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(In)Visible Boxes: Racialized Intersubjectivity and Transracial Mothering in Senna's *Caucasia*

Danzy Senna explores the challenges of racialized intersubjectivity in transracial mothering in her 1998 novel Caucasia. *Transracial mothering pertains to mothers who possess a different racial identity from that of their children, most often in mixed-race families. The literature on mixed-race identity and experience is notably limited, particularly concerning motherhood in mixed-race settings. This article addresses this gap and explores racialized intersubjectivity in mother-daughter relationships by analyzing motherhood in Danzy Senna's novel Caucasia. Racialized intersubjectivity describes how racial differences affect the interchange of thoughts and feelings, both conscious and unconscious, that provide a shared perception of reality between two or more persons. This paper builds upon the literature regarding the effect of race on maternal competence by looking further into racial dynamics in mixed-race families. A careful analysis of the text demonstrates how racial differences between mothers and daughters inherently impact their intersubjectivity, thus complicating their reality.*

What does it mean to mother across races? This is the central question Danzy Senna asks with her novel *Caucasia*, where she explores the challenges of racialized intersubjectivity in transracial mothering. Transracial mothering pertains to mixed-race families in which the mother has a different racial identity from that of her children (Twine 738). In the case of *Caucasia*, the mother is white, and her daughter is mixed-race, leading the mother to mother in a transracial setting. *Caucasia*, a national bestseller published in 1998, explores themes of identity, family, and racial embodiment. In this story, Birdie and Cole are the daughters of a black father and a white mother, intellectuals and activists in the civil rights movement in 1970s Boston. One day, Cole, the darker-skinned daughter, and their Black father abandon the family to find racial paradise abroad, leaving Birdie, the lighter-skinned

daughter, with their white mother, Sandy. Believing that the FBI is after them, Sandy goes on the run with Birdie, asking her daughter to pass as white and create whole new identities that go against what Birdie has believed all her life. Birdie is thrown into a life on the run, pretending to be a white girl named Jesse Goldman.

Figure 1. Portrait of the Manuel Family

As a brown daughter of a white mother, motherhood in mixed-race families is a personal topic for me. Figure 1 shows a portrait of my family that was taken when I was roughly five or six years old. On one side of my family tree, I am the daughter of a Filipino immigrant father whose family came to the United States (US) in the 1970s to escape political persecution. I am also the daughter of a white woman whose family roots have been traced back to the landing of the Mayflower in America. I am caught in a dichotomy of being both the settlers and the displaced, being both but never only one. This is a struggle, both internal and external, as my racialized body contends with society's normative views about what a family should look like. In this, my body itself becomes a site of contradiction, an abomination to the US racial caste system that delineates between white and nonwhite. In times of struggle and worry, daughters often look to their mothers for advice. When I look at my mother, I see a fantastic, loving woman whom I have been blessed to be a part of my life, a woman who has fought to create space for me and my sibling to exist in a

binary world that does not like in-betweens. However, our mother-daughter dynamic is not as simple as those of others. There came a point when I realized that my mother and I would live fundamentally different lives in the US simply because I am a woman of colour, and she is not. My struggles are not easily relatable to her, and vice versa. At times, this division between us has felt insurmountable. Thus, this research is born of my desire to understand the mixed-race experience and how race affects the reproduction of femininity between white mothers and nonwhite daughters.

There is a deliberate thought process behind using the term "nonwhite daughters" instead of "daughters of colour." Although white and nonwhite centre whiteness, I intentionally choose to use these terms because I argue whiteness to be the main barrier between parents and children in mixed-race family contexts that have a white and a nonwhite parent. Whiteness facilitates a different dynamic between family members than mixed-race families of two minority parents. I also argue that using the term "white mothers/nonwhite daughters" emphasizes the inherent divide between them; it emphasizes what the mother is and what the daughter is not. The theory this research utilizes, specifically from Kristin Zeiler, describes a passivity imposed upon beings experiencing excorporation and bodily alienation. The term "white mothers/nonwhite daughters" implies such passivity.

This article explores the racialized intersubjectivity in mother-daughter relationships through Senna's novel. Racialized intersubjectivity describes how racial differences affect the interchange of thoughts and feelings, both conscious and unconscious, that provides a shared perception of reality between two or more persons. In this case, the subjects are a white mother and a biracial daughter, and the shared perception of reality is the understanding of womanhood in the US.

Three main research questions guide the inquiry:

- How do the racial differences between whiteness and Blackness influence the intersubjectivity of Sandy and Birdie's mother-daughter relationship?
- How does Sandy mother Birdie?
- How does her method of mothering impact Birdie's understanding of her identity and place in society?

Through a careful analysis of Senna's *Caucasia*, this paper demonstrates how racial differences between mothers and daughters inherently impact their intersubjectivity, thus complicating the reality communicated between them.

The Body: Its Prescriptions and Subjectivities

Birdie's narrative begins and ends with her body, making it a core theme in the novel. *Caucasia* portrays the dichotomy of being invisible yet hypervisible and the forces of power determining which side the pendulum swings (Leverette 113). Birdie Lee, the novel's biracial protagonist, is stuck in a society that demands her to choose between her whiteness and blackness, yet both come at the cost of the other. How do our bodies shape our identities? Dominant culture tends to decide this for us, utilizing bodies as points of reference in the social hierarchy and giving meaning to them (Leverette 111). Leverett describes these socially prescribed meanings as "body fictions," which are "capable of colonizing the mind and spirit, subjecting the individual to psychological and social torment and even destruction" (123). In the novel, Birdie's identity becomes reduced solely to the racial definitions of her body; it becomes impossible to map out her identity without rooting it in her corporeality (Boudreau 60; Dagbovie 94). Her body becomes a site of conflict, used as a stage to portray the tenuousness between whiteness and Blackness (Boudreau 60). In *Caucasia*, it quickly becomes apparent that Birdie is not the sole person with the agency over her identity. Not only are people constantly telling her what she is and is not regarding her race, but her body also contends with the racial caste system embedded in American society; people like her are not supposed to exist. Many times, Birdie questions the legitimacy of her claims to Blackness; there even comes a point when her mother does not see her as Black like her sister Cole. Birdie's prescribed "body fictions" are reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's sense of his body under a colonized condition, as they both refer to the erasure of themselves by others (Dagbovie 101; Leverette 123). The conflict between her identity and her racialized body inherently affects her relationality with her mother, particularly when her mother insists that Birdie pass as white.

In this situation, Sandy compels her daughter to be racialized in a specific way through forces of interpellation because she holds authority over Birdie as her mother (Leverette 117). Yet Birdie's racial passing has a devastating effect on her self-identity. It imposes several limitations on her personhood (Boudreau 67; Dagbovie 104).

Although the mixed-race experience is not a new phenomenon, studies regarding it have been few and far between. Within the already sparse literature, there is even less research on motherhood in mixed-race families. The majority of the literature regarding *Caucasia* focuses on the themes of racialized embodiment and erasure. However, these studies do not include the mother's impact on such processes. Outside of *Caucasia*, literature regarding mixed-race experiences of motherhood demonstrates how race complicates maternal competence for white mothers of nonwhite children (Twine 730).

However, race affects mothering beyond maternal competence, fundamentally influencing mother-daughter intersubjectivities. This research contributes to this gap in the literature by studying how racialized intersubjectivity impacts the dynamics between mothers and daughters. By focusing on the representation of motherhood in Senna's novel *Caucasia* as a case study, this research seeks to better understand a mother's role in the racial fragmentation and bodily alienation of her mixed-race daughter due to their differing subjectivities.

To analyze the text, this research utilizes a three-pronged theoretical approach drawing upon the works of Kristin Zeiler and Gail Lewis and existing scholarship in feminist and motherhood studies. First, Zeiler's theory of excorporation and bodily alienation provides a useful lens to understand race and the body. In her theory, she builds upon Frantz Fanon's understanding of racialized embodiment to better understand how the systems of oppression and erasure impact and fragment the body (70). According to Zeiler, excorporation implies "an unwanted disruption of one's body—world relations where certain beliefs and norms about the subject's bodily existence that they have previously incorporated now stand forth as hindrances to their being in the world" (78). In this, an integrated aspect of one's lived body becomes a thematic object of others' attention (Zeiler 75). Fanon's experiences of excorporation were due to his skin colour; he was forced to attend to his own body because of racism. Likewise, for many people of colour in a white supremacist society, the colour of their skin acts as a hindrance to their existence in that world. Bodily alienation is the result of continuous excorporation over time (Zeiler 79). As Zeiler asserts, "If the subject continuously lives the disruptive movement that breaks the lived body apart, it means that they cannot but attend continuously to their body as an object" (80). This implies a deep loss of agency where "the self can come to experience and even identify with a passivity imposed on them by others" (Zeiler 80). One can characterize this as being outside of oneself, as being a passive passenger in one's body rather than an active driver.

Second, this research relies upon Lewis's understanding of transracial mother-daughter subjectivities. Lewis uses her own experiences of being mixed-race to discuss the "continuous birthing of racial differences and the ruptures that skin can cause between mother and daughter" (7). She describes a "profound psychic uncertainty" (2) that mixed-race children can feel with their white mothers, demonstrating how mixed-race children gain an early understanding of how race affects their subjectivities and how that complicates their shared intersubjectivity with their mother. Lewis acknowledges the power of society's construction of race over her relationship with her mother, asserting they "danced sameness and difference all the time, navigating the external and internal landscapes of racial difference" (19).

Lastly, this research pulls from the existing literature in Feminist and Motherhood Studies regarding mother-daughter relationships, the body, and imposed limitations on the feminine. This article particularly relies upon the scholarship of Susan Bordo when she describes the body as more than just a physical entity, but also a being "suffused with subjectivity" (74); how Luce Irigaray emphasizes how the rejection and exclusion of a "female imaginary certainly put women in the position of experiencing herself only fragmentarily, in the little-structured margins of a dominant ideology, as waste, or excess" (30); and of how Adrienne Rich asserts that "under patriarchy, female possibility has been literally massacred on the site of motherhood" (13).

Rich's concept of "courageous mothering" proves integral to this theoretical framework, positing that the most important thing a mother can do for her daughter is to illuminate and expand her sense of actual possibilities (165). This means that the mother herself works to expand the limits of her life. However, for the analysis of *Caucasia*, this research utilizes the flipside of this concept instead. If courageous mothering is expanding personhood and the sense of possibilities for the daughter, then its antithesis must be the further imposition of limits. As described by Zeiler, excorporation and body alienation constitute the limitation and fragmentation of the body. What is Sandy's role in this process as Birdie's mother? Thus, instead of looking at how Sandy is a courageous mother who expands Birdie's sense of possibility, this research analyzes how Sandy aids in fragmenting Birdie's subjectivity due to their differing racial identities and experiences.

The Consuming Nature of Race

In *Caucasia*, racial differences play a significant role in Sandy and Birdie's mother-daughter dynamic. Even before Sandy pressures Birdie to pass as white, there is a disconnect in their relationship. Racial differences lead to instances of maternal incompetence for Sandy; she does not understand how to care for her Black children. This incompetence becomes especially apparent when Cole, Birdie's sister, says, "Mum doesn't know anything about raising a black child. She just doesn't" (57) after Sandy fails miserably at braiding her hair. Similar to Lewis, so much of Sandy and Birdie's relationship is "choreographed through the social and familial and psychic meanings accorded to the differences in our skin" (6). Thus, racial differences have always made their relationship distinct from other mother-daughter dynamics in monoracial families.

This strained dynamic is exacerbated when Sandy insists that Birdie passes as white. In the novel, it is implied that Sandy joined a radical leftist group engaging in some type of illegal activity. Sandy becomes increasingly paranoid that she will be caught and arrested by the FBI, and this paranoia is what

eventually leads her to go into hiding with Birdie. According to Sandy, the only way they will be able to convincingly change their identities is for Birdie to pass as white. Although Sandy technically "asks" Birdie to pass, one cannot wholly understand the situation without understanding the dynamics of power between Sandy and Birdie. As Birdie's mother, Sandy inherently holds power over her daughter. Birdie is still a young girl at the time, very much in the stage of her life when "mother knows best." Therefore, no decision can be made equally between Birdie and Sandy in this situation, particularly when Sandy frames the racial passing as necessary for their physical safety. There is also no reason for Birdie to think Sandy was ashamed of her Blackness throughout her childhood, nor any indication that Sandy will expect her to pass as white forever. In her eyes, her mother is an innocent woman caught in a bad situation. How could Birdie have said no? There is a sense of a mother's manipulation of her daughter's body, exploiting her daughter's identity for her gain.

Sandy's insistence for Birdie to pass as white for their safety centres on Birdie's racialized body as the basis of their relationship. Birdie sees how "The two bodies that had made her stand out in the crowd—made her more than just another white woman—were gone; now there were just the two of us. My body was the key to our going incognito" (142). This causes Birdie to have an increasingly difficult time separating her race and body from her relationship with her mother, which has a significant impact on her sense of self. At one point in the novel, Sandy acts as if Birdie has been white all her life. Birdie recognizes this: "My mother did that sometimes, spoke of Cole as if she had been her only black child. It was as if my mother believed that Cole and I were so different. As if she believed I was white, believed I was Jesse" (306). This erasure is also evident in a later passage when Birdie ponders her racial heritage: "As I said it, I wondered for the first time if the same was true with blackness. *Did you have to have a black mother to be really black?* There had been no black women involved in my conception. Cole's either. Maybe that made us frauds" (my emphasis, 319). These passages highlight the "vanishing" Birdie describes, the sense of never being fully whole. They also portray the extreme "psychic uncertainty," which Lewis characterizes as part of the mixed-race experience.

Although done out of concern for her and her daughter's safety, Sandy negatively affects Birdie's identity by insisting she passes as white. A central aspect of Sandy's mothering in the novel is her insistence on Birdie assuming a white identity. This ultimately leads to the fragmentation of Birdie's subjectivity and personhood. Once she assumes a new white identity, Birdie experiences excorporation regarding her race, turning into bodily alienation after years of reinforcement. Birdie describes this inner fragmentation several times, recounting events as if she were outside of herself: "*Now I felt myself*

floating, looking down at us, the three of us, almost identical in our blue jeans, polo shirts, scuffed flats, our feathered hair falling around our faces. I saw myself as I sat there kicking the dirt, trying to disappear under my overgrown bangs" (my emphasis, 275). She continues to narrate her experiences of bodily alienation in her interactions with others: "*Instead, I felt outside of myself, as if I hovered over the scene, staring down at these two bodies as their tongues darted toward, then away from, each other. I watched myself*—this stranger with the brown feathered hair, the thick meeting eyebrows, the one who no longer wore a Star of David—*and thought how impressively she kissed*" (my emphasis, 314).

These passages demonstrate how others' conflicting perceptions of Birdie's body shattered her sense of self; she no longer held agency over her identity and body but allowed others to impose their perceptions of her. Birdie's racialized excorporation translated into a sense of incompleteness for her as she saw herself as "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" (149). Sandy's role in Birdie's incompleteness becomes starkly apparent towards the novel's end when Birdie contemplates how she should behave in a tenuous situation: "A voice entered my head, a voice of doubt, and I cursed it, knowing it was my mother. *Do you trust Dot with your secrets? Is she above the law, below the law, willing to go against the law and bring you into her home? Because you are against the law, Birdie Lee. Your body is a federal offence. Do you trust her with your secrets?*" (337). The limitations Sandy enforced on Birdie for years have become ingrained into Birdie's consciousness, impacting how she sees and navigates the world around her. This excerpt demonstrates Birdie's internal fear and insecurity that affects her relationships with others. The limits ingrained in Birdie's consciousness cause her to even doubt her relationship with other family members. Dot is her paternal aunt who has always cared for her, yet she remains uncertain whether to trust her or not. Sandy's form of mothering was simultaneously detrimental to her relationship with Birdie, Birdie's relationship with family and friends, and Birdie's relationship with herself, causing lasting damage to her daughter's personhood.

Conclusion

Caucasia demonstrates how racial differences between mothers and daughters inherently impact their intersubjectivity which, in turn, impacts the reality being communicated between them. The racialized intersubjectivity results in a disconnect between Sandy and Birdie as the reality the mother communicates does not match the daughter's lived experience as a biracial Black woman. Sandy's insistence on her daughter's racial passing implies a lack of understanding regarding the centrality of race in Birdie's identity and worldview.

She never knew the agony Birdie felt being both Black and white in a Black or white society because Sandy herself never experienced life from the blurry, grey area of society that Birdie inhabits. Simply, Sandy did not understand Birdie because she never had to live a day in her daughter's shoes. Therefore, Sandy communicated the only reality she knew through her actions—that of a white woman in the US. It becomes evident how Sandy's mothering acts as the opposite of Rich's "courageous mothering"; Sandy's willful ignorance of how race affects their reality works to further fragment Birdie's personhood. Her mothering eventually leads to the estrangement of their relationship as Birdie runs away from her at the end of the novel.

Senna's novel portrays the complexities of the mixed-race experience, for daughters and mothers. She challenges the myth of natural maternal instinct by showing how race impacts not only maternal competence but also mother-daughter intersubjectivities. Although *Caucasia* demonstrates what happens when racial dynamics are ignored, the novel still invites readers to imagine the inverse. What would affirmative, courageous mothering look like in Sandy and Birdie's situation? How can white mothers navigate the landscapes of internal and external racism to better understand and support their nonwhite daughters? Perhaps, building an imaginary for mixed-race children of white mothers is the first step in creating a world where racialized intersubjectivity enriches relationships rather than divides them.

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