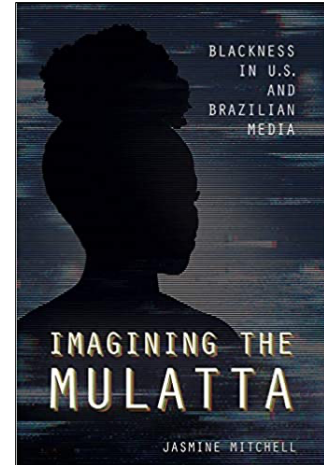


Jasmine Mitchell, **Imagining the Mulatta: Blackness in U.S. and Brazilian Media**, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020, 268 pp., \$26.00 (paperback).

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In **Imagining the Mulatta: Blackness in U.S. and Brazilian Media**, Jasmine Mitchell takes a fascinating look at the political and social implications of mixed-race women in the United States and Brazil through the lens of popular culture. Specifically, the book examines how three actresses—two American and one Brazilian—have conveyed ideas about racial harmony, White supremacy, and gender roles. Halle Berry (*Monster's Ball*), Jennifer Beals (*Flashdance*), and Camila Pitanga (telenovelas) are the main focus of this deep dive into manifest and latent meanings of race and gender.



The premise of the book is to compare the United States—a country with a history of colonization, slavery, and continuing racial divisions—to Brazil—also a country with a history of colonization and slavery, but one that is mythologized as a racial utopia. By comparing and contrasting the ongoing racism in the United States with the model of Brazil's racial mixing, Mitchell lays bare the fiction that Brazil's Whitening project has succeeded in producing a racially harmonious country to which the United States should aspire. In fact, she shows how the mixed-race identity of Brazil has not led to greater social justice.

The author argues and gives evidence of how, through the mulatta¹, popular culture works to manage Blackness, and especially Black women's sexuality, by masking it as racial progress. She succinctly describes it as "how Brazil and the United States have used the image of the mixed-Black female body as an instrument to buttress White supremacy and discipline people of African descent" (p. 4).

Brazil and the United States also have similar histories in their popular culture media, the telenovela in Brazil and movies and TV shows in the United States. The book traces the roots of the mulatta image in popular culture to Carmen Miranda in 1940's Hollywood. Then, mixed race women were available to White men, who always married White women. It briefly covers the history of singer and actress Lena Horne in the 1940s, through the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s with actresses like Pam Grier. But the author's analysis is situated primarily in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. The story was similar in Brazilian media, where White women played *mulata* because the film industry believed audiences wouldn't pay to see mixed-race actresses. Until the 1990s, most telenovelas portrayed mixed race women as maids or prostitutes.

The book examines popular culture as the site of this exploration because of how popular media have historically been used to establish identity, as it is intertwined with race and sexuality, and to convince people

¹ To distinguish women in the United States who are of mixed European and African descent, Mitchell uses "mulatta," while the sexualized version of the same in Brazil is "*mulata*."

of a postracist world. In fact, the author shows how popular culture media have mainly exploited and stereotyped women of mixed race.

Her analysis is illustrated with examples as recent as June 2012, when entertainment magazine *Complex* ran an issue on "The 50 Hottest Biracial Women," telling readers to "enjoy these mocha-colored, honey-tinted, caramel-complected babes" (p. 55). This opens chapter 2, where Mitchell lays out how media representations of mixed-race celebrities are used to mediate Blackness and regulate racial identity for nations. She selects the actresses used for their contrasts—while all three are of mixed race, only Jennifer Beals in the United States emphasizes this heritage; Halle Berry privileges her Blackness, as does Camila Pitanga in Brazil, who goes a step further with political activism. Mitchell highlights how these women still do not have complete agency over their own images but that media frame them in ways they cannot control.

The idea of passing, or being accepted as White in order to escape racial violence or move up in society, is a constant theme in Jennifer Beals' career. For example, in *Flashdance*, her character has an innate ability to learn break dancing in erotic nightclubs; in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, her character's love for jazz and soul food reveals her race; in *A House Divided*, she is the daughter of a plantation owner and his slave, and a quadroon madam of a brothel in *The Feast of All Saints*, while her character has trouble controlling her sexual appetite in *The L Word*. Press coverage also connected her to passing and mulatta archetypes.

Like Beals, Halle Berry has also played passing roles (*Queen*), but primarily is cast as Black (*Strictly Business*, *Losing Isaiah*), and identifies as such. Yet, the press constantly focused on her mixed-race parents, putting her at odds with her own identity. One bright spot was the Black press, which did not present her as in denial or confused about her heritage. In contrast, the mainstream White media focused on her personal life—divorces, domestic abuse, attempted suicide—rather than her acting skills, and gratuitously highlighted her racial background.

Camila Pitanga, unlike Berry and Beals, is politically active in issues of racial and social justice, using her privilege and celebrity to change the conversation about race and gender. She is among the most insistent of the three to claim a Black identity, while her light skin first allowed her entre into the world of telenovelas. The roles she has played serve to unmask the myth of racial harmony in Brazil (e.g., a maid in *Cama de Gato*). Media describe her as "one of the tropical pleasures of Brazil" (p. 86).

The theme of the White lover is pervasive throughout all three women's film careers (e.g., Beals' *Flashdance*, Berry's *Monster's Ball*, and Pitanga's characters, who marry wealthy White men). The book also briefly considers the meanings of other popular culture portrayals, including Vin Diesel and Dwayne Johnson in *Fast Five*, and the music of Pharrell Williams (*Beautiful*) and will.i.am (*I Got It From My Mama*).

Mitchell brings an authority born of personal experience to the topic of managing Blackness. In the preface, she explains what it is like to be the object of others' fascination, having been assumed to be a sex worker and called racial epithets, while also appreciating the flexibility that her racial ambiguity sometimes afforded. In her travels, she discovered that the stereotype of the *mulata* as hypersexual was common in many countries, yet she held out hope that Brazil would be different, only to be shocked by the treatment she received. That, she explains, was the impetus for this book.

The book is written in an approachable and interesting style befitting the topic of popular culture, while maintaining academic rigor in its analysis and argument. It would make an excellent supplementary text for a graduate or undergraduate class. Academicians who follow the works of Mary Beltran, Ralina Joseph, and Camilla Fojas will find it builds upon these scholars' works and adds important new avenues.

Mitchell pulls no punches, calling these portrayals in media and popular culture out for the covert White supremacy that they are, yet she does so in a way that is not divisive. Instead, by unraveling the symbolism, she offers a path forward. While the movies and telenovelas these actresses starred in are a decade or more old now, the book is timely for how it speaks to current issues of police violence against Blacks, social and income inequalities, and more. Indeed, an epilogue draws similarities to the political structures of the two countries, arguing that the impeachment of Brazil's first woman president, and the administration following the United States' first Black president were "eerily parallel" (p. 218). The myth continues, right up to the 2016 Olympics in Brazil, where NBC romanticized the country as a racial paradise and the ceremonies continued to show management of Blackness, even though the sexually seductive *mulata* was gone, in favor of a male streetcleaner. While she neatly puts to rest the idea that racial hybridity is the ideal for the future, Mitchell's book is not all pessimistic, as it also presents ways that pop culture can still become a space for resistance.