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Article

What Non-White Kids Do to White Parents: Whiteness and Secondary Socialization in the Case of White Parents of Mixed-Race and Internationally Adopted Children in France

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Abstract: International adoptions have rarely been studied from the angle of racial mixedness in France, as opposed to the way the adoption debate is shaped in the United States and the United Kingdom. However, a large majority of adopted children in France come from countries colonized by Europe in the past, and are very likely to be racialized as non-white. Adoptive parents, for their part, belong overwhelmingly to the majority population, racialized as white. As such, adoptive families usually involve, like families formed by mixed-race couples, white parents raising non-white kids. These two types of families can thus provide valuable insights on racial boundaries and how they are negotiated at the microsociological level. Moreover, as whiteness is generally characterized by invisibility and unspeakability, white parents of non-white children occupy a singular and heuristic position. They also experience an atypical whiteness: the norm of intrafamilial racial homogeneity being disrupted in their families, they experience racial alterity in a very intimate way—inaccessible to most whites. Drawing upon an ethnographic study conducted between 2015 and 2017, this article explores what racial mixedness does to the whiteness of white parents raising non-white kids in the French colorblind context. Investigating the different ways their whiteness is not only rendered unusually visible, but also questioned, reshaped, and—partially—disrupted, the article considers the socializing power of racial mixedness. As such, it considers parents not only as socializing agents but also as (re)socialized individuals, arguing that parenthood is a site of racial socialization.

Keywords: racial socialization; whiteness; international adoption; mixedness; family



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1. Introduction

On 2 February 2017, Theo Luhaka is violently apprehended by four police officers in Aulnay-sous-Bois, a working-class city in the northern Parisian suburbs. He endures a tear in the sphincter of approximately ten centimeters due to a blow of truncheon. The case, which comes six months after the death of Adama Traoré at the hands of the police in Persan (Val d'Oise, France), arouses strong emotions and is at the origin of demonstrations against police brutality in several cities in France.

When I conducted some of the interviews for this study, what was quickly called the “Théo case” had just made the headlines in the French press. In the families of Pauline Clombe¹ (33 years old, social worker, French of Italian origin, spouse 36 years old, order picker, Cape Verdean naturalized French, two sons of 5 and 3 years old) or of Anne Buanne (55 years old, radiology technician, French without known migratory ancestry, ex-spouse assistant nurse, born in Martinique of Martinican parents, one 18-year-old daughter), these two successive cases of police violence against young black men were discussed with the children. Pauline's eldest child was still young, but she thought it is important to discuss this matter with him, even though she admitted during the interview that she sometimes wants to preserve the “illusion” of a society in which he would not encounter racism.

Although the phenomenon is still much less widespread and commonplace than in the United States, where this type of discussion in African-American families regarding dealing

with the police has its own name (“the Talk”), it seems that some parents racialized as black or Arab in France also happen to have this kind of conversation with their children². On the other hand, it is certainly much rarer that parents racialized as white, such as Pauline or Anne, discuss it, at least as a means of preventing or anticipating conflictual interactions with law enforcement. But unlike most parents who are racialized as white in France, Pauline and Anne’s children are racialized as non-white. The two mothers therefore experience a singular position in whiteness as white parents of non-white children.

The family, being the essential site of sexual and social reproduction, is also par excellence the site of the (re)production of race. From this perspective, the family unit is the privileged space where racial relations can be observed at their most intimate level and where the fluidity of categories and identifications can be interrogated at the individual level. Racially mixed families, because they deviate from the norm of intrafamilial racial homogeneity (Chito-Childs 2005; Wade 2009), are a space where racial boundaries are partially driven into crisis, since, as Tyler writes, “the subjectivities of the members of interracial families represent disruption to the essentialist folk conception of racial difference” (Tyler 2005, p. 476). As such, international adoptive families and families formed by racially mixed couples are doubly heuristic. As “atypical” cases in which racial mixedness is particularly salient, they provide a strategic vantage point for observing the formation of racial boundaries or their negotiation or crossing. They indeed represent two types of families where white parent(s) raise and socialize nonwhite children. Often, the family has been studied as the framework in which children are socialized by their parents. Racial socialization in interracial families, both adoptive and non-adoptive, has been the subject of much research in the United States (Andujo 1988; Crolley-Simic and Vonk 2008; Smith et al. 2011). The socializing power of family has more rarely been studied in terms of what it does to the parents themselves. Indeed, if parents are socializing agents and if family socialization can influence the identity trajectories of the children, it is also possible to consider the other side of this socializing process. In this sense, it would then be necessary to consider that parents are also subject to a process of (secondary) socialization, or even resocialization (in the sense of transformative socialization), in the process of becoming parents (Céroux 2006). In turning the approach around, the idea is to move from an interest in how white parents racially socialize their children to an interest in how the whiteness of parents is itself potentially troubled, disrupted, or recomposed through the experience of parenthood across racial boundaries.

In “Marriage and the Construction of Reality”, Berger and Kellner (1964) focus on marriage as a major social institution in the social construction of reality for individuals. For both authors, the couple occupies a privileged status among meaningful adult relationships. As they write, “the marriage partner becomes the other *par excellence*, the nearest and most decisive co-inhabitant of the world” (Berger and Kellner 1964, p. 11). In marriage, individuals experience the world anew: this process is therefore foundational to an identity transformation, which results from a socialization by “friction” as described by Singly (2000). According to Berger and Kellner, the socializing potential of relationships depends both on their density and their intensity, that is, on the degree of intimacy and emotional attachment to significant others. It is drawing from this conceptualization of the conjugal relationship that Céroux (2006) proposes the consideration of children as significant others for their parents. In this sense, he takes up and extends Berger and Kellner’s perspective, according to which the arrival of children only adds to the intensity and density of family relationships. In this sense, he thinks of the possibility of a parental socialization that would be played out in parenthood itself, that is, in the intimate and prolonged contact with the children.

In the case of racially mixed families studied here, it can be hypothesized that the (re)socialization overflows to the racial level, since the child, racialized differently from their parents, participates in the construction of their social reality, which is always a racialized reality.

Moreover, because whiteness is generally characterized by unspeakability, invisibility and, ultimately, normality, the position of white parents of non-white children is heuristic in several ways. In particular, the (relatively) minority position of these white parents allows for a look at the contours and dynamics of whiteness itself—a whiteness that is partly brought into crisis. Drawing on the rich literature from the US and UK regarding white parents raising non-white children (Grow and Shapiro 1974; Luke 1994; Twine 1999; Samuels 2009; Crolley-Simic and Vonk 2011; Rauktis et al. 2016; Barn 2018), this article draws on interviews with white parents of non-white children to address their racial position and its possible destabilization in the experience of marital and family mixedness in the French context, which remains dramatically understudied from this perspective. I understand whiteness as a position of structural advantage and racial privilege, but also as a “point of view” on the world, others and oneself, as well as a set of cultural practices—usually unmarked and unnamed (Frankenberg 1993). In this article, I reflect on how the racial mixedness of the family impacts the parents’ whiteness—that is, both their position in the racialized space and the way they understand it, as well as their practices and imaginaries (Britton 2013).

While for some respondents, intrafamilial racial mixedness seems to confirm or even reinforce previous racial dispositions, most of the parents I met are confronted with a process of racial resocialization in parenthood, sometimes in direct contradiction with their previous racial socialization. In order to account for the relative marginality that some respondents experience with respect to whiteness, I borrow from Lewis (2004) and Hughey (2010, 2012) the concept of “hegemonic whiteness”. This concept, by allowing for reflection on the plurality of expressions of whiteness, makes it possible to consider that this relative marginality does not necessarily imply a renunciation of or a definitive exit from the boundaries of whiteness. It then permits the consideration of what the racial (re)socialization of white parents raising non-white children entails, in their experience of whiteness itself.

2. Data and Methods

This article is based on a survey conducted between 2015 and 2017, during which 91 semi-structured interviews were conducted, supplemented by observations (20 h)³. The research was articulated in two parts: a first one on international adoption, and a second one on mixed-race couples and their children.

In the first part of the survey, I conducted 53 interviews with international adoptive parents and adoptees. A total of 34 interviews were conducted with adoptive parents (single and in couples), aged 36–74, who had adopted from 21 countries or territories on five continents between 1970 and 2016. Parents were initially recruited through adoptive parent associations. These initial entries then provided me with access to additional respondents. Thus, approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ of the respondents are or were active members of an adoptive parent association ($n = 10$). I also gained access to respondents through advertisements posted on adoptive parents’ websites or forums, which are popular among adoption candidates. Most respondents adopted as a couple ($n = 22$), and of those who adopted as singles ($n = 12$), 11 were women. With two exceptions, all the parents surveyed belong to the French majority population racialized as white, and adopted at least one child from an African, Caribbean, Pacific, South American or Asian country. Finally, the intellectual professions are primarily represented in the sample, while no blue-collar workers were encountered. The 19 remaining interviews in this first part of the survey were conducted with people adopted into French families, aged between 19 and 44 and born in 14 different countries in South America, Africa or Asia. The respondents, adopted between 1972 and 1997, were adopted between birth and the age of seven. Nearly half ($n = 9$) were adopted by parents in managerial or intellectual occupations, six by parents in intermediate occupations, and three by parents in blue-collar occupations. Most adoptees were in intermediate occupations at the time of the interview, and only two were managers.

In the second part of the survey, 38 interviews were conducted with parents who had children in a mixed-race union, aged 33 to 79 ($n = 19$), and descendants of mixed-race unions, aged 17 to 50 ($n = 19$). All couples consisted of one person from the white French majority population and one person with a connection to non-European or overseas migration (therefore racialized as non-white and referred to as “minority” in the remainder of this article). With one exception, all minority spouses were born abroad or in an overseas department, and originated from 16 countries or overseas departments. In more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the cases ($n = 15$), it is the father who is racialized as non-white. Six respondents were in managerial positions and thirteen in intermediate positions (three of whom had working-class spouses).

Finally, among the descendants of mixed-race couples, all the respondents are French citizens and all but one were born in France. The parental couples to whom they were born are composed of a member of the white French majority population and a foreign parent ($n = 4$), a parent born abroad and naturalized French ($n = 12$) or a parent from an overseas department ($n = 3$). The minority parents thus came from 13 different countries or overseas departments. In a little more than $\frac{2}{3}$ of the cases ($n = 13$), the father is the minority parent. Nine respondents came from an upper-class family, four from a middle-class family and six from a working-class family. Five were high school or college students at the time of the interview, eight were in an executive or higher intellectual position, and six were in an intermediate occupation.

3. Results

3.1. *When Nothing Changes: A Racially Mixed Family as the Confirmation of Previous Dispositions?*

When asked what having a mixed family might have changed in their lives, in terms of their experiences or outlook on things, a minority of the parents interviewed said, in various ways, that “nothing had changed”. For these parents, not only is adoption not seen as an upheaval, but it is also seen as an obvious, if not natural, extension of prior cosmopolitan dispositions.

Florence Brunet (54, psychologist), who adopted her daughter in Nepal in 2008 and who described herself and her husband as “citizens of the world”, affirmed, for example, that adoption has only “strengthened [their] openness to the world”. Similarly, Alain Lacroix (57, doctor), who adopted with his wife (55, housewife) their eldest son in Djibouti in 1991, explained in an interview that: “It is because we were who we were that we did what we did”. The Lacroixes lived a large part of their lives as “expatriates”: based in Kanaky/New Caledonia at the time of our interview, they had successively lived in West Africa, Central Africa, and Oceania. Alain Lacroix described his family as “multicultural” and considered that their travels shaped their identity: “Maybe we are more African, sometimes I think I am more African than European”. From this perspective, he said that adoption was “something natural”, which he described as being an extension of what he calls the “multicultural experiences” the couple had in the course of their expatriation. The normality of adoption is therefore linked to travel and cosmopolitanism, which [Cosquer \(2018\)](#) has shown to be a crucial feature of white expatriates’ self-presentation.

Mathilde Rémy (39, civil servant in finance) also evoked the “multiculturalism” of her entourage in order to explain that the adoption of her daughter in the Central African Republic in 2012 did not, for her, “change anything at all”:

No, because I already had that way of looking at things. [...] So for me, no, it didn’t change anything at all. [...] And then I’ve always evolved in a multicultural environment, [...] whether it be the socio-cultural environment of my friends, who often have nothing to do with finance, or their origins, etc. I’ve always been curious about the world around me. I’ve always been curious about different cultures, etc., so it hasn’t changed anything for me, because I was already close to all that, immersed in all that, and my friends of African origin, I knew them before I had [my daughter], and so they are still there. (Mathilde

Rémy, 39, civil servant executive, daughter adopted from the Central African Republic, single)

The same argument can be found in Michèle and Bertrand Vaysse's interview (51 and 49, executives in the audiovisual sector), the latter considering, like Alain Lacroix, that the adoption was the "outcome" of cosmopolitan dispositions that were already there:

Oh no, I don't think it's changed much. I have the impression that it's an extension of us, the culmination of what we are. (...) It didn't create (...) an opening to the world or anything like that. Not at all. It's rather the opposite, it's rather our culture that pushed us towards this adoption. (Bertrand Vaysse, 49, executive in the audiovisual sector, one son adopted in Mali, as spouse)

It should be noted here that in the adoptive parents' discourse, the presentation of adoption as something evident from, not to say as the very "extension" of, a prior openness and interest toward the world and/or foreign cultures, often went alongside a colorblind perspective concerning the distancing of racial differences and the affirmation of a "universal subjectivity" (Cosquer 2018, p. 204) that is supposed to transcend borders, both symbolic and geographic. Thus, the Vayssees asserted that "international adoption has never been problematic" for them, in order to highlight their prior openness:

Whether he comes from here or elsewhere, we don't care. (...) He's here, he's black, we're white, he's from Mali and we grew up in France ... We're linked to other countries too, other languages, other cultures ... [...] Not only is it not a problem, but it's almost not a question. (Michèle Vaysse, 51, executive in the audiovisual sector, one son adopted in Mali, as spouse)

Michèle and Bertrand Vaysse, who said they refuse to be reduced to their nationality, thus affirm their cosmopolitanism both by claiming other cultural influences and by declaring the inanity of racial differences. From this perspective, it seems that cosmopolitanism as claimed by the parents met in this work is similar to the cosmopolitanism studied by Cosquer (2018) in its dimension of a racialized and classed distinction, characteristic of the white upper class⁴.

Among parents in mixed-race couples, this line of argument was less frequent, with almost all the white parents interviewed acknowledging that their union, and subsequently their family, were the occasion for major changes in their lives and an opening up to previously unsuspected realities. In these cases, it was not so much the arrival of the children but rather the beginning of the relationship that constituted the moment of entry into racial mixedness. While adoption is a conscious, measured and argued parental choice, being in a mixed-race union, by comparison, is often not perceived or described as a choice and is much more likely to be explained in interviews by the randomness of romantic encounters. In this respect, entry into family mixedness is not the product of a choice or a "project", as is the case for parents who have adopted a child abroad, but rather of circumstances that are considered contingent, if not fortuitous⁵. However, for Muriel Brulin (60, retired school teacher) and Laurence Gillot (54, unemployed), the mixedness of their couples and then of the families they founded also originated in previous dispositions:

But I think that I've always had this curiosity about what is different [...] There was, for me, this interest, there was a curiosity of someone different. (Muriel Brulin, 60, retired school teacher, French without known migratory ancestry, ex-spouse Algerian, one daughter aged 29)

Well yes, let's say that I have evolved more and more towards openness, towards multiculturalism, those kind of things. But it's true that somehow, unconsciously, without realizing it, I was ... [...] I consider myself a citizen of the world, since I've always been—well, since I was old enough to think about it—well, that's just fine with me. (Laurence Gillot, 54, unemployed, French without known migratory background, ex-husband Cuban naturalized French, three sons aged 24, 20 and 18)

We can find another reference to universal citizenship in Laurence Gillot's words: similarly to the cases presented above, the family mixedness (or even "métissage") is presented as in alignment with the cosmopolitan self. From such a perspective, adoption or mixed-race unions are portrayed as a continuation of a prior—desired and desirable—identity, characterized by openness and multiculturalism.

The family mixedness created by adoption can even become, in some cases, evidence of a particular open-mindedness, and a way for parents to present themselves. Thus, Arnaud Asselin (45, journalist) described the adoption of his son Jules in Mali as a "way of life" and as participating in the realization of a universal citizenship that he claims with pride. For him, adoption "is an act of citizenship. It is being a parent but it is also being a citizen". In this case, as for other parents interviewed, adoption is not only a way to start a family but becomes a way of affirming one's cosmopolitan self (Chantal Lacroix declares herself "proud" to have adopted her eldest child because, she explains, "it was rewarding for the family"). Here, the desirability of "cosmopolitanism" can undoubtedly be read in light of the class position of the adoptive parents interviewed, in that they belong mostly to the upper classes and in particular to the liberal or intellectual professions. This desirability is also racially located, [Cosquer \(2021\)](#) having shown in her work on white French migrants in Abu Dhabi that it is part of the distinctive practices on which the construction of whiteness is based. It can also probably be interpreted in the light of the very condition of internationally adoptive parents, as international adoption is often presented, whether by parents themselves or in the folk discourse, as associated with a particular openness to the other and a commitment to multiculturalism.

In those cases, previous socialization and colorblind dispositions that were internalized by parents seem to be rather unchanged by the experience of transracial parenting. Moreover, this very experience is interpreted by these parents as a confirmation of previous dispositions to "cosmopolitanism" or "multiculturalism"—and transracial parenting itself is presented through a colorblind rationale.

3.2. Breaking out of Racial Ignorance: Visibility and the Intimate Experience of Racism

In contrast to these few parents who emphasized the continuity and obviousness embodied by their family's racial mixedness, most of the white parents interviewed stressed the changes implicated by international and transracial adoption, and by founding a racially mixed family.

One of these changes is the experience of visibility in the public space that is often described as unprecedented. Because the white racial position, as a norm, is generally unspoken and unmarked—that is, socially "transparent" ([Stowe 1996](#), p. 70)—most white people have never experienced racial discomfort. They can navigate the world with what we can call racial insouciance, which speaks to what Mills called "white ignorance" ([Mills 2007](#)). Mills indeed develops a racial epistemology that allows us to examine the cognitive implications of the white racial position. Whites are socialized to not see a whole part of the world: because they take their social experience as the norm, they make themselves unable to grasp the racialized experiences of minorities. Whites are then socialized to not speak about race, to not see what it does, and to not hear when minority individuals recount their experiences. This cognitive phenomenon is directly linked to the erasure of the racial dimension of whiteness: white individuals can navigate the world pretending race does not matter, even more so in the French context where colorblindness is institutionalized ([Sabbagh and Peer 2008](#); [Simon 2008](#); [Beaman and Petts 2020](#)).

Nevertheless, the interracial families studied here, by derogating from the norm of racial homogeneity, are brought to deal with the public dimension of their family connection and the reactions that the racial heterogeneity of the family unit elicits. They then undergo the unprecedented experience of being forced out of the racial comfort that comes with being racially invisible. With this new visibility and publicity comes a particularization, if not a minorization, of the families concerned. According to Astrid Lassus (40, head of service in an association, a daughter adopted from Benin, married), her family "is no longer

an ordinary family” because it can no longer “go everywhere”. From then on, according to her, “in the eyes of others, we probably fell into another category. We are no longer... the French-French”. In describing the change in perception by others and the exit from the majority category of “French-French”, a euphemistic and roundabout, yet frequent, way of designating whiteness in France, Astrid’s words suggest that it is her whiteness itself—and that of her husband—that is affected by the family mixedness. Because they are no longer a family that can go unnoticed in the comfortable invisibility of the majority, Astrid and her husband cannot, when they are with their daughter, enjoy this particular privilege of whiteness anymore. It is, in other words, the same experience that Martine Clause described:

But it’s also the experience of not just being in an absolute norm [. . .]. I’m not black, but the fact that I have a black child, when she’s with me, makes us a singularity. The norm, it’s not a mother of one color and a child of another color. The norm is something else, and as a result, whether we like it or not, we are outside the norm and therefore we are looked at for that. Which is exactly the same thing in . . . I had a black partner, and it’s exactly the same thing for me in a love relationship. (Martine Clause, 47, teacher, a daughter adopted from Mali, single)

It is clear, according to Martine’s description, that the double departure from the norm of family racial homogeneity and the norm of whiteness results in a particularization and visibilization that is characteristic of a minorization process. When they are in the presence of their racialized as non-white children, the adoptive parents thus step outside the majority “absolute norm”, in Martine’s words. Incidentally, she compares mixed-race parenthood and partnering, comparing her situation as a white adoptive mother with her experience as a partner of a black man.

In this respect, accounts of white parents in mixed-race couples are explicitly similar to those of adoptive parents. Pauline Clombe, for example, remembered a vacation spent with her partner, during which she experienced looks that were all the more “shocking” because they were new to her:

We’ve already been subjected to it with João when we went to the south of France. At the beginning he said to me: “Yeah, people look at me weird”, and I said to him: “No, it’s nothing, stop overreacting!” My partner is light-skinned, in fact, he is very light-skinned, so . . . [. . . .] And in fact, at the end, yeah, I felt the looks, in fact, I found it a little . . . and then it’s . . . it’s easy to say for me, who’s white in a country of white people, in fact, for me I must say that it’s an unknown world. And so I was shocked. (33 years old, social worker, French of Italian origin, spouse 36 years old, order picker, Cape Verdean naturalized French, two sons of 5 and 3 years old)

As she stated, belonging to the majority (“a white woman in a country of white people”) had until then prevented Pauline from having a glimpse of the “unknown world” of racial discomfort, stigmatizing looks or discriminating attitudes. If her first reflex was to minimize her spouse’s comments, she quickly realized the “looks” were not only directed at her spouse, but also at the couple she forms with him, which came as a surprise for her, as the excerpt here reveals.

In her study of white mothers of multiracial children, [Karis \(2004\)](#) also compares the situation of adoptive parents and interracial couples and the social sanctions they may face. “Being in a racially mixed family”, she writes, “means that whiteness loses some of its taken for granted status and privilege, and that white women face situations in which they no longer have the option to ignore race” ([Karis 2004](#), p. 162).

White parenting of non-white children and interracial sexual encounters indeed are two ways of disrupting the racial reproductive order and jeopardizing the preservation of white identity, the boundaries of which have historically been maintained and secured through the control of sexuality and reproduction ([Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992](#); [Clancy-](#)

Smith and Gouda 1998; Stoler 1995, 2002). While they are not deprived of the status of whiteness per se, parents raising children racialized as non-white may experience a position at its margins, with the loss—or modification—of some of the privileges associated with it.

The interviews also suggest that racial ignorance is disturbed because raising children racialized as non-whites gives parents a more intimate understanding of racism and discrimination. Several parents mentioned how their experience of parenthood (or, in some cases, daily life shared with a non-white spouse) challenged their perception of racism. Their familial intimacy with individuals racialized as non-white, be it their children or partners, grants them access to a vantage point on racism, its expression and consequences. Denise Thiblet (79, retired teacher, French with no known migratory ancestry, Cameroonian spouse), for example, stated that “if (she) had not lived with (her) husband and children, (she) would not have been able to discover (racism). So completely, so deeply”. In a similar vein, for Karen Depinay, living with her ex-husband and raising mixed-race (“métis”) children differentiates her from the majority of white people—among them her current partner—in that she considers that she, unlike them, has a “lived” experience of racism without which it is not possible to fully measure it:

KD: Having lived with him, it allowed me to realize the difficulties . . . well, what they went through. Because I heard about it! [. . .] Yes, it changed my vision of things. Even more so.

SB: In relation to racism too?

KD: Oh yes, even more so. I have mixed-race children, too. [. . .] It opened my eyes... It made me grow up. [. . .] When we were walking around, people were looking at us. Well, obviously . . . you see, your vision of things evolve. [. . .] Well yes, because people don't know! When you haven't lived it, you can't know. And . . . you have to live it, to understand it. You have to be around, to really understand certain things. My current partner is totally open, of course, but yeah, that's it, what I've experienced, through my eyes, all that, my ex-in-law's family, no it's . . . you have to *live it*.

(Karen Depinay, 46, executive secretary, French without known migratory ancestry, ex-husband born in Martinique to Martinican parents, two children aged 16 and 14)

It is worth noting here the different ways of expressing awareness of racism and the “difficulties” faced by non-white people in Karen's comments. When she first talked about her life together with her ex-husband, she said that her awareness results from the fact that she “heard” about the “difficulties” experienced by her ex-husband and his family. In her interview, she stresses that racism, as well as the history of slavery, were frequently discussed by her former in-laws. On the other hand, when she talked about her children, she evoked “experiencing” things and not just “hearing” or “seeing” them, thus shifting from expressing a certain distance to pointing out a first-person experience. This change in the terms she used seems to refer to the particular position of parents in an interracial union, in comparison to adoptive parents. If conjugality represents the moment of entry into mixed-race parenthood and may constitute a moment of awareness, the experience of parenthood seems to constitute a moment of rupture that is even more radical. This could be due to the density and intensity of the ties between parents and children and the strong identification they imply, which we can assume is greater than that between two spouses.

In some cases, it is the subtleties and the less obvious expressions of racism that are “discovered” by parents. For example, Catherine Fournier talked about how she became aware of the ordinariness of racism when she adopted her daughter from Haiti in 2005:

It's awful! (. . .) I mean, I had read it, I had anticipated it, I knew that I had to lead her into it, but . . . But I . . . I had . . . well, how can I put it? I hadn't taken the full measure . . . [. . .] And so in fact it's broader than I thought. I mean, it affects people around you, your neighbors, your whatever . . . who can tell you in the same sentence: “But she is super adorable, she is nice etc., but . . . “. And

wham! A nice cliché about black people. (Catherine Fournier, 54, administrative executive in the civil service, one daughter adopted from Haiti, single)

In an article where she explores her condition as a white mother of African-American children, Haslanger identifies the shift in attitudes toward racism among white parents of non-white children as resulting from a shift from racism viewed as “offensive and morally objectionable” to racism experienced as a “personal harm” (Haslanger 2005, p. 282) in that it targets loved and intimate ones.

Furthermore, one of the particularities of certain accounts of the “discovery” of racism and its various manifestations is the way it is coupled, for certain respondents, with a presentation of racially segregated white spaces as non-racialized spaces, and therefore spaces that are free of racism. For Pauline Clombe and Maud Gandus, for example, their growing up in suburban or provincial areas where non-white people were a very small minority, if not absent, explains their belated awareness of the extent of racism:

I do think that the treatments are not equal. (. . .) Before, I think I didn’t want to believe it, actually. I think I didn’t want to believe it at all. [. . .] Suburban life is a different world actually. You see, I grew up in a house, so . . . I didn’t know that world. (Pauline Clombe, 33, social worker, French of Italian origin, spouse Cape Verdean naturalized French, two sons aged 5 and 3)

A lot of things have changed. (. . .) Well, on this issue of discrimination and racism, which I didn’t understand, of course. Because I wasn’t subjected to it, because... once again, I come from the provinces, where, before high school, diversity hardly existed. I didn’t know what it was, in fact. [. . .] So that changed a lot of things about my way of seeing things, that’s for sure.

(Maud Gandus, 37, educator, French without known migratory background, Algerian spouse, three children aged 9, 8 and 5)

The description of such all-white spaces as spaces in which racism would not manifest itself due to the very absence of non-whites has been analyzed by DiAngelo and Dyson (2018, p. 61) as part of a larger discourse of “racial innocence”, whereby whites are assumed to be able to navigate society easily “without a sense of themselves as racialized subjects” (DiAngelo 2011, p. 62). From this perspective, white racial segregation is seen as both unremarkable and non-racial, and individuals who grow up in such spaces “rarely, if ever, have to think about race and racism” (DiAngelo 2011). In the cases of Maud Gandus and Pauline Clombe, it is through their entry into family racial mixedness that this “racial innocence” is both made evident and disrupted. Even more blatantly, Laura Houliard described the colorblind environment she was socialized in, and how she was then “shocked” into an awareness of racism when she discovered, “at almost 30”, that she was living “in a world that does not exist”:

I think I was raised in a family where I was told that it didn’t exist. I mean... it’s not that I was told that it didn’t exist, but I grew up with the fact, with the idea that it didn’t exist, that a man of color, of any color, was equivalent. In my family, it doesn’t make any difference. (. . .) Maybe . . . maybe today I would be a moron, maybe I would be more narrow-minded, I would say things like: “Come on, sir, go get a job, juts make an effort!” Maybe I would have stayed a little bit on this image of... but today I know it’s more complicated than this. (. . .) It’s true that racism is a thing. (Laura Houliard, 38, school teacher, French without known migratory ancestry, spouse born in Martinique to Martinican parents, one son aged 6)

Maud Gandus also recounted a similar process of becoming aware of racism, which was prompted and accompanied by her spouse:

So in my case, it’s true that I . . . we discussed it. My partner said to me: “But what do you think? That your children will never face racism?” And I said: “No..”. “—But you’re delusional!” Oh yeah . . . Well, of course. But for me . . .

well, for me they can't be victims of racism, and nobody can be mean to them, you know, I'm a mom. And so it's very complicated, it's very violent for me. For their father, I'm not saying that it's not violent, but for him it's like, well, that's how it is, they'll be confronted with it, and they'll have to respond to it. That's basically it, and what he says is that they need to be clear about who they are, so that they can respond, and not be offended by it. (Maud Gandus, 37, educator, French with no known migratory ancestry, Algerian spouse, three children aged 9, 8 and 5)

In Laura's and Maud's words, the dimension of resocialization implied by the experience of mixed-race coupling and parenthood is made very explicit. Laura's colorblind socialization did not withstand the repeated discrimination experienced by her partner, and the intimate confrontation with racism changed her perspective. Similarly, the contact with her partner and the joint experience of parenthood made Maud reconsidered the colorblind approach in which, like Laura, she had been raised. This echoes the work of Vasquez (2014), who studied non-Hispanic White and Latino intermarriage in the United States and showed that the experience of "intermarriage disrupts non-Hispanic whites' white habitus" (Vasquez 2014, p. 403).

Here, it seems that the gendered division of labor and the fact that it is still women who are the families' caregivers also has an impact on the process of resocialization observed. Indeed, since mothers carried out most of the child-rearing work, they were more likely in interviews to express this kind of shift in their consideration of racism as a more intimate experience. A generational effect also seems at play here. Laura and Maud were born in the 1980s in France: if they both grew up in a largely colorblind context, they became mothers in the 2010s, at a time of dramatic change in the public discussion of racial matters in France, and of growing importance of political approaches towards racism in France (Picot 2016). This was not the case, for example, of the oldest parents I interviewed, who raised their own children during the 1970s, such as Denise Thiblet, mentioned earlier, whose children were born in the late 1960s, in a context marked by decolonization and the first waves of labor immigration.

Finally, some parents did not describe a change in their perception of racism so much as a change in how they reacted to it. In this case, parents said they have always been aware of racism and its extent in society, but feel more involved since becoming part of racially mixed families. While Thierry Firmin (47, engineer, two children from his relationship with Solkem Bouso) said that he "pays more attention" to racism than he used to and feels less willing to let racist comments go unnoticed than he used to, Gilles Bosselli (50, teacher, three children adopted in China, Russia and Kazakhstan, as a spouse) felt that the adoption of his three children made him more responsive ("I think I would react . . . maybe not more violently, but I do think I would react more").

Such a change in reaction to racism derives, again, from the transformation discussed above in the apprehension of racism from a distant understanding to the experience of "personal harm" once their loved ones are directly affected. The intimate experience of racism through one's children—and, in some cases, one's spouse—disrupts the passive attitude and "white silence" (Underhill 2018) that may have been adopted in the face of racial injustices that become all the more intolerable when they are targeted at one's own family.

3.3. *"We're White Outside, but We're Also a Little Bit Black in the Inside": Rationale of Distancing from Whiteness*

The most unexpected element of the interviews with white parents, however, is not the reconsideration of racism and its effects, or the mention of new behaviors towards racism. Rather, it arises in accounts of some respondents for whom the experience of a partly marginal whiteness and the consequent undermining of certain privileges seemed to lead to discourse on the reshaping of their own racialized position. This reshaping

translates into what they perceive as a disruption of their own racialization, disruption that was mentioned both by adoptive parents and white parents in interracial unions.

For example, Mathilde Rémy considered that the adoption of her daughter in the Central African Republic brings her closer to African culture, to the point of making her African herself:

People of African origin, they often are . . . as if they were grateful for what I did. Because in Africa, in fact, adoption is normal, and often they adopt each other, and so, yes, sometimes I was . . . I was thanked by African mothers at school who thanked me for having adopted my daughter. (. . .) Who kissed me, who thanked me for what I was doing, etc. So it will be more like that. But really, I understand, if it's in the African culture, it's as if I were actually African myself, so to speak. (Mathilde Rémy, 39, civil service executive, one daughter adopted from the Central African Republic, single)

While Mathilde's comments do not explicitly mobilize a racial register, her words do echo those of other parents who, like Hugo Fontaine, spoke directly of a change in their racial position:

But you have a sense of what it is to be black . . . (. . .). And it's true that you're a little black. Because you have a black son, he is your son, and you have the looks . . . You live it with him, the looks. (. . .) For example, there aren't many black people in the neighborhood, but they all know each other. They all say hello to each other. And the only white person they all say hello to is me. Because I'm not really white. And I don't feel white, you know, when they say hello to me. (Hugo Fontaine, 40, teacher, one son adopted from the Central African Republic, single)

For Hugo, the closeness and intimacy he shares with his son not only changed the way he perceives racism and racial inequality, but also made him "a little black", through shared experiences. This is also what Corinne Crespel reported when she talked about her trips to Haiti. While on the first trip—"the first time (she) went to a country where all the people are black"—she says she "felt very white", she did not have the same experience on her second trip, which was taken when she had already adopted her three children. She said that by that time, she no longer "felt white". In order to explain this change in her self-perception, she compared the situation of adoptive parents to that of adoptees:

That's what adopted children say, if you meet them, they feel . . . they say they are a bit "bananas", for Asians: meaning yellow on the outside and white on the inside. And I think that our own evolution is the opposite, meaning we are white on the outside, but we are also a little bit black on the inside. (Corinne Crespel, 50, teacher, one boy and two girls adopted in Haiti, as a spouse)

Corinne uses the "banana" or "bounty" metaphor, which is often used to designate adoptees who, because they were socialized in white families, would be "yellow" or "black on the outside" and "white on the inside", to turn it on its head. In this case, it would not be non-white children socialized in white families who would become "white on the inside" but the white parents who, through the experience of parenthood across racial boundaries, would become non-white themselves. Thus, Anne Buanec reports that her friends do not consider her white:

And then I think sometimes she (a friend) forgets that I'm white, because she's mad at white people, but it comes out like that, it's something irrational, because it comes out of anger, you know. And I was telling this to Eva and Eva said to me: "But Mom, you're not white!" I tell her: "Yes, I am white. I am white". (laughs) (. . .) But often, even at work, people say to me: "Yes, you are white, but you have a black heart" (Anne Buanec, 55, radiology technician, French without known migratory ancestry, ex-spouse born in Martinique to Martinican parents, one daughter aged 18)

The expression used by Anne Buannec resonates in a very specific way with the words used by other respondents about their adopted children (for example, Daniel Gimenez, 49, teacher, said that his daughter (adopted from the Ivory Coast), is building herself a “white heart in a black body”). Thus, in this reversal, it is not only the racialization of minority children raised in racially mixed families that is potentially disturbed or disrupted (Brun 2019), but also that of majority parents. These elements suggest that attention should be paid to how the experience of parenthood can operate as an instance of (re)socialization in a racialized sense. This is what Haslanger (2005) suggests when she considers her racial position to be rendered de facto “mixed” by parenting Black children. She considers that she “has been resocialized by [her] children”, from whom she has inherited some “some aspect of their race”, even though she shares no biological connection with them (Haslanger 2005, p. 285). She states: “I do think that my map for navigating the social and material realities of race has adjusted so that I’m now navigating much more often as if my social and material realities are determined by being ‘marked’ as of African descent”. (Haslanger 2005) In her view, the experience of parenting non-white kids entails a novel somatic relationship to non-white bodies and the everyday realities of children that inevitably mark the parents’ relationships with their own bodies and their own presence to others. She thus argues that it is necessary to consider the somatic dimension of racial socialization in order to grasp how transracial parenting can act as a process of (re)socialization, since “our racial identities deeply condition how we live our bodies and relate to other bodies” (2005, p. 277). By raising a non-white child, the dominant somatic norms internalized through the previous white racial socialization of the parents could thus be partially disturbed and challenged.

However, I consider it too radical to assert, as Haslanger does, that the racial position of the white parents of non-white children should be considered “mixed”. This assertion risks oversimplifying the reshaping of social positions and relations that can take place in the process of racial socialization in interracial families. The equating of the position of minority children who may, under certain conditions, “pass”, and thus benefit from a relative inclusion in whiteness (Brun 2022), with that of their parents, who may see their white position as partly transformed but who continue to largely benefit from the privileges guaranteed by their whiteness—even if marginalized—is based on problematic simplifications. Nevertheless, I find Haslanger’s proposal stimulating insofar as it calls for a consideration of parenthood as involving a (re)socializing process. In the case of parenting across racial lines, such (re)socialization may, as I mentioned, involve the disturbance or reconsideration of certain elements of white racial socialization previously internalized by parents.

In this sense, this disturbance may result in a distance from what can be described as hegemonic whiteness (Lewis 2004; Hughey 2010)—what I have called here the experience of partially marginal whiteness—while also revealing the content and contours of whiteness itself. Lewis is the first, to my knowledge, to coin the concept of “hegemonic whiteness” following that of “hegemonic masculinity” proposed by Connell (1995). The Australian sociologist defines the latter as the type of masculinity that is both normative and hegemonic within the structure of gender relations: it broadly refers to “the pattern of practice (. . .) that allows men’s collective dominance over women to continue” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, p. 832). In a word, hegemonic masculinity is “the most honored way of being a man” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), at the expense of other forms or expressions of masculinity. Drawing from this definition, Lewis understands hegemonic whiteness as the form of whiteness that is considered the most legitimate or genuine. Hegemonic whiteness is then this type of whiteness that is glorified over other forms of whiteness, and, just like hegemonic masculinity vis-à-vis patriarchy, “which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of [whites] and the subordination of [nonwhites]” (Connell 1995, p. 77).

As Luke (1994) highlighted, while the whiteness of white individuals in interracial families is made very salient and explicit (they are very often referred to as the “white parent” or the “white partner”), they do not share some of the experiences of most other

white individuals who are in hegemonic positions—being “invisible” in public; being unnamed as white; not experiencing racism closely or intimately; etc. Paradoxically, this doubly encourages them to distance themselves from hegemonic whiteness, as it becomes doubly uncomfortable for individuals accustomed to a relative form of racial insouciance and ignorance to be led to confront their whiteness while, at the same time, experiencing a certain marginality in it. Claiming a transformation of one’s white identity, whether it be expressed as a loss of whiteness or a gain of blackness, as some of the respondents did, is therefore a way of negotiating and coping with the discomfort that emerges from the crisis of whiteness resulting from their belonging to a mixed-race family. In this respect, it seems relevant to consider this crisis of whiteness experienced by white parents of non-white children as the consequence of a lack of adequation to the practices and norms of hegemonic whiteness. By relatively—that is, never definitively—breaking out of the norms of hegemonic whiteness through their experience of family racial mixedness, the white parents thus experience a new status, which drives some of them to explicitly break away from the dominant white position. Rather than a “loss” of whiteness, these parents experience a whiteness that is not entirely hegemonic.

4. Discussion

By considering that parents are not only socializing agents but are also potentially (re)socialized in the process of parenthood (here in a context of racial mixedness), this article allows us to consider racially mixed families as settings in which a whiteness in crisis is played out. If whiteness—and colorblindness—are not natural conditions or states but are learned and transmitted to children in various ways (Bartoli et al. 2016), attention must also be paid to how whiteness itself is potentially reconfigured through the experience of interracial parenthood. This in turn makes visible, on another level, the often elusive and ineffable (because normalized) characteristics of whiteness.

In this way, I highlight how the racially atypical situation of racially mixed families and the potentially marginal position of white parents can lead to a disruption of their previously internalized racial socializations, ultimately causing them to question, if not reconsider, their own understanding of their racial identity. Through this, the article suggests that the parental relationship, by its nature and by the dimension of identification of parents with their children that it often implies, operates as a (re)socializing instance that potentially destabilizes previous racial dispositions.

The white parents in mixed-race couples differ in part from white adoptive parents in that this destabilization may begin with the conjugal relationship, instead of with the child’s arrival. However, it seems that the very strong dimension of identification that the parental relationship implies is even more likely than the conjugal relationship to prove racially socializing. The difference between white parents in mixed-race couples and white adoptive parents also lies in the fact that the former were more likely than the latter to live in suburban areas⁶ and in more socio-economically mixed or even working-class environments. As such, they tended to rub shoulders with greater socio-economic and racial diversity than the adoptive parents interviewed, who tended to occupy higher income positions and to live in more economically and racially segregated areas than the mixed-race couples. More adoptive parents interviewed thus expressed an unchanged and unchallenged colorblind approach, as seen in the first part of the article.

While the interviews conducted unfortunately do not allow a precise examination of the dispositional effects of such (re)socialization processes on white parents, the results presented do allow the demonstration of how majority parents’ racial ignorance is disrupted. Such disruption then results in changes in the ways in which the world is viewed from the perspective of race relations and racism, as well as the ways in which respondents behave in the face of racism.

This is not to suggest that white parents of non-white children are themselves racialized as non-white by their parenting, but rather to argue that the experience of transracial parenting moves them away from the norms of hegemonic whiteness, in part by changing

previously internalized racial dispositions. In this way, and by turning the traditional sociology of socialization on its head, this article takes advantage of the racially atypical situation of the mixed-race families studied here in order to enrich our understanding of the contours and dynamics of whiteness, its various expressions and its possible reshaping.

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Notes

- ¹ All first and last names have been anonymized.
- ² See «Comment des familles noires et arabes apprennent à leurs enfants à vivre avec les forces de l'ordre», https://www.francetvinfo.fr/faits-divers/police/violences-policieres/on-a-peur-qu-ils-soient-blesses-ou-tues-comment-des-familles-noires-et-arabes-apprennent-a-leurs-enfants-a-vivre-avec-les-forces-de-l-ordre_4001867.html (accessed on 11 December 2021).
- ³ The observations were of associations of adoptive parents and of training sessions for adoption applicants, organized by AFA (Agence française de l'adoption), a public organization whose mission is to inform, advise and guide candidates for international adoption.
- ⁴ It should be noted here that I did not gather more general information on the political positions of the respondents during the interviews, which could perhaps have shed light on this use of a cosmopolitan discourse. However, international adoption was often associated, among the respondents, with a posture of general openness to the world, with which the presentation of a cosmopolitan self seems coherent.
- ⁵ It is worth noting here that one respondent, born to a French mother with no known migratory ancestry and a Malian father, mentioned in interviews that her mother had “always wanted” a mixed-race child, suggesting that her union with her father was at least partly a strategic decision. However, this is the only case among the respondents where a union with a non-white partner was explicitly sought.
- ⁶ In France, and unlike in the US, for example, suburban zones are less affluent than city centers.

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