

Zélie Asava, *Mixed Race Cinemas: Multiracial Dynamics in America and France* (Bloomsbury, 2019)

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The Black Lives Matter movement, reacting to racial tensions in the US and similar situations in other Western societies, has made it clear that the times of race-based inequality are not over. The idea that we live in 'colour-blind' societies in which racial constructions are outdone has been frequently exposed as delusional, while there are undeniably processes of cultural opening in which more visibility is created for non-white people, a tendency that is especially evident from recent films including more black and mixed-race roles and actors. It is crucial to pay special attention to mixed-race people in this regard, as a rapidly growing minority group reflecting the reality of present-day multicultural societies. However, many representations of mixed-race experience, or 'mixedness', underwrite stereotypes sustaining hegemonic whiteness (think of Vin Diesel and Halle Berry), and it is more generally in depictions of mixedness that racial ideology persists, often in highly ambivalent ways. This is the focal point of Asava's study: departing from recent hit films like *Loving* (Jeff Nichols, 2016) and *Divines* (Houda Benyamina, 2016), *Mixed Race Cinemas*¹ unfolds an alternative film history from the margins, looking at how problematic traditions of representation developed in American and French cinemas are. At the same time, the book highlights the fact that some films were not satisfied with, and hence attempted to revert, racist stereotypes. Mixedness, an identity "in-between cultures and ethnicities and yet often ascribed to one" (27), allows for an extent of mobility between conflicting racial constructions, and the flexibility thus entailed can serve the disparate goals of either affirming or dismantling racial ideology. Understanding that representations of race must be seen in close connection with national narratives and visual cultures, the study's comparative approach is well-aimed, looking at the USA as the dominant global film industry and France as the dominant European film industry. The former is notable for having the longest filmic history of interracial and mixed-race representations, whereas the latter, while only gradually opening up to multicultural themes and reproducing many US American clichés, has generally been more progressive in depicting interracial relations. Tracing these representational histories in context, Asava's book sets high hopes on the power of cinematic mixedness to realise a 'Third Space' in which identities can be fluid and hybrid, and which would reconcile ideals of equality with cultural difference and thus help establish 'post-race'

¹ Asava, Zélie. 2019. *Mixed Race Cinemas: Multiracial Dynamics in America and France*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic. 216 pages.

societies after all.

The study sets out with the first chapter's discussion of the relations between non-white/mixed visibility onscreen and behind the camera, highlighting the enduringly low participation of black and mixed artists in Hollywood productions, who were scandalised when no non-white artists were nominated for the 2015 and 2016 Academy Awards (#OscarsSoWhite). This notable absence, as Asava makes clear, reflects complex representational shortcomings such as white stars overshadowing black stars with greater screen presence, mixed characters being played by white actors, or parts formerly played by black actors being recast with mixed actors in remakes. The chapter also introduces some vectors of mixed representation in America and France respectively: following the ideological example of the lustful mixed housekeeper Lydia in *Birth of a Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), American films like *Hallelujah* (King Vidor, 1929) and *The Black Network* (Roy Mack, 1936) developed the hypersexual figure of the 'tragic mulatta' whose attempts to 'pass' for white ended fatally, whereas the French films made around American entertainer Josephine Baker such as *Zouzou* (Marc Allégret, 1934) or *Princesse Tam Tam* (Edmond T. Gréville, 1935) showed racial mixing in a positive light and made a foray towards an open and multicultural society. Asava notes that, even though people try to control Baker, and despite appearing visually "encaged" by various arrangements, her screen persona "refuses to let her agency be suppressed and ultimately enacts her will, thus acting as the central identificatory point for the spectator" (66).

The remaining chapters further explore these divergent models as they were actualised, updated or revised throughout the history of cinema. Chapter 2 discusses postwar American films such as *Pinky* (Elia Kazan, 1949), *Kings Go Forth* (Delmer Daves, 1958) or *I Passed For White* (Fred M. Wilcox, 1960), interrogating the dichotomies of the later 'tragic mulatta' figures. In this widespread anti-miscegenation narrative, mixed women's punishments for attempting to 'pass' for white—usually to improve their social status—served as warnings to police racial boundaries. According to the 'one drop of blood' rule, mixed-race people in the US were not accepted as white. While the blame in these films was mostly on the hypersexual female transgressor, Asava emphasizes that there was also a burgeoning sense of resistance and critique of society for keeping the racial divide in place. As comes out best in the third chapter's case study of the two versions of *Imitation of Life* (John M. Stahl, 1934; Douglas Sirk, 1959), these notable representations² depicted the situation of the tragic mulatta with considerable complexity, seeing her positioned in a tensioned space between black community and white hegemony, between family and career. Both films were vicariously centred around an alternative model of family, in which a white and a black mother live together with their daughters—a model that pointed to a culturally inclusive nation but which, at the same time, was still widely dismissed as impossible and therefore had to stay in the shadows. Still, as Asava argues, the screen presence given to mixed-race actress Fredi Washington in the 1934 version, and the inspiration from mixed entertainer Dorothy Dandridge for the daughter's persona in the 1959 remake (played, however, by white actress Susanne Kohner), should be recognized for providing some limited visibility for mixed actors against the odds of narrative disempowerment. Asava concludes that the mulatta's performance is increasingly transformative, "claiming independence, exploiting her sexuality, expressing her desire and refuting convention" (106).

From the 1990s onwards, French films have explored the possibilities of a multicultural society against the rise of nationalism and the New Right. Asava highlights the influence of *beur* (French-

² These films are also discussed by Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris in "Passing and Trespassing in Stahl and Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1934; 1959)", *Film Journal 7* (2021): 50-56.

Maghrebi) cinema emerging in the 1980s. Often focusing on life in the banlieue, this new wave of filmmaking followed American hood cinema and hip-hop culture to focus on the margins of French society, with a postcolonial interest in depicting social hardships, migrant experience and interracial relations. As chapter 4 makes clear, popular comedies like *Métisse/Café au Lait* (Mathieu Kassovitz, 1993) and *Les Trois frères* (Didier Bourdon and Bernard Campan, 1995) engaged more decidedly with the interracial family than the older Hollywood films, considerably decentring its monocultural and patriarchal baggage. Against the imperative to assimilate, Asava makes it clear that these films restored a level of agency to their female and male protagonists while still relying to a great extent on popular stereotypes they underwrote for comic effect. Further following Asava's line of argument, the revision of the family alongside ideas of the nation was taken one step further in the road movie *Drôle de Félix/The Adventures of Felix* (Olivier Ducastel and Jacques Martineau, 2001), in which a young, gay, HIV+, mixed-race man travels across France in search of his *beur* father. The film's protagonist is interpreted by Asava as a rewriting of the Western genre and its hero, whose self-sufficient masculinity is thoroughly decentred. The culturally, sexually and generationally diverse people Félix meets along the way become significant others for him. They constitute a multiracial non-biological family and sense of dialogical identity as he overcomes the traumatic experience of racism. This makes it possible for Félix, whose sexual orientation is "simply part of his identity" (142) to accept himself as "a Frenchman, an Arab and something inbetween, both 'like' and Other" (143). In Asava's eyes, the whole journey amounts to a non-essentialist idea of France in which citizenship is no longer based on *droit du sang* ('blood rights', or genetic heritage) but *droit du sol* (territorial rights), whilst also avoiding the homogenizing universalism of 'colour-blind' French republicanism. A final list of recent French popular comedies demonstrates that such a revised understanding of the nation is becoming more and more influential, testifying to the reality of mixed-race families in a multicultural society.

Whereas the case study of *Drôle de Félix* expresses hopes in arthouse cinema to unfold the post-binary 'Third Space' of identity, the conclusion once again argues for the importance of popular films. However, while in both French and American cinemas interracial family relations and mixed identities are increasingly depicted in a positive light, it would be misleading to assume that persistent stereotypes and racial inequalities have effectively been overcome. As an important step towards true 'post-race' societies, Asava sees science fiction and fantasy movies as especially promising when it comes to experimenting with hybridity and fluidity to challenge hegemonic whiteness, with *Star Trek's* Vulcan-human character Spock as a prime example.³ Mediating between species can be seen as an analogy to bridging interracial divisions, which in fact the 19th century constructed as species differences. The creative potential of these posthuman imaginations should be fully realised to provide "a space for imagining many kinds of mixedness" (167)—or else, the denied question of difference might return from the repressed, as epitomised in race-sensitive Zombie horror films, from *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968) to *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017). Positive representations of mixedness should proliferate, yet filmmakers should try harder to avoid stereotypes so as to popularise a sense of difference rooted not in tradition but in freedom and empathy, in which "subjectivity is formed in co-emergence with another I, whereby the Other is not a threat to my selfhood but ensures it" (168).

All things considered, I have found Asava's slim-yet-comprehensive study impressive for the sheer density of insights it contains, with over forty films discussed, also containing a helpful index of

³ A recent collection focuses more extensively on the association between mixedness and fantasy/science fiction: Dagbovie-Mullins, Sika A. and Eric L. Berlatsky. 2021. *Mixed-Race Superheroes*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press.

names and subjects to facilitate navigation. Many films are studied in close-up, readings of plot and character are coupled with shot analyses and examinations of mise-en-scène. This well-edited book expertly draws on previous writings on race in film and mixed-race identities by Donald Bogle, Naomi Zack, Mary Beltrán and Camilla Fojas, to just name a few. It also relies on an array of poststructuralist concepts of identity-in-difference such as Homi Bhabha's 'Third Space', Gloria Anzaldúa's 'new *mestiza* consciousness' in the 'borderlands', Donna Haraway's image of the cyborg and Judith Butler's understanding of performance. While some readers might find the book's use of theoretical language repetitive, it does provide a level of coherence in serving as a leitmotif, highlighting the author's emancipatory outlook throughout—an outlook the book shares with recent similar-themed works like Will Harris' autobiographical essay *Mixed-Race Superman* (2019),⁴ or Rebecca Hall's film adaptation of Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing* (2021).

⁴ Harris, Will. 2018. *Mixed-Race Superman*. London: Peninsula Press. The figurations of the 'mixed-race superman' explored by Harris include Barack Obama and Keanu Reeves, both also covered in Asava's study.