

Abstract

Title of Document:

MIXED MESSAGES: AN
INTERDISCIPLINARY NARRATIVE OF
INTERRACIAL SEXUALITY IN US FILMS,
1956-2001

Andrew David DeVos, PhD, 2015

Directed By:

Dr. Beverly Bickel, Clinical Associate Professor
Language, Literacy & Culture

Dr. Jason Loviglio, Chair and Associate Professor
Media and Communication Studies

Since 1903, the movie industry has produced nearly one thousand films offering cinematic contributions to the contentious discourse about the evolving meaning of race in US society. Despite the pervasiveness of such images, neither academia nor the general public fully recognize the integral place of interracial sexuality in US cinema, past or present. These filmic images have both incited discussion and contributed to the discourse about the ever-evolving meaning of race in US society—sometimes reflecting, frequently shaping, but always fully participating in this contentious national discussion. The representation of interracial sexuality in film charts the history of how various interlocutors discuss, disagree, and argue over the meaning(s) of race in any given era. This dissertation provides a narrative account of interracial sexuality in US films from 1956 through 2001, a period roughly covering the burgeoning years of the Civil Rights Movement through an era marked by the ascendancy of a powerful colorblind discourse insisting that race no longer mattered in US society. I periodize the era under review into four eras that roughly correspond to the four decades—the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and

1990s—and present a chapter for each in which I outline the major representational frames for depicting interracial sexuality. Each decade was characterized by multiple coexisting frames offering conflicting images of interracial sexuality, and these frames corresponded to contemporaneous ideas and discourses about the meanings of race in US society, history, and political culture. I draw upon a wealth of primary sources (including promotional movie posters, film reviews, opinion polls, and the films themselves) to historically analyze key films to argue that these cinematic texts offered valuable contributions to the ever-shifting yet historically bound discussion about the meaning(s) of race in the United States. This dissertation closes by arguing that cinematic depictions of interracial sexuality released over the past fifteen years have largely been shaped and structured by the prior four decades, while demonstrating how this history sheds light on a host of contemporary racial events from Barack Obama’s historic election and presidency to the Black Lives Matter movement.