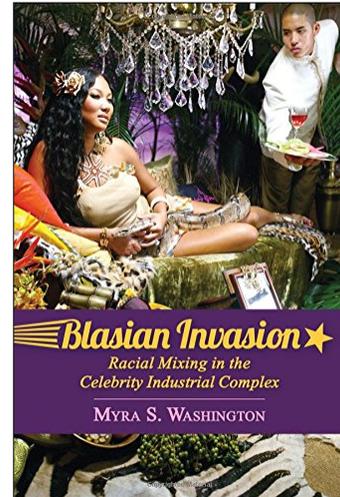


Myra S. Washington, **Blasian Invasion: Racial Mixing in the Celebrity Industrial Complex**, Jackson, MS: The University Press of Mississippi, 2017, 192 pp., \$65.00 (hardcover).

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***Blasian Invasion: Racial Mixing in the Celebrity Industrial Complex*** is a unique consideration of the emergence within the past two decades of multiracial Black and Asian/American legibility in media. Author Myra S. Washington, assistant professor in the Department of Communication and Journalism at the University of New Mexico, explains in this book how the term *Blasian* “went from being unidentified to taking an identifiable place in popular media culture” (p. 5). The term *Blasian* first appeared in 2001 when Korean adoptee Zak Heaton used it to describe his racial identity. *Blasian* later entered mainstream consciousness in 2009 during golf star Tiger Woods’ extramarital affairs scandal. In this book, *Blasian* is used to talk about celebrities who “self-identify with these socially constructed racial/ethnic categories of Black and Asian/American” (p. 6). Washington focuses on how *Blasian* celebrities build their celebrity brand by publicly claiming, explaining, and negotiating their multiracial identity. The book is based on media analysis of *Blasian* self-representation (and media representation) in newspaper, magazine articles, social media, commercials, press conferences, trade, releases, a divorce agreement, and more. *Blasian Invasion* makes important contributions to the meeting of media and race theories. Additionally, the book makes an important addition to the field of critical mixed race studies, which predominantly offers White-centered discussions on multiraciality. Like Rudy P. Guevarra Jr.’s *Becoming Mexipino* (2012), *Blasian Invasion* expands our understanding of the multiple experiences of multiraciality in the U.S. This book is intended for audiences in cultural studies, media studies, and critical mixed race studies. Any readers interested in celebrity, media, and the social construction of race would also find this book useful.



The book is divided into five chapters and a conclusion. Chapter 1, “Theorizing Blasians,” presents the research’s theoretical positioning within cultural studies, critical mixed race studies, and media and racial theories. Chapter 2, “Birth of a Blasian,” traces the history of *Blasian* mixed-race identity within transnational movements and the history of *Blasian* identity in celebrity and media. Chapter 3, “Modeling Race: Refashioning Blasianness,” presents theories on a *Blasian* “brand” within the celebrity industrial complex, through the analysis of Kimora Lee Simmons. Chapter 4, “‘Because I’m Blasian’: Tiger Woods, Scandal, and Protecting the Blasian Brand,” offers analysis on the transracial negotiation Woods and his management team use to protect the Tiger Woods brand during his extramarital affairs scandal. Chapter 5, “Sporting the Blasian Body,” considers the ways *Blasian* bodies articulate within nationalism, masculinity, race, and sports’ commodification of athletes by presenting analysis on *Blasian* athletes. The book concludes with a chapter, “En-Blasianing the Future,” which highlights the potential for *Blasians* to draw attention to the absurdity of biological and cultural premises for racialization, as well as demonstrate alternatives for affiliation that do not rely on race.

Washington constructs her work as both a media theory and a racial theory. Within this frame, she uses the concepts of "branding" and "transracialism" to analyze celebrity engagement in a Blasian identity in media.

### **Branding**

Using the language of branding, Washington analyzes how Blasians gain cultural and social legibility. Her main objective is to "use branding as a tool to map out the process of conferring meaning, legibility, to Blasians" (p. 5). Following scholarship on branding (Banet-Weiser & Lapansky, 2008; Hirschman, 2010; Schroeder & Salzer-Morling, 2006), Washington discusses how the Blasian brand establishes social relationships. However, she departs from existing literature because she is not addressing products that can be bought. She positions that identity itself is the brand, and that "it is the neo-liberal shift toward the individual and subjectivities as consumable commodities that makes this possible" (p. 17). Blasians negotiate a multiracial identity through personal self-branding strategies that "sell diversity" itself, and challenge media constructions of their identities (pp. 17–18). Blasian branding takes place within the power circulated in the celebrity industrial complex and the hierarchical racial order of the U.S. (p. 21). There are economic motivations, therefore, behind the commodification of multiracialness and the trendiness of ethnic ambiguity (p. 20).

As an example of Blasian branding, Washington analyzes the success of fashion model, fashion designer, and reality television star Kimora Lee Simmons. Utilizing the Blasian identity, Simmons makes "obvious and observable" moves going back and forth between performing Blackness and performing Asianness to brand herself (p. 50). Her Blasian brand is worked through "the over-the-top spirit of camp" (p. 50), which subverts dominant ideologies of race, gender, sexuality, and class. As an example, Washington analyzes Simmons' discussions with Mattel for a Kimora Barbie. The Kimora Barbie is a single mother of color, and Simmons has chosen skin tones and facial features that she hopes "represents a proper ethnic blend" (p. 60). Simmons decides that her Barbie needs to be "flashier," so she decides on a full-length fur coat and a dog, Zoe, as accessories to the doll. The Kimora Barbie is a "counterhegemonic representation of gender and race that is in keeping with Simmons' definition of fabulousity" (pp. 60–61). Mattel suggests they drop the Barbie label and instead call the doll "Kimora Lee Simmons" because the doll is so close to Simmons' image and divergent from the typical Barbie image. Simmons refuses this move, explaining that by taking the word *Barbie* away, she will seem more like a sidekick. Simmons uses her racial camp of performing "fabulousity" to carve a recognizable branding space for herself in the Barbie label.

Washington's discussion on racial branding and Blasian legibility in the celebrity industrial complex is a compelling look at how Blasian identity can be negotiated by the celebrity herself both for economic success (branding) and personal resolve of a marginalized identity. There is much benefit in exploring how multiracial identity is self-constructed within public and economic contexts. By departing from audience analysis and focusing instead on media makers, this analysis adds to discourses on media and the construction of multiracial identity. However, the way that Blasian is written into the book can sometimes mislead readers to think that Blasian is a term used by celebrities themselves. It can be made clearer that Blasian is not a personal identity claimed by all the celebrities discussed. Additionally, the lines become blurred whether Blasian is used in an American cultural or global media context. For example, the book

opens with a vignette of the controversy around the crowning of multiracial Miss Japan beauty pageant winner, Ariana Miyamoto. This example stands in contrast to others throughout the book, which take place in American cultural contexts.

### **Transracial**

In a fascinating theoretical direction, Washington analyzes Blasians as *transracial* through the lens of transgender theory, building on existing literature on race, gender, intersectionality and transectionality (Bow, 2009; Crenshaw, 1990; Fausto-Sterling, 1993; Yu, 2003). Borrowing from transgender theories, she links the discourses between being transgender and being transracial, but does not equate the two. She uses the term *transracial* "to operationalize how representations of Blasians function within our current racial landscape" (p. 12). In a desire for racial legibility, Blasians, "access symbolic identities, moving betwixt, between, and through Blackness and Asianness (or neither/both) as they so choose" (p. 14). Blasians destabilize existing ideas of race.

As an example of transraciality, Washington analyzes how Tiger Woods and his team (PR persons, managers, agents) use Wood's racial identity to navigate the media scandalization of his extramarital affairs in 2009. She argues that "the tensions between how and when he was Black, Asian/American, or neither demonstrate the utility of transraciality" (p. 72). Washington finds that public reaction and media coverage derived both from his Blackness and his Asianness. For example, one of the most widespread scandal narratives depicted Woods as revealing his true character, "pathologizing his hypersexuality as endemic to Blackness, and then linking Blackness to criminality" (p. 76). The media "blackening" of Woods tapped into dominant narratives of Blackness as dangerous, hyperaggressive, and hypersexualized. Racial humor in media focused on emasculating Woods by using feminizing discursive strategies typically aimed against Asian/American men (pp. 81–82). To protect his image and brand, Woods needed to use his apologia to "restore his social legitimacy" (p. 76) and "relegitimize his brand" (p. 83). In his final public apology, Woods addresses his continuing rehab for sex addiction, thus allaying fears of "an out-of-control Black masculinity" (p. 85). He also invokes Buddhism as a reminder of his Asianness and moral values and "possibly a return to non-threatening Asian/American masculinity" (p. 85).

This chapter (chapter 4) illustrates transraciality vividly by outlining Tiger Woods' racial positionings meant to navigate different moments of his career—before, during, and after the scandal. Analysis here does much to support Washington's argument that a transracial lens can help us understand "how representations of Blasians function within our current racial landscape" (p. 12). There is some loss of momentum, however, when Washington argues that Woods' identity negotiation does not employ "anti-Blackness." This is an interesting concept that could benefit from more explanation in the book. There is much evidence that Woods claims an Asian/American identity marker of the Buddhist faith to positively reflect on his brand, but explanation on his navigation of anti-Blackness can be made clearer.

In *Blasian Invasion*, Washington makes many important contributions to racial and media theory. She shows how Blasian legibility is built in the context of selling identity as a brand, and the trendiness of diversity. Washington also presents special consideration of the relationship between multiracial identity and the hierarchical racial order in U.S. politics and economics by showing how celebrities navigate Blasian

self-representation in media for economic success. This helps enrich discourses on multiracial identity and media that focus instead on artistic representation or audience reception. She proves that racial theory benefits from examining multiracial identities as sites of cultural disruptions because, as she explains, "Blasians explode the narrow boundaries of authenticity around racialized categories" (p. 120). In disrupting racial boundaries, Blasians offer us alternative ways of understanding alliances—one in which multiple subjectivities are taken into account. Finally, this work enriches critical mixed race studies greatly by giving better legibility to scholarship on non-White racially mixed people.

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