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Thinking Whiteness in French and Swiss Cyberspaces

Abstract

Despite their insistence on the common European colonial roots of whiteness, critical whiteness studies tend to focus on Anglophone contexts. This article explores the theoretical and analytical potential of deploying the concept of whiteness in other spaces, namely French and Swiss cyberspaces. First, we define whiteness as a “white vanguard narrative” which generates a discursive border distinguishing subjectivities or practices, and which changes across time and space. Second, we explore the discursive operation of whiteness in two cyber-debates hosted by a French blog and a Swiss blog. This comparative micropolitical analysis of discursive spaces—marked by very different colonial legacies—reveals the fluidity and heterogeneity of the marking processes through which racialized power relations continue to be disseminated in postcolonial Europe.

It is very good that there are yellow French, Black French and Brown French. This shows that France is open to all races and that it has a universal vocation. But as long as they remain a small minority. Otherwise France wouldn't be France anymore (...).[My France] consists of a European people of the white

race, of Greek and Latin culture and of Christian religion (General De Gaulle 1945, quoted in Blanchard 2005, 41, our translation).

Only the foreigner who has demonstrated that he (sic) is able and worthy should be naturalised. He has to be considerably settled in Swiss circumstances. He must have gotten used to Swiss living conditions. His nature, his character, his whole personality should qualify him for being accepted as worthy of becoming a good, reliable Swiss citizen. Naturalisation is a choice pertaining to qualification, or the fitness to become a citizen (Message of the Federal Council in front of the Federal Assembly concerning a project of a Federal Law pertaining to the acquisition and loss of Swiss citizenship, 9 August 1951 quoted in Studer, Arlettaz, and Argast 2008, 107, our translation).

Introduction: Decentering Whiteness

For more than a decade, critical whiteness studies have comprised a heterogeneous field of research, regrouping disciplines such as history, political science, cultural studies, legal studies, and literary studies (Hartman 2004; McDermott and Samson 2005; Nayak 2007). Despite this diversity, critical whiteness theorists share a commitment to analytical decentering. They all consider that the analysis of racialized power relations must be decentered from an exclusive focus on the racialized Other to a complementary focus on the referential—implicitly racialized—Self (Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1993). As Ruth Frankenberg states, the task is to “name whiteness”; to displace it from its “unmarked, unnamed status” (Frankenberg 1993, 5; see also Hartman 2004). Thus, critical whiteness studies explore the ways in which Western colonial and imperial enterprises were legitimized through the supposed “superiority of the white race” (Alcoff 2000), and how this idea still informs current relations, practices, and subjectivities in the guise of an “unexamined norm, implicitly standing for all that is presumed to be right and normal” (Andersen 2003, 24). Despite their insistence on the common European colonial roots of whiteness, however, few of these studies explore whiteness outside of Anglophone spaces.¹ The aim of this paper is therefore to *decenter whiteness* by examining how it operates in French and Swiss cyberspaces. We explore the theoretical, analytical, and empirical potentialities of this concept in these new spaces outside the Anglophone world, but also beyond the confines of the nation-state.

Decentering whiteness is a twofold task. First, we aim to complete current conceptualizations of whiteness, which remain strongly linked to their Anglophone context of production. For this purpose, the first part of the article formulates a narrative conceptualization of whiteness that can be deployed in various contexts in colonial and postcolonial Europe. In our theoretical discussion, we define whiteness as a white vanguard narrative that articulates together the modern ideas of “race” and “progress.” We argue that this narrative is both transformed and reproduced through the continuously changing processes of marking. These processes generate a discursive border between subjectivities or practices and reproduce hierarchical power relations. Furthermore, we explore the discursive specificities of the white vanguard narrative during illustrative moments of French and Swiss history. These historical examples show that whiteness is a fluid narrative, changing across time and space. Second, we decenter whiteness by means of its empirical exploration in new spaces. The second part of the article specifies the discursive processes that reproduce and transform the whiteness narrative. This specification leads us to conduct a comparative micropolitical analysis of two contemporary debates on racialized difference in French and Swiss cyberspaces.

French and Swiss cyberspaces provide particularly productive spaces in which to start naming a decentered whiteness. They are located at the heart of postcolonial Europe in two national contexts that have not yet been systematically explored from a critical whiteness perspective. In France, some recent studies have revisited the country’s past and present configurations of power relations through a racial and postcolonial prism (Balibar 2007; Blanchard, Bancel, and LeMaire 2005; Mbembe 2000), and some scholars have translated “whiteness” into the French term *blanchité* (Achin, Dorlin, and Rennes 2008, 12). In Switzerland, this perspective can be found in a small number of studies devoted to Switzerland’s involvement in the slave trade, slavery, and colonial enterprise or to the development of racial thought at the beginning of the twentieth century (Etemad, David, and Schaufelbuehl 2005; Kury 2003; Mottier 2000). These studies investigate racialized power relations in both of these contexts and appeal for further developments. In addition, the French and Swiss contexts differ with regards to their history and their socio-political institutions. France, a large and highly centralized state with an imperial past, is a founding member of the European Union; Switzerland is a small federal state which had a more limited role in the colonial enterprise and has always refused to join the European supranational community. Comparing these

very different national contexts permits us to grasp the discursive heterogeneity of whiteness. Comparing whiteness in cyberspaces—spaces which are easily and instantaneously accessible beyond national borders—permits us to show how whiteness is a “complexly constructed product of local, regional, national, and global relations, past and present” (Frankenberg 1993, 236).

Whiteness as a White Vanguard Narrative

Toward a Narrative Conceptualization of Whiteness

In this section, we develop a narrative conceptualization of whiteness. A narrative is a coherent “story” (Mottier 2000, 537). It provides meaning to the social world by simultaneously articulating several narrative elements. Following the argument of Véronique Mottier, we are concerned with the “social and political role” of narratives, that is, with their performative power to “bring into being that which they name” and to reproduce, as well as transform, relations of power (Mottier 2000, 537). From this perspective, we answer the following questions: Which story does whiteness tell? What are its main narrative elements? Which power relations does whiteness (re)produce? And through which does it operate?

Whiteness is a story about the “vanguard of humanity.” This “white vanguard narrative” (Alcoff 2000, 263) tells us how and why social subjectivities and practices² characterized by their Europeanness are superior to “non-European” subjectivities and practices. White vanguard is narrated through the combination of two main elements consisting of two constitutive ideas of Western modernity: “race” and “progress” (Gilroy 2000; Goldberg 1993; Tascón and Ife 2008).³ This narrative articulation emerged in the sixteenth century was consolidated in the context of the slave trade, slavery, and colonial expansions undertaken by European countries,⁴ and became the “central signifier of Europeans’ superiority” during the nineteenth century (Bonnett 1998, 1049).

Thus, the nineteenth century was marked by the systematization and stabilization of the modern concept of “race” through legal, scientific and symbolic institutionalized practices. Race was translated into colonial legislation where it constituted a core category in scientific knowledge about “humankind” in fields such as anthropology, anthropometry, and eugenics, and it informed various cultural representations as, for instance, “human zoos” (Bancel et al. 2004). The modern idea of race serves to fix and classify the meaning of social subjectivities and practices according to a *set of “natural” attributes* (Goldberg 1993). Within the narrative of whiteness, race

tells which subjectivities and practices are—or are not—“white” in relation to naturalized attributes. In addition, race intertwines with attributes related to “gender.” As Boris emphasizes through the concept of “gendered race,” race is always gendered, and gender always racialized (Boris 1995, 160; see also Boris 2005; Dorlin 2006; Lewis 2006). She thus asserts that:

Manhood, womanhood, and sexualities probably never exist apart from race; not only is race gendered, but the policing of the boundaries of race significantly takes place through rules on who can marry or have sex with whom, that is, through gendered definitions (Boris 2005, 73).

Furthermore, the whiteness narrative provides not only meaning to the social world by marking subjectivities and practices according to an articulation of gendered racialized attributes, but also by linking them to the modern idea of “progress.” As Goldberg points out, the “commitment to continuous progress: to material, moral, physical, and political improvement and to the promotion and development of civilization” provides a secularized teleology for modern Western societies (Goldberg 1993, 4). Progress requires the achievement of a *core set of universal values* that has to guide humanity. These values correspond to the modern liberal ideals of “the autonomous individual,” the “abstracted sovereign self,” “reason,” “order” and “control,” “equality,” and “liberty” (Goldberg 1993, 4–5; see also Tascòn and Ife 2008). Within the whiteness narrative, progress and race are mutually articulated, marking specific practices and subjectivities as white and, simultaneously, as the natural bearers or incarnation of progress.

In summary, whiteness portrays “European-based societies as the progressive vanguard of the human race (...)” (Alcoff 2000, 263). The main discursive operation of this narrative consists of generating a *discursive border* through *marking processes* which distinguish certain subjectivities and practices—representing the vanguard—from others. Whiteness thus legitimates, rationalizes, and naturalizes a whole set of hierarchical power relations in various spaces. The white vanguard narrative legitimizes the domination of the “European” colonizer over the colonized “Other.” Furthermore, it rationalizes the division of gendered roles by assigning the “white woman” to the reproductive function of the (white) national body (Dorlin 2006; Lewis 2006). However, as we will see in the Swiss and French cases, whiteness is a highly fluid and heterogeneous narrative with a continuous reconstruction and rearticulation of its elements across spaces. These elements invoke different social meanings—which are constructed through changing terms—by mobilizing sets of

racialized and gendered attributes depending on the context. During the consolidation of the Western European nation-states, specific *versions* of the white vanguard narrative tended to be sedimented within specific national spaces.

Whiteness also changes across time, with one of its major rearticulations occurring during the first half of the twentieth century. The disillusionment provoked by the “profit-motivated violence of World War I and the technologically orchestrated genocides of World War II” challenges the dominant-specific articulation of race and progress (Alcoff 2000, 263). Since theories of racial anthropology have been discredited and morally condemned, the term “race” “evaporates” from public practices and discourses (Goldberg 2006, 259; see also Mills 2007). Within renewed versions of the white vanguard narrative, race slips elusively and subtly into the subtext of discourses, practices, and institutions while the commitment to progress—to the universal achievement of liberal values—occupies the main text. However, race continues to give strong meaning to the story of whiteness. The “liberatory vanguard” of the world continues to be associated with “white” practices and subjectivities, although this association has ceased to be explicitly emphasized and remains mostly unquestioned and implicit (Alcoff 2000, 263). New versions of the white vanguard narrative claim in an implicit and subtle way “that European-based societies [lead] the world in maximizing individualism, civil liberties, and economic prosperity, which [are] assumed to be the highest human goods” (Alcoff 2000, 263). Consequently, the discursive border generated by whiteness becomes mostly hidden. Through almost always *implicit* marking processes, whiteness invisibly assigns specific subjectivities and practices to the white vanguard, representing the universal reference. *Explicit* marking processes continue to assign other subjectivities and practices outside of the (invisible) vanguard. Contemporary versions of the narrative of whiteness still naturalize and normalize a whole set of hierarchical power relations all over Europe.

In the following sections, our objective is to start—in Frankenberg’s term—“naming whiteness” in the Swiss and French contexts (Frankenberg 1993, 5). For this purpose, we will outline its versions and discursive operation during moments of Swiss and French history. The historical examples in this paper are highly selective and illustrative. We do not intend to retrace and reveal the entire trajectory of the white vanguard narrative. Rather, our aim is to identify the discursive specificity of the border generated by whiteness in both contexts. As we will see, these contexts have been marked by extremely different versions of whiteness.

The White Vanguard in French History

The trajectory of the whiteness narrative in the French context begins with France's colonial expansion in the seventeenth century.⁵ However, our focus is the emergence of the narrative at the end of the nineteenth century that historians identify as France's *mission civilisatrice* narrative (the "civilising mission") (Bancel, Blanchard, and Vergès 2003). This narrative appeared at a highly contentious moment, which was marked by the renewal of colonial expansion launched both to consolidate the ideals and principles of the young Third Republic and to reinforce national cohesion (Blanchard, Bancel, and LeMaire 2005). The main elements of this narrative can be found in the following extract from a speech by Jules Ferry—one of the most fervent political supporters of French colonization—in the French National Assembly in 1885:

[Superior races] have the duty to civilise inferior races.... I sustain that nowadays European nations realise this *superior civilising duty* with broad-mindedness, greatness and honesty (...). Could anyone deny that there has been more justice, more material and moral order, more equity and more social virtues in North Africa since France made its conquest? (Ferry 1885, our italics).⁶

This *mission civilisatrice* narrative emphasizes the racial superiority of the French nation and legitimizes its humanitarian right and "duty" to colonize racially inferior peoples. Since universal ideals of human emancipation emerged during the French Revolution, France became a vanguard nation whose destiny is to bring progress—the light of the universal values of equality and liberty—to indigenous people all over its empire (Blanchard, Bancel, and LeMaire 2005). This *mission civilisatrice* links the idea of progress closely to the idea of race. It explicitly designates the "European nations"—the "superior races"—as the bearers of a superior civilization. This narrative generates a border between the Frenchman, the citizen of the Republic, and the Other, the subject of the Empire. The former is the "universal individual" marked by "attributes of superior intelligence and education" and embodied by the "white French man," whereas the latter is the savage marked by racialized attributes (the North African in the extract above) (Scott 1996, 10–1; see also Blanchard, Bancel, and LeMaire 2005).

Gendered attributes also play a role in this narrative. As Scott emphasizes, under the Third Republic, women were excluded from the definition of universal individuality and thus from the possibility to exercise political rights (1996, 10–1). Influential thinkers

such as Gustave Le Bon and Emile Durkheim defined this exclusion as the result of a twofold process. The process of the “functional division of labour” led women to dedicate themselves to “affective functions,” namely to “conjugal fidelity” and “family” (Scott 1996, 96–7). This process is accompanied by the morphologic differentiation between men and women in terms of weight and brain size. The achievement of the twofold process is taken as a sign “of the progress of civilization” permitting distinctions to be made between “civilized societies” and the “savage” (Scott 1996, 97).⁷ In summary, since the *mission civilisatrice* narrative refers to the idea of progress articulated with gendered racialized attributes, it is a good indicator of the specific discursive construction of the French white vanguard narrative that circulated under the Third Republic.

In the mid-twentieth century, during decolonization, the main elements of the *mission civilisatrice* were challenged. Discourses ceased to refer explicitly to the superiority of human groups or practices. However, studies of some scholars working on postcolonial France allow us to assert that a form of whiteness without whites continues to inform subjectivities and practices (Blanchard, Bancel, and Lemaire 2005; Mbembe 2000). The elements of the civilizing mission are rearticulated and redefined in an updated narrative that Abdelmalek Sayad calls the *Chauvinisme de l'Universel* (“Chauvinist Understanding of the Universal”) (Sayad 2006, 187). According to Sayad, the *Chauvinisme de l'Universel* informs public discourses in the 1980s about the integration of the *beurs* (a slang word for “Arabs”) (Sayad 2006). These discourses designate *beurs* as the “second generation of immigrants” marked as not naturally belonging to the Republican body even though they were born in France. Their integration into this body requires that they undergo a prolonged process of education and civilization in order to lose the particularities of the communities formed by their excessively religious and traditional parents (Sayad 2006). The old civilizing mission thus turns into a mission to educate these descendants of colonized peoples. By demanding that “visible” French citizens assimilate, the *Chauvinisme de l'Universel* implicitly defines the attributes of the *Français de souche* (the “indigenous French”) as those of the universal Republican citizen (Bancel, Blanchard, and LeMaire 2005; Mbembe 2000). This creates a border between the subjectivities and practices assigned to the “Republic”—the white vanguard—and the subjectivities and practices assigned to particular ethnic or racial “communities” excluded from the vanguard.

The White Vanguard in Swiss History

In its Swiss historical trajectory, the whiteness narrative generates a different discursive border than it does in French history. Yet, in contrast to the French case, there exist few historical studies about Switzerland's participation in slavery, colonialism, or racial anthropology.⁸ We assume, though, that some narrative elements specific to a Swiss version of whiteness emerged around the seventeenth century through the participation of Swiss cantons in the slave trade, European colonial projects, and in missionary work (Etemad, David, and Schaufelbuehl 2005; Minder 2006). Nevertheless, imperial ambitions were minimal (David and Etemad 1998) since Switzerland was preoccupied with its internal contentions pertaining to religious and cultural differences. During the nineteenth century, peace among religious communities was achieved and the idea of mutual cultural coexistence was institutionalized (Kriesi 1998). A narrative claiming that the exceptional political institutions and values forming "Swiss purity" had to be protected from any foreign elements legitimated this consolidation of a specific Swiss national space. We call this narrative *the protection of Swiss purity*. The elements of this narrative justify, for example, the decision of a Swiss municipality to exclude an "African" from citizenship:

In the canton of Vaud, the title of citizen is not at all generously issued. They avoid giving it to Africans who make children with all sorts of girls (Municipality of Yverdon [canton of Vaud], November 1826, quoted by Etemad, David, and Schaufelbuehl 2005, 103).

As this excerpt shows, it is implied in the justification of the negative decision that only white ("non African") Swiss men are eligible for the title of citizenship since they, in contrast to Africans, have normal sexual moral conduct. Therefore Swiss citizenship is protected through the regulation of racialized sexual behaviors. As Mottier states, these rules are invoked in order to protect the social cohesion of an ethnically and culturally fragmented Switzerland (Mottier 2006).

At the end of the nineteenth century, when racial anthropology and eugenics became highly influential in Swiss universities and public institutions (Aeschbacher 1998; Mottier 2000), the protection of the Swiss purity narrative tended increasingly to refer to race. As historical studies show, eugenics politics invoke the narrative that the three Swiss cultures (Swiss French, Swiss German, and Swiss Italian) and Christianity represent the "Swiss breed" or the "pure Swiss origin" (Mottier 2000; Passy and Giugni 2006).

Eugenics policies served to protect the subjectivities and practices marked as “Swiss” and thus as the natural incorporation of a set of pure Swiss values (Mottier 2000, 549). At the beginning of the twentieth century, racial hygienic and eugenic discourses and practices served to delimit the boundaries of the Swiss body (Kreis 1992). For instance, claims in favor of the first cantonal law (Vaud) on sterilization legitimated the regulation of “mentally ill women’s” sexuality (Gerodetti 2007, 10). Through this discourse, “Swissness” is linked to a pure body that must be protected from racial degeneracy and even from Swiss females who are considered unable to be mothers (Aeschbacher 1998). These “naturally unqualified” guardians of the purity of the Swiss breeds fall on the side of degenerate Foreignness (Mottier 2006). In summary, before the Second World War, *the protection of Swiss purity* narratives invoke gendered racialized attributes in relation to the exceptional Swiss order. We consider them to be good indicators of the discursive specificities of versions of Swiss whiteness.

After the Second World War, as in the French context, race evaporated from the subtext of the Swiss purity narrative.⁹ The idea that exceptional values, political institutions, and behaviors, which all had to be protected, composed the Swiss order still informed discourses and practices. However, the idea of progress was linked to race in a more implicit way. For instance, this articulation can be found in debates about access to Swiss citizenship influenced by the *Ueberfremdung* narrative (“overforeignisation” narrative) (Kury 2003, Niederberger 2004). This narrative emphasizes that all humans, independent of their national origin, can be assimilated and can therefore incorporate and protect the pure set of Swiss values. However, some bodies and cultures are designated as excessively “foreign” by the *Ueberfremdung* discourse, rendering them both incapable of assimilating and threatening to Swiss purity. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, Italian male subjectivities and practices were described as “over-fertile” and were thus marked as naturally incapable of being assimilated to Swiss values and as posing a danger to its purity (D’Amato 2001). This *Ueberfremdung* narrative gives meaning to the Swissness/Foreignness border. Whereas Swissness is implicitly marked by racialized attributes, Foreignness is explicitly marked with such attributes. Even though the specific racial attributes marking Foreignness depend on the political and economic context (“Africans” in the nineteenth century and “Italian workers” in the twentieth), the Swiss vanguard narrative is always a story about the protection of *Swiss purity*.

A Fluid, Heterogeneous, and Disseminated Narrative

The historical contextualization undertaken for the Swiss and the French contexts permits us to start “naming whiteness”; to sketch its discursive specificities within these two very different nation-states. The deployment of our narrative conceptualization of whiteness shows how race and progress inform both of these historical examples, but are constructed and articulated in a variety of ways. Indeed, race differently marks and serves to exclude subjectivities and practices from the white vanguard. As discussed above, racialized gendered attributes assign subjectivities and practices to the side of “Foreignness” in Switzerland and, in France, to the side of “particular communities.” Differing attributes are implicitly linked to the white vanguard; attributes of the “Republican” citizen (such as rationality and masculinity) are emphasized in the French examples while attributes of pure “Swissness” (related to sexual and moral conduct, and explicit Swiss “origin”) inform the Swiss examples.

Progress also informs the French and the Swiss stories differently. In both versions, progress is defined as a set of values incorporated by the subjectivities and practices marked as “white” (“Republican”/“Swiss”) and denied to those marked as “non-white.” However, within the French white vanguard narrative, progress is constructed as *extroverted*, whereas it is *introverted* in the Swiss version. In 1885, Jules Ferry noted this distinction by separating the French Republican project from the Swiss project:

The Republican Party (...) has understood that one could not propose to France a political ideal complying with nations as free Belgium and Republican Switzerland. France needs something else: it can not only be a free country, it has also to be a great country which exerts its influence on Europe’s destinies. France must spread this influence throughout the world and bring its language, its customs, its flag, its arms, its genius everywhere (Ferry 1885).

France’s duty to “exert its influence” requires an extroverted conception of progress seen as a set of values that have to be universalized to the rest of the world. Subjectivities included in the white vanguard have thus to enter in a civilizing and educative relationship with subjectivities excluded from the white vanguard. In contrast, as our historical examples have shown, Swiss progress is “already here” due to the *exceptionality* of the Swiss order. Practices and subjectivities incarnating this introverted version of progress have only

to be protected against the Other without any need for education or civilizing influence.

In summary, the historical trajectories of the narrative elements of whiteness illustrate that whiteness constitutes a *fluid, heterogeneous, and disseminated* narrative. Whiteness is fluid since it has constantly been reinvented across time and space. It is heterogeneous because it involves continuously changing marking processes. It is disseminated through multiple discourses and practices which daily reproduce as well as transform whiteness in various spaces. The fluidity, heterogeneity, and dissemination of whiteness are even more pronounced in contemporary contexts. As Les Back stresses, contemporary means of communication such as the Web contribute to the instant diffusion and production of “new territories of whiteness that exceed the boundaries of the nation-state while supplanting ethnocentric racisms with new trans-local forms of racial narcissism (...).” (Back 2002, 647–48; see also McDermott and Samson 2005). How can we account for long-term power relations whose local manifestations are multifarious and fragmented (McDermott and Samson 2005, 256)? How is it possible to grasp the continuously changing disseminated discursive operation of whiteness in various spaces? In order to answer these questions, we claim that there is a need to conduct “micropolitical analyses” of local spaces (Twine and Gallagher 2008, 15). The tools for these analyses are developed and empirically illustrated in the following section.

Grasping Whiteness in French and Swiss Cyberspaces

Toward Discursive Micropolitical Analyses of Whiteness

In the previous section, we characterized the white vanguard narrative as performing a discursive border between certain subjectivities and practices through marking processes. This section specifies the discursive processes which both reproduce and transform this border. We claim that the discursive reproduction and transformation of whiteness is generated by implicit and explicit gendered racialized marking processes in terms of *wording, valuing, and devaluing*, as well as through specific *argumentative logics*.

Whiteness is produced through “wording processes” (Figgou and Condor 2007; Jenkins 2000). On the one hand, subjectivities and practices are explicitly worded by means of a set of gendered and racialized attributes that invoke the “natural,” namely the body, culture, and sexuality. On the other hand, subjectivities and practices tend to be implicitly worded as “white” through a set of neutralized and generalized attributes, since this wording process

declares that: “whites are not of a certain race, they are just the human race” (Dyer 1997, 3). Furthermore, this neutral wording is often coupled with valuing discursive mechanisms. In contrast, subjectivities and practices that are explicitly racially worded tend to be devalued. These wording, valuing, and devaluing processes perform a border between subjectivities and practices included on the side of the white vanguard and those excluded from it. They are embedded in argumentative logics (Billig 1997) aiming to legitimize and normalize whiteness. Exploring contemporary whiteness requires analyzing these processes of wording, valuing, and devaluing embedded in specific argumentative logics. The second part of this paper explores these processes through a comparative micropolitical analysis in the contemporary Swiss and French contexts.

Since the whiteness narrative is fluid, heterogeneous, and disseminated and since it is reproduced and transformed through marking processes that are mostly hidden, its empirical exploration is particularly challenging. In response to this challenge, we develop two analytical strategies.

The first strategy consists of locating whiteness within claims on racialized difference that are expressed during “contentious moments” (Tilly 2005, 4). Indeed, such moments involve claims that pertain to the naturalized inclusion of some specific subjectivities and practices on the side of the white vanguard through demanding better inclusion of subjectivities and practices explicitly marked by gendered racialized attributes. Such claims challenge and delegitimize the implicit marking of some subjectivities and practices as white. They tend to trigger *reactive claims* reasserting the inclusion of some specific subjectivities and practices on the side of whiteness while defending the need to exclude racialized Others. In such debates, since hierarchical power relations produced by whiteness have to be defended, the border generated by whiteness becomes salient. This border is reasserted through marking processes that become more explicit than they habitually are. Therefore, hidden discursive reproductions of whiteness become empirically readable.

The second strategy requires locating such claims during contentious moments in cyberspaces, particularly blogs. Blogs are sets of online debates which leave chronological traces of past and present writing about oneself or a topic (Gurak and Antonijevic 2008, 65). We claim that blogs hosting debates about racialized differences are good spaces for naming whiteness for four reasons. First, blogs consist of *discursive performances* which construct meanings of the world, stabilized in the form of a public discourse. The discursive content of blogs, however, is never entirely representative of a general public discourse but only of a part of it (Barlas and Çalışkan

2006, 15). Through the analysis of debates on racialized difference on blogs (which we call “cyber-debates”), we expect to identify fragments of the whiteness narrative.

Second, blogs are characterized by *informal publicness* (Barlas and Çalışkan 2006, 5). They are not completely public because they combine the intimacy of the private sphere with the spatial public distance that exists between bloggers (Back 2002, 633). Informal publicness creates the illusion of privacy, anonymity, and impersonality. Therefore we expect that implicit marking processes of whiteness will be especially free and pronounced on blogs about debates on racialized difference. Moreover, this informal publicness allows us to focus our analysis on shared narrative performance instead of on fixed social identities and behaviors.

Third, cyber-debates are located in *transnational and national spaces*. This makes them analytically pertinent for comprehending both the national specificity and the transnational dissemination of whiteness. On the one hand, via their technological openness, blogs are potential transnational spaces produced through the circulation of racialized marking processes among postcolonial European contexts. On the other hand, since blogs are still thematically organized in relation to national issues (Back 2002, 635), we expect them to contain racialized marking processes specific to their national contexts. On this basis, we claim that the comparison of blogs located in different national spaces is crucial for grasping both the transnational dissemination and the national specificities of whiteness. Through this comparison, a myopic focus on a single national context can be avoided and analytical claims can be more balanced and accurate.

In summary, whiteness can be grasped through the analysis of contentious moments on racialized differences, which are especially heuristic in cyberspaces. From this perspective, we conduct an illustrative and comparative micropolitical analysis on two blogs that host debates on racialized differences in France and Switzerland.

The French Cyber-debate on the Memory of Slavery

Recalling the historical sketch presented previously in this article, the French version of whiteness has to be named according to the discursive Republic/communities border. France has recently experienced several contentious moments during which its relation to difference has been renegotiated. During such moments, new meanings have been given to the border between the Republic and its particular communities. One of the most heated debates occurred in 2005 when the National Assembly passed a law to promote the “positive role of colonisation” in history books. This gave rise to a

broad public debate on the politics of French colonial memory, during which markers such as “French citizens of former colonies” or “postcolonial minorities” became highly visible. As they demanded better recognition of their specific historical experiences, these categories of French citizens were accused of withdrawing into their particular “communities” and of endangering “Republican cohesion” (Le Cour Grandmaison 2006). In light of this recent debate, it is pertinent to explore the controversy over colonial memory in order to illustrate the contemporary reproduction and transformation of French whiteness.

For this purpose, we conduct a micropolitical analysis of a cyber-debate over the memory of slavery in France. This debate was on the blog of Patrick Lozès that is hosted by the online version of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, a left-wing weekly newspaper. On this blog, Patrick Lozès, the President of the only association defending France’s black minorities on a national level (*Le CRAN*),¹⁰ deplored the fact that the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, did not attend the official commemoration of the abolition of slavery on 10 May 2009 (Lozès 2009). He also criticized the lack of significant museums dedicated to the French history of slavery. His article generated some supportive comments, but mostly long defensive comments (8 of 12). Most commentators reacted *against* the idea of commemorating slavery or other historical facts related to French “visible” minorities. These comments contain reactive claims against the inclusion of difference, lending themselves to an exploration of marking processes reproducing a whiteness narrative.¹¹

By reasserting that there is no need for a museum dedicated to the French history of slavery, reactive claims on this blog use explicit wording that gives meaning to practices and subjectivities assigned to the side of the “communities.” This wording refers principally to ethnic or racial terms as, for example, *arabe*, *noir*, *noir africain*, *noir des Antilles* (“Arab,” “black,” “African black,” “black from the Antilles”), all falling under the general term *communautaristes* (“communautarist”). This wording describes the *communautaristes* as being focused on particular interests, as this excerpt shows:

The *communautarist lobbyists* have understood well: to obtain (...) socio-economic privileges for the members of *their “race”* (since this is the daily objective of the CRAN), it is tactically more efficient to use historical blackmail and a guilt complex (“Seb’s” comment, *Nouvel Observateur’s* blog 2009, our italics).

This quotation also illustrates how such wording is inscribed in a semantic network of negative connotations. Subjectivities and

practices associated with “communautarists” are simultaneously devalued as tactically manipulative and self-interested. They are also devalued through a vocabulary of excess. For instance, one comment asserts that “the visible minority is becoming a little bit too visible” since “Blacks and Arabs” put themselves at the “centre of the world” by using the history of slavery as an “excuse” (“bzeom’s” comment, *Nouvel Observateur’s* blog 2009). These extracts mobilize racialized and gendered attributes of visibility, self-interest and emotional excess that justify the exclusion of some subjectivities from the Republican body.

At the same time, the commentators use more neutral wording to designate European geographical locations or the national body:

Slavery is universal and a-temporal (...). It was used everywhere, by every race, during millenniums, and was considered most of the time as perfectly natural (...). Until the end of the 18th century, when for the first time, anti-slavery associations in *France*, *Great-Britain* and in the *USA* claimed for its abolition on *philosophical grounds*. (...). Until this *beautiful* day, the 4th February 1794, on which, as far as I know, *for the first time in the whole history of humanity*, a sovereign institution (the Convention) officially decided to abolish this practice (...). *European* colonisation then spread the abolition of slavery through all the continents, even if this practice still persists today (...). For the first time in History, slavery is not anymore a “universal economic system” and officially acquires the status of a “*moral crime*.” A historical overturning voted by the *French Republic* (“Seb’s” comment, *Nouvel Observateur’s* blog 2009, our italics).

In contrast to the marking of the “communautarist” subjectivities and practices, this neutral wording defines *in counterpoint* subjectivities and practices linked to “Europeanity” or the “Republic.” Their marking as “whites” remains implicit while their differentiation from the “communautarists” values them implicitly as nonexcessive, truth-oriented, not manipulative and thus as the invisible reference point. However, some comments explicitly articulate positive valuing of “European” or “Republican” practices: “European countries” and especially the “Republic” are on the side of the “philosophical,” the “moral,” the “public good,” and the vanguard since they were the “first” to abolish slavery (“Seb’s” comment, *Nouvel Observateur’s* blog 2009). Reference is made here to all the gendered racialized attributes of the abstract Republican citizen who is embodied by the white man.

These processes of wording, valuing, and devaluing reconstruct a salient and incommensurable border. In the excerpt above, they assign some subjectivities and practices to the vanguard European abolitionist countries (guided by the French Republic) that spread out “for the first time in History” across “all the continents” the progressive idea of abolition through “colonisation,” whereas they assign Others (“the black or Arab communautarists,” the previously colonized) a place outside of this vanguard. Moreover, this border is also generated through the hierarchical ordering of “whites.” When the commentator “Bill” designated himself as a “white” and supported the claim of Patrick Lozès, one reactive comment asserted that:

Bill is the perfect example of the *little whitey* whose mind is shaped by the great brainwashing currently practised. He hates himself for crimes he has not committed. Bill, like the *vast majority of “white” French*, is probably a descendant of serfs: he has more reasons to cry about the fate of his ancestors than to criticise himself for being a hypothetical descendant of slave traders from Nantes, Bordeaux or Normandy (“Uhuru’s” comment, *Nouvel Observateur* blog 2009, our italics).

In this excerpt, “Bill” is portrayed as a failed white (a “little whitey”) who cannot be part of the vanguard since he gives in to the manipulation of the communautarists by assigning himself to a particular racial group. It is interesting to note that the term *blanc* (“white”) is placed in quotation marks. This creates a distance between the term and its enunciator who seems to refuse to be part of a particular group and defends its incarnation of the universal standpoint. In contrast, the terms marking Others are used without any quotation marks. In summary, the marking processes give a gendered racialized meaning to the Republic/community border.

It emerges from our analysis that these marking processes are embedded within three interconnected *argumentative logics* that defend power relations. First, commentators defend whiteness by a *logic of the evidence*. This logic is mobilized by “Seb’s” excerpt above. “Seb” constructs his claims as naturally obvious through the use of assertive phrases (“Slavery is universal and a-temporal”), the enumeration of historical facts, and the omission of the claims expressed by Patrick Lozès and his supporters. Second, reactive claims protect the white vanguard through a *logic of indignation*. The excerpt from “Seb’s” first extract above expresses indignation on behalf of the white victims of “ethnic lobbyists.” Other comments complain about “the rise of an anti-white racism” (“bzeom’s” comment, *Nouvel Observateur’s* blog 2009). This logic merges

attacks against whites with general attacks against the Republic. It serves thus to elect the particular standpoints of those on the side of the “Republic” as the only legitimate and normative standpoints. Finally, the systematic and repetitive devaluing of the claims of subjectivities and practices marked as “self-interested communautarists” (“Seb’s,” “Nolat’s,” and “bzeom’s” comments, *Nouvel Observateur’s* blog 2009) is embedded in a *logic of an automatic designation of subjectivities* figuring on the side of the Republic as *the only legitimate speakers*. This argumentative logic constructs the white French citizen as the only rational part in the discussion and automatically delegitimizes claims made in the name of difference. To summarize, these three argumentative logics reassert the unquestioned socio-political position of those representing the universal standpoint. These processes contribute to the normalization and legitimation of their dominant position when they are confronted with minorities demanding inclusion and recognition.

The Swiss Cyber-debate on Muslims and Coeducational Swimming Lessons

If we refer to the historical moments illustrated previously in this article, the Swiss version of whiteness has to be named with respect to the border between Swissness and Foreignness. This border has been renegotiated in the current debates on racialized difference. For instance, in 2007, public debates on a political initiative about foreigners’ criminality mobilized markers such as “men from the Balkans,” “Muslim countries,” and “Blacks.” More examples of such contentious moments are the controversies over the ban on minarets in 2009, and the recent media discussions about a potential prohibition of the burqa in Swiss public spaces (Schneuwly Purdie, Gianni, and Jenny 2009). In this context, it is pertinent to explore contentions surrounding Muslims, who are often also discussed in relation to gender, in order to illustrate the reproduction and transformation of today’s Swiss whiteness narrative.

For this purpose, we analyze a cyber-debate about Muslims, hosted by a left-wing Swiss-German blog, *Tagesanzeiger*, published on 24 October 2008 (Tagesanzeiger 2008). In this cyber-debate, people reacted to a journal article on the decision of the Swiss National Federal Court on the legal obligation for all public school children, regardless of their religion, to take coeducational swimming lessons. This legal decision was made because a Muslim father asserted his right to not send his sons to classes attended by girls. The account of this decision on the *Tagesanzeiger* blog provoked 66 comments arguing mostly in favor of the court decision and against the claim of the Muslim father. This cyber-debate allows us to

illustrate the specific discursive operation of contemporary Swiss whiteness.

Comments on the blog about coeducational swimming lessons used explicit wording to mark Muslim subjectivities and practices by racialized attributes. One excerpt states:

It is questionable, though, that people in this forum justify more religious tolerance arguing that Muslim countries have not known tolerance for a long time: are we really willing to compare *our democratic country* with *dictatorships*? This comparison is more than questionable (“E.U.’s” comment, 24 October 2008, 14:45 Uhr, *Tagesanzeiger* blog 2008, our italics).¹²

In this example, “Muslim countries” are characterized as “not respecting religious tolerance” and as “dictatorships.” Muslim subjectivities and practices are similarly worded and devalued in other comments with terms such as “Muslim culture,” “Middle Ages,” “patriarchy,” “minority,” and “origin.” For instance, one comment devalues Muslim subjectivities and practices by explicitly marking them as “not willing to assimilate to the Swiss democratic law” (“F.N.’s” comment, 7 November 2008, 8:37 p.m., *Tagesanzeiger* blog 2008). This specific wording and devaluation are both racialized and gendered. For instance, Muslim men’s perception of women’s sexuality is described as sexually antiquated with terms such as “intolerant” and “repressive” (“P.K.’s” comment, 24 October 2008, 3:08 p.m., *Tagesanzeiger* blog 2008). Muslim female bodies are specifically worded and devalued by attributes such as “wearing the headscarf” (WA, 24 October 2008, 1:44 p.m., *Tagesanzeiger* blog). In short, Muslim subjectivities and practices are specifically worded and devalued by cultural and phenotypical features that naturalize their “incapacity” to agree with coeducational swimming lessons.

More general wording marks Swiss subjectivities and practices through explicit terms such as “Switzerland” and “our culture”:

The judgement is absolutely correct. In *Switzerland* the *Swiss law* is valid and nothing like an *old fashioned Sharia*. Everybody is judged in the same way, exceptions for Muslims do not exist. Those who do not want to integrate should migrate to a *Muslim country* (“M.W.’s” comment, 24 October 2008, *Tagesanzeiger* blog 2008, our italics).

In this excerpt, general wording is embedded in the valuing processes of Swiss subjectivities and practices. Indeed, the explicit wording and devaluing of Muslims through terms such as “old fashioned Sharia” implicitly mark Swiss subjectivities and practices as modern. In many other comments, “Christian” and “European”

cultural attributes are valued. For instance, one comment values the “European separation between church and state” and assigns this explicitly to Swiss culture (“M.G.’s” comment, 24 October 2008, 3:34 p.m., *Tagesanzeiger* blog 2008). This wording of Switzerland as “modern,” “democratic”—and therefore a vanguard—is highly gendered. For instance, a commentator states:

I think that it is right for all children to be treated in the same way. If we go to a Muslim country, women often have to wear a headscarf, one is not allowed to kiss and so on. Then we also adapt. And if this is impossible for them, then there are many other countries on this earth (“A.W.’s” comment, 24 October 2008, 01:44 p.m., *Tagesanzeiger* blog 2008, our italics).

The example illustrates the way in which Swiss subjectivities and practices are implicitly worded and valued as those respecting sexual freedom and the liberation of the female body. In short, “Swiss” subjectivities and practices are implicitly, but sometimes also explicitly, generally worded through Christian and European cultural features attributing to them the natural capacity to embody pure democratic Swiss values.

The analysis of the *Tagesanzeiger* blog allows us to illustrate some discursive mechanisms that reproduce the border between Swissness and Foreignness. On the one hand, Swissness is designated as embodying “secularised modern Europe and Christian culture.” Therefore, the assimilation of Swiss subjectivities and practices to the exceptional set of Swiss values is given by nature and there is no threat of *Ueberfremdung*. On the other hand, “Foreignness” is designated as the “traditionalist Non-European and Muslim” subjectivities and practices that endanger pure Swiss values. They consist of inassimilable elements assigned outside of the pure Swiss body. The blog comments trigger two *argumentative logics* defending the power relations generated by the Swiss white vanguard. It is defended by the argumentative logic of the *rejection and denial of the new multicultural composition* of Switzerland. This logic completely denies the possibility of Muslim subjectivities and practices to be part of Swiss society or even a part of European civilization. Furthermore, Muslims’ assimilation to Swiss values is rejected as a valid solution since their cultural origin cannot overcome their potential of presenting the danger of *Uebefremdung*. Therefore, the second argumentative logic consists of claiming that *Swissness has to be protected* against contamination by “Muslim values.” That is why in this blog it is considered normal and legitimate that Muslims’ subjectivities and practices be excluded from Swissness and assigned to Foreignness.

Conclusion

Our aim has been to decenter whiteness from its Anglophone position of production and deployment. For this purpose, we have conceptualized whiteness as a fluid, heterogeneous, and disseminated white vanguard narrative, and we have conducted a comparative micropolitical analysis of the discursive operation of this narrative in French and Swiss cyber-debates. These developments point out the theoretical, analytical, and empirical potentialities of the concept of whiteness in new spaces. Our concluding remarks focus on the potentialities of our empirical exploration of whiteness.

The comparative micropolitical analyses of the French cyber-debate on the memory of slavery and the Swiss cyber-debate on Muslims and coeducational swimming lessons illustrate the discursive specificities of whiteness according to *local* issues. For instance, within the Swiss debate, the idea of race is deployed in relation to Muslim subjectivities and practices. Comments against the Muslim father's claim mobilized gendered racialized attributes, which mark Muslims as sexually repressive and heteronomous in opposition to the sexually free and autonomous Swiss. Our analysis also shows that these gendered racialized attributes are importantly intertwined with religious attributes, which strongly place the Islamic "traditional" values in opposition to Christian and European civilization. In comparison, within the French debate, since the contention is about collective history, reactive claims activate a set of attributes that draw a line between reason and emotion. The descendants of the colonized are marked as self-interested and emotionally excessive whereas the French Republican (white) citizens are marked as being on the side of truth and Republican cohesion. In summary, this comparison permits us to grasp "the nuanced and locally specific way in which whiteness as a form of power is defined, deployed, performed, policed, and re-invented" (Twine and Gallagher 2008, 5).

Our empirical analysis highlights some *national* specificities around the discursive operation of whiteness and tracks our previous exploration of the white vanguard narrative at some important moments in French and Swiss history. Within the Swiss debate, extracts often refer to the idea of the protection of Swiss exceptional values ("democracy," "tolerance") and institutions ("secularism"). As they do not conform to "exceptional Swissness," Muslims are constructed as a danger and are often asked to leave the country. An introverted notion of progress informs this injunction to leave Swiss territory (in German, it is literally to go "out of the country," to *Ausland*). The discourse dictates that progress is already here and has only to be protected against foreign elements. This strongly

contrasts with the meanings of progress constructed within the French debate. According to one extract analyzed above, the French Republic spread the progressive idea of the abolition of slavery to the whole world. This claim is informed by an extroverted idea of progress. Here, the discourse is that progress has to be spread through colonization or through the education of those who are not progressive enough. These different constructions of progress also inform the rhetorical style of the two debates. The Swiss debates consisted of short assertive comments asking Muslims to conform or leave, whereas the French debate mobilized long explanations about the historical truth seeking to educate the “communitarist” descendants of the colonized.

Finally, our comparative analysis illustrates the *translocal and transnational dissemination* of the white vanguard narrative. Although they are concerned with very different issues and located in two very different national spaces, reactive claims of the Swiss and French debates refer to a similar idea of “Europe.” Swiss claims emphasize the Christian roots of Europe and its democratic values such as tolerance, autonomy, and sexual freedom. Similarly, French claims evoke the vanguard position of Europe in the progressive march of history. Both of these claims implicitly refer to a common space and a common history that are powerfully—but also implicitly—racialized. In this regard, the local cyber-debates we analyzed can be read as similarly contentious over the idea of Europe, which, according to Gail Lewis, is an “idea that privileges a particular spatial configuration [i.e. nation-states] and also attempts to claim a specific—and superior—way of being human as its especial characteristic” (Lewis 2006, 91).

Thinking whiteness in French and Swiss cyberspaces has allowed us to explore whiteness as a fluid, heterogeneous, and disseminated narrative produced across past and present times and across local, national, and global spaces. We have shown that specific versions of whiteness tend to delegitimize and silence any public claims articulated in favor of racialized difference while reasserting the dominant position of white subjectivities and practices. In this regard, our results sustain previous deconstructionist approaches claiming that whiteness should be less understood as a “matter of skin pigmentation and more as an organizing principle in late modernity” (Nayak 2007, 738). However, our results also extend the scope of these approaches by highlighting an often neglected dimension of the daily reproduction of whiteness, namely that whiteness is an organizing principle of the right to be heard as a legitimate voice in a given community. On this basis, we advocate further comparative exploration of the discursive operation of whiteness in various

spaces. Such studies should be linked to critical political projects in order to rethink socio-political institutions of postcolonial Europe as well as to reflect on the conditions required for democratic debates to include the standpoint of marginalized voices.

NOTES

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1. For some exceptions, see Walgenbach (2005) who explores whiteness in Germany and Essed and Trienekens (2008) who question Dutch white identities.

2. We understand "subjectivity" as a socially constructed mode of being referring to naturalized entities to which collective and individual actors identify. We understand "practices" as a socially constituted mode of acting referring to ritualized actions reproduced by collective and individual actors.

3. Whiteness narratives existed outside of modern Western Europe. In a "critical history of the Europeanness and the racialisation of whiteness," Alastair Bonnett (1998) discusses the social meaning of the category "white" in pre-modern China and the Middle East and asserts that:

"Whether positively or negatively connoted, whiteness was widely employed within the identity constructs of non-European and pre-modern societies. All these forms have now been either forgotten or marginalized. (...) Today, with certain limited, and increasingly residual, exceptions, the term 'white', is equated with the term 'European'" (1998, 1036).

The discussion in this paper is thus limited to this hegemonic modern narrative of whiteness.

4. There is little agreement among scholars on the exact period of the invention of whiteness. Some studies consider that whiteness emerged among the settlers of the Spanish and English colonies, in parallel with the

modern idea of race by the end of the sixteenth century (Bonnett 1998; Goldberg 1993). Scholars focusing on the United States mention the end of the seventeenth century as the period when whiteness became an “explicit legitimized social identity” in relation to the context of legislation against blacks (Garner 2006, 260–61).

5. According to Dorlin (2006, 210–11), the French term *race* (“race”) is first used in 1684 in its modern sense: to divide humankind according to “endogenous” and “natural” attributes, within the writings of the traveler and philosopher François Bernier. Her hypothesis is that the plantations in the Caribbean French colonies can be considered as laboratories of racialized and gendered modern systems of domination which will translate into the young French Republic during and after the French Revolution.

6. All quotations from historical sources and blogs are our translations.

7. For instance, Durkheim regards societies in which women still take part in public life as savage: “There is now a very great number of savage people where the woman mingles in political life” (Durkheim quoted in Scott 1996, 97).

8. For some exceptions, see Mottier (2000, 2006), Mattioli (1998), Kreis (1992), Etemad et al. (2005), Brändle (2002), Minder (2002), and Kury (2003). This lack of studies appeals for further historical support in order to properly be undertaken the ideas presented in this article.

9. One should note, though, that eugenic institutional practices persist in Switzerland until 1970 (Gerodetti 2007).

10. *Le CRAN* is the acronym for the *Conseil représentatif des associations noires*, which we can translate as “The Representative Council of Black Associations.”

11. It is important to note that we chose these blogs because they contain public debates on current salient issues on racialized difference in France and Switzerland. Yet, even though left-wing oriented media host both blogs, we did not choose them with any regard to political ideology.

12. As users’ names on the Swiss blog seem to be “real” names, we mention only their initials.

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