The New Hollywood Racelessness: Only the Fast, Furious, (and Multiracial) Will Survive

by Mary C. Beltrán

Abstract: This article interrogates the rise of the "multiculti" action film and the casting of multiracial actors as Hollywood action film protagonists. These trends are examined in light of shifts in U.S. ethnic demographics and youth-oriented popular culture.

Recent Hollywood films such as *Romeo Must Die* (Andrzej Bartkowiak, 2000) and *The Fast and the Furious* (Rob Cohen, 2001) are notable for their multiethnic casts and stylized urban settings. Correspondingly, the key to the survival of the protagonists in these "multiculti" action narratives is their ability to thrive in environments defined by cultural border crossings and pastiche. Perhaps not coincidentally, the heroes who command these environments increasingly are played by biracial and multiethnic actors, such as Vin Diesel in *The Fast and the Furious* and *XXX* (Rob Cohen, 2002) and Russell Wong, who plays a pivotal role in *Romeo Must Die*.[1]

This trend reflects contemporary shifts in U.S. ethnic demographics and ethnic identity, while subtly reinforcing notions of white centrism that are the legacy of the urban action movie. In particular, as I shall argue, the new, ethnically ambiguous protagonist embodies contemporary concerns regarding ethnicity and race relations with respect to the nation's burgeoning cultural creolization and multiethnic population. The analysis presented here shall be situated in the history of Hollywood representations of the multiethnic inner city, as well as in relation to shifts in the country's ethnic demographics, cultural interests, and popular culture.

Romeo Must Die and *The Fast and the Furious* present two visions of the millennial city and its multiethnic inhabitants that at first glance appear radically different. *Romeo Must Die* tells the story of a struggle between African American and Chinese crime syndicates in the San Francisco Bay Area, a cityscape marked by extreme cultural divisions. In this millennial urban environment, ethnic groups are at war, "getting along" is just a dream used to sell ethnic-oriented clothes and music, and treading on another's territory can have deadly consequences. Two nonwhite and "bicultural" stars (with respect to crossing over from other cultural worlds of the mass media), Hong Kong film star Jet Li and the late

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R&B and hip-hop artist Aaliyah, rise within the narrative to end a bloody battle between the two factions.

In contrast, *The Fast and the Furious* depicts Los Angeles as racially harmonious. The story of a young white cop who goes undercover in the world of illegal street racing, *The Fast and the Furious* presents the inner city as a place where ethnic groups, although they know their own turf, compete amicably. Biracial actor Vin Diesel portrays the ethnically ambiguous leader of this culturally diverse, utopic subculture. This essay explores how the distinct settings, narratives, characters, and actors in these two films reflect and comment on contemporary American race relations, particularly its increasing multiracial/multiethnic dimension.

Ethnicity and the Inner City in Hollywood Film. Multiethnic cityscapes are not new to Hollywood; their roots stretch back to the gangster films of the 1920s and 1930s and to the social problem films of the 1940s. Films focused on young people in the inner city, whether teen delinquency films, urban gang films, or urban missionary films, subsequently became popular in the 1950s and 1960s.[2] In this era of "white flight" from large urban communities and African American and Latino migration to northeastern and western cities, these films exploited Anglocentric fears of juvenile delinquency and racial militancy in urban centers. Notable examples include *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955), *The Young Savages* (John Frankenheimer, 1961), and *Up the Down Staircase* (Robert Mulligan, 1967).[3] These movies established an iconography of urban environments and narrative expectations that both reflected and reinforced hegemonic notions of race, ethnicity, and class tied to housing and perceived safety in the United States. For instance, nonwhite city dwellers in urban genre films of the 1960s are often presented as problem people engaged in criminal or violent activity or effectively powerless and victimized in the face of insurmountable social problems.

As Ritchie Peréz argues in his essay "From Assimilation to Annihilation," the 1961 musical *West Side Story* (Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise)—*Romeo and Juliet* set amid a turf war between Puerto Rican and Polish American youth in Manhattan—reinforces notions that Puerto Ricans are "oversexed" and possess violent and criminal tendencies.[4] The multiethnic city also serves as a backdrop of unknown danger and lawlessness for these movies' white protagonists. In urban missionary films such as *Up the Down Staircase* and the more recent *Dangerous Minds* (John N. Smith, 1995), white teachers brave countless urban dangers as they help their charges face difficult challenges, demonstrating a natural superiority in the process.

Hollywood's representation of ethnic characters in urban settings began to shift, however, particularly with the release of Hong Kong martial arts films and blaxploitation movies in the 1970s. Film attendance was declining nationally; the hope was that such films would bring black and urban moviegoers into downtown theaters. Melvin Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Asssss Song* (1971) heralded the beginning of a cycle of black urban action films that deliberately subverted Hollywood's traditional racial expectations. Blaxploitation movies were distinctive in presenting protagonists with "black authority, power, and control," as Elaine Pennicott states.[5]

Manthia Diawara and Toni Cade Bambara describe the city in blaxploitation films as a community of African Americans rather than merely a repository of white fears. As Bambara notes, "Occupying the same geographical terrain are the *ghetto*, where we are penned up in concentration-camp horror, and the *community*, where we enact daily rituals of group validation in a liberated zone."[6] Through the construction of the city in this manner, its nonwhite inhabitants were afforded subjectivity and power. In addition, as Diawara has argued, policing and surveillance were situated as conflicts with which blacks had to contend (alongside poverty and crime), underscoring the state of the inner city as one of imposed colonization.[7] In addition to such submerged political messages, the narratives appealed to both blacks and other moviegoers through their catchy R&B soundtracks, flamboyant fashions, flagrantly melodramatic storylines, taboo sex, and choreographed violence.[8] Today's urban-centric, multiculti action film is built on this legacy.

The recovery of the Hollywood film industry, as well as lobbying on the part of civil rights groups against the stereotyping of nonwhites as inner-city drug dealers and prostitutes, led to fewer multiethnic and urban-centered movies being made. When they reappeared in the 1980s, these movies took new, less politically incisive forms. Most prominent was what has been termed the "biracial buddy cop film," in which a white police officer was partnered with an African American. Examples included the *Lethal Weapon* series (Richard Donner, 1987–98), starring Danny Glover and Mel Gibson, and *48 Hours* (Walter Hill, 1982), which catapulted Eddie Murphy to film stardom.

Despite their narrative possibilities, biracial buddy cop films did not generally address race relations directly. As Ed Guerrero points out, interracial buddy film narratives were often built around "the recurring central gag or comic motif . . . [of] Black penetration of clearly demarcated White cultural, social, or physical space" within the broader cityscape.[9] This rendered invisible the cultural community from which the African American characters hailed. This narrative focus on racial assimilation was replicated in television narratives of the decade, such as *The Cosby Show* (1984–92), which glossed over racial inequities and conflicts. As Herman Gray has noted in his book on African Americans on television, despite their surface focus on racial integration and equality, such representations worked merely to "reaffirm, shore up, and police the cultural and moral boundaries of the existing racial order."[10]

Also in the 1980s, urban crime narratives were melded with the preoccupations and motifs of science fiction, as in the Australian import *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979) and the Hollywood-produced *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). These films presented futuristic cities as dystopic urban landscapes where law enforcement could not begin to contain the ethnically diverse, pathological marauders who roamed their streets.[11] In *Blade Runner*, the city has been transformed beyond recognition by urban decline, cultural hybridity, and the effects of transnational corporate domination, making it overwhelming, unintelligible, and dangerous. As a result of such developments, these narratives propose, traditional heroes and protective social structures have disappeared or are no longer effective. This theme prefigures the crisis facing the millennial cities in *The Fast and the Furious* and *Romeo Must Die*.

Racially inflected permutations of the urban action film also appeared in the 1990s. Similar to the blaxploitation films of the 1970s, these films, variously called "ghetto films," "gangsta dramas," or black urban dramas, were produced by black filmmakers and focused on black subjectivity. Distinctively, however, many of these films featured more complex character development (typically of male characters) and interrogation of the relationship between social structures and the obstacles faced by African Americans in low-income inner-city neighborhoods.[12] As Guerrero notes, these films generally were motivated by frustration over conditions experienced by blacks in the face of increasing "Apartheid" in U.S. cities.[13] Policing, surveillance, and physical confinement are powerful motifs, underscoring the real and invisible boundaries that serve to keep inhabitants in their respective 'hoods.

Two examples of the 1990s cycle of urban action dramas, *Boyz N the Hood* (John Singleton, 1991) and *Menace II Society* (Allen and Albert Hughes, 1993), are set in South Central Los Angeles and address the coming of age of young men beset by the distractions and dangers of gang life and crime. As Diawara describes, these films are notable illustrations of the New Black Realism, characterized by its gritty vérité aesthetic in production design, cinematography, and editing; narratives set in African American–dominated neighborhoods previously not deemed worthy of inclusion in Hollywood story worlds; and the casting of rap artists and the integration of hip-hop fashion, music, and subject matter.[14]

By the mid-1990s, spurred by industrial developments, the urban-centered action film underwent further changes. Aside from the increased emphasis at the studios on massive budgets and profits, one sees what José Arroyo, in his book *Action/Spectacle Cinema*, refers to as a rising "slippage . . . between contemporary Hollywood cinema, action/spectacle, high concept, and the blockbuster."[15] *The Matrix* (Larry and Andy Wachowski, 1999), for instance, exemplifies a millennial version of the dangerous city, combining elements of the urban crime film and the science fiction film with the spectacle of computer-generated imagery.

More recent movies evidence even more hybrid and global influences. In *The Fast and the Furious*, we see the legacy of the exploitation-style racecar film, low-rider teen culture, the urban gang movie, and the cop film, while *Romeo Must Die* deliberately blends the Hong Kong action movie and urban gang film with hip-hop cultural aesthetics, music, and pop stars. This trend toward hybrid genres has been supported by an increase in global-oriented entertainment, particularly as the films of Hollywood actors of color begin to be distributed internationally.

The cinemas of other nations have also had a strong influence on the urban action film; Hong Kong action films in particular have influenced U.S. filmmakers and studios. Bruce Lee's first movie to be seen widely by Americans, the 1973 U.S. version of *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse), opened the floodgates in this regard. More recently, the rising popularity of Hong Kong action film aesthetics and the migration of Hong Kong directors, creative personnel, and stars have had a profound and immediately visible sway on Hollywood's version of the urban action movie. Among other consequences, by playing roles formerly reserved for white actors, Hong Kong crossover stars such as Jackie Chan, Chow Yun-Fat, and Jet Li have transformed traditional notions of the heroic action protagonist.

Another influence on the urban action movie has been the success around the world of hip-hop music and culture with youth of virtually all ethnic backgrounds. As a result, action narratives tend to emphasize hip-hop in their soundtracks, casting, and production and costume design. As Todd Boyd notes, paraphrasing DJ Quick in his essay on gangsta rap, gangster culture as commodified for the American market has come to be associated with hypermasculinity,[16] long a quality that has served as fodder in American action movies.

As a result of these many developments, in the mid- to late 1990s, the racial mix of the urban action film changed dramatically. African Americans, Asians, and other nonwhites, both men and women, began to appear as Hollywood action movie protagonists.[17] The emergence of Hollywood cops, world saviors, and vampire slayers of color arguably reflected not only diegetic and industrial evolutions but also shifts in cultural assumptions. Given that popular notions of bodily mastery, confidence, and mobility are still largely tied to white male bodies,[18] this trend implied both a challenge to the hegemonic status quo and a redefinition of the qualities required of contemporary, urban-centered heroes.

The most recent twist on this development involves the casting of biracial and multiracial actors as protagonists, making these actors the rising vanguard of Hollywood action figures. Recent big-budget films have cast as heroes such actors as Vin Diesel, The Rock (Dwayne Johnson), and Keanu Reeves. Industry executives increasingly appear to view these and other multiracial actors as box-office draws who both reflect the ethnic diversity of viewers and embody what these young viewers want in a film hero. As Sean Daniel, former film executive and producer of *The Scorpion King* (Chuck Russell, 2002), which starred the Rock, stated in the *New York Times*: "Dwayne Johnson is powerful, he is multicultural, he is very much contemporary, as is Vin Diesel. And that's where today's youth culture is at. Vin Diesel is appealing because he springs from today's young population. He is the son of today's diverse audience."[19]

These new protagonists also demonstrate their heroism in a manner that is sometimes distinct from that of their predecessors. While brawn and courage continue to be valued qualities, what might be termed "cultural competence" holds even more credence and power in the polyglot millennial environment, even when characters are written as white. What distinguishes these new heroes is their natural ability to navigate in, command respect in, and, when necessary, handily kick ass in a variety of ethnic communities. An exploration of contemporary ethnic demographics and cultural interests, particularly those of American youth, can shed light on how multiculti casting and new narrative constructions of heroism have come into vogue.

The Multiculti Millennial Audience. The evolution of urban action films and their respective heroes have, to a large degree, mirrored national sociopolitical changes. Developments that have had an impact, both on U.S. cities and on national race relations, include the shift to postindustrialism and the rise of the suburbs in the 1950s, the subsequent economic decay of many cities, the inner-city protests and riots of the 1960s, and, in more recent decades, the redevelopment of

some urban centers. Civil rights efforts over the last half-century, as well as changes in the attitudes of Hollywood film producers, have also influenced racial attitudes and perceptions about American cities. Particularly influential in this regard have been the ethnic demographic shifts of the last two decades, which have entailed a "complete shakeup of the country's ethnic and racial composition."[20] As a result of these developments, many younger Americans have a more open approach to matters of race and ethnicity than do their older counterparts.

With respect to ethnic demographics, notions of a white majority also no longer fit the country neatly. Speaking of today's teens, who have been referred to variously as Generation Y, the Echo Boomers, and the Millennial Generation, Neil Howe and William Strauss assert that "demographically, this is America's most racially and ethnically diverse, and least Caucasian generation."[21] As tallied by the U.S. Census, almost 36 percent of Americans eighteen and younger fell under the racial classification of nonwhite in 1999, while nonwhites made up only 14 percent of the GI Generation, born between 1901 and 1924. In addition, as Howe and Strauss state, "One millennial in five has at least one immigrant parent, and one in ten has at least one noncitizen parent."[22] Thus, we could expect to see a broad, multicultural perspective in many millennials—a cohort large enough to displace the baby boomers with respect to dictating popular culture.[23] The proportion of nonwhites rises exponentially when California—home to the film industry and other producers of global entertainment—is considered. In 2000, California became the second mainland state where whites are a minority; Latinos have outnumbered whites in California by one million since 1998.[24] Undoubtedly, nonwhites have reached an important critical mass through which their presence is beginning to be felt, even in the formerly white-dominated story worlds of Hollywood.

Meanwhile, the percentage of multiethnic or, as they are more popularly described, mixed-race families and individuals in the United States is also rising. In a revolutionary shift, in the 2000 census, respondents were given the option for the first time to describe themselves as biracial or multiracial; 6.8 million or 2.4 percent of the respondents indicated that they belonged to two or more races.[25] Given that many multiracial individuals also choose to identify themselves by only one ethnic or racial signifier, we can assume that the multiracial population in the United States is even higher. The number of mixed-race youth in particular has boomed and is expected to continue to increase with the decriminalization of mixed-race marriages and increasing social acceptance of marriages to those outside one's ethnic group. The impact of this growing mixed-race population is just beginning to be realized.

Moreover, as cultural critics such as Marilyn Halter and Leon Wynter assert, a "postmodern ethnic revival" has taken hold in the United States with respect to individuals of both European and non-European heritage expressing a greater interest in their ethnic origins than Americans in previous decades.[26] This renaissance in ethnic exploration and related consumer practices has been prompted by several factors, including increasing ethnic diversity and cultural pride since the peak of the civil rights and counterculture movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Related to these developments, a paradigm shift has taken place. In marked contrast to the racial attitudes that motivated the tragic mulatto discourses in the early

part of the twentieth century, as described by film historian Donald Bogle and others, nonwhite ancestry now has cachet. According to Wynter, "Blackness (or nonwhiteness) now suffers less and less of a discount in the marketplace, while whiteness commands less and less of a premium."[27] Nonwhite ancestry also has, I argue here, a particular cachet when combined with whiteness.

Young people of all ethnic backgrounds also are demonstrating in their media habits an interest in performers of diverse backgrounds. For example, one BBDO study of television viewing in the 1990s found that people aged seventeen to twenty-four are more likely than older viewers to watch television programs starring actors of ethnicities different from their own.[28] Many American entertainment producers, manufacturers, and advertisers are capitalizing on this evolution, as reflected in the commodification of ethnic-inflected fashion, products, and popular culture texts.

Alongside, and probably because of these demographic shifts, ethnically ambiguous media figures are gaining greater cultural visibility.[29] This trend can be seen in the ascendance of ethnically ambiguous models and actors, including mixed-race and light-skinned performers of color. In addition, "white" actors and models increasingly are modifying their appearance to promote an ethnic look, whether by increasing the size of their lips, making their eyes more almond-shaped, or adding curves by inserting implants.

The political potential of this new ethnic visibility has been the subject of continuing debate. Wynter, for one, says that mixed-race actors and models represent the ultimate challenge to traditional attitudes about race in the United States. The performers are "high-status billboards for the natural and perhaps inevitable positive resolution of the tension imposed on the freedom to enjoy an individual identity in a multiracial society."[30] How audiences "read" mixed-race actors with respect to notions of race and ethnicity is unclear, however, particularly when these actors portray white characters in films. Are we witnessing the beginning of a more racially egalitarian perspective or merely a bronzing of whiteness, repackaged to emphasize the aesthetic trappings of cultural creolization? As an analysis of *The Fast and the Furious* and *Romeo Must Die* illustrates, despite the apparent shifts in attitudes, a white ethos is still a potent frame of reference.

This brings us to scholarship on biracial and multiethnic representations in film and other forms of popular culture. While many of the earliest film images of biracial characters portray them as tragic mulattos, as described by Bogle, Jane Gaines, and Freda Scott Giles, later images are markedly more positive.[31] In her "Genealogy of Black Film Criticism," Anna Everett argues that Peola, in *Imitation of Life* (John Stahl, 1934), was the first biracial film character to break with previous negative characterizations.[32] Fredi Washington, a light-skinned African American, "imbues the character with an authenticating aura unavailable to a Caucasian actress attempting to pass for a black attempting to pass for white."[33] Washington also refused to pass in real life, despite her ability to do so, increasing her appeal with African Americans.[34]

Teresa Kay Williams underscores the resonance for contemporary audiences of mixed-race individuals like Washington. According to Williams, the unique physical

appearance of multiethnic public figures can have distinct appeal because of the "ambiguity and multiple otherness" associated in the popular imagination with miscegenation.[35] From this perspective, mixed-race individuals serve as resonant ethnic enigmas in U.S. society.

Many scholars now argue that the fluid identities that some feel characterize mixed-race individuals are the new wave in American racial identity. Gloria Anzaldúa was one of the first scholars to posit the unique strengths of the "new *mestiza*," and the potential for the *mestiza* to overcome traditional racial categories through the combining, rather than the denial, of diverse cultural attributes.[36] Naomi Zack describes this dynamic as embracing "racelessness," which she says is the basis of a future-leaning "identity founded on freedom and resistance to oppression rather than immanence and acceptance of tradition."[37] Such an identity, according to Zack, is constantly recreated in a dynamic process rather than based on origins or affiliation. There is a danger, however, as Carol Roh Spaulding points out, of this utopic ideal becoming merely "another version of biological homogeneity,"[38] in which *mestizaje* swallows racial divisions and material histories whole. The two films that are analyzed here present distinct Hollywood perspectives on these concerns.

"Racelessness" in *Romeo Must Die*. Of the two films, *Romeo Must Die* is more rooted in Hollywood racial paradigms, despite the relatively little screen time devoted to white characters. As a "hip-hop martial arts film" (producer Joel Silver's description) in the tradition of the white-centric urban gang movie,[39] *Romeo Must Die* presents the San Francisco Bay Area and particularly the city of Oakland as culturally divided. Only its multicultural protagonists and, arguably, those afforded symbolic whiteness have what it takes to survive. Set amid a struggle between black and Chinese organized crime families—and behind the scenes, a wealthy, white developer—over Oakland waterfront property, *Romeo Must Die* echoes actual political and racial struggles that have plagued the area for decades.

Jet Li stars as Han Sing, the son of the Chinese crime family and thus the Romeo who his enemies feel must die. Juliet to his Romeo is the late singer Aaliyah, who plays Trish, the daughter of the African American crime family. As performers with proven appeal to both whites and nonwhites, Li and Aaliyah are particularly suited to portray characters who easily navigate an ethnically divided and dangerous cityscape. Moreover, the narrative situates them as simultaneously able to embrace and transcend race.

Through abundant aesthetic display, the culturally diverse cityscape of the Bay Area is paired with vitality and energy, in contrast to Hong Kong, which is presented as repressed and monocultural through drab tones and gray skies. Boundaries between ethnic communities in the Bay Area are also emphasized through aesthetics and musical cues. Warm, multicolored hues in clothing and décor and hip-hop and R&B music are used to represent the African American community, while more austere design and Oriental motifs stand in for the Chinese culture of the Sing family. Even more austere, or "cultureless," is the white developer's work environment. A paean to impersonal, pricy minimalism, it is decorated in gleaming chrome and glass that offer no hint at cultural heritage, community, or family

connection. Ultimately, the visual and aural signifiers associated in the film's early scenes with African American and Asian culture are blended when Han and Trish are shown together, contributing to an underlying narrative message that harmony can be achieved through sharing and consuming multiple cultures.

While the presence of Jet Li as the chief protagonist marks a shift in traditional Hollywood casting, also pertinent is the casting of Russell Wong as Kai, the right-hand man to Han's father, the powerful Mafia boss Ch'u Sing (Henry O.). As portrayed by Wong, Kai serves as a symbol of multiracial America, despite the fact that the character's ethnicity as monoracial Chinese goes unquestioned. Given Wong's distinct Eurasian facial features, he literally and figuratively embodies national fears and fantasies of miscegenation, albeit at a submerged level. Wong's mixed ethnicity, Chinese and Dutch American, arguably lends credence to Kai's ability to know and respect the cultural codes in various ethnic communities, to cross cultural borders when necessary, and to serve as the Asian Mafia's chief liaison in negotiations with the African American gang. Given that Kai ultimately betrays his Chinese family, he also serves as the ideological "trouble in the text" with whom the main character must battle. His role thus coincides with previous representations of film protagonists that did not fit easy racial or ethnic categories.

Kai's introduction into the narrative highlights his bicultural mastery. In the first scene in which he appears, Kai adeptly saves Ch'u Sing's youngest son, Po (Jonkit Lee), from certain danger in an Oakland nightclub that is part of the African American syndicate's territory. Kai thereby establishes his cultural ease and competence, even on enemy turf. In contrast, Po is young and foolish; he does not know he has set himself up for a hostile confrontation that could cost him his life. When a fight ensues with several African Americans in streetwise garb, Kai easily and competently defends himself and Po. (In Hollywood action films, cultural mastery often translates into the ability to better one's opponent and maintain one's dignity, even in another's territory.)

Ultimately, however, Kai is revealed to be a villain. In one of the final plot twists, Han realizes that Kai, not the African American crime syndicate, killed Po, his brother. In his greed for power, Kai has chosen to betray his employer and sacrifice his ethnic allegiances. In the process, he also ignores the delicate boundaries between ethnic factions in the underground economy. If read as a mixed-race character because of Wong's ethnic heritage and appearance, Kai thus could be viewed as yet another cinematic illustration of the dangers of miscegenation. From this perspective, Kai is like other Hollywood mixed-race characters who are deceitful and dangerous in their drive to achieve the privileges of whiteness, a pattern that D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* established in 1915.

The character of Han is less ambiguous in this regard. Despite his recent arrival in the United States (at the beginning of the film, he is languishing in a Hong Kong prison for a crime his father committed), Han gradually asserts his cultural mastery in the Oakland milieu. As the hero, Han is a naturally superior fighter; his opponents, the African American men who work for Trish's father, ultimately are made to look foolish. In one scene, for instance, these men invite Han to play football, but the game is in fact a cover for their plan to rough him up. But

after being battered a bit, Han quickly turns the tables on the men by using martial arts moves and assaulting each one in turn. Through such display, Han is elevated racially in relation to his African American opponents, thus gaining symbolic whiteness.

Ultimately, both Han and Trish rise above their conflicts by turning their backs on their families and friends and, in effect, on their ethnic identities. Trish owns a popular shop that specializes in African American and other ethnic-oriented clothes and music, a multihued example of the postmodern ethnic revival in American patterns of consumption. Her young, hip staff, in fact, is a virtual United Colors of Benneton; the shop clerks appear to hail from a rainbow spectrum of ethnicities. But despite being the owner of a store that encourages its customers to embrace cultural diversity, Trish is socially and culturally isolated. She will not consort with the African Americans in her life because of their connections with organized crime. This is evident in her cool response when two men who work for her father flirt with her and in her strained relations with her father and brother.

Similarly, Han experiences only disappointment with respect to his dealings with his mob boss father and knows no one in the United States except for Trish. His climactic fight scene with Kai and subsequent face-off with his father mark the conclusion of Han's figurative struggle with his Chinese origins. In the face of these racialized dilemmas, a more fluid, idealized ethnic identity is posed as an alternative (and narrative solution) for both Trish and Han. Ultimately, the duo survives by embracing "racelessness," ethnic identities that are achieved through the consumption and sharing of music, fashion, and cultural forms such as martial arts, rather than by accepting their former ethnic community allegiances and in-group prejudices.

Utopic Multiculturalism in *The Fast and the Furious*: Only the Multiethnic Will Survive. In sharp contrast to *Romeo Must Die*, *The Fast and the Furious* presents a more optimistic vision of race relations in the millennial city. As director Rob Cohen has explained, the film was inspired by an article by journalist Ken Li on illegal drag racing on the East and West Coasts. Young Asian American men have been at the forefront of the craze since it was started in Southern California in the early 1990s.[40] Cohen chose to set the narrative in Los Angeles, the city described by Edward Soja and many others as the paradigmatic American city at the turn of the century. Many scholars consider it a continuing repository of American dreams and urban nightmares, particularly regarding human relations.[41] As such, the narrative in large part centers on the vibrancy of racial and ethnic diversity in the millennial city.

In Cohen's cinematic version of the world of street racing, *The Fast and the Furious* retains the subculture's primary tenet that speed rules, rather than the color of one's skin or even the amount of money in one's wallet. The racers, racing teams, and fans are extremely diverse. The extras in fact were actual street racers, and Asian Americans, Latinos, and African Americans far outnumber whites. Cohen also recruited Asian American street racer R. J. DeVera to be a technical consultant and to play a small speaking role.[42]

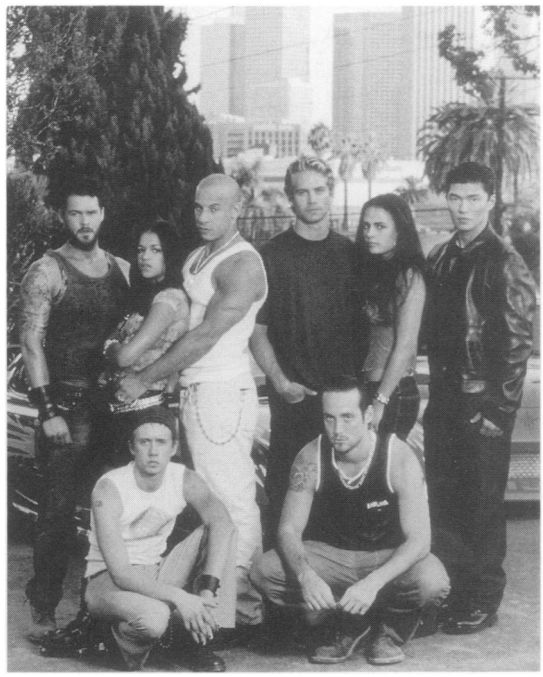

Figure 1. The multiethnic cast of *The Fast and the Furious* (Rob Cohen, Universal Pictures, 2001). *Back, from left to right:* Matt Schulze, Michelle Rodriguez, Vin Diesel, Paul Walker, Jordana Brewster, and Rick Yune. *Front:* Chad Lindberg and Johnny Strong.

While the extras lend an air of authenticity to the diegesis, the lead characters reflect the legacy of Hollywood whiteness that strongly influences *The Fast and the Furious*.[43] All but one of the lead teams in the racing scenes are nonwhite, but these characters are not well developed. They serve mainly as one-dimensional opponents with whom the main characters compete, as in the case of Asian American Johnny Tran (Rick Yune), or as comic relief, in the case of African American racer Edwin (played by hip-hop performer Ja Rule). Moreover, the one team that is ostensibly white rules the road and is the one with which audiences identify. I say ostensibly white because this team is led by Dominic Torretto (Dom), played by Diesel, a biracial actor of African American and Italian descent. Jordana Brewster, who plays his sister, is part Brazilian, while Michelle Rodriguez, cast as his girlfriend, is Latina as well. Again, while the multiethnicity of these actors is not made concrete in the narrative, related visual referents serve as submerged or not so submerged elements in the development of their characters. This makes for an ensemble with significant box-office appeal because of its multicultural roots and experience.

The ethnic ambiguity of Diesel as Torretto, the undisputed king of the street-racing world, in particular cannot be fully submerged. While it is established early on that Dom is Italian (white), Diesel's ambiguous looks and acknowledgment of his mixed ethnic origins in extratextual publicity raise questions about the hero's ethnic identity. This ambiguity, in turn, lends credence to Dom's strength of character, mobility, and mastery in the diverse subculture of the film, or what can be

termed "new ways of knowing" on the part of his character. Dom's Latina girlfriend also provides evidence of his ability to cross cultural borders and easily navigate and dominate in the diverse street scene. The director no doubt was aware that Diesel's biraciality would lend something unique to his performance: In Cohen's commentary accompanying the DVD of the film, he describes Diesel as a "new kind of leading man."

The addition of team members who are unambiguously white contributes to Dom's group ultimately being associated with whiteness, arguably easing their appeal for viewers weaned on traditional Hollywood racial paradigms. Even so, the "white" team members sport ethnic-oriented apparel, including a heavy sprinkling of *cholo*-style tattoos and woven caps. These visual signifiers symbolize the nonwhite "ethnicity by consent" of these individuals, all of whom are described as having grown up in multicultural L.A.[44] Through such narrative construction, Dom's team is shown to possess both the prized skills and knowledge associated with whiteness as well as those qualities presumably acquired by nonwhites in urban environments.

In contrast, Brian Spillner (Paul Walker), a mysterious stranger fresh on the scene, is described as a golden white boy from Arizona. While Brian is a competent and professional undercover police officer (unbeknownst to the racers), as well as a daring driver, his distinctly Anglo-Saxon whiteness offers little to no cachet in this culturally colorful landscape. His expensively renovated "rice rocket" (the racing term for a mega-amped Japanese street racer) afford him no quick respect either. When Brian appears on the scene, Mexican American racer Hector (Noel Gugliemi) jokingly points him out to his friends as the "snowboy" standing by his car. Edwin also tells Brian that "it's not how you stand by your car, it's how you race your car" that is important. In this manner, the "raceless" credo of street racing is communicated: racing ability and cultural savvy determine status and leadership, not whiteness or money. Only by proving himself as a competitive racer and gaining the affiliation of the leading team does Brian gain respect and acceptance.

The valence of whiteness within this world is complicated and at times contradictory. Most notably, the power of whiteness is diminished. Status is set dynamically through performance; speed literally rules. Like the 'hood films of the 1990s, *The Fast and the Furious* also is unusual in turning the camera on a slice of Los Angeles life that has rarely been seen on film. Much of the racing, as in real life, takes place at night, on streets that are normally packed with drivers. The film also reveals the rich culture that exists in neighborhoods like the primarily Latino Echo Park that seldom serve as backdrops for films. In addition, Cohen's focus on the consumer habits of the racers and their fans, who pour their money into expensive car accessories, street-savvy fashion, and other pop-culture items, highlights the social and economic vibrancy and vitality of the subculture.

Despite these progressive, color-blind elements, *The Fast and the Furious* privileges a white-centrist perspective and notions of natural white superiority. Perhaps most notably, white characters are posited as dominant within a subculture in which they are often absent or marginal. For instance, Asian American R. J. De Vera, who is acknowledged in real life to be one of the top street racers in Southern California, plays Danny, a small-time wannabe destined to be beaten

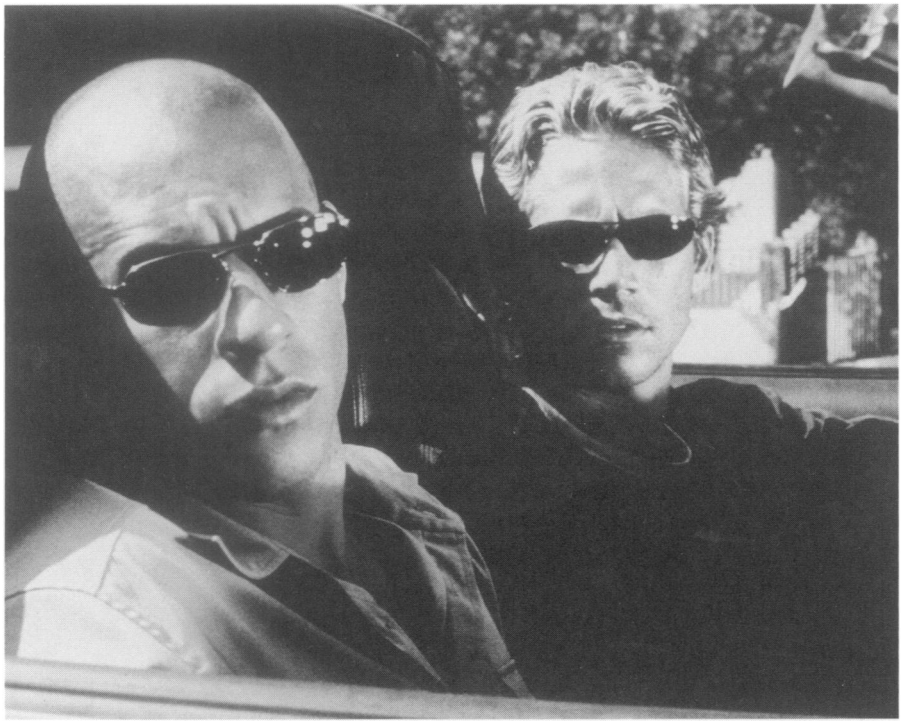

Figure 2. Dominic Torretto (Vin Diesel) mentors protagonist Brian Spillner (Paul Walker) in *The Fast and the Furious* (Rob Cohen, Universal Pictures, 2001).

by the white leads in the film. Conversely, Brian's ability to be accepted by the lead racing team, while nonwhite racers are not afforded similar respect, goes unquestioned.

The privilege afforded whites is painted in broad strokes during Brian's first chance to prove himself, in a drag race against Dominic, Edwin, and Danny. Hector is not allowed to compete; he is told, jokingly, he is too slow. Brian easily beats Edwin and Danny and ultimately competes head to head with Dom. The inability of the Asian American and African American racers to truly compete with these two "white" racers is not highlighted as remarkable in any way, although Asian Americans, Latinos, and African Americans dominate the actual subculture. The false hierarchy constructed in the narrative goes unnoticed, reinforcing traditional racial expectations.

The casting of Vin Diesel problematizes Hollywood tradition in this regard, however. Diesel's ambiguous ethnic identity, conjoined with his character's natural leadership in this environment, has new and unique implications for the action film. Despite Brian's positioning as central to the narrative, it is Dom, possessing what might be termed a bronzer whiteness, who demonstrates the inherent traits necessary to master this cultural landscape. Brian's ultimate sacrifice of his career

to save Dom from a prison sentence also demonstrates Dom's narrative purpose: to be a leader in this new, culturally pluralistic society.

The production design and casting of *The Fast and the Furious* also contain ambiguous and contradictory elements. The camera often lingers on the young fans of the racers, particularly young women of color and smartly dressed interethnic couples. In addition, the soundtrack underscores Cohen's urban-oriented aesthetic. However, even in this carefully constructed multicultural narrative, Hollywood norms of white beauty have primacy. In particular, while the young women featured as extras are mostly Asian American and Latina, many are tall and very thin, approximating an Anglo-centric standard of beauty. This is true even of the Mexican American racing team's crowd on what is presumably its own turf. This is a far cry from the actual physical diversity within the subculture. Arguably, it also includes young women who are short and curvaceous, a body type celebrated in the low-rider subculture, from which the racing scene borrows heavily. Ultimately, the aesthetics of the constructed setting reflect Hollywood standards, to the extent that "diversity" is limited to particular body types.

The New Raceless Aesthetic. Given demographic developments, it is not surprising that cinematic action narratives are becoming increasingly multicultural in their focus and aesthetics. Examples of these trends, both *Romeo Must* Die and *The Fast and the Furious*, posit through their casting and narratives that the embracing of an idealized "raceless" ethnic identity is key to mastery in the urban environment. Contradictions abound, however, when such narratives are rooted in Hollywood tradition and aim to appeal to white as well as nonwhite audiences. As Guerrero states, even in recent decades, Hollywood has "continued to stock its productions with themes and formulas dealing with black issues and characters that are reassuring to the sensibilities and expectations of an uneasy white audience."[45] In this respect, multiculti film narratives soothe white sensibilities even while attempting simultaneously to appeal to young viewers with "urban," media-savvy tastes.

A number of points can be made regarding the representation of race and race relations in multicultural action movies. For one, ideologies of white superiority and nonwhite subordination continue to have a powerful influence, even while the casting, production design, and other manifest components of the films promote a multicultural aesthetic. In *Romeo Must Die*, whites are seldom seen but nevertheless dominate the narrative environment by "pulling the strings" of both the African American and Chinese crime syndicates. Jet Li also is elevated to symbolic whiteness through the continual devaluing of African American characters, particularly in the fight sequences. In *The Fast and the Furious*, by contrast, white characters ostensibly rule the drag-racing subculture but in real life generally play marginal roles. However, Vin Diesel's presence as a chief protagonist complicates racialized expectations in this regard.

There are multiple ways to interpret the cultural implications of the boom in casting mixed-race actors. An emphasis on actors with an "is she or isn't she?" off-white look can be said to erase ethnic difference and, by extension, to deny the

nation's and film industry's history of racial discrimination. When multiracial actors replace monocultural actors of color, perhaps for easier consumption by audiences, they erase darker ethnic bodies in the process. In addition, when multiethnic identity plays even a submerged role in film narratives, as in the case of the characters played by Vin Diesel and Russell Wong, it tends to raise tensions that must be resolved within the narrative. The conflicts between Han and Kai in *Romeo Must Die* and Brian and Dom in *The Fast and the Furious* bear this out. On the one hand, multiethnic actors and characters often provide the "trouble in the text" of contemporary films, as they have throughout Hollywood cinema history. On the other hand, the rise in and popularity of mixed-race and multiethnic performers can be interpreted as a reflection and celebration of the increasing cultural diversity in the nation.

Audience reception to narratives involving "passing" is a matter for future research. Action heroes portrayed by biracial actors are still likely to be read as white. While scholars such as Williams and Antonia Grace Glenn have begun to explore the marketing of and audience reception to mixed-race actors, questions remain unanswered.[46] A number of successful actors have chosen not to foreground their mixed ethnicity in their star publicity; their ranks include Keanu Reeves, Jennifer Rubin, and Jennifer Tilly.[47] These actors generally "pass" without question despite their nonwhite ancestry. Similarly, biracial actors such as Halle Berry and Vanessa Williams have been coded consistently as African American without discussion of the complexity of their dual heritage. There is much to be learned from critical scholarship on these questions. Regardless of audience interpretation, biraciality is increasingly less submerged in Hollywood narratives, which is a powerful trend of contemporary concern.

Notes

1. As Michael Omi, Howard Winant, and other scholars have argued, while racial categories are social constructions, race has a material impact on individuals, families, and communities. Continuing, although decreasingly strong, taboos about miscegenation, for example, serve as indicators of the valence of racial boundaries in the United States. Nevertheless, growing numbers of U.S. citizens are of mixed racial or ethnic descent. For the purposes of this essay, "biracial" will be used to refer to individuals who can claim two racial backgrounds as defined by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, while "multiracial" will refer to individuals with more than two racial backgrounds. The racial groups identified by the Bureau of the Census in 2000 included white; black, African American, or Negro; Asian/Pacific Islander; and American Indian or Alaskan native. Multiethnic and the more popularly used term "mixed race" will be used here more generally to identify individuals who belong to two or more ethnic or racial groups or who are of indeterminate but mixed racial or ethnic status.
2. See, for example, Thomas Doherty, *Teenagers and Teenpics: The Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988), and Eric Schaefer, *"Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!" A History of Exploitation Films, 1915–1959* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999).
3. Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 1991), 195, and Ritchie Pérez,

"From Assimilation to Annihilation: Puerto Rican Images in U.S. Films," in Clara E. Rodriguez, ed., *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997), 147. Eric Avila addresses this dynamic in relation to science fiction films in "Dark City: White Flight and the Urban Science Fiction Film in Postwar America," in Daniel Bernardi, ed., *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 53.

4. Pérez, "From Assimilation to Annihilation," 146. Discussion of the historical construction of the Hollywood Latino/a as hypersexual in comparison to whites can be found in the work of such scholars as Ana M. López, "Are There Latins in Manhattan?" in Lester D. Friedman, ed., *Unspeakable Images: Ethnicity and the American Cinema* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latino Images in Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); and Mary Beltrán, "Bronze Seduction: The Shaping of Latina Stardom in Hollywood Film and Star Publicity," Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 2002. Scholars have documented a similar historical pattern for African Americans. David Cook's scholarship on the unequal, racialized utilization of Production Code norms regarding female nudity also is instructive here. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* (New York: Norton, 1996).
5. Elaine Pennicott, "'Who's the Cat That Won't Cop Out?' Black Masculinity in American Action Series of the Sixties and Seventies," in Bill Osgerby and Anna Gough-Yates, eds., *Action TV: Tough Guys, Smooth Operators, and Foxy Chicks* (London: Routledge, 2001), 108. For further discussion of the blaxploitation film and black urban dramas of the 1990s, see Manthia Diawara, "Black American Cinema: The New Realism," in Diawara, ed., *Black American Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 3–25; S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: Hip Hop Culture and the Production of Black Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Ed Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press); and Beretta Smith-Shomade, "Rock-a-Bye, Baby!: Black Women Disrupting Gangs and Constructing Hip-Hop Gangsta Films," *Cinema Journal* 42, no. 2 (winter 2003): 25–40.
6. Diawara describes Bambara's position in "Black American Cinema," 9. No information is provided regarding the source of the quotation.
7. Ibid.
8. For a discussion of miscegenation taboos as presented in Hollywood film, in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Imitation of Life* (1934), in particular, see Anna Everett, *Returning the Gaze: A Genealogy of Black Film Criticism, 1909–1949* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2001), and Chon A. Noriega, "Birth of the Southwest: Social Protest, Tourism, and D. W. Griffith's *Ramona*," and Gina Marchetti, "Tragic and Transcendent Love in *Forbidden City*," in Daniel Bernardi, ed., *The Birth of Whiteness: Race and the Emergence of U.S. Cinema* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 203–26, 257–70. Both Noriega and Marchetti discuss how portrayals of interracial romance were used, as Marchetti argues, "to recognize, domesticate, and absorb differences of various sorts to continue the ideological hegemony of the dominant culture" (270).
9. Ed Guerrero, "The Black Image in Protective Custody: Hollywood's Biracial Buddy Films of the Eighties," in Diawara, *Black American Cinema*, 237–46. See also Mark Winokur, "Black Is White/White Is Black: 'Passing' as a Strategy of Racial Compatibility in Contemporary Hollywood Comedy," in Friedman, *Unspeakable Images*, 190–214.
10. Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness"* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 87.

11. For further discussion of the urban environment in the Hollywood science fiction film, see Avila, "Dark City."
12. Jacquie Jones and other scholars have argued that this slice of life was foregrounded in 1990s films at the expense of representation of the black community beyond these confines. Jones, "The New Ghetto Aesthetic," *Wide Angle* 13, nos. 3–4 (1991): 32–43.
13. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 159.
14. Diawara, "Black American Cinema," 23. Other examples of the ghetto action film include *New Jack City* (Mario Van Peebles, 1991), *Straight out of Brooklyn* (Matty Rich, 1991), *Juice* (Ernest Dickerson, 1992), and *Fresh* (Boaz Yakin, 1994).
15. José Arroyo, preface to Arroyo, ed., *Action/Spectacle Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 2000), v.
16. Todd Boyd, "A Small Introduction to the 'G' Funk Era: Gangsta Rap and Black Masculinity in Contemporary Los Angeles," in Michael J. Dear, H. Eric Schockman, and Greg Hise, eds., *Rethinking Los Angeles* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1996), 133. See also Smith-Shomade's discussion of the influence of hip-hop on the gangster genre in "Rock-a-Bye Baby!" 28.
17. See, for example, Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre, and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1993); Tasker, "Fists of Fury: Discourses of Race and Masculinity in the Martial Arts Cinema," in Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel, eds., *Race and the Subject of Masculinity* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997); Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*; Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*; and Darius James, *That's Blaxploitation: The Roots of the Baadasssss 'Tude* (New York: St. Martin's/Griffin, 1995).
18. Richard Dyer, "Action!" in Arroyo, ed., *Action/Spectacle Cinema*, 18.
19. Quoted in Rick Lyman, "Job Openings in Hollywood: Heroes Wanted," *New York Times*, August 4, 2002, sec. 2, 1.
20. Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000), 3.
21. Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 15.
22. Cited in ibid.
23. Quoted in Leon E. Wynter, *American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business, and the End of White America* (New York: Crown, 2002), 180.
24. Rudolfo Acuña, *Anything but Mexican: Chicanos in Contemporary Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1996), 3.
25. U.S. Census Bureau, "The Two or More Races Population: 2000," Census Bureau brief, November 2001, www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-6.pdf.
26. Halter, *Shopping for Identity*, 83. Wynter describes the same development in *American Skin*, 136.
27. Wynter, *American Skin*, 136.
28. "TV Viewing Habits Differ in Black Households: While Black vs. White TV Viewing Habits Continue to Polarize, There Is Growing Mutuality of Preferences among Black and White Viewers 12–17," *Minority Markets Alert* 7, no. 5 (May 1995): 2.
29. Halter, *Shopping for Identity*, 171, and Wynter, *American Skin*, 170.
30. Wynter, *American Skin*, 170.
31. Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 9. See also Jane M. Gaines, *Fire and Desire: Mixed-Race Movies in the Silent Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), and Freda Scott Giles, "From Melodrama to the Movies: The Tragic Mulatto as

a Type Character," in Naomi Zack, ed., *American Mixed Race: A Culture of Microdiversity* (Landham, Mass.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), 64.

32. Everett, *Returning the Gaze*, 221.
33. Ibid.
34. Everett and Bogle both point to a number of indicators of Washington's intense popularity among black moviegoers. Everett, *Returning the Gaze*, 220–23, and Bogle, *Brown Sugar: Eighty Years of Black Female Superstars* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1980), 76–82.
35. Teresa Kay Williams, "The Theater of Identity: (Multi-) Race and Representation of Eurasians and Afroasians," in Zack, *American Mixed Race*, 91.
36. Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 79.
37. Naomi Zack, *Race and Mixed Race* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 164.
38. Carol Roh Spaulding, "The Go-Between People," in Zack, *American Mixed Race*, 110.
39. Joel Silver, producer's commentary, *Romeo Must Die* DVD, Warner Bros., 2000.
40. Rob Cohen, director's commentary, *The Fast and the Furious* DVD, Universal, 2001.
41. See, for example, Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1993), 223, and Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London: Verso, 1990).
42. *The Fast and the Furious* DVD.
43. For further scholarship on the legacy of whiteness in Hollywood film, see Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994). A number of seminal essays on this subject can be found in Daniel Bernardi, *The Birth of Whiteness* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996).
44. Werner Sollers, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).
45. Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 162.
46. Antonia Grace Glenn, "Hapa Passing (and Non-passing) in Contemporary Film and Television," paper presented at the conference of the Northeast Modern Language Association, Toronto, April 12, 2002; Williams, "The Theater of Identity," 86.
47. According to numerous publicity sources, Keanu Reeves is of Hawaiian and other mixed descent, while Jennifer Beals is of African American and Irish heritage. Meg Tilly is purportedly of Chinese and Canadian descent.