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The Borders of Race: Multiracial Identities in Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*

ABSTRACT:

Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1999) are stories that explore the complex social systems of people with multiracial identities, as well as the difficulties and struggles for recognition that mixed-race protagonists had to endure in twentieth-century America. *Passing* is set in the Harlem neighborhood in the early 1920s. In depicting the friendship between Clare and Irene, the novel focuses on the practice of racial passing. Larsen explores and comments on race relations and mixed racial identity. Set in the mid-1970s, *Caucasia* is a novel focused on the state of in-betweenness of two multiracial girls, Birdie Lee and her sister Cole. In comparing *Passing* and *Caucasia*, I will analyze the portrayal of the characters' state of liminality as they "pass", and the presentation of this contradictory process of self-affirmation and identity formation.

KEYWORDS: *Passing*; *Caucasia*; African American literature; the tragic mulatto trope; mixed-race identity.

1. Introduction/aims

This essay discusses and compares aspects of Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1999), which are stories that explore the complex social systems of people with multiracial identities and the difficulties and struggles for recognition that mixed-race protagonists had to endure in

twentieth-century America. In analyzing some of the novels' key passages, I intend to discuss the representation of the practice of racial passing, whereby social pressures and constraints push a person of color to identify themselves as belonging to a different racial group. As Allyson Hobbs outlines in *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life*, mixed-race men and women have often struggled with their racially ambiguous appearance and “with complex questions about the racial conditions of their times” (Hobbs 2016, 5). I will consider how Larsen and Senna depict the consequences and contradictions of this practice in conjunction with the racial discourse of *their* times. In comparing *Passing* and *Caucasia*, I will also analyze the portrayal of the characters' state of liminality as they pass, and the presentation of this contradictory process of self-affirmation and identity formation.

The practice of passing derives from bordering both Black and white identities and from those individuals' “complex understandings about their places in the world” (Wald 2000, 186), deeply entrenched with individual agency and their position in the social hierarchy. As Hobbs states, racial indeterminacy and racial ambiguity are at the core of passing – “it is the precondition that made passing possible” (Hobbs 2014, 8). In *Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture*, Gayle Wald argues that passing narratives illustrate “the contradictions of race as a locus of identification, even in cases when the subject's self-recognition conforms to that identity that is ascribed by racial discourse” (ibid. 2000, 186). It is this definition – the contradictions of race as a locus of identification – that I will use as a starting point for my analysis.

Although the two novels I will focus on were published 69 years apart, they explore similar, complex issues of race, identity, and desire. Larsen's *Passing* is set in the Harlem neighborhood of New York in the early 1920s. While considering a series of complicated social issues, it focuses on the relationship between socialites – and friends since childhood – Clare and Irene, and their fear of, and fascination with, each other's lives. Clare is passing for white, a decision that Irene, who identifies as African American, does not fully understand.

Set in Boston during the turbulent mid-1970s, *Caucasia* is a coming-of-age novel centered on Birdie Lee and her sister, Cole. It reveals Birdie's state of in-betweenness deriving, in particular, from her multiracial identity. Boston's

social setting and the tribal nature of student cliques in Birdie's schools create further barriers to her identity affirmation. When she and her mother, Sandy, flee from the FBI – when the latter, seemingly, becomes a person of interest – Birdie is further caged in: unable to freely express herself, for fear of worsening their precarious situation.

2. Critical framework

Over the years, the practice of racial passing and the notion of crossing the color line have been discussed by many scholars. In *Passing and the Rise of the African American Novel*, Maria Giulia Fabi highlights how passing as a literary trope emerges from within the African American tradition, even though some white writers, like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Lydia Maria Child, and William Faulkner, have presented the practice of passing within their novels (Fabi 2001). Works like James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (2022), in which the author states how passing for white felt like a betrayal of his birthright, or the controversial *Black Like Me*, an autobiographical account by the white journalist Howard Griffin (1962) of his experiment in passing for Black, are further accounts – fictional and non-fictional respectively – that focus on the complex relationship between race and self-recognition, or “the contradictions of race as a locus of identification” (Wald 2000, 186).

Even though *Caucasia* follows some of the conventions of passing narratives (Birdie manages to pass for white and get access to the “white Caucasia”), with her satirical approach the author largely, though not entirely, subverts the “tragic mulatto” trope¹. She offers a more nuanced take on Birdie's liminality, and she criticizes binary racial identity and society's fixation on this binarism². Birdie's coming-of-age journey does not end with her tragic demise,

¹ From fictional representations of mixed-race men and women, a trope known as ‘the tragic mulatto/a’ has emerged. In “The Tragic Mulatta Trope: Complexities of Representation, Identity, and Existing in the Middle of the Racial Binary”, Madeline Stephens defines the term: “the ‘tragic mulatta’ is commonly defined as a female character of mixed-race that meets a tragic end of either social ruin, isolation, or even death. 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, 6)” (Stephens 2019, 5). See also: Bennett 1996; Rummell 2007.

² A term deriving from socio-anthropology, “liminality” as a concept has also been used to investigate literature. It originated with the ethnographer Arnold van Gennep, who analyzed rites

but with her self-awareness of the contradictions of class and race in the United States.

Passing and *Caucasia* are set in different historical periods – half a century apart – and center on protagonists of different ages and geographical locations, but Clare and Birdie share the same willingness to find new ways through which they can break the cycle of social fragmentation and victimization bound to their biracial identity. At their hearts, the novels explore the same essential truths and employ many of the same tropes and repeated themes. To use Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s words, “we are able to achieve difference through repetition” (Gates Jr. 1987, 57). Indeed, these two stories can be analyzed in the light of Gates’ “‘signifyin(g)’ – repetition with a signal difference” (Gates Jr. 1988, 56) – because they are both built on the practice of passing for white, with the repetition, and distortion, of the tragic mulatto trope. A signal difference emerges when a trope changes or is remade by adding original elements. So while, in *Passing*, the tragic mulatta – Clare – seems to transcend the Black-and-white binary, just to end up dying because of her defiance of the system, *Caucasia*’s Birdie struggles with the same binary for her racial and sexual identity but with a difference: she does not die because of her search for an unstructured, in-between space. In fact, she flourishes.

The representation of passing and the trope of the tragic mulatto have been problematized by Larsen, and reinvented by Senna. While Birdie, living in the 1970s, does not have to submit to the same discriminatory Jim Crow laws that 1920s women Clare and Irene are forced to, she still endures the social consequences of her transgressions: an intense othering. As Naomi Pabst argues in “Blackness/Mixedness: Contestations over Crossing Signs”, Birdie and Clare’s unstable racial identities both derive from how the tragic mulatto trope places, on mixed-race subjects, the responsibility for their alienation and displacement (Pabst 2003, 196). However, this strengthens Clare and Birdie’s determination to transgress racial and sexual boundaries, because they have

of passage and divided them into three stages: rites of separation, transition, and incorporation. He defines the second stage as the “liminal phase”, which is part of the “liminal rites” rituals of transition. Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner defines rites of passage as moments that “indicate and constitute transitions between states”; a state is a “fixed or stable condition [that] would include in its meaning such social constancies as legal status, profession, office or calling, rank or degree” (Turner 1977, 4). See also: Turner 1967, 1969, 1974; Viljoen 2007; Winn 2010.

created a dimension – a “third space” (Bhabha 1994, 37) – to which they can escape.

The third space will be referred to a few times in this essay. To elaborate: it is a concept that emerges from the redefinition of culture and renewing the past, “refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (ibid., 10).³ It is, as defined by Homi K. Bhabha, a space of freedom, progress, and reconciliation between races. Mixed-raced people can find comfort in this neutral territory, as Birdie does by the end of *Caucasia*.

Drawing on Margaret Gillespie’s notion of racial and sexual transgression as theorized in “Gender, Race and Space in Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929)”, where she asserts that passing is “a blatant flouting of the perceived fixed social, sexual and ethnic identity positions” (Gillespie 2015, 284), I would argue that *Passing*’s Clare decides to transgress the color line, to move into a third space, because it is the only path available to her to reject the subordination of white supremacy. The act of crossing social and sexual boundaries is a direct attack on social limits imposed on mixed-race protagonists. In the same way that Clare chooses to be ambiguous about her racial and sexual identity, Birdie’s transgression is also on multiple levels: sexual ambiguity with her classmates and peers, ambiguous racial identity and positionality for her family and wider society.

In fact, *Passing* and *Caucasia* both offer what Brigitte Fielder calls “processes of race-making that are not necessarily heteronormative (even when they may follow heterosexual genealogies)” (Fielder 2020, 4). In *Relative Races: Genealogies of Interracial Kinship in Nineteenth-Century America*, Fielder posits how interracial kinship constructs alternative forms of racial identifications and follows non-heteronormative, non-biological models of inheritance. I would argue that this framework is equally applicable to *Passing* and *Caucasia*’s depictions of racial

³ In *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha illustrates a similar example of in-betweenness as those I am discussing from *Passing* and *Caucasia*, when he considers Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*. The protagonist of that novel, Chamcha, is in between two border conditions. As Bhabha explains: “On the one hand lies his landlady Hind who espouses the cause of gastronomic pluralism. [...] On Chamcha’s other side sits his landlord Sufyan, the secular ‘colonial’ metropolitan who understands the fate of the migrant in the classical contrast between Lucretius and Ovid” (Bhabha 1994, 224). The story of Chamcha is bound to the liminality of the migrant experience, which is “no less a transitional phenomenon than a translational one”. The protagonist is caught between a “nativist”, an “atavism”, and a “postcolonial metropolitan assimilation” (ibid.). See also: Bhabha 2015.

identities: Birdie and Clare consciously subvert these heteronormative and discriminatory forms of categorization in their search for a greater, better (third) space.

3. *Passing*: the transgressions of Clare Kendry

Larsen's novel is told principally from Irene's point of view, to whom passing is considered a risky endeavor, a sharp departure from the usual African American milieu. She is uneasy with, and curious about, the practice: "There were things she wanted to ask Clare Kendry. She wished to find out about this hazardous business of 'passing', this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chances in another environment" (Larsen 2014, 157). Irene perceives it as "not entirely strange perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly" (ibid.). On the one hand, Irene is attracted by Clare – a subtle, queer attraction and a fascination with Clare's dissent from social norms – but on the other is restrained by her own intrinsic submission to the race binary.

As if aware of her desire and her hesitation, Clare remarked, thoughtfully: 'You know, Rene, I've often wondered why more colored girls, girls like you and Margaret Hammer and Esther Dawson and—oh, lots of others—never 'passed' over. It's such a frightfully easy thing to do. If one's the type, all that's needed is a little nerve'. (ibid., 157-58)

In moments like this, Larsen contrasts Clare and Irene's divergent visions of passing. They are at the opposite ends of a spectrum: while Irene is cautious and cannot imagine the possibility of assuming the social identity of a white woman herself, Clare is confident about her choice, even feeling *entitled* to do so. She asks Irene: "Tell me, honestly, haven't you ever thought of 'passing'?" (ibid., 160) This is the question at the heart of the novel and, for many, of the 1920s African American experience: to cross, or not to cross, the color line. It is a question of agency too. In these narratives, as Wald explains, "embracing one's 'proper' racial identity is no less complex or potentially less fraught an act than choosing to pass" (Wald 2000, 187). In refusing or deciding to cross the color line, characters are, consciously or not, constructing strategies of resistance based on their racial performances – how they act, dress, live – and their choice to stay in a hidden, often inadvertent condition of in-betweenness.

In the final chapters of *Passing*, Irene suspects that Clare is having an affair with her (Irene's) husband, Brian, and has the chance to reveal this to Clare's husband, John. But Irene refuses to betray her friend. As she clarifies:

I had my chance and I didn't take it. I had only to speak and introduce him to Felise with the casual remark that he was Clare's husband. Only that. Fool. Fool. [...] That instinctive loyalty to race. Why couldn't she get free of it? Why should it include Clare? Clare, who'd shown little enough consideration of her, and hers. What she felt was not so much resentment as a dull despair because she could not change herself in this respect, could not separate individuals from the race, herself from Clare Kendry. (Larsen 2014, 227)

As is clear from this passage, Irene is unconsciously trapped in that state of in-betweenness, the same state in which Clare is consciously moving. Both characters occupy this liminal space. Larsen's protagonists are in an ongoing alternation between recognition and what Gabrielle McIntire calls "méconnaissance" (McIntire 2012, 788) – in effect, misrecognition of themselves with regards to the process of identity formation and the practice of passing. At the start of the novel, Irene has a stable subjectivity, but as the story progresses she cannot recognize herself, and she feels increasingly alienated and hesitant. By the final chapter, she is questioning everything, including her husband's fidelity and their marriage. Clare, on the contrary, views race differently. She does not align its social construction with heteronormative or biological trajectories. In passing for white, she is transgressing robust racial boundaries to achieve her own racial identification. She decides not to give up her agency, and she does not seem to care about the consequences of her decision.

In discussing this connection – and the tensions – between knowing oneself and passing, Elaine K. Ginsberg affirms that it is all about identities: "their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties", but also about "the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary-crossing" (Ginsberg 1996, 2). Irene and Clare have to confront race in the formation of their identities, but also all the collateral issues such as gender, class, and sexuality. Through Clare's defiance, Larsen reinvents the tragic mulatto trope: Clare is no victim, but a confident, reckless character who dies because she dared to be racially ambiguous in a society grounded in the racial binary. She does not die simply because she is caught. Larsen leaves Clare's death mysterious enough to be somewhat open to interpretation, but it is clear that it would not have happened had Clare not dared to play with the color line.

4. *Caucasia*: Birdie's state of in-betweenness

While Larsen's *Passing* is centered on characters that try to make something out of being stuck in a third space, or at least try to understand the boundaries of such a locus, *Caucasia*'s Birdie experiences this same dualism but cannot find or create a clearly defined dimension that is not an in-between one. It starts with an initial moment of misrecognition, when her father, Deck, and his partner, Carmen, do not identify her as Black, and continues with a moment of separation from her sister, Cole, exposing Birdie's condition of in-betweenness:

Others before had made me see the differences between my sister and myself—the textures of our hair, the tints of our skin, the shapes of our features. But Carmen was the one to make me feel that those things somehow mattered. To make me feel that the differences were deeper than skin. (Senna 1999, 91)

In passage after passage, Birdie is confronted with Cole's dark features and the general recognition of her sister's Blackness. Birdie feels she (Birdie) is not quite Black or quite white enough to sustain a sense of belonging to either identity. In contrast, Clare is confident enough to embody both Black and white, straight and possibly queer – as McIntire states, “in and out of the closet of racial and sexual belonging” (McIntire 2012, 783). Clare defies the contradictions of the social systems of her time, whereas Birdie struggles with the conflicts inherent in hers and with her desire for identification with one racial group and one sexual orientation. She is caught in a dichotomy between self-transformation and integration.

Caucasia is structured around a recurring key point: the tormented protagonist struggling with her own and other people's perception of the two sides of her ethnicity – and which side better defines her identity. Only by the epilogue, when she reunites with Cole, does she manage to go beyond the binary of the racial paradigm that is imposed upon her and the archetypal characteristics that she is supposed to embody. Before then, however, it is possible to recognize aspects of the tragic mulatto trope in Birdie's attempts to forge an identity. As Francisco Gyasi Bying highlights in *Dismantling the Tragic Mulatto/a*, the archetype is of protagonists afflicted by isolation and alienation, passing with characteristics that illustrate “the mutability of racial, gender, and sexual identity as well as genre designations” (Gyasi Bing 2019, VIII). It is clear that some of this is embodied by Birdie, but also, as Judith Berzon asserts, this archetype has a specific target:

[It is] usually a product of the white man's imagination and often expresses his deepest (usually unspoken) fantasies about the largest marginal group in our society, specifically: his assumption that the mixed blood yearns to be white and is doomed to unhappiness and despair because of this impossible dream. (Berzon 1978, 99)

The tragic mulatto archetype can also be associated with a liminal state, as it is often depicted in African American literature by a figure suspended and confused in a two-color system.

At first, Birdie lives with these social pressures in a state of self-abnegation and misrecognition. As the novel progresses, she starts using her racial ambiguity as a source of self-affirmation, questioning the racial lines and even calling Carmen a "bitch":

I confessed to her [Sandy], stirring my coffee ice cream in its silver bowl, that Carmen adored Cole, hated me, and that I didn't know why.
'She's a bitch,' I stated, words I had never said. 'I can't stand her.' [...]
'So, Miss Black and Beautiful doesn't think you're good enough, huh? You probably remind her of me, and that's what they're all trying to forget these days, you know— that they ever dabbed in the nitty-gritty land of miscegenation'. (Senna 1999, 114)

Birdie is not frustrated by her own flawed choices; rather, as Sika Elaine Dagbovie states in "Fading to White, Fading Away: Biracial Bodies in Michelle Cliff's 'Abeng' and Danzy Senna's 'Caucasia'", it is a frustration that rises from other people's expectations, "which always derive from the whiteness of Clare's and Birdie's bodies" (Dagbovie 2006, 94). Birdie does not know how to "balance being 'black and proud' with connecting to her white mother's heritage" (ibid.). As a teenager living in the 1970s, she comes to terms with her in-betweenness – her many possible ways to live as a white or Black girl – but, when she decides to flee from Boston, her mother chooses to take only Birdie with her, not Cole. By successfully passing for white, Birdie must endure the unbearable loss of her sister. As Hobbs argues, in each era, passing "determined not only how racially ambiguous men and women lived, but also what they lost" (Hobbs 2014, 5).

In fact, Birdie could be Jewish, Italian, or whatever they decide she will pass for. As Sandy tells her,

“You’ve got a lot of choices, babe. You can be anything. Puerto Rican, Sicilian, Pakistani, Greek. I mean, anything, really.’ [...] A slow smile filled her face. ‘And, of course, you could always be Jewish. What do you think?’” (Larsen 1999, 130)

Nonetheless, Birdie resists racial labels. In this sense, she refuses to erase her Blackness. However, as Dagbovie observes, Birdie is constantly erased under the white gaze when she passes for white (Dagbovie 2006, 101). At first, she welcomes this invisibility and alienation, but ultimately she manages to overcome these impositions by finding her way out of Caucasia to reunite with her sister.

Like Clare in *Passing*, Birdie questions the sexual binary too. She discusses her confused feelings for both male and female love interests. When she is about to have sex with her white New Hampshire neighbor, Nick, he asks her, “Are you still a virgin, or what?” (Senna 1999, 198), and Birdie can only think about her previous sexual experiments with her friend Alexis:

I had done some strange things with Alexis at Aurora. [...] I would hold her down and rub my body against hers, my face hot and moist in the crook of her neck, while I felt a sharp pleasure that turned to melting between my legs. (ibid., 198-99)

Clare and Birdie do not identify with either side of the binary and do not validate either their heterosexual or homosexual attractions. In fact, when Birdie replies to Nick, “Yeah, I’m a virgin” (ibid.), she ends up in a state of confusion and anxiety when Nick wants more from her. However, unlike the adult Clare, the teenage Birdie wants to experiment with her sexuality, but like Clare she finds comfort and a form of affiliation in a nonconforming and unstructured dimension.

5. Conclusion: Clare and Birdie – reversing the tragic mulatto trope

In the novel’s final chapters, Birdie gives up on trying to conform to anyone else’s specific racial background and surrenders to her unstructured identity – once again overturning the tragic mulatto trope. Her reincorporation into the world is guided by her own, more fluid rules, instead of succumbing to pre-existent categories that she does not recognize as her own. She undergoes the last *rite de passage* when she finds her way back to Boston with her sister, Cole. Their reunion epitomizes Birdie’s transformation and the climax of, and

breaking point from, her fluctuation between the binary of whiteness and Blackness. In her newfound third space, she is stepping away from the social pressures created by her white and Black peers and relatives.

In the last chapter, Birdie confronts Deck, the father who abandoned her. She tells him, "I passed as white, Papa" (Larsen 1999, 391), and is surprised by his reaction:

He was frowning at me [...] 'But baby, there's no such thing as passing. We're all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion, make-believe. It is a costume. We all wear one. You just switched yours at some point. That's the absurdity of the whole race game'. (ibid.)

Deck does not validate Birdie's experience with passing, even if it is clear that his choice of abandoning Birdie with her mom was based on what Michele Elam calls "the social force of color" (Elam 2011, 105). Birdie questions his actions: "Why did you only take Cole? Why didn't you take me? If race is so make-believe, why did I go with Mum? You gave me to Mum 'cause I looked white" (Senna 1999, 393). But crucially, by confronting her father, Birdie lays claim to her own dimension – her own third space, or unstructured identity.

As Stuart Hall and Michele Elam argue, cultural identity is not an "essence", but "a positioning" (Hall 1993, 108) or "a politics of position" (Elam 2011, 105). Birdie as a passer is "not re-inscribing a belief in an a priori racial essence but, rather, manipulating identity as it is imbricated in a constitute network of social conventions and institutional facts" (ibid.). She positions herself in her own, non-static social identity, deriving from her insight into colorism and classism. In this sense, *Caucasia* ends on something of a positive note, because Birdie decides to remain in San Francisco with Cole in what can be considered a moment of self-affirmation. She both comes out of her in-between condition and, to an extent, embraces it.

In contrast, *Passing's* ambiguous epilogue is less optimistic, conforming to the tragic mulatto trope to some degree but with a twist: giving Clare greater agency, freeing her from victimhood. Even if Clare cannot escape her tragic destiny, for years she managed to disregard racial lines. Throughout the novel, she crosses them, confronts racial barriers with "nonchalance" (Hutchinson 2009, 300), and is confident in her decision to pass for "the class dynamics of social mobility" (ibid.) in the United States of the 1920s. She cannot fully submit to the strict rules of Jim Crow society or integrate into her husband's

milieu. She understands that she is part of the same in-between territory in which they are simultaneously Black and white, straight and queer. Like Birdie, she chooses her unique politics of positioning: her unstructured identity.

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