

**Title of the article:**

*Maneuvering Whiteness in France: Muslim Converts' Ambivalent Encounters with Race*

**Author:**

Juliette Galonnier

PhD, Sociology

Assistant Professor

CERI/Sciences Po

56, rue Jacob, 75006 Paris, France

[juliette.galonnier@sciencespo.fr](mailto:juliette.galonnier@sciencespo.fr)

+33643817990

**Biographical data (100 words):**

Juliette Galonnier is Assistant Professor at CERI, Sciences Po (Paris). Her research investigates the social construction of racial and religious categories, and how they frequently intersect. She received in 2017 a joint PhD in Sociology from Sciences Po and Northwestern University. Entitled *Choosing Faith and Facing Race: Converting to Islam in France and the United States*, her dissertation was awarded the Best Dissertation Award of the American Sociological Association in 2018. She has published several chapters in edited volumes and articles in peer-reviewed journals such as *Sociology of Religion*, *Social Compass*, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, and *Tracés*.

Juliette Galonnier est Assistant Professor au CERI à Sciences Po Paris. Ses recherches portent sur la construction sociale des catégories raciales et religieuses et leurs intersections fréquentes. Elle est titulaire d'un double doctorat en sociologie (2017) de Sciences Po et de l'université Northwestern. Intitulée *Chercher la « foi » et rencontrer la « race ». Conversions à l'islam en France et aux États-Unis*, sa thèse a reçu le prix de la meilleure thèse de l'American Sociological Association en 2018. Juliette Galonnier est l'auteure de plusieurs chapitres publiés dans des ouvrages collectifs ainsi que d'articles dans des revues à comité de lecture, notamment *Sociology of Religion*, *Social Compass*, *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* et *Tracés*.

**ORCID account:**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9116-2421>

**Abstract (125 words):**

This article examines the meanings of whiteness in France by focusing on the specific case of white converts to Islam. By becoming Muslim, converts enter religious spaces in which they are a numerical minority. Usually unmarked and unnoticed, their whiteness is now very much visible, prompting interrogations about their racial categorization. Faced with moral dilemmas on how to best position themselves ethically while holding a position of dominance, white converts to Islam resort to a variety of strategies to portray themselves as “good Muslims” and

“good whites.” Relying on ethnography and in-depth interviewing, this article explores the contradictions, inconsistencies, and ambivalences that characterize white identities in the French context.

Cet article se penche sur les significations de la blancheur en France à partir du cas spécifique des personnes blanches qui se convertissent à l’islam. En devenant musulman.es, les converti.es intègrent des espaces religieux où ils et elles se trouvent en situation de minorité numérique. Alors qu’elle passe habituellement inaperçue, leur blancheur devient très visible, suscitant des interrogations sur leur catégorisation raciale. Confrontées à des dilemmes moraux sur le positionnement éthique à adopter lorsqu’on se trouve en position de domination, les personnes blanches converties à l’islam recourent à différentes stratégies pour se présenter comme de « bon.nes musulman.es » et de « bon.nes blanc.hes ». S’appuyant sur des recherches ethnographiques et des entretiens approfondis, cet article examine les contradictions, incohérences et ambivalences qui caractérisent les identités blanches dans le contexte français.

**Keywords (5 to 8) :** conversion, France, Islam, race, religion, whiteness

Mots-clés: conversion, France, Islam, race, religion, blancheur

**Total word count:** 10,495 words

**Acknowledgments:** The author would like to thank the special issue editors Mathilde Cohen and Sarah Mazouz for their invitation to reflect comparatively on the topic of whiteness in France.

**MANEUVERING WHITENESS IN FRANCE:  
MUSLIM CONVERTS' AMBIVALENT ENCOUNTERS WITH RACE**

**Introduction**

Since the seminal work of W.E.B. Du Bois,<sup>1</sup> whiteness studies have blossomed.<sup>2</sup> They have established that whiteness is characterized by structural advantage and normative invisibility:<sup>3</sup> “the most commonly mentioned attribute of ‘whiteness’ seems to be its pervasive non-presence.”<sup>4</sup> Whiteness is often considered as an unmarked, default and blank identity—a norm against which racial minorities are called to position themselves. As a consequence, whiteness enables those categorized as white to evolve freely in society, without experiencing racial objectification: “whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative and average, and also ideal.”<sup>5</sup> While these considerations apply most strongly in settings where whites are a majority, they can be challenged in spaces where whites are numerically marginal and where whiteness is questioned. In the recent period, a new wave of studies<sup>6</sup> has emerged, exploring “how whiteness functions in different national scenarios, and in an array of institutional and everyday contexts” and analyzing the “range and variations of the white ‘habitus.’”<sup>7</sup> Without contesting canonical findings about whiteness, this new body of work has sought to refine them, by claiming that “whiteness is not a static, uniform category of social identification” and that “the contradictions, inconsistencies, and ambivalences within white identities” should be acknowledged.<sup>8</sup> Although whiteness has been defined as a normative, invisible, and unreflexive identity, some scholars consider that “whites who are positioned differently in society may actually view or live whiteness quite differently”<sup>9</sup> and that “the experience of being white may be subverted through white people exposing and challenging their racial consciousness.”<sup>10</sup> This article proposes to explore such contradictions,

inconsistencies, and ambivalences by focusing on the very specific case of white converts to Islam in France.

Since the early 2010s, literature about whiteness has been growing in France.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, whiteness is seldom evoked as such in French public discourse. Its very translation into French language is contested (*blancheur? blanchitude? blanchité?*, although the latter term seems to have prevailed both in scholarly and public discourse). People who could be categorized as white (*blanc*) seldom identify as such, but rather tend to think of themselves as “French.” Accordingly, for people of immigrant descent, achieving whiteness means being able to embody “Frenchness” and integrate into the French Republican mainstream, whose colorblind universalism implies relinquishing any distinctive cultural, ethnic or religious identity. Yet, a few authors have wondered whether “when we talk about ‘Frenchmen’ without any further mention, we are not actually talking about ‘French whites.’”<sup>12</sup> For instance, the category “*Français de souche*” (“rooted French”), which indicates the absence of migratory origin and is frequently employed in mainstream discourse, never applies to black French citizens from overseas France (DOM-TOM), mostly functioning as a euphemism for whiteness. As Jean Beaman put it, “that white is synonymous with national identities often exists in contexts that purport to be colorblind.”<sup>13</sup> At the same time, recent political mobilizations and heated media controversies around the themes of “anti-white racism,”<sup>14</sup> “intersectionality”<sup>15</sup> and “white privilege”<sup>16</sup> have challenged French discourses of colorblindness, pointing towards the increasing (yet debated) relevance of the category of “white” as an option of identification for the French majority.

In exploring the convoluted meanings of whiteness in the French context, this article takes conversion to Islam as an entry point. By focusing on the experiences of white people

who were not raised in Muslim families and decided to embrace Islam as adults or teenagers, I analyze how whiteness intersects with other social identities, and specifically with religious belonging. Matthew Hughey writes that “more work must be done to tease out the junction of whiteness, class, gender, sexuality, and age.”<sup>17</sup> I argue that it is essential to add religion to this list. Recent scholarship increasingly recognizes the central role of religion in delineating the boundaries of race, and of whiteness specifically.<sup>18</sup> In the United States, religious groups such as Catholics, Jews and Mormons have long been racially suspect before becoming integrated into the white mainstream,<sup>19</sup> while Islam as a religion continues to be excluded from the definition of whiteness.<sup>20</sup> In France, the racialization of Islam has been widely documented, both in the colonial and post-colonial periods, including in legal procedures of naturalization, which frequently use Islamic religiosity as a criterion to monitor the boundaries of the nation.<sup>21</sup> Through their allegiance to a racialized religion, white converts therefore upset stereotypical expectations about whiteness, providing an example of whites living their whiteness differently. Because they do not occupy “the perceived core of whiteness,”<sup>22</sup> their situation bears resemblance to that of working-class whites, that is, “people whose very existence seems to threaten the symbolic and social order”<sup>23</sup> and who disrupt “the standard ways in which whiteness typically functions.”<sup>24</sup> Much like working-class whites disturb the stereotypical pairing between race and class, white converts to Islam represent an interesting sociological subject for they disrupt the taken-for-granted association between race and religion, between whiteness and Christianity, and between Islam and foreignness. Because of their unusual position, it can be assumed that they entertain a complex relationship to their racial privilege, offering a case in point to study local configurations of whiteness.

Converts, and white converts specifically, are a numerical minority within the French Muslim community. In a country like the United States, where Islam is much more a religion

of conversion, converts represent about 20% of the 3.45 million American Muslim population, which is roughly 700,000 people.<sup>25</sup> Most of these converts (64%) are African-American and only 22% are white American.<sup>26</sup> In France, the Religions Office of the Home Ministry estimated in 2012 that there are roughly 4,000 conversions to Islam every year and Muslim converts are believed to represent around 100,000 individuals, that is, not more than 2% of the total French Muslim population of 5.7 million.<sup>27</sup> While statistical information about the racial background of these Muslim converts is not collected, the number reflects both black (especially from the French Caribbean) and white converts. As minorities within the Muslim community, white converts share a position similar to whites who inhabit environments where whiteness is not unmarked, such as white rappers, whites living in majority non-white neighborhoods, white expatriates in non-Western countries, and “white allies” in the anti-racist movement.<sup>28</sup> Several empirical studies show that, owing to their specific social position, these white individuals “minimize, acknowledge, deny, embrace, or feel guilty about their privileged status”<sup>29</sup> in specific ways. This article proposes to explore how white converts to Islam envision their own whiteness and what their positions reveal about race and religion in France. After demonstrating that converts paradoxically “become white” by becoming Muslim, I document the multiple and at times contradictory meanings attached to whiteness within Muslim spaces. I then build on Andreas Wimmer’s conceptualization of boundary making<sup>30</sup> to describe how converts embrace distinctive strategies to work around racial boundaries and defuse racial situations<sup>31</sup> in the French context.

## **Methods**

The data for this article comes from a comparative and qualitative study conducted in the United States from January 2013 to April 2014 and in France from April 2014 to January 2016 as part of my doctoral research.<sup>32</sup> I conducted forty semi-structured interviews with

Muslim converts in the United States and forty-two in France. My interviewees were between nineteen and seventy-four years-old, with a mean of thirty years-old. Some had been Muslim for a few months, others for several decades. I interviewed men and women in equal numbers. Even though most of my respondents can be classified as white (n=19 in the U.S., n=34 in France), I also interviewed converts from other ethno-racial backgrounds. I diversified my field inquiry by conducting research in several cities: Chicago (n=26), Saint Louis (n=6), and Detroit (n=8) in the United States; Paris (n=24), Lille (n=11), and Marseille (n=7) in France. Contrary to dominant media and cultural representations, which tend to portray Muslim converts as unstable individuals, my respondents worked stable jobs (there are students, engineers, nurses, academics, and accountants in my sample) and although I interviewed a few working-class converts, middle and upper-middle class converts predominate in this study. I supplemented this interview data with ethnographic observations conducted in convert support groups, which provide help, guidance, and a community network to new Muslims. Most members were recent converts who came from diverse social backgrounds and were looking for a specific type of religious support (tailored to their specific convert needs), which they felt was lacking in conventional Muslim spaces. Due to space limitations, this article relies almost exclusively on the French portion of the fieldwork. Yet my account of the French case is informed by comparative insights from the United States, especially in highlighting the specific strategies that converts can deploy to counter their racial objectification based on the repertoires of evaluation<sup>33</sup> that are available in France.<sup>34</sup>

### **Conversion to Islam and the Discovery of Whiteness**

I started my fieldwork in the United States and subsequently moved back to France to complete the rest of my research. When I started contacting potential French interviewees, I retained some of the linguistic habits I had acquired in the United States. As a result, I did not

exercise sufficient caution when employing ethnic and racial categories in my speech. One of my French interviewees, Bruno (37, researcher, Lille), a convert of several years married to a woman of Tunisian descent, took issue with the way I talked about “white” converts to Islam. He told me that he and other converts he knew were hesitant to take part in my study because they did not identify as “*convertis blancs*” and did not want to be put in “such a box.” He interrogated me at length about the reasons why I used the words “race” and “racial” in my publications (he had looked me up online). He only accepted to be interviewed after I explained that I did not myself endorse such categorizations: as a sociologist, I merely intended to study their history, their current salience in our society, and their actual effects on people’s daily lives. Bruno’s initial skepticism about my research is exemplary of most French people’s unease with the use of ethnic and racial categories to describe themselves and others. Such discomfort and how it relates to well-entrenched beliefs about the virtues of abstract universalism and colorblindness has been widely studied.<sup>35</sup> Yet, and much to my surprise, I realized that after these initial adjustments and negotiations, French interviewees actually *did* talk a lot about race and even about whiteness. In fact, their positionality as a numerical minority in Muslim spaces had consequences on the way they related to their understanding of race, often forcing them to acknowledge their categorization as “white.” By becoming Muslim, their whiteness, usually unmarked, unnoticed and ineffable, had become visible, tangible and “speakable.”

Conversion to Islam and integration in majority non-white Muslim spaces leads to a reconfiguration of the awareness of whiteness. Although most interviewees stressed the warm welcome they received from their coreligionists, several also described instances when they found themselves as the only white person in the room, a situation they experienced as both comical and unsettling. Wanda (32, travel consultant, Lille), an affable young woman who was hired by a Muslim travel agency shortly after her conversion, recounted her first days at work

in the following way, “I was the first blue-eyed blond girl to show up! All my colleagues were called Fatima, Safiya, Khadija... I was like ‘Hellooooooo! It’s me!’ At the beginning, they were staring at me a little bit. But then after two weeks it was fine.” In Marseille, Sophie (27, social worker), also blond and blue-eyed, explained that she is constantly stared at in mosques: “I don’t have the typical face of a Muslim (sic), so, with my blue eyes, I really get noticed!” She confided that she herself could not help but gaze fixedly at other white converts, “even I catch myself staring at them.” The incongruous presence of white people within Muslim spaces attracts looks and raises eyebrows. While whiteness usually grants an insider status in the wider society, it is uncommon within the Muslim community. An indirect effect of conversion to Islam, therefore, is to propel reflexivity about whiteness.

Scholars, including myself, have argued that converts who don the visible attributes of Islamic belonging (specifically the *hijab*, but also the beard, various types of Muslim clothing, typical Muslim-sounding names, etc.) become exposed to new forms of racial discrimination and loose dimensions of their whiteness.<sup>36</sup> Yet, it can be argued that by becoming Muslim, white converts also “become white,” in the sense that they become hyper aware of their whiteness, especially because some of their non-white coreligionists make frequent references to it. Such racial objectification came as a surprise for many, but also as an offense. “It is very hurtful” (“*c’est super vexant!*”) said Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris), a dynamic young man involved in pro-Palestinian and left-wing organizations, whose Muslim friends of North African descent often remind him that he does not fully experience Islamophobia because he is white. Similarly, Thibault (35, educational assistant, Paris), who long idealized the Islamic tradition of Mali and married a Muslim woman of Malian descent, said that his travels to that country proved a major disappointment. His encounters with Malian Muslims were not as welcoming as he had expected: “I felt like Islam mattered less than the fact that I was white. I

think it hurt me in some ways. Especially because Islam for me is something antiracist, which does not make color distinctions. So that really struck me.” This experience of racial objectification was unprecedented for many.

Among Muslims, converts also discovered a number of terms identifying them as white. Terms such as *Français* (French) and its backward-slang *céfran* or the expression *jambon-beurre* (ham sandwich), were oftentimes used by non-white coreligionists to designate them. Arabic words such as *roumi* and *gaouri* (and its variant *gouère* or its abbreviation *gaou*) or West African terms such as *toubab* (and its backward-slang *abtou*) are also common in Muslim settings. Ludovic (26, school teacher, Marseille), a white convert, declared that such words considerably hurt his feelings,

I take issues with some people who... I mean... There was a girl I was dating, back in college, Samia. She was Tunisian [of Tunisian descent] and she spoke utter nonsense at times. She would be like “French people are like that, *gaous* are like this.” I told her: “Samia, let me remind you something. I am French, my mother is French, my father is French. I am not going to tolerate that one day I bring you to my mother and you have the nerve of saying ‘*gaou*’ in front of her. It is as if I was saying ‘*bougnoule*’ to you. No way! You would be shocked!” She responded: “but I am not saying it in a harmful way”. I said “I know, but during colonization, people who said ‘*bougnoules, bicots*’ they did not say it in a harmful way either. For them, it was nice. For some of them. But me I have a hard time digesting it.”

Ludovic equates the appellation *gaou* with the terms *bougnoule* or *bicot*, highly derogatory racial slurs used against North Africans since the colonial period. Such moral indignation indicates that he resists any assignation to a racial box: in line with French colorblind discourses, he interprets the use of any type of ethnic or racial category, including

those describing white people, as inherently racist. Yet, those terms are complex. As I was discussing the word *gaouri* with Bruno (37, researcher, Lille), who had also overheard it in mosques, his wife of Tunisian descent jumped in to explain that the term was used in her mother tongue to designate someone who is “white,” or “French,” but also “non-Muslim” – thereby highlighting the linguistic conundrum produced by white converts to Islam.

Upon converting to Islam, therefore, many whites become aware of their whiteness and must learn to navigate the fact that their social interactions with other Muslims are partly shaped by it. Yet, whiteness is endowed with ambivalent meanings within Muslim spaces, being alternately suspicious or fascinating depending on the context and situation.

On the one hand, whites are associated with domination and exploitation. The burden of history and continuing present-day oppression impact the perception of white people among Muslims who have suffered from European or white domination, be they immigrants from formerly colonized countries or African-Americans. In France, the memories and traumas of colonization remain vivid. Being associated with white racial dominance is often processed with shame and guilt by new Muslims. This is the case for Noémie (27, housewife, Paris) who told me that for her the white French identity (“*le fait d’être franco-français*”) was associated with three words: “slavery,” “colonization,” and then she hesitated between “globalization,” “misery,” “racism,” and “discrimination.” This identity was challenging for her: “you are on the wrong side, you are on the unjust side, on the side of injustice. I cannot stand it.” Noémie redefines whiteness and Frenchness as undesirable and unethical identities, which she carries with embarrassment in Muslim spaces.

An additional issue facing white converts is a suspicion about their arrogating the religion of Islam for purposes of cultural distinction. The specter of “religious appropriation” periodically resurfaces in face-to-face or online conversations within the Muslim community. White identity is frequently conceived of in mainstream discourses as empty, bland, flavorless and inauthentic. From this perspective, “cultureless” whites are viewed as longing for substance and meaning, emulating aspects of others’ cultures, depicted as “cool” or “oppositional.” Coded as non-white, Islam would provide white converts with “color capital”<sup>37</sup> to compensate for the dreariness of their whiteness. This perception was evident in some of the heated exchanges conveyed in my interviews. For instance, Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris) reported being frequently chastised by some of his North African coreligionists when engaging them on religious terrain, “I was bringing up *hadith* and stuff, but I realized they felt offended by it. Because for them, it was *their* religion. And I was the white guy who was claiming ownership of their religion. They told me ‘stop your paternalism.’” White converts’ incongruous presence in Muslim circles and their association with a history of domination can therefore cast doubts on their religious authenticity.<sup>38</sup>

### **Dealing with a Privileged Status: Moral Dilemmas and Justifications**

Yet, while it can arise suspicions at times, whiteness is mostly valued in Muslim spaces. More than other converts, white Muslims are often over-congratulated for their conversion. Noémie (27, housewife, Paris), who wears the headscarf, talked about the “fascination” and “frenzy” she generates among fellow Muslims. One day an older Muslim woman of North African descent saw her reading the Qur’an on the bus and started crying: “haaaaaaa a French girl who is Muslim!!! Thank God!!!! How powerful Islam is!” Noémie tried to explain that she was not more extraordinary than any other Muslim, but the woman was so happy that she did not have the heart to spoil her joy. The white converts I interviewed receive praiseworthy

comments with ambivalence. Benjamin (25, school teacher, Lille), an articulate young man who leads beginners' classes for new converts at a local mosque, feels that the wonderment he generates among fellow Muslims betrays the universal teachings of Islam, "if the Islamic message had been well-understood, there wouldn't be so much amazement." According to him, his presence into Islam is natural, not a matter of discussion and even less of astonishment. He contests his singularization and fetichization as a white convert on universalistic grounds.

Yet, the advantageous perception of white converts is evident when looking at the significant number of them who occupy leadership positions within the Muslim community, be it as scholars, speakers, representatives, board members in mosques, and heads of or spokespersons for Muslim organizations. Within the microcosm of French Islam, where whites are numerically marginal, questions of power and privilege—normally diluted in contexts where they are a majority—become particularly salient. In an article analyzing the ascension of white American male converts as renowned Islamic scholars, Mahdi Tourage explains that "white convert imams and sheikhs are not idealized for their successful performances and conversion narratives alone, they are also idealized for their whiteness."<sup>39</sup> In fact, they are often fast-tracked to positions of power and authority. Among my French interviewees, interpretations diverged as to why so many white converts currently occupy leading roles within French Muslim organizations. Resorting to a meritocratic repertoire of discourse, some presented competence and ability as the main factors behind such overrepresentation. Melissa (27, project manager, Paris), a white convert wearing the headscarf who was chosen as spokesperson for a large Muslim organization fighting against Islamophobia, explained her appointment as follows,

"it so happened that I was the only skilled person available back then. I am not saying that I was the only one, but at the time the position had to be renewed, there was no other volunteer. There was no favoritism.

It was not like ‘oh there you go, she is white, her name is Melissa, she is our perfect candidate.’ It did not happen like that.”

This diagnosis of mere competence was shared by Bruno (37, researcher, Lille), who, along with his wife of Tunisian origin, became very active in a Muslim consumer protection association and thought that, as a convert, he was an asset for the organization,

if we need to go through administrative procedures, for me that’s normal. But for a typical Muslim... I mean not a typical Muslim, but let’s say for someone who is from North Africa, who arrived with a residence permit and who became French at 20 years old, there is this kind of fear of the administration. Maybe. So yes, it can help [to have converts]. It opens some doors. Because we know how the systems work.

According to Bruno, compared to their immigrant coreligionists (or “typical Muslims”), converts possess an insider knowledge of French society that can ease things for the Muslim community, which explains why they ascend to positions of authority within it. Even though many people born Muslim are French natives too, their North African descent and Arabic names can prove detrimental in dealing with the administration, a problem converts can easily bypass in his view. Melissa and Bruno do not consider issues of white privilege or normativity as relevant to characterize their situation.

By contrast, some of my white interviewees who attained positions as representatives within the Muslim community expressed embarrassment that their achievement might have had something to do with their perceived racial identity. For some, fame and recognition proved detrimental to spiritual growth. During the first years of his conversion, Thibault (35, educational assistant, Paris) felt that he lost himself in a whirlwind of praise and admiration, “in my town, I was one of the first French guys who ever converted. And...I became a role

model, really. In the North African community there, everybody liked me. Parents, friends, everyone. At some point, I told to myself ‘what kind of game are you playing? You go to the mosque, but is it because you enjoy the way people look at you? Or is it for God?’” Thibault eventually decided to withdraw from the community and practice the religion away from the gaze of his coreligionists. Others complain about the tokenistic use of their whiteness. Sophie (27, social worker, Marseille), a white convert who does not wear the headscarf, felt that she was used in superficial ways by the Muslim educational organization she volunteers for. When representatives from the local government council announced that they would visit the structure, the president of the organization, a Muslim intellectual of North African descent, called her on the phone,

he told me that it would be nice if I could be there, as a volunteer. He added, very honestly, that it was also because three quarters of the volunteers wore the headscarf and he did not want the department council to think that all the women in the association were veiled. I thought that was weird, but he was very upfront about it, so fine. And then the day before [the official visit], his wife called me and she had this verbal slip-up: she said ‘so you will come, right? Because that way they will see that there aren’t only Muslims [in the association].’ ... Isn’t that crazy???

Sophie understands herself as a Muslim, but because she does not fit into the stereotypical representation of the “Muslim” (she is blond, blue-eyed, and not covered), the association symbolically used her presence as a token of integration to counter the scrutiny of the local French administration, whose suspicion of headscarves, and Islamically-inspired organizations more broadly, is well-attested. Sophie was disappointed by the attitude of the organization, “they see me as the little French girl. Being the only white woman there, it certainly did matter when the department council visited. But it is weird because it is like you have this role to play.” Because a measure of prestige is associated with whiteness, white Muslims are believed to be

“legitimate faces” who are in an advantageous station to speak in the name of Islam. They can be valued assets for a religious minority that is heavily stigmatized at the national level.

White converts holding positions of Islamic authority or spokespersonship are for the most part conscious of issues surrounding white privilege and visibility. This state of affairs prompts interrogations and dilemmas about the behavior they should adopt in Muslim settings and the ways in which they can maintain sincerity in their religious practice. How can they behave ethically when holding a racialized dominant position? The moral adjustments that converts discussed in interviews and among themselves reveal two main positions: using whiteness strategically or withdrawing from any public role.

Among interviewees who occupy positions of importance within the Muslim community, some decided to unapologetically embrace their role as white public faces, using their newly-acquired leverage to promote good causes and dispel stereotypes. Melissa (27, project manager, Paris), who was appointed spokesperson for a French Muslim organization strategically uses her identity as a white woman wearing the headscarf for what she sees as the greater good:

The fact that I am white with a French name, it gives credibility and more importantly it makes people acknowledge their own biases. Our goal is to break stereotypes that are harmful for the Muslim community, especially in the media. So if my identity enables me to get things moving, it is definitely a plus. Now, had it been a North African woman, she could have been just as good, if not better, but it wouldn't have broken stereotypes in the same way. (...) What counts is not that there is favoritism and this one succeeds better than that one. What counts is to work for the cause. And if a blond woman named Molly can advance the cause, so be it, all the better.

Melissa makes calculated use of her position as a white representative of Islam. She does not seek to redefine dominant representations of whiteness as privileged, but voluntarily marshals

it to disrupt the racialized features of the stereotypical Muslim and advance the struggle against Islamophobia.

On the contrary, some, like Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris) were hesitant about following this path. He admired the work of Melissa and her vocal fight against Islamophobia but had been confronted on this very topic by some of his Muslim friends of North African descent who are active in political anti-racist movements.<sup>40</sup> This is how he reported one of their conversations. When Melissa was appointed as spokesperson, they told him, “white privilege has struck again...” At first, Jérémy did not understand the meaning of their remark, “I was like ‘what the hell are you saying?’ For me, Melissa is a Muslim. She is veiled, she is Muslim. That’s what matters, no?” They responded, “That’s not how you should see things. You have to understand that it’s too easy for someone, because she is white, to arrive in an organization and climb the ladder like that, just because she looks more acceptable. We have to understand that we too have the legitimacy to speak.” Jérémy was skeptical: “For me, it is a matter of faith and religion.” They answered, “No. If it was only about religion, it wouldn’t bother us. But it is not. Islamophobia is about religion for sure, but it’s also about race.” Jérémy pondered their contentions and decided they were right. He concluded, “Now I think that, as a matter of principle, if someone offers me to give a talk on Islamophobia, I don’t think I would dare to do it. Frankly, I wouldn’t do it.” The conversations between Jérémy and his friends highlight the complexities of the intersections of race and religion in contemporary anti-racist struggles in France. As a white convert only partially exposed to anti-Muslim racism and benefitting from some measure of preferential treatment within the Muslim community, Jérémy eventually resolved to follow his friends’ advice and refrained from speaking publicly in the name of other Muslims. He started viewing silence and discretion as the best way to curb the daily

reproduction of his white privilege, turning down all invitation for public appearances related to Islam.

Yet, things were not necessarily as clear-cut in Jérémy's mind. He was often absorbed in deep moral quandaries about how to behave. He found the position of disappearance and withdrawal hard to sustain, especially when he saw what he described as uneducated, unskilled, and irrelevant coreligionists speaking in the name of the Muslim community. He was particularly angry after the January 2015 attacks on *Charlie Hebdo* and a kosher convenience store when journalists interviewed random Muslims in front of the Grand Mosque of Paris to record their reactions,

the journalists only picked up guys who were dressed—sorry about the word—like *blédards* [North African bumpkins], who had a strong accent and spoke uncouth language. I was like ‘why don’t you interview *me*?’ Here I think I would prefer to be interviewed because I would better handle the whole thing. So after Charlie Hebdo, I was like ‘this is starting to get on my nerves.’ People tell me ‘because you are white, avoid talking in the name of Muslims,’ but at some point I am like, ‘What the hell is this?’

In France, the politics of Muslim spokespersonship involve high stakes, as Muslims are constantly under the spotlight and frequently exposed to litmus tests of assimilation, respectability and conformity to public expectations of “good” and “moderate” Islam.<sup>41</sup> This predicament deepens the moral dilemmas of white converts such as Jérémy who hesitate between stepping up to provide a more “acceptable” image of the Muslim community and refusing that their public image as whites be used to reinforce the already well-entrenched cultural association between acceptability and whiteness, and the enduring disqualification of immigrant Muslims.

In sum, white people's position of racial dominance, generally unnoticed in wider society, is rendered acute by the small size of the Muslim community. The question of how to handle visibility and privileged status raises serious ethical dilemmas for white converts who intend to position themselves as "good Muslims" while being in dominant positions. To avoid this issue, many seek to reconfigure the boundaries of whiteness and Islam.

## **Working Around Boundaries and Redefining Whiteness**

To account for the variety of strategies identified in the interviews, I build on the work of Andreas Wimmer<sup>42</sup> who has offered a typology of the different paths through which actors redefine categorical boundaries. I find that French converts resort to three main strategies in response to their newfound whiteness: a) *crossing the boundary* by passing as non-white; b) *contracting the boundary* by emphasizing alternative identities (ethnic, regional, or class-based); c) *blurring boundaries* by redefining the category "Muslim" as purely religious, thereby overcoming racial, ethnic, national, and cultural cleavages.

### **Boundary Crossing and Individual Repositioning: Repudiating Whiteness**

A common strategy involves the crossing of racial boundaries in order to "stop being white." Converts taking part in such refashioning of the self express the will to repudiate their whiteness. Some self-consciously use Islamic markers (headscarf, clothing, beard, names) as a tool to pass as "non-white", in instances of what could count as "reverse passing" or "passing strange."<sup>43</sup> Noémie (27, housewife, Paris), who wears the headscarf and is married to a man of Mauritanian origin, is an example of someone who actually uses her visibility as a Muslim

woman to dismiss her whiteness. When she mentioned that she had moved from majority to minority status after adopting the *hijab*, I asked her how it felt. Her answer was immediate: “Actually, it pleased me. (...) It pleased me, because I am no longer a prisoner of this little French white dominant identity that infuriates me and that does not correspond to what is in my heart.” In the absence of affirmative action policies based on race in France, the benefits derived from being associated with racial minorities are mostly symbolic, political and moral for these converts.<sup>44</sup> Converts engaged in this path portray themselves as “race traitors, white mavericks who appear to be challenging the meaning of whiteness.”<sup>45</sup>

Importantly, they often try to distinguish themselves from other white converts and from white people in general by emphasizing that they are not like the “average white person.” They reinterpret their entire biography in light of this effort to establish that they had never embodied the stereotypical features of whiteness. Pauline (32, graphic designer, Paris), a white woman who grew up in a homogeneous rural area in the southern part of France, declared that she was “on the margin” of her small town, because she listened to rap music and practiced hip-hop dance, a rather unconventional hobby among her peers, whom she described as “very white.” She embraced Islam after moving to a larger city and going to a high school that was mostly attended by second-generation immigrants, many of whom were Muslim and became her friends. As for Noémie (27, housewife, Paris), she explained that before becoming Muslim she went through an “identity crisis” over her “Frenchness” and “whiteness,” “I didn’t feel French. I was very interested in *négritude*. I felt like I was a little black myself...” These interviewees portray themselves as people who were already on the fringes of whiteness, even before their religious conversion.

## **Boundary Contraction: Minimizing Whiteness by Promoting Alternative Identities**

Another more modest approach is that of converts who simply try to “do whiteness differently” by emphasizing distinctions, such as ethnicity, region, and class, as their main focus of identity. These particularizing strategies are used as a means to differentiate themselves from dominant understandings of whiteness.

This strategy is particularly developed in the United States, where a strong “white ethnic revival” has taken place in the post-Civil Rights period.<sup>46</sup> Converts engaged in this path portray ethnicity as positive and enabling, while shunning white identity as empty and negative. Consider for instance the case of Olga (23, student and nanny, Chicago) who is very proud of her Polish background. The fact that Olga is able to claim a Polish immigrant identity (she moved to the United States as a young child) allows her not to be associated with white American supremacy and its negative aspects. She states, “the thing is because I am Polish, and because I am an immigrant, even though I look American and sound American, a lot of my Muslim friends do tell me that I get a sort of a pass at times when they are shit-talking white people.” Similarly, Brian (23, student, Chicago) considers that he is not exactly white, because of his Italian heritage, “I am white but I am not, like, stereotypically white. I am Italian.” Olga and Brian hyphenate their identity (Polish-American, Italian-American,) to mitigate the negative assumptions associated with the mere white American label. In sum, they “play the ethnic card” in order to downplay their white privilege.<sup>47</sup>

In France, French rapper and convert to Islam Akhenaton (Philippe Fragione) provides another example of someone who uses his immigrant origins to authenticate his bonds with

Islam. In his lyrics and in public interviews, Akhenaton frequently connects his conversion to Islam to his Italian heritage (his family migrated from Italy). He reconciles the two identities by underlying a shared experience of immigration and stigmatization. He also reminds his audience that Sicily used to be an Islamic emirate (from 831 to 1091) and that Muslim influence can still be felt over Sicilian culture and dialect. In sum, “Akhenaton regards Islam as a kind of potential but occulted cultural bridge linking Italian communities, the products of earlier waves of immigration, to Maghrebi-Islamic communities, the more recent arrivals.”<sup>48</sup> This allows for the creation of a coherent religious and ethnic identity, rooted in the commitment to anti-racism and the distance from the non-immigrant white French mainstream.

Yet, the reference to ethnic origins was rare overall among my French interviewees. Ethnic identity revival is considerably less developed on this side of the Atlantic. It does not align with dominant cultural representations of identity, which remain rooted in abstract universalism.<sup>49</sup> However, I was surprised to notice that my French interviewees did engage in the promotion of alternative identities to their whiteness or Frenchness. This was done through the mobilization of strong regional identities, such as Breton and Occitan, each of which hinges upon distinctive cultural and linguistic content and a history of resistance to French cultural hegemony. Pauline (32, graphic designer, Paris), who comes from a small village in South-Western France, explained for instance that in the wake of her Islamic conversion, she started reconnecting with the Occitan roots of her grandparents and rejected her belonging to the French nation, “just to make things clear, I am not French. I am Occitan. You see?” Along with her friend Thibault (35, educational assistant, Paris), a Muslim convert who comes from the same region and was very influential in her own journey, Pauline progressively made Occitanism a primary component of her self-definition while simultaneously strengthening her Muslim identity,

we (Thibault and I) were really looking for an identity. In Islam we found one, but at the same time I think we really needed to reconnect with our roots. It wasn't sufficient. We liked Arab culture, we liked the Arabic language, but we were not Arabs. And we liked hip-hop and the social awareness it created, but we didn't come from the hood. It didn't quite fit. (...) So we decided to revisit our peasant roots, to go back to the land, to the language.

Pauline started learning Occitan, which her grandparents used to speak but her parents had forgotten, and she enrolled in a training course in traditional herbal medicine so as to weave her spiritual and regional identities.

Thibault took things a bit further—a regionalist activist, he teaches Occitan in a *calandreta* (bilingual school in French and Occitan), and frames his dual identity as an Occitan Muslim in terms of resistance to the French State:

For me, it is political in a way. Because... I found in regionalism an opportunity that I don't have as a Muslim to openly criticize the French State. I identify with the subjugation that the Occitan language and the Occitan people have had to endure from the French State.

In the current context, it is easier to voice a critique against the French Republic from a regionalist standpoint than from an Islamic one, but Thibault considers the two deeply intertwined. He opposes what he sees as the forced homogenization of the national body by the secular and centralist state, finding commonalities between linguistic and religious discrimination. As an Occitan, he resists the legacy of French *internal* colonialism, and as a Muslim that of *external* colonialism. Thibault's reflections are echoed in a recent book entitled *Comment peut-on être breton et musulman?* (How can one be at once Breton and Muslim?), published by a convert to Islam from Brittany.<sup>50</sup> The book describes with much alarm and

concern the progressive disappearance of regional languages such as Breton or Gallo due to the neglect of the French central state. In the author's view, the Qur'an, through its respect for human diversity and linguistic plurality, can provide powerful spiritual material to support the regionalist struggle. Here again, unexpected identities are crafted to redefine both race and region through religion.

The ethnic or regionalist projects of converts to escape race enable them to make sense of their personal history by deemphasizing their burdensome racial categorization as whites and replacing it with a more positive and Islamically consistent identity. But while American interviewees experiment with ethnic options *within* the realm of the American nation, presenting themselves as Polish-American Muslims for instance, these identity accumulations are odd in the French universalist context, which does not accommodate the hyphenated expression of difference. Hence, in France, attempts at identity reconfiguration are often made *against* the French nation-state, as evidenced by the case of Thibault, for whom religious and regionalist expressions combine themselves into a common denunciation of the French State.

The other "boundary contraction" strategy used by white converts prioritizes class status over racial belonging. It is mostly performed by lower-class white converts, who emphasize the socio-economic status they share with poor coreligionists. In France, Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris) frequently mentioned during his interview that he came from a working-class family close to the Communist party, having grown up in an industrial region of eastern France known for its powerful workers' movements and class solidarity with immigrants. Others, such as Janice (hairdresser, Lille), Roxanne (social worker, Marseille), Aisha (housewife, Paris), Romain (unemployed, Paris), Florent (restaurant employee, Lille), Isabelle (unemployed, Paris), Bernard (clerk, Lille), and Eleonore (sales assistant, Paris) insisted that they had been

raised in rough neighborhoods in city outskirts and had always shared their lives with people of immigrant descent, who were also influential in their religious conversion. By highlighting socioeconomic affinities with underprivileged immigrant Muslims, these converts present themselves as marginal whites who do not embody the dominant class features of whiteness.

### **Boundary Blurring, “Universal” Islam, and the Return of Whiteness**

The final strategy puts emphasis on religion as a master status that supersedes ethnic and racial categories. Converts engaged in this path follow the efforts of other Muslims before them, as part of what has been called the “Islamic revival.”<sup>51</sup> The Islamic revival hinges upon a marked separation between Islam as a religion and Muslims’ cultures.<sup>52</sup> In Europe, second or third generation immigrants involved in revivalist Islamic trends tend to differentiate themselves from the “cultural Islam” practiced by their parents (or grandparents) in order to embrace a more “religious Islam.” They prioritize voluntary religiosity over inherited ethnic or cultural belonging and promote an “Islam of the Tradition,” instead of a “traditional Islam.” A universal religion, Islam is presented as blurring ethnic and racial boundaries, allowing the communion of all, including white converts.

Converts are particularly active in the promotion of a form of “color-blind” religiosity that prioritizes a definition of Islam as a faith over the definition of Muslims as a racialized minority group. During his interview, Jérémy (24, educational assistant, Paris) differentiated the two definitions and contemplated what they involved for his recognition as an authentic Muslim. He noticed that while he was objectified as white by fellow Muslims who were politically active in anti-racist movements and understood Muslimness as rooted in a history of

racialization and resistance to oppression, the issue of his whiteness almost never arose when interacting with coreligionists who placed religion and faith at the center of their lives.

It is mostly political activists who are going to attack me on issues of paternalism and white privilege. But I have been to countless different mosques, meeting brothers and sisters who are not necessarily activists. They are practicing Muslims. Which means they have an understanding of what faith is. Maybe they cannot explain to you what imperialism is but they speak with their faith and from their heart. And with them I never felt what I felt from the activists. I never felt this idea of 'Islam as an Arab thing.' Because to them I am a brother. And the fact that I am white or not does not matter.

By putting the emphasis on colorblind religious brotherhood,<sup>53</sup> white converts like Jérémy successfully carve out a space for themselves in the *ummah*. But the rhetoric of colorblind Islam<sup>54</sup> can also obfuscate the power plays that continue to take place beneath an ideology of racial harmony. The boundaries of “good Islam” are often policed along racial lines in Muslim spaces and the quest for “pure religion” can inadvertently reproduce racial hierarchies. In fact, some converts see it as their specific mission to decipher, identify, and dissociate Islam from the various cultural influences that have supposedly distorted it. Having not been born to Muslim families, they consider that they are best positioned to accomplish this task because they are free from the so-called cultural biases inherited from early socialization. As such, converts often present themselves as rejuvenators of the faith. According to Chloé (21, student, Lille), converts are the ones who can foster an authentic renewal of the faith, “there is hope coming from new Muslims because we have the advantage of not having the weight of tradition that certain North African families have, when they mix up culture and religion. We come in with fresh eyes and a kind of *immaculacy* in a way.” According to Chloé, religious authenticity lies in the ability to adjudicate between religion and culture, something converts can do more candidly than so-called born Muslims of immigrant descent. At one of the convert support

groups I followed, the idea that converts are a hope for the future of the Muslim community because they bring in fresh blood and perspectives was well-entrenched. As put by the president, an older white woman who has been Muslim for several decades, “Islam will be revived by Muslims in the West. Converts have a great destiny.”

In portraying themselves as spearheads of the Islamic revival, converts also reproduce dominant understandings of whiteness as a blank and universal identity onto which “pure” religious Islam can be easily imprinted without being tainted by culture, race, and ethnicity. In their attempts at boundary blurring, they can therefore reinforce representations of whiteness as empty and culture-free. In addition, throughout my fieldwork, I was privy to condescending remarks about immigrant Muslims who were openly despised and through which implicit stereotypes of Western superiority were reproduced.<sup>55</sup> For instance, more than a few converts put forward their punctuality and meticulousness to cast themselves as assets for the Muslim community, otherwise presented as disorganized and irresponsible. Gérard (47, accountant, Marseille) considered that “Arabs lack rigor” and are a bit “nonchalant” in their behavior. He therefore saw it as his duty as a white French citizen to “bring in some rigor, some exactitude, some punctuality.” He added that the Muslim community often “makes a rod for its own back. There are lots of Muslims working as butchers, bricklayers, in taxi phones, or small grocery stores. Very few are doctors or have knowledgeable jobs. Their children are not well-educated, they spit on the floor, they smoke. I mean... not always, but often.” In a comment that brings to light the significant class contempt that also makes up the enduring stigmatization of Muslims in France, Gérard reaffirms the association between whiteness and social status.

The fact that white converts might be imposing their own views on Muslim communities has become a matter of concern and critique especially considering their professed superiority

to immigrant Muslims in that they would be more “rational,” “enlightened,” and “progressive.” For some commentators in the Muslim community,<sup>56</sup> converts’ attempts to “reform” Islam and practice a homegrown version of it by expurgating immigrant traditions is an exclusivist project, which reifies immigrant practices as deviant or backward. In sum, converts’ self-portrayal as rejuvenators of the faith, able to isolate “pure” Islam from corrupt cultural practices, is seen as replicating patterns of white hegemony.

## **Conclusion**

In Euro-American societies, whiteness is evanescent and unnoticed, which makes it hard to grasp and study. As a numerical minority among their coreligionists, however, white converts to Islam render whiteness visible and its boundaries more salient. In documenting the appearance of racial meanings in the daily experiences of white converts, I have shown that contrary to dominant assumptions, French people do talk about race and are even engaged in deep moral quandaries over how to maneuver it. While they previously enjoyed the possibility of ignoring the tribulations of racial ascription by virtue of their majority status, white converts must learn how to deal with whiteness within the Muslim community. The various strategies they resort to are a testament to the inventiveness that people deploy in their daily lives to escape racial objectifications, and to the fact that whiteness is both socially constructed and contested.

To be sure, some individuals are more reflexive than others. In studying racial consciousness among whites, Ruth Frankenberg once reported being “struck by the extraordinary ease with which individuals can slide from awareness of whiteness to the lack thereof and, related to that slippage, from race consciousness to unconsciousness and from antiracism to racism.”<sup>57</sup> This “now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t” articulation of whiteness can

also be found among white converts to Islam who react differently to their newly discovered racial status. In an important article, Knowles et al. find that white Americans resort to three distinctive strategies to manage their privileged racial status: “*deny* the existence of privilege, *distance* their own self-concepts from the white category, or strive to *dismantle* systems of privilege.”<sup>58</sup> The French converts encountered in this study also fit in those categories. Some inadvertently reproduce the tropes of white normativity by ignoring the racial dimensions of their position. The project of dissociating culture from religion (*boundary blurring*) can for instance at times perpetuate dominant conceptions of whiteness as blank and universal. Yet, other white converts are aware of these ramifications and try to come to grips with racial inequality, either by emphasizing other aspects of their identity (ethnic, regional, class-based) in order to distance themselves from white identity (*boundary contraction*) or by trying to dismantle white dominance through the definition of whiteness as unethical and undesirable (*boundary crossing*).

In the *Souls of White Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois talks about the “religion of whiteness,” which rests upon the belief that “whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!” In this study, I have shown that white converts try to overthrow the religion of whiteness with the religion of Islam, but such individual attempts lead to political and ethical quandaries. Can whiteness ever be escaped? As put by Troy Duster, “whites who have come to a point where they acknowledge their racial privilege are in a difficult circumstance morally because they cannot just shed that privilege with a simple assertion of denial.”<sup>59</sup> White converts aiming to repudiate or minimize their white racial identity are confronted with this daunting issue.

Finally, conversations about white converts and their position among French Muslims bring to light the complexity of the intersections of class, race and religion in the social definition of Islam. The contrasted reactions that white converts generate among fellow Muslims (whiteness as suspicious, fascinating, useful or irrelevant) reveals the existence of different conceptions of Islam (a racialized religion, a political identity, a universal faith) and competing projects of “Islamic authenticity.” Depending on their generation, migration history, class status, political leanings and religious orientations, French Muslims produce different understandings of whiteness, revealing the inherently constructed and contested nature of racial categories in relation to religion.

---

<sup>1</sup> WEB Du Bois, “Of the Culture of White Folk,” *The Journal of Race Development* 7, 4 (1917): 434-447; WEB Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folks,” in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1920), 22-36.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Kolchin, “Whiteness Studies: the New History of Race in America,” *The Journal of American History* 89, 1 (2002): 154-173.

<sup>3</sup> David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991); Cheryl I. Harris, 1993, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, 8 (1993): 1707-1791; Ruth Frankenberg, 1993, “Growing Up White,” *Feminist Studies*, 45 (1993): 51-84.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Keating, “Interrogating Whiteness: (De)Constructing Race,” *College English* 57, 8 (1995): 901-918.

<sup>5</sup> Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *Independent School* 49, 2 (1989): 1-4.

<sup>6</sup> France Winddance Twine and Charles A. Gallagher, “The Future of Whiteness: A Map of the ‘Third Wave’,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, 1 (2008): 4-24.

<sup>7</sup> Steve Garner, “Surfing the Third Wave of Whiteness Studies: Reflections on Twine and Gallagher.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, 9 (2017): 1582–1597.

<sup>8</sup> John J. Hartigan, “White Devils Talk Back: What Antiracists Can Learn from Whites in Detroit” in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, eds Birgit B. Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica and Matt Wray (Durham: Duke University Press 2011), 138-166, here 157.

<sup>9</sup> Birgit B. Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica and Matt Wray, eds, *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness* (Durham: Duke University Press 2011), 10.

<sup>10</sup> Alastair Bonnett, “White Studies: The Problems and Projects of a New Research Agenda,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 13, 2 (1996): 145-155, here 148.

<sup>11</sup> Bastien Bosa, “Plus blanc que blanc. Une étude critique des travaux sur la whiteness,” in *Les nouvelles frontières de la société française*, ed. Didier Fassin (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), 129-146 ; Maxime Cervulle, *Dans le blanc des yeux. Diversité, racisme et médias* (Paris: Éd. Amsterdam, 2013); Sylvie Laurent and Thierry Leclère, eds, *De quelle couleur sont les Blancs ? Des ‘petits Blancs’ des colonies au ‘racisme anti-Blancs’* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013); Margot Delon, “Des ‘Blancs honoraires’ ? Les trajectoires sociales des Portugais et de leurs descendants en France”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 228 (2019): 4-28.

<sup>12</sup> Bosa, “Plus blanc que blanc,” *op.cit.*, 136.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Beaman, “Are French people white?: Towards an understanding of whiteness in Republican France,” *Identities* 26.5 (2019): 546-562

---

<sup>14</sup> Damien Charrieras, 2013, “Racisme(s)? Retour sur la polémique du ‘racisme anti-Blancs’ en France,” in *De quelle couleur sont les blancs?*, eds. Sylvie Laurent and Thierry Leclère, *op. cit.*, 244-252; Mathias Möschel (this volume).

<sup>15</sup> Eléonore Lépinard, *Feminist Trouble: Intersectional Politics in Post-Secular Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2020).

<sup>16</sup> Maxime Cervulle, “La conscience dominante. Rapports sociaux de race et subjectivation”, *Cahiers du Genre*, 53 (2012): 37-54

<sup>17</sup> Matthew W. Hughey, “The (Dis)Similarities of White Racial Identities: The Conceptual Framework of Hegemonic Whiteness,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33, 8 (2010): 1289-1309, here 1306.

<sup>18</sup> Craig R. Prentiss ed., *Religion and the creation of race and ethnicity* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Anya Topolski, “The race-religion constellation: A European contribution to the critical philosophy of race,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 6.1 (2018): 58-81; Simona Tersigni, Claire Vincent-Mory and Marie-Claire Willems eds., *Appartenances in-désirables. Le religieux au prisme de l'ethnisation et de la racisation* (Paris : Editions Pétra: 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European immigrants and the alchemy of race* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1999); W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Moustafa Bayoumi, “Racing religion”, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 6.2 (2006): 267-293; Neda Maghbooleh, Neda, *The limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the everyday politics of race* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Naomi Davidson, *Only Muslim: Embodying Islam in Twentieth-Century France* (Ithaca; Cornell University Press, 2012); Abdellali Hajjat, *Les frontières de l'identité nationale: l'injonction à l'assimilation en France métropolitaine et coloniale* (Paris : La Découverte, 2012); Abdellali Hajjat and Marwan Mohammed, *Islamophobie: Comment les élites françaises fabriquent le « problème musulman »* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013); Elizabeth A Onasch, “Lessons on the boundaries of belonging: Racialization and symbolic boundary drawing in the French Civic Integration Program”, *Social Problems* 64.4 (2017): 577-593. .

<sup>22</sup> Camille Gear Rich, “Marginal Whiteness,” *California Law Review* (2010): 1497-1593, here 1512.

<sup>23</sup> Matt Wray, *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 2.

<sup>24</sup> Monica McDermott, *Working-Class White: the Making and Unmaking of Race Relations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 40.

<sup>25</sup> Pew Research Center, *New estimates show U.S. Muslim population continues to grow* (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Ihsan Babgy, *The American Mosque 2011: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque, Attitudes of Mosque Leaders* (Washington: CAIR, 2012).

<sup>27</sup> Pew Research Center, *Europe's Growing Muslim Population* (Washington: Pew, 2017), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Hammou Karim, Y a-t-il une « question blanche » dans le rap français ? », in *De quelle couleur sont les blancs?*, eds. Sylvie Laurent and Thierry Leclère, *op. cit.*, 190-196; John J. Hartigan, *Racial Situations: Class Predicaments of Whiteness in Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Anne-Meike Fechter, 2005, “The ‘Other’ Stares Back: Experiencing Whiteness in Jakarta,” *Ethnography* 6, 1 (2005): 87-103; Claire Cosquer, “‘Expat’ à Abu Dhabi: blanchité et construction du groupe national chez les migrant.e.s français.es” (PhD diss., SciencesPo Paris, 2018); Matthew W. Hughey, *White Bound: Nationalists, Antiracists and the Shared Meanings of Race* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Monica McDermott and Frank L. Samson, “White Racial and Ethnic Identity in the United States,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 31 (2005): 245-261.

<sup>30</sup> Andreas Wimmer, “The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries: A Multilevel Process Theory,” *American Journal of Sociology* 113, 4 (2008): 970-1022.

<sup>31</sup> Michèle Lamont, Graziella Moraes Silva, Jessica S. Welburn, et al., *Getting Respect: Responding to Stigma and Discrimination in the United States, Brazil and Israel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

<sup>32</sup> Juliette Galonnier, “Choosing Faith and Facing Race: Converting to Islam in France and the United States” (PhD diss., SciencesPo Paris and Northwestern University, 2017).

<sup>33</sup> Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot eds, *Rethinking Comparative Cultural Sociology: Repertoires of Evaluation in France and the United States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>34</sup> I redirect readers interested in the counterpart analysis of the experiences of whiteness among American Muslim converts to another article of mine: Juliette Galonnier, “When ‘White Devils’ Join the Deen: White American Converts to Islam and the Experience of Non-Normative Whiteness,” *Notes&Documents*, SciencesPo/OSC (2015), <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01422847/document>

<sup>35</sup> Michèle Lamont, Ann Morning and Margarita Mooney, “Particular universalisms: North African immigrants respond to French racism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25.3 (2002): 390-414; Patrick Simon, “The choice of ignorance: The debate on ethnic and racial statistics in France”, *French Politics, Culture & Society* 26.1 (2008):

---

7-31; Beaman, Jean and Amy Petts, "Towards a global theory of colorblindness: Comparing colorblind racial ideology in France and the United States," *Sociology Compass* 14.4 (2020).

<sup>36</sup> Myfanwy Franks, "Crossing the Borders of Whiteness? White Muslim Women Who Wear Hijab in Britain Today," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, 5 (2000): 917-929; Juliette Galonnier, "The Racialization of Muslims in France and the United States: Some Insights from White Converts to Islam," *Social Compass* 62, 4 (2015): 570-583; Leon Moosavi, "The Racialization of Muslim Converts in Britain and Their Experiences of Islamophobia," *Critical Sociology* 41, 1 (2015): 41-56; Solène Brun and Juliette Galonnier, "Devenir(s) minoritaire(s). La conversion des Blanc-he-s à l'islam en France et aux États-Unis comme expérience de la minoration," *Tracés* 30 (2016): 29-54.

<sup>37</sup> Matthew W. Hughey, "Color Capital, White Debt and the Paradox of Strong White Racial Identities," *Du Bois Review* 9, 1 (2012): 169-200.

<sup>38</sup> Leon Moosavi, "British Muslim Converts Performing 'Authentic Muslimness,'" *Performing Islam*, 1 (2012): 103-128.

<sup>39</sup> Mahdi Tourage, "Performing Belief and Reviving Islam: Prominent White Male Converts in Muslim Revival Conventions," *Performing Islam* 1 (2012): 217-126, 217.

<sup>40</sup> Pauline Picot, "Quelques usages militants du concept de racisme institutionnel : le discours antiraciste postcolonial (2005-2015)," *Migrations Société* 28, 163 (2016) : 47-60

<sup>41</sup> Romain Sèze, "Leaders musulmans et fabrication d'un 'islam civil'", *Confluences Méditerranée*, 95 (2015) : 43-58.

<sup>42</sup> Andreas Wimmer, *op. cit.*

<sup>43</sup> Martha A. Sandweiss, *Passing strange: A gilded age tale of love and deception across the color line* (New York: Penguin, 2009); Khaled A. Beydoun and Erika K. Wilson, "Reverse Passing", *UCLA Law Review* 64 (2017): 282-354; Julie Pagis and Yon Karel, "Se faire ouvrier·e. L'établissement, un cas de reverse passing ?", *Genèses* 114(2019) : 53-74.

<sup>44</sup> Noémie's words echo those of white American convert Michael Muhammad Knight, who approached his conversion to Sunni Islam at age fifteen as a means to settle scores with white America. Like Noémie, Knight took great pleasure in escaping his categorization as white, "when I told a white evangelical Christian that I was Muslim, she looked quizzically into my blue eyes and asked 'were you born in this country?'" I couldn't hide my smile; Islam had succeeded in transforming this small-town white boy into an alien, and I loved it." Michael Muhammad Knight, *Why I Am A Five Percenter* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2011), 83.

<sup>45</sup> Anoop Nayak, "White Lives" in *Racialization: Studies in Theory and Practice*, eds Karim Murji and John Solomos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 141-162, here 156.

<sup>46</sup> Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>47</sup> Charles A. Gallagher, "Playing the White Ethnic Card: Using Ethnic Identity to Deny Contemporary Racism," in *Whiteout: The Continuing Significance of Racism*, eds Ashley W. Doane and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (New York: Routledge, 2003), 145-158.

<sup>48</sup> Ted Swedenburg, "Islamic Hip-Hop versus Islamophobia: Aki Nawas, Natacha Atlas, Akhenaton," in *Global Noise: Rap and Hip-Hop Outside the USA*, ed. Tony Mitchell (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 57-85.

<sup>49</sup> In contrasting the intensity of ethnic identities in the US with the rest of the world, Mary Waters notes for instance that "the idea of being American does not give people a sense of one large family the way that being French does for people in France. In America, rather than conjuring up an image of nationhood to meet this desire, ethnic images are called forth." Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options, op. cit.*, 153.

<sup>50</sup> Jean-Marie Seiget, *Comment peut-on être breton et musulman ? Humanisme, diversité et libération en islam* (Janzé: Coëtquen Editions, 2015).

<sup>51</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, John Obert Voll and John L. Esposito with Kathleen Moore and David Sawan, *The Contemporary Islamic Revival* (London: Greenwood Press, 1991); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>52</sup> Olivier Roy, *Holy ignorance: When religion and culture part ways* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>53</sup> Vanessa Vroon-Najem, "Muslim converts in the Netherlands and the quest for a 'culture-free' Islam", *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 186 (2019): 33-51.

<sup>54</sup> Jeffrey Guhin, "Colorblind Islam: The racial hinges of immigrant Muslims in the United States", *Social Inclusion* 6.2 (2018): 87-97.

<sup>55</sup> This finding is also apparent in Ezra Ozyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2014).

<sup>56</sup> Michael Muhammad Knight, "The Problem with White Converts," *Vice*, March 12, 2013, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/vdyay3/the-problem-with-white-converts-to-islam](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/vdyay3/the-problem-with-white-converts-to-islam)

<sup>57</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, "The Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness," in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness, op. cit.*, 72-96, here 77.

---

<sup>58</sup> Eric D. Knowles, Brian S. Lowery, Rosalind M. Chow and Miguel M. Unzueta, “Deny, distance, or dismantle? How white Americans manage a privileged identity,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 9, 6 (2014): 594-609.

<sup>59</sup> Troy Duster, “The ‘Morphing’ Properties of Whiteness,” in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, *op. cit.*, 113-137, here 114.