

# Dual Identity

by **Victor Lu Huynh**

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**How do children construct their racial identity? Based on a groundbreaking study of children from so-called “mixed” couples, Solène Brun explores the processes of racialization within family structures.**

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Reviewed: Solène Brun, *Derrière le mythe métis. Enquête sur les couples mixtes et leurs descendants en France*, Paris, La Découverte, 2024, 332 pp., €22, ISBN 9782348078620.

In her book *Derrière le mythe métis*, Solène Brun tackles a complex issue that is deeply rooted in French social structures: *métissage* (racial mixing) and *mixité* (racial diversity). Through a series of sociological interviews, the author examines how racial identities are transmitted and negotiated within families formed by mixed-race couples – defined as unions between partners from different racialized groups (p. 73) – where parents and children are not necessarily racialized in the same way. The core issue of Brun's book is framed as follows: “How are racial identities transmitted when parents and children are likely to be racialized differently?” (p. 14). This question highlights the importance of family dynamics in shaping and transmitting identities, and examines the mechanisms by which children of mixed couples perceive and internalize their racial identity.

Brun explores these issues by asking whether, as in the United States, minority racialization prevails or whether there are different ways of negotiating racial boundaries in the French context. Here, she uses the term “minority racialization” to refer to the process by which certain social groups are defined and stigmatized through racial categories, which influence their identities and experiences and

produce structural inequalities. France, as a country historically steeped in universalist ideologies, offers an interesting field of study for understanding how racial identities are constructed and evolve in a context where the concepts of assimilation and universality have long been established as guiding principles for public policy.

The book also seeks to answer another question related to the concept of whiteness: what role does the presence of a white parent play in the process of a child's racial formation? This question is particularly pressing given that France does not officially recognize racial categories, in contrast to other societies that explicitly recognize race, such as the United States.

## A critical analysis of the *métissage* myth

The book begins by deconstructing the “myth of racial diversity”, an ideology that celebrates *métissage* as a force for unity and social progress. Brun criticizes this rhetoric, which she believes often masks persistent racial inequalities. Drawing on examples such as the French soccer team's victory in 1998 and the slogan “Black-Blanc-Beur” (Black-White-Arab, a play on the French tricolor flag), the author shows how it is often presented as a symbol of national cohesion, while at the same time obscuring the realities of racial domination and the legacies of colonization. She argues that this rhetoric of *métissage* is a tactic to sidestep the real issues of equality and social justice by focusing on an idealized image of diversity.

Brun describes — drawing on the work of Ann Laura Stoler, among others<sup>1</sup> — how *métissage*, far from being a simple matter of biological mixing, has been steeped in race from its colonial origins to the present day (p. 33). This discussion is key to understanding racial dynamics within interracial families, where race, though not officially recognized, plays a pivotal role in the formation of identities.

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2002.

## ***Métissage and colonization: between assimilation and rejection***

The book then focuses on *métissage* in a colonial context. Solène Brun traces the evolution of colonial attitudes (in Africa and the Caribbean between the 17th and 20th centuries) towards individuals identified as “mixed race”, and the way colonial authorities gradually came to perceive mixed marriages not as a means of assimilating the colonized, but as the threat of a “descent into savagery” among colonists, even though the bodies of colonized women were often made available to the colonizers (p. 41). These views gradually evolved to reflect the legalization of racial issues in a colonial context, where skin color became a key — albeit insufficient — marker for distinguishing between white and non-white people. As a result, specific legal provisions were established to maintain these racial distinctions, such as the February 1779 regulation in Saint-Domingue prohibiting non-whites from wearing certain types of clothing (such as hats or fine fabrics) in order to avoid any confusion with whites (p. 50).

Solène Brun also explores the dilemmas faced by colonial authorities in dealing with interracial children, who proved to be something of a legal headache. The question of their status, which oscillated between mere subjects of the Empire and full French citizens, mirrored the tensions between the universal nature of human rights and the racial imperatives of colonial France. Ultimately, the colonial administration decided in 1926 to recognize as French any person with a parent “presumed to be of French race” (p. 52), a decision that institutionalized race as the basis for French citizenship. The author then expands her analysis by returning to the origins of the concept of race, which can be traced back to the notion of “blood purity” in the Middle Ages (p. 56). She explains how marriages between Christians and non-Christians were strictly regulated to avoid “cursed mixing” (*ibid.*), a mindset that persisted and intensified during the colonial era. These prohibitions and regulations reveal a deep-rooted fear of *métissage*, which was perceived as a threat to the established racial order.

## **The complex dynamics of interracial couples**

The book then examines the situation of interracial couples today on the basis of a qualitative survey. Brun first makes a critical analysis of the dictionary definitions

of *mixité* and “mixed marriage,” such as that given by Le Petit Robert in 1994, where mixed marriage is synonymous with “interracial marriage” between two people of different religions or races (p. 76). Here again, the concept of *mixité* itself is problematic insofar as it is often based on racial categories that are still characterized by an implicit assumption that *mixité* is considered a departure from the norm of racial homogeneity.

The author then explores the different types of interracial couples and the factors that influence their formation, such as educational level and socio-professional category (p. 74). For example, she shows that migrants with higher education degrees are more inclined to form interracial couples than less qualified migrants. This observation suggests that marital diversity is, in part, a question of social and cultural capital, where more educated individuals are more likely to overcome racial barriers when forming marital relationships (p. 78).

The chapter also addresses how racial identities are constructed within these couples. Brun shows that self-perception and one's perception by others depend largely on skin color and racial origins. This means that the further a person's origins and skin color deviate from the norms of “whiteness” (a social and cultural construct that associates characteristics, privileges, and identities with people of European descent), the more that person will tend to believe that they are not perceived as being fully French. This observation underscores the importance of physical appearance in the processes of racialization, even in a context where race is not officially recognized as a social category.

## **The main challenge of passing on culture and language**

In her chapter on cultural transmission within mixed families, the author shows how the issue of language and culture — unsurprisingly — presents a major difficulty when it comes to raising children born from these unions. Most families choose to prioritize the French language, often because they fear that their children will encounter difficulties at school. A minority of families, particularly those with high cultural and financial capital, endeavor to teach their children the language and culture of the non-European parent, despite the challenges this may entail (pp. 153-157).

Agreeing on children's first names is another example of these complex family dynamics (p. 169). Here, the author refers to the work of Baptiste Coulmont and Patrick Simon, who show that the choice of first names reflects certain social dynamics and can be a strategic act. Parents often opt for names that help their children integrate while preserving a link with their origins (p. 147). Choosing names that are less culturally distinctive can be a way of responding to discrimination and stereotypes associated with immigration, thereby avoiding stigmatization and encouraging children's integration (p. 174). "Compromise" names (p. 181), chosen for their ambiguity and their potential to blend into French society, are often the result of lengthy discussions between parents. For example, the name "Sami" perfectly illustrates this idea of a compromise name. On the one hand, it can be perceived as a diminutive of "Samuel," a common first name in France associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition. On the other hand, "Sami" also exists in Arabic, which allows a link to be maintained with the culture of the non-European parent. This "in-between" name is therefore a strategic choice that bridges the gap between the parents' different cultural identities, helping the child integrate while preserving part of their cultural heritage (p. 182). These names are used to navigate between cultural pride, historical considerations (such as the Algerian War of Independence), and pragmatism, avoiding names that are too culturally distinctive and may be perceived as foreign.

Interracial diversity within families is the subject of constant negotiation, not only between parents, but also with grandparents and society at large (p. 189). The parents' choice of names, as well as their educational backgrounds, are influenced by power dynamics that include factors such as gender, class, and race. These dynamics are particularly visible in the way parents negotiate the cultural aspects they wish to pass on to their children, often based on what is perceived to be socially acceptable or advantageous.

## **The lucidity of multiracial children in dealing with racialization**

Brun focuses on the experiences of interracial children growing up in a society where race, although often implicit, remains a structuring force (p. 283). She highlights the diversity of these children's socialization experiences, which depend largely on their family context, but also on society's view of their racial identity. Some interracial

children take a proactive approach to understanding and embracing their complex identity, often by becoming politically involved or visiting the country of origin of their non-white parent. Others, meanwhile, may feel a certain distance from their cultural heritage, choosing to blend in by adopting a more neutral identity, often as a response to the expectations of the dominant society.

The author also explores how parents address the issue of racism with their children. She shows that parents generally adopt two main approaches: one is to prepare children to deal with discrimination by developing a keen awareness of racism; the other, more universalist approach aims to minimize the importance of race by adopting an attitude of “colorblindness” (p. 237), which disregards skin color. These contrasting approaches reflect the tension between the desire to protect children from the realities of racism on the one hand, and to help them navigate a society that values universality and racial neutrality on the other.

Solène Brun observes that this parenting style has a direct impact on how interracial children develop their identity. Some develop multiple and complex identities, as they seek to reconcile their mixed heritage with society's expectations (p. 241). Others may experience feelings of dislocation or inadequacy due to contradictions between their family socialization and prevailing social norms. The author points out that while these children may defy traditional racial categorizations, they are often required to negotiate their identity within a social framework — for example, through their parents' choice of “neutral” or “ambiguous” first names — that remains deeply marked by racial hierarchies (p. 309).

## Conclusion

In her analysis of interviews with parents of interracial children, the author deconstructs the myths surrounding *métissage* and highlights the complex dynamics that govern the transmission of racial identities within mixed families. Far from being a simple process of harmonious blending, *métissage* appears to be a space of tension and negotiation where issues of power, domination, and resistance come into play. The author seeks to offer a critical perspective on a subject that is often idealized, showing how racial identities are not only constructed but also constantly challenged in the French context. Her study attempts to shed light on the challenges faced by

interracial couples and their descendants, while questioning the future of race relations in a constantly changing society.

The book's primary shortcoming is that it draws too frequently on issues of concern to the United States, where questions and analytical frameworks often focus on racial dynamics unique to American society and history, such as the importance of race in everyday life, notions of segregation, and even the conceptualization of *métissage*. Indeed, the legacy of slavery, which existed between 1619 and 1865, followed by the introduction of Jim Crow laws in the southern United States, has left an indelible mark on American society. With regard to *métissage* specifically, a series of laws passed throughout the nineteenth century sought to prohibit or significantly restrict this practice, with the aim of containing it<sup>2</sup>. The question of race is therefore both recurrent, omnipresent, and ever-present, appearing both in university application forms and in demographic censuses. Unlike in France, statistical data in the United States is accessible and transparent. This situation profoundly influences how the concept of race is perceived on an everyday basis: distinctions in skin color are emphasized, with references to a "white America", a "black America", and "Chinese Americans". Furthermore, theories concerning the intelligence of these different populations continue to circulate in the collective imagination, evidence of a racial complexity that permeates society as a whole. Solène Brun seemingly applies this US framework to the French context without sufficiently questioning it, even though racial and historical issues in France, particularly with regard to immigration and *métissage*, differ from the situation in the United States. This may undermine the validity of her conclusions, given that racial hierarchies, which are still evident in the American context, and integration policies, which are specific to the French context, do not give rise to a homogeneous situation.

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), February 26, 2025. Translated by Susannah Dale with the support of Cairn.info and published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), February 10, 2026

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<sup>2</sup> Victor Lu Huynh, « 'Melting Pot' et métissage. Les femmes et le tabou de la miscégenation aux États-Unis », *L'homme et la société* 2014/1 n° 191, pp. 113-138.