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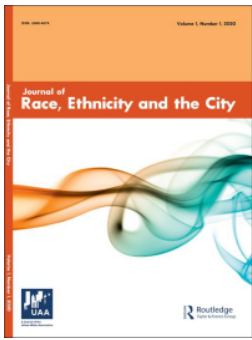
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Race, racism and coloniality in Bordeaux: Perceptions and experiences of 15 local women racialized as non-white

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the city of Bordeaux, a city mostly known today for its wine industry but with a strong colonial legacy as it was the second main slave trade harbor in France. Thus, Bordeaux illustrates the erasure of race, racism and coloniality in race-evasive and so-called post-racial French and European (urban and discursive) spaces. Based on in-depth interviews with 15 women racialized as non-white and living in Bordeaux, this article sheds light on some of the ways in which the participants perceived and experienced race, racism and coloniality to materialize in Bordeaux. Analyzed using tenets of thematic analysis, the findings are organized around two themes: (1) disrupting raceless discourses and whiteness and (2) drawing geographical and historical continuities. The findings help identify concrete ramifications of race, racism and coloniality in urban spaces and point to ways of developing racial literacy in and through cities.

KEYWORDS

Race; space; coloniality; city; racial literacy

Introduction

This article focuses on the experiences and perceptions of women racialized as non-white¹ and living in Bordeaux (France) to unearth some of the ways in which race, racism and coloniality materialize in the city. This study is motivated by two main research gaps. First, race and space are deeply intertwined but their connection often invisibilized, especially in race-evasive² and post-racial contexts like France (Cohen & Mazouz, 2021). Although a large body of literature on the connections of race and space in the U.S. exists, much less has been published on the topic in Europe (for exceptions see, e.g., Barwick-Gross & Kulz, 2024; Bonnett, 2002; Redclift, 2014). Breaking away from a long tradition of U.S.-centric research on race and racism, this study contributes to scholarship produced in and about Europe to address the specificities of the racial formations in this context. Focusing on race and space is a particularly relevant framework to work with in race-evasive Europe as it makes the invisible visible. This conceptual framework indeed sheds light on the mutual construction of symbolic and spatial boundaries and ways in which social positions are negotiated through both space and race (Neely & Samura, 2011).

Literature has shown the extent to which cities are strategic venues where meanings are (re)produced, contested, and rendered (in)visible (Sassen, 2012). Thus, exploring race and space in cities helps ground understandings of race, racism and coloniality in everyday

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experiences and therefore highlight the concrete ramifications these concepts have. Aiming to do that, this study relies on the testimonies of women racialized as non-white to amplify their voices and experiences—hinting at the second research gap this study sets out to fill. The role of material, mundane urban spaces and perceptions thereof, especially by non-white participants, has received limited scholarly attention (Dumitrica, 2019). Focusing on experiences of women racialized as non-white helps apprehend cities outside of whiteness, while amplifying voices and experiences of participants who are often underrepresented. Thus, trying to address the erasure of race in France and invisibilization of non-white voices, this study asks how do women racialized as non-white and living in Bordeaux perceive and experience race, racism and coloniality to materialize in the city?

Drawing on literature from racial and ethnic studies, cultural studies as well as social and cultural geography, the theoretical framework outlines the workings of race, racism and coloniality in European and French (discursive) spaces. The method section provides information about the respondents, 15 women racialized as non-white and living in Bordeaux, with whom I conducted in-depth interviews in spring 2023. Analyzed using tenets of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), the results point to the *racialization of space* and *(dis)continuities* that the participants perceived in Bordeaux. The findings echo certain aspects of *racial literacy* and point to ways in which this concept and the study of race and space could benefit from one another.

Contradictions and continuities of race in European and French discursive and spatial spaces

Increasing literature is produced from and about Europe that contributes to move past U.S.-centric scholarship of race, racism and whiteness and to make race a legitimate object of research in and about Europe (e.g., Beaman et al., 2023; Boulila, 2019; Pitts, 2020). This body of literature points to various strategies used across (macro- and micro-) discourses to construct Europe as a post-racial space (Goldberg, 2015) by putting race at distance, whether in the past or outside of the imagined European space. As a whole and notwithstanding local idiosyncrasies, European discourses are generally marked by the erasure of race in public discourses (Lentin, 2008), the predominance of (different shades of) whiteness (Wekker, 2016) as well as the imprint posed by colonial relations, slavery, and crimes committed during World War II. The narrative from and about Europe revolves around ideals of modernity, enlightenment, secularism, and universalism (Essed & Trienekens, 2008; Lentin, 2020) that are heralded as proofs that race and racism are foreign to Europe (Salem & Thompson, 2016), while they are in fact deeply woven into their colonial past and racist ramifications today (Lentin, 2020).

In France, race, racism and coloniality are addressed, or more often, obscured through a specific set of values (Singaravélou, 2023). The emphasis placed on the republic, secularism and universality is used to sustain hegemonic whiteness in part by constructing “French” as a neutral unifying label and by dismissing inflexions to that national category as communitarianism (Cohen & Mazouz, 2021). The removal of the term *race* from the French constitution in 2018 illustrates the pervasiveness of race-evasive discourses and associated simplistic chain of meanings that contends race being removed means racism is not experienced (Beaman, 2022). The erasure of race hinders the possibility of talking about racialization processes through which oppressions and privileges are (re)produced (Cohen

& Mazouz, 2021), thereby denying opportunities to seek help and justice in the face of racism. One outcome of hegemonic whiteness in France is the—at times tacit and at others active—silencing of minoritized voices and invisibilization of their experiences (especially of race, racism and coloniality). Academic literature has also pointed to the shortcomings of race-evasive frameworks given the shape-shifting nature of racisms (Goldberg, 2015)—hierarchies of differences are always re-negotiated and -imagined along new axes.

Focusing on space offers a lens to disrupt the erasure of race by shedding light on the material and urban ramifications of invisibilized racial formations in France today. This study draws on literature approaching cities as a form of discourse open to contention, (re)invention, and constructive of subject positions (Barwick-Gross & Kulz, 2024; Dumitrica, 2019; Sassen, 2012). Similar to work about linguistic landscapes, (urban) space is thus envisaged here as “a social, cultural and political space . . . a *historical* space, therefore, full of codes, expectations, norms and traditions; and a space of *power* controlled by, as well as controlling, people” (Blommaert, 2013, p. 3, italics in original citation).

Following the murder of George Floyd in the U.S., unprecedented mobilization occurred across Europe in spring 2020 that exposed colonial and racist symbols in public and discursive European spaces (Beaman et al., 2023). In France, questions raised regarding the presence of colonial figures in public spaces were cut short by a presidential discourse committed to celebrate the republic as a unifying race-evasive force and pointing fingers at communitarianism. The French president at the time, Emmanuel Macron, qualified anti-racist demonstrations and their demands for renewed collective symbols in public spaces as “a hateful and false rewriting of the past . . . recuperated by separatists” (Macron, 2020). The response from Emmanuel Macron illustrates the “historical as well as geographic denial” (Suaudeau & Niang, 2022, p. 52) of France’s status as a post-colonial country through which racism and coloniality are ignored and implications for contemporary race relations concealed. France’s race-evasive republican framework that centers whiteness and conflates it with nationality (Cohen & Mazouz, 2021; Dijkema, 2022) has played a central role in the erasure of racial communities in France (e.g., the absence of a French Black community, Niang & Soumahoro, 2019; Pitts, 2020). While racial identification is structurally discouraged and disavowed, spaces such as *banlieues* are stigmatized and racialized as non-white (Hancock, 2017). As a result, spatial identification has become a prominent proxy for racial identification in France both in terms of positioning individuals outside of whiteness as well as (re)claiming one’s marginalized positionality (Dijkema, 2022).

Literature has shown that the racialization of *banlieues* operates through the intersection of many dimensions—most prominently gender, social class, nationality, and religion (Hancock, 2017; Niang, 2019). The interplay of race and gender particularly comes to the fore through the construction of *banlieues* as *problematic* spaces. Such representation is used to legitimize policing *solutions* informed by colonial city governance (Dijkema, 2022) as well as white feminist calls to protect women from patriarchal oppression of non-white males (Hancock, 2017). In contrast, little attention has been paid to the intersection of male and white gazes (Yancy, 2008) in cities like Bordeaux tacitly and tactically represented as neutral by being (discursively and geographically) embedded in whiteness.

The (concealed) history of Bordeaux further highlights the relevance of focusing on this city as it exemplifies race-evasive discourses circulating in France. Bordeaux indeed played a prominent role in slave trade with close to 500 expeditions accounted for (Saugera, 2002). In spite of that, the historical status of Bordeaux as a slave trade harbor has been left

unaddressed by elected municipalities up until the early 2000s and in spite of decade-long grassroots mobilization (Saugera, 2002; Sutherland, 2024). Local associations such as DiversCités and Mémoires & Partages have played an essential role in attempting to weave race, slavery and colonialism into discourses from and about Bordeaux despite reluctance from elected municipalities (Sutherland, 2024). In France, repentance for slave trade has mostly been expressed by the city of Nantes which was, by far, the leading slave-trading port in France. Although all large harbors in France in the 18th century were to some extent involved in slave trade (i.e., La Rochelle, Saint-Malo, Lorient, Le Havre, Marseille, Honfleur, Dunkerke, Bordeaux), the hegemony of Nantes has allowed other cities to hide in its shadow and position themselves as minor slave trade actors (Saupin, 2008). Such avoidance strategy, however, conceals the considerable effect that slave trade had on these cities. Deep socioeconomic transformations occurred at the local level due to the significant accumulated wealth of trading families, which, in turn, manifested spatially with important urban transformations (Saupin, 2008). In Bordeaux, neighborhoods were built in the 18th century that became new urban centers (Saupin, 2008), many of which remain prominent sites today, and are listed in the UNESCO world heritage. However, the connection between slave trade and the wealth of the 18th century architectural ensemble in Bordeaux remains largely concealed in discourses from the city, as illustrated by this quote from the official City of Bordeaux website:

Bordeaux's heyday came in the 18th century when the city underwent tremendous commercial and demographic expansion. Intense activity took place on the riverside, particularly in Chartrons, where wine was traded. (Ville de Bordeaux, 2024)

Dominant discourses by and about Bordeaux therefore actively connect the city's present and past wealth to the wine industry. The city of Bordeaux therefore serves to illustrate how race, racism and coloniality are an integral part of the "archite(x)ture of European space" (Goldberg, 2006, p. 340) though often obscured.

Mobilizations in the spring of 2020 revealed cities are strategic venues where meanings about race, racism and coloniality are deployed and contested. As such, these mobilizations also pointed to cities as relevant (but underestimated) venues to develop *racial literacy*. This notion has gained attention in literature as a framework to *apprehend* ways in which race, racism and whiteness inform lives and representations, and to *disrupt* racial injustices (Chávez-Moreno, 2022). A large body of literature on racial literacy has focused on education and individual development of literacy (Laughter et al., 2023). However, the emphasis of racial literacy on identifying and disrupting racial formations and injustices bears great relevance for the study of race and space since much of this work also aims at making invisibilized racial ramifications visible. In identifying how race, racism and coloniality are perceived to materialize in the city of Bordeaux, this study therefore sets out to offer pointers as to the practical and theoretical relevance of thinking of urban spaces as medium to facilitate racial literacy.

Methodology

Positionality

Each step of this project came hand in hand with an extensive reflection on my positionality as a white researcher of French nationality who used to live in Bordeaux. This continuous exercise of reflexivity was informed by literature (Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 2009;

McIntosh, 1988/1990; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008) that further helped me identify the extent to which my readings of social realities, as researcher and individual, were permeated by whiteness. Acknowledging the various layers through which race and whiteness played out in my (professional and personal) life was crucial to identify the multifaceted ways in which whiteness materialized in the city, and part of the same “process of ‘defamiliarizing’ that which is taken for granted in white experience” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 44).

Connected to that, Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva’s (2008) account of the way traditional methodological approaches maintain white privilege was instrumental to connect production of knowledge and structural whiteness in academia. Using this connection as a starting point was essential to identify which epistemological traditions this study was constructed through and constructive of and try to dismantle these. One key aspect in that regard is the hierarchies embedded in the research between participants racialized as non-white and researcher racialized as white. I addressed my positionality as a white researcher during the interviews to avoid whiteness being unaddressed yet omnipresent. During the analysis, I shared the emerging themes with the participants and encouraged them to disprove, revise and comment on the results. The feedback I received from some of the respondents was helpful in fine-tuning the analysis and making sure the themes identified would be intelligible, meaningful, accurate and credible to the participants.

Data collection

The data collected for this study consists of in-depth interviews with 15 participants (see Table 1 below) recruited through snowball sampling and who identified as women racialized as non-white living in Bordeaux.³ The interviews were used to gain insights into how the participants experienced and perceived race, racism and coloniality to materialize in Bordeaux (France). I had outlined an interview guide informed by literature on urban communication (e.g., Georgiou, 2006, 2013; Van Liempt & Staring, 2021) and racialization of space (e.g., Amin & Thrift, 2002; hooks, 2009; Lipsitz, 2007). The interview guide included broad open questions about

Table 1. Overview of the participants.

Pseudonym	Years spent in		Racial identifications as told by the participants	Length of interview	Online/ face-to-face
	Age	Bordeaux			
Suzanne	39	6	Black woman (<i>Femme noire</i>)	1:03	online
Tiana	38	21	Black woman (<i>Femme noire</i>)	1:37	ftf
Cloé	24	1.5	Black woman (<i>Femme noire</i>)	1:26	ftf
Lali	53	23	Black woman (<i>Femme noire</i>)	1:46	ftf
Emmanuelle	27	7	Mixed-race (<i>Métisse</i>)	1:14	ftf
Claire	63	60	Afropean (<i>Afro-européenne</i>)	1:25	ftf
Oumy	37	37	Bordelaise, Senegalese, Muslim (<i>Bordelaise Sénégalaise Musulmanne</i>)	1:09	online
Madeline	27	3	Black woman (<i>Femme noire</i>)	0:44	online
Taiba	28	8	French with Afghan roots (<i>Française d’origine afghane</i>)	0:50	ftf
Meri	25	8 months	Palestinian (<i>Palestinienne</i>)	0:43	online
Niaaline	40	40	Fula bordelaise (<i>Peule bordelaise</i>)	1:05	ftf
Catherine	36	5	Mixed-race (<i>Métissée</i>)	0:45	online
Mona	28	12	World citizen, or, French and mixed-race (<i>Citoyenne du monde ou Française et métisse</i>)	1:05	ftf
Nadine	43	25	Mixed-race (<i>Métisse</i>)	0:53	online
Mila	56	12	Black woman (<i>Femme noire</i>)	1:00	ftf

homemaking practices, city as a liberating/constraining space, personal relationships, previous urban experiences, and the history of Bordeaux. Interviews were mostly participant driven as I asked follow-up questions based on the topics respondents would raise. In most cases, I only went back to the topic list at the end of the interview to check whether some themes had not been addressed, which was rarely the case.

Data analysis

The analysis process was informed by some of the main tenets of thematic analysis as presented by Braun and Clarke (2021). First, I familiarized myself with the interview data at length by listening to the interviews on several occasions, before, during and after they were transcribed verbatim. This helped me form initial ideas about what the participants shared regarding race, racism, coloniality, and racialization processes in Bordeaux and France. Second, I coded all data by arranging extracts from the interviews based on their latent and explicit meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2021). After I had created a few initial codes, I organized these under overarching categories while continuing to create more codes and categories. I kept on re-arranging codes and categories together throughout the coding process to create meaningful connections within the data. Scrupulously reading and coding through all the transcripts allowed me to gather similar extracts as well as to juxtapose contradictory passages that gave me insights into the nuances and complexities of what the participants shared with me. Overall, the analysis included both deductive and inductive elements (Braun & Clarke, 2021) as I navigated between transcripts from the data and literature, each feeding the other (i.e., I looked for literature connected to what I saw in the data, and saw in the data what I read about in literature). In developing themes, I moved back and forth between data, preliminary notes, literature, codes and notes taken straight after the interviews to identify shared meanings about the way participants connected race, racism and coloniality to their lives in Bordeaux. The findings pertaining to the racialization of space and (dis)continuities are presented in the following two sections: “Disrupting raceless discourses and whiteness” and “Drawing geographical and historical continuities.” Implications to develop racial literacy in and through cities are drawn in the conclusion.

Raceless discourses in Bordeaux: Making race visible and disrupting whiteness

Participants regretted that race and racism were generally hardly discussed in (connection to) Bordeaux. Through the interviews, the participants identified actors they perceived to be involved in (re)producing or erasing discourses of race and racism at the local level. It clearly came through most interviews that the participants felt successive elected municipalities had taken little responsibility and actions in putting race and racism on the agenda. Actions taken by elected municipalities since the early 2000s were welcomed by the participants but evaluated as nowhere sufficient.⁴ Particularly, the participants regretted elected municipalities only acted in response to the continuous work done by associations, therefore placing the burden of educating society about race and racism on the shoulder of people racialized as non-white. Lali’s quote encapsulates many of the shortcomings perceived by the participants about the limited actions and overall passiveness of elected municipalities:

The day Bordeaux will have really done and proposed something on the issues of the slave trade, slavery . . . because we're still at the stage where it's the associations, you know, that get things moving and get things done on this subject, that's it. So, the day Bordeaux will be able to talk spontaneously and calmly and without feeling obliged to do so about these issues and this subject, and to really propose things along these lines So, in other words, not wait for associations or activists to tell Bordeaux what to do. (Lali)⁵

The state of discourses of race, racism and coloniality in Bordeaux painted by the participants pointed to several tensions. First, although the participants described associations as leading the work to make race, racism and coloniality visible, elected municipalities were perceived as making the final decisions. Discourses about race, racism and coloniality in Bordeaux were therefore perceived to be *limited* and *top-down*, highlighting the political struggles over both race and space (Neely & Samura, 2011). A second tension appeared in the way elected municipalities had made race, racism and coloniality visible mostly in relation to history and through foreign and anonymous figures (e.g., statue "Toussaint Louverture," Promenade "Martin Luther King," statue "Strange Fruit"). The emphasis placed on antiracist actors from abroad rather than French activists is a documented strategy (Niang & Soumahoro, 2019) to position race, racism and coloniality as discursively and geographically external to France (Lentin, 2020; Salem & Thompson, 2016).

In addition to wishing for elected municipalities to take initiatives that put race, racism and coloniality on the map in Bordeaux, the participants also pointed to the type of discourses they wished to see. Some of the main adjectives repeatedly coming up in the interviews were "visible," "accessible," "pedagogical," "pacified" (*apaisé*) and "accurate," bearing particular resonance with the deeply race-evasive, universalist and polarized national French discourses (Salem & Thompson, 2016; Sommier, 2018). In contrast to national politicized raceless discourses, cities may offer opportunities to think and discuss race from a bottom-up perspective by appealing to everyday lived experiences (see Georgiou, 2006) including that of minoritized individuals. Echoing the words of Tiana, many participants regretted the potential of the city was not used to educate, especially considering the lacuna on the topic in the French national school curriculum (see, e.g., De Cock, 2018): "Everyone can learn, but not everyone is triggered to do so. That's what the city can be used for, to get people going" (Tiana).

Many participants wished to see discourses about race, racism and coloniality brought up across occasions and places in Bordeaux to reach varied audiences, while *also* having dedicated space(s) where invisibilized and scattered information could be gathered.⁶ Exposure to race, racism and coloniality at the local level in connection to Bordeaux's past was seen as an opportunity to develop racial literacy—a notion that translated in the participants' interviews in terms of knowing, showing curiosity, questioning status quo, and engaging in conversations on race. Several participants therefore seemed to hope for a virtuous circle whereby disrupting race-evasive discourses in cities would create opportunities for dialogue and criticality that would further challenge raceless practices. This echoes findings on racial literacy that have revealed (interactional) processes to name race and make it visible as significant steps to problematize and disrupt hegemonic whiteness (e.g., Rogers & Mosley, 2008).

Some of the participants felt individuals racialized as non-white had gained some visibility in recent years in Bordeaux. While noticing timid improvements in that regard, these participants also expressed concerns over this being a superficial trend more than

a structural shift. Some of the participants, more vocally Niaaline and Suzanne, were wary of the commercialization of racial and ethnic diversity that conveyed depoliticized impressions of living togetherness (*vivre ensemble*) and of representations catered to white audiences and still informed by colonial representations of Blackness (see hooks, 1992). Several participants nevertheless shared similar experiences of specific services that used to be unavailable to them in the hyper (white) city center and were nowadays accessible. Two of the most common examples mentioned by the participants included finding appropriate make-up foundation as well as going to white hairdressers. Although the latter had become occasionally possible it still remained rather exceptional as the participants talked of certain hairdressers' self-taught know-how rather than of hair salons advertised as having expertise for different hair types. All in all, the participants suggested their presence in Bordeaux as women racialized as non-white had become (more) normalized over the years. However, the sense of representativity in the city evoked by many participants seemed to transpire at the micro-level and not at the city management level, pointing to the structural ramifications of whiteness through which people perceived to be white have privileged access to governing institutions: "I see myself in every day-like people. Yes, I recognize myself quite regularly. But . . . in urban policy, let's say . . . uh . . . less [laughs] yes, less" (Nadine).

The whiteness of governing bodies in Bordeaux connects to the (re)production of privileges that some of the participants addressed in connection to the city's apparently notorious inward-looking culture (*culture d'entre soi*). Many of the participants explained Bordeaux to be (known for being) a difficult place for making acquaintances because locals have existing networks that can be hard to enter. Some of the participants drew connections between this inward-looking culture and privileges and racism in Bordeaux. This particularly came to the fore in connection to racism in workplaces that some of the participants found to be symptomatic of the "ambient racism" (Catherine) in Bordeaux. Examples provided by Lali, Catherine and Tiana about their workplaces illustrated the structural reproductions of privileges in a "feodal-like" (Lali) manner. The examples they mentioned included openly racist comments directly targeted at them or at larger groups (e.g., Muslims and Blacks), microaggressions, as well as being systematically passed over for promotions. Catherine explained that her Spanish and Central American origins positioned her as the recipient of "a little joke about 'Maria [typical Spanish name by French standards], go and do the housework.' Well, it's not clever, it's not mean, but it's an everyday occurrence" (Catherine). Tiana, in turn, recalled the following comment made by a white male colleague of hers: "And at one point, we were both working [Tiana and another Black female colleague], and he [white male colleague] came over . . . and he's doing something, and then he stood up and said: 'Ah, I feel like a slave master'" (Lali).

Tiana, Lali and Catherine all drew connections between racism in their workplaces and the specific context of Bordeaux that they perceived to allow for rampant structural racism, in part because of the bourgeois and inward-looking culture of the city. Thus, the participants drew connections between privileges and racism in Bordeaux that pointed to whiteness and racism being two sides of the same coin as systematic structural privileges and discriminations are co-constructed (Frankenberg, 1993). Whites and whiteness are nevertheless typically excluded from discussions of race and racism revolving around inequality as understood through the narrow lens of exclusion (Lentin, 2020) instead of a holistic understanding of racism as co-producing inclusion *and* exclusion, privileges *and* oppression. Exposing ramifications of race, racism and coloniality in cities hints at Lentin's (2020)

discussion of racial literacy as a tool to “unsettle the ‘white comfort’ underpinning the dominant approach to racism” as individualized and morally wrong (p. 11). Confronting white privileges and whiteness points to a core challenge of racial literacy and to the intensive analytical commitment and work it requires (Twine & Steinbugler, 2006). This also serves as an important reminder to refrain from idealizing cities as spaces of possibility detached from polarized and polarizing national discourses (see Georgiou, 2006).

Making geographical and historical continuities visible

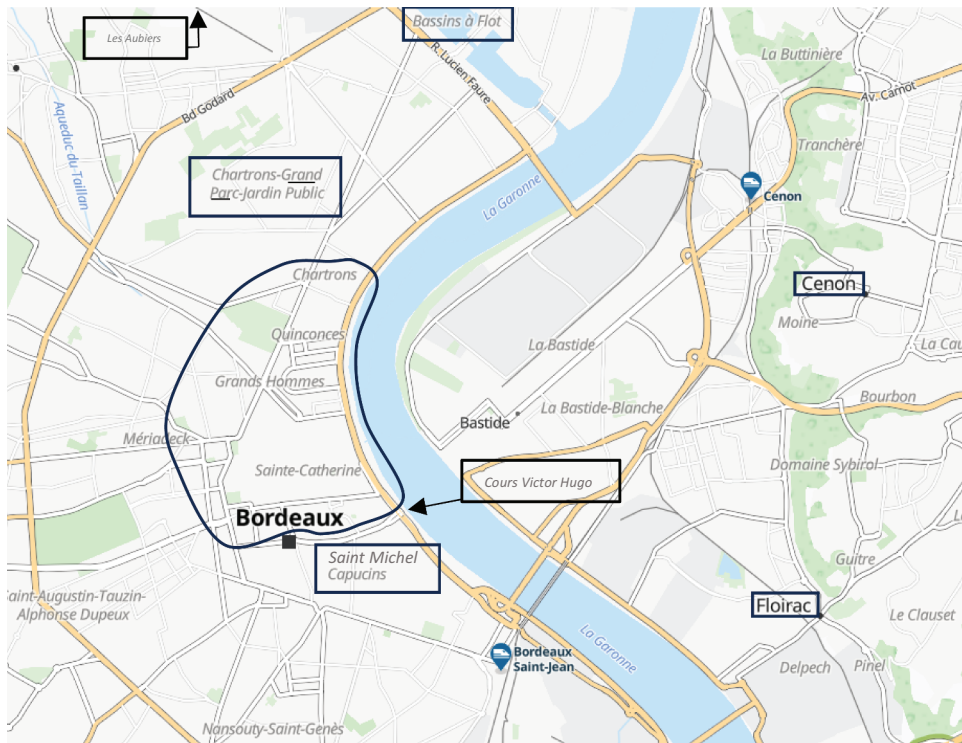
The perceived absence of discourses on race, racism and coloniality in Bordeaux sharply contrasted with the racialized organization of the city mentioned by the participants. They all showed great awareness of the racialization of specific neighborhoods in Bordeaux’s collective imaginary as non-white (in particular, Saint Michel, les Capucins, les Aubiers and Grand Parc as well as further peripheral areas such as Lormont, Floirac or Cenon) and clearly identified the hyper city center of Bordeaux as a white area (particularly Gambetta, Triangle d’Or and Chartrons) (see [Figure 1](#) below).

The racialization of Bordeaux as depicted by the participants revealed connections with social class as the white hyper city center was also described as embodying the bourgeois image of the city, in contrast with neighborhoods racialized as non-white and known to be associated with a more negative image:

Here, in the very center, we have this very bourgeois heart, we have all these beautiful high facades, etcetera, we have the Cours de l’Intendance. You don’t have to go all the way to Le Bouscat, all the way to Caudéran [peripheral wealthy areas], in fact, to see this, these. . . . It’s really, yes, in the center of Bordeaux, it’s still a very white city, apart from the Capucins and the Victoire, which then have a reputation for being shady areas. (Mona)

Most of the participants perceived the hyper city center to constitute a *white space* (Anderson, 2022) because of the majority of passerby being whites and of representations and services targeting whites. However, most participants, like in Mona’s quote above, also referred to the white city center in connection to beautiful architecture and historical buildings that denote wealth and create an attractive ensemble. These features became increasingly salient in contrast to the reputation of neighborhoods racialized as non-white as “shady areas” (Mona). Thus, the distinctive spatial imaginaries of neighborhoods in Bordeaux revealed the co-construction of urban and social grammars of race (see Bonilla-Silva, 2012; Jenkins, 2021). That is, rules about how neighborhoods in Bordeaux are seen, evaluated and who is assumed/expected to go there seemed to be mediated through race, while rules about the (implicit and covert) meanings of race were mediated through space. The spatialization of race covertly (re)produced the weaving of race in the local social fabric and sustained symbolic and spatial boundaries through dimensions, such as social class, put forward instead of but to signify race.

The relationships of the participants with different areas racialized as non-white in Bordeaux offered insights into the intersectional construction of space, race and social class in light of the intersectional positionings of the participants themselves, most of whom identified as (upper) middle-class women racialized as non-white. On the one hand, most participants associated Saint Michel, the historically racialized as non-white, working-class and student neighborhood actively gentrified in recent years (Chekroun et al., 2019), with



Legend



-  area identified by the participants to be racialized as non-white.
-  area identified by the participants to be racialized as white.

Figure 1. Map of Bordeaux with areas the participants identified to be racialized as (non)-white.

overall positive characteristics and reported going there, rarely but willingly for some, often for others. In sharp contrast, the participants depicted the areas of Grand Parc and Les Aubiers in a more negative light. The two participants who grew up there regretted the poor image of these neighborhoods and lack of administrative support to keep them in shape. Most other participants admitted relying on hearsay about these neighborhoods they had barely or never set foot in. The areas of Grand Parc and Les Aubiers therefore appeared estranged from the participants' as well as collective (spatial) imaginary about Bordeaux despite geographical proximity to the city center (15–20 minutes by tram and bike). This points to the importance of social class in mediating race in Bordeaux and echoes a central component of racial literacy as apprehending race and racism through class inequalities, gender hierarchies and varying intersectionalities (Twine & Steinbugler, 2006).

The geographical distancing and discontinuities between neighborhoods in Bordeaux was explicitly addressed by some of the participants who discussed the racialization of space in the city through the notion of *borders*. Asked how diverse she perceived Bordeaux to be,

Mona carefully thought of her wording and chose to describe the city as “pluricultural” because of “different Bordeaux areas that coexist, sometimes may overlap or intertwine, but are truly separate” (Mona). In turn, Suzanne talked of the Cours Victor Hugo (see [Figure 1](#) above) as materializing “the crossing of a frontier” toward “another world.” The notion of border also came up when participants talked of Bordeaux as a beautiful city typically referring to the city center. Niaaline addressed the exclusion of peripheral modern areas from ideal(ized) representations of Bordeaux:

in all the new neighborhoods that are being built, the comments people make are the same as for Les Aubiers, except that it’s not completely run-down yet. But people say: “Yeah, it’s all concrete, it’s ugly.” So, people, good people, cool people, don’t want to live there. They want to live in the old stone-built districts, in Chartrons where it’s very expensive and so on. But to say that you live in the Bassins à Flot or in Bordeaux Atlantique, it doesn’t make anyone dream when you say that in Bordeaux. (Niaaline)

Postcard-like representations of historical Bordeaux that participants both reproduced and contested further revealed racialized demarcations between a wealthy white historical city center and non-white newly built peripheral areas (see [Figure 1](#) above). Representations of the wealthy white historical city center were conflated with representations circulating in and outside of Bordeaux about the city as a bourgeois city. This image was powerfully connected by some of the participants to the history of the city as a slave trade harbor:

This link is there because, in fact, the city was rich for years because it was a colonial port, because it drew its wealth from that and so obviously, the city is marked by that . . . Well, in a good way since there’s beautiful architecture, beautiful houses, and so on. But I don’t think people really know that anymore; what the history of these houses is, why people say Bordeaux is a bourgeois city. And there you have it. You can see traces of it, but if you’re not interested, you don’t make the connection between these beautiful houses, the merchants’ small-town houses, and the past. (Catherine)

Catherine’s quote illustrates how most participants read the city: as a product of its (colonial) history. Yet, Catherine and several other participants were aware that the connections they drew were typically not drawn by white locals, therefore pointing to different readings of Bordeaux. As discursive terrains, meanings produced in and through cities are open to contention. Interviews with the participants revealed that most of them challenged *preferred meanings* (see Hall, 1997) of Bordeaux by making the racialization of space explicit and creating historical and geographical continuities. Such *oppositional reading* (see Hall, 1980) of the city is central to developing racial literacy in and through cities, and points to the urgency of doing so by drawing on minoritized voices to disrupt dominant urban narratives and re-invent spatial imaginaries outside of hegemonic whiteness.

The case of the canelé offers further insights into the concrete ramifications of geographical and historical (dis)continuities in Bordeaux. Tiana and Mona highlighted the legacy of Bordeaux as a colonial harbor in connection to the flagship delicacy of the canelé made of ingredients grown in previous colonies, particularly French Antilles: rum, vanilla and sugar. The canelé is deeply woven into the urban fabric of Bordeaux through bright red boutiques located throughout the city center and discursively constructed as a local product. As explained on the website of the main producer of canelés in Bordeaux: “the canelé is a Bordeaux tradition that is part of Aquitaine’s culinary heritage” since the 17th century (Baillardran, n.d.). Geographically anchored in Bordeaux, connections to the Antilles are

erased and the link between the 17th century and slave trade period is left unaddressed. The production of the canelé in Bordeaux echoes the case of bananas in France (see Ferdinand, 2022) which are symptomatic of a persistent colonial culture that erases historical and geographical continuities of everyday practices.

Conclusion

This study examined how 15 women racialized as non-white and living in Bordeaux (France) perceived race, racism and coloniality to materialize in the city. The findings were organized around two parts—disrupting raceless discourses and whiteness, and drawing geographical and historical continuities—that help draw implications about developing racial literacy in and through cities.

On the one hand, the findings pointed to the participants' perceived erasure of race, racism and coloniality in discourses from elected municipalities in Bordeaux, and, on the other hand, to the well-known racialization of space in Bordeaux. Thus, race, racism and coloniality in Bordeaux seemed to operate in a similar manner in Bordeaux as at the national level: erased from most official discourses but structuring everyday experiences (Cohen & Mazouz, 2021). Participants expressed a strong desire to see Bordeaux serves as a space to educate inhabitants on race, racism and coloniality. This desire seemed motivated by the contradictions between raceless discourses and racist experiences that characterized the participants' perceptions of the city, and which they sometimes connected to national discursive practices, further indicating how local and national levels are intermeshed. Developing racial literacy at the local level therefore also bears relevant implications for discourses circulating in society at large. The participants' testimonies suggested little space and opportunities exist to disrupt structural as well as everyday forms of racism in Bordeaux. Overall, the perceived absence of proactive actions from elected municipalities to engage with race, racism and coloniality coupled with the whiteness of the city center and inward-looking culture in Bordeaux presented the city as a place that sustains, or at the very least does not impede, racism nor hegemonic whiteness.

The findings of this study offer pointers about ways in which racial literacy can translate in urban spaces. In the context of Bordeaux, testimonies from the participants suggested racial literacy revolved around two related aspects: *visibility* and *connections*. That is, the participants highlighted the need to give visibility to race, racism and coloniality and to apprehend these issues through historical and geographical continuities. The relevance of making temporal and spatial continuities of race, racism and coloniality visible is particularly applicable in the case of Bordeaux that was a major harbor in the triangular slave trade. However, European space in general can benefit from making such connections visible since coloniality shapes European racial formations—both in terms of privileges and oppression—today as colonialism once did (Hesse, 2016; Maldonado-Torres, 2007).

In giving pointers about the connections they wished to see drawn and topics highlighted in Bordeaux, the participants' testimonies hinted at the way developing racial literacy could help reimagine Bordeaux in more inclusive ways and therefore disrupt whiteness in the city. The example of the flagship delicacy of the canelé brought up by two of the participants seems an appropriate metaphor of the city: made through its connections to the Antilles and Africa but represented as a local product. Connecting racial literacy to the study of urban spaces provides a lens to

approach cities as sites where racial meanings are (re)produced and contested through everyday (mundane) practices, i.e., *cities are not raceless venues*. It also encourages researchers and practitioners to think of ways in which cities can be utilized to facilitate racial literacy, i.e., *cities are not passive spaces but active resources*.

In turn, focusing on cities widens the scope of research on racial literacy and can contribute to think of the concept through some of the main features of cities: concrete, everyday-like, nuanced and dialectic (see Georgiou, 2006; Sassen, 2012). Concretely, apprehending racial literacy in connection to space and race provides opportunities to focus on dynamic co-constructive dyads through which race, racism and coloniality are given meanings, such as individual/structural, visible/hidden, past/present, local/national, discursive/material. Furthermore, and finally, connecting racial literacy to the spatiality of race and racialization of spatiality can contribute to bridge the gap between space, race and ecology. As increasing literature points out, bridging such a gap between all three notions is essential to tackle racial inequalities and the ongoing ecological collapse since they are mutually produced and articulated through urban and natural spaces (see Ferdinand, 2022; Ko & Ko, 2017; Sommier, 2025).

Notes

1. The phrase *racialized as non-white* is used throughout this article in place of other common labels such as *women of color* and *racialized women*. The phrase *racialized as non-white* seemed a better alternative in this context for two main reasons. First, the participants disliked the term *women of color*. Second, this choice makes it possible to talk of individuals *racialized as white*, therefore disrupting the invisibilization and exclusion of whites from racialization processes.
2. The term *race-evasive* is used in place of *color-blind* to (1) stir away from ableist language and (2) refrain from limiting race to phenotype (see also Chávez-Moreno, 2022).
3. The study followed all ethical requirements stipulated by the funder, Research Council of Finland, and host institution, University of Jyväskylä (Finland).
4. Since the early 2000s, a few initiatives have been taken to weave the colonial history of Bordeaux into its urban fabric. As such, Bordeaux has followed (albeit with some delay and to a lesser extent) in the footsteps of other prominent slave trade actors in France and Europe. For instance, Liverpool established the International Slavery Museum in 2007 and Nantes included several rooms dedicated to slave trade in its renewed city museum in 2008. In Bordeaux, statues have been erected to commemorate (the city's connection to) slavery, explanations were added to some of the street names linked to colonial and slave trade, and commemoration events have been organized yearly since May 2006 to celebrate the abolition of slavery. A permanent exhibition about Bordeaux's role as a slave trade harbor was added in the city's large museum, Musée d'Aquitaine, in 2009, which has however received a number of criticisms as noted by Sutherland (2024) who concludes her analysis of the museum on these words: "While incorporating slavery into Bordeaux's history, the museum fails to learn from its legacy and continues to exoticise, aestheticise and anonymize black bodies" (p. 38). In addition to signs and events in the city, a website dedicated to the history of the city and outlining memorial spaces in Bordeaux was also created (see <https://www.memoire-esclavage-bordeaux.fr/>).
5. All participant quotes have been translated from French to English by the author.
6. At the time of writing this article, the local association Mémoires et Partages is working on developing a dedicated space, tentatively called Maison Esclavages & Résistances. See Diallo (2023).

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