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Mixed Messages: Reading Contemporary U.S. Literature of Biracial Girlhood

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MIXED MESSAGES: READING CONTEMPORARY U.S.
LITERATURE OF BIRACIAL GIRLHOOD

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

Candice Nicole Hale

B.A., The University of Alabama, 2005

M.A., The University of Alabama, 2007

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Preface

For as long as I can remember, my race has always affected me. As the daughter of a white woman and a black man, I was already deemed different in my small Alabama town because I was mixed. With my very fair skin and long, curly locks, my classmates assumed I was not *all* black. I remember my classmates racially examining me. The “What Are You?” and “Are You Adopted?” questions would remain a constant part of my school years. My classmates were unapologetically cruel with their jokes as they often labeled me “racially challenged,” “a zebra,” “an Oreo,” “a mixed-breed” and/or a “half-breed mutt.” Those jokes were also extended to family and close friends that also felt compelled to make me understand just how different I was. I only wanted to fit in and belong to these spaces as a child and adolescent. As part of only a few interracial families in my community during the 1980s and 90s, I struggled to find someone like me. My own sibling, my younger sister, was not even a mirror for me because she phenotypically looked different than me. My sister had “authentic” black features (e.g. black people’s hair, facial structures, etc.) that deemed her *really* black in comparison to me. My home, my school, and my community were the spaces I expected to help shape my existence as a mixed girl. But I received so many mixed messages about race that I squirmed into my own versions of blackness and biracialness.

It would take many more years of questioning and negotiating for me to understand how incomplete my racial journey had been without any mirroring images of biraciality in front of me. I needed a mirror to help me see who I was and to understand what I had been experiencing. Years later in college, I found my mirror and I was not even looking for it. Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* was my “mirror.” This text would mark the beginning of my mirroring experience in understanding and embracing my black biracial identity. I did not know just how powerful it

would be to simply read myself on the page and to find a character that experienced life in similar ways to my own. *Quicksand* gave me the tools to unlearning every damaging thing that I had seen or heard about mixed-race (or mulatto) identity and allowing myself the space to figure out who I was and what it means on my terms.

As I used *Quicksand* as my literary mirror, I noticed some disappointments and failures in the literature and criticism I read when I wrote my master's thesis on Nella Larsen. In my thesis, I considered how the iconic, tragic mulatta Helga Crane set the stage for how most tragic mulatta female characters were represented in literature: tragic, sad, doomed, unhappy, unstable, and, even experiencing death. In my best efforts, I worked to dispel that outdated misrepresentation. Because I believed biracial identity no longer functioned in the same sociohistorical spaces, I cast Helga Crane into a different space—one where she is free and in control of her own choices to exist as black, white, or biracial. I wanted readers to see Helga's many movements as part of a biracial subjectivity where she could overcome racial boundaries, challenge racial categorizations, and assert agency in claiming a biracial identity.

Because of the mirroring experiences with Helga Crane in Larsen's *Quicksand*, I began to shape and mold my own biracial identity, but I also learned to embrace the fluid nature of what it means to be biracial in the U.S. I had to loosen that rigid black-white binary. By looking into this mirror, I can choose my identity and see myself fully as a biracial woman. My project, then, is a personal endeavor to reposition my critical ideas on the biracial characters in today's contemporary literature and to make a literary contribution to the field of Critical Mixed Race Studies. Furthermore, my dissertation might just serve as a mirror to another outlier struggling to exist as they tiptoe across a very, thin tightrope between black and white spaces.

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I am grateful to my dissertation chair, Dr. Michael Bibler, who has weathered this PhD journey with me to the very end. I am most grateful for his patience and understanding. You never gave up on me or my dissertation project. You pushed me to write even when I could not muster up a word. You respected my voice and the vision of my work. Your feedback and advice on every draft was helpful, encouraging, and insightful. Your belief in me never swayed. I am glad you decided to stand up for me and advocate on my behalf. I could not have finished this dissertation without your guidance, your motivation, and your confidence in me. I thank you for everything.

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I am greatly indebted to my graduate school friends—Martha Pitts, Yvette Hyde, Megan Feifer, Wendy Braun, YaYa Smith, and Alicia Nance—who were always there when I needed encouragement or feedback. I am thankful for your advice, support, and friendship. You all are great women and academics that are making strides in your own lives and careers today.

I am honored to be a part of the “Binders Full of Black Women and Black Nonbinary People in Academia” Facebook group where a countless amount of other black women academics showed up and sprinkled their “Black Girl Magic” all over me. These women

showered me with encouragement, support, laughter, and community when I had felt like giving up. Thank you all for coming into my life just when I needed you all the most.

I am thankful for my lifelong friends—Kassie, Kia, Shericka, April, and Misty—that saw the power and strength in my womanhood. Together, they have all pushed me into being a stronger woman, mother, and friend. Their love for me is appreciated and respected. These group of women have remained honest and caring to me over the years. The fun and laughter we all shared on our many girls' nights helped me to reject the bad and doubtful days I encountered during this process. Thank you all for putting up with me. It means the world to have friends that believe in you and your dreams.

I am forever indebted to three professors during my tenure at The University of Alabama that molded me as a student and scholar in the first place. One of the very first professors to show me just how dope I actually was is Dr. Tony Bolden. Dr. Bolden wrote on a paper of mine back in 2003 that I had a voice to share with the world and that any graduate program would be lucky to work with me. At first, I did not believe in his vision for my future, but a few years later I finally caught on to what he had always saw in me from the beginning. Without you Dr. B., I would not be a lover of African American literature or even considered pursuing the PhD. Then there's Dr. Robert Young, may he rest in peace and power, that believed in me in spite of my GRE score that the UA Graduate School said was not good enough. However, Dr. Young knew of my work ethic in scholarship and research and my determination to succeed because of the three courses I had taken with him in my undergraduate studies. Dr. Young taught me how to be a critical thinker first and foremost. As the current director of English Graduate Studies then, he admitted me conditionally so I could pursue my master's degree in English. Dr. Young fought for me to have a seat at the table and I will never forget that. Last, but certainly not least,

is Dr. Yolanda Manora. Dr. Manora is the professor that connected me to my literary mirror, Nella Larsen, in my undergraduate studies with the work *Quicksand*. It is in Dr. Manora's seminars where I discovered my own version of "Black Girl Magic." Dr. Manora exposed me to feminism and black women writers that changed my view of myself and what I had to offer the world. Dr. Manora was not only my thesis committee chair, but she was also a friend and mentor well after I left The University of Alabama. Without these three professors in my corner from the beginning, I would not be able to articulate my understanding of the world around me. Thank you for noticing me and molding me into a reflection of your teaching and expertise.

My very first teacher that gets all of the credit for my success is my mother—Dana Hale. Although not a teacher by trade, she has taught me things that a school could never impart to me. My mother taught me to be a fighter and to never give up. Even when I became a teenage mother at 16, my mother showed me that I could do or be whatever I wanted to be in spite of my setbacks in life. My mother persisted that I go to college and be the best me I could be. My mother's sacrifice to raise my daughter is a debt I can never repay her, but this dissertation is just as much a part of her as it is a part of me. There's no way I could be the student, scholar, or academic without her fighting for me and with me to succeed in this life. Your love is unconditional and I will never forget what you have done for me to get to this very moment. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I love you always.

My father, J.W. Hale Jr, is a man that taught me the value of hard work and determination. It is his strong work ethic that is instilled in me to always do my best no matter the cost. His endurance to work hard is definitely a part of me so thank you and I love you for that gift. My younger sister, Courtney Hale, has looked up to me as a role model for quite some time. Although she might not think this, I have never wanted to let her down and have struggled

to be the best version of a sister she could ask for in this lifetime. My sister's ability to bring laughter into my life is pure and loving and I greatly appreciate her using laughter to uplift my spirits. I love you and your laugh forever. I also love my other family members—brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, and cousins—that have supported me over the years. Thank you all for believing in me.

I would like to remember those special people in my life that are no longer a part of the physical world. My grandparents on both sides of my family—Billie Ruth Collins, James Mayben, Shirley Hale, and J.W. Hale, Sr.—would be so proud of my accomplishments. I would like to give a special recognition to my late sister Shannon Hale and my late brother Brandon Hale who departed this Earth too soon. I also lost a dear family friend, George Sears, that left me with valuable wisdom and advice to help me in this life. Lastly, I want to remember my family pet, Fergie Williams, that gives me many doggie memories and smiles. May you all rest in peace and power.

My most important piece of work in this world that I have ever created is not my dissertation, but it is my one and only daughter—Robyn Ciera Williams. You are the key motivator in my life. As most parents, I know everything I have done has been to make your life better. Although our life has not been an easy one, I have grown into a better person, a better woman, and a better mother because I never wanted to let you down. My greatest challenge was not letting you see me quit through the adversity I encountered. I share this success with you now because you have always believed in me and saw greatness in me. I appreciate the ways you honor me as your mother. You have always been a blessing to my life. You are my hope, you are my strength, and you are my light. You have been guiding me in the chaos of my life.

Thank you so much for opening my heart up to a love I cannot explain. I love you to the moon and back.

No acknowledgment could exist without the love and honor of God in my life. My forever supporter and encourager in this life literally pushed me to fight for myself when nobody else could. God showed me time and time again that I could never give up on something He placed within me as a child—a heart for learning and helping others—and I could not let Him down no matter the storms I weathered. God has been my constant beacon of light in the darkness. God never gave up on me. God gave me the armor to run straight into the fear of life’s many obstacles. What I have learned through God’s word is that “I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (Psalms 139:14). Father God, I thank you, for your unwavering love and support of me and all the foot soldiers you placed in my path along the way.

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Abstract

The tragic mulatta character is no longer an accurate representation of biracial female characters in literature. This dissertation considers the vast history of the tragic mulatto genre and its tragic and mired representations of biracial women and how they are often portrayed in literature. Within a historical, legal, and political analysis, I highlight the ways perceptions, attitudes, and representations about biracial individuals have changed, so those same shifts should change in the literature. Because of the burgeoning field of Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS), both scholars and authors are recasting and rewriting the narratives and discourses of mixed-race in the areas of literature, sociology, and psychology. My dissertation explains how CMRS's interdisciplinary approach to the issues and experiences of mixed-race is necessary, progressive, and innovative. Throughout the study, I propose new representations and new critical methods be used to analyze contemporary works to discuss current issues affecting the realities of biracial individuals. This dissertation analyzes the contemporary biracial fiction of Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998) and Heidi Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* (2010). I propose here that the two specific texts by Senna and Durrow serve as good models in demonstrating to readers how to develop a biracial literacy and how to read biracial characters with this same biracial lens. My analysis pushes us to read biracial literature in ways where we do not use biracialness as the tragedy. The dissertation stresses the need for increased publishing efforts of biracial and multiracial books and literature across more homes, classrooms, and libraries so all types of experiences can be represented in literature.

Introduction
Critical Changes: Transforming the Conversation in Biracial Literature

The story is old. Our testimonies are new.

—Jayne O. Ifekwunigwe

Scattered Belongings

My project begins by querying W.E.B. DuBois's idea, as he described in *The Souls of Black Folks*, of "what it means to be a problem" in American society at the turn of the 20th century (DuBois, 2003, 3). While DuBois' *The Souls of Black Folk* interrogates the double-consciousness of what it means to be black and an American, this project extends a similar conversation into the 21st century as I engage with black-white biraciality in contemporary U.S. literature. My dissertation specifically focuses on the black-white biracial mixture for several reasons. Because of the legal and historical past of the U.S. South, the mulatto character became a significant literary trope to discuss the ills and failures of miscegenation. Black and white became the principal taboo racial mixture for many widely used representations in 19th and 20th century literature by white and black writers. Furthermore, the gendered subjectivity of the tragic mulatta allowed many authors to discuss race and gender as intersecting oppressions. By writing in the tragic mulatto traditions, authors could speak extensively to the concepts of race, racial discrimination, racial stereotypes, and racial attitudes. These reasons alone make this project necessary to discuss biracial subjectivity in a contemporary discourse because the tragic mulatta tradition in literature has served a useful purpose, especially in anticipating our current understanding of intersectionality. But new eras require new tropes. More specifically, this project looks at the representations and portrayals of black-white biraciality in two contemporary novels, *Caucasia* by Danzy Senna (1998) and *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* by Heidi Pitlor (2010). These novels do the necessary work of deconstructing the binary system of race in the U.S. and redefining the color line. It is worthwhile to remember here that for DuBois "biracial"

equals black in the early 20th century. DuBois reminds us clearly in his political manifesto that “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the color line” (p. 3). The “color line” in the U.S. was/is an always shifting, contested idea, but, perhaps, its one stable base was that if an individual fell on the “colored” side of the line, then he or she were inferior vis-à-vis the “white” side. Who actually fell on the colored side was the subject of much anxiety and debate but anybody “mixed-race”—especially with “black blood”—was most definitely on the colored side.¹ When I use the term biracial throughout this project, I am referring to a “black-white” mixture unless the critical text or novel uses other phrases like “mixed,” “multiracial,” “mixed-race,” or “mulatto/a.” I use the terms “mixed-race” and “biracial” interchangeably. I will use the term “biracial” to mean a “first-generation” mixed person whose biological parents are of two different racial backgrounds. Furthermore, in this dissertation I also use “interracial” to refer to a relationship or marriage between a black man/white woman or a white man/black woman.² My point here is that the function and meaning of the color line has shifted since then to encompass an entirely different problem where to be biracial now has new meanings. In her article, “Negotiating the Color Line: The Gendered Process of Racial Identity Construction among Black/White Biracial Women,” sociologist Kerry Ann Rockquemore explains, “At the turn of the

¹ For example, consider the “melting pot” of America analogy where we have an influx of Italians, Irish, Jews, Eastern Europeans, who are all starting “colored” and then eventually over time are moving to “white,” and then there are Native Americans, Asians, Latinos occupying a tenuous, *slightly* more flexible space than “blacks.” For more information on such those racial spaces developed and embedded themselves in 20th century American identity, then consider Grace Elizabeth Hale’s project in *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*.

² Yet, I will also employ the same language choices as the critics and authors do when I engage with their work here. Also, because of the nature of my work, my discussion will focus largely on black-white multiracialism; this focus should not be taken to suggest that black-white multiracialism should dominate multiracial discourse—indeed, it should not—but merely reflects my research area. In addition, I acknowledge and realize that the texts I’m going to discuss may only feature heterosexual pairings, but I’m aware that marriages don’t only involve opposite-sex couples.

[21st] century, racial identity for mixed-race people involves choosing between available options, and the once-impenetrable color line is now a matter for social negotiation” (Rockquemore, 2002, 486). This new “problem” places biraciality in spaces that burst out of the strict, rigid binaries of black or white in an attempt to define race in more complex and nuanced ways, which, in essence, creates new categories, in addition to black and white, that yield more categories and negotiations for black-white biracials.

Yet, the problem that concerns this project is how that biraciality functions within these specific texts and in the field of literary criticism. As I lay out in this introduction, literary criticism concerning mixed-race or biracial characters focuses primarily on the notion of the tragic mulatta and the passer.³ These contemporary texts of biracial literature by Senna and Durrow do not reinscribe to those same depictions that were/are so prevalent in tragic mulatto fiction. While the existing criticism I discuss is useful for examining these contemporary works, I show that there is still a master narrative shaping our understanding of mixed-race characters in fiction—especially the genre of tragic mulatto fiction—that endorses dysfunction, confusion, displacement, trauma, aimlessness, and even death into the characters’ lives or environments.⁴ However, what these new texts do is offer a counternarrative, in which they triumph over those ill-fated characterizations and representations. Biracial authors themselves, Senna and Durrow remix and reinvent the iconic tragic mulatta characters that are not locked into a black-white

³ See *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* by Harriet Beecher Stowe; *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* by William Wells Brown; *The Garies and Their Friends* by Frank J. Webb; *Iola Leroy* by Frances Harper; “Désirée's Baby” by Kate Chopin; *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color-Line* by Charles W. Chesnutt; *The House Behind the Cedars* by Charles W. Chesnutt; *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson; *Quicksand* and *Passing* by Nella Larsen; *Light in August* by William Faulkner; and, *Imitation of Life* by Fannie Hurst

⁴ Some critics discussing how this genre has specifically shaped the notions and attitudes about biracial and mixed-raced characters in literature include Sterling A. Brown’s “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors” (1933), Judith Berzon in *Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* (1978), and Joel Williamson in *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States* (1980).

binary or a tragic representation. Rather, they offer their biracial female characters the ability to negotiate on their own terms— fluid, flexible, and hybrid identities that can empower, transform, and transcend these historical representations of biracial characters. Both novels I have chosen specifically for this project have black-white, female biracial characters and/or protagonists with a black father and a white mother. I am choosing to focus on female characters because the tragic mulatta is already the more common character trope, and because I want to keep the focus on biracial experience as it intersects with femininity.⁵ My project shows how even when these authors do employ the tragic mulatta trope, these authors use the literature to engage the tragic mode in an attempt to critique it and offer new ways of reading biracial characters.

I am choosing these two specific novels for a number of reasons. First, the authors' biraciality itself offers a closer connection and experience to the characters they are writing about. Second, the authors' focus on children and adolescents is important because it allows for a discussion on the complexity of growing up biracial (e.g. identity formation, racial identity options, fluidity) in the U.S. today that may be overlooked in adult characters. Third, the authors provide character representations that reflect the lived experiences and real consequences of biracial individuals. On a personal level, these texts have also mirrored and connected me to my own experiences and struggles of being biracial in the U.S. Reading these two texts can open up for reading other biracial literature that locate similar characters in their quest for fluidity and agency, characters hoping to understand the performative and shifting codes of race and culture, and characters wanting to form connections and relationships with the world around them.

⁵ Historically, tragic mulatta fiction was much more popular and the literary audience indulged in the fantasy and fascination of tragic mulattas. See Judith Berzon's *Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction*.

In order to fully understand how these contemporary authors have reimagined these biracial characters at the center of their fiction, where the tragedy of their racial makeup is not the central focus, it is imperative to understand that trajectory from then until now. In this introduction, I locate the critical discourse on the tragic mulatto character in literature past and present and show how the lack of biracial subjectivity and biracial identity formation continued to confine and control how we read these characters well up into the 21st century. By looking specifically at different junctures in U.S. history, law, and culture, the dissertation is able to locate black-white biraciality in its different transformations. What this project ultimately seeks to accomplish is to highlight the fact that, as historical conditions change, so do the links among the types of experiences of biracial people and any ensuing group consciousness concerning those experiences. Furthermore, while these historical, legal, and social changes eventually show up in the literature as well, I argue that too much criticism has leaned towards tragic representations and limitations for biracial characters in the literature. This project can guide us to different readings and different critical ideas about biraciality and biracial characters in literature.

While it is important to note the cultural, social, and legal factors that affect how biraciality has shifted, I must show the ways the definitions of biraciality as well as the self-perceptions of biraciality have changed. If not for the burgeoning field of Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS) and its accompanying scholars doing the work in the early 2000s, then the critical discourse on biracial individuals would remain stagnant in its tragic representations. CMRS has laid the groundwork for advancing new theories and models of biracial identity. My dissertation explains how CMRS's interdisciplinary approach to the issues and experiences of

mixed-race is necessary, progressive, and innovative to be used effectively in the field of literary studies.

Similar to the premise in Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, where she illuminates that after 400 years there are still "choked representations of an Africanist presence" (Morrison, 1992, 17) that will undoubtedly create and maintain a "willful critical blindness," (p.18) limiting and restricting how we read, analyze, and interrogate race and literature, my project demands that we develop a critical racial awareness in the literature we read. Racial literacy is one of my key terms here. Racial literacy is more than recognizing the racial problems and racial realities in the U.S. or even understanding and respecting one's racial identity because it is all important, but it is ultimately about skill building and social justice for a nation at large. Racial literacy is thus a skill set we can use to make effective changes on a number of personal, social, structural, and political levels in U.S. Yet, I see this skill set being used in today's contemporary literature. I look to legal scholar Lani Guinier and sociologists Frances Winddance Twine and Amy C. Steinbugler to frame my ideas and borrow from their own ruminations of racial literacy to define what I call biracial literacy, a subset of racial literacy. I explain how racial literacy becomes a set of practices and processes one learns and knows over time that ebb and flow in our small, private family spheres and then moves outward to our communities and societies at large. I propose here that the two specific texts by Senna and Durrow serve as good models in demonstrating to readers how to develop a biracial literacy and how to read biracial characters with this same biracial lens. I hope to show that reading with a biracial lens here gives us a different perspective and angle in learning how to find other moments of discovery and possibility within biracial literature that do not use biracialness as the tragedy. This project's analysis of the two novels serves as a racial literacy

tool for reading against the dominant narrative and thus allows readers to grapple with the personal, social, and institutional critique of mixed race in the U.S. Toni Morrison helped readers and critics see that even when they thought racial difference in African American identity and experience were not in a text they were. What I am arguing is that we can do one more than that. In addition to that, I suggest that this African American presence is not only black, but sometimes it is biracial and we need to know or be able to recognize when one is black or biracial in this literature. In that sense, I am following Morrison's example but with a specific focus on biraciality.

As my project moves away from identifying biraciality as the tragedy to befall biracial characters in literature, it is imperative to first understand how my project intends to read "race" in the U.S. in order to better understand my dissertation's specific discussion of black-white biracial characters. It is here where my understanding of race and racial identity are influenced and theorized by Hazel Rose Markus and Paula M. L. Moya. The notions of race are constantly changing and shifting to include a multitude of different cultures and experiences in the U.S., which makes it somewhat difficult to fully gauge race on individual terms, without recognizing the daily racial schemas and codes we encounter in our social worlds. In other words, they equip us with the knowledge of creating and acting out race in our daily lives. I extend my racial dialogue and understanding to the ideas proposed by Markus and Moya in their recent collection, *Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century*. Markus and Moya are vital for my project because they fully grasp and recognize the need to "do race" in a different way that positions us all into equal spaces instead of allowing past racial hierarchies and racist ideology to dictate how we experience race in the U.S. today. Markus and Moya offer us ways to move beyond conversations about race and ethnicity that focus on discourses that would have us believe

“We’re beyond race” or that “Everyone’s little bit racist” or one more that “It’s a black thing—you wouldn’t understand” (Markus & Moya, 2010, 5). Lastly, I look at mixed race in the U.S. through the CMRS lens that informs my project at hand here. CMRS is an interdisciplinary field of study that puts mixed race issues at the forefront of its mission.

After making these critical steps to understanding how I lay the framework for the introduction, I then offer chapter summaries about the textual analysis of the two selected novels and a conclusion to help situate myself as a contributor to the field of CMRS. I represent yet another voice to the biracial experience in the U.S. While my dissertation does not aim to provide a public policy statement on how to be biracial, how to raise biracial children, or how to change centuries of a tinged racial past, it does aim to find the moments in the literature that offset readings of tragedy and to use the literature to mark moments of possibility where the characters allow us to rethink the social and cultural problems of mixed race in the U.S. Furthermore, my dissertation encourages the audience to understand the possibility of what can happen when they unpack the narratives differently, because in the end representation always matters and affects the ways we read.

Understanding Biracial Literacy

Literacy, in this project, is at the center of understanding and creating dialogues about race in the texts I analyze. One can read the world in many prescribed ways, but becoming a reader, engaging in what I call the process of biracial literacy, is something beyond the mere act of technical reading and traditional literacy. Literacy researchers and theorists, Sarah J. McCarthy and Elizabeth Birr Moje, in “Conversations: Identity Matters,” reminds us, “readers and writers can come to understand themselves in particular ways as a result of a literate engagement” (McCarthy & Moje, 2002, 229). Throughout the two specific texts I analyze here,

there are characters reading books of fiction and critical theory (e.g. about biracial characters and/or race) and characters reading the “race” (bodies, behaviors) of other characters. I argue that the most important literacies offered in the novels are those involving reading racial scripts and behaviors of characters and family, reading race as an interactive process, reading as intertextuality, and the reading done by actual readers. More specifically, I show in Chapter 2 how reading with a biracial lens illuminates the ways certain characters are using the lens themselves. By understanding and engaging with these specific types of literacies in the novel, I propose here that by employing a biracial lens to the biracial characters, their interactions, and their environments in the novels garner a better understanding of “doing race” in our social worlds.

By foregrounding literacy as an important component in this project, I also draw on the critical discourse of mirroring proposed by African-American Children’s Literature scholar Rudine Sims Bishop in her work “Mirror, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors.” Mirroring, according to Bishop, enables readers to see themselves and their experiences reflected in the literature they read, which, in turn, provides other readers windows, or access, to other types of cultures and experiences they would never know. Using Bishop’s idea of mirroring helps to make useful connections to both race and literacy that inform this project.

I look mainly to legal scholar Lani Guinier and sociologists Winddance Twine and Amy C. Steinbugler to articulate a biracial literacy, which serves as a dynamic framework to understanding biraciality in contemporary literature. While both Guinier and Twine and Steinbugler speak of a racial literacy in a legal aspect and in a familial aspect, respectively, this project adds “biracial” to the concept of literacy to examine the critical significance of reading biraciality in both the lived realities of people and literary imaginations of characters. My aim

here is to articulate how the development of a biracial literacy can be used to effectively read notions of biraciality without tragic modes and stereotypes as well as gaining knowledge of the racial and social scripts present within biracial literature.

It is imperative to understand that individuals are not inherently born with any form of racial literacy, but instead it is a process that is learned and developed over time in our homes, communities, and work environments. Just as individuals learn how to engage in the technical aspect of reading a book, they can learn how to read their racial and social worlds too. According to Guinier, in “Racial Liberalism to Racial Literacy,” racial literacy functions as a reciprocal relationship between individuals and communities. Guinier explains:

Racial literacy depends upon the engagement between action and thought, between experimentation and feedback, between bottom-up and top-down initiatives, it is about learning rather than knowing. Racial literacy is an interactive process in which race functions as a tool of diagnosis, feedback, and assessment. Second, racial literacy emphasizes the relationship between race and power. Racial literacy reads race in its psychological, interpersonal, and structural dimensions (Guinier, 2004, 114).

In this regard, racial literacy is always a constant and interactive process that involves producing, learning, and knowing about the world. Although Guinier does not specifically mention this process on individual terms, but more so in an institutional or collective sense, I believe it allows for the authors here to engage in multiple points of views with characters, which, in turn, invites readers to consider the value of this interactive process of knowing and learning. Even when characters may not engage in this learning process, I intend to show how the authors can use their perspectives to demonstrate why or how such a process is necessary, and to encourage readers to engage in it themselves.

Twine and Steinbugler’s article “The Gap Between White and Whiteness: Interracial Intimacy and Racial Literacy” provides another aspect of establishing racial literacy that can be

useful in this project. Although Twine and Steinbugler are not speaking about biracial characters in literature, the notions they present here about race and family, race and socialization, and race and identity are necessary in understanding the ways the biracial characters exist and move within the narratives. Twine and Steinbugler explain, “Racial literacy is an everyday practice—an analytic stance that facilitates ongoing self-education and enables members of interracial families to translate racial codes, decipher racial structures, and manage the racial climate in their local and national communities” (Twine & Steinbugler, 2006, 344).⁶ The characters in these specific novels experience most or all of the same daily interactions of racial codes, structures, and climates within specific spaces because of their biraciality. In addition, these sociologists explain the usefulness of engaging in racial literacy for people and individuals that rest outside of those families, who are in a cultural position to “read” those families in literature and culture—sometimes from a position of power—in ways that can allow for false narratives.

Black, White, and Biracial: State of the Nation, State of the Notion

Issues of racial identity have shifted over time as new vectors of law, culture, and custom have transformed (both better or for worse) accepted codes of behavior for the racial cultures of the United States. Returning back to DuBois’ *The Souls of Black Folks*, my project reiterates how we come to understand and experience mixed race as a different notion today. One of my project’s aims, to situate race differently in the biracial literature I analyze here, is echoed in DuBois’ text when he states, “We seldom study the condition of the Negro to-day honestly and carefully. It is so much easier to assume that we know it all. Or perhaps, having already reached

⁶ Twine and Steinbugler continue on to say further “Yet racial literacy does not operate exclusively among either transracial parents or members of interracial families. It is a form of literacy that can be acquired by Black and non-Black members of diverse racial and ethnic origin as well as nonparents. Members of interracial families and couples varied in the degree of racial literacy that they possessed. Racial literacy can generate a particular sociopolitical vision through an ongoing dialogue about the meaning and value of race with one’s self and one’s family members, friends, and peers” (344).

conclusions in our own minds, we are loth to have them disturbed by facts” (Dubois, 2003, 99).

Although his manifesto on the consciousness of race in America was published in 1903, DuBois’ ideas are still relevant to race consciousness in the 21st century, where U.S. notions of race demand more critical analysis in both literature and popular culture. In *Southscapes*:

Geographies of Race, Region, and Literature, Thadious Davis wants us to believe that “Although racial configurations in the twenty-first century South are no longer reducible to a black-white binary, the residue from the centuries of that bifurcated world persists in its ethnically and racially diverse regions” (Davis, 2011, 6). My project reiterates that the black-white binary still exists and has left this racial residue in our minds and imaginations. In *Southscapes*, Davis contends that “The multiple stereotypes of black bodies promulgated in white southern society rendered black people vulnerable to the projections marking them as threats and pollutants who would defile the purity of both white spaces and white bodies” (p. 27). These projections are not only harmful to a construction of black identity but also to our American identity as readers and writers alike come to imagine these stereotypes as accuracies and not misrepresentations.⁷

Unfortunately, what ends up happening is that blackness gets treated as a “pollutant” that simply blackens whiteness (reiterating the binary, as in the one-drop rule) instead of creating or enabling some new category or something altogether anti-categorical.

I think it important here to see how the different literary and historical movements work to make certain representations matter. I explain here how African American and biracial identity

⁷ Although Davis is not talking specifically about mixed race here, it would be amiss not to believe that mixed race, especially in the Southern region, is not often regulated and conceived as “black” because of the ills of southern tradition that carries both miscegenation and the “one-drop rule” as placeholders for segregation and equality. Therefore, when she speaks of black bodies, I extend that same notion to mixed-race, or biracial characters, in the texts I analyze here.

has changed over time and what caused those changes.⁸ By looking specifically at the culture and customs of the Colonial period, the Antebellum period, the Reconstruction/Nadir period, Jim Crow Segregation, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Civil Rights Movement, I can locate biracial identity in its many transformations.⁹ I use Kathleen Korgen's 1998 text, *From Black to Biracial: Transforming Racial Identity among Americans*, to assist in identifying these specific transformations.¹⁰ Therefore, in this section, I explain how (bi)racial identity is situated in relation to the dominant white culture during these times in history and in literature.

During the early Colonial period, the notions of racial distinctions and racial categories did not affect the Africans and Virginians that first inhabited the new America. In fact, Korgen explains how "The history of biracial Americans begins soon after the arrival of the first Africans in North America. In 1619, a Dutch man of war gave the English colonists of Virginia twenty Africans in exchange for food supplies. Shortly thereafter, the first black-white biracial individuals were born in what is now the United States" (Korgen, 1998, 9).¹¹ Furthermore, Korgen reminds us how both Africans and indentured white servants worked together, became

⁸ Throughout the essay, I will use the terms "black" and "African Americans" interchangeably.

⁹ Jim Crow legislation and laws legalized racial segregation. The laws—which existed for about 100 years, from the post-Civil War era until 1968—marginalized black Americans. In addition, my project stresses that biracial subjectivity is a racial notion that did not ground itself in the earliest movements in U.S. racial and literary history. Consequently, it was not until the Multiracial Movement of the late 1970s where biracial and mixed-race identity labels were created in society and culture.

¹⁰ Kathleen Odell Korgen's sociological study of biracial identity in the U.S. address three primary issues: "(1) the racial self-definition of biracial individuals, (2) influences on racial self-conception, and (3) the individual, social, and structural implications of this racial self-identity. This examination reveals the transformation in racial self-definition among biracial Americans and present and potential repercussions of this alteration in racial identity.

¹¹ When engaging with Korgen's text, she employs the term "biracial" to describe mulattoes in the early periods of Colonial America because she uses the premise that biracial Americans did not just come into our lexicon and imaginations in the late 1970s to present day, but they were here as early as the birth of America in Virginia in the early 17th century.

friends, and, sometimes lovers. However, these types of friendships and relationships amongst Africans and Virginians quickly changed. Korgen notes:

For approximately forty years, African and white servants were treated with equal harshness under the law. Over time, however, white and black labor became distinguished from each another. White indentured labor dwindled, while African labor became transformed into slavery. The decision to establish African slavery inalterably affected the relations between blacks and whites in the United States. In turn, it played a direct role in how black-white biracial Americans have been perceived and treated (pp. 9-10).

In order to perpetuate and uphold the ideas of slavery, the English colonists used both religion and notions of white superiority against Africans to create clear distinctions between the two groups. In an attempt to curb miscegenation between the two groups, many white indentured servants were condemned and penalized for having sexual relationships and unions with African slave women.¹² Laws were enacted in Virginia to stop procreation of such unions. Trying to define the mulattoes' status and where to place them during this Colonial period was both confusing and difficult. Therefore, new measures of the laws had to be changed to account for this new phenomenon because miscegenation would prove to complicate race relations between the *now* two distinct groups, especially when notions of whiteness were to be both specifically different and superior to blackness.¹³ Korgen points out, "English law had historically relegated all children to the status of their fathers. However, if this were to be the case in the colonies, it

¹² Korgen notes: "In 1630, a mixed crowd of Africans and white Virginia colonists assembled to see Hugh Davis, a white man, severely beaten with a whip. His crime was having sex with an African woman. The colonial leaders deemed this act a 'dishonor of God and shame of Christians.' These leaders hoped that his whipping and subsequent public acknowledgment of his 'fault' would discourage any further sexual intercourse between English colonists and Africans. While there is no clear record of whether this strategy worked with the beaten Hugh Davis, it is quite apparent that the overall effort was a failure. Miscegenation between blacks and whites, and the subsequent creation of biracial persons, has been a consistent and integral part of colonial and U.S. history" (9).

¹³ In *New People*, Joel Williamson points out "In the late 1600s, fines and years of forced servitude were the fate of white women who gave birth to biracial children. Blacks and whites who chose to marry were banished from the colony of Virginia. By 1705, interracial couples who married were subject to prison terms of six months (8, 11).

would prevent landowners from using many of the progeny of their slaves as labor. The Virginia Assembly addressed this concern by declaring in 1662 that biracial children of slave women were slaves” (p. 11). Over the next century, the push to end miscegenation would be controlled with anti-miscegenation laws across the colonies to prohibit the union and births of mulatto children that would become, as Williamson notes, “the genius of a new people” (p. 59). These “new people” would be the one group of people to both jangle the nerves and increase anxiety in the racial discourse of U.S. history.¹⁴

In the antebellum period, African Americans had a special mission—to secure their birthright as U.S. citizens. However, with slavery in the U.S., Africans Americans faced a grim reality—a democratic paradox. What we encounter during the antebellum period then is the black person’s commitment to freedom versus the American promise of freedom. Democracy was never promised to African Americans, and they soon realized they would have to fight to obtain it. Slavery and racism set the stage for race wars in the U.S. Many blacks struggled to understand how the differences, external or internal, between blacks and whites were so deep to cause racial separation and division.¹⁵ Blacks were constantly measured against whites and deemed inferior. Biracial individuals, especially in the deep South, did not fare that much better.¹⁶ However, in Paul Spickard’s *Mixed Blood*, he discusses just how differently mulattoes

¹⁴ Korgen writes, “However, in spite of great efforts to prevent miscegenation, records indicate that there were approximately 60,000 biracial individuals in the former colonies by the end of the Revolutionary War” (12).

¹⁵ External features, or the physical characteristics, like complexion, facial features—head shape, full lips, wide, and large nose, and hair and hair texture were different than those of whites were then internalized to signal differences in intelligence, morality, and religion. By making these differences akin to not belonging to American ideals, whites were able to enforce a systematic ideology of beliefs and values on black slaves that made them inferior and different than whites in nearly every aspect of American culture. In other words, whites believed slaves were not Americans.

¹⁶ Korgen add, “The history of biracial individuals differs in the upper and the lower South. During the Antebellum period, the upper South consisted of Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, Maryland, Delaware, North Carolina, Tennessee, and the District of Columbia. The lower South was comprised of Florida, Texas, South

fared in the upper and lower Souths in the U.S.¹⁷ Slavery loomed over the South as racial identity for blacks was marked by racism, inferiority, and degradation.¹⁸

As African Americans situated themselves inside slavery's oppressive system, African American writers found in literature a way to create not only an American identity but a black identity too. The slave narrative emerged as the ur-text in African American literature. It began as the first expression of the black self. Through the slave narrative, the black body was constructed in new ways. The slave narrative's form uses testimony, memory, truth, and race to show how the black body is raced in a white dominated society. Because of the slave narrative, black writers could expose in literature the contradictions between American democracy and slavery.

On December 6, 1865, the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution "abolished slavery and involuntary servitude," signaling the long-anticipated era of freedom, equality, and opportunity for all Americans. However, the Reconstruction period in the U.S. would prove much more difficult to bring into reality. Even when the Reconstruction Act was passed in 1867 and the Freedmen's Bureau helped to protect the rights and lives of Southern blacks, it could not

Carolina, Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. Biracial people existed in the upper South since shortly after the first Africans arrived in 1619" (13).

¹⁷ Paul Spickard, in *Mixed Blood*, notes "Mixed-race persons did not exist in great numbers in the lower South until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even then they were not as numerous as those in the upper South. In 1850, the upper South had approximately two hundred thousand mixed race persons, while only about ninety thousand persons of mixed racial heritage lived in the lower South" (247). Spickard goes on to mention that the mulattoes in the upper South fared poorly because they were often seen as black and inferior and were rarely granted free papers. However, those in the lower South were in a different caste than blacks and many of them lived very well. Spickard states, "In cases of racial unrest, the white population could count on the loyalty of the mixed-race population" (248).

¹⁸ Korgen explains, "By the first decade of the nineteenth century, Northern states legally prohibited slavery. New York, which was the last Northern state to pass legislation against slavery, eradicated the institution within its borders in 1804. In the South, the clear economic profitability of slavery overwhelmed any moral hesitations about the institution. From the time of the Revolution, slavery became a particularly Southern manifestation" (12).

account for the white supremacist ideology that remained from slavery.¹⁹ While freed blacks naively believed that they would gain a new status after slavery legally ended and enjoy “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” and “equal protection under the law,” the reality was far more disappointing. Consequently, the buffer that mulattoes had created in the racial binary system between black and white people would find itself deteriorating because whites wanted to maintain racial superiority. Korgen points out how mulattoes threatened the natural order:

The development of scientific racism in the nineteenth century led to the further denigration of blacks and extreme white opposition to black/white interracial relationships. The pervasive eighteenth and nineteenth century scientific notion that natural order is based on inequality promoted arguments that justified slavery. [...] It was the increasingly supported notion of the genetic differences between whites and blacks which made slavery ethically, as well as economically, defensible. [...] No longer did many whites view mixed race people as ‘almost white.’ Instead, mixed blood was associated with physical debility, mental inferiority, and moral degeneracy (Korgen, 1998, 15).

In this regard, anti-miscegenation rhetoric began to play a major part in the ways racial hierarchies persisted well after slavery ended to keep a racial order that would relegate everything outside of “pure” whiteness as an abomination. Korgen adds, “As Reconstruction ended and restrictions on all those with any African heritage became increasingly severe, the former distinction between blacks and mixed-race persons began to close. Gradually, those of mixed racial background came to understand that, no matter how brown instead of black they appeared, they would always be seen as black by the white population (p. 17). Consequently, freed black and biracial citizens endured both legal and social degradation with anti-miscegenation laws, black codes, and Jim Crow laws (e.g. segregation). With the construction of these laws and mandates, black and biracial citizens remained debased, humiliated, and

¹⁹ Three major things happened during Reconstruction: 13th Amendment (1865) outlawed slavery, 14th Amendment (1868) provided equal protection to African Americans, and 15th Amendment (1870) granted suffrage to black men.

powerless to truly understand freedom and independence, which allowed white citizens to keep the race separate and unequal. Williamson points out, “In white eyes, all Negroes came to look alike” (Williamson, 1980, 62). In other words, whites began to believe in the racist ideology of the “one-drop rule,” that segregated, both legally and scientifically, blacks from whites.²⁰

But while Reconstruction did not change white supremacist ideology, it did foster a new sense of identity into the African American self. With a now legal right to citizenship and access to education, many blacks not only felt like Americans now but wanted to enjoy the same benefits as whites. Their racial identities begin to reflect one of hope and optimism, and one that would allow black people to exist equally with whites, or so they thought. The following decades of Nadir represent a disappointment in humanity and injustice to African Americans. And that disappointment and setback to the progress of America occurred with the Supreme Court 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case that made segregation legal and Jim Crow the enforcer.²¹ Williamson alerts us to the notions that circulated during the Jim Crow era: “The vast majority of society frowned upon any type of interracial fraternization. Both keepers of the law and of social etiquette strictly monitored any social interaction between the two races. At this point in history,

²⁰ The one-drop rule, which social scientists referred to as hypodescent, is the legal racial notion that any person born with a drop of black blood was categorized racially as black. Regardless if a mixed-race person had only ½ or ¼ of black blood, they were still deemed black under this racial ideology. There are specific racial designations depending on how your genealogy pans out. Some of those designations included octoroon, quadroon, mulatto, mustee, mustifino, quintroon, hexadecaroon, zambo, and griffe. Please see mixedracestudies.org for more information on these definitions.

²¹ Korgen adds “‘Jim Crow’ is the term used to describe a system of segregation between whites and nonwhites in the United States. The system was given constitutional sanction in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision, which declared that “separate but equal” facilities for blacks and whites was constitutional. This case stems from the attempt of Plessy, who was seven-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth African to gain the privileges of white Americans. Interestingly, he maintained that, because his African heritage was not discernible, he should have the same rights as any white man. The Court ignored this argument of Plessy’s and concentrated on whether or not enforced separation of whites and nonwhites was a violation of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments. They deemed that it was not. In their decision they declared the validity of Jim Crow legislation and the ‘one drop rule.’ It was not until 1954 with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that this verdict was overturned in the public school systems. It was not until 1964 and 1965 with the *Civil Rights Acts* and the *Voting Rights Act* that African Americans were given equal rights under U.S. laws” (note 9, 23).

anyone socializing with blacks was susceptible to the charge of being a ‘white nigger.’ People were convinced that if you ‘acted’ black you were black” (Williamson, 1980, pp. 98-108). For decades afterwards, black citizens endured daily injustices, especially segregation and the wave of tortuous lynchings, which forced the great “Migration North” for blacks to flee the South. These racial attitudes would persist well into the latter part of the 20th century in the United States.²² What the *Plessy* case did in the U.S. was to make all biracial people invisible because they were all legally “black.”

As the culture in the South proved detrimental to African Americans during Reconstruction and Nadir, the literature of those periods hoped to accomplish much more. As writer and abolitionist Frederick Douglass paved the way for African Americans to exist in literature and on the page, many other black writers continued to write with the same sophistication and to remain aligned with the literary conventions of the canon. Much of the writing during this time was meant to instruct whites and other African Americans on slavery’s wrongs and to correcting the historical record.

As black Americans struggled with being both African and American, the literature that consumed the period was that of popular literature and novels of purpose. Although the period did not grant many black people full citizenships and rights, the literature reflected the

²² The project, entitled “Free People of Color in Louisiana: Revealing an Unknown Past,” by book curator Michael Taylor at Louisiana State University Libraries explains some very interesting facts about the conundrums of race and freedom in the south: “The first record of a free black living on the prairies of southwestern Louisiana is from 1766...At the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, at least one in six of the roughly 8,000 people living in New Orleans was a free person of color. The city’s population, both white and black, increased significantly between 1791 and 1810 due to an influx of émigrés displaced by the Haitian Revolution (led by Toussaint L’Ouverture, a free man of color). The first official U. S. census of Orleans Territory in 1810 counted 7,585 free persons of color, compared to 34,311 whites and a total population of 76,556. The influx of black refugees from Haiti heightened anxieties among Louisiana’s white population. Over the previous twenty years, the colony/territory had only narrowly escaped several slave rebellions. Free people of color, it was argued, would only incite further unrest” (<https://lib.lsu.edu/sites/all/files/sc/fpoc/history.html#historygolden>). Given my previous attention to transnational constructions of race, I think it is important to note the racial difficulties by free people of color in Louisiana and by Haitian immigrants after the Revolution, as well as the further difficulty faced by this caste (as it was called in LA) after Reconstruction when law began to define them simply as “black.”

emancipation from slavery, the rebuilding of America, and the need to inform and delight. As blacks sought to define themselves alongside whites, especially by expecting the same rights whites had been born with, they often began emulating whiteness and whites in not only culture but also in the literature. While many black writers imitated white literary form, they often revised them too.²³

Black thinkers of the time, like W.E.B DuBois and Booker T. Washington, gave blacks and whites differing views as to what blacks should be doing to further themselves either politically or economically to change their positions in U.S. society. In 1903, sociologist and critic W.E.B. DuBois changed the face of African American identity with one of the most important African American documents in literature through his manifesto *The Souls of Black Folks*. In these essays, DuBois defines the black American's struggle to identify themselves and the burden of merging their African and American identities to form a perfect union in America. DuBois describes this struggle:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Dubois, 2003, 9).

DuBois's political platform urged black Americans to understand that they must stop living “within the veil” (p. 3) and realize their purpose to promoting the livelihood of blacks in America. In both the Reconstruction and Nadir periods, African American racial identity vowed to exist as one that incorporated both American and African in useful and political ways. While

²³ For example, Charles W. Chesnutt revises Joel Chandler Harris's “plantation tradition” style writing by replacing his Uncle Remus with Uncle Julius as well as “adding” the concept of “conjuring” in “The Goophered Grapevine.”

DuBois explored the richness of African American life and identity, he continued to group biracial people in the category of “black.”

During the Reconstruction/Nadir periods in U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies were able to permeate the social structures of slavery and segregation to such a degree that black and white people began to see them as natural and inevitable. Even the literature here sometimes mimicked and stereotyped Southern black life as it often insulted what it meant to be black in the U.S. The racial persecution, legal segregation, and lack of opportunities for success forced many African Americans to flee to many northern cities. However, America sees a new version of black racial identity as we enter in the Harlem Renaissance.²⁴

What we begin to notice in black identity formation in the Harlem Renaissance is specifically how black writers and artists seek to aggressively push the theme of self-definition and change in a way that advances a wider struggle for full citizenship, human dignity, and social justice. The Harlem Renaissance marked a great moment in history for African Americans with an overflowing of literary, artistic, and musical accomplishments.²⁵ Throughout slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Nadir, African Americans had withstood a long-troubled history and clearly had nowhere left to go but upwards. The Harlem Renaissance is considered one of the first established periods of excellence in African American literature and culture. When we look to identity construction in the Harlem Renaissance it varies between writers, critics, and artists, but the general consensus of the Harlem Renaissance is one that “uplifts the

²⁴ W.E.B DuBois, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, Claude McKay, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neal Hurston, to name a few, were part of the browning of America and represented the “Talented Ten” of The Harlem Renaissance. Most black leaders, in the Harlem Renaissance, were of mixed-race ancestry.

²⁵ Williamson points out: “In 1918, Edward Reuter published his findings that 3,820 of 4,267 Negroes who had ‘made any marked success in life’ were mulattoes” (129).

race.”²⁶ In this movement, black American artists took hold of their lives and the future of their people so that in upcoming years there could be representations of a culture and a people to be proud of in the U.S. The writers and the culture of the Harlem Renaissance allowed for black freedom of expression and identity to flourish in complex ways. While the texts of writers like Charles W. Chesnutt, W.E.B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston (and many others) create textual selves for African Americans, they also provide a narrative for race to exist as something more. Race, too, is a narrative that helps people makes sense of themselves and the society they live in. As the Harlem Renaissance coexisted with the Jim Crow South in the early parts of the 20th century, the latter part of the 20th century would welcome in more hope and optimism of a different racial outlook for both African Americans and biracial individuals. Yet, what still remains out of the narratives of race during this period is any notion of biraciality. Even during this moment of uplift, biracial individuals had to remain only “black” to promote black solidarity and black pride.

The 1950s and 1960s America would signal the end of Jim Crow segregation and would usher in the Civil Rights Movement. The Jim Crow South heralded in hatred and injustice to blacks in several ways (e.g. unequal schooling, poor housing accommodations, unemployment, and limited voting rights) in the mid-20th century than it ever had before. Korgen adds, “According to a Gallup poll, as late as 1958, 92% of Northern and Western whites and 99% of Southern whites were opposed to interracial marriages. Blacks also disapproved of mixed-race unions. They believed that it was predominantly the lowest of both classes who would engage in

²⁶ In the necessity of time, I cannot mention the differences in attitudes in beliefs in artists and writers during the time period as they are complex in nature, but the differences are situated around the “New Negro” writers—Hughes, McKay, Cullen, and others—who were in conflict with the old guard writer—W.E.B. DuBois. The main contention from DuBois is that these writers should write and create art that has a political purpose while these writers insisted on writing/art that gave them the freedom to write as they pleased, breaking free from the canonical, White forms.

interracial relationships” (Korgen, 1998, 19). With Jim Crow legislation and the one drop rule immersed as part of the fabric of American life in the U.S. South, many black and white people became prime targets of racism, humiliation, and degradation for simply wanting to marry interracially. In *Mark One or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America*, Kim Williams points out:

Although we tend to recall it primarily in relation to punitive measures against interracial contact in most areas of public life, Jim Crow was particularly lethal when it came to private, intimate association. No other racial or ethnic group has a history as tightly bound to state-sanctioned and state-enforced racial separation. Thus, for many blacks who would look back, the topic of racial mixture is fraught with trouble and woe (Williams, 2006, pp. 127-128).

Interracial love and marriage fueled a deep-seated fear that marked our society in very damaging ways. More specifically, this fear was conditioned and engrained in a U.S. society so much that the idea of interracial love was condemned as an abomination against God and a crime against the government.²⁷ Although interracial couples and marriages did not occur in droves in the south during the 1950s, the interracial love still happened and biracial children were born out of these unions. These interracial couples risked it all in the name of love and justice to be able to love and marry someone else regardless of their race. Fighting for civil rights issues during this time would eventually change race relations in the U.S. in dynamic ways.

One dynamic way in which the U.S. moved forward in race relations, especially in terms of interracial marriages, during the Civil Rights Movement was the landmark case of *Loving v. Virginia* in 1967. The landmark Supreme Court case—*Loving v. Virginia*—set up a cultural redefinition of marriage in the U.S. and struck down laws in Virginia banning interracial marriage as a violation of the 14th Amendment of the *U.S. Constitution*. The interracial

²⁷ Korgen alerts us to this point: “At one point or another in U.S. history, thirty eight states have passed anti-miscegenation laws. In some instances, couples were literally roused from their bed and arrested” (20).

couple—Richard and Mildred Loving—was arrested in June 1958 for marrying across state lines in Washington, D.C. and then returning to Virginia thereafter.²⁸ Phyl Newbeck and Brendon Wolfe note how appellate court Judge Bazile, a defender of anti-miscegenation legislation in Virginia, denied the Loving’s appeal to the Virginia Supreme Court in 1965, citing the anti-miscegenation law and religious doctrine as valid reasons: “Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix” (Newbeck & Wolfe, 2015, par. 2). Therefore, the Lovings appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. Two years later, on June 12, 1967, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unanimously in favor of Richard and Mildred Loving.²⁹ The *Loving* case breaks down over 300 years of legislation that promulgated a racial divide in the U.S. for too long.^{30,31}

²⁸ Phyl Newbeck and Brendon Wolfe notes: “After pleading guilty, they were forced to leave the state. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed motions and appeals on their behalf beginning in 1963, and after the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals ruled against the Lovings in 1966, the U.S. Supreme Court heard their arguments. The case came after nearly 300 years of legislation in Virginia regulating interracial marriage and carefully defining which citizens could legally claim to be white. Two U.S. Supreme Court cases, *Pace v. Alabama* (1883) and *Maynard v. Hill* (1888), upheld the constitutionality of such laws. In 1924, the *Act to Preserve Racial Integrity* banned interracial marriage in Virginia while defining a white person as someone who had no discernible nonwhite ancestry. It was this law that the U.S. Supreme Court ruling said denied Virginians’ ‘fundamental freedom’ to marry.” Please visit www.encyclopediavirginia.org/ for more information regarding these Virginia law cases.

²⁹ Newbeck and Wolfe reminds us “In his opinion, Chief Justice Earl Warren described marriage as ‘one of the ‘basic civil rights of man,’ fundamental to our very existence and survival. [...] To deny this fundamental freedom on so unsupportable a basis as the racial classifications embodied in these statutes, classifications so directly subversive of the principle of equality at the heart of the Fourteenth Amendment, is surely to deprive all the State’s citizens of liberty without due process of law” (“Supreme Court” par. 1).

³⁰ Korgen cites, “An increase in interracial marriages followed the *Loving* verdict that repealed this legislation. A “biracial baby boom” began shortly thereafter. Close to fifty thousand children were born to black/white, interracial marriage partners in 1990 alone” (20).

³¹ In celebration of the *Loving v. Virginia* victory, a graduate student by the name of Ken Tanabe (of an interracial, intercultural and international heritage) decided to do something special for this landmark case. He helped to create a Loving Day website that went live on June of 2004. On the website, www.lovingday.org, the celebrations “commemorate the anniversary of the Loving decision every year on or around June 12th. We host the

While *Loving v. Virginia* helped to redefine interracial marriage in the late 1960s, it was the events of the Civil Rights Movement that catapulted the push to change the racial hotbed of injustice, discrimination, and prejudice in the U.S.³² In the movement, there was a fervent energy and task at hand to bring the racial discord in the South to an end. With the help of sit-ins throughout the South, The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955), The March on Washington (1963), and The Selma to Montgomery March (1965), a countless number of crusaders for justice, both black and white, had a part in securing civil rights for all U.S. citizens. The Civil Rights Movement granted all black people and other minorities equal civil rights under the law with the *Civil Rights Act* (1964) and the *Voting Rights Act* (1965). With leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X between the 1950s-1970s, black people in the U.S. could finally have voices that embraced their blackness and laws granting them equal protection and rights. The Civil Rights Movement was a turbulent time in U.S. history that undoubtedly loosened the entrenched racist ideology of Jim Crow and slavery.³³

A global network of Loving Day celebrations commemorate the anniversary of the *Loving* decision every year on or around June 12th. We host the Loving Day Flagship Celebration in New York City, which is the largest of these events (over 1000 guests). We coordinate with multiethnic community groups such as The Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA), Swirl, Mixed Chicks, and MAVIN Foundation to promote their Loving Day Celebrations all over the United States. We also encourage people to host their own celebrations for friends and family. These celebrations are diverse in terms of both content and location, but we tie them together through our event listings on LovingDay.org. Loving Day Celebrations are shared among friends and passed down through families to establish a new multicultural tradition” (www.lovingday.org).

³² One of the most known murders during the Civil Rights Movement was that of 14-year-old Emmett Till, who was brutally murder for allegedly whistling at a white woman while visiting family in Mississippi. In an effort to expose the South for its cruel racism against African Americans, Till’s mother had her son’s bloated and mutilated body to be put on display in a public funeral service in Chicago. In this way, Emmett Till became a clear icon for the movement in the 1960s.

³³ Korgen explains, “As the sixties progressed, and Civil Rights protests were both accompanied and then followed by the War on Poverty, the Vietnam War, widespread experimentation with drugs, and sexual liberation, Americans began to turn inward. They were forced to confront defeat in both the domestic and the foreign war and continual social upheaval at home. During the seventies, individualism and interest group politics were spawned. The Black liberation movement, the women’s movement, the lesbian and gay movements, and others that emerged in the fifties, sixties, and seventies were part of a new tradition that embraced an ‘identity oriented paradigm. Identity-focused politics engulfed U.S. culture” (21-22).

While I provide a quick history of more than 200 years of African American experience in the U.S., I do so at the expense of focusing specifically on biracial identities. This history is relevant because it explains the development, or lack thereof, of biracial identity in America. Even through a series of defining moments and movements occurred across the U.S., those moments failed to create new opportunities for biracial people to define themselves. There was no specific movement for understanding and representing biracial identities as something unique even within the African American experience so a push to tout biracial identity really did not take hold during those big historical moments—that biracial issues usually got subsumed within the larger body of Black writing until the 1980s, which is arguably the first generation of biracial kids after *Loving v. Virginia* changed the legal understanding of race at the national (not just state) level.

Multiracial Movement and “Check-The-Box” 2000 Census

While being biracial or multiracial is not a new U.S. phenomenon in the late twentieth century, this growing awareness of self-expression and racial identification did not occur until the late 1970s and early 1980s, which resulted in nationwide organizations advocating on behalf of biracial and multiracial children and their black-white interracial parents during this time too. These activists were mainly middle-class white mothers that wanted to voice their concerns about their biracial children needing “more than one box” to choose for their racial identity instead of outright denying the other race altogether. As the one-drop rule regulated racial identity choices for biracial individuals to only include “black” in the U.S. racial landscape, these white mothers pushed towards legislation that allowed for racial classifications that included

both races and would operate as a separate race to include “multiracial.”³⁴ Kim M. Williams explains in *Mark One or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America*:

The debate over the multiracial category issue opened arguably the most probing examination of race in this country since the 1960s. Yet multiracial activists of the 1980s and 1990s did not reinvent the wheel of protest; instead, they creatively adapted and reinterpreted the tactics, ideologies, and legal outcomes available to them. The civil rights’ struggles of the 1950s and 1960s helped to remove fundamental barriers and produced the legal and political space for multiracial activism to take root and thrive (Williams, 2006, 7).

During the late 1970s, the beginning of the multiracial movement began with many local chapters and initiatives on racial classification distinctions in schools and government forms in California.³⁵ According to the Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA)’s website, the oldest multiracial group in the U.S., Interracial Intercultural Pride (I-Pride), was founded in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1978.³⁶ However, it was the national chapters of The Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA) in 1986, A Place for Us (APFU) in 1986, and Project RACE (Reclassify All Children Equally) in 1991 that would propel the Multiracial Movement in the

³⁴ In “Multiracialism and the Civil Rights Future,” Kim M. Williams explains how “Thus, the multiracial movement at the grassroots [level] was comprised almost entirely of black-white couples, who represented about 90 percent of its total adult membership base in 1997–1998” (56). Many women of the movement felt as if the government did not provide adequate rights to their children by allowing them to self-identify as more than one race. They advocated that a “multiracial” category be added to school and government forms (i.e. 2000 Census) to authenticate and acknowledge their black and white racial heritage.

³⁵ In her 2006 text, *Mark One or More: Civil Rights in Multiracial America*, Kim M. Williams gives a detailed history of the organizations created during the Multiracial Movement. Her text does an effective job of showing just how these organizations had a significant part in undoing the working definition of race and how a social movement was developed. See pages 7-16 specifically.

³⁶ On the AMEA’s website, under the “Outline History of AMEA” section, the organization provides specific dates and initiatives conducted from the late 1970s through the 2000s. Some accomplishments for the multiracial movement include: 1.) Berkeley Public Schools adopt a new classification on school census forms “interracial,” first such classification in modern US history due to the efforts of I-Pride (1979-1980); 2.) California state education officials restrict the use of the Berkeley Public Schools “interracial” classification to internal district uses only, citing federal reporting requirements which do not permit such a classification (1980-81); 3.) Biracial Family Network (BFN) of Chicago founded (1980); 4.) Interracial Family Alliance (IFA) of Huston founded (1982); 5.) Interracial Family Circle (IFC) of Washington founded (1984).

nation's spotlight about multiracialism in the U.S during the 1990s.³⁷ Advocating for a multiracial category on legal documents and government forms for their biracial and multiracial children, supporters and activists lobbied to Congress and The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) to reclassify biracial and multiracial children across the U.S. Legal scholar Taunya Lovell Banks writes in "Multiracial Malaise: Multiracial as a Legal Racial Category" that "Proponents of a multiracial legal category complain that multiracial individuals are harmed by not being recognized under law as multiracial. Specifically, they argue that the law neither recognizes their personal identity nor protects their right to self-identify racially and to have that identity accepted (Banks, 2018, p. 2784). Activists in both AEMA and Project RACE were steadfast in their efforts to make this new category a reality for biracial/multiracial individuals. Yet, the irony here is that many of these advocates, especially in the late 80s and 90s, were typically individuals that were not biracial or multiracial. Nonetheless, the OMB listened to them in some capacity to garner a positive step in the Multiracial Movement. Banks adds, "Attempts to add a multiracial category to census forms for the 1990 and 2000 censuses failed. Instead, for the 2000 census, the compromise offered was the option of checking multiple race boxes."³⁸ Not satisfied, the multiracial category movement (MCM) and some 'multiracial identity

³⁷ The AEMA's mission statement reads: "We believe that every child, every person who is multiethnic/multiracial has the same right as any other person to assert a personal identity that embraces the fullness and integrity of their actual ancestry, and that every multiethnic/multiracial family, whether biological or adoptive, has the same right to grow and develop as any other, and that our children have the right to love and respect each of their parents equally." Please visit the AEMA website for even more information: www.ameasite.com. The Project RACE mission statement reads: "Project RACE advocates for multiracial children, multiracial adults, and their families primarily through multiracial education and community awareness. We do not advocate for racial classifications, but are committed to the appropriate inclusion of multiracial people on any forms that require racial identification. We support policies that make a positive impact on people of multiracial heritage at local, state, and national levels." Please visit the Project RACE's website for even more information: <http://www.projectrace.com>

³⁸ In 1930, the racial classification—"mulatto"—disappeared. It would take another 70 years, in the 2000 Census, for biracial or multiracial individuals to choose more than one race.

legal scholars' continue to push for a separate racial category" (p. 2786). While it may appear that the advocates of the Multiracial Movement failed by not getting the specific multiracial category added to the census, Kim W. Williams suggests, "Spurred by a small group of activists in the 1990s, the American system of racial classification changed recently in a conceptually bold way. With moving reference to the self-esteem of their children, along with the moral conviction that multiracial recognition could help the entire nation beyond an impasse, multiracial advocates were astonishingly successful in the 1990s" (Williams, 2005, 53). The success of the Multiracial Movement allowed for many biracial/multiracial individuals to finally have a representative voice in the U.S. racial landscape. The Multiracial Movement of the early 1990s encouraged open debates, dialogues, and conversations about the notions of race in the U.S. Furthermore, the urgent debate over a multiracial category in the 2000 U.S. Census forced the nation to reflect upon important questions of what it means to construct and maintain racial identity for biracial and multiracial individuals.³⁹ In her dissertation, *Shades of Gray: Black-White Multiracialism in Contemporary American Literature*, Molly McKibbin reminds us:

The 2000 census change was both vehemently opposed and heartily supported, and for the most part the concerns raised by the census revision are still debated. Generally, arguments for and against changing the way the U.S. categorizes and considers black-white mixture can be broken down into two major groups: one that wants in some official capacity to be recognized as multiracial, and one that views change in the way blackness is classified to be a threat to black pride, racial solidarity, and civil rights and political empowerment (for all minority groups including African Americans). These two major camps of the mixed race census debate offer meaningful and important arguments regarding racial identity, and their dialogue illustrates the complexity of the current thinking about racial identity (McKibbin, 2011, 31).⁴⁰

³⁹ Kerry Anne Rockquomore and David Brunnsma informs us, in *Beyond Black: Biracial Identity in America*, that "debates surrounding census racial classifications, as well as changes in the census changes on race, are not new" (2), noting how the census has changed to include different categories from the 1890s to the 1990s.

⁴⁰ In her dissertation, *The Skin We're in: A Literary Analysis of Representations of Mixed Race Identity in Children's Literature*, Amina Chaudhri discusses in general how the shifts in racial identity have changed over time, but that representations are not appearing in children's literature as they should to reflect the 2000 Census results of

The history of racial classification also provides evidence that racial classification is a social and cultural process not a biological, genetic one, especially in our mired racial politics and legislation of black-white race mixing in the U.S. In her dissertation, *The Skin We're in: A Literary Analysis of Representations of Mixed Race Identity in Children's Literature*, Amina Chaudhri believes, "Such fluidity of racial identification should not come as a surprise to anyone who recognizes the temporality of human identity; we understand ourselves to be composites of so many historical and cultural features that we embrace, resist, assert, and deny depending on preference and need within context" (Chaudhri, 2012, 29). After the Civil Rights Movement and the *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court decision, biracial individuals find a place in the Multiracial Movement that grounds them in this sociohistorical place where racial identity is bound to reinvent itself in the aftermath of so much change for minorities in the U.S. McKibbin describes how "Leaders from AMEA and Project RACE testified before Congress regarding census revision as representative voices of 'the multiracial community' and also contributed to Maria Root's anthology *The Multiracial Experience* (1996), which (according to AMEA's website) was 'adopted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census as part of their resources used to determine what revisions (if any) should be made to the Race Question' (p. 4). In this regard, these advocates become prominent voices of the Multiracial Movement and continue today to make steps in the right direction for biracial and multiracial individuals to feel included and represented as a part of the racial landscape in the U.S.

individuals choosing to identify as more than one race. Chaudhri explains, "As a result, 6.8 million people identified as multiracial in that year's (e.g. 2000) Census, followed by 9 million in 2010. The decision to allow individuals to 'mark one or more' on the 2000 Census radically destabilized century-old ways of thinking about race (28).

Although the subject of mulatto (biracial) identity has been a placeholder in both the southern and African American literary traditions, the subject and topic of biracial identity politics and classification has experienced a major shift in scholarship at the cusp of the 21st century. Without the groundbreaking work of Paul Spickard's *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (1989) and Maria P.P. Root's edited volume *Racially Mixed People in America* (1992), then the multiracial movement would not have grown so exponentially as it has in the fields of sociology, psychology, education, and ethnic studies, which has also opened up the doors for the interdisciplinary field of Critical Mixed Race Studies (CMRS). Clinical psychologist and scholar Maria P.P. Root represents one of the pioneers in the early 1990s Multiracial Movement. Her edited anthologies *Racially Mixed People in America* (1992) and *The Multiracial Experience: Racial Borders as the New Frontier* (1996) give a voice and recognition to mixed-race subjects, politics, and identity. Root is specifically known for creating a "Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People" in the edited anthology *The Multiracial Experience* that speaks to the experiences and injustices racially mixed people should not have to endure.⁴¹

"Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People"

I have the right...
not to justify my existence in this world
not to keep the races separate within me
not to be responsible for people's discomfort with my physical ambiguity
not to justify my ethnic legitimacy

⁴¹ In the essay article, "Emerging Paradigms in Critical Mixed Race Studies," the authors discuss how "Root's award-winning anthology, which celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2012, was the first comprehensive examination of multiracial identity and the mixed-race phenomenon in the United States. It included co-founding editor and editor in chief of the *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies* G. Reginald Daniel and co-founding editor Paul Spickard. They took part in establishing foundational discourses for multiracial studies and critical mixed race studies" (Daniel et al 9).

I have the right...
to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify
to identify myself differently than how my parents identify me
to identify myself differently than my brothers and sisters
to identify myself differently in different situations

I have the right...
to create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial
to change my identity over my lifetime—and more than once
to have loyalties and identify with more than one group of people
to freely choose whom I befriend and love (Root, 1996, 7).

Root's "Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People" serves as a daily reminder of how one's social and cultural spaces can influence and shape biracial or multiracial identity in myriad ways.

These rights are often articulated and manifested in some capacity or another to the characters this project analyzes. Root's contribution represents one of the first voices of theorizing mixed race discourse in the 1990s and serves as a preeminent voice in the newly established CMRS.

Birth of Critical Mixed Race Studies

Well before the late 1970s, the topic of mixed race has been a part of the U.S. and other Americas. With scholarship from early critics like Judith Berzon, Joel Williamson, or Werner Sollors who discuss the ways mixed-race has infiltrated into both the legal and literary aspects of U.S. racial notions, I explain how mixed race has shifted and turned a corner with the birth of the CMRS field in 2010. In the first annual *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies (JCMRS)*, scholars and editors G. Reginald Daniel, Laura Kina, Wei Ming Dariotis, and Camilla Fojas work together as a collective unit to show the development of a multiracial discourse over the last two decades and how that discourse demonstrated a need for more critical inquiry and implications in scholarship. In their collectively-authored essay, "Emerging Paradigms in Critical Mixed Race Studies," the authors explain:

In the early 1980s, several important unpublished doctoral dissertations were written on the topic of multiraciality and mixed-race experiences in the United

States. Numerous scholarly works were published in the late 1980s and early 1990s. By 2004, master's theses, doctoral dissertations, books, book chapters, and journal articles on the subject reached a critical mass. They composed part of the emerging field of mixed race studies although that scholarship did not yet encompass a formally defined area of inquiry. What has changed is that there is now recognition of an entire field devoted to the study of multiracial identities and mixed-race experiences. Rather than indicating an abrupt shift or change in the study of these topics, mixed race studies is now being formally defined at a time that beckons scholars to be more critical (Daniel, Kina, Dariotis, & Fojas, 2014, 6).

During the Multiracial Movement of the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, there was an abundance of scholarship in the field of literary studies that focused specifically on tragic mulattoes, tragic passers, the marginal man, black racial uplift, repressed female sexuality, and/or lack of family.⁴² By the same token, in other disciplines and fields in sociology, psychology, and ethnic studies, the scholarship focused primarily on mixed-race identity politics, mixed-race subjectivity, biraciality, or multiraciality. In this section, I highlight three critical voices in literary studies that demand we read biraciality/multiraciality in another way, that we investigate more accurately, and that we offer contemporary (and realistic) representations of mixed-race identities in the new millennium.

Werner Sollors is a trusted and prominent scholar in the field of literary studies who beckons us to see race and identity changing right before we welcomed in the new millennium. In 1997, Sollors reminds us, in his seminal text *Neither Black nor White Yet Both*, that “the time may have come to stop avoiding the interracial theme in literature, to investigate, and to unpack its semantic fields” (Sollors, 1997, 4). It is interesting to note here that to continue avoiding the themes and issues as they appear in and outside of the literature is likely because as a nation,

⁴² Those critics include but are not limited to: Patricia Barbeito (1998), Pamela Barnett (1995), Judith Berzon (1978), Suzanne Bost (1998), Hazel Carby (1987), Barbara Christian (1980), Thadious Davis (1994), George Hutchinson (1995), Deborah McDowell (1986), Ann Rayson (1998), Werner Sollors (1997), Carol Roh Spaulding (1995), Cheryl A. Wall (1986), and Joel Williamson (1980). Please refer to bibliography for a list of those respective works by these critics.

especially during the late 1990s, we did not want to confront the realities of race in the U.S., but simply ignore race altogether. Sollors adds:

By dismissing as ‘Tragic Mulattoes’ a good many characters who are ‘neither black nor white yet both’ and by ridiculing the ‘conventions of their representation in literature as ‘unrealistic’ we may also silently, or not so silently, reinstate the legitimacy of two categories only, black and white. In other words, the term ‘Tragic Mulatto’ may have come to such prominence in criticism and in the public realm not because it permits a better understanding of past ideologies, but because it supports, in the guise of subversive-seeming ideological criticism, the ideology of racial dualism and the resistance to interracial life that are still more prevalent in the United States than are calls for hybridity. (p. 242)

In this sense, Sollors is cognizant of how the racial landscape in the U.S. and beyond is thus changing and how limiting it is to continue to read in only black and white. With his staggering research and impressive investigation into America’s obsession with mixed race, Sollors encourages us all to reexamine and reevaluate what we thought we knew about mixed race politics in the U.S. today and in the future.

Echoing Sollors’ call for more critical inquiry in literary studies, scholar Jonathan Brennan makes very similar accusations and offers solutions to providing a space for more analysis and thought. In his 2002 text, *Mixed Race Literature*, Brennan describes the apparent frustrations and disappointments about the lack of literary scholarship and/or deep critical inquiry concerning mixed-race/biracial fiction prior to this emerging CMRS field. Brennan argues:

Because the foundation for a mixed race framework has yet to be substantially transported to literary studies and has yet to inform the critical approach of most scholars who research and write about mixed race texts, and because of a subsequent lack of a critical language to address mixed race literature, those critiquing literature in this field have either had to build a new critical position from which to evaluate these texts, or ascribe the complexity of these hybrid texts to a single tradition, often misinterpreting the merging traditions that underlie the hybrid texts. For instance, because most literature scholars tend to follow distinct racial categories while explicating literary texts, and because they also often follow the long-established one-drop rule, writers of mixed heritage who are part

African are examined in the light of an African American literary, cultural, and social tradition. In part, this is correct. Many of them do belong to an African American community, and if they are simultaneously members of other communities, this does not deny them their claim to an African American community. Yet in order to really understand the tradition from which these writers create their literary works, one must also examine their parallel heritage without denying either one (Brennan, 2002, 18-19).

What Brennan does here is first call out the lack of scholarship in literary studies that focuses on both real and lived experiences of what it means to be mixed race in the U.S. (and beyond). But he even goes a step further to mention how even mixed-race writers are often regulated to only discussing one part of their heritage, namely as African Americans, instead of discussing the other race(s) that make up their racial DNA. Furthermore, Brennan believes, “The issues of merging literary traditions and mixed-race subjectivity, in light of increasing globalization and cultural hybridity, will become more and more critical in our understanding of cultural and literature, both in the United States and the rest of the world” (p. 36). Brennan’s call for recognition and visibility in literary studies by merging both literary studies and mixed-race subjectivity is at the very crux of my project here because if we work critically in scholarship and study without its presence, then that absence limits how we read, interpret, and understand biracial characters in the literature.

Following Brennan’s call for acknowledgment in a critical and visible space in literary studies, Suzanne Bost in her work *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas 1850-2000*, published in 2003, asks us to be mindful and cautious of the ways mixed race is represented and identified in literature and popular culture. Bost argues “...mulatta fiction is consistently misread, misunderstood, or studied with insufficient critical methods” (Bost, 2003, 71). For Bost fiction is powerful and can help to influence how we see the world around us so it is imperative to locate accurate representations of mixed race that do not keep us

in the dualistic, racist pathology of only black and white in the U.S. Describing contemporary representations of biraciality and/or multiraciality, Bost states:

Recent popular writings imply that with the changing of the millennium, America is being forced to adapt to new racial frontiers in which our familiar racial definitions are being undermined, support for civil rights is fragmenting, affirmative action quotas are changing the business world, genes are being manipulated, and technology is uncovering old racial secrets (p. 184).

Bost makes it clear that to read biraciality in a tragic, outdated, and racist way only furthers stereotypes and misconceptions about mixed race characters in literature.

This introduction now provides a necessary roadmap to direct us into understanding the necessity for the field of CMRS so these critical issues and nuances of biraciality and multiraciality can form a solid foundation for critical study and research. In the late 1990s, historians, sociologists, and critical race theorists began to express a need to organize and talk about mixed race and biracial characters in a new way that admitted to the hybridity without denying one side or the other or waxing into a racism-is-over attitude or mentality. However, literary critics have been slow to that turn. It is my aim here to try to position my project as an opportunity, in which I take the existing literary critical discourse to the next step by combining it with this sociological and psychological work of CMRS. What I have noticed is that some literary scholars are mainly still focused on the larger body of previous literature that exists about biracial characters instead of contemporary works. My contribution then is showing how CMRS is creating an opportunity that finally allows me and others to build on the important work Sollors and others have already done and now finally move beyond the tragic tropes. In doing this, I believe my project can help the scholars in the field of literary studies fully understand the different articulations that are being produced within the field of CMRS.

In their inaugural journal essay, “Emerging Paradigms in Critical Mixed Race Studies,” the editors/scholars, G. Reginald Daniel, Laura Kina, Wei Ming Dariotis, and Camila Fojas explain the need for a multiracial identity in the U.S. during the late 1980s and early 1990s:

In a similar trajectory [like the Civil Rights Movement], the assertion of a multiracial identity in the U.S. today is to rescue racial identities from distortion and erasure by incorporating all of one’s racial and ethnic backgrounds. An objective of the mixed-race movement has been to question the imposition of as well as resist traditional monoracial categories and boundaries by expanding them to include more multidimensional configurations. Individuals thus recognize the commonalities among their varied backgrounds (integration) and appreciate the differences (pluralism). Multiracial identity formations thus seek to build on the tenets of the civil rights movement, which advocated for the recognition of the equality of difference in the manner of egalitarian pluralism (Daniel, Kina, Dariotis, & Fojas, 2014, 9).

Biraciality and multiraciality are both concepts that have entered and are making a way in the 21st century U.S. racial landscape. Just like black people fought and marched for equal rights under the law during the Civil Rights Movement, biracial and multiracial individuals are fighting to be seen, to be recognized, and to be acknowledged in the U.S. In addition, these scholars explain, why it is important to add the term “critical” to the years of scholarship already connected to mixed race studies because they envision a new direction that is “recursive and self-reflexive” (p. 9). CMRS, in a way that borrows from the fields of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Legal Studies (CLS), which developed mainly in the 1970s, works to combat the unfair and racist practices and inequities in law and society that targeted marginalized communities of color. Critical Race Studies, then, is an interdisciplinary field that houses the work of ethnic studies scholars and activists, with a critical analysis directed towards issue of society and culture that also includes the intersections of race, law, and power and how it functions in racial justice scholarship and legal practices in the U.S. Therefore, the founding scholars of CMRS, believe:

Critical mixed race studies in turn encompasses these areas of analysis with an emphasis on all things related to “mixed” race. This includes renderings and studies of racial mixing, interraciality, multiraciality, transracial adoption, and interethnic alliances, among others. Ethnic studies and critical race studies are key components of critical mixed race studies and continue to advance similar inquiries and scholarly discourses about race, culture, and society (p. 7).

Daniel et al also explain how for so long the obsession with race-mixing dating back to the colonial era rested on both the risks and merits in both black and white populations. This was more so evident in the miscegenation narratives in the early 20th century, such as the works by Charles Chesnutt, Wallace Thurman, James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset, Jean Toomer, Nella Larsen and Walter White, as well as other critical inquiries of these and later works by scholars in both literary and black studies. With that being said, Daniel et al warn against the tension that may exist between black studies and critical mixed race studies because they insist that black studies is more of an ally than a foe. Furthermore, the editors of the inaugural essay, know it to be true that black studies and analyses of aforementioned texts have played a pivotal and important role in uplifting this new field (p. 7). This new field of study has been on the rise since 2004, when it reached a critical mass because many scholars, critics, and students began to describe their work as part of topics on mixed race and multiracialism, causing for scholarly attention and inquiry to the works, texts, and arguments created in graduate schools (e.g. masters theses, doctoral dissertations, and book chapters), classrooms, conferences, etc. in the late 1980s and 1990s. Now, as a distinct field of its own, CMRS can devote all topics of mixed-race and multiracialism to a recognized and growing field of study that has not always been available to counteract misrepresentations and to validate mixed-race identity and experiences in all aspects of our social and literary worlds.

In January 2008, at the beginning of what many critics and scholars name the Age of Obama, the thought of a CMRS field began to develop and founders collaborated to lay the

groundwork for the inaugural conference in Critical Mixed Race Studies in 2010.^{43 44} According to the tenets set forth by scholars Daniel, Kina, Dariotis, and Fojas, the mission of CMRS is as follows:

Critical mixed race studies places mixed race at the critical center of focus. Multiracials become subjects of historical, social, and cultural processes rather than simply objects of analysis. This involves the study of racial consciousness among racially mixed people, the world in which they live, and the ideological, social, economic, and political forces, as well as policies that impact the social location of mixed-race individuals and inform their mixed-race experiences and identities. CMRS also stresses the critical analysis of the institutionalization of social, cultural, and political structures based on dominant conceptions of “race.” [...] Accordingly, CMRS emphasizes the constructed nature of race. It stresses that racial categories and racial designations are “unstable” and “decentered” complexes of sociocultural meanings that are continuously being created, inhabited, contested, transformed, and destroyed (Daniel, Kina, Dariotis, & Fojas, 2014, 8).

Following the 2010 CMRS conference, the *JCMRS* was created in 2011.⁴⁵ Scholars Daniel, Kina, Dariotis, and Fojas discuss in the essay how “multiraciality is an important human experience, and the study of mixed race has become a distinct area of scholarly inquiry. Amidst the efflorescence of mixed-race discourse and activities, there have been no academic journals

⁴³ The Age of Obama is designated as a special time in biracial and multiracial camps and organizations because Barack Obama, as the epitome and face of the Multiracial Movement, became the President of the United States, therefore, making anything possible for biracial/mixed-raced individuals to succeed. In a sense, many thought that the election of a black biracial president would be the “thing” to change race relations in the U.S. and land us in a post-racial state of being.

⁴⁴ The 2010 CMRS Conference was held at DePaul University on Nov 5–6, 2010 and was organized by Camilla Fojas, Laura Kina, and Wei Ming Dariotis. There have been 4 more conferences to take place in 2012, 2014, 2015, and 2017. For more information about past programs, organizers, and/or activists, then please visit the website: www.criticalmixedracestudies.com.

⁴⁵ In 2011, Michele Elam writes *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium*; in 2012, Caroline A. Streeter writes, *Tragic No More: Mixed-Race Women and the Nexus of Sex and Celebrity*; in 2013, Sika Dagbovie-Mullins writes *Crossing B(l)ack: Mixed-Race Identity in Modern American Fiction and Culture*, and, in 2013, Ralina Joseph writes *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial*, but these texts would find themselves in the CMRS field or multiracial/ethnic studies instead of being housed in literary studies. Most of my research efforts come from CMRS and not within literary studies because the scholarship is not new or emerging with the same articulations one finds within CMRS.

specifically devoted to the topic. We propose to help fill that void with the *Journal of Critical Mixed Race Studies*” (p. 10). The *JCMRS* is the first academic journal explicitly focused on critical mixed race studies in the U.S. (p. 28).⁴⁶ Furthermore, the creation of this academic journal can be, as the authors suggest, “a remedy of sorts to this lack of criticality by serving as a scholarly response and counterbalance to the dangerously biased, and perhaps naïve, reporting, discussions, and representations found in the mainstream press as well as in other popular media” (p. 7). The *JCMRS* is a key step in the direction of sustaining and maintaining the available mixed-race and multiracial discourse in academia and other disciplines.

Reading and Doing Race

In this project, reading and doing race has several functions, allowing the narrative of race to tell a multiplicity of stories and experiences, about what it means to be raced and to do race in the U.S. In order to understand how my project intends to read race in the texts I analyze, I look to the scholarship of Paula M. L. Moya and Hazel Rose Markus. The dissertation seeks to find these moments of “becoming” and “doing” that encourage us to read differently. And I find that Markus and Moya’s collection *Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century* an effective place to begin because they understand that race and ethnicity are active agents in our social and historical worlds. My project is similarly interested in looking at race and identity as ways of “being” and “doing” because the biracial characters perform both fluidity and agency in profound and exact ways. I suggest here that being biracial and doing race is no longer an individual action, but a social and communal one that has very real consequences. Markus and Moya provide a roadmap of actions for society as a whole so that we can all learn how to “do race”:

⁴⁶ *JCMRS* was co-founded by G. Reginald Daniel, Wei Ming Dariotis, Laura Kina, and Paul Spickard with honorary founding credit given to Maria P. P. Root as well.

Contrary to what most people believe, race and ethnicity are not *things* that people *have* or *are*. Rather they are *actions* that people *do*. Race and ethnicity are social, historical, and philosophical *processes* that people have done for hundreds of years and are still doing. They emerge through the social interactions that take place among different kinds of people, in a variety of institutional structures (e.g. schools, workplaces, government offices, courts, media) over time, across space, and in all kinds of situations (Markus & Moya, 2010, 4).

Markus and Moya are crucial in my dissertation because they explicitly position race as more than an individual concern but one that must include and function through and by the interactions of others in our social worlds. In other words, in being and doing “biracial,” there is clearly a social process at play. While non-biracial readers cannot necessarily be biracial, I suggest in this project that non-biracial readers can “do biracial” in their reading strategies, especially once they learn how to read with a biracial lens. However, all of us, biracial or not, are capable of “doing race” on both an individual and collective level. Doing race can be many things for different people. Doing race and being biracial is not always a conscious and deliberate act of planned agency because some individuals may not be equipped with noticing and understand the racial schemas and codes that exist in front of them. Therefore, it is the duty of authors and novels here to explicitly teach us the distinction between knowing and doing race. Just as the biracial characters themselves struggle with doing and being biracial in the beginning of the narratives, I know that after careful negotiations and socializations in their respective racial and social environments, these characters eventually learn to understand what works best for them. In turn, these exchanges within the scenes and course of the novels begin to show all readers an alternative way of doing race and being conscious of race in the spaces they enter daily. In doing so, this biracial literacy reading strategy can help to undo the tragic representations and challenge old tropes of what it means to be biracial in contemporary literature. My goal by the

dissertation's end is to envision representations that showcase the myriad biracial experiences in the U.S. and to see that as citizens we do more than read race, but act out, and do race that makes all of us matter in important and effective ways.

In Chapter One, **Transcending Tragedy: A Literary Revision in the Literature of Senna and Durrow**, I look specifically at the tragic mulatta fiction genre with a specific emphasis on Nella Larsen's iconic Helga Crane in *Quicksand* and the tragedy that hampered this character in this novel. I compare Larsen's Helga Crane to the contemporary character representations of Birdie in *Caucasia* and Rachel in *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*. I show how contemporary representations move beyond the tragic representations. Aware of the historical shifts in racial discourse and racial identity, these authors are offering different portrayals of biracial characters that show something new, something specifically not tragic, that literary critics have not yet fully explained. These authors' different portrayals are reimagining biracial characters in useful ways that allow for new critical discourse that does not situate itself around tragic tropes. These young girls and women are heroines in their own right. Tragedy resides outside these characters now. Furthermore, I call attention to how these two authors are deliberately and explicitly citing earlier texts and giving their own characters triumphal narratives in order to set them apart from those earlier tropes and rewrite the narratives of biracial characters. I argue that the open-endedness of these two different texts is a strategic revision employed by the authors to transcend the tragedy.

In Chapter Two, **Discovering Mirrors and Racial Literacy: Reflections of Biracial Experience in the Literature of Danzy Senna and Heidi Durrow**, I specifically engage with the concept of racial literacy, defined by legal scholar Lani Guinier and sociologists Winddance Twine and Amy C. Steinbugler, to then propose my own notion of biracial literacy that the

biracial characters in the works of Senna and Durrow use to navigate their unique place of the biracial person in America. The chapter also offer other modes and techniques of biracial literacy that can be enumerated in different ways throughout the novels. What this chapter demonstrates is that the practice and engagement of biracial literacy is an emerging process that creates opportunities to talk about race in meaningful ways that can impact our racial and social worlds at large.

In Chapter Three, **Contested Spaces and Intersections: Navigating Identity in the Literature of Senna and Durrow**, I talk specifically about the contested spaces the biracial protagonists enter and how they learn to negotiate from within them. I engage in discourse about belonging and acceptance in one's social world along with the consequences that follows those group choices. The chapter reiterates the layered and complex nature of identities. Using both a black feminist analysis and a CMRS analysis, I discuss how the other minor characters view and read the protagonists' racial identities is always inflected by the intersectionalities of race, gender, class, sexuality, and geography. In addition, I call attention to assumptions and stereotypes that affect representations of black-white biracial women in literature. It is necessary here to allow these biracial protagonists the freedom to navigate their girlhood in ways that are no longer restrictive or oppressive.

In the conclusion, **Race Forward: Opening the Doors to More Conversations**, I want to discuss what happens next by extending the discourse in CMRS and beyond. By opening the doors to more conversations and dialogues, then narratives about race can change and we can change how we read mixed-race in the U.S. Yet, this chapter aids in finding ways to make biraciality and mixed-race relevant in the publishing world with more Young Adult (YA) Literature and children selections, in the classrooms and homes across the U.S. I stress how the

dialogues and conversations should not stop here because this is an on-going engagement that can help to eliminate the racial dissonance in our daily lives. I bring forth more biracial voices and accurate representations in literature and popular culture, by highlighting a model text with 2019's debut of Natasha Díaz's biracial coming-of-age YA novel, *Color Me In*. In addition, I highlight ABC's new show, titled *Mixed-ish*, is doing the actual work of putting representation of biracial experiences onto the TV screen. By this project's end, I show readers the potential power in biracialness, mixedness, hybridity, and fluidity that can forge in these narratives and beyond.

Chapter One
From Tragedy to Triumph: A Literary Revision in the Literature of Danzy Senna and
Heidi Durrow

So ‘’tain’t no use in me telling you somthin’ unless Ah give you de understandin’ to go ‘’long wid it. Unless you see de fur, a mink skin ain’t no different from a coon hide.

—Zora Neale Hurston
Their Eyes Were Watching God

By examining the historical and literary convention of the tragic mulatto, my project confronts the critical discourse so prevalent amongst biracial characters (and individuals) in the U.S. during the 20th century. The term “mulatto” was “borrowed from the Spanish (and is derived from the Latin *mulus* meaning mule) and used by the English from about 1600 onward” (Berzon 9). In *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*, Sollors adds “that the 16th century Spanish origin long considered etymologically derived from ‘mule’, may also come from the Arabic word *muwallad* (meaning ‘mestizo’ or mixed)” (Sollors, 1997, 127). Sollors adds for clarity and understanding here:

The zoological analogy with mules may thus not have been the word’s original, or exclusive, etymological source, but the term ‘mulatto’ certainly did become intertwined with the animal that was a cross between two species. Thus, the Samuel Johnson’s dictionary (1755) defined the word as ‘one begot between a white and a black, as a mule between different species of animals...and Josiah Clark Nott’s (1843) already cited declaration that Mulattoes were ‘the offspring of two distinct species—as the mule from the horse and the ass’ (p. 128).

Much like racial epithets, the term mulatto was held in contempt by people of color since it was clearly invented by whites in derision. Historically, the mixed-blood individual was usually the product of miscegenation between a black slave woman and a white slave master. Every mulatto was proof that the color line had been crossed. In this regard, mulattoes were typically symbols of shame, rape, and concubinage. In literature, the myth of the “tragic mulatto” emerged as a character who is saddened or even suicidal because he or she is caught between the black and white worlds without truly being accepted by either, thus, causing them to be trapped in a

permanent state of liminality. The tragic mulatto is the victim of a society divided by race, thus allowing no middle ground or no intermediate space, which often leaves this character particularly vulnerable. The key to understanding the tragic mulatto trope is that the characters will never fit or belong anywhere, but that they are to be tragically doomed. In *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States*, Joel Williamson traces the tenuous color lines from mulattoes to blacks in the 20th century and shows to what extent miscegenation affected the national U.S. culture. Williamson explains, “[Mulattoes were] a highly confused people. Their signals were hopelessly mixed, and the slightest mixture—even one drop—was enough to upset the system and jangle the nerves...Mulattoes were...a shallow, flighty, and fluttering people” (Williamson, 1980, 96). These mulattoes were often ostracized, ridiculed, and condemned by society for their mixed blood. Williamson provides an astute historical analysis of how mulatto people were actually marked and categorized in U.S. society that ultimately transferred into our thoughts and into the literature we read.

Sterling Brown was the first to name the literary stereotype the “tragic mulatto” as one of seven character types employed by white authors.¹ In his essay, “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors” (1933), Brown writes:

¹ In Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both*, he highlights and summarizes in detail the six elements of the tragic mulatto complex outlined by Sterling A. Brown in the early 20th century in his seminal essay, “Negro Character as Seen by White Authors.” The first element is that “Brown criticizes the Tragic Mulatto in literature as ‘a lost weebegone abstraction’ and finds it clichéd, unrealistic, non-individualized, and unoriginal; the second element is that “Brown regrets that the writers’ focus on Tragic Mulattoes results in the avoidance of more serious social issues and the absence of statistically more representative characters; the third element is that “Brown notes a significant gender division in the type: the male ‘mixed blood characters’, merely because they were nearer white, were more intelligent and militant, and therefore more tragic in their enslavement” than their ‘pure’ black counterparts, whereas the women...were exceptionally beautiful but often doomed,”; the fourth element is that Brown repeatedly emphasizes the underlying racialism in certain abolitionist treatments of the theme: ‘The mulatto is a victim of a divided inheritance; from his white blood come his intellectual strivings, his unwillingness to be a slave; from his Negro blood come his baser emotional urges, his indolence, his savagery,’; the fifth element is that “he [Brown] sees in white readers’ racial prejudice much of the reason for the existence of the stereotype,”; and, in the sixth element,” Brown implies and occasionally states explicitly that white American writers were more likely to employ the stereotype of the Tragic Mulatto” (223-225).

The stereotype is very flattering to a race which, for all its self-assurance, seems to stand in great need of flattery. But merely looking at one of its particulars, that white blood means asceticism and Negro blood means unbridled lust, will reveal how flimsy the whole structure is. It is ingenious that mathematical computation of the amount of white blood in a mulatto's veins will explain his character. And it is a widely held belief. But it is nonsense, all the same. (Brown, 1933, 161-162).

Brown's influence in literary studies about "The Tragic Mulatto Complex" is not to be overlooked when entering any critical discourse about the mulatto figure because his arguments make us question and revisit the ways in which white writers used the tragic mulatto stereotype. Sollors explains, "Conceived for white readers, these characters invite empathy because they are so much like whites and so little like blacks; the internal conflict they experience is explainable as a result of racial forces; therefore, no wonder white writers were far more eager to develop them" (Sollors, 1997, 225). Nonetheless, Brown's ideas have helped to shape some common ideas about the literary figure that has captured the imagination of both white and black authors in the 20th century. However, as Sollors writes about the tragic mulatto on the cusp of the 21st century, he adds to Brown's argument by noting:

However, transformed it was in the process, the stereotype of the Tragic Mulatto certainly has become part of dominant critical vocabulary. Not only is it in a position of dominance in the profession of literature, but it also appears in mass media. [...] 'Unmasking' fictional characters as embodiments of the stereotype of the Tragic Mulatto was a novel point when Brown made it over 60 years ago. By now, the insistence on naming or otherwise invoking this stereotype may in itself have become a stereotype that could profit from some fresh investigation (p. 228).

A fresh investigation, like the ideas proposed in my project, can do the necessary work of influencing a new way to approach the literary stereotype in effective ways that do not continue to reinscribe and rehash the same old and tired tropes about biracial characters.

Continuing within the same historical and literary vein, Judith Berzon in *Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction* places the prevailing racist ideology and pathology of the tragic mulatto trope in the center of our imaginations. Examining scientific and

legal discourses that often justify U.S. racism, Berzon explicitly reminds us of the abhorrent fear of miscegenation in the U.S. In this work, Berzon stresses that readers must recognize the prevailing racial ideologies that existed: “(1) the widespread fear of miscegenation; (2) the tenacious view that mulattoes are a degenerate, sterile and short-lived breed; (3) the unresolved dilemma of the social and economic roles of the emancipated African American; and (4) the unease with which Caucasians generally have regarded for those who carry the traits of both racial groups” (Berzon, 1978, 19). Because these notions and fears about mulatto individuals were so prevalent in society, it is to no surprise that those same attitudes about miscegenation appeared in the literature. Berzon adds that “many scientists asserted that race mixture between widely different peoples would lead to ‘disharmonies’—to physical, mental, and emotional deformities, which was a widely held belief known as hybrid degeneration” (p. 24), which furthered American society’s abhorrence towards miscegenation. Throughout her text, Berzon also writes that to the fact that the mulatto figure has been an extraordinarily powerful one in the American novel, where the “mulatto has captured the imagination of American novelists writing during every period of our literature” and “has been the central character in the works of some of America’s most influential white writers” (p. 14).² Including writers such as Gertrude Stein, William Faulkner, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Berzon reminds us that “The tragic mulatto figure, especially the beautiful, almost-white woman in whom white and black blood do battle, remains a figure of fascination for white authors” (p. 63). By the same token, many prolific black writers,

² Berzon explains this as “the idea that the offspring of race mixture inherit none of the good qualities of either of the parental stocks and thus are likely to die off in several generations” (24). From pages 53-94, Berzon highlights the mulatto in fiction where she places the mulatto in different identities: during 1760-1820 the mulatto represents the “noble savage”; 1845-1865 as part of “anti-slavery tracts”; 1865-1908 places mulatto in the “role of heroic victim who would be free or die”; 1908-1924 centered on black-authored fiction dealing with issues of “passing” and “intermarriage”; 1900-1930 centered on white-authored fiction with varying issues; The Harlem Renaissance focusing on mulatto as race leader and black bourgeoisie; and 1932-1977 showing how both white and black authored depictions of the mulatto character were changing.

especially during the Harlem Renaissance, utilized the trope to either implicate the problems of “the unhappy passer” and/or the “middle-class mulatto who denies his or her people” (p. 63). Therefore, if the mulatto is able to reconcile differences or even recognizes racial solidarity then “he is summoned back to his people by the spirituals, or their full-throated laughter, or their simple sweet ways”³ (p. 63). Furthermore, Berzon adds that “Many authors, both black and white, have regarded the mulatto as a particularly apt figure to symbolize the failure of the American myth of egalitarianism” (p. 52). In this regard, Berzon, Williamson, Brown, and Sollors understand how the stereotype is a stereotype created by whites for a certain effect. The literary landscape colored mulatto characters in negative and debilitating ways that have thus shaped racial attitudes, racial categories, and racial identity in U.S. society.

By the same token, Hazel Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* expresses how apt a figure the mulatto served in African American literature. Carby explains, “Afro-American literary and cultural history needs to reconsider the frequent use of the mulatto and to ask what the mulatto enabled black authors to represent before we can understand any particular use of the figure” (Carby, 1987, 89). Throughout *Reconstructing Womanhood*, Carby mentions Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston and the ways that each of these women used the mulatta figure in very specific ways to combat political, social, and sexual

³ Passing was a huge phenomenon in tragic mulatto fiction and Harlem Renaissance fiction. Passing, most often occurred when mulatto individuals were light enough to “pass” for white, but, there was a price to pay for passing, which most often meant disowning, ignoring, and leaving a part of your heritage behind. If individuals were mentally and emotionally strong enough to endure the price of passing, then they were comfortable as they crossed racial lines and passed as white. It should be noted, too, that not all tragic mulattoes in Harlem Renaissance fiction found it easy to return to a place of acceptance and belonging. For example, in Jean Toomer’s *Cane*, his mulatto characters—Kabnis, Becky, Esther, Fern, and Paul—suffer differently from either not being able to reconcile their differences or form an identity. (Berzon 68-70). Even in Larsen’s second novel, *Passing*, Clare Kendry is punished by death for attempting to “pass”.

injustices faced by blacks and women. Carby explains that the mulatto “has two primary functions: as a vehicle for an exploration of the relationship between the races and, at the same time, an expression of the relationship between the races” (p. 89). Carby is very important here in discussing contemporary notions of what it means to be biracial because it allows for readers to actually explore how biracial characters are thus raced, categorized, and dissected as well as how these characters express their biracialness in their own specific ways. Carby is able to point my focus in the dissertation to a place where rereading is a narrative strategy that must be employed to better understand not only the relationships between the races, but also the relationships between author and audience.⁴ Even when Carby suggests that these black women authors were writing their tragedies differently from white and male authors of the time, the notions of tragedy and ill circumstances still plague the characters specifically, pulling readers in circles around the issues of racist thinking and perceptions at the turn of the 21st century. Although the works discussed in my project may still engage us readers with a few tragic circumstances, I argue that Danza Senna and Heidi Durrow do so in new ways, including to write race out of the tragedy.

Trapped in the Quicksand of Traditions

As the literature often shows us, the tragedy of race in the U.S. is a topic of contention, controversy, and conflict. That tragedy is ever clear and present in 19th and 20th century literature once we discuss the tragic mulatto character. The 19th century literary scene credits Lydia Maria Child as one of the earliest U.S. writers to use the fictional tragic mulatto character in her short stories “The Quadroons” (1842) and in “Slavery’s Pleasant Homes” (1843), followed

⁴ Another strategy I employ in this project is the strategy of reading with a “biracial lens” that was mentioned briefly in the introduction, but explained more in Chapter 2. It mainly focuses on how I see the contemporary authors providing a narrative that allows for the process of a biracial literacy to take shape and form in the literature we read as well as in our daily interactions with people in our social worlds.

a few years later by the first African American novelist Williams Wells Brown with *Clotel* (1857). For the sake of this project, I only want to make attention to the tragic mulatto characters as they are presented in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. I show how the tropes of the tragic mulatto character has persisted so long into the imaginations of readers that many find it hard to remove the tropes from the past to see how biracial characters today can fit into different tropes or characterizations that are not so debilitating, offensive, and, simply, outdated. Because of Brown, we have had a clear idea of what it means to be a trope in the literary world and what type of impact that has on readers and critics alike. The characters definitely served their purpose in the literary and social worlds, in that, they warned readers of the dangers and problems circulating around miscegenation and racism in the South.

While the tragic mulatto trope functions as a complex figure in American literature, it is the female tragic mulatta character that takes center stage in my project. However, I find it imperative to explore one of the most iconic tragic mulatta characters from 20th century literature in order to show the necessary transformations from past to present. In this project, I choose Nella Larsen's Helga Crane from the 1929 Harlem Renaissance classic *Quicksand*. Unlike the melodramatic tragic mulatto genre in William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, where mulatta woman Clotel chooses death over a life of slavery by jumping into the Potomac River, and in Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars*, where mulatta woman Rena Walden, after being rejected from her white suitor, falls deathly ill and dies at the novel's end, the agenda in Larsen's *Quicksand* is an attempt to break away from that tradition, but as the text shows us, Larsen struggles to grant Helga a space that does not render her tragic. Nonetheless, Larsen was successful in moving beyond the politics of what Brown or Chesnutt were able to do with their biracial characters and granted her female biracial characters agency and choice. While the

scholarship that has emerged on Larsen's novel *Quicksand* has been substantial, many critics tend to examine Helga Crane by focusing particularly on three main areas—the inability to cultivate female sexuality, a lack of familial relationships, and the tragedy of being mixed-race. When critics tend to negate Helga's experiences of agency and choice or the ability to freely exist as biracial, then they dismiss her attempts to identify as something more than a tragic mulatta. Although sexuality, familial relationships, and race are crucial in understanding Helga throughout the course of the novel, it is even more important to be knowledgeable about how those experiences can shape Helga's biracial identity. Other critics feel that Helga's ultimate failure in the novel rests on the simple fact that she is a tragic mulatta. Although I only intend to examine a few critics that consider Helga a tragic mulatta, there is literature and criticism that look at it more extensively.⁵ Critics—Cheryl Wall, Ann Rayson, Barbara Christian, and Jessica Wegmann-Sanchez—regard Helga's problems as clearly racial ones that give her no viable alternatives to exist, causing her many setbacks in the novel.⁶

Cheryl Wall in "Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels" explains Helga's dilemma as a personal, psychological one where she can never reconcile her mixed-blood. Wall believes that "the tragedy for these mulattoes is the impossibility of self-definition. Larsen's protagonists assume false identities that ensure social survival but result in psychological suicide" (Wall, 1986, 98). Furthering her assertion about Helga's tragedy, Wall

⁵ For a full discussion of the tragic mulatto convention: See Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists* (35-61), Judith Berzon, Werner Sollors, and Hazel Carby.

⁶ Anthony Dawahare in "The Gold Standard of Racial Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*, still configuring Helga's dilemmas as racial, states differently that race is defined in terms of economy: "But the tragic endings of the novels also suggest that the overdetermination of racial values by the political economy of capitalism presents a no-win situation. Even the New Negro's revaluation of blackness as a source of pride appears in Larsen's work as a hopeless attempt to defy the reification of blackness as a sign of working-class inferiority. Larsen's novels suggest that the New Negro promoters of race pride, like their white identified detractors, remain trapped by the capitalist semiotics of race" (25).

states “As these characters [Helga Crane and Clare Kendry] deviate from the norm, they are defined—indeed too often define themselves—as Other.”⁷ They thereby cede control of their lives. But, in truth, the worlds these characters inhabit offer them no possibility of autonomy or fulfillment” (p. 109). How could Helga, in a 1920’s backdrop, exist as biracial, fulfilling her own desires, without being condemned by both black and white society? Without a biracial subjectivity, Helga has no other choices but to remain inside the racial borders that demand she never cross them.

Ann Rayson in “Foreign Exotic or Domestic Drudge? The African American Woman in *Quicksand* and *Tar Baby*” claims that all of Helga’s choices are negative and explains that “her psychological tragedy is that she cannot reconcile her two sides and is too intelligent, too stubborn, maybe too moral, to become either a European exotic or part of the black Bourgeoisie in America” (Rayson, 1998, 92). However, her choices are arguably not negative, but concrete proof that she made her own conscious decisions instead of just succumbing to other people’s versions of happiness. Rayson insists that “Helga, yet another tragic mulatta, cannot accept herself in Denmark as the exotic pet of society (the exotic primitive of Europe), as the wife of a Naxos professor (the American black bourgeoisie), or as the wife of a Southern preacher (the black rural folk culture)” (p. 92). In Rayson’s limited perspective, Helga is tragic because she cannot exist as either one or the other, simply stating, she needs to choose a box to fit into so that she can appease the likes of others too uncomfortable with her available options.

Throughout the novel, it is evident that Helga struggles with the duality of her mixed heritage, but must critics insist on labeling her tragic at every turn. Barbara Christian in *Black*

⁷ Clare Kendry, too, is often represented as a tragic mulatta, in Larsen’s second novel, *Passing*. Clare deceitfully positions herself into white mainstream society by shedding her black identity in order to “pass” for nearly 12 years. When Clare finally confronts her duality, after wanting to reconnect with “blackness,” her punishment is death.

Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976 harshly describes Helga as a “pathetic mulatta” who “finds that she is seldom perceived as a person in either the black or the white world. Instead she is an image” (Christian, 1980, 53). In an extreme account, Christian gives Helga no identity at all. Christian’s seemingly cold treatment of Helga as purely a literary creation ignores the emotional connection that some readers might make with the character, especially biracial readers.

Much like the other critics, Jessica Wegmann-Sánchez in “Rewriting Race and Ethnicity across the Border: Mairuth Sarsfield’s *No Crystal Stair* and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing*” alleges that “In Larsen’s novels, women who try to express more than one identity are buried alive or thrown out of windows...” (Wegmann-Sánchez, 2001, 154), which substantiates Helga’s need, or rather society’s acceptance, of a biracial subjectivity.⁸ Wegmann-Sánchez also believes that “...Helga cannot escape the quicksand of her last choice [to marry Rev. Pleasant Green] in order to continue her quest for identification as a person of mixed heritage” (p. 144). Society refuses to allow Helga to continue the quest of discovery with every choice she makes to live her life on her own terms. Living during the 1920s, Helga’s opportunity to live as a biracial woman, free and fluid in her identity, is rendered almost impossible and especially dangerous.

My goal in this chapter is to show the juncture between the past and the present. In the earlier texts, we have been conditioned to read the biracial character, or mulatto(a) characters, as tragic or doomed from the beginning of their first notions about race and how it manifests into their daily lives. Moreover, this literary trope serves as a reflection of the suffering biracial people might have experienced during this time in history. Consequently, these tropes find themselves not just in the literature of the time, but also a part of our media culture in TV and

⁸ Referring respectively to Helga Crane being “buried alive” figuratively in quicksand and Clare Kendry being literally “thrown out of a window.”

films.⁹ While the texts (and films) are paying witness to the times of racial unrest and the ills of miscegenation, the tropes begin to seep into the minds of readers that start to form thoughts and perceptions about a race of individuals that stay long after slavery and Jim Crow ends.

Trespassing on Racial Grounds

While it is clear that Nella Larsen intended to do something for the Tragic Mulatto genre that other writers like William Wells Brown, Charles Chesnutt, Frank Webb, Harriet Jacobs, Frances E.W. Harper, or others could not do, Larsen created Helga Crane in a society that was not ready for various identity options and constructions for biracial characters other than black and tragic. I argue that Helga Crane must be granted a rightful place in literature where she is to be remembered for something more than a tragic character. Whether or not critics name her tragedy differently, they often neglect to search for other alternatives in determining Helga's biracial subjectivity throughout the novel. When critics heretofore have regarded Helga as a tragic mulatta, they ignore her agency in choosing and transforming racial categorizations that have stipulated her own subjectivity. Helga's experiences throughout *Quicksand* reinforce how society would not tolerate an emerging biracial subjectivity yet Helga's resilience to forge that identity on her own is powerful. By looking at Helga in these terms, I argue that there are already the seeds for revising, and maybe even quitting, the tragic mulatto trope when we recognize Helga's agency and her fluidity throughout the novel. The following detailed

⁹ Donald Bogle's landmark *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in Films* (1973) is a definitive text that looks more closely at the use of mixed-race characters in films. He looks specifically at: *The Octoroon* (1913), *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), *Imitation of Life* (1934), *God's Stepchildren* (1937), *Lost Boundaries* (1949), *Pinky* (1949), *Carmen Jones*, (1954), *Sparkle* (1976), *Flashdance* (1983), *The Cotton Club* (1984), *Purple Rain* (1984), and *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1995). Bogle explains how mulatto characters elicited sympathy and acceptance from most audiences during the 20th century. In addition, he makes note of how these films had both positive and negative depictions of mulatto characters.

reassessment of Larsen is thus important to my discussion of *Caucasia* and *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* because of its emphasis on self-conscious action and self-awareness.

Using Helga's different movements in the novel, I expose the agency she claims in staking a biracial subjectivity, but it must be done from the lens of a biracial reading strategy. From the beginning of the novel, Helga's identity is questioned. At Naxos, Helga becomes terrified at the way they want her to conform. No longer happy parading around like a Naxos Negro, Helga realizes that "The South. Naxos. Negro education. Suddenly she hated them all" (Larsen, 1986, 3). Unlike the Naxos Negroes, Helga did not know "enough to stay in [her] place" (p. 3) and "she had refused to formulate in her thoughts, the face that she was utterly unfitted for teaching, even for mere existence, in Naxos. She was a failure here" (p. 5). Here, Helga describes herself as a failure, but it would serve readers better to see that Naxos was the failure rather than Helga. Wanting to uplift Negroes, Helga could not offer her students such an education when Naxos's policy of uplift, disguised by assimilation, had been a deception. In order to obtain the Naxos mold, Helga had to emulate traditional white norms and she would "never achieve it" and "could neither conform, nor be happy in her unconformity" (p. 7).

When Helga understands and recognizes that hypocrisy plagues Naxos, she needs to escape because "She could no longer abide being connected with a place of shame, lies, hypocrisy, cruelty, servility, and snobbishness" (Larsen, 1986, 14). Her own vision of uplift and education contradict the Naxos policy, so if she had remained she, too, would be a contradiction. Therefore, Helga's time at Naxos must be terminated, and she must seek out her own form of happiness. Contemplating her decision, Helga states "'Yes, partly. Then, too, the people here don't like me. They don't think I'm in the spirit of the work. And I'm not, not if it means suppression of individuality and beauty'" (p. 20). Amidst the dull and lifeless people teaching at

Naxos, Helga represents beauty and individuality and cannot suppress them in order to please others. If this makes Helga a rebel to her environment, then she should and must feel empowered not to become something she loathes and despises. Although Helga forfeits a good job for Black people during this time and place, she ultimately gains something more, the power to choose where she wants to belong, what she wants to do, and how she wants to do it. Helga pushes society's norms out of her way, beginning her quest for happiness. While most critics can recognize that Helga did not want to belong at Naxos, they miss Helga's agency and awareness to forge her own path, which is not to be defined or created by others.

After rejecting Naxos, Helga takes us on a journey. She travels to Chicago in search of a new home. Unable to reconnect with her Uncle Peter and find a home, Helga searches for employment. After several attempts and a diminishing cash flow, Helga finds temporary work with affluent race-woman, Mrs. Hayes-Rore. Noticing something peculiar within Helga, Mrs. Hayes-Rore positions her with an opportunity to work the "racial uplift" in New York. However, in her brief encounters with her new employer, Helga is given a lesson on life. Understanding Helga's family and racial background, Mrs. Hayes-Rore states, "For among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things [miscegenation, adultery, and abandonment] are not mentioned—and therefore they do not exist" (Larsen, 1986, 39). Representing society, Mrs. Hayes-Rore demands that nobody should become aware of such discretions, which could make her life harder than it should be. Not to forget the most important lesson for Helga, she insists "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 business. When you've lived as long as I have, you'll know that what others don't know can't hurt them'" (p. 41). When Mrs. Hayes-Rore demands that Helga hide her white heritage, Helga willfully submits to her

unyielding knowledge about black Harlem because she understands it will procure advantages for her in New York. Even though it appears that Helga has dismissed her white heritage in order to succeed in Harlem, she actually uses her biracial identity at its best. Without a fluid identity and the impulse to change who she has to be, Helga, if any other race, would have ultimately had to remain in her place, not being able to switch and journey from place to place. Her biracial identity grants her privileges, not available to most, to change according to her environment.

In Harlem, Helga creates a new life and begins to settle into a new identity. In this setting, Helga, “again had that strange transforming experience, this time not so fleetingly, that magic sense of having come home. Harlem, teeming black Harlem, had welcomed her and lulled her into something that was, she was certain, peace and contentment” (Larsen, 1986, 43). Naming Harlem “home” so quickly, Helga imagines that this time she can find happiness. Seemingly, Harlem appears to be a place of acceptance and true belonging: “Any shred of self-consciousness or apprehension which, at first, she may have felt vanished quickly, escaped in the keenness of her joy at seeming at last to belong somewhere. For she considered that she had, as she put it, ‘found herself’” (pp. 43-44). If Helga has found herself in Harlem, then she must know what it feels like to belong somewhere, regardless of how temporary or permanent it may actually be. Instead of focusing on the positive aspects of Helga’s frequent movements in the novel, most focus remains negative and critics misread such movements as Helga’s inability to actually ground herself and belong to a group. Helga describes her new happiness:

In the actuality of the pleasant present and the delightful vision of an agreeable future she was contented, and happy. She did not analyze this contentment, this happiness, but vaguely, without putting it into words or even so tangible a thing as a thought, she knew it sprang from a sense of freedom, a release from the feeling of smallness which had hedged her in, first during her sorry, unchildlike

childhood among hostile white folk in Chicago, and later during her uncomfortable sojourn among snobbish black folk in Naxos (p. 46).

Experiencing a sense of freedom and content in Harlem, Helga acknowledges that she, too, can actually be happy and can let the past stay behind. Helga can live according to her own choices.

Questioning why she must only acknowledge and live accordingly as a black woman, Helga retreats into finding a new form of happiness. Helga begins to feel differently about Harlem:

It was if she were shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race, closed up with that something in the racial character which had always been, to her, inexplicable, alien. Why she demanded in fierce rebellion, should she be yoked to these despised black folks? [...] [and her] anticipatory thoughts waltzed and eddied about to the sweet silent music of change. With rapture almost, she let herself drop into the blissful sensation of visualizing herself in different, strange places, among approving and admiring people, where she would be appreciated, and understood (Larsen, 1986, 54-57).

Often critics dismiss Helga's constant wandering as proof that she cannot belong; however, I argue that there is nothing wrong with Helga's frequent movements or her need for a change of scenery. Her biracial identity gives her the authority to change how she wants to live regardless if others see it differently. Helga takes flight from Harlem not only because she needs a change but also because she desires an environment without a limited perspective on race: "She began to make plans and to dream delightful dreams of change, of life somewhere else. Some place where at last she would be permanently satisfied (p. 56). When she leaves Harlem, Helga is dissatisfied and seeks a community more progressive and accepting in terms of race, more specifically a community that will not deny her biraciality.

Therefore, the journey continues to Copenhagen, as Helga approaches possible happiness in Denmark with her white aunt and uncle. While in Denmark, Helga experiences the beauty of people, places, and things. Not only is Helga intrigued by her new environment but also the

people of Denmark are intrigued by her as well. Helga feels welcomed and appreciated. Her Aunt Katrina even wants to show off her exotic beauty—"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" [and] "In her own mind she had determined the role that Helga was to play in advancing the social fortunes of the Dahls of Copenhagen, and she meant to begin at once" (Larsen, 1986, 68). Like others before her, Helga's aunt believes it is her duty and obligation to choose an identity that best suits Helga. All the while, Helga sees these attitudes as a way to become more acquainted with the culture and race of her mother's family. By coming to Copenhagen, Helga wanted to experience a *different* side of her identity.

Unknowingly, though, Helga is allowing herself to represent and function as a sexual object. Helga becomes a spectacle when "the many pedestrians stopped to stare at the queer dark creature, strange to their city" (Larsen, 1986, 69). When Helga notices that her acceptance is based on her dark skin, she becomes aware of her "exact status in her new environment. A decoration. A curio. A peacock" and Helga feels like an outcast (p. 73). In Denmark, Helga cannot exist on her own terms and becomes an internalized image of what a black woman represents in Europe. More specifically, Denmark native and painter Axel Olsen, who has admired Helga since her arrival in Denmark, only sees her as sexual.¹⁰ Without ever thinking Helga could represent something other than the exotic, over-sexed black female, Olsen upholds the stereotype to be a reality. This becomes evident when Olsen unexpectedly proposes (with his reasons): "You know, Helga, you are a contradiction [...] you have the warm impulsive nature of

¹⁰ During Helga's visit in Denmark, painter Axel Olsen really takes a liking to Helga's physical beauty and decides that her exotic nature must be captured in a painting. One evening out Helga notices him admiring her and is truly confused but Helga's uncle clears up the confusion: "I guess he's going to paint you. You're lucky, He's queer. Won't do everybody" (71).

the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I. And I am” (p. 87). Enraged and confused, Helga rejects Olsen instantly on both racial and sexual grounds. Olsen, also confused by her rejection, refers to Helga as “a tragedy” (p. 88) and claims “I think that my picture of you is, after all, the true Helga Crane. Therefore—a tragedy. For someone. For me? Perhaps” (p. 88). Olsen’s eroticized portrait of Helga described as “some disgusting sensual creature with her features,” “bad,” and “wicked” (p. 89) only further extends the tragic mulatta archetype. The painting reveals other people’s inability or resistance to see her as anything except tragic; others cannot see the real multidimensional Helga that exists throughout the narrative.

After living in Denmark for nearly two years, Helga’s next decision carries her back to Harlem. Contemplating and examining her choices, Helga wonders: “Why couldn’t she have two lives, or why couldn’t she be satisfied in one place? Now that she was actually off, she felt heavy at heart. Already she looked back with infinite regret at the two years in the country which had given her so much, of pride, of happiness, of wealth, and of beauty” (Larsen, 1986, 93). Helga could not have two lives because the individuals of both black and white society recognize that the color line is rigid and expects people to “stay in their place.” Helga enjoyed different experiences (Naxos, Chicago, Harlem, and Denmark) but once Helga becomes comfortable and content, society dismisses Helga’s choices as unacceptable.

Back in Harlem, Helga’s need for black people and the Harlem culture is short-lived, mainly because nothing more has changed. Harlem’s tensions about race are still prevalent and still grant Helga no true possibility to exist as she would like to. Helga clearly acknowledges her dilemmas with finding happiness on her journeys throughout the novel:

This knowledge, this certainty of the division of her life into two parts in two lands, into physical freedom in Europe and spiritual freedom in America, was

unfortunate, inconvenient, expensive. It was, too, as she was uncomfortably aware, even a trifle ridiculous, and mentally she caricatured herself moving shuttle-like from continent to continent. From the prejudiced restrictions of the New World to the easy formality of the Old, from the pale calm of Copenhagen to the colorful lure of Harlem. (Larsen, 1986, 96)

But, at each respective location, regardless of her ability to maintain happiness, she decides where she is to belong and flees when her biraciality is either threatened or condemned.

Distraught and jaded, Helga Crane is seemingly saved by religion and is whisked away by Reverend Pleasant Green to rural Alabama. In an instant, Helga had made a decision, a decision to seduce and marry Reverend Green and move for the final time in her journey to Alabama and recognizes that: “Things, she realized, hadn’t been, weren’t, enough for her. She’d have to have something else besides. It all came back to that old question of happiness. Surely this was it.” (Larsen, 1986, 116). Helga remembers the past journeys but knows that “at last, she had found a place for herself, that she was really living” (p. 118). However, this move is Helga’s most debilitating throughout the whole novel. Helga diagnoses her own fate by the end:

She had ruined her life. Made it impossible ever again to do the things that she wanted, have the things that she loved, mingle with the people she liked. *She had, to put it as brutally as anyone could, been a fool. The damndest kind of a fool.* And she had paid for it. More than enough she had to admit that it wasn’t new, this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it she had experienced. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree. (pp. 133-34, my emphasis)

Although most would render these words as proof that Helga “ruined her life,” a closer look would reveal that she had only been a “fool.” Moreover, being a fool does not equate to her being “doomed” as her fate as a tragic mulatta would suggest. If Helga must be criticized for her last choice, let it only be because she made a foolish choice. Whether Helga’s choices are good or bad throughout the course of the novel, she ultimately made all those choices. I argue that the most important takeaway here is that maybe she really is doomed, but the important thing is to

see that she chose to make the decision that may or may not have doomed her. The key thing is her agency, not the consequences of her choices. With every choice, Helga claimed a stake in forming a biracial subjectivity.

Helga acknowledges that her previous movements did not provide the right type of happiness that she was looking for. What type of happiness, to exist as a biracial individual celebrating and embracing both sides of her race, became readily available for Helga? Because such a space was not available to Helga, her final choice is disappointing because “the children used her up” (Larsen, 1986, 123) and she deserved more than that. In a fleeting moment, Helga mulls over her last choice: “How, then, was she to escape from the oppression, the degradation, that her life had become? It was so difficult. It was terribly difficult. It was *almost* hopeless” (p. 135, my emphasis). But, those who believe in Helga’s endurance to fight racial categories during her time can hope that her life would not end as the novel suggests. Not to mention, Helga in the midst of her hopelessness, oppression, and depression still makes a choice to stay for her children. Helga realizes that although her ultimate happiness cannot be reached immediately, her own children may have that possibility to live as she wanted to.¹¹

As the novel closes, Helga’s past must be remembered. Reflecting on the many movements she encountered, each location marks a different path in her life when she made conscious choices and decisions regarding her selfhood and identity. This reflection demonstrates that her plight informs her choices and they are not just random or casual reactions. With every choice, Helga contemplated and searched for answers to help her reconfigure her fleeting moments of rejection, alienation, and confusion. Through Helga’s frequent moves and

¹¹ Her own children, who would be “multiracial”, could have the possibility to forge a biracial (or multiracial) subjectivity that their mother struggled to maintain.

changes, the narrative evidently suggests that Helga desires a life free from racial burdens and restrictive classifications.

Throughout *Quicksand*, Helga is highly conscious of her surroundings and flees when she feels restricted or racially imprisoned. Helga has choices when she embraces a new kind of identity within each new place she moves. While her choices are always limited in that they are always subject to other people's projections, they still facilitate her biracial subjectivity by allowing her to work against social expectations. Helga shapes her identity even further when she moves away from the confinement, the restriction, and the alienation that plague her movements throughout the novel.

The bleak and unsatisfying ending marks a surprising turn of fate for Helga considering that in other turns of the novel she usually had the ability to get out of uncomfortable or disagreeable binds quite easily. But, in the end, her movement comes to an abrupt halt. The fact that the novel does not have an optimistic ending for Helga does not render her a tragic mulatta, however, neither should her *last choice* negate her agency throughout the rest of the novel. Helga asserts agency by her ability to contend with alienation, exploitation, and confusion from others who maintained such essentialist constructions of race.

Choosing Larsen in this project is both a personal and a deliberate choice as I discuss 21st century texts that focus on race and identity because it calls attention to the myriad ways women writers often struggled to assert their power and agency of their lives in society and in literature. Larsen's obscure departure from the literary scene was abrupt and disappointing to the future of black women writers during the time. Furthermore, both Senna and Durrow pay homage to Larsen through the works presented here that make the connections real and beneficial to readers of the genre. My resurgence of Larsen in the 21st century is to untangle the tragic representations

so that today's contemporary biracial characters can realize their fullest capabilities as women with agency and choice.

Leaving Tragedy Behind, Embracing Transformations

This chapter takes specific aim at contemporary literature where the main protagonists are female biracial characters who are often represented as “new” or “remixed” versions of the tragic mulatta.¹² Both Danzy Senna and Heidi Durrow clearly understand the dynamics of the tragic mulatto genre, but use the tragic mulatto tropes in a way to pull readers in, but with different plot lines and resolutions. These authors remix the tragic mulatto narrative because they actually place the tragedy outside of their protagonists' racial identities and force the readers to see the complexities and nuances of racialization, categorization, and stereotyping that society has thus created for them. These authors craftily make readers complicit in understanding a different way to read about biracial characters in literature. What we then see because of these necessary revisions are narratives about young biracial female characters that are capable of being something more than a trope or stereotypes. These protagonists are beautiful and insecure, brave and vulnerable, outspoken and shy, reasoned and visceral, smart and naive, and progressive and reactionary, which truly means their characterizations could be endless because the authors are writing in modes that break their protagonists out of the boxes and spaces the other characters intend on placing them inside of throughout these narratives. These authors show how these novels actively and explicitly craft new kinds of biracial characters that leave behind the tragic tropes of earlier biracial literature in the 19th and 20th centuries. When we

¹² While I make a deliberate and conscious choice in choosing female biracial centered narratives, it is important to note that there are contemporary narratives available and written by black-white biracial men too. Other male biracial narratives include Barack Obama's memoir *Dreams from my Father*, James McBride's memoir *The Color of Water*, and Gregory Howard Williams' memoir *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black*.

continue reading in the same critical spaces, we become trapped in the normalcy of the tragedy that U.S. history and literature provides for biracial characters. The past tropes of tragic mulatto fiction—confusion about identity, holding onto relationships, confusion of place in society, bad choices, suicide, punishment, and death—were able to guide our thinking in the 20th century in American and African American literature, but now my project can position our thinking into the 21st century.

Readers might be ready to expect tragedy because that is what we have had since the 1840s. However, in fact, there is tragedy, but when we look at it, we see it is a different kind of tragedy. These authors employ tragedy here so that the biracial characters can overcome it. Readers may initially assume and name these characters to be tragic mulattoes, but these characters are something different. They are no longer defined by any types of tragedies that exist in the narratives. My project looks at two contemporary novels about biracial characters. In that sense, Helga Crane anticipates these new biracial characters in these novels. Readers see a whole new set of tropes: racial fluidity and flexibility, proper identity formation, authentication of blackness/mixedness, white-presenting privileges, racial transcendence, hybrid and third spaces, and complicity and silence in racist systems.¹³ The textual analysis that follows provides evidence of how these tropes are now operating within biracial literature and allow readers to get caught up with the tenets of CMRS.

In this section, the project highlights those moments where the authors' visions for their respective characters, Birdie (in *Caucasia*) and Rachel (in *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*), take up the task of abandoning the tragic mulatto tropes of tragedy and doom. I offer a brief overview of the character's life, family, and location and pull out specific moments throughout the novels

¹³ All of these tropes may not exist or appear in each respective text, but these are ones that I have found to be most common in contemporary biracial literature, memoirs, and essays.

that showcase the authors' resistance to the old tropes and the tragic mulatto tradition. Both novels make apparent the ways in which these female characters must undergo an internal change of how they view race and their own racial interactions with their family, friends, and community.

Passing by Tragedy and Tradition in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*

Written in 1998, Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* Senna crafts a narrative centered on an interracial family living in Boston, Massachusetts during the 1970s, and chronicles the trials and tribulations young female protagonists and sisters Birdie and Cole Lee face during their adolescence. What happens here in the novel begins when two parents, respectively a white mother, Sandy, and a black father, Deck, realize that they no longer can pass as a happy loving couple in a happy marriage—their love and respect for one another changes and arguments increase—causing these parents to eventually separate. However, the parents fail to realize the consequences of separating a family, especially two sisters, based solely on skin color and racial phenotypes. Birdie is a white-presenting biracial girl while her sister Cole is a cinnamon-skinned biracial girl; Sandy chooses Birdie and Deck chooses Cole. What follows is the journey Birdie undergoes as she leaves the only family and life she has ever known and soon becomes a young biracial girl passing as a white Jewish girl named Jesse Goldman. Senna's novel is not just about race, but it is also about becoming, about disappearing, about changing and learning, about relationships and family, and about how we deal with the daily struggles of our lives. Senna pushes readers past the story of race and offers us a story of a young girl forging an identity that serves as a blueprint for other biracial characters in literature.

Senna employs many new tropes in *Caucasia* that position Birdie in spaces that are not tragic as her predecessors in early 20th century literary fiction. A few of those tropes include but

are not limited to: gaining and creating racial fluidity in social environments, understanding and learning proper identity formation in an interracial family, authenticating blackness, mixedness, and/or whiteness, remaining silent and complicit in racist acts and/or systems, participating in acts of racial transcendence, choosing hybrid and third spaces, and benefitting from white-presenting privileges. While I will not discuss all of the tropes in their entirety, I still argue that they are necessary for critical inquiry when discussing biracial characters in contemporary literature. The few I want to discuss here deal with Birdie and Cole's racial fluidity, Birdie and Cole's authentication of blackness, and Birdie's own complicit acts of passing and remaining silent on racist issues as Jesse Goldman.¹⁴ All of these tropes push the reader to understand the different ways to read biracial characters that do not focus on the tragedy of the character's life or circumstances.

From the beginning, Senna craftily positions Birdie into the narrative as a raceless and nameless character. As the second child of Sandy and Deck, Birdie came at the wrong time she believed because her parents argued incessantly, where she often believed "sometimes I wondered if it were my fault" (Senna, 1998, 19). Birdie had no real name, and because Cole wanted a parakeet for her birthday, then the family just settled on Birdie, even though, "[her] birth certificate still read, 'Baby Lee,' like the gravestone of some stillborn child" (p. 19). In this sense, I argue that Senna uses tropes of namelessness and confusion to stir up anxiety with the readers about yet another tragic mulatto character, but the story has only begun and readers must not blame Birdie for her parents' arguing and frustrations. In time, the narrator reveals a very unhappy marriage between two unloving people, which has nothing to do with Birdie here. The

¹⁴ The first part of the novel—Part 1: "Negritude for Beginners"—deals specifically with the time between the sisters and the early parts of their parents' separation so much of the issues that Birdie experiences she does so right alongside her older sister. So, whereby the chapter is devoted to Birdie and her journey throughout the novel, it would be amiss for me not to include the relationship with her older sister.

tragedy she begins to live through is a likely divorce as a child in a family, which as Cole explains to her sister: "...she bet they were going to get a divorce. She said everybody's parents did at some point" (p. 19).

Regardless of how their parents felt about each other, the two sisters were inseparable as young girls. The narrator reminds us, "In those days, I rotated around Cole. Everything was her. I obeyed her, performed for her, followed her, studied her the way little sisters do. We were rarely far apart. We even spoke our own language" (Senna, 1998, 5). Elemenos, as described in the narrative, "was a complicated language, impossible for outsiders to pick up—no verb tenses, no pronouns, just words floating outside time and space without owner or direction" (p. 6). The girls were left alone in their imaginary world to play, to love, to sing, to create, and to pretend. Birdie remembers: "I had some vague understanding that beyond our window, outside the attic, lay danger—the world, Boston, and all the problems that came with the city... We were the inside, the secret and fun and make-believe, and that was where I wanted to stay" (p. 7). Both Birdie Lee and Cole find comfort in their imagined Elemenos because they "could turn not just from black to white, but from brown to yellow to purple to green, and back again... they were a shifting people, constantly changing their form, color, pattern, in a quest for invisibility... The Elemenos could turn deep green in the bushes, beige in the sand, or blank white in the snow, and their power lay precisely in their ability to disappear into any surroundings" (p. 7). The concept of racial fluidity seeps into the novel in very colorful ways for the sisters and they learn how to shift in and out of their real and imagined worlds effortlessly. One of the most common tropes of new contemporary biracial literature is the ability for the characters to switch between different types of environments, speech, behaviors, etc. The sisters catch on pretty quickly in the

pretend world versus the reality of their dysfunctional family life.¹⁵ If switching in real life is not so easy, as Helga also found in *Quicksand*, then the idea that switching is safe and pretend sets the reader up for a stronger sense of tragedy to come as their family dysfunction continues.

I want to examine specifically what happens when Birdie and Cole are thrust into a new school and they are forced to negotiate and perform blackness almost at whim in hopes of seeking affirmation and acceptance from their peers. After dealing with their parents' recent "for-good" breakup and their father "really" moving out, Birdie and Cole struggle to understand the hows and whys of their family's dysfunction. In an attempt to appease her husband, Sandy decides to enroll their daughters into the Nkrumah Black Power School against her own beliefs because she believes the homeschool method will "keep [them] safe from the racism and violence of the world" (Senna, 1998, 26). While Sandy wants to keep her children safe, it is apparent that she and her husband fail to adequately prepare their mixed-race children to enter social spheres that question and attack their racial identities. Both sisters find out quickly that unlike the whimsical and made-up "Elemeno" language and people they imagined and took comfort in at home, their new peers force them into a "real" social reality where they buffer between acceptance and authentication at Nkrumah. The girls cannot take the imaginary world of the Elemenos to school with them. In this new space and with any space outside of their imaginary world, the girls have to face the truth that they do not have the ability to transcend race or racism here.

And as hesitant as Sandy is about the school that specifically caters its curriculum and instruction on African American students because Birdie Lee "looks" white and Cole "looks" black, she foreshadows a very troubling time for both girls as their social worlds are turned

¹⁵ This trope will be reexamined later in the novel when Birdie becomes Jesse Goldman and passes as a different person altogether in order to be on the run from the FBI with her mother from Boston to New Hampshire.

upside down by racist ideologies and ideas. Naomi Pabst in her 2008 article, “An Unexpected Blackness” calls attention to the importance of changing how we view blackness socially and culturally:

It’s imperative that we continue to develop a frame of reference that allows for variation between black people and allows for complexity along lines of culture, national belonging, and individual experience. For every black person there is a corresponding black experience. And the symbolic collectivity we label “the black community” is made up of many who in one way or another defy, exceed, transgress, or subvert the perceived imperatives of the category. And yet, some black experiences are more different than others, and some differences make more of a difference than others. Hybridity enables us to conceive of a blackness that crosscuts, overlaps, and blends with other categories, racial and otherwise (Pabst, 2008, 113).

Pabst is important to note here because, as Senna distinctly projects society’s views onto Birdie and Cole, we, too, as readers are capable of having those same types of perceptions. Therefore, we must understand how we are reading these narratives and to what effect. Birdie’s first day starts off with a lesson in colorism when her classmate questions her “blackness”: “‘What you doin’ in this school? You white?’ All eyes were on me, and I tried to think of something to say. I felt the familiar tightening in my lungs. The children stared at me, mouths hanging open. A terrifying silence had overtaken the room” (Senna, 1998, 43). Naomi Pabst explains how blackness is situated for biracial and multiracial individuals: “all at once you belong and you do not belong, you are simultaneously an insider and an outsider. You are black and yet your blackness is different, unusual. Yours is an unexpected blackness. And this means that in some people’s eyes, yours is an inappropriate, inauthentic blackness” (p. 115). As Birdie experiences Nkrumah, she becomes alien and outsider because she doesn’t have “nappy hair” and “cinnamon skin” like her older sister Cole as hair and skin become signifiers of authenticating a type of blackness. Cole has a different experience and socially blooms on the first few days and explains honestly, “No, Birdie. I kind of like it. I want to stay...Anyway, we can’t do home

school forever” (p. 47). Birdie’s experiences thus are different than Cole’s because her long, straight hair and white-presenting skin do not fit her classmates’ definition of blackness. Yet, Cole attempts to rectify the situation by bullying the girl who wanted to fight Birdie and cut off her hair. Cole boldly exclaims, “‘Listen metal mouth, Birdie isn’t white. She’s black. Just like me. So don’t be messing with her again or I’ll cut off all your hair for real this time’” (p. 48). Unlike the confidence Cole exudes and the way she parades around in her body as “black and proud,” Birdie has another story to tell about her body. After her sister protects her, Birdie explains, “I often found myself alone, chewing on my hair and nails with an insatiable hunger, as if trying to eat myself alive, picking at my scabs with a fervor, as if trying to find another body buried inside. I pondered whether it was better to be harassed or ignored” (pp. 48-49). Pabst reiterates Birdie’s dilemma when she explains “Those of us, and there are a lot of us, whose black identities fall outside the accepted formulas for blackness are subject to this self-same existential deviation from a mythical norm, and yet doubly so when we are also othered within the category *black*” (p. 128). However, Birdie is not quite ready and fails to understand that her mixedness is just a different type of blackness that her peers fail to accept because it fails to conform to one monolithic idea of how they are accustomed to viewing blackness. Unlike the tragic mulatta figures, Birdie and Cole do not retreat to a corner and sulk about the tragedy of their lives as new students in a new school. Senna gives her characters the choices and agency to choose how they envision themselves around others. Birdie and Cole makes deliberate choices in finding a resolution to the problems they encounter. By doing this, Senna does not adhere to the tragic mulatto tropes and creates problem solvers instead.

And even when it appears that Cole is free from any type of social trauma and drama at the new school, her blackness is thus questioned and ridiculed when her white mother fails to

understand “proper” black hair and skin regimens. We learn that Sandy “had been trying to do Cole’s hair for years now, and it always ended in disaster. When Cole was very little, my mother had simply let her run around with what she called a ‘dustball’ on her head. She had thought the light and curly afro adorable and didn’t quite understand the disapproving glances of the black people on the street” (Senna, 1998, 50). In the black community, hair operates and functions as one of the most salient aspects of self-esteem and identity politics for black girls and women so it’s a clear test that Cole fails to pass. Cole laments to her sister and her father—“Mum doesn’t know anything about raising a black child. She just doesn’t” (p. 53). For instance, Cole’s cinnamon skin has ashy knees, elbows, and ankles because she doesn’t use lotion. And, again, in an attempt to braid Cole’s hair like the girl on the magazine cover so her daughter can appear “more black,” Sandy’s version is horrible, leaving Cole’s hair sticking straight up looking nothing like the intricate and neat corn rolls on the photo. Thus, this begins the start of their troubling relationship and misunderstandings because Sandy just cannot understand “blackness.” But as Cole runs to her black father he seems to understand and gives her the money she needs to cater to the styles of her classmates. Cole’s persistence on looking “authentically” black is hard for her parents to understand initially. Even as a black man, her father is unaware of how to make it right for his daughter. He does not seem to be equipped to teach her styles of blackness or hip her to the newest fashions for black youth so he does the next best thing and gives her money to create the image she needs to be accepted by her peers.

Birdie and Cole try so hard to fit into their social environments. They even switch up their vocabulary so they do not sound white in an effort to authenticate their “blackness.” Reading from an *Ebony* article—“Black English: Bad for Our Children,” the girls learn to say things like “I’m goin to de sto’ and “Tell de troof”—thinking a lesson on Ebonics and slang can

truly help them authenticate their blackness (p. 53). Through hair, skin, language, and dress the girls almost put on a form of blackface so they can become what they think “black” is. In a way, the girls are simply trying to pass for an “authenticated” form of blackness that Nkrumah projects on them, putting on race in the novel like an accessory or costume.

In actuality, the girls do more than put race on and off because they really do change in how they interact in their school and social environments and in their homes like they never had before. Birdie explains very clearly:

I learned the art of changing at Nkrumah, a skill that would later become second nature to me. Maybe I was always good at it. Maybe it was a skill I had inherited from my mother, or my father, or my aunt Dot, or my Nana, the way some people inherit a talent for music or art or mathematics. Even before Nkrumah, Cole and I had gotten a thrill out of changing—spending our days dressed in old costumes, pretending to be queens of our make-believe nation. But only at Nkrumah did it become more than a game. There I learned how to do it for real—how to become someone else, how to erase the person I was before (Senna, 1998, 62).

Birdie undeniably makes a conscious effort to be somebody that her new classmates can grow to like and befriend as others had did with Cole. The need to authenticate her blackness comes at a higher expense because of her white-presenting skin and features. Birdie wears braids to mask the straight texture of her hair, she wears gold hoop earrings, Sergio Valente jeans, jean jackets with sparkles, and white Nike sneakers in order to look fashionably black and cool like her black classmates. Birdie admits, “I stood many nights in front of the bathroom mirror, practicing how to say “nigger” the way the kids in school did it, dropping the “er” so that it became not a slur, but a term of endearment: *nigga*” (p. 63). After some time, Birdie sees that her hard work has paid off and the other girls begin to interact with her so much that they ask her to be a part of their clique. As a part of the clique Brown Sugars, Birdie finally gains a sense of place at Nkrumah. We learn that: “A new boyfriend had catapulted [her] into the world of the freshest girls in the school. Now that [she] had been knighted black by Maria, and pretty by Ali, the rest

of the school saw [her] in a new light. Finally, Birdie is becoming visible in ways she never even imagined” (p. 64). However, I argue that Senna offers more than what meets the page here and provides necessary commentary about what it means to be perform blackness, mixedness, or both in our society and communities.

What is important to make note of here is that there is no one way to be black in this narrative, even though the language and fortitude to understand this escapes these young adolescents, only hoping to fit into a group for validation. As readers, we are more privy to understanding that Senna sees the bigger picture about the worlds we interact in daily. And until the black (and white) community can understand that there is no one “black, monolithic experience,” then many mixed-race children and adults will struggle to have their blackness accepted and affirmed by their social groups and will continue to be ostracized because they are different. Pabst reminds us here:

Difference often elicits fear, within and between groups. Difference is often labeled as *strange, inferior, inappropriate, and deviant*. Some get uncomfortable, threatened even, when the outlook, the world view, the ‘situated knowledge’ of a black person fails to conform to a dominant and expected narrative. My opinion is that the life experiences and perspectives of black people who have somehow landed outside the given parameters of blackness are perfectly legitimate unto themselves—they don’t need regulating or policing (Pabst, 2003, 128-130).

Instead of policing and protecting borders of blackness, our society should be moving towards opening spaces and borders that accept and embrace all types of blackness. For example, consider the times and moments when former President Barack Obama would get wrangled in authenticity politics of not being “black enough” by popular culture and news pundits. Senna employs very similar representations of blackness, authenticity, and performance with her two mixed-race characters in *Caucasia*. As sisters with the same black father and white mother, Birdie Lee and Cole share different racial signifiers (i.e. skin tone, phenotype, hair texture) that

positions both of them inside and outside blackness. By examining specific junctures of time, space, and place, Senna shows what happens when blackness is tested and sisters become not only different but also separated based on race. What is apparent in the novel is that both of sisters' experiences are different, but they are both changing themselves to fit a type and fit in just as we understand Helga's many changes in *Quicksand*. However, the difference here is that the other kids at school, after all, do not find race to be challenged. Instead, the girls' behavior satisfies them without asking them to change. The key here is recognizing the performative nature of the shift the girls present here in the novel. What's most important here is that we see the agency in the girls, not the apparent conclusion of them finally fitting in.

Our protagonist Birdie knows that there is definitely more than one way of being once she and her mother enter into the land of Caucasia. Birdie becomes another person and creates a whole new identity in hopes of protecting her mother Sandy from being picked up by the FBI. Birdie laments about the loss of her old identity:

I was a nobody, just a body without a name or a history, sitting beside my mother in the front seat of our car, moving forward on the highway, not stopping. (And when I stopped being nobody, I would become white—white as my skin, hair, bones allowed. My body would fill in the blanks, tell me who I should become, and I would let it speak for me) (Senna, 1998, 1).

As “fugitives of noble causes,” now Jesse and Sheila Goldman, Birdie and Sandy slip into the land of Caucasia, also known as New Hampshire, after four years of being on the run in motels, communes, and other available places. Birdie explains: “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. And for me, there was comfort in that state of incompleteness, a sense that as long as we kept moving, we could go back to what we had left behind” (p. 137). What they leave behind is Cole, other relatives, and the

only live they have ever known. Now, Birdie has to become Jesse and her Jewishness is a performance she and her mother have put together for the public at whim. Birdie has to remember specific details about her Jewish ancestry, religion, and culture while forgetting other details about her black culture and heritage, which is no small feat for a 12-year-old. Birdie shortly realizes that her mother is attempting, after some time, to actually settle down and become grounded in a new life with Jim, much to her displeasure, instead of waiting for Cole and her father “so [they] could start where [they] had left off” (p. 179). Birdie naively believes in a life that her mother no longer wants with her father. Birdie understands, “Now that we had stopped moving, allowing ourselves to bloom, it seemed the old had to disintegrate” (p. 188). She starts to become too comfortable passing as Jesse Goldman, but she also learns to stretch the truth out to believe the lies—“I had even convinced myself that my passing for this white girl, this Jewish girl, this Jesse Goldman, would support my father’s research” (p. 189). Birdie needs a way to discard Jesse that does not put her mother and her in harm’s way, but she finds no clear paths to making that happen. For the moment, Birdie has to remain Jesse against her body’s own rejection of her.

Her time with Nicholas Marsh, her neighbor’s white teenage son, shows us how she becomes complicit in his racist language and jokes about black people and his use of the nickname “Poca” (as in Pocahontas) to describe her skin in the sun. In this regard, Birdie would never let such injustices occur because she was taught otherwise, but as she passes as Jesse Goldman, she has to keep up the charades. What we learn though is that the talk of racist language, jokes, and black people cause anxiety and breathing problems with Birdie. Readers learn, after the joking, that “Before Nicholas’s jokes, I had believed I was falling in love. Now the feeling in my chest—the dropping—had turned into a kind of soreness. He looked stupid all

of a sudden” (Senna, 1998, 205). Birdie struggles in this game of passing as Jesse Goldman, and the racism internally affects her because it was a jarring revelation to the whole act of pretending to be white. Birdie’s passing as white has clear implications to the tropes of tragedy because it forces her to deny her blackness and to suffer the consequences of that action.

However, it does not stop young Birdie from wanting to be in the “it-crowd” again and to be visible (but this time as white) in her new surroundings. In order to be friends with the white girl Mona and her group of friends, Birdie has to dress and act the part so she can be one of the popular girls again. Yet, it comes at the expense of being mean to another mixed girl, Samantha, who does not have the white-presenting privilege that Birdie has. Instead of standing up for or befriending Samantha, Birdie does the opposite and becomes silent and complicit in the mean, racist behavior with her new friends. As the novel continues, we learn that Mona and Birdie/Jesse become “connected at the hip” and do nearly everything together. There are many instances where Birdie hears racial epithets and jokes that it becomes like a second language to Mona’s home life:

When I heard those inevitable words come out of Mona’s mouth, Mona’s mother’s mouth, Dennis’s mouth—nigga, spic, fuckin’ darkie—I only looked away into the distance, my features tensing slightly, sometimes a little laugh escaping. Strange as it may sound, there was a safety in this pantomime. 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 (Senna, 1998, 233).

Senna provides readers with a new outlook on the act of passing in this genre. After all, in older passing narratives people had their entire lives at stake. Instead of being tragic or solely a source of danger, Birdie’s passing shows her agency and strength because passing to her is a “game” that eventually she would end by revealing her “true” self. Even as a teenager, Birdie has the understanding of an individual that makes her identities work in flux for her own benefits. She is

adamant that she is a part of a game and that she is winning. Birdie believes she “was a spy in enemy territory. This was all a game of make-believe” (p. 269). Michele Elam in *The Souls of Mixed Folks* argues that “[Birdie’s] passing forecloses interpretability of her experience—experience which, throughout the text, she marshals as leverage for both self-assessment and social analysis” (Elam, 2011, 102) of the communities she enters. Birdie not only learns about herself during her time as Jesse Goldman, but also about all the other people in her proximity.

When the time is right, Birdie escapes from her mother’s grasp and lies and finds transportation to visit her father’s sister, Dot, in Boston in search for her sister and father. At once, Birdie drops the passing act as Jesse and goes back to the identity she has yearned to return to in its full form. In an earnest conversation with her aunt, Birdie realizes that although Dot reassured her she was “black,” she was determined not to “be black like Samantha. A doomed, tragic shade of black. I wanted to be black like somebody else” (Senna, 1998, 321). Birdie’s declaration is proof that she refuses to be anybody’s tragic mulatto or a part of anybody’s racial saga any longer. Birdie even dismisses her mother’s demands that she returns as Sandy travels from New Hampshire to Boston to return Birdie back to a home she no longer wants to be a part of. Birdie’s resistance is powerful because even at the young age of fourteen, she decides that her very existence to be who she needs to be will be determined in these moments of becoming. Birdie becomes who she wants to be and resist the life her mother had now carved out for her to fit the boxes she was now comfortable and complacent in. Birdie refuses to leave with Sandy, finds information about her father’s new address in California, meets her white grandmother, Penelope, for money, and flies out to Oakland, California to finally reunite with her sister and father after six long years. Birdie’s journey is more than a coming-of-age story because she

shows readers what happens when they make choices that have the potential to impact their future in specific ways.

After years of dismissing her identity and leaving her family, Birdie finally reconnects with Deck and Cole. However, the reunion with her father does not go as expected. Distant and aloof, Deck is unable to soothe and comfort his daughter, who has longed for his love, attention, and approval since she could walk and talk, but he does not miss the opportunity to talk to her about his work and totally dismisses her racial adventure as Jesse Goldman as mere child's play. Birdie snaps, "You left me. You left me with Mum, knowing she was going to disappear. Why did you only take Cole? Why didn't you take me? If race is so make-believe, why did I go with Mum? You gave me to Mum cause I looked white. You don't think that's real? Those are the facts" (Senna, 1998, 393). Just like her conversations with Sandy, she refuses to let anybody, including her parents, to invalidate her experiences as a biracial individual. In relation to Helga Crane, Birdie takes a definitive claim on who she wants to be and refuses to be boxed in by others' expectations of her. Unlike Helga, she continues forward and keeps moving along her racial journey to find ways that best align with the life she wants. Nobody is able to position Birdie in a place she does not want to belong. Her refusal is both powerful and necessary for Senna's revision of the tragic mulatto trope to be effective here.

Birdie and Cole's reunion, perhaps the most anticipated event in the novel, is worth the wait as the two sisters swoon over each other and speak in Elemenio to reignite their connection as sisters. Both sisters lament on the ways they missed each other and how their parents' decision was not well thought out, but the dialogue that is most important is about the racial codes, behaviors, and experiences they both faced. Birdie holds back for nobody at this point. Her voice is no longer muted and complicit in what others simply want for her. She is honest

and endearing to Cole: “Everybody had their own way of surviving...It had come so easily to me. I had become somebody I didn’t like. Somebody who had no voice or color or conviction. I wasn’t sure that was survival...they say you don’t have to choose. But the thing is, you do. Because there are consequences if you don’t...’Yeah, and there are consequences if you do” (Senna, 1998, 408). Birdie is excited to start a new adventure with her sister in California and to attend high school there where Cole explains, ““If you ever thought you were the only one, get ready. We’re a dime a dozen out here”” (p. 412). Birdie, Cole, and Sandy all even agreed to meet up as mother and daughters to mend their relationship. Birdie comes full-circle and forges her own path to be a mixed-girl on her own terms. With high school on the horizon, Birdie’s journey in California brings a multitude of possibilities and triumphs for her future. Senna’s narrative choices for Birdie bring forth a new biracial character in American literature that fights against the tragic mulatto tradition and tragic representations throughout the novel.

Transcending Race and Tragedy in Heidi Durrow’s *The Girl*

Published in 2010, Heidi Durrow’s *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* is a contemporary Bildungsroman of a black-white biracial protagonist, Rachel Morse, learning to navigate her racial and social worlds after experiencing a family suicide-murder tragedy. After literally falling from the sky and surviving against all odds, Rachel Morse is thrust into a new racial and social environment in Portland with her grandmother and aunt after moving from Chicago with her mother and siblings. Throughout the novel, Durrow alerts us of the complexities of growing up biracial and allows us to see firsthand how Rachel comes to digest her identity, culture, and family after a terrible tragedy. As a contemporary biracial character, Rachel is not the tragedy readers may be accustomed to in literature about biracial characters. Rachel’s story about race is only one story about being biracial in the U.S., but it is an important story because it

demonstrates the multifaceted and multilayered nature of race today. Durrow's protagonist is on a journey of healing and transformation from the abhorrent tragedy and trauma of witnessing her mother and two siblings die in a suicide. Readers see the transformations and consequences of a character, who just so happens to be biracial, working through that pain.

Durrow deliberately turns the tragic mulatto tropes on its head to allow us to understand that being mixed-raced is only part of her story, but it is not *the* story. Unlike the common tropes in tragic mulatto fiction, this narrative dismisses the concept of mixed-race as tragedy and focuses on the ways race operates as a personal story of becoming, transforming, and learning. Durrow utilizes the contemporary tropes of racial fluidity in social environments, authenticating blackness, mixedness and/or whiteness, and believing in racial transcendence. Here, I examine Durrow's characterization of Rachel and how she allows her protagonist to challenge racial binaries and scripts of biracialness and blackness in the U.S. and what consequences remain once she refuses to participate in racial scripts inscribed by either her family and/or communities.

As the narrative begins Rachel is with her grandmother and we are unaware of the tragedy that has affected her. Instead we learn that she is the "new girl." Rachel is deemed "the new girl" because she enters into a new environment as the black-white biracial girl with blue eyes and curly hair and without a mother and father present. From the beginning of the novel, we are made to visualize and see Rachel before knowing her story. After leaving the hospital with her grandmother, Rachel becomes visually available to the reader. The first thing we notice are responses from the bus driver who comments on Rachel's physical beauty and provides the first instance of racial marking by noticing "the prettiest blue eyes on the prettiest little girl" (Durrow, 2010, 3). Durrow does not waste any time visibly marking the pages with racial descriptions of skin color and other features because she is familiar with the tragic mulatto

tradition. Within only a few pages, we also learn a few things about Rachel's grandmother and aunt. We learn that her grandmother has "eggplant brown skin" and "was the first colored woman to buy a house in this part of Portland" (p. 4, 5). Aunt Loretta is also classified racially here by her skin tone as being "nut brown" and "beautiful" (p. 7). While it may seem as a way to discuss race, Durrow does it to specifically connect Rachel to both her black grandmother and her aunt that she has rarely had any familial connections too. Durrow is quick to impart the idea that family is important to one's upbringing. In a way to make Rachel adapt to her new surroundings, Durrow shows how both the grandmother and aunt try to make her feel comfortable with being in a new home and new place because in their minds, she is right where she needs to be. In many narratives of the past, tragic mulatto characters struggled to find a permanent home and family that genuinely welcomed them and appreciated their presence. If we look to Helga's own family, she is abandoned by her black father and her mother's new family disowns her, thus leaving Helga in an indeterminate position to be a part of a real family. Rachel is welcomed with open arms and admiration from her grandmother and aunt she barely even knows.

As Rachel begins the ritual to becoming the "new girl," her grandmother explains that she is actually a black girl, but this is a new concept to her because both her father Roger and mother Mor rarely discussed race with their children. These racial concepts become even more prevalent to Rachel as her grandmother prepares to get her ready for her upcoming first day of school. Rachel learns about what it means to be experience black, cultural practices when her grandmother partakes in "doing her hair." Rachel discovers, from her grandmother, just how nappy her "kitchen" is in the back of her hair (Durrow, 2010, 6). Her grandmother clearly explains, "'Black girls with a lot of hair don't need to be so tenderheaded'" (p. 6). But Rachel is

unaware of what this means and how it actually applies to her. The scene marks Rachel's first lesson into black girls' and hair care. Her grandmother is giving her a lesson on "how to be a black girl." Grandma Doris understands this as a black woman and wants to equip her granddaughter with such tools to prepare her, but because Rachel is new to actually understanding what it means to have a "kitchen" (described as having nappy and wild hair) she can only determine that it is deemed bad. Rachel is gaining knowledge about what it entails to be a young, black girl and what she must do to adjust to this new role. So, in a way, Rachel must adapt to being both the new girl at school and a new black girl.

While Rachel cries from the pain and shame of her bad hair and being scared in a new place in Portland without the only family she has ever known, we should note that Grandma Doris is simply teaching her what she has done for her own daughter and what her mother had done for her. Even with "family," Rachel feels uneasy and uncomfortable; however, her grandmother's goal is to teach her things about being black that she is oblivious to. Nonetheless, Durrow gives Rachel a voice that resonates with pain, trauma, and tragedy, but we must be sure to recognize that has nothing to do with her status of being biracial. However, it has everything to do with the pain of being uprooted from her former life and losing her family. Rachel laments as the first day comes to an end: "She doesn't say anything about my mother, because we both know that that new girl has no mother. The new girl can't be new and still remember. I am not the new girl. But I will pretend" (Durrow, 2010, 6). Rachel struggles with being a "new girl" because that means she must forget her old life, her parents, and her identity and she must confront the tragedy of what happened to her family. But as she will soon find out, trauma does not leave so quickly. Rachel will initially struggle to piece together her life and renegotiate her

identity. Durrow sets up the narrative here so that readers are expecting tragedy to close in on the new girl that cannot find her way.

As the novel progresses though, Durrow pulls back the tropes to show how Rachel learns to renegotiate and find a different way to exist. In Rachel's previous schools and environments (i.e. Chicago and Denmark/Europe), Durrow does not bring up the issues of race. As Rachel realizes school is something she is "supposed to do" (Durrow, 2010, 8), Rachel soon learns how she can also do race by following and understanding racial codes, dialogues, etc. from her social network of peers. Rachel's first day of school is very telling about her lack of racialization in the United States. She realizes that Mrs. Anderson "is [her] first black woman teacher" and that "there are 15 black people in the class and seven white people. And there's me...I see people two different ways now: people who look like me and people who don't look like me" (p. 9). In this particular scene, Rachel refuses to label herself on such binary terms of black and white; however, as readers we understand that Durrow makes those distinctions fairly easy for us because as readers of the world and the word (of literature) we recognize the racial binaries already set in place in this narrative, especially when we think about the tradition and legacies of race as they are often represented in southern and African American literature. But even more intriguing here is the fact that Rachel notices a racially ambiguous, classmate—Carmen LaGuardia— "she has hair like mine, my same color skin, and she counts as black. I don't understand how, but *she seems to know*" (p. 9, my emphasis). And what Carmen knows is what Rachel eventually comes to understand about her own race and identity through time in her new surroundings. What's interesting to point out here though is the idea of race not being a source of tension for Rachel and/or her family.

However, Rachel is a quick read and learns even during the first few days of school that race is a real experience. Rachel learns from her surroundings and others students:

I am light-skinned-ed. That's what the other kids say. And I talk white. I think new things when they say this. There are a lot of important things I didn't know about. I think Mor didn't know either. They tell me it is bad to have ashy knees. They say stay out of the rain so my hair doesn't go back. They say white people don't use washrags, and I realize now, at Grandma's, I do. They have a language I don't know but I understand. I learn that black people don't have blue eyes. I learn that I am black. I have blue eyes. I put all these new facts into the new girl. (Darrow, 2010, 9-10)

In this regard, a young Rachel learns that she is becoming raced, but is not so quick to attach race immediately to her identity. Instead Rachel learns she, the new girl, is black. It is almost as if Rachel must become a different person, a new person with a projection of racial duties she must understand and enact. However, Darrow shows how the issue goes much deeper than that as Rachel remembers: "And I think about the things that maybe made Pop feel alone, right in front of us, his family. No one knew how to cut his hair—he had tight black curls like other black people. And maybe he even had ash on his elbows and knees sometimes. He never told us he was black. He never told us we were" (p. 80). If Rachel performs the wrong racial script, then she will be bullied or ridiculed because of it. Therefore, she learns to read her environment on racial terms, even if she chooses not to identify racially. Here, Rachel becomes equipped with the tools and skills of "doing race." Her classmates are her first ways of knowing about racial codes and socialization in Oregon. Rachel's grandmother and Aunt Loretta provide conflicting ideas about race and notions of blackness that she must learn to eventually sort through, but Rachel's key source of racial socialization comes directly from her peers and shapes how she sees herself and others throughout the novel.

As the novel develops, adolescent Rachel comes to see and learn race differently and lets her social environment dictate her responses. It is Hazel Rose Markus in the article, “Who Am I?: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity” that reminds us about the nature of identity. Markus states:

Consequently, identities are always in flux. They are continually formed, expressed, changed affirmed, and threatened in the course of everyday life. As a person moves from home, to the classroom, to the store, to the bank, to a university office, to the gym, or to the home of a friend, the different social worlds she is part of can all work to shuffle the various aspects of her identity (Markus, 2010, 365).

Rachel learns from her classroom environment during her first year in Portland how to “do race,” especially as it pertains to the continual bullying from Tamika Washington. Rachel learns:

Tamika is no authority, but I noticed the other black girls agree. The only black people I’ve seen play tennis are Aunt Loretta and Pop. And they’re related to white people, to me. I don’t ever mention that I’m related to white people. And most of the time I try not to let the black girls like Tamika see me talk to Tracy, because Tracy is a white girl. And the way they say that — white girl — it feels like a dangerous thing to be (Darrow, 2010, 28).

Rachel is afraid to claim whiteness because in her social environments, her peers would further ostracize her, thinking she is superior to them. Rachel would rather have approval and a sense of community and belonging than to be excluded from her social groups. Rachel is (re)negotiating her identity—what it even means to be the new girl—and the new girl is obviously publicly “black.” Here, Rachel is socializing and hoping to “fit in” to be accepted as black by her classmates. By keeping Tracy on the down low, she picks up on the ways of negotiating the terrain of social scripts. She is becoming apt in playing her “assigned” racial roles. By the same token, there are also times where Rachel becomes somewhat confused about what she should think, feel, or understand about being black for her classmates, her grandmother and Aunt Loretta, and even herself. These performances are obviously different in each case—it is an

ephemeral yet socially real set of performances. Rachel continues learning about race, identity, and culture throughout the novel.

Understanding her racial environment is one thing Rachel learns to deal with in the novel, but also finding a place to belong as the new girl is a struggle too. Rachel explains “I have one girlfriend and a boyfriend. But my friend is white and my boyfriend is a secret. I have no black friends. Black girls don’t seem to like me. Maybe there is something dangerous about me. Aunt Loretta says there isn’t” (Durrow, 2010, 68). Unfortunately, Rachel struggles here to befriend other black girls because they choose to bully and agitate her because she is biracial. As Durrow colors the narrative for us and we learn how their insecurities about skin color and hair affect the way they ultimately treat Rachel, as their insecurities are clearly indicative of the white supremacist ideas and legacies of race in the U.S., there is a chasm between Rachel and these black girls that seem too wide to close. But her Aunt Loretta acknowledges and assures her that there is nothing dangerous about her.

Almost a year in her new surroundings, Rachel still feels like she is not quite a part of the new environment. She attests to the readers: “It’s Day 223. I’m the new girl. I must be the new girl. I will fill myself with the color blue” (Durrow, 2010, 69). Socially, Rachel is not making friends as she wants to and cannot yet fully grasp all the complexities and nuances of race in this new context. And when she attempts to understand but fails then she lets those thoughts, emotions, and anxiety muster around in her “blue bottle.” Rachel uses the blue bottle as a coping mechanism throughout the novel. She explains: “When something starts to feel like hurt, I put it in this imaginary bottle inside me. It’s blue glass with a cork stopper. My stomach tightens and my eyeballs get hot. I put all that inside the bottle” (pp. 10-11). Whenever Rachel feels uncomfortable about race, her mother, or the “accident,” she feels small. She retreats to her

stuffed blue bottle of emotions. Made of glass and susceptible to shattering and getting very hot, the blue bottle, also known as Rachel, risks an internal meltdown if its contents cannot be contained. Racially, she has been cast and painted onto a new racial landscape where she is unaware of the new and different tones and colors that surround her. After the accident, Durrow writes Rachel as a blank canvas—a new girl—and she is learning who these people (her family and community) expect her to be. I believe that Durrow wants to give Rachel a clean slate so that she can have a different future. Her past—the tragedy of losing her mother and siblings to a suicide-murder—are inextricably related to her mother’s inability to process her racial and social world in the U.S. And right after her Aunt Loretta’s funeral, the process of claiming and becoming racially marked starts again to become a confusing task for Rachel. Rachel mentions, “I am fourteen and know that I am black, but I can’t make the Gospel sound right from my mouth...I can see what Grandma sees in Lakeisha. It is a reflection” (p. 120).¹⁶ This is the first time Rachel acknowledges and claims black as her racial marker, but she is still unsure if her blackness can or will be authenticated and reflected back onto others in the same ways as she sees race with Grandma and Lakeisha.

As adolescent Rachel moves into high school, she begins rehearsing racial scripts and finding her own ways to move in between her own racial worlds. She explains, “In high school I still don’t have a best friend, even though I know how to answer the questions differently now. I’m black. I’m from northeast Portland. My grandfather’s eyes are this color. I’ve lived here

¹⁶ LaKeisha is Drew’s daughter. LaKeisha is a young, black girl around the same age as Rachel, but they have different ideas about school, boys, music, etc. Rachel acts more mature and respects academics in a way that intimidates and confuses LaKeisha. LaKeisha and Rachel become friends and see each other more after Loretta dies and Drew as he feels compelled to check on Loretta’s mother and niece. In this scene, it is Rachel that feels like Grandma Doris wants her to be more like LaKeisha, and that could mean she wants her to be “more black.” LaKeisha, unlike Rachel, doesn’t have to try on blackness as Rachel does because she is comfortable in her skin and embraces her blackness and identity because she has been raised with the scripts to the extent that they do not feel like scripts.

mostly my whole life. I'm black. I'm black, I know" (Durrow, 2010, 147-48). Like a rehearsal, Rachel knows how to answer those who inquire about her. It is especially easy for Rachel just to pretend to have a claim to blackness instead of actually believing or embracing her blackness. Rachel is clearly uncomfortable with sharing her testimony—her white mother murdering her biracial children—and her black father neglecting her. That story is too hard to tell and she pushes it down in her "blue bottle." Rachel has to deny that story until she is ready to confront the tragedy of her past. It seems easier to say this instead of sharing her story, but as the novel progresses this proves to be difficult too as she must deny parts of herself.

At the end of the novel, Rachel demands us to understand— "Brick puts his arm around me. When he looks at me, it feels like no one has really seen me since the accident. In his eyes, I'm not the new girl. I'm not the color of my skin. I'm a story. One with a past and a future unwritten" (Durrow, 2010, 264). Durrow labels Rachel a story in her narrative breaking away from the tragic mulatto trope so that she can represent a story of triumph and acceptance, which is something that Durrow hopes readers can be comfortable in knowing and understanding. In an interview with NPR News, Heidi Durrow discusses this exact notion with Michelle Norris. The transcript follows:

NORRIS: Heidi, as you well know, there's a long line of stories, books, movies, songs, folklore about the tragic mulatto trope. Why does this continue? And do you in any way feel like you were pulled into that undertow?

Ms. DURROW: I hope I wasn't. I hope that people can read this book as a break from that tradition. I think that tragedies generally end with a tragedy and there's nothing learned. And my book begins with a tragedy and at the end I hope that people have learned something, that there's a note of triumph in that. I wanted, especially in the story, to say yes, something really bad has happened to this girl. Yes, it's really difficult for her to deal with her mixed-race background in the world as it exists, but the tragedy is outside of her. It's not something that's part of her character. I think that's the thing that's been frustrating about other stories about the tragic mulatto, that somehow it was an inherent difficulty within the character. For Rachel, it's definitely not true that the difficulties come from

without and that she has this center, this core, this heart that really is –she’s still able to be whole, ultimately, and I think ultimately triumphant” (Durrow, 2010, “Reimagining the Tragic Mulatto”).

In the end, I argue that Durrow allows Rachel to create her own race story. She mentions all too strongly, “If only we had been a family that could fly” (p. 264). If they had been a family that could fly, they could fly above the troubles and tragedies of their lives, and transcend into different places and spaces. Durrow likens Rachel’s experiences to the swan she admires: “The swan takes one step. Three steps, four. It dips its head and then its wings catch the wind. It’s hard to tell: Is it still running or is it flying now? It’s on top of the water and in the air — like it’s in two worlds at once. The swan flaps its wings again and again, three times, four, and then it’s aloft. We watch it fly. Away” (p. 264). In this sense, the swan is not eager to be tip-toeing the boundaries of two racial worlds and does not feel comfortable and grounded in one or the other. The swan would rather fly away and chooses freedom instead. Rachel does not have to rise above the dictates of blackness, whiteness, or mixedness as she can occupy whatever spaces she chooses. We can only imagine what racial spaces she will encounter. What is so interesting here is that even Durrow cannot know what steps she will be taking on her racial journey, but whatever she decides she will no longer be anybody’s tragedy. Without the help of Brick, her father, or her mother, Rachel can tell her own story of race and identity. Durrow’s *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* allows us to see how the story of race in the U.S. and in literature is changing and emerging into a different kind of story.

Chapter Two
Discovering Mirrors and Racial Literacy: Reflections of Biracial Experience in the Literature of
Danzy Senna and Heidi Durrow

I'm sure most people don't go around all the time thinking about what race they are. When you look like what you are, the external world mirrors back to you an identity consistent with your idea of yourself.

—Toi Derricotte
The Black Notebooks

The absence of models, in literature as in life, ...is an occupational hazard for the artist, simply because models in art, in behavior, in growth of spirit and intellect—even if rejected—enrich and enlarge one's view of existence.

—Alice Walker
In Search of Our Mothers' Garden

In essence, to name oneself is to validate one's existence and declare visibility.

—Maria P. P. Root
Racially Mixed People in America

What these three epigraphs grapple with are ways biracial people come to be visible in not only their social worlds and their communities, but also in the world of literature and art. This project questions how we may actually get to that see that visibility in the world and in the words we read. In short, this project aims to raise reader awareness to the significance of racial literacy. In order to engage and learn the purpose of racial literacy, individuals must be willing to engage in real conversations and do the necessary work of avoiding “color-blind” rhetoric and enabling misrepresentation in all aspects of our daily lives. Individuals of color have more often than not been neglected, dismissed, and overlooked or treated as stock characters, stereotypes, and tropes in literature, especially in the 19th and 20th century, but that no longer should be the case. In her essay, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” Toni Morrison demands, “it is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves...We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience” (Morrison, 2019, 170). I use

Morrison here to explicitly remind us that there are narratives that are capable of speaking to the biracial experience in the U.S. Both Danzy Senna and Heidi Durrow provide two narratives that speak to biracial experiences of today's young female characters, but, furthermore, these narratives provide a bridge to understanding the value of racial literacy in our literary and real worlds.

In their text, *Literacy: Reading the Word & the World*, Freire and Macedo explain "In our analysis, literacy becomes a meaningful construct to the degree that it is viewed as a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people. In the larger sense, literacy is analyzed according to whether it serves to reproduce existing social formations or serves as a set of cultural practices that promotes democratic and emancipatory change" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, 141). In line with Freire and Macedo, the project understands the political impetus in naming one's experiences in the U.S. and believes that reading the world and words are of the utmost importance when reading narratives such as these two that deal specifically with the stories of race in the U.S.

Literacy is the vehicle that drives this project because it allows us to collectively recast racial narratives and experiences and to recognize the racial humanity and connections that we all share. Through the works of legal scholar Lani Guinier and sociologists Winddance Twine and Amy C. Steinbugler, my understanding of literacy must extend further than pages of our books and literature. These scholars position their data and research from a legal aspect and from a sociological one to discuss the term—"racial literacy." Racial literacy is more than just what we all can learn to do in society. The scope of racial literacy is a broad, on-going process where individuals create opportunities to discuss race in meaningful ways that affect change and promote social justice. According to Guinier, in her article "Racial Liberalism to Racial

Literacy,” racial literacy functions as a reciprocal relationship between individuals and communities that engage in “learning rather than knowing” (Guinier, 2004, 114). For this chapter, it is important to recognize that racial literacy is more often than not contextual to circumstances individuals encounter because it is not something individuals will always know or see first-hand. Racial literacy works best as a process that occurs between people in communities. Guinier explains: “Racial literacy is an interactive process in which race functions as a tool of diagnosis, feedback, and assessment. Second, racial literacy emphasizes the relationship between race and power. Racial literacy reads race in its psychological, interpersonal, and structural dimensions (pp. 114-115). Racial literacy requires individuals to be aware of their own social and cultural reactions to race and racism, but also mindful of the oppressive and racist systems that affect the lives of all people involved in society.

In addition, I want to reiterate how Twine and Steinbugler view racial literacy as a clear set of practices we all can bring into our daily practices in their study, “The Gap Between White and Whiteness: Interracial Intimacy and Racial Literacy.” As part of a study on interracial families, Twine and Steinbugler engage with racial literacy more so as a way to evaluate the racial dynamics and structures that are present within interracial families. Nonetheless, their study not only informs my research areas in biracial literature, but it also allows for a clear argument on the value of racial literacy in families and in communities. Twine and Steinbugler state, “Racial literacy is a set of practices. It can best be characterized as a ‘reading practice’—a way of perceiving and responding to the racial climate and racial structures individuals encounter” (Twine & Steinbugler, 2006, 344). These sociologists effectively demonstrate how these practices can be best achieved when evaluating the presence of racial literacy, in the interracial families used for their study, and include the following six criteria:

- 1) a recognition of the symbolic and material value of Whiteness;
- 2) the definition of racism as a current social problem rather than a historical legacy;
- 3) an understanding that racial identities are learned and an outcome of social practices;
- 4) the possession of racial grammar and a vocabulary that facilitates a discussion of race, racism, and antiracism;
- 5) the ability to translate (interpret) racial codes and racialized practices; and
- 6) an analysis of the ways that racism is mediated by class inequalities, gender hierarchies, and heteronormativity (p. 344).

Twine and Steinbugler's concept of racial literacy reinforces the possibility of learning, knowing, and changing racist and arrested systems of knowledge in our real social worlds. These six specific criteria are key practices of racial literacy that can be beneficial to individuals motivated to have a different dialogue on race in the U.S. Racial literacy, in theory, has no defined destination—it is a unique and complex journey where we can all start and end differently. Individuals are not born with racial literacy and are capable of learning and developing a racial literacy over time to equip them in our racial and social worlds.

Whereas Chapter 1 showed how these two novels rework and revise older tropes of the tragic mulatta to imagine better, more positive, and empowering possibilities for biracial characters, this chapter shows how the novels use those new tropes in conjunction with other literary devices to help educate their readers develop what scholars call "racial literacy." These novels explicitly narrate the ways that their biracial protagonists develop their own racial literacy as they learn to navigate the unique place of the biracial person in America. In turn, the novels offer those narratives as lessons that the reader must also absorb and follow in order to understand these characters' stories and identities fully. As these texts portray racial literacy,

they also offer racial literacy to their readers. Furthermore, the texts more precisely offer specific models of biracial literacy, a subset of racial literacy focused on uniquely biracial experiences.

In this chapter, I focus specifically on the theory of biracial literacy and self-awareness in the novels *Caucasia* and *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*. Through character analysis, this chapter demonstrates how both Senna and Durrow provide visibility and validation to the biracial female characters, Birdie and Rachel, in their own personal journeys to racial self-awareness and biracial literacy. Guinier and Twine and Steinbugler's theories of racial literacy helps to inform this project's notion of a biracial literacy. Biracial literacy, as I define it in my project, can be enumerated in different ways. I argue there are eight techniques that can be used by characters to develop biracial literacy, which include the following: mirroring, racial dialogue, culture and ancestry, reading/textual evidence, identification and connections, self-reflection, social justice, and intersectionality. With these specific techniques of biracial literacy, I contend that both Senna and Durrow create narratives and characters that serve as great examples in conveying what the process of a biracial literacy actually looks like.

While all of the eight techniques are important to the development of a biracial literacy, I focus on the different techniques for each novel to showcase each protagonists' journey to racial awareness in specific ways. In *Caucasia*, the analysis centers on the concepts of mirrors and mirroring, identification and connections, and self-reflection with Birdie Lee. In *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, the analysis foregrounds on reading/textual evidence, culture and ancestry, and self-reflections of Rachel Morse.¹ Discovering biracial literacy in these novels rests on the prevailing notion that biracial literacy is an emerging process that occurs over time and on the

¹ The project takes up the technique of intersectionality and racial dialogue in Chapter 3. The technique of social justice occurs minimally in these texts, but is still an appropriate form of racial literacy that affects the social, cultural, and political aspects of people's multiple experiences in the U.S.

characters' terms. Both Birdie and Rachel experience race in similar and different ways, but their responses and attitudes about race shifts too. What Senna and Durrow place before us are narratives that move beyond sentiment and anecdote.

Making Mirrors and Finding Oneself in Senna's *Caucasia*

In Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*, the main protagonist Birdie Lee is on a racial journey that is representative of the social reality of many biracial girls and teens today. In this section of the project, I focus especially on scenes of mirroring for Birdie. Mirroring is one of many ways that Birdie develops her biracial literacy through the novel. In addition to offering scenes depicting those moments, the chapter also does the work of demonstrating how Birdie develops her biracial literacy through her identifications and connections with blackness and through her self-reflection and awareness of race and identity throughout the novel. Lastly, I show Birdie's evolution of her biracial literacy.

It is important to first understand how I intend on defining and thinking about mirrors and mirroring in this chapter. Mirrors, in the most basic form in which we understand mirrors, are physical objects that provide reflected visual images of a character that already exists. In this regard, characters look into physical mirrors and see an image of themselves reflected back to them. On the other hand, the concept of mirroring does something different here for the characters. Mirroring invokes the processes of reflection and idealization that the characters may experience about themselves internally. That is, sometimes mirrors reflect who the characters think they are and sometimes they project who the characters want to be. Conversely, I also acknowledge the critical discourse of mirroring in Children's and YA Literature where Rudine Sims Bishop leads the charge. Bishop's mirroring concept is beneficial here because the

characters' biracial experiences warrant representation in today's literature. According to Bishop, mirroring is vital for children and young adults to encounter in literature:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books (Bishop, 1990, ix).

Bishop's argument allows us to see the value and need for all children to see themselves represented in the books they read. These mirrors often reflect what children may think about themselves and their experiences in the world and their experiences deserve representation and visibility. In that sense, I configure mirroring as a key component in assisting Birdie in developing her biracial literacy throughout the novel. In the novel, Senna is clearly aware of how important mirroring is for her biracial characters, especially with the word, "mirror," being used a total of 47 times. I argue that it is no coincidence that Senna strategically uses the images of mirrors and mirroring because she wants the characters themselves as well as the readers to understand the value of reflection and visibility in themselves and in the world.

From the onset, Senna sets up the images for us to see Birdie before Birdie can even see herself: "Before I ever saw myself, I saw my sister. When I was still too small for mirrors, I saw her as the reflection that proved my own existence" (Senna, 1998, 5). Through closer analysis, we can understand that as a young child unable to see in an actual mirror, Birdie assumes she must be identical to her sister Cole, but soon realizes through an actual mirror that she is not. Birdie sees for the first time that she is vastly different from her sister:

That night I looked at myself in the steamy bathroom mirror while I brushed my teeth, the white toothpaste foaming onto my hand, making me look like a rabid

dog, and I tried to think what Sicilian meant by reading my own face. I glanced at my sister's reflection behind me. She was also brushing her teeth, only neatly. Her hair was curly and mine was straight, and I figured that this fact must have had something to do with the fighting and the way the eyes of strangers flickered surprise, sometimes amusement, sometimes disbelief, when my mother introduced us as sisters (pp. 28-29).

So now there's two types of mirroring that are explicit in this scene—one that shows Birdie what she looks like and one that shows Birdie what she doesn't look like. In the beginning, through mirroring, Birdie develops biracial literacy as she maps the phenotypic features of her face with the notions of difference on her sister's face. She now becomes aware of why strangers are mired in disbelief at their relationship as sisters. Once Birdie and Cole are separated, Birdie's move to New Hampshire signals new types of mirrors available to her to help her continue developing her biracial literacy.

As Senna's novel continues into the land of Caucasia, Birdie becomes Jesse Goldman and her mirrors change and her racial identity shifts into uncomfortable spaces in New Hampshire.

At the start of the novel, Birdie explains to us:

One day I was playing schoolgirl games with my sister and our friends in a Roxbury playground. The next I was a nobody, just a body without a name or a history, sitting beside my mother in the front seat of our car, moving forward on the highway, not stopping. (And when I stopped being nobody, I would become white—white as my skin, hair, bones allowed. My body would fill in the blanks, tell me who I should become, and I would let it speak for me) (Senna, 1998, 1).

The language of whiteness here is equated with nothingness and blankness as Birdie describes her transformation in Jesse. From the first page of the narrative, Birdie struggles to attach herself to whiteness. In the passage, she is unable to speak freely from within and must learn how to be in the body she now inhabits. It's important to recognize here that in the different spaces in the novel, Birdie's mirrors become different for her respective environments. What I want to suggest is that Birdie needs to locate black, white, and biracial mirrors to help her develop her

own sense of racial identity as well as her biracial literacy. Without her sister, Cole, to balance her sense of self and racial identity as a biracial girl, Birdie struggles into a way to exist on her own, but, specifically, without Cole as her black mirror. In New Hampshire, both Sandy/Sheila and Birdie/Jesse are hoping to blend in and pass as a new family displaced from blackness and their past. While the journey is more easily managed for her mother, Birdie/Jesse still longs to be just like her sister by constantly noticing what she is not: “There were no curls, no full lips, still no signs of my sister’s face in my own. There had been a time when I thought I was just going through a phase. That if I was patient and good enough, I would transform into a black swan” (p. 180). Birdie’s ability to hope and be reunited with her sister fuels the development of her biracial literacy because she is learning to grasp the idea that passing as Jesse is only temporary. In the near all-white town of New Hampshire, Birdie/Jesse blends in almost perfectly and gets lost in a game she never actually signed up for. By no fault of her own, Birdie has been stripped of her blackness and her biracial identity in the land of Caucasia and must find ways to navigate both physically and racially without detection. Birdie must locate new white mirrors in order to fit in and to be a part of the game of passing. It is worth mentioning here that some kinds of mirroring can be more or less important to Birdie (and maybe even the reader).

With no black mirrors and no real connections to blackness, Birdie Lee struggles to exist on the pages of the novel. Unfortunately, Birdie realizes that she and her mother were full-fledged in “allowing [their] new selves to bloom, it seemed the old had to disintegrate” (Senna, 1998, 188). This becomes even clearer to the readers when Birdie seems to cast off her box of Negrobilia.² Birdie remarks: “But the objects in the box looked to me just like that—objects.

² This is the box of black things from her father and sister that she packed up from Boston so she could remember her old life. It includes “the fisted pick, the Nubian Notion eight-track cassette, the Egyptian necklace, the black Barbie head” (Senna 190).

They seemed like remnants from the life of some other girl whom I barely knew anymore, anthropological artifacts of some ancient, extinct people, rather than pieces of my past. And the name Jesse Goldman no longer felt so funny, so thick on my tongue, so make-believe” (p. 190). While Birdie Lee becomes lost in New Hampshire, she still allows for the memories of Cole to be “clear as sunlight” (p. 191). In this regard, she suppresses her black mirror down into a space that nobody will question.

The ultimate test to try out Jesse Goldman would come as Birdie returns back to public school after being homeschooled for four years by her mother. Conversely, it puts Birdie back into a similar situation, where she feels angst and fear of being alienated and isolated, as she did on her first day at Nkrumah as the new girl, but this time she is passing as a white Jewish girl hoping to secure friends in this New Hampshire high school. With only her white neighbor’s son Nicholas (Nick) Marsh as her only friend in the community, Birdie/Jesse expects the worst, wishing Nick “had given [her] a secret blueprint for surviving this place” (Senna, 1998, 214). Unlike Nkrumah, Birdie must hide a part of her identity in order to live a normal life as the white girls she sees around the community and in her new school. The difference in New Hampshire is Birdie is seeking a different mirror, specifically a white mirror, to help her perform her identity as the white Jesse Goldman. Birdie’s dilemma to belong resurfaces again:

I saw in their reflections the girl I failed to be, someone ordinary and alive and public, girls with one face, one name, one life. Wandering through them, I felt a yearning that surprised me. Something I hadn’t felt at Aurora. A yearning to belong to something ordinary, the same way I had felt at Nkrumah. I looked at these girls with their clownish makeup, their brassy bubble-gum faces, and felt an urge to be one of them (p. 219).

Birdie refuses to be invisible in this new space and wants to be a part of “the visible world” (p. 220), but it requires her to do much more than perform whiteness for this new community as she must shed her biracial identity altogether. Birdie’s bathroom scene with Mona and the other

white girls, who called her a zoo animal over the summer, mimics the same experience she had at Nkrumah because she is eventually initiated into Mona's clique and into a new white racial identity once they determine she has connections to the wealthy Nick Marsh. Birdie's performance of Jesse Goldman to Mona and others becomes sufficient and her new white identity becomes almost second-nature, which ultimately leaves less room, beneath her beige skin, for Birdie Lee to resurface. From the alternating identities of black Birdie and white Jesse, we can see the purpose of Birdie suppressing her biraciality for the greater good of developing her biracial literacy. In this sense, Birdie is thus taking the necessary steps in understanding why it is crucial to continue passing so she can soon be reunited with her sister and father.

Birdie and Mona's friendship signals a significant change in Birdie's racial journey and self-awareness. Birdie's need for social acceptance causes her to push her former life so far out of view that she allows racial slurs and insults to be hurled in her presence without any contempt. Birdie's performance as Jesse Goldman is in full-effect in this section of the novel: "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. And when I heard those inevitable words come out of Mona's mouth, Mona's mother's mouth, Dennis's mouth—nigga, spic, fuckin' darkie—I only looked away into the distance, my features tensing slightly, sometimes a little laugh escaping" (Senna, 1998, 233). Birdie's belief is that if she does not act like Birdie Lee, triggered by these racially insensitive moments, then she could continue this game of passing as Jesse Goldman so when the time was right, then she could reveal her true biracial self. Birdie explains, "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 (p. 233).

However, the only problem is that Jesse Goldman is starting to consume whatever version remains of Birdie Lee. Although Birdie experienced similar anxieties in fitting in with her black classmates at the Nkrumah Black Power School, the anxiety she feels in this space is inextricably tied to whiteness and the overt racism she must endure as Jesse. Birdie is learning how to maneuver through the many phases of her identity as Jesse.

The incident that pushes Jesse Goldman out of the shadows and allows Birdie Lee to be on a path to regaining her biracial identity is the unlikely mirror in another biracial girl—Samantha Taper. From the beginning of her first day of school, Birdie visually notices Samantha because she serves as a clear reminder to her sister Cole. Birdie states, “The girl was black like me—half, that is. I could spot another one immediately. But her blackness was visible” (Senna, 1998, 223). Although a part of the clique with Mona and other girls, Birdie explains, “I didn’t talk about Samantha, and I didn’t speak to her, either, but I did watch her with a wary fascination, glancing over my shoulder at her in the hallway, never stopping to look too closely, rubbernecking, the way one slows to look back at a freeway accident (p. 225). In a way, Samantha is a mirror that Birdie refuses to look into at this point in the novel because then she would have to reconcile her biracial identity and she’s just not quite ready to reveal herself entirely. Birdie’s use of the word “rubbernecking” in the above passage to describe how she looks at Samantha at school is significant because it positions her to be almost transfixed by Samantha’s physical being like one would be when looking in a mirror. It tells us how important it is for Birdie to find connections to blackness as she passes for Jesse.

By accident, Samantha and Birdie finally have a conversation at a party, where there is a shared connection of their biracial identity that reaffirms to Birdie that she is not invisible. Birdie asks Samantha: “‘What color are you?’ There was a prolonged silence, then she smiled

sideways the way she had in the woods. She said so softly that I wasn't sure I'd heard her right: 'I'm black. Like you'" (Senna, 1998, 286). Samantha's affirmation then provides the impetus for Birdie to stop passing as Jesse Goldman, which then prompts her to leave and find her sister Cole. In a bold move and decision, Birdie finds the courage to discard Jesse Goldman for good:

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, repeating a pattern of words under my breath, words that I no longer understood but whispered just the same. *kublica marentha doba. lasa mel kin* (p. 289).

The scene evokes the language of passing and mirroring with the words “passed,” “silver,” and “still” as she seems to shed away the outer exterior of Jesse so Birdie Lee can resurface. In a glance by the lake's silver reflection, acting as a mirror, Birdie is seeing her true biracial self a little more clearly. Birdie is one step in the process of biracial literacy once she accepts Samantha, as a mirror or duplicate of Cole. Whereas Samantha was part of the process of Birdie's biracial literacy, her reunion with Cole is yet another step. Finding Cole is the path Birdie must take to reclaim and stake her biracial identity. Connecting with Cole allows Birdie a true home space that accepts her no matter what and does not force her to choose. Although it has taken Birdie some time to get to this realization about herself, she is nonetheless on the path to changing how she sees herself no matter the risks and damage caused to others. Birdie's transformation into the forward evolution of a new biracial self reveals a young, independent, and fearless girl ready to put her life back together. Thus, Birdie is returning from a new place she could not be without that racial literacy empowered by her mirroring moment with Samantha.

After six long years, Birdie's quest for her sister is finally over and she is steps closer to fully embracing her biracial identity and a developing a stronger relationship with Cole. Through conversation and dialogue, Birdie comes to understand that Cole actually went on with her life when she couldn't do the same without her. Birdie contemplates, "I had believed all along that Cole was all I needed to feel complete. Now I wondered if completion wasn't overrated" (Senna, 1998, 406). At this juncture in the novel, Birdie acknowledges that the face/mirror/person she must accept and embrace is herself, but it takes her stepping outside of the expectations and approval of others to figure this out. Birdie reflects,

Something seemed to clarify as I looked into her face. I thought of Samantha, in that thick forest, with her cheap white shoes and blue eye shadow. I thought of Stuart at the party, laughing along to all those jokes spoken to him in fake slang. That was how they had learned to survive it. Everybody had their own way of surviving. My mother had her way, my father had his, Cole had hers. And then I thought of me, the silent me that was Jesse Goldman, the one who hadn't uttered a word, the one who had removed even her Star of David. It had come so easily to me. I had become somebody I didn't like. Somebody who had no voice or color or conviction. I wasn't sure that was survival at all. I spoke my thoughts aloud. *"They say you don't have to choose. But the thing is, you do. Because there are consequences if you don't"* (p. 408, my emphasis).

Birdie recognizes now that she has to choose who she needs to be, but that that choice belongs solely to her and on her own terms. As Birdie reflects on her time as Jesse, she realizes Jesse is someone that she could never really like. Jesse's silence made her a coward with "no voice...or conviction" (p. 408). Birdie Lee's biracial literacy definitely pushed her to be a different kind of individual that had both "color [and] conviction" (p. 408). I argue that by the end, Birdie completely disavows Jesse because of her inability to choose anything—voice, color, or conviction. I would also suggest that in order for Birdie to reach this realization that she needed Jesse to show her what happens when you do not choose. In the end, she rejects the colorlessness that Jesse represents and chooses biraciality.

For most of the narrative, Birdie allowed others like Maria at Nkrumah, Nick and Mona in New Hampshire, as well as Sandy, Deck, and her grandmother to make choices for her racial identity that failed to consider her emotional and psychologically well-being in the process. Unlike all of those characters imposing on Birdie's identity, Cole understands Birdie's frustrations about choosing how to identify as biracial and wants her to embrace it all on her own. Cole even mentions how the feeling of isolation and alienation will not impede her in that discovery because she explains, "'If you ever thought you were the only one, get ready. We're a dime a dozen out here'" (Senna, 1998, 412). Cole's affirmation about other biracial individuals allows Birdie to ease into a new school environment without ambiguity and anxiety about her biracial identity. Birdie is no longer willing to lie and deny any parts of herself to appease others.

At the novel's end, Birdie is able to start a new life in California, with a fresh outlook on life and relationships that embrace all parts of her racial identity. In this sense, Birdie appreciates that now she is no longer caught between the black-white binary that has suffocated her throughout the novel. A day after her reunion with Cole, Birdie leaves out for breakfast the next morning, but ends up finding much more on her journey throughout the city. While catching a bus to her destination, Birdie unexpectedly finds out how to belong and be herself by catching a reflection of herself in someone else: "One face toward the back of the bus caught my eye, and I halted in my tracks, catching my breath. It was a cinnamon-skinned girl with her hair in braids. She was black like me, a mixed girl, and she was watching me from behind the dirty glass (Senna, 1998, 413). The language of mirrors ends the novel as both Birdie and the mixed girl on the bus look at each other through the "dirty glass." The significance of the glass being dirty means that they only see some parts of one another, but their vision is not completely blocked or

impaired. Furthermore, it returns us to the notion of biracial literacy as a process we come to develop over time and throughout our racial and social worlds. The “cinnamon-skinned girl” finds a mirror in Birdie and changes how Birdie finally sees herself. In this last scene, Birdie, on her own terms, claims her biracial identity and identifies culturally as black in a way that asserts her agency like never before. Birdie’s choice is transformative because it took her years to learn and understand the racial world around her and to find the courage to be who she needed to be, which is a crucial and key aspect of contemporary biracial characters in literature. Unlike other passing narratives, Senna removes the tragedy from Birdie’s race story and allows her to come of age in an empowering and brave way.

Discovering Racial Literacy in *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*

In Heidi Durrow’s *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, she picks up the torch from Nella Larsen and provides a new mirror for today’s biracial individuals. Just as Larsen provided a personal mirror for her growing up as an adolescent and adult in the 1980s, Durrow understands the need for mirrors to reflect back onto one’s experiences in literature. In 2008, Durrow wrote an article titled “Dear Ms. Larsen, There’s a Mirror Looking Back” for *PMS Journal* that chronicled the moment she returns to Denmark to pay honor and respect to her literary mirror and mentor for her writing career and life. Larsen and Durrow share many unique characteristics with their background—both women writers and black Danes. In the article, she searches for the unmarked gravestone of Nella Larsen because she wants to commemorate her life. Durrow writes, “I am looking for what only Nella Larsen—a woman writer who is racially and culturally my twin—can give me, a lineage, or as Alice Walker describes it, ‘continuity,’ a place in a tradition of black women writers who are also white” (Durrow, 2008, 102). Durrow explains that she became aware of Larsen first during her junior year of high school but she had “filed the

information away for years...[and] would not let myself know her” (p. 103). Interestingly enough, Durrow laments on her struggle of not needing Larsen because she *had* to be a black woman writer and not a mixed one because her childhood and adolescent demanded that she be black in all things. Durrow explains, “No, I needed to be a black woman—not a half this or a half that. A black woman was all that anyone could understand me to be, including myself” (p. 104). Therefore, Durrow had to choose from the literary greats of black women writers to admire like Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, and Toni Morrison.

However, as this chapter already explains, denying parts of one’s identity has its own sets of consequences regardless if individuals want them or not. So, what Durrow finds is a mirror she cannot functionally use in her life: “Mine was a funhouse mirror. Skewed and distorted by a society governed by the one-drop rule, my mirror made me see myself as black and the truth of my mixed racial and cultural identity became a lurking ghostly shadow” (Durrow, 2008, 105). Unsure of who she is supposed to be for herself and as a writer, Durrow realizes she does need Larsen in order to write what she needs to write for herself as well as for others. Durrow explains, “I struggled to write the stories I thought a black woman writer *should* write. I couldn’t. Larsen’s published writing became the permission I needed to write the only stories I knew how to tell: of being black and Danish, and of being a white woman’s child” (p. 105). In an interview, Durrow explains, “Nella Larsen is incredibly important to me in that she was a half-black and half-Danish writer. I like the idea of making her my mother character—because she was a never a mother and also, in a creative sense, she has mothered me— another half-black and half-Danish writer” (Durrow, 2010, “Q & A”). Durrow continues the nod to Larsen by also

including an epigraph from *Passing* in her novel. And depending on the reader, they may notice the similarities to the female protagonists in both of Larsen's novels *Quicksand* and *Passing*.

In a sense, Durrow's Rachel is a remixed version of the biracial characters Larsen likely hoped to write into fiction that could one day challenge racial borders and scripts. In this moment as Durrow writes, there are racial possibilities and identity options that did not exist for Helga Crane, Audrey Denny, or Rena Walden in the early 20th century. It would be amiss not to reiterate the ways that Larsen has not only informed the research presented in this project, but also how Durrow's contemporary novel becomes one of the mirrors I didn't know I needed. In a very similar fashion to Larsen's semi-autobiographical novel *Quicksand*, Durrow creates a semi-autobiographical novel *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* so that other girls and women can find the mirror they did not quite know they needed.

Yet the literary mirrors in *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* do not stop there as Durrow also calls out to several texts by acclaimed writer Toni Morrison. Summer McDonald in "Cannon Fodder: *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* and the Problem of Mixed-Race Identity" writes extensively about this:

The novel not only borrows from Nella Larsen, a black writer, but makes several gestures to Toni Morrison's oeuvre. The mention of Rachel's blue eyes (Durrow's eyes are also blue) on the first page along with one of Rachel's teachers being named Mrs. Breedlove are blatant shout outs to Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The motif of people flying has a long history in black letters, including Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. In fact, a line towards the end of TGWFFTS, "surrender to the air," is strikingly reminiscent of a line from the last page of SOS, "If you surrender to the wind, you can ride it." Durrow's black inspiration goes far beyond the literary. The mystery at the core of the novel is more than likely drawn from the real-life trauma of a black woman and her children, a news story that Durrow has been reluctant to discuss in detail" (McDonald, 2011).

McDonald speaks to the real lived experience of a young, black mother who murders her children and this ultimately becomes the model by which Durrow crafts her tragic rooftop

mystery in the novel. According to the *New York Daily News*, it was reported on November 25, 1996 that:

A woman who forced her three children off the roof of their 15-story New York City apartment building then jumped to her death had been depressed since her mother got out of prison, neighbors and relatives said. Chicqua Roveal, 23, was a caring mother, but had been under stress since her mother moved in with the family and her boyfriend broke up with her, they said. Roveal and her son Andre, 7, died. Roveal's 2-year-old boy, Shando, and Andre's twin, Andrea, were reported in critical condition (Breen, 1996).

Knowing that Durrow employs both literary influences from Larsen and Morrison and from personal stories of a woman and mother here speaks to mirroring of tragedy and triumph, love and hate, confusion and stability, and trauma and healing that Rachel becomes a part of in *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*. Durrow is able to reimagine and reflect on these canonical pieces of literature and characters and brings them into contemporary contexts to show what happens we understand the effects that mirroring can have on the transformative and cultural negotiations of race and identity through literature. Through both the literary and figurative aspects of mirroring, discussed in this chapter, Larsen and Morrison serve as a mirror in which to see Rachel's experiences as well as a window into the experiences of other characters affected by circumstances of race and/or trauma. In an interview with Kierstin Johnson from *Bitch Magazine*, Durrow explains who her intended audience is for this novel: "In all honesty, my first audience for the book was me. I wanted to write the book that I'd always wanted to read—I think Toni Morrison said something like that when talking about her own work. But after that. I really hope that young women will connect with the book, regardless of their racial and cultural backgrounds" (Johnson, 2010, 10). In this sense, Durrow's novel is crucial in building bridges and connections with readers if they want to find a mirror or to engage in the process of a biracial literacy.

Building those connections and bridges makes it much easier to then peer into the window of Rachel Morse's experiences as a biracial protagonist in *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*. In this section, I want to focus specifically on an analysis of how Rachel develops her biraciality literacy through her own self-reflections and observations, her own act of reading, and through her culture and ancestry. While there are other ways that Rachel and other characters may learn or develop their own forms of biracial literacy, I argue that these three concepts are most salient for further examination here.

From the very beginning of the narrative, Durrow sets Rachel up as a keen observer and quick learner. She is smart and inquisitive beyond her years. While some of her teaching comes from her grandmother and her aunt at home, there is also an influx of influence from her peers at school. Rachel comes to know more about her identity as a black girl:

I am light-skinned-ed. That's what the other kids say. And I talk white. I think new things when they say this. There are a lot of important things I didn't know about. I think Mor didn't know either. They tell me it is bad to have ashy knees. They say stay out of the rain so my hair doesn't go back. They say white people don't use washrags, and I realize now, at Grandma's, I do. They have a language I don't know but I understand. I learn that black people don't have blue eyes. I learn that I am black. I have blue eyes. I put all these new facts into the new girl. (Durrow, 2010, 9-10).

In chapter 1, I showed how this passage contributed to the features of the tragic mulatta that insists that these characters are constantly in a state of anxiety or confusion, but that is not what I propose is happening with Rachel. Rachel learns at once many contradicting things—like her skin color, her vernacular, her hygiene routines, and skin care regimens—are either labeled as a black or a white cultural trait. Rachel is learning about social racialization and racial stereotypes that may affect her own sense of identity in the process. She is capable of not actually knowing the language, or vernacular her classmates speak, but she is keen enough to understand how to interact with them. By observing situations and listening to others around her,

she learns to be a sponge and intercept knowledge about her social and racial environments.

Rachel's self-reflection about race and the people around her motivate her to develop her biracial literacy, which shows her how to be a black girl in Portland.

Rachel's ability to maneuver around in her social settings shows how essential it is for her to feel accepted and liked by others. As she situates herself around the other girls at school, she discovers what not to say:

Tamika is no authority, but I noticed the other black girls agree. The only black people I've seen play tennis are Aunt Loretta and Pop. And they're related to white people, to me. I don't ever mention that I'm related to white people. And most of the time I try not to let the black girls like Tamika see me talk to Tracy, because Tracy is a white girl. And the way they say that — white girl — it feels like a dangerous thing to be (Durrow, 2010, 28).

Rachel learns how choosing white over black has its own set of consequences that she is not ready to cope with at this moment. She understands that in order to be accepted by certain groups of people, then she must hide or deny parts of her. From this passage, it seems like Rachel does not want to be ostracized for being more different than she already is. Choosing to deny whiteness or Tracy allows her to be in a different social space in her respective school setting. In this regard, she learns in the process of racial literacy that there are consequences for any choice she makes and it determines how she is evaluated and seen by others.

While the other two examples I provide here show Rachel in a state of learning and developing her biracial literacy, the example of Rachel and her Grandma Doris at the grocery store shows how Rachel is not always ready to learn what is often right in front of her. Rachel explains to us:

MISS AMERICA IS black today, and she has blue eyes. [...] She doesn't look black to me. Grandma picks up two newspapers to have one extra. She is happy that a black woman is the most beautiful woman in the world. And so is the grocery store cashier. It's a new day, the grocery store cashier says. And I believe that I am supposed to be happy about it. The grocery store clerk is dark-skinned-

ed, like Grandma and Aunt Loretta. Not Grandma nor the grocery store clerk look anything like the white-looking black woman with blue eyes who is the first black Miss America (Durrow, 2010, 58).³

Rachel seems to be shook by her grandmother's reaction to celebrating Vanessa Williams' title as the first black Miss America because Rachel does not understand or see the significance of the moment for black people in general to receive an honor of such high accord. Vanessa Williams winning the title as the first black woman for Miss America is a turning point in the black community in the 1980s. Rachel notices that unlike Vanessa Williams, her grandmother and the clerk are dark-skinned and look nothing like the "white-looking black woman with blue eyes" so she conflates their celebration for a lack of connection. Rachel's grandmother clearly relies on the "one-drop" rule regarding blackness and does not buy into the idea of biracial identity here. Rachel comes to understand that if blacks count you as black, then you are black. Yet, she seems somewhat perplexed by the notion that phenotypically Vanessa Williams has light skin, blue eyes, and straight hair that make her appear white to Rachel. Here, Rachel feels seemingly indifferent and does not quite understand the big deal about a black Miss America. Again, she does not understand what and why she should feel a certain way about black things as her grandmother and the cashier do in this scene, but it offers her context and knowledge about race and standards of beauty that become important to her later in the novel. Durrow is apt in providing scenes and experiences where Rachel is in a constant state of learning and developing her identity throughout the novel. Through these specific scenes and others throughout the novel, Durrow determines how valuable self-reflection and awareness is to Rachel because she is capable of using prior knowledge to help herself in future situations. Developing her biracial

³ On September 17, 1983, Vanessa Williams becomes the first black woman to win the title of Miss America.

literacy will not occur over night or even months, but she is taking the necessary steps in developing who she needs to be.

In the novel, Durrow show us just how much Rachel reads, what types of reading interests her, and why she reads in the first place. One of the most avid readers in the novel is our protagonist Rachel.⁴ Rachel explains, “When Grandma is gardening, I sit on the porch in her rocking chair and read. Right now I am reading Chaim Potok’s *The Chosen*.⁵ One girl in class said it was the first big book she has ever read. I’ve been reading big books since fourth grade. I have some favorites. I think this will become one of them” (Durrow, 2010, 32). It is interesting that she chooses this book because it focuses on an adolescent who must choose between tradition and assimilation in a Jewish-American context. And this makes sense that Rachel would connect as someone who is Danish and Black because she must learn to live as a bicultural and biracial individual. Aunt Loretta’s boyfriend, Drew, gifts Rachel with two very different books that he thinks will be helpful and beneficial to her adolescence: *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon and a Hans Christian Andersen fairytale collection. Durrow’s use of gifting these two specific texts to Rachel is intentional and significant because they provide her the exact racial and cultural literacy she needs for her own racial and cultural self-awareness. Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* critiques race in Europe that connects Rachel with her

⁴ The act of reading is paramount in this novel and Rachel is not the only physical reader of texts here. Other readers in the novel include Jesse, Drew, Aunt Loretta, and Grandma Doris (who reads the TV guide).

⁵ The SparkNotes’ editors provide the follow summary and plot information: “In tracing the friendship of two religious adolescent boys influenced by their fathers, Potok offers insight into the challenges of faith facing the American Jewish community in the wake of the Holocaust. Moreover, the book’s historical backdrop catalyzes one of the novel’s central conflicts: the conflict between tradition and modernity. Throughout the novel, characters are forced to choose between isolating themselves from the outside world and retreating into tradition—as Reb Saunders advocates—or actively embracing issues that extend beyond a single community—as demonstrated by David Malter’s activism. Among other subjects, the novel studies the different ways of balancing Jewish observance with life in twentieth-century America.” This summary and plot information is available here at SparkNotes: <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/chosen/context.html>

interracial family's own identity while living abroad. Hans Christian Anderson, who is a Danish writer, provides insightful tales and lessons of virtue, resilience, and adversity that are valuable to Rachel in her process of healing from trauma and learning a new environment. Rachel takes up the task of reading because she enjoys it and we learn how voracious of a reader she is in the novel. She adds, "I finish three books in ten days waiting on the porch" (p. 70). Reading gives Rachel a sense of pride because she becomes more knowledgeable in school and in life from those experiences. Rachel's reading does not simply stop with school books, library books, or gifted books. In order to be up-to-date with current events, Rachel explains "I have been reading the newspaper, the *New York Times*, since Jesse started bringing it to me from home. I know about everything that Drew is talking about. It's on my mind too" (p. 207). These scenes of reading aids Rachel in cultivating her racial literacy because they provide her with textual evidence of a circumstance, a situation, or an idea that interests her in ways that reflect who she is as a person.

In order to understand more about her black racial identity, she takes a critical step and begins to actually read literature about black and biracial experiences. She exclaims, "There's a new black literature section. It's four whole shelves. I found one book of poetry about a girl who has a white father and a black mother. I have never read anything like that before. And I'm reading the book that Drew gave me, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Durrow, 2010, 148). The fact that Rachel seeks out black literature in the local library demonstrates the demand of black literature to actually exist for biracial individuals like Rachel with a link to blackness and its culture. It also is able to provide her with cultural mirroring experiences as a biracial adolescent in Portland. Rachel's reading of Fanon here helps to make sense of black identity outside of the U.S. Fanon speaks extensively of his experiences in the Caribbean, Europe and Paris and on

being black in those societies. By employing intertextuality here, both Rachel and reader can gain another perspective of what blackness can look like in another varied form. Durrow is indicating that blackness is not just one thing—that blackness is not monolithic. By reading Fanon as well as the other text mentioned here, Rachel is developing her biracial literacy because she is reading specifically about race in a textual and narrative sense that shows her the actual processes of race through literature and/or cultural theory. What we learn by the novel's end is that idea of blackness being varied also implies to mixedness as Rachel understands her own identity. By understanding this concept, it reinforces another process in Rachel understanding racial literacy. As she reads this literature about race, identity, and culture, Rachel is gaining her own form of racial literacy by reading, processing, and learning how she is thus affected by race on her own terms. Rachel shows us how: "Then there's page 173: 'Wherever he goes, the Negro remains a Negro.' That makes me think of how the other black girls in school think I want to be white. They call me an Oreo. I don't want to be white. Sometimes I want to go back to being what I was. I want to be nothing" (p. 148). If we look back to Chapter 1, where I discussed Rachel's frustrations with race and identity as the new girl in Portland, but specifically at her school settings, then we can understand the contention she has here as she is digesting Fanon—she struggles with the rigid binary of black and white that Portland offers her throughout the narrative. Rachel is actively processing race from Fanon's work and applying its concepts to her daily life. In context of the quote, from Rachel's own memory and experiences before Portland, she had her own mind and memory, race was something she did not have to process or understand. Rachel is learning that she would much rather not engage in the "dominating binary categories" of black and white that exist in the U.S. In order to be Nella and Roger's daughter, she ultimately decides to choose an identity that best suits her experiences, her cultures, and her

story. The reading/textual evidence technique used here serves as a good model of how Rachel's knowledge of race, identity, and culture shifts in attitude and perceptions. Within months to a year, Rachel's biracial literacy grows and develops even stronger.

Another technique I employ here to show how Rachel develops her biracial literacy is culture and ancestry. Both Rachel's Aunt Loretta and her mother Nella serves as cultural and racial gatekeepers to how she comes to shape her racial identity, culture, and ancestry. It is no coincidence that Durrow sets it up this way where Rachel looks up to her Danish mother and her black aunt to guide her as a biracial girl during her adolescent years. Rachel is learning to read her new spaces and we may even expect her to learn to move more freely and fluidly between the worlds of black and white in Portland. While Rachel does not fully know who she is at the novel's beginning, she is definitely emerging into a young woman that has a better grasp on her future and what she expects out of others. Rachel values the time she can spend with her Aunt Loretta. In her moments with her Aunt Loretta, Rachel gets schooled on Black and African history and culture. Rachel exclaims, "Aunt Loretta is teaching me about African things" (Durrow, 2010, 78). And she serves as a good role model and teacher in helping Rachel know and process her racial heritage and identity that she was unable to learn from her own parents. It is also with her Aunt Loretta that she has a brief dialogue about race and family when she questions her aunt about her father's choice in women. The dialogue between them reads: "'How did they look?' I ask. And for some reason what I mean is: They look like Mor? Or did they look like me? 'Were they all light-skinned-ed?' I ask. 'Light-skinned,' she says. 'It's light-skinned, and the answer is... maybe. I never thought about it'" (p. 79). In this exchange, Rachel questions Aunt Loretta and wants to actually know about race and skin color as it affects her and her own family. Rachel's questions about race are the first time she discusses race with a family

member.⁶ Although the racial dialogue does not press too much into a series of questioning, it is a beginning for Rachel and Loretta to create a race dialogue and conversations. Rachel attests to one day being “someone like Aunt Loretta. Aunt Loretta is a black woman—the kind of woman I will be... There is paint beneath Aunt Loretta’s fingernails, and it doesn’t matter” (p. 98). This is the first indication of Rachel indicating that she wants to be a black woman and wants to model after Loretta. Here, we have Rachel suggesting that to be black like Aunt Loretta is the type of black she would like to be. In this example, Aunt Loretta serves as a mirror in which Rachel can see herself. Aunt Loretta’s notion of classy appeals to Rachel because it affords her more opportunities and advantages that she can see when she compares her aunt to other black women like her grandmother and the other church ladies. Through Aunt Loretta, Rachel gains the steps needed to further her understanding of black culture and ancestry, which develops her biracial literacy even more.

The only connection Rachel has to culturally identify her to her Danish identity and heritage are through the memories and stories left behind from her dead mother. Rachel needs to know her Danish culture because if she denies it, then there are consequences. Durrow is insistent in providing Danish words and language throughout the novel spoken by both Nella/Mor and Rachel so that the reader and Rachel do not lose focus of its importance.⁷ In other words, that means, for Rachel to understand herself and her identity, she must learn about who she is, both racially and culturally. As she gets older in the novel and works through the

⁶ In the quote above, Aunt Loretta says she did not think about the colorism in the family, but with all the attention to how the novel reads color and phenotype is very interesting concept put forth by Durrow here. It allows us to question if either Aunt Loretta sees race on a similar spectrum as Rachel’s father (her brother) where race is no indicator for whom we love or if she ignores the effects of colorism altogether.

⁷ Mor, is Danish for mother. It is the name Rachel frequently uses to remember her mother. Other characters refer to her as Nella though.

trauma of the accident, she yearns to know more about her Danish culture. She laments:

“Denmark, the one I know, has never been so much a real place as a story setting for things that Mor did or told. I know Denmark through her stories...If I had drawn a picture of Denmark, it would have been a picture of a feeling inside me, I think—like a cloudless sky, somewhere close to the color blue” (Darrow, 2010, 188). After being with her grandmother for around three years now, she has lost that connection to Danish things so when she meets Jesse whose mother is from Norway, she finds a mirror and a link back to her own mother. Jesse’s mom invites her over for a traditional Scandinavian dinner. The first thing Rachel notices is “the dining room where the table is decorated something like Mor would decorate for a special occasion: white tea lights burning, cloth napkins, and the special blue and white china” (p. 202) and then “the smell of familiar food fills the house. It smells like *frikadeller* or *flæskesteg*? *Kartofler* or *ris*?” (p. 203). Rachel immediately envisions her mother in this backdrop because it reminds her of her mother’s decorating styles and her love of baking and cooking for her family. Rachel thinks to herself, “If only I could turn the corner and find Mor right there in the kitchen” (p. 204). She learns to still find her mother within her life even though she is not physically present. Through her memories, she can still find Denmark. Rachel stresses to us: “I don’t want being Danish to be something that I can put on and take off. I don’t want the Danish in me to be something time makes me leave behind” (p. 205). Like race, her Danish language and culture are things that she wants to remain a part of her identity. Rachel’s motivation to reconnect with her mother is because she does not want to choose. Here, Rachel is asserting her desire for the multi-faceted aspects of her identity. Speaking to Jesse’s mother helps her recognize how much she not only misses her language but also her mother and the memories of a happier time. It is interesting how the narrative is set up by Darrow to place Rachel at the beginning, as this blank and clean slate, but

then by the novel's close, Rachel remembers just how much she loves, admires, and longs for Danish things and culture. This manifests into a clear realization for Rachel at the end of the novel when her Grandma Doris insults her dead mother for the last time. Screaming at her grandmother, Rachel exclaims: "I am Nella Fløe's daughter. That's what makes me special—me" (p. 237).⁸ Her connection to her mother and Denmark is more than her love for her mother. It is Rachel's duty to continue her mother's legacy and her stories for others to hear. If Rachel denies that part of her life, then she loses that part of the culture. Rachel chooses not to forget her mother or her Danish heritage in the process of becoming who she needs to be. Right before Rachel runs away, she shares with Brick: "I'm not the color of my skin. I'm a story. One with a past and a future unwritten" (p. 264). Rachel thus experiences a shift—where perhaps her race story becomes redefined and different than what readers are not typically accustomed to in the tragic mulatto tradition—she attempts to forge a third space that transcends race. Rachel's biracial literacy is well-informed by her own story by the novel's end.

⁸ Rachel yells this to her grandmother after she tells her: "Don't act like trash like your mama. It's not something a black girl can afford" (Durrow 237)

Chapter Three

Contested Spaces and Intersections: Navigating Identity in the Literature of Senna and Durrow

Racism intersects with their lives in a flood of elaborate, blatant, and subtle ways—from the definition of identity and self, to the performance of hurtful practices, to various articulations of dominant group power.

--Ausdale D. Van and Joe R. Feagin

The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism

This is for every mixed-race kid who knows what it means to exist in the in-between. There is power in any intersection. You will find your rhythm and carve out space to thrive in your own lane.

--Elaine Welteroth

More than Enough

I do not have to define this body. I do not have to belong to one camp, school, or race, one fixed set of qualifiers, adjectives based on someone else's experience. I do not have to remember who I am, or anyone else, think I am. I am a transitional space, form-shifting space, place of a thousand hellos and a million goodbyes.

--Rebecca Walker

Black, White, and Jewish

While biracial identity options did not exist in early tragic mulatta fiction for female characters like Rena Walden, Helga Crane, Angela Murray, or Janie Starks, the authors in this project give their contemporary biracial characters agency and choice to negotiate different racial identity options like black, white, biracial, or even no racial identity. Nonetheless, navigating this terrain of racial possibilities is no easy task for the biracial protagonists in Senna and Durrow's novels. Both Birdie and Rachel must negotiate their respective identities throughout the narratives. These young girls carve out spaces in their in-betweenness and find ways to exist outside of the restrictive black-white binaries. In the essay, "My Choice, Your Categories: The Denial of Multiracial Identities," Sarah Townsend, Hazel Markus, and Hillary B. Bergsieker argue, "all individuals must negotiate their identities within their social environments. An identity, then, is not just a personal or private project; it is a group project. It includes how individuals identify themselves, but also how others in their social worlds identify them"

(Townsend, Markus, & Bergsieker, 2009, 201). Before biracial individuals even fully realize it, their bodies are raced and categorized. Some people may assume that biracial people have the advantages of a fluid identity, but they cannot determine how others choose to identify them. In the essay, “Ideology of the Multiracial Movement: Dismantling the Color Line and Disguising White Supremacy,” Eileen T. Walsh reiterates, “Contemporarily, individuals are ostensibly given the choice of how to identify themselves regardless of appearance. But whether the public will accept whatever identity one proclaims is another question. A paradigm shift has to occur for society to accept how a person chooses to identify racially rather than ascribing race according to social perception or existing group identities” (Walsh, 2000, 196). Both Birdie and Rachel experience these same circumstances in their respective novels as they interact with minor characters’ views and assumptions about biraciality and biracial individuals.

For example, within *Caucasia* and *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, Senna and Durrow address this very dynamic when they cast Birdie and Rachel into black communities that eventually accept them and guide them to understanding who they need to be. Yet, we already know from Chapter 1 that neither of these characters chooses to identify solely as black by the novel’s end—Birdie chooses to identify as mixed/biracial and Rachel chooses to transcend the category of race altogether.¹ Biracial writer Lisa Jones puts it straight and forward in her memoir, *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair*, “As you get older, chances are you will define yourself by your alliances with a multitude of communities. No one community will speak for you completely and no one community should be so static as to not let you share in others” (Jones, 1994, 65). Jones points out that with time individuals change and so do their attitudes about race. However, as young adolescent girls, Birdie and Rachel desire to be accepted

¹ Durrow informs us that Rachel decides that she is not a race, but, indeed a “story.” In that regard, I argue Durrow’s strategy is to suggest that race itself is a story that is still being written.

by their black communities and to feel a sense of belongingness to a racial group because they want to avoid isolation and exclusion from their peers. In the article, “Who Am I: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity,” Hazel Rose Markus states, “Finally, our identities locate us in social spaces and tell us where we belong. Often people are unaware of this very important consequence of their race or ethnicity in defining who they are until something or someone questions their belongingness” (Markus, 2010, 384). This happens specifically to Birdie and Rachel when their black classmates question their right to belong and to be accepted in their black communities. These characters often experience bouts of frustration, indifference, and isolation until they are eventually accepted by the respective community. While these contemporary novels showcase the eventual acceptance by both black and white communities, the journey beforehand has not been easy to navigate for biracial characters and individuals.

The ambivalence regarding mixed-race in both history and literature swings from two opposite directions—black and white. In the past and even in present-day discourse, biraciality for the white community typically spoke to the ills of miscegenation and the over-arching one-drop rule that reinforced power structures whereas biraciality in the black community rested on two warring ideals between black solidarity and anti-blackness rhetoric. Suzanne Bost emphasizes: “Today, as in the nineteenth century, Americans are unsure about how race will matter in the future distribution of power. People of mixed race are targeted—studied, celebrated, or maligned—for challenging the terms of the debate” (Bost, 2003, 185). The social and personal angst Birdie and Rachel face throughout the narratives stems from these specific tensions in both history and in literature. Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins in *Crossing B(l)ack: Mixed-Race Identity in Modern American Fiction and Culture* writes “In popular culture, especially since the 1990s, mixed race has literally and symbolically become the ‘new black,’

both replacing and continuing a preoccupation with the racial ‘Other’ (Dagbovie-Mullins, 2013, 1). However, there are some critics who believe that this “new black” is nothing new and argue that the boom of biracial literature and biracial memoirs from the 1990s to the Age of Obama (2008) come to celebrate mixedness/biracialness in a way that devalues blackness. Michele Elam writes as one of the foregrounding critics of CMRS in *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* that readers and critics of biracial literature and literary studies can understand that:

it is essential to place the canonization of mixed race in the history and context of the current power of post-race discourses in dominant cultural discourses; to explore how mixed raced literature is increasingly being held up as a progressive good that is too often defined against so-called monoracial literatures; and to examine how the mixed race ‘voice’ is being culled, refined, and cultivated as the voice of the future (Elam, 2011, 46).

Elam warns us against putting too much stock into a phenomenon that could have other adverse effects to our literature and society. Other critics like Ralina Joseph and Rainer Spencer have also identified this as a key tension within the debates of mixed-race discourse. These critics find it imperative to disengage biracial literature from any anti-blackness and racial transcendence message. Anti-blackness is any rhetoric or notions that devalues and marginalizes blackness or black people and is usually manifested in the forms of overt racism. Racial transcendence is the state where one actually rises above any definition of race or racial identity. For example, Spencer in his work, *Challenging Multiracial Identity*, he argues explicitly against these modes of anti-blackness. His critique is widely accepted in the field of CMRS and adds dimension to the ways we extend specific readings to biracial characters in literature. Spencer explains:

Under the old trope, black/white individuals were pathological if they tried to assume a multiracial identity, while under the new trope they are pathological if they do not. Under the old trope, black/white persons were correct if they

identified as black and confused if they identified as multiracial; under the new trope, black/white persons are correct if they identify as multiracial and confused if they identify as black...It seems that black/white individuals are doomed to congenital pathology in some sense or other no matter what (Spencer, 2006, 39).

Spencer's argument shows the pathological dissonance that is has often situated against multiracial identity in the U.S. and how those choices have consequences no matter what identity one chooses. Furthermore, as Joseph contends, in her work, *Transcending Blackness: From the New Millennium Mulatta to the Exceptional Multiracial* that the conversation must change: "Instead of showing Americans embracing blackness in messy, hybridized, multiracial forms, the unspoken dictate in contemporary representations of multiracial Americans is that blackness must be risen above, surpassed, or truly transcended" (Joseph, 2012, 4). Joseph's argument demands to see blackness embraced in all its iterations because blackness can be more than one thing in the U.S., but many multiracial advocates are pushing for identities that move past blackness. Dagbovie-Mullins, Elam, Joseph, and Spencer contribute to the on-going debates within CMRS, but speak more directly to the history and legacy of mixed-race in the U.S. that has definitely left its indelible mark. Nonetheless, these analyses of CMRS are vital in understanding the ways the minor characters view and read the protagonists' racial identities throughout the novels. A CMRS analysis is not all that is needed to fully flesh out how these minor characters' come to shape their own racial literacy and how they perceive the protagonists' identities.

While a CMRS analysis is one part of discussing the minor characters' view of biracial identity in this chapter, the other part in discussing the minor characters' views is through the use of a black feminist analysis, namely the work of Patricia Hill Collins. I am fully aware that Collins is naming and discussing black women and black womanhood in her foregrounding work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* and that

my project looks specifically at black-white biracial identity and black-white biracial female characters, but it does not, in turn, exclude their blackness from the discussion at hand. So, I would argue that theories of black womanhood are immensely helpful in reshaping and reimagining perceptions, attitudes, and stereotypes about biracial female characters at large in this project.²

Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* is essential in discussing the societal, historical, and oppressive issues that affect black women in the U.S. and beyond. The minor characters' perceptions about black women could be muddled with oppressive representations and stereotypes that adversely affect how they perceive the biracial female characters in these novels. As a social critical theory, black feminist thought, as Collins mentions, must "aggressively push the theme of self-definition," "signify change," and advance the view of "a wider struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice" (Collins, 200, 36, 39, 41). Throughout her text, Collins explains how controlling images of black women as "Other" continue to oppress black women.³ When defined as "Other," black women are seen as inferior, not fully human, and experience objectification through the intersecting oppressions of race, class, and gender (p. 71). In *Caucasia* and *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, both biracial characters experience and question the "othering" that happens to them from other characters. Collins also reminds us, "Although most Black women typically resist being objectified as the Other, these controlling images remain powerful influences on our relationships with Whites, Black men, other

² If we remember from the discussion in the Introduction, the black/white binary often did not allow biracial characters or biracial individuals the ability or spaces to be their own people and often grouped them into spaces of blackness so I'm recognizing that this space exists. I find Collins' theory totally relevant to discuss here because these characters are still women of color.

³ Controlling images she discusses include: the "mammy," the "matriarch," the "welfare-mother, and the "jezebel".

racial/ethnic groups, and one another” (p. 89). Senna and Durrow demonstrate these types of influences and power dynamics in these novels, but they also offer models of black female characters that subvert and reject the status quo that the biracial female characters can look up to for resistance. Through literature, Collins believes, black women offer concrete ways in resisting oppression by finding their voice and by not playing the game of binaries, which is why it is important for all voices to be represented. More importantly, Collins wants us to understand that “Emergent women have found that one way of surviving the everyday disrespect and outright assaults that accompany controlling images is to ‘turn it out.’ This is the moment when silence becomes speech, when stillness becomes action” (p. 96). On that note, resistance in any form must occur to make the necessary changes in attitudes and thoughts of black women that can then filter into the attitudes of others to eradicate the racist, sexist, and oppressive stereotypes and images that affect representations of black women in literature.

What Collins offers here for this project is to fully grasp the notion that identities in this project are at once in flux with other intersecting factors that shape who we eventually become and how we perceive others in society. This chapter is clear in pointing out that people’s lives are multi-dimensional and complex and are not defined by single categories. Understanding all the identities that can make up a person is at the crux of this very chapter. Intersectionality is an important lens to use in this chapter because it shows us (readers) that identity is not one-size-fits-all in these narratives as these biracial protagonists attempt to define themselves.⁴ In *Black*

⁴ Intersectionality, first coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, was articulated in 1989. Crenshaw writes: “I argue that Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the interaction of race and gender...Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (140).

Feminist Thought, Collins defines intersectionality as “particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation” (Collins, 2000, 18). She goes on to say: “intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice (p. 18). The minor characters in these novels must consider that the intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, sexuality, geography, and any other factors are crucial in the process of developing a biracial literacy. Therefore, we must look to both analysis of CMRS and black feminist thought to make those connections make sense.

Whereas previous chapters have focused on the protagonists’ sense of self in terms of their choices and the development of their own racial literacy, this chapter examines the complex ways that other characters read the protagonists’ identities and, in some cases, develop their own forms of biracial literacy. The crux of this analysis is not so much that these minor characters develop racial literacy or that they experience a shift in consciousness, but that it works as an example for the readers to follow. Rather, the crux of the argument is that the way others view and read the protagonists’ racial identities is always inflected by the intersectionalities of race, gender, class, sexuality, age, and geography. By recognizing these intersectionalities we (readers) thus learn to recognize how the protagonists are also trying to navigate these things. That is, by reading how the minor characters read and respond to the protagonists’ identities, we see how race is never separate from concerns of gender, class, sexuality, geography, and age, teaching us that a biracial literacy cannot ever be just a racial literacy.

In the following analysis, I make the necessary steps in showing the ways other characters read not only the notions of race as they are presented in the texts, but also how they read the biracial female protagonists in their coming-of-age journeys here. In conjunction with

reading and understanding each character's specific racial journeys in the novel as seen through the gaze and perspectives of other characters, this analysis also does the work of demonstrating how readers can come to resist the stereotypes and misrepresentations surrounding notions of blackness and mixedness that are discussed in the novel. In the process, readers have the capacity to reimagine or develop their own biracial literacy so they can find other ways to read biracial characters in literature as well as biracial individuals in real life. In addition, I find it is vital to engage with other scholars in CMRS, specifically in sociology and psychology to help situate racial identity politics and biracial identity development as I examine the minor characters' reactions in the novels. While the circumstances are different with each biracial protagonist in Senna and Durrow's novels, the goal is to allow these biracial protagonists the freedom to navigate their girlhood in ways that tear down oppressive intersections and open up the spaces and borders that work to restrict and limit their stories and experiences.

Reading Race and Faces in *Caucasia*

In *Caucasia*, Senna sets the novel in post-Civil Rights-era Boston, Massachusetts during the 1970s to possibly infer to readers some false sense of post-racial sensibilities, but the novel proves otherwise that race and racism still exists even after the strides from the Civil Rights Movement. As one of the few interracial families in their town, the Lees begin to experience life in more racial terms as their daughters, Birdie and Cole, become older. Birdie and her sister Cole experience their racial transitions and questioning when they are thrust from their mother's homeschooling atmosphere to that of the all-black Nkrumah Power School. *Caucasia* has many instances where both Birdie and Cole deal with the challenges of being biracial in an-all black school; however, the bulk of those challenges are faced by her sister Cole because she phenotypically looks black compared to her sister Birdie. The black students make fun of Cole

because of her hair and skin. Cole laments to Birdie, “They all laughed at me last week. Just like the time my knees were ashy. ‘Cause of my hair. It looks crazy. They were calling me ‘Miz Nappy.’ None of the boys will come near me. Mum doesn’t know anything about raising a black child. She just doesn’t.” (Senna, 1998, 53). Here, the other black students are teasing her because she presently does not fit the image of what a black girl should be with nappy hair and ashy skin. What these students do not understand is Cole’s mother’s ignorance of how to raise a black girl child in regards to hair care and skin care regimens. Here, we can understand that Sandy’s intersectionality as a white woman puts her outside of the parameters of helping Cole understand the issues related to her hair and skin because she is a white woman. It undeniably affects the way she perceives Cole’s situation at school. Even when Sandy, Cole’s mother, does a terrible job in recreating a hairstyle from *Ebony*, she fails to read the images Cole so badly wanted to resemble because she is also unaware of the pressures of her daughter to be accepted by her black peers. The other children in the school cannot possibly know what Cole is experiencing because they do not have the understanding to know. Nonetheless, the bullying from her classmates affects Cole in ways that make her question her identity and how she wants to be seen by others. Child psychologist Beverley Daniel Tatum reminds us, “The peer group’s evaluation of what is Black and what is not can have a powerful impact on adolescent behavior” (Tatum, 1997, 61). In this aftermath of the teasing and bullying with Cole, Birdie explains to us that “Cole had already done it. Changed” (Senna, 1998, 62). With Jergen’s lotion and new hairstyles, Cole “was one of the more popular girls at school” (p. 62). While I only mention the incident with the hair and lotion here, both sisters practice Ebonics with each other and pronounce words in the mirror so they can stop speaking “white” all in the name of fitting in with their black

classmates (pp. 53-54).⁵ In this instance, Birdie's reaction to her sister's new-found popularity encourages her to want to belong in the same manner. Birdie explains, "I started wearing my hair in a tight braid to mask its texture. I had my ears pierced and convinced my mother to buy me a pair of gold hoops like the other girls at school wore" (pp. 62-63).⁶ All of which shows readers just how important belonging can be for biracial characters. In her powerful memoir, biracial cultural icon Elaine Welteroth reiterates, "Belonging is nuanced and, in some ways, fleeting for any teenager; but the longing for belonging is uniquely complicated as a biracial kid" (Welteroth, 2019, 66). Here, we have two sisters that are ultimately bullied into this sense of belonging in these black groups at school, which is unique because bullying is typically a negative problem that adolescents face in their peer groups. However, this need for group belonging and acceptance are inextricably connected to their sense of identity. Birdie and Cole's experiences are typical in biracial literature and reminds readers of what it means to actually belong to a group and to be accepted by others at such an impressionable age as adolescents.

While the classmates are one part of the equation that push Birdie and Cole into new spaces to test out their biraciality, it is the adults in the novel that read race from an entirely different perspective that have lasting consequences for Birdie throughout the novel. One key incident occurs with Birdie and her father Deck. While out for a daddy-daughter day, Birdie and her father are enjoying time together at the park, eating hot dogs, lying on the grass and looking up at the clouds in the sky—seemingly normal activities at a community park. However, Birdie

⁵ Birdie remembers, "I stood many nights in front of the bathroom mirror, practicing how to say "nigger" the way the kids in school did it, dropping the "er" so that it became not a slur, but a term of endearment: nigga" (Senna 63).

⁶ In speaking about texture, Birdie's hair is not like Cole's hair and resembles her white mother's straight hair with no thickness or kinkiness, which is common for black women's hair. Birdie does her best to simulate the illusion of thick hair with braids.

and her father are soon questioned by the police because “a strange couple with their gray terrier” (Senna, 1998, 59) believed Birdie was in danger. What happens in this scene also serves as a clear example of intersectionality. The “unraced” strange couple believes Birdie is in danger because of her vulnerability as a young, small, white-presenting girl with an older black man at the park. Birdie’s gender, race, and age affect how they see her in this space with her father. Birdie mentions, “They watched me, frowning, as I went up to the hot-dog cart and made my purchase. The man had a fierce scowl, but the woman smiled slightly at me, so I smiled back” (p. 59). The older couple walking through the park that day assumed that a black man and his white-presenting daughter could not possibly be together—could not be a family.⁷ This couple, misreads the common interactions between a father and daughter because of their differing skin tones. The couple’s intersectionality as older also affects how they view their mixed-race family at the park as unseen or uncommon to their own personal experiences. Their fear for Birdie is so strong that they command the on-beat police officers at the park to come to her safety. The exchange between Birdie, her father, and the police shows readers the uneasiness and discomfort of being targeted and profiled because of one’s race:

‘All right, brotherman,’ the younger one said to my father with a smirk. ‘Who’s the little girl?’ ...

‘She’s my daughter. Is there a problem?’ ...

‘All right, Birdie Lee. How do you know this man?’ ...

‘He’s my father.’ ...

He said in a whisper, ‘You can tell us, kiddie. He can’t hurt you here. You’re safe now. Did the man touch you funny?’ (pp. 60-61).

⁷ Birdie notes how, when she was a child, “the eyes of strangers flickered surprise, sometimes amusement, sometimes disbelief, when my mother introduced us as sisters” (Senna 24).

The police officers' status as white law enforcement affects, too, how they view the situation with Deck and Birdie. In an attempt to bring safety to the young, white-presenting girl, the officers read Deck as criminal, accusing him of molesting his own daughter and even kidnapping her. The officers read Birdie as scared and innocent and in need of their unsolicited help. Together they read Birdie and Deck as two mismatched characters in a family that they believe do not belong together.⁸ Readers then should question the reasons why and how families should match and then who gets to decide if those matches are appropriate. In *Raising Biracial Children*, sociologists Kerry Ann Rockquemore and Tracy A. Laszloffy explain "Because of the power of race, parents raising mixed-race children have a responsibility to engage in a process of racial socialization that will prepare their children to understand and effectively negotiate the complexities of race relations" (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005, 59). In this moment, Deck has the opportunity once they are released from interrogation to speak to his daughter about what transpired, but he takes another route to be silent instead of speaking to his daughter about the racism they both just experienced. Birdie states, "From his expression I could see that he didn't feel like talking... 'And they wonder why we want to get out of this place. I mean, shit, it's everywhere I go. Everywhere.' He stared at me for a moment, our eyes locked. Then he added, 'Study them, Birdie. And take notes. Always take notes' (Senna, 1998, 61). Deck's silence turns to anger from what he just experienced, but he fails to engage in the process of racial understanding and socialization that Birdie could benefit from and learn from if it were to happen again. Furthermore, Rockquemore and Laszloffy understand too frequently, in their

⁸ Birdie experiences another similar incident with police officers when she escapes to Boston to find her Aunt Dot. The officers question her: "Do you live here?" "Yes, with my aunt," I said, motioning to Dot. The cops looked back and forth between Dot and me, confused for a moment. The redhead said, "This lady's your aunt?" I hadn't seen that double-take since I had last been with my father—that look of skepticism mixed with embarrassment (335). Because Dot is black and Birdie is a white-presenting biracial girl the officers read them as non-related or not belonging.

research that “Sometimes with the best of intentions, parents keep silent around issues of race, not realizing that their silence communicates a message in and of itself. Silence about racial issues communicates that they are nonexistent or illegitimate topics for conversation” (p. 97). In that regard, Deck fails to connect and communicate with his daughter and Birdie is left without knowing what to actually study and to understand about the situation with the strange couple and the police officers. Birdie explains, “Since the incident at the Public Gardens, my father hadn’t had much to say to me. He went back to ignoring me the way he always had (p. 71). In this regard, Birdie is left without learning an important dialogue on racism, which her father is capable of expressing to her in that moment or thereafter.

Throughout the novel, Senna implores us to understand the importance of family and race dialogue. However, the way Birdie’s family reads her is extremely telling in this novel. Here, I look at the relationships that Birdie has with her mother (Sandy), her father (Deck), and her grandmother (Penelope). When Sandy and Birdie go on the run from the FBI and they pass in New Hampshire as Sheila and Jesse Goldman, Sandy neglects to read any of Birdie’s qualms, frustrations, and anxieties about being biracial and passing as white. Sandy’s indifference about Birdie is overshadowed by her own personal issues of saving herself that she gets lost in trying to figure out what is best for her daughter’s well-being. After Sandy divulges their secret identities and escape from Boston to her boyfriend Jim, Birdie feels betrayed by her mother. That betrayal ignites a new life inside of Birdie and she finally decides to speak up for herself. Birdie asks her the serious question of why her parents split them up. Sandy’s response baffles her:

‘We had to choose’...And the crazy thing is, your sister was the reason I did what I did. Having a black child made me see things differently. Made it all the more personal. It hurts to see your baby come into a world like this, so you want to change it’...My mother did that sometimes, spoke of Cole as if she had been her only black child. It was as if I my mother believed that Cole and I were so different. As if she believed I was white, believed I was Jesse (Senna, 1998, 275).

Birdie understands that everybody sees her and reads her as white even when she wants to be seen as black like Cole. The truth is that she does not look like Cole and when her own mother denies her biracial identity, then it really bothers her because nobody validates her biracial identity. What Birdie does not see is her mother's perspective. As a white woman with a visibly black child, Sandy knew she could not protect and defend Cole in the same ways she could defend and hide Birdie's true racial identity. Her identity as a mother stops her from choosing Cole to take along with her because she wants nothing more than to protect her from the overt racism and discrimination she was bound to face. Her mother's truth is hard to digest because she expects her mother to see her and read her like Cole, but her mother does not see them in the same way. Readers can gauge the frustration Sandy feels for deciding which one of her biracial daughters needs more protecting based off of phenotype and skin color, but can also understand how Birdie struggles to find somebody to see her and support her biracial identity. These experiences allow readers to see the complexity in embracing a biracial identity for adolescents in the U.S. In an effort to find racial solidarity, Birdie leaves her mother in search of her sister and father.

On the way though, Birdie has to reach out to her white maternal grandmother to assist her in getting her to Oakland. Penelope has always favored Birdie over her sister Cole because she is the mirror image of herself with similar white features and all. Regardless of her admiration for her granddaughter, she still reads her and her mother as a tragedy: "You poor, poor child. We don't choose our parents. It's all a terrible fate. I should have taken you away from her a long time ago. But she wouldn't have let me, you know. Sandy had a will of steel... It was doomed from the start. Tragedy in the making. Your mother should have stuck to her

world” (Senna, 1998, 364-365).⁹ Penelope’s racism shows throughout the entire novel, but, in this exchange, she clearly reads Birdie as tragedy, sad, and doomed to have problems.¹⁰ Penelope does not even attempt to read Birdie in any other way. Penelope’s identity as a rich, white, older, upper-class woman does not give her the insight into understanding the reasons her own daughter would forego all the advantages of a white, upper-class lifestyle to be in an interracial relationship with a black man and produce biracial children that will grow up to lead tragic lives. Penelope is a woman of tradition and the past and it blinds her perspective here so that she misreads Birdie’s issues at hand. Here, readers can glean that perhaps the grandmother is too old to change her racist behaviors and perceptions to make Sandy, Birdie, or Cole feel any better about the lives they have as an interracial family. Nonetheless, because she does like Birdie she gives her the money to locate her sister and father.

Once Birdie finds her father, she does not engage in a heart-warming reunion with him. Six years later, Birdie simply has questions for her father who left with his black girlfriend Carmen and his “black” daughter Cole to go off to Brazil. Like Sandy, Deck explains why he left her and how important race was for Cole: “Cole needed a black mother” (Senna, 1998, 394), but he refuses to see how Birdie needed race too. Deck’s intersectionality as a black man

⁹ Ronnie’s reading of Sandy and Deck’s interracial relationship is starkly different than Penelope’s. As a black man in the movement with Sandy and Deck, Ronnie’s concerns are not hinged on racism. After Birdie locates him in Boston and provides an address to her father in Oakland, he states, “I always wondered how you and your sister would turn out. I remember your mother telling me how worried she was about you at the school, how the other kids were giving you trouble.” “You were like this pale speck in a dark circle. I remember thinking your parents were such great mad scientists, embarking on this marvelous, ambitious experiment with you and your sister. I guess we all were back then. But I always wondered how it would turn out” (349). Here, he reads their interracial family as an experiment, in which anything could go wrong.

¹⁰ When Birdie talks with her grandmother about her black history project on Toussaint L’Ouverture at her new school on a visit to see her, her grandmother overreacts and insults the school and the neighborhood in an overtly racist rant: “It’s crazy, child abuse, to send your child into a neighborhood like that. She could be robbed or killed or anything! Jesus Christ, Sandy. I told you I’d pay for them to go to The Friends. I told you” (106).

prohibits him from thinking that only Cole needed a black mother because she looked black and Birdie did not. Deck failed to realize that perhaps Birdie needed a black woman, like his black girlfriend Carmen, to help Birdie learn how to be a black girl too. Cole reminds us how helpful she was for her early in the novel: “‘Her name’s Carmen and she’s so beautiful, Bird. Wait till you see her. She did my hair up last night in a French twist and we listened to music and she told me about—s-e-x’” (p. 84). Carmen helped Cole with her hair, her skin, her fashion, and other teenage related issues that girls share with mothers or mother figures (in this case). It is possible that Birdie, like Cole, could have benefitted from Carmen’s teachings and experiences as a black woman. Nonetheless, Birdie becomes indifferent to her parent’s logic that race plays no role in her self-identity because it is the impetus for her journey in the novel. Her parents misjudge her and misread what she needs growing up and she rarely gets a chance to ask the questions she needs to ask to them. Rockquemore and Laszloffy believe it is important and necessary to participate in “Healthy socialization [that] involves talking honestly, openly, and directly with children about how race shapes everyday life. It is also based on allowing children the freedom and opportunity to be curious, to ask questions, and to share their observations and views without fear of reprisal, disapproval, or punishment. It entails challenging racial views, attitudes, and beliefs that perpetuate racial inequalities” (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005, 77). Birdie waits six years to finally question her parents’ decision to split them up, but by this time her racial identity is in repair. Her father ridicules and invalidates her time passing as Jesse Goldman when she confides in him about her life away from him. Deck attests, “‘But baby, there’s no such thing as passing. We’re all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion, make-believe. It’s a costume. We all wear one. You just switched yours at some point. That’s just the absurdity of the whole race game’” (p. 391). For Deck, he reads his daughter as part of his race theory project

instead of being her actual father willing to listen and understand the reality of her experiences as a Jewish white girl—Jesse Goldman. Deck misses the mark to be the father she expected him to be once she locates him. Birdie realizes that along the journey so many people, including her own family members, read her in ways that dismiss her biracial identity altogether as well as look at race in ways that are oppressive and harmful to society in general.

Land of Stereotypes

While undercover/passing as Jesse Goldman, Birdie must be a spy in enemy territory with her white friends like Nick and Mona, but she often must endure harsh and offensive stereotypes about black women and men that push her to silent rage throughout the novel. Nick feels comfortable speaking in front of Jesse and shares his own assumptions about black women. We must reflect on Nick's identity as a middle-upper class, white male affects how he envisions race and black women throughout the novel. His location as a character that bluntly dehumanizes and marginalizes black women is somewhat lost on Birdie because she forgets her own location as a white Jesse Goldman that makes him think his assumptions are thus safe. For example, he mentions his rendezvous one year with hookers in New Amsterdam during Christmas vacation. He relies on stereotypes he heard that "black girls were supposed to be good" (Senna, 1998, 199) when making the choice to purchase sex from the hookers. He explains to Birdie that they all put their money together to buy "the fat black chick from Africa...and took turns with her" instead of the white or Asian one (p. 199). After the ordeal was over, Nick remembers "She was okay...I don't remember her face much" (p. 199). Nick undeniably positions this black woman as a mere object that he and his friends can purchase for sexual pleasure and dehumanize in the process because black women in general are often seen as objects instead of subjects. bell hooks maintains here that "From slavery on, white supremacists

have recognized that control over images is central to the maintenance of any system of racial domination” (hooks, 1992, 2) and these images of the black woman as jezebel almost work effortlessly in our social world to maintain the status quo of contemporary colonization and dehumanization of black women. Nick’s dislike of black people continues throughout the night. As they smoke weed together, he asks Birdie a joke: ““When they’re born, what’s printed on the inside of every black baby’s lip?” ...I heard him say, ‘Inflate to five thousand’” (p. 204). Birdie doesn’t laugh and ignores him. However, she cannot ignore the horrid and grotesque images of black people painted as savage creatures in the comic book, *Tintin in the Congo*, that is besides Nick’s bed. In a moment of disgust and hate of the images, Birdie responds aloud—“They’ve made us look like animals” (p. 204). Unknowingly, Nick hears her slip up and jokes, ‘Shit, maybe you could be colored in the right light. Better stay out of the sun’” (p. 204). His point in telling her to stay out of the sun or she will get darker forces her body to react to his blatant racism and she begins to breathe strangely with “regular wheezes...like an asthma attack” (p. 204). Nick, then attempts to apologize because he believes he’s hurt her feelings: ““I was just kidding about you looking colored. I mean, you don’t look it at all. You’re—You’re pretty. You’re gonna look really hot in a few years. I mean it’” (p. 205). Unbeknownst to Nick, she is utterly disgusted with him and his inability to recognize beauty in black women, much like her grandmother Penelope, because he is indeed a racist in her eyes. Birdie sighs, “I was falling in love. Now the feeling in my chest—the dropping—had turned to a kind of soreness” (p. 205). Nick’s racism changes her entire attitude about him as a person and she uses it as a measuring stick for other white male characters throughout the novel. However, Nick serves as one of the many white characters she must learn to disengage from so that her anger does not ruin her cover in the land of Caucasia. Nick’s identity as a young, white male does not negate his racism or his

overt stereotypes about black women, but it shows how his views and perceptions eventually change the ways in which Birdie engages and interacts with him.

As the only visibly out black biracial character in New Hampshire, Samantha Taper is constantly harassed by Mona and other students because of her racial identity.¹¹ Unlike Birdie, Samantha embraces and acknowledges her biracial identity; however, it is definitely wrought with degradation, humiliation, and condemnation. As the leader of the bullying and teasing, Mona is extremely offensive and racist, but nobody stops her, not even Birdie because then she would blow her cover as Jesse. Being called names like “Wilona” from the popular black sitcom *Good Times*, “Brown Cow,” and “Fucking bitch,” Samantha is openly harassed and mistreated by Mona and others to no avail (Senna, 1998, 223). From her hair styles to her clothing choice to her intellectual ability and to her talents in activities, Samantha is bullied by most of the students in her school. While middle-schoolers deal with usual doses of teasing, Samantha has to endure much more because of her status as black and female. After a summer break and a shot of puberty, Samantha reappears in a new light: “Now she stood before us in a hot-pink miniskirt and a light-blue halter top. Her body, we all could see, was at least as developed as Mona’s—she had pert, small, but undeniable breasts. We had never really seen her in this light before. She had always worn layers to cover up the back brace for her scoliosis. Now the brace was gone, and she stood revealed, no longer embarrassed by the flesh she had discovered” (pp. 250-251). Mona fails to acknowledge her in any positive manner, but dismisses her new look as overly sexual and exclaims to the group: “She looks like a hooker, if you ask me. God, I wonder what happened to

¹¹ Birdie schools us about Samantha’s background: “She was adopted. Only three days after her birth, she had been left on the steps of a church with a note stating her name and birthday. She had been adopted by a Quaker couple who had been unable to bear children. Nobody, not even her adoptive parents, knew the truth of Samantha’s origins. They could only imagine” (Senna 225).

her over the summer” (p. 251). In this regard, Mona hypersexualizes Samantha—mainly because she reads her as black—as an Other.¹² Collins explains, “Within the binary thinking that underpins interesting oppressions, blue-eyed, blond, thin White women could not be considered beautiful without the Other—Black women with African features of dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair” (Collins, 2000, 89). Many black women begin to internalize these differences without even realizing how such differences operate in society to oppress and marginalize. The marginalization continues even with Samantha’s new white boyfriend who jokes with his football teammates at practice to smell his fingers and get a “sniff of Samantha” (Senna, 1998, 252). This sexual degradation continues when “the other boys, meanwhile, would snap her bra then run away hooting, whip her with their gym towels, make mooing noises and licking motions with their tongues when she passed them in the hall” (p. 252). What Birdie comes to understand from hearing these rumors and incidents regarding Samantha is exactly what Carmen warned Cole about with white guys: “Carmen used to say to my sister that white boys were trouble. She said they might seem nice at first, but they can never forget your color. It’ll come up sooner or later, and then you’ll see that they always saw you as a black chick—a curiosity, a dabble in difference—nothing more” (p. 200). More importantly, Birdie notes, “I didn’t want to be black like Samantha. A doomed, tragic shade of black. I wanted to be black like somebody else (p. 321). Mona spews sexist and racist stereotypes regularly to make judgment calls and attitudes about black people that she fails to even have any type of meaningful relationships with them throughout the novel. Senna shows us that in the land of Caucasia racism and stereotypes are as commonplace as the white people that inhabit the spaces

¹² Mona’s stereotypes about black people do not just stop with Samantha. Once a new black male student comes to their high school the following year, Mona persisted to roll out the same red carpet of stereotypes for the new black guy: “His name’s Stuart Langley. I’ve never known any black guys, just Samantha. Wonder if they got big dicks, like everybody says” (248).

of New Hampshire. More importantly, it shows us how hard it is to untangle the intersections of multiple identities from one another.

Sorting Through Intersectionalities in *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*

As the texts show us the dilemmas and complexities of being biracial and mixed-raced, they also show us the possibilities and moments where U.S. society can reconfigure, recast, or reimagine its own racial compasses. Throughout *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, Durrow structures the narrative with a first-person point-of-view (POV) from five different characters—Rachel, Brick/Jamie, Nella, Roger, and Laronne — that demonstrate a narrative blueprint for recognizing intersectionality. Other minor characters like the Grandmother, Jesse, and Aunt Loretta also provide interesting dialogue here as well. Durrow creates a dialogue of race talk across the novel with the several different POVs. The beauty of Durrow’s POV structure is its multilayeredness and multivocality. Lisa Page writes “The characters all struggle to make sense of a world they can’t seem to belong in, racially or economically. And the structure of the novel, with each chapter told from a different character’s viewpoint, has a sort of ‘Rashomon’ quality that builds tension around the rooftop mystery” (Page, 2010, “Book Review”).¹³ These different minor characters and their POV reveals how their understanding or description of race is tangled with the other aspects of intersectionalities present in the novel. In this way, we get perspectives from both adolescents and adults across the intersections of race, gender, class, nation, and age. Through Durrow’s novel, we enter into a community of voices that speak to the legacies of race, of power, and of oppression. For purposes here, I demonstrate through the characters of Roger, Jesse, Laronne, Nella, Grandma Doris, and Aunt Loretta how multilocalized positions and

¹³ Originating from classic 1950 Kurosawa film, *Rashomon*, the Rashomon effect (as suggested by Page in her review of Durrow’s POV structure) explains how different people with different backgrounds, expectations, and experiences can view the same events in completely different ways.

identities can guide readers on a path to biracial literacy. What Durrow's novel does well here is to challenge the single story by allowing others to speak about race in ways that others in U.S. society often find either too uncomfortable or taboo to discuss.

Rachel learns how to navigate her racial and social identities, as we learn in Chapter 2, without much or any from her parents, but here I want to consider the complex location her father had in attempting to foster that identity with her in the novel. When we think of how the Morse family could gain or even understand what it is to be racially conscious or literate, we should look to the raced body in that family model—Roger Morse. Out of all the major characters presented here, Roger is the most undeveloped character and does not allow us to read him in the fullest capacity. The novel only allows us to piece together Roger. What we learn about Roger mostly is from the brief encounters he has with Brick in the hospital, from Nella's journals, and from Rachel's stories about her father. From these stories, we can read Roger as a character that abandons his family in their time of need. In the novel, we learn that Roger had bad experiences with race and racism in America, which prompted him into entering the Army and leaving America. For example, Durrow writes about the fascination with race on the military base—"Roger liked white girls, but not American white girls. They didn't do much for him, because they acted like you were supposed to be happy just because you got to rub your brown on their cream. But not these European girls—they loved the black boys they met in the bars near the American base. Roger loved them back" (Durrow, 2010, 71). Roger's status as black and male had very different outcomes in America and in Europe. His positive experience in Europe resulted in him thus marrying Nella and having a family with her. Furthermore, Roger seemed to believe that American women allowed race to affect their interactions with him, but the fact that Nella was "a shy white girl who came from a little town in a little country he knew

nothing about” (p. 73) made he believe that she was free from judgment, scorn, or even aware of how American society constructed images or the life of a black man. In this way, Roger did not want to participate and do race so how could we expect him to impart that racial literacy to Rachel after the accident and to even his family. Nella’s journals explain what Roger already knew about interracial marriage and the reality of race:

Today the woman at the kiosk was staring at us, and she said if the children father was black? Roger never was black. He was charming and fun and handsome. And he loved to have fun...I wasn’t ever thinking he was black. When he said but you cannot be pregnant, we cannot get married, and when I said why not he said cause you are white and I am not. I did not know that was a problem. So many white women were dating NCOs with brown skin, and it was normal to me. I do not think of this thing (pp. 123-124)

Roger’s former identity as an American black man provides him with the experience and understanding of how different interracial relationships are thus often prohibited in the United States. While Nella is unaware of the racism Roger knows, Nella cannot even name racism and calls it a “thing” to further let us know how much she refused to “read” him as black or his notion of American racism. While Roger clearly understands the racial dynamics of their so-called problem, Nella works on the assumption of racial transcendence because she fails to see race in the same ways as Roger. And it’s interesting here how she almost neglects to refer to Roger as black, but she uses other adjectives like “charming” and “fun” instead. Nella remembers: “Roger said I could not understand because Europa is not the same. He never wanted to come back to America. Is this part of why?” (p. 124). The “whys” Rogers fails to give is what makes it even more discerning when we expect Roger to be not only be present in his family but also to be available to Rachel after the tragedy. It is Rachel that explains to us that her father “never told us he was black. He never told us we were” (p. 80). Roger’s identity as a black man, both in Europe and in America, negatively affects his ability to have the tough conversations

with both Nella and his daughter Rachel about race and racism. Although Roger makes himself available to Rachel in the hospital, there is never any physical interaction and engagement between them. He abandons her and leaves her with her Grandmother Doris and Aunt Loretta hoping she can make it without him. Durrow provides only minimal plot information and interaction with Roger, which may suggest that he is not yet equipped with the tools and skills to talk to Rachel about the narratives of race in the U.S.

Whereas Rachel struggles to get any dialogue and help from her father, Jesse is an example of a minor character that attempts to impart knowledge and race-consciousness to a young, impressionable Rachel. Rachel alerts us: “Jesse isn’t like a white guy. He calls white people pilgrims. He speaks a broken Mayan Spanish. He recites revolutionary Jamaican poems by heart. He’s surprised that I haven’t read *Black Skin, White Masks* all the way through” (Durrow, 2010, 188). Jesse is different than what Rachel expects a white person to be. Rachel gathers from her interactions with Jesse that there is more than one way to be white. Jesse’s identity as a young, smart, white, upper-class male allows him to appear trustworthy and knowledgeable to Rachel. Over the course of the novel, Rachel becomes good friends with Jesse, connects with him through their Norway/Danish heritage, and even begins to grow fond of him in a romantic way from all the time they spent together at the rehab center. On the other hand, his identity in these positions also privileges him in ways that make it easy to manipulate Rachel too. This is most evident in the scene when LaKeisha and Brick leave Rachel and Jesse alone after they both decide that smoking weed and staying out late will get them in trouble. Older and more mature than Rachel, Jesse takes advantage of her naiveté and their friendship as they talk amongst themselves when both Brick and LaKeisha, both black characters, are not

around them. Rachel questions Jesse after making a comment about a bum on the beach. The conversation below explains more fully:

‘It sounded like maybe you thought he was a bum, or even like you weren’t like the men at the center because ... It sounded like you meant black people or ... I don’t know.’ ‘I didn’t mean it that way,’ Jesse says. ‘Don’t think that,’ he says and takes another puff. ‘You’re not mad are you?’ The way he says it is like an apology. I don’t want to be mad. ‘You’re different anyway, you know? It’s like you’re black but not really black,’ he says. ‘Don’t be mad, okay?’ (p. 230)

In this moment, Jesse takes it upon himself to distinguish Rachel’s blackness as different or superior than the other black people that he knows or interacts with. He even goes further to even mention that she does not really even belong to black people/blackness because she does not look how black people commonly look. His identity as a white male prevents him from knowing the different variations in skin color, eye color, and hair texture that black people can also have in the U.S. so his ideas here are oppressive and stereotypical. Jesse explains they should travel to another country before he goes to college. Rachel wonders where they should go and Jesse responds: “‘Brazil,’ he says. ‘You know you’d look just like everyone else there.’ ‘Really?’ ‘Everyone’s a mulatto there basically. Brown with green eyes, gray eyes, blue eyes. It’s all the same. Exotic. Those are your people,’ he says” (p. 231). During these dialogues about her exotic beauty, Jesse and Rachel kiss repeatedly and he touches her all over with “lust” in his eyes and reminds Rachel, “I didn’t come looking for this today” (p. 233). Although Jesse talks with Rachel about her traveling to different places and learning new cultures, he uses that as a ploy to toy with her sexually. The scene ends with Jesse telling us: “‘I’ve never done it with a black girl before’” (234). In these scenes, Durrow shows us how race is thus tangled up with the notions of nation and gender. Jesse is able to fantasize and exoticize Rachel in these moments because she is not “really black” and looks like the mulattos in Brazil so that he can think differently about

her position as a black girl. Jesse's intersectionality shows us that he is capable of knowing the difference between his words and his actions with Rachel.

Unlike Roger and Jesse that muddle up the conversations on race with their expectations and assumptions, Laronne gives us an inside look into Nella's life that we would not have access to and what we learn is valuable as we come to understand the commonalities they share as mothers and caregivers to their families. Laronne explains: "'You go on, ask people what they saw. A woman doesn't sacrifice her babies that way. No matter what's gone wrong. She's not gonna hurt no kids. But maybe *that man* did'" (Durrow, 2010, 48) Laronne cannot fathom that a mother could do this. She, unfortunately, reads her all wrong. Laronne's position as a mother makes it almost impossible to imagine that a woman who loves her kids as much as Nella could have murdered them. Instead of projecting such madness onto Nella, she assumes that her boyfriend is the culprit instead. Mothers do not kill their children as Laronne implies here. Laronne employs Nella and knows that single mothers "were all working on a second chance. If she could do any small thing to help, she would" (p. 22). Laronne, often against the advice of her husband who "sometimes chided her for getting too involved. 'You're the boss, not the mom,'" (p. 22) made herself available for Nella. In one of their numerous exchanges throughout the novel, they both share that need to protect and mother:

"'That's how it is. You want to protect them.'

'Funny how that happens,' Laronne said. 'You realize you'd do anything for them. Anything for them to be okay.'

'Yes,' Nella said. 'I will'" (p. 47).

In this moment, both Laronne and Nella are mothers that want to generally protect their children, but what we come to find out about Nella is that she pushes her children to their deaths. She

kills them because she cannot protect them from racism and prejudice.¹⁴ Durrow paints a picture through Laronne's eyes that allows us to read Nella as "mother" and "protector." The narrator alerts us: "The collection of whispered comments and impressions didn't add up to a story that made sense of what happened; they could hardly be considered clues. What people wanted to know was why Nella had turned so dangerous. Why hadn't the danger been seen?" (p. 46).

When she is even questioned, she remains steadfast in what she believes from the small interactions she shared with Nella as a friend, mother, and woman. The narrator explains:

"Laronne had only one thing to say to the reporter. 'That woman loved her babies, and they loved her'" (p. 47). Laronne is only capable here of seeing and reading Nella in specific ways.¹⁵

Nella's own position as a foreign, white woman in Chicago with no family does not grant her many resources to learn how to shield her children or herself from the racism or prejudice she encounters. What Nella also fails to see or understand is the common dialogue of race or physical contention when others visibly see biracial children (as her journal entries reflect in the novel).¹⁶ While Laronne and Nella only had a few interactions, their budding friendship could have been just the relationship to help and situate Nella into this new racial world of scripts, codes, and rules that she struggles to understand fully during her time in Chicago. For example,

¹⁴ This scene harkens back to Toni Morrison's character Sethe in *Beloved* who killed her child so she wouldn't end up in slavery years later. Nella actually mirrors Sethe's motives for trying to protect her children from a racist society.

¹⁵ Nella and the children had only been in Chicago for about four-six weeks, which hardly gives Laronne enough time to form a lasting friendship, but I believe it was one where Nella could have benefited from perhaps.

¹⁶ After the accident, Laronne cleans up the apartment and gives Grandma Doris some of Rachel's things and comes across a box of Nella's journals. These journals detail her first day through the last day in Chicago. Durrow's use of the journaling is very strategic and offers a way for yet another character voice that we lose if we just read "about" Nella from other's perspectives. The intertextuality that exists in this novel is extremely important because this journaling effect alerts me of how one's voice is profound and grants readers a way into understanding the pain, frustrations, and confusion a character experiences. This journaling strategy beckons to Celie in Walker's *The Color Purple* and how profound her voice to God was for readers. Durrow undoubtedly pays tribute to many canonical African American authors and narratives throughout her own novel.

it is Laronne that explains in a pleasant but firm way to Nella that her “white” boyfriend Doug should not refer to her biracial children as jigaboos because the word is both racist and offensive.

The narrative reminds us here:

“‘It’s from my little jigaboos.’ She said it with all love.

‘Your?’ Laronne paused.

‘My little jigaboos. That’s what Doug calls them. It’s so cute.’

‘Nella. Don’t say that again. It’s not cute’” (Darrow, 2010, 154).

Nella is completely caught off guard and unaware of her racist talk about her own kids. The scene further illuminates Nella’s inability to know and understand the racial dynamics in the U.S. and how words like “jigaboo” carries a heavy history with it. But Laronne is available to assist Nella in developing the understanding for the racial language and codes that exist in the U.S. From Nella’s journal entries, it is hard to determine whether or not Nella truly wants Laronne’s advice because it appears as if she only feels scolded instead of receiving help. When Nella is questioned one day at the kiosk in the grocery store about her children’s father, she becomes so angry with society and the constant questioning and interrogating. In her journal, Nella writes: “Never have I been thinking of my children as black. How to learn all these things that might hurt them? I want to pull out my tongue if I made them sad...It makes me so sad I said those things to them. I want them to know how much I love them. I love them and will keep them safe” (p. 154). In order to keep her children safe requires Nella to acquire a biracial literacy where she can learn and intercept the real experiences of race and stories that exist through engagement and interactions with others in her community. Nella remembers: “Roger always said it would be hard. America was not what I thought it was” (p. 23)—Nella is taken aback by the social realities of race in America and struggles to exist in this space. Ultimately, Nella’s

position as a foreigner and a woman left alone to parent biracial children affects the relationship she has with her children and her relationships with anybody thereafter. Nella's friendship with Laronne serves as clear evidence that she could have learned the skills and techniques to properly navigate the racial and social landscapes of Chicago. From these specific minor character interactions between Laronne and Nella, we can determine that racial literacy requires us to engage in conversations that discuss more than race because the implications of our other identities affect us in similar ways.

We learn that once Rachel enters Portland, Oregon after the fatal accident and tragedy, her notion of identity is directly affected by the multiple identity positions of her Aunt Loretta and her Grandma Doris. These two characters come at a time in Rachel's adolescence where their input of ideas, values, and morals are crucial in shaping Rachel's personality and attitude about herself and others. Both Aunt Loretta and Grandma Doris do their best in acknowledging Rachel's position as a young, biracial child and the terrible tragedy she has experienced. Aunt Loretta wants to impart her identity as a black, educated, classy woman onto her niece so that she will be familiar and accustomed to the experiences of black women. From the beginning of her stay, Loretta assists Rachel in that process. Her location as a black woman makes it important to share the intersectionality of black women and hair. Aunt Loretta explains her duty as a black girl: "I'd have to sit by the stove to get my hair pressed out. If I didn't smell the hair burning I knew it would be no good," (Durrow, 2010, 12) but Rachel knows as she sits between her aunt's legs to get her hair done that she is doing it right because she can "smell [her own] hair burning" (p. 12). As we are reminded from Chapter 2, Aunt Loretta is the type of black woman that Rachel eventually strives to become and she mimics her values and personality about women and

their roles in society. Everything that Rachel seems to learn from her Aunt Loretta is often in direct opposition to her Grandma Doris.

Grandma Doris' position as an older, illiterate, Southern, black woman definitely finds its way into the novel to offer a perspective that Rachel often rejects and rebels against. Grandma Doris is an old-fashioned, Southern Christian woman originally from Texas. Rachel is clearly aware of her Southern vernacular when she mentions, "I want her to put s's on the ends of her words and not say 'fixin to' when she about to do something" (Durrow, 2010, 9). However, Grandma Doris cannot change how she talks because she's not as educated as Rachel or her own children. What she has done is made sure her own children—Loretta and Roger—had more opportunities to succeed than she did. She explains her own educational shortcomings to her granddaughter:

'It's true. I don't know any of them books you be readin,' Grandma says. 'But I would of if they let me go to school. To that private school.' There is a story there that Grandma doesn't tell. It's a story that makes her sigh and tut-tut. When she digs again, she is in that story, not looking at the ground, but pictures of Texas in her mind. Or maybe they are pictures of herself young, more like Aunt Loretta — more like a girl who was going somewhere (p. 34).

Grandma Doris is unable to read because she did not have the same opportunities as Rachel or Loretta. Her position as an uneducated, black girl did not give her the same opportunities to be more than what she was supposed to become, which was to marry good and raise a family. So, Grandma Doris could not dream of more like Loretta or Rachel. Grandma Doris is unable to look past the generational ideas of what types of opportunities exist for black women today because of her intersectionality of age and traditional family models. Grandma's "more" for her own daughter Loretta "is a good secretarial job, a husband, two children and a house nearby" (p. 28). Grandma does not think her daughter, Loretta, will ever find another husband "with paint underneath her nails, or a woman smelling of chemicals instead of peaches and white soap" (p.

78).¹⁷ But Loretta does find a man and he adores her, but it does not stop Grandma Doris from her constant rants about how women and girls should act. Grandma Doris pushes those same ideas onto Rachel too: “Grandma keeps saying what I need to study is typing. That way I can work in a nice office one day. ‘A pretty girl’s gonna go somewhere. Now that’s a fact. Long as she keeps that pretty to herself and then her husband’...The way Grandma paints her dream for me, there’s a low sky...” (pp. 148-149). What we can understand from Grandma Doris is that her perspective forces her to see women in no other spaces where a man is not providing or taking care of them.

She constantly speaks to Rachel about looks, respectability, and her sexuality because no man wants to marry an unkempt woman without morals and respect. Grandma is bent on making sure her granddaughter is always presentable at church and other outings so she does not look like a “pickaninny” (Durrow, 2010, 96). In addition, Grandma Doris upholds oppressive standards of beauty that Rachel dismisses. Her grandmother reminds her: ““Stay outta that sun. It’ll make you dark and dusty”” (p. 170). Grandma Doris’ most harsh conversations occur in the novel when she discusses Rachel’s budding sexuality as a teenager. When Grandma Doris realizes Rachel has lied to her about being at the library when she was really with John Bailey, she resorts to name-calling and throws insults at her about her dead mother, Nella. Grandma Doris unapologetically states, ““Don’t do what your mama did. Some people aint figured to take care of babies. Specially some people, like your mama—hoing herself to that no-count man. [...] It ain’t respectable. Don’t be like your mama—sniffin around life like the only nose you’ve

¹⁷ Aunt Loretta’s first marriage to Nathan, a professional NFL player, ended because she could no longer live her life married to a habitual cheater just so she could have nice things and a big house in New York. Now back in Portland, Loretta decides to do thing on her own terms and has picked up her old hobby of painting and art. She does eventually find a man and enters a romantic relationship with Drew. They are unable to marriage because she tragically dies in the novel.

got is the one between your legs” (p. 151). In another instance, she catches Rachel with a boy in her bedroom and simply says, ““You little hussy. I should have known”” (p. 172). While Rachel is being a curious teenager and testing out her sexuality, her grandmother is at odds with how her behavior can ruin her reputation as a young black girl. One of the last things Grandma Doris says to Rachel before she runs away is too much for Rachel to digest: ““Don’t act like trash like your mama. It’s not something a black girl can afford”” (p. 237). What Rachel cannot absorb from her grandmother’s statement is the actual experiences and stereotypes that black women have faced for their sexuality and promiscuity just because they are black. Her grandmother is trying explain the concept of white privilege to Rachel that she did not inherit from her mother due to her racial identity as black. Grandma Doris’ inability to connect with Rachel on a better level causes them to clash quite often throughout the novel. Grandma Doris’ interactions with Rachel as well as Loretta shows readers the lingering effects of racism and oppression to black women and perhaps a better way to communicate with our daughters and their futures as women in society.

Throughout *Caucasia* and *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, it is critical to be aware of the minor characters’ multiple intersectionalities of identity because without them it is hard to grasp their outsider perspective in understanding the challenges these biracial characters are thus facing in their awareness of themselves and others. If readers can take into account how the minor characters’ intersectionality thus affects the minor characters’ reading of Birdie and Rachel in these novels, then the minor characters’ mistakes can serve as a lesson to them and can possibly alter or shift their own ideas about biracial characters in literature or with biracial individuals in real life. By doing so, these novels reveal, too, how an analysis in CMRS helps to educate and

inform readers about the emerging biracial identity developments that are happening in the literature and in real life.

Conclusion
Race Forward: Opening the Doors to More Conversations

Experience is the meaning maker in our lives. Our experience of the world around us is what changes us.

--Robert Atkinson
The Life Story Interview

Our ability to interpret racial meanings depends on preconceived notions of a racialized social structure. We expect people to act out their apparent racial identities; indeed, we become disoriented when they do not.

--Michael Omi and Howard Winant
Racial Formation in the United States

Our journey to understand race begins by thinking, writing, and looking at our own racial histories and by sharing them with others.

--Bonnie M. Davis
The Biracial and Multiracial Student Experience

As we race forward to the dawn of a new decade in 2020, our vision for the future of race in the U.S. should position us in places that encourage conversations with more critical thinking, shared understandings, and real connections with one another. Entering into a conversation about race and racism in the U.S. is not an easy task, but it is one that must take place in order for institutional and structural racist systems to change. In order to do that though, individuals must do the inside work of holding the mirror up and considering what they can do to reshape their attitudes and beliefs about race in American society. This journey of racial equity in the U.S. is both transformative and arduous because in order to do authentic work, then we all must contribute to undoing racism every single day. Therefore, in this project, I want readers and critics to navigate through the story of race in the U.S. and to find those moments that connect us all through empathy and understanding of the human experience. Our experience of the world around us is an integral part of who we are and who we eventually become. So, as a society, we must have the difficult conversations about race in order to change the status quo of racial inequality in the U.S. Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton in *Courageous Conversations About*

Race find it to be quite problematic when we fail to engage in these necessary conversations about race and its meaning in our homes, our classrooms, and our communities. They stress that individuals “cannot talk about race collectively as a nation, family, or school until we have individually talked about race in our own lives—personally, locally, and immediately” (Singleton & Linton, 2005, 76). It is imperative in the U.S. to discuss and talk about race and racism because if one cannot name it, then how is it that one is to ever change the racist systems and attitudes in our social worlds. Courage allows us to speak and to be heard, but it is also courageous to listen to others. Too often individuals refuse to engage in conversations about race or to simply remain silent because they “do not see color” or “let color define them.” However, that silence is indeed damaging to racial equity in the U.S. According to racial theorists, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, in their foregrounding work *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, they suggest how colorblindness should never be a desired goal in U.S.:

In the U.S., race is present in every institution, every relationship, every individual. This is the case not only for the way society is organized—spatially, culturally, in terms of stratification, etc.—but also for our perceptions and understandings of personal experience...we are compelled to think racially, to use the racial categories and meaning systems into which we have been socialized. Despite exhortations both sincere and hypocritical, it is not possible or even desirable to be ‘color-blind’ (Omi & Winant, 1994, 159).

Omi and Winant tell us race is embedded in all we do. Therefore, if we rely on a color-blind rhetoric, our society then fails altogether in creating and providing the racial literacies that help to deconstruct racist systems and thinking.

Nonetheless, the novels discussed in this project, *Caucasia* and *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, show how hard and vexing the process of enacting race is for any one character.

Reader-response theorist Norman Holland contends “All of us, as we read, use the literary work

to symbolize and finally to replicate ourselves. We work out through the text our own characteristic patterns of desire and adaptation. We interact with the work, making it part of our own psychic economy and making ourselves part of the literary work—as we interpret it (Holland, 1975, 816). Reading, as is reading race, is a personal act of discovery and a testimony to our lived realities and experiences. It is through the literature we read where the moments of possibility, discovery, and reflection exist and speak to our own realities and experiences. Through the literature of *Caucasia* and *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, individuals have the ability to fixate and adjust their mirrors onto themselves and to unpack how they are really showing up in these spaces to enact change in their interactions with others. These moments thus allow for individuals to engage in the process of racial literacy that demonstrates interconnectedness between others, shared learning and exploration, and empathy.

By opening the doors to more conversations and dialogues, then narratives about race can change and we can change how we read biraciality in the U.S. Senna and Durrow are doing the work of articulating the biracial experience through the characters of Birdie Lee and Rachel Morse. Those experiences are fictional in the literature, but they reflect the reality of many biracial individuals living in the U.S. Both Senna and Durrow's novels participate in creating, shaping, and reflecting the society in which it is read. From these novels, Senna and Durrow create spaces and opportunities for race dialogue and understanding in the literature we read, in the families we are a part of, and in the communities where we live together. Omi and Winant remind us “A more effective starting point is the recognition that, despite its uncertainties and contradictions, the concept of race continues to play a fundamental role in structuring and representing the social world” (Omi & Winant, 1994, 38). That message can be delivered through our family members and friends, our literature and arts, and other mediums like TV and

media. It must be delivered in every facet of our culture. I think it is just not enough to learn about race and racism in the family sphere, but in all parts of our culture and society. The complexity of these narratives and the narrative of race is that we must learn to reconcile the differences in age, race, gender, and sexuality and realize that all those points become intersections to better human understanding.

Critics in the fields of sociology and psychology offer different modes of explanation and insight about biracial individuals that are necessary to when considering the characterization of biracial characters in literature. By using an interdisciplinary approach in my project, I can better attend to the social and interpersonal development of the characters in *Caucasia* and *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*. The following sociologists, Kathleen Odell Korgen and G. Reginald Daniel, work to push the multiracial movement beyond the borders of the prescriptive one-drop rule, miscegenation laws and legislation, and racial hierarchies and systems that place mixed-race individuals inside the black-white binary in the early 1990s.¹ In *From Black to Biracial: Transforming Racial Identity among Americans*, Kathleen Odell Korgen notes, “Persons have more freedom to choose whom they will be. With increasing alternatives come demands for self-determination. For instance, simple awareness of the possibility of choice in racial identity leads many Americans to want that freedom” (Korgen, 1998, 88). While the freedom to choose a racial identity is at the core of the novels in this project, the novels also reveal that there’s no total freedom to choose because, as Markus and Moya remind us, people are in a constant state of becoming and doing race every day. However, the novels show us how biracial protagonists want nothing more than to determine who they will be. In *More Than Black? Multiracial Identity*

¹ Other sociologists include Marion Kilson, Ursula Brown, Kerry Anne Rockquemore and David Brunsma.

and the New Racial Order, G. Reginald Daniel offers a nuanced response to what a multiracial identity is capable of achieving:

Although embodied in individuals, the new multiracial identity is perhaps best characterized as a cluster of new possibilities in the nation's collective racial consciousness that seeks to transform traditional racial categories and boundaries by expanding definitions of blackness and whiteness. While the new multiracial identity is a flagship for this alternative consciousness, it should not be viewed as the solution, in and of itself, to racism and racial inequality. It remains to be seen how many individuals will actually live out the promise of the new multiracial identity and help create a more egalitarian racial order in the United States (Daniel, 2002, 189).

Daniel's ideas about multiracial identity allow us to understand that a new multiracial identity is not a solution to fixing the trauma of racism in the U.S, but what it can do is offer mixed-raced individuals racial possibilities that finally push them outside of the boxes of blackness and whiteness they often inhabited. Pushing for more racial identity options is not simply advocating for biracial individuals to feel better about themselves. Racial identity in the new millennium is capable of undoing fixed categories and strict boundaries that keeps us trapped in racist systems. Embracing and respecting one's individual right to choose how to identify themselves is only part of the goal here. Consequently, the major goal of this possibility is to ultimately achieve racial literacy in the U.S. where we untangle and recast race from the structural and institutional systems in society.

Other preeminent sociologists like Heather Dalmage, Kerry Anne Rockquemore, and Tracey Laszloffy, are important to mention here as they further discuss how interracial families and biracial children socially come to see themselves and others in their everyday lives. These sociological findings of mixed-race in the late 1990s and 2000s are crucial in understanding how protagonists Birdie and Rachel and their respective interracial families encounter racial inequalities and tensions throughout the novels. In Heather Dalmage's *Tripping on the Color*

Line Black-White Multiracial Families in a Racially Divided World she discusses the social and political nuances of living and existing on the color line as members of an interracial family.

Specifically, Dalmage makes the point that interracial families and biracial individuals become part of a journey that takes them on a trip of learning, understanding, and processing. Dalmage notes:

Those individuals who live close to the line, however, know that race is anything but simple. They are challenged to question what it means to be black or white. On a day-to-day level, race can get very confusing. They stumble, fumble, act inappropriately, and sometimes feel blown away. They may trip in all kinds of ways. Race itself is a trip, a journey. They travel through hardship, anger, solidarity, unity, hostility, terror, growth, happiness, fear, and uncertainty. Sometimes elusive, always present, race is a social construct that guides the journey of human growth and community (Dalmage, 2000, 17).

Dalmage's use of journey here implies, as I already mentioned, that race is a challenge, but is worth wrestling with if it means we can find a way to be or think differently about others and their experiences. Therefore, in understanding the journey of race in the U.S. allows us to see the characters and their families from a different perspective in *Caucasia* and *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*.

Kerry Anne Rockquemore and Tracey Laszloffy in *Raising Biracial Children* offer more than a guidebook on raising biracial children, but rather a critique of our socially, polarizing world that forces racial categorizing, racial hierarchies, and racial injustices as natural. These authors work here to provide the best ways at maintaining a racial buffer against racism, prejudices, and stereotypes affecting interracial families and biracial children. Rockquemore and Laszloffy believe "Families are the places where children receive some of the most powerful and lasting messages about their own identities and the world around them" (Rockquemore & Laszloffy, 2005, 59). As the project itself has shown, the interracial families throughout both narratives lacked in providing either a racial dialogue about identity options and possibilities to

exist and/or how to racially see others and themselves in their environments. Yet, these authors stress that racial identities do not occur in a vacuum where the family is the only influence. Outside of family, both friends and peers are vital in forming healthy racial identities. Rockquemore and Laszloffy argue— “If peers and friends understand a child’s racial identity in one way and affirm it, the child is likely to embrace this view of self and build on it. Conversely, if peers and friends reject or criticize a child’s racial identity, the child is more likely to reject or modify this self-definition and strive to develop an identity that will garner greater social approval” (p. 102). Both Birdie and Rachel experience these peer group influences in the novels and do what is needed to be accepted by their peer groups. Of particular interest to this study is Rockquemore and Laszloffy’s COBI model of racial identity. The authors’ model describes five different racial identities, giving mixed-race people the option to locate themselves anywhere on the continuum.² Rockquemore and Laszloffy’s study provides a nuanced way of approaching racial attitudes of parents and helping to understand validation and acceptance of biracial children in today’s world. COBI serves as a key tool in providing racial identity options that can exist for biracial characters in literature.

My rationale for grouping these sociologists and their works together is to explain the proliferation and visibility of biracial identity when racial discourse historically and legally forced biracial individuals to exist only as black or white. With such resources readily available, interracial parents could gain a better grasp of their children’s experiences, provide better racial

² The COBI (Continuum of Biracial Identity) model describes five different identity that include from a left-to-right scale a 1)an exclusively black identity, 2)a blended identity with black emphasis, 3)blended biracial identity, 4)blending identity with white emphasis, and 5)an exclusively white identity. This identity model is helpful to explain how some biracial individuals may opt to choose either singular racial labels and blended ones. Looking to this model can be very helpful too in fictional representations of mixed-race characters in literature. Look to *Raising Biracial Children* pages 5-9.

understandings, and to foster healthy racial identity development. While this project links the social and lived realities of interracial families and biracial children to those of the representations of interracial families and biracial characters in fiction, I understand the issue is that talking about representation in a close reading of a text offers certain kinds of conclusions about identity that differ from studies that aim to talk about actual people as a whole.³ However, bridging this difficult gap between the two kinds of conclusions is worth the effort, especially if it means rereading and new representations. While the Multiracial Movement and CRMS are working hard to make biracial and multiracial individuals visible, heard, and important to our racial world at large, the fiction we encounter should be doing the same type of work with biracial characters in literature. In the essay, “Ideology of the Multiracial Movement: Dismantling the Color Line and Disguising White Supremacy,” Eileen T. Walsh reminds us:

...the story of mixed race is not new but contemporary experiences and representations of mixed race are. Part of the writing and theorizing of multiracialism, then, is a departure from previous depictions of mixture and an effort, in fact, to re-imagine (mixed) race identities for new generations. Multiracial identity is imagined in relation to history but in ways that attempt to move beyond that history and discard some of its limitations. This is a new political, social, and literary moment in which racial identity is capable of transforming. Though race is characterized by transformation in US history, the change offered by the twenty-first century marks the first major step since the civil rights movement in revolutionizing US race concepts (Walsh, 2000, 197).

³ From the early 1990s to 2000s, the multiracial movement had a major impact in personal memoir writing and picture/interview collection books that celebrated mixed-race: Lisa Jones, *Bulletproof Diva: Tales of Race, Sex, and Hair* (1994); Lisa Funderberg's, *Black, White, Other: Biracial Americans Talk About Race and Identity* (1994); Shirlee Taylor Haizlip's *The Sweeter the Juice* (1995); Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995); Gregory Howard Williams, *Life on the Color Line: The True Story of a White Boy Who Discovered He Was Black* (1996); James McBride, *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (1997); Toi Derrocotte, *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey* (1999); Pearl Fuyo Gaskins, *What Are You?: Voices of Mixed-Race Young People* (1999); and, Rebecca Walker's *Black, White, Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001). There is an extensive list that continues onward in the new millennium that highlights the different types of mixed-race life writing.

Contemporary visions of biracial identity push us out of tired representations and old modes of thinking about race and identity in the U.S. and move us forward to racial identities that are transforming the narratives of race that speak to the reality of being biracial and multiracial. Knowing these stories and experiences of biracial individuals is both necessary and timely in our current racial climate.⁴

As early as 1997 psychologist Beverly Daniel Tatum encourages both parents and educators to put the discourse of race center stage in not only in education but also in one's family in her groundbreaking work *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*. Tatum addresses throughout how important it is just to speak to one's children (or students), regardless of one's race or ethnicity, about race. Tatum stresses—"I do think that when you engage in open and honest dialogue, you start to recognize the other person's point of view, and that helps you see where your action might be needed most. So if people engage in dialogue with the understanding that dialogue is supposed to lead somewhere, it can be a very useful thing to do" (Tatum, 1997, 132). Dialogues about race lead us to cultivate empathy, to build relationships, and to change perspectives about the world around us. However, if parents and educators cannot speak about race in effective ways, then other options for this type of dialogue should exist in other mediums to spark meaningful conversations about race.

⁴ There are several guidebooks available that focus on adoption, parenting, and teaching mixed-race children that are important to look at here for the home and the classroom. For example, Francis Wardle's in *Tomorrow's Children: Meeting the Needs of Multiracial and Multiethnic Children at Home, in Early Childhood Programs, and at School* works at assisting both parents and teachers in positively supporting the healthy development of diverse biracial and biethnic children. Marguerite Wright continues in *I'm Chocolate, You're Vanilla: Raising Healthy Black and Biracial Children in a Race-Conscious World* the discussion of how raising black and biracial children can occur in healthy and positive ways. And others like Myra Alperson write about adoptive parents of multiracial and multicultural children in *Dim Sum, Bagels, and Grits: A Sourcebook for Multicultural Families*. Donna Jackson Nakazawa provides yet another guidebook *Does Anybody Else Look Like Me?: A Parent's Guide to Raising Multiracial Children* to help assist multiracial families with research and information about multiracial children--preschoolers through adolescence.

One place where conversations and experiences can also occur is through the world of books and literature. However, there is an on-going dilemma in the publishing world because there just are not enough books written for and about children and adolescents of color in the U.S. in which to validate their stories and experiences. In Bishop's article "Mirror, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," she speaks directly to the reasons why the publishing world should mirror more diverse experiences in books. As an African-American Children's Literature scholar, Bishop's study was due in part to the alarming findings in Nancy Larrick's 1965 article for *Saturday Review* titled, "The All-White World of Children's Books," which critiqued the racial inequalities and biases in children's literature. Larrick's review explains, "Across the country, 6,340,000 nonwhite children are learning to read and to understand the American way of life in books which either omit them entirely or scarcely mention them" (Larrick, 1965, 63). Larrick's legacy was dedicated to dismantling the racial stereotypes in American education, and she clearly knew the destructive impact this neglect and omission would have on both black and white children.⁵ Twenty-five years later, Bishop's research tells us that while books increased during that period for African-American children, there were even lower numbers or no corresponding books for other minorities (Latinos, Asians, Native Americans) that provided mirrors and/or windows in children's literature (Bishop, 1990, ix). Literature is one of the most common ways for individuals to learn about themselves and others when the world fails to provide us with answers we may struggle to find. Therefore, imagine the disconnect when individuals cannot find mirrors to their own experiences or windows into the lives of different kinds of experiences. In that regard, as a race of people, we all become impacted and affected by

⁵ In the article, Larrick writes, "Of the 5,206 children's trade books launched by the sixty-three publishers in the three-year period [1962-1964], only 349 include one or more Negroes—an average of 6.7 percent...Most of them [trade books] show a way of life that is far removed from that of the contemporary Negro and may be highly distasteful to him" (64).

such omissions. When books do not serve as mirrors to children and those images are distorted or negative, Bishop says, “They learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in society in which they are a part of” (p. ix). As I mentioned in the introduction, marginalized groups have been historically disenfranchised and disadvantaged simply because of who they are, and the continued disregard in literature (and other mediums) should compel us to demand more accurate representations.

There are organizations that are calling attention to the disregard in children’s books and literature. One of those organization is We Need Diverse Books (WNDB). WNDB is a non-profit and a grass-roots organization whose primary aim “is to help produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people” (Oh, 2014, “About WNDB”). WNDB’s vision rests on making sure every child can see themselves on the pages of a book. The organization’s website is full of resources and programs working to diversify and open up the eyes of the publishing world in very specific ways, through mentorships, grants, scholarships, internships, and classroom visits that can push diverse experiences into more books.⁶

Another organization is The Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC) at Wisconsin-Madison. According to this organization, the publishing world is slow to the call of making sure all children “can see themselves and the world in which they live reflected” (Horning, 2019, “CCBC”) The reality of not seeing oneself in books can possibly stir up anxieties and concerns about one’s value and worth in society. The CCBC knows the power and value it brings children and young adults to be identified in “authentic, reliable books by and about people of color” (“CCBC”). The website explains: We received approximately 3,653 books at the CCBC in 2018. Of those,

⁶ Please visit <https://diversebooks.org/> for more information about the programs, mission statement, and founders of the WNDB.

- 405: books had significant African or African American content
- 202: books were by Black authors and/or illustrators
- 55: books had American Indian/First Nations themes, topics, or characters
- 38: books were by American Indian/First Nations authors and/or illustrators
- 314: books had significant Asian/Pacific or Asian/Pacific American content
- 351: books were by authors and/or illustrators of Asian/Pacific heritage
- 249: books had significant Latino content
- 197: books were by Latino authors and/or illustrators (“CCBC”).

The statistics show a drastically low number of books created for children of color in 2018 and tells us that much work is left to be done to make children of color’s experiences more visible in books. *New York Times* columnist, Roxana Barillas, explains “In the United States, the traditional market for book buyers has been the top 10 percent of the socioeconomic strata. Which means most authors, characters and stories that are published reflect the lives of affluent white families” (Barillas, 2014, “5 Reasons Why...”).⁷ And these realities insist on perpetuating the notion that diversity in children’s stories is not necessary for the self-worth and confidence for minority readers. Barillas adds, “In the end, more diversity simply makes more sense: educators need better tools to reach students where they are; publishers need access to a new and valuable market; and children need a broad range of stories that truly reflect our multicultural world. Investing in diverse content is a strategy that creates the best narrative for all (“5 Reasons Why”). A narrative for all demands that we find more ways to be inclusive of all experiences and this is one opportunity to make that happen even more.

Amina Chaudhri and Julia L. Conner insist on more examinations in literature and fiction that speak to the varied experiences biracial and multiracial children and youth face in the U.S. In *Multiracial Identity in Children’s Literature: Reading Diversity in the Classroom*, Chaudhri

⁷ Roxana’s 5 tips include: 1) To become readers, kids need to see themselves in books. 2) These books are desperately needed. 3) White children need diverse stories, too. 4) Multicultural stories empower and inspire teachers. 5) Diverse books make good business sense.

explains, “The current corpus of easily-accessible fiction depicting multiracial experiences is limited in too many ways. There are too few books, too little variety in terms of racial diversity, and too few books that merit the literary recognition...” (Chaudhri, 2017, 136). Chaudhri argues that those in charge of children’s literature production need to reexamine and reimagine what books are chosen and why because it is extremely important for “today’s children [to] feel their lives are worth being in books” (p. 140). In *Seeking ‘Free Spaced Unbound’: Six “Mixed” Female Adolescents Transact with Literature Depicting Biracial Characters*, Conner adds “Thus, what is missing in the field is an examination of how biracial youth make their voices heard, express their beliefs, explore their world, and understand their position in the world through literacy” (Conner, 2004, 35). Through literacy, these children and young adults find a way to matter and to exist in the world. Without their experiences validated for them in some form, they can come to see themselves as devalued, inferior, or unworthy. More specifically, Conner’s work speaks exactly to biracial literature inclusion within school libraries and classrooms because biracial literature can do a number of things for biracial readers: self-validating for biracial individuals, supports biracial identities, articulates their lives as biracial individuals, and can discuss their experiences as biracial individuals. In turn, Conner calls for increased publications and availability in schools (pp. 139-140). Changes in the production and publishing world can make all the difference for classrooms and libraries to house literature that reflects all types of student experiences and cultures. While I bring attention to the lack of diversity inclusion in publishing and literature for children and youth of color and what’s at stake when children fail to see themselves represented in the books they read, I recall Bishop’s warning about what happens when children from dominant social groups fail to see the experiences of other students in books. Bishop expounds, “They need the books as windows

onto reality, not just on imaginary worlds. They need books that will help them understand the multicultural nature of the world they live in, and their place as a member of just one group, as well as their connections to all other humans” (Bishop, 1990, 1). Our society is full of different experiences, different cultures, and different people and the books we encounter should at least encourage and promote adequate representations of those differences.

My hope is that representation of biracial individuals and mixed-race families does not just stop on the pages of books and literature but that it can carry over into other spheres in our society. The TV Network ABC is leading the charge with its brand-new show *Mixed-ish* that showcases Rainbow, a black-white biracial teen, growing up in a mixed-race family in the 1980s and the dilemmas they face to adjust to suburbia without losing themselves. *Mixed-ish* is the first major syndication that speaks to the ways mixed individuals desire to be seen on screen. Furthermore, they are not minor characters and are the main focus of the plot. *Mixed-ish* is able to offer those mixed-race families a visual representation and a voice for their experiences.⁸ By airing on primetime television, *Mixed-ish* is evidence of how the U.S. really is and not being remembered for how it once was. With more ways to provide positive and empowering representations for biracial individuals, I do believe that there can be fewer possibilities of consuming mixed messages about biraciality in our society.

⁸ *Mixed-ish* aired its first show in September 2019. *Mixed-ish* is a spin-off the hit show *Black-ish* that airs on the ABC Network. Kenya Barris is the producer of *Black-ish* and co-producer of *Mixed-ish*. Kenya Barris is married to Dr. Raina “Rainbow” Barris. Rainbow Barris is the real biracial person in which the show itself is modeled on in *Mixed-ish* because Kenya Barris believed his wife’s story was one to be shared and seen on screen. Biracial actress, activist, and producer Tracee Ellis Ross plays the adult Rainbow Johnson in *Black-ish* and does the voice-over in *Mixed-ish*. The theme song “In the Mix” from the show *Mixed-ish* is also performed and sung by biracial popstar Mariah Carey. The show and its producers are making it a duty to offer mixed-race representation in many facets of the show’s production and crew. Please look to <https://abc.com/shows/mixed-ish>. For more information on the show and character bios.

While *Caucasia* and *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* only account for two different biracial experiences in this project, there are other stories and experiences that have yet to be told.⁹ Birdie Lee and Rachel Morse show us two ways to exist as biracial in the novels and what it means to choose an authentic identity for one's self without any limits and restrictions from others. Across the project, Danzy Senna and Heidi Durrow find a way to speak to each other as their protagonists share similar obstacles of navigating racial angst and frustrations from their peers, experience racial understanding and awareness in their social worlds, and develop a racial identity and literacy to understand themselves. The openendedness of the two novels is a strategic move used by both Senna and Durrow where they fail to put strict racial borders and limitations on their racial identities. As readers, we are unaware of how their futures will be written and how they continue to navigate the terrain of racial identity in the U.S. Nonetheless, they are equipped to go forth in their journeys and live life in their own ways. Although Larsen could not grant Helga Crane, the iconic classic mulatta, a life or a future fulfilled in *Quicksand*, she left the hope of her testimony, her experience, and her legacy in the hands of other biracial writers like Danzy Senna and Heidi Durrow. Both authors demonstrate how two biracial protagonists, Birdie and Rachel, find power in their agency to choose their experiences and futures that place them outside of tragedy.

In today's literature, not all biracial characters must deal with tragedy or trauma, but they do experience life in ways that are akin to just human suffering and pain that we all endure in

⁹ There are other contemporary biracial texts like Emily Raboteau's *The Professor's Daughter* that looks at the traumas of race, family, and identity with two black-white biracial siblings. This text was outside of the parameters of my project as I chose to focus on young adolescent girls instead of adult female biracial characters. Other texts that explore the adult female biracial experiences are *Symptomatic* and *New People* by Danzy Senna. In addition, the former, two-term US Poet Laureate, Natasha Trethewey, who is also biracial, is the author of five collections of poetry: *Monument* (2018), *Thrall* (2012), *Native Guard* (2006), *Bellocq's Ophelia* (2002), and *Domestic Work* (2000) that often examine the legacy, the history, and the experiences of mixed-raced families in the South as well as the legacy of race and slavery.

one way or another. One recently published YA literature text that speaks directly to today's biracial characters in literature is Natasha Díaz's debut novel *Color Me In*. Released in August 2019, *Color Me In*, brings attention to the ways the young protagonist, Neveah Levitz, both black and Jewish, navigates a new environment that pushes her outside of her privileged life as a white-presenting biracial teenager in New York City. At the height of Black Lives Matter Movement, this novel examines how issues like colorism, blackness/authenticity, and passing still have the audacity to show up in our present-day narratives. Communities of color are under attack in all facets of our American culture, but Díaz deems it a responsibility and a call to courage to force the dialogue about oppressive, white supremacist systems in her text geared towards young adults. Díaz's coming-of-age novel demands that Neveah makes hard choices and engages in difficult conversations in order to push the narrative that no longer silences black and brown voices and experiences, which ultimately includes her own voice and complicit behavior. It describes the nuances of "doing race" the right and wrong ways and the eventual consequences they carry. The novel highlights how Díaz's autobiographical protagonist, Neveah, develops into a well-cultured biracial girl that understands how her blackness and mixedness can impact the communities she enters. Díaz's *Color Me In* offers a fresh and invigoration spin on the traditional passing narratives of the past, but it does so much more because it definitely colors in the spaces where black and brown voices did not always fit in American literature.

Finding a place to fit in the literature one reads is at the very crux of this project and has allowed me to find a place to tell my own story of struggling to exist on the page. As I reflect on the process of writing this project and understanding my place in the field of academic literary studies, I realize that my story is an important one to tell. Choosing to become biracial was no

easy task for me growing up. Looking back, I felt bullied into simply being black. In 2003, when I found Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* in my college Introduction to African-American literature course, I had no idea that it would become the impetus for my life as a scholar and academic in the field of CMRS. I always imagined me being mixed was just something that had happened to me, but it was hard growing up mixed with nobody to validate your experiences and it made my experiences seem different and strange. I remember being ashamed and embarrassed to tell others I was mixed because it was not considered cool or popular for a number of reasons. Like the biracial protagonists in this project, I wanted to fit in and belong so badly to a group. I struggled to belong in white spaces because I had too many black cultural influences that were alien to them and I was often too proper and not black enough in black spaces. I was not part of any anti-blackness movement. I didn't want to fly into racial transcendence. I just wanted to be noticed. I wanted to fit into the world I had been placed into. I wanted to matter in a way that didn't make me out to be a spectacle to everybody—something that people wanted to dissect and study. In 2019, I am still searching out for mirrors to see others like me, to read experiences like mine, to connect with others, and to experience the freedom to be myself. I'll never stop looking out in the world to see myself because for so long I denied myself the experience to be my full biracial self. I enjoy attending academic conferences to engage with my scholarly work on mixed-raced/biracial identity and discussing biracial characters in literature with my students because it gives them a window into those types of experiences. All of our stories matter and give us the ability to experience the world in profound ways through connection, difference, and understanding. Without Nella Larsen, I would not be the person I have become today. From beyond the grave, the Harlem Renaissance great has left an indelible mark on my life as well as others with her courage to speak out about her experiences during a time when racial (and

sexual) freedoms were muffled and contained. Larsen should know that the future is now and we are here to make her legacy even stronger and more vibrant for the world to see. Literature has given me the tools I needed to be myself, a black-white biracial girl living in the South, that couldn't always make sense of the borders I could not cross or the identities I had to tiptoe in and out of for everybody else. Now, I have my voice and a place to speak about what it means to be a mixed girl like me. My stories will always be with me and I'll be ready to connect and build bridges with others across the U.S. who will listen. Being biracial in the U.S. is definitely an event in racial gymnastics, but I have learned how to stick my landing—just look at me now.

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Vita

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