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THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE AND LITERARY
REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BIRACIAL SUBJECT

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
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ABSTRACT

Twentieth-century American literature incorporates interracial and biracial themes that bring to light the often unnamed and unrecognized biracial identities of many Americans. Unfortunately, despite the potential value for a deeper understanding of the construction of race, these themes have seldom been seriously considered *in the context of reevaluating the nature of the system that creates racial labels and categories* until the recent emergence of postmodern critical theories. This thesis examines the black-white interracial themes and biracial protagonists in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998) in order to explore the texts' representations of systems of hegemonic power that create racial labels and categories. I discuss the binary sociopolitical construction of race in the United States (black-white) and the complexity of biracial identities as a foundation for my examination of literary representations of biracial subjectivity, racial passing, primitive exoticism, and the intersections between race, class and gender. I conclude that a study of the interracial theme in literature is a dive into the chasm between margin and center, the enunciative split between the binary racial signifiers black and white. Therefore, representations of biracial subjectivity provide a unique vantage point for surveillance of the complexities of the human struggle to gain and maintain power.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Twentieth-century American literature incorporates interracial and biracial themes that bring to light the often unnamed and unrecognized biracial identities of many Americans.¹ Unfortunately, despite the potential value for a deeper understanding of the sociopolitical construction of race, these themes have seldom been seriously considered *in the context of reevaluating the nature of the system that created racial labels and categories* until the recent emergence of postmodern critical theories. As Werner Sollors suggests: “The time may have come to stop avoiding the interracial theme in literature, to investigate it, and to unpack its semantic fields” (4). This thesis proposes to examine the black-white interracial themes and biracial protagonists in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998) in order to understand the operations of the systems of hegemonic power that create racial labels and categories. In my reading of these two texts, I will examine the binary sociopolitical construction of race in the United States (black-white), the complexity of biracial identities, the theme of racial passing, the theme of the primitive exotic, and the intersections between race, class and gender.

In order to examine representations of race and explore interracial and biracial themes in American literature, my thesis will draw on New Historicism, ethnic literary and cultural studies, postcolonial studies and Critical Race Theory. Chapter One will rely on a collection of racial discourses that represent a history of the “color line” which divides black and white Americans

¹ While this thesis only examines portrayals of black-white biraciality in two specific twentieth-century novels, *Quicksand* and *Caucasia*, biracial and multiracial themes involving many other racial groups are also well-represented in twentieth-century American literature.

and will contextualize the vocabulary that I use to discuss race in this thesis. Chapters Two and Three will discuss *Quicksand* and *Caucasia*, respectively, by placing each text within the context of the literary and cultural histories relevant to the texts' representations of race. Chapter Four will summarize the major conclusions of my thesis. However, before embarking on this project, a critical question must be answered: what is race?

While notions of race refer to human bodies with certain physical traits (called phenotypic characteristics by racial anthropologists), most modern scientists agree that no biological basis for distinguishing "races" (or species) of humans exists. However, the institutionalization of American racism was supported by racial pseudo-science that had roots in the work of racist philosophies initially developed in Europe. During the eighteenth and nineteenth century, as European nations expanded into other continents and developed colonial empires, European scholars and philosophers began to develop theories of racial inferiority. Philosophers that published theories of racial inferiority include David Hume, Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel, yet perhaps the most well-known European racist is French scholar Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, who published *The Inequality of the Human Races* (1853) and later became one of Adolf Hitler's favorite authors (D'Souza 28, 63). By the mid-twentieth century, anthropologists, such as Ernest Hooton and Carleton Coon, were developing pseudo-scientific theories and systems of racial classification that were based primarily on hair texture, nose shape and head shape (Davis 19). These scientists assigned the racial identity "black" to people with "Negroid" phenotypic characteristics: rounder heads, frizzier hair, broader noses and darker skin (Davis 19). Similarly, the scientists assigned the racial identity "white" to people with "Caucasoid" phenotypic characteristics: longer heads, straighter hair, narrower noses and lighter skin (Davis 19).

Currently, The *Oxford English Dictionary* (2006) defines ‘race’ as “one of the great divisions of mankind, having certain physical peculiarities in common.” However, the dictionary’s entry also notes, “The term is often used imprecisely; even among anthropologists there is no generally accepted classification or terminology.” As noted by geneticists Lynne Jorde and Stephen Wooding, recent genetic studies examine the frequency of traits in different human populations and argue against the existence of pure races. These scientists note that genes that dictate different physical traits vary independently and are not carried in genetic clusters; therefore, a person may have blue eyes (traditionally associated with the Caucasian race) and extremely curly hair (traditionally associated with the Negroid race), making it difficult or impossible to assign that person to a racial category based on his or her phenotypic characteristics. According to Jorde and Wooding, biomedical studies have concluded that, due to “the continual mixing and migration of human populations throughout history,” the genetic makeup of two individuals who are socially assigned to different ‘races’ may be more similar than the genetic makeup of two individuals socially assigned to the same ‘race’. As F. James Davis notes, “At best, such anatomical groupings as Kroeber’s three races are only rough, statistical categories representing average differences of combinations of traits” (20). The impossibility of establishing concrete categories of human race is illustrated upon examination of biracial and multiracial people whose physical characteristics often confound people who wish to assign racial labels.

Despite the absence of a scientific basis for notions of “race,” racism, discrimination based on the notion of race, is a historical fact. After challenging faulty conceptions of race as “an essence, as something fixed, concrete, and objective” or “a mere illusion, a purely ideological construct which some nonracist social order would eliminate,” Michael Omi and

Howard Winant propose a theory of “racial formation” which includes the following definition of race:

The effort must be made to understand race as an unstable and “decentered” complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle. With this in mind, let us propose a definition: *race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies.* (Omi and Winant 123)

Expanding beyond Omi and Winant’s definition, Paul Gilroy proposes that a complete understanding of race must include not only race’s relationships to identity and culture but also its historical context and political implications since previous racial ideology leaves an indelible trace (Gilroy 251). This thesis will use Omi and Winant’s definition of race and also Gilroy’s emphasis on historical context. After acknowledging the significance of historical context in racial politics and racial theory, the necessity of this thesis’s historical orientation becomes apparent.

When discussing race, the concept of race must also be separated from the broader concept of ethnicity. While a person’s racial identity may correlate with that person’s ethnicity, ethnicity progresses beyond notions of race. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, “ethnicity” may reference membership in a racial group but also describes membership in a group of people having common “cultural, religious, or linguistic characteristics.” However, ethnicity and race are often very difficult to separate or distinguish from one another in issues of identity, politics or culture. The correlation between race and ethnicity becomes especially complicated for a biracial person whose heritage lies not only with two different ‘races’ but also in two different ethnic communities.

Racial terminology is inherently confusing because it often refers to ideologically constructed qualities or characteristics; thus, the meanings of racial vocabulary words are constantly shifting. In this thesis, I use the terms “black,” “white,” “biracial,” or “mixed race” when referring to race. When I use these terms, please understand that I am referring to signifiers that are elements of the historical and sociopolitical construction of race not essential, concrete characteristics of actual human bodies. I use the terms “biracial” and “mixed race” to refer to a person who has parents that personally identify and/or are socially identified with two different racial groups. I use the terms “African American” or “European American” when referring to culture or ethnicity. When I use these terms, please recognize that I am discussing shared heritage and traditions that extend beyond racial identity that refers to the phenotypic characteristics of human bodies. Other writers use some of the terms defined in this paragraph interchangeably or differently or use different terms. Although I do not use the word in my writing, some of my sources also use the out-of-fashion word “Negro” to refer to the black race and/or African American culture. I also chose not to use the term “mulatto” to refer to black-white biracial people due to the term’s negative connotations and association with the idea of a “sterile mule.” The exception to my avoidance of the term “mulatto” is my discussions of the literary trope of the “tragic mulatto,” which depicts biracial characters as perpetually torn by an internal struggle between their black and white selves. In addition, I chose not to use the word “miscegenation” to refer to interracial marriage and reproduction due to negative connotations which stigmatize interracial relationships.

This discussion and definition of race and the vocabulary used in racial discourse will clarify my discussion of interracial literary themes and my discussion of the position of the biracial subject within the systems of hegemonic power which create racial labels and categories.

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CHAPTER TWO: THE COLOR LINE

“For black and white Americans have been so long
And so intimately a part of one another’s experience
that, will it or not, they cannot be understood
independently.”

-Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (11)

In the United States, “black” and “white” form a pair of binary oppositions that have become heavily loaded signifiers that Americans use socially and politically to assign racial and ethnic identities to people and to define boundaries between political groups. Since the political investment of Americans in this dualistic semiology of race is enormous, maintaining a clear distinction between “black” people and “white” people has historically been a great concern for people who are racially identified as white Americans and black Americans. Ironically, white Americans who comprised the group that originally institutionalized racial ideology to preserve inequalities in relations of power between racialized groups of people have found support for continued use of binary racial signs by some black Americans and other minority group members who have responded to white racism by engaging racially-based politics and social programs in a struggle for social equality. A history of this separation between black and white Americans may be obtained through a review of the discourses that reflect America’s racial ideologies, which is the project of this chapter.

Robert Young argues that all poststructuralist critical theory originates in the struggle to break free of the Hegelian dialectic which has shaped Western thought about nature and history by defining ‘what is’ in terms of ‘what is not’, and Self in terms of Other (6). Young points out, “The very powers of rationality which enabled modern man to free himself from nature and

control it had also become an instrumental device to dominate him” (7). Young cites Nazi Germany’s campaign against the Jews and European colonialism as examples of the violence inherent to a Western dialectic that insists upon defining Self in terms of Other (8). However, Young also observes the impossibility of nullifying the Hegelian dialectic: “The real difficulty has always been to find an alternative to the Hegelian dialectic—difficult because strictly speaking it is impossible, insofar as the operation of the dialectic already includes its negation” (6). Young notes that poststructuralist theorists focus on identification of and discussion of the dialectic’s irrationality, but they do not dismantle it (6). This thesis will take a similar approach to the examination of the dialectical irrationalities of the sociopolitical construction of race in America.

Perhaps the difficulty of escaping this Western dialectic that Young describes explains America’s inability to resolve long-standing tensions that surround the politics of race, particularly those issues that have historically divided black and white Americans socially, politically, legally and economically. Hortense Spillers uses psychoanalytic discourse to analyze the dynamics of race and proposes that race is actually a manifestation of a human struggle for power: “Understanding how this mechanism works is crucial: ‘race’ is not simply a metaphor and nothing more; it is the outcome of a politics” (380). Spillers notes that ethnic groups that are indistinguishable by physical appearance have engaged in violent wars and discriminatory “racial politics” in other countries, such as Haiti, Somalia, and Yugoslavia but notes that in America the politics of race have historically been conducted on the basis of skin color: “In the context of the United States, ‘race’ clings, primitively, to a Manichean overttness—‘black’ and ‘white’” (380).

In order to understand the operations of American systems of hegemonic power which create and maintain race as well as to analyze representations of race in American literature, one must be familiar with the history of racial politics in the Western world and more specifically the history of racial politics in the United States. Paul Gilroy critiques notions of racial identity based “exclusively in terms of culture and identity rather than politics and history” (251). Gilroy recommends a reassessment of race: “At a theoretical level ‘race’ needs to be viewed much more contingently, as a precarious discursive construction. To note this does not, of course, imply that it is any less real or effective politically” (251). Political agendas conducted along the lines of race have a long history for both white and black Americans and validate Gilroy’s assertion that race may be used as a political tool.

White Americans initially institutionalized racial separatism and segregation as a means of maintaining hegemonic power over black slaves who were brought to America to be exploited for the economic value of their labor during the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. White Americans used eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophies of white racial supremacy to rationalize black slavery and implement racial segregation and discrimination designed to preserve white supremacy. Beginning with the arrival of the first black slaves, whites implemented legal and social boundaries that discriminated against black Americans and preserved the dominance of whites by maintaining a racial boundary line. Even whites who violated the racial boundary line were severely penalized. For example, in 1661 Maryland passed an act that condemned free-born English women who intermarried with “Negro” slaves to indentured servitude for the life of their husbands and dictated that any children born to the couple would be slaves (Sollors 395-96). This kind of institutionalized racial border guarding

preserved white social and economic privilege by conflating race with class and ensuring that most free people would be white and most slaves would be black.

Racial boundary lines were frequently enforced by laws involving “blood quantum,” a pseudoscientific fractional breakdown of the “racial composition” of a person’s “blood.”² Blood quantum theories were institutionalized in order to determine who would be considered “white” and allowed access to white privileges. Laws concerning “blood quantum” were particularly associated with legal restrictions regarding interracial marriage that were designed to maintain racial boundaries. In 1877, in the Virginia case of *McPheron v. Commonwealth*, 69 Va. 292, a biracial woman was allowed to marry a white man because “less than one-fourth of her blood is negro blood. If it be but one drop less, she is not a Negro” (399). However, less than twenty years later, the constitutions of both Florida and South Carolina declared that a person must have less than one-eighth black blood in order to marry a white person (401-02).

The racial boundary lines allowed white Americans to rationalize the dehumanization of blacks by constructing an idea of blacks as a group of people different from themselves, an inferior race that was by nature well-suited for slavery. From the arrival of the first black slaves in America until the end of the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, black slaves were legally considered property, like livestock, and had few legal rights; even the fundamental right to life was frequently in jeopardy. White masters had almost complete freedom in oversight and treatment of their black slaves, which often resulted in physical, sexual and emotional abuse above and beyond the psychological degradation of the condition of slavery itself, which is

² Current genetic studies invalidate these pseudoscientific ‘blood quantum’ theories. See Jorde and Wooding in works cited.

described so eloquently in slave narratives such as those of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs.³

Not all white Americans owned slaves; in fact, most did not. Many whites believed that the institution of slavery was immoral, and some whites aggressively fought for the abolition of slavery, particularly in the North, where the white industrial economy was not as economically invested in maintenance of racial boundary lines as the white agricultural economy in the South. However, many abolitionists who believed that slavery should be abolished because it was inhumane still believed in white racial superiority and were not averse to other forms of legal discrimination against blacks. Whether or not whites held white supremacist convictions, they still enjoyed the legal and social privileges that were denied to black Americans on the basis of race.

Following the abolition of slavery in the United States at the end of the Civil War in 1865, blacks were no longer legally considered property, but the systematic institutionalization of white supremacy continued in both the South and the North. White Americans felt economically threatened by newly emancipated blacks due to the economic devastation that resulted from the collapse of the agricultural economy in the South and the competition for jobs that resulted from the migration of blacks to Northern industrial cities in search of socioeconomic opportunities. Therefore, after the abolition of slavery, whites became particularly aggressive and violent about enforcing boundaries between 'white' and 'black' Americans. Interracial sexual relationships were more taboo than ever before as whites struggled to maintain dominance over newly emancipated blacks. Southern states passed laws called Black Codes and Jim Crow laws, which discriminated against blacks and perpetuated the systematic discrimination against blacks that began during slavery. In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois

³ See works cited.

published *The Souls of Black Folk*, in which he asserted, “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line” (Du Bois 23). Du Bois was addressing the way the legislative, social, political and economic “color line” had replaced the separation of black slave from white master, and thereby maintained the division between black and white Americans.

The standards for racial classification as “white,” which resulted in receipt of white privilege, varied from state to state, and became more stringent as white Americans felt increasingly threatened by blacks following abolition. White America slowly increased the legal requirement for “whiteness” until the “one-drop rule,” by which all people of any African ancestry were considered monoracially black, was widely enforced to preserve white supremacy and white “racial purity.” For white Americans, who have historically held a superior economic, social and political position relative to that of black Americans (and other Americans of non-European heritage), the one-drop rule provided an emphatic barrier which protected the dominant sociopolitical class from gradual infiltration by the stigmatized class through interracial reproduction. The one-drop rule did not acknowledge biracial or mixed racial identities because they posed a threat to the socially and legally constructed border between the dominant (white) and oppressed (black) groups.

Initial pockets of resistance to the one-drop rule, by both blacks and whites, existed in Louisiana and South Carolina, where notions of a Creole mixed race middle class (in many cases free people of considerable wealth—known as *gens de couleur*) had been established (Williamson 75). These people of mixed racial ancestry had a long tradition of racially identifying themselves as neither white nor black and frequently married amongst themselves. Ironically, instead of developing a mixed race consciousness that was skeptical of the white racial hierarchy, the free people of color embraced the racial hierarchy and established

themselves as a “buffer class” that was subordinate to whites and dominant over blacks.

However, due to continuous political pressure from other Southern states and an increased threat to white hegemony during Reconstruction, even Louisiana and South Carolina complied with the one drop rule by the end of the nineteenth century (75). The one-drop rule effectively dissolved any class ties between mixed race people and whites, and the formerly segregated mixed race free people were forced to abandon their notions of racial superiority and seek political and social alliances within the black community—all of America’s “colored” shifted to the monoracial identity “black.”

From that time until the end of the twentieth century, in reaction to institutionalized and cultural white racism, the diverse African-American cultural community, which consists of people of many shades of black, brown, yellow and white and combines black ancestry with white ancestry as well as ancestry from other racial groups, has traditionally accepted the social and legal imposition of the ‘one-drop rule’ for defining who is black and unified in a common cultural and political community in order to effectively engage in collective resistance of oppression by white Americans (Davis 139). The failure of the period of Reconstruction after the Civil War to achieve legal, social and economic equality for blacks required the diverse population of black Americans to unify, organize and protest America’s betrayal of its democratic ideals. F. James Davis describes the general acceptance of the rule by all Americans in the decades following the Civil War: “The rule was supported in the North as well as in the South, and by both whites and blacks, including mulattoes” (Davis 50).

In addition to implementing legal prohibitions that enforced racial boundaries and discriminated against blacks in employment, housing and customer service, some white Americans also formed white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan (founded in 1866) to

protect the racial boundary line with extralegal violence and terror tactics. These tactics included nighttime cross-burnings by disguised vigilantes and brutal lynchings. White racial border guarding became most violent during the 1920s. In 1924, the Virginia Senate passed 23 to 4 the “Act to Preserve Racial Integrity,” which required a racial ancestry certificate for all citizens born before 14 June 1912 and clearly stated, “For the purpose of this act, the term ‘white person’ shall apply only to the person who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian . . .” (Sollors 407). While the act made an exception for those who were less than one-sixteenth American Indian, it overturned the previous standard by which persons of less than one-quarter Negro blood were considered white (Sollors 407).

In addition to fortifying the barrier between black and white Americans by legislating the one-drop rule, white Southerners enacted laws against interracial marriage in every Southern state beginning in 1870 and accelerating during the first half of the twentieth century (Franklin 262). Racist groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, were particularly emphatic about their outrage at the idea of interracial sexuality involving black men and white women. These violent groups conducted brutal campaigns, often beating and lynching innocent black men, under the guise of protecting white women from black male sexual advances. For example, in 1908, an 84 year-old black man who had been married to a white woman for more than thirty years was lynched by a white mob in Springfield, Illinois (316).

Conversely, while the termination of slavery ended white male ownership of black female bodies, when white male-black female sexual liaisons or sexual victimization did occur, these acts were generally unacknowledged and ignored by white society and law enforcement. Biracial children born before the middle of the twentieth century were most often the children of black mothers and white men who were not involved in the rearing of their children. Biracial

children were frequently raised by their mothers within the black community and socially identified as monoracially black. Any attempts to legitimize interracial sexual relations through marriage were strictly prohibited. By 1950, interracial marriage was prohibited in 30 of 48 U.S. states (Sollors 408). For example, Virginia's 1924 "Act to Preserve Racial Integrity" elaborated on previous prohibitions against interracial marriage:

It shall be unlawful for any white person in this state to marry any save a white person, or a person with no other admixture of blood than white and American Indian. For the purpose of this act, the term 'white person' shall apply only to the person who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian; but persons who have one-sixteenth or less of the blood of the American Indian and have no other non-caucasian blood shall be deemed to be white. (Sollors 406)

This legislation shows how white Americans combined the standard one-drop rule for determining whiteness with other racist legislation (anti-miscegenation, segregation laws, etc) and tried to eliminate any possibility that black Americans could ever acquire the political power necessary to achieve social and economic equality.

Before the abolition of slavery, black attempts to participate in American racial discourse had been primarily limited to slave narratives that circulated among a reading audience composed primarily of white readers. However, after the abolition of slavery, blacks had more freedom of movement to organize and disseminate information among themselves. Blacks also had more access to America's racial discourse than ever before despite lingering racial discrimination. Organizations such as the Tuskegee Institute, the American Negro Academy and the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) struggled to foster economic, cultural,

legal and social advancement for black Americans in mainstream American culture (Franklin 288).

However, not all blacks were willing to integrate into a society and culture that was dominated by whites and institutionalized racial discrimination against blacks. Therefore, a black nationalism that was passionately anti-white, anti-European and separatist emerged as a prominent discourse for the first time in American history. This ideology establishes a narrow definition of blackness with a low tolerance for intraracial diversity, interracial relationships and multiracial identities. In 1914, Marcus Garvey established a separatist black nationalist organization, The Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA). The organization was founded in Jamaica but held its first convention in New York City's Madison Square Gardens in 1920. On January 1, 1924, Garvey issued a statement of belief that included the following tenets:

- The Universal Negro Improvement Association advocates the uniting and blending of all Negroes into one strong, healthy race. It is against miscegenation and race suicide.
- It believes in the purity of the Negro race and the purity of the white race.
- It is against rich blacks marrying poor whites.
- It is against rich or poor whites taking advantage of Negro women.
- It believes in the social and political physical separation of all peoples to the extent that they promote their own ideals and civilization, with the privilege of trading and doing business with each other.
- It believes in the promotion of a strong and powerful Negro nation in Africa. (Garvey)

While Garvey represents a very radical version of essentialist black nationalism, the theme of black separatism has reappeared repeatedly in black American politics and became very dominant again during the 1960s.

However, in the 1920s, despite increased attempts by whites to maintain racial boundaries and preserve white supremacy, most black Americans just wanted to enter American society and be treated the same as white Americans. This decade witnessed a flourishing of African American culture in the Harlem district of New York City, in a movement which became known as the Harlem Renaissance. During the Harlem Renaissance, black philosophers, writers, artists and musicians engaged in a period of cultural productivity that celebrated a unique, African American culture. Although at the national level American blacks and whites remained separated by a social, economic and political color line that separated and segregated black and white, some whites were willing to aid blacks in their struggle for civil rights and cultural advancement, which continued the interracial tradition of white abolitionists who aided the abolition cause during the slavery era. In *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, George Hutchinson documents white publishers and writers who gave black writers access to white-owned publishing companies, such as that given by Frank Harris to Claude McKay or by writers with *The Seven Arts*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic* and *The Liberator* to Jean Toomer (130-31). Hutchinson emphasizes the importance of this interracial network to the success of many Harlem Renaissance writers:

It was precisely because, like most innovative artists, these men straddled that threshold of social difference and journeyed between white and black intellectual communities that they were of signal importance to the Harlem Renaissance. They were able to straddle

this threshold—indeed, virtually required to straddle it—because of their educational backgrounds and devotion to literature. (132)

Individual white Americans also gave black writers financial support, such as that given to Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston by Charlotte Osgood Mason (Huggins 129), and literary connections and encouragement, such as those given by Carl Van Vechten to Nella Larsen and other Harlem Renaissance writers (Hutchinson, *In Search* 193, Huggins 129). Even more valuable than literary support, blacks also received political support from sympathetic whites. For example, white Americans William English Walling, Mary White Ovington and Henry Moskowitz made the initial plans for an organization to combat racism that later blossomed into the NAACP, which initially operated rent-free out of the basement of white Oswald Garrison Villard's *Evening Post* (Hutchinson, *Harlem* 139-40).

Due to the combined political efforts of both black Americans and white Americans who were sympathetic to the black cause, beginning in the 1940s, laws regarding blood quantum and prohibitions against interracial marriage began to be repealed state-by-state. President Roosevelt's appointment of an unprecedented number of highly-qualified blacks to important positions on his cabinet aided the creation and implementation of policies that gave black Americans increased opportunities for federal government employment (Franklin 391-94). In addition, Roosevelt's New Deal administration established agencies to help the nation recover from the Great Depression of the 1930s that benefited many African-Americans even though there was often racial discrimination in the administration of the program, especially in the South (399).

Despite a slight relaxation of racist laws during the 1940s and new opportunities generated for black Americans during World War II, as the mid-twentieth century approached,

many racist laws remained and many racist policies and prohibitions that were not laws were still socially enforced. In response, black organizations, particularly the NAACP, began to make further demands for full equality (Franklin 462). Around the mid-twentieth century, desegregation began in earnest. In 1948, President Truman issued an executive order for fair employment in the federal service (462). In 1950, the courts and the Interstate Commerce Commission began to desegregate interstate transportation systems (465). By mid-century, blacks received opportunities to vote in unprecedented numbers (465). During the Korean War, the military increasingly integrated its troops (462). In 1954, The U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* led to the desegregation of public schools (412).

Unfortunately, this significant improvement in the status of black Americans led to a backlash by white Americans who felt increasingly economically and socially threatened. This backlash was similar to the backlash that followed the Reconstruction period after the Civil War. Particularly in the South, whites organized for a final effort to stop desegregation and increased their violent assaults upon individual blacks who were perceived as violators of the black-white color line. Frustration with this continued violence toward and systematic oppression of black Americans led to the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, which involved both blacks and sympathetic whites in the fight against racial inequality.

Elected in 1960 with the support of the black vote, President John F. Kennedy lent his support to blacks by using executive action to secure the right to vote, federal employment and equal employment and housing opportunities for black Americans (Franklin 499). Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. led black Americans in an organized non-violent protest against violation of the civil rights of black Americans (498). King's protests included demonstration marches and "sit-ins" (during which black activists would sit in segregated all-white establishments and

refuse to leave). The interracial Congress of Racial Equality, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Nashville Student Movement sent “freedom riders” into the South to attempt the further desegregation of public transportation (500). Civil rights activists were often assaulted by Southern white citizens and police and jailed; however, the movement continued.

During the second half of the twentieth century, interracial relations slowly but gradually improved, and the emphasis on racial boundaries relaxed slightly. The 1964 Civil Rights Act improved the status and political power of black Americans within the United States’ predominately white hegemonic power structure. States began to repeal laws against interracial marriage by reducing the number of U. S. states with laws prohibiting interracial marriage to 19 (17 of those 19 in the South) by 1966 (Sollors 409). In 1967, in the case of *Loving v Virginia*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that all laws prohibiting interracial marriage were unconstitutional due to the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment (409). However, although the laws were no longer enforceable, many Southern states did not remove them from state constitutions. Mississippi’s “anti-miscegenation” law was not deleted from its state constitution until 1987 (410).

Although the Civil Rights Movement achieved some significant advances in the legal and social status of blacks, stagnancy and setbacks in other areas led to frustration and disillusionment on the part of civil rights activists. The assassination of American leaders who had promoted the black cause angered and grieved most blacks and many whites: John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X were assassinated within a five year time period that spanned the mid-1960s. Although racial discrimination was illegal, it still continued in many areas, particularly in the South. Despite frustration with continued racial inequality,

many black and white Americans continued to believe that integration of whites and blacks into a multicultural American society was the best way to ensure social equality for all Americans and continued to demand civil rights for blacks and the integration of society. However, by 1968, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders reported that the nation was “moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal” (qtd in Franklin 522). This grim pronouncement was an acknowledgement of lingering white supremacy and a persistent black nationalism whose adherents were so frustrated with white racism that they adopted a separatist and essentialist version of nationalism similar to that proposed by Marcus Garvey at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Like Garvey’s UNIA, the Nation of Islam, which was founded in 1930, maintained anti-white separatist and segregationist policies. During Malcolm X’s affiliation with the Nation of Islam in the 1960s, he supported the organization’s policy of racial separation of blacks and whites and notions of racial purity. In 1961, he even collaborated with the Ku Klux Klan on plans for separatist programs (D’Souza 398). Separatist programs were also advocated by other black militants who had tired of nonviolent protests, which they considered too conservative and ineffective in the fight for black rights. In 1966, the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Stokely Carmichael, shifted the guiding philosophy of the organization when he suggested the blacks must use “black power” to fight “white power” (qtd Franklin 515). Young black militants in California organized the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense and declared that white Americans must choose “total liberty for black people or total destruction for America” (qtd in Franklin 520). The 1967 Black Power Conference in Newark, New Jersey called for “partitioning of the United States into two separate independent nations, one to be a homeland for white and the other to be a homeland for black Americans” (qtd in Franklin 518).

White Americans who had engaged in the fight for civil rights side-by-side with blacks found themselves increasingly rejected from black organizations that wished to cut ties with American whites and create all-black organizations (515).

Although essentialist minority group identities may sometimes unify groups of people in a political struggle for equality, ethnic essentialism also reinforces and reinscribes the social and political barriers of the color line which divides black and white Americans. Ethnic essentialism also represses diverse individual identities within social and political groups. While the examples above are mostly radical groups operating on the fringes of black society, the “anti-white” attitude they express is also frequently a feature of mainstream black America. Psychologist Beverly Tatum calls this attitude an “oppositional identity” and says this identity develops in response to “growing awareness of the systematic exclusion of Black people from full participation in U.S. society” (60). She observes, “This oppositional stance both protects one’s identity from the psychological assault of racism and keeps the dominant group at a distance” (60). Unfortunately, the oppositional stance is often not limited to a rejection of racist institutions and individuals. Tatum notes that “attitudes and behaviors associated with Whites are viewed with disdain” and that there is a certain “in your face” quality that often accompanies this identity (61-62). She also notices that even positive behavior associated with whites, such as academic achievement, is often treated with disdain by blacks who have an oppositional identity (62). Both essentialist black nationalism, which sometimes includes black racism against other racial groups, and the milder anti-white stance of an oppositional identity reinscribe racial categories and social boundaries that were originally institutionalized by white supremacists. Although these attitudes and ideologies originate as a response to white racism and white

hegemony, they also perpetuate the historical racial division between black and white Americans.

In fact, white racial supremacy actually contributed to the formation of black American identity and political solidarity. By defining whiteness as “not colored,” systematically privileging the white race and institutionalizing racism against all people who are not white, white supremacy took an ethnically diverse, heterogeneous group of colored people from geographically dispersed locations and provided them a common cause upon which to build social and political unity. Similarly, minority acceptance of identity based on “anti-whiteness” results in some fear, distrust and dislike for minorities by whites who do not understand or consider the racialized history of suffering that evokes this political stance.

To reemphasize the use of the social construction of race as a political tool by both white and black Americans, I will expand on the nature of the system that creates racial labels and categories. First, white Americans adopted a European construction of whiteness with an “us” vs. “them” notion of superiority based on “not blackness.” White Americans institutionalized this racism to preserve white privilege and systematically subordinate blacks. Ironically, some black Americans have responded to white racism by accepting a black identity that is based on an “us” vs. “them” ideology of “not whiteness,” which perpetuates the racial constructs and boundaries upon which institutionalized racism depends. Thus, both white and black Americans have perpetuated the existence of race and racial categories. Ann Laura Stoler cites Michel Foucault’s term “polyvalent mobility” in her discussion of this wily ability of race to be used as a political tool of the hegemonic power at one time and the oppressed class at another time. In his 1976 Collège de France lectures on race, Foucault argues that “racial discourses produce new

truths and ruptures as they fold into and recuperate old ones” (qtd in Stoler 376). The continuous reincarnation of American race-based politics in new forms illustrates Foucault’s point.

However, the critical differences between race-based ideology and politics conducted by white Americans and those conducted by black Americans are significant: 1. Essentialist black racial ideology and politics, such as Black Nationalism, are generally a response to the continued privileged position of whites as a group and stigmatized position of blacks as a group in American society. 2. Black Americans do not carry the “big stick” of hegemonic power or have social, economic and political control of American institutions like white Americans do. Therefore, black racism does not manifest itself in institutional oppression of white Americans. Despite these critical and significant differences, both whites and blacks have contributed to the maintenance of the American color line that divides black and white Americans.

These efforts by both black and white Americans to define and guard racial boundaries rely on a political strategy known as essentialism, which assigns all members of a socially constructed group a homogeneous identity. The group striving to achieve or maintain political power ignores individual identities within the opposition group and creates a homogeneous, essentialized idea of the group on which to project the ideology required for conditions conducive to achieving and/or maintaining power. This essentialism renders the members of the opposition group invisible and silent since the actual subject is replaced with an essentialized construction.

Essentialism that aims at achieving or maintaining hegemony, must be distinguished from what Gayatri Spivak calls “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 214). Like hegemonic essentialism, strategic essentialism aims to reduce political opposition by repressing individual identities and producing a homogeneous subject. However, the goal of strategic essentialism is to promote the

survival of and to improve the political situation of a group being oppressed by another political group that has achieved hegemony. The oppressed group assumes a strategically essential identity and also projects an essentialized identity onto its opposition group as a political act. Spivak suggests that the oppressed group views assumption of the identities as a purely political act and discards the essentialist identities in non-political contexts to embrace diverse individual identities within the essentialized groups (214).

I could argue that white Americans have traditionally engaged primarily in the vicious form of essentialism in order to achieve and maintain power over black Americans. I could also argue that black Americans have engaged primarily in strategic essentialism in order to achieve the political unity required to defend Americans of color from the hegemonic designs of white Americans. However, can strategically essential notions be discarded in non-political contexts? Do strategically essential identities inhibit social interactions between groups and maintain racial boundaries? I could question whether a clear distinction between essentialism and strategic essentialism is possible. However, examining these distinctions and assigning moral value to different kinds of essentialism are not primary projects of this thesis. I have addressed essentialism in the context of explaining the ways that both black and white Americans have established and maintained racial boundaries and how these borders are situated within the human struggle for power.

Despite the continued relaxation of legislative and judicial border-guarding after the Civil Rights Movement, including the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972 and the Civil Rights Act of 1991, economic, political and social equality for black Americans didn't materialize by the last decade of the twentieth century. Deeply engrained racist ideology, discriminatory institutional practices and the great political investment of both whites and blacks

in racial identification made progress toward erasure of the color-line slow. Simply eliminating discriminatory legislation was not enough to erase the insidious effects of centuries of systematic racism and racist ideology. Many small reminders of the legacy of white supremacy remain in the media, in legal documents, and in American attitudes toward race. For example, until it was finally deleted in 1987, Mississippi's state constitution still contained a law prohibiting interracial marriage (Sollors 410). In addition, many black Americans still felt routinely discriminated against on the basis of race. For example, black drivers who were committing no illegal actions were pulled over by law enforcement officers so frequently that the phenomenon became known among black Americans as Driving While Black (DWB) (*Racial Profiling*). Many black Americans have filed law suits to protest this sort of racial profiling, yet the practice continues in many areas.

Especially frustrating for many black Americans is that, despite a growing black middle class, the socioeconomic discrepancy between blacks (as a group) and whites (as a group) remains. In *Two Nations*, published in 1992, social scientist Andrew Hacker provides statistical evidence of continued differences in income, education, and employment for white and black America and demonstrates that social inequality between the races still existed at the end of the twentieth century. Hacker suggests that most white Americans are not interested in redistributing America's wealth to close this gap: "As it will be shown, not only is the taxpaying electorate overwhelmingly white, but it is also middle class, middle-aged, and—increasingly—ensconced in insulated suburbs. In short, our time is not one receptive to racial remedies" (xiii). In addition to the unwillingness of middle class taxpayers to fund government programs designed to address the needs of inner city and rural poor, white Americans' support for minority Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity programs has waned due to the belief that less

qualified minorities are “stealing” jobs from more qualified whites or the belief that middle class blacks, who are often privileged by these programs, should not be privileged over middle class whites (D’Souza 253). The debate over the reasons for a continuing socioeconomic disparity between black and whites continued at the end of the twentieth century. Many whites blamed black cultural pathologies, and many blacks blamed systematic white racism. Whatever the reason for the continuation of racial inequities, even “successful” middle-class black Americans were very frustrated with their race’s continued subordinate position in society—a sentiment Ellis Cose discusses in his book *The Rage of A Privileged Class*.

The frustration of American blacks with racial inequalities contributed to the continued presence of “anti-white” ideology, including lingering Black Nationalism which sometimes included racist attitudes and remarks that target whites. The Nation of Islam continued to disseminate racist and separatist rhetoric. During a speech at New Jersey’s Kean College in November 1993, activist Khalid Abdul Muhammad of the Nation of Islam made vitriolic remarks about both whites and Jews:

If the white man won’t get out of town by sundown, we kill everything white in South Africa. We kill the women, we kill the children, we kill the babies. . . The so-called Jew is a European strain of people who crawled around on all fours in the caves and hills of Europe, eating juniper roots and eating each other. . . Everybody talks about Hitler exterminating six million Jews. That’s right. But don’t nobody ask what did they do to Hitler! They supplanted, they usurped, they . . . undermined the very fabric of society. (qtd in D’Souza 401)

Also, in 1993, a publicly funded Los Angeles radio station, KPFK, hosted an “Afrikan Mental Liberation Weekend” and broadcast statements that included “White people are genetic

mutations of blacks,” “So the white man is Satan himself,” and “White people can only produce white people. They are the mutants from black people. Black has the greatest genetic potential to annihilate white people” (D’Souza 402).

White extremists also continue to promote racist ideology and fight for racial separatism in an effort to preserve white supremacy despite the reduction of widespread institutionalized racism in America at the end of the twentieth century. During the 1980s, white supremacist David Duke led his organization, National Association for the Advancement of White People (NAAWP) in a campaign for the “division of North America into separate racial nations.” In 1989, Duke gave an interview in which he stated, “There’s only one country anymore that’s all-white and that’s Iceland. And Iceland is not enough” (qtd in D’Souza 397). Ethnic essentialism still maintained a presence among extremist groups in both white and black American culture at the end of the twentieth century.

Racial separatism, racial inequality and the presence of black rage are all evidence that Du Bois’s 1903 prophecy had been fulfilled; the “color-line” remained one of America’s greatest social problems with both blacks and whites contributing to racial border guarding and separatism. In his introduction to the 1953 edition of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois clarifies his ideas about race fifty years after the initial publication of the text in 1903 by discussing his realization that “the color-line,” which he’d originally identified as a problem of race and color, is actually a problem of psychology and economics (13). Although Du Bois did not have the tools of poststructuralist critical theory available to his analysis of race, his understanding of “the color-line” was evolving toward a conception of race as something much more complex than categorization based upon skin color. DuBois was beginning to realize that race was not biological but a sociopolitical tool to be used in the struggle for economic power, yet he still

recognized the devastating psychological effects of race upon human beings caught in its construction.

Now that I have conducted a general review of the politics and history of “the color line” in America, I will introduce the specific concerns of biracial Americans. Despite three centuries of effort by many white Americans and some black Americans to separate the white and black races legally, socially, and economically, black-white interracial sexuality, also known as “miscegenation” or racial mixing, has been present in America since the first blacks arrived on the country’s eastern shores. Initially, American interracial sexuality consisted of liaisons between white indentured servants and slave and free blacks in the Chesapeake areas of Virginia and Maryland during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; later, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, interracial sexuality consisted primarily of sexual victimization of black female slaves by their white masters (Williamson 6-14). As Joel Williamson points out, this American racial mixing was a continuation of white-black mixing that had taken place in Africa, Europe, Asia and Latin America long before American colonization by the British: “Therefore, when we speak of the mixing of black and white in America, we are actually speaking relatively. In the broad sweep of recorded history, black was never totally black, and white was never entirely white” (Williamson xiii).

This black-white mixing often produced biracial children, who came to be called “mulatto.”⁴ Interracial sexual relationships and the biracial children these unions have produced have blurred the boundaries between American racial groups and threatened to expose the irrationality that lies within the black-white binary construction of race. America’s “one-drop rule” has been the primary method of avoiding the dilemmas that biracial people present for the country’s black-white binary construction of race by categorizing biracial people as black and

⁴ See discussion of the term ‘mulatto’ on p. 7.

ignoring their white ancestry. This one-drop rule was not often challenged before the middle of the twentieth century since biracial children were most often the children of black mothers and white men who were not involved in the rearing of their children. Generally, biracial children were raised by their mothers within the black community, socially identified as black, and accepted as members of the black community.

This consignment of biracial Americans to the black community was very important to white border guarding strategies. Attempts to logically defend the binary social construction of race in America relied entirely upon the incorporation of the illogical one-drop rule and racial essentialism, for acknowledging that a person could be both black and white simultaneously (or part-black and part-white) would be an acknowledgement of the impossibility of maintaining clear boundaries between the races. Maintaining the boundaries between the races has been perceived as crucial to identity, culture, politics and economics by both white and black Americans, so biracial identities that attempt affiliation in more than one racial community have often been ignored or discouraged.

Until the second half of the twentieth century, maintaining a biracial identity in America was difficult or impossible due to pressure from both black and white communities that insisted the biracial person establish an identity in only one racial community, generally the black community. However, social and cultural changes which took place during the second half of the twentieth century have created space for discourse on diversity and difference within political and cultural groups. During the second half of the twentieth century, after laws against interracial marriage were declared unconstitutional in 1967 with the case of *Loving v Virginia*, the number of biracial children that were raised in culturally hybrid, interracial households and had loving relationships with parents of both races increased. However, the binary black-white

construction of race remained intact, racial border guarding by both whites and blacks continued and biracial identities remained largely unacknowledged. Due to the unique position (or lack of a position) for Americans with biracial identities in the racial classification system based on the notion of a distinct separation between black and white people, biracial Americans felt the full brunt of tensions generated by the dualism of American racial constructs and accentuated the inadequacies of the race “labels” Americans have historically worn.

Biracial Americans frequently experience pressure by both blacks and whites to assimilate into a single racial category; the consequence of refusal to comply is often alienation from both races. Simultaneously, the “authenticity” of membership in either racial category is often questioned either by the biracial individual or by the group. Additionally, due to historical tradition, many biracial Americans have been assigned by others and/or themselves a black identity, which complies with the one-drop rule but does not acknowledge their white ancestry or their relationships to white family and European-American culture, which often leads to experiences of cultural hybridity that cross racial boundaries. Less frequently, due to the requirement of “looking white” and the social stigma of “passing” for white, biracial Americans adopt a white identity by not acknowledging their black ancestry or their relationships to black family and black culture.

Stuart Hall discusses the hegemony of “the black experience” as it has been brought to bear on the heterogeneous alliance of people of color, including biracial people: “In this moment, politically speaking, ‘The Black experience’, as a singular and unifying framework based on the building up of identity across ethnic and cultural difference between the different communities, became ‘hegemonic’ over other ethnic/racial identities – though the latter did not, of course, disappear. . . .” (“New Ethnicities” 223). While Hall is discussing a movement which took place

in Britain, a parallel shift took place in the United States, especially due to the one-drop rule. While the unification of all Americans with African ancestry under the label 'black' has sometimes been effective as a political strategy for combating white racial discrimination, essentialist "anti-white" attitudes within the black community have often allowed little space for biracial identities or interracial relationships within the black community.

Likewise, the white community's incorporation of the one-drop rule and oppression of all non-white Americans (including biracial Americans) have also historically made it difficult for biracial Americans to function within the white community and maintain a biracial identity. For this reason, some biracial Americans whose physical features allowed them to be socially identified as white resorted to "passing" for white and cut ties to their black families and heritage in their pursuit of economic, social and political alliances within the white hegemony.

Despite this historical emphasis on monoracial identities, at the end of the twentieth century discourse on biracial and multiracial identities began to break down racial borders and boundaries, discount the value of racial categorization and create space for a political agenda that includes acceptance of cultural hybridity and mixed race consciousness. Hall discusses this shift toward diversity and the resistance to this shift within some national and cultural identities:

Since cultural diversity is, increasingly, the fate of the modern world, and ethnic absolutism a regressive feature of late-modernity, the greatest danger now arises from forms of national and cultural identity—new or old—which attempt to secure their identities by adopting closed versions of culture or community and by refusal to engage . . . with the difficult problems that arise from difference. ("Culture, Community, Nation" 361)

Some white Americans perceive this movement toward cultural hybridity as dangerous and believe that important parts of America's European cultural heritage are discarded as cultural diversity and multiculturalism become new societal standards. Some minority Americans also view the breaking down of racial borders as idealistic and dangerous and cite lasting effects of histories of racial discrimination and oppression. Hortense Spillers expresses her concern that dissolving notions of race will result in a resurgence of racism:

If one can succeed in establishing "race" as a logical fallacy—a "dance" performed on the surface of a page, or the cerebral cortex—then s/he is free to retrieve the most traditional and vicious forms of racism, including, most emphatically, the inveterate behaviors of white male supremacism, since he would now be guiltless of such charges, inasmuch as there is no such *intellectually competent* thing as "race" anyhow." (28)

Spillers fears that discarding racial labels will not stop systematic oppression of minorities, and she fears that the vocabulary used in the discourse on race may be lost, leaving American minorities unable to engage in discourse about their political concerns. Many white Americans also fear the loss of their white racial identities and white privilege. For this reason, many Americans, both black and white, cling tenaciously to traditional racial labels and refuse to acknowledge the differences and diversity within racial groups and within American society.

However, the binary racial labels of black and white are based upon the fallacy of the essential subject. Both dominant and subordinate racial groups preserve dualistic racial categories which makes racism a self-perpetuating plague that is impossible to eradicate. Political coalitions based on essentialist notions of race are justified by histories of racial discrimination, but when political groups are narrowly defined by exclusive monoracial identity, they create new histories of racial discrimination by enforcing homogenous identities within the

oppressed group and essentialist views of the political opposition. While an abrupt abandonment of racial signs and politics might indeed result in the type of racism Spillers fears, an introduction of notions of diversity and difference into intraracial and interracial politics cannot fail to highlight the irrationality of essentialist racial labels by reducing their significance and diluting their meaning.

Hall discusses a shift toward diversity within the black community in Britain and emphasizes the influence of poststructuralist critical theory on the essential black subject:

What is at issue here is the recognition of the extraordinary diversity of subjective positions, social experiences and cultural identities which compose the category 'black'; that is, the recognition that 'black' is essentially a politically and culturally constructed category, which cannot be grounded in a set of fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories and which therefore has no guarantees in Nature. ("New Ethnicities" 225)

Hall explains that this acknowledgement of the constructed nature of race allows for the recognition of "the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects" (225). I believe that a similar shift is taking place in the United States and hope that in the near future most Americans will form sociopolitical coalitions based primarily upon shared culture and goals and abandon ethnic identities based on "not-being Other." Like the integrated struggle for civil rights in the 1960s, this politics of antiracism will embrace both its minority members with multiple race affiliations and also white Americans who are willing to invest personally in the struggle for civil rights and social equality for all Americans.

Likewise, I hope that all Americans will learn to recognize the "limitations of thought and action" imposed by "us" vs. "them" patterns of thought and recognize the primacy of human identities over racial identities. Privileged Americans must also learn to recognize the legacy of

social and political inequality among racial groups that remains a symptom of our country's institutionalized racism. However, the socioeconomic insulation of middle class and upper class Americans makes it easy to develop a "blissful ignorance" about the appalling human conditions that exist in non-suburban America and in other countries around the world. Acknowledgement of cultural hybridity and multiracial discourse present opportunities for bridging this distance between self and Other.

The relaxation of legislative and judicial border-guarding by white Americans following the 1960s American Civil Rights Movement and the introduction of postmodern ways of thinking into American society have resulted in a slight deterioration of the binary construction of race and created space for discourse on biracial American identities. In her essay, "A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People," Maria P.P. Root specifies the different grievances that the multiracial discourse addresses:

When race is constructed through the mechanics of racism, oppression chokes multiracial people from all sides. This throttling and stifling takes many forms: forced to fit into just one category from school registration to US Census surveys; affiliations forced with oppressive questions (e.g., "Which one are you?"); forced to "act right," "think right," and "do right" in order to belong; and forced to prove ethnic legitimacy in order to have an identity in an ethnically diverse society. (357)

Root proposes that the biracial subject can engage in the political act of resistance by taking control of his or her own identity, allowing that identity to shift and change, and identifying with more than one group of people (359). Root also promotes participating in the American discourse on multiraciality as an act of political resistance (364). By speaking about biracial identity, the biracial person moves from the position of object to the position of subject by

creating a “public, historical self” (Gates 108). This thesis discusses interracial themes and biracial protagonists as such an act.

Both *Quicksand* and *Caucasia* capture a biracial (black-white) woman protagonist’s coming of age experience, and both texts focus on the protagonist’s search for identity and a sense of belonging. Both novels examine the sociopolitical construction of race, the difficulties of identity formation for the biracial protagonist, the sociopolitical implications of biracial identity and the intersection of gender and race. Notably, both Nella Larsen and Danzy Senna are women of biracial (black-white) heritage and, therefore, personally invested in the political implications of their portrayals of biracial women living in twentieth-century America.

Larsen wrote during the Harlem Renaissance, which was a time period when the first generation of black Americans to escape the institution of slavery was struggling to build a place and a culture for itself in a country dominated economically, politically, and socially by a white hegemony (Huggins 4). Blacks had been freed from slavery but were still oppressed by Jim Crow laws and other forms of economic, social and political discrimination. The leaders of the Harlem Renaissance strove to develop African American art and culture that would serve as “a bridge across the chasm between the races” (5). African American literature was a significant part of this cultural renaissance. Nella Larsen’s contemporaries included Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, W.E.B. Du Bois, Countee Cullen, Sterling Brown, James Weldon Johnson, and Jessie Fauset. These writers created literary masterpieces that were recognized by whites and blacks in the United States and abroad.

However, one limitation upon the Harlem Renaissance writers was that the literary establishment was controlled by white publishers who determined which of their works made it to print. In her essay, “What White Publishers Won’t Print” (1950), Zora Neale Hurston

discusses the publishers' concern with financial gain to be garnered from texts with popular appeal and lack of concern about whether or not portrayals of the black characters were realistic or accurate (170). The general public (and, therefore, the publishers) tended to favor works that emphasized primitive, anti-intellectual, sensual, sexual blacks and texts rife with racial conflict. Hurston objected to this trend: "But for the national welfare, it is urgent to realize that the minorities do think, and think about something other than the race problem" (170). Due to this pressure on black writers to produce representations of stereotypical black subjects, the literary works published by these Harlem geniuses tended to portray characters that in many ways reinforced essentialist stereotypes of blacks and whites.

It is easy to argue that Larsen's biracial protagonist of *Quicksand*, Helga Crane complies with these Harlem Renaissance era requirements for a "publishable" black text. Nathan Huggins identifies the dominant theme of Larsen's novels as "the uncompromising dilemma of the cultured-primitive Negro" and describes Helga's character as an example, saying that Helga is "overwhelmed by the ethnic war within her mulatto psyche" (157). However, I suggest that Helga was overwhelmed by the sociopolitical construction of race that created a color line right through the middle of her nuclear and extended family. As noted by Hutchinson, Helga's experiences bear a near autobiographical resemblance to Larsen's own experience. The novel is set during the early twentieth century, the same time period during which it was published. Helga struggles to find a place for herself as a biracial woman living in America, which was racially segregated, and Denmark, which was desegregated but predominantly white. The novel positions the biracial protagonist with respect to both black and white communities, examines the complexity of identity for biracial people, explores the theme of the primitive exotic and investigates the intersection between race, class and gender.

Danzy Senna published *Caucasia* at the end of the twentieth-century, a time when multiculturalism and poststructuralist theory were gradually beginning to create space in the discourse on race for previously unrecognized and unheard biracial and multiracial voices. Senna's novel investigates the constructed nature of race and the instabilities, contradictions and fallacies of racial labels. The text captures the experiences of its biracial protagonist, Birdie, and documents the girl's transition to womanhood and her struggle to explore her identity and place in America during the early 1970s amidst a backdrop of racialized politics which were carried over from the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Senna examines the binary sociopolitical construction of race, the complexity of biracial identities, the theme of racial passing, and the intersection between race, class and gender.

My exploration of the interracial and biracial themes in *Quicksand* and *Caucasia* will emphasize the texts' representations of the operations of the systems of hegemonic power which create and maintain racial labels and categories and examine the position of the biracial subject within the sociopolitical construction of race.

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CHAPTER THREE: THE (DIS)INTEGRATING BIRACIAL SUBJECT IN *QUICKSAND*

“Why couldn’t she have two lives, or
why couldn’t she be satisfied in one place?”
-Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (93)

The interracial and biracial themes of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) expose the irrationality of the binary sociopolitical construction of race in the United States and reveal the systems of hegemonic power which create and maintain racial labels and categories. By examining the text’s representation of biracial protagonist, Helga Crane, whose experiences bear many autobiographical similarities to those of Larsen, the text explores the complexities of mixed racial heritage, cultural hybridity and biracial identity, to include ambiguities of physical appearance and social and political affiliations in conflicting racial groups. In addition, the text moves from a national to a transnational perspective on race by transporting the protagonist from the United States to Copenhagen, Denmark. The primary projects of Larsen’s text are to expose the illogical essentialism of racial categories and to portray the human devastation wrought by institutionalization of the color line. The novel reveals the silences, gaps and exclusions of dominant racial ideology as biracial Helga unsuccessfully seeks to establish a satisfying identity for herself in five different geographical and sociopolitical locations, four in the United States and one in Denmark.

Quicksand was inserted into the American discourse on race at a time when the country continued to adjust to cultural changes wrought by the abolition of American slavery in 1865, less than one generation earlier. During the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the

twentieth centuries, both black and white American writers frequently exploited black-white biracial characters to embody the tension which characterized political, economic and social relationships between black and white Americans. Literary explorations of the black-white biracial character were conducted by canonical writers such as Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Charles Chesnutt, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, Kate Chopin, William Faulkner, and Willa Cather.⁵

This literary discourse on the black-white biracial subject was particularly prevalent during the Harlem Renaissance, which was a period of African-American cultural productivity that took place during the early twentieth century in New York City. During this time period, as discussed in admirable detail by George Hutchinson in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, the philosophies of pragmatism (emphasis on actions that achieve practical results) and cultural pluralism (blending of cultures into the American “melting pot”) merged with an effort by many black and white American intellectuals to redefine and broaden the understanding of American identity. Hutchinson suggests that the artists of the Harlem Renaissance attempted to use art as a method of revising American conceptions of race:

Many writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance, both black and white, believed that realistic fiction, poetry, and drama would bring greater interracial understanding by exploring the psychology of racism as well as opening a space for the re-creation and expression of diversely “American” selves. (*Harlem* 42).

Quicksand may be read as one of these texts that attempts to revise conceptions of race.

Larsen’s text frames its interrogation of dominant racial discourses by exploiting a literary trope which depicts mulatto characters as perpetually torn by an internal struggle between their black and white selves. This struggle is known as the trope of the “tragic mulatto.”

⁵ See works cited for specific texts.

Sterling Brown named this trope in 1969 by describing the “tragic mulatto” as a character who is typically unable to overcome internal racial conflict and is therefore doomed to a life of alienation, psychological torment and, quite frequently, death (*American Fiction* 45) Brown also notes that one variation on the trope is resolution of the mulatto’s internal conflict by assimilation—either the black or white part of the character’s nature triumphs, which results in a monoracial identity that represses and denies the other part of the character’s heritage:

The mulatto or quadroon, or octoroon heroine has been a favorite for a long time; in books by white authors the whole desire of her life is to find a white lover; then balked by the dictates of her society, she sinks to a tragic end. In our century, Negro authors have turned the story around; now after restless searching, she finds peace only after returning to her own people. (“Negro Portraiture” 340)

Larsen employs and exploits this trope and offers an ambiguous text with complex multiple layers of meaning. In many instances, the text offers alternative readings of race discourse, and may be read either as upholding or as subverting established stereotypes about racial categories, identity, and biracial people. Larsen spares neither black nor white American communities from her sharp criticism for perpetuating an illogical construction of race.

Quicksand captures the illogic of American racism, portrays the psychological and emotional costs of maintaining racial categories and labels and gives voice to the experiences of Americans who do not fall easily within institutionalized racial categories. Helga Crane’s racial orientation is established in the United States and shaped by her personal experiences with racial labels and categories. In fact, Hutchison calls *Quicksand* a semi-autobiographical novel and provides evidence of the many similarities between Larsen’s life experiences and Helga’s story

in his recently released biography, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line* (2006).

Throughout the text, Helga struggles to establish a stable social identity but is continually frustrated by her inability to self-identify completely with any single racial group due to America's intolerance of multiracial identities and lack of tolerance for social affiliations that cross racial boundaries. In the United States, African-Danish-American Helga is labeled and categorized by herself and others as "Negro," using the American one-drop rule, which dictates that people with any known African ancestor will be categorized and identified as black, regardless of known white ancestry or contradictions in physical appearance (Davis 4). Helga refers to her identity in childhood as that of an "unloved little Negro girl" (23). Also, as a young woman, when asked by an old Danish woman in Copenhagen "what manner of mankind" she is, Helga replies, "I'm a Negro" (76). However, this racial identity does not acknowledge the heterogeneity that results from the cultural hybridity Helga experiences as a black girl being raised by her white mother in a predominately white culture. Helga's discomfort with racial categories reflects the effects of race upon her personally--the disintegration of her nuclear and extended families and her own family's rejection of her.

In 1928, the year that *Quicksand* was published, 34 American states had passed laws prohibiting interracial marriage and sometimes also interracial cohabitation (Sollors 395-407). At the time that African-Danish-American Larsen was writing *Quicksand*, in the majority of the United States, neither her biological parents nor the biological parents of her black-white biracial protagonist, Helga, were legally allowed to marry or establish a family. Both the author and her protagonist are grievous breeches of the American color line, since they were conceived by consensual interracial sexual intercourse between a black man and a white woman.

Black Americans have historically interrogated and challenged this legal, social and economic racial boundary line that was originally erected by white Americans as a way to resist hegemonic oppression and to rebut white theories of black racial inferiority. I believe that is exactly what many of the “genteel” writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as Larsen, who wrote of mulatto or light-skinned bourgeois black Americans and featured interracial themes were trying to do. One way that these writers interrogated the validity of racial categories was to incorporate the theme of “racial passing,” in which black Americans moved within white American society and sometimes concealed their African ancestry. However, writers who implemented these biracial and interracial themes were often severely criticized by black critics, such as Sterling Brown, for ignoring the concerns of the majority of the black community and catering to white readers (Sollors 225).

Brown asserts that many nineteenth and early twentieth century representations of biracial characters lack realism, avoid more serious social issues than the social dilemmas that result from interracial reproduction, prevent the appearance of more representative black characters, uphold racial stereotypes by assigning positive character traits to the biracial character’s “white blood” and negative character traits to the character’s “black blood,” and appeal to white readers who are interested in reading about predominately white people of color who are presumptively “more like them” than the majority of the black American population (qtd in Sollors 224). Additionally, Brown notes the division of mulatto characters along gender lines, noting that while all of the mulattos are presented as tragic, most male mulatto characters become heroic rebels while the female mulatto characters are generally limited to symbols of exotic sexuality (“Century” 340).

The text's emphasis on Helga's ability to relocate in a variety of national and international communities, both predominately black and predominately white, does call into question the character's ability to represent most twentieth century biracial American women. Most biracial American women of this time period would have found their mobility constrained by the economic and social limitations of being a stigmatized member of American society and would most likely have been without connections to welcoming extended family to host an extended visit overseas. However, despite her inability to represent the social and economic limitations of most biracial woman during the early twentieth century, Helga does not seem particularly unrealistic, especially in light of George Hutchison's recent evidence of the parallels between Helga's journey to Denmark and those of Larsen herself. I suggest that one of the text's projects is to call into question the fundamentally essentialist notion that a single character or person *could* represent a race, gender or community. Although at times strategic essentialism is helpful in the political struggle for equality, ethnic essentialism also reinforces and reinscribes the social and political barriers of the color line which divides black and white Americans.⁶

Although Helga is presented as a "symbol of exotic sexuality," particularly during the Copenhagen chapters, by the text's conclusion she has rejected the role of primitive exotic and assumed control of her own sexuality (although she has not gained control of the associated reproductive process). In György Lukács's essay "Realism in the Balance," he observes that the creative realist shows "how thought and feelings grow out of the life of society and how experiences and emotions are parts of the total complex of reality" (1039). *Quicksand* shows how racism destroys human relationships by depicting how Helga's thoughts and feelings and relationships to other human beings grow out of her experiences of a racialized society. Racism shapes Helga's experiences and emotions, which become a part of her reality.

⁶ See discussion of essentialism on p. 19-20.

If racial identities and representations of racial subjectivity are useful for examination of relationships between racial discourse and power, biracial identities and representations of biracial subjectivity are as useful for examination of relationships between racial discourse and power as monoracial identities or subjectivities. In her essay “Notes on an Alternative Model—Neither/Nor,” Hortense Spillers argues that literary representations of the biracial subject, such as the trope of the tragic mulatto, were created by white American males in an attempt to deny the mingling of white and black bloodlines (302). Spillers believes that the biracial character was created in order to symbolize racial separation within the human body and expresses fear about the consequences of recognizing biracial subjectivity:

But to reify ‘mulatto/a’ as actual race-being, whatever that might entail—as one fears is beginning to happen on the scene of the new pluralism—would amplify the ‘race’ question, reinforce it as an implement of political power, revivify the ‘black/white’ divide, and essentially reinstall a sometimes ambiguous color consciousness that the late twentieth century purports to have left behind. (28)

Spillers’ criticism does not acknowledge that the biracial subject can also symbolize racial integration and biracial identities shaped by experiences of cultural hybridity. Spillers’ criticism of representations of biracial subjectivity suggests adherence to the well-established but illogical one-drop rule, paves the way for racial essentialism and does not recognize the social and political dilemmas of biracial Americans whose nuclear families straddle America’s institutionalized color line.

While Helga is never able to integrate her racial identities due to her personal experience of racism, Audrey Denny, who serves as Helga’s mirror or double, symbolizes the possibility of integration of racial identities. Although, according to the one-drop rule, Audrey is racially

assigned the identity of a black woman, she socializes with both blacks and whites. The text clearly establishes that Audrey does not “pass” for white when Anne informs Helga that whites socialize with Audrey even though “they know she’s colored” (60). Helga admires Audrey’s ability to “ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people” (62).

Significantly, Audrey’s interracial socializing angers Helga’s roommate, Anne Grey, who views Audrey’s interracial socialization as a betrayal of the black race. Anne is particularly upset by Audrey’s social relationships with white men and calls her behavior “outrageous” and “treacherous.” Anne serves as a symbol of essentialist black identity, separatism and racism. The text’s incorporation of Audrey’s character and Anne’s vehement dislike for Audrey reflects Carla K. Bradshaw’s observation that multiracial people remind “those who have achieved false security by denying differences and invoking artificial notions of homogeneity” of the ever present differences between all individuals (79).

In *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy suggests replacement of the essentialized black subject with understanding of the socially constructed nature of race and an appreciation of diversity within the black population. However, Gilroy issues a warning similar to Spillers’s about the potential dangers of exposing race’s constructed nature: “The difficulty with this second tendency is that in leaving racial essentialism behind by viewing ‘race’ itself as a social and cultural construction, it has been insufficiently alive to the lingering power of specifically racialized forms of power and subordination” (32). *Quicksand* meets the challenges presented by the dilemma which Gilroy frames. The novel simultaneously acknowledges the very real historical, social and political ramifications of racism, exposes the socially constructed nature of race and criticizes essentialist identities.

While the text's development of plot, themes and characters in the American settings briefly acknowledge the viciousness of white racism in America, the text's American settings primarily subvert the notion of the essential black subject by examining intraracial divisions within black American communities. However, the text's brief forays into white American racism and the development of plot, themes and characters in the Danish setting acknowledge specifically racialized forms of power and subordination that affect people of African ancestry around the world, giving rise to the notion of a global black experience. These racialized forms of power and subordination result in the experience that W.E.B. Du Bois named "double consciousness" and which he described as a "sense of looking at one's self through the eyes of others"—the eyes of the dominant group that holds power (2). Gilroy, like Du Bois before him identifies the fractured consciousness which results from racialized subordination as "the constitutive force giving rise to the black experience in the modern world" (*Black Atlantic* 38). While *Quicksand* does acknowledge the experience of fractured consciousness as a transnational black experience, the text's conclusion dramatically also emphasizes the diversity within the black community and the dangers of an essentialist black identity.

Quicksand portrays the frustration and alienation of the biracial subject who feels an intense conflict between the personal and the political—a conflict between biracial consciousness and the politics of social identity generated by the systems of hegemonic power which enforce divisions between black and white Americans. Helga is described in the text as having "skin like yellow satin" and "biscuit-colored feet," yet, in the United States, in accordance with the one-drop rule, she is characterized by both blacks and whites as black since her African ancestry is clearly manifested in her phenotypic characteristics. Due to society's correlation between race and physical appearance, Helga is socially assigned and at times accepts

a black identity; however, this racial identity does not acknowledge her Danish heritage or her upbringing by her white mother, in a white family and in a predominately white community until the age of fifteen (Larsen 23). However, Helga's identity is constructed as racial Other in a white American community during her childhood, and having been abandoned by her black father, Helga finds herself the sole person of color within a white family who "feared and hated her" (6).

Helga is particularly traumatized when the white spouses of her mother, who remarried when Helga was six years old, and her mother's emotionally absent but fiscally supportive brother, Uncle Peter, do not wish to acknowledge Helga's place within their white family, which is the only biological family Helga knows. The "jealous malicious hatred of her mother's husband" (Larsen 23) and her uncle's wife's pronouncement that she is both illegitimate and inconvenient (28) as well as her personal observations of systematic racism that preserves white supremacy contribute to Helga's understanding that as a non-white woman, she will not find acceptance or equality in white America even though her racial ancestry is as white as it is black.

Ironically, although both white and black Americans clearly identify Helga as black, her search for a sense of family and community is only slightly more successful in black American communities than it is in white American communities. One way that *Quicksand* refutes the notion of an essential black subject is by examining intraracial divisions within the African-American community. The primary emphasis of *Quicksand's* American settings is on the adverse effects of intraracial racism and essentialism within African-American culture of the early twentieth century. Helga is positioned within four different African-American communities, those of Naxos, Chicago, Harlem and rural Alabama. The text uses these settings to criticize black attempts to mimic white bourgeois culture and values, identify socioeconomic

class stratification within the African-American community, expose black racism against whites, critique black separatism, highlight suppression of diversity within the American black population and portray the provincialism of rural black communities. While the novel examines interracial and biracial themes, the text simultaneously examines the intersection of oppressions due to race, class and gender.

In the novel's initial setting, Naxos, a southern black college, Helga is initially enthusiastic about her role as an educator at the institution whose founder had declared its mission to be educating black Americans: ". . . this was the thing which she had ardently desired to share in, be a part of, this monument to one man's genius and vision" (Larsen 3). Helga is generally accepted as a member of the black community by her peers, yet she soon becomes disgusted by the community's acceptance of white social, political and economic dominance and theories of black racial inferiority. Helga's analysis of the racist rhetoric of a white preacher who is given a respectful and enthusiastic reception at the black school criticizes accommodation of white racism by black Americans (3). In addition to Helga's distaste for the culture of accommodation at Naxos, she also begins to recognize the class divisions that exist in the black American community and learns that because she does not meet certain narrow political and social criteria, she will never be fully accepted among the elite members of the black community of Naxos: "Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't 'belong'" (8). Truly "belonging" to Naxos's elite caste requires "ancestry and connections" within black elite social circles, the kind of ancestry and connections that makes the family of Helga's fiancé James Vayle "people of consequence" (8). The socially

stigmatized and failed interracial relationship of Helga's parents leaves her with "no family" and tinges her with connotations of illegitimacy that Naxos's elite are unwilling to tolerate.

Helga's distaste for Naxos's accommodation of white supremacy and Naxos's intraracial black hegemony which closely mirrored America's white hegemony in its incorporation of exclusive instead of inclusive membership standards eventually alienated her despite her initial desire for belonging and acceptance:

Helga, on the other hand, had never quite achieved the unmistakable Naxos mold, would never achieve it, in spite of much trying. She could neither conform, nor be happy in her unconformity. This she saw clearly now, and with cold anger at all the past futile effort. What a waste! How pathetically she had struggled in those first few months and with what small success. A lack somewhere. Always she had considered it a lack on the part of the community, but in her present new revolt she realized that the fault had been partly hers. A lack of acquiescence. She hadn't really wanted to be made over. (7)

Helga finally realizes that she does not like or accept the prevailing culture at Naxos, so she returns to her native Chicago to seek financial assistance from her white uncle. While in Chicago, Helga also begins to seek employment. Helga fails at both of these tasks, so she follows an employment opportunity to New York City. Helga's movement from Naxos in the American South to Chicago and New York parallels the migration of many black Americans who migrated from the rural areas of the agricultural South to the industrial centers of the North in search of economic and social opportunities.

First in Chicago and later in Harlem, Helga discovers that she will not find acceptance in some African-American communities without repudiation of all ties to her white family. Larsen places emphasis on black separatism and denial of biracial identities in black American

communities by including the reaction of prominent black activist Mrs. Hayes-Rore to the discovery of Helga's biracial heritage:

The woman felt that the story, dealing as it did with race intermingling and possibly adultery, was beyond definite discussion. For among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned—and therefore they do not exist. (39)

Hayes-Rore advises Helga to keep her biracial heritage a closely-guarded secret: “And, by the way, I wouldn't mention that my people are white, if I were you. Colored people won't understand it, and after all it's your own business. When you've lived as long as I have, you'll know that what others don't know can't hurt you” (41). Larsen plays on the irony that Hayes-Rore's advice that Helga should conceal her white heritage puts Helga in the position of “passing” for black, a subversion of the mulatto as a literary type who attempts to conceal his or her blackness and “pass” for white in order to function in white American culture.

Not only is Helga expected to conceal her white ancestry, she is also expected to remain within the boundaries of a segregated black society and shun any social affiliation with white Americans. Helga's New York friend and roommate, Anne, is particularly opposed to any kind of social interaction with white people and considers it “an affront to the race, and to all the varicolored people that made Lenox and Seventh Avenues the rich spectacles which they were, for any Negro to receive on terms of equality any white person” (48). Helga notes the irony in the juxtaposition between elite black hostility toward whites and the elite black tendency to mimic white bourgeois behavior. For example, Helga observes that Anne's rejection of all things white is only theoretical: “But she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living.

While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race” (48).

Helga’s experiences in the American settings reveal that her social assignment into the socially stigmatized race of her black father presents difficulties for her due to systematic racial discrimination by whites against blacks in the United States. However, Helga’s personal relationships with other Americans, both white and black, are complicated more by her mixed racial ancestry than by her black ancestry. Neither the black nor the white American communities in which Helga is positioned will accept the psychological and cultural realities of her biracial ancestry—the fact that a monoracial identity ignores the fact that she is biologically (genetically) and culturally as closely related to her mother’s family (socially labeled “white”) as she is to her absent father’s family (socially labeled “black”). Larsen presents the dilemma of biracial Americans who are pressured to assimilate into a single institutionalized racial category or remain alienated from all of America’s predominant sociopolitical groups. Since Helga realizes that America’s binary sociopolitical construction of race does not have a place for her, she decides to form an identity that is entirely independent of racial identity, categorization or label despite her desire for belonging and acceptance.

In response to her failure to successfully establish an identity for herself in black or white communities within the United States, Helga begins a quest for what the narrator calls “that blessed sense of belonging to herself alone and not to a race” (64). Helga goes overseas to a place where she believes there are “no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice,” what she believes will be a race-free haven, her mother’s native Denmark. However, Helga’s efforts to escape racial identity have been futile due to the links between physical appearance and racial identity.

Larsen's movement of Helga to predominately white Copenhagen broadens the text's focus to a transnational examination of race. In Denmark, as in the United States, Helga will be primarily identified by others as "non-white" Other. As Helga's ship arrives at the port in Copenhagen, she realizes that her efforts to escape racial identity have been futile due to the link between physical appearance and racial identity. Helga's "skin like yellow satin," "dark eyes," and "curly blue-black hair" clearly distinguish her as different from Scandinavians. In Denmark, as in the United States, Helga will be primarily identified by others as "non-white," yet Denmark's cultural incorporation of race does not follow the binary black-white pattern of the United States. When Helga is in Copenhagen and encounters an old countrywoman at Gammel Strand and informs the woman that she is a Negro, the woman becomes "indignant, retorting angrily that, just because she was old and a countrywomen she could not be so easily fooled, for she knew as well as everyone else that Negroes were black and had woolly hair" (76). Helga uses the label "Negro" for herself because it is the only racial identity she has ever known in the United States, but the old country woman's indignant response reflects the inadequacy of using essentialist labels for diverse groups of human individuals. In Denmark, Helga is not considered black, and her initial fear of rejection by her white Danish family is unfounded. She is welcomed with great enthusiasm, showered with material possessions and immediately introduced in bourgeois Danish society. Helga discovers that race operates differently in Denmark than in the United States.

In spite of Helga's relief at the warm welcome given her and her enjoyment of the luxurious lifestyle of her upper-class Danish family, her satisfaction with her place in Danish society wanes as she discovers that her value to the Dahl family is not entirely based on her biological relationship to them and their feelings of familial affection. Larsen's placement of

Helga in predominately white Denmark allows for the examination of a subtle yet insidious form of racism less overt than the hostile legal and social discrimination against blacks in America.

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said discusses exoticization of non-European cultures as a style for “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over” the Other (3). Said discusses the European creation of racial discourse, which focuses on differences between European and non-European cultures. This discourse inevitably represents non-European cultures as less civilized and inferior. Thus, the notion of European superiority is based upon the construction of a relatively inferior non-European “Other.” Said asserts that this construction of the categories of “us” and “Other” creates “limitations on thought and action” (3).

Larsen exposes the Danish exoticization of non-Europeans as a historically specific form of racial Othering. The Danes regard Helga as an overly sexualized, primitive, exotic Other, a representation which lacks any correspondence to the experiences or knowledge of the real Helga. Helga’s Aunt Katrina has predetermined “the role that Helga was to play in advancing the social fortunes of the Dahls of Copenhagen” (Larsen 68). Upon her arrival in Denmark, Helga attempts to don conservative clothing similar to Katrina’s, but her aunt quickly rebuffs her stating, “Oh, I’m an old married lady, and a Dane. But you, you’re young. And you’re a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression” (68). Katrina pressures Helga to conform to the role which has been predetermined for her before her arrival in Denmark. Larsen highlights Helga’s role as primitive exotic by emphasizing her body as a spectacle:

The day was an exciting, not to be easily forgotten one. Definitely, too, it conveyed to Helga her exact status in her new environment. A decoration. A curio. A peacock. Their

progress through the shops was an event for Copenhagen as well as for Helga Crane. Her dark, alien appearance was to most people an astonishment. Some stared surreptitiously, some openly, and some stopped dead in front of her in order more fully to profit by their stares. (70)

Although Helga's role of exotic Other provides her with celebrity status in Danish society, Larsen does not allow her reader to forget the dynamics of power at work. The narrator observes that although Danish men are sexually attracted to Helga, Danish women feel "no need for jealousy" since Helga does not represent a threat: "To them this girl, this Helga Crane, this mysterious niece of the Dahls, was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn't one of them. She didn't at all count" (70). The racial dynamics at work in the Danish setting contrast with those of the American setting, juxtaposing the unique racial dynamics specific to two distinct national cultures.

In the American setting, the nation's social, political and economic structure historically supports and is supported by racial domination which began during the period of American slavery. Also in the American setting, people of African ancestry are present in numbers large enough to pose a significant threat to the supremacy of white Americans, resulting in blatant legal and social efforts on the part of white Americans to maintain hegemony over Americans of African ancestry, who respond by forming an essentialist black American identity in order to engage in a collective resistance to this racial oppression by whites, a strategy which Gayatri Spivak calls "strategic essentialism" (214).⁷ However, in the Danish setting, the Danes are secure enough in their relative power to consider people of African ancestry intriguing although

⁷ See discussion of essentialism on p. 19-20.

they still insist upon an essential differentiation between people of African ancestry and themselves, which takes the form of exoticization.

Helga's relationship to Danish artist Axel Olsen again exposes the configurations of power at work between blacks and whites in Denmark. Upon meeting her for the first time, Axel stares at Helga and then addresses Katrina to make comments about Helga's physical appearance. He never addresses Helga or considers her reaction to him. Axel makes plans to paint a portrait of Helga, but he "didn't ask, didn't say anything about it" because he doesn't consider the possibility that she might object (Larsen 71). Despite his lack of respect for her, Helga is fascinated by and attracted to Axel because he is "brilliant, bored, elegant, urbane, cynical, worldly" (77). The security and self-confidence that Axel possesses as a wealthy white male are qualities that Helga has always wanted to acquire for herself. With the encouragement of her Danish relatives, Helga initially pursues the possibility of marriage to Axel in order to secure an identity and a place for herself within Danish society. As Helga begins to consider marriage, the personal and the political intersect.

Postcolonial theory provides a tool that can aid in examination of the text's representation of the intersections between the personal and the political. Frederic Jameson asserts that third world texts must be read as national allegories which demonstrate third-world literature's insuperable connection between the personal and the political, the individual and the nation (69). In a response to Jameson, Aijaz Ahmad interrogates Jameson's essentialist categories of "first-world" and "third-world" and proposes that Jameson's theories about third-world literature may also be applied to the texts of first world minorities (15). Ahmad argues that the population of the so-called "third-world" is too diverse for a theory as specific as Jameson's. As an example, he discusses Urdu literature which has no history of incorporating national allegories. Ahmad

also argues that many people in so-called “first-world” countries manifest the insuperable connection between the personal and the political that Jameson suggests is limited to third-world texts. As an example, he discusses the work of American minorities Ralph Ellison (*The Invisible Man*), Richard Wright (*Native Son*), Adrienne Rich (*Your Native Land, Your Life*), and Richard Howard (*Alone With America*) (15).

Like the other texts by American minorities cited by Ahmad, *Quicksand* provides an opportunity for allegorical analysis and an examination of the text’s relationships between the personal and the political. In fact, by incorporating the Danish setting, *Quicksand* transcends the national to create a transnational allegory which coincides with the transnational perspective that Paul Gilroy associates with crossings of the Atlantic. Gilroy criticizes “overly integrated conceptions of culture” which lead to the creation of narrowly defined ethnic groups and cultural nationalisms and argues that the people of the African diaspora on both sides of the Atlantic share transcultural, international, colonial histories that defy national boundaries (2). Gilroy argues that scholars and writers “could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussion of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective” (15). *Quicksand* incorporates exactly this approach by including both the United States and Denmark as settings for Helga’s experiences with race, an allegorical reading of the text may be conducted at both the national level, as Jameson suggests, and at the transnational level, as Gilroy suggests.

Helga’s Othering by the Danes results in her manifestation of Du Bois’s “double consciousness” (Du Bois 3). Since Helga badly wants acceptance from her Danish family and Danish society and enjoys the lifestyle of material luxury she has been given, she submits to “the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired” (Larsen 74) and erects a veil between her

private self and the Helga she presents to Danish society. Helga wears clothes that she believes are gaudy just to please the Danes (69). She feels terrified when displayed as an exotic at social functions but smiles and presents a calm appearance (70). Because the Danes find it charming, Helga intentionally uses faltering Danish even though she has a better command of the language (74). Helga finds that, temporarily, this role is “intensely pleasant to her; it gratified her augmented sense of self-importance” (74). However, Helga’s satisfaction in her role as primitive exotic is short-lived. With dismay, she begins to realize that the sociopolitical construction of race has followed her to Denmark and that she has been unable to escape the socially assigned identity of non-white Other.

Helga’s relationship to the Danes may be read as an allegory for the historical configurations of power between people of European heritage, referred to collectively as the West, and non-European people from around the globe. The Danes are much wealthier than Helga, just as the material wealth of the West has historically exceeded that of the non-Western world. The Danes insist upon Helga’s Otherness by reinventing her as a primitive exotic, just as the West has historically constructed the Otherness of non-Europeans around the globe in order to distinguish between those who hold power and those who are subordinate. *Quicksand’s* establishment of these allegorical relationships between Helga and the Danes emphasizes biracial Helga’s affiliation with other non-Europeans, particularly with other people of African ancestry, and for the first time in the text, Helga develops a sense of herself as a participant in a transatlantic black experience.

Helga’s developing black identity enables her personal rejection of her socially assigned identity as exotic Other, which is symbolically represented by her rejection of Danish artist Axel Olsen’s proposal of marriage. Helga gives up her struggle to escape the politics of race and

establish relationships based solely on fulfillment of her personal needs and desires. Ironically, the political (race) becomes an unavoidable issue for Helga when the ultimate personal relationship (marriage) is at hand; it is this collision of the personal and the political that causes Helga to realize that she will never be able to escape race. Helga expresses to her Aunt Katrina the reason she does not want to marry Axel, which is her belief that interracial reproduction is “wrong” (78). Katrina asserts that Danes don’t think of race in connection with individuals, implying that, unlike Americans, Danes are able to separate the personal and the political with regard to racial issues (78). The Danes are able to maintain this separation of the personal and the political with regard to race since the Danish population is almost entirely white, and minorities do not represent a threat to the dominant class in Denmark.⁸ In the United States, the dynamics of power are quite different, so Helga responds to Katrina by emphasizing her own experiences of the intersection between the personal and the political. The narrator details Helga’s response: “She didn’t, she responded, believe in mixed marriages, ‘between races, you know.’ They brought only trouble—to the children—as she herself knew but too well from bitter experience” (78). This conversation about marriage and race accentuates Helga’s feelings of insecurity about her place in Danish society: “Instinctively she wanted to combat this searching into the one thing which, here, surrounded by all other things which for so long she had so positively wanted, made her a little afraid. Started vague premonitions” (79).

⁸ *Quicksand* does not address African slavery or black-white race relations in the Danish West Indies. Beginning in 1697, the Danish West India Company established and colonized sugar plantations in the West Indies. The company imported black African slaves to work sugar plantations in the Danish West Indies, mainly on St. Croix. In 1754, The Danish West India & Guinea Company was bought by the Kingdom of Denmark, so the Danish West Indies became a Royal Danish colony. In 1792, Regent King Fredrik VI passed a Royal Edict outlawing slave trade in the Kingdom of Denmark, but the edict did not come into force until 1803. Additionally, the edict was not immediately enforced, and slavery in the Danish West Indies continued until 1846 when Governor Peter von Scholten, a Danish abolitionist, finally emancipated the slaves. However, the 1792 edict still made Denmark the first country in the world to legally prohibit slavery. The Danish later disposed of the Danish West Indies by selling it to the United States in 1917. (“The Danish West Indies”)

The discussion of race and marriage between Aunt Katrina and Helga is interrupted when Fru Fischer arrives for a lunch date. Fru Fischer reinforces Helga's suspicions that Denmark is not free of racial discrimination with her derogatory comments about "Bolsheviks and Japs and things" and "that hideous American music they were forever playing" (African American jazz) (80). Fru Fischer's emphasis on her own stagnant taste in music, which is limited to a repetition of "good old-fashioned Danish melodies," makes her a symbol of an essentialist nationalism freed from time and space (80). Helga's suspicion that she has not escaped race after all is again confirmed when she witnesses her Danish companions' response to the black performers of a vaudeville show which they attended:

She felt ashamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget. And she was shocked at the avidity at which Olsen beside her drank it in. But later when she was alone, it became quite clear to her that all along they had divined its presence, had known that in her was something, some characteristic, different from any that they themselves possessed. (83)

Upon her realization that she has not escaped race or racial hierarchy by fleeing to Denmark, Helga responds by rejecting "whiteness" and constructing a black identity.

Ironically, once Helga has discovered her distaste for her subordinate role in Danish society, Axel asks her to marry him, and simultaneously confirms her earlier suspicion that he had proposed only so that she would become his mistress (84). Helga firmly rejects Axel's reification of her as a sexual object and his hand in marriage, yet the relations of power in which the white European male dominates the colored, non-European female remain clear as Helga reflects on the consequences of her actions: "Abruptly she was aware that in the end, in some

way, she would pay for this hour. A quick brief fear ran through her, leaving in its wake a sense of impending calamity. She wondered if for this she would pay all that she'd had" (87).

However, despite her apprehension about the possible consequences, Helga coldly informs Axel that she will not marry him or any other white man. Significantly, instead of basing her refusal solely upon her personal relationship with Axel, Helga invokes race as the basis of her rejection. Axel questions her introduction of the political into the personal: "I have offered you marriage Helga Crane, and you answer me with some strange talk of race and shame. What nonsense is this?" (88).

Axel, like Katrina, does not understand why Helga insists upon a connection between the personal and the political. The Danes repeatedly tell Helga that for them, personal relationships are conducted independently of racial politics. The text reaffirms the basis of Jameson's theory of the national allegory; separation of the personal and the political is an option that is only available to members of a group which is secure in its hegemonic power, in this case, the Danes. In contrast, dominated groups, including minorities, like Helga, cannot escape the awareness that their physical, social, and economic survival is in jeopardy, which results in an inability to separate the personal from the political. Helga's personal experiences of her parents' difficulties in their interracial marriage and American racism combine with her epiphany about the connection between Danish exoticism and racism, and Helga forever relinquishes her hope for a personal escape from the politics of race. Although Helga had initially "resolved never to return to the existence of ignominy which the New World of opportunity and promise forced upon Negroes" (75), she changes her mind. Accepting the sociopolitical construction of race and assuming a black self-identity, Helga decides to return to America and "her people."

My discussion of the constructed nature of race at the beginning of this essay suggests that Helga's decision to accept a black identity is a surrender to the crippling mythology of race, but Helga's decision may also be read as an acknowledgement that the myths of race create real consequences for real people. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Gilroy's definition of race in "The End of Antiracism" insists that a complete understanding of race must include not only race's relationships to identity and culture but also its historical context and political implications since previous racial ideology leaves an indelible trace upon new notions of race (251). Helga's decision to adopt a black identity may be read as her personal reaction to the political realities of her own social situation.

Initially, Helga's development of a black identity suggests that the novel will be resolved following the pattern of the tragic mulatto trope which resolves happily with the mixed race protagonist's return to her "true place" in the black community.⁹ However, *Quicksand's* unhappy conclusion emphatically criticizes the essentialist nature of Helga's construction of blackness. Her essentialist thinking is described by the narrator as recognition of "the irresistible ties of race" and a desire for "those things, not material, indigenous to all Negro environments" (92). She contrasts the "pale serious faces" of Denmark with the "laughing brown ones" she remembers from African American communities (92). Larsen even imbues Helga with a sympathetic understanding of her black father's desertion of her white mother and herself in order to return to "his own kind" (93). Helga considers these revelations to be "knowledge of almost sacred importance" (93). However, these essentialist ideas about blackness lack historical specificity and ignore the intraracial differences that Helga herself has observed and experienced

⁹ For example, Frances W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* captures the experiences of a biracial woman who initially has difficulty establishing a racial identity but later discovers happiness in the formation of a black self-identity and establishment of herself in a segregated African American community.

in the black communities of Naxos, Chicago and Harlem. Helga's mythical thinking about race contributes to her tragic fate in *Quicksand*'s conclusion.

Larsen foreshadows the failure of Helga's essentialist black identity when the narrator describes Helga's pang of regret at leaving Denmark and the Dahls, who, despite their essentialist vision of Helga, have become genuinely fond of her and are sincere in their desire that she will return to her place in their family: "Why couldn't she have two lives, or why couldn't she be satisfied in one place?" (93) Helga is almost immediately unable to sustain the essentialist black identity that she based primarily upon a rejection of white culture. While the text alludes to resolution of the tragic mulatto dilemma through Helga's return to "her people," *Quicksand* ultimately subverts that tradition and criticizes essentialist racial identities.

The text's ambiguities open the field for some revolutionary readings of the text. Upon acknowledging Helga's rejection of him, Axel informs Helga that their relationship has been a tragedy and adds, "I think that my picture of you is, after all, the true Helga Crane. Therefore—a tragedy. For someone. For me? Perhaps" (88). Once the text's conclusion is considered, this dialogue presents the possibility that Olsen had never truly believed that the primitive exotic type, which he had adapted for his aesthetic purposes, corresponded to Helga's true self. His comments imply that ultimately it is not the sociopolitical construction of race itself but Helga's acceptance of racial stereotypes and essentialist identities that has limited her thoughts and actions, and doomed her to permanent dissatisfaction; in that case, the "true Helga Crane" is a tragedy for herself.

Although Olsen is extremely arrogant and has internalized some racial stereotypes, by extending an offer of marriage to Helga, Olsen recognizes her humanity and demonstrates a willingness to engage with her in a relationship that transcends the sexual. Due to society's

placement of Helga in a stigmatized group, she feels unable to base her decision solely on her personal relationship with Olsen and rejects his proposal on the basis of essentialized notions of race: “You see, I couldn’t marry a white man. I simply couldn’t. It isn’t just you, not just personal, you understand. It’s deeper, broader than that. It’s racial” (88). By making this decision, Helga allows the sociopolitical construction of racism and society’s racial norms to shape her personal decision. However, the racial essentialism which Helga adopts as a reaction to white racism, ironically, operates the same way as the Danish’s “us” vs. “them” style of thinking that appalls her.

The text’s conclusion highlights the inadequacy of Helga’s essentialist black identity by featuring her failure to thrive in a black community, in particular a rural community which incorporates symbols stereotypically associated with black culture (spirituality, agriculture, vernacular speech, poverty, sexuality and fertility). After a failed affair with Robert Anderson and a highly emotional religious experience (a myth-based religious conviction that will fail her just as her myth-based racial convictions do), Helga spontaneously decides to marry a Southern, black, country preacher, Reverend Pleasant Green and devote herself to racial uplift, a project she scorned as condescending while teaching at Naxos. While Helga’s dissatisfaction with her roles of wife and mother and the provincialism of life in rural Alabama does not indicate dissatisfaction with her black identity, it does reveal the dangers of essentialist racial identities that ignore nonracial aspects of identity such as gender, class and culture.

Despite the fact that she has established herself in a black community, for reasons related to gender-specific oppression and socioeconomic class, Helga is soon miserable in rural Alabama, yet she feels unable to escape due to the responsibilities of motherhood. The text’s conclusion leaves Helga bedridden, depressed and dreaming of escape while she gives birth to a

rapid succession of children. Gender-specific oppression, socioeconomic oppression, race-based oppression and Helga's own poor decisions relegate her to the typical fate of the tragic mulatto, chronic dissatisfaction symbolized by a deteriorated physical condition.

In part, *Quicksand*'s tragic ending is an indictment of essentialist constructions of race that do not recognize the discontinuities and fissures that are a part of individual identities and human communities. Helga is continuously hunting for a community that will affirm her biracial self. Since that community does not exist in early twentieth century America or Denmark, Helga continuously relocates in an infinite quest for community and identity. In "A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People," Maria P. P. Root discusses specific grievances that biracial and multiracial Americans have with the sociopolitical construction of race:

When race is constructed through the mechanics of racism, oppression chokes multiracial people from all sides. This throttling and stifling takes many forms: forced to fit into just one category from school registration to US Census surveys; affiliations forced with oppressive questions (e.g., "which one are you?"); forced to "act right," "think right," and "do right" in order to belong; and forced to prove ethnic legitimacy in order to have an identity in an ethnically diverse society. (357)

Root reaffirms the inability of existing racial labels and categories to meet the social or political needs of biracial people, which are the dominant theme of Larsen's novel.

However, Helga's problems are not only social and political, they are also personal and psychological. Helga's tragic ending is not only a critique of society but also a critique of her own inability to develop an identity that will sustain her as she operates within a flawed sociopolitical construction of race that she cannot escape. Helga does not create an internal identity that transcends her social racial identity. While the text clearly establishes the political

reasons why a biracial person may choose to accept a monoracial black identity, it also suggests a more radical identity available not only to people of mixed race but to all people.

Through the character of Audrey Denney, *Quicksand* suggests the creation of what Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa refers to in her text *Borderlands: La Frontera* as “mestiza consciousness,” an identity that refuses to be bound by essentialisms and celebrates interracial and intraracial diversity without ever losing sight of the collusion between race, gender and specific forms of power and subordination (80). Although her appearance in the text is fleeting, Audrey, serving as Helga’s mirror or alterego, develops an identity which breaks down the barriers between self and other, and allows her to defy social customs and cross racial boundaries in her establishment of personal relationships.

Although, according to the one-drop rule, Audrey is culturally assigned the identity of a black woman, she socializes with both blacks and whites. This interracial socializing angers Helga’s roommate, Anne Grey, who views Audrey’s behavior as a betrayal of the black race. The text clearly establishes that Audrey does not “pass” for white when Anne informs Helga that whites socialize with Audrey even though “they know she’s colored” (60). Anne is particularly upset by Audrey’s social relationships with white men and calls her behavior “outrageous” and “treacherous.” Anne serves as a symbol of black nationalism, separatism and racism. Ironically, since she later adopts an essentialist black identity and logic very similar to Anne’s, Helga is irritated by Anne’s racist rhetoric at the time and admires Audrey’s ability to “ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people” (62). Had Helga been able to adopt a mestiza consciousness similar to Audrey’s, she may have been able to insist upon acknowledging both her black and her white racial ancestry, resist pressure to conform to essentialist identities, and

create a place for herself within either a predominately black community in the United States or with her biological family in the predominately white community of Copenhagen.

Quicksand suggests that while eradication of racial borders must take place at a societal level, if individuals discard the myth of essential racial subjects and adopt mestiza consciousness, both intraracial and interracial relationships will improve. The text suggests that the voices of multiracial Americans who participate in the discourse on race will break down mental barriers that are based on a dualistic “us” vs. “them” style of thought. The novel serves as a powerful critique of the irrationality of the sociopolitical construction of race, yet this critique does not mitigate the text’s acknowledgment of the insidious effects of racism.

Quicksand echoes the warning issued by Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* that the discourse on race must remain “alive to the lingering power of specifically racialized forms of power and subordination” (32).

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CHAPTER FOUR: IDENTITY, RACE AND THE BIRACIAL SUBJECT IN *CAUCASIA*

“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 quite ready for consumption.”

-Danzy Senna, *Caucasia* (137)

The interracial and biracial themes of Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998), like those of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928), reveal the political, social and economic investments of Americans in racial labels and categories. Veronica Chambers, author of *Mama’s Girl* notes, “Danzy picks up where Nella Larsen left off at the end of the Harlem Renaissance.”¹⁰ Both novels engage the perspective of a biracial (black-white) protagonist in order to explore America’s institutionalization and cultural incorporation of the sociopolitically constructed racial categories of black and white. Likewise, both novels were written by biracial (black-white) American women who are personally invested in their representations of race. However, the seventy years that separate the publication of the two novels witnessed drastic changes in America’s interracial relations, primarily due to the legal and political victories of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, particularly the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, specifically in public facilities, in government, and in employment. The settings of the two novels are also separated by half a century, with *Quicksand* set in the first decades of the twentieth century and *Caucasia* set primarily in the 1970s. Despite these temporal and historical differences, the dominant themes of the novels are very similar. Like *Quicksand*, *Caucasia* explores the complexities of

¹⁰ Inside cover material of *Caucasia*.

biracial experience, including ambiguities of physical appearance and social affiliations in conflicting racial groups. Also like *Quicksand*, *Caucasia* exposes the irrational essentialism of constructions of race and portrays the human devastation caused by institutionalization of the American color line.

The coming of age of *Caucasia*'s protagonist, Birdie Lee, shapes the text's plot, which is defined primarily by Birdie's exploration of her racial identity. This exploration is guided by Birdie's growing recognition of the significance of her racial identity in a society that is characterized by racial separation between blacks and whites and preservation of white racial privilege. The text reveals the negative effects of race on all Americans, yet it particularly focuses on the experience of cultural hybridity that takes place along the boundary of the color line that divides Americans into racial categories. Employing her own perspective as a mixed race woman, Senna deploys her biracial protagonist, Birdie, to explore the unstable, shifting nature of identity, relationships between the personal and the political, and the intersections between class, gender and race.

Caucasia entered the American discourse on race at the end of the twentieth century, a time when the population of multiracial people in the United States was larger than it had ever been previously yet a time still characterized by tension and separation between racial groups. While the political successes of the Civil Rights Movement had resulted in unprecedented social mobility and employment opportunities for some individual black Americans and fostered the expansion of the black middle class, statistics suggest that black Americans as a group were still at a socioeconomic disadvantage.¹¹ Additionally, large populations of inner city black Americans were plagued by high crime rates, poverty and troubled school systems and had little

¹¹ Social scientist Andrew Hacker's book, *Two Nations*, provides statistics that document the socioeconomic discrepancies between black and white Americans.

socioeconomic mobility. Black frustration with American institutions perpetuated racial bias and white resistance to loss of race-based socioeconomic privilege contributed to a continuation of racial politics, racial separatism and tension between racial groups.

This continuation of the historical division between American blacks and whites was accompanied by a continued suppression of biracial identities, and biracial Americans continued to be socially pressured to assume monoracial identities. In 1992, Carla K. Bradshaw noted, “The political climate in the United States appears to be one of degenerating race relations. Even though the political gains won by minority groups over the last few decades have given minority race consciousness more general prominence than had previously been the case, a similar heightened consciousness about multiraciality remains absent” (87). Despite the absence of consciousness about biracial identities, the number of interracial marriages between blacks and whites and the number of biracial offspring the marriages produced continued to grow, a trend that began following the 1967 Supreme Court ruling that overturned the last remaining laws prohibiting interracial marriage (Spickard 374-75). During the decade following Bradshaw’s pronouncement that multiracial consciousness was not recognized in the United States, *Caucasia*’s publication inserted the novel into an expanding American literary discourse that featured biracial themes. Lise Funderburg, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, Lisa Page, James McBride and other writers contributed to this literary exploration of interracial and biracial themes.¹² These writers examine the unique personal and social dilemmas of people whose parents identify with different races in a society that is characterized by racial division, discourages interracial relationships and pressures individuals to choose monoracial and monocultural identities.

Caucasia’s protagonist, Birdie, serves as the first-person narrator and describes her life experiences from childhood through adolescence. The text focuses on the implications of

¹² See works cited page for specific texts by these writers.

Birdie's racial identity as it is manipulated by Birdie, by her family and by society. The text begins with a brief exposition, which describes the crisis that occurs when Birdie's racial identity is disrupted during her childhood by the disintegration of her interracial nuclear family. Birdie is separated from her black father and darker-skinned sister and forced to assume a white social identity when she accompanies her white mother during her mother's flight as a fugitive from the law. The exposition introduces the metaphors of perpetual motion, continuous development and disappearance that are used throughout the text to describe the instability of Birdie's racial identity: "I disappeared into America, the easiest place to get lost. Dropped off, without a name, without a record. With only the body I traveled in. And a memory of something lost" (1).

Throughout the novel, Birdie has a sense of herself as unfinished, which is conveyed through metaphor. Birdie compares herself to Frankenstein: "I had liked that image of myself as a monster, an unfinished creation turned against its maker . . ." (297). Birdie also associates herself with a cross-dressing prostitute, named Corvette (note the connotations of motion), who inhabits the space between traditional notions of male and female. Birdie refers to Corvette as a woman but notes the "hoarseness beneath the voice, a thickness to her neck" (298). Birdie can relate to the Corvette's occupation of the place of no name since Corvette seems neither male nor female, just as Birdie feels neither black nor white: "I saw something I liked in the woman's cracked mask" (298). A third metaphor that Birdie uses is the comparison of herself to worms lying on the sidewalk after rain—"small lumps of unformed life waiting to be crushed" (400). Using these metaphors, the text communicates the vulnerability of people who have no socially constructed place to identify or hide, no public sanction for their private existence, no political support for their personal needs. The text affiliates the social displacement of biracial people

with other non-dominant, socially stigmatized groups, such as other minorities, women, homosexuals and transgendered individuals.

Caucasia's plot captures different stages in Birdie's racial identity development. Psychologist James H. Jacobs theorizes stages in the development of biracial identity, which closely parallel Birdie's experiences: stage one, pre-color constancy; stage two, racial ambivalence; stage three, biracial identity (200-03). As a very young child, Birdie has not yet internalized a racial identity, a phase that Jacobs labels pre-color constancy (200). However, as Birdie grows older, through the influence of social institutions, Birdie internalizes a black social identity. Despite her black social identity, Birdie experiences internal racial ambivalence due to the deviations between her experience of cultural hybridity, society's association of physical appearance with race and the exclusive social norms of essentialist black identity. The discrepancies between Birdie's social identity and self-identity become exponentially greater when Birdie moves to a predominately white community and assumes a white social identity despite her black self-identity. Finally, distressed by her inability to find a monoracial group that will accept a social identity that accommodates her experience of cultural hybridity, Birdie begins to accept the dissonance between her self-identity and her social identity and the shifting, unstable nature of social and self identities as facts of life. Jacobs envisions biracial identity as something other than black or white—both black and white, mixed, brown, etc., an identity that incorporates identification with multiple racial groups. However, at the text's conclusion, Birdie views her biracial identity as a specific aspect of a more general black self-identity, which reflects the historical oppression of all people of African American heritage by whites who hold power (Jacobs 202).

Through my discussion of Birdie's biracial identity development, I also examine the text's portrayal of the influence of social institutions, such as family, school and community, on racial identity development. Developmental psychologist Deborah Johnson lists social status, resource distribution, economic attainment and residential patterns as primary influences on the racial norms and values of families, schools and communities, which in turn shape the racial identity development of the individual (35). Like *Quicksand's* protagonist, Helga Crane, Birdie is influenced by social institutions in the development of her racial identity. However, throughout most of *Quicksand*, Helga has some degree of control over her social and cultural affiliations, primarily by manipulating the external variable of geographical location. In contrast, Birdie is at the mercy of social institutions throughout most of *Caucasia*. Her geographical relocations and racial identity are dictated by her mother, Sandy, for the majority of the novel. Sandy first inserts Birdie into a primarily black community and school and four years later into a predominately white community and school, which leaves Birdie no option but to adjust to her social environments the best way she can. Perhaps the protagonists' differing degrees of agency with respect to geographical relocation reflect their respective ages. Helga is a young adult in *Quicksand* while Birdie is still a child and adolescent in *Caucasia*.

However, interestingly, each novel reverses its protagonist's degree of autonomy and mobility at the text's conclusion. Helga loses confidence in her ability to shape her own identity and feels literally immobilized and stagnant due to her acceptance of an essentialist racial identity, a provincial geographical location and gender-based oppression with respect to childbearing and childrearing. In contrast, at *Caucasia's* conclusion, Birdie has finally discovered her ability to reject essentialist racial identities which were imposed upon her by her parents and social institutions and constructs a biracial self-identity that is a specific aspect of her

broader black identity. Birdie's newly discovered autonomy is reflected in her geographical mobility, which supports her successful quest for reunification with her sister, Cole, and father, Deck. At the texts' conclusions, social institutions have destroyed Helga while Birdie has developed a biracial identity that transcends the racial limitations policed by social institutions.

Caucasia's first chapter describes Birdie's initial identification with her darker-skinned older sister, Cole, who serves as her primary attachment figure. The difference in the girls' physical appearances is important to the text's examination of the social construction of racial identities. While Birdie and Cole share the same parents, Birdie has light skin and straight hair; therefore, racialized society identifies her as "white" based upon her lack of physical characteristics that are clearly associated with African ancestry. However, Cole has dark skin and curly hair which suggest that she has African ancestry; therefore, society identifies her as "black" based on her physical appearance and the American one-drop rule.¹³ Ironically, Cole is the sister who has blue eyes, often considered a mark of "whiteness" (43).

During their early childhood, both Birdie and Cole maintain raceless identities and fantasize about a chameleon-like, color-changing people called the Elemenos whose shifting appearances allow them to blend into any racial group. Cole invents the language, people, and land of Elemenos and tells stories of them to Birdie:

The Elemenos, she said, could turn not just from black to white, but from brown to yellow to purple to green, and back again. She said they were a shifting people, constantly changing their form, color, pattern, in a quest for invisibility. According to her, their changing routine was a serious matter--less a game of make-believe than a fight for the survival of their species. The Elemenos could turn deep green in the bushes, beige

¹³ See p. 12 for discussion of the one drop rule.

in the sand, or blank white in the snow, and their power lay precisely in their ability to disappear into any surrounding. (7)

The girls even invent a language of Elemenno, which they speak to each other and which no one else understands.

By extending the transformation of the Elemenno beyond a simple black to white binary, *Caucasia* implies that the dominant group in a particular society is not necessarily the dominant group within every social situation within that society. Therefore, an individual's attempts to assimilate into the socially dominant group in a constantly changing social environment sometimes deemphasize affiliation with one racial group and sometimes deemphasize affiliation with another. In other words, *Caucasia* portrays racial identification as a specific manifestation of a broader human struggle to reconcile the personal being and the social being, an issue larger than a rejection of blackness and embrace of whiteness. The text develops the idea of a chameleon-like tendency of *all* individual human beings to blend into the dominant group of *any* particular social situation if such assimilation is possible, and the text also examines the negative consequences for individuals who fail to do so.

Caucasia illustrates that the dominant group in a specific social situation is not always the dominant group of society at large and that the operations of domination and subordination are not limited to the racial domination of blacks by whites. The text emphasizes this point by introducing the social suppression of non-racial forms of difference, such as differences in culture, class, gender and sexual orientation. I will return to these non-racial forms of difference later in the thesis.

In keeping with this theme of constantly shifting human identity, which is developed throughout the text, Birdie and Cole's raceless identities are short-lived since they are soon

confronted by the socially constructed monoracial labels of American society and the political implications of those labels. Birdie learns that even if her private racial identity may remain ambiguous and can be concealed, society will construct a racial identity for her and will discourage a racially ambiguous identity due to the politics of dominant racial groups. Birdie is initially presented with racial ideology at a very young age by her parents, Deck and Sandy Lee. Deck and Sandy are both heavily involved in the fight for black civil rights in America during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. However, their approaches to fighting for civil rights differ drastically. Deck is a Harvard-educated intellectual and believes in the power of ideas to change reality. In contrast, Sandy believes that personal activism is the most effective way to create change in society.

Deck, a college professor, self-identifies and is identified by others as black even though his mixed racial heritage is evident in his phenotypic characteristics, as described in the text:

He was not very dark, and his features were not very African—it was only his milk-chocolate skin that gave his race away. His face spoke of something other—his high cheekbones, his large bony nose, his deep-set eyes, and his thin lips against the brown of his skin . . . His hair wasn't so woolly, either. It was more like that of some of the Jews she had seen who had afros—black ringlets pleasantly curling into his scalp. (34)

Despite his classical education in a predominately white cultural institution, Deck becomes involved with civil rights politics and the Black Power movement. However, his activism takes the form of intellectual work, a form of protest that is tolerated by the dominant culture at his university and in society. He devotes himself fanatically to studies of race in America, as Birdie informs the reader: “He was obsessed with theories about race and white hypocrisy and seemed to see my mother’s activism as a distraction” (22).

In contrast to Deck's physical features which reflect his African ancestry and result in his personal, social and racial identification as black, Sandy has blonde hair and blue eyes and is from an upper-class, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP), Boston family that traces its genealogical roots back to Cotton Mather. Despite her bourgeois roots, Sandy identifies with socially stigmatized people, perhaps due to her own alienation as an overweight young girl: "It wasn't clear why she had been the one to cross over, cross out, and not Randall—if it was simply a roll of fat that had sent her to the other side, or something beyond that, something that she had understood about the world that the rest had been blind to" (344). During her late adolescence and early adulthood, Sandy rebels against America's white hegemony. Sandy's rebellion against the white hegemony is a rejection of what she perceives as an oppressive hegemony, a rejection similar to what anthropologists Signithia Fordham and John Ogbu describe as a characteristic of black American subjectivity, an "oppositional social identity" (181).

First, Sandy devotes her efforts to supporting the Jewish cause. Later, she marries Deck, a black man, during a time when interracial marriage was still illegal in some parts of the United States, and joins radical political activists who are fighting for civil rights for black Americans. Unlike Deck's adherence to socially acceptable forms of protest, Sandy sometimes expresses her rebellion against the dominant culture through illegal activities. She enjoys shoplifting and also becomes involved with a very radical and violent branch of the Civil Rights Movement, which leads to her participation in illegal activities and consequent flight from the law (20). She accuses Deck of never really practicing what he preaches and tries to live her politics on a daily basis. Birdie describes her mother's politics: "My mother liked to tell Cole and me that politics weren't complicated. They were simple. People, she said, deserved four basic things: food,

love, shelter, and a good education. Everything else was extra” (22). Ironically, Sandy’s “simple” politics complicate her life and her family’s relationships irrevocably.

Birdie soon learns about the complexity of racial politics since Deck and Sandy choose to encourage their biracial daughters to develop black identities. Deck and Sandy realize that American social relationships are based on monoracial categories and labels and that, in accordance with the one-drop rule, their daughters will be socially identified as ‘black’ by most people in American society. Sandy is initially ambivalent about her support for encouraging Birdie to adopt a black identity because she recognizes the dissonance between her daughter’s physical appearance and the phenotypic norms of the racial category “black,” but Deck proclaims, “In a country as racist as this, you’re either black or you’re white. And no daughter of mine is going to pass” (27). While Deck is correct in his assertion that his daughters will not be able to avoid being assigned racial identities in a racialized society, his acceptance of the binary racial categories black and white validate and perpetuate racialized thinking. Deck does not instruct his biracial daughters to recognize the inadequacy of racial labels for describing the complexity of human identities and hybrid cultural experiences.

Deck encourages the girls to develop black identities and become familiar with black culture. For example, Deck teaches them black political rhetoric, such as “Ngawa, Ngawa, Black, Black Powah!” and how to perform a dance called the Bump (10, 18). Despite initial reluctance, Sandy also eventually supports the development of her biracial daughters’ black identities by enrolling them both in a black power magnet school, called Nkrumah. The parents’ influence on their daughters’ racial identities illustrates the role of the family as a social institution in perpetuating the sociopolitical construction of race.

As Birdie's parents begin to shape Birdie's racial identity, she moves into stage two of Jacobs's identity model and becomes ambivalent about her racial identity. Although she generally accepts the black identity assigned to her by her parents and community, at times she questions its validity due to its conflicts with her physical appearance and personal experiences. Although their parents have taught them to self-identify as black, when Birdie and Cole begin to attend Nkrumah, they find that their upbringing, which was conducted primarily by their white mother, did not prepare them culturally for the norms and values of their black peer group or the black power magnet school. The girls are not adequately prepared to pass the ethnic legitimacy tests that they face as they move into the black community at Nkrumah. The girls discover that their hairstyles, clothing, Standard English and "ashy" skin are unacceptable to their peers. Cole declares, "Mum doesn't know anything about raising a black child. She just doesn't" (53). Although Sandy was successful in supporting the development of her daughters' black identities, she is not able to transmit the traditional black cultural norms and values that do not reflect her own cultural experiences.

Birdie experiences a particularly difficult adjustment because unlike Cole, who has darker skin and curly hair, Birdie's physical features do not clearly correlate with her African ancestry; she is socially identified as white because society does not correlate straight hair and light skin with African ancestry. Therefore, Birdie experiences racial discrimination and stigmatization from both white and black communities. White society stigmatizes her African ancestry and her self-identity as a black person in order to maintain existing racial hierarchies that preserve white privilege, yet, simultaneously, the black community stigmatizes her due to essentialist racial group norms.

As psychologist Beverly Tatum notes, essentialist definitions of blackness often cause biracial children and adolescents who identify as black to feel excluded by their black peers (182). Tatum discusses the construction of racial identity among black adolescents and explains that “young people are operating with a very limited definition of what it means to be Black, based largely on cultural stereotypes” (62). She explains that black encounters with systemic racial discrimination against blacks and white supremacy result in the development of an “oppositional stance” or an anti-white attitude that serves as a psychological defense mechanism. Tatum also discusses the ways that this oppositional stance is sometimes directed intraracially toward people of African ancestry who have affiliations with white culture (61).

In Birdie’s case, as a light-skinned biracial girl at a predominately black school, she identifies with and is loyal to the black community due to her parents’ influence on her identity, yet she still experiences racial discrimination from her black peers on the basis of her physical appearance, which reflects her white ancestry. Paul Spickard provides two explanations for this typical stigmatization of biracial people in the black American community: (1) fear that the biracial person’s partial membership or acceptance in the higher-status racial group may lessen loyalty to and affiliation with the stigmatized group (2) some light-skinned African Americans and multiracial people of African descent have historically exploited their racially ambiguous physical appearances to secure white privilege by denying their African ancestry (374). Although biracial and light-skinned people have historically been allowed membership in the black American community, this membership has generally been extended upon the condition that the biracial or light-skinned person establishes a monoracial black identity and passes ethnic legitimacy tests that are a condition of membership. Birdie’s peers in the black community

initially question her membership in their group due to her difference in physical appearance, so she must pass rigorous ethnic legitimacy tests before she is accepted by her peers.

Gloria Anzaldúa discusses this phenomenon of ethnic legitimacy tests based on exclusive differentiation between Self and Other.¹⁴ She also observes the similarity between essentialist constructions of ethnic identity and the racial Othering initially implemented by Europeans in an attempt to maintain hegemonic power supported by white privilege:

We shun the white-looking Indian, the “high yellow” Black Woman . . . Her difference makes her a person we can’t trust. Para que sea “legal,” she must pass the ethnic legitimacy test we have devised. And it is exactly your internalized whiteness that desperately wants boundary lines (this part of me is Mexican, this Indian) marked out and woe to any sister or any part of us that steps out of our assigned places. (143)

Upon being confronted with Nkrumah’s cultural norms and values, Birdie and Cole react to their peers’ racial essentialism and ethnic legitimacy tests by learning how to “be black.”

The girls practice African-American Vernacular English, begin to style their hair and select clothing in accordance with black cultural trends and lotion away the “ashiness” of their skin: “The Jergen’s lotion made me feel like I was part of some secret club” (49). Birdie’s affiliation with her darker-skinned sister “authenticates” her and aids her struggle for acceptance by her black peers. While Birdie is unsure that her racial categorization as black is rational due to the contradictions between the essential definition of blackness at Nkrumah and her own physical appearance and cultural experiences with her white mother, she is determined to maintain her close personal relationship with her sister, so she is willing to do anything necessary to achieve acceptance in the black community: “I knew I had to make more of an effort to blend in or I would lose her for good” (62). Eventually, by carefully adhering to group norms and

¹⁴ See discussion of Edward Said’s theory of the Other on p. 53-54.

embracing the essentialist black identity that is the cultural norm at Nkrumah, both girls achieve acceptance by their black peers.

Despite Birdie's final acceptance by her black peers, she is constantly anxious lest her acceptance in the group be revoked due to her deviance from the essentialist norms of the community: "But I never lost the anxiety, a gnawing in my bowels, a fear that at any moment I would be told it was all a big joke" (64). Birdie initially creates a black social and racial identity that is acceptable to her peers but does not correspond to the complexity of her biracial self-identity based on her personal life experiences. However, instead of maintaining a "double consciousness" which distinguishes between her social identity and self-identity, Birdie changes her self-identity to correspond with her social identity.¹⁵ Birdie informs the reader, "I learned the art of changing at Nkrumah, a skill that would later become second nature to me . . . There I learned how to do it for real--how to become someone else, how to erase the person I was before" (62). In this way, Birdie destabilizes her self-identity and learns to change her own conception of who she is in order to accommodate the demands of her changing social environments. Fordham calls suppression of racial identity a strategy of "racelessness" and describes the goal of the strategy as assimilation into the white community by suppressing characteristics that identify a person as black ("Racelessness" 54). However, Fordham's theory can be expanded beyond a black-white paradigm to examine other relations of domination and subordination.

Like the color-changing rainbow spectrum of the Elemenos, Birdie and Cole's suppression of characteristics identified as white undermines the notion that a strategy of racelessness is only enacted by blacks to assimilate into society's dominant group (white). At Nkrumah, Birdie and Cole modify their behavior and their own conceptions of what it means to

¹⁵ See p. 47 for a discussion of W.E.B. DuBois's theory of double consciousness.

be black in order to meet the membership requirements of America's subordinate racial group, which is the actually the dominant group in their school and community. Thus, even before *Caucasia's* plot incorporates the traditional "passing" theme in which Birdie passes for white, a subversion of the traditional theme presents Birdie "passing" for black.¹⁶

Historically, racial "passing" is associated with a person of color who denies his or her African heritage in order to access the benefits of white privilege. The text upends this notion by having Birdie and Cole suppress characteristics associated with whiteness in order to achieve acceptance by blacks. While racial "passing" for white has negative connotations of race betrayal, disloyalty and dishonesty in the black community, the text's use of the trope accentuates the irony of the fact that it has historically been socially acceptable in the black community for biracial people to deemphasize their white ancestry in order to achieve membership and establish political affiliations in the black community. In other words, in accordance with the one drop rule, "passing" for black is socially acceptable to both blacks and whites while "passing" for white is unacceptable to both black and whites. The text's incorporation of tests of ethnic legitimacy by race-based groups also accentuates the fact that historically both white and black American communities discourage and stigmatize identification with multiple racial groups. The question in both black and white communities throughout the text seems to be whether Birdie is one of "us" or one of "them."

The negative psychological and emotional effects of categorizing human beings into categories of "us" and "them" using racial stereotypes are illustrated by Birdie's white maternal grandmother and Deck's black girlfriend, Carmen, who represent white and black racism

¹⁶ See p. 30 for a discussion of "passing." This subversion of the passing theme is very similar to that incorporated in *Quicksand*, when Helga conceals her European heritage from the black community upon the advice of Mrs. Hayes-Rore. See p. 51.

respectively. Each woman has a very essentialist conception of racial identity, which shapes her personal relationship with Birdie. Birdie's white grandmother serves as a symbol of white racism and white supremacy. Birdie's grandmother prefers Birdie to Cole since Birdie is the lighter-skinned granddaughter. Birdie describes her relationship with her grandmother: "I always seemed to get the brunt of her attention while Cole was virtually ignored. I thought Cole was the lucky one because she was allowed to stay locked in the guest room watching television while I had to sit under the old lady's scrutiny, hand folded in my lap, listening to her tell me stories about how good my blood was" (100).¹⁷ The grandmother's obsession with blood reflects her belief in the outdated myth that an individual's physical appearance is dictated by certain proportions of racialized blood. According to this myth, phenotypic characteristics associated with the white race are attributed to "white blood" while phenotypic characteristics associated with the black race are attributed to "black blood." However, genetic science has revealed that phenotypic characteristics are determined by genes not by blood and that different physical traits vary independently.¹⁸ Birdie explains her grandmother's racist behavior and embrace of racial mythology by reflecting on the link between her grandmother's sense of security and her grandmother's belief that her own racial group is superior to all others: "She believed, deep down, that the race my face reflected made me superior. Such a simple, comforting myth to live by" (366).

Carmen, Deck's girlfriend, serves as a black mirror image of the white grandmother's racist behavior. Carmen finds a sense of security in her essentialist black identity, which corresponds to Tatum's "oppositional stance" and is based upon rejection of all things and people associated with white culture; therefore, she embraces Cole, Deck's "black" daughter,

¹⁷ See p. 10 for discussion of blood quantum and racial categorization.

¹⁸ See p. 4 for a summary of geneticists Lynne Jorde and Stephen Wooding's discussion of genetics and race.

and rejects Birdie, Deck's "white" daughter. Birdie explains, "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" (91). The parallels between the two sisters' experiences of racism reveal the location of racism in both white and black communities. Birdie's experiences with Carmen, and Cole's experiences with her white grandmother illustrate racism's ability to cause emotional and psychological damage and divide families and communities whether the racist behavior originates in the white community or the black community.

Despite her tenuous position in the black community and her father's refusal to emotionally engage with her, Birdie's biggest identity crisis occurs when her parents divorce and her mother decides to go underground as a fugitive from the law due to illegal political activities. Birdie is separated from her sister, whose custody is given to their black father due to Cole's "black" physical appearance, and Birdie is assigned a white, Jewish identity by her mother as part of an elaborate cover-up designed to help Sandy evade law enforcement. Birdie notes that due to the ambiguity of her physical appearance, she could have passed for Puerto Rican, Sicilian, Pakistani, or Greek, but Sandy assigns Birdie a white identity that corresponds with her own racial identity so that the two of them can travel incognito without being identified as a white woman traveling with a non-white child. Thus, in circumstances beyond her own control, Birdie embarks upon the experience of racial passing: "My body was the key to us going incognito" (128). This incorporation of the traditional trope of "passing" for white complements the text's earlier subversion of the trope, in which Birdie "passed" for black.

After spending four years on the road running from the law, Sandy, who has changed her name to Sheila Goldman, and Birdie, whose name Sandy has changed to Jesse, settle down in a predominately white community in New Hampshire. While Birdie is successful at passing for white and acquires a white peer group, the internal racial identity she developed during her early childhood and shares with her primary attachment figure, her sister, remains black, and thus she feels unable to “be herself” in her new relationships. Unlike her erasure of her racial self-identity when she “becomes black” socially at Nkrumah, in New Hampshire Birdie develops a double consciousness in which her social identity is white but her personal identity is black.

Her experience of double consciousness causes Birdie to feel an overwhelming sense of loss due to the absence of the black social identity which she had shared with her black father and sister (188, 240, 241). After Sandy and Birdie become established in their new community, Sandy embraces her new identity and stops discussing stories about when Birdie’s interracial nuclear family was still intact or plans to reunite with Deck and Cole (287). Sandy finds a white boyfriend and housing and employment in the white community and decides to settle down. Sandy’s abandonment of her own affiliations with the black community leave Birdie, who still self-identifies as black, trapped and alienated within a predominately white society and culture and desperately missing her black father and sister and her own affiliations with black culture.

While “passing” for white, Birdie experiences the benefits of white privilege, but she is also exposed to white racism that is painful for her to witness due to her affiliations with and identification with the black community. Birdie hears her white friends use derogatory terms to refer to black people, including “nigga, spic, fuckin’ darkie” (233). She also witnesses the objectification of black women as sexual objects to be used, disrespected and discarded by white men (199, 252). Although Birdie is highly offended by this blatant racism, she remains silent in

order to preserve her membership in the white community even though her silence comes at a high psychological cost. Just as she did at Nkrumah, Birdie “erases” all signs of her self-identity in order to adopt a social identity that will earn her acceptance in the dominant community, which is in this situation, a white community (221). Just as her affiliation with Cole aided her in finding acceptance with her peers at Nkrumah, Birdie’s affiliation with white Nick Marsh, her landlord’s son, allows her to gain admission to the white community in New Hampshire. Once again Birdie learns that racial identity is socially constructed, not an inherent quality, and that she can manipulate her racial identity in order to acquire membership privileges in multiple social groups.

While Birdie enjoys social acceptance and white racial privilege, she discovers that the constant “erasure” of her self-identity makes it difficult to prevent her white social identity from infiltrating her self-identity:

From the outside, it must have looked like I was changing into one of those New Hampshire girls. 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 . . . The less I behaved like myself, the more I could believe that this was still a game. That my real self—Birdie Lee—was safely hidden beneath my beige flesh, and that when the right moment came, I would reveal her, preserved, frozen solid in the moment in which I had left her. (233)

Birdie tries to maintain her connection to her black father and sister by reminiscing about African-American culture (260). She maintains a box of Afrocentric items, which she calls Negrobilia, that were left for her by her father and her sister when the family separated. These

items are her only tangible reminder of her black identity, and she begins to add other items that help her to maintain her connections to her lost cultural heritage.

Birdie's preservation of her black self-identity is also evident in her close observation of her black peers, who are alienated in their predominately white school. The white community's stigmatization of blackness and the struggle of her black peers for social acceptance is a constant reminder to Birdie of the consequences of abandoning her own access to white privilege. Stuart Langley, a recruited black football player, has "a strained, pleasing smile" and a nervous laugh and is only interested in dating a chubby, blond cheerleader (251). Samantha Taper, a biracial girl who is being raised in a white family, is only interested in dating a "thin-lipped, freckled junior" (252). Samantha is ridiculed and rejected by the girls in Birdie's clique and made an exoticized sex object by the white boys in the school. Birdie also observes that the white kids expect Stuart and Samantha to engage in an intraracial dating relationship since they are the only two black kids at the school but that the two peers evade each other: "In fact, they actively avoided each other, as if proximity might cause them to combust" (252). Fordham discusses black students' avoidance of their black peers as one manifestation of a raceless identity in which a black student may avoid association with other black students in order to better assimilate into the dominant white community (57). Once again, universal operations of domination and subordination are evident, and as racially stigmatized members of society, Samantha and Stuart, deemphasize their affiliation with the stigmatized group in order to assimilate into the dominant group.

Just as the other two black kids intentionally avoid each other, Birdie does not publicly acknowledge her racial identification with Samantha and Stuart. Birdie constantly watches Samantha, yet she watches passively as her white friends engage in race-based verbal abuse of

the biracial girl. Ironically, the two girls finally speak for the first time when they accidentally meet while peeing in the woods together because some white girls are monopolizing the bathroom. This setting is laden with the historical connotations of segregated “whites only” restroom facilities and colored people of all shades who have no alternative but to retreat to the woods for excretion (283). Upon their initial encounter, the identities of both girls remain ambiguous. Birdie initially misrecognizes Samantha as her sister, Cole, while Samantha initially thinks Birdie looks like a boy (283). Both girls remain in the darkness and shadows throughout their exchange, never fully visible. This imagery reflects the dominant theme of racial ambiguity, which is represented metaphorically by vague visual images throughout the novel. However, the encounter’s most interesting revelation comes when Birdie almost reveals her true racial identity to Samantha, but then decides not to trust Samantha with her secret. Ironically, although Birdie decides not to reveal herself, she inadvertently discovers that Samantha has known her secret all along. Impulsively, Birdie asks Samantha, “What color are you?” and Samantha replies, “I’m black. Like you” (286).

This revelation of Samantha’s knowledge is astounding for the reader in the context of the abuse that Samantha has borne from Birdie’s white friends without ever attempting to expose Birdie’s own affiliations with her stigmatized class. The revelation is also significant for Birdie because it marks the point in the text when she decides that she cannot pass for white any longer and leaves New Hampshire to search for her own black sister and father. Perhaps Birdie realizes that by betraying Samantha in order to protect her white social identity, she is also in some way betraying herself since she, like Samantha, shares ancestry with all racially stigmatized people of African ancestry. As Birdie leaves New Hampshire and her white identity behind, she reflects

on her inability to stabilize her identity and the pressure she feels to “kill” part of herself and identify with only one race:

I wondered, as I passed the clear abandoned lake---silver, still, silent—if I too would forever be fleeing in the dark, abandoning parts of myself that I no longer wanted, in search of some part that had escaped me. Killing one girl in order to let the other one free. It hurt, this killing, more than I thought it would, but I kept walking . . . (289)

Ultimately, Birdie decides to leave New Hampshire because she is psychologically traumatized by society’s dualistic construction of race, which produces the contradictions between her personal racial identity (black) and her social racial identity (white); she describes her experience of double consciousness and her Negrobilia as “the lies of my body and the artifacts of my life” (381).

Caucasia undermines racial essentialism and examines the ironic dissonances and gaps in the logic of race. Birdie analyzes the illogic of racial stereotypes and racial border-guarding throughout the text. When Deck begins to spout negative rhetoric about white “ofays,” Birdie interrogates him, “Isn’t Mum ofay?” (10). With this question, Birdie explores the discrepancy between Deck’s essentialist characterization of white people and her own positive experiences with her white mother. Likewise, Birdie questions essentialist characterizations of blacks, such as the animalistic drawings of Congolese in Nick Marsh’s *Tintin in the Congo* comic book (204) and Mona’s myth about black men in New York City who kidnap white girls to sell on the black market in porn rings (259). Birdie begins to realize that racial ideology is often used to suspend human beings from historical time and space in order to create essentialist categories that may be used in the struggle to alter relations of power between sociopolitically constructed groups. This realization of race’s constructed nature causes Birdie to doubt her own black identity: “Did you

have to have a black mother to be really black? There had been no black women involved in my conception. Cole's either. Maybe that made us frauds" (285).

Birdie's parents' relationship also demonstrates the inadequacy of racial stereotypes. One example is Deck's belief that a black woman of his own race will make him happier than he is with Sandy. Deck presents the myth of "strong black women" in order to support his assertions of Sandy's inadequacy as a wife. Michelle Wallace describes this myth in her text, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*:

From the intricate web of mythology which surrounds the black woman, a fundamental image emerges. It is of a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men. Less of a woman in that she is less "feminine" and helpless, she is really more of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life-giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman. (107)

Ironically, although Deck buys into racial mythology and incorporates it into his criticism of his wife, Sandy is a "strong white woman" and takes more personal risks in challenging the racist hegemony than Carmen, her replacement, Deck's "brown sugar," ever will. In addition, Deck and Sandy both enjoy intellectual stimulation and share common political values. Only years after their marriage is over does Deck eventually realize that he had more in common with his white wife, Sandy, than he ever had with his black girlfriend, Carmen (396-98).

The text's examination of the inadequacy of convictions based on racial essentialism also extends to the subversion of the idea that Birdie is more like her mother since she is the "white"

daughter and Cole is more like her father since she is the “black” daughter. Although both Deck and Sandy are opposed to racism, skin color is the basis upon which they assign custody of their daughters when their family disintegrates. Despite Deck’s love for Birdie, he ignores her and focuses his attention on Cole in an attempt to prepare his “black” daughter for survival in a world where he knows she will not receive access to the white privileges that light-skinned Birdie might receive (57, 72-73). However, although Birdie is socially identified as white, she self-identifies as black, and she psychologically and emotionally needs her black father’s love and attention just as much as Cole does. Birdie struggles to capture her beloved father’s attention and affection by repeating his essentialist racial rhetoric and acting as a “spy” for him when moving unnoticed among white people. However, Birdie is never able to attain Deck’s recognition of the importance of their relationship, and he abandons her with her white mother at eight years old. It isn’t until the end of the novel, when Birdie is fourteen years old and finally tracks him down in California that Deck recognizes a little of himself in Birdie: “You know, you look a little like my mother. I never noticed that before. Same skinny body, broad shoulders. Same eyes” (395). Just as Deck is initially blind to the similarities between himself and Birdie, he is also initially blind to the differences between himself and his darker daughter. Although Cole and Deck are both socially identified as black and thus share social identity in a stigmatized racial group, Deck eventually discovers the differences between them that transcend their shared racial identity: “Cole turned out to be as different from me as any child could be” (394).

Like Deck, Sandy bases her relationships with her daughters on their physical appearances. Sandy assumes that since Birdie can physically “pass” for white, she will have no difficulty in adjusting psychologically and emotionally to life in a predominately white community. Although Sandy had been concerned for her light-skinned daughter when Birdie

attended predominately black Nkrumah, until her daughter runs away from home, Sandy does not realize the psychological and emotional trauma that attends Birdie's double consciousness as a result of maintaining both a white social identity and black self-identity. Likewise, Sandy justifies her abandonment of her dark-skinned daughter, Cole, on the premise that Cole will be psychologically and emotionally damaged if raised by her white mother in a predominately white community (216). However, Sandy doesn't account for the psychological and emotional damage that Cole suffers due to the loss of her mother (407). Deck and Sandy, despite their rage against racist American society, find society's construction of race shaping their relationships with their own daughters based on skin color.

Senna's text affiliates the biracial person's shifting racial and cultural identifications with humanity's universal conflict between society and self, public and private, political and personal. Just as the relationship between the personal and the political is a major theme of *Quicksand*, it is also a dominant theme of *Caucasia*, which provides an opportunity to examine the text's interracial and biracial themes by returning to the second chapter's discussion of Frederick Jameson's theory of the third-world national allegory, which is based on human relationships between public and private, and Aijaz Ahmad's theory that literature by first-world minorities may also be read allegorically.¹⁹ While the text reveals the dynamics of universal operations of domination and subordination and relationships between those who have power and those who don't, *Caucasia* also lends itself to a more specific allegorical reading in which Deck represents black Americans, Sandy represents white Americans and Birdie and Cole represent biracial Americans. However, *Caucasia* also includes ironic subversions of racial essentialism and racial stereotyping that make its allegorical framework less reliable than *Quicksand*'s clear delineations between domination and subordination with respect to race. For example, in *Quicksand* the

¹⁹ See p. 56 for discussion of Jameson and Ahmad's theories.

white Danes are clearly dominant, and biracial Helga is clearly subordinate. However, in *Caucasia* the dominant white racial class is represented by Sandy, an obese woman with strong affiliations to the stigmatized class, while the subordinate black class is represented by Deck, a Harvard-educated male who is employed and published by educational institutions that are controlled by the dominant social class.

As a black American, Deck spends most of his adult life studying the inescapable bond between the personal and the political for black Americans, a bond which characterizes his own life experiences. While Deck is busy constructing his intellectual campaign against racism in America (political), race splits his own family in two (personal). Birdie observes, “He was the same father who had started me. The same father who had cared more for books and theories than he did for flesh and blood” (393). Ironically, after his own family splits down the middle along America’s color line, Deck decides that race is insignificant since it is socially constructed and not a biological reality. When Birdie tries to express the misery of her experience of double consciousness and racial passing, Deck tries to comfort her by telling her that she’s upset for no reason: “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” (391). Deck is oblivious to the real effects of racism and racial politics on real people, specifically on his own personal relationships with his daughters. Birdie reminds him, “If race is so make-believe, why did I go with Mum? You gave me to Mum ‘cause I looked white. You don’t think that’s real?” (393).

In contrast to Deck, who tries but is unable to separate the personal and the political, Sandy tries but finds it difficult to integrate the personal and the political in her life. Sandy tries to distance herself from her affiliations with the hegemonic group responsible for oppressing

black Americans and tries to live out her liberal politics in her personal life by marrying a black man and becoming a radical civil rights activist. She tells Birdie, “It doesn’t matter what your color is or what you’re born into, you know? It matters who you choose to call your own” (87). However, with this idealistic statement Sandy ignores the power of history and culture. Despite her efforts to maintain an oppositional stance against the white hegemony, the benefits of white privilege often cause discrepancies between Sandy’s actions and her ideology. When Sandy’s interracial marriage disintegrates and her radical political activities get her into trouble with the law, she is able to retreat to live anonymously in the white, middle-class suburbia of New Hampshire. Additionally, Sandy vocalizes her unity with black Americans and lower class laborers, but she exercises her own access to racial and class privilege in order to secure better employment and housing (143). Although Sandy imagines herself to be allied with people of America’s stigmatized social groups, she is able to use white, middle-class privilege to overcome the intersection between the personal and the political whenever it becomes inconvenient.

Birdie finds that her own negotiation of the personal and political with respect to race is even more complex than either of her parents’ due to her biracial ancestry. Unlike her darker-skinned sister, Cole, Birdie’s physical appearance gives her access to white privilege. Therefore, she has some agency in shaping her social racial identity that many people of African ancestry do not have. Birdie can choose to identify as black or white, and depending on the particular social situation she is in, she is sometimes able to emphasize or deemphasize her affiliations with one racial group or another in order to blend in with the dominant group in that particular situation. As a child and adolescent, Birdie is overwhelmed by the malleability of her racial identity and its political implications.

However, while still a young girl, Birdie begins to witness the sliding and shifting nature of all human identities. This examination of human identity expands on the novel's "passing" theme by examining not only race but also other aspects of human identity, such as culture, gender, class and sexual orientation.

Birdie's lessons in shifting identities begin with her parents. She watches her father change the way he speaks when he is around his black friends, like Ronnie Parkman or Tony, the cook at the local soul food restaurant: "My father always spoke differently when he was around Ronnie. He would switch into slang, peppering his sentences with words like 'cat' and 'man' and 'cool'" (10). In this way, Deck is able to assume an essentialist black identity that required him to use African American Vernacular English instead of Standard English. Birdie also notices that when her family drives through neighborhoods that are unfriendly to blacks, her white mother would drive and her black father would hide under a blanket and play the "disappearing Daddy game" (249). In this way, her family "passes" for a white family and drives safely through the neighborhood.

Birdie also witnesses her radical politically activist mother slide into the persona of a WASP named Sheila Goldman in order to escape the law and gain access to housing or employment: "Her hair had been transformed into a loose bun. She looked like a real mother, cool, self-possessed, the kind of mother who would be on a television commercial for Ivory soap. She winked at me. . . . 'I think they bought it. I think I got 'em'" (146). Sandy's assumed identity allows her to access the material rewards of white privilege by causing whites with economic power, such as the Marshes to see her as one of them: "Her bony nose, her blue eyes, flickering, nervous--an educated voice. They heard her accent, so like their own, and knew she

would do just fine. Never mind that thin, glowering adolescent by her side, they thought. They saw a woman and a child. No man? No problem. They knew she was one of them” (150).

Not only does Birdie witness changes in language and physical appearance as methods of adapting to cultural norms, she also sees the shifting nature of human sexuality and gender identity. First, Birdie and her mother both engage in lesbian relationships during their stay at a feminist commune (136, 297, 350). Bernadette and Alexis, Sandy and Birdie’s lesbian lovers are mentioned repeatedly throughout the text even though both Birdie and her mother also engage in heterosexual relationships. Next, upon her return to Boston during her search for Cole and Deck, Birdie discovers that Ali Parkman’s dad, who had “passed” for the perfect heterosexual husband and father when she was younger, is actually a homosexual. Birdie recalls her admiration for the Parkman family’s apparently perfect cultural conformity, “Their family had seemed the antidote to mine. One color, one love, forever together” (327). In addition to her discovery that Ronnie Parkman is gay, Birdie also meets and identifies with the cross-dressing prostitute, Corvette, at a significant juncture in the novel. The theme of ambiguous sexual orientation compliments the theme of racial ambiguity. Even the Marshes’ female horse serves as a symbol of the disparity between appearance and reality by assuming the incongruous moniker Mr. Pleasure (150).

Birdie’s awareness of all of these instances of identity as something that can change and be manipulated causes her to realize that her racial identity may never crystallize into a stable, monoracial affiliation. However, although the text emphasizes the universal instability of human identities, including racial identities, and emphasizes the irrationality of essentialist constructions of race, *Caucasia* does not advocate the dissolution of racial identities. Even as Cole explains to Birdie how the Elemeno achieve invisibility by constantly changing, Birdie begins to doubt the meaning of a raceless existence: “Something didn’t make sense. What was the point of surviving

if you had to disappear?” (8). The text develops the significance of racial identity as a tool to be manipulated in the struggle for economic, social and political power.

In addition to having parents who socially identify in two different racial groups, Birdie has lived in and participated in the culture of both black and white communities, so Birdie recognizes the racial ambiguities of her identity, but she also realizes that due to the history of race in America and her own personal experiences, she shares social and political commitments with all people of any African ancestry. Birdie wants “clarity to the darkness,” and, therefore, she decides to preserve her black self-identity as the broader foundation of her specifically biracial identity (341). By the text’s conclusion, *Caucasia* implies that individual racial identities should be grounded in history and personal experience not essentialist racial norms, and the text emphasizes that since personal experience is continuously unfolding and new histories are constantly being created, racial identities are subject to continuous revision.

Although deceiving people about her self-identity in order to find social acceptance eventually becomes natural for Birdie, she often feels a desire to tell her history from her perspective, to take ownership of her identity: “I was feeling that itch—an itch I had felt many times before—to tell my story, the truth of where I had been” (342). Finally, upon her return to Boston, Birdie tells her story to her Aunt Dot and then to her black friend, Ali Parkman. Birdie reveals to the reader the sense of agency she achieves by telling her story: “Once spoken, the secrets seemed to lose some of their weight. The secrets that had owned me seemed to become my own all of a sudden—my history lesson to play with, to mold, to interpret and revise as I pleased” (312).

In his discussion of Frederick Douglass’s slave narrative, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. theorizes the connection between the act of writing and “the act of creating a public, historical

self” (108). Just as slave narratives asserted a previously unrecognized black subjectivity, by telling her own story, the story of life along the boundary of the color line, Birdie is able to assert herself as a biracial subject, which allows her to begin to construct a biracial identity. Likewise, although *Caucasia* is fictional and not autobiographical, Danzy Senna is also engaging the power of literacy and representations of biracial subjectivity to achieve recognition of the historical subject who straddles the American color line.

Birdie’s new agency with respect to her racial identity aids her in dealing with the realization that after finally finding her sister, she still doesn’t feel complete: “I had believed all along that Cole was all I needed to feel complete. Now I wondered if completion wasn’t overrated” (406). Birdie mentions to her sister that Deck has decided the girls are not black or white after all and that race is just socially constructed (408). Cole replies, ““He’s right, you know. About it being constructed. But’—she turned to me, looking at me intently—‘that doesn’t mean it doesn’t exist’” (408). Birdie thinks about all of the racism that she has witnessed and the way that she has silently stood by and watched it without protest in order to remain acceptable to the group holding social power. She decides that she doesn’t want to be a person with “no voice or color or conviction” (408). She replies to Cole, “They say you don’t have to choose. But the thing is, you do. Because there are consequences if you don’t” (408). However, Cole, aware of the human destruction wrought upon her own family by racial politics, replies, “Yeah, and there are consequences if you do” (408). Cole’s comment implies that merely selecting a racial group to identify with and entrenching behind racial boundary lines will not solve the problems of race.

At the novel’s conclusion, when Birdie is fourteen years old and developing her biracial identity, she discovers that, in California, there are many other biracial people. Cole informs her,

“If you ever thought you were the only one, get ready. We’re a dime a dozen out here” (412). At this point, Birdie’s biracial identity corresponds with stage three of Jacobs’s identity model. However, unlike the identity described by Jacobs’s model, Birdie’s biracial identity develops as a specific aspect of her black identity due to her recognition that race-based oppression is a part of American institutions and her recognition of racism’s negative effect on all people of any African ancestry.

Like *Quicksand*, *Caucasia* clearly locates the psychological and emotional problems of biracial people in society and in the construction of race; these are not problems which are located in the biracial individual. As Maria P.P. Root notes, “. . . it is the marginal status imposed by society rather than the objective mixed race of biracial individuals which poses a severe stress to positive identity development” (188). However, unlike *Quicksand*, *Caucasia* features the biracial protagonist’s agency in shaping a biracial self-identity. Unlike Larsen’s protagonist, Helga Crane, Senna’s biracial protagonist, Birdie Lee, does not meet with the traditional fate of the tragic mulatto trope at her text’s conclusion.²⁰ Instead of reaching a state of physical and psychological deterioration and perpetual alienation, Birdie realizes that she can survive in a racist American society and still preserve a racial identity that reflects the complexity of her personal experiences with race, a biracial identity which she views as a specific aspect of her black identity.

On the final page of *Caucasia*, Birdie confirms her biracial identity as she observes another biracial girl, who is sitting inside a schoolbus, watching her. In Birdie’s final recollection, the text reemphasizes the metaphor of motion for the ambiguity of shifting human identities. The scene also affiliates the specific biracial experience with the broader black experience through the symbolism of the colors of the bus—yellow and black: “It was a

²⁰ See discussion of Sterling Brown’s theory of the tragic mulatto trope on p. 42-43.

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. . . . Then the bus lurched forward, and the face was gone with it, just a blur of yellow and black in motion” (413).

Caucasia is a provocative exploration of the unique experiences of biracial Americans who find themselves with family, friends and cultural affiliations on both sides of the color line, a boundary maintained by both white and black Americans. Like other American literary texts written by biracial people, this text’s development of interracial and biracial themes suggests the possibility of identity and affiliation with more than one racial group and a defiance of essentialist monoracial identities. However, also like other American biracial texts, *Caucasia* clearly explores the political implications of racial identity in a culture where knowledge, power and resources are allocated inequitably along racial lines and white privilege is preserved. As Cookie White Stephan notes, “The mythical American melting pot of individuals who know and respect the cultures of all peoples of the society may have a literal beginning in the experiences of mixed-heritage individuals with cultural exposure to more than one group” (63).

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CHAPTER FIVE: THE COMMITMENT TO THEORIZING THE BIRACIAL SUBJECT

“Those historical subjects subsumed under ‘mulatto/a’ cannot be so easily banished to the realm of the mythical, nor is it my wish to do so.”
Hortense Spillers, *Black, White and in Color* (302)

Theorizing representations of the black-white biracial subject in twentieth century American literature is inherently problematic because recognition of biracial subjectivity seems to legitimize the use of racial ideology to categorize and label human bodies. However, once both the sociopolitically constructed nature of race *and* racial ideology’s real consequences for real people are acknowledged, biracial subjectivity emerges as a reflection of the real consequences of racial ideology for historical subjects with parents who self-identify and/or are socially-identified with two different races. In this context, the label “biracial” becomes a reference to the enunciative space between the binary opposition of the racial labels “black” and “white.” Therefore, the biracial subject is as valid as any other racial subject, which is to say not valid at all; however, representations of biracial subjectivity, like other representations of racial subjectivity, provide a unique perspective from which to examine the relationship between power and the discourse that produces racial labels and categories. As Samira Kawash observes in her discussion of hybridity and race, “It bears repeating that such essentializing cultural divisions as the color line *both* distort *and* account for lived experience; there is no realm of experience or subjectivity outside or beyond the effects of the color line” (Kawash 6).

Biracial Americans find themselves caught in the in-between spaces of a racialized national culture, a culture which has been shaped by racial ideology and race-based identity

politics. Representations of biracial subjectivity in American literature reflect the racialization of cultural differences and social conflicts within American society. However, representations of biracial subjectivity also reflect the impossibility of identifying distinct boundaries between America's racial groups (which are *socially constructed* references to types of human bodies) and ethnic groups (which share common cultural, religious or linguistic characteristics but are also often frequently associated with racial groups). Representations of biracial subjects who have social and cultural affiliations in multiple racial groups challenge essentialist notions of racial purity and, ironically, through their *bi-raciality* undermine the significance of racial identities by blurring the socially constructed "color lines" between racial groups and emphasizing the complexity of human identities. Therefore, representations of biracial subjectivity actually pave the way for a transition from racialized politics to a politics of antiracism.

Homi Bhaba explains the way in which the ambiguity of cultural borders leads to the revision of signs of identity and the emergence of cultural collaboration in his text of postcolonial critical theory, *The Location of Culture*:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These "in-between spaces" provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining that idea of society itself. (1-2)

This thesis's examination of representations of the black-white biracial subject in American literature reveals a particular "in-between space" or experience of cultural hybridity, the

experience of individuals whose nuclear families straddle the color line which divides black and white. Bhaba's use of the word "hybridity" was not meant to refer to an actual subject but to the process of constructing knowledge. However, applying Bhaba's concept of hybridity to the biracial subject highlights the inadequacy of the construction of racial ideology since the biracial subject serves as a reference to the enunciative space between the binary opposition of the black subject and the white subject. By revising the signs of identity that have historically characterized racial discourse in the United States, the validity of historically respected knowledge regarding the sociopolitical significance of race is brought into question.

Anne Fleischmann uses Bhaba's theory of cultural hybridity to discuss the biracial characters in the fiction of African-American writer Charles Chesnutt in her article, "Neither Fish, Flesh, Nor Fowl: Race and Region in the Writings of Charles W. Chesnutt." Fleischmann justifies the use of postcolonial theory for analysis of American literature:

Though slavery cannot be equated with colonialism, the post-bellum era invites comparison with post-colonial situations because of the cultural syncretisms occasioned by the biological and cultural intermixing of master and slave, white and black. In places, the cultures of Africans, slaves, free-born African Americans, and Europeans melded during the antebellum and post-war periods, creating a social and racial hierarchy that was both complex and dissimilar to a more simplistically imagined master-slave relationship. (467)

Fleischmann's work is only one example of how representations of biracial subjectivity in American literature invite a reading that focuses on the "Third Space of enunciation" produced by representations of race.

The texts this thesis examines, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*, through their protagonists, Helga and Birdie, portray the biracial subjectivity of children whose parents are socially-identified in dualistically opposed American racial groups; each woman is the child of a "white" mother and a "black" father, has social and political affiliations in both European-American and African-American cultures and struggles to find a place of belonging for herself within an American culture that affirms essentialist, monoracial identities. Each protagonist discovers that twentieth-century American culture is fractured by racism and racialized politics and that many Americans are unwilling to recognize or accept ambiguous or multiple racial identities that reflect particular experiences of cultural hybridity. These biracial protagonists metaphorically represent the inability of traditional racial labels and categories to adequately account for the complexity of human identities and cultural hybridity.

Interestingly, just as these protagonists find a widespread lack of acceptance for biracial identities that reflect unique experiences of cultural hybridity, Bhaba has found a lack of acceptance for his own theorization of cultural hybridity. Antony Easthope dismisses Bhaba's suggestion that people should "inhabit an intervening space" as an invitation to a psychotic loss of identity and discusses the way that hybridity leaves "gaps coherent identity would fulfill" (345). Easthope's thinking reflects the same flawed logic as the myth of the tragic mulatto, the assumption that *healthy* identities are coherent, unified and static. However, Bhaba's hybridity more accurately recognizes the incoherence, instability and complexity of human identities as they shift and slide in reaction to changes in sociopolitical environment. Bhaba references Franz Fanon's observation that cultural and political change requires the moment of "occult instability" during which the people break free of the continuity of nationalist traditions and create a new cultural identity. Likewise, shifting from racialized politics to a politics of antiracism will

require recognition of the space “which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure *the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew*” (Bhaba 37). Using the notion of biraciality as a re-vision of the signs of racial discourse, paves the way for cultural collaboration and a politics of antiracism and social equality.

Like Easthope, Aijaz Ahmad believes that Bhaba’s ideas are too utopian. He argues that Bhaba is blind to the fact that “a sense of place, of belonging, of some stable commitment to one’s class or gender or nation may be useful for defining one’s politics” (14). Ahmad recognizes that racialized experiences of cultural hybridity do not resolve the universal human problem of reconciling the personal and the political. In fact, when two or more cultures converge, processes of domination and subordination may reveal relationships between the personal and the political that are otherwise difficult to detect. However, for biracial individuals living in a racially fragmented society, establishing a “stable commitment” to a single monoracial community in order to reconcile the personal and the political in a socially acceptable manner requires a psychological amputation of part of oneself.

Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* portray “the shifting margins of cultural displacement” as a place fraught with danger, a place of confusion and ambivalence (Bhaba 21). In other words, the biracial subjects represented in these texts engage in the universal struggle to reconcile the personal and the political, an experience that cultural hybridity does not prevent or transcend. Both protagonists long for the “sense of place, of belonging, of some stable commitment” that Ahmad proposes as the foundation of a personal politics based on identity (14). However, the monoracial and monocultural identities of twentieth-century America’s racialized society and political groups provide no location in which a person of

multiple racial and cultural affiliations can “belong” without enacting the familiar operations of domination and subordination that privilege one part of oneself over another.

For Helga and Birdie, the essentialist monoracialization of their social identities conflicts with their personal experiences of cultural hybridity. Helga, who attempts to construct a place to “belong” for herself in a variety of monoracially-identified communities, fails in her project because her identity, which developed from her experience of cultural hybridity, is incompatible with systems that institutionalize monoracial identity and politics. Likewise, Birdie eventually learns to accept the fact that she will never achieve the sense of “belonging” advocated by Ahmad due to the conflict between her own experience of cultural hybridity and American culture’s essentialist racialization of social and political groups. Unlike Helga, Birdie learns to accept the ambiguity and complexity of her racial and cultural identities, but the absence of a “place” receptive to this culturally hybrid identity reveals the investment of many Americans in monoracial ideology and racialized politics.

As I argue that biracial identity paves the way for a shift from racialized politics to a politics of antiracism, I must reemphasize the ways that representations of the biracial subject illustrate the importance of remembering the historical context that leaves an indelible trace on appropriated signs. Racial ideology has historically been used both to legitimize the brutality of colonial domination *and* to enact a politics of resistance by the oppressed. Therefore, dismantling racial ideology presents a threat to the operations of oppression by hegemonic powers that have institutionalized racism; however, a transformation of racial signs also threatens groups that have historically experienced oppression along the lines of race. Philosopher Naomi Zack describes the way in which new readings of racial signs are resisted by oppressed groups that stand to gain from the revision of racial ideology:

Anything that disturbs the ontological premises underlying the racial status quo, no matter how liberating it may be in principle, will at this time be perceived as a threat to the gains justly secured by nonwhites on the group-based pluralistic model. That a wide-scale revision of received opinion about the existence of race may undermine racist thought and behavior is almost beside the point, insofar as it appears to be either a merely theoretical enterprise or a threat to what is desirable about the status quo in terms of liberation. (“American Mixed Race”)

Agreeing with Zack’s assessment, literary critic Robert Young argues that appropriating the categories of race for use in representation of cultural hybridity is a perilous operation due to the historical usage of racial signs. Young asserts that “the interval that we assert between ourselves and the past may be much less than we assume. We may be more bound up with its categories than we like to think” (28).

In response to the concerns presented by Zack and Young, I acknowledge the importance of remembering the histories of domination and subordination conducted along the lines of race in order to guard against future reoccurrences. However, I revert back to Bhaba’s reference to Fanon’s contention that a people’s cultural inheritance must be transformed in the moment of revolution. As Bhaba asserts, “The changed political and historical site of enunciation transforms the meanings of the colonial inheritance into the liberatory signs of a free people of the future” (Bhaba 38). At the last part of the twentieth and first part of the twenty-first century, as the number of non-white and mixed race Americans continues to increase, a quiet revolution is transforming the significance of racial labels. The prevalence of themes of hybridity, biraciality and multiraciality in ethnic American literature reflects this trend, which crosses racial boundaries.

Just as representations of the black-white biracial subject appear in twentieth century American literature, representations of biracial and multiracial subjects with affiliations in other dominant American racial groups are also present. The variations on the hyphenated American experience are too extensive to list exhaustively. However, Gloria Anzaldua's discussion of a multiracial Mexican-American "mestiza" identity in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Teresa Williams-Leon and Cynthia L. Nakashima's compilation of articles addressing the multiracial Asian-American experience in *The Sum of Our Parts: Mixed Heritage Asian Americans*, and Terry Wilson's description of the Native American experience in his article, "Blood Quantum: Native American Mixed Bloods," are a few of many examples of American literary treatment of biracial and multiracial subjectivity. These texts also provide evidence that although the literary theme of mixed race consciousness crosses racial and ethnic boundaries, the experience of cultural hybridity for both groups and individuals within groups varies widely.

Through the realization that race is sociopolitically constructed and the acknowledgment of individual identities which reflect experiences of cultural hybridity, America can evolve beyond racialized politics; a transition from racialized politics to a politics of antiracism could eventually pave the way for ideological changes that will produce new historical situations free from the essentialist racial stereotyping of the past. The time has come to recognize that the racial labels of 'black' and 'white' have always been 'mind-forg'd manacles,'²¹ and no better representation of the inconsistencies of this binary construct exists than an examination of the biracial themes of American literature, which emphasize the inadequacy of essentialist, binary racial labels and focus on interracial and biracial themes.

African-American literary critic Henry Louis Gates also offers guidance for the direction of future ethnic and minority studies when he suggests that the usefulness of polarized racial

²¹ From the poem "London" by William Blake, referencing the oppression of humanity by social institutions

positioning has expired and should be exchanged for an exploration of the overarching constructs which originally created binary ideologies:

I submit, then, that the ritualized invocation of otherness is losing its capacity to engender new forms of knowledge and that the “margin” may have exhausted its strategic value as a position from which to theorize the very antimonies that produced it as an object of study. Instead, we must prepare to forgo the pleasures of ethnicist affirmation and routinized resentment in favor of rethinking the larger structures that constrain and enable our agency. (299)

As my examination of *Quicksand* and *Caucasia* demonstrates, a study of the interracial theme in literature is a dive into the chasm between margin and center to obtain a unique vantage point for surveillance of the complexities of the human struggle to gain and maintain power.

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