

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies

Title

Zélie Asava. Mixed-Race Cinemas: Multiracial Dynamics in America and France

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6nv7r9p1>

Journal

Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies, 1(2)

Author

Cortana, Leonard

Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/C81258344

Copyright Information

Copyright 2022 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Review

Zélie Asava. *Mixed-Race Cinemas: Multiracial Dynamics in America and France*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 216 pages. \$135.00 cloth. \$38.65 paperback. ISBN: 978-1501312458. \$30.92 eBook (pdf). ISBN: 9781501312465. \$30.92 Ebook (Epub and Mobi). ISBN: 9781501312489.

Following the increased visibility of mixed-race characters and interracial families in our international mediascape, Zélie Asava, a Kenyan-Irish independent film scholar and classifier at the Irish Film Classification Office, offers an important contribution with the publication of *Mixed-Race Cinemas: Multiracial Dynamics in America and France* in the fields of transnational film studies and mixed race studies. Comparing French and American cinemas seems logical, since, from the earliest days of cinema history, the two film industries have had significant international exposure and have constantly strengthened exchanges between their national talents. France and the United States, nonetheless, hold contrasting views about race. For example, in summer 2018, a bill that is still pending was submitted to the French National Assembly to remove the word “race” from its constitution, despite visible ongoing racial tensions in the country. When French scholars and activists have tried implementing racial and postcolonial frameworks in their publications, some French intellectuals and journalists have placed the blame on harmful American influence.

Proceeding chronologically through the main movements of mixed-race cinema, Asava capitalizes on a large corpus of films to skillfully demonstrate that the two film industries, despite their differences, have developed similar patterns of representation. Readers will appreciate Asava’s efforts, already in her thorough introduction, to analyze films not only from a cultural standpoint but also from the valuable included information about the industry’s development and star system, the promotion and critical reception of these films in mainstream media, and the evolution of film aesthetics while framing mixed characters and families. Constantly navigating between imaginaries of containment and transgression, the monograph relies on landmark texts in critical race theory, postcolonial theory, and feminist and intersectional readings to unpack mixedness, always well informed by the development of the vibrant and multidisciplinary critical mixed race scholarship. Another stimulating methodology consists of replacing the mixed-race films in a transmediatic approach, in dialogue with other television texts, short films, magazines, and live performances, which considerably enriches the well-known corpus of studio-produced films in both countries.

The book is well suited for undergraduate media/film students, who will learn about the earlier use of blackface, the narrative tropes of the tragic mulatto/a, Hollywood classics and French films, and the landmark dates of mixed-race struggles and victories. Film scholars and cinephiles will appreciate the compilation of insightful anecdotes and precious archival information, the analysis of multiracial cinematic locations like New Louisiana, and the inclusion of lesser-known films that typically do not come to mind when generating a corpus of mixed-raced films. Asava’s study serves as a large and complex database of films, that will be a valuable tool in updating course syllabi with new film entries and scholarly research.

If the theme of anxiety around the representation of the mixed-race family remains one of the omnipresent tropes that circulates across the ocean and throughout the monograph, her attention to the context of production intertwined with some life stories of the main protagonists makes more complex the readings of hybrid identities. In chapter 3, when she examines some of the most relevant repeated uses of tragic mulatta characters in Hollywood, she methodically juxtaposes actress Fredi Washington's life story with her onscreen persona, revealing how, already in the 1930s, her "in-betweenness," reframed by the media, circulated constantly between her public and private life. Asava provides then a framework to look at other careers throughout film history, making visible her thorough understanding of star studies' approaches. In chapter 4, she retrieves two overlooked 1990s French comedies, *Metisse* (Kassovitz, 1993) and *Les Trois Freres* (Bourdon/Campan, 1995), both in the fields of film and mixed race studies. She applies an uncommon intersectional reading that interrogates how the French Far Right National Front Party produced fear discourses against the rise of a multicultural society in the late 1980s, which resulted in a queering of a cinematic gender expression and placed the interracial family in a new "racial sexual mythology." This observation situates these films as hypotexts of more recent productions that more overtly tackle these narrative tropes.

One can hope that, in the coming years, Asava will work on a new edition that will include nonfiction works and more specifically self-ethnographic films that will provide new directions to expand her methodology. Her final observations on the potentiality of revisiting this history to understand the current context of production of mixed-race films, which both endorse and challenge stereotypes, are striking. The future is promising and the convergence of the fields of transnational film studies and transnational mixed race studies will grow as the world is becoming more globalized and the film narratives more inclusive of racial minorities. *Mixed Race Cinemas* leads us to wonder whether the cinematic mixed-race revolution might be expected not in the emergence of new patterns of representation but rather in our capacity of reading through more transnational complex lenses.

Leonard Cortana

New York University