

Imagining a Mestiza-Self Through the Double-Consciousness Trope

Regina Ponce M.A. M.S. (SFSU)

Summary:

This paper is a comparative study between two African-American novels: **Caucasia** by Danzy Senna (1998) and **Quicksand** by Nella Larsen (1928). It specifically discusses how their respective mixed-race protagonist re-appropriates the double-consciousness trope –a term originally coined by African-American scholar W. E. Du Bois to describe the existence of blacks in the United States. More specifically, I argue that Danzy Senna’s novel *Caucasia* transcends traditional notions of mixed-race identity found in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*. First, I establish that Helga, the mulatta protagonist of *Quicksand* is constructed to play the version of the double-consciousness which assumes that mixed people (black and white) in United States live with internalized racism. Next, I demonstrate that *Caucasia* challenges *Quicksand* by providing us with a mulatta protagonist who re-appropriates the notions of double-consciousness by making it instrumental to her own survival and birth-right to be mixed.

Keywords: mestiza, double-consciousness, African-American, female identity, Brazilian miscegenation .

Introduction

A brief background on the tragic mulatta African-American trope is appropriate. Historically, this Afro-American archetype is evident, particularly, in the literature of the nineteenth and early twenty centuries. Traditionally, and as a protagonist, the tragic mulatta encompasses society’s racial division and is “a person of mixed-race assumed to be sad, or even suicidal, because ...she does not completely fit in with either the white or black world” (The Tragic, 2009). Further on, rejected by blacks and whites alike, she internalizes racism against herself and struggles to find her own identity. Much of the creation for this stereotype relies on the African-American Scholar Du Bois, who coined the term double-consciousness to explain what it means to be black in America in his lifetime. In his renowned essay, “Of Our Spiritual Striving” (2004), first published in 1903, he explains the black man’s struggle in this way:

[...] 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 twoness,-- An American, a Negro; two souls; two thoughts; two unreconciled strivings [...]. (p.2)

The tragic mulatta archetype encapsulates the notion that a mixed-race female’s life is worse than that of blacks, for her double-consciousness is materialized in mind and body. She never finds acceptance by either race. She is the victim of society’s inability to accept racial ambiguity.

Doomed to tragedy

In *Quicksand*, the first novel reviewed here, Nella Larsen constructs her protagonist to conform every bit to the stereotype: she signifies upon the tragic mulatta by endowing her with a double-consciousness which equals to a split character.

We are introduced to protagonist Helga Crane by an omniscient narrator, who is our sole source of information about her. At first, she is revealed to us sitting in a beautifully designed room, elegantly surrounded by “a blue Chinese carpet,” while resting her feet on an “oriental silk...stool.”

Physically, she is said to be pretty, despite the narrator's assessment she has an air of "petulance," and a mouth with "a tiny dissatisfied droop" (LARSEN 1998, p.5). Her physical appearance, and setting, frame Helga as pretty and tasteful, but also unhappy and frail.

Helga teaches at Naxos, a highly regarded southern academy for black students. She is described as having worked very hard for her career, but suddenly wanting to give it up; the main reason is a speech just delivered by a white preacher at the black Ivy League institution. Helga reflects on his words that the place is the "finest school for Negroes...and...if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products there would be no race problem..." (p.7) Helga feels insulted. Soon, the speech prompts her to ponder about the staff, administrators and teachers of the school, which she concludes are all hypocrites. Next, her anguished thoughts turn towards her fiancé and his family; she reflects that as rich southerners, they look down on her, for not abiding to Naxos and for not having a last name, a pedigree. In anger and sadness she realizes that in the "Negro society," just as in the white, "if you couldn't prove your ancestry...you didn't belong". (p.12)

A few days later Helga leaves for Chicago, while ignoring her friend's plea that she "...can't go. Not in the middle of the term". (p.16) Without much savings -which the narrator stresses is the result of her expensive taste- Helga boards a train to Chicago, hoping a white uncle living in the city will help her.

It is still early in the novel but already Larsen's signifying upon the tragic mulatta trope starts to take shape: Helga's rush to leave her career without a safety net; her unreliable plans to get a job; her dissatisfied air; her deep-set melancholy; her profound sense of being rejected by the fiancée and his family, for her lack of a pedigree, all point out to the mulatta archetype and its "despised" self-image. (p.17)

As we continue the story, and Helga boards the train, we watch her deeply involved in her thoughts and, thus, are allowed a glimpse into her psyche. This episode becomes an effective narrative strategy used by the author to persuade us of the root of Helga's problems, while making her reflect the tragic mulatta stereotype: First, she remembers her mother, a "fair Scandinavian" girl brought to "poverty, sordidness" by marrying her black father. (p.22) Next, she recalls him leaving them. Her mother marries again, but Helga's recollection of the second marriage is filled with still more anguish such as rejection by the mother, hatred by the new stepfather and cruelty of her stepbrothers. In short, Helga's mulatta's psyche is unlocked for us in order to expose being damaged.

Once in Chicago, Helga heads up to her uncle's house. At his door, she panics but waits till a maid appears and informs her uncle is not in, but that his new wife will receive her. Unhappy by Helga's presence, the new bride acknowledges she has heard about Helga, but also remarks that Helga's mother was never married and, thus, she is not a real relative. She advises Helga not to return to their home by adding: "I'm sure an intelligent girl like yourself can understand..."(p.25) This event brings Helga more old memories, heightens her marginalized self, exposes her internalized racism. She acknowledges, simultaneously, she resents but also understands those rejecting her. Acting out her self-contempt, Helga faithfully portrays the vision of a tragic mulatta's inability to integrate her black and white selves.

By this point, Helga's tale has established her existence as plagued with an unstable emotional and an aimless life as a result of black and white rejection. The story continues to display Helga in multiple settings but always persecuted by the same tragic mulatta curse.

After a temporary job in Chicago, Helga heads up to N.Y., where she lives with Anne, a sophisticated, intellectual, upper class black woman. By the suggestion of her ex boss, she hides her white background as she is made to believe that, "Colored people won't understand it..." (p.35) Momentarily, Helga feels she "found herself" (p.37): her going to Harlem with sophisticated black friends; her new job; new clothes; night clubs, Anne's beautiful place, all made her feel she belongs.

But -as expected- little by little, her sense of stability is ruined by her supposed ill psyche. Soon, she feels a growing contempt for the places and people around her. She begins to find Harlem primitive, and her friends upper-class fakes who proclaim civil rights and black-is-beautiful while copying white people's life style. It is exactly during one of these emotionally painful episodes that Helga begins to fantasize about a life in Copenhagen, Denmark, where her mother's side of the family lives. Helga's mind turns Copenhagen into a land without prejudice, a place offering her inner peace, emotional stability, and material comfort. In other words, a country where she could finally be herself.

Without much fuss or planning, we are told, Helga leaves New York behind and a few days later arrives at Copenhagen to the wealth and warmth of aunt Katrina and uncle Herr Dahl. The Dahl's receive Helga with great enthusiasm and plan to introduce her right away to their socialite friends. Aunt Katrina had already plans on how to dress Helga for the occasion and generously, but insistently, offers to buy her wardrobe and jewelries. At the night of the reception, Helga makes a great impression entering the room - in a dress hardly covering her body, with jewelries resembling those on the necks of ancient primitives. Helga is admired by the crowd as a black sculpture: something to look at but not to touch.

After days of being paraded at dinners and parties, Helga begins to understand the role she is expected to play to belong to the Dahl's social group. For a while, she plays her part in exchange for a life of money and class. But, soon, the day comes when Helga is filled with scorn for her family's expectations she be their African "peacock", a noble savage, the black princess of the Copenhagen imagination. (58) Two years later, Helga is back in New York. Helga's experience in Europe becomes another instance in which society can't accept her racial complexity: she had left New York hoping to express her own mixed-race identity, but she is unable for the Europeans perceive her as a black primitive.

Larsen's narrative strategy to signify upon the tragic mulatta is clear; she denies Helga the ability to joyfully experience her mixed-race identity through a series of tragic endings, inability to overcome racial rejection, fragile psyche, and a life living in social limbo. Through Helga Crane, Larsen tells us that, a mulatta's psyche is the powerless hostage of society's outsider-gaze.

It is noteworthy the remarkable extension writers such as Larsen go to make their characters epitomize the tragic mulatta literary myth -constructed by the narrow vision which proclaims that to be mixed is to be mixed up. A close look at Helga's narrative reveals that the omniscient narrator is biased. For instance, Helga's turning her back on Naxos - an insulting academy for blacks - is judged as a rushed, immature decision rather than the brave act of a woman who seeks a life with dignity. Moreover, despite the acute awareness of the white and black races' shortcomings, the character is never allowed to restore her damaged self-image but, instead, keeps moving towards self-destruction.

The mestiza's consciousness as a third-sight

A century later, however, after the Civil Rights movement, we are introduced to a radically different novel about the life of a mixed-race female. This time the protagonist has a new voice, transformative experiences and the ability to transcend racial essentialism. Intrinsically distinctive from the others before her, she lives in the pages of *Caucasia* (1998) by Danzy Senna.

Racial conflict pervades Birdie's life, the mixed-race protagonist of the novel, who looks back at her life to tell us about her childhood. At seven years old, she watches the riots of 1975 Boston, where the people of her town live by the motto: "A fight, a fight, a nigga and a white..." (p.7) Birdie's home is pervaded with racism as well. At the beginning of the end of her parents' interracial marriage, she watches in dismay her mother, across the room, calling her black father a "pompous prick," while he shouts back she is a "fat white mammy". (p.1) Through it all, Birdie tries to survive sticking together with her sister Cole, who like her father is much darker than herself. Together, in

the safety of their room, Cole and Birdie speak “Elemenos”, a language they have created from a people they imagine, whose skin always shifts in multiple colors. (p.1) Soon, however, the comfort of their relationship is disrupted as their parents split and Birdie watches her beloved older sister spend much more time at her father’s than her mother’s home. Feeling her dark-skinned sister is her father’s favorite, Birdie chooses to stay back at home with her white mother.

From Birdie’s telling, however, even during the good times, free of divorce threats, there is plenty of challenges for her interracial family. The following passages encapsulate well Birdie’s feelings about race at home: She recalls a frequent scene when she would, anxiously, watch her mother nervously braiding Cole’s kinky hair. The episode would always end up with Cole looking dissatisfied at herself in a mirror, turning to Birdie and, after staring at her straight long hair, leaving the room in tears. Afterwards, invariably, Cole would tell Birdie their white mother was not fit to care for a black child. Days later, running chores outside the house, Birdie recalls her mom, sadly, staring at black children, next to their black mothers, with their pretty braided hair.

One can’t argue against the fact that Birdie is a victim of racism. Thus, in her signifying upon the tragic mulatta, Senna does accept the view that a mulatta’s life is shaped by racial division. Nonetheless, she does not allow it to shut off Birdie’s consciousness but, on the contrary, allows her to realize that black and white people often react blindly to race, as they follow a racial script imposed by society. For instance, Birdie is hurt by her black father’s preference for her darker sister. As she puts it, he shows “a cheerful disinterest for her”, while teaching Cole on issues of race as if she were his only black child. She reasons her Scholar father discriminates her lighter skin and, paradoxically, practices at home the color ideology he fights in the academia. (p.56) But she also explains her father’s action as the result of his tormented black soul: Boston of 1975, she argues, is a time where blacks and whites loath each other openly; a black man married to a white woman, if tolerated before, is now despised by his own social group. Sadly, she understands that Cole “was the proof that his blackness hadn’t been completely blanched”, by his Harvard education, marriage to a white woman, and cozy association to white intellectuals believing experts on the “The Negro Problem”. (p.55-56)

Birdie’s acute discerning abilities extend to how she perceives her white mother as well. The daughter of a blue-blood Boston family, Birdie explains her mother’s inner troubles, partly, from her consciousness that her heritage belongs to the oppressor’s side of the racial equation. Still young, her mother Sandy runs away from her grandmother, whom her mother claims to be “the last, thank God, of an evil line”. (p.25) Sandy is a white rebel, an activist who, contrary to her black husband, disdains intellectualism. But Birdie’s narrative implies that it is less at stake for Sandy to be outwardly emotional in her riots; her white-skin lineage has historically been perceived as the embodiment of civilization and intellectual superiority.

Birdie, soon, realizes that oppression is not the monopoly of white people either since the tendency of labeling individuals by where they fall within the color spectrum seems to be everywhere, including in her all black school. She recalls having to recite **black-is-beautiful** everyday in class, yet, black sometimes looks pretty ugly to her. For instance, at her first day at school, upon entering the new class room, a black student reacts to her lighter skin by saying: “Who’s that? I thought this was supposed to be an all black school”. (p.43) And as the days go by, Birdie moves around the school fearing to get smashed by black girls seeing her body as that of the enemy.

By this point in the novel, it becomes clear that Senna’s opposition to the tragic mulatta stereotype happens through the construction of Birdie’s consciousness. Birdie’s narrative develops with a subjectivity that refuses binary accounts of race, even during some of the most excruciating moments when her young life takes even worse turns.

Birdie’s staying at the black school is, suddenly, disrupted by her parents split and her father taking off with Cole to Brazil, while leaving her behind with the white mother. On top of these

events, her mother reveals she is being persecuted by the FBI for revolutionary activities and that they must escape. In the middle of the night, not making much sense out of her parents' choices, Birdie leaves New York with her mother, carrying just a few items and the memory of herself and her sister "...face-to-face, touching each other's hair and speaking in Elemenó". (p.54) Birdie is about to embark on a four-year clandestine journey.

To help disguise her mother's identity, her mother requires Birdie passes for Jesse, a white Jewish girl. But rather than perceiving herself just as her mother's victim, and reflecting the expanded consciousness of the new mulatta the author envisions, Birdie uses her trickster role to gain insight about the white world. She spends years in shoddy hotels till the day her mother finally decides to settle in the country of New Hampshire - a place she promises is filled with the integrity of the common people. Soon, however, Birdie learns that prejudice from white people is far from being directed only to blacks.

During one of her outings with the new made girlfriends, Birdie is asked whether she is really Jewish. She remembers having rehearsed with her mother to say she was not -totally- Jewish. Then she explains to the group that her father's side of the family is Jewish but her mother's is not. Relieved about her revelation, her girlfriend Mona turns to the girl's pack and says: "I told you guys she wasn't really Jewish". (p.247) The episode teaches Birdie that even trailer girls, from poor farms, feel superior to Jewish ones. Prejudice, she reflects, runs deeply among whites as well.

During times of unbearable loneliness - when Birdie feels she can no longer fake her identity - Birdie remembers playing a game with herself: to pretend her underground life is just a field trip to prepare a report for her black school about: "What White People Say When They Think They're Alone". (p.189) Certainly, her journey as a mixed-race girl passing for Jewish, in America's countryside, offers a wealth of data.

But the time comes when Birdie, still hardly a teenager, refuses to continue her clandestine life in the country town, which she realizes is far from her mother's vision of a blue-collar paradise. As it happened in New York years ago, Birdie leaves the town in the middle of the night with just a few items. Now, however, she is in charge of her decision and determined to find the whereabouts of her father and sister.

By now it becomes clear that Birdie's passing for a white Jewish girl has solidified, not effaced, her mixed-race identity. Her role as a human trickster affords her insights into the white and black worlds and, later on, leads her to conclude they are both less than sensible.

Some readers may also be astonished by the lack of climax during Birdie's encounter with her father. His answer to her question of "What possible excuse" (p.385) he would have for not trying to find her, turns out to be disappointing: he had been committed to writing another book about race, which this time, he believes, would be a breakthrough. He could not have afforded time off. Shocked and in tears, Birdie proceeds to reveal that she has been passing for a white girl. But instead of sympathizing with her suffering, her father dismisses her experience and reacts by intellectualizing it and saying: "But baby, there's no such thing as passing. We're all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion...". (p.393) In disbelief at his inability to understand her pain, Birdie reacts violently. Filled with anguish, she tells him to go "Fuck" his theories (p.391); challenging his new color blind approach, she reminds him that if race did not exist, he wouldn't have chosen to take her darker sister to Brazil, while leaving her behind with her white mother.

Birdie can't be fooled and, despite her young age, is acutely aware that her father's rationalization falls short even to explain his own racial experience. She recalls, for instance, a day in her childhood when they spend a rare moment at a park by themselves. As she plays, and he snoozes on the grass, cops suddenly wake him up with the words, "All right, brotherman, Who's the little girl?". (p.55) One of them takes Birdie to the side and whispers to her, "You can tell us kiddy. He can't hurt you here. You are safe now. Did the man touch you funny?". (p.55-56) Eventually,

the police leaves them alone, but the episode stays with her.

Finally, Birdie is ready for the most joyful part of her trip: to meet her older sister Cole, once her main window to the world. Cole is studying in a Café at Berkeley. Once she approaches the place she promptly recognizes Cole's "high forehead," like the white mother, and her "deep-set eyes," like the grandmother (p.401).

As Cole and Birdie embrace each other, we are instilled with the possibility that, perhaps, biracial voices may be able to debunk much of our old notions about race.

References

1. DU BOIS, W.E..B. "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." *The Souls of Black Folk*. London: Paradigm Publishers. 2004. 1-7.
2. LARSEN, Nella. "Quicksand." *Quicksand and Passing*. VA: Wilder Publications, 2010. 1-106
3. SENNA, Danzy. *Caucasia*. N.Y.: Riverhead Books. 1984.
4. "The Tragic Mulatta in "Cane" and "Quicksand". Bukisa March 10th 2009. http://www.bukisa.com/articles/42867_the-tragic-mulatta-in-cane-and-quicksand. Accessed in 06/12/11.

Regina Ponce M.A. M.S.
San Francisco State University
reglatam@yahoo.com