Je (Ne) Suis (Pas) Parisienne:

Exploring Normative Femininity Through the Lens of Constraint and Desire

Master Thesis

Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship

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Word count: 21.591

June 2024

Utrecht University

Je ne suis pas Parisienne
Ça me gêne, ça me gêne
Je ne suis pas dans le vent
C'est navrant, c'est navrant
Aucune bizarrerie
Ça m'ennuie, ça m'ennuie
Pas la moindre affectation
Je ne suis pas dans le ton
Je ne suis pas végétarienne
Ça me gêne, ça me gêne
Je ne suis pas Karatéka
Ça me met dans l'embarras
Je ne suis pas cinéphile
C'est débile, c'est débile
Je ne suis pas M.L.F
Je sens qu'on m'en fait grief
M'en fait grief

- Zaz, "La Parisienne"

Fashion, face à moi
Fais de moi une Parisienne
Qui se déhanche sans complexe
Ou presque
Fashion face à moi
Comme toute ces filles là
Ah je t'en prie, fais de moi le fashionista
Que je ne suis pas

- Paola, "Fashionista"

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Introduction

It is a rainy night in March, and I am standing in line to enter La Maroquinerie, an event venue in Paris, for a concert of my favorite French musical duo Rouquine. I had purchased a ticket before leaving for Paris and decided to go alone. The queue consists of a few dozen men and women in their 20s and 30s, all white, speaking French, and dressed in jeans and sneakers. When I enter the venue, a support act is playing on stage. It is a duo with a man playing the keyboard and a singer called Paola behind the microphone. The song Paola sings is about a young woman who wants to become a real *Parisienne*. In order to achieve this, she believes she must become a fashionista like "all the girls over there" in Paris.[1] As I listen, I am reminded of another song by the famous French singer Zaz, which equally tells the story of a young woman who strives to become a true *Parisienne*. However, to be considered a *Parisienne*, she feels she must drink, take drugs, become a vegetarian, do yoga, and sleep around with many men.[2] Both Paola and Zaz emphasize how the women they are singing about are not really *Parisiennes* and that what they are striving for ultimately feels quite unattainable.

The existence of songs about the *Parisienne*, which detail the qualities and behaviors expected of such a woman, indicates that the *Parisienne* can be seen as a normative cultural archetype of French femininity. These songs also reveal that the *Parisienne* is both an aspirational figure and a source of pressure and frustration for women. Aspiring to fit in with "all the girls over there" can be daunting because becoming a "real" *Parisienne* ultimately seems impossible. This research substantiates the songs by Paola and Zaz through ethnographic research among women in Paris, showing that the *Parisienne* is indeed a type of normative femininty particular to the city of Paris that operates on women in complex ways, causing both feelings of constraint and desire.

Normative Femininity Through the Lens of Constraint and Desire

Normative femininity has been researched extensively by anthropologists across cultural contexts and refers to the socially constructed and culturally specific standards, behaviors, and attributes that define what it means to be feminine within a particular cultural and historic

1. To see Paola's performance at La Maroquinerie, visit: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htOH6e__IHs.

2. To listen to La Parisienne by Zaz, visit: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IpqV5vD7Tw.

context. For example, in a Japanese women's college in the 1990s, women were taught to become wise mothers and good wives who knew how to dress and behave well, which included color coordinating one's outfit, speaking properly, smiling, and making eye contact (McVeigh 1996). In the early 2000s, Haredi Jewish girls in an Israeli kindergarten were instructed to adhere to certain "practices regarding clothing, hair, voice, food consumption, gestures, and whole-body movements" (Yafeh 2007, 516). In her ethnographic fieldwork, Yafeh (2007, 516) found that "the value of modesty, characterized by abstinence and restraint, becomes the cornerstone of Haredi femininity, which is at the same time embodied in "doing," in certain acts that become feminine rituals of cultural affiliation." In Guinea, Fioratta (2018, 68) showed how Muslim women were taught the importance of good feminine behavior by a male Koran teacher, who told them to cover their hair with a headscarf and to "walk quietly down the street without calling attention to yourself," so that they would not get into trouble with strange men. Just like there are hegemonic ideas about appropriate Japanese, Haredi Jewish, and Guinean Muslim femininity, there are culturally specific, hegemonic ideas about appropriate French femininity.

In her article on contemporary French feminist discourses, French literary scholar Anna Kemp (2009), paints and criticizes the picture of the ideal French woman as someone who is sexually liberated, wears fashionable clothes and make-up, and who generally asserts her femininity through her physical appearance and dress. Kemp (2009) further argues that this image of femininity is shaped by a consumer culture that prioritizes women's desirability and charm over deeper forms of empowerment and equality, leading to the eroticization of the French woman. French culture scholar Claire Humphrey (2012) argues much the same but speaks about the *Parisienne* rather than the French woman, however, the latter is consistently conflated with the first.

The French Republic is symbolised by a statue of what is known as *la Marianne* and one can find statues of this woman in and on Paris' most important government buildings as well as on public squares. *La Marianne* symbolises the Republic and its motto of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Yet, every image of *la Marianne* has been modelled after famous French women like Brigitte Bardot, Laetitita Casta, Catherine Deneuve, and Ines de la Fressange. Alle of whom are white, heterosexual, and wealthy. Never has a black, gay, or poor woman been chosen to model for *la Marianne*. In line with French values, the normative French woman is thus white, liberated, and wealthy, and preferably heterosexual. In this sense, *la Marianne* could be constituted for *la Parisienne* and vice versa. Contributing to this "myth of *la Parisienne*" (Humphrey 2012, 264) is the fact that her "desirability is continually

sustained in films, literature and fashion-related media such as magazines and advertising" (Humphrey 2012, 256). Both Kemp (2009) and Humphrey (2012) conclude that the ideal French woman, in many ways embodied by the *Parisienne*, is a narrowly defined type of femininity that is exclusive and limiting, because it promotes an ideal of white, republican Frenchness focused on consumerism, attractive appearance, and (hetero)sexual freedom that excludes women who fail to conform to these standards.

In this research, I will show how a set of gendered norms set forth by the *Parisienne,* pertaining to fashion, beauty, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, and social class, operate on my interlocutors. I show how these aspects converge in normative ideas about the *Parisienne* "body beautiful" (Reischer and Koo 2004) that becomes a token of belonging in a "visual economy of recognition" (Ahmed 2000, 30), where women's perceived fit with the dominant norm is leveraged by other women to form judgments about who is and its not a "real" *Parisienne*. However, I also show how the shared middle class background of my interlocutors substitutes at least to some extent, for issues of ethnicity, race, and sexuality, confirming the widely accepted anthropological thought that intersectionality matters when it comes to normativity. Yet, normative femininity as embodied by the *Parisienne* extends beyond ideas about what is the "right" fashion, beauty, sexual orientation, ethnicity, race, and social class to ideas about what a *Parisienne's* life should be like more generally.

Visions of "the good life," (Fischer 2014) of how people differentially conceive of and pursue wellbeing, happiness, and prosperity, are culturally specific and shape people's aspirations, desires, and hopes for such a life. Over the past decade, extensive anthropological research has been conducted on the concept of "the good life" (e.g. Fischer 2014, Appadurai 2013, Walker and Kavedžija 2015). Due to the scope of this research, which focuses primarily on the concept of normative femininity, I do not have space to address theories on the good life extensively here. Yet, as I will show, the normative vision of "the good life" that is associated by my interlocutors with the *Parisienne* is a frictionless existence filled with friends, parties, and a strong *joie de vivre* (joy of living) supported by the generational wealth, social and cultural capital the *Parisienne* inherits from her family. I will also show that this idea of the good life is simultaneously aspirational, limiting, and inaccurate for my interlocutors, because the lives of women in Paris are, perhaps unsurprisingly, more complex. So far, I have mainly discussed how gendered norms and normativity can function as controlling and constraining mechanisms that govern fashion choices, behaviours, roles, and

ideas about the good life more generally. However, such a view of the controlling workings of norms ignores that there is another side to normativity. Norms do not merely function as controls and constraints, but as social constructs that instill an affective desire to be like the norm; to fit in. As cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (2008, 266) argues in *The Feminine Complaint,* normativity can be seen, "not only as a disciplinary operation on how people imagine the good life, but as an aspiration people have for an unshearable suturing to their social world." In other words, normativity can be considered a human desire for deep connection to those around them. This aspirational dimension of normativity should not be forgotten when examining the operation of norms. Norms can be constraining and limiting, yet also produce affective desires that come to shape processes of self-making and of relating between self and others. Cultural discourses like the *Parisienne* may (or may not) instill desires that are (or are not) in agreement with those of the subject, however, as Moore (2015) states, "desire is a productive force precisely because it animates the relationship between psyche and culture, a relationship that is set up in fantasy and representation."

My interlocutors indeed call attention to the limiting and constraining standards associated with the *Parisienne,* like her slender white body, heterosexuality, and wealthy family background, and such attributes predetermine who can and cannot be seen as a *Parisienne.* Multiple interlocutors expressed feeling uneasy about such standards, and many feel pressured to conform to them; feeling like they do not have a choice to dress and act as they want and feeling judged when they diverge from the norm. However, the women in this study also express admiration and praise for the confident attitude of the *Parisienne* and the lifestyle she represents. For example, they like her independent style, the male-female equality that she represents, and her free spirit, and they try to emulate it. By showing how normative femininity embodied by the *Parisienne* operates on my interlocutors differentially, this research contributes to the anthropological literature on gendered normativity by providing a new lens for thinking about normative femininity, not merely as a constraint but as an affective desire for social connection in a specific cultural context.

Research Questions

This research explores how ideas about normative femininity, embodied by the *Parisienne*, operate on women in Paris by examining their thoughts, feelings, and everyday lives. To do so, I first needed to establish whether women in Paris recognize that the *Parisienne* exists. The first subsidiary question therefore asks whether women in Paris recognize the phenomenon of the *Parisienne*. My second subsidiary question then explores how women

relate to the *Parisienne* by examining their thoughts and feelings about the normative physical aspects of the *Parisienne* like her body, ethnicity, and social class. And finally, I ask what women's daily life in Paris is like to enable a comparison to the normative image of "the good life," represented by the *Parisienne* and her lifestyle.

Based on the thoughts, feelings, and observations on the daily lives of twenty-six middle class women in Paris, this study seeks to elucidate how normative femininity operates on women within a culturally specific context from an anthropological point of view. For obvious reasons, this research does not represent the thoughts, feelings, and lives of all women in Paris - an impossible task given that there are 1.1 million women living in the greater metropolitan area of Paris - nor is its objective to explain the historical rootedness and development of normativity associated with the *Parisienne*. Instead, it provides a detailed ethnographic account of how normative femininity, embodied by the *Parisienne*, operates on a limited number of middle class women.

Research Population and Location

The initial research population was defined as women living in Paris aged 18 and above who had been living in Paris for at least one month and that were staying for at least three months. In my research proposal, I also indicated that I wanted to include women with different ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, ages, body sizes and education levels. Other than this, I had not wanted to limit myself a priori to a specific group of women. Rather, I wanted to allow myself to engage with whomever I encountered. Ultimately, twenty-six women formally participated in this research to varying degrees, one of which became my friend and key interlocutor in Paris: Amélie, a 33-year-old native French entrepreneur and photographer born in a city two hours west of Paris who had been living in Paris for at least ten years. Like me, she is white, middle class, and university educated.

Overall, my average interlocutor could be described as a young slender white heterosexual native French woman from the middle class, university-educated, born outside Paris but currently residing in the city center. However, the final sample of interlocutors included women aged 21 to 40, four of which identified as ethnically mixed, two as lesbian, one as religious (Muslim), and all but two had received a university education. All but one had slender bodies. Only three women were born and raised in Paris and twenty-three women were born outside of Paris, of which ten outside of France. However, most (nineteen) currently lived in the city center. Six women lived in the more affluent suburbs southwest of Paris, sometimes alone or in shared housing, or with their parents. Only one, the only black

woman that participated in this study, lived in a less affluent area northeast of Paris. At least nine women clearly tried to dress in the simple-and-chic dress code of the *Parisienne*, something I will elaborate on in chapter 1 and 2, but an equal number of women seemed to prefer more alternative or eccentric styles, referred to by Amélie as the "new *Parisiennes*," wearing items like baggy jeans, big jackets and beanies, either consciously or subconsciously moving away from the classic *Parisienne* style. The other women did not seem overly concerned with fashion and mostly dressed casually. With a few exceptions, my sample of interlocutors represents a fairly uniform group of predominantly white, heterosexual, educated, middle class women. The evident consequence is that the findings in this study reflect the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a very small group of women living in Paris.

The research concentrated on the city center of Paris (see map below), where women are confronted most with images of the *Parisienne*. My field site encompassed the entire inner city which is made up of 20 districts (*arrondissements*). Each district is characterized by its own socioeconomic status visible in its landscape, entertainment opportunities, and commercial activity. Therefore, each district attracts a different kind of population: from the rich Parisians and expats in the chic 6th district to the lower-income and culturally mixed residents in the 19th district. The stereotypical "OG *Parisienne*," as one of my interlocutors called it, lives in the most expensive 6th, 7th, and 8th districts (blue dots on the map), whereas the "new *Parisienne*" often lives in the cheaper 19th and 20th districts (orange dots on the map). During my time in Paris, I lived in two apartments in two different areas within the 10th district (yellow dots on the map), each offering a distinct environment. The first, the one closer to the 3rd district, was in a bustling, gentrified area, while the second was in a quieter, lower-income area behind a large boulevard that is somewhat known to attract homeless people and prostitutes,[3] [4] which influenced my sense of safety, especially at night. However, my personal experiences with feeling unsafe added depth to my understanding of a feeling my interlocutors also experienced often in Paris, something I will return to in chapter 3.

3. Pauline Darvey, "Prostitution à Paris: La Police Accusée de Rétablir de «Manière Détournée» le Délit de Racolage," *Le Parisien*, July 26, 2022, https://www.leparisien.fr/paris-75/prostitution-a-paris-la-police-accusee-de-retablir-de-maniere-detournee-le-delit-de-racolage-26-07-2022-N37GTW43OFC5XEUIDAMFDGLIUE.php.

4. Franceinfo, "Paris: 398 Personnes Dormant à la Rue Boulevard de la Vilette "Mises à l'Abri," October 10, 2023, https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/europe/migrants/paris-398-personnes-dormant-a-la-rue-boulevard-de-la-villette-mises-a-l-abri_6113358.html.

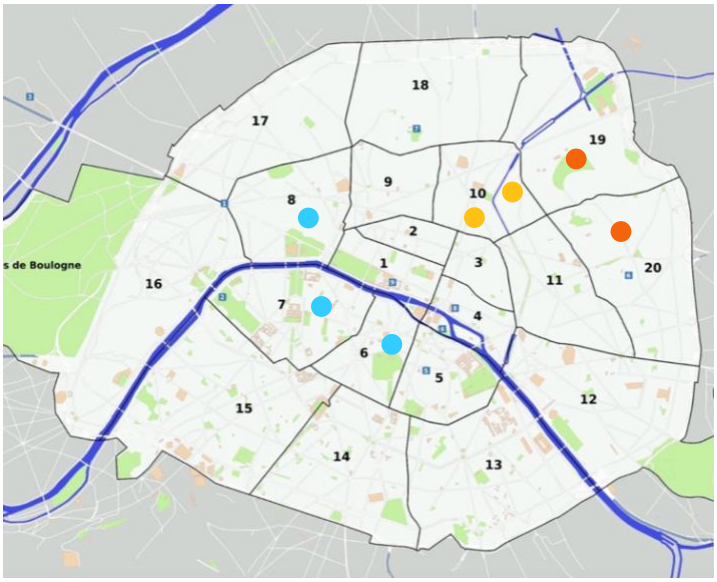

Figure 1. Map of Paris city center comprising 20 districts (Wikimedia Commons).

Methodology

Fieldwork in Paris spanned 2.5 months across the spring of 2024. To collect data, I used a combination of semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and field walking. In total, I conducted eight in-depth interviews (2-4 hours each) and fourteen street interviews (15-30 minutes each). I also attended over twenty events and activities like dinners, sports classes, and parties that provided opportunities for participant observation. Finally, I engaged in daily field walks, averaging 15.000+ steps daily, documenting my observations of the city and its women. Besides these formal methods, I had at least two dozen informal meetups with women – and men – where my research was often topic of conversation. Combined, these methods have provided me with a detailed and rich understanding of life in Paris.

When I arrived in Paris, I quickly realized that it was easiest to meet women through social apps like Timeleft (meeting strangers over dinner), Carom (connecting high-skilled professionals), Bumble BFF (dating but for friends), ClassPass (booking workouts), and Instagram. This is how I met five key interlocutors, among them Amélie. These platforms worked well in facilitating connections with women and provided opportunities for participant observation. However, they have also inadvertently limited the diversity of my participants, because they attract predominantly educated, middle-class people that have time and money to spend on social activities.

Another primary method I used was to conduct street interviews. When I met Amélie at my first Timeleft dinner and told her about my research, she was excited to talk to me and after a few weeks she proposed that we work together on a shared project where we would go out on the streets of Paris to photograph *Parisiennes* and talk to them about their lives in Paris. I agreed because it gave me the opportunity to meet women off the apps and to spend more time with Amélie, and in doing so learning more about her life. Together, we conducted fourteen street interviews on four separate occasions with a total of eighteen women. We chose the sites of our interviews strategically, making sure to visit a variety of districts so that we would encounter women of different backgrounds, however, ultimately, we still ended up interviewing and photographing women who shared similarities with us in terms of age, ethnicity, and social class, because when approaching people on the street it is easier to gain trust when the other person looks like you.

For the field walks I tried to cross the entire city by foot as much as possible. I lived in the 10th district, so naturally I spent a lot of time there, frequenting restaurants, shops and public spaces. However, I made it a priority to visit as many districts as I could, walking across the city every day, observing, photographing, and taking notes. Ultimately, I spent time in almost all 20 districts, except the 12th, 13th, 14th, and 15th, which are located in the more residential south of Paris. Because these districts are residential, they are quieter and there is less activity and interaction to observe. Therefore, I felt that visiting these areas was less interesting. Overall, the combined visual, textual, and audio data I collected during my time in Paris through interviewing, participant observation, and field walking have enabled me to capture life in Paris in different formats, leading to rich data and thick descriptions that I use throughout this research.

Positionality

Positionality is generally identified by situating the researcher in relation to the subject under investigation, the research participants, and the research context (Holmes 2020, 2). My positionality as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, upper middle-class woman with a university education and progressive political views undeniably influenced my research. This study primarily reflects the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of women who I could easily access, because they share similar backgrounds with me. Regarding the subject under investigation - (gender) norms and femininity - my decade-long personal and academic interests in gender issues and anthropology directed the exploration these topics. Nevertheless, despite my background, I have tried to keep an open mind while writing this thesis; aware of my

tendency to cast anything that oppresses or limits women, like (gendered) norms can do, as bad and undesirable. Finally, the context of this research – the lives of middle-class women in Paris - aligns with my own privileged life experiences. I grew up in an upper middle-class family in a city close to Amsterdam, went to a good school, and have always been able to pursue my personal, academic, and professional goals. My positionality has ultimately resulted in a research product that mainly speaks to the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of 'women like me,' which is a very small percentage of women in Paris.

Structure

In order to understand how normative femininity operates on women in Paris, this thesis is structured into three main chapters. The first chapter shows how and why the *Parisienne* can be considered the embodiment of normative femininity by discussing how my interlocutors perceive the *Parisienne* by discussing their descriptions of her and her lifestyle, as well as feelings of judgment, social pressure, and admiration that they experience in relation to her. The second chapter explores how women relate to the *Parisienne* by zooming in on five aspects that became recurring themes in my interviews: (1) fashion, (2) normative sexuality, and (3) beauty, which unite under the header of "body", (4) race and ethnicity, and (5) social class. The chapter confirms the widely accepted anthropological thought that intersectionality matters when it comes to normativity and that middle-classness can substitute, at least to some extent, for ethnicity, race, and sexuality. The third chapter investigates the disparity between normative ideas about the "good life" represented by the *Parisienne* by highlighting the lived experiences of Parisian women, bringing to the fore challenges such as sexual harassment and feeling unsafe as well as positive aspects of urban living, like finding love, work, and freedom. Finally, the conclusion addresses the central research questions; explores discoveries and repercussions of my research for the academic and societal debate on normative femininity; discusses limitations of this research; and proposes directions for future research.

Chapter 1

La Parisienne:
The Embodiment of Normative Femininity

"White, blonde, blue eyes, tall, skinny, lives in a wealthy district, like the 5th, 6th, or 7th. She comes from a rich family, dates someone rich, is outgoing; she likes meeting people but only in her own circle. It's typical *Parisienne*." – Farah (24)

"Elegance, active, always on the hunt of fine dining places, cultural events, eager to travel, do getaways, always on the hunt for something cool and new." – Constance (39)

"She's pretty and free." – Béatrice (25)

These are just a few descriptions I received when I asked twenty-six women, all living and working in Paris, what came up for them when I asked about *la Parisienne*. Every time I was surprised by how particular the answers were. They were not general descriptions of a woman, but very specific and defined notions of what a *Parisienne* is. Overall, the descriptions covered a wide range of attributes, such as having a sophisticated and expensive fashion style, wearing minimal make-up, being skinny, being educated, white, rich, living in the wealthy parts of town, having a complicated and volatile heterosexual love life, as well as a variety of other behaviors, like smoking Vogue cigarettes, wearing red lipstick, and reading literary works while sipping coffee at terrace alone. I often wondered what would happen if I asked twenty-six women in New York or twenty-six women in Tokyo about the typical New York or Tokyo woman. Would I hear similar things? Perhaps to some extent, but my assumption is there would be meaningful differences. Because what we think or expect a woman can or should be, is defined by the cultural and historical context in which she exists (Chodorow 1995; Schippers 2007).

Every (sub)culture has its own narrative of normative femininity. A narrative that encompasses a given society's expectations about appearance, behaviors, roles, and other attributes that are deemed appropriate or desirable for women. Such norms are reflective of the underlying values, belief systems and power dynamics that are present in a certain culture, and they are transmitted and reinforced through institutions like the media, religion,

family, education, and the law, among other things. This chapter explores who *la Parisienne* is according to my interlocutors by discussing the descriptions my interlocutors gave of her and her "*bobo-Parisienne*" lifestyle. I also explore the thoughts and feelings women in this study have about this normative idea of femininity, including feelings of judgment and social pressure, as well as admiration to demonstrate how women feel both constrained and inspired by the *Parisienne.*

A Portrait of a *Parisienne*

It is a cold and rainy Tuesday evening in February as I make my way up the stairs towards the exit of the Opéra metro station in the center of Paris. Men and women dressed in dark coats and equipped with umbrellas rush past me up and down the stairs, hurrying to get to wherever they are going. As I exit the station, the first thing I see is an immense advertisement for luxury fashion brand Bottega Veneta plastered across the facade of the Opéra Garnier, one of the most remarkable buildings in Paris. No less than eleven incredibly bright lamps, positioned at regular intervals along the roof, illuminate the gigantic advertisement; I estimate that it must be at least 25 meters wide and 18 meters high. It shows a white, young woman with exposed, thin legs laying on her back reading a magazine. She is wearing a little black dress, minimalist black boots, and to her left sits a large, white shopper bag with something that looks like a belt and some clothes protruding from it. Her dark hair and face are not clearly visible. The background is a soft, earthy pink and the words 'Bottega Veneta' are set across in a classic white, serif font.

For a moment I stand, looking amazed, surprised and a little appalled at the advertisement. The facade of the Opéra Garnier must be being renovated - no doubt for the Olympic Games that are coming to Paris in July - but I had not expected it to be covered in an enormous advertisement for a luxury brand. As I wait for the traffic light to turn green and cross the street, I reconsider. In fact, it makes perfect sense that one of the most iconic buildings in Paris would be obscured by a fashion advertisement displaying a thin, white woman lying around, reading a magazine, presumably after she has been shopping. It is the spitting image of the *Parisienne*.

Figure 2. Photo of the Bottega Veneta advertisement on the facade of Opéra Garnier (own material)

About five minutes later, I walk into a bubble tea shop around the corner of Opéra. I am meeting Selima for my first formal interview. Selima is a 31-year-old woman who I met the previous Wednesday at a dinner arranged via a social app called Timeleft. I am slightly late, so when I enter, Selima is already sitting alongside the dark window. She has taken off her coat and has put her bag on the table. Selima is small and she is wearing yellow and black chequered pants, a red sweater and gold-rimmed glasses that remind me of the eighties. Her dark curly hair falls loosely around her face, and she smiles brightly as I walk over to greet her. Selima is originally from a North African country which is visible in her dark hair, eyes, and complexion. She came to France when she was eighteen to continue her education. French is still one of the main languages spoken in her country, mainly in urban areas where she is from, due to former colonization by France. During dinner the previous Wednesday, I had asked Selima if she was open to talk to me about my research that I had introduced to her that evening. She made the impression on me of an intelligent woman with clear opinions and I was interested in hearing them.

After we sit down with our bubble teas, I kick off the interview. We talk about her work, her educational journey, her identity as both an Arabic Muslim person and a French person, and about the time she spent living in London for a few months and how much she enjoyed that experience. Then I turn the conversation to the idea of femininity and Parisian femininity in particular. I ask her who she thinks *la Parisienne* is. She thinks for a moment then responds:

> **Selima:** She has effortless beauty and care, she dresses sober, not with many colors and not with so much jewelry. She dresses simple, she doesn't wear glitter or anything sparkly, she has a soft hair color like blonde or light brown, she doesn't wear any strong eye shadow. It is very defined and limited. Also, people embrace it as a lifestyle.

I am a little taken aback by the specificity of the description, not expecting her to have such clear ideas about what this woman looks like, so I ask her how she got this idea of the *Parisienne*. She answers that she sees them in public space and that she has met them at her studies and at work. As I listen, my mind conjures up the enormous Bottega Veneta advertisement that I passed earlier tonight, and I think how much Selima's description resembles the young woman on that poster.

Silently I wonder if Selima's description will turn out to be a unique one in my research. However, I would soon learn that such a detailed response is far from unusual and that all descriptions would eventually boil down to a fairly uniform image of the quintessential *Parisienne:* a thin, white, educated woman with effortless beauty and an elegant, classic fashion style who is fond of expensive clothes in muted colorus. She can afford to live in one of the wealthy 6th, 7th, or 8th districts of the city and is always surrounded by her close circle of equally upper class Parisian friends. Only two out of twenty-six women that I asked about the *Parisienne* described her factually: simply a woman from Paris. Interestingly these two women were two out of three interlocutors that were born and raised in Paris. More often, interlocutors gave examples of the "ultimate *Parisienne*". They would, for example, refer to French model, designer, and influencer Jeanne Damas who owns fashion brand Rouje, a brand that capitalizes heavily on the "French-girl aesthetic," but also to well-known actresses like Catherine Deneuve, Marion Cotillard, and Brigitte Bardot. Real life portraits of *Parisiennes*. Some interlocutors would add other specifics, like stressing that the *Parisienne* is an independent woman, sexually free and agentic, "in a relationship but you don't think she's in a relationship," as one of my interlocutors put it. Some even went as far as to include her job, saying that she works in communication or journalism. And many would call attention to the *Parisiennes's* lifestyle and habits, like partying a lot, going for coffee at hip coffee shops, buying expensive bread at fancy bakeries where she makes small talk with all the staff, or sitting alone at a terrace while reading a book and smoking her Vogues.

The *Bobo-Parisienne* Lifestyle

Laura is a 25-year-old blonde, native French woman who moved to Paris a few years ago from a city in the southeast of France. During my interview with Laura, one of the first things she says when I ask her about the *Parisienne* is that there are places, like chic restaurants and private clubs around the Eiffel Tower and in the 16th district, that cater exclusively to people like the *Parisienne*, an upscale clientele known as *les bobos*. *Bobo* is a contraction of the words *bourgeois* and *bohème* (bohemian), and a slightly teasing term for educated, rich people in big French cities who are politically left-leaning. Being a *bobo-Parisienne* means being open minded and having progressive political views, but – as I would find out - it is mainly demonstrated by behaviors like doing yoga, going for coffee with friends, and partying. Aurélie (26) who I met sitting with her boyfriend along Canal Saint Martin in the hip 10th district on a sunny afternoon in March, where they were recovering from a hangover, perhaps described the lifestyle of the *bobo-Parisienne* best.

> **Aurélie:** Aah it's like, well, it's living in Paris and having this kind of… maybe *métro, boulot, dodo* lifestyle you know. It's like you take the metro, you go to work, and then you sleep and kind of this routine. But, like that's the week, and then in the weekend you go out a lot and you party and you have a lot of friends. I mean that's my case so I'm just talking about me, but I think that yeah, *la Parisienne* has friends, girlfriends who talk a lot, love to go to coffees. Uhm… and a yeah she… she likes shopping, she likes fashion, she… uhm yeah maybe she doesn't have the money to buy the bag she wants but she's still gonna really want it and… she's gonna find a way to get it.

Aurélie embodies the *Parisienne* and her lifestyle in many ways. She is the daughter of French parents and has lived in an affluent suburb west of Paris for most of her life until she moved to the city center of Paris. She is blonde, blue-eyed, and skinny, she smokes – not Vogues but e-cigarettes – and when I met her, she was wearing an oversized, blue-and-white striped shirt, jeans, and hip sunglasses. She does not live in the 6th, 7th, or 8th district but in the still well-off 9th and she had just come back from spending 1.5 years in Brazil where she completed her master's degree. When I asked Aurélie how she felt about the lifestyle of the *Parisienne* she said it was fine and easy, yet when I asked Laura the same question, she said:

> **Laura:** I don't have a choice.

Lisa: You don't have a choice?

Laura: This is what people do in Paris and if I don't go along with that, I won't have anything to do.

Aurélie and Laura, despite looking similar, feel differently about living the life of a *Parisienne*. For Aurélie, who spent most of her life in an affluent Parisian suburb and in the city center it is fine and easy, for Laura, who was born more than 550 kilometers south of Paris, it is something she has to do. It is telling that although the *Parisienne* is equated with freedom, Laura feels that she does not have a choice but to conform to living the life of a *Parisienne*, even if she admitted to me that she did not necessarily aspire to live like that in the future. It demonstrates that the *Parisienne* and her life are indeed normative phenomena that come with expectations and consequences if those expectations are not met. On an affective level, it means that women like Laura adopt a vision of the good life that does not feel true to who they believe to be. As Laura told me later in our interview, she loves being in nature, hiking in the mountains near her hometown and dressing comfortably, but this not the reality of ther daily life in Paris.

The image of the *Parisienne* and her lifestyle is not just something that lives in the minds of my interlocutors, it is also a phenomenon that is emulated by influencers and that has been written about and portrayed extensively in popular media (Humphrey 2012). When I lived in Paris, I started to follow Instagram accounts of women who portray themselves as the ultimate *Parisiennes*, like Jeanne Damas (@jeannedamas, 1.5 million followers) Leasy In Paris (@leasy_inparis, 243.000 followers), and Jeanne Ménard (@jeanne_andreaa, 326.000 followers) and the picture they paint conforms to Aurélie's description of the *Parisienne* and her life; the posts and stories provide a steady stream of beautiful, skinny, young women drinking coffee together, buying groceries at organic food markets, and partying with Paris' in-crowd in impeccable outfits. There are also numerous books that talk about how to dress, behave, love, and even raise children like a French woman, who is consistently conflated with a Parisian woman.[5]

5. Some examples include Ines de la Fressange's *Parisian Chic*, Mireille Guiliano's *French Women Don't Get Fat*, Jamie Cat Callan's *French Women Don't Sleep Alone*, and Pamela Druckerman's *French Children Don't Throw Food.*

It is clear from the descriptions by Laura and Aurélie, and from narratives broadcast by influencers like Jeanne Damas and books about the *Parisienne*, that having the lifestyle of a *bobo-Parisienne* is contingent on a few factors, for one, you need to have money to pay for the partying and the shopping you do on the weekend. It also helps if you live in the city center, because taking the RER lines from the suburbs to meet your friends for daily coffees and nighttime parties takes a lot of time. Second, you need to have close friends that have the time and money to party and drink coffee with you, and finally, it helps if you speak French so that you can join in on the talking. Understanding who the *Parisienne* is, is thus not only about her appearance but about understanding the lifestyle she represents; a superior lifestyle – as the books would have us believe - that requires money, a social network, and the right place to live, in other words, it requires abundant economic, social, and cultural capital.

Thoughts and Feelings about the *Parisienne*

Some of my interlocutors find the *Parisienne* and the lifestyle she represents inspirational or even aspirational, yet others find it shallow or annoying, and some have both positive and negative thoughts and feelings about it. One of my interlocutors who was very positive about the *Parisienne* was Jennifer (40), a hairdresser from New York who moved to Paris in 2023. When I interviewed her on a sunny afternoon in the Buttes Chaumont Park in Paris' 19th district, she said:

> **Jennifer:** Like, they know what they like and they're not going to be… I wouldn't say you have a lot of people pleasers here and they feel very strongly about the things, their passions and their traditions, their cultures, their food, and they're happy to say no.
>
> **Lisa:** And is this a woman you've met? That you're describing to me?
>
> **Jennifer:** Yeah, absolutely yeah all of them. So far, the French women… right, it's kind of in my mind the quintessential… like she exists yeah absolutely.

When I asked Jennifer whether she admires this attitude of the *Parisienne*, she said, "Absolutely. I strive for it." Carmen, a 21-year-old law student of French parents who was born in Barcelona and moved to Paris in 2022 for her studies, said something similar when she told me that she tries "to embrace the power" of the *Parisienne*, referring to her

confidence and style. She told me that she does not consider herself a *Parisienne*, because as she said, "To be truly Parisian you have to be born in Paris," but she stressed how she likes that *Parisiennes* "feel good about themselves," and that she admires it.

Other women, like Alice (28), a professional woman working in marketing, admired the eccentric dress styles that women can wear in Paris without being judged. Alice was one of the few women who expressed that women in Paris are free to wear whatever they want, because most of my interlocutors expressed feeling the need to conform to a "simple-and-chic" dress code to fit in. Two other women I met, Céline (29) and Constance (39), who are both born-and-raised *Parisiennes*, seemed somewhat proud to be real *Parisiennes*. Even when Céline's friend Charlotte (26), who was born in the city of Nantes, admitted that she never revealed to strangers that she was from Paris instead telling them she is from Nantes to avoid being judged as a snobbish *Parisienne,* Céline said:

> **Céline:** I'm very… proud, no I don't know if I'm proud or not, but I'm totally cool with the fact of being *Parisienne*. I've really grown up in this city and yeah when I see… when I meet someone like in a different country and I say I'm from Paris, I'm proud of it, I'm at peace with that totally.

Constance, whom I met on the street while photographing with Amélie, clearly enjoyed living the lifestyle of the *Parisienne*: going out with friends, discovering new culinary hotspots, and cultural events. Moreover, Constance was clear that she likes the confidence that the *Parisienne* represents. Others, like Selima and Veronica (27), an Italian PhD student at the Sorbonne University, said that they do not necessarily judge the *Parisienne* badly, saying that "it has its place" in Paris. Yet, there were also women who pointed out issues with the *Parisienne*.

Adrienne (35) who was also born and raised in Paris just like Céline and Constance, did find the *Parisienne* problematic, saying, "I kind of dislike it, because you're right it's totally white. Very normal." Referring to the white skin colour of the *Parisienne* and the privilege and wealth that it symbolizes. Something Farah, a 24-year-old woman of Algerian descent who lives with her mother in a suburb south of Paris, echoed. When I asked Farah how she compares to the *Parisienne,* she said without blinking that she does not feel represented because the image of the *Parisienne* is a white woman. However, Farah also told me that she enjoys dressing up and looking good like a *Parisienne*, yet also said that she does not like how the *Parisienne* puts her into a category, a category that is "shallow" and that

"doesn't have much to offer," because the life of the *Parisienne* solely "revolves around looking nice."

For Elena (25), a business student in Paris who told me she came from a poor Romanian family, the lifestyle of the *Parisienne* is somewhat aspirational, because when I met her for an interview she told me how she felt jealous of colleagues who could afford to live such a life, expressing that she wished she had the financial means to travel to exotic destinations like *Parisiennes* do in summertime and to dress up in "Parisian girl summer dresses" that she told me she and her friend were "totally obsessed with" last summer. However, because Elena had to provide for herself since she was eighteen years old, she felt she did not have the means to live like a *Parisienne*, because she needs to spend money on her priorities, like paying her tuition fees and rent.

For Aliénor (25), a psychology student born and raised in a suburb of Paris, the "old P*arisienne*" is indeed a fashionable girl who works in journalism or communication, but to her, the new *Parisienne* represents more of "a cool way to live," going to clubs, concerts and cultural events; a life she clearly also leads and enjoys. Women like my friend Amélie and my interlocutor Béatrice (25), a good friend of Laura, who moved to Paris from the same city in the southeast of France, both expressed they like the lifestyle of the *Parisienne*; pursuing all kinds of cultural and social activities at any time of the day and generally being a "free woman," but they also talked about the issue of needing to be skinny as a *Parisienne.* They both emphasized that weight is very important and that they both experienced judgment from their mothers and peers about their body size despite both being slender women. Both also dealt with feelings of "not being good enough."

The feeling of pressure and being judged became a recurring theme in my interviews that shows that the *Parisienne* is indeed a type of normative femininity that exerts a certain pressure on the lives of my interlocutors. This reminds me of what Claudia Liebelt (2019, 688) writes in her ethnography on female beauty norms and urban belonging in Istanbul:

> Female bodies are constituted and classified not simply through hegemonic norms, but also through a "visual economy of recognition" (Ahmed 2000, 30). Thus, the scrutiny and affective judging of female bodies occurs in social encounters in which categories of difference become tokens for urban belonging or extraneousness in a visceral and affective sense.

In Paris too, women's bodies are subjected to hegemonic norms like being skinny, pretty, and white, additionally, true *Parisienne* femininity is displayed by engaging in the "right" lifestyle of going for coffee, doing yoga, and going clubbing. Indeed, these attributes become tokens in a "visual economy of recognition" on which women's perceived fit with the dominant norm is leveraged by other women to form judgments about who is a "real" *Parisienne*. Yet this is not the only side of what the *Parisienne* represents to my interlocutors; she is also an aspirational figure that helps women "fit in" with other women in Paris.

So far, this chapter has shown that there is general consent among my interlocutors about who the stereotypical *Parisienne* is, what she looks like and how she lives her life, but that there are also differences in the aspects that my interlocutors emphasize or that they admire or do not like. From this point of view, it becomes clear how the norm of the *Parisienne* as a skinny, rich, white woman who can afford an expensive lifestyle filled with clubbing, shopping, and drinking coffee with friends, is not merely a phenomenon of a social structure that limits women in the ways they live their lives and that oppresses them to conform, but also something that women – to varying degrees – admire or even strive for and that they utilize to fit in, signalling a need for social connection with other *Parisiennes*. Being like the *Parisienne* thus becomes a way of signalling that one belongs to Paris; that one fits in. This indicates that Berlant's (2008) argument that normativity can be seen as a desire for connection to the social world, holds value for understanding how gendered norms operate on women. The next chapter explores in more detail how women relate to the *Parisienne*, specifically in relation to five problematic categories that emerged from my data: fashion, heteronormative sexuality, beauty, race and ethnicity, and social class.

Chapter 2

Relating to *La Parisienne*: "She Exists, but I Am Not Her – And That's Okay"

Alice Pfeiffer (2019), an Anglo-French journalist who wrote the book *Je Ne Suis Pas Parisienne,* writes that the *Parisienne* is a "fictional character […] overflowing with social, ethnic, heteronormative insinuations that are always taken for granted." Speaking with the women in this study about their thoughts and feelings about the *Parisienne*, I learned that my interlocutors indeed recognize issues of social class, ethnicity, and heteronormative sexuality with the idea of the *Parisienne*. However, they also told me where I can find the *Parisienne*: in the 6th, 7th, or 8th district. Alice Pfeiffer's claim that the *Parisienne* is a problematic fictional character is thus only half true, because according to my interlocutors the *Parisienne* exists.

During the interviews I conducted as part of this research, there were five aspects that my interlocutors repeatedly came back to regarding the norm that the *Parisienne* represents and that they find problematic. These aspects are (1) fashion, (2) sexuality, and (3) beauty, which unite under the header of "body" in this chapter, (4) race and ethnicity, and (5) social class. In this chapter I show how the women in this study relate to the *Parisienne* as the embodiment of normative femininity by unpacking their thoughts and feelings in relation to these five aspects. Ultimately, I show that their standpoint towards the *Parisienne* is best described by the statement: "she exists, but I am not her – and that's okay."

The Body of the *Parisienne*

Within anthropology, two primary theoretical perspectives regarding the body have emerged over the past few decades: "the body as a symbol and as an agent" (Reischer and Koo 2004, 297). The first perspective views the body as a symbol of social structures that conveys social meaning to self and others, whereas the second perspective sees the body as agent in the social world; not merely a representation of social structure but able to transform social reality. The body is seen as a representation of the self's essence (Reischer and Koo 2004, 306), therefore modification of bodies, for example by dressing it in clothes and accessories, putting on make-up, piercing body parts, dying hair, or applying tattoos, signals something about the self; that one is part of a certain social group or the reverse; that one opposes a

particular social group. Bodies are also modified to signal change of social status, but as Reischer and Koo (2004, 297) write: "the overarching theme and primary end of most body work is the pursuit and attainment of beauty, however it may be defined," and historically, beauty has been gendered as a female attribute, with women's bodies being central to the discourse on beauty (Banner 1983). The female body thus becomes a site where dominant cultural meanings about ideal body and beauty are inscribed (Balsamo 1996), yet also a site where such meanings are contested. This section explores how attributes pertaining to the body, like fashion, beauty, and heteronormative sexuality, are viewed by my interlocutors as symbols of gendered norms attached to the *Parisienne.*

Fashion

It is halfway through February an I am attending a social gathering that I signed up for through Instagram at a local wine store. The gathering started at seven in the evening, and I was the first one to arrive. After about twenty minutes, another woman arrives. The woman is beautiful, tall and slender with dark eyes and dark brown hair. She is wearing red lipstick and black eyeliner in Amy Winehouse-like style. Overall, a very Parisian look. But it is what she is wearing that attracts my attention, especially her dark-green cape, that reminds me of the capes the Hobbits wear in Lord of the Rings, and the miniature sword she wears in one of her earlobes as an earring. In the two weeks that I have been in Paris, I have never seen a woman dressed like this and I am immediately intrigued by her independent style. Anaïs, as I find out her name is, is a 32-year-old, native French woman, born outside of Paris, but currently living in the 20th district. She works in a bookstore and loves reading fantasy books and playing videogames and later tells me, when I meet her for an interview, that she is a self-proclaimed geek.

As Hansen (2004, 371) notes in her review on anthropological perspectives on clothing, fashion, and culture, clothes have "strategic effects" and "expressive abilities" entailed in their material properties; they are our "social skin" (Turner 1980 [1993]). When Anaïs introduced herself to me in English with a heavy French accent that I found very charming, my first thought was that based on her body, face and voice, I found her the epitome of female Frenchness, indeed Parisianness, however, with her outfit she was clearly signaling something different, leveraging it seemingly strategically to place herself squarely outside the narrative of the *Parisienne.* Clothing is an important part of who the *Parisienne* is. When I asked one of my interlocutors, Adeline, a 30-year-old, native French woman from

the south of France who had been living in Paris on and off for about sixteen years, about this, she said:

> **Adeline:** They all look the same. There is this very specific idea of what elegance is, like it has to be simple and chic, but it's kind of posh, you know. It's a very prescriptive idea of what elegance is. If it's too frilly, then it's not classy enough.

Other women too, like Selima, stressed how defined and limited the *Parisienne* style is. The look is expensive and classy with muted colors – preferably black – and without glitter. Amélie had talked about this phenomenon too during our first one-on-one conversation. She told me *Parisiennes* prefer to wear black because they do not want to stand out and because it makes them look skinnier.

The theme of "fitting in" became a recurring one in my interviews. When I talked to Béatrice about dressing like a *Parisienne* she told me: "Like, I'm not from Paris, but if I want to be in Paris, I have to do this to fit in. If I do the cliché, no-one will notice me." I asked her if she finds fitting in important and she replied: "I don't really want to be like everyone, but no-one will notice me like that, so it's more comfortable for me. I'm part of that group," referring to the *bobo Parisiennes.* Béatrice's statement seemed to confirm Amélie's assertion that *Parisiennes* do not like to stand out and that an effective tactic to achieve this is to dress like other *Parisiennes.* Dressing "like a *Parisienne*" is sometimes also a way to mask that one is not a "real" *Parisienne*. For example, Farah told me: "When people think of France, they think of Paris, and I'm part of it, even though I'm not wealthy, I don't have a huge social life, but I still fit in, because of appearances; the way I look, the way I dress, the way I talk."

Overall, the dress code of a *Parisienne* is narrowly defined and prescriptive, and straying from such a dress code can make a woman feel out of place, even like she is being watched or judged. Most of my interlocutors expressed that they do not like the prescriptive clothing style of the *Parisienne*, although some said they occasionally take inspiration from it. Nevertheless, many still conform to the simple-and-chic dress code of the *Parisienne*, because it is easy for them and so that they fit in. Yet others choose, either consciously or subconsciously, to move away from the image of the stereotypical *Parisienne* by dressing differently; women Amélie labeled as the "new *Parisiennes*."

A woman that embodies this "new *Parisienne*" is Aliénor (25), a psychology student who was born in the department of Seine-Saint-Denis, about half an hour by public transport away

from the city center and now living in a town on the border of Paris' 12th district. I met her sitting with her friend Elise (27), also a psychologist, at a terrace near Place de la Bastille on a rainy afternoon in March. Aliénor was wearing old, white sneakers, a pair of baggy jeans with lots of pockets, and a green beanie. On her eyelids, she was wearing some smudged, winged eyeliner. When I asked her about the *Parisienne*, she first started rattling off the cliché: a girl who is into fashion, who works in journalism or communications, a mean girl even. Then she said, "But today, it's not this anymore. It's more a cool way to live; to go out, go to clubs, discover food, go to movies, concerts, and other cultural things." This cool, new way to live, as I would come to realize during my time in Paris, was indeed most visible in the 19th and 20th districts, where I saw women dressed like Aliénor drinking beer in Buttes Chaumont Park, browsing second-hand clothing stores and vinyl record shops, whereas in the center of Paris, near the Louvre and in the chic Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighborhood, I would still find the traditional *Parisiennes*, dressed in dark wool coats sporting luxury bags, drinking wine on terraces and shopping at exclusive brand stores.

Fashion is a clear marker of lifestyle, and a symbol of belonging to a social group. However, I could not help but feel that the fashion of the new *Parisienne* represented a new norm for women who were trying to escape the stereotype of the *Parisienne.* In her ethnography on the pursuit of respectability among white, working-class women in north-west England, Skeggs (1997) showed how these women used clothing and cosmetics to look more middle class, thereby protecting themselves from the specific stigmas associated with working-class femininity. The new *Parisiennes* can be considered to leverage similar bodily techniques to achieve a similar result; by wearing baggy, second-hand clothes, sneakers, and beanies, the new *Parisiennes*, either consciously or subconsciously, escape association with the stereotypical *Parisienne* and the stigma of the haughty mean girl that goes with it, yet in doing so they move into another type of normativity that signals belonging to another social group: that of the new *Parisienne.*

Heteronormative Sexuality

In her ethnographic research on single women in rural and urban India where heterosexual marriage is instrumental to being considered a valued part of society, Lamb (2018, 62) argues that women's sexuality is "a form of belonging and exclusion" by highlighting how women whose bodies or sexualities do not conform to normative standards of feminine beauty, reproductivity, and heterosexuality are excluded from marriage and denied social recognition as valued individuals. In Paris, a woman's value is (no longer) determined by whether she is

in a heterosexual marriage, but her sexuality is still problematic in other ways; having the "right" sexuality - that is heterosexual - is still a signifier of inclusion or exclusion. Two of my interlocutors, Adeline and Adrienne, who look more like "new" *Parisiennes* than stereotypical *Parisiennes*, openly identify as lesbian and are in a relationship. They are also the only interlocutors who mentioned the heteronormative character of the *Parisienne* as problematic. The topic of heterosexuality came up when I asked them whether having the look of the *Parisienne* is something that they had ever strived for. Adrienne explained:

> **Adrienne:** I think for me, I don't... So, I never tried to look like this idea of the *Parisienne*. No, because I'm too... I mean... I'm so far from it that it cannot play a role on me. I don't know how to say that. It's so far from me that there is no way I can relate to this idea. First of all, because I'm a lesbian. And then also because probably the fact that I was really born in Paris, I don't have to show like the legitimacy. I feel legitimate about my... I belong to Paris.

In this fragment, Adrienne expresses that she does not relate to the idea of the *Parisienne* because she is a lesbian, Adeline agreed with her. An author that has also expressed issues with the heteronormative character of the *Parisienne* is Alice Pfeiffer (2019), who makes an interesting link between fashion and the heteronormative character of the *Parisienne.* In her book, she discusses how *Parisiennes* often wear boyfriend jeans, oversized shirts and men's jackets, which gives them an androgynous look. Items like trench coats, striped t-shirts, and men's shoes - promoted by fashion icons like Ines de la Fressange - are now considered fashion staples of the *Parisienne*. French fashion has thus adopted styles once considered lesbian and rebranded them as new forms of femininity. However, as Pfeiffer argues, these styles have lost their original rebellious meanings and now paradoxically oppose the freedom early pioneers in menswear sought. Instead, *Parisiennes* use these masculine elements to emphasize their femininity, presenting a delicate appearance rather than demonstrating equality or queerness. As Pfeiffer (2019) states, "if the term queer refers […] to a process of deconstructing the heteronormative matrix, both in appearance and in expectations and life choices, the *Parisienne* corresponds in every way to a hypernormative construct, far from an engaged questioning that would jeopardize her identity and the society that conceived her."[6]

6. This is my English translation of the original text that is currently only available in French.

The reality of the *Parisienne* is that she is heterosexual and there is not yet space for other sexual orientations in the current narrative. Women who identify as lesbian, queer, asexual, or any other type of sexuality than heterosexual – or cisgender for that matter - are by definition not *Parisiennes*. Because my research includes only two women who identify as something other than heterosexual and because I did not meet any women who identify as something other than cisgender, it is not possible for me to make strong statements about the intersection of heterosexuality and normative femininity. However, from my conversation with Adrienne and Adeline, I took away that they dislike the heteronormative character of the *Parisienne*, but that they were not especially bothered by it. Adrienne even places herself outside the narrative of the *Parisienne* because she can make claims to being a born-and-raised Parisian, which, interestingly is still an important attribute of the *Parisienne.*

Beauty

It is a grey morning in February as I walk to my French language class near Place de la Bastille. It is almost Valentine's Day, and the city is littered with advertisements for chocolate, perfume, and lingerie. On the way I pass an advertisement of French lingerie brand Etam depicting a skinny young woman with long dark hair posing in sexy red lingerie. The woman resembles the *Parisienne* in the sense that she is skinny, pretty, and seemingly confident in her sexuality. I quickly snap a picture of the advertisement and continue my way to class. In my French class, one of the women has attracted my attention since the first day. Her name is Ana and she is from Brazil. She is at least 1.90 meter tall and very curvaceous, besides this, her voice is low and her jawline strong. She looks feminine when comes to how she styles her hair and the clothes she wears, but she is somewhat masculine in her bodily appearance. I have not yet had much chance to speak with her, but today I propose to get some lunch together with our Indian classmate, Laila. As we exit the building and walk to the corner of the street, Ana tells me she visited the Netherlands recently and that "it was like paradise" for her. She says she felt good because the women there looked like her: tall and curvaceous, not so "petite" like the French women. Laila, who is short and curvaceous, nods and says she feels the same. Ana tells us it is hard for her to buy well-fitting clothes in Paris, because the beauty standards, and therefore the clothing sizes, are so different. Laughing, Ana explains that in Brazil, women ought to have big boobs and big asses and that men ought to be muscular. As we are having this conversation, we are standing a mere thirty meters away from the lingerie advertisement I passed this morning, and while we are talking about body shapes and sizes, I am thinking that none of us look anything like the woman on that poster.

A few weeks later, as I exit the Buttes Chaumont Park after going for a run, I come across another advertisement. It shows a tanned, curvaceous woman who smiles brightly at the camera. It catches my attention because it is so different from the regular fashion and beauty advertisements I see in Paris on a daily basis. The advertisement is for Brazilian beauty brand Sol de Janeiro and advertises body cremes. As I take a picture, I think back to Ana's statement; the beauty standards in France really are different.

Figure 3. Photos of advertisements I passed on the street near Bastille and Buttes Chaumont Park (own material).

"Women's worth is centered around beauty, specifically in Paris," Farah says to me while stirring her cocktail in the bar of the expensive hotel where we are meeting, "and beauty in Paris is about being skinny." Being skinny is an important attribute of the *Parisienne* and the women in my study are aware of this. As Béatrice said:

> **Béatrice:** There are many beauty standards for women in France. Even for me, even though I look quite Parisian and I'm quite slim, I feel like sometimes I'm not skinny enough.

That being skinny is important is something my interlocutors learn from a young age, both Béatrice, Amélie, and a French friend of mine in the Netherlands told me that their mothers were instrumental in teaching them that French women should be skinny, a sentiment that was shared among girls in school. Amélie told me:

> **Amélie:** My mum always put pressure on my sister. She was a size 42, and I think my mum didn't think that was a good size. She was definitely not happy about it and she always told me: "don't eat too much Nutella because you don't want to become like your sister." And in high school, also, when I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, half of the girls in my class had an eating disorder, you know. Like, Kate Moss was their biggest role model and everybody wanted to be skinny, so all the girls in my class, they smoked and drank coffee just so that they wouldn't be hungry.

Béatrice also talked about the influence of her mother, but thought that things were changing for her generation.

> **Béatrice:** There is some revolution now in our generation. My mum and my best friend's mum always talk about their weight and when I lose weight, my mum is always so happy. She would be saying like: "ah you lost weight, that is great!" For my mum, how do you say… appearance is first, then feelings. But maybe sometimes you lose weight because you feel bad, but then it's still good that you lost weight.

Perhaps things are indeed changing in France, because Amélie told me that a counterculture of body positivity is slowly starting to take off and she showed me a few Instagram accounts that promote body positivity, like @justinaccessible (366.000 followers), @taniamakeuplus (266.000 followers), and @louiseaubery (605.000 followers). However, as became clear from my conversations, being skinny remains the norm. A norm that holds less sway over the same women in other countries. Amélie told me that she lived in New York for a few years, a time she called "the best time of my life." Béatrice too, who lived in Montréal, Canada, for three years, expressed that she had felt better in Montréal. When I asked why, they both gave reasons to do with experiencing less pressure on body weight and being freer to "wear whatever you want" regardless of body size and shape. Besides Béatrice and Amélie, who were the most outspoken about the Parisian "body beautiful" (Reischer and Koo 2004), at least four other interlocutors also addressed this issue with me. Selima for example, who

lived in London for seven months, pointed out how she felt freer in her body in London; that she could wear whatever she wanted without attracting looks.

Beauty is a highly subjective matter, culturally defined and, as Reischer and Koo (2004, 298) argue: "an index and expression of social values and beliefs – so much so that "the history of [society] is in large measure the history of women's beauty." In general, being slim has become the standard of beauty for women from a Euro-American perspective. However, a now famous study by Popenoe (2004) shows that such a perspective of beauty does not hold in all cultural contexts. Popenoe (2004) conducted ethnographic research among the Azawagh Arabs in Niger where female fatness is considered beautiful and desirable. Popenoe writes that among the Azawagh Arabs, women "cultivate an aesthetic of softness, pliability, stilness, seatedness," which opposes the male aesthetic of "hardness, uprightness, mobility" (2004, 191), this reflects the idea in Islamic scripture that women and men "are radically different kinds of beings that are best harmonized when opposed to one another" (Reischer and Koo 2004, 309-10).

Despite cultural differences in perceptions of beauty, "for those who wish to be recognized as "women," norms of outer appearance and standards of feminine beauty play a quasi-existential role" (Liebelt 2022, 207). Liebelt, who studied the role beauty and body play in the lives of middle class women in urban Turkey, argues that beauty remains tied to women in a "tragic way," pointing to beauty as "a site of struggle and a somatechnological orientation toward an ultimately unattainable ideal" (Liebelt 2022, 208). This statement reminds me of what Adeline told me when we were talking about the cliché of the *Parisienne*: "So, I guess, like you say, it's just what it is, a cliché, but I guess the harm can lay in how unattainable that image is for most women, I guess, to look like." And because beauty is an outward expression of femininity that is so intricately tied to a woman's identity and sense of self (Bartky 1990), the normative beauty standards of the *Parisienne*, especially when it comes to body size, do affect multiple of my interlocutors, despite all being slender women.

Besides her body, the *Parisienne* is problematic in another way, because as Skeggs (1997, 98) points out: "being, becoming, practising and doing femininity" can vary greatly for those identifying as women, depending on factors such as age, social class, ethnicity, or race (Liebelt 2022, 207). The latter two are especially important for some of my interlocutors who do not identify as native French and/or white and for too long, scholarly debates of

beauty have ignored implications of class, race, and ethnicity, departing from "a racially unmarked, implicitly heterosexual woman of an unspecified class" (Craig 2006, 162).

Ethnicity, Race and Social Class

Ethnicity, race, and social class significantly influence women's experiences with dominant beauty ideals, intertwining to create "a normalizing discourse" (Craig 2006, 164) that portrays poor women and women of color as deviant and flawed. Out of my twenty-six interlocutors, four identified as having double ethnicity from a country where the dominant skin color is not white. All four spoke French and had either one or two parents who were born in France, but either one of their parents or both grandparents were born in another country, and in my interviews with them, ethnicity was a recurring topic of conversation. In terms of social class, all my interlocutors belonged to the middle class. Most came from middle class families; all but two attended university or had jobs that paid sufficiently to live comfortably in Paris and its more affluent suburbs. Yet, my interlocutors were keenly aware of the implications of social class associated with the *Parisienne.* In this section, I first discuss matters of ethnicity and race, demonstrating the problematic conviction that Parisian still means white, and second, I discuss how my interlocutors feel about the intersection of social class with the gender norm embodied by the *Parisienne.*

Ethnicity and Race

Four of my interlocutors, Selima, Farah, Aiysha (21), and Janaína (25) all identified as having mixed heritage. Selima and Farah both had North African roots in countries formerly colonized by France, which was visible in their olive skin, dark hair, and dark eyes. Janaína also had olive skin, dark hair and eyes, but had Brazilian roots and Aiysha had West African roots, visible in her black skin, dark hair, and eyes. When I asked Aiysha, who I met while conducting street interviews, if she considered herself a *Parisienne*, she said: "no, because the cliché is white and blonde, and I am not that."

Skin color is a clear marker of difference in a city like Paris where the dominant ethnicity is native, white French, and these four women all had experiences of being treated differently, being questioned, or feeling excluded based on their non-white appearance. Selima told me about a time she went to a bar in Paris with five blonde girls. They met a guy there and when he introduced himself to the girls, he spoke in French to all the blonde girls, but when he came so Selima, he addressed her in English, apparently assuming that she was not a French speaker. Selima recalled how she came home later that night and told this story

to her roommate. She expected her roommate to be just as surprised as she had been, but after some thought her roommate said, “but you don’t look French,” essentially saying that it was only fair that the man had addressed her in English.

La Parisienne is white or as Farah said: “Parisian means white.” During my research, I heard many more statements about skin color to the same extent, but Janaína, who I met sitting along Canal Saint Martin with her friend Manon (26), perhaps voiced it most extensively when I asked her how she experiences living in Paris, saying:

> **Janaína:** The first thing is that I don’t have a white passing or anything, so I can’t fit in. Even if I was dressing just like the cliché, even if I was delicate, stuff like that, I wouldn’t fit in because I’m not white, so I can’t. But I’m not interested in fitting in this cliché of *la Parisienne*. I’m not a fan of it. It can be irritating, not being seen as a French person. First of all, when people see me - not even talking about *la Parisienne*, because I am a *Parisienne* - but I’m not just that, I’m also Brazilian, but also, I am French, just as much as any white French. So that can be irritating at some point. But personally, I’m completely okay with not fitting in the public’s vision of the French person or *la Parisienne*.

The majority of the interlocutors in this study are white, if not native French, and none of them shared experiences of exclusion based on race or ethnicity, however, that does not mean none of them are aware of these issues nor that they have no opinions about it. When I asked what she thought about *la Parisienne*, Adrienne who is white and native French, said: “No, the truth is that I kind of dislike it, because you’re right, it’s totally white, very normal.” Alice echoed this statement when I asked her the same question, saying: “It’s not really 2024. It’s so French-French. There’s no mention of diversity. It’s a very little piece. The elite, more than real people.” However, out of the twenty-two white women in this study, only three expressed dislike or concern about the whiteness of the *Parisienne* and it was never a topic of extensive conversation with them as opposed to when I was speaking with non-white women.

Overall, Farah’s statement that “Parisian means white” seems an accurate one. The women in this study who did not identify as white and/or French clearly were aware of the *Parisienne’s* skin color, however, despite feeling like they do not “fit in” or feeling “not represented,” these women did not seem too concerned with these issues. Perhaps a possible explanation is that despite not being white, these women still belonged to the middle class

and had relatively good lives in Paris, which to a certain extent substitutes for not being white.

Social Class

"A lot of what the *Parisienne* is, is the question of whether you're wealthy enough to afford to live in central Paris," Farah says as we sit at the hotel bar. I get what Farah means, the center of Paris, especially the relatively wealthy central districts are unaffordable for anyone with an average or below average income. The majority of Paris' citizens therefore live in the suburbs which are six to seven times larger in population size than the twenty districts that constitute the center of Paris and are much more afforable.[7] [8]

The *Parisienne* generally lives in the 6th, 7th, or 8th district, is educated, comes from a wealthy family and dates someone rich. Moreover, she surrounds herself exclusively with her equally Parisian *bourgeois* friends. Sitting in the Buttes Chaumont Park, I asked Adeline what she thinks about this:

> **Adeline:** You have to be an heiress. I don't know, it's like you have to be Deneuve's niece or whatever. So, to me, this idea of the *Parisienne* is linked, I mean, intertwined with the class aspects of this, I guess, when we think Parisian, we think of the elegant Parisian, not the poorest, poorer Parisian, like, living in a, I don't know, I think there is this thing. You have to be so rich to live the lifestyle of the *Parisienne*, according to what people say it is. It's a very *bourgeois* idea.

The *Parisienne* is thus a priviliged woman, she comes from a *bourgeois* family, referring to a well-off, educated family who owns property and is able to support her education and lifestyle financially, socially, and culturally. Moreover, *bourgeois* in French means having the right social networks to get ahead in life. It reminds me of another conversation I had with Anaïs as we walked through the streets of Paris on a grey afternoon at the end of February. As

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7. The price per square meter in the wealthy districts of the inner city now averages more than 10.000 euro with the 6th district claiming first rank at 15.108 euro per square meter in 2024. Source: Statista.com, "Average Price per Square Meter for Residential Real Estate Properties in Paris, France, in January 2024, by Arrondissement," https://www.statista.com/statistics/766844/price-per-square-meter-of-apartments-by-arrondissement-paris/.

8. The average price per square meter in most of Paris' less affluent northern and northeastern suburbs averaged 4.120 euro in 2022 and in the slightly more affluent southern and southwestern suburbs the square meter price averaged 6.640 euro in the same year. Source: Paris Property Group, "Île-de-France Real Estate Sales Are Falling (Except in Paris) but Prices Are Stable," https://parispropertygroup.com/blog/2022/in-ile-de-france-real-estate-sales-are-falling-but-prices-are-stable/.

we walked along the narrow troittoir with cars zooming past, Anaïs said that after meeting me at the wine event and hearing about my research, she had to think about a girl she once worked with in the bookshop and who she befriended.

> **Anaïs:** This girl seemed very *Parisienne* to me because she had all these privileges. She always had enough money to buy books, because she came from a family with money. That girl didn't grow up in Paris, but if you grow up in Paris, I mean, it's very advantageous for a child, just because they go to school in Paris, where kids build up a network of other privileged kids from a very young age. I never had that. My parents were nurses, so it's not like… they were not poor, but they also weren't rich, but everything had to be re-used, kept, and recycled, because "you may need it some day in the future." My grandparents were poor immigrants from Italy, they fled that country after the Second World War and started their own business here in Paris. They did well, but they were so careful about spending money, despite having good money from their business. So, for example, my grandmother, she had this old, white plastic garden chair, you know, one like you don't really use inside, but only in the garden. She had this chair in the living room covered with a mountain of clothes to make it comfortable, when they could just have bought, like, a comfortable chair. To me, this is unbelievable.

Anaïs' story shows how she feels that being born and raised in Paris is very advantageous for a child's future. It also shows how her own upbringing compares to such a narrative of privilige. Nevertheless, it is clear that Anaïs does not count herself as being part of the priviliged *bourgeoisie* of which the *Parisienne* is part, despite not necessarily coming from a poor background.

My interlocutor Elena's (25) story is different. Elena is originally from a small town in Romania and spent part of her childhood and teenage years in the suburbs of Rome. One of the first things Elena told me about herself while sitting at a crowded terrace near the busy Place de Clichy on a warm evening in April, is that she comes from a poor family and that she has always felt ashamed of this. She told me that when she came to Paris two years ago, she was immediately confronted with a new lifestyle that she could not afford. Ever since she was eighteen, she always had to support herself, so she never had money for luxurious vacations or even an apartment for herself. But seeing all her Parisian friends and colleagues going on holidays to exotic destinations made her feel frustrated about her situation, wishing

she was able to have such a lifestyle as well. At least, she said laughing, she can post regularly on Instagram to show all her friends in Italy that she is living in Paris, something she considers somewhat of a status symbol despite not being able to fully participate in the *bobo-Parisienne* lifestyle.

This chapter has unpacked how my interlocutors relate to the *Parisienne* as the embodiment of normative femininity by exploring their thoughts and feelings in relation to body, race, ethnicity, and social class. Overall, the women in this study who cannot conform to the norm set forth by the *Parisienne* based on their sexual orientation, ethnicity or race, were also the women that were least interested in being seen as a *Parisienne*. As Adrienne pointed out: "it is so far from me that it cannot play a role on me," a sentiment Janaína reflected when she said that despite experiencing irritation about not being considered French, she was completely okay with not fitting in the public's vision of the *Parisienne*. As a result, these women, either consciously or subconsciously, moved away from te dominant narrative of the *Parisienne* by adopting a more more colourful and baggy clothing style associated with the new *Parisienne.* The women in this study who identified as heterosexual, white and/or native French, in other words, those who conform to the norm at least to some extent, generally expressed more positive thoughts and feelings about the *Parisienne* and seemed to conform more to the simple-and-chic dress code of the *Parisienne*. The only parts of the *Parisienne* some of them seemed to struggle with was the bodily norm of being skinny.

The traditional *Parisienne* and the new *Parisienne* are not so different in the end. There may be more space for other skin colours and sexual orientations in the narrative of the new *Parisienne,* and the clothes, drinks, and types of places she frequents may change, yet both types of *Parisiennes* have a lifestyle that requires economic, social, and cultural capital. Perhaps the clue then lies in what all my interlocutors share, which is middle-classness. In many ways, this is a confirmation of the widely accepted thought in anthropology that intersectionality matters when it comes to gender and gendered norms; middle-classness, in this sense, becomes a substitute for sexuality, ethnicity and race.

Ultimately, however, none of the women in this study considered themselves stereotypical *Parisiennes*. When they spoke about the *Parisienne*, they always seemed to be talking about a woman that was not them. Yet, not being considered a stereotypical *Parisienne* was not problematic for my interlocutors. Some were not interested in being seen as a *Parisienne* in the first place and although others clearly admired the *Parisienne,* none necessarily seemed to want to *be* a *Parisienne*. My interlocutors' standpoint towards the

Parisienne is therefore best described by the statement: “she exists, but I am not her – and that’s okay.”

In this chapter I have discussed how women relate to aspects connected to the normative physical appearance of the *Parisienne*. In the next and final chapter, I demonstrate how the real lives of real Parisian women compare to a normative image of “the good life,” represented by the lifestyle of the *Parisienne* by looking at two contradictory experiences of life in Paris: a general experience of not feeling safe versus enjoying the freedom and opportunities that Paris provides.

Chapter 3

“I Love It and I Hate it”: The Real Life of Real Parisian Women

The norm associated with the *Parisienne* entails visions of “the good life” (Fischer 2014) as a frictionless existence filled with friends, parties, and a general sense of *joie de vivre* (joy of living). Moreover, that life is supported by the generational wealth and social and cultural capital the *Parisienne* inherits from her family. However, for my interlocutors, life in Paris is not the privileged and romanticized version of the life of the *Parisienne*, but a life filled with complex and opposing feelings. This chapter first discusses a theme that recurred often in my interviews with women and in my own life in Paris: fearing sexual harassment and feeling unsafe. I discuss the experiences of sexual harassment women in this study have faced as well as their strategies to avoid harassment to show how it affects their daily life. However, despite a pervasive feeling of not being safe, Paris also provides opportunities for my interlocutors as they find love, education, work, and enjoyment in the city. The second section of this chapter therefore explores the freedom women experience and the opportunities they find in a city that they also regularly feel unsafe in.

The Streets Belong to Men? On Sexual Harassment and Feeling Unsafe

Living in Paris as a woman comes with fear of sexual harassment and with feeling unsafe; nearly 80% of the women in this study expressed feeling unsafe in Paris, predominantly on the metro, the most important mode of transportation for people in Paris. One of my interlocutors, Anaïs, even went as far as to say that “the streets belong to men.” In this section, I explore women’s experiences with sexual harassment as well as the impact this has on their daily life to show that life in Paris is not always “Emily in Paris vibes,” as one of my interlocutors put it, referring to the popular Netflix tv show in which a young female American marketing executive moves to Paris for work and is swept up in a whirlwind of romantic intrigue, haute couture, and pristine clean streets without ever setting one foot on the Paris metro, a place where the women in this study experience feeling unsafe most.

Experiences of Harassment

Lisa: What is it like being a woman living in Paris?

Farah: I love it and I hate it.

Lisa: How so?

Farah: I love fashion, I love people-watching. Looking nice is part of the game in Paris, but what I hate about it is the male gaze, the aggressive male gaze, staring at you, asking for your phone number on the street. I don't want to be harassed for the way I look.

Lisa: Who harasses you?

Farah: Older men harass me, mostly North African men. I was even once threatened with rape if I didn't give my phone number. It's not enough to simply say no to a man who wants something from you on the street or in the metro, when you say no, there must be another reason.

Lisa: Like what? Like saying, "no, because I have a boyfriend?"

Farah: Even that isn't good enough of a reason, because they will say something along the lines of "what he doesn't know won't hurt him", or "he doesn't need to know." There was a time when an older Iranian man, he was married with kids, often came to the bookstore where I work, and he was always looking at me and asking for my phone number. In the end my managers had to kick him out and he hasn't been back since, but I know he lives around the bookstore.

Farah's experience is not unique. Many of my interlocutors expressed having dealt with (sexual) harassment by men in Paris. While walking through the streets of Paris together, Anaïs told me, "When I go outside, at least three out of every ten men come talk to me, like they would ask for my phone number. I really dislike it. Like, what gives you the right to talk to me?". Others, like Adeline, told me she has often been confronted with indecent exposure by men on the metro.

Adeline: But I guess, yeah, in the transportations, I guess, like, a lot of women have been harassed in the transportation, touched, insulted. I think there have been, like, a... How do you say? A *sondage*? How do you say that?

Adrienne: A survey?

Adeline: A survey. Yes. Like, a few years ago, like, 100% of women living in Paris had been at least one time in their life been, like...

Adrienne: Harassed.

Adeline: Harassed. Yes, that's absolutely a play. So, I guess, guys showing their dicks, like, touching you, wanking around. Yeah.

Lisa: You've seen this personally?

Adeline: Mm-hmm, oh yeah and more than once, people being, like, really, like... yeah. I guess, a lot… yeah, a lot of solicitations. Like, asking, coming, like, a lot of people coming through. It's exhausting.

There was indeed a survey conducted in Paris a few years ago that resulted in a report demonstrating that incidents of sexual violence on the Paris public transport networks had increased since 2020 by 7%. Although not affecting 100% of women as Adeline stated, the report still showed that one in every three respondents (male and female) became victims of sexual harassment on the Paris public transport system. However, 74% of occurrences was aimed at women whereas a mere 7% was aimed at men.[9] During my time in Paris, I was never directly assaulted or harassed in public transport, but I did witness and experience instances of "light" harassment like catcalling and staring on the metro. I was also part of a Facebook group for women living in Paris where experiences with harassment on public transport were posted on a weekly basis. To address the issue of increasing harassment, the

9. Ministère de la Transition Écologique et de la Cohésion des Territoires, "Prévention des Violences Sexuelles et Sexistes dans les Transports Collectifs Terrestres," November 22, 2023, https://www.ecologie.gouv.fr/prevention-des-violences-sexuelles-et-sexistes-dans-transports-collectifs-terrestres.

Parisian Public Transport Company RATP co-developed an app called UMAY that helps users, mostly women and LGBTQI+ persons, to share their real-time location with trusted contacts while traveling. The app also allows users to report unsafe situations and find safe spaces throughout Paris. Currently, the app has 10,000+ downloads and RATP and the organization behind UMAY are now establishing safe spaces in the Paris metro corridors for people who have experienced harassment on the metro or who are fearful of being targeted.[10]

Despite the seeming pervasiveness of sexual harassment, especially on the metro, some of my interlocutors, like Adrienne, Manon, and Constance, expressed that they do not often experience it themselves. When I asked Adrienne and Adeline how they experience living in Paris, Adrienne, who has short hair and a slightly androgynous appearance, told me, "I think I feel that most of the time it's a safe city, but I probably am not very targeted to some types of… catcalling or yeah, harassment, street harassment. Probably not as often as for some more feminine women." Manon, who also has a more masculine look, told me something similar, saying that she used to experience harassment just like her friend Janaína, but that she does not anymore, because of her style and because of her attitude, "I don't get bothered and I don't see men as threats," she told me, yet sometimes she still does not feel safe. Manon is an actress working in cabaret and when she goes on stage, she wears elaborate make-up that she applies before leaving her home. When she goes out, she wears a big hat to avoid showing her face. Nevertheless, as she put it, "when sometimes people see me, I feel I have bad eyes on me, and I don't feel safe for my life." Constance, with 39 years old one of the older women I interviewed for this research, told me she used to be harassed a lot when she was younger, especially on the metro, and that she felt insecure for a long time, but that now she is not the target anymore. According to her, this is not just a matter of age but also of attitude. She feels confident and this is what she projects to the outside world.

Some women in this study expressed never having experienced harassment directly but talked about factors like the degraded urban environment that makes them feel unsafe. On a sunny day in March while out talking to women on the street and photographing with Amélie, I met Alaksandra. Alaksandra (23) came to Paris in 2023 from her hometown Minsk in Belarus to work as an au-pair. When I met her, she was living with her au-pair family on the border of a suburb east of Paris. When I asked her how she experienced living in Paris as a woman, she

10. Laureline Chatriot, "Violence Sexistes: Que Sont les "Safe Places" Mises en Place par la RATP?" *RTL*, July 15, 2023, https://www.rtl.fr/actu/debats-societe/violences-sexistes-que-sont-les-safe-places-mises-en-place-par-la-ratp-7900282813.

told me that it was not very safe compared to where she was from. She thought some areas were also more dangerous than others but that those dangers likely did not come from something evident, but were caused by the fact that "the area looks dangerous".

> **Alaksandra:** You will see some ugly buildings, some graffiti, and it's usually without people. Like, not crowded at all. And like, when you come home at night... yes that feels dangerous, but probably because of the stories that I heard about France, so I cannot say that it's really dangerous, because I haven't experienced… luckily and hopefully it will stay this way, but it's just the way the city looks in some areas. Obviously, it's not the center. But you know where I live, the metro station looks terrible. It looks disgusting. You may see some junkies, you will see some, like, other people from who you expect threat even though probably they won't do anything. In some areas it's dangerous just because how the area looks and that you expect threat.

What Alaksandra is essentially substantiating is a well-known phenomenon in criminology called the Broken Windows Theory (Kelling and Wilson 1982) that poses that noticeable signs of crime and antisocial behavior contribute to an urban environment that fosters more crime and that induces feelings of not being safe (Thompson et al. 2012). During my time in Paris, I frequented several rundown metro stations close to my home that were known to attract junkies, drug dealers and homeless people who resided in the area. I too often felt uncomfortable or unsafe when I had to change trains at these stations, not because something ever happened to me there, but because of the way it looked and smelled, and because of the people it attracted, something I will return to in the next section. However, other women, like Céline (29), a born-and-raised *Parisienne* that I met sitting at a terrace with her friend Charlotte (26) did not seem concerned by her surroundings. Céline lived around the corner of my second apartment in Paris, perhaps 500 meters away from me, on a stretch of boulevard known to be a rougher area.

> **Céline:** I think there is different types of neighborhoods, but finally you can have trouble everywhere or you can feel safe. Me, I am living up, like near the Boulevard, and that's like… for a lot of people, a lot of my friends tell me like that I am in a like a ghetto neighborhood and that's like… and I never feel in danger there. But yeah, there is a lot of men that stay there and that can look at you or… but they just don't annoy me at all, never.

Unlike Alaksandra, Céline was not bothered by her surroundings or by the men in her street who would look at her, however, Céline presented a somewhat unique point of view among my interlocutors. Overall, most women in this study expressed having at least some experiences with sexual harassment or were fearful of it and therefore regularly felt unsafe, especially on the metro. Most women in this study would not go as far as to say that the streets belong to men, as Anaïs posed, but they did develop strategies to avoid harassment. In the next section, I discuss these strategies in more detail to show that sexual harassment has meaningful impact on the lives of my interlocutors.

"You Always Think: Will I Get Bothered Today?": The Impact of Harassment on Daily Life

It is eleven in the evening when the train rolls into Gare du Nord, Paris' main train station. I spent two days in the southern city of Lyon and while on the train back I noticed that I was dreading returning to Paris especially alone at night. When the train has come to a standstill I get off and I immediately notice a tightening of my jaw and a tensing of my muscles. As fast as I can I make my way through the crowd, my eyes scanning the station hall for potential threats. I spot the sign for metro line 5 and take the escalator downstairs, I get on the metro and after one stop I have to change at Stalingrad station, one of the more unpleasant metro stations of Paris that has a reputation for being frequented by drug dealers, junkies, and homeless men. Again, as quickly as I can, I jump on the line 2. A man stumbles in after me. He is clearly drunk and smells of stale alcohol and tobacco. I quicken my pace and take a seat as far away from the man as I can. While the carriage sways across the tracks, the man starts making his way down the aisle while mumbling incomprehensibly, eyeing the handful of women sitting in the carriage with me. Before he can get to where I am sitting, I get off at Colonel Fabien, another metro station known for its unpleasant surroundings, but also the closest station to my home. I take a deep breath. One more street and I am home. Instead of taking the Boulevard de la Vilette, which is the quickest route to my home, but also known to be a gathering point for junkies and homeless men, especially at night, I take the Avenue Claude Vellefaux. After walking quickly for five minutes, keeping my eyes on the pavement, I take the second street left. My street. I am nearly there. As I approach my front door, I spot a group of young men on scooters standing at the corner. They are being loud, their voices echoing through the empty street. I feel my heartbeat going up. I grab my keys from my purse and hold one key between my middle finger and index finger as if it were a weapon. My eyes

flash between the group of men and my front door. I am glad I decided to change clothes before getting on the train this evening so that I am not wearing the summer dress I put on this morning. Twenty meters, ten meters, I stop in front of my door, swipe my tag across the keypad and hear the click that means the door has opened. I pull at the doorhandle and step inside. It is a door that closes automatically but it is slow, so I push hard to force it closed. Once the door has shut, I breathe out. I make my way through the second door and up the stairs. My studio is dark and quiet, but I hear the voices of the men at the corner coming in through the single-glazed windows. I walk over to the window and look outside; they do not seem to have noticed me. Slowly, I pull my curtains closed.

This is just one out of the many nights I came home alone in Paris and every time I went through the same motions of being afraid to get bothered, walking quickly, avoiding eye contact, and then feeling relief as I closed the door behind me. Because I have been living in cities throughout my life and I have experienced moments of fear like the one presented here many times, I have learned how to conduct myself in the cityscape, especially at night, to avoid harassment or – if I cannot avoid it – to get away from it as fast as I can. In her book *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-Made World*, Leslie Kern (2020) writes about this:

> Over time and through repetition (or iteration, as Judith Butler would say) these [embodied habits] condense and shape the body. Your posture, walk, facial gestures, eye contact, stance, muscle tension, and more are moulded by navigating the urban environment - the city of men - and the social relations that swirl within it. Your body "keeps the score" of moments of fear, harassment, violence, and unwanted contact.

Many of my interlocutors too feel afraid to become victims of sexual harassment and have therefore learned embodied habits to protect themselves from unwanted male attention. This fear caused a general feeling of being unsafe, but it also triggered behaviors such as dressing down, avoiding certain areas, adjusting their modes of transportation and even staying home. In this section, I explore the various ways women in this study try to avoid sexual harassment in Paris to show how (fear of) sexual harassment impacts the daily lives of women in Paris in meaningful ways.

Women are taught from a young age to fear strange men especially in cities and at night-time and we are instructed by our mothers and friends to avoid walking alone at night and to text when we get home. Regardless of such strategies, many women have experienced sexual

harassment in public (and in private) and when a woman has experienced sexual assault once, her fear of sexual assault intensifies (Kern 2020). Therefore, seemingly innocuous and frequently occurring forms of "light" street harassment, like catcalling and staring, reinforce the fear women feel as they are "constantly sexualized, objectified, and made to feel uncomfortable in public space' (Kern 2020).

News reporting too, plays an important role in emphasizing the many dangers women face in public spaces. Before I came to Paris, I read a news article published by The Guardian in 2017, called *'No-Go Zone' for Women? How Street Harassment in Paris Boiled Over*. It detailed stories of women who frequently experience harassment in Paris' La Chapelle neighborhood – which also encompasses the Stalingrad metro station - at the hands of the many immigrants that reside in this area. The article quoted verbally aggressive comments thrown at women like "what's up your skirt?" and "lower your eyes, slut."[11] I also read more recent news articles that discussed the opening of designated safe spaces in the Paris metro corridors due to the increase of sexual harassment[12]. So, when I came to Paris, I was very aware that La Chapelle was an area to be avoided and that I should pay extra attention when I was on the metro. This was reinforced by conversations with women who also told me that I would do better to avoid the consecutive metro stations Barbès-Rochechouart, La Chapelle, Stalingrand, and Jaurès for the same reasons. Unfortunately, these four metro stations were on the line that connected the place where I lived to many other parts of the city, therefore I regularly felt uncomfortable while traveling on the metro. Because of these pervasive feelings of fear, it is unsurprising that many women, including myself, have cultivated strategies to avoid harassment.

Talking to Farah at the hotel bar, she told me, "I don't go out. Ever." When I asked her why not, she said:

> **Farah:** I feel unsafe. I don't walk alone at night. I don't trust Ubers or taxis. I don't go out because it's too risky.

11. Megan Clement, "No-Go Zone for Women? How Street Harassment in Paris Boiled Over," *The Guardian,* June 1, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jun/01/calais-paris-france-street-harassment-women-migrants-la-chapelle-refugees.

12. RATP, "Let's Work Together Against Harassment in Public Transport," *RATP.fr*, March 6, 2024, https://www.ratp.fr/en/stop-harcelement.

Lisa: How does that make you feel?

Farah: It makes me feel sad. I get jealous of girls who live in the inner city of Paris. For them it's much easier to go out at night, because they don't have to take the RER to the suburbs.

Public transportation, especially the metro and the RER lines that connect the inner city to the suburbs, were a frequent topic of conversation regarding experiences of sexual harassment and feeling unsafe. Aliénor told me that she likes to go clubbing and that when she does, she likes to wear outfits with fishnet tights. However, when she travels from her home in the suburbs to the city center with the RER, she makes sure to cover up her tights with jogging pants or a long coat to avoid getting comments from men. Other women, like Charlotte (26), Céline's friend, who originally came from Nantes to study in Paris, chose a different strategy, preferring to avoid the metro altogether by biking. Whenever I met Amélie too, she would always be on her bike. When I asked her about this once, she expressed that she felt freer on her bike and that by biking she could avoid taking the metro. That public transport is often a danger zone for women is not a new phenomenon. Many social scientists have studied it across cultural contexts (e.g. Lewis 2019; Quinones 2020; Biana et al. 2023; Chowdhury 2023). Public transport, in many ways, becomes an infrastructure of inequality in the modern city.

Other women too developed strategies to avoid harassment. One of my closest friends in Paris, Emmeline (28), told me that on the first night she walked home from the atelier where she worked near Canal Sant Martin, she held a key between her fingers, just like I had done that evening coming back from Lyon. Women like Anaïs and Farah, who told me they were frequently bothered on the street by men who would, for example, ask for their phone number, told me how they walk fast and look at the pavement to avoid making eye contact. That way they felt they could avoid unwanted male attention. A more drastic strategy they also applied was to just stay home. Anaïs told me very specifically that she believes that "the streets belong to men," and during our interview, she even took me around the city to point out that the cityscape was dominated by men; men who urinate on the trottoirs, men who blow smoke in your face from their cigarettes, and men who hang out in parks and on public squares, forcing you take a detour, just to avoid the chance of getting harassed.

Other women, like Selima and Megan (29), told me they did not feel comfortable wearing skirts or shorts in Paris, because "showing leg" would attract attention and therefore

they preferred dressing in pants. Yet other women like Carmen, who was born-and-raised in Barcelona, stressed that despite also experiencing feelings of not being safe it was "much worse" in Barcelona. Nevertheless, in Paris, she said, "I oblige myself to dress well, to cover up, to avoid comments, especially in the metro." There were only two women who expressed that they never felt unsafe in Paris: Aurélie and Jennifer.

When I asked Aurélie how she experiences her life in Paris as a woman, she told me she does not feel the danger at all, but she still admitted that she is aware of potential dangers and that she is prepared to respond if necessary. Aurélie's lack of fear was also partially due to her experience living in a big city in Brazil, a place she considered far more dangerous for women.

Aurélie: In comparison, I know that I'm lucky here.

Lisa: So, you say you don't feel the danger at all…

Aurélie: No, it's fine. Super fine. I mean I'm… I think I'm lucky because I'm always surrounded by people, but even when I'm alone and… I maybe sometimes even take risks, but I don't feel like unsafe.

Lisa: Like what risks?

Aurélie: Like going out or coming super late back home, walking. Really, I can do it easily and I know that I'm going to have these kind of actions, like looking behind my back or… but I'm kind of prepared in a way… I mean I'm aware of all these things, so I… in the end nothing ever happened to me here, so… it's fine. And you know, I can be kind of strong and if something is happening, I… you know, I can…

Lisa: [laughing] You'll shout at them.

Aurélie: Yeah [both laugh]. I can totally shout. And I can even be violent if someone is violent to me or… I would for sure do that.

Jennifer too, despite expressing feeling safe in Paris, said: "I feel safe walking around at night, yeah. I mean, I'm not… you know, doing anything unsafe with headphones or

whatever. I would just have one in, because you know, you want to be aware and keep an eye out. But I've never felt in danger." These tactics show that despite feeling safe, even Jennifer and Aurélie were aware of danger and applied tactics to ensure their safety. Another strategy women employed was to "fake your attitude". Constance, a born-and-raised *Parisienne*, explained:

> **Constance:** How you feel and what you project as a woman can be different. You might be acting stronger than you are, because Paris is a tough city. You have to take your space. Fake it till you make it. In my twenties I was harassed a lot, especially on the metro, and I felt uncertain for a long time, but now I'm not the target anymore. It's also a question of attitude, not just age.

The attitude Constance refers to involves believing that by acting stronger than she feels - such as by walking upright with large strides and by taking up space on the pavement - she can boost her confidence and project an aura of confidence that will ward off men.

All these strategies show that the lives of my interlocutors in Paris are impacted by (fear of) sexual harassment and that this fear is pervasive. As Manon put it, "In Paris, you always think: will I get bothered today?". When a woman prefers to bike instead of taking the metro, when she covers up, walks fast, avoids eye contact, or when she holds a key between her fingers as a weapon, these are clear signs that her freedom is curtailed. It is an unfortunate reality that many women living in cities worldwide face today. However, even though freedom for women is curtailed in important ways, the city is not just a place of fear and danger. It is not just a barrier; it also presents opportunity and freedom for women. In the following section, I explore the positive sides of life in Paris.

Freedom and Opportunity

On a Thursday night in April, two weeks before I am due to leave Paris, I am sitting on a terrace with Amélie after visiting a photo exhibition together. This weekend Amélie is moving back to her hometown in the west of France to live with her boyfriend after living in Paris for ten years and we decided to have a last drink together. It took us a while to find a terrace that still had space because despite it being a Thursday it seems like the whole city is out and everyone is sitting with their friends, laughing, smoking, and drinking. As we sit outside, our jackets and scarfs pulled up against the chilly evening air, Amélie says, "You know, I have really fallen in love with Paris again and I don't really want to leave." I look at

her while she surveys the Haussmannian buildings and lit windows that line the small street. She continues, “after breaking up with my ex, I was not in a good place and I really wanted to leave Paris, but now I feel good again and I love my life here. I love being with my friends, and I love that in Paris there is always something to do. I’m really going to miss that.”

After living in Paris for nearly two months, I understand what Amélie means. I am from a relatively small city in the west of the Netherlands that probably resembles Amélie’s hometown in many ways, and ever since I came to Paris, I have been amazed and excited by the endless possibilities that Paris has to offer, from going to museums and attending concerts, to having dinners with complete strangers, going partying any night of the week, discovering an incredible variety of restaurants, markets, and shops, and being able to attend any type of sports class, wine tasting, creative workshop, or book discussion. You name it and you will find it in Paris. As another one of my interlocutors, Alice, put it: “Here we can do everything we want any time of the day.” In addition to career opportunities or academic pursuits, the endless possibilities of discovery and novelty are what attracts many of my interlocutors to Paris. Because despite problems with sexual harassment, noise, dirt, and the extremely competitive housing and job market, life in Paris is still worth it for most of my interlocutors and many would not want to live anywhere else, at least not at this point in their lives.

My interlocutors enjoy life Paris for multiple reasons. Many have found love, a job or the opportunity to advance their academic careers by attending prestigious universities or obtaining a position as a PhD student; others enjoy the vibrant music and party scene, and the rich cultural life Paris offers in the form of museums, architecture, restaurants, and boutiques. As many women stressed, there is always something new to discover in Paris; “It’s like an endless shopping road,” one of my interlocutors would say. For one of the women, Elena, her life in Paris is even somewhat of a status symbol that she leverages on social media to show her former classmates in Italy that she has “made it” in Paris. Interestingly, despite clear ideas about the chic and elegant *Parisienne* fashion, some interlocutors like Janaína, Manon and Alice expressed that in Paris, you are free to wear what you want. Regardless of her assertion that she feels she cannot fit into the narrative of the *Parisienne* based on her skin colour, Janaína said she does not feel out of place because so many people in Paris have eccentric styles and that this pushes her to express herself in the way she wants as well. Alice even said that when she sees someone on the metro in an extravagant outfit, she thinks: “oh wow, what audacity!”. Manon echoed these sentiments by saying that in Paris “people have style,” that

they, “try to dress and to express themselves by their clothes,” and that she finds it cool and unique to Paris.

Paris represents freedom and opportunity at many levels for my interlocutors, and throughout my research, I increasingly discovered that freedom is an important theme in their lives. From the freedom to dress like you want; to love who you want; and to do what you want. Freedom is also one of the core values of the French Republic whose motto is “*liberté, egalité, fraternité*,” meaning liberty, equality, and fraternity. Freedom – or its more legal-political counterpart liberty – is collective narrative that is instilled in French citizens in public schools from a young age (Limage 2001). Early in March an event occurred that demonstrates this statement and that several of my interlocutors mentioned in interviews and were very proud of.

A few days before International Women’s Day, the French Parliament passed a constitutional amendment to protect the right to abortion in its constitution, making France the first country in the world to do so[13]. On the day of the vote, March 4th, a large screen was placed in the vicinity of the Eiffel Tower that televised the result of the vote live. When the President of the French National Assembly read aloud the result of the vote, the hundreds of people gathered near the Eiffel Tower erupted in cheers, while texts like *#IVGConstitution*, referring to *l’Interruption Volontaire de Grossesse* (#VoluntaryTerminationOfPregnancyConstitution), and *#MonCorpsMonChoix* (#MyBodyMyChoice), were displayed across the Eiffel Tower. A few days later, on International Women’s Day, the constitutional amendment was officiated during a public ceremony led by President Macron. Unfortunately, I was made aware of the event too late and could not attend myself, but Amélie went and was even interviewed for a short segment on French national television.

Many of my interlocutors have experience with sexual harassment and many feel unsafe in Paris regularly. They also freely admit that Paris is tough city with a “harsh energy” where you need grit and perseverance to succeed; where quality of life is not always great because of noise, pollution, and an extremely competitive job and housing market; and where even boyfriends are in short supply, as Elena once mused. Regardless, it is still a vibrant city with

13. France is the first existing country that enshrined the right to abortion in its constitution, however, former Yugoslavia had this right in its constitution as early as 1974. Source: Tanja Ignjatovic, “Yugoslavia Pioneerde Abortion Rights in Constitution Long Before France,” *BalkanInsight*, March 8, 2024, https://balkaninsight.com/2024/03/08/yugoslavia-pioneered-abortion-rights-in-constitution-long-before-france/#:~:text=The%20Constitution%20of%20the%20SFR,on%20the%20birth%20of%20children.

many opportunities for those who are in a position to take them. It goes without saying that not every woman is in such a position to the same extent because opportunities are unequally distributed based on gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity, and social class. However, I have shown that despite the negative and unpleasant sides of life in Paris, the women in this study can be said to have a fluid relationship with the city, loving it and hating it simultaneously.

Normativity, as Berlant (2008, 266) argues, can be seen as a "disciplinary operation on how people imagine the good life," as evidenced by how my interlocutors gave detailed accounts of the ideal life of the *bobo-Parisienne*. This chapter, however, has demonstrated that my interlocutors are aware that the frictionless life of a *Parisienne* is more complex in reality. As two of my interlocutors, Charlotte and Alaksandra, stressed: life in Paris is "not like Emily in Paris." Ultimately, this chapter has demonstrated that despite being aware of normative visions of "the good life," the women in this study are not naïve; they know that life in Paris is not like a tv show and they do not romanticize life in Paris. From these normative visions arise both positive feelings and experiences of being a free Parisian woman and the feeling that one's choices are limited as a woman in the city, forced to modify behaviours and appearances in response to threats and fear of sexual harassment that present barriers to being truly free.

Conclusion

Much of anthropological research and gender theory has focused on normativity as a disciplinary force of expectation, reinforced through institutions like religion, media, and the nation-state, that instills in women ideas about appropriate behaviours, roles, and other attributes (e.g. McVeigh 1996, Yafeh 2007, Fioratta 2018). Scholars and journalists alike have shown how this applies to the *Parisienne*, who is consistently portrayed in films, literature, magazines, and advertisements as a white, attractive, heterosexual, free woman of good birth (Kemp 2009, Humphrey 2012, Pfeiffer 2019). A telling parallel is also drawn by these scholars between *la Parisienne* and *la Marianne*, the woman who symbolizes the French Republic and whose statue – which can been found all over Paris - has been modeled exclusively after famous, white, French women. The message this sends to women across France is that the normative French woman is white, liberated, wealthy, and preferably heterosexual. Additionally, beyond beauty, sexual orientation, social class and ethnicity, the normative femininity embodied by the *Parisienne* extends to include visions of a normative "good life" (Fischer 2014) filled with parties, friends, and a general sense of *joie de vivre*, powered by generational wealth and inherited social and cultural capital. A life that is not for everyone. However, there is another way to conceive of normativity. As Berlant proposes, normativity can also be seen as "an aspiration people have for an unshearable suturing to their social world" (Berlant 2008, 266). In other words, normativity can be considered a human desire for connection to those around them. This research has sought to question the narrow view of normativity as a structural force that limits and constrains women and to provide ethnographic evidence that normativity works in more complex ways by asking how normative femininity operates on women in a culturally specific context: the city of Paris. It has done so by exploring how women perceive and relate to the *Parisienne* as the embodiment of normative femininity by examining the thoughts, feelings, and daily lives of twenty-six middle-class women.

The first chapter has demonstrated that there is a general consensus among my interlocutors regarding the stereotypical *Parisienne*: she is a slim, wealthy, white woman leading an opulent lifestyle of clubbing, shopping, and socializing that represents a prescriptive and exclusive image of femininity and "the good life," in line with the critiques of Kemp (2009), Humphrey (2012), and Pfeiffer (2019). On the other hand, the *Parisienne* was also described by some women as confident, independent, and free to pursue the life she

wants. These descriptions reveal that there are differences in the aspects women emphasize, admire, or dislike about the *Parisienne*, showing that normative femininity does not only operate as a social constraint but also as an ideal that women admire and strive for to various extents.

The second chapter has examined how my interlocutors relate to the *Parisienne* as the embodiment of normative femininity by focusing on body, race, ethnicity, and social class. Interlocutors who were not white or heterosexual were generally less interested in being seen as *Parisiennes*, expressing indifference or acceptance of not fitting into the idea of the *Parisienne*. As a result, these women often adopted a more colorful and relaxed clothing style, aligning themselves with a different type of normative femininity represented by what one of my interlocutors referred to as the "new *Parisienne*." Conversely, women who identified as heterosexual, white, and/or native French, and thus conformed to the norm set forth by the *Parisienne* to a greater extent, generally expressed more positive feelings about the *Parisienne* and adhered more closely to her simple-and-chic style, though some struggled with the bodily expectations of being skinny. The narrative of the new *Parisienne* may be more inclusive of different skin colors and sexual orientations, both the "OG" and "new" *Parisiennes* maintain lifestyles that demand significant economic, social, and cultural capital, indicating that middle-classness can substitute for other aspects of identity like ethnicity, race, and sexuality. Ultimately, none of the women in this study considered themselves stereotypical *Parisiennes*. While they acknowledged the existence of the *Parisienne*, they did not fully identify with her and were content with that distinction. Their attitude can therefore best be summarized as: "She exists, but I am not her – and that's okay."

The third chapter investigated the gap between normative ideas of the "good life" of the *Parisienne*, which includes partying, having lots of friends, and the means to pursue an opulent lifestyle. Although this vision was not a complete folly, it also did not reflect the lived experiences of my interlocutors. Many of my interlocutors experienced sexual harassment and regularly felt unsafe in Paris. They described Paris as a challenging city with a "harsh energy," requiring grit and perseverance to succeed. As my interlocutors stressed, the quality of life in Paris is compromised due to noise, pollution, and a highly competitive job and housing market, and even the dating scene is complicated. Nonetheless, Paris remains a vibrant city with numerous opportunities for those positioned to take them like my interlocutors are. Despite evident drawbacks, the women in this study exhibited a complex relationship with Paris, simultaneously loving it and hating it.

Throughout these chapters I have tried to show how normative femininity, embodied by *Parisienne*, including normative visions of "the good life," operates differently on my interlocutors. Normative visions of the good life evoked both positive feelings of being a liberated Parisian woman and the realization that choices about how to dress, where to go, and how to get there, are limited by the pervasive threat of sexual harassment. Furthermore, for those who do not adhere to a simple-and-chic fashion and who are not white and heterosexual, the *Parisienne* presents more constraining and limiting norms than for the women who are white, heterosexual and who enjoy dressing like a stereotypical *Parisienne*. Yet, I have shown that the normative femininities embodied by the "OG" and the "new" *Parisienne* operate as an emotional longing on all my interlocutors to fit in with at least some narrative of normative femininity, showing that normativity can be seen as "an aspiration […] for an unshearable suturing to their social world" (Berlant 2008, 266). In doing so, I have contributed to the anthropological literature on normative femininity by expanding its generally accepted definition as a constraining and limiting mechanism of control to embrace it as an affect that helps women feel like they fit in; like they belong.

This conclusion has broader implications for the societal and academic debate on normative femininity. Within the societal debate women are often portrayed as victims of gendered norms imposed on them by society and much of contemporary feminist activism is aimed at debunking problematic norms that limit the freedoms of women. I am not arguing that this is wrong for there are many disfunctional norms that keep women in a place of submission, like the norm that brands women with many bedpartners as "sluts," while men are congratulated for it, or the norm that makes a "bitch" of a woman who speaks her mind. However, such activism neglects that normative femininity can also foster connection between women. Women who are part of an activist group generally also share norms about appropriate attire, behaviour, and lifestyle and adhering to such norms fosters a sense of belonging and strenghtens community. It is thus important to consider in what ways normative femininity is detrimental to women and in what ways it can work to cement relationships between women. For the academic debate, a similar argument can be made. The tendency within anthropology to explain normative femininity as something that constrains women, that curtails their freedom and limits their choices, is somewhat simplistic and blinds us to a fuller exploration and understanding of the concept. I therefore call for a renewed engagement with normativivity in general and with normative femininity in particular that leaves room to explore the unexpected ways in which (gendered) normativity functions across societies.

Anthropologists are uniquely positioned to do so as ethnography is and excellent research method to uncover the intricacies of normativity.

Ethnographic research has also been instrumental in understanding women's lives in Paris; it would not have been possible to make sense of the thoughts and feelings of women through oral accounts alone. The time I spent in Paris enabled me to experience for myself what being a woman in Paris is like and it helped me to better understand and situate the stories women told me, not rarely because I experienced what they were experiencing, especially when it came to feeling judged, wanting to fit in, and feeling unsafe. Overall, conducting ethnographic research has allowed me to step into an unfamiliar world with fresh eyes (Bernard 2011), making note of the things that seemed strange or unique, while over time developing a sense of understanding this new world, discovering patterns and documenting them.

There were, however, also some drawbacks to the way I conducted my ethnographic research. For example, I did not delineate my research to any specific location, space, or neighborhood within Paris and having such a wide geographical location sometimes made it challenging to know when, where and how to conduct meaningful participant observation. Therefore, interviewing has been a central method of data collection in this research, supplemented by audio, textual, and visual data from field walks and observations. Additionally, I met most of my key interlocutors through social apps and because of the algorithms that power most of these apps, I often encountered "women like me," meaning other educated women with time and money to spend on such activities. Therefore, my sample of interlocutors has turned out fairly uniform in terms of age, sexuality, ethnicity and social class. Consequently, this research only speaks to how predominantly young, white, heterosexual women from the middle class perceive and relate to the normative femininity embodied by the *Parisienne*.

This research cannot speak to thoughts, feelings, and life experiences of women who are the opposite of what the *Parisienne* embodies: a poor immigrant woman living in the less affluent suburbs of Paris. The question that this poses, and which presents an interesting avenue for future research, is how women who cannot conform to the norm based on their skin color, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic position relate to the *Parisienne*. Perhaps, they are not interested in fitting in with this idea of normative femininity, like the few interlocutors in my research who did not identify as white or heterosexual, or perhaps they are completely unaware of the existence of the *Parisienne,* or they have no clear ideas about

who this woman is. Of course, research into the workings of normative femininity does not need to be limited to Paris or the *Parisienne*, it is equally interesting to find out how other types of normative femininity in different cultural contexts operate on women, for example in contexts where religion plays a much bigger role in the construction of normative femininity. Ultimately, I hope that other ethnographic research, like mine has done, will contribute to new ways of thinking about (gendered) normativity within anthropology and that it can shed light on the cross-cultural workings of normativity, not merely as a structural constraint but as an affective desire for social belonging.

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