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**Gendered and Racialised Ambiguity: An Exploration of *Métisses*
Women's Complex Identities and Representations in French-African
contexts.**

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Declaration

"I declare that this dissertation has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and that it is entirely my own work.

I agree that the Library may lend or copy this dissertation on request".

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Date: **29/08/2022**

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Aliyah', with a large, stylized flourish underneath.

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Abstract

The term *métis* a French word referring to a person of mixed ancestry - which, for the purposes of this research, will designate a person specifically of 'black' and 'white' parentage - despite its absence of biological reality, has been used increasingly in the present francophone society where the possibilities of contact between peoples and cultures have multiplied. Representing both an individual and collective experience, it is a complex concept, reflecting a pluralistic and moving reality that not only points out the relationship of each individual to their own history and identity, but also the relations that society maintains with otherness. Whether assumed, rejected, or subject to indifference, the *métis* identity is thus a major space for reflection on the evolution of today's multicultural societies.

In this context of a moving and evermore dynamic notion of identity, the figure of the *métisse* woman in particular (whether in literature or society) stands at the crossroads of discourses on race and gender, as well as class and sexuality. The present research therefore aims at offering a non-exhaustive overview of feminine afro-descendant *métissage* by studying the processes of identity construction, evolution, and representation of this ambiguous figure, with a particular focus on in-betweenness, double consciousness, and sense of belonging. To do so, the study will first rely on literary works from the past centuries, from canons such as Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) and Emile Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) to Abdoulaye Sadjó's *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal* (1951) portraying the *métisse* through the writers' (male) gaze upon her. Secondly, this study will propose an analysis revolving around the lived experiences of five women of French-African descent using semi-structured interviews. The participants, drawing on their own personal understanding of their identity, were invited to share aspects of their stories, to contrast and assess traditional representations of *métisses* women. In light of the literature representing the *métisse* and of the interviews' findings giving her voice, the present research seeks to interrogate what it means to be a *métisse* woman and explore how her ambivalent identity is imagined, constructed and experienced as fundamentally intersectional, gendered and racialised.

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Introduction

Métissage [mixture, mixing¹] is everywhere and a common phenomenon across all ethnic groups. But behind this seemingly ordinary term lies the world's colonial history with its share of violence towards racialised bodies. Transpiring through is the myth of hierarchised 'pure' races, objects of fascinations and projections of all kinds. The 'racial' and cultural status of mixed individuals is a much-discussed issue at the heart of ongoing debates that can be traced a long way back. The following section will retrace the origin of the word '*métis.se*' and provide a definition for the purposes of the present research.

What is in a name? Debated Terminology within the Field

The term *mulâtre* [mulatto in English] is the ancestor of *métis* and is derived from the word 'mule' designating the infertile hybrid offspring of a donkey and a horse. It took on a particularly pejorative meaning in the French colonial context and essentially referred to individuals born from the union of 'black' and 'white' parents. Its later derivative *métis* - considered less problematic - comes from the latin *mixtus* (mixed, mingled) and was used in Europe to describe a plant, an animal or an object², product of the union of two distinct species prior to its application to humans. The human *métissage* that emerged from the first contacts between distinct ethnic groups and later in the processes of conquest, colonisation and slavery, became inseparable from a violent history and a legislative network marked by the exclusion of difference and segregation. The 19th century, through the intermediary of the French anthropological school in particular, proceeded to attribute pseudo-scientific specificities to *métis* people leading to the conclusion that intermixing is dangerous and harmful to the development of mankind (Schmidt, 2003, 9).

In fact, the terminology used to talk about 'mixed-race' people remains a contested, unsettled site within postcolonial theories of identity since it presupposes the mixing of two supposedly 'pure' 'racial' elements without a biological reality. The very concept of 'race' seemingly survived its scientific invalidation and stands for 'a social category at the service of systems of power which produced essential irreducible hierarchies, and provided justification for mass crimes' (Ndiaye, 2008, 36). Historically, sociologically and politically constructed,

¹ All gloss translations unless otherwise stated are the researcher's.

² Such as the so-called '*tissu métis*,' a piece of fabric made out of cotton and linen.

‘race’ and ethnicity³ ‘are not primordial and essential notions, which make some individuals different from others, but are rather social representations, which at a particular historical point of time, have come to define some people differently from others’ (Mullen, 2021, 36) rendering ‘racial’ identities fixed and unchanging. The melanic factor is a natural fact but its interpretation was a cultural one. The social constructionist approach used in this dissertation arguing that one’s ‘race’ or ethnicity is socially constructed (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998) is particularly useful to avoid slipping into essentialist thinking about ‘race’.

The English term of ‘miscegenation’ coined in the founding context of the American Civil War, if it is considered the closest equivalent to that of *métissage*, nevertheless immediately carries a technical and scientific racially-based connotation and fails to emancipate from the idea of ‘race’ (Lu, 2014, 113). The same goes for words such as ‘biracial’, ‘mixed-race’, ‘multiracial’, ‘hybrid’... all constituting problematic terms partially inadequate and originating in nineteenth century ‘race’ science fiction (Ifekwunigwe, 1999, 9). Therefore, for the purpose of this particular research, I made the informed choice to stick with the French term *métis* as an appropriate shorthand alternative to the myriad of ambiguous terms previously cited to name individuals with differently racialised parents. Indeed, according to Jayne Ifekwunigwe (2001, 43-44) ‘in French-African contexts [...] alternative translations of *métis(se)* both include and transcend Black/White discourses and in so doing encompass diasporic convergences across ethnicities, cultures, religions and nationalities’. Widely used in common French language across countries in a non pejorative way, within and without the population it refers to, the term neutralises and de-privileges the term ‘race,’ de-centering it as a primary essential marker. However, as rightly noticed by Ifekwunigwe, the term *métis* still isn’t sufficiently satisfying mixed people’s need for an inclusive mediating word that would be ‘a uniform but not essentialist term which carves out a space for the naming of their specific experiences without necessarily reinscribing and reifying “race”’ (44). I am thus fully aware of the limitations posed by the use of *métis* but found it to be the most relevant compromise.

³ By ethnicity I refer to the ‘differences between individuals and groups in skin colour, language, religion, culture, nationality or sometimes geographic region’ (Nagel, 2003, 6). Currently exclusively centred on visible differences among groups, notions of ‘race’ were historically broader and could include religious or linguistic groups (such as Jews, Irish or Italian people) considered non-white intermediate ‘races’ (Ndiaye, 2008, 102).

It is also important to note that this study focuses on the specific figures of *métisse* women of 'black' (African) and 'white' (French) *métissage* by no means invalidating other types of 'interracial' mixing between different ethnic groups.

Researcher's Personal Experience

Born in Dakar (Senegal), the researcher herself is a *métisse* woman of mixed African-French descent - her mother being a French and Malagasy woman and her father being a Toucouleur⁴ Senegalese man. Having lived in Dakar's multicultural environment until age eleven then France's until age twenty-one, she was always concerned with issues of identity, belonging and self-definition. These resonate with her own personal experience and led to the decision to carry on this research while still searching for evolving answers. This embodied knowledge of the two main ethnic identities and the relationship between them motivated this interest for other testimonies and in understanding the notions central to identity-building in mixed and racialised contexts. For these reasons, the researcher has a very particular access to the population studied, a sort of 'thread of affiliation' (Maalouf, 2000, 120) which considerably facilitated the research process as discussed further in the methodology section.

Research Aims

This study apprehends, through the *métissage* of African-French women, two of the most actual and discussed concept in the field of social sciences and humanities: that of 'race' and 'identity' as one cannot address the question of *métissage* without questioning these two social objects. This dissertation will not examine the biological dimensions of race, ethnicity or gender, nor will it detail, debate or draw conclusions on physical distinctions between 'blacks' and 'whites.' Rather, it will study assertions of physical distinctions between groups led by social constructions of 'race,' gender, or ethnicity.

In light of the literature that represents the *métisse* and of the interviews' findings, the present research seeks to explore how the *métisse* and her ambivalent identity is imagined, constructed and experienced as fundamentally fluid and complex.

⁴ Tukolor or Toucouleur people are a West African ethnic group native to the Senegalese region of Futa Tooro.

By considering the process of identity construction, evolution and representation of this ambiguous figure - with a particular focus put on issues of in-betweenness, double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) and belonging - this research will attempt to grasp what it means to be a *métisse* woman.

Structure of the Dissertation

The first section of this study is dedicated to a detailed literature review surrounding the *métisse*, first through her already particular status during slavery and colonial times; then as an object of ambivalent desire and sexual Other in canonic French literature; and finally through the lens of colorism, social status and the urge to whiten.

The second section presents the methodology and features information about research design, sampling and access, data collection and analysis as well as ethical considerations.

Lastly, preceding the final conclusion completing the study, is the third section composed of the synthesised key findings and subsequent analysis revolving around the lived experiences of the participants and the challenges they face.

I) Literature Review

Introduction

Due to the subject of Black people in France being marginalised in both academic and non-academic literature, studies on topics such as mixed 'race' identity or colorism in metropolitan France are rare, compared to what may be found in the United States for example. In France, the ideology of the République was posed as theoretically colourblind and indifferent to other physical characteristics. Being French has traditionally been considered as a political adherence to the nation at odds with any racialised vision. (Ndiaye, 2008, 97). Yet the French Empire did develop by subjugating populations described as non-white and uncivilised which were thus denied citizenship. The dividing line between citizens and subjects was therefore both political and racial as being French resulted ultimately in being white. This explains the difficulty to think through and comprehend *métissage* given that the *métis* people blurred reference points while at the same time serving as an intermediary between dominant and dominated. While few French sources still

briefly address the ambivalence of the *métis*' status, even less, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, address the experiences of women. This literature review will intend to provide an overview of the dominant perspectives and representations of the *métisse* woman, if not from the viewpoint of the population concerned, at least through that of those seeing, imagining and constructing her.

The Legacy of Colonisation and Slavery

Mixed individuals historically inspired two types of essentialising views. First, the fear of miscegenation, or mixophobia, the legacy of slavery and colonialism largely supported by pseudo-scientific and naturalist texts such as Arthur De Gobineau's *Essay on the Inequality of Human Races* (1853). This very influential document sees miscegenation as necessarily leading to the decay and destruction of civilisation and mankind through the destruction of the 'pure' white 'race.' Having firmly stated that the products of interracial unions were degenerate (Gobineau, 24), Gobineau however interestingly still recognises a few qualities to the *métisse* woman in particular. He acknowledges in a footnote referring only to mixed women, their 'powerful charms' and beauty considered as the most delightful result of racial mixing. This is a paradoxical perception of the *métisse* both as a product of miscegenation descending the white male and as his (sexual) partner. Susan Weitmann (2007) further assesses Gobineau's vision by describing the *métisse* as 'a symbol of unity and destruction, the most desirable product of an ultimately doomed sexual enterprise' (13). She thus clarifies this pull and push relationship between attraction and repulsion. This brings in the second essentialist perspective on this figure, the modern conception of mixophilia present in the anti-racist imaginary characterising the end of the twentieth century. It associates mixed people with beauty, sensuality, notions of synthesis of opposites, enrichment and as an aesthetic model to a so-called 'post-racist' world. Both visions, whether through positive appreciations or discriminating scopes reduce and other the *métis*.

The effects of skin colour do not merely constitute historical curiosities inherited from slavery and racism, but ongoing mechanisms with a great influence still.⁵ That is true in the United States and it is also applicable to France. To better understand the ambivalent status

⁵ Verna M. Keith and Cedric Herring, "Skin Tone Stratification in the Black Community", *American Journal of Sociology*, n°3, 1991, 767-770.

of the *métisse* and figure out where she stands in the discriminatory stigma weighing heavily on blackness, it is necessary to focus on slavery as the base for the construction of racialised imaginaries (Ndiaye, 2008, 88). As securely established by now, the notion of 'race' is politically constructed in order to justify colonial domination and slavery in particular. The considerable variety of skin colours was the subject of a precise taxonomy during this period, founding a social and colorist hierarchy within the slave system, where lighter skins were 'favoured'. Pap Ndiaye (2008, 86) argues that 'colorism is in a way a wry by-product of racism [...] a form of acceptance of the racial hierarchy and, subsequently, of domination and power relations at stake.' According to Victor Schoelcher, observer of the power dynamics within French colonies, growing tensions and division emerged between *métis* people and black people as a result of such differences of treatment:

What maintains the strength of the colonists, what perpetuates their superiority, is precisely the hatred that the mixed-blood created by their pride, between them and the Blacks. People of colour would want to rise to the Whites, but without bringing the Blacks up with them; they will not succeed.⁶

In the Americas, *métis* people were better regarded than Black people and possessed a higher status, the fairest in complexion able to 'pass' as white could attempt to escape persecutions more easily (Ndiaye, 90) although this phenomenon involved more men than women. Despite the 'advantages' the palest had, *métis* people were never considered white enough, and the colour line remained resolutely in place within common imaginary as internal tensions increased gradually within colonised territories reinforcing racial division. Their value as slaves, more specifically for women, was all the greater because their complexion was light, perceived as more delicate, more suitable for domestic or sexual services than the work in the fields. Indeed, an incentive for white men to abuse black women was 'the monetary and symbolic worth of their mixed-race or 'mulatto' offspring [as] lighter skinned slaves fetched a higher price at market and occupied a higher status in the cultural system of slave owning society' (Nagel, 2003, 107). In the southern United States, the price of these women advertised as 'fancy girls' was much higher than that of women with darker skin (Ndiaye 90-91) and translated white men's sexual preferences. A difference

⁶ Victor Schoelcher, *Des colonies françaises. Abolition immédiate de l'esclavage*, (Paris, Pagnerre, 1842) 201-202. Every translation from French sources are the researcher's unless otherwise stated.

confirmed by Walter Johnson's study of the slave market in nineteenth century New Orleans detailing the particular attention given to such women. He further argues that purchasing a *métisse* was a sexualised transaction, a 'contest between white men played out on the body of an enslaved woman.'⁷ Marli Weiner's research surrounding mistresses in South Carolina incorporates the 1859 journal of Ella Clanton Thomas, the wife of a plantation owner, giving an account of the sexual exploitation of *métisse* women.⁸ Her observation, corroborated by historians, features the more potentiality of light-skinned female slaves to be seen as sexual goods (Nagel, 108). The masters who chose a lighter-skinned slave likely projected upon her their racial prejudiced representations according to which a fair skin equals a higher degree of intelligence and beauty, but also an ability to perform delicate tasks and better understand the white masters' demands. The study of the original status of the *métisse*, with the relative privilege offered by her beauty, attractiveness and her partial whiteness already points to her characterisation as both sexualised and othered.

The Métisse: a Sexual Other⁹ in Canonic French literature

The charms of a *mulâtresse*¹⁰ are powerful. We owe them first of all to a double heredity: Negro heredity that allows, in love, gestures full of slowness and flexibility and in which there is as much weakness as there is endearing strength. Western heredity that grafts on this background the contributions of a French education received or copied: shimmering clothing, silky, elastic, which perfectly embrace advantageous and restless forms; vocabulary richer than all the most sonorous African dialects; ways to stand, walk or hug; and then blushes and lipstick that make the face and mouth more greedy... (Sadji, 1965, 154)

In the preceding excerpt from Abdoulaye Sadji's *Nini mulatto from Senegal* (1965) the *métisse* is described as a charming ambivalent figure in a sort of intermediary state between

⁷ Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 113.

⁸ Weiner, Marli, *Mistresses and Slaves*, (Illinois University Press, 1997) 95-96.

⁹ The term *Other* is used widely in the humanities to identify groups and individuals defined as alien, exotic, and different; often Others are from different races, ethnic groups, nationalities, sexualities or classes as evidenced by Bell Hooks in 'Eating the Other,' *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 22-39.

¹⁰ 'In the French islands, *mulâtre* or 'mulatto' refers to a child born of a black mother and a white father (common), or a black father and a white mother (rare).' Chevalier de Jaucourt, in *Encyclopédie*, entry "Mulâtre" 1765.

her two ancestries. Similarly, analysing the alluring photograph of 'A Colored Belle of Puerto Rico' (see Figure 1) included in Trumbull White's book *Our New Possessions* (1898, 357), Joane Nagel exposes the analogy between the newly acquired geographical territory of Puerto Rico - invaded in 1898 during the Spanish-American War - and the photographed young woman as America's new possession. Nagel (2003, 155) adds that she is 'sexually exotic, but safe, wild, but tame, exotic enough to arouse, but familiar enough to reassure the eager, but anxious traveler' which is useful to understand the sort of middle ground she represents in the eyes of white men. The woman in the picture, of African-Spanish descent, is described in the caption as an 'attractive colored girl' and an example of the 'higher type of that race.' This suggests that the *métisse* is viewed as the perfect mistress, the ideal courtesan in the erotic western (and French) imaginary of the nineteenth century as she adheres to racialised beauty standards surrounding light skin while retaining the erotic 'flavour' attached to her black descent. She distinguishes herself by physical and spiritual advantages both inspiring simultaneously passion, admiration and confusion in the travelers' that see her¹¹ as attested by Lafcadio Hearn's flattering portrait of a Martinican *métisse* (see Figure 2). Due to her reputation emphasising both her beauty and looseness, she is portrayed as both 'sexually titillating and exotic, and still pale enough to be apparently respectable' (Weitmann, 2007, 2).

While exposing the connections between ethnicity and sexuality, it appears that ethnic boundaries also constitute sexual boundaries holding certain people in and keeping others out. Shaping notions of sexual desirability and delimiting classes of ethnic 'Others' that might be considered oversexed (usually coloured individuals often seen as savages), undersexed, perverted or even dangerous (Nagel, 2003, 9). A few examples of this ambivalent vision may be found in canonic French literature, for instance in Charles Baudelaire's poetry. Indeed, the cycle of Jeanne Duval (or cycle of the black Venus) is inspired by Baudelaire's long time *métisse* mistress Jeanne, considered his most famous muse, said to be behind some of his most sensual poems. In the ambivalent meeting of poetry and historical biography, Jeanne becomes the incarnation of a simultaneously desirable and dangerous coloured *femme fatale*. Her portrait (see Figure 3) by the poet enhances her curves and gives her a mischievous look, reinforced by the manuscript mention in latin *quærens quem devoret*

¹¹ Maurice Rugendas, *Voyage pittoresque dans le Brésil*, 1835.

which may be translated as 'seeking someone to devour' as if in search for a victim to bewitch. Baudelaire's poems about Jeanne emphasise a powerful racist and exoticist imagery. In 'La Chevelure' and 'Parfum Exotique' (see Appendix B, page 52) in particular, the controlling, unmediated white male gaze is placed upon the displayed body of the *métisse* becoming the portal to imagined exotic lands. She is a means to an end through which the poet may escape and conquer idealised territories. In this period where free people of colour were merely tolerated on French soil and where the rare *mulâtresses* living in Paris were domestic dressmakers or prostitutes (Schmidt, 2003, 185), Jeanne Duval evoked the sea, tropical beaches and islands, sometimes a beautiful ship sailing, other times a journey, a scent, a dancing snake, a night vault, a copper skin, or a vase of sadness. If in the two previously cited poems the *métisse* figure is a passive object of desire transporting the intoxicated poet in a foreign paradise, in *Sed Non Satiata* [Unslakeable Lust] the mixed woman actively motivates the male poetic voice's lust with her stereotypical lubricity and animality unsettling the power relations:

Singular deity, brown as the nights,
Scented with the perfume of Havana and musk,
Work of some obeah, Faust of the savanna,
Witch with ebony flanks, child of the black midnight¹²

Divinised here, she is also demonised 'O pitiless demon! pour upon me less flame' (*Ibid*, 1942) later on exerting a strong influence on the helpless poetic voice likening her to several intoxicants such as wine or opium. 'She is a source of sensual stimulation and also a pitiless demon, whose sexual appetite frightens and excites the speaker' (Weitmann, 86).

Puzzling and mysterious, the real living muse, Jeanne, even escaped the poet's pen and caused much ink to flow. Indeed, by resorting to the very epithet of *Black Venus* 'critics and biographers have systematically effaced her individuality and undermined her role as the lover, muse, and partner of the famous poet.' (Weitmann, 2007, 116). Progressively made into a myth as generations of such people went by, the real woman underneath was ultimately remodelled into a symbol of licentiousness and pernicious sexuality. In an attempt to legitimise both Jeanne and the love affair binding her to the poet, Théodort de Banville writes in his *Lettres chimériques* (1885, 281-282):

¹² Baudelaire, 'Sed non satiata', *Les Fleurs du Mal*, (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1942) 29.

Jeanne was not black at all; she was even white. Without a doubt she was a girl of colour; the creoles, who know about these things, saw it without fail, by means of this slight white line on the nail which nothing erases, and which is the distinctive sign; at last she had the svelteness, the nimble gesture, the soft and seductive grace of the mixed blood; but she was neither lustrous like ebony, nor like anything black.

This passage once more attest of the push and pull ambivalence of the *métisse* due to the two, seemingly clashing, parts of herself. Her not being strictly black, as repeatedly argued by Banville, implies she is more acceptable, suitable and legitimised to be Baudelaire's lover. It is nevertheless acknowledged that she is undoubtedly coloured. Despite the racist representations depicted in Banville's portrait, she is viewed positively as beautiful and graceful, a vision proper to a close friend of the poet but contradicted in almost all subsequent portrayals of Jeanne throughout the twentieth century. She was said by Jacques Crépet (1922) to encapsulate 'the universality of the vices common to the *métisse*: libertine, sneaky, liar, spender, alcoholic, - stupid moreover'¹³ or regarded as a simple-minded prostitute with a deviant sexuality as established by Alfred. E. Carter (1977, 70):

Like most whores she was rather pathetic: mentally retarded, slow on the uptake, content to dwell from day to day, tolerant of her queer poet provided that he paid the bills and she could occasionally get to bed with some lusty brute whose loins were stronger and his desires less finicky.

As the 'Black Venus,' she became a caricature (Weitmann, 132), stereotyped and reduced, as a mixed woman of unknown background, to the racist and sexist characteristics associated with blackness and female blackness potentially used in order to minimise her value to the poet and contribution to his work. Jeanne's identity was forcefully established as an archetype, representative of the *métisse*, a monster of immorality, a type placed upon a practically anonymous woman.

Another striking piece of literature still studied in French secondary schools and displaying the *métisse* in this liminal state even further is Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*. The 1867 novel depicts an unfortunate interracial union between Thérèse - the eponymous *métisse* character - and her white husband Camille, whom she betrays in a scandalous and passionate affair with Laurent and whom she later kills with the help of her lover. Zola touches on 'contemporary

¹³ Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes de Charles Baudelaire*, (Paris: Louis Conard, 1922), xxix.

fears of degeneration and decadence linked to uncontrolled (deviant) sexuality' (Weitmann, 79). Similarly to Jeanne, Thérèse's features are in direct opposition to those usually cited to differentiate black people: she is 'pale', has a 'long, narrow, pointed nose', 'pale pink lips resembl[ing] two thin threads' and her skin is of 'olive whiteness.' (*Thérèse Raquin*, 1975, 17). The only elements that could suggest that she might be of a mixed ancestry are the reference to a matte light complexion and to her thick dark hair. Actually the daughter of a Frenchman and a North African woman, the reference to Thérèse's *métissage* is very subtle here although this African blood in her veins, her mother's legacy, commands her behaviour driven by instincts she hides beneath her white façade: 'I have been told that my mother was a daughter of the chief of a tribe in Africa. I have often thought of her, and I understood that I belonged to her by blood and instinct.' (*Ibid*, 61). Weitmann argues that, for Zola, 'a métisse is really a coloured woman with the capacity to hide her blackness behind a false cloak of whiteness' (82). This hereditary determinism explains Thérèse's nature through that of her African mother pointing to 'race' and gender as crucial intersecting notions since it is indeed the coloured woman who taints her mixed child with her bestial, hypersexual heritage: 'the blood of her mother, the African blood that burned her veins, began to flow, to beat furiously in her lean, almost virgin body. She spread out, offered herself with a sovereign shamelessness' (*Ibid*, 59). She behaves as would an animal in heat craving a (white) lover, unrecognisable once one exposes the 'bestial, sexually-insatiable blackness beneath the white mask' (Weitmann, 87). Intrinsically, physiologically even, she resembles a feline 'mimick[ing] the cat, lengthen[ing] her hands like claws, and [giving] her shoulders feline undulations' (67) 'her black eyes wide open, her body writhing, ready to spring' (26). If her intensity and sensuality seduced Laurent at first, it also frightened him at the same time: 'Laurent felt cold to the bones[...] In truth he was scared. His mistress did not yet possess him entirely; there remained in his heart a little of the discomfort he had felt under the young woman's first kisses' (67). Almost systematically building on the imagery of fire, 'flames were escaping from her flesh [...] her burning blood [...] hot smells...' (*Thérèse Raquin*, 59) the novel adds a demonic dynamic to the character similar to the bizarre deity from *Sed Non Satiata*. This imagery is dual as it likely refers to both desire and hell, attraction and danger, pulls and pushes as a prominent recurring theme in all the texts encountered featuring sexual relationships between the *métisse* and her white lover. The fear of castration is furthermore present both in Laurent's effeminised transformation at the end of the novel -

under the enduring influence of Thérèse - and in Baudelaire's poem, the poetic voice fearing to become the Persephone to the *métisse's* Hades.

Alas! and I cannot, licentious Megaera,
To break your spirit and bring you to bay
In the hell of your bed turn into Proserpine!¹⁴

Thérèse sexually dominates Laurent and he seems unable to satisfy her. She is a lethal, pathological woman, a fundamentally ambivalent character (attractive and repulsive) whose abnormal sexuality seduces and destroys her white partners as well as herself. In this, Zola's vision of sexual degenerescence is close to that of Gobineau as it involves a determinist causal relationship between Thérèse's racial ancestry and her ultimate downfall filled with murder, prostitution and suicide (Weitmann, 77).

This portrait of the *métisse* is shared by other contemporaries of Baudelaire and Zola such as Eugène Sue, who, in *The Mysteries of Paris* (1843) describes Cecily as an audacious and diabolical *métisse* with a 'natural perversity' (Sue, 1: 169), a 'creature as beautiful as she is perverted, as enchanting as she is dangerous' (3: 242). It persists in the following century adding to the erotic animalistic aspect a certain madness and great violence as exemplified by the following extract from Miguel Ángel Asturias' *A Kind of Mulatto* (1963, 54-55):

The mulatto was terrible [...] in the night, lying by his side, she would cry and bite him so hard that it was not uncommon for her big mouth of superb beast to smear itself with blood, which she tasted and swallowed, while she scratched him, enraged, with her eyes rolled back, without pupils, her breasts dripping with sweat.

It appears that racialised depictions of ethnic Others' sexual impurity, perversion, dangerousness or desirability all partake in establishing 'normalcy' or deviance and in reinforcing ethnic segregation (Nagel, 2003, 55). All the pieces of literature explored here were written by white, arguably influential men (although Asturias, briefly mentioned, is of mixed Spanish-Guatemalan ancestry) and it is likely that their fame and exclusiveness had an impact on contemporary social representation of 'race' crystallising and amplifying racial fears, fantasies and stereotypes. In fact, according to Nagel, 'negative images or accusations

¹⁴Baudelaire, 'Sed non satiata', *Les Fleurs du Mal*, (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1942) 29.

about the sexuality of ethnic Others contribute to the creation of disreputable and toxic outgroups and can be used to justify their exclusion, oppression, or extermination' (55-56).

Of dubious morality, the *métisse* is a fearsome seductress double and ambiguous. Exotic and sexually exuberant, she is treacherous, violent and wicked while, paradoxically, meeting the finest criteria of beauty.

Turning white: Colorism and Social Status

As mentioned above, the issue of colorism in literature - that is the existing distinctions and inherited social hierarchies within Black people based on their colour nuances - will be the subject of this section. Colorism will allow this study to think about the correlation between skin colour and social position beyond distinctions between 'black' and 'white.' Numerous American studies, as previously stated, show that Black elites were in fact mixed-race. The idea that the lighter the skin, the higher the social position, still constitutes a common feature within American culture. Historian Dominique Rogers argued that, in Saint-Domingue,¹⁵ the elite of colour was very mixed: mulattos and quarterons¹⁶ sometimes handled large sums, or were more often engaged in the commercial and craft economy although their engagement was still modest. This is particularly visible in Le Masurier and Joseph Stavar's rather idyllic representations of *Métis*' domestic and social prosperity in French Colonies (see Figure 4 and 5) both paintings showing the large spectrum of *métissage* (from dark to brown and beige) with a particular emphasis put on the women's elaborate clothing. According to a Haitian proverb, '*neg wiche sé mulat, mulat pov sé neg*': the rich Black man is a mulatto, and the poor mulatto is a negro (Ndiaye, 2008, 94). The colonisation of Africa also played a role in establishing melanic hierarchies. In the west, the first *métis* (of mostly Portuguese and French descent) participated in the Atlantic slave trade from Senegal's minor departing point in the mid fifteenth century. In Saint-Louis-du-Sénégal and Gorée, for example, Africans with fair skin enjoyed special advantages since these Senegalese cities were administered by *métis* elites enjoying French nationality since the end of the 19th century, alongside three other Senegalese communes. This was an extremely rare case (Ndiaye, 94-95). *Métisses* born of the union of local African women and colonial

¹⁵ French colony in the West Indies from 1659 to 1804, situated on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, present-day Dominican Republic and Haiti.

¹⁶ Individuals with one quarter of black ancestry and three quarters of European ancestry.

administrators had active trade relations with Europeans and were called the *signares* deriving from the Portuguese *senhoras* [ladies]. Strategically placed and coveted by several major colonial powers, Senegal is a country where the question of *métissage* and of the status held by these *signares* is actually addressed in literature, notably through the writings of Abdoulaye Sadjì. In *Nini, mulâtresse du Sénégal* (1965), taking place in Saint-Louis during colonial times, Sadjì's eponymous character Virginie Maerle is 'almost' white. Very light-skinned with blond hair and blue eyes, she aspires to marry a white Frenchman. The author exerts a critical eye regarding Nini and *métisse* women in general, analysing without complacency the Senegalese society, its social dynamics revolving around skin colour, and the seemingly inescapable hierarchy it entails. He writes:

Nini is the eternal moral portrait of the mulatto woman, whether from Senegal, the Antilles or the two Americas. It is the portrait of the physically hybrid being who, in the unconsciousness of her most spontaneous reactions, always seeks to rise above her own condition, that is, above a humanity which she considers inferior but to which she is inexorably linked by fate.¹⁷

Having this quote in mind, one may recall Frantz Fanon's 1952 analysis of Mayotte Capécia's famous novel *I am Martinican* (1948) in *Black Skin White Masks*. As Capécia demonstrates her profound desire to marry a blond white man exclusively (Capécia, 202), Fanon comments that she does not claim anything but 'a little whiteness in her life' (Fanon, 1952, 42) accepting of all the rejections and humiliations brought by her status as a coloured mistress. She, on the contrary, rejoices not to be the offspring of a black union as she discovers her grandmother was white and her mother subsequently *métisse*:

So my mother, then, was a *métisse*? I should have guessed it when I looked at her light colour. I found her prettier than ever and cleverer, and more refined. If she had married a white man, do you suppose I should have been completely white? ... And life might not have been so hard for me?¹⁸

Fanon, evaluating this reaction as a 'nauseous phenomenon' since what Capécia wants is a kind of 'lactification' supposed to save the 'race' through its whitening (*Ibid*, 47). Perfectly aware of women's (such as Capécia) obsession to whiten, Sadjì describes these idealised unions as 'the crowning achievement of a certain dream of greatness and distinction [...] The great dream that haunts them' (Sadjì, *Nini*, 95) and justifies their extravagant behaviour. By

¹⁷ Sadjì, *Nini*, Avant-propos, Présence Africaine, 1988, 7.

¹⁸ Mayotte Capécia, *Je suis Martiniquaise* (Paris, Corrèa, 1948) 59.

marrying white French men, they literally cross the line of colour separating them from the world of their Western ancestors they deem more valuable.

This phenomenon described here is an example of what may be defined as self-hatred on the part of the *métisses*, both Martinican and Saint-Louisian, rejecting their blackness. Indeed, in the French West Indies as well as in West Africa, being black and being mixed does not have the same meaning. Many *métis*, especially women, were not keen to be assimilated to Blacks. *Métis* lineages were often maintained through marriages in such a way as to cast blackness into the distant past, a socially demeaning one to recall (Ndiaye, 2008, 96). Nini's particular appearance leads her to consider it 'a clear sign of her belonging to the "superior" race of the Nordics [...] her eyes and last name plac[ing] her somewhere on the world map, that is closer to the pole than it is to the equator' (Nini, 41). Yet, no matter how hard she tries 'passing,' some of her features (nose, lips and 'feline gait') betray her and reattach her to the ancestry she despises and denies. If in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), W.E.B Du Bois provided a precise evaluation of skin tones crucial to measure the different social positions linked to skin colour, it is E. Franklin Frazier who posed the problem in the clearest way in his book *The Black Bourgeoisie* (1955), expanding on the correlation between colour and class in the American society. The same way as during slavery, 'the slightest drop of white blood seemed to lift them [*métis* people] up on the scale of humanity' (Frazier, 204). The acceptance of the racial hierarchy put in place by Whites, explains Frazier, creates individuals without identity who refuse to identify with the black world while being rejected by the dominant group. Hence the self-hatred, since the contempt that black *métisse* bourgeoisie suffered is attributed to the fact that it is associated with the mass of Blacks: to hate other Blacks and to differ from them at all costs, states Frazier, is to hate oneself. This is why, he explains, black bourgeois feel insulted if one confuses them with Africans and why they largely claim their disgust for 'negroes' (Ibid, 204). Sadjı argues that this desire for segregation is most evident in *métisse* women powering a sophisticated system of hierarchies dividing them into three main classes:

First-class mulattos who are almost white and refuse to be mistaken for *métisse*. [...] Second-class mulattos are more brown but no less pretentious than the first ones. They feel that they have a certain superiority complex regarding them often justified only by a slight shade in the comparative colour of their epidermis. [...] Mulattos of the third class occupy the last level of this hierarchy. The social position of their parents and the dark colour of their skin are incompatible with living entirely the European way.

So they live between the two worlds and the two conceptions that mark the white clan and the black clan. (*Nini*, 42-43)

This hierarchy of colour leaving nothing to chance does not include male mulattos that are, Sadjji adds, relegated alongside Blacks in the same contempt at the lowest level of the entire hierarchy (*Ibid*, 42). In the novel, discussions about Saint-Louisians' percentages of blackness are constant: 'there is a little boy, one hundred percent black, two old mulatto women half black, a girl white at four-fifths and an authentic white man' (*Ibid*, 27) which emphasises the importance of those categories for the characters. According to Fanon, in Sadjji's story there are two types of women: 'the Negress and the mulatto. The first one has only one possibility and one concern: to turn white. The second wants not only to turn white but also to avoid slipping back' (Fanon, 1952, 54) namely into blackness by marrying a coloured man. By refusing to even consider a black man's proposal, by refusing to speak Wolof¹⁹ or be associated in any way to brown and dark-skinned people, her people, Nini attempts at creating a new power balance to not divert from her dream of greatness and whiteness. Whether one deals with Mayotte Capécia of Martinique or with Nini of Saint-Louis, the same bilateral process is observed: an attempt to acquire, through their internalisation, assets that were not originally theirs (Fanon, 59-60): a name, a social status, and a recognition and incorporation into a social group once hermetic to them. This dream justifies, according to both Fanon and Sadjji, the *métisse's* overcompensating behaviour to seduce a white man and avoid her colour, yet inescapable.

Conclusion

Through this literature review, the study went back to the colonial origins of French-African *métissage* and, with the help of both American and Francophone literary works, analysed the different portraits and incarnations of the *métisse*, from a valuable slave of relative privilege to a sexual temptress - exotic and dangerous - and finally a vain, split and self-loathing being. The racist and sexist tropes - hypersexualisation, colorist aesthetic, essentialisation, etc. - through which the *métisse* is perceived and experienced overlap and definitely exacerbate one another in creating a long-lasting series of enduring stereotypes. Allowing the researcher to examine the potential evolution of society towards this figure through the

¹⁹ Main language in the Senegambian region.

evolution of its literature, this dissertation leads at last to concrete present-day lived experiences of actual *métisse* women whose voices are yet to be heard in the literary corpus and will be prioritised in the findings section. One will therefore see whether this central vision inscribed between fascination and repulsion - which few, if any, mixed characters escaped in the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century - should be conjugated in past tense or not.

II) Methodology

The following section presents the methodology used in this dissertation, outlines the research design, discusses the sampling methods employed, the access to the five participants and features information about the collection and analysis of data as well as ethical considerations taken into account.

Research Design

The study aims at exploring the identity of *métisses* women through an interdisciplinary approach combining literary analysis with sociological methods, namely the interviews of five French-African women. Identity theory, considering it a multifaceted concept involving constant negotiation both within the individual and with others (Mullen, 2021, 35), is a key framework in order to understand the complexity of a mixed identity and the challenge to belong. This intense process negotiating meanings of their identity in which these women are engaged may be marked by the resistance to, or the internalisation of, available meanings and discourses (Mullen, 36) about race and gender.

In this, the analytical framework of intersectionality will prove extremely useful and significant for this study. The term, coined by black feminist scholar and Law Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, demonstrates a multifaceted connection between one's social and political identities, 'race', gender and other systems that work together to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. In 2020, thirty years after she used it for the first time, Crenshaw defines intersectionality as 'a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other' (Steinmetz, 2020).

Through this framework, one may better grasp the intersecting concepts of 'race' and gender constituting a particular double jeopardy for black and brown women who are subsequently 'multiply burdened' (Crenshaw, 1989). 'Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated' which contributes to the marginalisation of such women in feminist theory as well as antiracist policy discourse (Crenshaw, 140).

The social constructivist approach, viewing 'race' as a socially-constructed concept without an objective or biological relevance, is also significantly employed in the Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS) framework used in this dissertation. 'Emphasis[ing] the fluidity of racial identity and other intersecting identities to critique processes of racialization and social stratification'²⁰ CMRS theorises the negotiation of black and white interconnections tackling the belief that supposed 'racial' groups may be divided into neat distinct categories. It furthermore offers important insights on the process of racialisation of black and mixed individuals and the way in which it perpetuates internalised racism considerably affecting the lives of racialised people (Mullen, 41). This framework coupled with that of intersectionality allows this research to nuance, complexify and challenge essentialist conceptions of mixed 'race' and identity as fixed, homogeneous and unchanging.

Sample and Access

The present research used the combination of both snowball and convenient sampling in order to approach the target population studied, namely mixed-heritage French-African women. Aiming at interviewing diverse profiles both in age and background: I had no age-related requirements (the participants simply needed to be at least 18) hence the intergenerational and international nature of the project. Although tempted to expand my sample size, a smaller number of participants allowed me to conduct more in-depth, personalised interviews lasting from forty minutes to almost two hours.

Most participants not being fluent in English, the use of French, both their and my mother tongue, ensured authenticity, built a quicker sense of trust and eased the communication as they felt more comfortable telling their stories in their own words. The transcription and

²⁰ About CMRS mission statement <https://criticalmixedracestudies.com/about-cmrs/>

translation work following the interviews was carefully done in order to guarantee that the tone, phrasing and expression of each participant was preserved and transmitted as faithfully as possible.

The researcher's own position and access to the experiences being shared certainly had an impact on the interactions during my fieldwork. Indeed, their identity as a *métisse* Franco-Senegalese woman not only was an advantage regarding the use of convenient sampling but also helped to build trust more easily with the participants surrounding discussions about their identity. In this regard, the investigation was facilitated by the insider's embodied knowledge and the fact that the researcher was perceived as accessible and empathetic or, at least, as more likely to understand issues and exposure of mixed women's identity and minority situations. The shared 'racial' and gendered identities between researcher and participants undoubtedly contributed to their ease to share at times confusing and stressful experiences.

Data Collection and Analysis

In accordance with the nature of this study, the qualitative research method was deemed best fitted to address its objectives. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing guided - although still relatively fluid and flexible - conversations both face-to-face and through Zoom. Semi-structured interviews are proven to be notable qualitative methods of data gathering especially within a feminist research framework (Bryman, 2012, 491). Often considered less invasive than ethnographic quantitative research, it also suggests a high degree of reciprocity between participant and interviewer, the latter stepping out of the role of passive listener to participate in the co-construction of knowledge with the former (Bryman, 492-493). This active process enabled further self-reflection on the part of both researcher and researched in an autoethnographic manner that significantly augmented the collected data (Mullen, 2021, 75). This researcher-participant relationship described by Bryman is additionally non-hierarchical which allows women's voices to be heard and express their ideas, thoughts, stories in their own words with their own rhythm which was very important in the context of this research. Once the interviews were conducted - generally in an informal public setting such as coffee shops or in the comfort of their own homes when online - the findings and transcriptions were the main source for my qualitative data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Such considerations were taken into account prior to conducting the interviews, during and after the data collection. The participants were familiar with all the information concerning the purpose of the study, the methods used and the measures to protect their anonymity, especially regarding data storage and their right to withdraw at any time without justification and even after the data collection. Every name and personal detail that might reveal an individual's identity was modified, except for nationality(ies), ethnicity(ies), country(ies) of birth and country(ies) of origin, since those are fundamental data for the researched topic. Their permission was given to audio record the interviews and delete the files once transcribed. Every effort was made to ensure that the participants felt comfortable, respected and listened to throughout the interviews that dealt with potentially sensitive experiences. It was made sure to stay available and address any query, question, concern or potential corrections emerging thereafter.

III) Findings and Analysis

The following section features the findings of study linking the key themes discussed during the interviews (see Appendix A page 50 for the full interview guide) to the insights brought by the literature review. The transcription and data analysis of the interviews were realised with the preoccupation of avoiding as much as possible to dilute and misrepresent the original narratives. The assessment of initial observations, allowed the identification of overarching themes, key aspects of the *métisse* embodied experience common to all or most of the participants which were, then, developed and theorised. The combination of literary and sociological approaches helps to anchor and contrast some of the reflections on literature into the lived experiences of the participants' reality enabling the women's voices to, at last, be heard.

1) *Métisse* Experience: the Challenge of Self-definition and Identity Construction

'How many times have white people asked me whether I felt "more Togolese" or "more French," and I always answer "Both!" to avoid having to choose' Claire (24, Franco-Togolese) explains, 'before, I thought it was amusing, but it doesn't make me smile anymore' she adds. In fact, this very commonly asked question pops up almost systematically in each participants' daily lives when meeting new people. According to Amin Maalouf (1998) this seemingly innocent question is actually dangerous as it presupposes the existence of one single 'true' affiliation, a fundamental 'essence' prevailing over every other and determined at birth (Maalouf, 2). Pretty much summoned to 'pick a side' and justify their choice by necessarily comparing their two heritages, Maë (22, Franco-Reunionese) feels uneasy when asked this question as for her 'it will always induce a judgement from the person in front of you [...] I am not asking you to choose between your mother and your father so why should I?' She points out the lack of reciprocity from white people who do not receive that type of question, or, at least, certainly not as much as mixed or black people. It appears that the claiming of a more complex, double or multiple identity is unusual and therefore marginalised. When asked about how she felt towards this inquiry, Ela (56, Franco-Malagasy) confesses that she 'hates' this question as she does not know what to say. At first she attempts to separate the two cultural components and explain what each of them brings to her personality before changing her mind:

People always say that when we are *métisse*, we are "caught between two stools," well, I never say that because I know I don't feel that way and I don't need to choose between 'black' and 'white' since who I am is the combination of the two.

This singular feeling of experiencing both plurality and unicity recalls Maalouf's argument that 'Identity can't be compartmentalised divide[d] into halves or thirds' (1998, 2) it is unique although composed, in fact, by multiple elements. The denying of this possibility may affect *métis* people meeting with general incomprehension in a context where 'either/or' rather than 'both/and' thinking still dominates. If, as Maalouf argues, 'no one allegiance has absolute supremacy' (*Ibid*, 13) why do mixed people feel the pressure to synthesise and provide others with simplistic justifications? Ela states 'in general, when I decide to list my origins people almost make me feel like it is too long, that it is exaggerated, unnecessary. The

more I say the less coherent and plausible it is to some people' as if multiplicity, somehow, wasn't entirely normal.

Chosen Identity and Prescribed Identity

The very first instances of questioning in a *métisse's* life starts with that of others, usually through another question, mentioned by all participants, even more inescapable for racialised people: 'where are you from?' It is usually followed according to the interviewees by a little investigation as whoever asked starts making assumptions about what is more likely to be the answer based on the person's sole appearance. 'Anywhere I go, I am asked this question. To be honest, I anticipate it. Sometimes it comes up before "Hello!" before "What's your name?" or "What do you do for a living?"' laments Claire. To her, people sometimes sound like their only interest is knowing which label they will be able to stick on her: 'Of course they don't mean any harm. But it is often out of any context, just because they looked at me up and down and thought I was somehow different although I am probably as French as them.' Claire expands by explaining the question ended up displeasing her largely because of its very high frequency and non-reciprocity. On the other hand, Maë faces a different kind of uneasiness when confronted with this 'systematic' question:

What's tricky is that I have no contact with my father so I always have to mention this part of the story at one time or another. So it's complicated since I don't have all the answers, it's a blur. It happens more than I would like it to, there are times when I expect it and 'prepare' for it outright.

Maë is aware she does not appear 'half-white' even though she is, and wonders why *she* always has to justify her appearance and not the white people asking. Aïssatou (55, Franco-Senegalese) accounts on the 'game of riddles' that often follows during which people list several origins that are the most likely to - according to their racialised internalised representations - suit her:

Most of the time, I am considered Caribbean, Latino-American or from the West Indies; but rarely, if ever, from sub-Saharan Africa and Senegal. When I went to Venezuela, I was mistaken for a Venezuelan, in Morocco, for a Moroccan, among the Reunionese I am considered one of them. I am quite literally undercover almost everywhere... but where I do come from! Until

people talk to me in their own language (Arabic, Creole etc.) and ultimately figure things out.

Interestingly, both Fatou (37, Franco-Malian) and Aïssatou prefer to consider themselves ‘citizen[s] of the world’ able to feel at home anywhere although retaining their main allegiances. On the opposite hand, Ela, occasionally mistaken for a Native-American, a Polynesian or Maghrebi woman abroad, defines her *métissage* as too light to be visible in France. She adds: ‘people don’t see it that much, apart from other *métis* looking at me, sensing something, but unsure, not knowing what I am exactly. If I don’t mention my last name I go unnoticed.’ In Madagascar, she is a *vazaha* [a foreigner] immediately noticed as very few live there. Having lived a long time in West Africa, Ela further explains that she was invariably considered white, a *Toubab*²¹ which she deplores:

I don’t like it when the fact that I am not dark causes a lot of people to tell me that I am not really *métisse*. I don’t like it being taken away from me. It is an important part of me and it frustrates me to have it overlooked so often and not taken seriously like that.

The common astonishment or disbelief shown by some of the people facing the participants (once their real origins stated) hints at the imagined answer they had in mind. This identity projection or assumption based on one’s appearance underpin their own unconscious bias, and the racial prejudices accumulated over the years. This projection onto the *métisse* being inaccurate, some people may either be left surprised and confused or want to start a bigger, potentially unsolicited, discussion. The people playing this guessing game do it without any bad intention (Ela) but unaware of the discomfort having ‘different set of spectators inspecting and speculating about [one’s] ethnicity may cause’ (Nagel, 2003, 40-41). According to Nagel, ethnicity is a negotiated social fact, the result of a ‘dialectical process’ emerging from day-to-day interactions between individuals. Both what the participants make of their own ethnicity, and what others make of it matter as ‘individuals can have a portfolio of ethnic identities, some of which are more or less salient in various situations and vis-a-vis various audiences’ (Nagel, 2003, 42) particularly exemplified by the experiences of Aïssatou and Fatou:

²¹ ‘Toubab’ [‘white’] is a Central and West African name for a person of European descent found in Gambia, Senegal, Guinea, Mali, and the Ivory Coast.

I don't always wake up with the same identity. Abroad I am French, in France, I am from Marseille, in a concert in Bamako, I am Malian, at work, I am a French diplomat... It depends on the context.

The identity of the *métisse* may therefore be experienced as both multiple and situational. Nevertheless, as shown by psychologists Tamara R. Buckley and Robert B. Carter in a study on seventeen mixed women, 'black' and 'white' *métisse* women are systematically identified by US American society as exclusively 'black.' This convention, known as the *One drop rule* (a drop of black blood is sufficient to be considered black), naturally creates a serious identification problem as many subjects aren't comfortable being physically associated with a given colour. This rule had an impact all the way to France, as Claire states: 'In high school I was always told that I was black just like in the United States which I did not understand.' The rule attenuates one's complexity and multiple allegiances to simplify things and make them more homogeneous, accessible, and thus, reassuring. That is, in fact, what people look for when they ask about the *métis* ethnicity: a tidy, simple, and necessarily reductive affiliation. All participants in this study report that they were forced, at one time or another, to disclose their racial identity to professors, administrators, neighbours, strangers, etc. Most were at times pushed to identify one specific affiliation which led to a sense of incompleteness and even guilt towards the unelected allegiance. Claire argues that by having to answer the same questions about her racial background so often, she ended up wondering about who she was herself:

You'd like to define yourself as both [...] when you're told you're black while having grown up in the blur, you want to deny it not because you're not assuming but because it would be as senseless as being told you're white.

These everyday inconveniences can generate, throughout a lifetime, at best a certain weariness, at worst an identity crisis, sometimes leading to a form of paranoia. The occasional bitterness of some participants is visible even when expressed humorously when their national identity is questioned and suspected, as if there was a contradiction between their appearance and their citizenship. An essential distinction to be made is that of chosen identity and prescribed identity. Chosen identity refers to the many ways in which people define themselves, while prescribed identity reflects the way others see them. (Ndiaye, 2008, 55). American sociologist Tommy Shelby (2005) distinguishes 'thick blackness' - based

on a culture, a history, common references, and a language that marks a clear difference between those who carry it and others - from 'thin blackness' delineating a group that only has in common a prescribed identity, in this case 'Black.' This notion of 'thin identity' gathers very different populations under their lowest common denominator: their perception as Blacks (Ndiaye 57).

This section intended to demonstrate how sets of identities carrying their own prejudices could be forced upon, or denied from the *métisse* in an effort to label them. If there is certainly a hierarchy among the allegiances, constructing a subjectivity is not immutable but rather flexible, as it is impossible to predict how the participants will want to define themselves twenty years from now.

Language, a Key Aspect in the Need to Belong

A person's sense of identity is at least partly subordinated to language and, more specifically, to one's mother tongue. Language is a cultural specificity that often came up throughout the interviews conducted as of crucial importance in the processes of *métisse* women's attachment to their cultures. It is frequently perceived as a sort of bridge, giving access to one or more cultures and especially to minority groups. All five participants happened to have an African father and a European (French) mother, and most of them experienced a difficult relationship with feeling legitimised and recognised as pertaining to their fathers' cultures, precisely in relation to language. Fatou is the only polyglot participant able to speak Bambara²² since she was a child alongside French, whereas Aïssatou started off living in Dakar not knowing how to speak Wolof for her entire childhood. As a fourteen-year-old she slowly started learning in order to be able to go out and shop alone. But it is only as an adult, after having spent years living in France that she decided to go back for good and master the language as an autodidact:

It is through my younger cousins immersed in the culture, customs and language that I slowly got to actually know this side of my family. I was the one reaching out to them. My father taught me neither language nor religion.

²² Malian national and main language.

Learning the language definitely opened previously hermetic doors to Aïssatou within the Senegalese society that now recognises her as a true Senegalese woman. If some people might still doubt and question her identity, all uncertainty ceases the second she speaks Wolof to them. For Fatou, language is the key to much more than just the French and Malian worlds, but also allows for the creation of new bonds, new allegiances, and belongings, exceeding the frontiers of countries and outside of those present in her blood:

Those who know me well know that I have a very strong attachment to Europe but also to the Arab world, to the Middle East as well, whose languages I speak: Arabic, Hebrew... That is also a very large part of my identity. There are moments when I feel very oriental.

This way, the sum of the experiences introduced through the process of language learning - coupled with the opportunity of truly connecting with another culture (living there, getting to know its customs, inhabitants, etc.) - has the potential to add to someone's identity by grafting this other element to it. This way, someone living within a culture and speaking a language that isn't their mother tongue, may, with time, assimilate the culture of the host country and call it their own, subsequently adding to the fluidity and flexibility of identity.

However, if language can pave the way for the inclusion of allegiances and connections, its absence can, in contrast, draw a line between insiders and outsiders. It is the case for Ela, Maë, and Claire, who aren't bilingual, and therefore only speak their mother tongue: French. 'My father did not build the bridge between me and his culture, his language' Claire declares:

'I don't speak Mina,²³ It was not a habit for my parents, that's a shame. I know a few words but it is impossible for me to form a correct sentence and, quite frankly, even understanding is close to impossible even within my own family.

Ela shares Claire's point of view since she wasn't taught how to speak Malagasy and, for this reason, felt constantly 'set apart, on the sideline, never really feeling like [she] belonged in the family.' 'I don't think I will ever fit in and I don't think I actually want to' she says humorously.

²³ West African dialect present in the south of Togo and Benin.

As for Maë, whose Reunionese father left after she was born, things are even more challenging as she wasn't exposed in the slightest to his culture. 'I don't know the language, I don't know the culture, I have never been there, the only thing I did was occasionally tasting food from Reunion' which explains why she primarily recognises herself in the French culture she knows best. As can be seen through the various narratives examined, language is a key element inseparable from identity. It constitutes an advantage facilitating mixed individuals' connection to and integration within a population or culture. It is both a means of communication and a component of identity. Its absence in some cases reinforces *métisse* participants' struggle to belong and sense of in-betweenness is further developed in the following section.

An Identitarian Problem? The Paradox of Difference

Métisse women are said to be in an uncomfortable position 'in-between' their two allegiances. A sort of 'skin ache' (Ilboudo, 2001) an identity struggle and displacement. Ela argues, 'in my Malagasy family, I was made to understand that I am not the ideal Malagasy woman and the fact that I am mixed didn't allow me access to the family vault for example.' The term 'double consciousness' theorised by sociologist, historian, and Civil Rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) describes the individual sensation of feeling as though one has more than one social identity, divided into several parts, making it difficult or even impossible to coincide with oneself (often inducing psycho-social anxiety). The concept is useful to understand the *métisse's* experiences of a 'two-ness' that cannot be divorced from gender. Not only do black and brown women have to see themselves through the lens of whiteness and blackness, but they also have to consider the lens of patriarchy. Indeed, 'if she is rescued from the myth of the negro, the myth of the woman traps her. If she escapes the myth of the women, the myth of the negro still ensnares her' (White, 1985, 28). This acute consciousness is clearly double and, even more accurately, triple as a *métisse* who is coloured (race), French-African (national and/or continental belonging), and female (gender). The idea of triple consciousness as an extension to that of Du Bois argues that mixed women must reconcile not only their Black self and their French self, but also acknowledge their womanhood. 'We are supposedly too light for the black community and simultaneously too dark for the white community. It is easy to feel illegitimate and out of

place', Claire contends. If Ela prefers expressions like '*métisse*' or 'woman of colour' (Gates, 1995, 219) since she feels they are a better fit than 'Black' woman for her, Claire, in contrast, decided to claim her identity as a Black woman:

All my life I've been wondering about who I am. For a long time, I considered myself *métisse*. I used the term a while but ended up stopping. [...] Finally, I came to the conclusion that if I'm not white, there's only one option left really. Yes I do have a lighter-skinned privilege but it doesn't prevent me from belonging to the black community.

The phenomenon of political blackness, whereby an individual refers to oneself as black, is a way of actively partaking in and belonging to a community, distancing itself from white people. It could be done with the desire to assert an uncertain identity, defend a threatened identity, liberate an oppressed identity or regain a lost identity. Guadeloupean author Oruno Lara, noted among the first non-white Guadeloupean writers to shed light on black and *métis* consciousness but also on issues of 'race,' racial tension, and colorism, demonstrates a form of political blackness. He writes in his book *Questions of Colour* (1923, 82), 'it was better [...] to define ourselves as black since we were, to reclaim the word Negro, and work to educate ourselves, improve, in order to enforce the respect, in their own rights, of both the word and its signifier.' He, later on, states: '[b]lind, those of us who seek to take advantage of a delineation between negroes and mulattos: they do not see our weakness. Unconsciously, they perpetuate the prejudice of colour.' A prejudice aimed at dividing dominated populations to better control them, as seen in the literature review. Pap Ndiaye (2008, 119) does however mention the pressure militant Black people may put on the *métis* and lighter-skinned individuals to identify themselves to the community and its movement by demonstrating their blackness. Finding themselves 'precariously positioned in relation to their black peers, [mixed people may be exposed] to what has been termed 'horizontal hostility' (Campion, 2019) a phenomenon 'creating a boundary that places mixed-race individuals outside of the imagined black space' (Mullen, 2021, 42). Eager to feel like a part of the community, Maë describes how she tried overacting her blackness in high school, imitating her Afrodescendant friends to be accepted at all costs.

At that time, I only had African friends, and I felt, while hanging out with them, I was lacking something they all had. Common cultural experiences, references for music or food that I felt so ashamed not knowing that I

started to pretend I did. I invented for myself a new personality modelled on my friends' and changed my behaviour, my accent, the way I spoke, and even the way I danced. It was lame to try fitting in as if I had their story. I don't, I have my own now but this was not it.

Maë was afraid not to be able to form intimate relationships within this ethnic group because she felt she lacked sufficient credibility to construct the authentic black cultural identity her father did not transmit to her: 'I'd like to be even, I'm looking for balance.' Claire expands on the concept of horizontal hostility by highlighting the lack of legitimacy *métisse* women feel, her desire to use the 'we' but the hostile response of Black people taking away their right to talk about the discriminations they experience just because they are lighter-skinned. This behaviour invalidates and undermines their lived experience which brings them back to prescribed and denied identities on the basis of 'unmatching' skin colour or features.

Maalouf considers *métis* people as 'frontier-dwellers by birth' (2000, 36) 'bridges, go-betweens, mediators' amid various communities and cultures 'living in a sort of frontier zone crisscrossed by ethnic, religious and other fault lines' (Maalouf, 4-5) which can constitute an exhausting and lonely position to be in. He adds that 'every one of my allegiances links me to a large number of people. But the more ties I have the rarer and more particular my own identity becomes' (17-18). Maë states 'whenever I go to class in university or partake in any activity, I am often the only mixed person there, I am used to it now but it used to make me sad'. Ela joins echoes this saying 'I never wanted to be different, it is not always positive to be different, it does have its share of loneliness' since few people can fully relate to what they are going through.

This section exploring the mixed women's experiences with self-definition and identity construction definitely establishes it as an ongoing challenge, the outcome of which is still a work in progress for some participants, especially Claire and Maë the youngest among the participants. The process is thus further complicated by others putting the *métisse's* chosen identity into question, projecting their own internalised understandings of 'race' and stereotypes, othering the woman and setting her aside and outside one or both her ethnic communities. There happens to be, indeed, a striking gap between the complexity of the comprehensive chosen identities and the simplism of certain racial prescriptions. The divide between 'thick' (multifaceted) and 'thin' (prescribed) identity is clearly apparent.

Acknowledging that essentialist words aren't without consequences is an important process to understand how they help perpetuate historical prejudices 'for it is often the way we look at other people that imprisons them within their own narrowest allegiances' (Maalouf, 22). According to Ela, 'the people who feel they are a hundred percent of something - be it nationality, ethnicity, religion, etc. - are always those who have difficulty conceiving multiplicity.' Aïssatou sees herself as a 'sponge soaking up cultures,' never choosing between denial of the self and denial of the other, she states that 'the more we learn from the cultures of the world and let them compose us, the richer we get.' The term *métisse* is globally accepted by all participants, was (for Claire and Aïssatou), and is (for Maë, Ela, and Fatou) a good umbrella concept they recognised themselves in and actually used. Feeding into this nevertheless difficult challenge *métisse* women face figuring themselves out, are the numerous issues raised by colorism and its impact on day-to-day life which will be the subject of the next section.

2) Colorist Perceptions and Representations: The Role of *Race* and Gender

According to social psychologist Erving Goffman, it is often when children go to school that they learn about their stigma, sometimes from day one, through teasing, bullying, exclusion, and fights.²⁴ It is indeed at school that, in the eyes of their classmates, both Maë and Claire understood they were 'black' unlike the other kids. Usually, children are introduced to relations of racial domination by the adults surrounding them, primarily parents, but also the larger family and neighbouring social environment (Ndiaye, 115). Ela recalls that, in her family, it was pretty taboo to talk about *métissage*, especially on the side of her French family where such discussions only occurred when brought by a third party and generally ended up awkward for everyone:

One time, in a coffee shop, a man made some kind of comment regarding my tanned skin colour to my French grandmother and she instantly blushed with embarrassment slurring something about me sunbathing a lot. It only occurred to me years later that she was actually trying to minimise my Malagasy side... Erase it even!

²⁴ Erving Goffman, *Stigmate*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1975, 46-47.

If Ela's grandmother cannot actually erase her granddaughter's mixed heritage she still tries to mitigate this difference in the eyes of French people, probably scared of what people might think or say about her family, Ela supposes. In continuity with the *métis*' child experiences within the familial space, the school space proceeds with the learning process of racial assignation, which it neither creates nor puts into question (Ndiaye, 115). For Claire, the beginnings were painful as a mixed child with a different culture than others', the colour of her skin playing a role in the potential of her successful integration: 'In elementary school, I was really excluded; I had only one friend. A friend whose parents were American, so it was different because she came from another country, with another culture and therefore was already an outsider' she recalls, 'the others kept asking why I didn't straighten my hair or use creams to be more like them.' If Fatou, Ela, and Aïssatou were also victims of several hurtful comments about their skin colour, they were not excluded from the class group and managed to make friends with their schoolmates. Claire, on the other hand really felt she didn't belong to the cohort and emphasises her past wishes not to be different and fit in: 'I remember my friend often teasing me by saying that I was black, and I remember my reaction shouting at her "No, I'm not black!" She did not understand my stubbornness and laughed'. These wounds early on in the most formative years tend to determine not only people's attitudes towards their own affiliations but also the hierarchy deciding on their relative importance. Differences in religion, colour, accent, or even clothing may constitute unforgettable stigma and insecurities these children could carry for the longest time. For Maë, it appears normal for most children that were not confronted with much diversity to not really grasp what it is to be *métis* at this age and why some comments might be harmful. She further describes what she felt was an innocent, childish curiosity:

It was more like 'Oh! You have frizzy hair!' And everyone wanted to touch them. But it was nice, they were very intrigued. No rejection or anything like that, on the contrary, I was well integrated but was always considered a curiosity.

It suddenly hits differently whenever those events persist once adult as 'some behaviours wouldn't happen to Caucasians, for instance, customers at work or random people touching my hair without notice still happens too often' Maë agrees. To her, the reasons behind such

familiarities lie in three intersectional aspects - her youth, her womanhood, and her colour - that overlap and push people to believe they're entitled to this attitude.²⁵

Similarly to Mäe, Fatou was not bothered as a child by this unfettered curiosity and inquisitive looks still bothering Claire today. 'When I was little the only thing that made me angry was people touching my hair without asking, until today, it is something I hate. Other than that, I didn't mind being the centre of attention' (Fatou). For her, issues of colour didn't really affect her at school but rather in the workplace. Growing up in Marseille, a very cosmopolitan city, she notes:

It was more in the working world that I discovered things, glass ceilings under which to open some doors when you are a woman first and especially a mixed woman, you need to work twice as hard. I have often seen positions pass me by while I was objectively more qualified and I am not the only one. French diplomacy is still very masculine, enarque²⁶, and white so it is more complicated for those who are none of the three.

Fatou's insight on this particular sphere of the French job market is a perfect example of different aspects of one's identity intersecting to create new forms of advantages and disadvantages. Fatou's 'lack' of the three factors she presents as the norm in this area (masculinity, whiteness, and graduation from ENA) undermines her opportunity chances and justifies her having to put more effort in. As difficult as it was for her, a *métisse*, she attests to the even greater challenge it is for a darker-skinned woman. Whether it is at home, school, or work, *métisse* women's first realisation of their visible difference is often puzzling, sometimes even brutal. If skin colour does have an impact from the beginning, what of the so-called 'privilege' *métis* are said to have?

***Métisse* 'Superiority' and Pretty Privilege**

When discussing her teenage years, Aïssatou recalls her surprise when, in her Senegalese high school mostly composed of black students and very few *métisses*, 'everyone said we were the most beautiful. It was rewarding but not really objective I feel.' Mixed women's

²⁵ To learn more about the highly charged history of Black people's hair - a complex, multilayered, and political subject as it is never 'just' hair - see Emma Dabiri's engaging book, *Don't Touch My Hair*. (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 2019) exploring the ways in which Afro hair has been appropriated and stigmatised throughout history sparking an important conversation on personal boundaries.

²⁶ A graduate of the ENA (École Nationale d'Administration), French equivalent of a prestigious Ivy-League university in the United States such as Harvard or Yale.

beauty's ever growing reputation seems to stretch across the African and European continents. Aïssatou explains that French policemen would escort her sometimes and be charming with her while they would always be asking for her brother's ID: 'when you're a *métisse* and you're cute, most things go well, whereas *métis* men back then were treated the same way as black men' which echoes the melanic hierarchy displayed in Sadjì's *Nini* (1965) exclusively implicating women while relegating black and brown men to the very bottom. This pretty privilege is still valid and appears tinted with exoticism in Maë's experience:

At work, there was a customer who told me that I was very beautiful, that he loved my hair very much, and that I was very 'exotic'... but what am I, a coconut? An avocado? It made me laugh afterward because you don't really say that about a person.

She found this encounter, the obsession over her hair, and the words employed quite 'weird' and 'on the verge of the acceptable.' In this instance, she was reminded of her physical difference through a compliment that, in fact, both sexualised and othered her, which confirms the surviving of racialised stereotypes and projected fantasies applied to the *métisse*. Ela further noticed, when dating Malagasy men, that most were very excited to be in a relationship with her because of her *métissage* on the lighter side:

I felt like an exotic fruit with one of them as no one else ever called me 'my beautiful Tahitian.' At that time I was flattered to be associated with a type of woman I personally found very pretty. I think he saw me as something out of the ordinary, less bland, a sweeter fruit.

Ela's account clearly translates her former partner's essentialist vision, exemplifying a form of mixophilia that she was paradoxically flattered by. 'I also had the mother of a former French partner frightened by me as she knew about the Malagasy culture of witchcraft and feared for her son' she recalls highlighting once again the reminiscence of racialised prejudices on *métisse* women. People Ela knew were openly racist would also say problematic things regarding the black 'race,' criticising black women's lack of attractiveness in particular, and when called out on it, they (black men) would 'forgive your origins and claim that *you* are different, cute, beautiful, sexy, not exactly black more this and less that.'

The concept of *métissage* has been put onto a sort of pedestal in recent years, which the participants noted, being attributed the merits of potentially 'overcoming' racism,

constituting the ideal future of humanity, etc. Praising and idealising it to the point of seeking to have '*métis* babies' at any cost is rather unhealthy and a concerning instance of negrophilia, whereby black people are loved for the wrong reasons, such as certain prejudicial physical assets, wild characters, generous curves... Not all of the features associated with black people are seen as desirable, however. In fact, dark skin and kinky curly hair being the first two criteria for a 'failed *métisse*' (Claire). The mix between Caucasian and black is considered by many men as 'the best of both worlds' Claire argues citing the phrasing she often heard about herself: 'White women are considered too fragile while black women, well, are the opposite, too dark, too wild, too loud, etc.' Such extremely exclusive beauty standards are constructed to the detriment of both Black and Brown women, who do not correspond to those, who are not tiny, don't have nice relaxed curls, clear eyes, slim delicate features like a small nose, and so on. Fatou observes that, if it is no surprise that black women tend to try brightening their skin to get closer to the ideal colour, white women, paradoxically, use tanning products bringing them closer to the same 'ideal' shade; without, needless to say, ever risking to cross the colour line. Aïssatou testifies that 'black men dating *métisse* women as light as possible is viewed as a sign of success' just like marrying a white man in *Nini's* colonial Saint-Louis was a way to climb the social ladder. In modern times, the *métisses* are viewed by mainstream western beauty standards as some of the most beautiful women in the world, deemed superior by many (whether black or white) to women with darker skin tones, as colorist perceptions considerably damaged international collective imaginaries.

Light-skinned Versus Dark-skinned

Further, undermining the unity of the black community is the divide between light-skinned and dark-skinned *métisses*, an internal boundary recalling that of the Saint-Louisian's melanic hierarchy. In the preface to Pap Ndiaye's *The Black Condition* (2008), the story of two *métisse* sisters is related: Paula described with lighter-skin, her features corresponding exactly to the previously cited standards, and Victoire with a darker complexion and black curly hair. If the story does demonstrate the large spectrum *métissage* can encapsulate, it most importantly states that 'such a disparity was not insignificant, that it constantly urged both the sisters themselves and their entourage to choose. [...] It was impossible to include in the same

feeling, the same representation, the girl nearly white and the girl almost black.²⁷ While Paula was promised to a luminous future full of her successes, a 'kind of viciousness seemed to attach itself to the dark figure of Victoire on whose behalf an unhappy or ill-intentioned hand had thrown the dice at the moment of conception' (Ndiaye, 2008, 12). In this instance, Victoire is the one that may be viewed as the 'failed *métisse*,' the unlucky one who had the misfortune to inherit more of her African heritage, while her sister enjoyed lighter-skinned pretty privilege. Maë confesses that she happened to think about her brown skin colour as a sort of potential romantic handicap: 'I don't think too much about it but maybe if I was white or lighter it would be easier... simpler for me to find someone and be in a serious relationship. Simply be the standard for once.' For Claire, the shade doesn't matter, a coloured woman living in a Western predominantly white society have a more similar background to hers:

Yes there is the light-skinned privilege, no one can deny it. But even if you have a slightly different path than mine, with less obstacles or different ones, you will still be perceived as black here. The Whitriarchal society doesn't care if you are mixed, or brown, or black. As long as you're not white, you will have the experience of a racialised person and this is a fact.

In African countries however, lighter *métisse* women are advertised everywhere to promote the selling of dangerous brightening products: the so-called 'skin-bleaching' cosmetics industry handling billions of dollars all over the world. Completely legal and normalised in Africa, the Americas and Asia, this flourishing market of depigmenting ointments and creams to whiten the skin is extremely dangerous and a major public health problem. Women, however, are aware of the numerous risks and potential side effects they entail before taking them anyway. That shows how serious the issue is, not from a strictly aesthetic point of view but from a social and public health one. To be more precise, the aesthetic issue is a social one. (Ndiaye, 2008, 110). Such practice in West Africa, according to Aïssatou, is called *Xéssal* (*xéss* meaning 'white' in Wolof) and is widespread in large cities, especially in Dakar. When asked why women would harm themselves for a lighter shade, she explains that 'depigmenting' creams are not intended to erase the blackness of the woman, they just want

²⁷ Préface de Marie Ndiaye in Ndiaye, Pap, *La Condition Noire*

to make her prettier and lighter.’ Such products represent twenty percent of black women’s consultations in dermatology according to a Parisian doctor.²⁸

Representation Matters: Beauty Standards and the *Métisse* in the media

The way colorism plays out in beauty standards is also evidenced by *métisse*’s representation throughout the French Media. TV series and movies constitute a concrete example of the ways in which colorist perceptions transpire. There used to be a virtual ban on showing mixed unions of any sort on French TVs for the longest time, on the basis that the public opinion would feel uncomfortable. It appears clear that the efforts to portray mixed couples are very shy, although they are in fact, starting to appear more and more, especially in short advertisements in the past few years, as observed by Claire and Ela. Nevertheless, although they may sometimes ‘help to damp down racial, ethnic or other prejudices, they often help to perpetuate them’ (Maalouf, 2000, 121).

Regarding literature, as previously stated in this dissertation, there are very few writings from mixed women that are showcased, while the hegemony of canonical writers such as Baudelaire and Zola is still unrivalled. This favours their status, continually spreading the same colonialist and exoticising visions, without any mediation allowing for the other side of the story, for *métisses*’ voices, to be heard.

Ela states ‘I never felt really represented on TV, even now that more and more *métisses* are getting roles, it is always the same ones with voluminous curly hair and clear eyes who get it,’ she still acknowledges the evolution from very caricatural depictions - such as the openly racist advertisements for cacao powder - to somewhat decent ones without any exaggerated traits. The idealised *métisse* is also currently trending on social media where they are referred to as *natural queens*, promoting the acceptance of natural afro hair, in line with the globalised *body-positive* movement. Regarding mainstream cinema and animation releases, Maë recalls the first time she saw a Black heroine in an animated movie:

It was the Princess and the Frog which is still my favourite Disney movie to this day! I remember telling myself that Tiana and I were alike. I could easily identify with her and project myself into her character for the first time.

²⁸ Doctor Antoine Petit from the Saint-Louis hospital, cited in the leaflet ‘Being beautiful? Yes. Ruin our Health No!’ *Label Black Beauty*.

Real-life coloured 'princesses' may also be found in the renowned French show *Miss France*, more diversified nowadays than during the first few decades of its existence, which crowned a total of four *Misses* from French-African backgrounds: Sonia Rolland in 2000, Corinne Coman in 2003, Flora Coquerel in 2014 and Clémence Botino in 2021. What is striking - although not as surprising if one is familiar with the history of the *Miss France* contest, all of those beauty queens are light-skinned *métisse* women without an exception.

Beauty standards are historically constructed and refer to social determinants, reinforced, as far as women are concerned, by male demands (Ndiaye 111-112). Taking into account colorism, a *métisse* woman tends to have more success than a black woman (not necessarily more than a white woman) because her attributes are closer to the Eurocentric Western aesthetic goals.

In all sectors, Fatou feels that not enough is done to be representative of the true face of France, but she recognises a certain evolution: 'The path of the revaluation of black beauty is still very long but shorter than when I was a child'.

There are still unconscious biases marked by the colonial era that are important to deconstruct at school. It is a very long, remarkable history that has marked the imaginations and is transmitted from generation to generation. The prejudices related to black skin are still tenacious as proven by the famous 'test of the doll' invented in the United States of the 1940s and reproduced in the 2022 French Documentary *Blacks in France* in which mixed and black children were presented with a white doll and a black doll, before being asked to choose their favourite. The white doll, back in the 1940s and more than 80 years later in 2022, is systematically chosen. If some children are unable to explain their choice, others justify it by ensuring that the white doll is the prettiest.

The French case is similar to the American one from the point of view of social colorist hierarchies, as darker black people often prove to be in a more disadvantaged social situation and experience more racism. The social hierarchy of colour inherited from colonial times, although less salient, is persistent, surviving the slave order that gave it birth in the form of modern colorism and despite recent movements of valorisation of black skins. Although the media and advertising no longer depict beauty standards as caricatured as they once did with the exclusivity of the white skin, melanin discrimination still weighs more heavily on dark-skinned Blacks. But the main difference lies in the racialised appreciation of people, more subtle than the black and white binary of the United States. Being a *métisse*

woman can undoubtedly include particular psychological and social hardships, but racial prejudice remains lighter than that suffered by people who are significantly darker (Ndiaye, 126). If the *métisse* instigated - from the beginning of the 19th century to the present-day - the appearance of a set of stereotypes and prejudices, she also assumed during the same period a function of vector for the affirmation of a specific multifaceted identity.

Conclusion

The present research studied the construction process of *métisse* women's identity in light of the relationship with their multiple allegiances, of the perception they and others' have of themselves and of the subsequent challenge to belong. The analysis points out the diversity of experiences that shaped each participant's paths bringing them together on certain points: there is no denying that *métisse* women's trajectory is far from linear and simple. Both at the crossroads of numerous - at times conflicting - identity components and in-between those very elements, the *métisse's* challenge lies in the effort produced to try navigating them and build a steadier, safer sense of self.

The difficulty that self-definition usually represents for *métisse* women at one time or another in their lives, marked the emergence of the recurring themes of chosen and prescribed identity, language as key marker of belonging, feelings of othering, foreignness, alienation, exclusion or illegitimacy with regard to one or both ethnic, cultural groups, etc. Alongside and likely fueling even partially those experiences, are colorist perceptions and representations, discussions surrounding lighter-skin privilege and the hierarchy of colour. The various themes identified while analysing the data materials meet and echo the contributions of the literary review. These findings first confirms the persistence of stereotypes and dated projections onto the *métisse's* racialised identity and body, although perceived as 'rare' by most participants: often going unnoticed or neglected. The exoticist comments aimed at complimenting Ela's resemblance to a Tahitian woman or Maë's 'exotic' natural hair mirrors the modern conception of mixophilia in which such 'positive' appreciations essentialise the woman, reducing her to her perceived difference.

The study further highlights that such underlying problematic behaviours mostly come from men from any sides of the women's mixed background, although not in the same way. It

stresses the importance of gender as a major intersection in constructing a racialised identity as black women navigate a traditionally white and male space. While white (French) men tend to question inquisitively the 'origins' of *métisse* women and apply internalised exoticist conceptions of racialised women, black men (African, French or both) tend to reinforce pre-existing colorist assumptions favouring lighter-skinned women deemed more beautiful and desirable: the so-called 'best of both worlds.' Both populations however label *métisse* women with a set of inaccurate or reductive identities solely based on their appearances directly or indirectly adding into the mix the pressure to choose and 'pick a side.' Often socially alienated, *métisse* women are surrounded with boundaries placing them sometimes inside and other times outside of the imagined black space and community (Mullen, 2021, 222) giving way to a shared sense of identity displacement as suggested by the data. The curiosity and ambivalent responses they provoke in others cause some of the participants - especially the younger ones Maë and Claire - a certain confusion rendering it difficult not to let such microaggressions invade and affect their own relationship to their identities. Interestingly enough, despite coming up with several memories and relevant instances featuring microaggressions marked by racism and sexism, three out of four participants felt they had not experienced racism but had been treated pretty 'normally.' As they recalled and revisited past memories, some of them were surprised to remember particular occurrences in which they were exoticised, othered or excluded and subsequently unpacked them with a new set of eyes. By minimising the racist and essentialist dimension of these reportedly small, trivial events they experienced, the participants tended to dismiss and forget those interactions likely judged not clear or violent enough to be shocking. Therefore, taking part in this study enabled participants to undertake a self-reflective process of re-evaluation' (Mullen, 220).

This research further allowed me to learn about other *métisse's* experiences and the impact they have on their personal and relational development. Through the narratives of the individuals interviewed, my objective was not to generalise but rather to describe the complexity of French-African women's *métissage*, encompassing a number of diverse and equally important areas - language, religion, customs, lifestyle, influences, etc. - as 'even colour and sex are not "absolute" ingredients of identity' (Maalouf, 24). For most participants, the 'racial' melanic element is a part of who they are: it doesn't define them

and they are not limited to it. The multidimensionality of the *métis* experience - or, in fact, any individual's - cannot be understood through single-axis analysis (Mullen, 41). Using the framework of intersectionality, it appears clear that gender, 'race', ethnic background as well as age play a significant role in the way the interviewees perceive themselves and apprehend their identities. Fatou (38), Aïssatou (55) and Ela (56) show signs of a more stable and accepting sense of self acquired (according to them) with maturity and time: 'I am at peace with myself now and I know who I am.' declared Aïssatou.

Described less and less within a binary standpoint, the research understands identity as dynamic, composite, adjustable and ever evolving that cannot be contained by one single marker. Although there is still a lot more to uncover and explore surrounding the investigation of *métisse* identities, it is my hope that - by contributing to knowledge on this area of Critical Race Theory rooted in contemporary preoccupations - this dissertation and its findings shed a light on how these inherently complex subjectivities are perceived and experienced to counter misconceptions, lingering stereotypes and unconscious bias. When identifying areas for future research, it would be useful to scale up significantly, broadening the sample size of participants and opening it to *métis* men of French-African descent. The more substantial work, building upon the present study, would investigate potential overlappings or deviations from mixed women's experiences proposing a more comprehensive overview of the *métis* condition. On another hand, an interesting take would be to investigate the representation and processes of identity building of the *métis* child within the field of children's literature through the study of picture books. The potential evolution from stereotyped depictions to the actual display of inclusive and diverse multicultural identities (likely to increase the child's awareness over such issues) would really be a fascinating aspect worth studying further.

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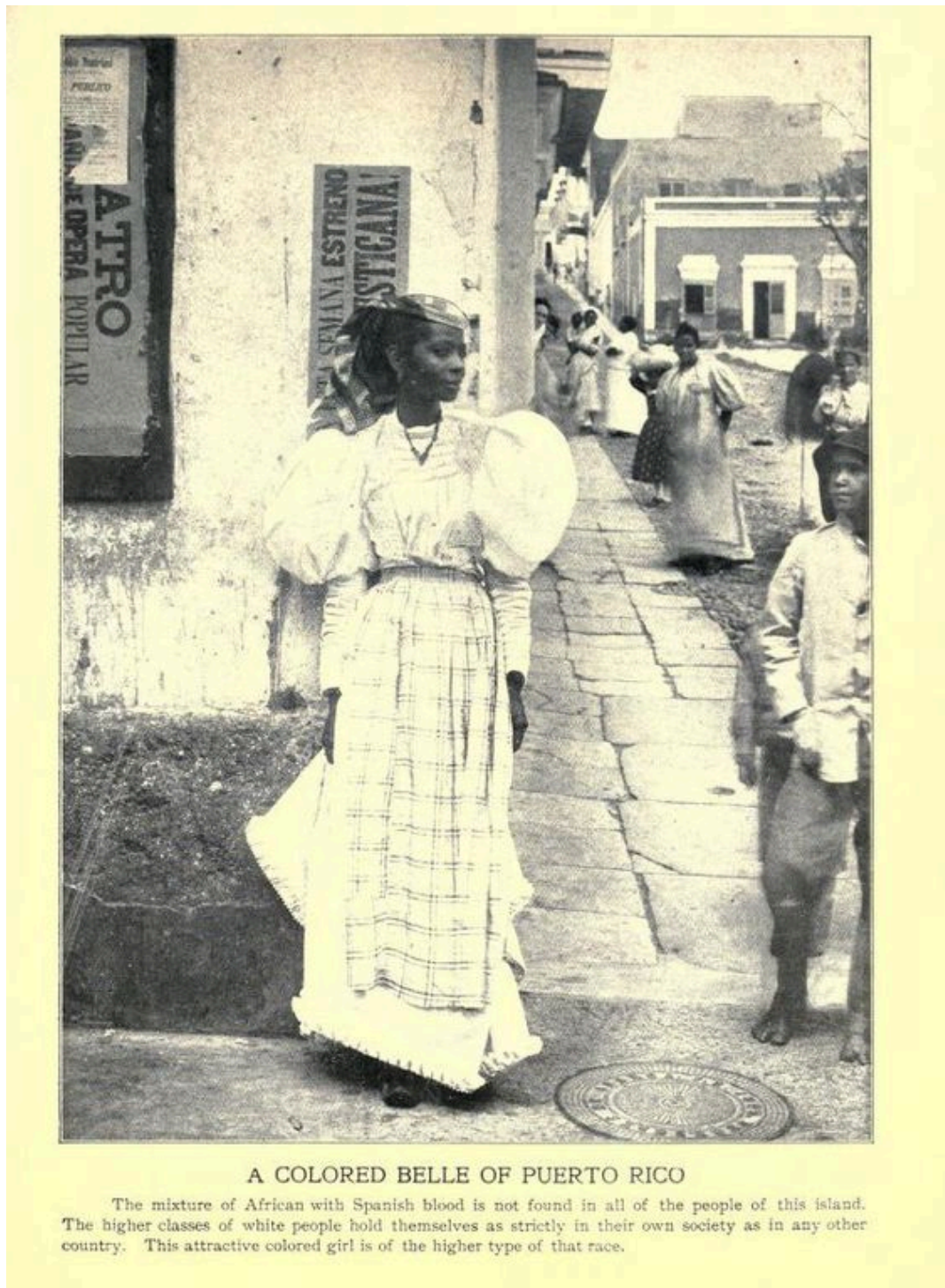


Figure 1: Trumbull White, 'A Colored Belle of Puerto Rico' in *Our New Possessions: Four Books in One (The Philippine Islands, Puerto Rico, Cuba, The Hawaiian Islands)*, 1898, 357.



Figure 2: Lafcadio Hearn, Portrait of a Mulatto woman from Martinique, *Esquisses martiniquaises*, written between 1878 and 1880, published in 1924.



Figure 3: Charles Baudelaire, *Portrait de Jeanne Duval* [*Portrait of Jeanne Duval*], 1865. Pen and brown ink drawing.



Figure 4: Le Masurier, *Famille de mulâtre* [*Family of Mulattos*], 1775. Oil on canvas. Paris, Ministry of Overseas Territories.



Figure 5: Joseph Savart, *Quatre femmes créoles* [Four Creole women], 1770. Pastel on paper laid down. Museum Schoelcher, Pointe-à-Pitre, Guadeloupe.

Appendix

A) Interview Guide (Translated)

- **Self-definition and management of métissage**

- What do you answer when asked 'where do you come from?' Do you present your origins? All of them?
 - Is that a recurring question when you meet new people?
- How do you define/describe yourself (what terms do you use)? Do you employ, do you recognize yourself in the term 'métisse' (mixed-race)?
- How are you perceived, treated in France V in your other country(ies)?
 - How do you explain this difference?
 - Is the integration easy, difficult?
 - How do you feel as a métisse woman in both places?
 - How do you think that your mixed-heritage influences the way you are perceived?
 - Is your identity flexible, does it change from one place to the other? (Are other identities imposed upon you? Do you adapt to those?)
- Have you ever felt torn between your two heritages/cultures? In a position where you had to/were asked to choose?
- Are you often asked which of those two parts you prefer? What do you answer?
 - Do you have a stronger sense of belonging towards one of your cultures? Both? Neither?
- Eventually, would you say that the most appropriate feeling regarding your identity is that of being in-between, caught between two stools or, on the contrary, that of being plural, multiple, encompassing both?

- **Representation**

- Drawing back to your childhood and adolescence. Was it taboo talking about métissage (miscegenation), colours or race in your family or entourage?
 - At school or at home, were you surrounded by people from different cultures and diverse appearances? Did you feel at ease, represented, belonging, integrated, different, discriminated...?

- What do you think about the representation of racial diversity and specifically of *métisse* women in French media, advertisements, series, literature...?
 - Does any aspect strike you? (Colorism, featurism...)
 - Did you notice an evolution of this representation over your lifetime?
- What are your thoughts on the beauty standards and ideals dominating our western societies but also the rest of the world? Recurring favouring obsession for white or lighter skins considered as more beautiful found in every continent (paving the way for harmful cosmetics to whiten at all costs for instance).

- **Responses to literary texts**

- How do you feel about the different stereotypes raised by the characters in the literary excerpts I offered you to read? Baudelaire (1857) and Zola (1867) first with this idea of the *métisse* as a dangerous (lethal even) femme fatale? Hypersexualisation, exoticism...
 - Do you recognize yourself in any of the portrayals made by those writers?
 - Are they echoing a discourse, comments you have already heard, seen or read?
 - Do you feel like some of these stereotypes and ideas are still more or less present nowadays in French culture?
- What are your thoughts on Abdoulaye Sadjí's (1951) character Nini? Superficial, obsessed by social status and ascension through marrying a white man, despising and dismissing her African heritage and everything related to (her) blackness (including language).
 - Do you recognize yourself in any way in Sadjí's *métisse* characters?
 - Have you ever noticed this kind of hierarchy of colours he describes extensively drawing lines even among mixed-race women?
- Are you familiar with these visions of the *métisse* woman, exoticising, hypersexualising, or even infantilising for Sadjí making her completely superficial and vain?
- Do you think literature (and more broadly culture) still has a certain impact on the way *métisse* identities are perceived?
- Do you have any last thought, comment, piece of advice, wish for the future that you would like to share?

B) Literary Excerpts (Translated)

Emile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* (1867): a “Tenebrous Femme Fatale:”²⁹

Context: The novel depicts an unfortunate interracial union between Thérèse - the eponymous métisse character - and her white husband Camille she betrays in a scandalous and passionate affair with Laurent and whom she later killed with the help of her lover. Zola touches on contemporary fears of decadence and degeneration related to deviant and uncontrolled sexuality as well as mixed unions. Thérèse is a lethal, pathological woman, an object whose abnormal sexuality seduces and destroys her white partners. His fundamentally ambiguous (attractive and repulsive) identity is crucial for her depiction as erotic and dangerous to white men.

... you could distinguish [...] the pale, grave profile of a young woman. [...] To a low parched forehead was attached a long, narrow, pointed nose; the pale pink lips resembled two thin threads, and the short, nervy chin was attached to the neck by a line that was supple and fat. The body, lost in the shadow, could not be seen. The profile alone appeared in its olive whiteness, perforated by a large, wide-open, black eye, and as though crushed beneath thick dark hair.³⁰

... the blood of her mother, the African blood that burned her veins, began to flow, to beat furiously in her lean, almost virgin body. She spread out, offered herself with a sovereign shamelessness. (*Thérèse Raquin*, 59)

Laurent had never known such a woman. He remained surprised, uneasy. Usually his mistresses did not receive him with such enthusiasm; he was accustomed to cold and indifferent kisses, to weary and satiated loves. (*Ibid*, 59)

... inwardly she lived a burning, passionate existence. When alone on the grass beside the water, she would lie down flat on her stomach like an animal, her black eyes wide open, her body writhing, ready to spring. (*Ibid*, 26)

... She mimicked the cat, lengthened her hands like claws, and gave her shoulders feline undulations. (*Ibid*, 67)

It seemed as if her face had just been illuminated from within, that flames were escaping from her flesh. And, around her, her burning blood, her straining nerves, threw hot smells, a penetrating and pungent air. At the first kiss, she revealed herself a courtesan. (*Ibid*, 59)

²⁹ The name of Susan Weitmann's thesis '*Tenebrous Femme Fatale*' (University of Edinburgh, 2007).

³⁰ Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin*, 1975, 17. All translations from this source are the researcher's.

Charles Baudelaire, Jeanne Duval, the “black Venus” (*Les Fleurs du Mal*, 1857)

‘Sed non satiata’ [Unslakeable Lust], ‘Parfum exotique [Exotic Perfume]’, ‘La Chevelure [Head of Hair]’

Context: Charles Baudelaire’s long-time métisse mistress, Jeanne, is considered the most famous of his muses and has inspired some of his most sensual poems. At the meeting of poetry and historical biography, Jeanne, like Thérèse, becomes the incarnation of the fatal woman, both desirable and dangerous. The irony, however, is that she was a living woman whose body and character were appropriated and caricatured to approach contemporary racial stereotypes. The process of creating myth is highlighted by generations of biographers and literary critics turning a real woman into a symbol of licentious and harmful sexuality. We can identify in the poems for or about Jeanne, the powerful racist and exoticist imagery that Baudelaire uses in an unmediated portrait of this unknown woman.

SED NON SATIATA

Bizarre déité, brune comme les nuits,
Au parfum mélangé de musc et de havane,
Œuvre de quelque obi, le Faust de la savane,
Sorcière au flanc d’ébène, enfant des noirs minuits,

Je préfère au constance, à l’opium, aux nuits,
L’élixir de ta bouche où l’amour se pavane ;
Quand vers toi mes désirs partent en caravane,
Tes yeux sont la citerne où boivent mes ennuis.

Par ces deux grands yeux noirs, soupiraux de ton
âme,
O démon sans pitié ! verse-moi moins de flamme;
Je ne suis pas le Styx pour t’embrasser neuf fois,

Hélas ! et je ne puis, Mégère libertine,
Pour briser ton courage et te mettre aux abois,
Dans l’enfer de ton lit devenir Proserpine !

Singular deity, brown as the nights,
Scented with the perfume of Havana and musk,
Work of some obeah, Faust of the savanna,
Witch with ebony flanks, child of the black
midnight,

I prefer to *constance*, to opium, to *nuits*,
The nectar of your mouth upon which love parades;
When toward you my desires set out in caravan,
Your eyes are the cistern that gives drink to my
cares.

Through those two great black eyes, the outlets of
your soul,
O pitiless demon! pour upon me less flame;
I'm not the River Styx to embrace you nine times,

Alas! and I cannot, licentious Megaera,
To break your spirit and bring you to bay
In the hell of your bed turn into Proserpine!³¹

PARFUM EXOTIQUE

UNSLAKEABLE LUST

³¹All translations of Baudelaire’s poems were by William Aggeler in *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954).

Quand, les deux yeux fermés, en un soir chaud
d'automne,
Je respire l'odeur de ton sein chaleureux,
Je vois se dérouler des rivages heureux
Qu'éblouissent les feux d'un soleil monotone ;

Une île paresseuse où la nature donne
Des arbres singuliers et des fruits savoureux ;
Des hommes dont le corps est mince et vigoureux,

Et des femmes dont l'œil par sa franchise étonne.
Guidé par ton odeur vers de charmants climats,
Je vois un port rempli de voiles et de mâts
Encor tout fatigués par la vague marine,

Pendant que le parfum des verts tamariniers,
Qui circule dans l'air et m'enfle la narine,
Se mêle dans mon âme au chant des mariniers.

When, with both my eyes closed, on a hot autumn
night,
I inhale the fragrance of your warm breast
I see happy shores spread out before me,
On which shines a dazzling and monotonous sun;

A lazy isle to which nature has given
Singular trees, savory fruits,
Men with bodies vigorous and slender,

And women in whose eyes shines a startling candor.
Guided by your fragrance to these charming
countries,
I see a port filled with sails and rigging
Still utterly wearied by the waves of the sea,

While the perfume of the green tamarinds,
That permeates the air, and elates my nostrils,
Is mingled in my soul with the sailors' chanteys.

EXOTIC PERFUME

LA CHEVELURE

Ô toison, moutonnant jusque sur l'encolure !
Ô boucles ! Ô parfum chargé de nonchaloir !
Extase ! Pour peupler ce soir l'alcôve obscure
Des souvenirs dormant dans cette chevelure,
Je la veux agiter dans l'air comme un mouchoir !

La langoureuse Asie et la brûlante Afrique,
Tout un monde lointain, absent, presque défunt,
Vit dans tes profondeurs, forêt aromatique !
Comme d'autres esprits voguent sur la musique,
Le mien, ô mon amour ! nage sur ton parfum.

J'irai là-bas où l'arbre et l'homme, pleins de sève,
Se pâment longuement sous l'ardeur des climats ;
Fortes tresses, soyez la houle qui m'enlève !
Tu contiens, mer d'ébène, un éblouissant rêve
De voiles, de rameurs, de flammes et de mâts :

HEAD OF HAIR

O fleecy hair, falling in curls to the shoulders!
O black locks! O perfume laden with nonchalance!
Ecstasy! To people the dark alcove tonight
With memories sleeping in that thick head of hair.
I would like to shake it in the air like a scarf!

Sweltering Africa and languorous Asia,
A whole far-away world, absent, almost defunct,
Dwells in your depths, aromatic forest!
While other spirits glide on the wings of music,
Mine, O my love! floats upon your perfume.

I shall go there, where trees and men, full of vigor,
Are plunged in a deep swoon by the heat of the
land;
Heady tresses be the billows that carry me away!
Ebony sea, you hold a dazzling dream
Of rigging, of rowers, of pennons and of masts:

Un port retentissant où mon âme peut boire
 À grands flots le parfum, le son et la couleur;
 Où les vaisseaux, glissant dans l'or et dans la
 moire,
 Ouvrent leurs vastes bras pour embrasser la gloire
 D'un ciel pur où frémit l'éternelle chaleur.

Je plongerai ma tête amoureuse d'ivresse
 Dans ce noir océan où l'autre est enfermé ;
 Et mon esprit subtil que le roulis caresse
 Saura vous retrouver, ô féconde paresse,
 Infinis bercements du loisir embaumé !

Cheveux bleus, pavillon de ténèbres tendues,
 Vous me rendez l'azur du ciel immense et rond ;
 Sur les bords duvetés de vos mèches tordues
 Je m'enivre ardemment des senteurs confondues
 De l'huile de coco, du musc et du goudron.

Longtemps ! toujours ! ma main dans ta crinière
 lourde
 Sèmera le rubis, la perle et le saphir,
 Afin qu'à mon désir tu ne sois jamais sourde !
 N'es-tu pas l'oasis où je rêve, et la gourde
 Où je hume à longs traits le vin du souvenir ?

A clamorous harbor where my spirit can drink
 In great draughts the perfume, the sound and the
 color;
 Where the vessels gliding through the gold and the
 moire
 Open wide their vast arms to embrace the glory
 Of a clear sky shimmering with everlasting heat.

I shall bury my head enamored with rapture
 In this black sea where the other is imprisoned;
 And my subtle spirit caressed by the rolling
 Will find you once again, O fruitful indolence,
 Endless lulling of sweet-scented leisure!

Blue-black hair, pavilion hung with shadows,
 You give back to me the blue of the vast round sky;
 In the downy edges of your curling tresses
 I ardently get drunk with the mingled odors
 Of oil of coconut, of musk and tar.

A long time! Forever! my hand in your thick mane
 Will scatter sapphires, rubies and pearls,
 So that you will never be deaf to my desire!
 Aren't you the oasis of which I dream, the gourd
 From which I drink deeply, the wine of memory?

Abdoulaye Sadj, *Nini mulâtresse du Sénégal* (1951)

Context: *Nini* takes place in Saint-Louis (Senegal) during the colonial period and tells the story of the eponymous character Virginie Maerle - described as «almost white» with very light

skin, blond hair and blue eyes - aspiring to marry a white Frenchman. The author takes a critical look at Nini and métisse women in general by analysing without complacency the Senegalese society and the social dynamics revolving around the skin colour and the seemingly inevitable hierarchy it implies.

Nini is the eternal moral portrait of the mulatto woman, whether from Senegal, the Antilles or the two Americas. It is the portrait of the physically hybrid being who, in the unconsciousness of his most spontaneous reactions, always seeks to rise above his own condition, that is, above a humanity which he considers inferior but to which he is inexorably linked by fate.³²

Here, there is a little boy, one hundred percent black, two old mulatto women half black, a girl white at four-fifths and and an authentic white man. This makes for the most picturesque and touching scene. (*Nini*, 27)

It is true that Nini is «milk coffee» almost white, a «milk coffee» in which the coffee has been clearly absorbed, assimilated by the milk. A miracle of nature wanted her to be blonde with blue eyes, a clear sign of her belonging to the «superior» race of the Nordics. She likes to tell anyone willing to hear: her eyes and last name place her somewhere on the world map, somewhere that is closer to the pole than it is to the equator. Yet three things attach her in spite of herself to this soil of Africa that she denies with all her strength: first her small crushed nose with wide open nostrils; then her strong and greedy lips; finally, this feline gait that she tries to correct in a perpetual stiffening. (*Ibid*, 41)

But the desire for segregation is most evident in mulatto women, which are divided into three main classes.

There are first-class mulattos who are almost white and refuse to be mistaken for *métisse*. [...] Second-class mulattoes are more brown but no less pretentious than the first ones. They feel that they have a certain superiority complex regarding them often justified only by a slight shade in the comparative color of their epidermis. [...] The first and second class mulattoes relegate the Blacks and male Mulattos in the same contempt.

Mulattoes of the third class occupy the last level of this hierarchy. The social position of their parents and the dark colour of their skin are incompatible with living entirely the European way. So they live between the two worlds and the two conceptions that mark the white clan and the black clan. (*Ibid*, 42-43)

³² Sadji, *Nini*, Avant-propos, 1988, 7. All translations from this source are the researcher's.

It is the crowning achievement of a certain dream of greatness and distinction that makes all mulatto women, Ninis, Nanas and Nénettes live outside the natural conditions of their country. The great dream that haunts them is that of being married to a white European [...] their need for gesticulation, their love of ridiculous parade, their calculated, theatrical, disgusting attitudes, are all effects of the same grandeur mania. (*Ibid*, 95)

... to unite with the European, to “whiten” little by little and to cross the line of colour that separates her from the world of her Western ancestors. (*Ibid*, 103)

The charms of a mulatto woman are powerful. We owe them first of all to a double heredity: Negro heredity that allows, in love, gestures full of slowness and flexibility and in which there is as much weakness as there is endearing strength. Western heredity that grafts on this background the contributions of a French education received or copied: shimmering clothing, silky, elastic, which perfectly embrace advantageous and restless forms; vocabulary richer than all the most sonorous African dialects; ways to stand, walk or hug; and then blushes and lipstick that make the face and mouth more greedy... (*Ibid*, 154)