

MIXED RACE HOLLYWOOD by Mary Beltràn and Camilla Fojas, eds. New York: New York University Press, 2008, 325 pp.

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Article:

Mixed Race Hollywood is a collection of essays that could not be timelier. As popular media, journalists, and citizen bloggers actively dispute the impact of President Barack Obama's election on attitudes toward race, editors Mary Beltràn and Camilla Fojas have compiled a series of essays that explore ways popular media and celebrity have presented miscegenation and racial identity for Americans. These historical and critical essays analyze specific films, television programs, Internet sites, and the appearance of celebrity image to help explain the ways popular media presentations of race correspond with the development of social behaviors and attitudes. Though some might credit "liberal Hollywood" for ushering America into the "mulatto millennium," it is obvious from the collection of essays in this book that Hollywood is not always the leader of public opinion but often takes the more conservative approach, lagging behind fairly widespread social attitudes.

The editors divide the book into four sections: themes of mixed race representation, miscegenation and romance, genre and mixed race characters, and finally, a section that examines the shift in media presentation of mixed race characters from tragic to heroic. The introduction by Beltràn and Fojas helps set the background and the overall argument that media presentations reveal a cultural shift in American attitudes toward mixed race characters. The introduction also provides some useful notes on terminology.

The essays begin, appropriately, with J. E. Smyth's chapter, "Classical Hollywood and the Filmic Writing of Interracial History, 1931–1939." This chapter examines films such as *Cimarron* (1931), *Ramona* (1936), *Show Boat* (1936), *Jezebel* (1938), and *Gone with the Wind* (1939), to show that early Hollywood did occasionally produce a film of historical fiction that managed to escape the racial censorship of the Hays Code (1930–68). The discussion here includes a focus on biracial heroines, which could make this chapter interesting supplemental reading for courses in gender studies as well as African American, American Literature, and film studies. I have to say that Smyth's examination of Scarlett O'Hara made me reconsider aspects of a character I thought I knew fairly well.

Camilla Foja's chapter on "Mixed Race Frontiers" continues the discussion of mixed race in historical films. She compares the westerns *Duel in the Sun* (1946) and *Rio Lobo* (1970) to show how the two films might represent more than 20 years of attitude change toward mixed race characters. Whereas Pearl from *Duel in the Sun* is "orphaned between two cultures," the character of Pierre Cordona from *Rio Lobo* assimilates as a vital support for the film's white hero, Cord McNally. The final chapter in this section does not provide traditional film scholarship but examines how the Internet site, Mixedfolks.com, celebrates multiracial heritage by "outing" multiracial celebrities. This chapter felt a bit out of place in this particular section but did offer an important examination of the Internet as a forum for racial discourse.

Some of the liveliest chapters in the book come in part 2, which examines film portraits of miscegenation and mixed race romance, adding to the discussions provided in works such as Susan Courtney's *Hollywood Fantasies of Miscegenation: Spectacular Narratives of Gender and Race, 1903–1967* (2005). I found Heidi

Ardizzone's analysis of *Night of the Quarter Moon* (1959) particularly interesting because, based on the 1927 *Rhinelander* case, this often-overlooked film corresponds with the current fascination with "reality." Ardizzone's discussion about the disparity between the earlier case and the 1959 film's adaptation to racial politics and "Hollywood endings" is a smart and compelling read.

In "A Window into a Life Un-closeted," Robb Hernandez adds a comment on the scholarship of New Queer Cinema and what he observes as the critical omission of interracial politics in analysis of these films. He introduces the "spice boy" as a character type, which the films often paired with the lovelorn white gay protagonists and observes that romances between white male protagonists and the "Spice Boys" rarely survive. His study of spectatorship revealed that gay male Latinos identified with the white protagonist.

Kent A. Ono's analysis of *Come See the Paradise* (1990) continues the discussion of films based on American history. *Come See the Paradise* tells the story of a white character whose Japanese American wife is imprisoned during World War II, even though there is no evidence that she is less patriotic than her German American counterparts. Central to Ono's analysis is the biracial daughter, Mini, a child who is the passive observer of this history and, as Ono notes, the "generic spectator" from a liberal, post-racist future.

Part 3 of the book includes essays examining biracial characters and genre conventions. Adam Knee's essay considers two horror films and a fantasy film for treatments of race mixing. Although the horror film *Underworld* (2003) takes an obvious position on mixing (in this case the "races" of vampires and werewolves), the argument that *Jeepers Creepers* (2001) tells a multiracial story is more difficult to unpack. Adding *Bewitched* (2005), a romantic fantasy based on the long-running television sitcom, seems less useful to the understanding of how genre conventions influence portrayals of mixed race characters. I could argue that horror is an inherently conservative genre, which often involves traditional taboos and fear of "the other" in its storytelling, so that revulsion toward the mixed monsters of horror movies would be predictable, making the more liberal message in *Underworld* a genre deviation. (For example, the more typically conservative horror film *Species* [1995] warns that human and Extra Terrestrial DNA should not be mixed; the result is a beautiful, powerful, and deadly creature.) On the other hand, romantic fantasies often suggest that love conquers all, and difference may not be something to fear. I would caution against generalizing based on analysis of three films. We have notions of "genre" and "race" because people seem to have an inherent need to categorize (and predict) films as well as people. Individuals consistently defy stereotypes. It is less often that characters and films defy their genre. When they do, the surprise can be delightful.

Other chapters in this section include Jane Park's "Virtual Race," which examines the science fiction films *The Matrix* (1999) and *Pitch Black* (2000) to suggest that the racially ambiguous action hero presents audiences with a futuristic vision of a mixed race nation. "From Blaxploitation to Mixploitation" is an essay by Gregory T. Carter, which looks at the careers of mixed race actors in action genres, suggesting that the racial identities that might have once been a career handicap may now be assets. Carter observes that black action genres have been refurbished as "mixploitation," but former traits remain.

The last section of the book deals with the shifting meanings of mixed race characters and actors. Sometimes it seems that the decision to place an essay in one section or another was a bit random. For example, the intriguing essay "Detecting Difference in *Devil in a Blue Dress*," might have easily fit into the section on genre, because Aisha D. Bastiaans's examination of *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995) involves discussion of film noir, neo noir, and black wave films. Film noir envisions a world of shady deals and moral concessions, and this film about an African American detective looking for a "white" woman in L.A.'s black community is clearly noir. According to Bastiaans, we know noir when we see it; when it comes to race, not so much.

Mary Beltràn's essay "Mixed Race in Latino-wood" is an analysis of the careers of Jessica Alba and Rosario Dawson, suggesting that racial ambiguity opens many doors, especially for actors who understand and have absorbed mainstream, "white" values. Angharad N. Valdivia's essay, "Mixed Race on the Disney Channel," is a reminder that "Hollywood" is a system of global media giants looking first to the bottom line. Even the

perceived conservative disposition of Disney is subject to market forces, recognizing the necessity to adapt media products to population changes within its consumer base. As long as mixed race characters developed for Disney Channel's "tween" programming show profits for the media giant, Disney will respond to "normalize an ethnically diverse universe with a happy ending" (286). The final essay by LeiLani Nishime examines the Matrix trilogy and its star, Keanu Reeves, as a vision of a hybrid future, where anything is possible. However, the analysis suggests that the trilogy demonstrates contempt for the hybrid and a terror for contamination.

Although this collection of essays is not the first or final word on the subject of mixed race in Hollywood, it makes a strong argument that images in popular media reflect a significant cultural transformation in America, perhaps signaling the approach of the "mulatto millennium." However, when blogs complain that Barack Obama's white mother disqualifies him from holding the title of America's first black president, we have not quite reached the era of liberal post-racism or of fully embracing racial mix. I may not always agree with some of the authors' interpretations, yet I definitely recommend this book as one that adds important observations to the discussion of media and racial identity. One day it will be the content of a film's characters that audiences judge, not the color of their skin. Meanwhile, works such as *Mixed Race Hollywood* raise provocative questions and contribute to our understanding of media, race, and cultural change.