

UC Santa Barbara

Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies

Title

Ralina Joseph, Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial

Permalink

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Journal

Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies, 1(1)

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Publication Date

2014

DOI

10.5070/C811021386

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Review

RALINA L. JOSEPH. *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2013. xx + 226 pp. 20 photographs. \$23.95 paper. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5292-1. \$84.95 cloth. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5277-8.

With its particular emphasis on contemporary mixed-race representation in media and popular culture, *Transcending Blackness* joins the recent plethora of scholarship on the subject of mixed-race identity, experience and cultural politics including: Habiba Ibrahim, *Troubling the Family: The Promise of Personhood and the Rise of Multiracialism* (2012); Marcia Alesan Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* (2012); Carolyn A. Streeter, *Tragic No More: Mixed-Race Women and the Nexus of Sex and Celebrity* (2013); Diana Paulin, *Imperfect Unions: Staging Miscegenation in U.S. Drama and Fiction* (2012); Tavia Nyong'o, *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance and the Ruses of Memory* (2009); and Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (2008), to name but a very few. Associate Professor of Communications at the University of Washington, Joseph's first book ushers in the next chapter of the antebellum trope of the ever-serviceable "tragic mulatta," examining its trajectory and transformations well into the 21st century. Analyzing the complex national fear and loathing embedded in, as well as the pleasure and political possibility of, racial representation, Joseph creates an insightful typology of "the new millennium mulatta" and the "exceptional mulatta." Offering an end-run around the endless dead-end debates about terminology (what to call whom), Joseph's categories enable her rich exploration across a diverse range of exemplary mulattas on the contemporary scene, from *The L Word*, *Caucasia*, *Mixing Nia*, and *America's Next Top Model*.

Joseph's book is one of the first scholarly works on mixed-race identity to emerge from the field of communication. Her foray is testimony to the fact that this field is growing ever-more interdisciplinary, a fact to be celebrated and yet which heralds particular challenges. Scholars are often publishing in journals traditionally associated either with a particular discipline or with a particular ethnic orientation; so, with the exception of *MELUS* and the newly-minted *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies*, there have been few shared publishing venues in which to see what others are doing or have done in critical mixed race studies. This also has important implications for scholars coming up for tenure and promotion: they may need a department chair's leadership in encouraging review committees to seek evaluations from scholars outside what they may have considered the boundaries of their discipline. Even then, the best interdisciplinary work can reflect both gaps and overlaps. In *Transcending Blackness*, for instance, Joseph is admirably attempting to integrate many different critical interests and methodological approaches, but understandably these cannot always be fully reconciled. And perhaps because Joseph is moving across communication, race theories, and gender studies—and doing so across many media—*Transcending Blackness* cannot always pay full attention to differences of form, genre, and mode. But truly these are minor quibbles, significant only to the extent they are representative of the challenges facing all critical mixed race scholars today. And it is important to note that while these interdisciplinary challenges should be acknowledged, they also lead to refreshing lines of inquiry in *Transcending Blackness*. Her efforts to join the social sciences with the humanities enables a particularly keen analysis of the significance of *gender* across public, political and performative representations of mixed race. Furthermore, Joseph's thoughtful attention to the complex intersectionality of race, gender and social position in contemporary society suggests the wider relevance of the study of mixed race serving as an important reminder that mixed

race scholarship is not a narrowly provincial or specialized sub-field but rather a window onto American culture itself.

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