"Othering" mechanisms and multiple positionings:
Children of Thai-Belgian couples as viewed in Thailand and in Belgium

Introduction

In May 2013 in Stockholm (Sweden), the members of the Thai Women Network in Europe (TWNE)[1] organised their annual gathering. It was their 13th assembly since the network was founded at the beginning of the 2000s, and the theme of that year's meeting was about the mental health of Thai migrants. Many Thai women from different European countries went there together with their friends and TWNE co-members, whereas a few others arrived with their ethnically diverse families. Given my low proficiency in the Thai language, I attended the gathering with my Thai friend who translated for me the many conversations and discussions held in Thai. During the second day of the event, invited speakers - a few of whom came from Thailand - delivered several lectures. A lawyer working for a government agency in Thailand provided practical and legal information. Regarding voluntary military service for young Thai men, she mentioned that they had this "duty" to the state at the age of 18[2] but added that those who gave up their Thai nationality would not need to fulfil their military service. After this lawyer's lecture, some participants asked questions triggering a discussion around issues regarding military service.

This discussion reminded me of some Thai mothers I met in Belgium who decided not to pass their Thai nationality to their sons to preserve them from the aforementioned obligation to the Thai state. In fact, military service in Thailand does not only concern young men with Thai parents but also male youth of Thai and foreign parentage, specifically those registered in a Thai embassy who acquired the Thai nationality by birth. The Thai state's creation of a possibility of obtaining the Thai nationality for this group of children suggests its deep-seated interest in reproducing the Thai nation beyond its defined political frontiers (Fresnoza-Flot 2018). In this context, how are these young people presently viewed in Thailand and beyond it? How do they position themselves within the myriad viewpoints and stereotypes about them in their social spaces traversing nation-states' borders?

The present article tackles these questions through a case study of children of "mixed" parentage, specifically the offspring of Thai-Belgian couples. The qualifier "mixed" here stems from the emerging scholarship on "mixedness" (see Collet 2015; Rodríguez-García 2016; Spickard 1989; Varro 2003), notably from the literature about "individuals of mixed descent, across national, racial, ethnocultural or religious boundaries" (Törngren *et al.* 2019). It denotes a combination of socially constructed categories of differences including nationality, ethnicity, and family belonging. The latter category - "family belonging" - emphasizes the suggested meaning of "mixed", that is, biological (blood) link between parents and their children. This meaning is one of the remnants of the world's colonial past during which the qualifier "mixed" strongly signified "mixture" of different "human races".

By focusing on mixed-parentage young people, the present article highlights one childhood form, which may overshadow other existing "childhoods" in Belgium and in Thailand: for

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[1]   During the time of my fieldwork, this network had about 500 members from 15 countries in Europe (interview with the TWNE's president, 25 May 2013).

[2]   This is based on the Thai Military Service Act of 1954. At the age of 18, young men are expected to register to do a voluntary military service. If they do not so, they have to participate in a compulsory military service lottery at the age of 21: if they draw a black card they will be exempted, but if they draw a red card they have to accomplish their military service.

example the childhood of "slum children (*dek salam*)" in the latter country (Bolotta 2014). Nonetheless, given that mixed-parentage children mostly inhabit cross-border social spaces, their case may offer fresh insights regarding the way young people confront differentiating, often exclusionary social viewpoints in various settings and the "multiple transnational circulations" of these views highlighted in the present Special Issue. The interest here in this group stems from three observations. First, the Thai migration in Belgium has been mainly taking place through the marriage channel since the 1980s, leading to the formation of many Thai-Belgian households with children. Second, Thai migrants actively maintain their links with their country of origin through visits there as well as through socio-cultural organising and religious practices in Belgium – these practices immerse their children in social spaces encompassing both Thailand and Belgium. At present, the majority of Thai migrants in Belgium are women in couple with Belgian men and many of them reside in the regions of Flanders and Brussels. Third, unlike the experiences of Thai migrant women (Fresnoza-Flot & Merla 2018; Heyse *et al.* 2007), those of children of Thai migrants in Belgium remain an unexplored research terrain. Examining their case will therefore bring new empirical contributions to the study of children of migrants and their agency.

The third observation above reverberates the situation of children of "mixed" couples – in which the partners have different nationalities (at least at the beginning of their unions) and ethnicities. Their case is generally little investigated due to the tendency within the field of migration studies to focus on marriage migrants' experiences (Cole 2014; Constable 2003; Fresnoza-Flot & Ricordeau 2017; Ishii 2016) and to include in the analysis the children of mixed couples as part of the "second generation", the members of which were born and grew up in the receiving country of their migrant parents (for example: Attias-Donfut & Wolff 2009; Portes & Rumbaut 2001; Simon 2003). The few existing studies on mixed couples' children mainly delve on identity constructions, linguistic issues, and social "Othering" (Dumanescu 2015; Kamada 2010; Unterreiner 2015; Rocha & Fozdar 2017; Sedmak 2012). These works form part of the larger literature on mixed-parentage children, who have been the object of scholarly investigations in multiethnic societies in Asia, Europe, and North/South America (see Edwards *et al.* 2012; King-O'Riain *et al.* 2014; Rocha & Fozdar 2017; Törngren *et al.* 2019). In many cases, the experiences of mixed couples' children are viewed from the vantage point of their societies of residence, that is, their experiences are considered as taking place only within the political boundaries of these societies. This excludes the fact that these young people mostly inhabit cross-national social spaces connecting their parents' respective countries of origin.

To grasp the experiences of these individuals within such spaces, a transnational approach taking into account the societies in which they are enmeshed appears indispensable. This means paying attention to the social stereotypes and state policies concerning them in their parents' countries of origin, as well as finding out the way they react in return to the existing societal and state views about them in those societies. To reflect this, the present article adopts a two-step approach to analyse the experiences of mixed couples' offspring, specifically the children of Thai-Belgian couples. In the first analytical step, it investigates "Othering" in Lister's terms, that is, "a dualistic process of differentiation and demarcation, by which the line is drawn between 'us' and 'them' – between the more and the less powerful – and through which social distance is established and maintained" (2004: 101). This process involves the construction and reconstruction of imagined, supposed ethnic boundaries separating the "us" and "them" in Barth's sense (1969). It also entails the fabrication of interpersonal differences based on racist discourses (Weedon 2004) and on other categories of subordination such as gender, social class, age, and sexual identity (Wilkinson & Kitzinger 1996). Since the conceptual framework of "Othering" pinpoints the main categories of

subordination intersecting in the lives of individuals, it helps us uncover whether, how, and to what extent children of Thai-Belgian couples are socially viewed as insiders and/or outsiders in the respective countries of their parents. The case of these young people therefore contributes to the research field of Othering in the context of migration, in which adult migrants (notably the so-called "first generation") are the usual objects of scientific inquiries (for example, Betts & Krayem 2019; Guðjónsdóttir & Loftsdóttir 2017; see also the contributions in the present Special Issue). In the second analytical step, the present article looks at in detail the "self-positioning" (Anthias 2001) of children of Thai-Belgian couples, notably their reactions and strategies to "Othering" mechanisms in which they are subjected to in their cross-border social spaces.

Before I unveil their situation, I provide first the background settings in which their experiences of "Othering" and their self-positioning take place. I also present the data-gathering methods of my study, informants, and fieldwork details to contextualise the empirical data analysed in two steps at the core of this article.

"Othering" and the children of mixed couples

Individuals of mixed parentage are most often the target of discriminatory remarks and exclusionary policies linked to what the majority population in a given society considers as threatening differences to their nation's identity. Nonetheless, this is not always the case as having mixed parentage can also bring advantages. These two sides have been widely documented and the literature on the subject demonstrates the racialisation of mixed couples' offspring in many countries around the world (Edwards *et al.* 2012; Haritaworn 2016; Rocha 2019; Unterreiner 2015; Varro 2003).

Studies have shown how the political regimes of a state control not only the couple formation of its subjects but also its citizens' offspring born of mixed unions. During the colonial period, children of mixed parentage were treated as "different" and as "threat" to the colonial regime. For example, although sexual unions between colonizers and native women were often encouraged in the Netherlands East Indies, interracial marriages were restricted as "marriage" legitimised mixed couples' "progeny who would consequently inherit European wealth and privilege" (Stoler 2002 cited *in* Loos 2008: 40). In Indochina, the French colonial government only granted French citizenship to the so-called *métis* under strict condition: their French father should have legally recognised them (1918 decree), or they had to show proof that they were part of the French "race" (1928 law) (Saada 2012). In early Belgian Congo, interracial relationships were "welcomed" for the effective "control" and "understanding" of the occupied populations (Heynssens 2016), but in 1919 when Rwanda and Burundi became subjected to the Belgian colonial rule these relationships were restricted by the colonial authorities to preserve their power (*ibid.*). The children of mixed parentage called *mulâtres* in these Belgian colonies were considered as "errors" or "accidents", and many of them were sent to Belgium for adoption to "whiten" their "souls" (Ghali 2016: 56). Likewise, in Dutch-ruled Indonesia, there was a strong concern about the children of mixed parentage then referred to as "Indo-Europeans", who "were not sufficiently exposed to 'European' ways of behaving and thinking" (Bosma & Raben 2007). After the independence of Indonesia in 1949, this group of people was given the possibility to acquire Indonesian citizenship but many retained their European legal status, which may be due to their souvenir of violence against them by the majority population in the past (Hewett 2015).

The stigmatisation and discrimination of mixed-parentage people can also be linked to the socio-legal disapproval of mixed couples in many societies, an issue that is important for the contextualisation of the situation of young people in the present study and for understanding

the relational character of their experience. For instance, in South Africa, the Immorality Act of 1927 prohibited sexual intercourse between whites and Africans, and during the apartheid regime in this country, the Mixed Marriages Act (1949) banned unions between the two groups (Jacobson *et al*. 2004). This made the children of mixed unions illegitimate in the eyes of the law, or a "crime" in the word of Noah (2016), a known television personality who was born in such a union and who wrote in his autobiography about his experiences of being excluded from socio-political rights in South Africa. In the United States of America (US), "interracial" marriages had been prohibited as early as the 18th century, and the "one drop rule" that classifies the offspring of "whites and blacks […] as black" denied this group of mixed parentage children access to the socio-economic class of their white fathers (Gilbert 2005: 62). It was in 1967 that the legal ban on "interracial" marriages ended thanks to the success of the Loving case filed in the US Supreme Court. Although in many societies, mixed marriages are no longer legally prohibited, the offspring of mixed couples remain in many cases socially viewed as "incomplete" and "different". Various terminologies have been used to describe them: *haafu* in Japan (Hamilton 2012), *kopinos* (Korean-Filipinos) in the Philippines (Edelson 2015), *mestizos* in countries formerly under Iberian colonial rule (Wade 2008), *métis* in Canada (Gagnon & Giguère 2014), and so on.

All the above mechanisms can be described as "Othering" as they involve interpersonal differentiation producing social distance between the "us" and "them" (Lister 2004). They mainly involve phenotypes-based categorisation (racialisation) intersecting with other factors such as social class and nationality/ies. At present times, such mechanisms render people of mixed parentage "particular" from the majority population in their country of residence. This consequently brings emotional and social difficulties to many of them (see for instance the case of *Japinos* or children of postwar Filipino-Japanese couples: Seiger 2017). However, it also provides a sort of privilege to some who gain access to certain opportunities in the entertainment, sports, and beauty pageant industries (see Van Esterik 1996). We observe here the social transformation of the "monster" figure attached to mixed-parentage people into that of "fashion models" (Haritaworn 2016). Some states in today's world extend their respective nationality to children of their (former) citizens who migrated abroad or to those who become internationally known. For example, the Philippine government has a double nationality policy and offers *balikbayan* (returnee) visas to migrant Filipinos and their children (Fresnoza-Flot 2018). As documented through time, the "Othering" of mixed-parentage people continues, as we shall see in the case below of individuals born of Thai-foreigner unions. Nonetheless, such "Othering" is now taking a different direction that tends to increase the socio-political acceptance of these individuals in their parents' respective countries.

Intermarriages of Thais and the birth of *luk-kreung*

In Thailand, the children of mixed couples have been widely called as *luk-kreung* (literally, "half-child") to refer to the offspring born of a union between a Thai and a *farang* or a Western "white" (wo)man. This group of people has evolved from a socially "non-desirable" to a valorised figure in Thai society, which appears connected to how Thai society views intermarriages and *farang* through time.

At first, it was interreligious unions between partners with different ethnicities that received strong disapproval in Thai society. During the 17th century, the Siam state issued a decree prohibiting such unions involving "specifically the Thai and the Mon" due to "the fear that the offspring" born of those relationships "would convert to the religion of their father, and side with their father's nation in time of conflict" (Bumroongsook 1995: 72). For the same reason, intermarriage between Thai women and foreign men with "non-Buddhist faiths" including "English, Dutch, Javanese and Malay men" were also forbidden (Loos 2008: 31). This early

view of mixed unions' children as "potential traitors" to the Siam state took shape against the backdrop of the negative social image of *farang* at that time. During the Ayuttaya period from the 16th century to the early 18th century, *farang* were seen as "suspicious strangers" (Kitiarsa 2010). Such an image progressively transformed into "distant Others" during the early Bangkok period (latter part of the 18th to early 19th centuries) and as "imperialists", then as "civilizing agents" during the second half of the 19th century to the early part of the 20th century (*ibid.*). It was during this latter period that intermarriages between *farang* and Thais became an important object of state control: for example, the Thai state through its 1897 law required Thai-*farang* couples to legally register their marriage, a regulation that Thai-Thai couples were not subjected to (Bumroongsook 1995). By registering their marriages, Thai-*farang* couples legitimised not only their unions but also the birth of their offspring on Thai soil. In 1914, King Rama IV restricted marriages between Thais and *farang* across social class lines for the purpose of "national security" and preservation of "local religion" (Lapanun 2019: 50). It should be noted that during the early period, it was often Thai men of privileged social and/or intellectual class backgrounds who formed a couple with *farang*: for example, the union of Prince Chakrabongse and his Russian wife Catherine (see Chakrabongse 1957). Thai women of less privileged social class background, on the other hand, usually married with *farang* men (Lapanun 2019).

These social class and gender dimensions of intermarriages became more prominent in the Thai society in the 19th and early 20th centuries, at which time the Thai fascination for *farang* progressively turned from a "craze for things *farang*" to the "*luk-kreung* phenomenon" (Kitiarsa 2010: 72). Children of Thai-*farang* couples became an indicator of privileged social class belonging. However, this symbolic social value of *luk-kreung* started to decline during the Vietnam War period (1955-75) when US military bases were installed in the North and Northeast (Isan) of the country. Contacts between Thai women and US military men took place near these bases, notably in "Rest and Recreation (R&R)" areas (Feanghu 2011), which led to the formation of "mixed" couples on a mostly temporary basis. During this time, the image of *luk-kreung* became synonymous to "children of rented wife (*mia chao*)", that is, the offspring of a Thai woman sex worker and a US military man. *Luk-kreung* were seen by Thai people as the "rice outside the paddy field" or *khaao nork naa* (see Reynolds 1999). This specific "*luk-kreung* phenomenon" revived the Thai State's view of *farang* as a "threat" and of *luk-kreung* as "potential traitors" to the Thai nation. This view explains the Thai government's "special announcement" in 1972 prohibiting the acquisition of Thai nationality by children of Thai women with *farang* (Bumroongsook 1995: 76). Aside from legal exclusion, *luk-kreung* underwent social discrimination and ostracism due to "racial" and social class factors intersecting in their lives. In contrast to their "white" *luk-kreung* counterparts, *luk-kreung* with *farang dam* (black foreigner) parent and Thai sex worker mother carried a double social disadvantage because of their dark complexion and of their mother's work.

The end of Vietnam War in 1975, the taking off of the Thai economy in the 1980s, and the increasing immigration and emigration phenomena in Thailand sat the scene for the introduction of a new Nationality Act in 1992. This allowed *luk-kreung* with *farang* mother or father to access the Thai nationality (*ibid.*). Since the height of Thailand's economic growth from the latter part of the 1980s to the first half of the 1990s, the figure of the *luk-kreung* has acquired new valorised meanings but with "racial" overtone due to the emphasis on "whiteness". As Chaipraditkul remarks, "[t]he image of the dark skin is generally less popular than white skin, as the dark skin can symbolise degradation, considered a type of untouchability to the Thais" (2013: 30). White complexion appears in this case to be an indicator of "money, wealth and privilege", as High (2004) observes in Thailand's

neighbouring country of Laos (High 2004). Nonetheless, privileged social class belonging can mitigate the racialising impact of dark skin on *luk-kreung*, which affirms the "constantly changing fortunes" of people's skin and their "capability of achieving movement" through the Buddhist "cosmic hierarchy" based on "their own actions" (High 2014: 72). For instance, Tiger Woods, an internationally famous US golf player during the 1990s and early 2000s born of a union between an African American military man and a "non-elite" Thai woman, obtained an "honorary Thai citizenship" during his visit in Thailand in 1997, which put into question the real meaning of Thai-ness (Weisman 2001: 231). Moreover, the social class dimension of intermarriages and of *luk-kreung*'s lives still lingers. We can observe this in the case of Isan-born Thai women living in couple with *farang* in Thailand and abroad, who receive "moral criticism and scorn from urban Thais" for "shamelessly pursuing foreign men for a quick and easy path to wealth" (Sunanta 2013: 189). Thai women who worked in the sex/intimacy industry in Thailand when they met their *farang* husband or partner are also most often subject of this kind of moral contempt. Such social view about these *mia farang* ("wives of Western men": *ibid.*: 184) may subsequently affect the way their mixed-parentage children would be socially considered.

Nowadays, *luk-kreung* represents "a modern form of Thainess" (Kitiarsa 2010: 72), which the entertainment, modelling, beauty pageant, and sports industries in the country (re)produce and consume. They appear in many movies and television programmes in the country, producing an increasing normalisation and social valuing of their supposed "differences". In her study of individuals of Thai-German and Thai-British parentage, Haritaworn explains that "a capitalist consumer culture" shapes the "relations of production" of the "positive image" attached to the figure of "beautiful mixed race person", as it "reshuffles and combine 'differences' around race, disability, gender, class and age in novel and yet often predictable ways, diversifying a standard that nevertheless remains the same" (2016: 68-69). As we will see later in this article, the Thai state also participates in this process by offering the Thai nationality to *luk-kreung* and by supporting certain cultural initiatives targeting this group of people. Indeed, the images of *luk-kreung* are "constructed and commodified by those 'at the top'" with a three-fold purpose: "to support evolving idea(l)s of Thai modernity, to convey those idea(l)s to the Thai mass public, and, in turn, to project a 'modern,' 'developed,' and 'cosmopolitan' picture of the country to an international audience" (Weisman 2001: 233). Taking into account this larger context, we can hypothesise that the children of Thai-Belgian couples in the present study experience various mechanisms of "Othering" in Thailand similar to those within the Thai migrant population in Belgium and within the larger Belgian society. This situation may prompt them to adopt strategies of self-positioning to make sense of their situation.

Researching children of Thai-Belgian parentage in their cross-national social spaces

The data examined in this article originated from a three-year study of children who grew up or were growing up in mixed families with Filipino and Thai mothers in Belgium. They were collected using qualitative methods such as interviews, informal conversations, ethnographic observations, and small-scale survey. From a total of 52 interviewed young people, the 17 who were born of Thai-Belgian marriages are the focus of analysis in the present study. I chose their case due to the richness of my empirical data about them that included in-depth fieldwork in Thailand, unlike the children of Filipino-Belgian couples in my study for which I did not get the chance to conduct much fieldwork in the Philippines.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I found it hard to find and meet this group of young people. To address this difficulty, I identified first the places of socialisation of their Thai migrant parents in Belgium and immersed myself within these places from 2012 to 2013, notably in

Thai Buddhist temples. I conducted observations almost every weekend in two of these temples: one in Mechelen in Flanders and one in Waterloo in Wallonia. To facilitate my fieldwork, I took Thai language classes in a Thai association in Brussels. I also participated in some organised activities within the Thai migrant population in Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels regions, such as the annual *Sokran* (Thai New Year) and Thai cultural festivals. In addition, I adopted the "children-in-families approach" (Bushin 2009) that consists of interviewing all the members of the family (parents and their children) if the situation permits it. This allowed me to grasp the family history of my informants and to deeply understand the experiences of the interviewed young people in the family. To address the ethical question of my study, I employed a double consent approach to be able to talk to or interview minors: getting first the permission of the parent(s) and then asking the children's accord to participate. Before my interviews and informal conversations, I provided an information sheet to my informants and explained to them the focus of my research including its objectives and the reasons for my interest in children's lifeworld. I carried out interviews with minors in the presence of one or both of the parents. Asking children aged below 12 to draw appeared useful in starting a conversation and to find out how they viewed their family.

To gain supplementary insights about the lives of Thai-Belgian children and their families, I did home-stay in one Thai-Belgian family and I collaborated with the Thai migrant women's regional association called the TWNE. I acted as an external observer of two programmes that this association co-organised in Thailand in 2014. One of these programmes targeted the children of Thai migrants abroad, and it was during this programme that I conducted a survey among its seventeen participants (including two Thai-Belgian children). From July to August 2014, my fieldwork in Thailand involved various activities including "following" in Marcus' (1995) sense one Thai migrant who grew up in Belgium and was in vacation in Bangkok, "following" two Thai mothers who accompanied their children participating in a TWNE's programme, and research visits in places such as the North-eastern region of the country where many Thai migrants in Belgium originated.

In this article, I draw from my fieldwork in Belgium and in Thailand, notably from my interviews and informal conversations with 17 children of Thai-Belgian couples. The age range of these informants (12 females and 5 males) was from 7 to 31 years; their average age was 15.4 years old at the time of my meeting with them. Four of the interviewed informants were born in Thailand, and in terms of nationality, six possessed a double nationality (Thai and Belgian) and eleven had single nationality (9 Belgian and 1 Italian with a father born in Italy but grew up in Belgium). I also obtained insights from my interviews and conversations with 17 Thai mothers and other social actors such as leaders of some Non-Governmental Organizations, researchers, and religious figures in Belgium and in Thailand. In the present article, the names of all these informants are modified to protect their privacy.

Children of Thai-Belgian couples as racialised "Others" here and there

In their transnational social spaces connecting Belgium and Thailand, Thai-Belgian informants occupy an ambivalent position as being on one hand socially accepted but on the other hand socially differentiated from the "Us", as I unveil in the following sections.

Integrated legally but "Othered" socially in Belgium

> I went to the [Thai] temple in Mechelen and I have to follow Thai meditation and Thai lessons. (Catherine, 16 years old)

> When I was little, we went to Thai temple, and I went there with my mother. I like the foods there (laugh), but I never talk to them [Thai-Belgian children]. I'm a little bit shy. (Elaine, 20 years old)

These vignettes suggest that Thai temples represent an important space of socialisation (Butratana & Trupp 2011; Webster & Caretta 2016), not only for Thai migrants but also for their children in Belgium. These temples are therefore a primary site where to observe how Thai migrants in the country perceive Thai-Belgian children. During my fieldwork, I identified four Thai Buddhist temples in Belgium, among which the largest were in Mechelen and in Waterloo. These two temples offer activities for the children of Thai migrants, notably those of mixed parentage: the Thai temple in Mechelen organises Thai language and Thai traditional dance classes, whereas the one in Waterloo offers stay-in-the-temple camps to learn Thai traditional music instruments. In one of these temples, I observed two often-competing ethnic identifications among Thai migrants: as Isan (from the Northeast of Thailand) versus as Thai (from other parts of this country). For example, a Thai informant from Bangkok confided to me that she was "often uncomfortable" to be in the temple as most people frequenting it originated from Isan, talked most of the time in Isan language and consumed mostly Isan foods such as glutinous rice (fieldnotes, 28 June 2014). Most Isan-born parents in my study, like Elaine's mother, talked in Dutch or in French with their children, and only few of them registered their young offspring to the Thai classes in the temple. Most of the informants in my study, such as Catherine and Elaine above, had frequented one of the aforementioned temples, thanks to their Thai mother's initiative[3]. This underlines the relational dimension of Thai-Belgian informants' immersion in the Thai migrant population.

Aside from the temples, a few Thai associations like the Thai Learning Center (TLC) had put up Thai language classes for children of Thai-*farang* parentage; the Thai embassy in Brussels has also organised activities for children of Thai migrants, mostly in collaboration with TLC[4]. The variety of activities for children within the Thai migrant population in Belgium reflects, on the one hand, Thai adult migrants' concern regarding the transmission of what they call "Thai culture" from Thai parents to their ethnically mixed offspring. On the other hand, it indicates their view of these young people as individuals in the process of becoming "Thais", still "incomplete" and therefore need adults' guidance and framing. As one Thai association leader told me during an informal conversation, the "crisis" that the Thai migrant population in Belgium faces is the fact that many Thai migrants' children in this country "are not able to speak Thai" (fieldnotes: 3 June 2014). In this case, "Thai-ness" appears mainly tied to mixed-parentage children's knowledge and mastery of the Thai language. This coincides with the reality in Thailand where *luk-kreung*'s "Thai-ness" is questioned when they do not or could not speak the Thai language (Van Esterik 1996; Weisman 2001). While study informants seem need to complete their "Thai-ness" before the eyes of Thai migrants in Belgium, they also necessitate at the same time to adjust to the larger Belgian society, as the vignettes below suggest.

> I particularly heard most of the times from people that I am *métis*. Most of the time, there are people who treat me as bastard, because a bastard is someone who was born of different 'race(s)'. (Jean, 12 years old)

> It is people who remark that I have different nationality. So, they ask me, ah 'what nationality do you hold?' or 'from what country you came from?'. They see that physically I am Thai. I tell them that I am half Thai, half Belgian. (Luc, 20 years old)

The children of Thai-Belgian parentage are legally treated as full members of the Belgian nation and automatically acquired the Belgian nationality due to the fact that one of their

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[3]   All the study informants, except one of them, had a Thai mother and a Belgian father, which reflects the general situation of Belgian-Thai heterosexual couples in Belgium.

[4]   Some photos of their activities involving mixed-parentage children can be found in TLC's website: <http://www.thailearningcenter.be/belgium/Photos.html> (as of 30 August 2013).

parents is Belgian citizen born in Belgium[5]. This is facilitated by the *jus sanguinis* (right of blood) principle of Belgian nationality law. In fact, aside from this possibility, being born in Belgium also gives an opportunity to children of migrants to access the Belgian nationality (*jus soli* or right of soil). Nonetheless, despite this inclusive Belgian nationality law, the study informants experienced being questioned or teased regarding their ethnic and/or national origin. This usually took place in the school setting, an unpleasant experience for many of the informants like Anne (23 years old) below.

> I think when I was [young], I was a little bit annoyed. I think I told you that when I was very young, because no one knew where Thailand was: okey 'I'm half Thai', [but my classmates said] 'so you're Chinese?', [I said] 'No'. Because China was the only thing they had heard from Asia, so [they said] 'you look Asian, so you're Chinese'. 'No, I'm not Chinese'. It was hard to explain. So, it was annoying sometimes.

Like Anne, Catherine had a hard time in school. She was teased during her elementary school days and came back home one time crying: "they say 'Chinese' to me, but what 'Chinese'? I'm Thai". Travis (24 years old) confided that his schoolmates perceived him as "Asian", which initially made it difficult for him to integrate in his class. In this context, the category "Asian" appears to convey a negative meaning, which limits possibilities of other forms of ethnic identification. This seems in contrast with the situation in other countries such as the United States of America (USA), where the encompassing category "Asian" – the "model minority" – is most often connoted positively (Wu 2014). For informants like Jean, Anne, Catherine, and Travis, being perceived as "Others" (Chinese or Asian) and not as part of the "Us" (Belgians) in their society of residence made them feel "different" in a pejorative sense. It also triggered them to question and reject the categories "Asian" or "Chinese".

On the contrary, a few informants appreciated their supposed "difference" from the majority Belgian population: for example, when Elaine's schoolmates asked her country of origin, she replied "my mother is Thai and my father is Belgian, but sometimes, they thought that I was Spanish or Mexicans… It's okey, I felt special".

The racialisation experiences of the informants made them feel either socially excluded or included because of their phenotypic "differences" viewed as something particular. It is interesting to remark that despite the existing stereotype about "Eurasians" as "beautiful" (Haritaworn 2016: 1) in European countries such as in Belgium, study informants such as Elaine emphasized being "different" rather than being "beautiful" in reference to their ethnically mixed origin. These feelings fluctuate through time as they grow up, move up of the educational institutions, change residence, and/or engage in the labour market. Catherine observes this when she changed school, from almost a "white" institution in a small village to one more ethnically mixed school in the city:

> Now in my class, in fourth year (high school), there are, yeah a lot of religions. Walter is half-Brazilian, Nina herself is half-Morocco, Bruce is a half-Belgian and half-Indonesian, and me half-Belgian and half-Thai… Yeah [there is no teasing anymore], because they (her classmates) understand.

In the context of "social and cultural mixedness" (Varro 2003), mixed-parentage individuals like Catherine blend with the "Others" who become the norm in mostly urban spaces in Belgium. This often allows them to accept and make sense of their ethnically mixed

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[5] The acquisition of Belgian nationality is not automatic when the Belgian parent was not born in Belgium. In this case, the Belgian parent must make a declaration at the municipality office of his or her place of residence before the child reaches the age of five (see *Mouvement pour l'Egalité des Droits*: <http://www.allrights.be/node/286>).

background. Nonetheless, it is when they go to and spend some time in Thailand that they fully grasp what it means to be mixed-parentage individuals, as the following section unveils.

Thai-Belgian *luk-kreung* as valorised but partially included "Others" in Thailand

> I just have the Belgian citizenship. I think I'm going to ask for Thai citizenship. You don't have that automatically, but I think I could ask, because it's very convenient to travel in Asia, because they are going to open their borders, for example to go to Burma. If you're European, you have to ask your visa, but if you're Thai, you can. (Anne)

In Thailand, the children of Thai-*farang* couples like the informants in the present study can acquire Thai nationality by virtue of *jus sanguinis* or having a Thai parent. To avail this opportunity, their Thai parent must register them at the Thai embassy in their country of residence. In the case of children with one Thai parent, they should choose one nationality at the age of 20 only. If they choose to be Thai, there is an obligation to fulfil, that is, compulsory military service for boys at the age of 21. In addition, mixed children can access other privileges that the Thai State offers to their returning migrant citizens and to their families. For example, mixed-parentage children facilitate the life of their *farang* parent. To obtain a permanent residence permit, Thai-*farang* couples with a child of their own only need to register their marriage and wait two years before submitting their application, whereas mixed couples without children need to wait at least five years after getting married and need to provide a medical certificate of their infertility.

Aside from its offer of Thai nationality to children of Thai-*farang* couples, the Thai state also designs programmes targeting this group of individuals. This is may be due to these children's increasing numerical visibility linked to mixed unions involving Thais, notably in the context of (sex) tourism in the country. One example of Thai state's initiatives was the third "Homecoming: Thai youth cultural program" that the Thai Foreign Affairs and the Thai Ministry of Culture together with TWNE organised from 21 to 25 July 2014. This event introduced Thai culture, history, and society to children with Thai origin or of mixed parentage residing in Thailand or abroad. Seventeen young people aged 7 to 18 from seven countries (Belgium, Germany, Japan, Luxembourg, Switzerland, Thailand, and USA) participated (Fresnoza-Flot 2015). Two of them were from Belgium and were accompanied by their Thai mothers. In total, there were six adult participants: three mothers of the young participants and three observers (including me). This Homecoming event took place in Bangkok and in the province of Lopburi (located in the centre of Thailand) with activities such as Thai social etiquette session; traditional dance and martial arts sessions; and visits to historical places, museums, and temples. Throughout the programme, participants had the opportunity to taste a variety of Thai foods but some of them did not like to eat spicy Thai dishes.

Beyond the legal dimension, the study informants came to know how it felt to be "white" *luk-kreung*. Since the racial conception of beauty in Thailand seems to be based on "whiteness" considered as an indicator of "money, wealth and privilege" like in Laos (see High 2004 and 2014), the interviewed young people saw possibilities for their social incorporation in Thailand. Paul (20 years old) who was starting his fashion-modelling career in Bangkok remarks: "When I started my (modelling) career there, there were only *métis*. It is really the *métis* who are searched in that domain". This confirms the "commodification" of *luk-kreung* (Weisman 2001), who are socially valued "commodities" in the Thai economy and "good representatives" of the Thai nation's modernity to the world. At the time of my fieldwork, there was important international media attention to Vanessa Mae, a famous British violinist of Thai origin who represented Thailand and not the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK) in the Sochi 2014 Winter Olympic Games. She appeared an

embodiment of Thailand's hybridity and modernity, and her case suggests that being "white" means not only having a fair complexion and coming from a highly developed country but also possessing certain physical prowess and talents. Immersion of *luk-kreung* in the Thai nation and economy, thanks to their physical beauty, ethnic mixedness, and competences, reinforces in return their own perceived "difference" from the majority Thai population. Travis, who engaged in a one-month modelling career in Bangkok endorsing jeans of a known brand, complained:

> I feel like a foreigner, yeah, because people like asked me, quite a lot actually in the market, in the shopping mall. You have many people looking or asking, 'could I take a picture?'. It was nice but sometimes… […] I sort feel different, feel not the same.

Despite the opening of its doors to mixed-parentage individuals, the Thai society still othered *luk-kreung*. In the case of Thai-Belgian informants in my study, there are two main reasons for this. The first one points to their phenotypic characteristics (fair complexion, blue or light brown eyes, non-black hair, tall height…), which are most often identified as akin to those of *farang*. Catherine observed during her every visit in Thailand that "when people look at" her there she feels stranger. The second reason is that Thai-Belgian informants mostly have a low level of proficiency or are not at all proficient in the Thai language, which creates linguistic barriers between them and Thais. As Mathew (10 years old) explained, "I feel a bit (foreigner) because many times I don't know how to speak very well Thai. So they (people) say, 'he? You're not Thai'". This remark echoes the critical gaze of Thai society vis-à-vis *luk-kreung*'s "Thai-ness" as "partial" and "incomplete", particularly when these individuals fail to satisfy the social expectations towards them such as regarding Thai language competence (see Van Esterik 1996). It is not surprising that Thai migrants in Belgium organise activities for their offspring to immerse them in the Thai cultural universe with emphasis on Thai language mastery, which can allow these young people to meet social expectations in Thailand when they go there. These expectations revolve around the figure of a "good child (*dek di*)" who displays loyalty, obedience, and respect to "big people (*phu-yai*)" such as his parents, the state's authorities, and most importantly the King (Bolotta 2016). Thai language mastery can somehow be considered a manifestation itself of those qualities in the case of mixed-parentage children, as living abroad where language and ways of life are different from those in Thailand poses them challenges to grasp all the Thai cultural and linguistic subtleties. Thai language mastery can facilitate the successful honouring of "the monarchy, Buddhism and the nation" (*ibid.*) of mixed-parentage children of Thais, which would make them during the process "authentic" Thai people - *khon Thai tae*.

"I want to be in the airplane": Multiple positionings of Thai-Belgian young people

A Thai language teacher during an informal conversation shared with me a story of a Thai-Belgian boy who was learning Thai with her (fieldnotes, 23 April 2013). The boy is the youngest in a family of five and like his two other siblings he could converse in Thai. According to the Thai teacher, she was giving Thai language class every Sunday to the three youngsters in their home. One time, the boy told her that he wanted "to be in the airplane". The Thai teacher was surprised and asked him why. The boy replied, "because when I'm in Belgium, people mistake me from Thai and when I am in Thailand, they think that I am *farang*". Looking for his "proper place" in the world, this boy positioned himself in-between Thailand and Belgium by not claiming to be part of both societies. Like him the informants in my study found a way to confront social viewpoints about them "here" and "there".

> All the time [my schoolmates asked me of my origin country], I say 'and you, from what country you came from?'. I never reply to them because frankly speaking no, [if I would answer 'yes'] they make racist reflections after. That is why I never reply. (Jean)

Invisibilising one's ethnic mixedness represents one of the self-positioning strategies of the study informants. This strategy includes not only avoiding questions related to one's ethnic or national origin but also not using the Thai language outside of the domestic sphere. Anne, for example, refrained herself from uttering any Thai words in her school in Belgium: "I think I didn't want to speak Thai because everyone asked me what do you speak. Ah it is so strange because specially kids are very narrow minded, and I don't want to explain". She added that by speaking French without "accent, people know that you are Belgian at some point". It is interesting to note that in terms of language use, informants aged below 14 (like Anne when she was young) tend to pay attention to their interlocutor's main language, that is, speaking only Thai with Thais such as their mother and French or Flemish with their Belgian entourage and schoolmates.

Other informants embrace and emphasise their "Otherness" instead of keeping their ethnic mixedness invisible. For example, those who speak fluently Thai confront social stereotype in Thailand about them as *farang* by demonstrating their linguistic competence, as Catherine explained: "sometimes, they talked about me in Thai, and they don't know that I understand it, and I just let it them doing it, and I don't say anything or respond something, but if I talk Thai, they are always surprised". Catherine's mother told me that her daughter's Thai language competence made people in their village in Thailand to consider her as "*khoen Thai*" (Thai people). Aside from speaking Thai, a few informants like Paul and Travis take advantage of their "Otherness" to penetrate the fashion limelight in Thailand. Paul confides, "I accept my situation as real *métis*. So, I adjust [to the situation]. I am really Thai when I live in Thailand. I greet people and so on". Greeting here means practicing the "*wai*", that is, "bringing open palms together and synchronizing with a dip of the head or a bow (low, lower, or lowest, depending upon the level of veneration to be shown toward the person or object being addressed)" (Welty 2009: xi). Moreover, in Belgium, the obvious positioning strategies that informants adopt include changing one's place of residence and school, from rural to urban place where there is important social mixedness, as what Catherine and her family did. Befriending mixed-parentage individuals in the school setting is another strategy. Travis shared to me his approach below:

> It was not so easy to make new friends [in school] because then you have to fit it. So when I come in a classroom, I will look around. It's like 'okey is there one more Asian guy?', and if I would not see an Asian guy, I would say 'okey I'm only Asian guy, I have to make my stance, make myself clear. I don't want people to bully me you know.

In legal terms, self-positioning can be clearly observed in the way informants view the Thai nationality. We observe this in the vignette in the precedent section about Anne's wish to acquire the aforementioned nationality to be spatially mobile in Southeast Asia, where countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations impose less border restrictions to their citizens. Informants who possessed already the Thai nationality alongside their Belgian nationality revealed to me their interest to maintain cross-border links with Thailand through regular visits in the country. Two children who participated in the "Homecoming" programme of the Thai government also expressed their intention to get involved again in similar initiatives.

Concerning their view about Thailand, some informants considered it as a place "for vacation", for "travel" and to meet their Thai relatives; they did not see themselves living there. A few informants with less contact with Thai relatives wished to live and work in other countries than in Thailand and in Belgium: as Travis explains, "it's not cheap to go to

Thailand". Belgium, on the other hand, appears to be the place where many informants have strong emotional links due to the presence of their immediate family members and friends as well as to their experiences of growing up in the country.

Whereas a few children of Thai-Belgian couples (like the boy who wanted "to be in the airplane") undergo challenges to find their "place" in their cross-national social spaces, many informants found a way to address the social stereotypes about them as *luk-kreung* in Thailand and as *métis* in Belgium. Self-positioning in space, vis-à-vis one's interlocutor, and in cultural context appears multiple suggesting the complexity of the cross-national social spaces of children of Thai-Belgian couples as well as the agency of these young people.

Conclusion

The present article explores the "Othering" experiences and self-positioning of children of Thai-Belgian couples in their cross-national social spaces. The analysis of their case shows that although they are legally welcomed in Thailand and Belgium in terms of access to citizenship, they remain at large an object of "Othering" due to their phenotypic characteristics perceived as different from those of the majority population.

In Thailand, this experience takes place in the wider context in which *luk-kreung* are "commodified" and become a symbolic representation of the Thai nation's modernity (Weisman 2001; Kitiarsa 2010). The social expectations to which *luk-kreung* are subjected in Thailand find its shadows in Belgium, specifically within the Thai migrant population in this country where adult Thai migrants organise various activities aimed at their children. These activities with an emphasis on the mastery of the Thai language and other Thai cultural practices reflect Thai migrants' view of their children as individuals "in the process" of becoming Thai due to the fact that they are growing up in Belgium and that many of them could not fluently speak Thai. Outside of the Thai migrant population, Thai-Belgian informants enjoy full membership since birth to the Belgian nation, but are often considered as *métis* in their spaces of socialisation such as in school. Their "Othering" experience appears stronger in rural context than in urban setting where "social mixedness" (Varro 2003) reigns in everyday living. Their feeling of being "different" or being "Others" in Thailand and in Belgium produces multiple positioning strategies: invisibilising one's ethnic roots, accepting and highlighting one's supposed "Otherness", and acquiring the Thai nationality (for those who did not have it yet). These strategies help the study informants to counter social stereotypes and expectations about them in Thailand and in Belgium. Inhabiting cross-national spaces provide the study informants professional and mobility possibilities, but most often this puts them in a situation of "in-betweenness" like migrant children of the "1.5 generation" (Bartley & Spoonley 2008) who were born in a country - usually that of their migrant parent(s) - and migrated to their present society of residence before the age of 18. The members of this generation most often feel not being part of the "here" and "there" at the same time.

Indeed, the children of Thai-Belgian couples in the present study experience various mechanisms of "Othering" in different societies, which prompts them to position themselves in multiple ways in space, vis-à-vis their interlocutor, and in cultural settings. It would be worthwhile for future research on these children to examine how their "Othering" experiences affect their self-identification through time. At present, the children of Thai migrants in Belgium are increasingly becoming composed of *luk-kreung* or *métis* on the one hand and of "1.5-generation" Thais. The way these young people experience and make sense of the mechanisms of "Othering" in Belgium represents an interesting topic to be examined using a comparative perspective.

Acknowledgements

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