

Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas (Eds.), **Mixed Race Hollywood**, New York University Press, 2008, 325 pp., \$24.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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In the wake of “Obama-mania,” conventional wisdom about racial identity is facing a set of new and unique challenges. It is therefore imperative for scholars and industry professionals to reflect on multiracial identification, representation, history and post-racial politics as they pertain to art and to life. This is exactly what *Mixed Race Hollywood*, edited by Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas, sets out to do. In four parts, the book examines representations of multiracial people as integral yet often silenced parts of our real and imagined communities. A truly interdisciplinary study, the essays explore a wide range of topics — from early mixed race film characters to Blaxploitation and “multiracial chic” to children’s television programming, same-sex romance and the “outing” of mixed race stars online. Both provocative and timely, the collection helps its readers better understand the evolving conceptions of what race actually is and can be — mixed. The threads running through each essay are these two questions: How are mixed race people deployed as subjects and/or objects in Hollywood? And, when it comes to issues of mixed race, does art imitate life or does life imitate art?



Each part of the book answers these questions from a unique cultural perspective. The introduction is a crisp lexicon that fosters understanding of the subject, then presents the historical relationships among anti-miscegenation legislation, Hollywood industry codes dictating normal and appropriate onscreen interracial romance, and representations of mixed race individuals in popular culture. Part One, titled “Miscegenation: Mixed Race and the Imagined Nation,” begins appropriately with J. E. Smyth’s chapter, “Classical Hollywood and the Filmic Writing on Interracial History, 1931–1939.” Smyth argues that early films like *Cimarron* (1931), *Ramona* (1936), *Show Boat* (1936), *Jezebel* (1938), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939) helped to introduce and integrate mixed race people and issues despite the official censorship of the Hays Code (1930–1968). Most notable is the discussion of Scarlet O’Hara as “both a sexually and racially transgressive force in *Gone With the Wind*, . . . that in many ways make[s] her the most powerful biracial heroine in American historical literature” (p. 34). The theme of transgression is picked up again in Camilla Fojas’ chapter on “Mixed Race Frontiers.” Fojas compares two border Westerns, *Duel in the Sun* (1946) and *Rio Lobo* (1970), to show how representations of mixed race characters display a distinctly American racial ethos and argue for U.S. power concerning political and geographical boundaries. *Duel in the Sun*’s Pearl is a threat that must be controlled and contained, as compared with Pierre from *Rio Lobo*, who carries the “hope of assimilation” to both sides of the color line (p. 61). The third and final chapter in this section by Lisa Nakamura, “Mixedfolks.com: ‘Ethnic Ambiguity,’ Celebrity Outing and the Internet,” takes a turn from the big screen to the ever shrinking computer screen as a site for mixed racial rhetoric. Nakamura explains that the capabilities and constraints of new media place distinct demands on multiracial celebrities: “just as . . . copyright law . . . requires users to attribute every piece of their creation to its original source, so too are multiracial movie

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stars compelled by their fans to 'attribute' themselves" (p. 71). Lamentably, such citations and attributions operate all too often to produce masculinity, whiteness, and heterosexuality as normative.

Part Two, "Identity, Taboo and 'Spice,' " presents many of the collection's most intriguing insights. Heidi Ardizzone's treatment of *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959) and the infamous Rhinelander Case in "Catching Up With History," details the simultaneous and contradictory fates of interracial marriage as both social corrective and tragic error. This ambivalence is taken a step further by Robb Hernandez in "A Window into a Life Uncloseted: 'Spice Boy' Imaginings in New Queer Cinema." Hernandez's compelling reception analysis demonstrates how, even in counter-hegemonic queer films, the Latino emerges primarily as supporting character, and usually as fetishized sexual object, to the leading white male subject. Most poignant are the Latino respondents' links to their own life experiences that echo these filmic themes. Hernandez's contribution is followed by the best chapter of the entire book, Kent A. Ono's "The Biracial Subject as Passive Receptacle for Japanese American Memory in *Come See the Paradise*." Reading this chapter made me watch the film, which is so haunting because it makes (feminine, child, Japanese-Irish American) mixed race identity both necessary and irrelevant. Necessary because the mixed race girl, Mini, is a *tabula rasa* upon which the memory of Japanese American interment can be written, irrelevant because she has "no agency of her own" (p. 137). Thus, the mixed race individual becomes the "generic spectator" from and for an idealized post-racial reality (p. 151).

Ono's insight is the key to understanding Part Three, "Genre, Mixed Race, and Evolving Racial Identities," which surprisingly focused primarily on male leads such as Vin Diesel and Keanu Reeves and the horror, sci-fi and action genre conventions they make and break. Adam Knee's essay, "Race Mixing and the Fantastic," explores two horror films, *Jeepers Creepers* (2001) and *Underworld* (2003), and a fantasy film *Bewitched* (2005). Though the chapter is in many ways as creative as its texts, and displays moments of sheer genius, overall, the analysis seems disjointed, decontextualized and sometimes stretched. For instance, I can see how *Bewitched* might be read as a narrative of Jewish ethnic passing but without discussions of why this is significant in a post-WW II United States, something seems missing. Likewise, the simple equation that links racial mixing with horror, cannibalism and penetration without discussion of how these acts have played out historically in terms of slavery and segregation asks too much of its readers. By contrast, Jane Park's "Virtual Race: The Racially Ambiguous Action Hero in *The Matrix* and *Pitch Black*," is much easier to unpack. Park coins the term "virtual race" to explain how racial difference works best in terms of ambiguity, represented by "a character's embodiment and/or knowledge of nonwhite cultures" (p. 187) even as that character is coded white. Critical analysis of ambiguity's shifting forms, structures of power, and multiple and disperse identifications is continued by Gregory T. Carter in "From Blaxploitation to Mixploitation: Male Leads and Changing Mixed Race Identities." Carter asks whether actors can transcend race or if race binds actors. By comparing the contemporary experiences of Vin Diesel and The Rock to historical experiences of Ron O'Neal, Carter's answer is yes on both counts. On the one hand, ambiguity has been a hindrance. On the other hand, ambiguity is now harnessed as "chic." What is left unanswered are the ways in which many monoracial American identities (e.g., black, white, Asian, Latino/a, Arab) are themselves mixed (Pabst, 2003).

The fourth and final section "Generation Mix: Shifting Meanings of Mixed Race Figures," transitions from ambiguity to ambivalence and focuses primarily on female roles. Echoing Amy Robinson

(1994), Aisha D. Bastiaans argues in "Detecting Difference in *Devil in a Blue Dress*" that mixed race identification is a dramatic, triangulated and ongoing process of seeing and not seeing, knowing and not knowing. For Bastiaans all racial identification is detection, as audiences are asked to fill in the gaps with their own common sense racial notions. This thesis seems to hold true for other contemporary narratives of detection like *Alias*, about which it would have been nice to read a chapter in this volume. In any case, Mary Beltrán's essay "Mixed Race in Latinowood," explores the public image campaigns of Jessica Alba and Rosario Dawson, arguing that Alba initially garnered more mainstream success because she could be more readily coded as white and that Dawson was cast in more supporting roles (until recently) because she could be more readily coded as black. It is interesting here, and in the two chapters that follow this one, that though attempts are being made to move beyond the black/white paradigm they are not entirely successful. What happens in this final section, as perhaps is the authors' point, is that this is what happens in Hollywood and in life as well. One need only glance at Lightstorm Entertainment's *Avatar* and at Disney's *The Princess and The Frog* for evidence of this point. So says Angharad N. Valdivia in "Mixed Race on the Disney Channel." Valdivia reminds the reader that children's programming is as much influenced by the market as any other type of programming, yet there are some lines that still cannot be crossed. "To be sure . . . For every *Cheetah Girl* movie set in a mixed race universe, there is a whole television series along the lines of *Lizzie McGuire* in which whiteness reigns supreme" (p. 286). The final word belongs to Leilani Nishime in "The *Matrix* Trilogy, Keanu Reeves, and Multiraciality at the End of Time." Nishime states that the trilogy can be read as an experiment in borderless utopian hybridity. However, the truth is that the films display nothing but boundary crossing and in so doing reify them by erasing all context from Neo's multiracial body and killing it.

To conclude, *Mixed Race Hollywood* is an important and necessary set of interrogations into mixed race as ambiguous form, commodity, transaction, and trend. Though some analyses could be more complete or placed in different parts of the book for continuity's sake, ultimately each essay asks us to think critically about the role of media in the formation of mixed race subjects, forging of interracial relations, and imagining of new forms of democratic living. For that, I recommend the book wholeheartedly.

References

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