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MIXED RACE
From Pathology to Celebration
Ji-Hyun Ahn

Racial mixing is a longstanding topic of theory and empirical analysis in multiple disciplines, including literary criticism, postcolonial studies, and race and ethnic studies. Scholars address racial mixing in terms of in-betweenness, (racial) hybridity, and *mestizaje*, a Latin-American term that describes cultural blending (e.g., Ang 2001; Bhabha 1998; Bhabha 1994; Canclini 1995; Kraidy 2005; Anzaldúa 1987). Yet until recently, media studies have not focused on mixed raciality because audiences are not taught to read multiracial figures on-screen. However, the cultural meaning of multiraciality is changing as media representation becomes more diverse and inclusive. Media scholars note that the media/cultural representation of mixed-race people has shifted “from pathologization to celebration” (Parker and Song 2001) and “from tragic to heroic” (Beltrán and Fojas 2008).

This chapter addresses the causes of this shift and its significance for larger social transformation by critically examining the politics of mixed-race representation in the American media landscape. The chapter focuses on scholarly discussion in the United States, but it also encompasses transnational scholarship by introducing research on mixed-race representation in East Asia that takes a different historical trajectory from the West.

Beyond Binary: Historical Context of Mixed-Race Studies in the US

The concept of mixed raciality is historically and culturally constructed, defined by particular boundaries in different societal contexts. Scholars use multiple concepts to radically re-theorize mixedness. In her inspiring book *Borderlands/LaFrontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), a feminist and Chicano studies scholar, uses the term “mestiza consciousness” to theorize new hybrid subjectivity. In the postcolonial studies tradition, theorists such as Stuart Hall (1978; 1995), Néstor García Canclini (1995), and Homi Bhabha (1994) use the terms “hybridity” and/or “Third Space” to produce a conceptual space that blurs boundaries and challenges the established categorizations of racial identities. Across these conceptual frameworks, one of the crucial theoretical implications of mixed-race categories is that they deconstruct formerly rigid binary oppositions such as black and white, colonizer and colonized, master and slave, and original and reproduced, illustrating that these binaries are not fixed but constructed.
The term “mixed-race” generally refers to a person born to differently racialized parents. Yet the term “multiracial” was introduced to reflect the constructed nature of the mixed-race category and has gained linguistic currency, complementing the use of the term mixed-race today. In current usage, “mixed-race, biracial, and multiracial all are used equally to refer to relationships and individuals of two or more of the socially constructed racial categories of the United States” (Beltrán and Fojas 2008: 4). Because the mixed-race category is culturally and historically specific, various names and terminologies indicate particular types of racial mixing: *mestizo* (racial mixing of indigenous Latin Americans with Europeans and others), Chicano (Latinos of mixed Mexican heritage), hapa (originally referred to a mixed Hawaiian heritage but more generally refers to individuals with mixed Asian or Pacific Islander and white), and Amerasian (historically used to describe the mixed-race population born to American soldier fathers and Asian mothers in postwar Asia).

This diversity of mixed-race categories and terminologies demonstrates that racial mixing has always been complex. Yet mixed-race identity in the United States is commonly perceived through the frame of black–white relations due to the country’s long history of European colonialism and slavery. Throughout much of its history, America practiced a well-known racial categorization system of hypodescent called the “one-drop rule,” under which anyone with even “one drop of black blood” was considered black. Scholars note that the notion of hypodescent perpetuated a notion of “pure blood” and “pure white” (Wilson 1992; Davis 1992; Nakashima 1992). In other words, the one-drop rule enforced the dominant class’s desire to keep the American nation white (Squires 2007). In the meantime, the “strong reinforcement of the one-drop rule provided a firm black identity for most African Americans” (Davis 1992: 125) because it strengthened group cohesion within the black community (Kimberly 2009). In addition, until 1967, the year that *Loving vs. Virginia* ended anti-miscegenation laws, U.S. law prohibited interracial marriage as a threat to racial purity (Nakashima 1992). Such racial classification (e.g., the one-drop rule) as well as racial laws (e.g., anti-miscegenation law) vividly illustrate how American racial hierarchy is constructed in relation to blood, though Hawaii had an alternative racial categorization system that balanced egalitarian pluralism and assimilation (Davis 1992: 131). In short, scholarly discussion of mixed race points to the myth of a black and white racial binary system as a source of racism against mixed-race people (Valentine 2009).

**Early Hollywood Narrative on Miscegenation and Mixed-Race Identity**

For decades, the Hollywood film industry has been one of the most powerful media institutions producing popular cultural texts that shape social norms and stereotypes about gender, race, class, and sexuality (Shohat and Stam 1994). One of the most lasting Hollywood stereotypes of mixed-race persons is the “tragic mulatto.” Originating from the Spanish term *mulo* (mule in English), which literally refers to a hybrid offspring of a donkey and a horse, the term “mulatto” is derogatorily used to describe a black biracial person. In early literary tradition as well as in Hollywood films, mixed-race characters were described as “tragic, unnatural phenomena” and “psychologically damaged outcasts, angry at both parents’ racial groups” (Squires 2007: 34). In the tragic mulatto trope, the characters were tragic “because the mixed race individual must die to restore order for
white society” (Squires 2014: 107). This stereotype denigrates blackness as a “problem” to be gotten rid of. Angel (2007: 248) insists, “By continuously framing these stories [of mixed-race characters] as tragic, rigid categories of racial identity are reinforced, and the multiracial child is buried further under layers of racial essentialism.”

This tragic mulatto character in early Hollywood was easily absorbed into the passing narrative. As Nerad (2014) observed, “Although there are incidences of white-to-black passing, because of the history of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and racism in the United States, the most common iteration of racial passing has been black-to-white” (11). In other words, the practice of passing more typically occurred among light-skinned people of color by taking on white identities for the purpose of acquiring upwards social mobility. Yet those who passed for white “were subject to social, physical, and legal repercussions if whites discovered their masquerade” (Squires 2007: 55). As such, the passing characters were treated as deceitful and punished in Hollywood films made in the era of segregation.

In addition to the passing narrative, because colonialism and slavery are so deeply rooted in American racial imagination and politics, the fear and desire of miscegenation—interracial sex and marriage between black and white partners—emerged as a central theme among some African-American novelists in the early twentieth century (Daniel et al. 2014: 7). Since interracial marriage was illegal until 1967 in the United States, depictions of miscegenation were also restricted by the Production Code Administration (PCA) in early Hollywood. Yet miscegenation was not entirely absent from Hollywood films. Producers invented various techniques to visualize the desire for miscegenation without violating the Production Code. Films avoided showing “actual miscegenation” by casting white actors in non-white roles (Beltrán and Fojas 2008: 8), illustrating that miscegenation was a “forbidden fantasy/desire” in early Hollywood films.

In her analysis of Hollywood narrative and cinematic representation of miscegenation from the early 1900s to the late 1960s, Susan Courtney (2005) astutely demonstrates that Hollywood films projected a fantasy of black and white miscegenation to generate viewing pleasure for spectators. By examining how early Hollywood films, including The Birth of a Nation (1915), Imitation of Life (1934), Pinky (1949), and Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner (1967), construct miscegenation narrative within the films in relation to the changes in the PCA’s restriction on miscegenation, Courtney (2005) shows that the miscegenation narrative was gendered, sexualized, and raced, reinforcing white patriarchy.

As the first Hollywood film that cast a black actress as the passing character, John Stahl’s Imitation of Life (1934) deserves elaboration. Stahl’s choice of Fredi Washington to play the character Peola, a black biracial figure who decides to pass as white in the film, was a sensation at that time, given Hollywood’s long tradition of casting whites as black characters (Bowdre 2014). Though Washington’s screen time in the film was not substantial, her presence unnerved PCA members who “read Peola’s light skin and her eventual passing as signifiers of miscegenation” (Courtney 2005: 144). In other words, while the film did not actually depict miscegenation, the PCA read Peola’s fair skin (and her passing) on the screen as a result of miscegenation that fictionally happened outside the film narrative. Courtney (2005: 144) explains, “By conflating miscegenation and passing in this way, the censors attempt to extend the Code’s ban on sex and desire across black and white racial boundaries to prohibit identification across them as well.”

In 1967, the Supreme Court of the United States struck down all remaining anti-miscegenation laws in the United States in its Loving vs. Virginia ruling. This key moment in the history of American racial politics increased the visibility of mixed-race people
in America’s public consciousness and precipitated a “biracial baby boom” (Beltrán and Fojas 2008; Angel 2007; Root 1992). Though whether the actual number of interracial marriages increased because of the Loving decision is controversial, the case significantly reduced the stigma against interracial marriage (Daniel 2014). Released in the year of the Loving decision, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner (1967) was the first Hollywood film to locate interracial marriage at the center of its plot, and it still stands as one of the most popular and successful miscegenation Hollywood films. While the power of PCA had significantly declined by the 1960s, interracial sex and marriage were still considered taboo. Thus, though the plot of Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner treated the conflicts and reunification of two main protagonists’ families, the film contained no interracial sex scenes (Angel 2007).

From Tragic to Heroic: Contemporary Mixed-Race Representation

After the Loving decision, social movements of the 1970s and 1980s including feminist movements, anti-racist movements, and gay right movements precipitated the rise of political correctness and multiculturalism in the 1990s. In this context, mixed-race studies scholarship burgeoned in the 1990s and into the 2000s. A few important early studies include Paul Spickard’s Mixed Blood (1989), Maria Root’s edited volume Racially Mixed People in America (1992), Naomi Zack’s anthology American Mixed Race (1995), Parker and Song’s anthology Rethinking Mixed-Race (2001), and Jayne Ifekwunigwe’s “Mixed Race” Studies: A Reader (2004). Based on this founding scholarship in mixed-race studies, mixed-race media scholarship began to develop in the early twenty-first century. As the first media studies anthology devoted to the topic of mixed-race representation, Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas’ Mixed Race Hollywood (2008) explores a range of themes regarding popular mixed-race representation in early Hollywood films and in contemporary television programs, celebrity image/culture, and Internet sites. As the book’s topic implies, multiracials now appear in all forms of media, including magazines, ads, comics, matching websites, film, and TV.

Whereas early Hollywood miscegenation narratives and visual representations of mixed-race figures depicted the lives of mixed-race people as tragic, associating negative cultural meanings with racial mixing, contemporary popular representations of mixed-race people complicate racial lines and cultural meanings of biraciality. As Beltrán and Fojas (2008: 10–11) describe, contemporary Hollywood’s representation of mixed-race characters has become “neutral, ordinary, positive, or even heroic,” leading to an “overall boom of the casting of mixed-race actors in contemporary film and TV.”

Analyzing mixed-race African–American characters in contemporary American popular culture, including best-selling novels, primetime TV dramas, and reality competition shows, Ralina Joseph (2013) demonstrates that the image of the tragic mulatto has been reconfigured in the contemporary setting. She describes two hegemonic representational modes of mixed-race African Americans in mainstream media: the “new millennium mulatta” and the “exceptional biracial.” According to Joseph, the tradition of the tragic mulatto informs the new millennium mulatta in that new millennium mulatta characters are punished for playing a race card. For the new millennium mulatta, blackness is considered the “cause and effect of sadness and pain” that “must be surpassed to arrive at a state of health or success” (Joseph 2013: 6). In this sense, the new millennium mulatta iterates the “sad race girl” trope of the tragic mulatto.
By contrast, the exceptional multiracial typology prizes mixed-race blackness over “pure” blackness. The exceptional multiracial is celebrated for overcoming or transcending blackness (or even race), as in the case of model Tyra Banks as well as the participants on the reality competition show *America’s Next Top Model* (see chapter 4 of Joseph’s book). This exceptional multiracial trope is a part of recent discourses that assert a post-racial society and colorblindness by framing race as malleable and something that one can transcend through performance. Joseph insists that these two types of stereotype on mixed-race African Americans are not replacing each other. Instead, the new millennium mulatta “is functioning in tandem with it [exceptional multiracial], with both modes operating simultaneously in a dialectic” (Joseph 2013: 4).

Joseph’s analysis of the exceptional biracial is resonant with what Mary Beltrán (2005) calls “new Hollywood racelessness.” Beltrán (2005) argues that the action film genre in contemporary Hollywood now casts biracial or multiracial actors as protagonists. A few emblematic examples are Keanu Reeves in *The Matrix* trilogy, Russell Wong in *Romeo Must Die* (2000), and Vin Diesel in *The Fast and the Furious* (2001). These action heroes’ biraciality (or multiraciality) is marked as a new ideal of Hollywood’s raceless aesthetics. Yet these biracial action heroes’ racial(ized) bodies are still “likely to be read as white,” reinforcing Hollywood’s longstanding tradition of white supremacy (Beltrán 2005: 64).

Beltrán’s analysis raises the topic of racial visibility in visual culture. The textual meaning of the visual materials is not fixed but rather contested through audiences’ interpretation and reinterpretation (Du Gay and Hall 1997). How audiences read the images of biracial figures on the screen indicates the level of racial visibility in visual culture. In her book *Undercover Asian*, LeiLani Nishime (2014) problematizes the visual absence of multiracial Asian Americans in American popular culture, revealing audiences’ inability to read them as multiracial Asian Americans. Through her thorough analysis of emblematic multiracial Asian Americans—Keanu Reeves, Tiger Woods, and Kimora Lee Simmons—she argues that their (racialized) bodies serve as cultural sites where audiences’ mis-reading and re-reading of race take place, offering both new possibilities and limits for reconsidering racial visibility in popular media. She notes, “The primary issue is not whether Reeves is ‘really’ Asian or white or even multiracial, but under what circumstances he is visible (or not visible) as multiracial Asian American—and why” (Nishime 2014: xv).

Like Hollywood action films, contemporary television is actively incorporating multiracial representations as well as diverse ethnic representations through so-called “multiculti-casting” or “colorblind casting.” Although not explicitly interracial/multiracial-themed shows, increasing numbers of dramas include more multiracial cast members for secondary roles or background characters for the purpose of setting up the post-racial world of the main protagonists. Examples are *Nip/Tuck* (2003–10), *Grey’s Anatomy* (2005–present), *Glee* (2009–15), and *Modern Family* (2009–present), to name a few. In addition, some primetime TV dramas such as *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–9) and *Parenthood* (2010–15) have made interracial couples and their biracial children central to the show’s narrative, reflecting increasing numbers of social issues around multiracial people in America. As Nilsen and Turner (2014: 4) assert, “While negative racial stereotypes do continue to circulate within the media, the dominant mode of televisual racialization has shifted to a colorblind ideology that foregrounds racial differences in order to celebrate multicultural assimilation.”

It is certainly empowering for audiences, people of color in particular, to see more inclusive racial representation on TV. Yet scholars also critique the ideological implications of this inclusive casting practice, arguing that such casting is not necessarily progressive or inclusive. Erica Childs (2012) argues that “interracial relationships may
be popping up more frequently on television but they do more to reinforce the current racial situation rather than challenge us to move beyond it.” Pointing out that interracial inclusion in primetime TV dramas is mostly through the union between white men and women of color, Squires (2014: 131) insists that it is because “men of color are too threatening to become part of the extended family.” Even with the multiracial family on the show, it is problematic that Asian mothers are largely missing from biracial TV families, whereas white fathers present and play an active role in the family dynamics (Day 2015). Critical scholarship is therefore needed to examine how current casting practices frame racial and cultural diversity.

Mixed-Race People as a Marker of a Post-Racial Society?

One of the most contentious debates on mixed raciality in the contemporary era regards the discourse of a post-racial society. Barack Obama’s election as the first black biracial president significantly changed the cultural and political landscape in the US (Kimberly 2009; Parameswaran 2009; Jolivette 2012), triggering among some the idea that race and racism is no longer an issue in the United States. This idea took root in the popular discourse of a post-racial and colorblind society.

Since the early 1990s, the mainstream media has popularized the idea that the growing multiracial population in the US indicates a racially harmonious future in articles such as Time magazine’s “New Face of America” in 1993, Newsweek’s special report on “Redefining Race in America” in 2000, and the New York Times’ article on “Generation E.A.—Ethnically Ambiguous” in 2003. These claims were supported by statistical data on demographic change (e.g., the 2010 Census showing that America’s multiracial population grew faster than any single-race population). In this aspiration toward the “new face of America,” the mainstream media treated biracial/multiracial people as a marker of a utopian vision of post-racial society (Squires 2014). This treatment aligned with Hollywood’s shift in mixed-race representation from the trope of the tragic mulatto to that of heroic, exceptional figures and the media’s celebration of mixed-race beauties, which together romanticized mixed-race people as the harbingers of America’s post-racial future. The visible increase in popular culture of emblematic “exceptional multiracial”—to use Joseph’s (2014) term—celebrities such as Tiger Woods, Keanu Reeves, Jessica Alba, and Jennifer Lopez signifies a new level of racial diversity and integration in the United States.

Despite the mainstream media’s enthusiastic embrace of mixed-race figures, scholars have expressed concern over the discourse that celebrates a supposed post-racial society through mixed raciality (see Elam 2011; Dawkins 2012; Mahtani 2014; Squires 2014). As a critical intervention in the production of mixed-race aesthetics and media rhetoric regarding post-racial society, Michelle Elam (2011) deconstructs the mixed-race mythology by interrogating the ways in which the mixed-race category (and identity) is framed, marketed, and celebrated in the post-Civil Rights era. Minelle Mahtani (2014) also resists the romanticization of multiraciality, questioning what type of (racial) mixing particularly matters to whom through an anti-colonial perspective. As such, even though popular media appropriates the image of the mixed-race figure as a utopian vision of a raceless society, “race remains prevalent because of biracial people, not in spite of it” (Ramon 2013: 100). Perhaps what current mixed-race celebration signifies is not the end of race/racism but a new departure for reimagining political action as we enter a seemingly problematic post-racial society.
Mixed-Race Representation in a Global Context

Research on mixed raciality is focused on the US and the UK, but some recent work has broadened (critical) mixed-race studies to include a more global scope. One of the first anthologies on mixed-race populations around the globe, *Global Mixed-Race Studies* (2014), reminds scholars that mixed-race experiences and identity politics must be understood in relation to historical context and national/regional politics. While the book is a meaningful first step toward globalizing mixed-race studies, it also requires critical intervention on what it means to set “North American experiences and histories as a backdrop” (King-O’Riain 2014: viii) when we discuss other nations’ mixed-race experiences in different contexts. To wrap up our discussion, I will introduce current studies on mixed-race representation in East Asia, in South Korea and Japan in particular, to offer some useful insights into global mixed-race studies.

In the West, race has played an important role in shaping national politics. By contrast, few East Asian countries have a long history of racial politics due to their relatively homogenous racial/ethnic populations and their strong developmental nationalism in the postcolonial era. Thus, Asian mixed-race studies generally examine “Amerasians” because of America’s heavy military presence in the region during and after WWII. Wherever the American army was based, including Seoul (South Korea), Okinawa (Japan), and Phuket (Thailand), Amerasians were considered a social problem and were ostracized because of their “racial impurity.”

For this reason, media representations of mixed-race individuals have been rare in East Asia. In South Korean postwar films, mixed-race figures embodied the tragic national history of war and national anxiety over American military imperial power (Koh 2009). In this sense, Amerasian characters resembled the tragic mulatto trope: tragic, angry, helpless, poor, and pitiful, though their pain and social stigma was rooted in the historical context of war rather than slavery and segregation. This is also true of Japanese film. Analyzing cinematic representations of mixed-race children in Japanese films from the 1950s to the 1970s, Mika Ko (2014) argues that films rarely depicted the lives of mixed-race children but instead sexualized and objectified female biracial bodies under a heterosexual male gaze to illustrate emasculated (Japanese) masculinity.

Yet the transition from pathology to celebration in mixed-race representation is a global trend. Mixedness and (racial) otherness is now promoted and commercialized in the work of selling difference and diversity in East Asia in the era of neoliberal globalization (Ko 2010). Global migration has accelerated the increase of international/interracial marriages in East Asia, expanding a different mixed-race population (mixed-race children of Asian descent) and kindling a new fascination with racial mixing. In Japan, the rise of hāfu discourse contrasts with the earlier konketsu, the Japanese term for mixed-blood, and kindling a new fascination with racial mixing. In Japan, the rise of hāfu discourse contrasts with the earlier konketsu, the Japanese term for mixed-blood, which carries a negative connotation, signals a positive change in the cultural meaning of biraciality. Yet the hāfu discourse is highly gendered such that hāfu models in fashion and beauty industry are mostly white biracial females of European or American descent (Iwabuchi 2014). By contrast, in South Korean mainstream media, white biracial males are increasingly popular figures (Ahn 2015). As such, the cultural currency of whiteness in East Asia is highly contested and entails multiple ruptures. Yet this topic is understudied. The examination of biracial whiteness in the transnational context is a much-needed research program that has the potential to reshape the conceptual frame of global mixed-race studies by tracing how whiteness transforms as it travels across the globe, and to problematize white privilege at the global level.
REFERENCES


**Further Reading**


Elam, M. (2011) *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (A critical study of mixed-race aesthetics in a number of different forms, such as literary, artistic, media and popular culture, including comic strips, fiction, and drama.)
