

**UCLA**

**UCLA Electronic Theses and Dissertations**

**Title**

Racing the Biracial Body: Biracial Performativity and Interpretation in Pinky and Caucasia

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4fb9t70d>

**Author**

Frierson, Sharon Melody

**Publication Date**

2013

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

Racing the Biracial Body:  
Biracial Performativity and Interpretation  
in *Pinky* and *Caucasia*

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts  
in Afro-American Studies

by

Sharon Melody Frierson

2013



## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Racing the Biracial Body:  
Biracial Performativity and Interpretation  
in *Pinky* and *Caucasia*

by

Sharon Melody Frierson

Master of Arts in Afro-American Studies  
University of California, Los Angeles, 2013  
Professor Darnell Montez Hunt, Chair

In traditional passing narratives, the protagonist was always thought to be authentically black because of her one drop of black blood. The idea of passing relied on the notion that there was an authentic racial self that one was concealing. The mulatta represents assimilation, the end of blackness, and the end of the discussion on racism. Elia Kazan's 1949 "problem film" *Pinky*, based on the novel *Quality*, in many ways embodies the traditional passing narrative. Danzy Senna's 1998 novel *Caucasia*, on the other hand, acts as both a testimony of the lived experiences of being multiracial and critique of the rigidity of racial categories in the United States. Senna argues that race is more performative than biological. By centering on a racially mixed young woman and her family, *Caucasia* complicates and deconstructs the black/white binary and challenges multicultural theory.

The thesis of Sharon Melody Frierson is approved.

Uri Gervase McMillan

Caroline Anne Streeter

Darnell Montez Hunt, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

## DEDICATION

I am deeply grateful for the *incredible* patience of my committee members, family, and especially the late Dr. Jesse James Scott. This thesis is dedicated to them.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER I: PINKY- TRIED AND TRUE.....	15
CHAPTER II: CAUCASIA- CREATING NEW MEANINGS.....	31
CONCLUSION.....	50
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	51

## INTRODUCTION

America has always been “the land of miscegenation.” The history of the United States is one of disparate groups clashing and comingling. Passing for white captured the imaginations of past writers because it was symbolic of America’s contradictions – the rhetoric of equality versus hierarchies based on race, the melting pot versus Jim Crow laws, unity as opposed to division. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, these contradictions were powerfully conveyed in passing narratives such as *Quicksand* and *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*.

This thesis demonstrates that the media portrays biracial and black characters differently in film from white characters and that this difference is usually negative in tone and relies heavily on racial stereotypes. One overarching theme from these results implies that the perception of race is more salient than one’s actual race. I am wary of the way multiraciality has become fetishized in the media and in the popular discussion on race. I worry when multiracial pride is used to uphold an ahistorical and depoliticized vision of race in America. I am not so interested in categorizing further, or adding new groups, so much as I am interested in deconstructing the premise of race itself.

By comparing *Pinky* (1949), a racial passing film from the mid- twentieth century, to *Caucasia* (1998), a passing novel produced at the cusp of the new millennium, that were made during periods of racial strife, and significant political progress for African Americans, the construction of race can be understood as a shifting cultural phenomenon that defined categories of privilege and the nature of power relationships between whites and blacks. By comparing these two cultural texts I hope to show the ways in which the passing narrative has changed over time and how the tragic mulatta trope has been utilized in each text. Such a comparison is necessary because the texts show the progression of racial identity performance and politics in



the United States. The protagonist in *Pinky* embodies the tragic mulatta trope in every possible way and the film was produced during the Jim Crow era where African American women and men were not only treated as second class citizens but also physically and mentally terrorized. On the other hand *Caucasia* and its protagonist represent progression of the traditional passing narrative and the tragic mulatta trope. *Caucasia*'s author Danzy Senna brilliantly demonstrates the nuanced and often times contradictory nature of being a mixed-race woman in the United States.

The inability of black characters to successfully pass as white in traditional passing narratives demonstrates the rigidity of the definition of blackness versus the flexibility of racial categorization for other groups (e.g. Irish and Jewish immigrants were initially categorized as another race, however, over time, they were able to assimilate). This rigid definition of blackness assures the maintenance of white skin privilege, and alleviates any fears for whites that they could at any moment become a slave, or black. In this thesis I will focus on the mixed-raced female body which has historically been referred as a mulatta. The mulatta character's ambiguity and ambivalence make her an ideal figure through which to interrogate debates over essential, "authentic" identity and identity as constructed and performable, debates that continue to charge the field of African American studies.

## **Racial Passing**

In the introduction to *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, Elaine K. Ginsberg posits that passing is about the boundaries established between identity categories and about the individual and cultural anxieties induced by boundary crossing" (2). Passing is about the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen and thus, passing is about identities: their creation or imposition, their adoption or rejection, their accompanying rewards or penalties. The genealogy

of the term passing in American history associates it with the discourse of racial difference and especially with the assumption of a fraudulent “white” identity by an individual culturally and legally defined as “Negro” or black by virtue of a percentage of African ancestry. As the term passing metaphorically implies, such an individual crossed or passed through a racial line or boundary – indeed trespassed – to assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression and accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other. Enabled by a physical appearance emphasizing “white” features, this metaphysical passing involved geographical movement as well; the individual had to leave an environment where her “true identity” – that is, parentage, legal status, and the like – was known to find a place where it was unknown (Ginsberg 3).

By extension, “passing” has been applied discursively to disguises of other elements of an individual’s presumed “natural” or “essential” identity, including class, ethnicity, and sexuality, as well as gender, the latter usually effected by deliberate alterations of physical appearance and behavior, including cross-dressing. Passing is not only associated with a simple binary, but also passing demonstrates the multiplicity of racial or related identity categories into which one might pass. Passing is not always permanent; it may be brief, situational, or intermittent. Although the cultural logic of passing suggests that passing is usually motivated by a desire to shed the identity of an oppressed group to gain access to social and economic opportunities, the rationale for passing may be more or less complex or ambiguous and motivated by other kinds of received rewards.

Adrian Piper claims that if a mixed race person is not inclined toward any form of overt political advocacy, racial passing in order to receive benefits deemed deserved may seem the only way to defy the system of racism (244). Passing, then, becomes more than simply a

rejection of black identity. Going in a different direction than Piper, legal scholar Randall Kennedy defines the term, passing, as requiring that a person be self-consciously engaged in concealment. Such a person knows about her African American lineage – her black “blood” - and either stays quiet about it, hoping that silence along with her appearance will lead observers to perceive her as white, or expressly asserts that she is white (knowing all the while that she is “black” according to ascendant social understandings).

For Kennedy, passing is a deception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identities from which she would be barred by prevailing social standards in the absence of his misleading conduct. The classic racial passer in the United States has been the “white Negro”: the individual whose physical appearance allows her to present herself as “white” but whose “black” lineage (typically only a very partial black lineage) makes her a black according to dominant racial rules.

According to Phillip Brian Harper in his article “Passing for What? Racial Masquerade and the Demands of Upward Mobility,” there are “other functions typically served by racial passing than the accomplishment of merely individualist objective” (Harper 382). The passer’s ability to register as white depends on precisely the binary structure of black/white racial difference whose constructed character the practice of passing is itself meant to reveal (Harper 383). The generic, or standard – racial pass in the U.S. context, Harper posits, is the one in which a “light-skinned person legally designated as black passes for white, the reverse racial pass, then denotes any instance in which a person legally recognized as white effectively functions as a non-white person in any quarter of the social arena” (Harper 383). This is significant for my argument because it shows how racial passing and passing narratives have a very specific meaning because of their U.S. context. The binary, black/white way in which race

is constructed within the U.S. is profoundly important in understanding how mixed-race people have been portrayed in cultural texts.

In “Slippery Language and False Dilemmas,” Julie Cary Nerad describes the U.S. race system as “conceived in slavery, gestated in racist science, and bred in Jim Crow segregation,” and “calcified into a visual epistemology of racial difference based largely on skin color” (813). This visual schema of biological difference was generally reduced to just white and non white. This illusion of racial dichotomy sometimes allowed very light-skinned African Americans to choose between a black or a white identity (Nerad 813). Recent scholarship on passing for white has complicated the simple binary of individual choice by recognizing racial passing as an aggressive political challenge to the ideological construct of race. Passing acts as a form of performative trespass, meaning that passing exposes race as a performative identity category, like gender and class. Recognizing this dimension of racial identity does not reduce the cultural and psychological significance of race; rather, it attempts to separate race from biology and the false hierarchy of innate difference that has been used historically to justify systemic inequity and violence (Nerad 813). By stripping away biology from race, passing’s performative trespass not only reveals the construction of race by the dominant society, but still exposes the very real consequences of race, particularly a black or mixed-race racial identity.

Whatever the rationale, both the process and the discourse of passing interrogate the ontology of identity categories and their construction. For the possibility of passing challenges a number of problematic and even antithetical assumptions about identities, the first of which is that some identity categories are inherent and unalterable essences: presumably one cannot pass for something one is not unless there is some other, pre-passing, identity that one is. Further, passing forces reconsideration of the cultural logic that the physical body is the site of identity

intelligibility. Allowing the possibility that “maleness” or “whiteness” or ethnicity can be performed or enacted, donned or discarded, exposes the anxieties about status and hierarchy created by the potential boundary trespassing (Ginsberg 4). For both the process and the discourse of passing challenge the essentialism that is often the foundation of identity politics, a challenge that may be seen as either threatening or liberating. In either instances, passing discloses that truth that identities are not singularly true or false but multiple and contingent.

The genealogy of the concept of passing in American culture also reveals the origins of passing in the sexual exploitation of black slave women by white men. The children born of these encounters inherited the abject status of the mother even as, through successive generations, a visible, albeit culturally inauthentic, “whiteness” was reproduced from “black” female bodies. At the same time, to insure the reproduction as well as the purity of his whiteness, white men also needed to exert control over the sexuality of both white women and black men, effectively enslaving the former and emasculating the latter (Ginsberg 5). Consequently, in American history, race, sex, and gender have been inextricably linked, first through a system of slavery that placed white men in control of the productive labor of black men and the productive and reproductive labor of both black and white women, and then nationally through an economic and political system and cultural ideology that established a fundamentally racist and sexist hierarchy of privilege dependent upon the oppression of non-white, non-male bodies.

Framed in biological terms, passing (regardless of intent) is usually understood as perilous for the passer’s “true” black identity and thus in conflict with her responsibility to both her African American family and the race. Social conventions frequently punish individuals who fail to fulfill this responsibility (Nerad 815). However, by supporting the tenets of racial uplift and punishing passers who reject the black race, some passing novels minimize their subversive

potential by associating racial responsibility with that single drop of black blood, thus reinforcing the association between racial identity and biology. Scholarship on racial passing also continues to allow the “rhetoric of biological difference to seep to the surface, failing to disrupt the idea that the pre-passing identity is true and the passing identity is assumed” (Nerad 816). This reinscription of identity categories, in turn, tends to reestablish the passing identity as secondary and performed and the pre-passing identity as the primary (which shades easily into essential) identity (Nerad 816). This is important to this thesis because it exposes how even academia falls prey to assumptions of race and biology’s inherent relationship. As long as passing is continued to be regarded as the performance of a secondary identity that necessitates the rejection of one’s essential and authentic self, the passer’s punishment (both self-inflicted and communally sanctioned) seems a matter of course, a result of her desertion of self, family, and race (Nerad 817).

Although little is documented about the actual extent of racial passing by blacks in the United States, the idea of passing derives its power not from the number of instances of passing but as a signification that embodies the anxieties and contradictions of a racially stratified society (Ginsberg 8). For the legally or culturally black individual racial passing is an attempt to move from margin to the center. From the perspective of a dominant race, passing is a deception, an attempt to claim status and privilege falsely. But when “race” is no longer visible, it is no longer intelligible: if “white” can be “black,” what is white? Race passing thus destabilizes the grounds of privilege founded on racial identity. While much of the criticism on passing intentionally tries to destabilize the idea of a biological, authentic racial identity and to illustrate how passing functions subversively, it often ends up reinforcing biological definitions of race (Nerad 817). Passing novels, especially those of unintentional passing, have the potential to destabilize not

just ideological race categories but also the conceptual framework scholars and readers apply to those narratives. Unintentional passing exposes how race sometimes was a matter of choice and that such choices were governed not just by a character's personal desire for socioeconomic gain but by her present sense of identity and her family's racial identification (Nerad 837). These novels hint at fluidity within the U.S. racial system that is all too often simplified.

One of the assumed effects of a racist society is the internalization, by members of the oppressed race, the dominant culture's definitions and characterizations. This is the context in which the literature of racial passing continues to be most often read. This body of literature, as traditionally discussed, includes the narratives of those individuals who escaped slavery by passing as white. Additionally, works of fiction and non-fiction by both white and black authors complicate identity issues with multiple boundary crossings, both literal and figurative. Although some critics have accused black authors who write passing fiction of pandering to white audiences by portraying passing as a source of anxiety and alienation for the passer, it is significant that most of these authors were individuals for whom the ambiguity of their racial identity was likely the source of their creative concern.

In her essay on James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, Samira Kawash cautions against any singular interpretation of the passing narrative. She argues that "blackness or whiteness as they emerge in the passing narrative belie the possibility of identity or authenticity that would allow one to be unequivocally black or white" (64). Kawash also claims that the passing narrative is not about the representation of blackness or whiteness; rather, it is about the failure of blackness or whiteness to provide the grounds for a stable, coherent identity (63). Blackness and whiteness as they emerge in the passing narrative belie the possibility of identity or authenticity that would allow one to be unequivocally black or white. Passing,

Kawash posits, insists on the fallacy of identity as a content of social, psychological, national, or cultural attributes, whether bestowed by nature or produced by society; it forces us to pay attention to the form of difference itself (63). In the case of race in the United States, difference is named and produced on the “color line.” Passing plays on this line, exposing racial difference as a continually emerging distinction empty of any essential content.

To suggest that fictional race passing may be read as a metaphor for alienation and self-denial on the part of these characters is to ignore the rich complexity of this genre. Passing may act as a tactic that allows these protagonists to exercise creative subjectivity. Although the discourse of race passing and discussions of race-passing narratives traditionally assume a black/white binary and related class system, complication of that dichotomy in fiction belie any such simple assumptions (Ginsberg 11). Senna’s protagonist Bridie Lee is a light-skinned girl who chooses to identify with her black ancestry although she “looks,” and is generally assumed to be, white. In effect a mirror image of the traditional passing narrative, Birdie’s story foregrounds the threats to white complacency and hetero-normative sexuality, as well as to social privilege. For Birdie to identify as black, to self-construct an identity perceived by a white majority as less desirable, disrupts the assumptions of superiority that buttress white privilege and self-esteem.

The positive potential of passing lies in its challenging those categories and boundaries. In its interrogation of the essentialism that is the foundation of identity politics, passing has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions, and to cross social and economic boundaries that exclude or oppress.



## **Mixed Race Identity**

To better understand racial passing narratives, one must also gain an understanding of the protagonists of many of these texts who are typically mixed-race individuals. Jonathan Brennan goes into great detail discussing multiracial identities in *Mixed Race Literature*. Brennan posits that an assertion of multiple identities does not entail a deconstruction of all mono-racial identities, but an insistence on the right to claim one's true self (3). It is important to address the creation and conception of the idea of "race," without which the idea of "mixed race" would not exist (Brennan 6). An exploration of the world of mixed race identity both reinforces essential categories of race and also proves one of the best opportunities to see the limitations and absurdity of racial categories (Brennan 7). Many mixed race literary texts serve as trickster narratives, overturning and undermining fixed expectations of identity and appropriate behavior (Brennan 8). Since the establishment of European colonial rule and the creation and institution of slavery in the New World, it has been a widespread policy, authorized by the "one-drop rule," to classify those with any perceivable or arguable African American heritage as "black," thus attempting to negate the wide variety of mixed racial and cultural identities in the United States (Brennan 15). Such a collapsing of the historical, however, is problematic.

The body of literary works by mixed race writers stands as a testimony to their existence, and as a repudiation of false racial narratives. The growing body of mixed race scholarship testifies to its acceptance and importance (Brennan 17). Much of the discussion on mixed race identity and literature is being developed in the growing field of "mixed race studies." In response to other scholarly fields that often ultimately prove hostile to the idea of mixed race by insisting on a reductive reading of multiple identities, the field of mixed race studies is developing a framework for the discussion of contemporary multiple identities and for the

analysis of the historical development of these identities in a sociological and psychological framework, which can be quite useful in informing an analysis *Pinky* and *Caucasia*.

Literary representations of mixed race subjects' subjectivity serve as both a reflection and a perpetuation of stereotypes surrounding mixed race people (Brennan 43). In "Fading to White, Fading Away: Biracial Bodies in Michelle Cliff's *Abeng* and Danzy Senna's *Caucaisa*," Sika Alain Dagbovie posits that multiracial identity is complicated because it entails simultaneously embracing community and individuality in a society where people tend to see that goal as two discrete goals, oppositional and conflicting (107). In *Caucasia* Birdie embraces the black community that she is both a part of and separate from, while wondering if she will ever transcend the skin, the body. Her desires seem inconsistent, yet manifest the artifice of race; it is real and not real, palpable and obscure. The unique racial projections of these literary characters thus offer identification possibilities that remain historically grounded in blackness without being imprisoning.

### **Racial Performativity**

In her highly influential work *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler builds on notions of identity to create a theory of performativity, which holds that bodies – whether those of race, gender, nationality, or sexually – have no fixed status. Rather, identity acts as a function of the various ongoing repetitive acts (2). The value of Butler's theory as an analytic tool for examining passing narratives is her insistence that performances are not a singular or self-conscious theatrical imitation or identification, but a process by which the self is constituted through the ongoing, yet never completed, reiteration of discursive practices. Performativity has been the subject of debate within both studies of racial passing and African American Studies, as critics have considered whether race can be understood as performative and, if so, what its political or

critical possibilities might be (Zackodnik xxi). In *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race*, scholar Teresa C. Zackodnik describes how African Americanists, such as Valerie Smith, question the ethics of readings enabled by theories of performativity (xxi). Such scholars find that these theories risk masking the historical and lived experience of racialization and gendering in the United States. Smith states, “I find discussions of the performativity of race and gender...of limited usefulness precisely because...I resist the evacuation of historical experience from the construction of raced and gendered bodies” (51). Judith Butler has answered such criticism in *Bodies that Matter* by arguing against “choosing subject...at the center of [her] project” and for an understanding of “construction as constitutive constraint,” which “does not foreclose the possibility of agency, [though] it does locate agency as reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power and not a relation of external opposition to power” (x, 15).

Butler’s controversial theory is crucial to this thesis because it allows the mixed-race female protagonists of *Pinky* and *Caucasia* ways in which to be black and female, mixed-race and female, at the same time, and in one instance and not in another without them being seen as less of a “full” character. While identity as performance may be rooted in communal and cultural traditions that inform that performance, according to Zackodnik, it may also be perceived by some to be a profoundly rootless instability that does not adequately address lived experience (157). A politics of identity rooted in the affirmation of African American “community” and a critical questioning of the performance’s political possibilities and efficacy seem to motivate the continued unease with reading racial passing as anything more than a individual’s attempt to better her material position. Rather than reading narratives of passing as making a political intervention in conceptions of race at a time when racial difference was obsessively policed and violently asserted, critics have continued to regard them as limited in subversive potential and

impotent in political strategy. Whether guarded on one side of the color line or the other, “blackness” continues to be carefully policed in American culture and elsewhere in the West (Zackodnik 157). This kind of border patrol and identity politics has made for one rather long-standing reception of passing narrative as advocating a rejection of “blackness” for the social access and economic security gained by passing for white, and of passing itself as “dishonorable” act that indicates the character’s lack of “integrity” or loyalty to their “race.”

### **The Tragic Mulatta**

In popular films such as *Pinky* (1949) and *Imitation of Life* (1959), the mulatta characters provided a sexual desirability that mammy figures were denied. However they paid a price for the liberties allowed to them on the big screen and have, for the most part, been what Donald Bogle has called "tragic mulattas". As characters whose racial identity could rest somewhere between black and white, passing characters have the potential to subvert racial categories by proving the falsity of the black and white racial binary. Judith R. Berzon describes the tragic mulatta character in *Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* as “an outcast, a wanderer, one alone. She is the fictional symbol of marginality rejected out of fear and hatred by the dominant group, and is often rejected out of envy and hatred by the subordinate group as well” (100). Additionally, the tragic mulatta character is usually depicted as being ambivalent toward the two castes. She is torn between the two groups, not primarily in a psychosocial sense, but rather as the expression of her divided biological inheritance (Berzon 100).

According to Bogle the tragic mulatta "is made likeable--even sympathetic (because her white blood, no doubt)--and the audience believes that the girl's life could have been productive and happy had she not been a 'victim of divided racial inheritance'" (9). All passing characters

(from black to white) are mulattas, and in the films examined in this website, all of them have been tragic. Because of the American racial binary of black and white, in popular film, the mulatta is forced to choose between being black or white. The passing character is by definition choosing being white but cannot escape their blackness. By the end of the films, most of the passing characters are still in pain and torn between worlds. Though Bogle's definition of the tragic mulatta may easily refer to the title character of *Pinky* more so than the protagonist in *Caucasia*, his definition is still relevant. In the first chapter of this thesis, I will further explore the 1949 film *Pinky* follows the traditional passing narrative including its full fledged tragic mulatta. In the second chapter I will discuss the ways in which Danzy Senna's 1998 novel *Caucasia* veers away from traditional passing narratives and allows its protagonist to not only acknowledge and in a sense run away from the tragic mulatta trope.

## CHAPTER I: PINKY – TRIED AND TRUE

*“Nobody deserves respect as long as she pretends she’s something she isn’t” – Miss Em*

The culmination of the trend toward black realism in the American cinema of the nineteen forties came to a head in 1949, with its unique cycle of popular movies that tackled the race problem of America. These films – *Home of the Brave* (1949), *Lost Boundaries* (1949), and *Pinky* (1949) – all situated blacks at home in the United States, enduring the problems of civilian life, rather than the all-for-one, one-for-all heroics of war-time. Of the three films, *Pinky* achieved the greatest critical success. Directed by Elia Kazan and produced by Darryl Zanuck, *Pinky* starred Jeanne Crain in the title role and Ethel Waters in the supporting role of Aunt Dicey Johnson. The film was an adaptation of the 1946 best-seller, *Quality*, a novel first serialized in the *Ladies Home Journal*.

*Pinky* is the story of Patricia "Pinky" Johnson, a light-skinned black woman, trying to live a “better” life. For Pinky, a better life means passing for a white woman in the North where she became a nurse and getting engaged to a white doctor. However her fear of being exposed to her white fiancé compels her to flee to her childhood home, an un-named Southern state, where her grandmother cares for the wealthy Miss Em, played by Ethel Barrymore. When Miss Em’s decision to will her estate to Pinky results in a painful and racist legal battle.

*Pinky* opens with a shot of the protagonist on a train traveling to the Deep South. According to critics and scholars of the film, though surprised at first, the audience soon suspends its disbelief that Pinky is related to the black washerwoman, Aunt Dicey. But, like Pinky, the audience remains troubled by the situation to which the heroine returns: the poverty of her grandmother’s home and the humiliation by whites. In “Image and Ideology in Kazan’s *Pinky*,” Christopher John Jones describes the white audience as also “shudder[ing] at the abuse

[Pinky] receives from a razor-carrying black woman with whom she has argued over money, and at her mistreatment by white police who have come to her rescue and then turn against her when they realize she is black” (111).

Pinky is depressed by the life she returns to – the squalor of her home and the daily threats and insults. She is attacked by a knife-carrying black woman. Later she is arrested by the police, who have come to her defense only to thugs. After being almost raped by two white drunk men who call her “the whitest dinge” they have ever seen, Pinky decides to return North to her fiancé and live as a white woman. The audience sides with her and questions Dicey’s demand that Pinky care the aristocratic Miss Em. Though now impoverished and near death, Miss Em’s pride and arrogance epitomize to Pinky the South’s racist code. At first angry about the burden of caring for the arrogant, demanding old woman, Pinky learns to respect Miss Em and her viewpoint that Pinky, by passing for white, was pretending to be something she was not. Pinky realizes that if she rejects her black heritage, she will lose something very important – her self-respect.

After Miss Em dies, willing her large deteriorating house to Pinky, the protagonist must fight the resentment in the small town and defeats the attempt to have Miss Em’s will nullified. She also resists her fiancé’s paternalistic encouragements to forget her developing destiny in her homeland, ultimately opting instead to accept her identity as a black woman and her role in racially uplifting her community. The film’s final shot depicts Pinky supervising black nurses in Miss Em’s former house, now converted to a school for black nurses.

After its premiere at the Rivoli in New York City on September 29, 1949, *Pinky* met with a mixture of approval and disdain from white and black critics across the country. Some writers praised the film either for daring to address race relations and confront whites' discrimination

toward African Americans or for its quality entertainment. Several of these reviewers nevertheless critiqued *Pinky* as being a superficial attempt to resolve the issues that it purported to criticize and as resolving these issues in too "easy" a fashion (Sayre 118). Almost all of the critics highlighted the actors' performances, particularly those of Crain and Waters.

Reviews of *Pinky* were far more numerous than those for *Lost Boundaries*, and of the two films, *Pinky* enjoyed greater box-office success, particularly in southern cities like New Orleans. Andy W. Smith, vice president and general sales manager for Twentieth Century-Fox, announced in December "record-shattering grosses" at the State Theatre in New Orleans and proclaimed that "'*Pinky*'s performance in the South, as well as around the country, has been unprecedented." Smith further claimed that exhibitors had shown "unparalleled support" by having 8:30A.M. openings and by advertising the film as a "major event." During its final four days at the Roxy Theater in Atlanta *Pinky* grossed over \$13,000, which Pittsburgh's African American newspaper, the *Courier*, reported as the most any Twentieth Century-Fox film had ever grossed in Atlanta at a first-run theater. *Variety* noted that *Pinky*, "with a name cast and the backing of the company's sales organization and its 650 theatres," had topped the list of the three "Negro tolerance pix" with \$4.25 million out of the \$8.5 million in domestic rentals. *Home of the Brave* came in at second place with a predicted estimate of \$2.25 million, and *Lost Boundaries* was third with an expected total of \$1.8 million in domestic rentals. *Pinky* might have demonstrated to whites, again according to Smith, "how unlovely their attitudes are," but it ultimately proved no challenge to segregation.

By not challenging the "system," *Pinky* did not pose much of a threat to the "peace" of white Atlanta. As mentioned earlier, *Pinky* was not released until cuts required by Smith were made in the film. Indeed, as *Variety* and the *New York Times* reported, some fifty feet of film-34



seconds of 102 minutes-were cut from the final version shown in Atlanta. The moments cut included an "attempted rape scene, the slapping of a Negro girl by a white policeman and the final scene showing the principals (Pinky and her fiancé) kissing." Two of these three cuts involved overt physical interaction between white and black characters-in other words, moments of potential sexual and racial violence and miscegenation. Although fictionalized, on-screen sexual relations between white and black characters, in addition to outright violence toward black characters, would not be tolerated by censors acting on behalf of mostly white viewers.

In his critical article about audience reception to *Pinky*, Christopher John Jones asserts that the filmmaker's "dilemma of casting the role of Pinky was provided by the consideration of audience psychology" (117) which tipped the balance in favor of the white actress. As a general distribution film, *Pinky* would be targeted at a predominantly white audience. Jones also asserts that when watching the film, white audiences would consciously accept that, according to the more abstract theme of the film, they were watching the problems of a black person. But actually the white identity which the actress bore would unconsciously control the audience's reactions to a greater degree. The abuse which Pinky received from the town's people, the humiliation comedowns imposed by Aunt Dicey and Miss Em, are underserved and thus more unsavory, because they are directed at a white actress (Jones 117).

At the beginning of the film, the audience is encouraged to side with Pinky against Aunt Dicey. Then when Dicey realizes that Pinky had been passing for white up North and tells her, "Denying yourself like Peter denied Jesus. They done educated the heart out of you," and when Miss Em tells her, "Nobody deserves respect as long as she pretends she's something she isn't," these principles, suddenly introduced into the story, take precedence over the audience's protective feeling toward the "white" Pinky, based on their reaction to the abuse given her

whiteness, is replaced by a belief in their principled commitment to helping her figurative black brothers and sisters. The film's plot anticipates a visceral reaction to the actress as person, as physical being, as a white person who does not deserve to be treated as a black person, by offering a more ideological, principled reaction (Jones 118).

The twist of the story, according to Donald Bogle, is that while caring for the cantankerous Miss Em, the mulatta attains maturity and stature (151). "Nobody deserves respect as long as she pretends she's something she isn't," the woman tells her. Pinky realizes that if she returns north and passes for white – something she isn't – she can never have self-respect. When Miss Em dies, leaving her decaying mansion to Pinky, the girl fights to keep their property. She painfully comes to understand responsibility and justice. "Tom, you can change your name," Pinky tells her white fiancé after winning her property suit, "I wonder if you can change what you are...I'm a Negro. I can't forget it. I can't deny it... You can't love without pride." She ends her romance, opting to remain in the South and work with her people. In the movie's final and memorable shot, Pinky stands before Miss Em's mansion, which is now converted into a black nursing clinic. She is content because she has pride in her race. Yet Pinky is aware that she has sacrificed personal happiness. Like all tragic mulattas narratives, *Pinky* ends with a wiser woman, but one not completely fulfilled.

As a motion picture *Pinky* also ended not completely fulfilled. The reviews were conflicting. *Newsweek* glowed: "Elia Kazan...here does an admirable job of blending a courageous approach to racism and the strictly emotional factors of Pinky's personal history" (Sayre 118). But *The Daily Worker*, noting that Pinky "finds herself" through the aid of Miss Em, called the film a deception which insisted that "The solution to its [Negro] problems will come from the white ruling class and that they will be rewarded individually by the measure of

simple goodness, not by organization or political struggle” (Bogle 151). *The Daily Worker* pointed up but one of the compromises that diluted *Pinky*’s power. Bogle asserts that there were other compromises. In *Quality*, the novel by Cid Ricketts Sumner on which *Pinky* is based, *Pinky* won her courtroom case, but the Ku Klux Klan burned down Miss Em’s house in retaliation. The novel’s ending was far more honest than the optimistic and triumphant conclusion that the film offers through a scene in which a group of cute ebony nurses are seen laughing in the converted hospital (Bogle 151).

But the film’s greatest compromise, according to Bogle, was casting white actress Jeanne Crain in the lead role. More than any other film in which a white has played a black role, *Pinky* typified the movie industry’s methods of grasping audience identification (Sayre 119). In a number of scenes, Ethel Waters as Dicey, the typical black domestic, is shown washing, ironing, or performing other menial chores. No one expected any more from her, and audiences were neither surprised nor outraged by her behavior. But when Jeanne Crain’s *Pinky* was forced to take in washing to earn money for her lawyer’s fees – as she stood over a scrubbing board with the carefully placed studio sweat rolling off her perfect porcelain –white face – white audiences were automatically shocked and manipulated so that they sympathized with this lovely white girl compelled to work like a “nigger.” To Kazan’s credit, that scene came across as intended and by the time Jeanne Crain entered the courtroom, movie patrons of 1949 felt she had been through enough to deserve a favorable decision in the case. Likewise the insults and threats she endured seemed twice as menacing because they were committed against a white actress. And by the same token, her “interracial” romance with actor William Lundigan upset no one because, in actuality, it was no such thing at all.

*Pinky* uses the mulatta character to gain audience sympathies, exploring the effects of Southern racism by subjecting the almost-white main character to racially motivated degradations. Significantly, the film embodies the mulatta through a white actress, producing an ambiguous interplay of audience identifications. The film engages multiple deployments of the mulatta character: through the actress, through the social context of the Hays Code, through the visual conventions it deploys, and through its narrative, which draws on the historical and rhetorical development of the mulatta character (Kydd 98). These multiple and other contradictory impulses provide the film's audience with a complex and conflicted understanding of race. Some moments in the film point to race as a cultural and social construction, while other moments the film reaffirm and consolidate the absolute primacy of race as a social category. These conflicts are most significantly embodied by the main character Pinky, since her narrative role as the mulatta, trapped between black and white, interacts with her visual portrayal as a character neither black nor white, embodied by a white actress (Kydd 98). These ambiguities are also played out in the film's narrative articulation of the politics of family and inheritance. The history of the representation of miscegenation and mulattas, both in literature and film, frequently focuses on the issue of family ties between black and white Americans. The casting of a white actress not only garners white audience identification; it also reaffirms the centrality of whiteness as the norm against which nonwhite people are designated "other." As Lola Young suggests, this type of casting choice affirms "the assumption that 'whiteness' provides the 'base' for portraying the complexities of human subjectivity."

*Pinky* relies for its effect on the simultaneous identification on the part of the audience with white actress Jeanne Crain and black character Pinky. The play between the extra-diegetical knowledge of whiteness of the actress and the necessity of the character's blackness is at the

heart of the film. Yet this process of identification has complex ramifications. The cinematic representation of a mulatta character requires the embodiment of a mulatta, in the form of an actor, whose own racial identity comes into play in the representation of the character (Kydd 107). This embodiment engages a crisis of representation of racial mixing. In terms of the visual schema (and the audience's extratextual knowledge of the actress) Pinky is white, yet narratively, she is black. The miscengenistic relationship and the white ancestors that created the mulatta character are completely absent from the film. No narrative of this period shows both parents either together or separately. Yet interestingly, the race of the parent who is shown relates to the ultimate destiny of the character.

*Pinky*, like the other films in which the mulatta character is identified with the black community, makes no mention of how Pinky comes by her white physical characteristics. Her only living relative is Dicey. There is only one brief mention of a dead mother and no mention at all a father. This absence is specific to the film; in the novel from which the film was adapted, *Quality*, information about Pinky's white father can be assumed second-hand from conversations with Dicey. In his article comparing the book and the film, Christopher John Jones suggests that this is partially a function of the novel, which allows for more exposition on matters not directly related to the development of the plot than is possible for film (Jones 115). Yet *Pinky*'s function as a part of the mythification of the stereotype of the tragic mulatta relates it to other cinematic representations such as those in *Lost Boundaries* (1949) and *Imitation of Life* (1934, 1959). Since most of the other examples of classical Hollywood films with mulattas, either passing or not, do not show the interracial family structures, Pinky's negation and censorship of interracial sex are not only a general function of adaption from book to film, they are also specifically part of Hollywood's representation of displacement of miscegenation.

Pinky's absence of an acknowledged family, and particularly of any white relations, is part of a Hollywood practice, based in censorship, which obscures the history of miscegenation. In this film, interracial sex and marriage are erased from the past, through they remain a possibility of the present and a potential of the future, if Pinky marries the white Jim (Kydd 110). Jeanne Crain's whiteness allows for Pinky's romance to be visually portrayed, since at this point in film history, interracial intimate contact (for example, scenes of kissing between black and white actors) was still prohibited legally and socially. Despite the film's focus on miscegenation, it is narrative focus, not a visual one, since we are, after all, watching Jeanne Crain enact a romance with the white William Lundigan.

The deletion of historically situated miscegenation and the absence of interrelated white and black characters further complicate the use of a white actress in the mulatta role. The actress herself begins to function symbolically in creating the light-skinned black woman in the absence of a white relative. The ambivalence created by the dichotomy of white actress/"black" character resonates with the thematic ambivalence inherent in the mulatta character, trapped between black and white.

Since a white actress serves the function of representing a passing mulatta, she then has to bear the narrative burden of being demonstrated to be black. Mulattas often bear a racialized body in fiction dealing with mixed-race characters and passing. In the case of Pinky, the white body of the actress has to be racially marked to position her as a black character, yet this racializing cannot be allowed to over-mark her; otherwise the effect of her whiteness will be lost. She must retain sufficient black characteristics to accentuate her role as not belonging fully to either race yet remains identifiable as white to maintain audience identification.

There are moments when visual themes in the film marks Pinky's racial duality. This is mostly accomplished through a film noir style of lighting (Kydd 119). In such scenes near the beginning, Pinky expresses her thoughts about returning north to Tom through an internal monologue voice-over. The first of these scenes occurs at night, and through this temporal setting ostensibly motivates that lighting scheme, the portrayal of Pinky in heavy shadow and her light externalizes her internal struggles as well as her dual nature. The next scene shows Pinky walking in and out of heavy shadows under the tress as, in another internal monologue, she composes a telegraph to Tom. The use of these visual motifs can thus be read as racially motivated, visually accentuating her "dark" side. This "dark" side might be read, according to conventional film noir expectations, as related to a psychological dualism; in the case of Pinky, these lighting codes signal not only a psychological duality, but a biological duality as well. Thus, along with other devices designed to add suspense to the plot, this lighting is used to convey the state of her undecided mind. Yet as the narrative develops, there are fewer moments when Pinky is carefully represented this way. As she progressively identifies herself as black, she is visual shown in brighter, softer, and thus less ambiguous light. The lighting scheme changes to appear more in line with the generic convention of melodrama rather than film noir (Kydd 119). This lighting change signals a shift in Pinky's psychological makeup from the dual/split personality of film noir to the more "normalized and domesticated psychology of melodrama. Despite this shift, the plot continues, in different ways, to code Pinky's character as black.

Ultimately, then the form of racial marking that Pinky assumes is as much narrative as iconic. Specifically Pinky experiences racism and humiliation that characterize her as black. These moments produce more than just an individual identity crisis for the character, although

such a crisis is undoubtedly evoked in both narrative and visual themes. The mulatta character has its origin in abolitionist fiction, as rhetorical method for pointing out the debilitating effects of racism. Pinky's scenes of racial humiliation reflect this use of the mulatta (Kydd 116). There is a sense of anxiety over the absence of visual racial identification, an anxiety that is played out through and overcompensation in terms of the mulatta character's objectification. This objectification can be more fully accounted for through a discussion of filmic conventions of looking and the gaze however, it is important to note that the narrative racial marking often takes on the aspects of violence and sexual objectiveness; Jeanne Crain is less physically marked as black than her character is narratively placed within a racially stratified society.

For example, Pinky is walking through the "colored section" of town when two White men in a car offer her a ride, mistaking her for a white girl. When she says that she lives in this section of town, they shine a light on her and pursue her, while one of the comments, "this is the whitest dinge I ever saw." The light they shine on her illuminates her from behind, making her dress transparent and showing her legs. When they catch her, they grab her and rough her up until she is able to escape across the fields back home. The scene thus overtly correlates the racialized woman with the sexualized woman. When Pinky is revealed to be black she loses rights over her own body. When she is no longer respected as a white woman, she can be touched, searched, and aggressively looked at by men who assume this right over her. On one hand, this could be read as the film's most progressive social commentary. It foregrounds the residual effects of the system of slavery and the nature of contemporary racism in the treatment of black women: the way that Pinky becomes objectified by the figures of white male authority is reminiscent of a system in which black women's rights over their own bodies were systematically abused and compromised (Kydd 113). By referencing white male sexual



aggressiveness toward black women, the film also alludes to the existence of mulattas as the product of this systematic abuse of black women. Yet on the other hand, the film offers the image of the objectified mulatta's body as part of its own spectral pleasure.

Thus Pinky's objectification follows traditional methods of sexually objectifying the female body. This scene and others point to the visual nature of racial politics and the anxiety created by a woman who can pass. Pinky's racialization is associated not only with sexualization but with an intense and potentially violent scrutinizing gaze. As plot devices, these moments situate Pinky as black. Pinky develops the vial uncertainty of the mulatta character, accentuating her role as a woman to be looked at and examined for traces of her identity and for a developed understanding of racial coding.

The mulatta woman's body is constantly placed in Hollywood narrative through hyper-surveillance and violence (Kydd 120). Pinky is threatened with rape by white men who simultaneously appear protective of white women in relation to black men. The mulatta woman (whether embodied by a white or black actress) evokes the anxiety of undefined racial boundaries. In the face of a racial difference that is not visible, acts of looking and seeing become overdetermined. Pinky is constantly looked at. The looks are often hostile and aggressive, even to the point to being accompanied by physical attack. The looks are also investigating. They thus represent a multiply racial objectification of the woman's body that contains and incorporates sexual desire, scrutinization, and a potential threat of violence. This potentially violent desire positions the black woman as the object of the white male gaze designed to possess and humiliate, and even if the sexual aspect of the look is played down when the gaze appears from the perspective of a black male, there is still a continuation of the violent gaze.

*Pinky* mostly supported the status quo, despite its slight progressive push for greater tolerance and fairer treatment of African Americans; *Lost Boundaries* indirectly promoted integration and acceptance as well as a merger of white and black social spaces. In all probability such a distinction did not escape Smith's keen and discriminating eye. The filmmakers lead viewers to accept Pinky, played by the white Jeanne Crain, as black—that is, the ways in which Pinky is culturally and cinematically inscribed as black. Her blackness is made apparent, in part, by the ways in which characters label her as black; only near the film's conclusion does she define herself to Tom as "a Negro." But even more pointedly, Pinky's blackness is cinematically asserted from without her. Pinky appears in spaces that indicate her racial identity to viewers: in her childhood room in Dicey's home, outside (as opposed to inside) the gate of Miss Em's columned mansion, or in the black section of town. Lighting effects and the use of dark shadows, Courtney posits, also serve to highlight Pinky's dual racial identity throughout the film.

As Thomas Cripps writes in *Making Movies Black*, *Pinky* enjoyed the "fill force of a major studio" behind it. Cripps argues that through *Pinky*, "liberalism entered the big time" (45). Reviews confirm the influence of the studio packaging of *Pinky*. *Time* magazine, for example, asserted that "partly because it puts entertainment above soap boxing, Darryl Zanuck's sleek movie (*Pinky*) is head and shoulders above its predecessors both as entertainment and propaganda." Paul Jones, movie editor for the *Atlanta Constitution*, speculated that "what has been wrong with most of the 'race' films so far has been that most producers were hesitant about sinking too much production cost into them without feeling them out. As a result, such films as *Intruder in the Dust* and *Home of the Brave*, among others, have fallen short on production value and on story material." In *Pinky*, however, Jones found a cast "top-heavy with names," "almost flawless" production, and a story that "builds sympathy and understanding for the

minority." Jones believed that "20th Century Fox has shot their big guns on *Pinky*, and he recommended the film, despite its focus on a "social topic." The film indeed had big names behind it. Producer Darryl F. Zanuck and director Elia Kazan had collaborated previously on *Gentleman's Agreement*, which won an Academy Award for best picture of 1947." Ethel Barrymore, Ethel Waters, and Jeanne Crain were well-known actresses and were all nominated for Academy Awards for *Pinky*-Crain for best actress and Barrymore and Waters for best supporting actress. The film benefited from an A-studio budget. *Pinky's* production cost as \$1,585,000. *Lost Boundaries* was budgeted at \$600,000, more than 200% less than *Pinky*.

The studio also contributed to *Pinky's* success through the "financial muscle" that it provided in terms of distribution and advertising. Indeed, Fox appears to have invested heavily in plat-forming the film, resulting in extensive coverage-far more extensive than the film *Lost Boundaries*-in popular and trade publications. Fox marketed the film to both white and black audiences, indicating that Hollywood was finally taking black audiences more seriously. Advertisements for the film appeared in both white and black newspapers, and special efforts were made to accommodate black viewers-balconies reserved at the Roxy in Atlanta, for example, and the African American *Chicago Defender*-sponsored premiere in the Midwest. An ad in *Variety* directed at exhibitors proclaimed that showing *Pinky* represented a departure for the South: "*Pinky* opening in Atlanta, GA, is the biggest thing to hit the South since *Gone With the Wind*" (52). On November 17, 1949, opening day in Atlanta, the city's African American newspaper, the *Atlanta Daily World*, noted that "for the first time in the history of the Roxy, the entire balcony will be reserved for colored!"

The *Atlanta Daily World*, *Constitution*, and *Journal* all reported that moviegoers "packed" the Roxy-"standing room only" crowds" and "record crowd[s]." The line for admittance

was never less than a block long, claimed the *Constitution*, with a maximum of a thousand persons in attendance at one point. *The Journal* claimed that "while approximately 7,000 Negroes (the day's total) enjoyed the picture filly, one of the largest crowds of white patrons ever to assemble at the Roxy theater in a single day paid strict attention to a film using racial conflict as the theme." Papers mentioned that no disturbances occurred, indicating that some sort of problem had been expected (but by whom is unclear). The *New York Times* reported that policemen noticed "'nothing louder than a sneeze' except for one instance, when the balcony of Negroes and ground floor of whites applauded a 'victory' for the Negro heroine." The lack of any violent or negative disruption proved to a *Daily World* reviewer that "people with a logical viewpoint are to be found everywhere, and that prejudice and hate among us is a rapidly fading evil." interestingly enough, the *Chicago Defender* also commented on the "calm" that prevailed during the first week of *Pinky's* Atlanta showing. Aggressive plat-forming of *Pinky* played a substantial role in its success."

However, printed advertisements played down the racial component of *Pinky's* narrative, lending an air of mystery to the film. The *Motion Picture Herald* showed six ads used for *Pinky*; three of these ads, absent of any headlines or captions, highlight only the face of Jeanne Crain, with one only showing her from the nose up. It is unclear from such images what the film is about or who the person intensely staring at the reader is. The advertisements offer no indication of racial identity or "passing" as the subject of the film. Using captions such as "She Told Me-Too Late!" and "She Came Home a Stranger!" the ads equally obfuscate the character's racial identity and thus her dilemma. By essentially erasing black bodies and therefore blackness from *Pinky's* advertisement campaign, the filmmakers and distributors reaffirm the centrality of whiteness as the norm against which nonwhite people are designated "other," just as having a

white woman play the role of a mulatta. The film's ad campaign's purging of any hint of its true narrative, the passing narrative, also acts to obscure the history of miscegenation in the United States.

## CHAPTER II: CAUCASIA - CREATING NEW MEANINGS

*“[I] didn’t want to be black like Samantha. A doomed, tragic shade of black. I wanted to be black like someone else.” – Birdie Lee*

In traditional passing narratives, the protagonist was always thought to be authentically black because of her one drop of black blood. The idea of passing relied on the notion that there was an authentic racial self that one was concealing. Furthermore, the sign implied that black and white were the only two races in existence. Groups who don’t fit into the black-white binary become invisible. Identities not easily labeled are not as palatable in the America imagination, since they tend to signify “outsider, poverty, non-white, un-American” whereas the mulatta represents assimilation, the end of blackness, and the end of the discussion on racism. And race mixing can exist and has existed happily within a racist and racialized structure.

*Caucasia* traces the story of two sisters growing up in New England from 1975 until 1982. Born to a white mother and a black father, both intellectuals and activists in the Civil Rights Movements in 1970s Boston, Cole, the oldest sister, looks visibly black, while the narrator, Birdie, looks white. Birdies and Cole are intensely close even speaking “Elemeno,” a made-up language only the two of them understand. In this make-believe world, the girls imagine the Elemenos as a “shifting people, constantly switching their form, color, pattern, in a quest for invisibility” (Senna 7). As Cole and Birdie will quickly learn, however, “the ability to disappear into any surrounding” (Senna 7) is not as simple as they would like to believe. Given their skin colors, they are separated by the cultural understanding of race and visibility, and eventually separated by their own parents.

In contrast to most literary and cultural representations of passing, Danzy Senna’s 1998 novel, *Caucasia*, casts blackness as the ideal, desired identity. For protagonist Birdie Lee and her

sister, Cole - whiteness simply pales in comparison. In childhood, Birdie and Cole form strong bonds with each other and their black heritage. The two sisters transfer their love for blackness to Golliwog, the black doll perversely bestowed on the darker sister, Cole, by their white, blueblood grandmother (Harrison-Kahan 19).

By reversing the racial dynamics of more traditional passing narratives such as *Imitation of Life*, Senna's novel reinvents the themes of passing for a multicultural, post-Civil Rights era to tell the story of a biracial female protagonist who comes of age during the 1970s. Raised to identify as black, the fair-skinned, first-person narrator, Birdie, is educated in her African American heritage at Nkrumah, the black power school she attends in Boston. Acting black does not always come easily to Birdie, who must learn to speak black English, wear her straight hair in tight braids to mask its texture, and accessorize with gold hoops, Sergio Valente Jeans, and Nike sneakers. Once she is initiated into "the art of changing" (Senna 62), Birdie is finally able to pass for black, accepted by the most popular girls at school as a member of the Brown Sugar Clique (Harrison-Kahan 20).

Birdie's world is turned upside down when her parents' marriage is unable to survive Black Pride. Sandy and Deck Lee divvy up their daughters according to their color: "cinnamon-skinned, curly-haired" (Senna 5) Cole disappears with their father, who goes in search of a racial utopia in Brazil, while Birdie and her paranoid mother go underground, eventually recreating lives for themselves in predominantly white small-town New Hampshire. According to Birdie's mother, the fact that her daughter could pass for white would allow them to elude the FBI, who are on her trail, she presumes, for her involvement with a radical activist group. As Birdie tells it, "The two bodies that had made her stand out in a crowd-made her more than just another white woman – were gone; now it was just the two of us (Senna 21). My body was the key to our going

incognito” (Senna 128). Birdie must not only re-label herself as white, but must also confront a painful separation from the now absent black body: her beloved sister, Cole.

In describing Birdie’s transformation into a white girl, Senna makes yet another important innovation in when compared to a traditional passing story such as *Pinky*. In the novel, whiteness is not represented as a monolithic category. Birdie must pass for a specific kind of white. Although Birdie, “a black slate” (Senna 130), a wide variety of “darker” Europeans – “Puerto Rican, Sicilian, Pakistani, Greek” (Senna 130) – her mother insists on inventing a Jewish identity and history for her. Once schooled on her black self at Nkrumah, Birdie is now schooled by her mother on her make-believe father - Jewish intellectual David Goldman characterized by a “mop of curly black hair, an afro, the way Jews have sometimes [...] [H]e was pretty much an atheist even though he wanted you to know your history, your heritage. For him, Judaism was more like a cultural thing” (Senna131). With this simple displacement of afro for “Jewfro,” Birdie Lee is transformed into a half-Jewish girl named Jesse Goldman, passing as the daughter of an assimilated Jew. Birdie’s Jewishness is, however, contingent. If questioned, her Jewish identity will explain her identity, and interestingly protect Sandy.

Sandy and Deck Lee have romanticized notions of how to deal with a racially divided society. For Deck, the answer is to withdraw into his writing of academic treatises on race, yet at the same time, ignore his visibly white daughter, assuming only Cole needs the benefits of his coaching on white racism. For Sandy, the answer is radicalism. She hides various fugitives in their home and meets with a political resistance group. The precise level of Sandy’s involvement is never fully explained, although her crime seems to be hiding weapons in her basement. Sandy and Deck as a result, never consider the consequences of their actions. Their daughters pay the price because ultimately, despite Sandy and Deck Lee’s academic, anti-racist belief, they fall into



U.S. racial trappings, basing their understanding of race almost exclusively on color. Thus, Birdie finds herself disappearing to her father, sensing his discomfort with her white skin, whereas Cole is “the proof that his blackness hadn’t been completely blanched” (Senna 7). Deck Lee clearly feels that he has betrayed his own black identity by receiving a Harvard education, and crossing into the “land of miscegenation” (Senna 10), not realizing that by refusing to recognize his daughter’s bi-racial identity, he is leaving her stranded there.

Birdie’s sense of identity is more complicated than her sister’s because unlike Cole she does not have a “face that betray[s] all its origins” (Senna 41). Birdie thus finds herself trying to be both white and black in order to fit into the narrowly defined black or white communities of Boston in the 1970s, and unable to be either. Birdie’s changeling-like abilities allow her to move between a black and a white world, but her racialized subjectivity gets caught somewhere in the middle, without a secure place to stand. *Caucasia* as a whole destabilizes the hold of normalizing representations of black or white because Birdie never fits neatly in, and her self-representation remains confused and conflicted as it responds to cultural prejudices about race from both the white and black communities.

Birdie has a “split awareness’ which is, typical of minority peoples: “All minority people living in a society that maintains its supremacy by devaluing those who are different possess a double-consciousness or split awareness: first, awareness of themselves in positive terms: and second, awareness of the negative view in which the dominant society holds them” (Senna 309). Birdie also has a triple-consciousness; however, being a bi-racial female who is racially “other” no matter where she is because of her Caucasian features. Birdie identifies herself as black and white, but she realizes that everyone around her needs to slot her into one racial category or the other, inevitably erasing a part of how she sees herself.

Even before she flees with her mother and passes as white, Birdies learns the “art of changing” when she and her sister Cole are sent to the Nkrumah School, a private school which focuses on black politics and culture; here, Birdies learns “how to become someone else, how to erase the person I was before” (Senna 53). At this all-black school, Birdie is visibly different from the other children and is ostracized and tormented until her sister comes to her defense: “Birdie isn’t white. She’s black. Just like me” (Senna 40). While Birdies may not have the “ashy” knees and “nappy” hair Cole does, Birdies clearly identifies herself, at least in part, as culturally black, even if the students at school insist on some kind of validated proof of her blackness. At the Nkrumah School, Birdies is twice asked about her racial identity: once on the first day when a boy asks, “What you doin’ in this school? You white?” (Senna 36) and later, after Cole has come to her defense, one of the girls asks, “So, you black?” (Senna 54). While these seem to be necessary questions at this particular moment, it also shows that the children are more willing to accept Birdie’s self-affirmed identity, rather than what their eyes see, a point even her parents seem incapable of comprehending. Birdie still feels like she is pretending on some level, however. She quickly learns that she can “dress the part,” making it easier for her to be accepted. Thus, by wearing certain kinds of designer jeans and white Nike sneakers and learning how to say “nigger, the way the kids in school did, dropping the ‘er’ so that it became not a slur, but a term of endearment: nigga” (Senna 52), Birdie finds herself first asked out by a boy and then accepted into the “Brown Sugars club” for girls with boyfriends.

Ironically, even though Cole looks visibly black, she also must “learn” to be black to really fit in at the school. Cole even tries to teach herself and Birdie how to talk less “white” from an article in *Ebony* magazine: “We don’t talk like black people. It says so in this article. [...] They have examples in here. Like don’t say, “I’m going to the store.” Say, “I’m going to de

sto.” Get it? And don’t say, “Tell the truth.” Instead, say, “Tell de troof.” Okay?” (Senna 5). Language, as the entire novel makes clear, is at least as much a part of performing racial identity as anything else, a point Birdie and Cole have learned through their father. Thus, when Deck is with his friend Ronnie, he speaks differently: “He would switch into slang, peppering his sentences with words like ‘cat’ and ‘man’ and ‘cool.’ Whenever my mother heard him talking that way, she would laugh and say it was his ‘jive turkey act’” (Senna 9). Later, when Deck is explaining his need to separate from Sandy, Sandy is angrier: “‘A sistah,’ Don’t blacken your speech around me. I know where you came from. You can’t fool me” (Senna 21).

Cole’s attempt to “become” black are also, however connected to visibility. Thus, in her first gym class, the other children “call her out” for her white knees: “‘Check it out! Check out Cole’s knees.’ ‘Ain’t she ever heard of lotion?’” (Senna 41). Cole makes her mother take her immediately to Woolworths to buy Jergen’s lotion and that night Cole teaches herself and Birdie “where the trouble spots were [...] Elbows, knees, claves, but especially the feet, where the dust could leave a thick layer that you actually looked white and dry and cracked and old-looking” (Senna 41). Birdie does not really need the lotion in the same way Cole does, but she realizes that she needs to emphasize the similarities between herself and Cole as much as possible because as the outside world pushes in, Birdie and Cole are forced to become more cognizant of their differences. This becomes especially true for Cole, who significantly, is becoming far more self-conscious about her adolescent body and how she looks. Her mother’s inability to do her hair becomes the most telling evidence for Cole that her mother is an obstacle to her “becoming” black. Thus, Cole tells Birdie: “They all laughed at me last week, [...] ‘Cause of my hair. It looks crazy. They were calling me ‘Miz Nappy.’ None of the boys will come near me. Mum doesn’t

know anything about raising a black child” (Senna 4). Birdie and Cole both know, however, that Sandy *can* do Birdie’s straight hair without difficulty, and Cole feels resentful despite herself.

Birdie thus blames her body as her closeness to her sister becomes more strained, particularly when her father’s new girlfriend Carmen refuses to deal with Birdie: “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 78). As she approaches puberty, Cole begins to believe these differences matter as well. Carmen understands how to deal with a black child in a way that Sandy cannot, and thus Carmen knows where to take Cole to have her hair done in braids or how to put on makeup in ways appropriate to Cole’s black body. Birdie’s sense of self-identity becomes particularly confused by their separation because she confirms her own bi-racial identity through her sister, despite what she knows the rest of the world see. Indeed, Cole is the mirror in which Birdies see herself – “the reflection that proved [her] own existence” (Senna 5).

In the “white world” of Sandy’s Cambridge family, of course, it is Birdie who fits in more neatly. It is an acceptance, however, which makes Birdie feel like her body is betraying her connection to her sister. Her grandmother, a “blueblood” who can trace her roots back to Cotton Mather, focuses all her attention on Birdie while virtually ignoring Cole on the rare occasions when she sees them, taking comfort in the fact that Birdie could be Italian or French (Senna 92). Like virtually all the adults around her in the book, however, what Birdie’s grandmother fails to realize is that how Birdie’s looks have nothing to do with who she is.

Birdie’s world starts to fall apart when Sandy realizes that someone within her group has betrayed them, and she is now wanted by the FBI. Believing that her only choice is to disappear,

Sandy and her husband Deck secretly decide that the girls will go with the parent they most closely resemble. Thus, Cole goes to Brazil with her father and Carmen, while the nine-year-old Birdie and her mother spend the next six years hiding out and constantly on the move. At first Sandy tells Birdie that she can 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). Ultimately Sandy makes the decision, however, constructing her own new identity for Birdie. Birdie becomes Jesse Goldman, child of the recently deceased Jewish father Daniel. Again, despite her seeming racial sensitivity and the passionate anti-racist politics, which necessitated that she flee, Sandy is being unwittingly racist when she tries to reassure Birdie that she is not really passing because “Jews weren’t really white, more like an off-white,” and that “they were the closest I was going to get to black and still stay white: ‘Tragic history, kinky hair, good politics’ she explained, ‘it’s all there;” (Senna 119). Sandy trivializes her daughter’s racial consciousness by assuming that Birdie’s blackness can be so easily exchanged. Perhaps most destructive for Birdie, it is an identity for which her mother assumes complete control. As the novel will make clear, Birdie’s sense of self-identity is threatened throughout the novel because she is stripped of the agency to define herself.

*Caucasia* also insists that a racialized subjectivity cannot be separated from gendered performance. Females experience an increased sense of self-consciousness about their bodies in adolescence, particularly at puberty, becoming more aware of how they are seen by others and becoming more critical of what they themselves see, a process which often problematizes a girl’s body image. As an adolescent female, Birdie is in a particularly vulnerable position as she tries to construct a self-identity behind a “strange” body. Being forced to erase her past at this particular developmental stage leaves Birdie feeling completely disembodied, 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” (116). Hiding behind the “disguise” of her body distances Birdie from her body, and throughout the novel she recounts scenes of observing herself from outside her body: “I experienced a sense of watching myself from above. It happened only occasionally. I would, quite literally, fell myself rising above a scene, looking down at myself, hearing myself speak” (162). The experience distances Birdie from her own body, making an embodied subjectively difficult.

Birdie also realizes that she needs to hold on to this sense of pretending if she is to remain connected to her sister, who by this time she has not heard from in four years. Birdie “changes” into a New Hampshire 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” (198). Birdie needs to keep reminding herself that she is performing her identity. To exaggerate her performance, to act even less like “herself,” Birdie imagines that she can sill pretend that it was all a game: “that my real self – Birdie Lee – was safely hidden beneath my beige flesh” (199).

New Hampshire also reinforces for Birdie that whiteness is constructed and the way she performs whiteness is specific to this particular place, at this particular, time, illustrating Rebecca Aanerud’s point that the “construction and interpretation [of whiteness] are informed by historical moment, region, political climate, and racial identity” (37). In this small town “made up mostly of poor famers and trailer parks” (122), Birdies finds herself confronted with real racism by the pervasive and unrealistic stereotypes that control most of her friends’ thinking about African-Americans. Her best friend Mona parrots her brother Dennis’ warning that in New York “there are black guys on the streets [...] that are out for white girls, and that if they catch

you, they'll send you on the black market to a porn ring" (Senna 219). Her friend Mona also wonders if the only black boy in school, a football player, has a "big dick," and Birdie realizes that racial stereotyping is an obsession with white people: "it came up all the time, like a fixation, and there was nothing I could do to avoid it" (Senna 210).

For the most part, Birdie can ignore the comments, until one day as she and her friends are sitting in the sun, and they enviously wonder how Jesse tans so easily; this scene points to the hypocrisy of color-based racism because they also worry, however, that if they stay in the sun too long, they will end up "look[ing] like little niggers," especially Jesse (Senna 210). The scene reminds Birdie of her sister sticking up for her at school, and she is forced to walk away before she says something. There is no room in this small New Hampshire town for anything in-between; you were either black or white, and Birdie feels that by taking one side of the dichotomy, she is betraying her sister and thus herself. The longer she stays in the town, the harder it is not to accept this new identity. Birdie is frightened as her memories start to fade and she finds herself changing: "[T]he name Jesse Goldman no longer felt so funny, so thick on my tongue, so make-believe (Senna 161). Birdie knows that she must continue to feel strange within her "new" body; if she can hold onto this idea, it will mean that she will someday need to return to her "real self" and most importantly, to reconnect with her father and sister. As her memories of her father and Cole continue to fade, Birdie realizes that she is disappearing; even her mother seems to forget her daughter's real identity, speaking about Cole as "if she had been her only black child. [...] As if she believed I was white, believed I was Jesse" (Senna 233). It is this erasure of her blackness which makes Birdie progressively more desperate for external validation of her "true" identity.

One night at a party, Birdie and Samantha, another black/white mixed race girl, accidentally meet in the woods and Birdie asks Samantha what color she is. More significantly, Birdie is convinced that she hears Samantha say, “I’m black. Like you” (Senna 242). It is enough for Birdie to finally get the courage to head for Boston in search of her sister because she realizes she needs to unite her selves: “[I] didn’t want to be black like Samantha. A doomed, tragic shade of black. I wanted to be black like someone else” (Senna 274). Birdie realizes that only by asserting agency over what this color will be, will she ever be able to become the woman she wants to be. She understands that her identity will never be complete until she owns both her blackness and whiteness and claims her bi-racial body. Birdie feels like she is literally cutting a part of herself away in order to claim her blackness, however, and she feels great grief “leaving” Jesse behind. Birdie even wonders, once she arrives in Boston, if perhaps the “real” Jesse has been left behind and will be found the next morning by Sandy: “Maybe she would find me there, in the bed – the other me, Jesse Goldman. [...] it was too strange to think that Jesse Goldman was gone, that I had erased her in one night” (Senna 260). She has been forced to choose one or the other, however, and she accepts the fact that she is “killing one girl in order to let the other one free” (Senna 245). Birdie is trapped within a repetitive cycle wherein she must act as a “serial killer” through her identity.

When Birdie does manage finally to trace her father and sister to California, she hears yet another misperception of race from her father. When she ashamedly tells her father that she has been passing as white, Deck does not seem particularly concerned, telling her, “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 (334). Birdie, however, can see that her father’s intellectual beliefs are far too simplistic, realizing that if race were really make-



believe, she would not have been separated from her sister. Race may have been a costume Birdie wore, but it does not make the effects on her own self-identity any less real: “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). When she does finally find Cole, Birdie hears these same conclusions from her sister: “he’s right about it all being constructed. But [...] that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist” (348). As Birdie and Cole have both learned, the construction of race varies across lines of class and gender, and race is far more complicated than simply skin color or phenotypical characteristics. Interrogating how these social constructions are interpreted and represented and lived is the key to destabilizing an overly simplistic understanding of the connection between race and visibility. Though camouflaging of aspects of one’s identity is probably a human universal, racial passing is particularly a phenomenon of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. It thrived in modern social systems in which, as a primary condition, social and geographic mobility prevailed, especially in environments such as cities or crowds that provided anonymity to individuals, permitting them to resort to imaginative role-playing in their self-representation (Sollors 247).

Birdie Lee’s white body represents identities that remain ascribed to, yet not confined by “blackness.” Birdie wants to be seen as a young woman of color despite other’s attempt to bleach her past, present, and future. She is not frustrated by flawed choices, but rather from other people’s expectations, which always derive from the white appearance of Birdie’s body (Dagbovie 94). She finds comfort in her black identities despite living a socially white life. When subjected to the white gaze, passing inhibits Birdie’s self identification (Dagbovie 101). Her disappearance is marked by her awareness that her body has been manipulated in order to pass: “when I stopped being nobody, I would become white – white as my skin, hair, bones,

allowed. My body would fill in the blanks, tell me who I should become, and I would let it speak for me” (Senna 1). Birdie is identified by her body, even before she can tell her story. Outsiders’ ready acceptance of Cole as a person of color makes more difficult Birdie’s acceptance of her own body. Their acceptance of Cole also renders Birdie overshadowed by her older sister. Birdie’s body, the combination of her features and color, acts as an enemy informant, announcing to the world an identity that she resists. Without Cole by her side, Birdie cannot explain her connection to blackness; her body implies a different story as her white skin pushes her out of black communal acceptance and into (white) space (Dagbovie102).

Birdie’s discomfort and confusion about her racial identity cause her to desire a kind of invisibility. Other characters see Birdie’s white skin instead of her individuality. Birdie seems to vanish symbolically because she is a mixed race person who looks white. Deck Lee cannot see his daughter’s blackness. He seems to look through Birdie rather than at her at many points in the novel. The homonym existing between Cole’s name and coal seems to represent how his daughter alleviates the anxiety attending Deck’s own black identity (Dagbovie 103). Has he “sold out” by marrying a white woman? When teenage Birdie reconnects with her father, he continues to ignore her. She asks, “papa, do you even know where I’ve been? Do you even care? I’ve been living as a white girl, a Jewish girl. I’ve waited and waited, and I kept the box of crap you gave me. But you never came” (Senna 334). Deck’s response shows that he still cannot see his daughter, proposing that “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. That’s just the absurdity of the whole race game” (Senna 334). Deck’s response could also be interpreted as rather than ignoring her, he considers his daughters in an abstract way, as experiments, or as pawns in a theory, rather than as flesh and blood daughters. His

romance with Cole's (and Carmen's) blackness seems to have petered out once Brazil proved to be a disappointment. Deck's academic analysis of passing again evokes Birdie's invisibility: he ignores the pain she associates with passing or white. By dismissing and trivializing her passing as not really passing, as merely "switching" costumes, Deck invalidates Birdie's feelings of invisibility.

According to Dagbovie, Deck's articulation of the social construction of race also denies racial essence and discrimination (103). Though Birdie also recognizes the fallacy of race as a concept, her understanding of its "real" implications mirrors how she thinks of her own body. Though she rejects the idea of the "bodily" as actual or valid, she nonetheless invests in its ability to mark her closer to blackness. Though Birdie does not literally vanish in the eyes of other people, she fades before her own eyes becoming invisible within her own mind (Dagbovie104). Because Birdie self-identifies as a black person, or at least more black than white, her racial passing feels to her like a vanishing. Though others identify her body as white, she recognizes herself as black and "other."

While Birdie passes for something she both is and is not white, she also passes for something she is and is not (black). To "camouflage" her whiteness in the black world, she must find ways to look more black; she needs her "white" body to make a "black" statement. Birdie wants others to acknowledge her blackness, but she knows her curls will not last and that physical blackness will remain a fantasy. By depicting Birdie's painful awareness of the absurdity of her dream, Senna critiques the impossible standards that define blackness (Dagbovie105). As a biracial subject, Birdie becomes entrapped into this restrictive criterion.

Ultimately *Caucasia* marks whiteness then, illustrating that the varying abilities to 'see' whiteness are as much a result of consciousness as they are of race. It is this consciousness that

Senna's novel demands of its readers. Senna herself is the daughter of a black, Mexican father and white, Jewish mother. She has self-consciously "colored" herself in the face of cultural assumptions about her white skin: " 'I've never really "passed" as white in a conscious kind of way, but it's always there; I'm constantly passing for white unwittingly.'" Senna believes that "white people need to acknowledge their own privilege [...] there's a denial of the fact that racism continues to exist and that white skin continues to afford privilege" (Boudreau 69). Birdie has learned that a different way to survive, telling Cole: "'They say you don't have to choose. But the thing is, you do. Because there are consequences if you don't' (Senna 349). It is a choice she is willing to make, however, knowing that she will now speak for herself rather than allowing her body to do all the talking; no matter the consequences.

The adolescent girl's body becomes a perfect stage on which to illustrate the tenuous status of racial identity. Body image is further complicated, as *Caucasia* makes clear, when the racialized body is destabilized; Birdie's body image is constantly changing as she moves from between the races, an experience that leaves her feeling physically disconnected. *Caucasia*, of course, reflects a recent critical impulse to examine whiteness as a socially constructed racialized identity. By asking how whiteness is performed by subjects, thus, while Birdie looks white to the rest of the world, ironically it is this very "whiteness" that Birdie dons to hide her true identity when she and her mother disappear. Throughout the novel Senna explores the performative nature of race, even suggesting that a racial identity is a costume which can be worn. The costume that is finally seen, however, has very real effects on individuals within a racist society.

Femininity and racial difference are inextricably entwined in representations of mixed race subjects and this intersection of gender and race often proves lethal. Whereas *Pinky* falls prey to such entanglement, Senna reacts against such stereotypical depictions of mixed race

identity by resisting conforming to the feminized trope of the tragic mulatta (Harrison-Kahan 25). Birdie refuses to succumb to the fate of the tragic mulatta. Despite the irresponsibility of both her parents, Birdie survives, “a little injured, perhaps, but alive” (393). *Caucasia* implies that part of the reason Birdie is able to survive is that she passes as Jewish instead of white; that is, she does not completely renounce her identity as other. As her mother insists, Birdie “wasn’t really passing because Jews weren’t really white, more like an off-white. [...] [T]hey were the closest I was going to get to black and still stay white. ‘Tragic history, kinky hair, good politics,’ she explained. ‘it’s all there’” (140). Mourning Cole and all that she and her name represent, Birdie is able to preserve some of the blackness she is forced to repudiate by taking on a Jewish identity. Birdie is not “really passing” because passing is explicitly understood as passing for white (Harrison-Kahan 26).

In her theory of performativity, Judith Butler argues that gender lacks a core, or essence. She describes how the formation of a subject’s identity occurs through the reiteration of performances, or acts, that verify that identity. Like other passing novels, *Caucasia* exemplifies this theory of identity by applying it to race (Harrison-Kahan 27). Birdie learns the lesson of performativity at Nkrumah (Harrison-Kahan 27). As Butler and other theorists argue, identity is also determined by language, which both initiates and forms part of these performances. Earlier, for example, Birdie describes how her father “blacken[ed his] speech” (Senna 25) to better fit in with his new friends in the Black Pride movement, “peppering his sentences with words like ‘cat’ and ‘man’ and ‘cool’” (Senna 10).

Several scholars of African American literature have argued that the concept of passing upholds racial essentialism because the subject’s “true” identity becomes defined in its very erasure. To further this argument, they point out that the passing figure often returns to her black

roots, confirming that that identity must be the “real” one (Harrison-Kahan 31). In fact, the identity that is covered up can be just as fabricated as the one performed in its place, which is why so many passing narratives end ambiguously rather than with a whole hearted embrace of blackness. Birdie’s experience further proves that even a false identity can carry with it the stigma of seeming essentialism since she continues to be aware of her assumed Jewishness, even after she has shed its outward signs. The Star of David turns out to be one of the few items she takes with her when she runs away from her white existence in New Hampshire, adding it to her box of “Negrobilia,” which contains Golliwog and a collection of Black Power objects given to her by her father and sister before they disappeared (Harrison-Kahan 31).

Race appears to be in the eye of the beholder, reflecting the desires and identification of the one who looks. But race can also reflect the desires and identification of the one who is looked at. When Birdie expresses the need for her identity to remain fluid, her fears are directly linked to her resistance to the fate of the tragic mulatta. She recognizes that the tragic mulatta is a racial and sexual stereotype when she observes another mixed girl at her school, Samantha, who develops a reputation for promiscuity, reaffirming the myth of the eroticized black woman. Because Birdie does not want to be a “doomed, tragic shade of black” like Samantha, but “black like somebody else” (Senna 321), Birdie decides to leave New Hampshire and forego her white, Jewish existence – a decision that directly coincides with the impending threat of her heterosexual initiation since it occurs on the same night that she makes out with Nicholas. Birdie’s decision to run away from “Caucasia” is motivated by her desire for blackness, as well as her recognition that there is more than one way to be black.

Although *Caucasia*, privileges blackness over whiteness in some ways, the novel does not end with the act of “loving blackness” alone. Instead, *Caucasia* concludes with a validation

of multiplicity (Harrison-Kahan 43). At the end of the novel, Birdie rediscovers her black self when she is reunited with Cole. The two sisters decide to make a new home together in the culturally diverse, liberal landscape of Berkeley, California where biracial children are “a dime a dozen” (Senna 412). In the last paragraph of the novel, Birdie indulges in her own fantasy of a racial utopia. Passing a school bus, she looks up at the faces of the students:

They were black and Mexican and Asian and white, on the verge of puberty, but not quite in it. They were utterly ordinarily, throwing obscenities and spitballs at one another the ways kids do. One face toward the back of the bus caught my eye, and I halted in my tracks, catching my breath. It was a cinnamon-skinned girl with her hair in braids. She was black like me, a mixed girl, and she was watching me from behind the dirty glass. For a second I thought I was somewhere familiar and she was a girl I already knew. I began to lift my hand, but stopped, remembering where I was and what I had already found. Then the bus torched forward, and the face was gone with it, just a blur of yellow and black in motion (Senna 413).

This scene directly echoes an earlier episode in which Birdie looked up at a school bus to catch her first glimpse of Samantha, the only other girl of color in her small New Hampshire town. In the earlier scene, Birdie prioritizes the plurality of her identity over its duality. As the scene progresses, the different races represented by the “utterly ordinary” students on the bus – black, Mexican, Asian, and white – no longer remain distinct. They blend together as the bus moves forward, and the dark face that Birdie saw becomes a “blur of yellow and black in motion.” In this description, whiteness disappears altogether, for this is not *Caucasia* after all, but California (Harrison-Kahan 43). Through her depictions of contradictory and constantly shifting self, Senna queers the understanding of mixed race identity through Birdie, affirming that race – even whiteness itself – is not clear-cut and fixed, but multiple and “in motion” (Harrison-Kahan 45). Senna’s novel asks intriguing questions about racial identity, highlighting, through Birdie’s first-person narration, the often fluid boundary between racial categories and the sometimes arbitrary assignation of racial labels. *Caucasia* is equally concerned, however, with how these

labels affect subjectivity. While Birdie can say, “And when I stopped being nobody, I would become white – white as my skin, hair, bones allowed. My body would fill in the blanks, tell me who I should become, and I would let it speak for me” (Senna 1), it is clear that lettering her body speak for her, by “becoming” white, Birdie is stripped of the agency to define herself. Forced to negate her “invisible” blackness, Birdie literally begins to disappear behind a white identity she does not understand or want.



## CONCLUSION

*Pinky* in many ways embodies the traditional passing narrative. For many white film-going audiences, passing films represented the potential to debunk myths about race. However these films were limited in their ability to change race relations because they relied on existing popular notions about race and identity. By having a white woman play the role of mixed-race black woman the film makers were able to further make the mulatta body palatable to white audiences by literally erasing any “blackness” from *Pinky*. *Caucasia*, on the other hand, acts as both a testimony of the lived experiences of being multiracial and critique of the rigidity of racial categories in the United States. Senna argues that race is more performative than biological. By centering on a racially mixed young woman and her family, *Caucasia* complicates and deconstructs the black/white binary and challenges multicultural theory. *Caucasia*’s importance lies in Senna’s descriptive and the theoretical categorization of racial construction and identity.

At a time in which an increasing number of Americans hail from racially and ethnically mixed backgrounds and are exposed to different cultures through popular culture, one of the most pressing questions has become: how much, if at all, does racial or ethnic identity mean in America? Furthermore, one of the most important questions facing post-segregation society is: To what extent should race or ethnicity play a role in determining a person’s identity? Hopefully I have laid the groundwork for further and more exhaustive research.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Berzon, Judith R. *Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction*. New York: New York UP, 1978. Print.
- Brennan, Jonathan. Introduction. *Mixed Race Literature*. By Jonathan Brennan. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002. Print.
- Bogle, Donald. *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*. New York: The Viking Press, 1973. Print.
- Boudreau, Brenda. "Letting the Body Speak: 'Becoming' White Caucasia." *Modern Language Studies* 32.1 (2002): 56-70. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Mar. 2011.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York: Routledge, 1993. Print.
- Cripps, Thomas. *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1993. Print.
- Dagbovie, Sika Alaine. "Fading to White, Fading Away: Biracial Bodies in Michelle Cliff's Abeng and Danzy Senna's Caucasia." *African American Review* 40.1 (2006): 92-109. *Academic Search Premier*. Web. 17 Feb 2011.
- Ginsberg, Elaine K. Introduction. *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. By Elaine K. Ginsberg. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. 1-18. Print.
- Harper, Phillip Brian. "Passing for What? Racial Masquerade and the Demands of Upward Mobility." *Callaloo* 21.2 (1998): 381-397. *JSTOR*. 4 Oct. 2012. Web.
- Harrison-Kahan, Lori. "Passing for White, Passing for Jewish: Mixed Race Identity in Danzy Senna and Rebecca Walker." *MELUS* 30.1(2005): 19-48. *JSTOR*. Web. 12 Mar. 2011.

- Jones, Christopher John. "Image and Ideology in Kazan's *Pinky*." *Literature Film Quarterly* 9.2 (1981): 110-120. *Academic Search Premier*. 12 Mar. 2013. Web.
- Kawash, Samira. "The *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*: (Passing for) Black Passing for White." *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. Ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. 59-74. Print.
- Kennedy, Randall. "Racial Passing." *Ohio State Law Journal* 62.1145(2001): 1-29. *HeinOnline*. 4 Oct 2012. Web.
- Kydd, Elspeth. "'The Ineffaceable Curse of Cain': Racial Making and Embodiment in *Pinky*." *Camera Obscura* 15.1 (2000): 95-121. *EBSCO*. 12 Mar. 2013. Web.
- Nerad, Julie Cary. "Slippery Language and False Dilemmas: The Passing Novels of Child, Howells, and Harper." *American Literature* 75.4 (2003): 814-841. *Academic Search Premier*. 17 Feb 2013. Web.
- Piper, Adrian. "Passing for White, Passing for Black." *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. Ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg. Durham: Duke UP, 1996. 234-269. Print.
- Pinky*. Dir. Elia Kazan. Perf. Jeanne Crain, Ethel Barrymore, and Ethel Waters. 20th Century Fox, 1949. DVD.
- Sayre, Nora. "Racial Films of the 1940s: Safe Fearlessness." *The Nation* 226.4 (1978): 117-119. *Academic Search Premier*. 12 Mar. 2013. Web.
- Senna, Danzy. *Caucasia*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1998. Print.
- Sollors, Werner. *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Zackodnik, Teresa C. *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2004. Print.