

## ROMANTIC ATTRACTION AND MARRIAGE

**W**hen this project began, I had no intention of delving into the interviewees' romantic lives. But I soon discovered that many men wanted to talk about this subject, particularly about their sexual desires, and that some women were interested in sharing their own romantic preferences. Along with attraction came talk of romantic relationships, spouses, and long-term partners. And in all these domains, interviewees dwelled on the identity of the people they chose, particularly whether he or she was "French" or something else.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter begins with a theme expressed by many of the male interviewees: their intense attraction to "French" or "European" women, particularly "blondes with blue eyes," and their pursuit of such women. This is followed by what women said about their own romantic attractions and relationships, which was altogether different. The final section focuses on the choice of spouse or long-term partner among the dozens of interviewees who have taken that step. Romantic attraction, relationships, long-term-partnerships, marriage: for many of the interviewees, this aspect of life is, in the words of one, "a cradle of *intégration*."

While most of the interviewees discussed in this chapter have already been profiled—see the Appendix for page references for each interviewee—details relating to these subjects have been largely deferred until now. Readers are advised that some of the interviewee statements quoted here, especially relating to men's sexual desires, are extremely candid, even raw.

### "BLONDES WITH BLUE EYES"

"I think that, like all men, I have a fantasy of blondes with blue eyes." That is what Shayan said, and, as it turned out, many

of the male interviewees expressed a strong attraction to such women.<sup>2</sup> That relatively few “French” women fit this image—only about ten percent are natural blondes,<sup>3</sup> and fewer still are also blue-eyed—did not put them off. Indeed, many have had relationships with precisely this kind of woman. Even those whose interest was somewhat broader sought women they described as “French” or “European.” They focused on hair color (blonde or light brown, but not black, like theirs) and hair texture (“smooth,” rather than “curly” or “kinky”). The desired eye color was blue or another light color (not brown, like theirs), and the desired skin color, perhaps most important, was “fair” or “white” (not “tan,” “swarthy,” “dark,” or “black,” like theirs).

Where does the desire for a “blonde with blue eyes” come from? What is its connection to the feeling of acceptance by “French” people? A number of male interviewees offered answers to these questions, at least for themselves. Samuel’s account is the most detailed.

*Samuel.* Now forty-three, Samuel was born and raised in the same French city where he still lives. His mother was “French,” and his father was Maghrebi. By his own account, Samuel’s life has been marked by the conflict between how he views himself and how others see him. “I felt French,” he said, but French people “didn’t see me as French. They catalogued me as Maghrebi.” He felt their “contempt.” It was worse:

I always had the impression that they considered me sub-human. They made me feel that I didn’t belong to their world, with their insults, with how they looked at me. I wanted to prove that I was French like them. I wanted to find a door to enter into their world. I am French! I am like you! You must accept me!

For much of Samuel’s life, “French” women would play a big role in this effort. A “blonde with blue eyes” was the kind of woman that, Samuel says, “I dreamed of, the one I searched for.” It started with Monique, when he was only ten. Monique was blonde. “I was in love with her like a crazy person.” When he was fifteen, he fell “madly in love” with Elena, who was “French, but of Ukrainian origin.” He recalls, “I was very, very proud. I’d entered, a bit, into the world that had kept me out.” But Elena’s mother was “incredibly racist. She called me *le crouille*,” the “very worst insult for Arabs back then.” It was “worse than shit.”<sup>4</sup>

Samuel's first long-term relationship was with Julie. Although of mixed "French" and Algerian origin, Julie didn't look "very Arab." Unlike Samuel, Julie had light skin and a "purely French name." One could see that she "had some foreign origin, but nothing more." Although Samuel and Julie stayed together for six years and had two daughters, he didn't really love her. "Julie was too similar to me. We were more like brother and sister."

One day, when he was twenty-six, Samuel passed a woman as he entered a local café. "I fell in love the moment I saw her, this magnificent blonde with blue eyes. She was beautiful, everything I'd always dreamed of in a woman. I was crazy, crazy in love." When she reappeared at that cafe two months later, "she said she'd come back for me because I'd been in her head the whole time." Her name was Céline.

Samuel left Julie to live with Céline. During the years that followed, Samuel says he saw his daughters regularly but was otherwise swept up with Céline. While his relationship with her was troubled from the start, it was also thrilling. Samuel loved her—"At the time, I would have given my life for her"—and she loved him. He was thrilled. "Finally, someone of that world found me important, found me handsome, and loved me. Her love transported me; it was incredible." While "the most important thing was how she looked at me," Samuel recalls, he was also proud "when we went out together. French men didn't like it at all, a beautiful blonde with blue eyes to be with a foreigner."

Not merely a "blonde with blue eyes," Céline "had no foreign origin at all. Physically, she represented the French woman." Being loved by, in his words, "*une Française de pure souche*" was

something that had never happened in my life, to me, the Maghrebi. I had a blonde with blue eyes! It allowed me to enter into the world that didn't want me, to prove that I am French, like them. When she accepted me into her life, I felt I had almost acquired a new social status, pushing away my status as a foreigner. Finally, I had succeeded in life.

While thrilling, the relationship with Céline was, he says, "the most brutal time of my life." Céline behaved bizarrely and often lied; she disappeared for weeks at a time and told far-fetched stories about where she had been. Though they had a son together, Samuel had no contact with her "racist" parents after they told

Céline they would never even see the child once he was born, “since he’ll be the son of a *bougnoule*.”

After fifteen years together, Céline put an end to their relationship. Since then, Samuel says, “I’ve begged her a thousand times to come back. Today, I suffer.” But losing Céline meant something more for Samuel. Toward the end of the interview, he summed this up: “I had sought to enter into that world through a woman, a woman who is purely French. I’m sure I knew this unconsciously at the time, but this is the first time that I’ve realized it consciously.” That’s over now. “The blonde with blue eyes, the one who had accepted me into this world, now rejected me. It was like that whole society had rejected me.” Céline “put me back in my place as a Maghrebi.”

*Other male interviewees.* Before turning to the accounts of other interviewees, it is important to place the image of a “blonde with blue eyes” into context. Various people used this term as the archetype of a “French” person in completely non-romantic circumstances. When Zhora was insulted during an argument over a parking space with a “French” couple, she thought, “Oh, so that’s the problem. It’s not that I was already waiting for the parking spot, but that since I’m a *bougnoule*, I don’t deserve it. But if I’d been a blonde with blue eyes, the space would have been for me.” Shayan spoke about the future, when his son, who would have a “dark complexion, black hair, and brown eyes,” will apply for a job. A less-qualified “blond with blue eyes” might be chosen instead because he would be “a true Frenchman.” Olivier says that when a Maghrebi like him passes “a blond with blue eyes” on the street, the Maghrebi is “seen badly.”

Other interviewees spoke in the same vein. Looking back on her early childhood, Caroline says, “I wanted dolls that were White, blonde with blue eyes.” When speaking of his adolescence, Clément spoke of how a friend was treated differently wherever they went, repeatedly noting that the friend was a “blond with blue eyes.” Indeed, the interviewees are not alone in using this term for the archetypal French person. According to anthropologist Didier Fassin, French employers of the recent past used various “codes” when hiring,

the most classic of which was “BBR” for “Blue-white-red” [*Bleu-blanc-rouge*], but not meaning “French national,” as one

might be tempted to think, but rather “of the white race.” . . . More explicitly, some resorted to the formula “BYB” for “blonds with blue eyes” [*blonds aux yeux bleus*]. (D. Fassin 2006a: 150)

Like Shayan (who spoke of his “fantasy” attraction to blondes with blue eyes) and Samuel, many male interviewees were clear about the kind of woman they sought for romantic relationships. Paul, who has a Korean *faciès*, grew up in France after being adopted by a French couple. They raised him to be purely French and he has always seen himself that way; indeed, he says, “I’m White in my head.” And so “the type of woman who appeals to me is European. I’m not at all attracted to Asian women.” Like Samuel and Shayan, Paul has followed through on this preference. His first wife was a “blonde with blue eyes” and, now divorced, he is engaged to a woman who is “blonde with light brown eyes.”

Usman felt “inferior” when he came from Pakistan for advanced university studies. Trying to fit in as quickly and thoroughly as possible, Usman only dated European women. “Those of other ethnicities didn’t appeal to me,” he explained. While the relationship between this preference in women and colonialism has already been noted, Usman had far more to say about his feelings:

I always liked, I was always very lucky to be with someone of European origin, blondes with blue eyes. That always pleased me. It was very important. I was very happy about that. I’m not afraid to admit that to be with a woman from here was, for me, a kind of success.

This feeling was not limited to dating. “If you marry such a woman and you have children here, it brings a sort of satisfaction.” Usman’s wife is blonde, and he has two sons with her. Usman added, “I’ll now say something that’s not very correct. I’m happy in comparison with my friends, even those who live abroad, men who accepted the weight of family tradition, who went back to Pakistan to marry a girl there. I made my own choice.”

Saying that “there’s something of our parents in us, something of their history, because we follow them,” Usman con-

trusted his experience with his father's a generation ago. His father had been a student in Scotland shortly after Pakistan won its independence from the United Kingdom in 1947. A Scottish woman, he said, "was apparently in love with my father, and my father had a certain sentiment for her." This "shocked" people back in Pakistan and, chastened, "my father married my mother. The story ended there," he said, "though my father always had a certain regret."

Youssef threw himself into mastering all things French as soon as he came to France from Morocco for advanced university studies. He has only been attracted to "*Françaises de souche*," he said, and married a woman who is "White with very blue eyes." Through the present (he is now divorced), he has "always been with French women, certainly."

Perhaps because Youssef has a doctorate in the social sciences, he explained his attraction analytically. According to him, "the psychological unconscious is very important." What one desires may be formed early in life, but "you only discover it at the moment when the person is there and those characteristics manifest themselves, a beautiful White woman and all, you seize on it." With such a woman, Youssef feels a "desire for cultural and linguistic conquest." He says that this "crossing"—he grew up in a small village in Morocco—makes "me richer than I am myself." French women "teach me things. That's important to me."

Of South Asian origin, Vincent has spent his entire life in France. His profile details how thoroughly he integrated himself among the "French" people around him, but also how fearful he remains of being rejected. Vincent said that he is attracted to only one type of woman: "clearly White, a European type." He has "no interest" in women of his own "origin." Early girlfriends were "of German origin" or "purely French" and blonde. He married a woman who is not only French, but also, he points out, a "*Française de souche*."

Growing up in Gabon in Central Africa, François had a strong, positive feeling toward Whites. Even before coming to France for university studies, he was attracted only to women with "light, white skin." He says that

there are beautiful Black women, but I've never felt the attraction. Much to the contrary. I ask myself why. I once told a

friend about this. She asked, "Do you realize what you said?" I responded, "Yes, but it's real. I feel this. I can't hide it."

Continuing, François said that "all the women I've gone out with in France are White." When he got married, a friend from his childhood remarked to him, "We always knew you'd marry a White woman." They had a child, but the marriage did not last. He has since had two children with other women, both "White, pure French, White."

While all of these men—Shayan, Samuel, Paul, Usman, Youssef, Vincent, and François—share an unchanging interest in a certain type of woman (whom they describe as "White" or "French," some specifying a "blonde with blue eyes"), a few other male interviewees voiced more nuanced preferences. They include Thomas, Nassim, Jean, Mohamed, Mathieu, and Charles.

Thomas, a twenty-nine-year-old who has spent his entire life in France, is proud of being Black but is also proficient in making his way in an overwhelmingly White world. When the topic of his romantic interests first came up in his interview, Thomas was emphatic. "There are men who need to 100 percent integrate themselves into French society and, to do so, feel they have to be with a White woman. That's not me." He has never been attracted to Whites, he said, and, though his wife is a *métis*, "I'm not especially attracted to *métis* women."

Thomas then reported that "mixed couples are all the rage these days," and that six men in his group of ten Black friends are with White women. Thinking about this, he said, "Maybe that's what attracted me to my wife. It's possible. Unconsciously." He left the thought unexplained, but he returned to it at the end of his interview. Out of the blue, he told me, "If you saw my wife, she's *métis*, but she's White like you."

Of Algerian origin, Nassim also grew up in France. As his profile shows, he worked at mastering French styles of dress, speech, and behavior and at being accepted by "French" people for most of his life. His romantic interests followed the same pattern. He said, "I was attracted to European women, not Arab women"; indeed, he sought "the most European woman possible. I preferred blondes with blue eyes." His first girlfriend had "very big, blue eyes, smooth hair, and a slim physique." She "was everything that was most European." But this was "an impossible love," since her parents were "extremely racist."

After that relationship ended, Nassim continued to date only “European” women, he says, until a couple of years ago, when he returned to his Maghrebi and Muslim roots. He broke up with his “European” girlfriend at the time and began dating a deeply religious Maghrebi woman. This was significant, he explained. “She was my first Arab, my first Muslim girlfriend.” And unlike all his romantic relationships over the prior fifteen years (he is thirty now), this one is

chaste, as Islam requires. That was also new for me, to have a relationship with someone with whom there’s no fornication, not even kissing. It’s been a spiritual battle. It intrigues me enormously to get past the act, even past desire. I’ve found a meaning, even a pleasure, in working within myself.

After a year and a half together, he says, “I asked her father in the traditional way for her hand in marriage.” The couple is now engaged.

Jean grew up in France feeling ashamed of being Black, although he is now moving toward acceptance, even pride, in this identity. A longtime artist, Jean used to depict only White people in his work—even rendering himself as White when including an artist in a design—but now mostly draws Black people. He portrays Black struggles in much of his current work. Jean’s feelings about women have followed the same evolution, though he says that the change has been slow. When he was growing up, his image of beauty was a “White woman.” He says, “I was never attracted to Black women” and “didn’t want Black girlfriends. A Black woman had a way of talking that was too Haitian for me, too African, very close to their culture, which isn’t mine. I was nearly assimilated. They smelled of Haiti, they smelled of Africa, they smelled of it all. I was just a French person at that time.”

Jean’s only serious relationship was with a White woman, and even today, he says, “I prefer a White woman.” But as with his more recent drawings, Jean is nurturing a new interest in Black women:

Since I accepted myself for what I am, there’s been a discovery of Black women, who I appreciate a bit more as I begin to know them. I don’t think I’m attracted to them, but I take them for who they are. And I think that they can understand



me better than a White woman can, that they can understand me internally.

Jean's sense of beauty is shifting, too, though this has not been easy. He needs to "unblock" his attraction to White women, he says, "but it's a process. Before I didn't see the beauty of Black women. Now I'm trying to destroy the Western view of beauty to build a beauty that's more universal." Jean would also like to be more "universal" when thinking about himself. "There could be people like me who'd be seen as handsome."<sup>5</sup>

A devout Muslim, Mohamed grew up in Morocco. He reported that, "like most Moroccan men," he was drawn to "European women, blonde or not. It was a dream." After moving to France at age twenty-five, he first married a Maghrebi woman whose family had come from Morocco. After this marriage ended, he married his current wife, Clara, who conforms to his early feelings of attraction. Clara is a French-born woman who is "blonde with blue eyes and very pale skin." But Islam is still important to Mohamed: of Albanian and Montenegrin origin, Clara is also a devout Muslim.

Mathieu, who is of mostly Vietnamese origin, has spent his entire life in France. He feels that everyone who subscribes to French values should be considered French, regardless of a person's origin or length of time spent in France. His romantic preferences do not focus on native-born French women either:

Since adolescence, I've always been attracted to Mediterranean women. With big eyes, maybe accentuated by kohl. And black hair that's a little curly. A bit dark-skinned. Italian or Spanish, Algerian, Turkish; for me, all Mediterraneans are the same. But any type of woman is ok, except an Asian.

Mathieu dated a woman he described as "Algerian" for five years, as well as "another Algerian, a Russian, a Bulgarian, and a French woman." Then, counter to his preferences, he dated an Asian woman. "At first," he says, "I was curious." This girlfriend was Kana, who had come from Japan as a young adult. Mathieu and Kana are now married.

Finally, there is Charles, who is from Martinique. He said, "I don't have an ethnic ideal" among possible romantic partners. "It's very simple. There are two things that are very important in

a woman. She can't be skinny, and she must have a strong personality. The rest are accessories: white, black, yellow, green, or red, long hair or short. All accessories." Charles explained further. A woman he's with can't be a "skeleton" or "mannequin," and she must not be "submissive" or "crumble" in the face of his strong views. "Above all else, she must be accomplished professionally and intellectually." Of his major relationships, "first there was a White, second a Maghrebi, and then a Malagasy woman. Between them were a Japanese woman and a Martinican." The last girlfriend, the Malagasy woman, was Ariel, who's now his wife.

Among the male interviewees who are attracted to "French" or "European" women, some avoid women of their own origin. One of the Maghrebis spoke about the importance of cleanliness in his love life. Explaining why he has only been interested in "*Françaises de souche*," he said, "there's hygiene, for example." Although he has evidently never had a sexual relationship with a Maghrebi woman, it has been French women who have taught him "important things on a hygiene level" and made him see things differently in "matters of hygiene."

A Black interviewee reported similar feelings:

I've always had trouble establishing a relationship with a Black woman. It goes further. It's on the order of repulsion. I can't go out with a Black woman. It's repulsion. It's very strong. It's terrible. It's always been like that. I find that they are dirty, that they stink. Even if that's not been confirmed, that's how I feel.

In sum, the great majority of male interviewees who spoke about their romantic preferences focused on a particular aspect of the woman they sought: a specific physical appearance. Most sought "blondes with blue eyes," or, more generally, what they called "French" or "European" women. But what about the female interviewees? What were their preferences?

### WOMEN'S ROMANTIC PREFERENCES

As it turned out, the few women who talked about their romantic preferences spoke very differently from the men. While it is impossible to know how much that difference arose from the

dynamics of these interviews, particularly the fact that the interviewer was a male, it is still worth reporting what these interviewees said.

Born and raised in France, Nour grew up in an urban neighborhood that was overwhelmingly “French.” Although her parents had come from Algeria, she and her siblings fit into this community from the start. Their friends were Catholic. “I never felt judged,” Nour explained. “There was a great tolerance. I didn’t sense racism at that time. Not at all.” She felt French and has been adamantly “non-Muslim” since childhood.

By the time Nour’s older siblings started dating, they “always went out with French people,” she said, the kind of people who “could be called ‘the true French.’” At first, Nour did not follow their lead. She was “very tolerant about appearance” and “dated many Maghrebi men.” The problem was that she “didn’t want a Muslim,” and all the Maghrebi men she dated “had religion in their heads.” They criticized her for drinking alcohol and “because I ate pork and ignored Ramadan. It was very difficult,” she recalled. As time went on, she turned to “French” men, and her two long-term partnerships have been with such men.

Fouzia, whose parents came to France from Algeria, has spent her entire life in the same city in France. Now in her mid-fifties, she graduated from high school and a nursing program and then, as an accredited nurse, had a career working in a hospital. She went out with “French” men, she explained, “because in my social, cultural milieu there weren’t any Algerians. By my senior year in high school, there weren’t any. And after that, in the professional milieu there were fewer and fewer. There were a lot more Europeans, French.” I asked whether she had a preferred type of man. No, “it was a matter of encounter. When you meet someone, it’s not a question of origins. It’s a story of emotions, of feelings.” As it turned out, Fouzia’s first boyfriend was “half-Arab and half-French,” but “after that they were only French.” This includes the father of her daughter.

Zhora, who grew up in a poor *banlieue* in France, left home to finish high school and attend college in the city center. Although Zhora was romantically attracted to Maghrebi men, with their “olive skin and black eyes,” relationships with them didn’t work out. “I was very free,” she said, and Maghrebi men “of that generation weren’t as free as me.” And so “I realized that it had to be a

European." When she was twenty-two, Zhora married a "French" student at her university. Laughing at the memory, she said, "I didn't intend to marry a person like him. He didn't fit any of my criteria. It was a shock."

Anna, who is Black, was raised in France by her White stepmother and a father who had rejected his West African origins. "I was raised as a European," she said. "I was very White; I was very French." Anna's romantic interests have matched this sense of herself:

I've always dated only Westerners. I've never felt any attraction for Black men. I can't explain it. It's always been like that. I can see that some Black men are handsome, but I don't feel an attraction toward them. It's something I reproach myself for, that I'm only interested in Whites. It's not normal. Poof. Well, that's the way it is. Sorry. I'm not going to force it.

Caroline, who is also Black and grew up in France, reports a similar experience, though a shift may now be underway. Romantically, she says, "I'm more attracted to Whites. I'm not particularly attracted to Africans." She described her longtime boyfriend, who became her husband and now ex-husband, as "French," by which she means "White." Her current boyfriend, with whom we had dinner, is too. Perhaps, she says, "I'm like my mother" who is Black but married a White man, Caroline's stepfather. Unlike Anna, Caroline thinks that she might change in the future. "For a long time, I couldn't see myself with an African or a Black, but now it wouldn't bother me."

When Yuka arrived from China to attend college, she set about integrating herself into the community of "French" students. She had no romantic preferences, and when she began to date, "everything happened naturally." Yuka went out with "French" men, she said, because "in the final analysis, they were the ones in my classes." I asked Yuka whether she might have dated a fellow student who happened to be Chinese. She laughed. "Chinese, clearly not. I don't know why, but I wasn't at all attracted to Chinese men. And then Western men," she laughed again, "they might have brown or blond hair and be tall." The man she chose to marry, "just a classmate who'd become a friend," is a tall, brown-haired man from a longtime "French" family. But his being "French" didn't matter, she said, "not at all."

Amina is an IT consultant who came from Cameroon in sub-Saharan Africa almost twenty years ago. A forceful personality, she is clear about the kind of man she likes:

I'm attracted more by a mindset than a skin color. I'm attracted to someone who's like me, with a strong personality and a way of life that's neither completely European nor completely African. Someone who'll understand my desires and needs. Someone who accepts me as I am, who doesn't seek to dominate me.

But that's not all. "I'm attracted to a certain type of man, okay. He has to be tall, strong, handsome, and intelligent. Because I want someone to talk with. But no, I'm not attracted to a skin color."

Finally, there is Aya, a thirty-one-year-old Maghrebi woman who came to France a few years ago. She explained her attraction to Black men in detail:

I go out with men from sub-Saharan Africa for a number of reasons. There's the mindset and the physical side. In mindset they're close to me. They have similar origins, the colonial history, all that, plus the food, which is spicy. Then there's the physical side. There's a precise type for me.

Laughing, she continued:

I'm little and I go out with big men, always a meter eighty-five [six feet. one inch] or taller. It's bizarre, but it's like that. In general, they're hefty, either heavy or muscle-bound. Attractions are like that, you can't explain them. I like dark-skinned men and no body hair. I've never seen a Black person with body hair, so that avoids the problem. I detest body hair, especially on men. I can't tolerate it.

Since only eight women spoke about their romantic preferences, sweeping generalizations must be avoided. A few observations are still possible. Unlike the men, none of these women mentioned or sought "blonds with blue eyes." None of the women used images like "cultural conquest" or "entering into" the world of "French" people, and none focused on the sense of being an outsider who wants in. Finally, while physical characteristics were important to some of the women, many spoke

about the personal characteristics they sought in a man. These women sought a man who is like them (temperamentally, professionally, religiously), who is a member of the same community, or who would accept them as they are.

### THE CHOICE OF A SPOUSE OR LONG-TERM PARTNER

While only about two dozen interviewees spoke about their romantic preferences and experiences, all of the interviewees who had been married or had taken a long-term partner<sup>6</sup> readily spoke about the person they had chosen. Each person's choice of spouse or long-term partner (for some, more than one spouse or partner over time) might be viewed from the outside as a choice between someone whom the interviewees typically described as "French" and someone of non-European origin. This would generate some simple numbers: 60 percent of those who married or lived in a long-term partnership did so with a "French" person, 30 percent with someone of their own non-European origin, and 10 percent with someone of a different non-European origin. But this breakdown does not capture the interviewees' own ways of thinking.<sup>7</sup>

Interviewees instead chose spouses or long-term partners in accordance with how they felt about themselves. Their choices fall into four general types:

- (a) a person like you, i.e., a person with whom the interviewee shares an identity;
- (b) among interviewees who want to feel French, a "French" person;
- (c) someone who helps the interviewee recapture their origin while still feeling French; and
- (d) a person of any origin or *faciès*, since the interviewee is indifferent to such matters.

#### (a) *A Person Like You*

A number of interviewees spoke about having an identity that has remained stable over the years. While it is not surprising that many of these people married or partnered with people

of the same identity, it may be surprising that fewer than half chose people of the same origin as themselves.

Some, of course, married or partnered with people of the same origin. Two of the Maghrebi women who grew up in France, Hiba and Khira, entered into arranged marriages with men from their countries of origin. Sami, who remains proudly "Tunisian" despite his decades in France, first married a woman of Algerian origin and then a Tunisian woman who still lives in Tunisia. Nima, a political exile from Iran, married a woman from Iran. And Eric, who is from China, married a Chinese woman.

But other interviewees married or partnered with "French" people, seeing no difference between themselves and the person they chose. The fact that millions of "French" people would disagree, or even find it ludicrous in light of the interviewees' non-European *faciès*, is immaterial to them.

Rémy, the son of a "French" mother and a father from Vietnam, is now in his seventies. Growing up in France, he was raised to be totally French, even while he was mocked by other children as "the little Chinaman." At twenty-one, he married the seventeen-year-old daughter of a local "French" farmer. "We got married. It's now been more than fifty years that we're married," he said. Rémy will not tolerate anyone suggesting that he is Chinese. Rémy's intense feeling of being French motivated him to join the army and then pursue a career in the National Police. Now retired, he still stands and puts his hand on his heart when the French national anthem comes on television.

A similar experience was reported by Henri, whose father was "French" and mother was Vietnamese, and who is also retired. Although he was ridiculed for his Asian appearance and subjected to discrimination for much of his life, Henri's sense of identity is clear: "I've always thought of myself as French. Always." He married a "French" woman and pursued a career with the postal service. As he explained, "I worked for France. I always worked harder to prove that I'm French."

Isabel grew up in the Republic of the Congo, a former French colony in sub-Saharan Africa. From a Western-educated, super-elite family, she heard only French "since the cradle," and French was the sole language at school. Throughout her childhood, she said, she did not learn a word in any African language. Isabel came to France at sixteen and became a citizen at twenty.

She married a man from a longtime “French” family and, though now divorced, has retained his distinctively French last name. She is a lifelong Catholic. Her sense of identity is clear: “I am, before anything else, French. I am French.”

Other interviewees who consider themselves French and chose “French” spouses or partners have already been discussed in the context of romantic attraction. Shayan has spent his entire life in the same French city and has always thought of himself as French. He married a woman who is from a longtime “French” family. Nour, who has also spent her entire life in the same French city and has always felt French, partnered with two “French” men. Paul and Caroline have felt French their whole lives and have chosen “French” people as spouses. Although Paul’s *faciès* is entirely Korean and Caroline is Black, they both say they feel White.

For Rémy, Henri, Isabel, Shayan, Nour, Paul, and Caroline, the choice of spouse or partner was obvious: feeling French, each chose a “French” person.

**(b) “French” – The Kind of Person You Would Like to Be**

While the interviewees just discussed have always felt French, many others started life not feeling French, but have spent decades mastering French norms while fitting in, or trying to fit in, among “French” people. Since this experience was reported in their profiles, each interviewee in this group requires only a brief mention.

For some of these interviewees, their efforts to fit in have had the desired result: a feeling of acceptance. Usman, who came to France from Pakistan for advanced studies, avidly learned to behave like the “French” people around him, married a “French” woman, and forged a successful career in high-tech business. Yuka, another interviewee who came to France for university education, cast aside her Chinese background and enthusiastically participated in the life of the “French” students around her. Now married to one of these fellow students, Yuka feels comfortable in the community where she lives. Achraf grew up in a successful business family in Tunisia and came to France for college. After partying his way through college (he had never been religious and had no discomfort with drinking alcohol), Achraf married a



woman who was “pure French” and launched his own business career in France. Successful from the start, he was accepted by the elite of the French town where he and his wife settled.

A far larger number of interviewees have worked to integrate themselves among “French” people—and married or partnered with a “French” person—but still do not feel accepted. Although Vincent has always lived in France, has had a long career at a large French company, and married, he said, a *Française de souche* woman, he is still afraid of being rejected. Samuel, another lifelong resident of France, became successful in the entertainment business and gained acceptance through the love of a “French” woman, but he felt cast back to his original Maghrebi status when she ended the relationship. Yet another interviewee who has spent her entire life in France, Zhora worked hard to advance her education, married a “French” man, and pursued a career in the French civil service, but she feels that she is still seen as a *bougnoule*.

This list continues. Karim said that he made himself “more French than the French” and partnered with “*Française de souche*” women, but he feels that his *faciès* precludes true acceptance. Asma values all things French and married a “French” man, but she feels spurned as a Maghrebi. Youssef mastered French social norms, earned advanced degrees at French universities, married a “French” woman, and feels French, but sees people pulling away because of his “Arab mug.” Finally, François has thrown himself into life among “French” people and married or partnered with three “French” women, but he still feels excluded because he is Black.

A striking pattern emerges when these people are considered as a group. True, all are integrated into norms of the “French” people around them, and all married or partnered with “French” people, but there is a sharp divide between those who feel that they are accepted by “French” people (Usman, Yuka, and Achraf) and those who feel at risk of being rejected (Vincent, Samuel, Zhora, Karim, Asma, Youssef, and François). While all of the marriages or long-term partnerships of the people who feel accepted remain in place, all of the marriages or partnerships of the people who feel rejected (or subject to rejection at any time) have broken apart.

**(c) *Someone Who Helps You Recapture  
Your Origin While Still Feeling French***

Such distress is not inevitable. Of the many interviewees who felt rejected by “French” people while growing up in France, two made trips to their country of origin that changed their lives. These are Clément and Grégoire. After taking these trips as young adults, each returned to France feeling proud of the culture and values of his country of origin, and each married a woman from that country. During the years since, each has combined a strong appreciation of his non-European heritage with an equally strong feeling of being French. Their experiences are worth reporting at length.

*Clément.* Clément's family came to France from Senegal, West Africa, when he was six. Growing up, he did his best to fit into his largely “French” neighborhood but was repeatedly humiliated. He felt that “France didn't accept me. There was never a moment when I felt I belonged; the color of my skin reminded me of this.” Clément's experience with girls followed the same pattern. “I never succeeded in going out with a French girl even though I tried many times. It wasn't possible,” he said, because of “my category.”

Even after five years of military service in France, Clément didn't feel “fully a part of France.” He “needed to break with the rhythm of French life,” he said, to “go back to where there are people like me, to know the community, the ethnic group I belonged to.” Clément decided to spend “three or four months in Senegal to rejuvenate myself,” he said, “and track down my roots, to know who I am, to regain a bit of my origins. I had to know. I was like the adoptive child who needed to see his biological parents, even if they didn't want to see him.”

Although his time in Senegal began as “a true shock,” Clément gradually adjusted to the life there. With time, he went further. “I began to see deeper. It was interesting and refreshing. I learned to live as people there do,” and finally “I felt at home. The four months restructured how I saw things, my values.” Clément also fell in love with a Senegalese woman. The trip, he reported, “was truly an upheaval for me. I came back to France completely transformed. I was proud because I had recovered

some of my background, because I'd enriched myself culturally. I felt I'd gained new powers, that I'd grown."

Clément visited Senegal again to court the woman he had met there. Overcoming obstacles that will be discussed in chapter 6, he married her, and they settled in France. Now, Clément says,

I know who I am. I know that my origins are in Senegal. So, even though they don't let me fit in completely into France, it's not terrible. I can let it go a bit; I can be less affected by that. And so today I'm lucky to be immersed in a double culture. While I can't fully lay claim to my French identity, I can draw upon that other part of me. It's a great advantage.

Clément, his wife, and their daughter have made a life in France. And even though Clément still "can't gain the same respect as others in France," the connection he forged with Senegalese culture has made him more "confident."

*Grégoire.* The son of a Vietnamese mother and "French" father, Grégoire was mocked for his Asian appearance while growing up in France in the 1950s and 1960s. He felt "ugly, truly ugly." Then came an experience that, he said, "completely changed me": he accompanied his mother on a two-month trip to Vietnam in 1974. He was twenty-five.

Grégoire's mother's family gave him a bed with a mosquito net while "they slept on the ground." He still marvels at this. "They didn't know me, but they gave me the best they had. Why did they do that? Because we're family, it's my family. I found this extraordinary. These were worthy people." As the visit progressed, "I realized that I had a family. I had a strong feeling for them. It was overwhelming." His time in Vietnam made him "enormously" prouder of himself.

Although Grégoire had only been attracted to "White, European" women before his trip to Vietnam, he started courting a young Vietnamese woman, Thanh, while he was there. It was an "unimaginable," an "impossible" romance. After returning to France, he corresponded with Thanh, proposed to her in a letter, and then returned to Vietnam to marry her. During our interview, Grégoire wondered aloud what had motivated him. "Why? Why her? To discover my roots, maybe." The couple settled in France and now, after "forty-two years of marriage," he said, "it's been good. It's worked out well."

Although Grégoire still feels intensely French, he has been active in his city's Vietnamese-French friendship association since his trips to Vietnam. In the media, he says, "things are said about Vietnam that are false. We must speak the truth." He attends conferences and writes to journalists "to reestablish the truth." Insults about his Asian appearance no longer bother him: "It's me who decides about myself. I changed during my trip to Vietnam."

Clément and Grégoire are exceptional cases, of course, and Grégoire's brother Henri presents a striking counterexample. Although the brothers' joint profile reports virtually identical lives, they differed in one respect: only Grégoire returned to Vietnam and underwent a change in his romantic interests. Henri did not. As a young man, Henri liked European girls (especially Polish girls, "because they were blonde") and then married a "French" woman. Apart from Clément and Grégoire, few of the interviewees who grew up in France have spent time in their countries of origin, and none have seen their attitudes change so radically.

**(d) *A Person of Any *Facières* Since  
You Are Indifferent to Such Issues***

While the great majority of interviewees who have gotten married or entered into a long-term partnership cared about whether their spouse or long-term partner was "French" or someone of the same origin as themselves, this was not universal. Four interviewees were completely indifferent to this issue. These are the members of two married couples: Mathieu and Kana, and Ariel and Charles. While the romantic preferences of Mathieu and Charles have been reported earlier in this chapter, the choice of spouse for all four requires further discussion. As seen below, these people are outliers, either because their concept of who is French is unrelated to *facières* or because they are indifferent to whether their spouse or partner is French.

*Mathieu and Kana.* I met Mathieu and Kana at their apartment in an ethnically diverse housing complex where they live with their infant daughter. Mathieu has always lived in France and has always felt French. For Mathieu, being French has had nothing to do with a person's *facières*, and, unlike his father Grégoire and uncle Henri, his mostly Vietnamese *facières* has never made

him uncomfortable. He socializes with people of all origins. This began in the neighborhood in which he grew up and the multiethnic schools he attended, and it continues today. As a former Maghrebi girlfriend once remarked when she looked at the “twenty or so Whites, Blacks, and Arabs” he had invited for a social occasion, the group looked like “Benetton.” Mathieu, he said, “hadn’t even noticed it.” Although being French is important to Mathieu, he has an expansive view of what that means: everyone is French so long as they see themselves as French, speak the language, and adhere to basic French values. This could include his wife Kana, even though she came from Japan just five years ago. When he decided to marry her, he was indifferent to whether she was “French” or something else.

When Kana was growing up in Japan, she recalls, “I always dreamed of living abroad. For me, the Japanese—and I’m Japanese—aren’t free. There’s always something unstated that they hide.” They are also “programmed.” It’s always “you mustn’t do this, you mustn’t do that.” After college, Kana “fled” Japan. She chose France by happenstance, because it was the only European country that offered her admission to a master’s program, but she has made a life there.

Kana’s view of French identity, like Mathieu’s, has nothing to do with origin or *faciès*. For her, “the French are descendants of immigrants,” and are “not only White.” And so, she said, “when I think of who’s French, I don’t differentiate among black, white, yellow skin color. For me, France is a mixture. Just because I was born in Japan doesn’t mean I’m Japanese. If I feel French, then I’m French.” Like Mathieu, Kana did not consider the *faciès* of the person she chose to marry.

*Ariel and Charles.* Ariel and Charles are IT specialists who work and live in a tech hub among engineers and other IT specialists from a wide range of countries. Although cognizant of bias among “French” people, they are unbowed by it, focusing instead on their own lives and the protection and satisfaction afforded by their technical expertise.

Originally from the former French colony of Madagascar, an island nation off the southeast coast of Africa, Ariel came to France for university studies. The issue of who is or isn’t French does not interest her:

If someone says he's French, then he's French. I don't distinguish between White French people of ancient French origin and more recent French people who originate from immigration. They have different ways of behaving and different cultures, but I see them all as French.

Ariel's interest in a partner or spouse was unrelated to whether he was "French." Her former partner of eleven years was from Martinique, an overseas *département* of France in the Caribbean. While he was "very pale" with only a bit of "charcoal" in his skin, she says that his skin color didn't matter "at all." And though Madagascar and Martinique are thousands of miles apart, "I felt close to him culturally because he too had left his island." They had both "cut an invisible rope to live in France." Ariel later met Charles, who is also from Martinique—she chuckled at the coincidence—and they got married. She is dismissive of racism in any form. "Racism is totally unimportant to me," she declared; it's nothing but "intellectual pollution." Indifferent to such issues, Ariel said nothing about Charles's *faciès*.

Charles, who grew up in Martinique and has lived in mainland France since his college years, has always felt French. While some French people can speak of "our ancestors, the Gauls," he says, that's of no consequence for him. Indeed, Charles finds the subject of who counts as French so unimportant that he didn't mention it when discussing his romantic partners or his marriage with Ariel. As reported above, for Charles, a woman's *faciès* matters not at all.

### ***Patterns in the Fate of Marriages and Long-Term Partnerships***

Although the interviewees present a small, non-scientifically selected sample of people of non-European origins in France, it is worth looking at the fate of their marriages and long-term partnerships:

- a. Much like the overall population of France, where about half of all marriages end in divorce (Statista 2019; INED n.d.), approximately half of the interviewees of this group—people who

forged relationships with people they consider like themselves—saw these relationships break apart.

- Section b. Among the interviewees of this group—people who have worked at becoming more French and entered into relationships with a “French” person—a sharp divide emerged. The marriages or partnerships of virtually everyone who did not report feeling inferior to “French” people or subject to rejection at any time remain intact, while the marriages or partnerships of everyone who reported such feelings have broken apart.
- Section c. These two men, each of whom became proud of his heritage during a trip to his country of origin and married a woman he met there, remain in their relationships.
- Section d. All of these people—who were indifferent to the *faciès* of the people they chose—remain in their relationships.

## CONCLUSION

Even though this chapter addressed issues that are personal to each individual, some overall patterns are evident among the interviewees.

First, there is a marked difference between men and women with regard to romantic attraction. Among the men, those who have been focused on fitting in among “French” people (notably, Samuel, Shayan, Usman, Youssef, Vincent, François, and, for most of their lives, Nassim and Jean) feel an intense desire for women who embody their image of the supremely “French” woman. For each of these men, this means a *faciès* that is altogether different from his own. The women who spoke about their romantic interests described a very different orientation. Most who feel themselves to be French (notably, Nour, Anna, and Caroline) were drawn to “French” men. Most of the other women are interested in a man of any *faciès* who values her for such things as her values, strength of character, and professional career.

The fates of marriages and long-term partnerships among all the interviewees suggest two broader patterns. First, a secure sense of one's worth and place in France is typical among those whose marriages or long-term partnerships remain intact. Second, an abiding feeling of inferiority to "French" people and fear of rejection appears to be particularly problematic for any marriage or partnership with a "French" person. Literally all of these relationships have broken apart.

### NOTES

1. Although two or three of the interviewees were apparently gay, none of them chose to discuss the topics covered in this chapter.
2. This attraction is hardly new. In Fanon's "little tale" of sexual intercourse immediately following the account described in chapter 4 of this book, the French woman is a "'maddening' blonde" (*Black Skins, White Masks* (1986 [1952]: 63).
3. See [Ladepêche.fr](http://Ladepêche.fr) 2007.
4. Derived from Arabic, "*crouille*" or "*crouillat*" became a stinging insult for Arab people during the twentieth century but has "progressively disappeared from the vocabulary of racist insults" (Ruscio 2020: 69).
5. That Jean could be seen as handsome—which he has only begun to consider—stands in sharp contrast with his feelings as a child. He no longer needs to do such "ridiculous" things as pinch his nostrils in the hope of looking like a White person.
6. Since 1999, the French legal code has recognized a contractually-based civil union known as PACS. In their accounts, the interviewees did not limit themselves to such government-recognized relationships.
7. These percentages also cannot be compared with broader demographic studies, since French law prohibits the collection of data relating to race or ethnicity—leaving statisticians with the inexact proxy of country of origin—and even this identity stops at the first French-born generation. Someone like Lucas, who is Black but was born in France of French-born parents, would be counted as a member of the "mainstream population" (see, e.g., Beauchemin, et al. 2010: 2).