



MULTI-ETHNICITY IS NOT AN ABSENCE OF LOCATION BUT A MULTIPLICITY OF IDENTITIES, A NEW DESTINATION THAT HAS NOT TERRITORIAL BASIS.

Boarding for New York. I'm back. As always when entering U.S. territory, I am asked to fill in a questionnaire. The same question awaits me, requiring me to tick a box specifying my ethnicity: «Caucasian» «Hispanic», «Asian», «Black», or «Other».

To cross a border, one must define and delineate oneself, and in my case, limit myself. Because I am of mixed origin, therefore multifaceted. To many people, this means being a mix of two different ethnicities.

There I am, with not box to tick, limited to choices that deny my existence. In France, like in many other countries, growing up mixed often means erasing some of the history of two people who would supposedly have braved the rules of a divided world, in order to imagine a future with no borders. In America, the concept of *métissage* (which loosely translates to multiethnic) doesn't even exist. Instead, the country has its «One Drop Rule», the historical rule that anyone with one drop of non-white blood would automatically be placed in the 'black' category, and hence considered automatically inferior, impure. This binary status was used to discourage interracial unions.

Because, let's not forget it, *métissage* was often not chosen, but the result of a colonization, the submission of natives, or of forced immigration. All mixed children recalled a history of violence and domination.

Today, this rule also serves to diminish our complexities to make things simpler. This means growing up partially invisible – and having to choose to enhance (if not to caricature) one side of our multiplicity to make it more comprehensible, acceptable, and therefore reassuring. Saying I am mixed says very little in the end – and only brings up fantasies, and often blurred perceptions.

BECOMING MÉTISSE

Every society tries, in its own way, to define, frame, give people a comprehensible identity, pushing the minority to adjust to the majority. It puts borders and boxes to reinforce its dominant status, and mixed people become like a hazy mass. But I feel I have always been the opposite by essence. *Métisses* are the opposite of limits or borders. We are born in jetlag and in translation: we are the sum of two or more frontiers.

In each relation, a question arises : how can you define yourself when faced with someone else ? How can you establish a base on what is an initial turmoil ? Do we also need to create clear limits to be understood, and to choose one side, in order to live with someone from a single background ?

Let me first answer this questionnaire. Which box should I chose ? I was born in Paris from a Franco-Vietnamese mother, who was born and raised in Saigon. My father is Peuhl, born in Bafatá, in Guinea-Bissau and who was raised in Senegal.

Before the day I was born, the concept of frontiers didn't preoccupy me. My country is France; my mother's is Vietnam, my father's Guinea Bissau. In my mind, growing up, territorial borders didn't exist as a mode of identification. My mother spoke of her reality and her youthful memories in a land I was beginning to fantasize about, and integrate in my dreams. My father told tales of a faraway land, which also became my imaginary playground. I was constructing myself in Paris, Saigon, and Bafatá.

Let's look at these choices again: Black ? White ? Asian ? Not really, not only. Or should I tick all three ? Once again, I only exist via three prede-fined choices. I am a hybrid, an anomaly, an unforeseen phenomenon perhaps. Hang on, no, there is a box for these kinds of cases: the box stating "other". There, done, I've ticked it. Other. I am the Other.

FIGHTING FOR A RICHER SENSE OF SELF

When I was younger, a question haunted me: how can I exist and introduce myself to the world ? I remember questions about my names in high school.

"Is your name Hamadou or Frédéric ?"

"Both"

"What religion are you ?"

"My father is Muslim and my mum is a Buddhist and I have catholic uncles; some of my cousins go to church and others go the mosque"

"You're weird, you need to make up your mind!"

For as long as I can remember, I have always had to choose. I was also asked if I'd rather keep *"my right arm or my left arm"*. Since the person asking only comes from a single history, it is my duty to adapt. The one sitting inside a neatly defined box looks at what lies beyond like a distant blur.

Later, as I was graduating from high school, I created a project called *'sang mêlé'* (for mixed blood, a pun with *'s'emmêler'*, or 'tangled up'). I was going through a phase of trying to find a sense of equilibrium between all the contradictory elements that were inside me.

I finally realized that it is not the blood but the cultures that make us different, and things that are both visible and invisible: language, religion, even countries within a same continent.

A few years ago, I was in Miami. I was photographing a model whose father was half Korean and half Japanese, and whose mother was American and the idea came to me. As I was looking for the right light to shoot her, we began talking about our lives, and our shared sense of being became apparent : a need to constantly negotiate borders put into place by a domineering world.

We both longed for a place that would look like us, that we could define ourselves; where we could claim back control, rather than conform ourselves to imposed norms. This is how the photo project was born: with the current proliferation of images, showing faces as evidence for multiplicity could create a basis for discussion.

That was the beginning of a multimedia project we now call Born in Translation. Because, after all, that's what defines all of us, to be born in this translation. Nothing is lost, on the contrary, we are enriched by our diversity.

It is a space for all those born in this multiplicity, to tell our rich stories and abolish a sense of feeling like 'halves'.

CELEBRATING VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE DIFFERENCES

Multiethnic identity finds a slow equilibrium. It takes time and understanding. In the end, it is up to us to find a balance between all these heritages, and this creative project allows us to live each of our backgrounds to the fullest. We must open the way, show our faces because sometimes – often-, being mixed cannot be seen with a naked eye. It is therefore essential not to limit the perception of *métissage* to distinctive physical traits and skin tones. I remember a childhood friend, Emmanuel, who travelled between Spain, his mother's country, and Germany, where his father was from. Before February 7th 1992 and the signature of the treaty of Maastricht which created the European Union, he lived in an in-between space that no longer exists today.

Métisses are much more complex than a mix of bloods and skin tones. Somewhere in this notion of *métissage* lies a great deal of hope, and of blurred borders. Of the new unions of people who once would have never met. With Born in Translation, we are going to transform our mother and father's heritages, we are going to perceive, write and question other limits. We will tell new stories that haven't been told yet, which everyone needed to hear to open up to the Other.