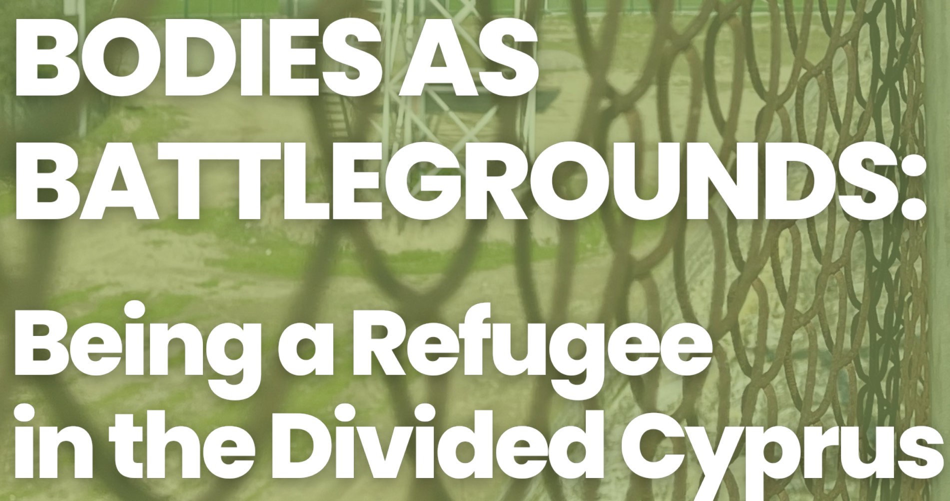

BODIES AS BATTLEGROUNDS:

Being a Refugee in the Divided Cyprus

Jade Borsoi

Bodies as Battlegrounds:
Being a Refugee in the Divided Cyprus

An Ethnography of the Embodied Experiences
of Refugee Racialization in Cyprus

Master Thesis
Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship

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Cover Photo taken in Nicosia, close to the UN buffer zone by Jade Borsoi

Abstract

This thesis explores the embodied experiences of refugee racialization in Cyprus. It focuses on how structural policies and everyday interactions perpetuate racial prejudices against refugees. Through a three-month ethnographic study employing sensory ethnography, this research investigates the dynamics of racialization at both individual and institutional levels. By analyzing the role of social structures in creating a regime of racial difference, this research reveals how racial meanings are ascribed and internalized within Cypriot society. In this way, it contributes not only to the understanding of racialization processes among the legally defined category of the refugee but also to the manifestations of racism toward black and brown bodies. It highlights and examines the intersection of class, culture, and sensory dimensions in shaping racial attitudes. Through detailed ethnographic encounters and theoretical insights, this thesis offers a critical perspective on how refugee policies and practices in Cyprus produce and sustain racial hierarchies.

Acknowledgments

This research reflects a journey that began in 2020 after completing my Bachelor's in Business Management. It symbolizes a profound understanding that politics is fundamentally intertwined with the human body. Through this study, I aimed to explore a sensitive question: which bodies are prone to be harmed and oppressed? I decided to pursue this exploration through the lens of anthropology, a subject I deemed the most fitting starting point for this journey. However, gaining admission into this Master's program required me to demonstrate my unwavering commitment and aptitude. Today, I wish to express my deep gratitude to the teaching faculty for allowing me to spend a year delving into intricate thoughts, challenging societal norms, and discovering my voice amidst the complex debates of our times. I firmly believe that anthropology plays a defining role in today's world, infusing depth and nuance into our collective minds while steering clear of oversimplified narratives.

I owe the success of this research to the warmth, kindness, and generosity of the wonderful people I met in Cyprus. My gratitude goes to Sofia, my host, who opened her home to me during this three-month research. She was my second mother, and I will forever cherish the personal stories she shared with me. To all my friends in Cyprus, whether Greek Cypriot, Turkish Cypriot, or from other parts of the world, my affection and gratitude toward you knows no bounds. My return to Utrecht has left me yearning to revisit Cyprus, knowing that a part of myself will forever be tied to this beautiful island.

Last but not least, I want to thank my family and friends in France and Utrecht for their unconditional support throughout this research. I am also immensely grateful to Dr. Hayal Akarsu, my supervisor, for her kindness and trust, which have undoubtedly shaped me into a better anthropologist.

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“It is not possible to enslave men without logically making them inferior through and through. And racism is only the emotional, affective, sometimes intellectual explanation of this inferiorization.”

Frantz Fanon (1967: 40)

Introduction

It was a rainy afternoon in March 2024, unusual weather for Cyprus, given the number of people in the streets forcing their pace. They were seeking refuge underneath any bus shelter, waiting for the last drops of water to disappear before continuing their path. Living in the Netherlands for over a year, I was used to this weather change, and carrying an umbrella was part of my routine. The rain did not stop me from my initial destination: the local supermarket recommended by my host, Sofia — an ordinary activity for the surprising encounter I am about to describe.

I arrived at the store, looking for some *feta* and *halloumi* to embody the Cypriot lifestyle perfectly and pretend I was a local. However, my coverage was soon about to be exposed when I saw no English translations for the products standing in the alleys. Luckily, one of the employees approached me and started a conversation in Greek. I gave him a friendly smile with the only words I knew: "*Sygnómi, den miláo elliniká*" (Sorry, I don't speak Greek). When he realized I was French, his face lit up, and he started screaming in the supermarket: "*Michael Jackson, come here! There's someone here for you!*". I was confused. Not that I was expecting the revival of the world-famous pop icon, but when I turned around, a skinny and tall black man stood next to me with a pitiful look. Why would I suddenly be helpful to this "Michael Jackson"? The supermarket owner, Nicholas, clarified this for me:

> He's from Congo, so explain to him in French that he needs to eat! He has a stomach ache since three days now. He doesn't speak and he doesn't work! What am I supposed to do? If he doesn't get better, he'll get fired!

I approached Michael, sitting on a little red plastic chair and huddling up upon himself. Surprisingly, his real name was "Michel" and not "Michael." He said Nicholas could not pronounce it, so he changed it. I already felt quite unsettled when Nicholas repeatedly called him "Michael Jackson," but not using his real name felt like a subtle way of stripping away his identity and individuality. Because it was *subtle*, neither

Michel nor Nicholas seemed to realize the embodied form of racialization behind this micro-aggression. They laughed about the name change and engaged in a coping strategy where they used humor as a rationale to avoid acknowledging Nicholas' racist behavior. Yet, this act of "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) illustrates how racialized power dynamics can be so deeply ingrained that they operate with the complicity of the marginalized individual.

Michel is one of 427 Congolese asylum seekers who have applied for refugee status in Cyprus in 2023 (Drousiotou and Mathioudakis 2023). This small island in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea is a divided country. Like many asylum seekers, Michel initially arrived through the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), a *de facto* state in the northern part. He then sought asylum in the Republic of Cyprus (RoC) in the South, a European Union member state (EU). The island's unique repartition resulted from a long-standing and complex dispute between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots that started in 1974. The same year, the United Nations drew a border called the "Green Line" to prevent an escalation of the conflict between the two communities. Michel entered a country with two different states and two different asylum procedures. The RoC is recognized internationally and adheres to the EU regulations and the Geneva Refugee Convention[1]. On the contrary, the TRNC is recognized only by Turkey and lacks a formal asylum system.

Failure to a harmonized governance regime increases refugee discrimination and social exclusion (Trimikliniotis 1999). The labor market policies implemented in the RoC are one indicator of refugee racialization. The government in the south defined a restrictive list of jobs where asylum seekers can legally work (Drousiotou and Mathioudakis 2023). These include low-paid and low-skilled employment, similar to Michel's current position as a supermarket employee. His working conditions illustrate how racism can be embedded in seemingly race-neutral policies and

[1] The Geneva Convention was established in 1951 and "asserts that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom." Source: https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention

institutional structures, leading to discriminatory outcomes and perpetuating social and economic inequalities (Omi and Winant 1986).

In this encounter, Michel's racialization process happens a) on different scales, individual and institutional, and b) transcends the "structure-agency" dichotomy (Giddens 1984) – an ongoing debate in social sciences about the extent to which individual actions (agency) are determined by or can influence broader social structures that shape society. This dynamic interplay highlights that racialization requires attention to both the structural influences that shape social interactions *and* the individual agency that can reinforce or alter these structures. This raises questions about how the refugee governance regime perpetuates racial discrimination and how this influences Cypriots' internalization of racial meanings in everyday encounters with refugees. This thesis examines how racist attitudes and behaviors are often unconsciously ingrained in one's physical actions, reactions, and bodily habits (Essed 1991; Fanon 1952; Fassin 2011). Exploring the embodied forms of refugee racialization in Cyprus will give insight into racialization as a process embedded in both social structures and individual actions. This three-month ethnographic research in Cyprus seeks to answer the following research question:

How do structural policies enact a regime of racial difference and reinforce Cypriots' internalization of racial prejudices against refugees?

The aim of this study is a) to analyze how social structures perpetuate the imaginaries of "whiteness" and "blackness" (Fanon 1952) and b) how they embody these ideas that c) continue to shape social interactions with refugees and black and brown communities.

Academic Relevance: Migration and Racism

By looking at the process of refugee racialization in Cyprus, this thesis contributes to scholarship on migration and racism.

Scholars in international relations have approached the study of population movement across borders through the lens of legal arrangements and international security problems (Malkki 1995). In the words of Loescher (1992, 5), "Mass migrations are frequently employed as foreign policy tools, and refugees have become instruments of warfare and military strategy." Understanding the "refugee experience" became part of the standardized framework established by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).[2]

Anthropologist Lisa Malkki (1995) critiques this bureaucratic approach, which tends to depict refugees as a homogeneous group. She acknowledges the multifaceted characteristics of "refugeeness" where "refugees do not constitute a naturally self-delimiting domain of anthropological knowledge" (Malkki 1995, 496). Looking at refugees as an identical social group sharing a similar situation of displacement, label them as a group instantly removed from their culture and identity as soon as they leave their countries. Linked to this viewpoint, Barbara Harrell-Bond and Eftihia Voutira (1992) contend that the representations of refugees often promote widespread perceptions of a separate racial group, thereby further marginalizing and pushing refugees to the fringes of society. I contribute to this debate in Chapter 2, where I discuss Michel Agier's work (2016) and illustrate how the refugee system of governance, with the example of the *Pournara* camp, can reinforce processes of exclusion and marginalization.

By examining asylum policies and practices, Didier Fassin (2011) highlights how often these social structures construct certain refugees as more "genuine" victims deserving of protection and compassion while others are framed as potential security threats or "bogus" claimants unworthy of humanitarian concern. These distinctions frequently map onto racialized narratives where the bodies of refugees from Middle

[2] The UN apparatuses developed the three "durable solutions" (returning to the home country, integrating into the host society, or resettling elsewhere), which became an integral facet of the refugee system.

Eastern and African countries are recognized “as bodies out of place” (Ahmed 2014, 2).

By looking at how brown and black bodies become a “site for racial experience” (Fassin 2011, 420), this study not only contributes to scholarship on migration and refugees but also builds on the understanding of racialization *beyond* the legally defined category of “refugees.” The social interactions I rely on in this thesis to explain the embodied forms of racialization do not systematically account for the bodies of refugees. I often did not know whether black or brown people I saw Cypriots kick out from public spaces – a practice I will discuss in Chapter 3 – were granted refugee status or if they arrived in Cyprus as economic migrants, for example. Ultimately, this precision accounts for Cypriots’ negative perceptions toward non-white bodies in general, independently of the alleged legal status of the person.

The attitudes and behaviors towards black and brown communities are entrenched in an unconscious and affective thinking process whereby skin color becomes one marker of racial identity (Fanon 1952). As James Baldwin wrote, “Long before the Negro child perceives this difference [socially imposed White superiority and Black inferiority], and even longer before he understands it, he has begun to react to it, he has begun to be controlled by it.” (Baldwin 1963, 26, quoted in Bonilla-Silva 2019). This is the reason why I focused this research on “embodied racialization” – as a manifestation of “embodied racism” – to explain how racial categories and meanings are constructed and projected onto non-white bodies in social structures and social interactions. The two concepts, while related, are slightly distinct in the study of race. “Embodied racism” is a concept discussed by, among others, scholars Philomena Essed (2001) and Didier Fassin (2002; 2011). They address how racist attitudes and behaviors are unconsciously expressed through bodily actions and reactions. In essence, both concepts contribute to understanding how race operates at a visceral, often unconscious level in social structures and interactions. Still, they differ in their emphasis on the construction of racial categories (embodied racialization) versus the expression of racial prejudices (embodied racism).

Because racial categories are not static but continually shaped by social, economic, and political forces, Omi and Winant introduced the concept of "racial projects" (1986) to describe how human bodies and social structures are represented and organized based on racial meanings. They refer to "projects" to describe the social structures, such as immigration policies and housing patterns, which involve assigning racial significance to physical traits. This involves how those assigned meanings create frameworks that systematically include or exclude non-whites from particular spaces, opportunities, or treatment within a society. I draw on Ghassan Hage's work (2000) on white racial privilege in modern multicultural Australia to show that in Cyprus, "whiteness" is perceived as a privileged race that operates as an invisible governing ethnic category. I contribute to this understanding in Chapter 2, where I expose a regime of racial difference where "whiteness" organizes the refugee system of governance, from citizenship to employment.

To give substance to the ideological line of "whiteness" and "blackness" that classify the bodies of refugees, this research will use "sensory ethnography" (Pink 2009) to locate the "diachronic articulation" (Berg and Ramos-Zayas 2015) of emotional and affective responses to racialization processes.

Methodology & Population

Sensory Ethnography

Before coming to Cyprus, I could not speak Greek or Turkish. I initially saw the language barrier as an obstacle because I could not spot informal conversations in the streets of Nicosia. However, this became an opportunity to focus on the bodily reactions that seemed to produce disgust or rejection toward black and brown bodies. From refusing entry to a black man in a shoe shop to justifying the exclusion of African refugees because they "smell bad" [3], I used my senses to spot behaviors that might be conscious or unconscious, but that conveyed a process of racialization.

[3] Interview with Elena, 05/04/24

To analyze the senses' operationalization in the process of refugee racialization, I chose to use "sensory ethnography," a methodology developed by Sarah Pink (2009). Her work highlights how sensory methods can enrich ethnographic research by incorporating the multisensory dimensions of human experience, including sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell. The senses came out as a differentiating factor in my field notes because they gave me clues about how I perceived people during the interview and after when I was reviewing them. I relied on this method because my senses, these unspeakable feelings of unease, could identify situations when I felt some bodies were unwelcomed. Starting from my second day in the field, I could locate nonverbal manifestations of racism triggered by aesthetics and taste preferences – a theme I will touch upon in Chapter 3. I realized that the mundane observations I had noted in my logbook were accounting for short-term sensory experiences (the discomfort about the proximity of the black body) and long-term emotional orientations (historical anxieties due to the Turkish invasion of the Northern part of Cyprus).

The concept of "racialized affect," coined by Berg and Ramos-Zayas (2015), and Sara Ahmed's work on the "Cultural Politics of Emotion" (2004) connect the visual cues, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations with racial stereotypes or experiences. By looking at the study of emotional manifestations of racism, they show how refugees are perceived as dangerous before actual contact. Feelings emerge in encounters but are also shaped by the immediacy mediated by pre-existing histories (Ahmed 2004). Ahmed's examination of hate, "affective economies," and the politics of fear offers valuable insights into how emotions construct social boundaries and negotiate power within societies facing migration flows. Cyprus is a relevant location to study how historical accounts of the conflict fuel anxieties and resentment within both communities against refugees – a theme I touch upon in Chapter 1. These emotional processes create "us versus them" mentalities that influence resource distribution and are leveraged politically to maintain social hierarchies.

Entering a Conflict Zone: Cyprus

I chose Cyprus as a field location because of its unique political situation and geographical position – an island considered the entry door to Europe that is currently the EU's top recipient of asylum seekers per capita (Drousiotou and Mathioudakis 2023). Cyprus has a rich history due to a complex historical and political conflict primarily rooted in ethnic tensions between the island's Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities. In the mid-20th century, as Cyprus sought independence from British colonial rule, nationalist movements emerged within both communities. Greek Cypriots aimed for *Enosis*, or union with Greece, while Turkish Cypriots pushed for *Taksim*, or partition of the island, to create a separate Turkish state. Tensions escalated into violence in the 1960s, leading to a UN peacekeeping intervention. The situation further deteriorated in 1974 when a *coup d'état* by Greek nationalists, backed by the military junta in Greece, sought to annex Cyprus to Greece. In response, Turkey invaded the northern part of the island, citing the need to protect Turkish Cypriots. This invasion resulted in the *de facto* division of Cyprus, with the north becoming the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC), recognized only by Turkey. The south remains under the control of the internationally recognized Republic of Cyprus (RoC). Despite numerous efforts and peace talks over the years, the island remains divided today, symbolized by the UN-patrolled "Green Line" separating the two communities.

The war of 1974 created significant internal waves of migration. Greek Cypriots living in the North had to flee to the South and became internally displaced. Turkish Cypriots living in the South went through the same painful experience and left their homes to move to the North. Overall, it is estimated that around 200,000 Cypriots were displaced during this period.[4] Nowadays, while the tensions between the two communities are still palpable, their physical barrier is part of the past. Since 2003, the crossings from the North to the South have finally opened. After the island's

[4] Source: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/cyprus/historical-development

division, Turkey and the Turkish Cypriot administration agreed to facilitate the migration of thousands of people from Turkey to the North of Cyprus to compensate for the Greek Cypriots' displacement. These Turkish immigrants were welcomed with open arms: they were housed in Greek Cypriot residences and received Turkish Cypriot citizenship almost upon arrival. During the same period, in the Republic of Cyprus, the mass displacement of Greek Cypriot refugees became an economic opportunity. They became cheap labor and created the preconditions for Cyprus' modernization.

Until the 1980s, Cyprus maintained a highly restrictive immigration policy toward third-country nationals. However, the economic growth of the 1990s, mainly due to mass tourism and the development of the tertiary sector, marked a significant demand for labor forces that exceeded the supply of Greek Cypriot workers (Trimikliniotis and Pantelides 2003). The government of the Republic of Cyprus slowly started issuing working visas for domestic workers from Asia, especially Sri Lanka and the Phillippines. Additionally, the collapse of Central and Eastern European economies, especially in the Balkans, influenced the inflow of migrant workers.

In 2003, another type of migration in Cyprus emerged with the demilitarization of the Green Line. An increasing number of migrants are arriving by sea from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and Southeast Asia to the occupied territory in the North and are trying to pass to the southern part of Cyprus and, hence, the European Union. 'The government claims that at least 80% of all irregular migrants in Cyprus arrive by crossing the 'green line'" (Mainwaring 2008, 23). Moreover, Cyprus' accession to the EU impacted the number of refugees seeking asylum on the island. Its geographical position confers the "privilege" to be considered part of Europe's rich continent while being either a bridge or a divide between the North and the South (Mainwaring 2008). According to Eurostat, in February 2023, the Republic of Cyprus recorded the highest rate of first-time asylum applicants (885 applicants per million people) in the

European Union.[5] While most are from Syria (4,105 applicants in 2022)[6], the number of refugees coming from African countries such as Nigeria, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of Congo has increased since 2020. In 2022, there were 7,229 applicants from these three countries, compared to 1,392 applicants in 2020.[7] Consequently, the arrival of refugees on an island experiencing political instability and ethnic conflict further contributes to the emergence of feelings of invasion among both communities.

Experiencing Division: Nicosia

I specifically chose to live in Nicosia, also known as "the last divided capital in Europe," (Demetriou 2008, 55) to conduct this research. The city's old town hosts in *Ledras* Street, one of the most used checkpoints to cross from the North to the South, which only opened in April 2008. This unique configuration makes the city an unparalleled melting pot of cultures and nationalities, where Turkish Cypriots, Greek Cypriots, Armenians, and Maronites gather. However, I observed some tensions among the local population with the recent demographic change. An increased number of people from Syria, Nigeria, and Congo are hosted in apartments right in the center. To this end, I focused much of this research on this specific neighborhood by interviewing "ordinary people," that is, Cypriots owning restaurants or coffee shops.

I also fully immersed myself in the local community, thanks to Sofia, my host, who graciously introduced me to her circle of friends and family. Sofia was what O'Reilly (2012) would conceptualize as my gatekeeper. She helped me connect with key refugee organizations such as the "Cyprus Refugee Council" and "Generation for Change." These non-profit organizations gave me invaluable insights into the structural policies and reception conditions for refugees in Cyprus. Although I successfully interviewed representatives from two of these organizations, gaining access to other refugee associations proved challenging. Despite having contacts and

[5] Source: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2023-002954_EN.html
[6] Source: https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/AIDA-CY_2022update.pdf
[7] Source: https://asylumineurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/AIDA-CY_2020update.pdf

directly visiting their offices, I encountered difficulty receiving callbacks. As my fieldwork progressed, I realized there is a lack of integration infrastructure in Cyprus, which means that these organizations are often the first point of contact for refugees, resulting in their hectic schedules.

Finally, to align my research methodology with the processes of refugee racialization, I conducted participant observation in the streets of Nicosia's old town. I dedicated significant time to documenting behaviors, appearances, and occasional conversations, mainly when languages other than Turkish or Greek were spoken.

Ethics & Positionality

I still recall a history lesson from my secondary school days when I was twelve years old. It was the first time a teacher mentioned "race." The context was the Second World War, and he mentioned the "Jewish race" while cautioning us against using the word "race," as he said it connotes being racist. As I was working on my thesis, this memory resurfaced and made me realize why I had felt uneasy from the outset of delving into my research topic. Only when I came across the work of Sarah Mazouz, a French sociologist who recently released a book titled "Race" (2020), I understood the connection between my discomfort in discussing race, and France, the country of my upbringing. Mazouz asserts: "In France, the word 'race' is the subject of numerous controversies and disputes, in the activist, political, and academic spheres, almost a taboo."[8] She argues that the refusal to use this term is rooted in France's colonial past and the abstract universalism that influenced the formation of the French Republic. Consequently, studying racism in this context was a challenge as I had to reassess my relationship with the term. My perspective is undeniably influenced by my upbringing as a French woman, which posed a challenge to my ability to recognize certain forms of discrimination.

[8] Rokhaya Diallo and Grace Ly. "*Race, le mot qui fâche.*" Episode 75. August 2021. https://open.spotify.com/episode/2LEWOBExZRU3sgHTD6rIp6?si=2322a4f5755b4b0e

During my two-year stay in Paris, I encountered a city rife with poverty and prejudice against people with darker skin. As I prepared for my fieldwork in Cyprus, I braced myself for overt displays of racism. I expected direct racist remarks from the individuals I would engage with. To my surprise, however, my experience in Cyprus was quite different. I spotted blatant acts of racism, but I also experienced more subtle forms of racism – similar to mispronouncing Michel's name. The decision to focus on the manifestation of racism in Cyprus presented me with ongoing introspection regarding my own responses and apathy towards instances of racism that I encountered. Thus, when faced with individuals exhibiting signs of racist attitudes during interviews, the ethical dilemma of whether to challenge such views or maintain a neutral stance arose. Complicating matters further was considering existing rapport and friendships established during fieldwork and the potential impact of personal bias on decision-making. These unresolved questions necessitated daily self-reflection to navigate the discomfort and ethical complexities encountered.

Lastly, the impact of my ethnicity on the findings I gathered cannot be denied. During my interviews with Cypriots, most of whom were Greek Cypriots of white ethnicity, the role of my skin color in shaping our interactions was evident. During discussions on their attitudes towards refugees, primarily from the Middle East and Africa, I perceived a greater openness due to our shared racial identity. Additionally, being a woman proved advantageous, as it aligned with cultural perceptions of being a good listener, thereby enabling participants to entrust me with personal narratives. This allowed for relatively unhindered access to the field and the participants' personal space.

Outline

Embodied racialization has different façades. Accordingly, I decided to structure my chapters along two different scales: macro, by looking at how racism is embedded in social structures (Chapter 2), and micro, by analyzing how it operates in everyday encounters (Chapter 3). Understanding the processes of racialization at these two

different levels exemplifies their interconnectedness. Within each chapter, I highlight various markers of racialization. From citizenship and employment (Chapter 2) to poverty and taste (Chapter 3), these indicators show how racial discrimination operates and persists in Cypriot society.

This research begins with the historical context of the Cyprus conflict, examining the complex issue of a Cypriot national identity and the concerns arising from the growing influx of refugees to the island. The first chapter focuses on the impact of emotions and sentiments in shaping collective identities within a nation already marked by inter-ethnic discrimination and division. Referred to as the "politics of memory," (Bryant and Papadakis 2012) the analysis reveals a deliberate selection and manipulation of feelings of resentment to align with nationalistic narratives of *Enosis* with Greece and *Takism* with Turkey. Nonetheless, it highlights that Cyprus's identity remains closely linked to Greece. The collective identity of Greek Cypriots is not solely based on a shared historical connection with Greece; instead, it is rooted in a moral obligation to safeguard Greek "spirituality" against the backdrop of "Turkish barbaric culture."

The feeling of being culturally threatened and Turkey's occupation in the northern part of Cyprus manifests itself in the suspicion among Cypriots toward refugees' intentions to settle in Cyprus. They depict them as a political leverage, ultimately impeding their integration into Cypriot society. This contextual framework sets the foundation for exploring the mechanisms through which refugees are being racialized. Chapter 2 will reveal a regime of racial difference that operates within the refugee system of governance. It draws on three main apparatuses (the *Pournara* refugee camp, citizenship, and employment) to show how whiteness operates as a system of domination (Hage 2000). This process of racialization does not only appear within social structures but also within everyday interactions. Chapter 3 will follow this line of thought to expose the exclusion of black and brown communities from public spaces. It highlights how racialization becomes unbounded by the legalistic definition of the refugee category. Darker bodies are perceived as lacking aesthetics,

which justifies their spatial marginalization. Ultimately, this last chapter highlights how racialization operates at the intersection of class and culture.

Chapter 1:

About Wounds and Scars

Picture of a paintaing in the center of Nicosia which represents the TRNC covered in blood as a symbol of the Turkish occupation (05/02/24)

Chapter 1: About Wounds and Scars

My arrival at Sofia's place, an old traditional Cypriot house on the outskirts of South Nicosia, was the culmination of a journey that began while I was still living in Utrecht. During my fieldwork, I wanted to live with a local resident and genuinely "immerse in the field," as anthropologists would say, and I was lucky to meet Sofia. She is a joyful, welcoming, and energetic woman in her sixties from the Maronite community in Cyprus, a minority group originally from Lebanon and Syria. She is a trained architect and studied in London, like many other Cypriots, because of the colonial past with the British Empire. In addition to her job as an architect, she runs an independent online media platform followed by over 21,000 people in Cyprus alongside three of her fellow university friends. The platform critically analyzes local and international politics, from the Saint Habakkuk monastery scandal[9] to Cyprus President Nikos Christodoulidis's support to Israël.[10] Lastly, she collects seasonal wild asparagus and mushrooms every Wednesday with her mother, Melissa, in her childhood village, *Dağyolu*, in the island's Northern part.

I loved Wednesdays. They were special times for Melissa and Sofia. They would refer to it as a long-awaited moment to return to "their roots" for a day. Because of the *coup d'état* organized by the Greek military junta and the following Turkish invasion in the North in August 1974, Greek Cypriots and Greek-speaking minorities living in the North had to flee to the South and became internally displaced. Sofia and Melissa are among the estimated 200,000 Cypriots who became refugees during this period.[11] Feelings of longing to return to *Dağyolu* explain why Melissa never missed an opportunity to return to her village. Even when sick or weak, Melissa told me that these weekly trips to *Dağyolu* kept her alive.

[9] In March 2024, two monks were allegedly discovered in possession of a substantial sum of €800,000 in cash, and were caught on camera engaging in intimate sexual acts with one another. This news revealed the links between the far-right party and the Church.
[10] Source: https://www.facebook.com/share/p/sd22XLMHKpwQ3gE6/
[11] Source: https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-education-systems/cyprus/historical-development

They used to arrive home at around 8 pm with a dozen wicker baskets filled with local fungi that they would lay on the wooden table in the living room. I would come downstairs to help Melissa trim the asparagus, and while we focused intensely on our task, both women felt the need to call upon memories of the past during that moment. Sofia evoked painful reminiscences of the war of 1974.

> You know, when the coup took place against the president, we were in the middle of the fight in Nicosia, and my father was taken to prison. My mother moved all her belongings to her house in the village in the North. Then, after three weeks, we had to leave the village because of the Turkish invasion, so it's like becoming refugees twice within a month. I kind of lived through bombardments and through fighting and killings so that was a landmark.

Sofia's poignant testimony directly manifests Cypriots' shared experiences of suffering, loss, and injustice during the war of 1974. It captures how scars and wounds shape collective recollections as theorized in the "politics of memory" developed by Rebecca Bryant and Yiannis Papadakis (2012).

This first chapter draws on the rhetoric of collective trauma associated with the Cyprus conflict to show how that history fuels divisive narratives between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots. These discourses perpetuate discrimination against non-Greek communities, hence refugees. Like the island itself, the interpretation of the Turkish invasion is mainly divided into two competing narratives to legitimize the intervention of the two "motherlands": Greece and Turkey, as exemplified by Sofia's statement:

> I grew up with the dominant kind of discourse that "Cyprus is Greek", and when I was young I remember my mother saying to me: "You're not Greek, but you belong here, and Cyprus belongs to you".

In this chapter, I argue that wounds and scars guide national identity, belonging, and attachment questions. It aims to answer the following inquiries: "How do historical sites of violence, massacre, and occupation become sites of memory that reinforce national identity narratives? What role do grievances over historical injustices play in galvanizing nationalist movements?" During my fieldwork, I observed a strong feeling of affiliation to the Greek spiritual identity among the Greek Cypriot community. Therefore, I underscore the relationship between Cyprus and Greece as a manifestation of "affective nationalism" (Antonsich et al. 2020). This refers to the deep-rooted emotional and personal connection to the Greek cultural, historical, and spiritual heritage. Lastly, I demonstrate that the memories of the Turkish invasion continue to fuel emotions of fear and anxiety among both communities about "outsiders," especially refugees. Indeed, they are instrumentalized and portrayed by Cypriots as a political tool that Turkey is using to destabilize the island and reclaim its sovereignty. Consequently, the conflict's political-historic complexity negatively influences how Cypriots perceive refugees.

Section 1. The Politics of Memory

Depending on which side of *Ledras* Street you stand in the divided city of Nicosia, you will get different views on the Cyprus conflict. This street was once a thriving commercial hub in the heart of Nicosia. Still, after 1974, it became part of the United Nations Buffer Zone, physically dividing the Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot communities. In April 2008, after years of negotiations, the *Ledra*s Street crossing was reopened, allowing the free movement of people between the two sides for the first time.

While in the South, Greek Cypriots teach remembrance of Turkey's invasion in the hopes of getting back the land that they claim to own, in the North, Turkish Cypriots have focused on commemorating the Turkish intervention in 1974 as a "peace operation" to protect Turkish Cypriots against Greek Cypriots who want union with Greece, rather than an invasion (Bryant 2004). Turkish Cypriots often emphasize their perceived status as a disadvantaged minority in Cyprus during British colonial rule

and the post-independence period when they were facing discrimination and threats from the Greek Cypriot majority. They emphasize suffering, displacement, and loss experienced by Turkish Cypriots during the conflict, including stories of atrocities committed by Greek Cypriot militants (Papadakis 2008).

The memory of Lella, one of the Greek Cypriot participants I interviewed in March 2024, underscores the intentional selection of a specific narrative about the Turkish occupation. In the Republic of Cyprus, historical accounts are institutionalized in schools to conform to the nationalistic discourse:

> In elementary school, the notebooks that we write on they're given to you by the public school. The cover of the notebook is a picture of the Church of Apostolos Andreas, which is now in the north side, in Karpas. And on the picture, there is a slogan that says "I never forget and I fight".

In this example, the school becomes an affective and active site of historical grievances. Like every Greek Cypriot child of her age, Lella has been raised with a sense of duty, resilience, and emotional attachment to a lost homeland. Her souvenir reflects the deeply embedded nature of the "politics of memory" in Cyprus, as analyzed by Rebecca Bryant and Yiannis Papadakis (2012). Both scholars studied how Cyprus's official state narratives and educational systems propagate specific historical memories and nationalistic sentiments. The slogan "*I never forget and I fight*" instills a collective memory of loss, encouraging future generations to remember the perceived injustice and to remain committed to the cause of reunification or resistance against Turkish control.

Later in the conversation, Lella has a breakthrough. I see her looking around, puzzled, as she realizes the consequences of such a slogan:

> This is all in retrospect, I was young, I don't remember, but the problem is that it created a sense of "we need to fight against an enemy," who are the Turks,

> and you just divide what was supposed to be a unified country. And actually, in this case, the perceived enemy was not just Turks in general but also Turkish Cypriots.

Displaying this slogan in schools effectively divided Cypriots along ethnic lines. By portraying Turks as the "enemy," Turkish Cypriots were also at risk of being discriminated against, especially before opening the borders in 2003 when contact between both communities was impossible. In this view, the construction of history is framed through oversimplified, binary oppositions that cast one side as purely virtuous and the other as entirely evil, overlooking the complexities and heterogeneity within each community (Papadakis 2008).

I observed that the younger generations challenged these exclusionary narratives because they did not seem to embody their parents' scars about the lost homeland, yet these painful memories still circulate and actively shape Cypriots' actions and perceptions in the present (Hadjipavlou and Cockburn 2006). Elena's statement, a 21-years old Greek Cypriot woman, confirms this finding:

> Before the checkpoints opened, I hated Turkish Cypriots because I have been told at school that they are the enemy. Now, I'm fine with them, they are also Cypriots after all! But some of my friends, they still have this anger toward them when they see them or hear them speaking Turkish in the streets.

The harmful consequences of propagating "us" versus "them" narratives favor the demonization of Turkish Cypriots. It is worth noting that this rhetoric also affects Greek Cypriots in the TRNC; however, their experience of discrimination is less visible due to their majority status compared to other ethnic groups in Cyprus. In 2020, Greek Cypriots represented 75,7% of the overall Cypriot population compared to Turkish Cypriots, who only accounted for 9,9%.[12]

[12] Source: https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/cyprus/

Consequently, discourses aimed at portraying one group as the hero to blame the other for the war crimes have real implications for community cohesion and inter-ethnic discrimination (Papadakis, Peristianis, and Welz 2006). Christos, who was among the Greek Cypriot participants I discussed with, expressed a strong refusal to traverse the divide separating the two communities: "*Oh no, I would never cross on the other side, it's an occupied territory, it's not my country!*"

I met Christos on my second day of fieldwork. I was told to try out the *halloumi* pie at *Avo*, an Armenian restaurant in the old town of Nicosia, where the most famous checkpoint of Ledra Street stands. I sat on the terrasse with a warm *halloumi* pie in my hands. Suddenly, a man came out of a small library where countless books were standing outside. When I told him I was French, he confidently replied, "*Oh, mais je parle français!*" (Oh but I speak French!). It felt like home for a couple of minutes. Christos did his PhD in Paris about the Cyprus conflict and proudly showed me the books he had written, some of which were in French. Before I could ask him questions, he started talking about the island's division. What is interesting to mention is that during our conversation, he did not talk about the Greek coup d'état; he kept pointing toward the violent Turkish invasion – which confirms how history purposely selects stories to fit the Greek Cypriot nationalistic discourse in this case. His one-sided view of the conflict made him reluctant to cross to the other side even though his store was just a five-minute walk from the checkpoint. I have heard about Greek Cypriots who have not wanted to go to the TRNC a couple of times already. For some, it is because they do not wish to contribute to the local economy of the North, and they prefer to stay in the South even if they live close to the border. However, for Christos, it was not about helping the economy in the North; it was about embodying the superiority of Greek spiritual identity, a topic I discuss in the following section.

The politics of memory in Cyprus highlights how deeply entrenched and emotionally charged historical narratives shape Greek and Turkish Cypriots' perceptions. Educational materials and state propaganda perpetuate a sense of loss and resistance among Greek Cypriots, framing Turks and Turkish Cypriots as enemies and

reinforcing divisions and distrust between the communities. However, a question remains: How do these narratives operate to delineate who belongs to Cyprus?

Section 2. The Affects of Nationalism

It was my second week in Nicosia. I was still trying to grasp the peculiarities of its historical context to better apprehend my research topic on refugee racialization in Cyprus. Before coming to the island, I had made a list of the organizations that could be helpful to visit for my research. The "Home for Cooperation," a community center in the middle of the buffer zone, was one of them. Its mission is to bridge the gap between separated communities by offering a physical and intellectual space for gathering. As part of its activities, it organizes lectures and debates on several themes, such as gender equality, education, and peace.

On February 19, I attended a book launch on women's involvement in peacebuilding mechanisms in Cyprus. It was an intimate setting with about twenty people sitting in a white, impersonal room. A man dressed in a blue check shirt wearing an iconic mustache takes the floor to present the "Association for Historical Dialogue and Research (AHDR)". His name is Alexander, and he introduced himself as the "History Education Officer" who develops non-formal educational material related to the history of Cyprus. He initiated his talk with a question for the audience: *Who is native and who is foreign?*

This question triggered something in me. Coming from France, a unified country whose national identity is unchallenged, Alexander's inquiry left me wondering about the notion of collective identity in Cyprus. By framing it in terms of nativeness versus foreignness, it highlights the boundaries and distinctions between Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots to assert their belonging and rightful claim to the island. When I interviewed Alexander to answer my concern about collective identity, he first called upon history's purpose: "*Usually, history teaches people their origins and their belonging in a collective which tends to be defined in the sort of "us" and "the others."* This dichotomy speaks to the competing narratives and identities at play. As evoked

in the previous section, historical accounts are shaped by the "politics of memory" that portray a common "enemy" (Bryant and Papadakis 2012). But what about collective identity? Under what conditions can one group claim to be the indigenous, authentic collective while casting others as outsiders or interlopers?

Alexander enlightened me: "*The overarching thing for Greek Cypriots is who was here first and who came after, and therefore who has the right to this land.*" His statement emphasizes objective factors such as language, territory, or ethnicity that individuals or groups have towards a particular nation or national identity. Indeed, Greek Cypriots usually refer to the Byzantine Empire's presence to justify its linguistic, cultural, and religious (Greek Orthodox Christianity) ties. However, I argue that these tangible elements need to be addressed in *relation* to the emotional dimensions of national identity to better encompass Greek Cypriot's feelings of belonging to Cyprus. In this view, I use "affective nationalism," a concept developed by Antonisch et al. (2020), to underscore the subjective forms of emotional and personal attachments. Christos' statement, which refers to the reason why he does not want to cross to the North, helps to grasp the process of affective nationalism:

> Us, the Greeks Cypriots, we don't have a problem with Turkish Cypriots. They were forced to embrace Islam to avoid taxes imposed by the Turks even if their origin is Christian and Greek. But, I see a difference between the 'organic' and 'spiritual' DNA.

At the time of the interview, I could not fully grasp the meaning of his distinction between "organic" and "spiritual" DNA. Looking at it through the lens of "affective nationalism" (Antonisch et al. 2020), I see Greek Cypriots' strong sense of affiliation to the Greek spiritual identity as a *manifestation* of affective nationalism: it draws boundaries based on perceived cultural and spiritual differences. To further expand Astonish's view on collective identity formation, it connects with Rebecca Bryant's (2002) work on Greek Cypriot nationalism. Bryant argues that Greek Cypriots imagine a "purity of spirit" (2002: 520), a relevant analysis in line with the distinction Christos

made between “organic” and “spiritual” DNA. Her core argument concerns Greek Cypriots seeing a pure, continuous "spirit" (psychí) as the essence tying them to the land beyond biological descent. Moreover, the claim that Turkish Cypriots “were forced to embrace Islam” but are originally “Christian and Greek” echoes Bryant's point that Greek Cypriots view Turkish Cypriots as ethnically Greek “by blood.”

As the interview with Christos continued, it became clear that he referred to the unbreakable spiritual kinship between the Greek Cypriot community and the land of Cyprus:

> There is a difference between the Greek and Turkish mentality. You know the myth of the red apple? It’s about Turkey's objective. They come, they kill, and they did the same here! We don’t share the same spiritual wisdom. For us [the Greeks], our civilization, it’s about love, freedom, and human rights. So yes, Cyprus belongs to Greece.

Christos’ statement is grounded in the idea that Greek civilization embodies higher values and has a rightful claim to Cyprus. Here, the *“myth of the red apple”*[13] is referenced as a symbol representing Turkey's ambition to conquer the world. Historically, this myth is associated with pan-Turkic and Ottoman imperial aspirations, suggesting a view that a desire for conquest and domination drives Turkish history and policy. Overall, this quote encapsulates a worldview that sees Greek and Turkish identities as inherently oppositional, with Greeks associated with positive, humane values and Turks with violence and conquest. It uses these perceived differences to justify a political stance regarding the sovereignty of Cyprus.

In this section, I highlighted the connection between the instrumentalization of historical narratives that fuel nationalistic sentiment within the Greek Cypriot community and their impact on *constructing* and *engaging with* their identity. Questioning belonging in Cyprus is not solely based on a legalistic approach that

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[13] In Turkish mythology, The Red Apple is a potent symbol associated with Turkish nationalism and Turkish expansionist aspirations.

recognizes language, territory, and citizenship as objective factors to delineate who belongs and who does not. The Greek Cypriot nationalist conception of the nation-state embodies, first and foremost, the spiritual connection to Greek humanistic values. Ultimately, the two previous sections emphasize the absence of a unified Cypriot identity. In the following part, I discuss the consequences of political and ideological breaches on refugees arriving on the island. How do the historical and ethnic division of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots affect their perceptions of refugees?

Section 3. Migration & the "Turkish Game"

The wounds of conflict and occupation shape Cyprus's past and present history. As explained in the previous sections, the instrumentalization of historical accounts profoundly affects how Greek Cypriots perceive Turks and Turkish Cypriots. They claim that Cyprus belongs to Greece based on the rhetoric of Greece's historical presence on the island and higher spirituality. As a result, they tend to represent themselves in opposition to the Turkish mentality, seen as barbaric, to portray their culture as superior, and engage with racist discourses. Christos also used this Greek cultural rhetoric to talk about foreigners coming to Cyprus when I asked him how he felt about the presence of refugees on the island:

> Greeks cannot be racists! It's part of our culture. In Greek mythology, we even have a Goddess spirit of welcome: Philophrosyne.[14]

In this quote, Christos is vehemently rejecting the notion that Greeks can be racist, positioning it as antithetical to their culture and identity. He invokes the authority of Greek mythology, citing the goddess *Philophrosyne* as a symbol of welcome and hospitality, to support his claim that openness to outsiders is an intrinsic part of Greek culture. By doing so, he constructs a collective identity narrative that portrays Greeks as inherently welcoming and inclusive people, incapable of the perceived

[14] Interview with Christos, 14/02/24

xenophobia implied by racism. This appeal to ancient mythological roots aims to enshrine a spirit of acceptance as a timeless, defining characteristic of Greek identity. His quote highlights how collective identities are often shaped by selective interpretations of culture and history that reinforce a virtuous sense of self (Loizides 2007).

As a long silence followed Christos' sentence, I longed for the next set of questions to go further on these topics and uncover his seemingly unconditional understanding of hospitality towards outsiders. Before I could ask any additional questions, he uttered a contradictory statement that helped me spot the inherent duality in practicing hospitality when it comes to the specific group of "refugees":

> But you know, the problem is that there are two types of migrants, the *real* refugee and the *fake* refugee. The real one has real economic, safety problems in his country so he needs to leave, and I'm okay with that, he can come, but the fake one is being paid to stay in my country and undermine my culture. (Emphasis is mine).

By distinguishing between "real" and "fake" refugees, Christos introduces an exclusionary dynamic that allows him to be selectively welcoming based on his perceptions of refugees' motivations and authenticity. Those he deems legitimately fleeing hardship are accepted, while those he suspects of having ulterior motives to "undermine his culture" are rejected as imposters unworthy of hospitality. This duality exemplifies how idealized cultural narratives around welcoming foreigners can coexist with more exclusionary attitudes driven by fears that outsiders may threaten the ingroup's identity, norms, and way of life (Ahmed 2004).

When I asked Christos, the actor behind the deliberate act of sending "fake refugees," he immediately mentioned the existence of a "Turkish Game." For Greek Cypriots like Christos, there is a deep-seated mistrust of Turkish motives stemming from the events of 1974 when Turkish forces occupied the northern third of the island.

Conspiracy theories about Turkey deliberately sending settlers, migrants, and refugees southward to "destabilize" and "alter" Greek Cypriot culture tap into long-standing fears of ethnic subjugation and cultural erasure (Hatay 2008).

In this particular case, anxiety plays an active role in blurring the boundaries between a real and an imagined threat of invasion. Sarah Ahmed's work on the "Cultural Politics of Emotion" (2004) gives substance to this finding. She argues that emotions such as anxiety do not simply exist within individuals but are instead shaped by social and cultural discourses and narratives. As exemplified by Christos' resentment toward the Turkish state, the exclusionary narratives discussed previously do not only promote inter-ethnic discrimination, but they also produce mixed feelings of fear and suspicion toward foreigners in general and refugees in particular.

To go further in this analysis, I quote Elif M. Babül, an anthropologist who did her fieldwork on the politics of hospitality in Turkey: "Populations most in need of protection and care cast as guests can turn into hostages in their hosts' dealings with their past and present political rivals." (Babül 2024). In other words, the intended humanitarian response toward these populations can become entangled with and overshadowed by the lingering political tensions and suspicions. In Cyprus, refugees are metaphorically and physically trapped in Cyprus' political battles between Greece and Turkey.

The story of three Cameroonian asylum seekers is one illustration of refugees' entanglement in Cyprus' political playground. On May 24th, 2021, they got stuck in Cyprus' buffer zone for almost two months. They jumped from the TRNC into what they hoped would be the EU-recognized Greek South. Unfortunately, they ended up in the UN-patrolled buffer zone, a no man's land in which they had to live under extreme conditions, in tents, and in the sweltering heat. The Cyprus government found itself in a "critical situation," [15] as mentioned by Nicos Nouris, the former

[15] Source: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jul/17/no-mans-land-three-people-seeking-asylum-stuck-in-cypruss-buffer-zone

Ministry of Interior. They justified the detention and the entry refusal of the three asylum seekers because they were afraid of opening a new migratory passage:

> It's not a matter of three people – that would be ridiculous when so many are coming. But if I accept these three people, then [such crossings] will be the next common practice. They'll be coming by the thousands… Turkey will put them on buses and send them to the checkpoints." [16]

In this case, Turkey's prominence as a referential and occupational third country in the politics of hospitality in Cyprus complexifies the perceptions of Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots towards external migrants. Consequently, the ethics of hospitality proclaimed by Christos and defined by Kant as "the right of a stranger not to be treated as an enemy when he arrives in the land of another" (1957 [1795]: 20) amplifies contrasting responses among Cypriots and the state, a theme I will discuss in the following chapter.

In substance, this first chapter aims to set the stage for the reader to understand the peculiarities of studying refugee racialization in a country where inter-ethnic racist attitudes were and are still part of the everyday lives of Cypriots. It connected two main frameworks: "the politics of memory" (Bryant and Papadakis 2012) in relation to "the politics of emotions" (Ahmed 2004) to analyze the formation of a Greek Cypriot identity, the overarching ideological framework that prevails in Cyprus.

[16] Source: https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/jul/17/no-mans-land-three-people-seeking-asylum-stuck-in-cypruss-buffer-zone

Chapter 2:

Black Bodies in White Structures

Picture of a paintaing in the old town of Nicosia that reflects the difference of treatment between Cypriots living in the same country (12/02/24)

Chapter 2: Black Bodies in White Structures

I was walking down the street of *Kinyra*. My fieldwork was ending, and with it, the winter season. The sun was slowly becoming unbearably hot. I was starting to understand why nobody cycled and why Cypriots told me I was lucky to leave Cyprus before the summer arrived. "*Are you back from your daily Marathon*?" Sofia would ask me every day. As I did not rent a car, I walked almost fifteen kilometers per day. This daily exercise became an excellent opportunity to observe spontaneous conversations in the streets of Nicosia.

Although my Greek and Turkish are practically nonexistent, I had an advantage by being French: the last wave of refugees coming to Cyprus was coming from African countries, some of them being French-speaking territories because of histories of French colonization. According to a report by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) published in March 2023, Cyprus has had a significant influx of refugees from countries such as Somalia, Congo, and Cameroon [17]. The report states that in 2022, Cyprus received over 18,000 asylum applications. This figure represented a 125% increase compared to the previous year, making Cyprus one of the European countries with the highest number of asylum seekers per capita.

While walking down the street on *Kinyra*, I overheard two black men chatting. I took off my headphones when I heard some French words and noticed that they were engaged in a heated conversation. I was intrigued to know what they were talking about and yet convinced that I would end up in a personal conversation that would be irrelevant to my research. Instead, I was genuinely shocked when I heard one of them saying:

> Ces putains de Chypriotes ! Ils attendent de nous qu'on travaille douze heures par jour sans se plaindre ? Ils nous prennent pour leurs esclaves ! Surtout qu'on fait leur sale boulot, celui qu'ils ne veulent pas faire ! (Those fucking Cypriots!

[17] Source: UNHCR, "Situation of Refugees and Migrants in Cyprus," Published in March 2023

> They think we can work twelve hours per day without complaining? They think we are their slaves! And we are doing their dirty work, the one they would never do!)

How does this encounter captured in the streets of Nicosia become a manifestation of embodied racialization? The way they discuss their working conditions suggests that they are subject to a system of exploitation and discrimination in the labor market. This chapter analyzes their resentment by looking at how racism operates within social structures, a practice that has been defined as "structural racism." Structural racism drew the attention of several anthropologists, such as Michael Banton (1969) and Douglas Massey (1993). I contribute to its understanding by covering three main areas in which racism is structurally embedded in the refugee system of governance: reception conditions, citizenship, and the labor market.

First, I discuss the reception conditions of refugees by focusing on the *Pournara* reception center in the southern part of the island to show how the refugee camp becomes an apparatus to justify the exclusion and marginalization of refugees (Agier 2016). Second, I compare Cypriot citizenship granted to wealthy migrants from Russia, China, and Ukraine to "subsidiary protection status" granted to refugees from Middle Eastern and African countries. I argue that the legal distinction made by the Cypriot government between these two groups highlights a regime of racial difference where *whiteness* is the privileged race.

Lastly, the words used by these two men to describe their working situation point to an environment where their labor is taken for granted and their basic dignity is disrespected. They feel akin to "slaves" and being relegated to "dirty work" that Cypriots will not do themselves. I explore these unequal power relations where the jobs provided to refugees are based on racial legacy. I use Omi and Winant's framework of "racial projects" (1986) to argue that human bodies and social structures are represented and organized based on racial meanings. In other words, the bodies of refugees, which represent an inferior race to whiteness, are entitled to work only in low-skill and low-wage sectors. Refugees are reduced to a state of "bare life"

(Agamben 1998). Their political existence is stripped away, and they are governed primarily by administrating their biological needs.

Ultimately, this chapter shows a racialized system of refugee governance that is not only embedded in legal and institutional frameworks but also in people's minds, whereby whiteness is seen as a superior race. It reveals the long-standing systemic discrimination and biased attitudes that have created an inferior socioeconomic status for refugees, enabling workplace injustices and a racist power dynamic to persist in Cyprus.

Section 1: Locked Up Outside

I remember driving past the "*Pournara* Temporary Center," one of the two refugee centers on the island. The government of the Republic of Cyprus built this facility in 2019, with a fund from the European Union on the outskirts of the village of *Kokkinotrimithia*. I was in the car with my host, Sofia, on our way to celebrate Easter at a family member's house in the village of *Astromeritis*, in the south of the island. It takes only thirty minutes to drive from Nicosia to Pournara. The center is located near the Green Line, which divides the island into two parts but far away from other cities. I heard Sofia sighing beside me when we arrived close enough to see the barbed wire encircling the facility. It was a sigh of despair:

> It's awful how people are being treated there. They are like lions in a cage! I've heard that there are more than 3000 people parked there! It's overcrowded, and the conditions are inhumane.

Sofia compares refugees in this center to animals, as their living conditions highlight the devaluation of their lives. When Nikos Trimiklioniotis conducted research on the living conditions for refugees and migrants in the camp, he reported a "strong odor of burnt flesh from a nearby animal incinerator, which makes many of the inhabitants sick, particularly new-born children" (2020, 7). I could not visit the center as they do

not allow visitors. However, I have met Lella, who is working for the Cyprus Refugee Council, and she had similar views:

> At first, it was a good idea to build a new facility because we only had the other camp [Kofinou], and with the increase in migration flows, we had to do something! But the problem now is that they try to make their lives as hard as possible so that they don't come, so they can pass on the message to the people in their countries not to come. Which is just totally, totally ridiculous in my opinion.

Pournara is the first step in the asylum's journey. It is the only registered center where refugees and migrants can stay until their asylum application is processed. It is at this juncture that asylum seekers claim their true ordeal commences – a plight which many describe as a "veritable hell." [18] Refugees and immigrants enter Cyprus via Turkey (Trimikliniotis 2020). They typically acquire a student visa for Turkey first, then board a flight destined for *Ercan*, a town in the island's northern region under Turkish occupation. Upon arrival, they traverse the Green Line, a buffer zone overseen by the United Nations, to gain access to the southern portion of the island, an area internationally acknowledged as part of the European Union. After their border crossing, refugees must spend several weeks or even months at the Pournara reception center to formally submit their asylum application. As one interlocutor stated, "*In the South, the system is constipated, and in the North, it's completely blocked*"[19]. The asylum application process in Cyprus is particularly slow, leaving many refugees in limbo for extended periods while living in the camps.

This uncertainty and lack of clarity about their future is also part of the politics of "proactive deterrence" (Trimikliniotis 2020: 6). In other words, the government aims to make the living conditions very difficult, to say the least inhumane, for refugees to

[18]Source: https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/40167/migrants-live-in-misery-as-cyprus-suffers-overwhelm-with-migrant-influx
[19] Interview with Corina, 24/02/24

avoid coming and staying in the country, as mentioned by Lella. Anthropologist Michel Agier has written extensively on issues related to refugees and the systems of governance that have emerged around them. He argues that refugee camps are spaces of exception, representing a form of extraterritorial space where standard rules and laws are suspended. Refugees exist outside of the regular order. In this view, Michel Agier draws on Agamben's concept of "bare life" (1998). Refugees are often reduced to this state of "bare life," whereby their political existence as citizens with rights and agency is suspended. They become governed primarily by administering their basic biological needs – food, shelter, and healthcare.

The measures taken by the state reflect a more general policy of otherness aimed at establishing differences and justifying exclusion (Kobelinsky and Makaremi 2009). Refugees are seen as human beings "out of place" who need to be confined to spaces like refugee camps. At the same time, their movements and identities are administered by international organizations and host states (Malkki 1995). The modern nation-state system constructs refugees as a distinct, essentialized population separate from the citizens of any sovereign territory. However, the *homogenization* of individuals in this category is achieved with a racial and religious *differentiation* of the characteristics inherent to this group. Michalis' statement, a Greek Cypriot entrepreneur in retail, confirms this argument:

> I mean, Ukrainian people that arrive here, yeah, they are not viewed in the same way that Muslims who come from Lebanon and Syria. We will never consider them as refugees.

Ukrainian refugees are seemingly seen as more culturally similar and acceptable – because they are assumed to be white and Christian – while black and brown refugees from the Middle East and Africa face more significant prejudices and are more negatively racialized as an "other" group. This comment reflects the unconscious collective imagination around the representation of the refugee category based on perceived cultural proximity or distance from the host society. These imaginaries are

governed by a powerful system of thought that associates “whiteness” with civilization, culture, reason, and superiority (Fanon 1952).

Here, I want to make a distinction between the *white phenotype*, which is a biological trait, and the *white condition* or “whiteness,” which can be explained as a thinking process of superiority that enables the people who belong to this group to establish and impose their norms on other groups that they see as inferior. By the same reasoning, *blackness* is a socially constructed identity and experience that exists in contrast to and often in resistance against whiteness (Fanon 1952). It encompasses a position often perceived as inferior because associated with primitiveness, lack of culture, irrationality, and inferiority. As mentioned by Carnegie, “the mythology that endows black otherness with special allure serves in complex ways to constitute the dominant ‘white’ self” (2001: 569). Consequently, “blackness” embodies an "otherness" that is both marginalized and exoticized, serving to reinforce the dominant white identity. How does this ideological line directly influence the legal framework that regulates citizenship questions in the country?

Section 2: A Regime of Racial Difference

“Race as a signifier indicates implicitly human worth; the regimes of truth are played out in economies of employment, housing, policing, and governance” (Hall 1999; Hall et al. 2013; McPherson 1999; quoted in Antonsich et al. 2020: 20).

Race is an abstract logic of hierarchization. It establishes a power relation between different social groups embodied at different scales in different contexts. The structures we rely on to live - in other words, those that enable us to have a job, housing, access to healthcare, culture, and the social life of a neighborhood - are inevitably affected by the *meaning* we attribute to race and hence “whiteness” and “blackness.” Omi and Winant’s articulation of the concept of “racial projects” (1986) connects how race is *perceived* to what race *means* to people. They argue that human bodies and social structures are represented and organized based on racial meanings. Consequently, embodied racialization emerges from the cumulative effects of these

racial projects over time, embedding racial inequalities into the fabric of society through institutions, ideologies, and everyday practices. I contribute to this debate by showing how citizenship becomes a marker of embodied racialization.

“*Everyone was getting wealthier, so nobody cared!*” replied Giorgio with a slightly embarrassed smile. A silence settled over the room. Since the start of our conversation, Gorgio seemed uncomfortable talking about these subjects in public. I watched him look around to ensure we were not being listened to. Nevertheless, he continued his sentence:

> The value of areas increased, especially in cities like Limassol [a city on the southern coast of Cyprus] where they invested a lot. It even happened with the blessings of our government! But now it stopped as it was a big corruption scandal.

In the given passage, Giorgio mentions the “Cyprus Investment Program,” also known as the “Golden Passport” by Cypriots. When he uses the pronoun “they,” he is referring to affluent migrants, predominantly from Russia, Ukraine, and China, who can obtain Cypriot citizenship by investing a minimum of 2.2 million euros in the country (Rakopoulos 2022). My introduction to Giorgio occurred through Ekele, the founder of the Non-Profit Organization (NGO) “Generation For Change,” which advocates for the rights of migrants and refugees in Nicosia. After interviewing Ekele, I requested the contact details of a Cypriot who participated in one of the NGO's activities, and that is how I got in touch with Giorgio. When I got his email, I did not know that he was working for the government of Cyprus. It was not until we agreed on a meeting location at his workplace that I realized he worked at the Ministry of Health. I remember arriving in front of this gigantic building. I was a little surprised that Giorgio wanted to have an interview about refugees, a sensitive political topic, in a government facility. I later realized that he was not expecting me to ask such personal and political questions.

When I finally reached the 6th floor, a man in his forties accompanied me into his office. Giorgio seemed just as stressed as I was, ultimately encouraging me to take charge of the conversation. After five minutes of getting to know each other, I got to the core of my research. I asked, wavering: "*How do you feel about refugees coming to Cyprus*?". He looked at me, a little bothered by my question: "*That's a very political question, can I answer it later*?". Only after thirty minutes of conversation, during which I felt the trust between us had been established, did Giorgio indirectly answer my initial inquiry: "*You told me you've been living in Cyprus for two months? So you must have the general picture of Cyprus by now, right*?" I did not answer as I wanted him to tell me *his* understanding of the situation. I was somewhat shocked by his openness, which came almost out of nowhere after our very formal conversation:

> We are like a village, everybody knows each other, we are racist, we are all racist *but* we want money, we want people to work for us, *but* we are still racist. (Emphasis is mine).

His last statement is important because it explicitly mentions "race" and "wealth" as preconditions to be accepted in Cypriot society. Welcomed migrants are the ones who can contribute to the Cypriot economy, regardless of ethical considerations. As touched upon with the "Cyprus Investment Program," Cyprus' economic self-interest and pursuit of wealth took precedence over scrutinizing the ethical implications of this citizenship-by-investment program, at least until the corruption scandal halted it.

In August 2020, Al Jazeera released a series of investigations called "The Cyprus Papers Undercover"[20] that publicly denounced this "corrupt citizenship-selling practice" which aims to provide "safe harbors where people and money are hidden away" (Rakopoulos 2022: 174). Indeed, in the documentary, you explicitly see members of the Cypriot government involved in the citizenship procedure of a criminal Chinese

[20] Al Jazeera (2020). "The Cyprus Papers Undercover", accessible at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oj18cya_gvw

investor. The “small island” character where “*everybody knows each other*,” as mentioned by Giorgio, takes on its full meaning when you see how easily the connections between members of the government and corrupted lawyers are made. In the context of Cypriot and European passports being issued without hindrance to wealthy investors, it is worth considering the people who are, conversely, denied entry by the Cypriot government.

Only two months ago, in April 2024, Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides announced on the social network “X” the suspension of asylum applications for Syrian refugees.[21] The president justified this measure by recognizing Syria as a “safe” country and urged the European Union to do likewise to prevent large numbers of migrants crossing from the Lebanese coast. When we know that in Cyprus, wealthy and white migrants are welcomed with open arms, and Syrian refugees characterized by their darker skin are rejected, what does this tell us about the racist ideology behind the conditions to be welcomed and accepted in the country?

In a recent study by Nikos Trimikliniotis (2020) for the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, the author argues that, with only limited exceptions, the Cypriot government's policy confers on asylum seekers a “subsidiary protected status” rather than fully granting them the “refugee status.” The subsidiary protection status offers fewer privileges, with the most significant limitation being the inability to reunite with family members. This policy has drawn repeated criticism from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Cyprus.

In contrast with the permanent legal status reserved to wealthy migrants, the temporary status granted to refugees shows a “regime of racial difference” that constructs certain bodies as more acceptable while marking others as perpetual outsiders or threats, hence limiting their political and legal rights (Antonisch et al. 2020). In this view, theories on racialization have moved from explicit racial categorization to a model of understanding racism through its “colorblindness.” In

[21] Source: https://www.dw.com/en/cyprus-suspends-syrian-asylum-applications/a-68814230

other words, racism used to be looked at by openly discriminatory practices (Boas 1953), but anthropologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) argues that "colorblindness" is a useful framework for discussing racialization processes. He shows that colorblindness is a modern form of racial ideology that denies the existence of racial discrimination. However, interestingly, my Cypriot interlocutors did not seem to deny the persistence of "race" to hierarchize individuals.

Michalis, a Greek Cypriot participant, mentioned it explicitly. "*We've always looked up to the Europeans!*" he confided in me with a hint of a smile. I took a moment to think about this. His opposition between "we" and "Europeans" intrigued me, although Cyprus has been part of the European Union since 2004. I asked: "*Why are you framing Cypriots as outsiders of the EU?*". Michalis looked at me, slightly shocked, as if the answer was self-explanatory, but he continued to explain nevertheless:

> We've been an underdeveloped country. It's not just the European Union, it's the European orientation that we cherish. Everybody started from agriculture and then starting sending their children first to Greece, then to England, now to the mainland Europe to study. Those [understood here as people from the West] are superior races because they got rich and educated before us.

My conversation with Michalis is particularly noteworthy because it is the first time I have heard a Cypriot referring directly to the admiration of the "European orientation" framed as a "superior race." He implies that the path to development necessarily follows the European model. Civilization markers rely on the agricultural sector's transformation and Europe's inherent superior educational system. The conversation with Michalis reveals how deeply entrenched notions of white superiority can be, even in multicultural societies like Cyprus. It shows how "whiteness" operates not just as a racial category but as a system of power and privilege that shapes global perceptions of progress, education, and civilization. In essence, Michalis' statement confirms Fanon's theoretical framework on "whiteness" (1952), a concept I discussed in the previous section.

Another scholar, Ghassan Hage (2000) gives substance to understanding how whiteness operates as an invisible governing racial system within societies' official multiculturalism. In his seminal work on "White Nations: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society" (2000), he finds that for many Anglo-Australians, being "Australian" is instinctively and discursively linked to being of Anglo-Celtic white ethnic heritage. Non-white immigrants and Indigenous peoples are seen as "ethnic minorities," perpetual others against the white mainstream. I connect Hage's analysis of the Australian population to my research in Cyprus because the island is also a multicultural society where the historical ethnic communities of Greek Cypriots, Turkish Cypriots, Maronites, Armenians, and Latins always lived together. As emphasized in Chapter 1, a unified national identity does not yet exist in Cyprus, the Greek Cypriot nationalist discourse is hegemonic and marked by its historical heritage and Greek Hellenism. Therefore, I see a parallel between Hage's analysis of Australians' attitudes and Cypriots' perceptions toward non-white immigrants. Even if they both live in multicultural societies, whiteness remains the unchallenged, superior race for Australians and the cherished, admired race for Cypriots. I would argue that whiteness, as a system of thought, is even more prominent in Cyprus, where the nationalistic rhetoric is built against the Turkish and East "backwardness" (Hatay 2008), a race seen as inferior.

In Cyprus, official and permanent citizenship is granted based on a regime of racial difference, leading to a hierarchy that favors affluent investors who are predominantly white. At the same time, refugees are relegated to a temporary status with limited to no rights. This system not only operates within legal frameworks but is also ingrained in the collective imagination, positioning refugees as an inferior race and excluding them from the national body, resulting in the subsidiary protection status they receive. Subsequently, I will delve into the impact of this racial hierarchy on labor market policies for refugees.

Section 3: Working Hard to Integrate

"*Let me give you an example*," Lella replied when I asked her thoughts on the policies in place to promote the labor market integration of refugees. She works as a "Social Advisor" for the "Cyprus Refugee Council" and shared the story of one of her colleagues who is Cypriot but has an Indonesian background to show me how racism operates in the labor sector.

After the war of 1974, Cyprus experienced labor shortages in sectors like tourism, construction, and domestic work, prompting many Indonesian migrants to take up jobs in these labor-intensive industries driven by better economic prospects than in Indonesia. More specifically, there was a high demand for domestic workers like nannies, caregivers, and housekeepers in Cyprus from wealthier Cypriot households. Many Indonesian women have migrated to fill this demand, which explains the racial discrimination experienced by Lella's colleague:

> Somebody who lives in the same building as her — even though my colleague is the *owner*, not just the *renter* – thought she was the cleaner of the building. She was dressed exactly how I would be dressed. But this person saw her name and skin color, and that was it!
> (Emphasis is mine).

This example reconnects with how race is *perceived* to what race *means*. Despite being a property owner and well-dressed, Lella's colleague was immediately assumed to be a cleaner simply because of her Indonesian background and darker skin color. It provides a clear example of how embodied racialization manifests through everyday interactions and the intersection of structural policies. In a society that privileges and normalizes whiteness, racial minority groups are typecast into specific restricted roles or class positions. The collective unconscious feeds on these connections, which makes it very difficult for racialized migrants and refugees to break free from these racial conditionings.

It is essential to note that the problem in the abovementioned example is not the profession's nature. The issue comes from the fact that this person was racialized because of her skin color and ethnic background to condition her for a profession that is often very hard and low-paid. This is an insidious form of racism that shows how race and racism operate in everyday interactions to hierarchize individuals among racial lines.

In the Republic of Cyprus, the labor market accessibility for asylum seekers – a person who applied for international protection in another country but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated – is minimal. The service-based model that helped stir up the economy and relied upon the importation of cheap migrant labor in the 1980s has harmful consequences on asylum seekers' social inclusion. Before October 2023, asylum seekers could work two months after they submitted their application. Now, the law changed, and they are entitled to wait a minimum of nine months to be able to work. In the meantime, they are under state control and receive an average of 100-150 euros per month to provide for their needs.[22] Additionally, refugees are only authorized to work in six low-paid and low-skilled sectors. The government's choice to restrict refugees' opportunities to work in other fields where they could explore their potential is intimately linked to the perceived human worth of these populations. Their societal role is solely based on their utility, not on their individuality and personal fulfillment. They need to work hard to integrate.

This chapter examined the embodied forms of refugee racialization in Cyprus, where racism is embedded in social structures and imaginaries. It focused on refugee governance in three key areas: reception conditions, citizenship, and the labor market. By looking at how racism is deeply embedded in the refugee governance system, it highlighted the inhumane conditions of reception centers, discriminatory citizenship policies that favor wealthy (often white) investors over refugees from Middle Eastern and African countries, and restrictive labor market access for asylum

[22] https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/cyprus/content-international-protection/housing/

seekers. These policies reflect a deeply ingrained racial hierarchy where whiteness is privileged. The system is ingrained in both the legal and institutional structures as well as in individual attitudes, leading to persistent systemic bias that contributes to a disadvantaged socioeconomic position for refugees – a theme I discuss in the following chapter.

Chapter 3:

A Matter of Taste

Picture of the entry door of Dimitrios' shop where a sign is displayed to prohibit people wearing flip-flops to enter (14/03/24)

Chapter 3: A Matter of Taste

It all started with a pair of shoes on a sunny Tuesday afternoon. On my second day in the field, I was ready to explore the symbolic old town of Nicosia, standing inside the Venetian Walls built in the 16th century to protect the city against Ottoman invasion. Five centuries later, this neighborhood hosts in *Ledras* Street the most frequently used checkpoint to cross the border between the North and the South, separating Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots.

In Nicosia, the fear of invasion is still alive today, but the invaders do not have a single battlefield for Cypriots. They travel from one location to another, creating apprehension among the local population. This imagined enemy is harmless and defenseless because they eventually do not always decide their own destiny. Often associated with suspicion and dirt, for Cypriots, they prove to be an uncivilized outlier: merchants in the old town fetishize and reject them over their cultural distinctiveness. If the reader has not yet guessed their identity, I will break the secrecy: I am talking about a pair of flip-flops worn by refugees.

In the old town of Nicosia, Cypriots call them – the refugees — *pantoúfles*[23]. Therefore, these shoes became a central investigation for analyzing the process of refugee racialization in everyday interactions. They became a marker of exclusion that Cypriots personified in a struggle for *taste* and *class status* to exclude this social group from the public space.

Chapter two explained how racism becomes ingrained in *social structures*, leading to discriminatory policies and attitudes toward refugees and creating a power dynamic between "whiteness" and "blackness." This chapter delves deeper into these structural forces by examining their impact on *social interactions* between Cypriots and refugees in the old town of Nicosia. Firstly, it explores the development of a

[23] "Pantoúfles" means "flip-flops" in English. I became aware of this denomination while interviewing Andreas, a Greek Cypriot I introduce in this chapter.

"culture of poverty" (Lewis 1963) and analyzes the embodied racial sentiments (Ahmed 2004) directed at these communities, where refugees and migrants are often perceived as criminals and a threat. The second section demonstrates how these feelings manifest in reality, using "taste and distinction" (Bourdieu 1984) as markers of cultural distinction to perpetuate racism at the intersection of class and race. Finally, it discusses the consequences of perceived taste distinction in understanding the process of racial segregation in Nicosia. Ultimately, this chapter investigates how racial prejudices and stereotypes become intertwined with perceptions of socioeconomic status.

Section 1: A Culture of Poverty

By the time I got accustomed to living in Nicosia, I was positively shocked by the city's multicultural character. Greek taverns and Armenian canteens to my right, Turkish Kebabs, Nigerian restaurants, and Vietnamese cafés to my left; I could feel the continual hubbub of life through the smell of Moi Moi[24] and the sound of women singing Filipino karaoke on a Sunday afternoon. However, I became more attentive to Cypriots' perceptions of the old town's social fabric when I met Nicholas, the supermarket owner I presented in the introduction. Every time I came to his shop, which is located in *Agia Andreas*, in the southern part of Nicosia and outside the Venetian walls, he made comments about the people living in the old center: "*Don't go to the old town, there's all these losers! They are doing nothing except selling drugs!*". When Nicholas referred to the place as being populated by "*losers*" and drug dealers, I was skeptical about these representations. It reminded me of how we portray specific neighborhoods as places of crime and danger when associated with immigrant communities, as it is the case with the "*banlieues*" in the suburbs of Paris (Slooter 2019). Even if he did not say it explicitly, I understood that the "*losers*" he was referring to were actually refugees and migrants in general, but also black people in particular. The interview with Andreas I am about to describe gave me relevant insights to understand the root causes of Cypriots' negative perceptions toward these

[24] Famous Nigerian dish composed of black-eyed peas, bouillon, dried crayfish, onions, and ground peppers

communities: they reflected broader unequal racial and socio-economic dynamics in the old town, grounded in the housing scheme for migrants and refugees (Demetriou 2008).

Andreas is a well-known figure in the old town of Nicosia. He owns a charming café, is the leader of the trade union movement, and is a candidate for the Mayor's elections in June this year. He gave me valuable insights into the neighborhood's character and policies. Traditionally, the neighborhood functioned as the center of Cypriot political and cultural life. However, after the war of 1974, the area was left to decay with the subsequent establishment of the Green Line. The properties owners in this area are left with a dilemma. They can either renovate their apartments, which is very expensive because the neighborhood is considered a "monumental character," and must comply with the architectural design imposed by the municipality. Or, they can try to find people to live in them, although they are entirely neglected and unsanitary.

Refugees and migrants are often the target population to live in these deteriorating buildings. Andreas showed me pictures of places where they converted a two-bedroom flat into a ten-person apartment. They live in hazardous conditions and remain at the mercy of their hosts. Moreover, each refugee receives a housing allowance of one hundred euros per month, but the money is not directly given to them. Instead, the landlord is the mediator in the transaction, but he sometimes abuses his power in the process, as exemplified by Andreas:

> What happens is that the owner can say: the government did not approve the €100 for your rent, they will only give €60.00. So you have to give another €40.

As the conversation with Andreas continued, he had the same views as Nicholas about the old town, describing it as a place of "criminality" and "drug trafficking." Andreas showed me pictures and CCTV footage he collected from the shops in Ledra Street to exemplify his perceptions. I could see several acts of vandalism committed mainly

by black people. "*That's why people are afraid when walking alone at night in the old town, and I can't blame them!*" Andreas would tell me while displaying the videos on his phone. To bring perspective to the expression of these sentiments of insecurity, I use Oscar Lewis's framework in "The Culture of Poverty" (1963) to explain the vicious link between precarity and criminality at the intersection of race. Lewis (1963) described the culture of poverty as a set of beliefs, values, and behaviors that adapt to and perpetuate poverty. One key aspect is the development of violent behavior and high incidence of crime. He argues that the "culture of poverty" is an adaptation to marginal conditions in a capitalist society. In the case of migrants and refugees in the old town, there is a strong link between the vulnerable and precarious position they are in – especially if they are within the nine months when they are not allowed to work, as explained in the previous chapter – and the participation to illegal and criminal activities.

In this section, I argue that poverty operates as a marker of refugee racialization. As Lewis stated in his self-reflection essay on his conceptualization of the "culture of poverty" (1963): "I would sharply distinguish between impoverishment and the culture of poverty. Not all people who are poor necessarily live in or develop a culture of poverty" (1963, 1). Even if not all refugees in the old town are poor and actual criminals, Cypriots contribute to their precarious existence and essentialize all black people for being thieves and drug traffickers. They develop fearful behaviors without interacting with them, as expressed by Maria, one Greek Cypriot interlocutor:

> I see it in the streets when a Nigerian or a Syrian is walking, and suddenly you see everyone checking their bags. It's like putting qualities on people purely based on their skin color.

As Didier Fassin brilliantly stated in his essay "Racialization: How To Do Races with Bodies": "The question of embodiment and racialization recalls how social relations – in particular the way people look at, talk to, behave with, treat others – shape racial identities" (2011, 431). In other words, the black body triggers feelings and sentiments

outside the rational reality. To go further in this emotional analysis, I use Sara Ahmed's work on the “Cultural Politics of Emotions” (2004), which examines how emotions construct boundaries and shape social hierarchies. Maria’s described scenario, where people check their bags when a Nigerian or Syrian person walks by, exemplifies Ahmed's concepts of “affective economies” (2004) and how emotions circulate to create boundaries between bodies. It demonstrates how emotions “stick” to certain racialized bodies, producing fear or suspicion based solely on visible markers like skin color. However, a question remains: How do they operate in practice to exclude black people in public spaces?

Section 2: The Prejudices of Wearing Flip-Flops

“*Get out! You’re not welcome in this shop!*” shouted Dimitrios, the owner, as a black man walked into his boutique. I froze.

Dimitrios is a 26-year-old Greek-Cypriot born in Nicosia, but he also lived in the UK for most of his life, which explains his British accent. When I entered his shop, he was standing at the back, looking at his phone, and I almost seemed to be disturbing him. Dimitrios was wearing black jogging bottoms and a navy blue sweatshirt. I could barely see his face because he had decided to keep his hood up. After a few minutes, he got up from his chair and came over to ask me if I needed help.

"*What type of shoes do you want? I have the best brands of trainers you can find on the market in Nicosia! I don't sell fakes like in the North!*” he said with a scornful tone. He was not entirely wrong; the North is known to serve as a haven for counterfeit merchandise (Bryant 2021). Dozens of shoes from brands such as Adidas, Nike, and Jordan were meticulously displayed on the walls. Each shoe had its little display, which indicated real attention to detail. “*I’m a passionate guy*,” he would tell me every time he put one of the pairs of trainers back in place so that they were perfectly aligned. I felt there was a little irony in Dimitrios' own casual attire – black jogging bottoms, navy blue sweatshirt, hood up – which did not align with the image of refined taste he was trying to project through his merchandise. I was about to try on

a pair of shoes when a black man dressed in grey jogging bottoms and a dark T-shirt entered the shop. His only aesthetic distinction with Dimitrios was his shoes: the man wore flip-flops.

When Dimitrios tells him to go away in a more or less aggressive tone, the man looks at me with much incomprehension. He tried to reply something in English but gave up when Dimitrios shouted once more: "*Don't you understand? Leave! You don't have anything to do here! Look at the sign on the door.*"[25] At that point, I honestly did not know what happened. Many questions came to mind: Did Dimitrios kick out this man simply because he was black? Or did I miss something this man might have done to get himself kicked out like that? Should I react? Should I tell him it is a racist act? But was it? I did not even have time to say anything before Dimitrios turned around and said: "*These people are everywhere, they are making the streets dirty.*"

This situation, which created a lot of confusion for me to interpret, reflects the insidious nature of embodied racialization. It refers to a bodily expression of bias manifested in the judgment Dimitrios is making regarding the man's aesthetics. When I tried to discuss the reasons for this exclusion with Dimitrios, he only kept referring to the "dirtiness" of this man. Not because he was unclean but because he was wearing flip-flops, which was, for a shoe shop owner, a sign of lack of aesthetic and taste. To justify himself and to reassure me that this was not a racist act, he told me:

> It doesn't matter if you're from Pakistan, Senegal, or any other place, you're wearing flipflops, you're not coming in. 99,9% of Cypriots don't go to the mall wearing flipflops, but 99,9% of Pakistanis wear flip-flops, even in winter.

What is interesting in this case is Dimitrios's attempt to justify his behavior by drawing a clear boundary between the two groups based on a cultural practice: "99.9% of Cypriots" do not wear flip-flops to the mall. It shows how the imaginaries

[25] The reader can find a picture of this specific sign, located on Dimitrios' shoe shop entry door, on the front page picture of this chapter.

that associate “blackness” – hence people from Pakistan (brown people) and Senegal (black people) – with a lack of culture and civilized taste, work in practice. By couching the exclusion in terms of a *taste* distinction – deeming flip-flops inappropriate attire – rather than overtly racial or ethnic criteria, Dimitrios avoids appearing overtly racist. In this view, I argue that deploying taste preferences is a covert battleground for asserting cultural reproduction and legitimating power class dynamics. Taste distinction becomes a proxy for exclusion along racial/ethnic lines under the guise of ostensibly race-neutral criteria.

Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework on taste, distinction, and social reproduction (1984) provides prominent insights into the connection between taste and class. He argues that physio-chemical phenomena, such as taste and smell, allow dominant groups to reproduce their cultural capital and legitimize their position of power. Bourdieu argues that taste is not innate but socially constructed and used to signify one's place in the social hierarchy. In this case, the adjective “dirty” is not merely a description of a pair of flip-flops that could be filthy; it acts as a common denominator to delineate the “pure taste” from the “vulgar taste.” The former is embodied by the dominant class and characterized by a sense of distinction. At the same time, the latter is attributed to the lower classes that are left with a necessary choice, a “barbaric choice,” as coined by Kant (1996, 99). In this respect, “class is not an organized actor with conscious aspirations. It is rather a logic of practices which operates not through institutional organizations but through shared meanings and habits.” (Rahkonen 2011, 131).

Consequently, taste judgments can operate as vehicles for “symbolic violence” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) - imposing the tastes of the dominant group as the de facto standard while delegitimizing and marginalizing the cultural practices of other groups. The subtle, indirect forms of symbolic violence echo the everyday forms of racism that are more easily detected through the use of the senses. Sight allows us to explore different manifestations of racism. In this case, dirtiness personified in flip-

flops triggered Dimitrios' sensory reaction when he saw the black man entering his shop.

An interesting parallel can be drawn with the comment of the two black men I heard in the streets of Nicosia: "We are doing their dirty work". While Cypriots like Dimitrios view migrants and refugees as dirty/improper based on their clothing and appearance, these same groups are also engaged in the low-wage "dirty" labor that is essential but looked down upon by Cypriot society. There is an irony and contradiction in simultaneously excluding these groups as "dirty" while also exploiting them to do the dirty work of Cypriots.

Flip-flops become a marker of exclusion, almost to the point of fetishization. Indeed, the Whatsapp group that Andreas showed me reflects this argument. All the shop owners and workers in the old town report the social lives in the neighborhood to this group. Andreas was scrolling, searching endlessly for a picture he could not find, when he suddenly exclaimed: "*Ah! I got it, it's what I wanted to show you.*" I bent over the black screen where I could see the photograph of a man sitting on a bench, crossed-legged and on his feet: a pair of flip-flops. Andreas explained:

> You see this guy, we even have a word for him: *pantoúfles*. It mostly means people from Pakistan, but sometimes the term covers African people too.

The connection with those perceived as different is no longer exclusively grounded in skin color, although vestiges of this relationship's logic of hierarchy persist. Taste judgments embedded in a logic of cultural distinctiveness are also contributing factors. The argument is that racism is currently being compounded and amplified through intersecting prejudices stemming from aesthetics, socioeconomic status (class), and ethnicity (race).

Section 3: Spatial Segregation

I remember walking down the streets of *Evagorou*, a brand-new residential neighborhood with sophisticated, new restaurants, cafés, and luxury boutiques. The neighborhood is designed for and inhabited by those of higher socioeconomic status (Demetriou 2008). Its newness implied recent development and investment, often associated with affluence and modernization. Interestingly, the architectural aesthetics of this district sharply contrasted with the ones of Nicosia's old town, where migrants live in unsanitary buildings. This suburban shift represented a change in living preferences and symbolized a desire for a more "modern" lifestyle associated with higher social status (Demetriou 2008). It created exclusive spaces that appealed to middle and upper-class residents, whereby refugees and migrants were excluded, hence creating a form of racial segregation.

Historically, racial segregation has been used as a tool to maintain social hierarchies, economic disparities, and political power imbalances (Massey 2007). While many forms of legal segregation have been abolished in most countries, *de facto* segregation often persists where racialized communities are kept apart in various spheres of society. Among all the scholars who have researched racial segregation in urban areas (Massey and Denton 1988; Wilson 1987; Logan 2003), the studies by Bonilla-Silva and Embrick (2007) are particularly relevant for understanding the formation of a "white habitus" in Nicosia.

The concept draws on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "habitus" (1972) and is defined by Bonilla-Silva and Embrick as a "racialized uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites' racial taste, perceptions, feelings, emotions, and views on racial matters" (2007: 324). In essence, "white habitus" describes how white people's understanding of race and racial issues are formed through a constant, pervasive socialization process that is itself racialized (being in contact only with white people). In this view, the schooling system in Nicosia gives substance to the process of "white habitus" (Bonilla-Silva and Embrick 2007). It shows a racialized system of sharing spatial resources. A recent article published in January 2024 by the

Cyprus Mail highlights that "49.5 percent of schoolchildren in Nicosia have a 'migrant background'" [26]. In this article, they explicitly refer to schools located in the "old town" of Nicosia where most children are coming from Syria. I remember discussing this figure with my host, Sofia. She gave me valuable insights into how the spatial distribution of resources operates at the intersection of class, culture, and race:

> People think that because it's a school with a lot of kids from Syria, Nigeria or else, it's gonna be a problematic and bad quality school, but it's the opposite!

The racialization of black and brown communities as poor and dangerous (discussed in section 1), but also as a lack of taste and aesthetics (covered in section 2), affects the spatial distribution of resources in Nicosia, especially within the educational system. Sofia's example of a school's closure in the neighborhood of *Evagorou* (located outside of the old town) further highlights how brown and black communities are being marginalized on socio-economic and cultural grounds:

> There was this private school which opened in the area, very good school. Multicultural: we had Turkish Cypriots and immigrants as well. And they closed it in 2010. They said it was because of an issue with the building, which was bullshit, I'm an architect. You give me any building, I'll find the problem! It was definitely a racist thing.

When I asked Sofia about the reasons why they would close this school, she told me that it was "*because they [migrants, refugees] cannot have the same cast like us [Cypriots] the same bus, clothes, doctors.*" Analyzing the school closure example through Setha Low's work on "maintaining whiteness" (2009: 81) reveals a complex interplay of race, class, and cultural norms. By restricting access to a very good school for migrants, the closure could be interpreted as a form of social "gating," metaphorically similar to the gated communities Setha Low studied in the USA (2009).

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[26] Source: https://cyprus-mail.com/2024/01/21/nearly-50-of-nicosia-pupils-from-migrant-background/

It aims to preserve existing social hierarchies and limit marginalized groups' acquisition of cultural capital associated with the fear of social downgrading. The willingness to "maintain whiteness" (Low 2009) created a cultural and physical divide between Cypriots and these communities, reflected in the spatial organization of urban areas in Nicosia.

This chapter examined the complex interplay of race, class, and cultural distinctiveness in Nicosia, focusing on the experiences of refugee racialization in the old town. It explored how poverty and criminality become associated with the refugee community, leading to embodied racism in everyday interactions. It used the symbol of flip-flops to illustrate how taste and cultural practices become markers of exclusion. Lastly, the chapter discussed spatial segregation in Nicosia and how the education system reflects and perpetuates racial divides. Racism in Nicosia operates through intersecting prejudices based on aesthetics, socioeconomic status, and race, resulting in the marginalization of refugees. Ultimately, it reveals how social boundaries are created and maintained through subtle forms of discrimination and cultural distinctions: it is all a matter of taste!

Conclusion

Paintaing in Nicosia where you can read the following slogan: "Embrace Humans, not Borders" (04/04/24).

Conclusion

This study has delved into the processes of refugee racialization in Cyprus. By employing "sensory ethnography" (Pink 2009) as a method to delve into the emotional and sensory dimensions of racism, this thesis has contributed to the understanding of the embodied manifestations of racialization. It highlighted that race is not merely a theoretical concept but a tangible reality deeply ingrained within individual bodies, social structures, and societal customs. Recognizing the multitude of racialization indicators at the intersection of class, taste, and culture emphasizes the necessity of continuously engaging with the concept of "race" at political, academic, and personal levels.

Race serves as both the symbol and the driving force in human interactions, economic systems, political frameworks, our physical beings, and our feelings. It embodies an abstract power dynamic between whiteness and blackness that operates on various levels to marginalize non-white bodies. It performs globally through repressive immigration policies, domestically through the denial of legal rights (Chapter 2), and interpersonally through violent and concealed forms of discrimination and racial prejudice (Chapter 3). The rationales behind the formation of racial categories are contextual and insidious, as the markers utilized to subjugate a particular social group may vary from one location to another. However, the underlying logic remains consistent: In a post-colonial era, whiteness still serves as a mechanism for imposing cultural standards and values onto racialized communities (Hage 2000). Observing the intricate interplay between structural forces and everyday interactions that (re)produce socio-economic inequalities for refugees along racial lines in Cyprus reinforced this narrative. In this research, the multifaceted processes of refugee racialization have been theoretically and empirically laid out by placing them in conversation with how bodies are structurally hierarchized (Omi and Winant 1986), physically repressed (Agier 2016), emotionally apprehended (Ahmed 2004), and visually rejected (Bourdieu 1984; Fassin 2011).

Starting with examining the historical accounts of the Cyprus conflict, this research initiated a conversation about the role of memory, emotions and affects in forming collective identities in a country grappling with inter-ethnic discrimination and division. The collective identity of Greek Cypriots is strongly intertwined with Greece and is rooted in the preservation of "Greek spirituality" in opposition to "Turkish barbaric culture." Adverse cultural portrayals of Turkey and its occupation in the northern part of Cyprus have a detrimental impact on the reception of refugees, depicting them as a collective menace and a political instrument that obstructs their integration into Cypriot society.

I further delved into their integration by uncovering the indicators of racialization within the social frameworks of refugee governance (Chapter 2). This choice revealed a regime of racial difference in the refugee governance structure. On the one hand, affluent investors from Russia or China are granted Cypriot citizenship in exchange for investing 2.2 million euros in the country. On the other hand, refugees from Middle Eastern and African countries are treated as second-class citizens with limited to no rights. Despite being legally bound, this distinction has perpetuated the perception of inferiority and lack of sophistication within black and brown communities, permeating the collective consciousness of Cypriots. In the final chapter, I explored how a simple pair of "flip-flops" serves as a marker of racialization. This comparison highlighted the correlation between social class and race. It exemplified the inherent power dynamics in constructing "good taste" (Bourdieu 1979) by examining how poverty and aesthetics intersect with perceptions of race and class. It demonstrated the exclusion of refugees based on cultural distinctiveness.

This research is an invitation

By exposing the embodied manifestations of refugee racialization in Cyprus, this research contributed to theoretical conversations on the rejection, apprehension, and acceptance of certain bodies over others, *beyond* the legalistic definition of the refugee category. Consequently, it paves the way for questioning the foundations of

an “ethics of hospitality” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000). In a moment where European states respond to migration by erecting physical borders and creating mental boundaries to institutionalize fear as a means of relating to the Other, is it not the appropriate timing to reimagine the dynamics of our social communities? With this inquiry, I do not intend to limit the investigation to the legal framework that shapes co-existence within the nation-states' borders. Instead, I see this research as an invitation, a proposal to reimagine new ways of living together based on an idea borrowed from Colin Davis (1996). Some would qualify it as utopian, but I would instead describe it as inevitable:

> “What would it mean if, rather than responding to the threat of the Other with violence, we endeavoured to accept our dispossession of the world, to listen to the voice of the Other rather than to suppress it?” (Davis 1996, 44)

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