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# Status (in)congruence in migration

## Transnational mobilities and class aspirations of French Muslim professionals

Margot Dazey<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The social order is sustained by interlocked racial-class hierarchies. Building on a case study of transnationally mobile French Muslim professionals, this article examines the national entrenchment of these racial-class hierarchies. It unpacks the various racial-class formations migrants encounter during their transnational journey, and how these formations manifest as embodied dispositions. For many French Muslim professionals, spatial mobility serves a project of racial and class mobility, providing access to middle-class privileges previously denied to them in France. It also renders more tangible the national foundations of racism and Islamophobia, making strange taken-for-granted situations in French society. Drawing on extensive interviews that center on life histories, the article emphasizes how minority individuals acquire knowledge about racism and make sense of these experiences as they move across borders. Ultimately, it argues that spatial mobility can have transformative effects on the incorporated sets of racialized dispositions that propel individuals to see, feel, and act in certain ways, pointing to the heuristic value of a transnational approach to intersectionality studies.

**Keywords** Status incongruence · Class aspirations · Transnational mobility · Migrating racialization · Racial socialization · Islamophobia

Social class classifications are racially coded, with class positions being shaped by racial assumptions, while racial identities are simultaneously layered with class-based representations. In the US context, for instance, blackness is frequently associated with lower-class culture, while whiteness is linked to socioeconomic affluence. Other racial minorities, such as Arabs or Asians, often occupy intermediary position within this racial-class spectrum (Feagin and Sikes 1995; Gans 2012).

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These intertwined processes result in what can be described as racial-class hierarchies—systems of classification that emerge at the intersections of racial and class-based judgments.

This article examines the national entrenchment of these hierarchies, drawing on the conceptual framework of intersectionality (Collins 2009) and extending it through a transnational lens (Purkayastha 2012). It explores how minority individuals navigate shifts in these social-class hierarchies and encounter new forms of classification as they move across borders.

In doing so, this article contributes to phenomenological approaches to race and racism, which consider how racially constituted difference is lived and experienced by minority individuals (Essed 1991; Lamont et al. 2016). It asks: How do minority individuals understand and reflect on the shifting regimes of (class-inflected) racialization they encounter? To what extent are their cross-national efforts for upward mobility constrained by race? And how do they navigate new forms of racial-class categorization in their migratory destinations, especially in relation to the classificatory frameworks they developed in their home country? Addressing these questions requires attentiveness to the embodied dispositions that shape how individuals “conceive and navigate their racialized position daily”, as well as how they “categorize others and interpret the world along racial lines” (Brun 2022: 212–213).

Methodologically, the entry point to study nationally bound racial-class hierarchies is transnational mobility.<sup>1</sup> Mobility entails the reconfiguration of individuals’ racialized dispositions in context-specific ways. In this respect, the article complements a rich tradition of comparative research on racial-class hierarchies. Essed (1991) on highly educated Black women in the Netherlands and the USA, Lamont et al. (2016) on middle- and working-class African Americans, Black Brazilians, and Israeli Ethiopian Jews, and Naudet and Shahrokni (2019) on upwardly mobile racial minorities in France and the USA—all look at the intersections between class and race in diverse national contexts. Doing so allows them to compare national regimes of racialization showing, for instance, how distinct cultural repertoires—such as Brazilian racial democracy or American neoliberalism—and distinct class structures shape the phenomenology of racial exclusion, that is how individuals interpret and respond to racism (Lamont et al. 2016: 275–279). In contrast, this article shifts the focus from comparative cross-national case studies to the heterogeneous racial-class formations encountered by geographically mobile individuals *over their life course*. Specifically, it examines how French emigrants navigate shifting racial, class, religious, and national categorizations during their transnational journeys, and how they make sense of these varied systems of classification over time.

The empirical data presented in this article consist of biographical interviews with 27 French Muslims who have experienced, or are currently experiencing, transnational mobilities.<sup>2</sup> All participants hold postgraduate degrees (either a master’s

<sup>1</sup> The notion of “transnational” emphasizes the need to consider immigrants simultaneously as emigrants and acknowledge their complex attachments to their home countries (Boccagni 2012).

<sup>2</sup> With the exception of two individuals recruited through personal networks, interviewees were selected through the *Love-Leave* project—a collective research initiative led by Olivier Estèves (University of Lille, 2021–2023), which focused on the expatriation experiences of French Muslims. The project



or a PhD), work in professional roles (including managers, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and others), and earn (usually much) more than 3,000€ a month. All have also experienced a form of upward socioeconomic mobility compared to their parents' educational level, profession, and lifestyle, with the majority coming from working-class backgrounds and having undergone a significant social shift.<sup>3</sup> All participants self-identify as Muslim (with varying degrees of religious practice) and share North African descent, with the exception of one participant from the Comoros Island. As we will explore, their dual identification as both Muslim and non-White reveals the intricacies of race and religion<sup>4</sup> as well as the gendered racialization of Islam in contemporary France (Galonnier 2021). The interviews were conducted between June 2021 and November 2022 via zoom (due to distance constraints), with one interview taking place in Paris. They lasted three hours on average, were fully transcribed, and analyzed thematically.

Overall, the narratives collected elicit a collective imprint on these trajectories. In France, Muslim professionals face racial and religious barriers to career advancement and middle-class lifestyles (section "[Status incongruence in France and aspirations for socio-spatial mobility](#)"). Enacting their constrained efforts of social uplift, cross-national mobility brings them into contact with heterogenous racial-class hierarchies, exposing the contingent nature of social classifications (section "[Migrating racialization and exposure to alternative racial-class hierarchies](#)"). For many, mobility represents an opportunity to claim middle-class privileges<sup>5</sup> that were previously inaccessible due to pervasive racism and Islamophobia in France (section "[Toward status congruence abroad?](#)"). As the conclusion suggests, this analysis of geographical mobility illuminates the (trans)national, religiously inflected, and dispositional<sup>6</sup> dimensions of social status—dimensions that intersectional research could explore in greater depth.

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Footnote 2 (continued)

included both a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews, with participants recruited via a call for respondents posted on social medias and in *Médiapart* (Estèves et al. 2024). The interviewees for this article include 13 women and 14 men, all within the same age range (31–46 years old). The majority (18 individuals) were born and raised in France. To protect their anonymity, all names have been changed.

<sup>3</sup> 18 interviewees have working-class fathers (typically factory or construction workers, or skilled workers such as electricians or carpenters) and often stay-at-home mothers. 5 interviewees come from lower-middle-class backgrounds (their parents being administrative employees, craftsmen or shopkeepers), while 4 come from upper-middle-class families (with parents who are chartered accountants or company managers for instance).

<sup>4</sup> The formation of the French nation state, particularly its colonial foundations, has long conflated Muslimness with Arabness—regardless of the religious observance or self-identification of Maghrebi immigrants and their descendants (Davidson 2012). This blending of race and religion persists to this day, evident in the “Muslims-qua-Others” category, a catch-all label for non-White (predominantly Arab) individuals in a society that minimizes the significance of race and ethnicity (Beaman 2017).

<sup>5</sup> The concept of “middle classes” lacks a single definition in sociology and varies across national research traditions. In the UK, it often includes the more privileged sectors of managers and professionals, while in France, it is more narrowly defined (Bacqué et al. 2015). For this article, the middle classes are understood as individuals with high income, typically homeownership, occupations in management or professional fields, higher education, and a comfortable lifestyle.

<sup>6</sup> By dispositions, I mean the incorporated products of socializing experiences through which individuals acquire more or less lasting ways of seeing, feeling, and acting (Lahire 2019).



## Status incongruence in France and aspirations for socio-spatial mobility

The French Muslim professionals I interviewed express an “existential stuckedness” in France (Hage 2009)—a sentiment shared by many geographically mobile individuals but with the specificity of being racially constituted in their case (Mandin 2020; Alloul 2021a). These racial constraints may explain why this group exhibits a stronger desire to emigrate compared to those without a migration background in France (Caron et al. 2023). Similar to other minority elites (Feagin and Sikes 1995), racial and religious discrimination in the workplace and other settings undercuts the middle-class benefits typically associated with tertiary education and professional achievements. These processes shape what is known as *status incongruence*, a mismatch between individuals’ positions across different status hierarchies (Hughes 1945)—in this case, between high class status and low racial-religious status. This section explores how experiences of status incongruence in France nurture Muslim professionals’ aspirations for transnational mobility, and how these aspirations unfold upon arrival in their migratory destinations (mostly global cities, such as Tokyo, London, or Dubai).

### A feeling of racially constituted “stuckedness” in France

Two spheres of life appear particularly impacted by experiences of status incongruence: the careers and consumption practices of French Muslim professionals.

Most interviewees recount various forms of racism in the workplace, including jokes, lack of politeness, and disrespectful behaviors. Idriss, a 38-year-old purchasing manager, frequently faced misrecognition at work in France, with clients refusing to send him invoices and instead addressing his white colleague. As he recalls: “I was clearly perceived as a second-class citizen. [...] The only [other] Arabs in the company were the workers on the building sites” (interview with Idriss, July 2021). These interactions, which alternate between blatant, covert, and “subtle” forms of discrimination, highlight entrenched racial-class hierarchies (with Arabs occupying the lower echelons) as well as racialized class stereotypes (Feagin and Sikes 1995). Such misrecognition often coincides with other forms of unjust treatments that negatively affect the material conditions of French Muslim professionals: discrimination in job interviews, limited opportunities for promotion, and wage gaps, all of which contribute to a pervasive sense of “stuckedness”. Samir, a 36-year-old risk manager now working in Luxembourg, reflects: “the [career] evolution I’ve had here, I would never have achieved in France” (interview with Samir, July 2021). He points out that Black and Arab managers were often confined to consultancy contracts in France but had opportunities to climb the career ladder in Luxembourg.

While the professional “stuckedness” of French emigrants of Maghrebi descent has been explored in emerging literature (Shahrokni 2019; Mandin 2020), status incongruence also hampers their consumption and leisure activities. Bilal, a 43-year-old computer engineer, made the decision to leave France after experiencing a series of racist incidents, one of which occurred during a wedding in his early thirties:



I had a good salary. I thought, I'm going to treat myself, buy a nice car. [...]. So I went to a friend's wedding in Brittany. [...] I came with my *Audit TT coupé* – so I arrived at my friend's wedding, and I overheard people I didn't know saying: "Ah, that must be a drug dealer." (interview with Bilal, September 2021)

Bilal's account highlights the potency of racialized (and gendered) class stereotypes: his ascription to Arabness comes with images of socioeconomic deprivation or suspicion of illegal financial means—embodying the figure of the "*garçon arabe*" that intersects with gender, race, age, and class (Guénif-Souilamas and Macé 2006) and points to the fact that social identities are not unidimensional or additive, but rather mutually constitutive (Collins 2009). The trope of the young Maghrebi male delinquent is so entrenched that it eclipses the possibility of upward social mobility in the minds of white onlookers.

Beyond private settings, race-class stereotypes also obstruct French Muslims' access to middle-class spaces of leisure and consumption. Both Idriss and Samir shared the unsettling experience of visiting high-end car dealerships in France, only to be ignored by salespeople (interview with Samir, July 2021; interview with Idriss, July 2021). In cafés and restaurants, interviewees often encountered instances such as having their names misspelled, being seated at the back of the establishment, or being outright denied entry. For Hamza, a 38-year-old broker living in Dubai, a particularly painful memory stands out from a recent visit to an upscale Parisian restaurant:

I'm with three friends, all North Africans. Including my client – he is a portfolio manager managing four billion you see. So we arrive at the entrance. [...] and the bouncer says: "No, that's not going to be possible". (interview with Hamza, June 2021)

Such experiences of race-class exclusion and the resulting sense of stuckedness are not unique to the individuals I interviewed. They align with the findings of a growing body of research on upwardly mobile French nationals of North African descent engaging in professional migration (Le Renard 2016; Shahrokni 2019; Mandin 2020; Alloul 2021a, 2021b, Estèves et al. 2024). Overall, their aspirations for mobility are shaped by a complex interplay of factors, including career ambitions, the desire to escape the racial ceiling in French workplaces, and the need to evade Islamophobic stigmatization. For many French nationals of Maghrebi descent, hopes of racial-class mobility are increasingly channeled through spatial mobility, given the racialized barriers they face within France's labor market and society at large.

### The national contingencies of everyday racism

How do these aspirations unfold upon arrival in migratory destinations? A common theme in the interviewees' narratives is the sense of relief they feel from escaping the systemic othering they experienced in France. Jamal, a 34-year-old female doctor who moved from mainland France to Réunion Island, illustrates the heuristic potential of considering overseas territories from a critical race lens (Cosquer et al. 2022):



We get the impression that in mainland France, there's this need to categorize people to decide how we interact with them. But in La Réunion, nobody cares about that – about origins, first names, appearances – because there's all kinds of looks. So, with my brown hair and slanty eyes, I could easily be from La Réunion. [...] There was no question about it. Not even about my first name, which isn't Creole. But people don't really care, they don't question it. And that was such a relief.

When I got there, I realized just how burdensome it was to have to justify myself, to say “–Yes, my name is Jamal J-A-M-A-L. Yes, it's a boy's name, but it's me. –What's your origin? –Tunisian. [...]” And all the incessant things we face here [in mainland France], which we don't even notice anymore because that's just the way it is. (interview with Jamal, November 2021)

Jamal's “weariness”—a term she also used—highlights the visceral toll of everyday othering. Questions about her appearances, name, and origins have become routine in mainland France, to the point where they are accepted as “part of the expected, of the unquestionable” (Essed 1991: 50).

It is only through comparing her experiences in metropolitan France and Réunion Island that Jamal recognizes the exhaustion caused by daily racial stigmatization. In this sense, spatial mobility offers minority individuals a powerful lens through which to interpret, and challenge, racism. By comparing their experiences in (mainland) France with those in their migratory destinations, they can assess the (un)acceptability of certain behaviors and grasp the nationally contingent nature of racial and religious hierarchies. Jamal's sense of relief in discovering alternative racial-class arrangements underscores the emancipatory potential of “denaturalizing” everyday social hierarchies. This process allows individuals to view what were once considered ordinary, taken-for-granted situations as strange, revealing the constructed nature of racism and Islamophobia in French society.

Wafa's account further illustrates how transnational migration induces a sense of defamiliarization. Wafa, a 34-year-old administrative executive in Dubai, spent a year in the UK as part of her university studies. She reflects on her time in Britain with alleviation, describing it as an encounter with “a certain tolerance”:

I went to England, and there I opened my eyes. England was gray, but for me, everything was bright. I was so glad, so happy, to change air, change environment, discover something new – new friends, a new culture, a certain tolerance. One thing that stood out was my roommates. When I told them “My name is Wafa” or “I don't drink alcohol” at parties, no one ever asked me: “Wafa? But where does that come from? [...] You're French, but where are you from?” [...] I've never been asked, “Why don't you drink alcohol?” Whereas [in France] I remember I often heard: “Come on, just take a little sip, it won't do you any harm”. [laughs] My French friends [would say that] all the time. (interview with Wafa, November 2021)

Wafa's testimony highlights the thrilling feelings that come from escaping everyday othering as non-French: “England was gray, but for me, everything was bright”. While in France, she experienced ascribed outsidership—shaped by national,



racial, and religious markers of difference like her name, appearance, and beverage choices—she realized that such experiences were not as fixed as she had once believed. By comparing her time in the UK with her experiences in France, she recognized the changeability of social arrangements, particularly the contingent nature of the suspicions surrounding her “Frenchness” and pious practices.<sup>7</sup>

The liberating realization that they could be perceived unequivocally as French appears in many narratives of French Muslim emigrants. Yassin, a 34-year-old purchasing manager living in Mexico, vividly recalls his first experience abroad. During a week-long visit to London in his early twenties, he felt an unexpected desire to expatriate: “There, I got a slap in the face [*là je me prends une claque*] and that’s what made me want to leave [France]. [...] That’s where I see cops in turbans. That’s where I’m considered French” (interview with Yassin, July 2021). Denials of national membership are common for individuals of postcolonial descent in France, reflecting the restrictive conception of Frenchness that infuses contemporary French polity (Mazouz 2017). Similarly, Amir, a 33-year-old financial software consultant, describes the relief he felt from the absence of “suspicions of non-Frenchness” in Japan: “Going abroad was a deliverance [*délivrance*] because nobody is going to question the fact that you are French”. His relief contrasts with the mental strain of daily othering in France: “There’s not a single time in my life when someone asks me where I’m from, I say ‘Strasbourg’ and people stop there. [...] It constantly reminds you that you’re not really French. And so, I grew up with that. I grew up with this malaise” (interview with Amir, June 2021).

If being racialized as an “Arab” in France often involves early life experiences of othering as non-French (“gr[owing] up with this malaise”), racial socialization encompasses—more generally—intimate knowledge and embodied expectations of racist interactions.<sup>8</sup> Through their knowledge of the game, to use Bourdieusian terms, social agents develop their practical sense via the alignment between structures and expectations. For minority individuals, this practical sense entails anticipating stigma and discrimination, and acting accordingly. In this way, racist experiences operate as agents of socialization, fostering the incorporation of “a set of reflexes, ways of behaving and reacting to events” (Brun 2024a: 286). Job search processes can illustrate these (nationally shaped) expectations. Sadia, a 33-year-old HR executive who wears the hijab, moved to Canada after experiencing numerous

<sup>7</sup> Wafa’s account challenges the view that Islamophobia is simply a form of race-based exclusion, where Maghrebi or North African identity serves as the primary basis for the marginalization of French Muslims (Beaman 2017: 9). Instead, it reveals how Islamophobia can also operate through the language of choice and the interrogation of religious practices. Wafa faces pressure to disregard Islamic prohibitions on alcohol consumption and is repeatedly asked to justify her choices (“Come on, just take a little sip, it won’t do you any harm”). This form of Islamophobia highlights how religious identity can be scrutinized in ways that extend beyond racial ascription alone.

<sup>8</sup> This article concentrates on anti-racist practices acquired through racial socialization, fitting into a broader trend in the sociology of race relations that examines othering mechanisms and the ways individuals deal with these mechanisms (Brun 2022). However, recent research highlights the heuristic value of exploring, in a non-essentialist way, the broader dimensions of racial socialization that extend beyond experiences of racism, including parenting styles, educational pathways, and professional practices (Brun 2024a; Zhou-Thalamy *in press*).



Islamophobic incidents in her workplace. Upon arriving in Ontario, she sent out several CVs and was overwhelmed by the number of interview invitations she received: “I was shocked! Shocked and pleasantly surprised. Because I’ve never had so many interviews offers” (interview with Sadia, November 2021). While in France, she would send hundreds of CVs without a single response (“it wasn’t 1% [response rate], it wasn’t 10% [...] it was zero comma”), in Canada, “one CV out of two would lead to an interview”. This “pleasant surprise” is echoed in Sophie’s experience. Sophie, a 36-year-old lawyer, was born to a Muslim father of Algerian descent and a Catholic mother of Hungarian descent, who purposely gave their daughters “typically French first names and Algerian middle names” to shield them from racist ascriptions. After moving to London in the early 2010s, Sophie was shocked to find that potential employers didn’t discriminate against her for wearing the veil: “I’ve been surprised because I’ve had a lot of job interviews where I went in thinking, ‘[...] They’re going to open the door [and] I’m going to get a reaction.’ And I’ve never had that” (interview with Sophie, December 2021). Sophie’s and Sadia’s experiences highlight the gendered dimensions of Islamophobia in France, which severely limit the professional opportunities of highly educated women who wear the veil (Ajbli 2011).

In these stories, we hear the scenarios of racism<sup>9</sup> that Muslim professionals have internalized while living in France: predictable questions about their names and appearances; expectations of being asked “where are you from”; anticipation of disapproving looks at job interviews. These scenarios reveal how racialized dispositions are incorporated into French society—a society marked by colonial legacies, color-blind ideologies that privilege whiteness, an exclusivist conception of national belonging, and a restrictive understanding of secularism (Fernando 2014; Mazouz 2017).

### The changing significance of Islamic visibility

The French nation state also stands out in relation to the hyper-visibility of Islamic markers (Galonnier 2021). In contrast to French society, where Islamic markers often carry exclusionary connotations in social interactions, Muslim professionals recount their experiences in migratory destinations where religious differences do not bear the same stigmatizing weight. Jamal, the 34-year-old doctor living on Réunion Island, expresses this shift:

Over there [in La Réunion], people dress as they like – women wear veils, men wear little hats – and nobody minds, you can see it. It’s so fluid. I was taken aback [interloquée]: ‘It’s incredible, there are veiled women here and nobody cares.’

<sup>9</sup> Essed (1991: 74) defines these scenarios as “the general expectations about manifestations of racism in a specific type of situation”.



In (mainland) France, veiled Muslim women are the focus of intense political and social scrutiny, which renders them hyper-visible. On Réunion Island, however, Jamal is surprised by the indifference toward them—there, “their identity is neither abstracted nor overdetermined”, making them visible but unremarkable (Fernando 2014: 79).

Beyond the veil’s unremarkability, many interviewees note the “normalization” of Muslim practices abroad, where such practices pass as “unmarked, unnoticed, unthematized” (Brighenti 2007: 326). Djibril, a 34-year-old trader working in London, is struck by how his Muslim colleague’s use of a prayer room is a non-issue: “There’s no one to judge you [...] it’s not frowned upon” (interview with Djibril, June 2021). Yassin, a 34-year-old purchasing manager, shares a similar experience from his time in the USA: “On Fridays, I have a work colleague from Lille who prays and is very committed [...]. Nobody says anything to him. He’s not a boss, you know.” (interview with Yassin, July 2021). Jamal, Djibril, and Yassin all express relief at the absence of social penalties surrounding religious practices, as Islamic markers are no longer tied to the pervasive suspicions they encounter in France.

This absence of negative judgment presents French Muslim emigrants with the unexpected freedom to discuss religious matters openly in everyday interactions. Not only is religious difference not devalued (“it is not frowned upon”, “nobody minds”, “nobody says anything”), but it is also given space to be acknowledged. Yassin’s experiences of the USA vividly illustrate this shift. One day, at his work canteen, a Jewish colleague asked him why he didn’t eat meat: “Before I could finish my sentence and say: ‘I’m a vegetarian.’ He says: ‘Oh, does it have something to do with halal?’” This sparks a conversation between them about halal and kosher food, as well as the religious freedom to follow these dietary laws. The ease with which religious topics are introduced in US daily life also surprised him during a conversation with his friend John about weekend plans:

“John, what are you doing on Sunday? Let’s hang out!”

“–Yeah, but not before noon.”

“–Why not?”

“–I’m going to mass Sunday morning.”

[Yassin reflects] The fact that these people are so open-minded and talk about it like this... For example, during Ramadan and I would go to pray tarawih [special Ramadan prayers] [...] and I’d say to John] “–No. I can’t meet up.”

In France, to my French friends, [...] I would have said “–I have something to do.” But with my friend who says “–I’m going to mass on Sundays” I say “–I’m going to the mosque to pray”. What does he reply? “–God bless you.”

Their relationship with religion is totally different. (interview with Yassin, July 2021)

In both anecdotes, Yassin was inclined to behave as he would in France: pretending to be vegetarian to conceal his halal diet and fabricating social commitments to avoid discussing his mosque visits. However, his dispositions prove misaligned with the US context, where faith and religious practices are far more socially accepted (Galonnier 2017).



Beyond the lack of social penalty for religious practices and their widespread acceptance, Yassin's experiences also point to something else: the institutional recognition of religious difference. This distinction is useful, as Brighenti (2007) differentiates between minority empowerment through indifference and empowerment through recognition. While the unremarkability of Muslim practices abroad reflects the emancipatory potential of indifference, several interviewees, like Yassin, also highlight their appreciation for visible religious infrastructures. For example, Yassin recalls his first day at work in the USA: "My boss picked me up and gave me a tour of the factory. [...]. 'This, Yassin, is a prayer room. If you pray, you can pray here' I thought: 'Wow, okay. That is really great'" (interview with Yassin, July 2021). Yassin's surprise echoes the reactions of other interviewees who were struck by figures of authority wearing the veil. Wassim, a 42-year-old risk manager, recounts his amazement upon encountering a veiled customs officer upon arriving in London: "I thought to myself: 'In France, we'd never see this'" (interview with Wassim, June 2021). These kinds of experiences are common across narratives from the French Maghrebi diaspora (Estèves et al. 2024: 184–185). As Mandin (2020: 308) notes, they symbolize "an opening to new possibilities that are perceived as impossible to achieve in [mainland] Europe due to pervasive racism and discrimination practices."

### **Migrating racialization and exposure to alternative racial-class hierarchies**

Recognizing the contingent nature of French racial-class hierarchies coincides with exposure to alternative systems of classification. For French Muslim professionals who have migrated abroad, encountering these different racial-class systems prompts them to reconsider the racialization processes they face in France and reshape how they define themselves and others along racial lines. The concept of "migrating racialisation" is particularly helpful here. Grill (2017: 1137) defines it as the "processes in which forms of racialisation operate as (re-)produced forms of knowledge but also as embodied dispositions among migrants moving toward societies with different histories of racial formation". Given that the individuals interviewed for this study relocated to regions with divergent racial formations, it seems worth stressing the diversity of the racializing processes they encounter. To illustrate this heterogeneity, the following section examines the global itineraries of three interviewees—Yusra, Amir, and Idriss—focusing on their encounters with different racialization regimes and exploring the interconnectedness of race, class, gender, and religion in shaping their social trajectories.

#### **"In this region, being French of Maghrebi origin is highly regarded" (Yusra)**

Yusra, a 34-year-old lawyer living in Bahrein, was born in France and spent 5 years of her childhood in Algeria. She later moved to Paris for middle school and to Marseille for high school. Her mother, a French language teacher in Algeria, faced social downgrading upon arriving in France, where she took up work as a canteen



employee. Her father, an accountant, used deliberate educational and residential strategies to uplift the socio-economic status of his four children.

Although Yusra does not recall experiencing significant racism while growing up in France (despite mentioning several racist incidents throughout the interview), she emphasizes the pervasive impact of sexism both in Algeria and France (“throughout my whole life in fact, like for yours, I guess”). She also reflects on the racialized and gendered class stereotypes directed at her during her university years:

Sometimes at university, they’d tell me I was from the *quartiers* [working-class housing projects on the outskirts of French cities]. “It’s so great to achieve a bac+5 as a Maghrebi girl from the *quartiers*, given everything you’ve been through.” But I haven’t been through anything, I’ve never lived in a *quartier*. (interview with Yusra, January 2022)

Yusra’s experience reveals the persistent stereotype of the young French woman of North African descent and working-class background, assumed to be oppressed by a patriarchal family, and expected to embrace upward mobility through educational achievement and residential distancing from immigrant neighborhoods (Guénif-Souilamas 2000). Interestingly, these racialized and gendered class stereotypes were reactivated in a completely different context a decade later, when Yusra vacationed in the USA. There, she was racialized as Latina due to her “curly hair and tanned skin” and faced suspicion of shoplifting in every store she entered: “I experienced what Latinas experience; in fact, Latinas are the Maghrebis of the United States.”

After completing a master’s degree in Marseille, Yusra took on an international corporate mission (VIE) as a junior legal adviser in Algiers, where she says she first encountered overt racism:

That’s where I experienced racism. Racism because I’m Franco-Algerian. From Algerians, by the way. [...] It was microaggressions like, “Yeah, you – the pseudo-Algerians.” We were always told that we weren’t 100% Algerian, that we were some kind of French hybrids. (interview with Yusra, January 2022)

These “microaggressions”, directed at Yusra and a fellow Franco-Algerian colleague from lower-class background (whom she later married), contrasted sharply with the favorable treatment given to “the two Frenchmen of French origin” volunteering alongside them. Yusra and her colleague were “literally relegated to back of the background”, envied for their French passports, while the white French volunteers were “constantly praised” by their Algerian colleagues. These multilayered dynamics reflect the complexities of global racial hierarchies, wherein Yusra and her colleague’s discrimination at the hands of Algerian nationals may also signal the precarious position of middle-class Algerians within broader power structures between states (Bidet 2021: 300).

The social penalty associated with Yusra’s binational background was largely lifted after her marriage and relocation to the Gulf countries—regions unmarked by French colonial history (unlike Algeria) and thus characterized by different modes



of racialized ex/inclusion. After spending a year in Oman, followed by 4 years Dubai and 3 years in Bahrein, Yusra managed, in less than a decade, to build a successful career in the legal sector. Not only does she earn double the salary she would have in France (“In France, I’d never have had this”), but she also lives in a spacious four-bedroom house with a garden, employs a Sri Lankan maid, and sends her son to an exclusive private school. For Yusra, there is no question that her North African heritage and French passport are valuable assets in the Gulf job market:

In the workplace, in this region, being French of Maghrebi origin is highly regarded. [...] It’s an asset. [...] We share an Arab culture, which means we’re a bit of a bridge between the two [...]. In my company, I see daily how this is valued. Because I can both... I know the language, the attitude to adopt, the culture of people from the UK, US, or Europe. And I can also adapt when it’s just people of Arab descent. (interview with Yusra, January 2022)

Yusra’s experience reflects the cultural performances expected of French Maghrebi workers as they navigate both “European” and “Arab” cultural codes (Le Renard 2016: 11, Alloul 2021a: 94). In contrast to France, where hyphenated identities associated with French colonial legacies are disqualified (Cohen and Mazouz 2021: 11), Yusra leverages her background to her advantage in Bahrain, transforming a “minority identity” that was socially penalized in France into a professional asset. Although she does not speak modern standard Arabic (and thus is less exposed to potential “subtle” forms of exclusion), she is able to capitalize on the valorization of embodied Arab traits, drawing on the dominant cultural repertoire of her migratory destination to fuel her upward mobility aspirations.

**“As a foreigner, you’ll always be a foreigner. You’ll never be considered Japanese”  
(Amir)**

Amir is a 33-year-old financial software consultant who was quoted above regarding the relief he feels from being unambiguously perceived as French abroad. He grew up in Strasbourg in a working-class Algerian family, where educational and professional success was strongly encouraged (“A third of all the sentences my father ever said to me throughout my life—I’m not even kidding—was: ‘Do your homework’ ‘How was school?’ ‘What are your grades?’ ‘Let me see your notebook’”). After graduating from a prestigious engineering school (where, while he did not experience racism, he felt socially distanced from his upper-class peers), Amir secured a job without difficulty at the Tokyo branch of a French bank, allowing him to pursue his longstanding interest in Japanese culture (“I’ve always been passionate about Japan [...], primarily because of manga and video games”). His banking career, however, is driven by economic aspirations: “I didn’t really know what I wanted to do with my life, so I said to myself: ‘We’re going to make money’. Because that’s it; because I was fed up with shopping at Dia [a discount supermarket]”. Like Yusra, Amir’s expatriation could be seen as part of what Hof and Alloul (2023: 16) describe as “migratory class-making”: “the agentive transposition of mobility aspirations beyond the national state through a process of transnational migration”.



In Japan, where he has lived for less than a decade, Amir has experienced forms of white passing (similar to those of another interviewee in Tokyo) to the point where Japanese women would make anti-Arab comments in his presence:

It's quite funny because Japanese people, often Japanese women who went to France and came back – sometimes don't realize... I don't know how they do it... that I'm of foreign origin, of Arab descent. And they have a field day [elles se lâchent]. They don't like Arabs. Holy cow! [...] I take great pleasure in getting them to talk first. I want to get as many horrors out of them as possible, and then I tell them... I reveal the pot-au-rose. But I don't blame them at all. They've just had bad experiences [in France]. (interview with Amir, June 2021)

Amir's account illustrates the ambivalence that often accompanies white passing, exposing him to racist sentiments (Brun 2024a). His experiences underscore that “race is not something you can ‘see’ in an obvious or natural way” (Brun 2024b: 127) but is deeply shaped by social and historical contexts.

While white passing may result in unwanted inclusion into racist complicity, Amir's ascription to white Frenchness also offers certain privileges, as European and American immigrants often retain global advantages due to their citizenship. Amir further elaborates on these dynamics within Japanese racial hierarchy:

One thing that's quite funny in Japan is that everyone is a foreigner. Well, there are gradations when you're a foreigner. An American or a Frenchman is a little higher up the pyramid of foreigners. But then, between a German and an Italian, there's no particular preference, or rather, it's a personal preference. And it's funny to see some white French friends, who have never been confronted with discrimination, discover it here. Generally, it's not very mean, but there can be comments, or not having getting certain jobs because they don't speak Japanese, or certain apartments. They're super racist in Japan when it comes to apartments. There's no BBR code [“Bleu Blanc Rouge”, a 1990s-era French hiring discrimination code]. No, it's clearly stated: “We don't take foreigners here.” That's very clear. In fact, I'd like to say, it's better [this way]. At least it's square [au moins c'est carré]. As a foreigner, you'll always be a foreigner. You'll never be considered Japanese. [...] We're all Arabs to them [laughs]. (interview with Amir, June 2021)

Amir provides a nuanced insight into Japan's racial structure, where the primary divide is between nationals and foreigners (Yamashiro 2013). His awareness of this binary is sharpened by his own lived experiences: unlike his white French friends “who have never been confronted with discrimination”, Amir recognizes the relative “color-blind” nature of the “foreigner” category (“We're all Arabs to them”), with foreigners facing similar barriers to jobs and housing. Amir also expresses a preference for Japan's explicit racial boundaries over the more covert racism of French society (as illustrated by the “Bleu Blanc Rouge” scandal). His observations align with broader shifts in global hierarchies, where Europe is no longer seen as “an attractive haven for one-dimensional (racialised) immigration from the Global



South” and Asia “morphing into appealing settlement destinations for European middle-class migrants” (Hof and Alloul 2023: 2–3).

### “The Arabs of England are the Indians and Pakistanis” (Idriss)

Idriss is a 38-year-old purchasing manager living in Switzerland. He grew up in a small town in the Vosges, attending private Catholic schools where he was one of the only Arabs (“In the classroom, I was a stain [*une tache*]”). Before embarking on a career with one of France’s largest engineering groups and experiencing instances of racist misrecognition as described above, Idriss spent 8 months in London to learn English. The multicultural fabric of British society was a shock to him: “Veiled women at customs, a Sikh guy with his headscarf [...] Frankly, I said to myself: ‘Wow, England!’”—reiterating in similar words Yassin’s opinion quoted above, showing a shared emotional response to the diversity they encountered in the UK.

Beyond his initial excitement about this “melting pot” of cultures, Idriss’s experience in Britain led him to realize that Arabs did not occupy the same place in the racial and class hierarchies of France and the UK:

In England, what struck me was seeing Arabs and realizing that we didn’t have the wrong label there [qu’on n’avait pas la mauvaise etiquette]. I mean, over there, the Arabs of England are the Indians and Pakistanis. The Arabs over there are mostly from the Middle East. So Oxford Street [London’s biggest high street] is full of Arab corners. And compared to French models, in cities where there are Arab streets, it’s dirty, and there are only grocery stores. You go there [in England], in the streets, and sure, there are chichas and things like that but these are only classy and chic places. It’s true, it’s a bit weird to see that. [...] We’d go into stores like Sotheby’s boutiques. You go in, you see a jacket you like, try it on, and the sales assistant isn’t going to say: “No.” I don’t know how to explain it, but there’s no haughty looks. [laughs]

Me: When you said, ‘The Arabs over there are the Pakistanis and Indians’, did you notice that too? Was it visible?

Idriss: Yes, it’s visible. That is hyper-visible. Hyper-visible, yeah, in the sense that all the jobs that were a bit dirty, like dishwashers, they were Jamaicans and Indians. [...] I don’t know how to put it, but you recognize people when you’re there, in that scheme. (interview with Idriss, July 2021)

Idriss’s surprise stems from the shifting racial-class status of Arabs in the UK, compared to their position in France: in London, Arabs are visible in prominent areas, associated with upscale shops, cafés, and restaurants, and not treated with disrespect. His observations highlight how national context shape scenarios of racism: having been accustomed to “haughty looks” and “hav[ing] the wrong label” in France, Idriss’s expectations are shattered—positively—in London. In the UK, Arabs (who predominantly come from the Middle East rather than from North Africa, as Idriss judiciously remarks) are viewed as “ambiguous insiders”, not fully assimilated into “mainstream” Englishness or whiteness, nor fully fitting into public



categories of “race” or “diversity” (Nagel 2001: 389). It is important to note that Idriss’s London experience dates back to the early 2000s, when Arab minorities had not yet been framed as a social problem, and the securitization of Islam had not fully taken shape. His astonishment underscores the denaturalizing potential of comparative interpretative strategies as well as the unsettling realization that racial-class classifications are nationally contingent (“It’s true that it’s a bit weird to see that”).

Idriss’s awareness of British racial-class hierarchies is shaped by his familiarity with comparable dynamics in France: “the Arabs of England are the Indians and Pakistanis”. His observation recalls Yusra’s assertion that “Latinas are the Maghrebis of the United States”. In both cases, analogical reasoning allows them to appreciate the national-specific nature of social orders. Pulling a little harder on this thread, Idriss’s and Yusra’s comments also point to their understanding of racism as a structural—rather than individual—problem, as they identify similar mechanisms through which racism is perpetuated: securitization and surveillance (as in in Yusra’s case with racial profiling) and economic exploitation (as seen in Idriss’s experience with subordinated jobs occupied by Jamaicans and Indians).

Idriss’s understanding of structural racism is informed by his personal experiences and those of his family: his sister, who wears a headscarf, was unable to find work as a pharmacist in France; his brother, an engineer with the same first name as one of the 9/11 terrorists, was forced to retrain in finance and pursue a career in Singapore; another sibling moved to London to escape the discrimination he faced in France. These experiences add weight to Idriss’s own recollections of pervasive racism within the French educational system, where Black and Arab students were often funneled into low-qualified jobs (“When we went to the local school, we came out with a CAP or a BEP [vocational diplomas]. You worked as a plumber, electrician, or in a factory. That was the pattern”). In contrast, Idriss recounts his astonishment when he first encountered an Arab doctor in France:

The first time I saw an Arab doctor or lawyer was in the Paris region. The first time I arrived in Argenteuil, I made an appointment with an ophthalmologist. I saw an Arab name and I thought, “What the fuck is this?” I was shocked. (interview with Idriss, July 2021)

The unthinkability of Arabs in professional jobs underscores the prominence of racial-class hierarchies in French society. His reaction once again highlights the persistence of racialized class stereotypes, even among members of racial minorities.

## **Toward status congruence abroad?**

The trajectories of Yusra, Amir, and Idriss illustrate distinct pathways of sociocultural class progression. As noted in studies on “privileged migrations” (Cosquer 2023; Hof and Alloul 2023), transnational journeys are often linked to upward social mobility and class-making practices. What makes the experience of French Muslim emigrants distinctive, however, is the exercise of class privileges that were previously inaccessible to them due to class-informed racial and religious stigma in France. This section examines these new class sensibilities and demonstrates how



their “class journey” (Alloul 2021b: 185) may render a potential return to France not only unattractive but perhaps even inconceivable.

### The relieving exercise of class privileges

Most of the French Muslim emigrants interviewed emphasize the career progression they experienced after leaving Europe. This progression is tangible in the responsibilities they gained abroad, the competitive salaries they earn, and the professional promotions that received. Recall the statements by Yusra, the lawyer living in Bahrain, and Samir, the risk manager in Luxembourg, regarding the significant career opportunities they encountered abroad –opportunities not realistically available in France. Beyond money and prestige, professional recognition means that their expertise is no longer questioned. For Samir, experiences of work misrecognition, where white colleagues questioned his expertise, “were possible in France but here, no; here [in Luxembourg] many partners are Black and Arab”, adding that any racist behavior was swiftly dismissed in the Luxembourg workplace (interview with Samir, July 2021).

Beyond work, interviewees describe newly gained access to middle-class lifestyles in their destinations. Take Idriss, for example, whose shopping in London no longer involved the “haughty looks” he’d grown used to in France. Similarly, Yusra contrasts her shopping experiences in Lyon and Dubai:

At the Louis Vuitton store in downtown Lyon, I was followed by all the security guards [...] At first, I didn’t pay attention. I just wanted to buy a bag. And wherever I went, I was followed. The only [other customers] were white women moving around too. At first, I thought, “Maybe it’s me”. [...] But no: the two security guards were following me, leaving [the white] women alone who were touching the items, while I didn’t even touch anything. And yeah, that really bothered me. And I thought to myself: “I’m not going to spend 4,000 euros with them. At some point, you have to stop. I’ve got nothing to prove.” So, I left. I never experienced that in Dubai. Quite the opposite, in fact. I’ve seen people in Dubai, I swear, French people dressed like the archetypal neighborhood guy [*l’archétype mec des quartiers*], really, with jogging and TN [Nike sneakers]. I swear, the door was opened for them. (interview with Yusra, January 2022)

Similar to an interviewee in Alloul (2021b: 184), Yusra’s class mobility and luxury tastes overseas “did not free her in the medium term from a pervasive racial technology of exclusion in Europe”. In contrast, she observes that the “archetypal neighborhood guy”—racially coded as Arab or Black in France—receives respectful service in Dubai. The racial-class order that excludes racial minorities from middle-class services in France is thus reconfigured in Dubai, where they can access the class-making practices of their choosing.

Djibril, a 34-year-old trader in London, makes a similar comparison regarding his dining experiences in France and the UK: while he is “very well received” in a fancy restaurant in London, the owner in Paris refuses him entry, claiming the restaurant is



full (interview with Djibril, June 2021). His account closely mirrors a racist incident shared by Hamza, who was denied access to a French club with his friends despite being “superbly dressed—shirts, suit jackets” and willing to pay for an expensive table. “Frankly, I’ve traveled a lot and that only happens in France [...] They don’t want Arabs”, he says, contrasting his experiences in Dubai and Madrid, where he lived for several years (interview with Hamza, June 2021). Taken together, these stories highlight the “sociocultural anxieties about one’s class location” shared by European professionals with a postcolonial background (Hof and Alloul 2023: 9): their experiences abroad offer them opportunities for upward class acculturation and racial uplifting—experiences that were inaccessible to them in France.

### **An impossible return to France?**

Stories of racialized social uplift should not obscure the challenges of transnational migration. Undoubtedly, the daily life of French Muslim emigrants abroad is not devoid of difficulties, which existing research has rightly documented. These emigrants still face global racial hierarchies largely unfavorable to them, and do not always experience the linear career pathways they were aspiring to (Le Renard 2016). They encounter restrictive citizenship regimes in Asia and elsewhere, limiting property ownership and permanent settlement (Hof and Alloul 2023: 10). And they face increasing securitization and exclusion in places like Canada, fueled by anti-Muslim sentiment (Mandin 2020).

However, many emigrants feel that, despite these obstacles, their lives abroad are better. Sophie, the 36-year-old lawyer in London who was quoted above regarding her expectations to be discriminated against because of her veil, expressed this sentiment:

Here [in the UK], it’s not perfect. We’ll never be part of the upper upper classes. That’s not what is happening. But at least we can have a life that’s a bit more normal in the everyday. Because, career or no career, good income or no good income, if in your daily life, when you go to get bread, you get spat on, it’s just not livable. (interview with Sophie, December 2021).

For Sophie, pervasive racism and Islamophobia make life in France unlivable. She further observes a key difference among the French lawyers and legal managers she knows in London: white emigrants often “return to France in the end”, while non-white/Muslim emigrants rarely do.

This observation highlights how the future-making practices of French emigrants are racially informed. For Sophie, the fear of discrimination, not the fear of downward mobility, makes returning to France unattractive to most emigrants of North African descent. This view is echoed by Yusra, as she was discussing the everyday racism she encountered in France, notably in the workplace:

I’ve been living in the Gulf for eight years now [...] and I cannot tell you if I’d be able to go back to France because of this. [...] These microaggressions, on a daily basis... Living in your country, where Islam is seen in this [negative] way all the time... From a media, political point of view. People start saying



things, but your day-to-day life isn't at all like that, your aspirations aren't like that at all. You just want to be happy in your life. And I don't think I could do that. I couldn't live like that in France. (interview with Yusra, January 2022)

Yusra signals the dissonance between her aspirations for self-realization and “normalcy” and France’s Islamophobic atmosphere. Her story speaks to the widespread feeling of existential “stuckedness” among upwardly mobile French nationals of North African descent in France, as highlighted above.

Just as racial socialization in France shapes specific racialized dispositions, so too can socialization abroad lead to lasting changes in these dispositions. This process involves adjusted expectations around interpersonal interactions, new sensibilities in what is considered acceptable behavior, and changes in how individuals perceive themselves and others within racial and class hierarchies. Yassin’s story illustrates this shift. After 6 months in Canada, he asked his cousin to take him to a bakery:

I walk into the bakery, I'm super happy, I want to get my petits pains, my pains au chocolat. I'm as crazy as a kid in a candy store. I walk in with a smile on my face: “Bonjour Madame”. I've just spent six months...

Me: In Care Bear Land?

Yassin: Exactly. [In Canada] when you come in with a smile like that and say “Hello”, you're greeted the same way. So, I walk in and say, “Bonjour Madame”. She barely looks up. “Ok. [...] So, I'd like this, this and this.” “–Yes, will that be all?” “–Yes.” And then, the disillusionment. I ripped the “au revoir” out of her mouth. [...] I get into the car, disgusted. My cousin asks [...] “What's the matter? Didn't you find what you wanted?” I say [...] “Dude, I entered, and she's barely said ‘hello’, ‘thank you’, ‘goodbye’. It barely came out of her mouth. What do I have to say to get them to say that?” And he replies, “Well, what's the problem?” And that's when I say to myself, “Well, I've lived in a certain norm in France and I've gotten used to it: the police profiling, the fact that people talk to me differently because I'm different. But here [in Canada], for six months, in Care Bear Land like you said, I've been treated like everyone else. So, from now on, I want to be treated like everyone else”. [...] It made me want to pursue more international studies and leave [France].

Yassin’s overseas experience fundamentally shifted his emotional response to racist interactions. He is no longer disposed to accept disrespectful treatment in everyday encounters—or discriminatory practices like police profiling—as “normal.” His time in Canada exposed him to alternative understandings of race relations and new conceptions of acceptable behaviors. In this way, his story underscores the significance of examining the “spatially-induced reconfigurations of behavioral sensibilities, along with their implications for (racial) self-worth” (Alloul 2021b: 179).

## Conclusion

The analysis of French Muslim professionals’ transnational trajectories pushes the conceptual framework of intersectionality in three directions.



First, it calls for a transnational lens in examining how intersecting axes of race, class, and gender shape power dynamics (Purkayastha 2012). As French Muslim professionals move between national contexts, they confront the contingencies of social hierarchies. Their migratory experiences challenge the naturalized classification systems in postcolonial France, revealing the shifting significance of class, race, and religion across different geographies. In this context, migrating racialization—particularly class- and gender-inflected racialization—highlights the importance of provincializing certain racial-class formations and understanding (self-ascribed and externally ascribed) identity categories in their national contexts. Colonial legacies, in particular, are crucial to understanding these dynamics.

Second, the itineraries of geographically mobile French Muslims bring religion into focus as a central axis of social distinction (Purkayastha 2012; see Galonnier in this special issue). In France, Muslim professionals face the production of Islam as an incommensurable difference, rooted in colonial legacies that conflate Muslimness with North Africanness (Davidson 2012) and a particular history of secularism (Fernando 2014). Islamic markers—such as clothing, language, and names—and as importantly Islamic practices—like praying, fasting, adhering to a halal diet—serve as powerful signals of difference, exposing Muslim bodies to systems of stigmatization and exclusion. Muslim women wearing the veil, in particular, encounter heightened Islamophobia. As such, religious othering, based on the flawed notion that religious identity is purely a matter of individual choice and free will, must be studied on its own terms and in relation to other axes of oppression.

Third, the experiences of French emigrants underscore the heuristic value of examining race through the lens of habitus, dispositions, and socialization (Brun 2022)—a framework primarily applied to the analysis of class and gender. Drawing on socialization theories that emphasize transitional moments (Darmon 2016), this study illustrates how racialized dispositions, acquired in one national context, may be misaligned when individuals move to another. Growing up with expectations of discrimination in certain spaces (e.g., public places, job interviews, or clubs), based on markers like names or clothing, minority individuals internalize racialized dispositions that influence their perceptions, feelings, and actions. However, experiences of geographic mobility can catalyze lasting changes in these dispositions, leading to significant reconfigurations in how individuals navigate race and identity.

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