. This has implications for considering how whiteness is crucial to understanding European identity more broadly, including through the rise of the Far-Right, the recent Brexit and Leave campaigns, and anti-immigration sentiment throughout Western Europe.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 4 October 2017; Accepted 31 October 2018

**KEYWORDS** Race/ethnicity; France; whiteness; belonging; national identity; colorblind

*France views and portrays itself as a white country. My whole life, I've felt erased by the national narrative. People even keep complimenting me on how good my French is. It's deeply embedded in the national consciousness that [the] 'true' identity is one which has been here forever.*

- Rokhaya Diallo, French journalist and writer of Senegalese origin

In late July 2017, MWASI, a French Afro-feminist collective formed in 2014, held the Nyanspo festival in Paris with the slogan 'Don't Agonize, Organize!' Such a three day festival might otherwise been unremarkable except for the fact that about 80 percent of the festival's schedule was specified for either Black women, women of color, or Black individuals more generally ('espace non mixte femmes noires,' 'espace non mixte femmes racisées,' 'espace non mixte personnes noires') in order for such individuals to reflect on experiences of racism and devise afrofeminist political strategies.<sup>1</sup> As French

**CONTACT** Jean Beaman  [beamanj@purdue.edu](mailto:beamanj@purdue.edu)  [@jean23bean](https://twitter.com/jean23bean)  Department of Sociology, Purdue University, 700 W. State Street, West Lafayette, IN 47907, USA

© 2018 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Republican ideology dictates that the only meaningful identity is a French one, the festival's 'non-mixte' scheduling immediately drew controversy. It was deemed an 'anti-white' event, one that was racist towards whites. It was accused of being 'communitariste,' the dreaded term in French for separate (ethnic) identity-based communities. Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris, demanded that the festival be cancelled and argued that it violated anti-discrimination laws.<sup>2</sup> La Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l'antisémitisme (The International League against Racism and Anti-Semitism, or LICRA) and S.O.S. Racisme – two French anti-discrimination and anti-racist organizations – also denounced the festival. On Twitter, LICRA declared that 'Rosa Parks must be turning over in her grave.'<sup>3</sup>

In June 2018, Paris's Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (The School of Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences) held a day-long symposium on the 'White Condition: Reflections on a French Majority' ('La condition blanche: Réflexion sur une majorité française').<sup>4</sup> Led by social scientists Sarah Mazouz and Mathilde Cohen, the symposium explored the variant ways that whiteness is the standard in French society and how non-white minorities are simultaneously visible and invisible. Yet this conference – the first of its kind in French academia – was also not without its controversy. It was also labelled as racist and anti-white.

Both of these controversies were revealing of how the terms 'white' and 'whiteness' have meaning in French society, despite France's disavowal of such racial and ethnic labels. What is complex about considering what whiteness and white mean in French society is how racial and ethnic terms have no official legitimacy. France does not collect official statistics on race and ethnicity and does not have state-level racial and ethnic categories. There is no category on the French census for white or black. Under the French Republican model, being French is supposed to trump all other identifications and differences such as race and ethnicity are not officially acknowledged.

Yet, there are many ways that race and ethnicity are marked without official designations by the state (Beaman 2017; Keaton 2010; Ndiaye 2008). In what follows, I bring together literatures on whiteness, racial formation, and race and racism in Europe to argue for and demonstrate the salience of whiteness in French society. Specifically, based on ethnographic research in the Parisian metropolitan area, I discuss how middle-class children of North African, or Maghrebin, immigrants in France conceptualize whiteness as default in French society and how they are racialized as non-white.

I further discuss how their racialization as non-white is one indicator of France's ongoing racial project (Omi and Winant 1994) in which the links between whiteness and belonging to France are continually produced and reproduced. Part of this racial project which marks differences among France's populations involves the social construction of whiteness as the

default or the norm. I use the example of the middle-class North African second-generation to illustrate how French identity is understood at macro and micro levels as white.

I will first discuss the background to and methodology of this study. I then discuss how whiteness fits into France's racial project and reflects the larger connection between whiteness and Europeaness and European identities as white. In doing so, I connect and apply existing research on racial formation in the United States, whiteness as a social construction, and race and racism in Europe to France in order to demonstrate how French is constructed as white. I then discuss the experiences of middle-class children of North African immigrants in which their exclusion because of their racial and ethnic status was continually reinforced and how they make sense of the construction of French identity as white. I conclude by discussing the implications of the centrality of whiteness in France for other plural societies.

## Background

In order to unpack how whiteness is understood by non-white individuals in France, I first discuss the broader context of North African, or Maghrebin, immigrants and their descendants in France.

France's colonial empire in the Maghreb began in Algeria in 1830, in Tunisia in 1881, and in Morocco in 1912. Algeria would remain in French control until 1962 and Tunisia and Morocco would remain in French control until 1956. Though emigration from the Maghreb to France began as early as the early 1900s, World War I brought immigrants from these French colonies *en masse* to France for work. These immigrants, who were expected to only be temporary residents, often settled in the outlying *banlieues*, or suburbs, of major cities because of the presence of cheaper housing and factory employment. The number of Maghrébin immigrants continued to increase with World War II, the end of France's Fourth Republic in 1958, and the Algerian War of Independence in 1962. This increase saw more and more North African immigrants living in subsidized housing complexes (or *habitations à loyer modéré* or HLMs) in the *banlieues*. These Maghrébin immigrants often had low levels of educational attainment than native French and worked in low-skilled employment. Due to an economic recession and declining employment opportunities, France temporarily suspended immigration of non-European workers in 1974. However, this led to migrant workers settling permanently with their families in France as opposed to returning to their home countries (Silberman, Alba, and Fournier 2007). According to the Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques (National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies, or INSEE), which conducts the French census, more than half of the immigrants

who arrived before 1974 came for employment-related reasons; and another one third came to join their husbands or family. The North African second-generation – including my respondents – descended primarily from this population (Silberman, Alba, and Fournier 2007). While citizenship status has historically been complicated for children of immigrants (at least partially due to the distinction between citizenship and nationality), currently individuals born in France to Maghrébin immigrants become citizens at 18 years old and are seen to have ‘virtual citizenship at birth’ (Simon 2012).

Because the French census does not demarcate racial and ethnic origin of citizens due to French Republican ideology, there is a dearth of data on second-generation populations. The available data from the 1999 *Étude de l'histoire familiale* (Study of Family History, or EHF) combines individual country of birth with parent country of birth (see Meurs, Pailhé, and Simon 2006; Tribalat 2004). As of 1999, about 26 percent of second-generation immigrants in France are of Maghrébin origin. Specifically, about 14 percent are of Algerian origin, 9 percent are of Moroccan origin, and 4 percent are of Tunisian origin (Tribalat 2004). The largest survey of the second-generation, the 2009 joint Institut National d'études démographiques (National Institute of Demographic Studies, or INED) and INSEE, *Trajectoires et origines*, reports unequal treatment and discrimination towards and a lack of inclusion of second-generation North African immigrants (Simon 2012). This survey also reports that many individuals do not feel accepted as French by others because they are not seen to ‘look French’ (Simon 2012). Other research on these children of immigrants focuses on their inherited disadvantage from their immigrant parents as well as their disadvantage relative to whites (Lombardo and Pujol 2011; Silberman 2011; Simon 2012). Yet, as of 2003, about 15 percent of second-generation North African immigrant men and about 23 percent of second-generation North African immigrant women hold salaried jobs (Lombardo and Pujol 2011). This is the segment of the Maghrebin second-generation I discuss in this paper.

### Data and methodology

Data comes from ethnographic research including semi-structured interviews with 45 middle-class adult children of Maghrebin immigrants living in the Parisian metropolitan region. They were all born and raised in France. The original aim of this study was to understand the experiences of ethnic minorities in France. I focus on middle-class individuals, those who have achieved upward mobility vis-à-vis their immigrant parents. I delineate middle-class by respondents' educational attainment levels and professional statuses. In terms of education, I focus on those who passed the *Baccalauréat* (BAC) exam and attended college (whether or not they actually graduated). In terms of employment, I focus on

those in the French socio-professional category of *cadre*. Snowball sampling was used to draw a respondent sample. My respondent sample includes 24 men and 21 women. Respondents range in age from 24 to 49 years old; the average age being 32 years old. In terms of North African origin, about 55 percent are of Algerian origin; about 26 percent are of Moroccan origin; and 17 percent are of Tunisian origin. About 35 percent of respondents live in Paris proper and about 65 percent live in the *banlieues*, namely the inner-ring *départements* of Seine-Saint-Denis, Val-de-Marne, and Hauts-de-Seine. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Interview transcripts were then coded using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990) for emergent themes related to whiteness and the nature of French identity. All respondents' names are pseudonyms per Institutional Review Board guidelines.

### Race, racism, and whiteness in Europe

My thinking about the significance of whiteness in France is informed by how race and racism operates in Europe more generally, particularly in contexts where racial categories are not explicitly acknowledged or measured. David Theo Goldberg's (2006) framework of racial Europeanization is instructive here for how race and racism are framed throughout Europe – either as exceptional, i.e. as pertains to the Far Right, or as phenomena of the past, i.e. as in the Holocaust. To Goldberg, race is often framed very narrowly, yet orders and makes the nation-state throughout Europe, even without explicit categories. Europe therefore is silent about race, despite ample evidence of its significance in everyday life across the continent (Lentin 2008).

Part of Europe's silence about race and racism is also a silence about whiteness. Goldberg further argues that being seen as European, or a part of Europe, is predicated on being white:

The taboo of racial characterization, and the at least official avoidance of racial expression or categorization, reinforce the long historical presumption of Europe as the home of whiteness and Christianity. It follows that any person of color or non-Christian (at least genealogically) in Europe presumptively is not of Europe, not European, doesn't (properly or fully) ever belong. Just as, historically, anyone whose ancestry was considered to emanate from elsewhere was deemed non-European (Goldberg 2009, 179–180).<sup>5</sup>

Goldberg further argues that Islamophobia and xenophobia in Europe is fueled by a fear of Europe becoming non-white, or the encroachment of non-white individuals into Europe:

Europe's racial self-articulation has long expressed itself in terms of the denial, exclusion, and ultimately the purging of those not white – not European, to be empty, circularly precise – from first its ideational conception and then also from what it has taken as its territory (Goldberg 2009, 187).

These are the processes for maintaining Europe for particular Europeans, not unlike the desire to the maintain France for particular French individuals, as articulated by the Front National, France's Far Right political party. Despite years of colonialism and related immigration, non-white individuals are continually seen as non-European. To the extent that immigrants were or are acknowledged, it was as temporary residents, not potential members of the nation-state. As all racial and ethnic categories are social constructions, whiteness is also a social construction, which in Europe is based upon colonial domination of other countries.

Much extant empirical research links whiteness and national identities throughout Europe, albeit not often focused on France. Europeanness is framed similar to whiteness, particularly in terms of societal power relations (Kaufmann 2006; Keskinen 2017; Weiner 2012). That white is synonymous with national identities often exists in contexts that purport to be colorblind or otherwise race-blind (Moschel 2011). Whiteness is at the core of various national identities. For example, Keskinen (2017) demonstrates how whiteness is at the core of national identities in Nordic countries which also serves to ignore or deny racial histories. In the context of the United Kingdom, British as white is a default category into which it is impossible for other individuals to integrate. To Byrne's (2007) white women interviewees living in London, being English is defined as being refined, middle-class, and above all, white. Central to this discussion is the fear of losing English identity or the fear of England becoming less English due to an influx of immigrants, among other phenomena. Cretton (forthcoming) demonstrates how Switzerland has a racial logic in which race is not acknowledged, yet non-white individuals are assumed to be non-Swiss. Being white and being Swiss are seen as synonymous, and black comes to stand in for characteristics seen as incompatible with Swiss national and cultural identity. Similarly, in Germany, who is and who is not German is a distinction often based on race and ethnicity, in which an individual who is not white is seen as suspect as German (Müller 2011). In the Netherlands, the Dutch terms 'autochthon' (from this soil) and 'allochthon' (from another soil) function as ethnic and racial labels for Dutch and non-Dutch individuals (Essed and Trienekens 2008). Moreover, the hidden curriculum in Dutch schools serves to promote values associated with being white in the Netherlands, despite the actual ethnic diversity in the Netherlands (Weiner 2015). In Norway, the term 'white' is often reserved for individuals who are thought to be culturally similar enough to assimilate to mainstream society-or individuals closest to Norwegian. In common parlance, schools are described as black



schools when a large percentage of the students are immigrants, regardless of their origin or skin pigmentation (Alba and Foner 2015).<sup>6</sup>

### Whiteness and France's racial project

In considering what whiteness means in the French context, I apply two theoretical frameworks developed outside of France, namely whiteness studies and racial formation. First, I discuss the salience of race and racism in France. Despite the Republican denial of the significance of race and ethnicity, several scholars of French history (Kastoryano 2004; Peabody and Stovall 2003; Wieviorka 1992) have argued that France has long relied on racial and ethnic boundaries in constructing its national identity, particularly in terms of what occurred outside of the 'Hexagon,' namely colonial rule and slavery. Furthermore, other scholars have noted how French Republicanism has been used to minimize both the long history of international migration to France, including from its former colonies, and the multicultural nature of French society (Chabal 2015; Noiriel 1996). Moreover, despite the repeated disavowal of race in France, many have demonstrated how racism, as well as race, are salient in French society across micro, meso, and macro levels (Fanon 1967; Kastoryano 2004; Keaton 2010; Jugé and Perez 2006; Simon 2012).

The significance of race and racism despite the official denial of both also relates to notions of who can and who cannot be included in France. For example, in 1967's *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon, the Martinique-born writer and philosopher quickly understood that he could never be seen as French despite having been born in the French *département* of Martinique and spent time in the French hexagon. He writes of how 'white civilization and European culture have forced an existential deviation on the Negro' (1967, 14). Therefore blacks in France are not seen as of France. Fanon demonstrates how colonialism and slavery have created the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in the construction of France. This is another way of considering how whiteness and blackness are co-constitutive of each other, and how whiteness as synonymous with Frenchness relies on being black as the opposite of being French. His work suggests that discourses established through colonialism continue to benefit whiteness. Even though *race* as a term exists in the French language, the National Assembly suppressed its use in legislation in 2013 (Beydoun 2013). It is this context that makes race in France both necessary and difficult to discuss. I argue that France is undergoing a racial project, per Omi and Winant (1994) formulation. In such a racial project, 'racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed' (Omi and Winant 1994, 55). It is a way of making meaning out of differences, which are

historically and socially informed, among individuals. In France, a racial common sense is created in a seemingly colorblind society.<sup>7</sup>

Racial meaning is applied without officially substantiating racial and ethnic categories, so that the North African second-generation – as well as other ethnic minorities – can be racialized in a context in which the only meaningful identity is a French one. Other scholars have demonstrated how Maghrébin-origin individuals and other ethnic minorities are racialized as non-white or ‘other’ (Beauchemin et al. 2010; Kastoryano and Escafré-Dublet 2012; Keaton 2009, 2010; Simon 2012; Silverstein 2008). In this context, race ‘signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies’ (Omi and Winant 1994, 55), which ‘form a distinctive stigmata of inferiority’ (Keaton 2010, 106).

Just as French Republicanism denies the existence of race and racism, I argue that it simultaneously denies the existence of whiteness and white supremacy. Part of France’s racial project is the continued production and reproduction of white as normal or default. Such production dates from the construction of the nation itself; French culture is portrayed as an unchanging, homogenous entity (Beaman 2017). As the two examples I discussed at the beginning of this paper suggest, white supremacy is often mobilized as anti-white racism (Fleming 2017). In fact, Gallagher and Twine argue that whiteness itself is a racial project, in that ‘it only derives its political meaning in relation to other groups within a racial hierarchy’ (2017, 1599).

As I discussed in the last section regarding how whiteness functions in Europe more broadly, whiteness becomes synonymous with national identity in a context in which whiteness is synonymous with citizenship and full societal belonging. Garner (2016) delineates four frames of how whiteness is constructed and racialized within the United Kingdom, including how whites see themselves as victims and how individuals cannot define who is British but could easily define who is not British. From the conception of the United States, American citizenship was originally only available to ‘free white men’. As such, whiteness was and is both legally and socially constructed as there was a direct connection between being legally determined to be white and being a citizen (Harris 1993). This is another way of considering how whiteness is normalized, commonplace, or as Bonilla-Silva (2012) refers to is, part of ‘racial grammar’. Such ‘racial grammar’ serves to embed our discourse with whiteness, normalize whiteness, and preserve the way of things, including the domination of individuals categorized as white (Twine and Gallagher 2008). Part of the examination of whiteness is making visible both white supremacy as well as whiteness in terms of power relations (Emirbayer and Desmond 2015; Garner 2017). Both Hughey (2010) and Lewis (2004) refer to whiteness as ‘hegemonic’ in American society, which allows us to consider the shared meanings of whiteness by Americans racialized as white. Specifically, it refers to ‘a shifting configuration of practices and

meanings that occupy the empty space of “normality” in our culture. Collectively, this set of schemas functions as that seemingly “neutral” or “pre-cultural” yardstick against which cultural behaviour, norms, and values are measured’ (Lewis 2004, 634).

While there has been focus on whiteness in other parts of Europe, less has been written on how whiteness structures France. This is perhaps because of how the French Republican model makes it difficult to see French as a racialized category and in turn, makes whiteness to tease out. Moreover, the Republican ideology enables a colorblind logic in which racism is not explicated mentioned and it is seen as racist to invoke race. Unpacking France’s racial project requires discussing whiteness because the racialization of Maghrébin-origin individuals and other racial and ethnic minorities exists in a context in which whiteness is the standard. In what follows, I discuss how non-white individuals – here, Maghrebin-origin individuals – understand how whiteness operates in French society.

### French as white to non-whites

‘Many people think being French, it’s being white, eating pork, going to mass every Sunday morning, being Catholic and so on ... But me, I say being French is not that, for me being French is simply working in this country, paying taxes, it’s just living here’. So explained Nasser, a 36 year old of Algerian origin who was born and raised in Seine-Saint Denis, a *département* north of Paris. As we sat in his office at the television station where he has worked as a journalist for a number of years, surrounded by cubicles and television monitors, he explained his difficulties being the only non-white person where he works. This is in contrast to his *banlieue* community where most residents are immigrant-origin individuals – or as Nasser puts it, ‘*les issus de la colonisation*,’ or descendants of France’s colonial empire in North and Sub-Saharan Africa.

One another occasion when we were taking the tram to his apartment, he pointed out all the North African and Sub-Saharan origin individuals on the tram and on the streets as we rode by. ‘How could you feel French in a community like this?’, he asked rhetorically. Nasser challenges the racial and ethnic nature of what it means to be French, yet also recognizes that French people see being white as a prerequisite for being French or being included in French society. He acknowledges how others see being French as synonymous with being white affects him. Even though he sees himself as part of France—however complicated that is for him—because he is not white, he is not seen by others as part of France.

Moreover, the French term, *français de souche*, which technically means native-born French individuals is never used for second or subsequent generation immigrant populations. In other words, native-born French

individuals are understood to be white. Individuals like Nasser are usually referred to as foreigners or immigrants, even though as people born and raised in France, they are neither.<sup>8</sup>

In a September 2015 interview with France 2 Television, Nadine Morano, a *Les Républicains* party politician, stated the following: 'In order to have a national cohesion, it is necessary to keep equilibrium, meaning the cultural majority. We are a Judeo-Christian country – as General de Gaulle said – of the white race, which attracts foreigners. I want France to remain France. I don't want France to become Muslim.' *Les Républicains* is a center-right political party formed in 2015, when former president Nicolas Sarkozy renamed the *Union pour un mouvement populaire* (UMP). Morano's comments convey not only how Muslim is a racialized category located at the bottom of France's racial and ethnic hierarchy, but also how it is in opposition to whiteness and the idea of a 'true France.' Despite French Republicanism which negates race and ethnicity as actual categories, French itself is a racialized identity.

The North African second-generation is one population that is racialized, which occurs simultaneously with the construction of French as white and France as a white nation. As has been demonstrated elsewhere (Beaman 2017), despite many children of Maghrebin immigrants feeling French as part of their own identities, they are still kept on the margins of French society and are perceived by fellow French individuals as not French. According to French demographer Patrick Simon, 'This dissonance is undeniably a source of tension and generates feelings of rejection. While the French population is ethnically and religiously diverse, this diversity is not yet fully incorporated in the representation of Frenchness' (2012, 13). They are 'visible minorities' (Ndiaye 2008) because they are not white, and it is this visibility that excludes them from fully belonging in France.

Karim, a 32-year-old of Algerian origin who lives in Malakoff, a *banlieue* south of Paris, is one example of this phenomenon, as well as of the upwardly-mobile segment of the Maghrébin second-generation. Despite his parents not being attending school past the age of 14 and working in only menial kinds of employment, Karim is well-educated and an accomplished journalist. Yet this upward mobility does not minimize the racism he and others experience. 'People still see being French as being white,' he explained. 'Everything is fine so long as Maghrebin individuals are relegated to being gangsters or criminals, but once they become doctors, like my wife, then more and more people feel threatened. And people are even more racist.' In other words, the increased visibility of Maghrebin-origin individuals like himself and his wife in middle-class positions in society challenges conceptions of French society as white. Such a perceived 'threat' only heightens the exclusion this population faces. Moreover, Karim and others

live in a French Republican society that not only disavows race and ethnicity as bases for identity but also communities based on identities.

But Karim believes this is only true for racial and ethnic minorities in France. 'Whites can just be individuals, they are just French. A group of whites is not seen as a group or a community but whenever there is a group of blacks or Maghrébins, they are accused of being communitarianist,' he explained. Whiteness is the default in French society (Ndiaye 2008). As such, the connection between French and white operates at both individual and institutional levels (Jugé and Perez 2006). Therefore, there is nothing exceptional about whites congregating amongst themselves, yet it becomes visible and problematic when people of color do it. Karim further clarified for me how many Maghrebin-origin and sub-Saharan African-origin individuals live far from the center of Paris—often in neighborhoods with poor transportation to the city and few employment opportunities. 'But they did not choose to live in those neighborhoods, they were put there,' he explained. Karim thinks these conditions in France are only getting worse. He hears the word 'white' more today than when he was growing up, as if people are more explicit in discussing who belongs and who does not in France.

As I have argued elsewhere (Beaman 2015), many middle-class children of Maghrebin immigrants refer to the legal dimensions of being French over its cultural dimensions in order to assert themselves as French. As does Nasser, they acknowledge that many people see being French as being synonymous with being white, yet they challenge this conception by defining being as French as having legal ties to the nation. So even if they are excluded from the cultural dimensions of being French or from actually being included in French society, they can still assert that they are technically French because they are French citizens. Noura, a 30 year old of Algerian origin who lives in Drancy, a northeastern *banlieue* of Paris, similarly asserts a place for herself and other children of North African immigrants in French society, while also recognizing its various inherent problems:

We have to combat this myth that to be French means you have to be white, or you have to have Judeo-Christian background ... there should be no hierarchy between children who come from a long line of French relatives and children of immigrants ... Minorities are often not seen as legitimate. The media only focuses on their problems, not their successes.

Even though technically Noura and other children of North African immigrants have a claim to being a part of French society, they acknowledge that they are not treated as such. Being French is often not equated with having French citizenship but involving 'cultural markers of birth, ancestry, and accent as well as residence' (McCrone and Bechhofer 2010, 921). And these cultural markers are sustained by racial and ethnic distinctions. The

boundaries around French identity require whiteness and the exclusion of immigrant-origin individuals tied to its colonial empire, which is why the North African second-generation can never fully belong despite their assertions to the contrary. France therefore continues to perpetuate racism and white supremacy despite its colorblind racial ideology.<sup>9</sup>

One way that difference is marked in France outside of explicit racial and ethnic categorization is through language related to immigration, as I discussed earlier. The Maghrébin second-generation is often described as foreigners or in related to the immigration of their parents, rather than their native-born existence in France. But this is different for 'white' children of immigrants in France. For example, former French president Nicolas Sarkozy is a second-generation French person, as he was born in France to a Hungarian immigrant father. Yet his immigrant origin posed no barrier to his political career or ascension to the French presidency. He was and is seen as French and was never considered not French. I argue that this is because Sarkozy is white, and therefore it was not difficult to imagine him as representative of French society. Such success is almost unimaginable for an individual of Algerian, Moroccan, or Tunisian origin. He or she would not be considered a legitimate member of the French Republic. Sabri, a 30 year old of Tunisian origin, recalled how Sarkozy once likened himself to Obama in an interview, on the grounds that both were children of immigrants, though Sabri noted that 'the son of a white immigrant is not the son of a black immigrant. It's not the same thing.'

The differentiation between Sarkozy and Maghrebin and other non-white descendants of immigrants is further illustrative of how non-whites are only provisional guests in French society. Goldberg (2006) notes this as well, writing, "The idea of the European excludes those categorically as non-European, as being not white. [It says] You are here but don't (really or fully) belong. Your sojourn is temporary, so don't get too comfortable' (347). Many respondents are continually asked where they are from, as if France could not conceivably be an answer to that question.

### **Discussion: whiteness in France and beyond**

Here, I have brought together literatures on whiteness, race and racism, and racial formation and applied them to the French context to illustrate how non-white individuals conceptualize French identity as a white one. I have used the example of the middle-class segment of the Maghrebin second-generation in order to unpack France's racial project and demonstrate how whiteness as the norm is part of this racial project. Even though many respondents see being French as constitutive of their identities, they understand that their compatriots do not see them as French which they attribute to their being non-white. The racialization of French identity as white

exposes the tensions of French Republicanism, which both directly and indirectly denies France's longstanding ethnic diversity due to its colonial and immigration histories. Considering how whiteness operates in France through the perspectives of non-white individuals also illustrates how white and whiteness can have social meaning, even in a society where they do not 'exist' and purports to be colorblind.

France is a society often obsessed with losing its identity. The Front National has capitalized on this 'crisis' through an 'Islamization of France' rhetoric, or the idea that French identity is being eroded by the growing presence of Muslims, or non-whites more generally. This partly explains why, for example, having Halal food at supermarkets or removing pork from school cafeteria menus generates so much controversy (Almeida 2017). I argue that this also relates to how whiteness is continually in crisis, and how it continually reinforces itself in response to this crisis. As such, protecting French identity requires protecting whiteness as default. My thinking of how white identity or whiteness is seen as a default in French society relies upon a broader construction of European identity or Europeanness as white. As white supremacy is global (Weiner 2012), considering how it operates in France reveals how France is also a part of a global racial and ethnic hierarchy.

Moreover, I am reminded of Stuart Hall's example of tea as a symbol of the United Kingdom – another context where whiteness is the default category. Yet tea is a product of the British colonial empire in India, as 'not a single tea plantation exists within the United Kingdom' (1991, 49). This image of a homogenous white society contradicts the non-white component of the U.K. And more recently, whiteness as default relates to recent immigration-related events in Europe. The case of Brexit in the U.K., the vote for the U.K. to leave the European Union, can largely be understood through xenophobic and racist sentiment and a fear of losing an essential British cultural identity. Similarly, the rise of the Far Right in societies besides France, such as Germany or the Netherlands, and the so-termed Syrian refugee crisis and how different European societies have responded to it reflect how whiteness is central to discussions who is an ideal citizen or ideal member of society (Garner 2017).

In titling this article with the question as to whether or not French people are white, I sought to interrogate how understandings of French identity are racialized and synonymous with whiteness, as well as how people outside of those definitions understand the relationship between whiteness and French identity. Yet, as Fanon aptly illustrated, blackness and whiteness are co-constitutive of each other, therefore a focus on the racial and ethnic othered populations must include a consideration of how whiteness sustains such otherness. Therefore, if Fanon was understood as Black and not French, being French is understood as white.

## Notes

1. <https://nyansapofest.org/>.
2. [https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2017/05/28/anne-hidalgo-demande-l-annulation-d-un-festival-en-partie-interdit-aux-blancs\\_5135073\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2017/05/28/anne-hidalgo-demande-l-annulation-d-un-festival-en-partie-interdit-aux-blancs_5135073_3224.html); [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/06/12/why-its-so-hard-for-minorities-in-france-to-find-safe-spaces/?utm\\_term=.2ce93a581320](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/06/12/why-its-so-hard-for-minorities-in-france-to-find-safe-spaces/?utm_term=.2ce93a581320) I should note that a compromise was reached in terms of the festival in which the exclusive events would be held at the private venues and the festival events that were open to everyone could be held at private venues.
3. [https://twitter.com/\\_LICRA\\_/status/868123586518757376?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E868123586518757376%7Ctwgr%5E373939313b636f6e74726f6c&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.lemonde.fr%2Fsociete%2Farticle%2F2017%2F05%2F28%2Fanne-hidalgo-demande-l-annulation-d-un-festival-en-partie-interdit-aux-blancs\\_5135073\\_3224.html](https://twitter.com/_LICRA_/status/868123586518757376?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E868123586518757376%7Ctwgr%5E373939313b636f6e74726f6c&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.lemonde.fr%2Fsociete%2Farticle%2F2017%2F05%2F28%2Fanne-hidalgo-demande-l-annulation-d-un-festival-en-partie-interdit-aux-blancs_5135073_3224.html).
4. <https://global-race.site.ined.fr/fr/evenements/autres-manifestations/>.
5. Part of this is due to the conflation between European and Christian as identities (Bonnett 1998).
6. Moreover, this is similar to equating whiteness with 'eliteness.' Ayling (2017) argues that the colonial relationship between Nigeria and the UK has colored Nigerian parents' perceptions of quality education which leads them to prefer sending their children to private schools in the UK, versus high-quality schools in Nigeria.
7. Although Omi and Winant (1994) theoretical frameworks of racial formation and the racial project have been criticized as solely applicable to the United States, I suggest that their frameworks are quite applicable to non-United States contexts as, among other characteristics, they do not rely on Black/White binaries. In addition, I would like to challenge the idea that an American understanding of race and ethnicity is completely divorced from a European one, particularly when considering the interlinking histories of slavery by both the United States and several European countries (Goldberg 2006).
8. This is not unlike the experiences of people of color in other plural societies, including the United States, where they have to contend with whiteness as the default for national identities (see Trieu and Lee 2016).
9. One example of this is how so-called neutral laws have disparate outcomes based on race and ethnicity (Moschel 2011).

## Acknowledgments

I thank Nasar Meer for organizing this special issue and for his feedback and guidance. I also thank the reviewers for their useful comments and suggestions. Finally, I thank respondents for their generosity and participation. All errors are my own.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.



## ORCID

Jean Beaman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1645-0968>

## References

- Alba, R. D., and N. Foner. 2015. *Strangers No More: Immigration and the Challenges of Integration in North America and Western Europe*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Almeida, D. 2017. "Exclusionary Secularism: The Front National and the Reinvention of *Laïcité*." *Modern & Contemporary France* 25 (3): 249–263. doi:10.1080/09639489.2016.1272561.
- Ayling, P. 2017. "Whiteness as a Symbol of Quality Education: An Analysis of Perceptions of Quality Education among Affluent Nigerian Parents." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the British Sociological Association, Manchester, April 4–7.
- Beaman, J. 2015. "Boundaries of Frenchness: Cultural Citizenship and France's Middle-Class North African Second Generation." *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* 22 (1): 36–52. doi:10.1080/1070289X.2014.931235.
- Beaman, J. 2017. *Citizen Outsider: Children of North African Immigrants in France*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Beauchemin, C., C. Hamel, M. Lesne, and P. Simon. 2010. "Les Discriminations: Une Question De Minorités Visibles." *Population & Sociétés* (INED) 466. [https://www.ined.fr/fichier/s\\_rubrique/19134/466.fr.pdf](https://www.ined.fr/fichier/s_rubrique/19134/466.fr.pdf)
- Beydoun, K. A. 2013. "The French Kiss 'Race' Goodbye." *Al Jazeera*, June 2. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/06/20136273349196523.html>
- Bonilla-Silva, E. 2012. "The Invisible Weight of Whiteness: The Racial Grammar of Everyday Life in Contemporary America." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35 (2): 173–194.
- Bonnett, A. 1998. "Who Was White? the Disappearance of non-European White Identities and the Formation of European Racial Whiteness." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (6): 1029–1055. doi:10.1080/01419879808565651.
- Byrne, B. 2007. "England – Whose England? Narratives of Nostalgia, Emptiness and Evasion in Imaginations of National Identity." *The Sociological Review* 55 (3): 509–530. doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.2007.00720.x.
- Chabal, E. 2015. *A Divided Republic: Nation, State and Citizenship in Contemporary France*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cretton, V. *Forthcoming*. "Performing Whiteness: Racism, Skin Colour, and Identity in Western Switzerland." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.
- Emirbayer, M., and M. Desmond. 2015. *The Racial Order*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Essed, P., and S. Trienekens. 2008. "'Who Wants to Feel White?' Race, Dutch Culture and Contested Identities." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31 (1): 52–72. doi:10.1080/01419870701538885.
- Fanon, F. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.
- Fleming, C. 2017. *Resurrecting Slavery: Racial Legacies and White Supremacy in France*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Gallagher, C., and F. W. Twine. 2017. "From Wave to Tsunami: The Growth of Third Wave Whiteness." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40 (9): 1598–1603. doi:10.1080/01419870.2017.1308535.

- Garner, S. 2016. *A Moral Economy of Whiteness: Four Frames of Racializing Discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Garner, S. 2017. "Surfing the Third Wave of Whiteness Studies: Reflections on Twine and Gallagher." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40 (9): 1582–1597. doi:[10.1080/01419870.2017.1300301](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1300301).
- Goldberg, D. T. 2006. "Racial Europeanization." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29 (2): 331–364. doi:[10.1080/01419870500465611](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870500465611).
- Goldberg, D. T. 2009. *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Hall, S. 1991. "Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities." In *Culture, Globalization, and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, edited by A. D. King, 44–68. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- Harris, C. 1993. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106 (8): 1707–1791. doi:[10.2307/1341787](https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787).
- Hughey, M. 2010. "The (Dis)Similarities of White Racial Identities: The Conceptual Framework of 'Hegemonic Whiteness'." *Ethnic & Racial Studies* 33: 1289–1309. doi:[10.1080/01419870903125069](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870903125069).
- Jugé, T. S., and M. P. Perez. 2006. "The Modern Colonial Politics of Citizenship and Whiteness in France." *Social Identities* 12 (2): 187–212. doi:[10.1080/13504630600583387](https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630600583387).
- Kastoryano, R. 2004. "Race and Ethnicity in France." In *Social Inequalities in Comparative Perspective*, edited by F. Devine, and M. C. Waters, 66–88. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Kastoryano, R., and A. Escafré-Dublet. 2012. "France." In *Addressing Tolerance and Diversity Discourses in Europe: A Comparative Overview of 16 European Countries*, edited by R. Zapata-Barrero, and A. Triandafyllidou, 27–47. Barcelona: Barcelona Centre for International Affairs.
- Kaufmann, E. 2006. "The Dominant Ethnic Moment: Towards the Abolition of Whiteness?" *Ethnicities* 6 (2): 231–253. doi:[10.1177/1468796806063754](https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796806063754).
- Keaton, T. D. 2009. "'Black (American) Paris' and the 'Other France': The Race Question and Questioning Solidarity." In *Black Europe and the African Diaspora*, edited by D. C. Hine, T. D. Keaton, and S. Small, 95–118. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Keaton, T. D. 2010. "The Politics of Race-Blindness: (Anti) Blackness and Category-Blindness in Contemporary France." *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 7 (1): 103–131. doi:[10.1017/S1742058X10000202](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X10000202).
- Keskinen, S. 2017. "Racialization, Minority Activism, and the Threat of Separatism." Paper presented at the British Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Manchester, UK.
- Lentin, A. 2008. "Europe and the Silence about Race." *European Journal of Social Theory* 11 (4): 487–503. doi:[10.1177/1368431008097008](https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431008097008).
- Lewis, A. 2004. "What Group?' Studying Whites and Whiteness in the Era of 'Color-Blindness'." *Sociological Theory* 22 (4): 623–646. doi:[10.1111/j.0735-2751.2004.00237.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0735-2751.2004.00237.x).
- Lombardo, P., and J. Pujol. 2011. "Le Niveau De Vie Des Descendants D'immigrés." In *Les revenus et le patrimoine des ménages*, 73–81. Paris: INSEE.
- McCrone, D., and F. Bechhofer. 2010. "Claiming National Identity." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33 (6): 921–948. doi:[10.1080/01419870903457199](https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870903457199).

- Meurs, D., A. Pailhé, and P. Simon. 2006. "The Persistence of Intergenerational Inequalities Linked to Immigration: Labor Market Outcomes for Immigrants and Their Descendants in France." *Population* 61 (5–6): 645–682. doi:10.3917/pope.605.0645.
- Moschel, M. 2011. "Race in Mainland European Legal Analysis: Towards a European Critical Race Theory." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34 (10): 1648–1664. doi:10.1080/01419870.2011.566623.
- Müller, U. A. 2011. "Far Away so Close: Race, Whiteness, and German Identity." *Identities* 18 (6): 620–645. doi:10.1080/1070289X.2011.672863.
- Ndiaye, P. 2008. *La Condition noire: Essai sur une minorité française*. Paris: Editions Calmann-Lévy.
- Noiriel, G. 1996. *The French Melting Pot*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Omi, M., and H. Winant. 1994. *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*. New York: Routledge.
- Peabody, S., and T. Stovall, eds. 2003. *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Silberman, R. 2011. "The Employment of Second Generations in France: The Republican Model and the November 2005 Riots." In *The Next Generation: Immigrant Youth in a Comparative Perspective*, edited by R. Alba, and M. C. Waters, 283–316. New York: New York University Press.
- Silberman, R., R. Alba, and I. Fournier. 2007. "Segmented Assimilation in France? Discrimination in the Labor Market against the Second Generation." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30 (1): 1–27. doi:10.1080/01419870601006488.
- Silverstein, P. 2008. "Thin Lines on the Pavement: The Racialization and Spatialization of Violence in Postcolonial (Sub)Urban France." In *Gendering Urban Space in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa*, edited by K. Ali, and M. Rieker, 169–206. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan.
- Simon, P. 2012. *French National Identity and Integration: Who Belongs to the National Community?* Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.
- Strauss, A., and J. M. Corbin. 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Tribalat, M. 2004. "An Estimation of the Foreign-origin Populations of France in 1999." *Population* 59 (1): 49–80. doi: 10.3917/pope.401.0049.
- Trieu, M., and H. Lee. 2016. "Midwest Asian Americans, Internalized Racial Oppression, and Identity Shifts." Paper presented at Global Cities Symposium, Purdue University, October 17–18.
- Twine, F. W., and C. Gallagher. 2008. "The Future of Whiteness: A Map of the 'Third Wave'." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 3 (1): 4–24. doi:10.1080/01419870701538836.
- Weiner, M. F. 2012. "Towards a Critical Global Race Theory." *Sociology Compass* 6 (4): 332–350. doi:10.1111/j.1751-9020.2012.00457.x.
- Weiner, M. F. 2015. "Whitening a Diverse Dutch Classroom: White Cultural Discourses in an Amsterdam Primary School." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38 (2): 359–376. doi:10.1080/01419870.2014.894200.
- Wieviorka, M. 1992. *La France raciste*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.