COMMODIFYING LOOKS:
MULTIRACIAL WOMEN AS “EXOTIC”

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The rigid “one-drop rule” that strictly defined racial categories in the United States ignored the presence of multiracial individuals. The 1967 Loving vs. Virginia Supreme Court ruling, which eliminated the last of the anti-miscegenation laws between whites and non-whites, slowly paved the way for a shifting representation of mixed individuals as the number of multiracial births significantly increased. From this time, mainstream white cultures started to treat racially mixed people as “the children of the future,” as a way to conveniently deflect racial tensions that persisted within U.S. society. These depictions were, and still are to this day, problematic because they idealize the multiracial character and identity while completely neglecting this group’s marginalized representations of commodified bodies.

Multiracial women in particular are often described as “exotic” and excessively beautiful. According to a society which has heightened the worth of attractive women, these stereotypes may be desired. The term exotic, however, is extremely degrading as it can be defined as strikingly unusual and foreign in origin, lending to images of otherness and sexual promiscuity. Many feminist scholars have also criticized the beauty industry itself, as oppressive to women by creating unattainable and confining standards. How are these images perpetuated and in turn internalized? And how do multiracial women negotiate such representations?

I will explore these questions by first addressing how representations, as cultural critic Stuart Hall argues, are historical and institutionalized practices that have been used to maintain hierarchies of power. Next, I will highlight the cycle of oppression that used these representations as a template to restrict multiracial women--specifically the black/white Mulatta and Eurasian figures--in the past by portraying them as the “best of both worlds” or “worst of both worlds.” Critiquing current beauty handbooks that contain images of racially mixed women will demonstrate how stereotypes perpetuate, and in this case mold the identities of female viewers who may come to believe in these limited portrayals as truth. Finally, I will look at novels written by mixed-race women from different points in time, to present a variety of ways in which these women contested dominant representations, and to get an insight into their world that has heavily been affected by these prevailing stereotypes. By doing so, I will be able to provide a multifaceted understanding of the representations of multiracial women.