INTRODUCTION

In July 2015, I stopped in France on the way to do research for an ethnography course I was to teach at Yale that fall. I stayed with an Airbnb host who had emigrated to France from Morocco nearly thirty years earlier, and we talked for hours. She spoke superb French, lived in a carefully maintained downtown apartment, had multiple degrees from French universities, and worked as a business consultant. Still, she had to deal with people who acted as though she did not belong in France.

Our conversations sparked a project that would continue until this book went to press. I returned to France in August 2016, choosing to stay with Airbnb hosts whose online profiles suggested family roots outside of Europe. (In the US, this might be called reverse racial profiling.) Wherever I stayed, I was struck by how readily my hosts talked about their lives, often at length and with deep emotion. These conversations led me to the research protocol I followed throughout this project. Before each of my next six trips to France, I chose one or two metropolitan areas and sent messages to potential Airbnb hosts explaining that I would be visiting their city not for tourism or business but to speak with them about life there. Many reacted positively. Abbas wrote back, "Your project sounds very interesting, and it will be a pleasure if I can help you," and Olivier wrote, "This sounds very interesting!" With each host who wished to participate, I booked a night or two in the extra bedroom or apartment they rented out. As the trips progressed, reviews on my Airbnb profile from prior hosts piqued the interest of others. When I inquired about staying with her, Aya wrote, "The comments left by other hosts make your project sound appealing, so I'll happily take part."

During these trips, I took public transportation from one home to the next, carrying my duffel bag and backpack. Upon arrival, I would give my host a detailed description of the proj-

ect and the interview I hoped to conduct, answer any questions they had, and then ask if they wanted to participate. I would also ask if they were comfortable having the interview recorded. Virtually everyone was enthusiastic. During the next day or two, we would conduct the interview, but also share meals and talk about whatever came to mind. If the host lived with family members, I would get to know them, too. Some hosts took me on walks in their neighborhood or introduced me to friends, and one brought me to a family cookout in the country.

I continued traveling to France until I had spoken with people of varying backgrounds throughout the country. In all, I conducted interviews in and around nine cities: Bordeaux, Lille, Lyon, Marseille, Nantes, Nice, Paris, Strasbourg, and Toulouse. While some of my hosts lived within the city itself, others were in suburbs, nearby towns, even exurbs. I recorded 156 hours of interviews with a total of sixty-six people and had hundreds of hours of informal conversations. On the few occasions when I had mistakenly chosen an Airbnb host of European origin, I interviewed that person, too, to see what would come of it. During my few hours off, typically during a host's workday, I walked around town, observing the scene and talking with people.

The interviewees trace their roots to many parts of the world: nine countries in sub-Saharan Africa, three countries in Northwest Africa, three islands in the Caribbean, and thirteen countries in Asia and South America. As with people of non-European origin in France generally (see Tribalat 2015: 21–23; Breuil-Genier, Borrel, and Lhommeau 2011: 33–35), the great majority of the interviewees originate from former French colonies, though some originate from former colonies of other European countries or from countries that had not been colonies. I say "originate" because many of the interviewees have lived their entire lives in France; it was their parents or grandparents who had come from elsewhere. Many spoke of themselves in this way, for example, as *d'origine sénégalaise* (of Senegalese origin). I also use the umbrella term "colonies" to cover the various forms of European control of foreign lands and people, including protectorates, territories, mandates, and, in the case of Algeria, *départements* (where the great majority of indigenous people were controlled by Europeans).

Originating from such different places, the interviewees have different cultural backgrounds and physical appearances. As dis-

cussed below, most categorized themselves according to three perceived physical types—Maghrebi, Black, or Asian—each of which is associated with a presumed geographical origin. For Maghrebis, this is the "Maghreb" of Northwest Africa; for Blacks, usually sub-Saharan Africa or the Caribbean; for Asians, the countries of East Asia. They also range in age, from their late teens to early seventies, and in their economic circumstances and temperaments. While some interviewees were better off than others, almost all would be considered middle class by Americans.[1] I interviewed both men and women, though slightly more men. The interviewees live in or near cities of different sizes throughout France. While some came to France in early adulthood, most grew up in France, and a few come from families that settled there well before they were born. Ironically, some interviewees have deeper roots in France than former Interior Minister and then President Nicolas Sarkozy, whose father came to the country as a young man and whose mother's father came as a teenager.

The interviews followed a flexible protocol. We began with an autobiographical overview, during which I did not interrupt or ask questions. This continued for however long the interviewee wished, ranging from ten minutes to more than an hour. One began with his grandparents, who had become French citizens, and concluded his account three generations later, with his adult son. After the autobiographical sketch, we would return to the various periods of the interviewee's life, from childhood to the present. While some interviews were completed in only one session, exhausting both of us, most required two or more sessions. At the end of each interview, I asked my only predetermined questions: Was there anything the interviewee wished to add? Had I said anything insulting? Here, as throughout each interview, it was important for the experience to be collaborative.

Each interview was a conversation. While I asked questions, interviewees were free to speak at whatever length they wished and say whatever they thought important. Olivier described the experience as an "interesting way to interrogate myself," and Nassim said that his interview "allowed me to understand things." I asked each person to set me straight at any time. I assured each that I would not share the recordings with anyone and that I would not reveal their real names or where they live when I published the results. All the names in this book have

been changed, and no interviewee's city or town is identified.[2] In a few places, I shifted minor details to protect a person's privacy. After I returned to the United States, I sent the interview recording to each interviewee who had requested it. No one ever asked me to keep what they said confidential. To the contrary, many asked me to include their accounts in whatever I published.

The interviews were often emotional. Some people cried or took breaks to compose themselves. Samuel said that his interview "churned up memories of great misfortune," but that he "had to put it all in place. Telling you certain things," he added, "helped me enormously." Vincent said that his interview was "the first time I've thought about" various aspects of his life. François was "proud" of having participated in the project, and Olivier told me that he found the experience "very interesting, very exciting." Tarek, who suffered grievously during his adolescence, said that his interview was "the first time I've told anyone about this. It gave me the right to tell my story." At the end of his interview, Tarek added:

> It was a pleasure to take part in this exchange. I hope that a great number of people will do this and that you'll succeed with your project. You spoke to me about writing a book. If one day you write and publish a book, I would very much like to read it. I hope you distribute as many copies as possible.

And Thomas said:

> It has given me pleasure to share my experiences. I hope you recount them. And if what you write helps people to be open-minded, that is the ultimate goal; to be open-minded and avoid psychological barriers. It would be as if I succeeded along with you.

Months after his interview, Vincent emailed me, saying:

> Our encounter was very powerful for me. It's funny to know that someone halfway around the world knows me better than my close friends. I have had a lot of highlights in my life. Our time together is one of them.

Such comments inspired me to keep making these trips and then spend more than three years writing this book.

Of course, the interviews did not happen in a vacuum. In France, attitudes toward non-European immigrants and their descendants are often intense. As readers of this book will likely know, many people in France complain about the purported behavior of such people, particularly those who live in the notorious *banlieues*. (While *banlieue* simply means suburb, the word is often used as a shorthand for the broken-down housing projects called *HLMs* or *cités* located on the outskirts of French cities.) In 2005, following the deaths of teenagers who had run from the police in a Parisian *banlieue* and the ensuing upheaval, then-Interior Minister Sarkozy famously vowed to use high-power water hoses to "clean out the scum."[3] In 2020, Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin went even further, speaking of the *ensauvagement* (roughly, becoming savage) of people who live in these communities. A series of large-scale terrorist attacks that rocked France in 2015–16 (the same period as my first trips) hardened feelings throughout the country. Mostly committed by self-described Muslims, these and later attacks have been used to stigmatize entire categories of people, usually labeled "Muslims," "Arabs," or "Maghrebis."

People of non-European origin are often criticized for their supposed failure of *intégration*—not the same word as "integration" in English, but more like "assimilation" or "fitting in." As Gérard Noiriel (1996) and others have chronicled, France has long been a country of immigrants. Until 1945, the vast majority came from elsewhere in Europe. Within a generation or two, people in these families had usually learned French, adopted core French values, and lived according to French norms. They had integrated themselves into the larger society and, having done so, came to be seen as French.[4] Many claim that the non-Europeans who have come to France since about 1945 have failed to do the same. Even worse, some argue, are these people's children and grandchildren—people who have spent their entire lives in France—who have purportedly refused to integrate themselves into French society. Speaking the nonstandard French of the *banlieues*, they are said to lack French values and to behave in antisocial, if not criminal, ways. Although most of these so-called "second-" and "third-generation immigrants"—a revealing oxymoron—are French citizens, many critics contend that they do not deserve to be seen as French. The problem,

they claim, is not where their families came from, their religion, or their physical appearance, but their failure to integrate into French society.

Testing the validity of this position—that being accepted into French society has everything to do with *intégration* and nothing to do with physical appearance or religion—was the central goal of this ethnographic project. But rather than pursuing the airy abstraction of acceptance into French society, I decided to focus on the experiences and feelings of each interviewee. Had they worked to integrate themselves into the language, values, and norms of people they see as unquestionably French? If so, had they succeeded? Did they feel accepted? Especially among interviewees who grew up in France, questions of identity were central. Did they feel French? Did they feel that people whom they accept as unquestionably French see them as French? How have these feelings evolved over time?

As this book will show, the answers to these questions varied enormously. The level of acceptance felt by the interviewees ranges, to put it colloquially, from mostly through sort of, sometimes, in some ways, with some people, in some circumstances, to not at all. One near-constant, however, was the interviewee's identity in the eyes of others: even a person who feels French, and who has mastered the language, values, and norms of people they see as indisputably French, confronts a barrier grounded in their non-European physical appearance. To their dismay, the great majority of interviewees feel that they are seen as Maghrebi, Black, Asian, etc., *rather than* as French. With this identity comes a raft of social and economic consequences, including stereotyping, bias, and outright discrimination. More painful still is the emotional cost many reported, particularly in feelings of inferiority and a fear of rejection.[5] The most dramatic consequence is visited upon those who have spent their entire lives in France: if you are not seen as French, then what are you? The answer, according to many, is brutal: you are a foreigner in your own country.

Perhaps because almost all of the interviewees were Airbnb hosts—people with a room or apartment to rent, and thus participants in the larger economy—it turned out that the majority had attended French universities and subscribed to what they saw as French norms and values, notably *laïcité* (today largely seen

as the exclusion of religion from the public sphere).[6] Although some were Muslim, none wore religiously oriented clothes like veils or skullcaps in public. Their homes were like other homes I have visited in France. Dozens of interviewees spoke explicitly and repeatedly about their success in integrating themselves into what they saw as the French way of life, with a few declaring that they had become "*plus français que les Français*" (more French than the French).

I should be clear about my own views here. I do not see such devotion to fitting into someone else's norms as inherently virtuous, and certainly don't think that conforming to the norms and whims of those in a dominant position should be a condition for acceptance. But this is an ethnographic project grounded in the accounts of flesh-and-blood people who have the feelings and attitudes they have. I listened as carefully as I could to these people as they spoke about their lives—about their goals, experiences, and feelings about issues that were important to them—and have tried to communicate their accounts faithfully.

As with the interviews, this book focuses on what individuals have experienced during their lives and how they have made sense of these experiences. This does not mean that the book is narrow in scope. To the contrary, by listening carefully to dozens of people who feel they are like millions of French people in virtually every way other than their non-European appearance (and, for some, religion or name), and then by reporting and synthesizing what they said, I have had a chance to provide an in-depth view of this important segment of people in France today. Their experiences may be relevant throughout Europe and beyond.

While the interviews were wide-ranging, they always included two issues: the interviewee's personal identity (how they think about themselves) at various periods of life and their sense of social identity (how others see them), particularly whether they felt accepted by those whose French identity they accept. These are hardly simple issues, and ambiguity, nuance, contradiction, and uncertainty—all the variety of human experience—came into play. Nor are these issues static. Like everyone else, the interviewees have gone through different stages of life. They have grown up and been educated, joined the work world, and held a variety of jobs at different levels. While some have remained single, most have married or entered into long-term re-

lationships and have had children, even grandchildren. Some have gotten divorced or separated from their partners. They have lived in different neighborhoods, some in different cities. During the same period, France has undergone changes, too, including economic uncertainty, terrorism, and disputes relating to non-European immigration and the absorption of later generations. Through this sweep of time, each of the interviewees has had experiences that changed how they see themselves and how they feel others see them.

Since I was an inextricable participant in this process as both a visitor and interviewer, I should describe myself. I am in my late sixties and am considered "White" in the United States. As will be seen, various interviewees alluded to my skin color and the texture and color of my hair during the interviews, usually in comparison to their own or that of their family members (in some cases, noting that my skin is darker than theirs).[7] Obviously but also importantly, I was from elsewhere; someone who arrived by prearrangement in their home, joined them for meals and conversation for the day or two I stayed there, and then departed. Particularly during the interviews, which were conducted apart from other people, they spoke with me about issues that many had not discussed with people they know, including neighbors, friends, and coworkers with whom they interact every day. Further, I am not a member of French society. This was evident from my accented French and my unfamiliarity with the prejudices that anyone living in France would know. I did not think ill of the interviewees; indeed, I was eager to learn about life from their own perspective.

My own background should also be noted. Although I was born and raised in New York City, my father came to the United States as a young child, and my mother was a child of immigrants. While growing up, I heard stories of the bias they had faced in the US. During my twenties, I lived off and on in West Africa and did doctoral studies in anthropology. I then became a lawyer. Over the last fifteen years, I have returned to my original interest in other societies and ways of life, traveling to various countries, particularly Morocco and Mali, to listen to people talk about their lives and concerns. I have also worked closely with West African asylum-seekers in New York and taught an ethnography course.

OVERVIEW OF EXISTING ETHNOGRAPHIES

In recent years, there have been at least twenty-two book-length ethnographies focusing on people of non-European origin in France. These are Beaman (2017), Boucher (2010), Bowen (2017, 2010), Chuang (2021), Domergue (2010), Fernando (2014), Fleming (2017), Kastoryano (1986), Keaton (2006), Killian (2006), Kobelinsky (2010), Larchanché (2020), Mahut (2017), M. Mazouz (1988), Provencher (2017), Rigaud (2010), Selby (2012), P. Silverstein (2004), Slooter (2019), Sourou (2016), and Tetreault (2015).[8] Many are of high quality and all contribute to the literature about the populations they address. Even taken together, however, these ethnographies leave some imbalances and gaps:

- More than half of these ethnographies focus substantially or exclusively on Paris or its *banlieues*.[9] This leaves areas throughout France—including the metropolitan areas of Lille, Lyon, Marseille, Nantes, Nice, Strasbourg, and Toulouse—largely unrepresented.
- The majority focus either primarily or exclusively on Maghrebi people.[10] Only three focus on Black people.[11]
- Only a few of these ethnographies cover more than one geographical area in France or more than one social category of people (e.g., Maghrebis).
- Many target very specialized populations. These include asylum applicants at a residential center; people who sought services at a psychiatric services center; people who sought services at an intercultural center; people of Laotian origin living in Montpelier; people who recently left a single African city to settle in the Paris area; fourteen teenage girls living in a Paris *banlieue*; and people of Martinican or Guadeloupean origin in the Paris area.[12]
- While most focus on poor or marginalized people—an extremely important segment of society—only a few address those who have made their way into the middle class.

Another limitation arises from the studies' methodologies. While many are rich in detail, few seem to have had extensive recordings to draw upon. This may be understandable, particularly among groups or in public places, but many important

details are lost in even the most thorough field notes. These may include patterns of speech and word choices, shifts in affect, and signals of interactional dynamics. By contrast, a large library of recordings allows the ethnographer to listen, listen, and listen again after fieldwork is complete, as I did during the first two years of the Covid pandemic. Recordings also allow the readers of this book to "hear" much of what was said through hundreds of direct quotes. I hope these passages provide an immediacy, and perhaps a deeper understanding, of the interviewees' lived experiences than any paraphrasing could.

PIVOTAL TERMS

Since this book focuses on the interviewees' accounts, the words they used in describing themselves and others require special attention. This is especially true where words have a different meaning from what English speakers would understand by their apparent English equivalent (what the French aptly call "false friends").

Français. While *Français* (feminine: *Française*) means "French," of course, most interviewees use the word in a distinctive way. People of non-European origin who were born and raised in France—people who may speak only French, who fully share French values, and who feel themselves to be French—are usually *not* referred to as "French." Except when speaking of their own sense of identity—many said, often emphatically, "I am French"—most interviewees reserved the word for people who have all these attributes *and* a perceived European physical appearance.[13] Throughout this book, I will follow these interviewees' way of speaking, putting "French" in quotes where needed to communicate the kind of person they see as indisputably French.

Various people pointed to the importance of skin color, together with the associated hair texture and color, shape of nose, eyes, etc., to being seen as "French." These include interviewees who grew up in France and are fully integrated into French values and norms of behavior, even those who say they are French. This way of speaking arose repeatedly. For Caroline, "a French person is White." If Jean refers to someone as "French," he said, "implicitly, I'd be saying that he's White." Karim thinks that it is

"impossible" to be French without being White. Tsiory believes that any children he has in France would never be considered French because French people are "White, White, White." Slapping his arm, François said bitterly, "to be French is in the skin."

Hiba's interview brought home the equation of skin color with being seen as French. She and her husband are of Berber (rather than Arab) origin, she says, and their son has the same relatively pale skin as they have. Laughing, she put her arm next to mine and said, "You're darker than me. My son is more French than you!" That my life story and accent make it obvious that I'm American was not at issue. For Hiba, her son is "more French" than I am because his skin is lighter than mine.

Of course, being "French" is not an absolute; some people are neither entirely "French" nor entirely something else. A person with lighter skin may be seen, in Hiba's words, as "more French" than someone with darker skin. The same sliding scale may operate with regard to religion (some consider Catholics to be more French than Muslims), name (European names are said to be more French than non-European names), and behavior (one interviewee eliminated his "expressive" gestures, he said, in order to be "more French"). But to be seen as indisputably French, almost all said that one must have a European appearance.

Maghrebis, Blacks, and Asians. Because the interviewees used the terms *Maghrébins*, *Noirs*, or *Asiatiques* to describe themselves and people they identify as like them, I use the translations Maghrebis, Blacks, and Asians for such people.[14] As discussed below, the main basis for being seen as Maghrebi, Black, or Asian is a person's perceived physical appearance and assumed geographical origin. But one must be careful when using these terms. Despite their grounding in a perceived physical appearance (and thus the terms' seeming objective reality to the interviewees), there is nothing essential about them. In other words, there is no biological or genetic basis for being seen as Maghrebi, Black, or Asian—or, for that matter, as French, European, or White. These are all social categories.

Race, racisme, and raciste. The interviewees used *racisme* and *raciste* much as Americans use "racism" and "racist," but that was not true of *race*. The highly contested status of race in French society is apparent from how the interviewees used—and did not use—the word. Jean, who identifies himself as Black, said

that "although there are people who speak of the black race, there is no black race. There's only the human race." But apart from Jean's rejection of a "black race," few people used the word *race* except to report times "French" people used it at their expense. Lina and Khira both reported being called "dirty Arab" or "dirty race" over the years, and Sami complained that people used the slogan "France for the French" to talk about "the White race." One day, a classmate of Elise's blurted out, "*nique ta race*" (roughly, "fuck your race").

Even if the word *race* was rarely used, the interviewees frequently described themselves and others according to perceived physical types. The word they typically used was *faciès*.

Faciès. While *faciès* (also *faciès* in plural) can be translated as "facial appearance" or "facial type," interviewees used this word to refer to a physical appearance thought to be characteristic of people who originate from a certain region of the world. The different perceived *faciès*—all stereotypes—were readily described by the interviewees. An "Arab *faciès*," they said, entails dark skin, curly black hair, and brown eyes. Maghrebis may have either an "Arab *faciès*" or a Berber *faciès*, like Hiba's, with stereotypically lighter skin. The *faciès* of Blacks is said to include very dark skin color, coiled black hair, and a broad nose. Like other Asians, Henri has, in his words, a "Chinese face," and Tsiory spoke of his "slanted eyes." A European *faciès* is said to involve pale skin, straight blond, red, or brown hair, a pointed nose, and eyes of any color.

One's perceived *faciès* is pivotal to one's social identity; that is, to how one is seen by others. Thus, while immigrants whose *faciès* are seen as European can become "French" once they or their children speak unaccented French and adopt French values and norms, this is not true for people from Africa and Asia, who, as Nadia said, "have a different *faciès*." Both Nour and Olivier are not seen as "French" despite their French values and behavior because, each of them reported, of "my *faciès*."

Some of the interviewees (and even more of the interviewees' children) have one parent of European origin and one of non-European origin. Such people, known as *métis* (feminine *métisse*; of mixed parents), would physiologically have a mixture of *faciès*, but, according to the interviewees, that is not how they are seen. Where the *faciès* of the parent of non-European origin is still evident in someone's appearance, he or she is seen as that

kind of person. François's children are *métis* and, although they were raised by their "French" mothers, he says that they are seen as Black rather than French. Abdel, whose father is "French" and mother Maghrebi, said that he is seen as Arab because of his "Arab head." The case of Henri and his son is instructive. Henri, whose mother is Asian and father "French," is seen as Asian because of what he called his "Asian *faciès*," but he said that his son, whose mother is "French," has a "European *faciès*" and has been able to present himself as "French."

Depending on the context, the word *faciès* will be translated as "physical appearance" or left in the original French.

Typé. While *typé* (feminine: *typée*) can be translated as "typed" or "typical," interviewees use the term in a distinct way: having the *faciès* characteristic of a familiar "type" of person. Maghrebis use this word to refer to someone who looks Arab. Samuel said that he has been "*typé*" since childhood, so is seen as "an Arab, not French." Elise said that she is only "a bit *typée*," while her brother Abdel, with his "very curly hair and beard," is "more *typé*." Asma's supervisor at work refused to use her Maghrebi first name, saying "Arabs, they're too much. What's more, you're pretty, not at all *typée*. You'll be Nicole."

To be more *typé* is to be less "French" in the eyes of others. For Clément, who is Black, a truly French person is "White, without color, not *typé*." And being more *typé* makes life more difficult. Vincent said that his son, whose mother is "French," has had fewer problems because "he's less *typé* in an Indian way."

Whites. The noun White (*Blanc*) is simple to translate but complicated in how it is used. As discussed below, the interviewees use the word "French" to index the (presumed) fact that the person being referred to would, *unlike the interviewee*, be seen as White. But, apparently unlike "French" people, the interviewees also use the word White for "French" (or "European") people. This was most pronounced among interviewees who identify themselves as Black: they used White interchangeably with "French." A few of the Maghrebi, Asian, and other interviewees also used White in this way, although far less frequently.[15]

Français (or Française) de souche. This expression, roughly meaning "of French stock" or "French to one's root," refers to a person whose family has been in France for generations. Vincent, Karim, and others used this term to describe their choice

of romantic partners or spouses. Emphasizing that his girlfriend "had no foreign origin at all" and that "physically, she represented the French woman," Samuel called her a "*Française de pure souche*." The term also arose when interviewees spoke of the National Front slogan "France for the French."[16] According to Fouzia, "When people say 'France for the French,' they mean 'France for the *Français de souche*.'" Excluded are people like Fouzia, who were born and raised in France and live like "French" people, but don't have a European *faciès*.

Intégration and assimilation. *Intégration* is the process by which an individual fits into a group of people, as when a new student fits into her new school or a person acts in accordance with a group's social norms. With his non-*banlieue* clothes, behavior, and language, Jean said, "I'm very well integrated." Yuka is sure she has "integrated" herself into her "French" community because, she said, "in my everyday life, when I go out, when I do something, I do it like other people." Since it might cause unnecessary confusion to translate this word as "integration," which Americans generally use to describe people of different "races" living in the same community or attending the same school, this book will often leave *intégration* in the French.

Unlike *intégration*, the French word *assimilation* will be uniformly translated as "assimilation," since the English word has much the same meaning. Although largely out of date in France (*assimilation* having been largely supplanted by *intégration*), it was used by a few interviewees. Abbas complained that even when people from outside Europe "try to integrate themselves, to assimilate," French people "continue to reject them." And Karim said he has done everything possible to "assimilate" into French society, but still feels that he will "never be accepted by the French."

THE LITERATURE RELATING TO RACE IN FRANCE

Lurking behind the interviewees' use of these words are issues that have received enormous attention in the academic community. Is it meaningful to talk about race in France? If so, what does race mean in that context? What are the perceived races in France today, and how are they interrelated? Is it significant

that the interviewees rarely use the word *race* except in recounting insults by "French" people?

Instead of providing a full-blown literature review, I focus on what is important to this ethnography: the writers who are most helpful in understanding what the interviewees mean by such words as *race*, *faciès*, and *typé*, and such categories as *Français*, *Maghrébin*, *Noir*, and *Asiatique*. The eminent sociologist Stuart Hall lays the groundwork. In a speech given in 1996, Hall described race as a "floating signifier" that

> *works like a language*. And signifiers refer to the systems and concepts of the classification of a culture, to its practices for *making meaning*. [They] gain their meaning . . . in the shifting relations of difference, which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field. Their meaning, because it is relational, and not essential, [is] different in different cultures, in different historical formations at different moments of time. (Hall 2021: 362; emphasis Hall's)

Hall argues that race is founded on a presumed "Nature = Culture" equivalence. Even though race has been debunked scientifically, as a cultural concept it "is made to follow on from nature, to lean on it for its justification" (367). And because race is simultaneously culture and (presumed) nature, "these two systems . . . correspond with one another, in such a way that it is possible to read off the one against the other" (367). In another essay, Hall provides an example from Europe: "'Blackness' has functioned as a sign that the people of African descent are closer to Nature, and *therefore* more likely to be lazy, lacking in higher intellectual faculties, driven by emotion rather than Reason" (Hall 2000: 223; emphasis his). "[T]he body is a text. And we are all readers of it. . . . We are readers of race, that's what we are doing, we are readers of social difference" (Hall 2021: 369).[17]

The interviewees' use of the terms *Maghrébin*, *Noir*, and *Asiatique* (translated here as Maghrebi, Black, and Asian) exemplifies Hall's theory. Although they live in different parts of France and come from an enormous range of personal and family backgrounds, these people spoke in essentially the same way. For them, someone who is thought to look like an Arab or Berber is labeled Maghrebi. A person with dark skin and coiled hair, perhaps with a wide nose and thick lips, is seen as Black. Someone

with a "Chinese face" and "slanted eyes" is seen as Asian. And while individuals vary widely in physical appearance—Elise described her brother Abdel as more *typé* than her, François is darker than his *métis* children—they are all classified according to the same relational system. Anyone can be "read" physically as a certain type of human being within this system and be presumed to have certain "natural" qualities, such as temperament and level of intelligence.

As will be seen in the chapters to come, this classificatory scheme has deeply affected the interviewees' lives. Hall's description of how Blackness functions in European societies is played out among the interviewees in France who are seen as Black, both in grossly demeaning stereotypes and ways in which they report being treated (chapter 2). Similarly, people who are seen as Maghrebi or Asian are thought to be a certain way naturally, and many interviewees report being treated accordingly (chapters 1 and 3).[18]

But what about ethnicity, which Hall describes as the "discourse where difference is grounded in cultural and religious features" (Hall 2000: 223)? Aren't Maghrebi, Black, and Asian all, to an important extent, cultural as well as racial categories? While this question cannot be fully addressed until the end of this book—after these categories and such related issues as religion are discussed in detail—it is worth bearing in mind that people lumped in the same category may trace their origins to different cultural traditions, and that many of the interviewees are culturally far more similar to "French" people than to their forebears in distant countries. Hall's theory of the relationship between ethnicity and race should be cited, as it will prove to be instructive:

> [T]hose who are stigmatized on ethnic grounds, because they are "culturally different" and therefore inferior, are often *also* characterized as physically different in significant ways. . . . The more "ethnicity" matters, the more its characteristics are represented as relatively fixed, inherent within a group, transmitted from generation to generation, not just by culture and education, but by biological inheritance. . . . Biological racism and cultural differentialism, therefore, constitute not two different systems, but racism's two registers. (Ibid.; emphasis his)

This leaves the category of people seen as "French." Here the sociologist Colette Guillaumin's theory of racism in France

proves useful. Writing in 1972, Guillaumin points to "the occultation of the Self, of which [White] people have no spontaneous awareness" (Guillaumin 1995 [1972]: 50).[19] The "racism prevalent in France," she contends, "recognizes only others and not itself. . . . It offers its own completely adequate explanation of lived experience, one that is literally so blindingly obvious that it prevents its proponents from also seeing, specifying and designating themselves as a race" (52). This racism "is so deeply ingrained in our social system that it distorts language to its own ends" (51). White is "used mainly adjectively," while such words as Black and Asian "have become nouns" (ibid.).

A number of anthropologists and sociologists have recently focused on the anomalous position of Whites in French society. Citing Guillaumin, Didier Fassin notes how the French language reveals "what people would rather hide—racism" (D. Fassin 2006b: 34). Only recently, Didier and Eric Fassin write, have some people "come to realize that the people called 'French' turn out to be 'white'" (D. and E. Fassin 2006: 9). Sarah Mazouz builds on the thinking of W.E.B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, as well as of Guillaumin and Fassin, in distinguishing between the concepts of "racialization" (the "logics by which racial hierarchies are produced") and "racisation" (the "process by which a dominant group defines a dominated group as constituting a race") (S. Mazouz 2020: 48–49; see Cohen and S. Mazouz 2021: 5–9). Controlling the process by which others are seen as (inferior) races, Whites are "racialized but in no way racized" (S. Mazouz 2020: 49). "Whiteness is invisible" (Cohen and S. Mazouz 2021: 8).

While these writers help explain why people seen as White speak of themselves as French rather than White, the interviewees' use of the word French is more nuanced. Many, such as Samuel, Nour, Hiba, Clément, Anna, Isabel, Henri, and Shayan, say "I am French" and yet, when referring to others, use the same word to indicate that the person has, *unlike them*, a European *faciès*. This is what Samuel, Nour, Anna, Isabel, Henri, and Shayan meant when they spoke of their spouses or partners as "French," often following up this reference with a physical description. Similarly, those like Henri and Samuel, who had such a parent, described that parent as "French."

Further, French was *not* the word these people typically used when referring to themselves. Samuel has spent his whole life

in France, has had a successful career among "French" people, and now lives in a wealthy neighborhood where, he said, "90 percent of the people are French." And while he responded, "I'm French," when I asked about his personal identity, he referred to himself as Maghrebi or Arab throughout two days of conversations and five hours of interviewing, often emphasizing his "Arab" appearance. Other interviewees did much the same, saying "I'm French" when asked about their identity, but usually referring to themselves as Black, Asian, or Maghrebi in other contexts.[20]

The sociolinguistic concept of "shifter" helps explain this choice of words. The reference of a term "shifts" regularly, "depending on the factors of a speech situation" that are presupposed by a "rule of use" when the speaker "indexes" something distinct in that situation. (M. Silverstein 1976: 24–25; see Gal and Irvine 2019). The circumstances and conditions being "indexed" by people like Samuel will be illustrated throughout this book: though they view themselves as French according to an ideology of Frenchness grounded in such non-physical qualities as a lifetime spent in France, adherence to such values as *laïcité* and *intégration*, and the quality of one's French, they are prevented by their *faciès* from being accepted as French socially. They may feel French, but, as they know too well, they aren't seen as French. Their *social* identity—Black, Asian, Maghrebi, etc., rather than French—is routinely indexed, and implicitly acknowledged, in their choice of words. Samuel's romantic relationship with a "French" woman—in his words, a "blonde with blue eyes!"—made him feel that he had entered "into the world that didn't want me." In ending the relationship, Samuel said, she "put me back in my place as a Maghrebi."

Where did the concept of race and the different categories of race come from? While this issue has also generated a vast literature, the historian Pap Ndiaye helps contextualize the interviewees' experience. "The modern notion of 'race,'" he says, "was invented to justify colonial domination, particularly slavery" (2008: 76; 2009: 48).[21] At least from the time of France's colonial conquests, "to be French was to be white" (2008: 84). "Whiteness was an index of normality and universality. It served as a criterion of civilization" (2008: 77), while "the populations being subjugated were defined as non-white and non-civilized" (2008: 84).

The salience of race did not dim as time went on. As Ndiaye reports, "during the period between the two World Wars, the racialization of French identity went hand in hand with a celebration of colonial exoticism, [serving to] distinguish the civilized from the non-civilized, the 'us' from the 'them'" (2008: 88). But this is not just history; "the imaginaries of racial stereotypes" dating from colonialism "persist over time" (2009: 55).

The question remains: does the concept of race really apply to France? Many argue that it does. In making this argument, historians like Ndiaye draw on centuries of French history, including France's involvement in the slave trade, its fabulously profitable exploitation of enslaved people in the Caribbean colonies, and its vast colonial empire, but also the nineteenth and early twentieth century pseudoscience of race advocated by such Frenchmen as Arthur de Gobineau and Georges Vacher de Lapouge, the World War II Vichy government, and Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front party (see, e.g., Noiriel 2006 and 2010; Beaud and Noiriel 2021; Ndiaye 2008; and Bleich 2004). Others argue that France has been a champion of race-free thinking and, sometimes, race-blind governance during the same period. They, too, have a rich history to cite, including the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, the French Constitution, the 1978 law prohibiting the collection of statistics based on race,[22] even the national motto "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" (see ibid.).[23] Both sides are right at least in one way: for more than two centuries, two diametrically opposed ideologies have been powerful forces in French thought and action.

As will be seen in the chapters to come, these ideologies struggle against each other today in the lives of the interviewees. In Stuart Hall's way of thinking, races configure much of the social world in which they live in the form of a classificatory system by which people are "read." In France (a case of less concern to Hall), people are read as either White, referentially called "French," or as Maghrebi, Black, Asian, etc. Grounded in a stereotyped *faciès* that sets each of these presumed types of people apart—with the most *typé* appearance as its archetype—each individual is "read" as being one or another of these categories. With this socio-physical identity comes a presumed biological identity that is, in turn, presumed to correlate with certain behavioral tendencies. That is the world the interviewees must

inhabit. But, at the same time, the great majority of interviewees reject much of this way of thinking. At least one of them rejects the classificatory scheme itself, and those who accept it overwhelmingly reject its presumed "Nature = Culture" linkage. Often citing the strain of French ideology by which all people are equal and undifferentiated, these interviewees reject the stereotypes, biases, and outright discrimination that attach to their social identity.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The interviewees' vast richness of experience posed a challenge in organizing this book. For the initial chapters, I chose to group the interviewees according to the categories that they themselves use. Two of these categories, Maghrebi and Black, were especially salient: throughout their interviews, people continually referenced these identities when discussing their lives in France and in describing how they felt that others, especially "French" people, saw them. Chapters 1 and 2, respectively, focus on interviewees of these two identities. The remaining categories were far less fraught. Asians (*Asiatiques*, who are seen as having an East Asian *faciès*) constitute a third category. And then there are the interviewees who originate from different parts of South or Western Asia. They do not fall into a distinct group, but, because of their non-European (non-White) *faciès*, they too are not seen as "French." Flagging the stigma that attaches to Maghrebis and Blacks in France, a number of these interviewees made clear that they are not confused with such people. The absence of this stigma among both Asians and people who originate from South or Western Asia provided the logic for discussing both groups in chapter 3. As one of the interviewees said, apart from people with a European *faciès,* there are three types of people in France: Maghrebis, Blacks, and everyone else.

Each of these chapters begins with a detailed profile of one interviewee, followed by a dozen or so shorter profiles, all using the interviewee's own words as much as possible.[24] The demeaning stereotypes, especially of Maghrebis and Blacks, are presented as plainly as the interviewees reported them. Much of what they said was painful to hear and may be painful to

read. The profiles tell only part of the story, however. Since each profile provides a sense of only one person's life, the profiles in each chapter are followed by a discussion of similarities of experience among interviewees of that group. For example, chapter 2 addresses discrimination that many Black interviewees reported enduring in various aspects of life. Recognizing that people who share a social identity often have similar experiences—after all, they all live in France and are seen as Black (or Maghrebi, Asian, etc.)—is vital to understanding the conditions they face.

The rest of the book, chapters 4–6, addresses experiences that are shared by people across all non-European *faciès* and presumed origins (transcending the categories of chapters 1–3). Chapter 4 discusses feelings of inferiority and the fear of rejection among all categories of interviewees. This involves both the "colonialism in the head" reported by some and its flip side, the feeling of superiority many sense among "French" people, which they attribute to the persisting effects of colonialism. Chapter 4 also notes the lack of any feeling of inferiority or fear of rejection among most of the interviewees and summarizes the strategies they use to avoid these corrosive emotions. Finally, it reports a striking pattern among the interviewees who originate from countries that had not experienced colonial control by Europeans: none of them feel inferior to people of European origin.

Chapter 5 is devoted to feelings of romantic desire and the choice of spouse or long-term partner, again across the full spectrum of interviewees. Many interviewees recounted their experiences, even fantasies, with astonishing candor. While men and women sought different qualities in romantic attachments, as well as in spouses or other long-term partners, the majority of both genders gravitated toward "French" people. Where an interviewee chose a "French" spouse or partner, the long-term success or failure of the relationship correlated closely with how comfortable the interviewee felt in French society.

Finally, chapter 6 takes up the experience of being Muslim or assumed to be Muslim. According to the interviewees, Muslims are stereotyped as culturally backward, unwilling to fit into French society, and fundamentally opposed to French values, particularly *laïcité*. This is problematic for many interviewees. Although none of these people resemble this stereotype, they

find themselves socially tarnished by it. And then there is the not-so-obvious question of who is Muslim. According to the interviewees, most "French" people assume that Maghrebis are Muslim and assume that non-Maghrebis (or non-Arabs) are not. But neither generalization is borne out by the interviewees: some Maghrebis are not Muslim, and some Blacks and other interviewees are. For both sets of people, however, the issue is not left to their private lives. Many "French" people, interviewees believe, try to ferret out whether they are practicing Muslims in a recurring moment of life in France: when they are offered wine or a pork dish at a social occasion.

The conclusion highlights larger themes in the interviewees' lives and relates these themes to the relevant statistical and scholarly literature. As with this book overall, I hope it fosters a greater appreciation of people like the interviewees, who are fully involved in the life of their country.

Finally, the appendix sets out basic facts about each interviewee—age, gender, country of origin, time in France, education, and employment—and the pages where each is mentioned. Readers are encouraged to refer to the appendix as they read the chapters to be reminded of who a person is and where else in the book that person is discussed.

NOTES

1. While there do not seem to be statistics on the income levels of Airbnb hosts in France, the majority of hosts in the UK earned over £30,500 a year as of 2014–15 (Statista 2015).
2. The omission of where the interviewees live proved less significant than one might imagine. With the partial exception of Paris, the interviewees' experiences relating to their sense of self and acceptance by others did not vary according to the metropolitan area in which they live. Where the size of a city is significant to a person's account, this is noted.
3. The word Mr. Sarkozy used, *racailles*, has a long history. As early as the sixteenth century, its then-current form, *racure*, was used disdainfully for France's urban poor. During the colonial period, *racailles* was used, again disdainfully, for colonized peoples, including Vietnamese and North Africans (Ruscio 2020: 117–19).
4. This is obviously a broad-brush generalization. There are whole categories of European immigrants, notably Roma, who remain marginalized over multiple generations. In some quarters, there are also biases

against Jews and darker-skinned people of European origin, even in later generations. Finally, some people distinguish between families that have been in France—even in a specific community—for generations and families that arrived more recently.

5. Some, of course, have risen above such hurts, showing extraordinary strength. See chapter 4 below.
6. Although this shorthand is not incorrect, as John Bowen (2007: 20–33) explains, there is no generally accepted or stable concept of *laïcité.* Indeed, "there is no historical actor called laïcité: only a series of debates, laws, and multiple efforts to assert claims over public space. . . . In sum," he says, "there is no 'it'" (2007: 33).
7. My physical appearance was hardly incidental to this project. As the French anthropologist Didier Fassim says, "the anthropologist himself cannot elude his own bodily presence in the game of racial unveiling: he is entirely part of it" (D. Fassin 2011: 421).
8. In addition, ethnographies by Didier Fassin (2013) and Sarah Mazouz (2017) focus on personnel in government agencies who interact primarily with people of non-European origin.
9. These are Beaman (2017), Bowen (2007, 2010), Chuang (2021), Fernando, (2014), Fleming (2017), Keaton (2006), Killian (2006), Kobelinsky (2010), Kastoryano (1988), Larchaché (2020), Mahut (2017), M. Mazouz (1988), Provencher (2017), Selby (2012), P. Silverstein (2004), Slooter (2019), and Tetreault (2015).
10. These are Beaman (2017), Bowen (2007, 2010), Domergue (2010), Fernando (2014), Keaton (2006), Killian (2006), Kobelinsky (2010), M. Mazouz (1988), Provencher (2017), Selby (2012), P. Silverstein (2014), and Tetreault (2015).
11. These are Keaton (2006), Mahut (2017), and Slooter (2019).
12. These are, respectively, Kobelinsky (2010), Larchaché (2020), Sourou (2016), Rigaud (2010), Mahut (2017), Keaton (2006), and Fleming (2017). Another five, Beaman (2017), Killian (2006), M. Mazouz (1998), Selby (2012), and Tetreault (2015), focus exclusively or primarily on a specific cohort of people: Maghrebis in the Paris area.
13. By "European" or "French" I mean nothing more nor less than what the interviewees mean. As discussed below, there is no essence to these words or any other social category, and the only dividing lines between those who qualify as a certain kind of person and those who don't are the ones they draw themselves.
14. While the French adjective *asiatique* means Asian in a general sense, interviewees limited the noun *Asiatique* to people with a physical appearance they associate with East Asia. Thus, while all such interviewees used *Asiatique* to describe themselves, none of the interviewees who originate from elsewhere in Asia described themselves this way. Because the English word Asiatic is outdated and offensive among many English speakers, I translate *Asiatique* as "Asian."
15. Virtually all Black interviewees routinely used the noun White in this way, and this book contains nearly a hundred direct quotes in which

they use this term. By contrast, only two of the interviewees who identify as Maghrebi and four who identify as Asian are quoted as using White in this way, and even they used "French" far more often. One interviewee who spoke of his "Indian *faciès*" and another who originates from Iran used the word White, but only once each.

16. The *Front National* (National Front) party was renamed *Rassemblement National* (National Rally) in June 2018, after most of the interviews were complete.
17. According to Hall, this marker of social difference is far from neutral: "'Race' is a political and social construct. It is the ongoing discursive category around which has been constructed a system of socio-economic power, exploitation and exclusion—i.e., racism" (Hall 2000: 222).
18. The interviewees who aren't seen as Maghrebi, Black, or Asian—those who originate from Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, or India—fall into the residual category of people with non-European *faciès* discussed in chapter 3.
19. Throughout this book, I quote from published translations of foreign-language sources. Where these are unavailable, the translations are my own.
20. Readers may be reminded of W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" here. Its applicability to France today, especially among people classified as Black, is discussed at the end of chapter 2.
21. Ndiaye 2006 and chapter 2 of Ndiaye 2008 are nearly identical. Where the same quote appears in both publications, I hereafter cite only the better-known work, Ndiaye 2008.
22. Subject to limited exceptions, the 1978 law makes it unlawful "to collect or process data of a personal nature that reveal, directly or indirectly, the racial or ethnic origins" of anyone (Simon 2008: 19).
23. Although it is often argued that "Republican" ideology has been race-blind, at least during the colonial period this was largely untrue (see, e.g., Bancel and Blanchard 2017a; Ndiaye 2008: 83–84).
24. Since people spoke spontaneously, sometimes changing direction mid-sentence, some of the quoted passages in this book have been edited or condensed for clarity. Similarly, since some people spoke about the same subject at different points in their interviews, some quotes have been combined.