

Acting the Passer: An Intersectional Reading to Danzy Senna's From Caucasia With Love (1998)



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Summary:

The present paper addresses Danzy Senna's debut coming-of-age novel *Caucasia* (1998) within an intersectional matrix of the entwined dynamics of race, gender and class. The focus is on how the protagonist, Birdie Lee, negotiates her complex identity in a racially stratified America of the 1970s. Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, the study demonstrates how the experiences of the main character in terms of identity formation within the context of border crossing, highlight the complexity of mixed-race women lives. The study also discusses the psychological conflicts brought about by racial passing, through the story of *Caucasia*, which in its turn reveals the tension between self-authenticity and social survival. The story's novelty stems from the author's endeavour to re-invent or revive the trope of passing. The present paper attempts to figure out how the main character's transgression of racial and gender boundaries establish identity as constructed and performed.

Keywords: Identity, Intersectionality, mixed- race, Female Subjectivity, Passing

Am I to be cursed forever with becoming someone else on my way to myself? Audre Lorde, "Change of Season" (1992)

INTRODUCTION

Historically, race has been employed as a biological classification of men and women on the basis of certain visible physical features passed from one generation to another. Despite the fact that the legitimacy of the word has

been put into question, 'race' is still used as a label to classify people on the basis of their phenotype, leading to the formation of attitudes and stereotypes about groups. Looking into the past and at the current reality of the US, our attention is turned to racial passing as a race related issue. With no intention to dispute the idea that race, rather than biologically given, is socially constructed, there is no denying that race is real, but why does race still matter in a supposedly 'post-racial' era? Though the idea of race as social construction has become a truism, individuals' classifications have not been eradicated, on the contrary, they are palpable as race is used to construct difference among people and results in specific kinds of discrimination and disadvantage for those who are racialized. As far as differentiation, as a constant feature of race, is concerned, attention is turned to a peculiar type of narrative known as Passing.

The wide range of examples of people who have attempted to pass, as chronicled by American history, stand as an important manifestation of the persistence of the binary racial classification system prevalent in the US and which opposes "Blackness" to "Whiteness." Needless to say, America's ever changing cultural landscape, marked by a natural increase in conversation about race, was influential in creating a space wherein many of the complexities related to identity formation could be unpacked and examined.

The resonance of those polar oppositions within the black-white binary is accentuated when Danzy Senna, a "Post-Soul"¹ writer, explores the conflicting issue of growing up in the highly diverse context of the United States, once described as "*E Pluribus Unum*," or the nation out of many. Through the story of a mixed-race family, Senna sparks off on the issue of racial identity in several ways and centres upon the socially-enforced performative nature of passing. The aim is to reveal how identity, because of others, is imposed and becomes self-created due to certain cultural and historical dimensions that contribute to the passer's identity formation.

Senna's story follows the lives of two biracial sisters Birdie and Cole born to Deck, a Black academic father, and Sandy, a White activist mother who is also the estranged descendant of a Bostonian family. The elder sister Cole, who took after the father's hair and skin colour is Black, while Birdie, who is light-skinned with straight hair, often passes for white. Despite their marked physical differences, the two sisters were inseparable until their parents' marriage broke up. As a result, Cole followed her father, because she looked like him, while Birdie went with her mother Sandy. The rest of the story follows Birdie's attempts to reconnect with her lost

¹ Post-soul writers refers to artists in general, who were born or came of age after the Civil Rights Movement.

sister while growing up with her white mother and navigating her identity as a black girl passing for white.

It is noteworthy to mention that the unique dilemma faced by biracial people already captivated the attention of early black writers who adapted their texts in the forms of the sentimental romance, the domestic or utopian novels, to articulate their views on slavery, segregation, and racism. In an effort to capture the life of the outcast, the trope known as "the tragic mulatto" emerged.

For purposes of assimilation within the black and white racialized worlds, Birdie, the twentieth century passer, does not hesitate to use her physical appearance, either to darken or to lighten, the one she wants to be. As a biracial girl growing up in Boston during the 1970s, Birdie finds herself in a world already defined by racial borders. To cope with this environment's animosity, Birdie creates a variety of personalities. For instance, because of her straight hair and light skin, she finds it difficult to gain attention in an all-black elementary school. In contrast, she has little trouble persuading others of an imagined, "off-white" Jewish identity when she moves from Boston to New Hampshire in an exclusively white institution. Although these costumes conceal Birdie's true identity, they enable her to live in environments with no tolerance for hybrid identities. Given that the act of passing is largely dependent on race performativity, and that this performativity is most effective when it pertains to African American females, it follows that Crenshaw's Intersectionality theory, is of particular relevance to the present paper as it crystalizes the inseparability of identity categories as parts of a completely tangled web. In other words, with this aim in mind, we will first refer the colonized-colonizer relationship described by Fanon together with W.E.B Du Bois' concept of double consciousness to examine how privilege is stratified by race and gender and how this stratification becomes intrinsic to racial passing. To best understand this argument, a consideration of race as a social construct, and certain dynamics related to racial boundary crossing inherent to the socio-political context in which the characters' pass, imposes itself. The second step consists of adopting Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality to highlight the ways in which gender and race inform the racial passing experience. We take up the question of passing and intersectionality most pointedly, in the third and last section, by providing a reading of *Caucasia* to highlight the authors' ways of dealing with racial ambiguity, and eventually show how Senna interrogates racial dualism and promotes the validation of multiple identities based on the concept of intersectionality.

1. Intersectionality and the Social Constructionist View of Race

When legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality”¹ in 1989, it was a relatively obscure concept that was soon propelled to the forefront as a theory, paradigm, tool, or a lens meant to pull into focus those on the fringes. The concept’s magnitude soon challenged fundamental assumptions about race and allowed for its in-depth and complex analysis in the field of Critical Race Theory. Its genealogy in the United States goes back nineteenth century black feminist orators and anti-slavery activists like Harriet Jacobs and Sojourner Truth, whose agenda would soon become the backbone of twentieth century women activists, namely, like Chery Clake (1983), Bell Hooks (1984), or Deborah King (1988).

It is worth remembering that the very first contestations related to the cause of African women, even before the term feminism was coined, already foreshadowed interrelationships between racism and gender. However, as history shows, though the question of what it means to be a woman under different historical circumstances was one key interrogation that is perennially relevant to the feminist agenda, it remained more often than not exclusive to white women. More importantly, despite the movement’s emancipatory actions, its positive effects have not been equally felt or interpreted by all women who have come in contact with it. Indeed, even though the 1970s and the 1980s in America proved to be a breeding ground for the emergence of the idea that women are universally united in their shared experience of oppression, the black activists’ women hopes were soon dashed.

In multiple ways, these activists’ works were a critical response to the many forms of oppression, mainly conveyed through patriarchy, racism, capitalism and heterosexist views. These-militant women pointed out to the idea of an interlocking system of oppression, principally channelled via “black feminism” and “womanism” movements to describe what Crenshaw would later term “intersectionality.” Crenshaw used the term intersectionality to describe how multiple forms of discrimination, power, and privilege intersect in Black women’s lives, in ways that are expunged when sexism and racism are treated separately (Crenshaw 1989). Her definition suggests a dissatisfaction with the “single-axis framework” that was already in place in the fields of antidiscrimination law, feminist theory and anti-racist politics. The “single axis framework” implies that disadvantage plays out as a single identity and not as many identities but as already noted by A. Lorde in a talk delivered at Harvard University for Black History Month in 1982, “there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives” (138).

More precisely, Crenshaw noticed that in the legal cases, she was confronted to, women were compelled to choose between bringing a claim of racism or sexism, and could not say that they had been discriminated against, due to the combined

¹ Crenshaw’s law-focused articles, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” (Crenshaw 1989) and “Mapping the Margins” (Crenshaw 1991), mark the introduction of intersectionality and social movement politics into the academy.

effects of race and sex. Crenshaw, subsequently, formulated the following definition of intersectionality:

Intersectionality is a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking. (149)

For more clarity, Crenshaw uses the traffic analogy, wherein someone is positioned in the middle of an intersection whose four directions represent race, gender, class and religion, with cars coming simultaneously from all four directions. It follows that discrimination, like traffic through an intersection does not necessarily flow in one direction and might be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and possibly from all of them. Likewise, if a black woman is hit at the crossroad, her wounds do not necessarily result from one single side and in such a context, the "single-axis framework" validity is put into question leaving the floor to what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) would term "matrix of domination."

This said, we can claim that seeing one's race identity and one's gender identity not as two separate entities but as co-constitutive, is central to the understanding of intersectionality. The latter investigates how, "intersecting identities create instances of both opportunity and oppression, where a person can, depending on his or her particular identity in a particular social context, experience advantage, disadvantage, or both at the same time" (Warner 2008). In other words, falling within intersectionality model, because of one or multiple target identities, proves decisive in determining a person's right to privilege.

Indeed, the examination of these various intersections contributes to alter the already existing understanding of oppression, leading women to Live within a "crisscross system of oppression" as described by Collins 2006. In the years following Crenshaw's (1989) framework, "intersectionality" has taken on a life of its own by opening a plethora of new and exciting research questions across various academic disciplines. Standing as one of the most problematic legacies of the Enlightenment, the word "race" ¹ has been loaded with different meanings for

¹ The origin of the word "race" is unknown but considerable etymological research has shown that, over the period from 1200 to 1500, the word "race" got firmly integrated into several European languages. The word "race" appears in English (race), French (raza, raca), Spanish (raza), Italian (razza, raza), German (reitza, reizza, rasse). Though the word did not have a clear origin from an etymological point of view and could not be ascribed to one single meaning, "Arabic" and "Greek-Latin" hypotheses lead to a genealogical and typological meaning of race. In the 19th century, several linguists (Walter W. Skemore, Francis Henry Stratmann, Friedrich Kluge and Edward Pick on saying that the closest meaning to the word "race" was in the lineal descendance, blood line, origin, momentum,

different people and from varied philosophical and political venues. The view of race that natural and physical divisions exists among humans and are hereditary reflected in morphology, and which are correctly captured by terms like Black, White, and Asian (or Negroid, Caucasoid, and Mongol-oid), is known as the biological definition of race (F. Haney López 1994). Racialized¹ groups of people are either exterminated, as they are biologically inferior, or subordinated as a result of their genetic inferiority.

The biological story of race traces its roots back to the sixteenth century with Europeans' encounters with the various inhabitants of the African continent. The scientific and philosophic accomplishments going through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to divide human beings into specific groups were more than academic exercises. Rather, they were used to justify the extermination and displacement of certain populations, namely, Native Americans and the establishment of the institution of African slavery in the United States. The view that race is a social construction, began to gain importance in the 1940s, mainly because of the eugenics movement in the US.² Even though the many attempts to define racial categories by physical attributes ultimately failed, scientifically and legally speaking, by the end of the twentieth century, people consciously or unconsciously continued to invest their morphologies with racial meaning, as interestingly explained by N. Zack (1998):

We do not usually think that there is anything wrong with the ways in which people are sorted into races—that is, with the criteria for membership in different races—because we think that what race a person belongs to is obvious from looking at him or her. We do not question the naturalness of racial differences or the very existence of races. We go on about our business as though there always have been human races and there always will be human races. (Zack 1998 1, qtd in Elizabeth Castrellon, 2010)

Admittedly, Zack articulates the existing gap between the post-racial discourse and the persistence of racial division in a society that promotes "colour-blindness," or the refusal to recognise race as a significant component of identity. Nera (2014) explains that part of the problem is related to the fact that while the absurdity of the racial system is recognized, racial rhetoric and terminology still persists because it is 'the primary language' used to discuss race. She further argues that that the same language sets boundaries in the face of a concrete ability to

lineage, family, class, family line or breed. See Milan Hrabovsky's Etymology of the Word "Race" and the Issue of the Concept of "Race."

1 The term "racialize" indicates the processes by which groups come to be constructed as races. Therefore, "racialized groups" are those groups that are thought of in racial terms.

2 Also known as 'racial hygiene,' eugenics is the scientifically inaccurate theory that the human race can be improved through selective breeding of population.

understand oneself as more Americans fail to define themselves with respect to one particular racial label (21).

2.The Passing Trope

Discussing the racial genealogy of the term 'passing' in American history, Ginsberg (1996) explains how individuals come to assume a new identity by escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other (3), (qtd in, Sarah J. Tracy Angela Trethewey) Dennis Cooley and Kelby Harrison, in their turn, enforce the definition of passing as:

In times of trouble, those who belong to persecuted classes can often be tempted to pass as a member of the oppressor group. Unfortunately, no matter when or where someone lives, it can be a time of trouble because there always seems a societal need to make one or more group the focus of social dislike if not hatred; so there is always an incentive to pass (2012 1).

Literature and feminist critical race theory have engaged with the subject of passing which has been historically constructed as a product of slavery and Jim Crow racism. Although passing has its historical roots in relation to race, other theorists have adopted and applied it to other identity markers like gender, sexuality, and class. Put differently, people might "pass" and move into a mainstream identity category in order to benefit from the privileges and the rights they are denied because of one or different identity categories. From the first time they set foot in America (1619) and even long after slavery was abolished (1865), Africans and African Americans have been denied rights and discriminated against in a country founded upon ideals of white supremacy.

In the field of post colonialism, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) is pivotal when it comes to the study of the dehumanization and declassification of blacks under colonial rule. As one leading figure of the past century, Fanon's main interest was to shed light on the psychodynamics of racism in relation to socio-economic and political forms of domination to answer the question of what it means to be human in an increasingly dehumanised world. The Black lived experience for Black men and Black women is generated by the inferiority complex enforced by white people for the maintenance of their superiority. As proposed by Fanon, because of the advancement of the white individual throughout society, black people alongside other people of colour suffer from a severe inferiority complex as they are taught to see themselves as unimportant. A feeling, principally, due to an outer appearance which has been loaded with negative connotations by white people.

Between the eighteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, countless African Americans passed as white, saying farewell to families and friends and leaving behind them their roots. It was, as Allyson Hobbs writes, "a chosen exile," and a "tale of loss," a separation from one racial identity, seeking refuge. Deeply

intertwined with the social, legal, and cultural history of race in the U.S, the phenomenon of passing has been shaped by changing definitions of race, identity, and belonging. To pass as white in the antebellum South was to escape the shackles of slavery. Postbellum period witnessed an increase in passing, especially for those with mixed European and African ancestry and many African Americans came to consider passing as a form of betrayal. When the initially hopeful period of Reconstruction proved short-lived, passing became an opportunity to resist the racial framework provided by the one-drop rule that legalized racial segregation in the Southern United States from the end of Reconstruction (1877) until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s.

The standard racial passer in the United States was the "white Negro," whose physical appearance allowed him to be identified as "white" but whose "black" lineage, a one drop of black blood made him a Negro. Also known as the "mulatto", the passer, is often confused about whether he is more "white" or more "black," and is forced to choose between his dual identities, passing either into "whiteness," one of the most familiar presentations, or into "blackness." While doing so, the passer emphasizes the nature of race as performative. Racial passing, in other words, epitomizes the performativity of identity or the idea that each identity is constructed through repeated actions (Ginsberg 1996). Taking into account Judith Butler's notions of gender, namely that gender is created by the performance itself, rather than being an essential identity, Ginsberg reports that race, too, is created by repeated actions which, in turn, generate the illusion of race.

Interestingly enough, most of the passing narratives challenge the validity of one particular boundary, more commonly known as "the colour line." "Crossing the boundary" is used in reference to what W.E.B. DuBois described in his 1903 essay collection and land mark of African American literature, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), where he also developed his concept of 'double consciousness', which is "the sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, or measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity". Double consciousness can be defined as the struggle African Americans face to preserve their blackness while at the same time they have to conform to the standard imposed by a dominant white society. In this respect, Du Bois writes, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness...one ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 11).

The stakes of identity in the passing narrative reveal the divide since the passing character is caught between the desire to maintain a fake identity to gain certain rewards, and the risk to reveal his true self and loose everything. To avoid the prejudice of an imposed racial group, he or she consciously embraces whiteness. Accepting the bargain demands from the passer to continuously adjust and readjust his/her self- image which eventually leads to alienation. In passing

narratives, social conduct is subtly dictated by racial standards. Hence, characters who can fit into several racial stereotypes but who actually don't belong to any of them provide important insights for these stories.

By presenting the conflicting nature of being neither black nor white, yet both, Warner Sollor referred to the "tragic mulatta" archetype. The term mulatta is the feminine gendered version of the term mulatto, believed to be derived from "mule" or the Arabic word muwallad, meaning "mestizo" or "mixed" (Raimon 2004). In the words of Teresa C. Zackodvik (2004), the tragic mulatta as a figure of hybridity, becomes a liminal figure who transgresses racial distinctions and racialized notions of womanhood in order to challenge dominant cultural understandings of such identity categories. (p. xii)

The US transitional cultural landscape in the aftermath of slavery witnessed a natural increase in conversation about race with a particular emphasis on mixed-race characters who captivated audiences as result of their unique dilemma. At the heart of texts such as Lydia Maria Child's *The Quadroons* (1842) and William Wells Brown 's *Clotel, or, The President's Daughter* (1853), published before the Civil War, stood female protagonists who were literary figures able to cross racial boundaries. These works, also known as 'narratives of passing,' focused on mixed race female characters, whose mixed identities would lead to unhappy lives and sad deaths.

3. Relating Intersectionality to Passing through *Caucasia*

As seen in the previous section, the social constructionist perspective of identity challenges the essentialist view of race. In *Caucasia*, for instance, this is evidenced through the character of Birdie, whose identity was constructed in a way that foreshadows the dialectic between identity and representation or stereotyping. As Tajfel (1978) realised over forty years ago, "we live in a world in which the processes of unification and diversification proceed apace, both of them faster than ever before" (Qtd. in Howarth 2002 146). Questions of identity along with group membership and representation frame daily interactions in contemporary societies. It is in this particular social context, that Birdie Lee, because of constant pressure, examines and re-examines her different identities against the flux of unstable representations around her. For example, Birdie defines herself through who she is not rather than through who she really is. These stereotypes influenced how she performed her identity depending on the people by whom she was surrounded with the intention to be accepted as member of any social category, as she performs both Blackness and Whiteness. Put differently, because she is biracial, she does not know what tomorrow will bring as she struggles with changing from white to black all depending on what is going on and where she is. Living under the constraints of the national paradigms of body politics and socially effaced under the pressure of others' expectations, she exclaims, "My body would fill the blanks tell me who I should become, and I would let it speak for

me"(Senna 1). The "blanks" Birdie is talking about refer to her individuality and identity.

The very meaning of whiteness and thus of Americanness is also put into question in the epigraph as Birdie reports that America is the easiest place where one can "disappear," "without a name; without a record. With only the body I travelled in" (Senna 1). Despite the complex situation Birdie is going through, she is not presented as the "tragic mulatta" figure, on the contrary, by avoiding this cliché, Senna reinvents the passing novel. Her female protagonist is, in the words of Bertram (2002), a "cultural mulatta" living in a supposedly post black era. Though victim of her divided racial heritage, Birdie is also transgressor of racial boundaries as she does not fully relate to either blackness or whiteness, rather, she strives to construct an identity of her own.

Narrated from the point of view of Birdie, *Caucasia* begins in the present but proceeds with the narrator's memories of her past experiences from 1975 until 1982. The novel is initially set in Boston, where Birdie, spends a part of her childhood. In her own words, "this was back when Boston still came in black and white, yellowing around the edges" (Senna 1). It is the summer before Birdie turns eight years old and mid-1970s Boston is under the grip of intense racial tension of the Boston Busing Crisis. At first, the young Birdie does not see how her sister is different from her and is not yet aware of her lighter skin tone. She indicates, "before I ever saw myself, I saw my sister" and "that face was me and I was that face" (Senna 5). Birdie's first sign of racial camouflaging is suggested in a childhood game she plays with her sister in the attic, as the two siblings imagine their own fictional world inhabited by people named "Elemenos". These persons, in their eyes, "could turn not just from black to white, but from brown to yellow to purple to green and back again ... they were a shifting people constantly changing their form, color pattern, in quest for invisibility" (Senna 7). As Cole and Birdie quickly realize, however, "the ability to disappear into any surrounding" (Senna. 7) will prove more complicated than it seems. In addition to their opposed skin tones, disparities at the level of cultural understanding of race and visibility becomes unequivocal at the moment their parents decide to separate.

The different situations and challenges Birdie encounters are prefigured through constant feelings of self-effacement resulting from the pressure of others' judgment which reveal the consequences of falling into the borderlines of identities. Her quest for a non-authentic type of Blackness is noticed during the two important phases of her evolution from childhood to adolescence which do coincide, respectively, with her life in Boston and her experience in New Hampshire.

Before the family circle falls apart, the Lees were established in Boston, a racially stratified city that did not facilitate Birdie's self-recognition as black. For instance, she already observes how strangers and even people in her close circles define her by the lightness of her skin; a fact that is confirmed by her mother who calls her "a little Sicilian" (Senna 27). Unaware of what this means, the young girl

senses that, "it sounded dirty off my mother's tongue" (Senna 27). When she decides to look in the mirror later that night, she realizes how different she is from Cole, "Her hair was curly and mine was straight, and I figured that this fact must have had something to do with the fighting and the way the eyes of strangers flickered surprise, sometimes amusement, sometimes disbelief, when my mother introduced us as sisters" (Senna 29). Furthermore, Birdie becomes aware of her twoness when she notices that Deck, her father, "never had much to say to [her]. In fact, he never seemed to see [her] at all" (Senna 55). Cole, on the other hand, represented everything he cherished, as she remained his only concrete and palpable figure through which blackness was made real. It follows that being a lighter-skinned daughter of a black American father and a white mother embodies Birdie's first source of discomfort. In addition of being caught between blackness and whiteness, Birdie feels unable to choose between her father's desire for a homogeneous form of black integration and her mother's unconscious rebuttal for blackness.

In addition to her attempt to guarantee a strong father-daughter relationship, Birdie is cautious to follow her sister's steps. To ensure blackness, she asserts that her Cole is "the reflection that proves [her] own existence. [...Her life] rotated around Cole" (Senna 5). Adhering to this form of self-identification is not without consequences, as Birdie cannot transcend racial essentialism and visibility, instead; she lives with the burden of betrayal. She feels that "her body decodes her, makes her invisible" (Senna 101). Since Birdie's skin colour present her as white even though she is also half black, she is bruised by this masquerade. Curiously enough, Sandy and Deck Lee, who came together because of shared intellectual interests and activism in the civil rights movement, also fall into U.S. racial trappings, basing their understanding of race almost exclusively on colour.

Another important instance of Birdie's trial to perform blackness occurs when she attends the Black Power school, Nkrumah; an all-black school with her sister. The young girl's light skin and straight hair immediately led to her being labelled as white and once again her visible whiteness is thwarted against her invisible blackness. Because she does not look black like her schoolmates, Birdie is harshly teased and ostracized. One day, she is beaten and humiliated by a black boy who mockingly asks: "What you doin' in this school? You white?" (Senna 43), thus, to escape bullying, Birdie turns to her elder sister Cole seeking protection, the latter plainly asserts that "Birdie isn't white. She is black. Just like [her]" (Senna 48), and that she should not be messed with. No longer teased and humiliated thanks to Cole's presence, Birdie's feeling as the 'Other' did not disappear, as she painfully pronounces, "I often found myself ..., as if trying to eat myself alive, ... as if trying to find another body buried inside. I pondered whether it was better to be harassed or ignored" (Senna 48-9). Desperate to be integrated in her black community, Birdie, regardless of the fact that she fails to "reproduce" blackness physically

speaking, decides to act as an authentic black girl. She tries to learn how to become black and to be somehow “an ‘authentic’ African American” woman (Grassian 324). As put by (Rummell 2007), “passing for black constitutes Birdie's ticket to survival at Nkrumah just as passing for White served as a survival mechanism for earlier passers” (7).

In order to fit in within the black model of girlhood, Birdie starts a phase of metamorphosis and gets initiated into the art of changing (Senna 62). Firstly, she decides to change the way she looks by wearing her straight hair in tight braids to mask its texture, and accessorize with gold hoops, Sergio Valente Jeans, and Nike sneakers, similar to the ones worn by her classmates. Furthermore, Birdie with the help of Cole, alter their way of speaking and train to talk in “Black English,” as described in a magazine article found by Cole, who reports: “We don’t talk like black people Birdie. It says so in this article. Like, don’t say, I’m going to the store. Say, I’m goin’ to de sto. Get it?” (Senna 57). In addition to that, Birdie practices “how to say ‘nigger’ the way the kids in school did it, dropping the ‘er’ so that it became not an insult, but a term of flattery: nigga” (Senna 63). As Birdie learns to speak black English, she not only associates herself with blackness, but she also does distance herself from the higher social class way of speech, which singles out for whiteness, and which is very representative of her mother Sandy. When Birdie, in response to her mother’s question, replies “I don’t see nothing”, Sandy disapproves and corrects her, “Anything! You don’t see anything!”. Though both expressions presuppose the meaning, they are attributed to different social classes. Sandy’s reproach to her daughter for the language she uses entails those differences between blacks and whites are also exhibited through verbal performance. Birdie herself reflects on her mother’s way of thinking about language, class and race after she reprimands her for ‘talking black’:

She didn’t like my new way of talking. Sometimes a piece of her that she tried to keep hidden seemed to sneak out--a piece of her that had grown up in a big old Victorian house in Cambridge, had been educated at one of the best prep schools, had spent evenings reading Sartre aloud to her father, the Harvard classics professor, in the den off the living room (Senna 112).

The fact that language variation acts as a marker and instrument for social and racial stratification is undeniable. Sandy places greater emphasis on ‘talking white’, to confirm her belonging to the class of the privileged, as opposed to black speech which is synonymous of poverty and failure. In a sense, the mother sees her daughter’s light feature as a chance to realise herself as she doesn't want her daughter to miss all the practical socio-economic rewards that come with “talking-white.”

Finally, Birdie’s changes in both looks and language prove successful as the girl is accepted as Black by her classmates and included in a friend group, “The Brown Sugar Clique.” These radical changes that mark Birdie’s attempt to achieve authentic blackness, did not fully liberate her from the fear of being excluded, as

indicated in the following statement, ““I never lost the anxiety, a gnawing in my bowels, a fear that at any moment I would be told it was all a big joke” (Senna 64.) As she is obliged to live in a body which is not hers in order not to be unmasked, Birdie feels “void of a stable core or identity” (Grassian 325). She became conscious that at Nkrumah she first learned “how to become someone else, how to erase the person I was before” (Senna 62). Yet, she feels void and invisible despite all her efforts, she is in the words of Kawash, “caught between what the body says and what the body means” (130). Birdie’s experience draws attention to the conventional definition of passing which typically explored the realities of explicitly institutionalized racism, because of the essentialist view of race. In the case of *Caucasia*, a converse relationship is suggested by Senna who sees that race is given a certain form of fluidity thanks to the passer’s phenotypical complexity. Paradoxically, this shift does not reduce the persistence of stringent racial within a supposedly multi-cultural, colour-blind society. Accordingly, despite the fact that Birdie lives at the cusp of the new millennia, she has to secure a solid ground of identification, and she has to “act out” Blackness to be accepted in a Black community, at the expense of her white interior. So that her blackness becomes visible, she has no other alternative than erasing the person she was before (Senna 62).

When Birdie’s parents’ marriage is unable to survive, the family is divided along colour lines. The girls’ world is turned upside down, as she is separated from Cole who is taken by Deck. Once Birdie, follows her mother, she finds herself, one more time, trapped in the game of invisibility as they strive to recreate lives for themselves in a predominantly white small-town in New Hampshire. Sandy takes advantage of the flexibility of her daughter’s racial passing to evade the FBI, who is searching for a white woman and her Black daughter, and moves freely in society. As put by Birdie, “the fact that I could pass ... would throw [us] off our trail” (Senna 128). Birdie must not only get used to her external whiteness, but must also accept the painful separation from her beloved sister, Cole, the only one who could connect her to her internal blackness.

Now, the nine-year-old Birdie Lee and her mother, will live with the fear of being caught up at any time and will constantly move from one place to another. At first, the young girl is given the possibility to decide what her “history” will be: “you’ve got a lot of choices, babe. You can be anything. Puerto Rican, Sicilian, Pakistani, Greek. I mean, anything, really” (Senna 110.) Finally, Sandy decides that Birdie becomes Jesse Goldman, child of the recently deceased Jewish father Daniel. The fact that racial performance can be simultaneously acted and imposed is evidenced in Sandy’s statement as she first gives the choice to her daughter and then she retracts, leaving Birdie with no other alternative than rewriting her body within a space she does not really long for.

As the story progresses, and as Birdie enters the in-between stage of adolescence, she feels powerless and unable to act according to her own desire and finds it difficult to define herself. Birdie exemplifies, once again, how her racialized subjectivity cannot be separated from her gendered performance. As a female, she becomes particularly involved in assessing a bodily self-consciousness, becoming more aware of how she is seen by others and becoming more critical of the way she sees herself. Birdie is in a particularly ambiguous position as she faces a double jeopardy, to use Crenshaw's terminology. In other words, Birdie has no other alternative than constructing "Jess" identity in a strange body, which leaves her confused because she is forced to erase her past and what she believes is her true self. By splitting the body of Jessie from the self of Birdie, she is an object rather than a subject: "In those years, I felt myself to be incomplete – a gray blur, a body in motion, forever galloping toward completion – half a girl, half-caste, half-mast, and half-baked, not ready for consumption" (Senna 116). Furthermore, by inhabiting a new body, Birdie creates a new persona as she adjusts her gender performance. She describes herself as dressing "in oversized tomboy clothes", with an "old-fashioned" look to her (Senna 220). When she becomes friend with Mona, she has to play "catch-up", learning "how to be a girl...I talked the talk, walked the walk, swayed my hips to the sound of heavy metal, learned to wear blue eyeliner and frosted lipstick and snap my gum"" (Senna 227).

During the years she spends in the New Hampshire small town, Birdie is surrounded by friends whose racist attitudes and stereotyping towards African Americans made her feel her "real self," Birdie Lee, was safely hidden beneath her "beige flesh" (Senna 199). Under these circumstances, Birdie deliberately obscures her black inner self behind whiteness and easily delivers this raceless identity synonymous of authenticity, to grant her survival. In the long run, Birdie is terrified as her memories of the past start to fade and she finds herself changing: "[T]he names Jesse Goldman no longer felt so funny, so thick on my tongue, so make-believe (Senna 161).

Finally, when Birdie returns to Boston, she feels alienated and distraught, as she explains: "the name Jesse had been a lie, but as I walked home that day, I wasn't sure the girl Jesse had been such a lie," and goes on saying "I wondered if whiteness were contagious. If it were, then surely, I had caught it. I imagined this 'condition' affected the way I walked, talked, dressed, danced, and at its most advanced stage, the way I looked at the world and at other people" (Senna 329). No longer contend to live with the burden of passing, Birdie flees again leaving behind her the sites of her dual passing and goes to California and is reunited with her sister Cole and their Father. When Birdie remorsefully admits to her father that she has been passing for white, Deck replies, "There's no such thing as passing. We're all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion, make-believe. It's a costume. We all wear one. You just switched yours at some point (Senna 334.) For Birdie, however, her father's position do not rationalize the horrible situation she has been going through, for if

race were really an illusion, she would not have been separated from her sister. Race may have been a costume Birdie wore, but it had tremendous effects, "I got what he was saying, but I also knew what I had seen and heard in New Hampshire. Who I had become? That was as real as anything else" (Senna 338).

Recognizing that strict racial boundaries do not accurately represent who she is, Birdie creates an identity category that is not fully Black nor white but somewhere in between, a third space. Birdie mirrors Senna who once said in "Passing and the Problematic of Multiracial Pride" (2005), "I have come to understand that my multiplicity is inherent in my blackness, not opposed to it. To be black ... is to contain all colors" (85).

4. CONCLUSION

Conclusively, Senna's endeavour to deconstruct race in a post-civil rights era allows her to engage with the quicks of racial passing by underscoring the dilemma of her female character who is divided between the lure of authentic blackness and the dream for post blackness. Birdie Lee, in other words, strives to find her true self through her restless crossings between cities and racially distinct circles. In this sense, a reading of *Caucasia* demands a reconceptualization of the race issue by taking into account the enduring presence of white racial hegemony, and by extension, privilege under the lens of contemporary multicultural politics.

Ultimately, Birdie Lee epitomizes the passing mulatto girl who is physically and psychologically confronted to the transitional states her gender and racial identities undergo. She is involved in the perpetual process of negotiating with the discontinuities and inequalities within both her surroundings and her biracial self. Both Birdie and Jesse become part of her identity which she cannot condone. Hybridity represents an opportunity for Birdie to come and face the fact that she must choose her own way of self-identification based on different circumstances. Her willingness to reach a balance or fill the void which she feels as being birdie and Jess was to a point solved as long as she abandoned Blackness for whiteness and vice versa. This complicated quest meant to reconcile the two selves is not a straightforward task, but depends on the ability to break those long-held assumptions about whiteness and blackness.

Passing can be described as a double-edged sword as seen in the character of Birdie whose dual or even multiple identities interrogate the essentialism that is the heart of identity politics and her decision to pass paves the way to the opportunity to create new identities. In spite of that, it becomes clear that the protagonist's bravery to survive the representation of a biracial self is used by Senna as a reversal of the tragic mulatta archetype at the eve of twenty first America. The fated burden of invisibility is driven by the young girl's journey of crossing geo-racial borders as they troubled her pursuit for a more fluid form of blackness. On her way to construct a girl's body image, Birdie is involved in performing both gender and race, whereby Birdie's inner conflicts are intensified in

both communities she temporarily comes close to, and where the fictional order of racial visibility is determined by skin tone.

Given the complex interplay of race, gender and other identity attributes, implies that the formation of subjectivity involves a kind of role playing in an attempt to foster a sense of authenticity, more particularly for those involved in passing. Viewed in this light, Senna's treatment of the issue of biracial female subjectivity in *Caucasia* can be seen as revelatory of the extent to which identity categories interact and are subject to constant change, as proposed by Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality.

Interestingly, a postmodern interpretation of Birdie's crossing journey is reflective of the possibility of deconstructing the authentic blackness from within in favour of a hybrid space for post-blackness. Giving primacy to the mulatta character's struggle for attaining self-definition, crystalizes the interdependency of various identity categories and the authors' intension to question fixed notions of identity. Furthermore, the fact that Senna dares to begin her career with *Caucasia*, and tackle the theme of passing, that many considered as *passé*, we assume, could imply that she has felt the urge to make her own innovative contribution to this type of narratives.

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