Mixedfolks.com

"Ethnic Ambiguity," Celebrity Outing, and the Internet

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I am mixed with black and white and proud of it. I am glad that there is a site like this around.

— "Clint," mixedfolks.com

Huey uses the peace and quiet of vacation to tackle the great mysteries of our day:

"Yeah—Vin Diesel's black."

— "The Boondocks"

Multicultural, multiracial, or "multiculti" actors were reported as enjoying a newfound vogue in a December 2003 New York Times article entitled, "Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous." In it, Ruth La Ferla writes that racially mixed actors are now "perceived as good, desirable, successful" because they possess "a face whose heritage is hard to pin down." In 2000, Paul Spickard wrote that "multiculturalism is all the rage" and that "in the last decade and a half, a multiracial movement has emerged in the U.S., resulting in a booming business in multiracial autobiographical narrative." In recent years the popular press has paid particular attention to racial hybridity or multiraciality, the space where races previously seen as separate converge in the space of a single body.

Simultaneously with this development, the rapid adoption of Web 2.0 technologies that allow users to create and distribute their own content has given rise to a vast body of text and images on films, television shows, stars, and industry gossip by fans and other media enthusiasts. Scholars like Henry Jenkins have seen film and Internet convergence as a generally positive development, because it enables grassroots media production in digital media to democratize the film industry. Do-it-yourself amateur cultural production such as machinima and fan-produced moving image additions to the diegetic universes of Star Wars and other familiar narratives "affirm the right of everyday people to actively contribute to their culture." Jenkins concludes that the Internet has given rise to new opportunities for a user-produced folk culture based around digital media creation to create a new "convergence culture."

While users are creating new bodies of folk media on the Web, hybrid texts composed of disparate elements taken from all types of digital sources and composited into new forms of "grassroots" media, a new social awareness of racial "hybridity" also is being created at the grassroots level. This "convergence culture" encompasses both racial regimes and media taxonomies. Media convergence and racial hybridity, or "ethic ambiguity," are both old things that are "new again," just as the development of earlier media technologies such as the photograph, printing press, and phonograph permitted the development of convergent media such as "talking books" and illuminated photography, so too has racial hybridity had an earlier, socially marginal characterization as "race-mixing" or miscegenation. However, at the turn of our century, a limited type of rehabilitation of both terms has taken place; at least for now, both are celebrated as democratizing, novel, and ultimately part of a narrative of technological and social progress.

Little has been written about the Internet as a channel for information on mixed race stars, which is in a way unsurprising, for the Web has always been a suspect method for getting at the "truth" about anything, especially stars. Indeed, early fears of the Internet had much to do with the lack of accountability that users had in regard to telling the truth and establishing correct attributions for statements. However, an analysis of user-produced Web sites on race and film stars can offer unique insight into what users want from stars in regard to public articulations of racial identity. This presents an interesting counterpoint to the tendency of new media theory to claim the Internet as a raceless space, since users' bodies are invisible while they use it. Much mainstream scholarship about the Internet notes that its most salient distinguishing feature is its ability to conceal identity markers such as gender and race. This is its utopian promise and claim to adding something genuinely new to user experience.
As Burnett and Marshall write, "Part of the allure of the Web is that one's identity may not be attached to one's physical body on the Web. One can transform...in the anonymous web."^4

The Web is unlike film because its interactivity and collaborative authoring tools permit, indeed depend upon, participation and authorship by users. Thus, the Web has a peculiar and privileged relationship to gossip. The Web content permits anonymous publication, making attribution difficult to establish. And when it comes to the matter of race and stars, the Web works like a tremendous gossip mill, but one with a difference. For when stars leave the matter of their race purposely ambiguous, the Web steps in to fill this gap in knowledge with speculation, assertion, and opinion. Celebrity Web sites speculate endlessly about all aspects of star identity, and in the case of stars defined as "mixed race" by mixedfolks.com, like Vin Diesel, Jessica Alba, Cameron Diaz, The Rock, and Jennifer Beals, at least some of this speculation has to do with race. The Black Entertainment Network posits that the nature of this speculation changes depending on the race of the audience as well, in an article posted in 2004 on the bet.com Web site, writer James Hill noted that white audiences are unaware of and unable to see black multiraciality: "What I found amazing was the filmmaker's assumption that the average White viewer would understand the subtlety of bi-racial features that let Black folks know Vin Diesel and Jennifer Beals had 'something in 'em,' where most White folks didn't seem to notice at all."

Hill asserts that black audiences are differently enabled when it comes to perceiving the distinctive features of mixed race actors; the "open secret" of Diesel's and Beals's biraciality is not a secret to them, but only to "White folks."

Both black and white fans are intensely aware of race, albeit in different ways and with different perceptual understandings of it, and multiracial fans identify strongly with multiracial stars. In this chapter I will discuss the Web as a technology that can work to out mixed race stars, to fix their identities or at least encourage stars to claim them. This digital medium also evidences users' intense interest in what stars "are" and lets them broadcast these opinions. Mixedfolks.com is a Web site whose community of fans and users claim their right to participate in how stars ought to be represented racially. In this sense, they are intervening to rewrite star identities to solidify the sense of a distinctive mixed race identity that encompasses everyday people as well as stars. The site's design provides a gathering place for users to share their mixed race personal narratives, thus going far beyond its overt purpose as an outing site for celebrities. Users themselves come "out" on the site by sharing their stories of misunderstanding, classificatory confusions, racial anxieties, and ultimate sense of identification as "mixedfolks" that arise from accepting and understanding the nature of mixedness as a "third" identity.

In 2003 La Ferla asked the reader to "consider the careers of movie stars like Vin Diesel, Lisa Bonet, and Jessica Alba, whose popularity with young audiences seems due in part to the tease over whether they are black, white, Hispanic, American Indian or some combination." Diesel has proven so far to be the master of this particular tease, and the mystery of his actual racial heritage has given rise to a great deal of speculation on the Web and elsewhere. Though the black media industry has been eager to claim him as one of their own—he was featured in an Ebony magazine article as one of "Hollywood's Top Black Moneymakers," and his film The Fast and the Furious has aired on the Black Starz! Cable network—he refuses to claim his blackness outright in any medium. When Diesel was featured on the cover of Entertainment Weekly, the accompanying article emphasized its subject's carefully tended racial ambiguity: "Diesel isn't being coy; he's being clever. He's not hiding from the public, he's courting it. By stripping away all identifying marks, presenting himself as a blank slate—particularly when it comes to his racial background—he's found a way to market himself to the broadest possible audience. He's selling himself as a multiethnic Everyman, a movie star virtually every demographic can claim as its own. "If you're Hispanic, you look at Vin and see a Hispanic," Cohen notes. "If you're Italian, you see an Italian. If you're African American, you see an African American. He could probably even play a Jewish character." Boiler Room director Ben Younger sees Diesel the same way. "People seem to make him into whatever they want him to be," he says. "Which is maybe one of the reasons why he's so popular. He's our boy." Which is kind of funny because a lot of the people doing that wouldn't necessarily get along with each other. Italian Americans and African Americans? Not exactly a match made in heaven."

The fluidity of Diesel's race is matched only by the diversity of his roles; he has played several Italian and Latino characters, and even his "blackest" role, that of a mysterious science fiction hero in Pitch Black, Diesel would only describe in an interview as "urban."

While Diesel, perhaps the most high-profile E.A. actor of recent years, steadfastly refuses to address the issue of his own racial background and identity, this is a relatively recent development. His independently...
produced short film *Multi-Facial* (1995) poignantly depicts racial passing as an occupational necessity for actors with ethnically ambiguous looks. *Multi-Facial* portrays mixed race actors as having no identities at all rather than enjoying a "third" identity, and thus having no effective way to market themselves to the film industry. The industry itself is blamed: when Diesel's character is rejected after reading for a dramatic role as a Latino, a compassionate Latina actress volunteers information about a soap opera that might hire him, and a black actor offers to help him get into an "industrial." "Industrials" such as music videos, infomercials, and training videos rely on the use of racial and gender types to hail diverse audiences. These "bread-and-butter" parts, as they are referred to in *Multi-Facial*, benefit greatly from the use of multiracial actors who can simultaneously hail many audiences.

However, the ambitious protagonist rejects these roles as unworthy of a "great actor," since great actors transcend type. Unfortunately, the roles available to him as a struggling young actor are all of this kind. He is asked to rap and to perform other types of minstrelsy to audition for roles as a Spanish-speaking Latino, an Italian "Guido" wearing a porkpie hat and a sleeveless undershirt, and as a "mad homeboy." *Multi-Facial* strongly critiques racial film casting that forces mixed race actors to adopt broadly typecast performances of racial types; the scene in which Diesel channels Al Pacino's performance as Tony Montana in *Scarface* to get a part as a Latino ends painfully when he is unable to answer an actress's impassioned burst of Spanish with one of his own.40 However, Diesel's efforts to pass as Latino, Italian, and black are depicted as surprisingly successful: the attractive Latina actress asks him after the interview, "Don't you know Spanish?" implying that he would have learned it at home as she had, and that he has at least "gotten over" with her. Thus, the film depicts racial passing as an occupational necessity for mixed race actors that can bleed over into aspects of their personal lives.

*Multi-Facial* was screened at the Sundance Independent Film Festival, and Diesel credits it with landing him his first role in a Hollywood film as an Italian American soldier, Adrian Caparzo, in Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. In an interview that accompanies the DVD version of *Multi-Facial*, Diesel says that the film is fictional but based on his own life, and he is quick to claim groundbreaking status for himself as a director and writer. He says that he realized after viewing the finished twenty-minute film that "I had just done something that might not have been done before. The stars had very clear origins; very clear nationalities, and mine has always been in question." He claims that the film was successful because it introduced "something new": the multiracial actor. Diesel's entrepreneurial spirit is much in evidence in this interview; he relates that he had to make his own film in order to get the right kind of role as a multiracial character, and that in doing so he "introduced to the film world someone whose origins weren't as clear as others actors and stars." Indeed, the film makes a poignant case for the humiliations and discomforts of racial passing for multiracial actors in the film industry. However, Diesel's trajectory as a star has relied on a different but related strategy for getting the "right kind" of roles. Instead of declaring himself to be white and denying himself as a "black actor," a category that he notes as a particularly distinctive and formidable one when he lists "Danny Glover, Sidney Poitier, Morgan Freeman" as role models for his black actor father, he refuses to identify as anything at all other than mixed. In so doing, he avoids the self-hating identity of a black man who refuses to admit that he is black and avails himself of a different racial strategy for assimilating to white society: that of covering.

According to Yale legal scholar Kenji Yoshino, minorities of all kinds are compelled to "cover—to minimize the race-salient traits that distinguish [them] from the white mainstream."41 In a version of the neoliberal strategy adopted by President Bill Clinton's so-called don't ask, don't tell policy in regard to gay soldiers in the military, covering requires that race become a subject individuals of color are forbidden to articulate. "Color-blind" social policies require the cooperation of the individual, who is compelled to suppress or "cover" her racial identity as much as possible. While passing usually requires action, covering requires inaction. Just as the ethnic assimilation model allowed nonwhites to join American society despite their skin color and differing phenotypes so long as they were willing to act differently, or change those aspects of their exotic identities that could be changed, color-blind policies need individuals themselves to act blind to their own color.

There are subtle yet extremely important differences between passing and covering. If passing was the strategy of individuals who could not be assimilated to white privilege because of their colored bodies, and who thus chose to rewrite them as white, covering is the recourse of those who live in a "multicultural" world that values the exotic and does allow people of color to gain positions of power but requires them to cover in order to get it. Neoliberalism dictates that it is acceptable and sometimes good for an individual to be black but unacceptable for them to perform their blackness in
specific institutional settings such as work, school, or other instances of the public sphere. Light-skinned multiracial actors such as Diesel, Dean Cain, Keann Reeves, Kristin Kreuk, and The Rock who play nominally white roles are able to manage their skin color and body far more actively than other stars do or are able to do; they are indeed "multifacial." Muteness or vague-ness about race, a refusal to declare a specific connection to a nonwhite racial group, is a strategy to cover race. Yoshino describes the landmark case of a United Airlines flight attendant who was fired for wearing cornrows to work. This case exemplifies the ways that racial identity must be suppressed if it can be characterized as elective. The flight attendant's unsuccessful lawsuit for unlawful termination on the basis of racial discrimination was rejected because it was determined that her cornrows were elective, that she was responsible for her decision to wear them. The court maintained that it was disciplining her behavior, which she could change, rather than her race, which she could not. The compulsion to cover creates a dilemma that is different from but just as confounding as that of light-skinned black people in the early twentieth century.

Paul Spickard claims that the recent popularity of biracial biography reflects a concept of identity that is distinctly postmodern, in contrast to earlier narrative about racial passing that appealed to a modernist sense of identity. He writes, "Gates... notes that the thematic elements of passing—fragmentation, alienation, liminality, self-fashioning—echo the great themes of modernism.' One might go a step further and say that the themes of multiraciality—constructedness, contingency, paradox, multiplicity—are among the themes of postmodernism.' I would modify that formulation to say that while passing is modernist, covering is postmodernist. The requirement to cover is a form of racial governmentality that works to punish expressions of race but does not require an individual to pass muster as a different race. Although it is an equally rigorous but less "modern" technique than passing, it is close enough to attract criticism on the same grounds.

In her landmark essay "Passing for White, Passing for Black," Adrian Piper elegantly details the anatomy of passing as a tempting but shameful act. And if passing is despised within the black community, ou ting is perhaps even more so. Piper writes, "In the African American community, we do not 'out' people who are passing as white in the European American community. Publicly to expose the African ancestry of someone who claims to have none is not done." Piper further explains that "a person who desires personal and social advantage and acceptance within the white community so much that she is willing to repudiate her family, past, history, and her personal connections within the African American community in order to get them is someone who is already in so much pain that it's just not possible to do something that you know is going to cause her any more." While Diesel has never denied that he is black or part black, his refusal to own his blackness in public is read as a betrayal or at least a disappointment by many of his African American critics. The "black community" has expectations regarding star conduct in terms of racial identity, and Diesel has failed to meet these. And nowhere has this criticism been more vocal than on the Internet.

From the civil rights movement's earliest days, its African American leaders in the United States have promoted a discourse of racial uplift that required outstanding individuals, members of a so-called talented tenth, to represent the race in a positive light to society at large. This discourse of racial rehabilitation is alive and well today, as users create Web content that makes urgent claims for stars and celebrities of color to take up the burden and responsibility to represent their racial and ethnic identities for the good of all people of color. Mixed race fans are no different, and have similar requirements for their chosen stars: as is asserted in Men- gel's article "Triples: The Social Evolution of a Multiracial Panethnicity: An Asian American Perspective," multiracial people often fail to identify strongly with any one of their races of origin, but rather form a separate collective identity based on "panethnicity which is based on mixedness per se." The notion that mental health and self-esteem—surely an entitlement in the American context—can only be attained through viewing role models that permit positive racial identifications informs the design and content of mixedfolks.com. This site's creators and users, its virtual community, believe that stars have a social duty and an implicit obligation to represent their minority heritage when they gain a place in the public eye. They demand, sometimes respectfully and sometimes not, that stars acknowledge their nonwhite racial heritage, even when or perhaps especially when this star is a multiracial person who plays white roles. This is because racial ambiguity demands articulation and clarification by viewers; in cases in which a star's race is not phenotypically obvious, the star has the opportunity to disavow her race. And just as the main stumbling block to hybrid new media is the copyright law that requires users to attribute every piece of their creation to its original source, so too are multiracial movie stars compelled by their fans to "attribute" themselves. Multiracial fans have a unique stake in multiracial stars acknowledging their 'darker' racial heritage.
It has been more than ten years since *Multi-Racial* brought Vin Diesel to the attention of mainstream Hollywood. He is now the star that he says he always wanted to be, as well as an actor who is respected more than most of his peers who perform in action-hero roles. Why has Diesel maintained this racial tease during his long and successful career as an actor and star? Beyond the rhetoric of transcendent individualism espoused by the self-made man and entrepreneurial auteur lies the imperative of global marketing. Multifacility is crucial for consolidating popularity in a global marketplace of celebrity. Other multiracial stars like Jennifer Lopez have followed a now-familiar trajectory from “ethnic” star appearing in “ethnic” films to “global” star by taking roles that are racially unmarked or, rather, marked as nominally white. (In her 1999 video “If You Had My Love,” the viewer witnesses a remarkably literal example of this movement in the space of three minutes; Lopez appears as a cornrowed hip-hop girl, a Latina flamenco dancer, and a white-clad blonde with straight hair.)

Celebrity mixed race identity that aspires to global standing needs to claim and defend a position of unmarked racial otherness: while it will not admit or allow its identity as belonging to a particular race (thus excluding particular audiences from the pleasures of identification), it is equally zealous about eschewing normative whiteness. This makes it impossible for any specific racial group to claim the star as a role model. Vin Diesel has been Diesel’s strategy; he is an actor who has had to work very hard at disavowing blackness after his mainstream success in films like *The Fast and the Furious* and *Pitch Black* made him a desirable role model for the black community.

Mixedfolks.com subordinates star gossip to a specific political goal: that of promoting the visibility and rights of mixed race folks who are not necessarily stars. Ironically, it accomplishes this by subverting the carefully maintained and modulated identities of mixed race stars by outing them as mixed. It also provides extensive bulletin board space for users to post pictures of themselves and personal narratives and to form connections based on sharing a pan-ethnic mixed identity, a “third” identity. The site attempts to resolve the problem of missing role models for mixed race “folks” by identifying some from the popular culture. The site lists actors, musicians, and other mixed race celebrities who are often assumed to be white by many viewers and connects them to their “hidden” racial backgrounds. There are three categories of “mixedfolks” that organize the list of stars and other famous people such as athletes and musicians: “African/African American, Hapa/Asian (entire Asian continent) and Hispanic and Native American.”

Users who did not know that comedian Rob Schneider is part Filipino, that actresses Jennifer Beals, Halle Berry, and Mariah Carey are part African American, and that Mercedes Ruehl, Madeleine Stowe, and Lynda Carter are part Latina are set straight on the site’s home page. These people are all claimed as “mixedfolks,” whether or not they identify themselves in that way. The way in which these actors and public figures are identified as “African/African American,” “Asian,” or “Hispanic or Native American” without their consent or most likely knowledge characterizes this form of information dissemination as “outing.” Rather than simply giving true or untrue information about stars, the site works by revealing the hidden and slightly scandalous racial truth about these figures, a truth they are at times anxious to hide or at least choose not to publicize. Raquel Welch, born Jo Raquel Tejada, is listed under mixed race “Hispanic” actresses as Bolivian and white. The site links to a *New York*


Times article that describes her decision to come out as a Latina after having been seen as a generic white bombshell (but always an "exotic" one, as viewers who remember her fur bikini in One Million Years B.C. will attest). In this article, cited as well by Thrupkaew, Welch says, "I'm happy to acknowledge [being Latina] and it's long overdue and it's very welcome. There's been kind of an empty place here in my heart and also in my work for a long, long time." Welch is thus framed as a model of mixed race identification, one that the site encourages other actors to emulate.

The site’s creators are very careful to deflect criticism of their site’s mission to out stars by posting an explanation on the home page that they beg users to read before e-mailing them with complaints. It reads:

About MixedFolks.com
(Please read before e-mailing me)

1.) First of all let me state that the purpose of MixedFolks.com is simple, to celebrate your multiracial heritage. I try to provide information that multiracial people will find relevant and interesting. It is not meant to be divisive.

2.) You will notice that most of the people on this site are mixed with African or African-American and something else. The reason for this is that when I first started the site it was just going to feature half White and half Black people because that's what I am. But as I started working on the site I decided to add anybody who was half Black to add diversity. Once the site went up I got a lot of e-mail from people asking me to add other people who were of Mixed race origin but not necessarily Black. At first I wasn't going to do that because I thought it would be too much work adding all those people and also because I felt that I could only relate to issues affecting those who were half Black. But as I talked with more and more biracial people of other races I learned that we all have similar issues, both positive and negative.

3.) I realize that some of the people on this site choose not to identify with being biracial and that is their prerogative. I'm just stating that they happen to be of mixed race heritage, what they choose to call themselves and identify with is their business and I respect that. I'm not trying to tell anyone what they should identify with, it's none of my business.

The site's stated mission to serve all mixed race people, not just stars, means that its creators must overtly concern themselves with user feedback. While some Web site creators can tend toward hostility or defensiveness when confronted with user criticism, this one tries hard to be or at least appear responsive to challenges from community members regarding unclear or inconsistent racial definitions, the exclusion of particular racial groups (like non-African Americans), and accusations of "divisiveness." The site proprietor takes pains to note that he has changed the site to reflect their preferences and complaints. Though he claims that the issue of mixed racial definition is "much to complex" [sic] to resolve on the site, he does assert the right to convey racial truth despite stars' individual preferences. Though stars may wish to pass or at least cover, he is "just stating that they happen to be of mixed race heritage, what they choose to call themselves and identify with is their business and I respect that." This is a tricky position to take, for revealing someone else's "business" by just stating what they "are" is a peculiar way to "respect"
their identifications. However, the site's ultimate goal, which is to provide a virtual community for "mixedfolks," coalesces around the pleasures of star identification in at least two senses of the word: the identification and consequent reclassification of formerly perceived white stars as "people of color," a process that allows them to be rehabilitated as role models, as well as the identification with the star by the viewer. The site's design encourages both of these processes, particularly in its "community" pages.

The site offers a rich array of resources for its users. Though the celebrity outing page is set as the default home page, on its left-hand side a menu listing "MF Community," "Chat," "Library," "Multimedia," "Links," "Comics," "Names," and "Message Board" offers several modes of interactivity that encourage learning and further exploration. The "library" link leads to four pages of bibliographic information, listing critically respected mixed race memoirs such as James McBride's *The Color of Water* and Rebecca Walker's *Black, White and Jewish: The Autobiography of a Shifting Self*, along with fictional accounts of mixed race identity and passing such as Lalita Tademy's novel *Cane River* and William Faulkner's *Light in August*. These are mingled with more culturally marginal titles like *Six Black Presidents: Black Blood, White Masks* U.S.A., which outs several American presidents as mixed race African Americans. The section also includes an extensive list of children's books on mixed race identity, such as Marguerite Davo's charming *Black, White, Just Right!*, Scholarly books on the topic of mixed race identity are also much in evidence here: Maria P. P. Root's *Racially Mixed People in America* and Ursula M. Brown's *The Interracial Experience* are listed along with screenshots of their covers. The emphasis on self-education and research evidenced in this part of the site demonstrates the intention to move beyond gossip about stars and into a more self-reflective and analytical mode regarding interracial identity. Significantly, the site does not link to other celebrity gossip pages or Web sites about the film industry. The celebrity outing content listed on the front page teases the reader into entering the site and hopefully becoming interested in some of the resources likely to promote self-education, reflection, and community.

*Mixedfolks.com* thus gives the lie to the notion that E.A.s satisfy "a desire for the exotic, left-of-center beauty that transcends race or class," as Amy Barnett, editor of *Teen People*, asserts, since it works to reattach racially mobile bodies to their "proper" racial categories. However, the Web site claims a socially positive identity that attempts to hail its audiences as politically active group of "mixedfolks" by describing its mission as follows:

> "These pages are for all the rest of us. Mixedfolks who may not be well-known but we still want to represent." Rather than exposing the hidden facticity of race in order to shame or embarrass the actors, the site identifies them as hidden sources of inspiration and identification that must be made to "represent" on the Internet despite their disapproval of (or failure to acknowledge) a nonwhite racial identity in film and television. There is a complex interplay between the site's construction of a "mixedfolks" identity community within its bulletin boards and areas for user participation, the visual culture of celebrity mixed race outing, and the intermedial connections between the celebrity Web site and filmic and televisual media. Rather than "transcending race or class," bracketing these identity categories as outmoded or beside the point, the site and its community assert that "E.A. beauty" arises from the mutual recognition of hybridity, both in shared mediaspaces and in virtual community spaces.

A vibrant community of users has grown up around this celebrity outing site, creating an interracial palette of mixedfolks that is very different from what Hollywood produces as models of mixedness. On the post-YouTube Web, everyone is potentially a star, and the site encourages users to "out" themselves just as it outs movie actors, musicians, athletes, and "others." The pages linked to "MF Community" contain personal profiles put up by users. Each page has sixteen slots for photographs submitted by users, as well as a paragraph that explains the ways that they are "mixedfolks." This form is designed exactly like that of the main site that identifies the stars, with spaces for pictures and short bios. The link between users' mixed racial identity and mixed star identities is overtly stressed not only by the site's designer, who set up this template, but also by the community members themselves. In "Carolyn's" profile, which includes a photograph of herself smiling at the camera in a chin-on-hand pose, she writes, "My mother is Italian, my father is Black/Rican. I love being mixed, I don't claim to be one or the other. I am 29 years old and love playing the 'spotting game' with my husband. You know the game... where you see a star or just someone off the street and say, 'I know that person has a lil' somethin' somethin' up in 'em.'"

The use of photographic headshots of both stars and community members in this site is vitally important to creating a visual culture of mixed race identity, for the photos invite the viewer to visually verify the existence of a "little somethin' somethin' up in 'em," to quote mixedfolks.com community member Carolyn. Users are invited to gratify the desire to racially profile others by playing the "spotting game" in digital mediaspace.
This use of the Internet as part of a scopic regime of understanding mixed race identity has its roots in earlier visual media, in particular, photography and film. Courtney asserts that film, in particular, played a crucial role in solidifying the notion of race as visible and apprehensible to the naked eye. In this sense, film technology was only following up on a custom established by the legal system as early as the nineteenth century; as she notes, the "scopic rule" of racial identification was in force as early as 1806.24 As she writes in her persuasive genealogy of racial regimes of vision, "Conceptions of race as something the eye can see are by no means unique to the twentieth century," though visual media technologies like film intensified them. She also notes that the scopic rule whereby an observer was empowered to determine a person's race solely by visual observation was only "one of two methods by which the court attempts to determine racial identity (the other is bound up with ancestry and racial names)."25 Mixedfolks.com only asks that community members provide first names in order to protect their privacy, thereby giving them the chance to hide their ancestral names—this is de rigueur in most virtual communities. Remarkably, many members provide their full names as well as their photographs, thus demonstrating an openness that has become increasingly rare as identity theft and scams have become more prevalent. Users of mixedfolks.com are eager to claim and represent their mixed race status through personal photographs, biographical narrative, and disclosure of their real identities.

It is probably not surprising that the biggest surprises on mixedfolks.com have to do with the number of celebrities who have a "hidden" Asian heritage. Asian multiracial people have long had the privilege of choosing to claim whiteness through passing as well as through covering. Unlike for mixed race black people, who were subject to hypostatic rules of blood quanta, such as the "one-drop rule," the classification system of mixed race identity has been much looser in the case of multiracial Asian Americans. The elaborate taxonomic language of "black" and "white" ancestry such as "quadroon," "octofoon," and "mulatto," to which multiracial African descent have been subjected, does not apply to Asian multiracials: the term "Eurasian" seems to have sufficed for all admixtures.26 While some viewers may know that Dean Cain, Keanu Reeves, Kristin Kreuk, and the Tilly sisters are part Asian, it is unlikely that they are aware that Nia Peeples, Paula Abdul, Norah Jones, Ben Kingsley, and Shannyn Sossamon are.27

The "names" link on the site provides several lists of names describing different types of multiracial people. The majority of these refer to African American ancestry, but the site's community-creating mission gives equal time and space to a list of terms contributed by community members. The first list's terms, which include "mulatto" and "octofoon," are attributed to the American Heritage Dictionary. The second list, however, includes eighty-six terms, including "Blackamooze," "Blackipino," "chexmex," "Blattino," "Mexicooon" (described as "an offensive term for someone of both Mexican and black ancestry"), "wigger," "Oreo," "wood chips," "Halfrican," and "rice cracker."28 The flagging of only some of these terms as "offensive" implies that the rest of them are not. Both nonoffensive and offensive terms are listed on the same page as the first and better-known list of terms, as if they were just as legitimate. This transmission of vernacular, on-the-ground knowledge of mixed race identity exemplifies the Internet's affinity for spreading folk culture, for it broadcasts a counterculture regarding mixed race identity that can be read alongside and in opposition to the American Heritage Dictionary and Dictionary.com. The problematic language of hypostatic descent that has its roots in the slave trade is opposed to a new vernacular of hybridity that contains a great deal more complexity and humor. In addition, it recognizes the existence of other, non-African races as components of mixed racialized identities.

Mixedfolks.com also recognizes shades of white. Just as the site's language of classification tends to identify stars' racial heritage in terms of which parent is which race (e.g., "His father is black, his mother is Irish" in Vin Diesel's profile), in keeping with this emphasis on detail, it also taxonomizes whiteness in terms of ethnicity and nation. Italians, Irish, Scandinavians, Scots, Germans, and especially Jews are listed as parents of "mixedfolks," just as Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, Mexicans, and Indians are all listed specifically. This desire to make distinctions between whites, in a sense to treat them as "mixedfolks" as well, resonates with earlier, now forgotten struggles by Jews and other former people of color to assimilate into whiteness. As Eric Goldstein and David Roediger write in their insightful historical treatments of whiteness as a social construct and contested identity, whiteness was achieved by ethnic Europeans rather than simply conferred.29 Mixedfolks avoids a monolithic view of whiteness by acknowledging its different varieties in its genealogies of mixed race stars.

The Internet has always provided a space for transformations of various kinds. Diarists become bloggers and publishers, and amateur camera users become photographers whose work is reproduced widely in all sorts of contexts, thanks to Blogger and Flickr. The transformation of media
professionalism by the Internet is paralleled by transformations in racial identity representation. Internet users have availed themselves of their power within the new participatory medium of the Internet to revise the story of celebrities and race, to color-in racial blankness or default whiteness by uncovering narratives of mixed racial identities. Vin Diesel is a transformative, convergent, and contradictory figure as well. He is an entrepreneur and self-made man who was nonetheless “discovered” by a major Hollywood director, an actor who cares about his craft yet appears primarily in spectacle-driven genre films dubbed “video games” by film reviewers, a black public figure who will not claim blackness. The promiscuous production of digital communication about stars guarantees that all kinds of virtual communities, including communities of multiracial “thirds,” will continue to shape media narratives about mixed race.

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NOTES

4. Henry Jenkins, Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 132. Machinima is “a hybrid of machine and cinema . . . 3-D digital animation created in real time using game engines” (152). These visual narratives exploit the characters, sets, and other visual apparatus of preexisting popular game repurposed such as Halo or Grand Theft Auto to create new narratives. See his chapter in Convergence Culture entitled “Quentin Tarantino’s Star Wars? Grassroots Creativity Meets the Media Industry” for some excellent examples and an extended discussion.
6. 1bid., 175
7. This is of course true as well about star sexuality. See in particular Michael d’Angelo’s wonderful book on celebrity outing, Gay Random and Crossover Stardom: James Dean, Mel Gibson, and Keann Reeves (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).
9. La Ferla, “Generation E.A.”
11. “Urban” often stands in for “African American” or “black” in the entertainment and fashion industries.
12. While there is a long history of white actors in nonwhite roles, such as Pacino in Scarface, Luis Rainer and Paul Muni as O-Lan and Wang in The Good Earth, and Richard Barthelmess in Broken Blossoms, the racial identity of the actor remains clear to audiences. This is not the case when mixed race actors portray whites, hence the mission of mixedfolks.com.
13. Kenji Yoshino, Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights (New York: Random House, 2006), 133. Yoshino takes this term from sociologist Erving Goffman, who defines it as follows: “It is a fact that persons who are ready to admit possession of a stigma (in many cases because it is known about or immediately apparent) may nonetheless make a great effort to keep the stigma from looming large. The individual’s object is to reduce tension, that is, to make it easier for himself and the others to withdraw covert attention from the stigma . . . this process will be referred to as ‘covering.’” Erving Goffman, Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 102.
14. Vin Diesel’s active management of his facial and bodily representation extends to areas other than movie roles: according to FameTracker.com, director John Frankenheimer claims that on the set of Reindeer Games, Diesel refused to show his "guns," or extremely muscular, arms, in pictures in which he was not the star. “Vin Diesel: Fame Audit,” www.fametracker.com/fame_audit/diesel_vin.php (accessed October 8, 2006).
17. Ibid.


19. See Mary Beltrán, "The Spitfire, the Airbrush Artist, the Trainer, and the Diva: Racializing and Classifying Moreno and Lopez as Star Bodies" (paper presented at the symposium "Latino/a Studies in the Midwest," Ohio State University, Columbus, April 2004), for an excellent historical discussion of race-changing in the service of marketing.


21. The rest of the disclaimer reads as follows:

4.) I realize that most all Blacks in America have some mixed ancestry. But there is clearly a difference between someone who has parents of two different races and someone whose great great grandmother was White but everyone else in their family is Black. This does not mean that there are not people who are multigenerational mixed but in order to narrow the focus of this site (due to limited time and resources) many of them are not included. This should not be seen as a dismissal of those who are multigenerational mixed, or that they are any better or worse than other mixed people.

5.) So the next question is, how do you determine who is mixed? First of all, I don’t determine who is mixed, but for the purposes of this site (Except the MixedFolks.com Community) I can only add someone to this site if they have parents of two different races (in other words first generation mixed, I have made a few exceptions though). The only reason for this rule is that I simply don’t have time to research and add everyone who ever had some race mixing in their past. Again, this does not mean that there are not people who are multigenerational mixed but in order to narrow the focus of this site (due to limited time and resources) many of them are not included. Unfortunately I have to clarify this because to some it is not understood. Realistically this site is for enjoyment and information, it is not intended to be the final word on the definitions of race or who is mixed and who isn’t. That is a question much too complex for me or this site.

22. This text appears on the “MF Community” page.


25. Ibid.

26. Though Eurasian identity lacks a taxonomic set of terms to describe it, there has been a long-standing obsession with identifying any admixture of white and Asian blood; this is especially evident in narratives depicting Indian and British relations in the context of empire. See Kipling’s story “His Chance in Life” and others from *Plain Tales from the Hills* for an example of racial anxiety about the infiltration of “half-caste” Eurasians into government positions. Rudyard Kipling, *Plain Tales from the Hills,* ed. Godfrey Cave (London: Penguin, 1994).

