

Mixed Race in Latinowood
*Latino Stardom and Ethnic Ambiguity
 in the Era of Dark Angels*

Mary Beltrán

Scholars of the status of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. entertainment media tend to be cautiously optimistic in this postmillennial era about opportunity and visibility.¹ Latinos are being featured in more nuanced and compelling roles, while a growing number of actors and actresses, among them Jennifer Lopez, America Ferrera, and Benicio del Toro, are gaining the publicity and popularity that qualify them as full-fledged members of the Hollywood star system.

A less understood wrinkle of contemporary Latino stardom that speaks to both the permeability and the permanence of imagined racial borders is in regard to how a number of contemporary stars identify with respect to ethnicity and race. More specifically, many successful Latino performers are of mixed racial heritage and choose to highlight this *mestizaje* in their publicity. Actors such as Jessica Alba (who is of Mexican, French Canadian, Danish, English, and Italian descent) and Freddie Prinze Jr. (who is Puerto Rican and Hungarian on his late, famous father's side, and Irish, English, and Native American on his mother's) are just two members of this growing contingent; they are joined by such performers as Rosario Dawson (who is Puerto Rican, Afro-Cuban, Irish, and Native American), Salma Hayek (who is Lebanese and Mexican), Jimmy Smits (Puerto Rican and Surinamese), and Cameron Diaz (Cuban and German American).

That is not to say that there is not a great deal of diversity among this contingent. Some stars of partial Latino descent foreground their Latin American ancestry (such as Rosario Dawson, who has been always

forthcoming about her heritage), while others choose not to dwell on it in their publicity but are nevertheless "claimed" by the Latino-oriented entertainment news media and Latino fans (as was the case for Freddie Prinze Jr. for some years before he publicly embraced his Puerto Rican heritage). Irrespective of the many differences among what I term "mixed Latino" stars—to highlight that they have public images both as mixed race and as Latino—their careers have much to teach us about how notions of *Latinidad* and of racial categories more generally are evolving. Has something shifted in "Latinowood," as some Hollywood insiders dub the Latino creative professional community,² or in the industry's racial politics of casting that currently privileges actors of partial Latino heritage?³ And what are the implications of this phenomenon with respect to imagined racial borders and notions of what it means to be Latina or Latino in U.S. popular culture today?

In this chapter I consider the implications of this shift and speculate in particular on the impact of the increasing emphasis on *mestizaje*, which I define for the purposes here strictly as racial hybridity, on Latina and Latino opportunity and star promotion in Hollywood media productions. To do so, I analyze the public image and career of one of the most successful actresses of mixed Latino background today, Jessica Alba, and to a lesser extent that of her contemporary, Rosario Dawson. Alba and Dawson, who have experienced radically different careers in the last decade, serve as apt case studies for this exploration, given that their multiracial heritage has occasionally figured as a topic of discussion in their interviews with the press. Their careers and the promotional texts that have contributed to their public images, including critics' reviews, promotional materials, and interviews, thus provide rich texts for the study of discourses circulating on mixed race and Latino identities in the mass media and U.S. social life.

Jessica Alba got her start as a young teen in a variety of small film and television roles and has since become a star of enough notoriety to play herself on HBO's satire of Hollywood stardom, *Entourage* (2004+). Interestingly, Alba's breakout role, and the one for which she arguably is best known, was that of racially mixed and genetically enhanced Max Guevara in the science fiction television series *Dark Angel* (2000–2002). This character, a heroic warrior of the future with a Hispanic last name and the DNA of multiple individuals of diverse racial heritage, is part of the new wave of mixed race characters that have become increasingly visible in Hollywood film and television texts in recent years.⁴ Jessica Alba and

Dark Angel thus offer a rich case study of contemporary mixed race representation. In Alba's career trajectory since the series end, she also has had an increasingly visible profile that sheds additional light on the treatment of a mixed Latina star in contemporary Hollywood.

To further explore these casting and promotional tendencies, I compare Alba's career and public image with that of Rosario Dawson. Dawson arguably is seen as a more serious actress, as surveys of her films and film reviews bear out; she has acted in and has been well received by critics in a number of low-budget independent films, as well as having worked for such respected directors as Spike Lee, Robert Rodriguez, and Oliver Stone. She does not appear to be considered for the same roles as Jessica Alba, however, at least when it comes to bigger-budget and/or studio-driven films. In such films Dawson often has small roles amid large ensemble casts, as was the case in *Alexander* (2005), *Sin City* (2005), and *Rent* (2005), or has been stuck in thankless "best friend" roles, as in *Down to You* (2000) and *Josie and the Pussycats* (2001). This is beginning to shift as Dawson is cast in more lead roles, however; her work in *Men in Black II* (2002) and *Clerks II* (2006) is a case in point. Another important distinction between the two actresses is that Dawson has typically played Latina and African American characters, whereas Alba has been cast in a number of "ambiguously white" roles over the years, the dynamics and the consequences of which I explore in more detail later in this chapter.

In this exploration, I interrogate how the actresses' public images have developed over the years, and in particular how they have been received by media gatekeepers such as critics and journalists. How has the mixed ancestry of each actress been treated in their press coverage, and what has been the impact of their evolving images on their casting opportunities? With these questions in mind, can it be said that all *mestizaje* is the same when it comes to mixed Latino (or, in this case, Latina) stars? Through interrogating these questions, I aim to shed light on the boundaries and implications of mixed race and Latina identities as articulated in Hollywood films, star promotion texts, and both mainstream and ethnic-oriented news coverage.

Latinos, Always "Ethnically Ambiguous"?

This is not to say that it is new for Latina and Latino stars to be mixed race. Given the privileging of fair skin and other European phenotypal

features in Hollywood, Latino actors and actresses with some European ancestry have traditionally had an advantage with respect to being considered for lead roles, a paradigm that is only recently beginning to lose power.⁵ Hollywood producers' casting of Spanish actors and actresses such as Antonio Banderas, Penelope Cruz, and Paz Vega in Latin American and Latino roles is just one manifestation of this preference. But while many Latino stars have been of mixed ancestry, stars of partial Latino descent often did not admit to or heavily publicize it prior to the 1990s, the decade in which mixed race births boomed in this country. Those who chose not to "out" themselves as mixed race likely were hoping to avoid being typecast in ethnic roles or, alternately, wanted to maintain the careers that their "Latin look" enabled.⁶ Mixed Latino actors and actresses of past eras include the late Anthony Quinn (who was Mexican and Irish), *Wonder Woman's* Lynda Carter (who is half Mexican), and Raquel Welch (of half-Bolivian heritage). Notably, some previously "closeted" mixed Latino actors and actresses who have "come out" regarding their Latin heritage have found new acting opportunities with the move. Raquel Welch, born Jo Raquel Tejada, for example, was quickly cast in Latina film and television roles.⁷

The apparent vogue for mixed Latino stars follows the more general popularity in Hollywood and U.S. popular culture since the 1990s for ethnically ambiguous looks. Mixed race actors and models in particular are being centrally featured in advertising and media productions, alongside ethnically inflected and "multicultural" products and aesthetics. These trends have been prompted, among other catalysts, by increasing ethnic diversity and cultural curiosity in this country. In the realm of Latino-oriented media outlets, this has translated to a focus on mixed Latino celebrities "getting back to their roots" through such devices as interviews and photo shoots that take place in their ancestors' country of origin, as in *Latina* magazine's photo shoot with model Christy Turlington in January 1999, complete with the headline "*Nuestra* Christy returns to El Salvador." As scholars such as Marilyn Halter and Leon Wynter have discussed in relation to these trends, and as Danzy Senna aptly remarked, the "mulatto millennium" is upon us.⁸

Within these new formations, Latino icons and images have been centrally featured. This is likely because of the Latino legacy of *mestizaje*: Latinos, though often not acknowledged as multiracial, are of widely mixed ethnic and racial descent with respect to indigenous and Spanish ancestry and heritage that can be traced to African and other origins. As Gregory

Velasco y Trianosky notes, "The central racial and cultural reality of Latino life is that everyone is *mestizo*."⁹ This legacy of amalgamation, among other things, has historically been interpreted as reasoning for the racialization of and discrimination against Latinos in legal policy and by U.S. social institutions.

It comes as somewhat of a surprise, then, given this long history and statistics which indicate that the rate of Latino outmarriage is 1 in 3,¹⁰ that scholarship on mixed race in the United States has often neglected to focus on mixed race families or individuals of partial Latino descent. In part this is because of continued confusion and debate regarding whether Latinos are a race or an ethnic group¹¹—and, thus, whether Latino-white relationships or individuals can be viewed as interracial. Recently scholars such as George G. Sánchez, Gregory Velasco y Trianosky, and Angharad Valdivia have begun to remedy this gap through critical attention to *Latinidad* in relation to hybridity and/or mixed race;¹² I build on their work here. My approach is based on the understanding that Latinos, while not defined by the government as a race, are a racialized ethnic group—as Chon Noriega notes, "legally white but socially black,"¹³ as evident in their historical and contemporary treatment by social institutions.

Perhaps most important when it comes to the predominance of individuals of full or partial Latino descent among the new wave of multicultural figures in U.S. popular culture, some (though certainly not all) Latinos possess an appearance similar to that of more clearly biracial or multiracial individuals. As Clara E. Rodríguez argues, the "look" historically popularized for Latinos and Latinas in Hollywood includes a light tan, café au lait complexion that falls between stereotypical norms of white and black skin tones,¹⁴ while some Latinos also possess other phenotypic features that defy easy racial categorization. An illustration of how this look can be construed for a trendy multiracial appearance: in 2003, a *New York Times* article on the new vogue for racially ambiguous models and actors in the realms of fashion, advertising, and media—what it termed "Generation E.A. (Ethnically Ambiguous)"—opened with the story of Leo Jiménez, a young model extremely popular with designers and club promoters because of his multiracial good looks. The model's "steeply raked cheekbones, dreadlocks, and jet-colored eyes" were the result not of being the child of biracial parents, however, as the article went on to reveal, but simply of being Columbian.¹⁵ As Leo Jiménez aptly illustrates, Latinos are already mixed race and as such have at times become trendy in the midst of the vogue for the multiracial figure.

Performers of partial Latino ancestry such as Jessica Alba and Rosario Dawson thus are at times pulled into the wave of popular interest, gaining acting and promotional opportunities in the midst of the Mulatto Millennium, at least in part because of their ethnically ambiguous appearance. Among their contemporaries are countless lesser-known actors and actresses who, like Leo Jiménez, are also being cast in minor, nonspeaking, and extra roles to help flesh out the multicultural ethos of film and television storyworlds set in both present and future settings. Examples include *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) and the films of the futuristic *Matrix* trilogy (1999–2003). As such they are possibly portraying Latinos, but just as likely are meant to be interpreted as Filipino, Samoan, half African American or Asian, or simply light-skinned "ethnic" types. While it could be argued that this amounts to increased casting opportunities for Latino actors and actresses and thus should be interpreted as a progressive development, it is important to examine what happens to the representation of *Latinidad*, or Latinness, in the process. To begin to explore these dynamics, the case studies of Jessica Alba and Rosario Dawson illuminate how *Latinidad* has come to be framed in the careers and public images of two actresses of partial Latino descent.

Jessica Alba and Max Guevara, Mixed Race Icons

According to biographies of Jessica Alba, the actress was born in 1981 in Pomona, California. She has related to interviewers that her mother is of Danish, French-Canadian, English, and Italian descent, and her father is Mexican American. Notably with respect to her Mexican heritage, Alba's father, Mark Alba, has been described in drastically diverse ways by the news media, some of which seem to attempt to avoid the label of Mexican American. He was described by *Marie Claire* magazine as "Mexican-Indian and Spanish," for example.¹⁶ At the other extreme, he was described as "dark Mexican" in a *Rolling Stone* interview with Alba in 2005.¹⁷ Such odd treatment of Alba's paternal heritage likely reflects the historical colonization and related denigration of Mexican Americans in the United States, as Pérez-Torres, Valdivia, and others argue regarding the continued privileging of certain types of *Latinidad* in sociopolitical spheres and popular culture.¹⁸

Alba was fairly young when she began acting; reports state that she started taking acting classes was twelve. She got her first, minor film role

a year later in the children's comedy *Camp Nowhere* (1994); other roles followed in commercials and children's television series such as Nickelodeon's *The Secret World of Alex Mack* (1994–98), on which she appeared in 1994, and *Flipper* (1995–2000), on which she had a recurring role from 1995 to 1997. A survey of her work in these years reveals that she likely benefited from the newly multicultural ethos and casting of Nickelodeon, Disney, and other children's media producers, trends that Angharad Valdivia discusses in another chapter of this volume. Ambiguously ethnic roles that the young actress appeared in during these years include her role as Maya on *Flipper* and tomboy Samantha Swoboda in the children's techno-geek action film *P.U.N.K.S.* (1999).

With regard to star promotion, the publicity that Alba received was negligible at this stage in her career. While critics at times made mention of Alba as attractive, as in reviews of the teen horror-comedy film in which she played a girl-next-door type, *Idle Hands* (1999),¹⁹ in none of the publicity that could be found for Alba from these years was ethnicity mentioned. Apparently it was seen as prudent to promote Alba merely as an "American" teen, even while she found much of her opportunity in nonwhite roles. Perhaps another reason for this lack of ethnic specificity was due to her audience—more specifically, due to a perceived lack of attention on the part of young audiences to performers' racial identities. Advertising firms were finding in 1990s studies that this was often the case, and likely media producers were taking notice.²⁰ According to this research, it likely did not matter to the same degree for Jessica Alba's young viewers as it did for their parents whether she was white, Latina, mixed, or all of the above.

When Jessica Alba was eighteen, her career underwent a dramatic turn. She was given her first major role when she was cast by *Dark Angel* executive producers James Cameron and Charles H. Eglee to play Max Guevara, a genetically enhanced (or in *Dark Angel*-speak, transgenic) female in a dystopic future. More than a thousand young women reportedly were considered in the producers' search for an actress with an appearance and stage presence suitable to portray Max. In this search a multiracial look was definitely part of the producers' vision. "If you're really going to assemble the best of humanity, why not cross the whole genetic spectrum?" Eglee asserted in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly* in 2000. "We wanted someone with a transgenic look."²¹ Casting director Robert Ulrich has contributed that the series was cast to support the multiracial aesthetic the producers were aiming to create:

"It was in the future when everyone was going to be mixed and hopefully mixed in together. And obviously that was a very important part to casting the character of Max. And I think one that was one of the most wonderful things about Jessica, because it's hard to tell what exactly Jessica's ethnic background is."²²

After the series debuted in the fall of 2000, Alba was quickly noticed by viewers, particularly young male fans. News stories about the series make note of the boom in Jessica Alba-dedicated Web sites and other signs of popularity that the young actress quickly received, even though *Dark Angel* did only moderately well in the ratings in its two seasons and was panned by some reviewers. For instance, at the culmination of the 2000–2001 season she was awarded a 2001 Teen Choice Award and the 2001 *TV Guide* Award for Breakout Star of the Year. She began to get offers to star in films and other projects.



Max Guevara (Jessica Alba) is multiracial but also raceless in the Fox television series *Dark Angel* (2000–2002). Photo courtesy of Movie Market, Ltd.

An interesting question here is the impact of Alba, as a mixed Latina star, rising to stardom in her portrayal of a mixed race and part-Latina character. Max Guevara is not so neatly categorized, however, as her backstory complicates how she can be read with respect to racial or ethnic identity. One could argue that the character is coded as Latina according to Hollywood traditions of racial marking, with Alba's olive complexion and dark brunette hair and makeup in the role contributing to this construction. This proves difficult to sustain, however, given that Max does not identify as Latina in the narrative. She never, for instance, questions the origin of her seemingly Hispanic last name, while the series producers reveal in commentary that accompanies the season 1 DVD set that her first name is short for the ethnically generic "Maximum." We also learn early in season 1 that Max's mother, who by appearance in flashback could be Latina, was not her biological mother.

And while Max has DNA that can be traced back to multiple individuals, such that she undeniably is multiracial, the series does not explore mixed race identity on more than a metaphoric level. Perhaps most important in this regard is the fact that Max's genetic *mélange* was manufactured in a laboratory and thus is removed from any connection to ethnic history or communities. Max also is characterized as so mixed that any one possible identity is nullified. "With my DNA, I'm pretty much a blood relative to everybody who's been anybody, ever. Winston Churchill . . . Einstein . . . Pocahontas," she shares with her compatriot and love interest Logan Cale in a season 1 episode.²³ Max's racial identity, rather, is one of affiliation, demonstrated in her sense of responsibility to her "family" of similarly engineered X-5s. Her X-5 brothers and sisters, a virtual United Colors of Benetton corps of genetically manufactured supersoldiers, while providing a visible metaphor for multiracial identity, also symbolize the elision of race. Max Guevara is the most developed case in point; in her case, Latino culture, history, and community were effaced in her creation.

Interestingly, despite her character's ambiguous but primarily mixed race status, early publicity for the series seldom made mention of Jessica Alba's multiethnic roots. Readers today are likely used to hearing of Alba's "smoky multicultural looks" and heritage of "ethnic *mélange*,"²⁴ but little mention of Alba's mixed ancestry was made in the articles that heralded the debut of *Dark Angel*. The first publicity for the series in *Entertainment Weekly*, for example, described only Alba's beauty (more specifically, her "mouth-agape beauty and swollen lips").²⁵ Other journalists chose to focus on *Dark Angel's* similarity to other sexy and hard-fighting female

characters on television, such as Buffy of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.²⁶ When Alba's ancestry was mentioned, it was at times reported incorrectly, often with her Mexican heritage downplayed or left out entirely. For instance, in an article in *Entertainment Weekly* in 2001, journalist Benjamin Svetkey described her as "a genetics experiment all her own. Part Spanish, part Danish, part Canadian, and part Italian."²⁷

The Latino-oriented press was quick to notice the actress, however, and to trumpet her arrival as a new Latina star. This is unsurprising, given that the casting of a Latina, whether of full or partial descent, as the lead in a network television series was almost unprecedented in 2000. Alba and the *Dark Angel* series were mentioned in news outlets that reported on Latinos in Hollywood media projects, such as *Latina*, *Hispanic*, *People en Español*, and *Latin Heat*, an industry trade journal, with Alba touted as a rising star. Alba later was awarded a 2001 ALMA (American Latino Media Arts) Award as Breakthrough Star of the Year. This was followed by a second ALMA Award for Outstanding Actress in a Television Series in 2002. It would appear that Alba was fully embraced as a Latina actress within Latino-oriented media circles, even while she was clearly promoted in the mainstream press as mixed race. Schisms could occasionally be noted in reaction to this dual promotional strategy, such as in coverage in the Latino-oriented media that prodded the actress for not embracing her *Mexicanidad* more fully. For instance, a news item reported by *Latina* magazine in the spring of 2006 described her as "Mexican-American Alba (you can keep denying it, mi'ja, but we know the truth!)."²⁸

Notably, in the period in which *Dark Angel* was broadcast, multiraciality was garnering a great deal of attention in popular culture. Films such as *The Fast and the Furious* (2001) and *The Scorpion King* (2001) were being released, while their mixed race stars, Vin Diesel and Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson, respectively, were prompting discussions of what Valdivia has termed the increasing "ethnification" of popular culture.²⁹ By 2001, news coverage of Jessica Alba often focused on her diverse ethnic background, now usually more correctly described. One especially blatant example was *Entertainment Weekly's* quiz on its EW.com Web site, titled "What Nationalities Are in Jessica Alba's Ancestry?" Given *Dark Angel's* lower ratings in 2001-2, Alba appeared to be receiving attention in part simply because she was seen as appealing to many fans. What would become of Alba's career and public image when she no longer was cast in a role that placed multiraciality at its crux, however? Exploration of the actress's post-*Dark Angel* career and image sheds additional light on mixed Latino stardom.

*A Place for Ethnic Ambiguity in "Real" Storyworlds?
Alba after Dark Angel*

Jessica Alba's career has taken new turns in the years since *Dark Angel* was canceled in 2002. While the actress has appeared in a handful of films since then, a survey of these films reveals that producers and casting directors were at least initially unsure of how to cast her outside of futuristic and/or fantastic settings. This is not to say that they may not have had high expectations with respect to her ethnic versatility—as long as the characters she was portraying were not white. For example, in 2003 Alba portrayed both a native Iban woman in 1930s Malaysia in the period drama *The Sleeping Dictionary* and a brash Puerto Rican dancer from the Bronx in the urban dance drama *Honey*. Unfortunately, Alba appears out of her element in both roles, particularly with respect to her attempt to proximate believable accents for her characters. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam's discussion of white-centrism as reinforced in studio-era Hollywood through lack of attention to realistic language and accent of non-white characters, particularly those from regions deemed third world, seems still relevant when considering Alba's verisimilitude in these roles.³⁰ Although *Honey* earned some respectable early box office and did fairly well in DVD sales, *The Sleeping Dictionary* was never released in theaters; both films were panned by critics.

Alba fared better with respect to story lines set in more fantastic surroundings. Two of her more recent roles involved portraying comic book figures, the superhero Sue Storm/Invisible Girl in *Fantastic Four* (2005) and a sweet stripper in Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City* (2005). Controversy initially arose among comic book fans over the casting of Alba as the historically Nordic Sue Storm, which she supposedly muted when she appeared in dyed blond hair and impressed fans in the film. *Sin City*'s Nancy Carruthers, as portrayed by Alba, also appears to be ambiguously white. Similarly, Alba was cast opposite Paul Walker in the deep-sea-diving thriller *Into the Blue* (2005), in a case of color-blind casting that had the actress don various bikinis and allowed her to utilize her scuba-diving skills.

In the meantime, Jessica Alba has been consistently lauded in the press for her beauty and even more so for her perceived sexiness. To list a handful of her recent achievements in this regard, Alba was named one of *Teen People*'s 25 Hottest Stars under 25 in 2005, while her performance in

Sin City was awarded Sexiest Performance by the MTV Movie Awards. In 2006 she also topped *Playboy*'s Hottest Celebrities list. This celebration of Alba's body has accompanied her rising status as an actress. Perhaps the most noticeable sign of this development in Alba's career, in June 2006, she was named "Must Girl of the Summer" by *Entertainment Weekly*, headlining its 2006 "It List." In its story on the star, the magazine declared Alba to be "on the brink of Hollywood domination," despite the fact that she was appearing in no films to be released that summer.³¹

Notably, as Alba has become increasingly successful as a Hollywood actress and visible as a public figure, she has spoken more candidly about her mixed race identity. As she described her childhood to *Rolling Stone* journalist Allison Glock, "I never really belonged anywhere. . . . I wasn't white. I was shunned by the Latin community for not being Latin enough."³² Her discussions with interviewers in recent years have addressed elements of Latina identity that go beyond appearance, such as language and cultural habits. For instance, Alba has mentioned how her life has been impacted by not being given the opportunity to learn Spanish when she was growing up. "My grandfather was the only one in our family to go to college. He made a choice not to speak Spanish in the house. He didn't want his kids to be different," she has noted.³³ Alba added that she is currently taking lessons in Spanish.

*Ambiguously Ethnic, Not the Same as
Ambiguously White: Rosario Dawson*

Alba's off-white appearance and the advantages it brings her as a Hollywood actress become more apparent when her opportunities and promotional texts are compared with those of her peer Rosario Dawson. As noted previously, while Dawson has had a busy career and is also widely praised as attractive, she has experienced very different acting opportunities than Alba. We can surmise that this is in part because the two actresses have made different career choices. Arguably, however, it is also because Dawson's more markedly ethnic appearance and urban image have translated to media industry perceptions that her marketability to film audiences is not as broad as Alba's.

A comparison of the two actresses' promotional texts and filmographies reveals the pivotal importance of how a performer's appearance and early career choices are "read" by critics and journalists and ultimately

contribute to the construction of racialized star images. This is particularly noticeable in the case of mixed race actors, who may be marked with a racialized image that actually differs from their ethnic origins and/or identity. For example, Halle Berry is interpreted by journalists as African American even when she brings her Euro-American mother with her to the Oscars, Cameron Diaz is perceived and promoted as unambiguously “white,” and Salma Hayek simply as “Latina,” even though their mixed racial heritage, which belies this simplicity, is known to much of the public. Mixed race is increasingly an identity category available to stars, but one that is unstable when it comes to its impact on their careers.

In this regard, Jessica Alba’s initial lack of ethnic self-labeling in her career and her light tan, not brown, skin, and perhaps even her perceived girlishness have contributed to the perception that she is ethnically ambiguous to the degree most preferred by Hollywood producers and casting directors in casting lead roles. In other words, Alba has achieved an “off-white” image, to borrow the term coined by Diane Negra to describe the liminal racial status of white ethnic actresses since Hollywood’s silent film era.³⁴ Dawson, in contrast, has somewhat darker skin and dark hair that does not look as natural when dyed blond (as has recently been a favored look of Alba’s), has a more womanly and urban image, and has been associated with her mixed heritage since she began her acting career. Given Hollywood’s ongoing, unwritten racial paradigms of casting, which still often dictate a color line between whiteness and nonwhiteness, it comes as no surprise that she has typically been cast only as Latinas, Latin Americans, and ambiguous ethnic types, and in one case, as Persian (in *Alexander*). She also has been much less likely than Alba to be cast in nonethnic specific (“white”) roles. On the other hand, Dawson has received opportunities to portray the romantic partners of characters played by African American actors, including Will Smith in *Men in Black II* (2002) and Eddie Murphy in *The Adventures of Pluto Nash* (2002)—a casting paradigm that can be seen as a holdover from classical Hollywood’s reluctance to portray mixed couples on screen. The rise of male actors of color who are seen as “having box office” and thus as able to headline a film has in this regard been a boon to Rosario Dawson’s career.

Dawson also is viewed as more “urban” than Alba, which arguably has contributed to this racialization of her public image. A preponderance of Dawson’s films have been set in New York City, beginning with *Kids* and subsequently including *He Got Game* (1998), *Light It Up* (1999), *Sidewalks of New York* (2001), *25th Hour* (2002), and *Rent* (2005). In these films her



Rosario Dawson in one of the roles that contributed to her urban, ethnic image. She starred with Usher Raymond (left) and Robert Richard in the urban teen drama *Light It Up* (1999). Photo courtesy of Edmonds/Fox 2000 and the Kobal Collection.

major costars have often been other actors of color. Such was the case in *Light It Up*, a drama about New York City high school students in a standoff with police in an effort to force improvements at their school; Dawson plays a brainy student who is convinced to take part. In addition, the story that is often repeated about Dawson’s entrée as an actress is that *Kids* director, Larry Clark, “discovered” Dawson on her Lower East Side tenement stoop when she was fifteen.³⁵ This and the predominance of New York-centric roles that Dawson has portrayed since have contributed to a public image that is strongly rooted in the city and its polyglot, distinctly “ethnic” cultures. Common associations of Nuyorican and Afro-Cuban cultures with African American culture in the United States also arguably have an impact in this regard. Puerto Rican culture has historically been intertwined and strongly associated with African American culture in New York City in particular,³⁶ leading to an association with “blackness” in the public imaginary to a degree distinct from that of other Latino groups.

It is important to note that this process of the differing racialization of Alba’s and Dawson’s public images has taken place not only in Hollywood

but to a large degree in the Latino- and African American-oriented news media and by ethnic advocacy groups that monitor media representation. More specifically, Alba and Dawson have been embraced by their overlapping ethnic communities, but to different degrees. A review of their mention in Latino-oriented magazines and nominations for awards such as the ALMAs supports that while both have been claimed at various times as Latina stars, Alba appears to have received more attention from the Latino-oriented press and especially from Latino advocacy groups. On the other hand, Dawson has been additionally “claimed” by and lauded for her acting by African American-oriented media outlets such as *Essence* and *Jet* magazines and groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which has honored her at its annual Image Awards ceremony.

Over the years, Dawson has received positive reviews from film critics (she has been described, among other things, as a “rising starlet” and “a lovely and appealing screen presence”),³⁷ and she was recently part of the ensemble cast of *A Guide to Recognizing Your Saints*, awarded a Special Jury Prize for best ensemble performance at the Sundance Film Festival in 2006. Her “diverse as downtown” image³⁸ has likely affected how she is viewed by Hollywood producers, who appear to still often be guided by white-centric norms, however. Interestingly, the few directors that have cast her as a romantic lead opposite a white male have in fact been New Yorkers. They include Edward Burns, who cast Dawson in both *Sidewalks of New York* and *Ash Wednesday* (2002), and Spike Lee, who cast her opposite Edward Norton in *25th Hour*.

Hierarchies of Mestizaje: Mixed Latino Stars and Racialization

It is worth exploring the fact that Alba’s *mestizaje* appears more desirable than Dawson’s not only to Hollywood producers but also to Latino media outlets. While it is important not to read too much into this supposed difference, it does underscore the vagaries of contemporary Latinidad as defined within Latino communities and particularly by media outlets. What factors determine whether a star of partial Latino ancestry will be embraced by the Latino community? Notably, not all types of racial ambiguity are necessarily embraced equally. As Gregory Velazco y Trianosky argues, while *mestizaje* is very much a part of Latino and Latin American history, it still is not necessarily acknowledged or celebrated.³⁹ Indigenous and African ancestry

continues to be denied and denigrated in casual talk and actions (my own mother, who likes to be reassured that her tan is not too dark when she has spent time in the sun, is just one example), while fair skin is typically celebrated. Similar patterns at times can be discerned in the Latino-oriented media when it comes to coverage of mixed Latino stars. In this regard, the historical “one-drop” rule, which dictated that any African ancestry meant an individual was black, still appears to be in effect, both in Latino-oriented realms and in Hollywood casting circles: Rosario Dawson has to contend with an association with blackness in her image, whereas Jessica Alba does not. Arguably for mixed Latina stars their approximation of the expected “Latin look” is still a necessity, while the more they can play with whiteness within these parameters, the better.

An illustration of the importance of perceived “assimilability” to whiteness to being viewed as a bankable Hollywood actress can be seen in the career of Jessica Alba, who is currently constructed as the Millennial Girl Next Door. The complexity of this construction should be acknowledged, however. Her public image arguably is coming full circle as she is seen simultaneously as mixed race *and* as the average U.S. American girl. As she noted to *Entertainment Weekly* in June 2006 in response to her popularity, “People today, especially this next generation of kids, they don’t look like middle America anymore. They’re not all blond and blue-eyed. They’re more ethnically mixed. Today, the girl next door looks more like me.”⁴⁰ This can be viewed as a strategic, assimilationist move in the development of her public image, but also as a sign of an increased broadening of ethnic notions in the popular imagination. Moreover, it is paying off. Alba appears to be following in the path set by Jennifer Lopez as she begins to be cast in a number of non-ethnic-specified roles in her upcoming films, a definite shift from how she was cast a few years ago. The films she has in production include the medical drama *Awake*, the romantic comedy *Good Luck Chuck*, the Ten Commandments-inspired satire *The Ten*, and the comedy *Bill*, in addition to *Fantastic Four* and *Sin City* sequels.

Mestizaje and Mixed Latino Stars: Conclusions

Both in the mainstream and at the high end of the marketplace, what is perceived as good, desirable, successful is often a face whose heritage is hard to pin down.

—Ron Berger, chief executive, advertising firm Euro RSCG Worldwide⁴¹

In exploring Jessica Alba's and Rosario Dawson's evolving careers and public images, it becomes clear that in many ways Max Guevara's ambiguous but deracialized identity serves as an apt metaphor for how the actress who portrayed her was initially sold to the U.S. American public, and how Rosario Dawson, running up against what we might call the "one-drop rule of color-blind casting," has not and likely will not any time soon be given this opportunity on the big-budget film playing field. More recently, Alba has begun to complicate her image, however, as she shares increasing information about her struggles and achievements as a mixed race individual and actress. This ambiguity, as is foregrounded in Max Guevara's characterization and in Alba's public image, still can offer a challenge to Hollywood and the nation's imagined constructions of race, placing into question why anyone can be neatly categorized.

But while Alba, Dawson, and other mixed Latino actors provide a reminder of the constructed nature of racial and ethnic categories, and may publicly identify in a manner that emphasizes a mestiza or multi-racial identity, they cannot fully avoid the process of cultural racialization that typically takes place in the realm of star promotion, which often reiterates a white-black or white-nonwhite color line. As the comparison of these two actresses illuminates, this process is dependent on the media industries' interpretation of an actor's appearance and acting choices, and, to a lesser extent, on how the star identifies him- or herself. Through these dynamics performers are subtly or not so subtly racially classified by production companies, publicists, and the entertainment news media, a process that has ultimate sway in an actor's career and public image. Performers can attempt to influence this process through their choice of news outlets in which to give interviews and other declarations of racial and ethnic affiliation, but ultimately they cannot change age-old paradigms that have guided how Hollywood film actors have been labeled, cast, and publicized.

Although her success does increase Latina visibility, Alba notably has had many doors open to her that are still not available to other Latinas, in large part because of her off-white appearance and image. As Ron Berger, chief executive of the advertising firm and trend research company Euro RSCG Worldwide, notes in the quotation at the beginning of this section, the most desirable look today is often one that is hard to pinpoint with respect to race and ethnicity—that is, as long as some of that heritage appears to be European American. From this perspective, is Alba's success reflective in any shape or form of a rising status of Latinos in the

United States or in Hollywood with respect to casting opportunities? Not necessarily, considering that in this process Latinidad is often nullified, construed merely as a hint of ethnic possibility that is never made meaningful.

Notably, while ambiguity and approximation of whiteness can result in increased opportunity in contemporary media projects, Latino representation as constructed by Hollywood still rests on notions of distinctive Latino elements and traits, which include an inherent *mestizaje*. This *mestizaje* is in danger of being submerged in movements to whiten and deny African and indigenous ancestry and appearance while exalting the multiethnic, however. In this regard the "multiculti" wave needs to be viewed critically, particularly regarding how it may threaten to halt progress toward increasingly diverse and dimensional Latino images. But much of the responsibility in this regard lies with Latino communities and media outlets. As Gloria Anzaldúa famously has argued, the challenge for Latino communities is to embrace the contradictions of our mixed ancestry in all its permutations. In this regard, mixed Latina stars such as Jessica Alba and Rosario Dawson serve as important symbolic tropes, whose future careers will have a great deal to say about the racial borders that affect Latinos more generally.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Camilla Fojas for her astute suggestions, particularly regarding the assimilable mixed race star, in her review of drafts of this chapter. I would also like to thank LeiLani Nishime for organizing the American Studies Association conference panel in 2006 at which this chapter was first presented, and my *comadre* Becky Lentz for introducing me to the guilty pleasures of *Dark Angel*.

NOTES

1. I hereafter use the term "Latino" in a gender-inclusive manner to refer to both Latinas and Latinos, rather than the more unwieldy Latina/o or Latin@.
2. I first heard this term used by Bel Hernandez, CEO and publisher of *Latin Heat*, a media industry trade journal, where I interned to conduct research in 2000. Hernandez in fact has since trademarked it. *Latin Heat*, which reports on

the deals made by Hollywood media companies with Latino actors and creative professionals, utilizes it in its recurring "LatinoWood" USA: The Inside Chisme" column.

3. See Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), for a foundational discussion of the racialized paradigms of casting in the Hollywood film industry.

4. For discussion of the new centrality of mixed race actors and models in film, television, and popular culture, see my essay "The New Hollywood Racelessness: When Only the Fast, Furious (and Multi-racial) Will Survive," *Cinema Journal* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2005): 50-67; as well as Marilyn Halter, *Shopping for Identity: The Marketing of Ethnicity* (New York: Schocken Books, 2000); Leon E. Wynter, *American Skin: Pop Culture, Big Business, and the End of White America* (New York: Crown, 2002); Danzy Senna, "The Mulatto Millennium," in *Half and Half*, ed. Claudine O'Hearn (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 205-8, and Caroline A. Streeter, "The Hazards of Visibility: 'Biracial' Women, Media Images, and Narratives of Identity," in *New Faces in a Changing America: Multiracial Identity in the 21st Century*, ed. Loretta I. Winters and Herman L. DeBose (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), 301-22.

5. For further discussion of the film industry's long-term preference for Latino and Latina actors of fair skin and appearance, see Clara E. Rodriguez, introduction, *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the U.S. Media*, ed. Clara E. Rodriguez (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 1-12; Charles Ramírez Berg, *Latinos and Film: Stereotypes, Subversion, and Resistance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Antonio Ríos-Bustamente, "Latino Participation in the Hollywood Film Industry, 1911-1945," in *Chicanos and Film: Representation and Resistance*, ed. Chon Noriega (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 18-28; and Mary Beltrán, "The Hollywood Latina Body as Site of Social Struggle: Media Constructions of Stardom and Jennifer Lopez's 'Cross-Over Butt,'" *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 19 (2002): 71-86.

6. Clara E. Rodriguez points out that fair, blond, and blue-eyed Latino actors and actresses typically are not considered for Latino roles; by Hollywood standards they do not have what she terms the preferred "Latin look" (*Latin Looks*, 4). Such rules regarding the "type" of Latino who might be considered for a lead role are beginning to shift, but only slightly.

7. Since she began to publicly promote herself as half Bolivian, Welch was cast in the Latino-themed *Tortilla Soup* (2001) and in *American Family* (2002), a television series about a Mexican American family written and produced by Gregory Nava.

8. Senna, "The Mulatto Millennium"; Halter, *Shopping for Identity*; Leon E. Wynter, *American Skin*.

9. Gregory Velasco y Trianosky, "Beyond *Mestizaje*: The Future of Race in America," in Winters and DeBose, *New Faces in a Changing America*, 176.

10. For discussion of the current rates of out-marriage in the United States, see Michael A. Fletcher, "Interracial Marriages Eroding Barriers," *Washington Post*, December 28, 1998, A1.

11. See Elizabeth M. Grieco and Rachel C. Cassidy, "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin: Census 2000 Brief," *Mixed Race' Studies: A Reader*, ed. Jayne Ifekwunigwe (London: Routledge, 2004), 225-43, for an overview of the problematic way in which Hispanics are currently tallied on the census. This discussion provides evidence for why Latinos continue to hold an indeterminate status in relation to racial categories and group identity.

12. Velasco y Trianosky, "Beyond *Mestizaje*"; Angharad N. Valdivia, "Latinas as Radical Hybrid: Transnationally Gendered Traces in Mainstream Media," *Global Media Journal* 3, no. 4 (Spring 2004), <http://lass.calumet.purdue.edu/cga/gmj/spo4/gmj-spo4-valdivia.htm>; George C. Sanchez, "Y Tú Que? (Y2K): Latino History in the New Millennium," in Ifekwunigwe *Mixed Race' Studies*, 276-82.

13. Chon Noriega, *Shot in America: Television, the State, and the Rise of Chicano Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xxvi.

14. Rodríguez, introduction, *Latin Looks*.

15. Ruth La Ferla, "Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous," *New York Times*, December 28, 2003, sec. 9, p. 1.

16. Dennis Hensley, *Marie Claire*, August 2005, par. 4, http://magazines.ivilage.com/marieclaire/mind/celebinterview/articles/0,,673522_673618-2,00.html.

17. Alba appears to be quoted in this article by Allison Glock, "The Body and Soul of Jessica Alba," *Rolling Stone* June 30, 2005, 76-83, par. 6. The paragraph in which the quotation appeared is not listed in the excerpted article on *Rolling Stone's* Web pages, but the complete article can be found in its reprint version. See "Fantasy Figure," *Guardian*, July 17, 2005, <http://film.guardian.co.uk/interview/interviewpages/0,,1530103,00.html>.

18. Rafael Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Valdivia, "Latinas as Radical Hybrid."

19. See, for example, Marc Savlov, "Idle Hands," *Austin Chronicle*, April 30, 1999, www.austinchronicle.com/gbase/Calendar/Film?Film=oid%3a142862; and Ron Wells, "Idle Hands," *Film Threat*, April 26, 1990, www.filmthreat.com/index.php?section=reviews&id=710.

20. BBDO New York, "TV Viewing Habits Differ in Black Households," *Minority Markets Alert* 7, no. 5 (May 1995): 2.

21. Eglee cited by Benjamin Svetkey, "The Terminatrix," *Entertainment Weekly*, March 16, 2001, par. 14, www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,280327_1,00.html.

22. *Dark Angel: Genesis* (Twentieth Century Fox, 2000), featurette, *Dark Angel: The Complete First Season* DVD set.

23. *Dark Angel*, season 1, episode 10: "Art Attack."

24. Benjamin Svetkey, "Jessica Alba Is Our Must Girl of the Summer," *Entertainment Weekly*, June 30, 2006, 45-51, par. 9; and Allison Glock, *Rolling Stone*, June 30, 2005, par. 7, respectively.

25. Dan Snierson, "Back to the Future: EW Goes behind the Scenes at Fox's Latest Foray into Sci-fi Drama," *Entertainment Weekly*, March 28, 2000, n.p., par. 3, www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,85597,00.html.

26. For example, see Lewis Beale, "Attack of the Sexy Tough Women," *New York Daily News*, October 19, 2000, 52.

27. Svetkey, "The Terminatrix," par. 12.

28. Latina.com, "Jessica Alba to Host MTV Movie Awards," www.latina.com/latina/searchresults.jsp?jsessionid=2A538684F558A74579BCED3D09A6A9B8.

29. Valdivia, "Latinas as Radical Hybrid."

30. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

31. Svetkey, "Jessica Alba Is Our Must Girl of the Summer."

32. Glock, "The Body and Soul of Jessica Alba," par. 7.

33. Ibid.

34. Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Stardom* (London: Routledge, 2001).

35. This information has been confirmed by Dawson in multiple published interviews, including Logan Hill's "Avenue A-Lister" in *New York Magazine*, September 5, 2005.

36. See Juan Flores, "Qué Assimilated, Brother, Yo So Assimilao: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.," in *Challenging Fronteras: Structuring Latina and Latino Lives in the U.S.*, ed. Mary Romero, Pierrette Hongdagnu-Sotelo, and Vilma Ortiz (New York: Routledge, 1997), 175-86.

37. *Love in the Time of Money* (review), *Hollywood Reporter*, January 14, 2002; Andrew O'Hehir, "Movie Reviews: *The Rundown*," *Salon.com*, September 26, 2003, www.salon.com.

38. Hill, "Avenue A-Lister."

39. Velazco y Trianosky, "Beyond *Mestizaje*."

40. Svetkey, "Jessica Alba Is Our Must Girl of the Summer," par. 8.

41. Quoted in La Ferla, "Generation E.A.," par. 4.