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Indefinite Ethnicity in Fact and Fiction: “Invisible Color” or “Honkified Meanderings”?

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of English  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts in English

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by  
Anita L. Hughes  
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## ABSTRACT

Indefinite Ethnicity in Fact and Fiction: “Invisible Color” or “Honkified Meanderings”?

by

Anita L. Hughes

Passing, both standard and reverse, is the process of changing ethnicity. The methodology of reverse passing varies, but claiming “no color” is ineffective in fact and fiction as can be seen in James McBride’s *The Color of Water*, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip’s *The Sweeter the Juice*, Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*, and Rosellen Brown’s *Half a Heart*. The characters in these texts attempt indefinite ethnicity by denying color and are prone to restlessness and failure until they accept racial duality.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: “MAKE MULATTOS, NOT WAR”

Novelist Danzy Senna’s protest slogan sets the stage for the new mixed-race census category in an era that is ever-evolving. Whether denoted as “reracing” (Newlyn 1048), “racial cross-dressing,” or “ethnic transvestism” (Delton 311), reverse passing has come of age in American literature. In direct contrast to the standard passing novel where a light-skinned yet “legally designated” black individual opts to be white, reverse passing occurs when a person “legally recognized as white effectively functions as a non-white person in any quarter of the social arena” (Harper 382). Reverse passing is also generically defined as when someone from an “empowered” culture chooses to join a minority race, a process wherein the individual “tr[ies] on’ identities of racialized Others” (Newlyn 1046). It is a selective process at best. Passing literature traditionally does not expand beyond the color line to include gender preference, and it only occasionally addresses religious issues. Without elaboration, the definitions at hand leave the field wide open for interpretation.

Some critics assert that there is no such thing as reverse passing; those in the minority do not think of themselves as a minority -- it is all just passing, no matter who is doing what. Another point of contention is the definition of race itself. Race is not just color; race is not just membership in a group. Some physical attributes such as hair texture, facial features, and skin tone are genetic, but race is also socially constructed, “maintained by laws and economic structures rather than biology” (Delton 314). Because color and race are “exquisitely arbitrary” (Haizlip, *Sweeter* 34), is it truly reverse passing if the conversion is from a less than one hundred percent pure Empowered background to a less than one hundred percent pure Other culture? Both are valid arguments. If, however, one considers the circumstances dictating reverse passing, the immediate immersion into nuances of the adopted culture, and the rescission rate back to the

empowered culture, reverse passing does exist and is an entirely separate issue with an entirely different purpose.

Phillip Brian Harper and Andrea K. Newlyn have independently identified three categories of reverse passing: 1) transracial movement, 2) classic reverse passing, and 3) indefinite ethnicity. Danzy Senna's ethnic labeling in *Caucasia* and Rosellen Brown's interpretation of color in *Half a Heart* invite an analysis of this latter category and challenges the reader to consider that any claim to be of no color is a fallacious argument. Claiming indefinite ethnicity negates its very own purpose. The individuals do not want to be of no color; they simply seek confirmation of racial identity. Danzy Senna's "honkified meanderings" (*Caucasia* 189) provide the means. By comparing these novels with two personal memoirs, James McBride's *The Color of Water* and Shirlee Taylor Haizlip's *The Sweeter the Juice*, one can also consider whether fictional indefinite ethnicity supports the nonfictional experience of racial confirmation. Passing literature predominantly addresses the black/white demarcation, but three of the referenced works also involve a third factor, Judaism, which further complicates the identification of race and color. Harrison-Kahan challenges this demarcation: "Occupying more than one position at once, Jewishness simultaneously signifies whiteness and racial otherness; furthermore, the confusion over whether the label "Jewish" refers to race, ethnicity, religion, or culture is emblematic of its complex meanings across categories of identity" (19-3). Without clear-cut phenotypic identifiers, "labels" are the most accessible means of separation from the Other.

Chosen from a limited field of primary sources, the texts are a representative sampling of literary depictions of children and adults attesting to "no color." *The Color of Water* is James McBride's recollection of his mother's life. Ostracized from her Jewish parents for her marriage to a black man, she compensates for their rejection by raising her twelve children with the belief that since "God is the color of water" (51), they, too, were devoid of color. Shirlee Haizlip's *The Sweeter the Juice* is a formulaic account of what it means to be white or black or both or neither.

Her account of the search for her mother's sister is reminiscent of a detective story in its sometimes overwhelming procedural detail, yet the text is significant for its emphasis on alienation and dual loyalty. An on-line piece by Danzy Senna supports her inclusion. Entitled "Mulatto Millennium: Since When Did Being the Daughter of a WASP and a Black-Mexican Become Cool?" the article reveals that although her works are fiction, her heritage is of pivotal influence. *Caucasia* is rife with deception, disappearance, mixed marriage, and "invisible color" (Senna 321). *Half a Heart* provides an interesting counterpoint to *Caucasia's* identity crisis. Brown's novel has two narrative voices: a rich-white-Jewish mother coming to terms with a daughter from an interracial college tryst versus the black-pride-raised daughter trying to reconcile her whiteness.

The referenced works emphasize invisibility and camouflage. Invisibility is not the same as being without color. McBride's colorless water is transparent, but one can see it. Culturally, one associates transparency with purity and openness. Conversely, invisibility represents stealth or lack of consequence. Even with the optimistic presumption that prejudice could become a thing of the past, no matter how color-blind, how globally correct, one pretends to be, it is not possible to be of "no color." Few individuals are one hundred percent anything, but all must lay claim to something, be it black, white, gray, or as McBride's brother believed, as green as the Incredible Hulk (McBride 52). In the end, transparency and invisibility are only assumed attitudes. They do not make a difference. If reverse passing is one individual's solution to a personal dilemma, one's own quest for comprehension and resolution, the very fact someone declares he or she is of no color confirms the opposite. No person stands alone. Generations of miscegenation demand recognition. Denying one's color is denying one's existence. An individual who pretends to be of no color internalizes a cloak of invisibility. Whether daughter or mother, the women presented in these works collectively participate in "honkified meanderings" through the course of their lives in search of confirmation of racial identity. They are invisible only to themselves.

## CHAPTER 2

### STANDARD VS. REVERSE PASSING: HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT

Anything different from the familiar contributes to an atmosphere of fear. Be it race, religion, or national origin, individuals tend to identify most easily within the ethnocentric comfort zone of their immediate lives. All things foreign are thus automatically suspect, and this suspicion breeds prejudice. The color of one's skin is easy to label if the color is recognizable. The problem arises if the subject skin is the same color as one's own. With the advent of mixed-race generations, how can one justify hatred if there is an inability to pinpoint race on the basis of supposed racial indicators such as facial features, speech, or skin color? F. James Davis places the origin of racial invisibility in a historical context, wherein

[c]enturies of miscegenation had produced large numbers of mixed persons who appear white and who could pass when they wanted to, either permanently or for temporary convenience. And a great many Southern whites became extremely anxious - perhaps paranoid is not too strong a term - about the specter of "invisible blackness." (qtd. in Watson 110)

One has to have a distinct color in order to be the recipient of bias. The "invisible blackness" became a source of frustration and anxiety for generations of white folk, unintentionally encouraging the trend to "pass" in both life and literature.

It is not a new concept, but the requisite secrecy keeps the process underground. Haizlip approaches the silence with a bit of sarcastic dark humor:

Hundreds of thousands of blacks passed for white, starting in the days of slavery and continuing into the present. Because of the secret nature of the transaction, no records were kept of the exact numbers who created new places for themselves in American society. Population experts tell us that large numbers of black people are "missing." I doubt they were abducted by aliens. (*Passing* 48)

Science fiction plots aside, from sources as early as Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to a currently requisite multicultural reading list staple, Nella Larsen's *Passing*, literary references to passing reflect the ebb and flow of race relations in the United States. Induced by both fascination and fear throughout history, plantation owners bought, sold, and treated slaves in the 1800s with callous disregard for their families or feelings. The subsequent Jim Crow laws spawned no better treatment. White society flocked to Harlem Renaissance clubs in the 1930s, scorned the civil rights violence of the 1960s, and embraced genealogy with the publication of Alex Haley's *Roots* in 1976. An oft-overlooked detail is that African-Americans were not the only ones desiring to "move from the margin to the center of American Identity" (Mullen 77). As the country developed, numerous generations of immigrants struggled to live The American Dream, often abandoning in full their homeland culture and Old World mentality. Fortifying the duplicitous nature attributed to passing, and unfortunately heightening black/white tension, when European immigrants "shed language, culture, and tradition in order to become, or allow their offspring to become, true (white) Americans," it is seen favorably as an "exemplary instance of culture assimilation" (Mullen 77). It is a frustrating testament to White America, at best. If one is a light-complexioned black, one passes. If one is European, one assimilates.

Reverse passing is equally frustrating. How inconceivable is it to imagine someone wanting to toss away a "safe" identity to join ranks with the Other? "Why would anyone want to?" is the generic response. Reverse passing is not exclusively white to black. Sinclair Lewis's *Kingsblood Royal* is perhaps the best known of the genre, but numerous illustrations of crossing ethnic boundaries "backwards" can be found in such diverse books as Mark Twain's *Pudd'n'head Wilson* (white and black babies switched at birth), Mezz Mezzrow's *Really the Blues* (white, Jewish jazzman to black), Laura Hobson's *Gentleman's Agreement* (gentile reporter to Jew), John Griffin's *Black Like Me* (disguised white reporter to black), and Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* (white man to Indian). For all of these books, the hegemonic culture is white, but the

definition of the minority “race” is up for interpretation via stereotype, religion, nationality, and itinerary.

Newlyn introduces the first category of reverse passing, transracial movement, as a process that involves a character’s voluntary sacrifice of an empowered position via movement between any of the races:

Unlike passing texts, . . . transracial narratives depict a character’s full assumption of a given racial identity, regardless of whether or not that identity represents the character’s “real” racial classification. Characters in transracial narratives thus spend large portions of their lives (from childhood to adulthood, for example) living *as* white when they “are” black, or *as* black when they “are” white.

Typically these characters are unaware of their real racial identity until they are reraced (that is, made aware of their real racial background). (1048)

*Kingsblood Royal* and *Puddn’head Wilson* are prime examples of transracial movement, but using this definition, there is little distinction between standard and reverse passing. With reracing, the origin source color is often interchangeable and illusory. Neil Kingsblood is visually white but “juridically, and later socially black” (Newlyn 1052). Twain’s Valet de Chambre is juridically black but visually and socially white.

Harper identifies two additional categories of the reverse racial pass. The “classic reverse pass” such as in *Black Like Me* requires one to “try on” a particular racial identity via cosmetics or medicine for a defined period of time. This description is similar to Michael Awkward’s interpretation of “transracial crossers” wherein individuals “consciously engage” in the process which “critically. . . requires changes to their bodies in order to conform to the phenotypic variation (stereo)typically associated with the racial Other” (qtd. in Newlyn 1052). Harper adds an additional caveat to this interpretation by emphasizing that it is only through the resultant “narrative disclosures” that the individuals achieve societal significance (383). Loosely construed, the narratives lead readers to believe that if one cosmetically alters complexion, one

has to write a book about it before it can be considered a contribution to the exposure of racial inequality. A person who reverse passes naturally can keep quiet.

This situation is in sharp contrast to Harper's other category of reverse passing wherein one "never lays claim to any racial identity whatever" (383), a situation eerily reminiscent of the current "don't ask, don't tell" military policy. From Sandy Lee's cloak of invisibility in *Caucasia* to Ruth Jordan's no-color God in *The Color of Water*, the texts addressing indefinite ethnicity in this thesis are a predictable result of Watson's "invisible blackness" phobia.

While both standard and reverse passing involve choice, the degrees of duplicity required by each are inversely proportional. Those who reverse pass publicly identify with their new culture and publicly announce their stance to their abandoned one. They choose this identity freely and are often self-righteous in the disclosure. Those who pass in the traditional sense live a secret life. Amy Robinson believes that "[t]he mark of . . . success for any instance of passing ordinarily consists precisely in its inconspicuousness" (qtd. in Harper 382). Larsen's Claire Kendry of *Passing* is stuck between two worlds. She loves the secret camaraderie of her black friends as much as she treasures the convenience and comfort of white culture with her white husband. As a result, she lives in fear of discovery: "I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out all right. But I'll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply too—too hellish" (Larsen 168). Successful passing requires silence.

There is a shared insinuation of malicious intent with both passing and reverse passing texts, and credence is frequently called into question. Underlying the standard pass is the question of deceit and selfishness, as Larsen's Claire Kendry concedes: "I wanted things, I knew I wasn't bad-looking and that I could 'pass' (Larsen 159). Phillip Harper's article "Passing for What? Racial Masquerade and the Demands of Upward Mobility" cites *Passing* as a classic example of a light-skinned Negro "becoming" white in order to achieve the "social upward mobility that is always the implied stake in the standard racial pass" (388). Others see standard

passing as an individual's denial of self, a "disavowal of an identity that proper race pride and healthy self-regard would lead him or her enthusiastically to embrace" (Harper 381). This concept excludes those who pass temporarily and purposely for convenience in employment and culture.

Reverse passing is not without credibility problems. Jennifer Delton's article, "Before the White Negro: Sin and Salvation in *Kingsblood Royal*," quotes Gubar's observation that "whites have crossed the color line as a pose, while blacks have done so out of necessity, for survival" (320). William Tindall, in "The Sociological Best Seller," demotes both *Black Like Me* and *Gentleman's Agreement* as stories about an "artificial Negro" and an "artificial Jew" (56), and implies their publishing successes are sales tactics: "At the present time it seems that if an author wants his novel to sell better than the better sellers, he has only to choose for his subject either the evils of drink or the prejudice against Jews, Negroes, or, sometimes, Chinese" (55). It is significant to note that his comments were circa 1947 at the height of post-war anxiety. In an ironic juxtaposition of reverse passing, this fear can be traced back to an even earlier incident in history when Harriet Beecher Stowe warns America that "a system in which white-skinned African-Americans are bought and sold would sooner or later allow some enterprising speculator to profit by selling white orphans to unsuspecting masters as fair-skinned octoroons" (Mullen 80). As stated before, all things foreign are thus automatically suspect, and this suspicion breeds prejudice. Time and experience have yet to change this attitude.

Adding to the credibility issue are the sexual innuendoes. Reverse passing is less commonly termed as "ethnic transvestism" or "racial cross-dressing" (Delton 311). Transvestism is "the practice of adopting the dress, the manner, and frequently the sexual role of the opposite sex" ("Transvestism"). If "race" is substituted for "sex," the definition aptly describes reverse passing, but the disturbing sexual suggestion remains. Racial cross-dressing carries the same connotation. Historically, black men and women are typecast as insatiable, mysterious lovers. Equally stereotypic is the suggestion that all white men crave black women. If these

misconceptions carry over to reverse passing, the inference is that sex is a primary motive for the transition. It is a reasonable argument given the nomenclature, but there is no proof. Other than the question of complexion preference for sexual partners, there is little illicit, insatiable, or mysterious sex in current passing literature. As can be seen in Hurston's *Passing*, Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy*, and Charles Chesnutt's *The House behind the Cedars*, characters who pass have less incentive for sexual activity because they fear ethnic revelation through dark children. The myth is furthermore debunked by Scales-Trent's suggestion that history "questions the common understanding that all miscegenation in this country came from the rape of slave women. . . . Indeed, anti-miscegenation statutes were enacted in this country precisely because so many blacks and whites loved each other and wanted to marry" (11-3). Generations later, the concept of crossing racial lines for love is still an inconceivable image for many individuals

The circumstances instigating the reverse pass vary greatly according to itinerary. In some, third-party involvement causes the initial shift, in others it is a personal reaction to the inherent racism of the era. Some opt out for convenience, and some are direct results of investigative reporting assignments. Be it from post-war fear, anti-Semitism, or a staunch civil rights platform, each passes in his or her own way, but all feel it a necessary solution. It is unfortunate that even now one might be comfortable in his or her own skin, yet still feel the need to pass for economic reasons, social acceptance, or educational advantages.

In order to guarantee the necessary inconspicuousness, a successful standard passing involves the personal choice to alienate oneself from family and friends. Claire Kendry

. . . wished to find out about this hazardous business of "passing," this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chances in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly. What, for example, one did about background, how one accounted for oneself. And how one felt when one came into contact with other Negroes. (Larsen 157)

In reverse passing, the friends and often the family make the choice to alienate. Neil Kingsblood's fellow Rotarians disown him and the neighbors openly ostracize his family. A party host asks Phillip Green to keep his assumed identity a secret so as not to embarrass "any Jew-haters" in attendance (Hobson 147). John Griffin is burned in effigy (Griffin 157). Alienation is a natural byproduct of denying one's identity and, in the end, is no doubt the main impetus to rescind, to go back to the way things were.

It is important to remember choice. Reverse passing characters have the ability to "discard and adopt racial identities" (Newlyn 1046). They all "occupy the position of the white subject who has the privilege to consider which racial identification he wishes to embody" (1046). Although Newlyn sees this choice as a reflection of the authority and history of "bourgeois whiteness" (1046), i.e., "because they can," reverse passing is a personal, not a political, statement, and the choice is distinct from Harper's rationale for standard passing – the desire to choose upward mobility. Contrary to the above assumptions, this option is not an exclusively white privilege. The whole concept of the standard pass would not exist if the light-skinned black did not also have the opportunity to "reformat his race identity" (Newlyn 1059). The option is closed to the vast majority of African-Americans, but to rule it out completely is to negate the unknown percentage of the black population who have successfully passed.

With many of the reverse passing texts, we see immediate immersion into the nuances of the adopted culture. The characters automatically assume the vernacular, mindset, and awareness of their new ambient cultural environment. All characters also succumb to an instant recognition of the gender protocol requisite to their new roles and most also quickly unearth their own latent prejudices. Mirrors play a key role in this discovery functioning as "double devices: they reflect and, as glass, they cut" (Balfour 365). The reflection reveals a multitude of images: "oneself, the truth, the ideal, illusion" (Ferber 124). Once the previously "white" characters observe their "new" reflections, the emotions unfurl and the assimilation begins. James McBride believes his "true self was a boy in the mirror" (90). John Griffin feels he is "imprisoned in the flesh of an

utter stranger, an unsympathetic one with whom I felt no kinship” (10). Neil Kingsblood experiences a similar baptism. When entering a lunch counter just after hearing of his new heritage, he automatically assumes the role: “Why did I ever come in here? But I better try and like it. This is the kind of dump I’ll get from now on. Or worse” (Lewis 61). This hesitance carries over to his fear even to get a haircut, afraid that the barber will now “jimcrow” him (Lewis 67).

Characters in reverse passing texts weigh a lifetime of white bias with a newfound oversensitivity to the nuances of being black. The transition is immediate and potent, but it does not always work. The rescission rate for reverse passing is high and the aftermath emotionally volatile. For many, the rescission is never complete. The individuals return time and again to the marginalized culture, desperately trying to reconcile the moral standards of both worlds. It is here where W.E.B. DuBois’s concept of double-voicedness, synonymously termed double-consciousness, most aptly comes into play. DuBois theorizes that the plight of the black man is having to look “at oneself through the eyes of others” (694). Torn between two worlds, two cultures, two “skins,” a person’s ideology clashes. Add to this internal schism a gender or religious factor, and the individual truly experiences multiple consciousness.

For those of indefinite hues, whites and blacks alike, in a miscegenastic society, skin color is akin to a suit of clothes, something that can be donned to fit the desired setting. Many passing novels are studies in contrasts at the very least, or as Malcolm Bradbury writes in his introduction to *Puddin’head Wilson*, “morally schizophrenic” (17). Those who pass find shifting degrees of empowerment from shifting social contexts; they live in a world governed by their choices of identity and participate in their own ideological politics at any given time.

One definition of politics is “activities concerned with achieving control, advancement, or some other goal in a nongovernmental group” (“Politics,” def. 4a(3), emphasis added). It is this “other goal” that comes to play when Harper concludes that “passing can never . . . function as an effective strategy for social and political change with respect to the governing racial order

. . . Its limited, though real, critical value lies in its deconstructing race—and, particularly, whiteness—so as to provide us with intellectual tools in a properly political struggle” (386). The majority of referenced characters reverse pass to learn something, to overcome latent prejudices that they know are wrong, and to come to terms with their own moral standards using the “intellectual tools” their experience offers.

Reverse passing is not the answer to white racism. It is not an attempt to invade the turf of black society. It does not entail the desire for upward mobility. It is one individual’s solution to a personal dilemma, one’s own quest for comprehension and resolution. The incrementally more open and honest nature of reverse passing differentiates it from standard passing, which no matter how legitimate it may be because of society’s injustices, is left with a core of deceit because of the requisite silence. The politics of reverse passing are that of education and awareness, Harper’s “intellectual tools.” So long as the “Other” remains a recognized option, reverse passing will continue.

### CHAPTER 3

#### “WHERE SHOULD MY DEEPEST LOYALTY LIE?”:

#### INDEFINITE ETHNICITY IN THE MEMOIRS OF MCBRIDE AND HAIZLIP

Yet conflict was a part of our lives, written into our very faces, hands, and arms, and to see how contradiction lived and survived in its essence, we had to look no farther than our own mother. (McBride 29)

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Our psyches, souls and sensibilities are black. Sociologists would say we have been “socialized” as black people. Yet our lives have been deeply colored by our absence of deep color. (Haizlip, *Sweeter* 13)

Memoir pieces have a dubious reputation in the literary world. There is an automatic tendency to question the level of veracity and the reliability of memory and self-selection, yet, as with passing literature in general, there is validation in their portrayal of “snapshots of American racial attitudes. . . . Each memoir offers a slightly different angle from which to view the question of racial belonging, of who is claimed by whom”(Graff 42). “Claiming” is significant in these memoirs. To the detriment of their “white” kin, much of the emphasis in the McBride and Haizlip texts slants to the positive attributes of the “black” side of the family. Shirlee Haizlip’s account exudes success for the darker members of her family; those who pass do not fare as well: “This is the story of a family that accepted its color but rejected its race. This is the story of a family that accepted its race but rejected its color. This is the story of how the black family prospered and became visible. This is the story of how the white family fled and became invisible” (*Sweeter* 16). McBride’s outlook is less theatrical but is no less personally slanted: “The uncertainty that lived inside me began to dissipate; the Ache that the little boy who stared in the mirror felt was gone. My own humanity was awakened . . .” (229).

For both authors, this pride is a self-defeating albatross. Their goal of authenticity is sometimes weakened by the very same truth they try to tell. Haizlip questions her own predisposition to an internal bias: “Where should my deepest loyalty lie? To myself, my mother, my husband, my children? To my race, and if so which one?” (*Sweeter* 243). McBride’s conflict is from deep within: “There were two worlds bursting inside me trying to get out” (266). Textual reliability aside, in the end, the memoirs are not without value. France Winddance Twine concludes that the memoirs are “novellas of consciousness, parenting guides, antiracist treatises, and feminist autobiographies” (148). They provide a unique perspective on the delineation between race and color, and they are a significant resource for demonstrating the futility of labeling for “when uncertain racial identity is blamed for unhappiness, misery may spring as much from parental alcoholism or abandonment as from race” (Graff 42). Indefinite ethnicity is only another label, an excuse for the lack of perceived acceptance. It is not a true means of reverse passing, and it does not guarantee the desired invisibility.

#### “Spiritual Camouflage”: Invisibility or Meandering?

Like the meandering quests for invisibility in their fictional counterparts, Shirlee Taylor Haizlip and Ruth McBride Jordan escape their assumed indefiniteness by “spiritual camouflage” (Haizlip, *Sweeter* 208). They each embark on their own private search for the grails of identity via meandering through “honky” society. Their travels, perhaps travails is the better word, are real, but their destinations are as uncertain as their concepts of color.

With her acknowledgement that “I was always a running-type person” (McBride 42), Ruchel Dwajra Zylska, a/k/a Rachel Deborah Shilsky, a/k/a Ruth McBride Jordan, takes the historical concept of the Wandering Jew (McBride 225) to a new level. Her life is a series of meanderings, masquerading, and moving from place to place, literally and figuratively running from her parents, running to her husband’s blackness, occasionally running for herself, always running for her children. Her son recalls that “[s]he opened the door for me but closed it for

herself long ago” (McBride 269). Ostracized from her parents after consecutively marrying two African-American Gentiles, Ruth Jordan vacillated, sometimes hypocritically, between her God’s “color of water” (51), her children’s “shades of brown” (22), and her own insistence on self-identifying as a “light-skinned” (21) individual. Significantly, she never attaches a color to her own “light-skinned” description. “Light-skinned” has connotations of blackness in passing literature, but Jordan lays claim to being neither a light-skinned black, a light-skinned white, nor a light-skinned Jew. Phillip Harper supports this pseudo-passing:

Indeed, according to the technicalities derived from our understanding of the more conventional instances of racial passing – reverse or otherwise – Ruth McBride Jordan never really *passes* at all, since, rather than ‘pretending’ to be other than the white person that her appearance suggests she must be, Ruth McBride Jordan simply never lays claim to any racial identity whatever, at least not through the greater portion of the life that her son’s book chronicles. (383)

She attempts both indefinite ethnicity and blackness and is successful in neither.

The refusal to stay in one place is Ruth Jordan’s answer to the pain and rejection of her earlier life. McBride acknowledges that his mother was “spinning in crazy circles only because she was trying to survive,” her running was the “modus operandi when things got tough” (182). By dictating when and where her family resides, Jordan establishes a sense of control through their constant movement: “She could not grasp exactly what to do next, but she kept moving as if her life depended on it, which in some ways it did. She ran, as she had done most of her life, but this time she was running for her own sanity” (McBride 164). The son temporarily inherits her psychological need for movement: “Just like Mommy did years before me, I began my own process of running, emotionally disconnecting myself from her, as if by doing so I could keep her suffering from touching me” (138). McBride cannot adopt a static, visible lifestyle until he stops questioning his mother’s existence and his own duality. When “Mommy” finally becomes “Ma,” James McBride jumps a major emotional hurdle.

Harper attributes Ruth Jordan's identification with the black community to an almost bipolar assimilation process:

Now, this is not to *deny* that identification; late in the memoir, McBride –who, clearly at times, accounts for his mother as effectively an anomaly in the essentialism of racial 'blood' – refers to Ruth as 'a black woman in white skin' (204), thereby suggesting just how extensive her evident black identification must be. Nor is it to suggest that Ruth, in never claiming blackness, by reverse token simultaneously laid a simple, if tacit, claim to white identity. . . . The point, to state it plainly, is that, even in her explicit disavowal of whiteness and her apparently extensive black identification, Ruth McBride Jordan stopped short of attaining to black *identity*, which fact, according to her son's narrative, impressed itself quite emphatically upon the consciousness of even the grade school-age James. . . . "Yet Mommy refused to acknowledge her whiteness (16)." (McBride qtd. in 384)

*The Color of Water* is a literary hybrid. James McBride weaves his own memories with his mother's story related in semi-fictional dialogue. She acknowledges her whiteness in her early years; she denies it in his first person narrative. Choosing one identity does not erase the other. Only with age does acknowledging whiteness take second place for Ruth. She now has a whole new demon with which to wrestle, "...but the question of her own mortality is one she seems to be preoccupied with of late, probably because she knows death is the one condition in life she can't outrun" (McBride 261). The only solution is acceptance. For the first time, neither movement nor invisibility is the answer.

Shirlee Taylor Haizlip is predictably stationary in *The Sweeter the Juice*, but she tells the story of an entire family on the run: "That's how it came to be that my mother's brothers and her one sister, her father, her father's mother and all her aunts and uncles except one chose to live another life" (*Sweeter* 75). When the Morris family "divested all its blackness into her,"

Haizlip's mother, Margaret Morris Taylor, becomes the "scapegoat" of the family (267). Shirlee Taylor Haizlip is raised with the belief that her "cloak of color" is a birthright: "It never occurred to me that I would be mistaken for anything but what I was, a colored girl" (153). It is not until the onset of her search for her mother's sister Grace ("Grace of God," a blessing), that she begins to question the "spirituality" of her camouflage, "Am I not 'them' as well as 'us'?" (267). In this sense, "them" is universal. The reader can legitimately substitute a multitude of identifiers from Republican to Buddhist to Yankee. Black/white is not the only point of separation.

When Haizlip speaks of her mother's trek as "the last leg of her journey to locate herself within her family" (249), it becomes her journey of awareness as well: "This trip had removed some of my blinders – not all" (263). Although her "running" is more psychological than Jordan's, it is no less epiphanous:

I began the search for my mother's family believing that I was looking for black people "passing for white." And they did indeed pass. But what I ultimately found, I realized, were black people who had become white. After all, if you look white, act white, live white, vacation white, go to school white, marry white and die white, are you not "white"? (266)

Haizlip's perspective takes on "a totally different context (185), and with this realization she becomes comfortable with both her own blackness and her aunt's whiteness.

#### "God is the Color of Water": Water and Mirror Imagery

[O]ne afternoon on the way home from church I asked her whether God was black or white. A deep sigh. "Oh boy. . . .God's not black. He's not white. He's a spirit." . . . "Does he like black or white people better?" "He loves all people. He's a spirit." "What's a spirit?" "A spirit's a spirit." "What color is God's spirit?" "It doesn't have a color," she said, "God is the color of water. Water doesn't have a color." (McBride 50-51)

William Ramsay states that “race is as fluid as water” (135). Perception of self is equally fluid. The memoir texts regularly incorporate mirror and water imagery as a means of illustrating the characters’ understanding, or lack thereof, of self. Placed in Watson’s color-phobic, “invisible blackness” society, the mirrors, especially, reveal all. James McBride reflects that as a child “I believed my true self was a boy who lived in the mirror” (90). With the onset of youthful cruelty, McBride is made aware that his own black skin is vastly different from the hue of his schoolmates: “I felt the same ache I felt when I gazed at the boy in the mirror. I remembered his, and how free he was, and I hated him even more” (105). Shirlee Haizlip’s family uses a figurative mirror to put on, and take off, the makeup of color. They cover the mirrors of truth for the Shiva of the person deemed “dead,” the in-house, closed and formal Jewish mourning period after the death of a close relative wherein all mirrors are shrouded in cloth.

Indefinite ethnicity is proven false when the water reflects or the mirror reveals the person within. Both reflections are indicative of truth, but mirrors offer fixed images while water pictures are in a constant state of flux. For Shirlee Haizlip Water imagery is a life-threatening association. She is exposed to an early recognition of prejudice with the report of a lynching: “Every black person carries around a reservoir of rage. For some it is always full, sloshing around and overflowing at the slightest provocation. For others, like me, its level tends to stay low. But it is always there. When I saw Emmett Till’s pictures my chest was full of water” (*Sweeter* 177). She later compares her darkness to the ebb and flow of the ocean: “Looking across the vast sea of white faces, I was keenly aware of my doubleness” (149). Along with ubiquitous title references, McBride brings water to the forefront: “The question of race was like the power of the moon in my house. It’s what made the river flow, the ocean swell, and the tide rise, but it was a silent power, intractable, indomitable, indisputable, and thus completely ignorable” (94).

“I Was Keenly Aware of My Doubleness”: Contradictions and Consciousness

“What’s in a name” is a particularly apropos inquiry in settings of racial uncertainty. Ruth McBride Jordan goes through radical name changes and is “a flying compilation of competing interests and conflicts” (McBride 260). James McBride personalizes his mother’s color-of-water God and gives his own children water-evocative names - Azure (252) and Jordan (270). Margaret Morris Taylor finds “no dissonance in giving to her infant Negro daughter the name of an apple-cheeked Hollywood princess” (Haizlip, *Sweeter* 19). Shirlee Haizlip feels it necessary to change the spelling (19). For each one, their names carry their identity

E. J. Graff ties in the duality of these individuals in her explanation of the unique character of memoir pieces: “These authors grapple with the sense that they don’t quite belong anywhere, that they aren’t fully claimed by either race. But their wide range of experiences reveals how deeply racial identity, like any identity, is affected not just by society but also by family, character, time, and place” (42). Is their desire for camouflage, for invisibility, self-imposed or dictated by the whims of others? Double consciousness can be “both a gift and a burden” (Balfour 349) in that it provides insight into dual cultures at the same time that it awkwardly challenges one’s identity awareness. The memoir authors both successfully reconcile self and society, but the road to this outcome is not without cost. Contradictions in their biracial childhoods are inevitable. For James McBride, it is primarily in the educational, spiritual, and familial arenas. When determining what schools her children are to attend, “Mommy’s contradictions crashed and slammed against one another like bumper cars at Coney Island” (McBride 29). The siblings are all sent to predominantly white schools “to get the best education. . . . Blacks could be trusted more, but anything involving blacks was probably slightly substandard” (29). Religious life is equally contradictory: “She never spoke about Jewish people as white. She spoke about them as Jews, which made them somehow different” (87). Family life takes a personal toll in that “Mommy was the wrong color for black pride and black power, which nearly rent my house in two” (McBride 96).

For Shirlee Haizlip, contradictions and consciousness are revealed for the most part in physical appearance and in the frustration of being “deprived” (*Sweeter* 71) of the family members who have “folded like meringue into the white world” (170). Doubteness is especially pivotal for Haizlip when she initially meets these relatives: “It was a scene that I had thought about all of my life, but one that I had doubted would ever occur. It was like a play within a play, all the actors playing double roles, none of our lines scripted” (264). To Haizlip, “physical appearance is meaningless to identity” (*Passing* 46–7) because of their diverse characteristics: “Their straight, wavy, curly, kinky or nappy hair was blond, brown, auburn, red and black. Their eyes were hazel, green, blue, gray, brown, black and even lavender. My family had all of these colors and textures” (*Sweeter* 39). She eventually adopts an admirable stoicism:

A journalist acquaintance asked me recently if I had ever wanted to pass for white. I told him that I had no need to, but that I certainly could not control the perceptions or assumptions other people might have. My color, I said, had allowed me to sit on top of and look over both sides of the high wall that separates the black and white experiences. And yes, that has been an advantage in the revelation of the dark secrets people have in their white souls. (238)

Everyone is of color, be it internal, external, or imagined. Haizlip’s placement on the edge of a high wall gives her perspective in place of prejudice.

Unlike the multiple consciousnesses permeating the emotions of all characters in the fictional selections, religion only affects the mothers in the referenced memoirs. Spousal choices force both women to experience an equal-opportunity Shiva. The sisters are dead to each other. In an ironic juxtaposition of terminology, Margaret Morris Taylor’s strong Baptist beliefs are partially born of this Jewish ritual. Just as she, too, was “buried” by the numerous family members who passed, Margaret defiantly rationalizes their abandonment and performs her own personal Shiva: “I had put all my relatives out of my mind and made them all dead” (Haizlip,

*Sweeter* 249). Margaret Taylor's Jewishness ends there, but the "death" is complete. After several reunions, both Haizlip and her mother finally realize that:

. . . Grace was indeed white. She could not give up being white, nor could she tear down the alabaster walls she had built around her life. She would be content to see us as often as we might like to visit, as long as no one in her circle knew who or what we were. In other words, she would be satisfied to continue the pattern of the past. (252)

Unlike her niece's ability to climb onto that high wall of diversity, Grace stands sheltered behind her wall, poignantly alabaster in color. Haizlip is precise in her assessment of the resultant family relations: "There are infinite ways of dealing with denial. Some are not subtle" (*Passing* 50).

Ruth McBride Jordan is similarly Shiva'd. The lack of maternal relatives is clarified to her children with the cold response, "I'm removed from my family. . . . Dead" (McBride 99), "[t]hey want no parts of me and me I don't want no parts of them" (McBride 1). With these declarations, she in turn "conceals the Jewish heritage from her children; in effect, she 'kills' her children's ties to the white side of the family" (Watson 102). Ruth Jordan's identity is challenged on all fronts for "even Jews have disagreed about what constitutes Jewishness, whether it is religion, race, or both of these" (Watson 105). In support of Mullen's comment about the European "assimilation" versus African-American "passing" double standards, Harper states that:

What is so striking about the passage of Rachel Deborah Shilsky to Ruth McBride Jordan is that it comprises precisely the European immigrant's shedding of originary language, culture, and tradition, in order not for the "passer" to become "white," but rather for her to occupy more or less comfortably the margin of U.S. society to which blackness has historically been relegated. (385-86)

Ruth's initial concealment of her Jewish heritage and her subsequent ambivalence with the "non-Jewish dominant white community in Virginia" (Twine 152) transfers laterally to her son. McBride's reference to a community center in Far Rockaway as "once the home of middle-class whites and Jews" (35) "implicitly draw[s] a distinction between the two" (Harper 385). The Jewish element is not a coincidence and it is not a secondary factor in these passing narratives. At the very least, it serves to be a natural and critical reflection of the individuals' vexed personalities.

Family relationships are precariously sensitive. Margaret Morris Taylor's sister Grace has "no conscious memories of her colored years" (Haizlip, *Sweeter* 250) and passes without hesitation or remorse. Shirlee Haizlip admits rather condescendingly to her desire to "white them [her mother's family] out of my consciousness" (100), yet regrets not knowing a large majority of these same relatives, even her gay Uncle Percy who "carried a secret identity as great as the one my mother's family harbored" (241). Ruth McBride Jordan ignores color all together but unconsciously creates her own "rainbow coalition that descends on her house every Christmas and Thanksgiving" (McBride 277). James McBride initially desires uniformity but decides otherwise, providing perhaps the best solution to color angst:

I thought it would be easier if we were just one color, black or white. I didn't want to be white. My siblings had already instilled the notion of black pride in me. I would have preferred that Mommy were black. Now, as a grown man, I feel privileged to have come from two worlds. My view of the world is not merely that of a black man but that of a black man with something of a Jewish soul. (McBride 103)

"Color" is objective, "self" is psychological, and "soul" is spiritual. McBride's identification with the internal "soul" loosens his attention to physical difference and supports his own redemption. Be it skin color or law, rarely are situations distinctly black and white. Although taking circuitous routes, the writers arrive at their own personal gray.

## CHAPTER 4

### “BEFORE ALL THIS RACIAL AMBIGUITY, I WAS A BLACK GIRL”:

#### INDEFINITE ETHNICITY IN FICTION

Traditional passing literature emphasizes whiteness. Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* and Rosellen Brown’s *Half a Heart* provide the opposite, “cast[ing] blackness as the ideal, desired identity” (Harrison-Kahan 19–1). As much as the authors’ names reflect “layers of brownness” (Haizlip, *Sweeter* 30), the phenotypic “‘either/or’ model cannot capture the complexities of racial identity” (Newlyn 1052-53). The settings are similar. Both novels involve young daughters of mixed marriages, both involve childhoods spent apart from a parent, and both have indirect Jewish influences. The stories are of coming to terms with one’s self, one’s color, and one’s womanhood, but maturity does not come without a price. Incorporating Judith Butler’s argument that “gender lacks a core,” Harrison-Kahan proffers that one’s “identity occurs through the reiteration of performances, or acts, that verify that identity” (19–5). For Birdie Lee and Ronnee Reece, gender awareness and acceptance is cemented only after they are able to confirm racial identity and to reconcile their Jewish influence. The changing face of hybridity, multiple-consciousness, and moments of invisibility are all factors in their understanding of racial dynamics.

#### “Island of Anonymity”: Invisibility or Meandering?

Sandy Lee’s “Island of Anonymity” (Senna, *Caucasia* 85) is an awareness-opening mental state brought about by a blizzard confinement when she rejoices in the silence of the whiteness that surrounds her. Many years later, she is again a prisoner of circumstances, a white woman with a black mindset in a mixed-race world. Anonymity is elusive. As the “one-drop rule” which dictated racial identity for years slowly disappears, the queries remain: Is race a color or an attitude? Do you have to be black to be black? In her article, “Blackness/Mixedness:

Contestations over Crossing Signs,” Naomi Pabst poses additional questions: “[C]an a person sell out of blackness if he or she never bought in? What type of investment or inheritance must precede the possibility of selling out? What if a person never straightforwardly identified as black and has few claims to the cultural signifiers usually associated with blackness?” (186). All questions are pertinent here to emphasize the duality of the main characters in these texts. *Half a Heart* features Miriam Vener, a white Jewish mother who is an ardent advocate for racial equality yet is unable to acknowledge her daughter’s blackness in public. The dark-skinned Ronnee “who imagines herself a cool, calculating gold digger, is actually a vulnerable young woman burdened by society with conflicting identities” (Gray 95). Ronnee sees gray in everything except herself, and she is as deceptive and conniving as she is naive and truth-seeking. She demands attention and wants to see the world as it truly is for “[n]othing is black and white. Except me” (Brown 247). In a world where the typical phrasing is black *or* white, this declaration accentuates her view of the strict genetic demarcation from her white mother and her black father.

Mixed-race Birdie faces the same dilemma in *Caucasia*. She longs to turn into a “black swan” (Senna 180); she considers herself black, looks white, and is lost in racial limbo because “Papa says I’m not black or white anymore” (408). Senna’s life is a mirror image of Birdie’s:

Let it be clear -- my parents’ decision to raise us as black wasn’t based on any one-drop rule from the days of slavery, and it certainly wasn’t based on our appearance, that crude reasoning many black-identified mixed people use: if the world sees me as black, I must be black. If it had been based on appearance, my sister would have been black, my brother Mexican, and me Jewish. Instead, my parents’ decision arose out of the rising black power movement, which made identifying as black not a pseudoscientific rule but a conscious choice. *You told us all along that we had to call ourselves black because of this so-called one drop. Now that we don’t have to anymore, we choose to.* (Senna, *Mulatto* n.p.)

Life is a masquerade for the entire Lee family. The father hides under a mask of intellectualism. The mother conceals herself under the guise of radicalism. The sisters escape from reality via a private language. Even a favored horse is not who he claims to be: “Mr. Pleasure” is a mare. Birdie’s invisibility is preordained. Because her parents cannot agree on a name, Birdie’s birth certificate is never changed from the anonymous legal moniker “Baby Lee,” “like the gravestone of some stillborn child” (Senna, *Caucasia* 19).

Reminiscent of Miriam, Sandy Lee (another “layer of brownness” name) is a staunch believer in racial equality, but her flights from reality do more harm than good. Taking full advantage of her daughter’s “straight hair, pale skin . . . and general phenotypic resemblance to the Caucasoid race” (Senna, *Caucasia* 128), Sandy forces her daughter to take on a new persona and further complicates Birdie’s acceptance of identity: “My body was the key to our going incognito” (128). Her mother’s reliance on bodily appearance negates the idea of choice, which is mental rather than physical.

“Race” as a biological entity is based on genetics. “Race” as a social construction is based on appearance, attitude, and culture. In both, labeling adds to the uncertainty of identity. If one is no longer automatically black under the one-drop scenario, is he or she “black and white,” “mixed,” “hybrid,” “multiracial,” or “other”? In an interesting solution to the nomenclature problem, and at the same time echoing Ronnee’s perception of the world, Naomi Zack suggests that gray become a new mixed-race category as the first step “en route to a more desirable end of ‘racelessness’” (qtd. in Pabst 202). It is this racelessness, this no-color-distinction, which defies the mechanisms of “color-coded thinking” (Evans 42) and lends itself to Senna’s and Brown’s characters sharing a common desire for “invisibility.” Zack’s “desirable end of racelessness” is neither impractical nor a fantasy, but it does illuminate the need for Otherness. Immediately before Ronnee meets her mother, she fully believes her money-making scheme will succeed because “the best acting is invisible” (Brown 211), yet conversely her very next move is no longer an act, sitting “against the oily-smooth upholstery of the backseat of the car, invisible”

(Brown 211). As their new relationship gets more heated, Ronnee comments on Miriam's invisibility with condescension-coated regret:

“I have two parents, he doesn't like to remember that. I have – I'm two-colored, which he doesn't seem to notice much. He says everybody's got a lot of mixing in their background, but I try to tell him that's, like, *invisible*. . . . They don't have a parent they can see, the one who brings in that difference.”

“...But you didn't used to be able to see me,” Miriam whispered. Ronnee whispered back. “But I knew you were there.” (Brown 196)

Their invisibility has a yin-yang quality to it: useful and harmful, desirable and undesirable. It serves no purpose for the reconciliation of identity.

In *Caucasia*, the sisters share a secret language and a secret world complete with “place and a people as well. . . . [The Elemenos] were a shifting people, constantly changing their form, color, pattern, in a quest for invisibility” (Senna 7). Fully reflective of the desire to be invisible, it was “less a game of make-believe than a fight for the survival of their species. . . . [T]heir power lay precisely in their ability to disappear into any surrounding” (7). In what Harrison-Kahan refers to as “the chameleon-like ability to blend in with almost any group of people” (19–5), Sandy also unknowingly takes on the Elemeno-like ability to “disappear into any surrounding” in her constant flight. Senna's characters are both color-fixated and color-blind. When not “in costume,” their only answer to survival is invisibility: “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” (Senna, *Caucasia* 391). Absurdity aside, it is a real component of Birdie's emotional stability. Watson believes that through her reallocations of identity, Birdie “becomes an embodiment of ‘invisible blackness’” (110). As she slowly gains awareness, however, running is the immediate solution: “Birdie feels ‘most safe’ when she is ‘on a moving vehicle, rolling toward some destination but not quite there’ (293)” (Harrison-Kahan 19–16). Skepticism

replaces her “invisible blackness” and she finally asks, “What was the point of surviving if you had to disappear?” (Senna, *Caucasia* 8).

The road to invisibility is a meandering route through White America. Sandy and Birdie go underground, traveling through a dizzying series of accommodations: friends’ homes, hotels, a commune, a New England horse ranch. As soon as they feel their invisibility breached, they move on. Ronnee does not travel as extensively, but her Quixotic quest for Mom’s money is equally roundabout. She loves life with her father, but she loves the allure of a Stanford education more. Without a financial contribution from her absent mother, the dream is impossible. She prefers to go through life unnoticed, but eventually reconciles the geometrically and culturally opposed Brooklyn and Houston mentalities and gains her mother’s trust.. When both girls achieve that moment of illumination instead of invisibility, the meandering stops.

#### “Help Me, I am Drowning”: Water and Mirror Imagery

Reminiscent of Birdie’s “black swan” fixation, Birdie and Ronnee swim through their coming of age stories. Birdie associates the first moment of awareness that her parents are separating with the sting of ocean water: “I understood what was going on, even if I couldn’t have explained it at the time, and my skin was tingling all over like the prickle of salt water when you stay in the ocean too long” (60). “Caucasia” as a locale brings to mind a hidden, private island. Whether it be Birdie’s Island of Anonymity (85), or Aku-Aku, her father’s favorite restaurant named after “the loneliest inhabited island in the world” (119), water is what cuts them off from the Other.” They need water to survive, but they also have to accept its confining presence. Ronnee Reece seeks a way out of her existence with a plea to the school’s admissions department: “Please help me. . . . I am drowning” (Brown 77). Successful in her appeal for attention, she literally sinks in the private school setting with each asthma attack: “She felt it coming on her more and more often, felt as if the waves were closing over her head” (77). As she becomes comfortable with self, water takes on a cleansing element. The pool at her mother’s

house “look[s] like a million gallons of Windex” (251). She has to wipe clean the window to her soul before seeing her true self.

Mirrors have less symbolic influence in the fiction pieces but are still valid icons. As Birdee grows out of her dependence on the Elemeno language to communicate with her sister, she vacillates between recognition of its historical significance and its real-life irrelevancy: “I mouthed the word shimbala at myself in the mirror. It was somewhere between a noun and a command in Elemeno, but I couldn’t remember what it meant” (Senna, *Caucasia* 180). Ronnee reaches her first stage of awareness with the realization that her mother is married to an ophthalmologist. His patients look through mirage machines, which “wouldn’t show them certain images their eyes were too myopic or astigmatic or color blind to see” (Brown 6). The ability to look at oneself honestly in the mirror reveals both the voice of society and one’s own acceptance of difference.

#### “Negritude for Beginners”: Contradictions and Consciousness

The sequencing of race to religion to gender of necessity incorporates the double consciousness dilemma, literally the process by which one adapts to being a foreigner in one’s own land. Feminist critics apply this dilemma outside the racial construction arguing that W. E. B. DuBois’s theory is “applicable to all women: ‘this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’” (Ling 741). Until Birdie and Ronnee come to terms with the contradictions in their lives, they will always look at themselves through someone else’s eyes. The girls have to “pass” Senna’s *Negritude for Beginners* (*Caucasia* 3) before they can graduate to acceptance of their duality.

In addition to the color question, both daughters have to come to terms with Judaism. Harrison-Kahan argues that since this requires an individual to occupy “more than one position at once, Jewishness simultaneously signifies whiteness and racial otherness; furthermore, the confusion over whether the label ‘Jewish’ refers to race, ethnicity, religion, or culture is

emblematic of its complex meanings across categories of identity” (19–3), and thus mirrors the problems of biracial identity. Ronnee’s sacred Otherness is more limited, as it is her mother’s religion, not hers, but if Judaism is an ethnicity historically passed down maternally, she is herself black, white, and Jew. Birdie’s mother equally exacerbates the quandary. Giving her daughter the alias Jesse Goldman, Sandy believes Birdie “wasn’t really passing because Jews weren’t really white, more like an off-white.” Birdie accepts her own “conversion” by acknowledging her mother’s rationalization that “they are the closest I was going to get to black and still stay white” (Senna, *Caucasia* 140). If Birdie is “not ‘really passing’ because passing is explicitly understood as passing for white” (Harrison-Kahan 19–5), she, too, adds another layer to her hybridity. Denoting it as “ethnic queerness,” Harrison-Kahan affirms this dichotomy:

. . . Jewishness draws attention to the fact that multiplicity itself is, appropriately, multiple, since it refers both to the potential to transcend dichotomies, such as black and white, as well as to the need to account for the intersections of identities: the way that gender, sexuality, and class are interarticulated. In destabilizing categories of identity, Jewishness reveals identification itself to be an ambivalent process; it functions as a kind of ethnic “queerness,” exposing the multiplicity not only of mixed race identity but of identity in general. (19–4)

Disregarding the current homosexual connotations of the word, “queerness” can also be interpreted as “different,” anything “deviating from the expected or normal” (“queerness”). In this context, it is an appropriately individualized identifier.

Birdie thrives on dressing in costume with her sister, an act that becomes increasingly significant as her awareness of racial boundaries expands: “I understood what was going on, even if I couldn’t have explained it at the time” (Senna, *Caucasia* 60). Although Birdie is determined to fit in, to learn “the art of changing” and “how to become someone else, how to erase the person I was before” (62), her box of “negrobilia” accompanies her everywhere. The box is a cry for recognition, a physical manifestation of Freud’s theory of compartmentalization,

and her latent recognition and acceptance of what lies ahead. It is her defense mechanism against the Other, and its cardboard presence at hand gives her a modicum of racial confirmation. Armed with proper clothing, proper liturgical references, and proper dialect, Harrison-Kahan asserts that “like her blackness at Nkrumah, Birdie’s Jewishness rests on her ability to accessorize” (19–6). A significant act of awareness comes when she “most directly faces anti-Semitism,” and decides “to discard her Jewishness” (Harrison-Kahan 19–7). The Star of David is defiantly placed in her box of blackness, but the act is without conviction. Harrison Kahan asserts that this “experience further proves that even a false identity can carry with it the stigma of seeming essentialism since she continues to be aware of her assumed Jewishness, even after she has shed its outward signs” (19–8). The ultimate awareness moment comes when she finally takes a stance, confronts her father, and challenges his racial hypothesis: “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, *Caucasia* 393). Her father preaches race as a social construction. With her first-time confrontation, Birdie becomes fully cognizant of the inequities of color and the realities of life as a multiracial child. She comes “of age” at the same time she comes “of race.”

In the situations at hand, double consciousness is a misnomer. Referencing Rebecca Walker’s book, *Black, White and Jewish*, Harrison-Kahan states that by “combining the African American sense of twoness with the Jewish American sense of ambivalence, [Walker] suggests that ‘double’ is an inadequate adjectiver for a consciousness that is much more complex” (19–7). Birdie must look at herself through eyes of a black, white, and allegedly Jewish woman. Her perspective is at best of challenge to DuBois’s double-voicedness.

Conquering multiple-consciousness is the first step in the resolution of identity. For both girls, this entails multiple “ah-ha” experiences. Only after much introspection does Ronnee recognize the truth about her mother’s pseudo-colorblind perspective: “But this mother would have kept her black. Neatly, exactly half black. As much as she could” (Brown 217). It is the precocious young stepsister Evie who quietly encourages Ronnee to receive that one crossover

call from their mother which ultimately reunites the two women: “There was no last word, only a first one. . . . ‘Mom?’” (Brown 402). The truth Ronnee seeks is in her own acceptance of difference: “She was no color, every color, bright and stupid, brave and terrified – they canceled each other out – and, though it would have been easier to be blind, she saw it all” (Brown 384). The act of cancellation does not necessarily evoke invisibility. Ronnee is still very able to “see” her predicament.

The placement of gender last in line for resolution is not an absolute. Neither daughter questions her female status as a whole, but adding to the multiplicity, Birdie also experiences gender choice in her awareness process. An early stop on their run is Aurora, a lesbian woman’s commune. Here Birdie witnesses her mother “breaking Bernadette’s heart” (Senna, *Caucasia* 136), and here she encounters her first pseudo-sexual experience, a hormonal crush on her friend Alexis. She later tracks down her father and Cole by convincing a reluctant school friend to ask his homosexual father about their whereabouts, and in the process, her horizons broaden with the father’s complete affirmation of his gay lifestyle, “This is the father you were born with, Ali, I’m sorry” (Senna, *Caucasia* 350). She interprets it as a confirmation of her own father’s rationale of abandonment; he could easily say “This is the skin you were born with, Birdie, I’m sorry.” Birdie accompanies her father to card games from an early age; she knows the meanings of dealing with the cards you are dealt.

One recurring theme of passing literature features the “tragic mulatta,” a female child born of one white and one black parent. Traditionally depicted as “beautiful mulattas who tragically struggle with adjusting in both the white and black worlds” (Watson 102), the daughters of *Caucasia* and *Half a Heart* “willingly fight the diversity of their roots” (101), rise above this tragic image, “a little injured perhaps, but alive” (Senna 393), and become “stronger in [their] adversity” (Watson 108). They do not do it alone. The daughters are one half of a powerful dynamic. Their mothers are forceful influences, and like it or not, both parties must come to terms with the genes. Just as Birdie and Sandy accept likeness and difference, Ronnee

and Miriam eventually come together in peace and benefit from the initial adversity. Watson proposes that the traditional tragic mulatta image is changing: “Now, when one thoroughly examines biracial literature, a Lacanian mirror of the past and present becomes evident, and, it is at that moment, that the face of diversity represented by the mulatto is truly a face that reflects us all” (112). In this respect, the mirror that alerted James McBride to his real self is also the instrument of truth.

Marginalization of minorities is another recurring theme, but “[i]f women have traditionally occupied the margins, though, women of color have been doubly marginalized” (Warhol 687). Women of dual color are marginalized in even more ways. Ronnee and Birdie see their lives as a series of contradictions. They are caught in the middle of two clashing cultures and two clashing ideologies. They want to be black in more than just skin color. Watson agrees with F. James Davis’s assertion that “[i]t is the way people think, feel, and believe, not how they look, that makes them members of the black ethnic community,’ a dynamic that not only fits Birdie’s state of mind, but Sandy’s as well” (111). This mindset can easily be applied to Ronnee and Miriam and is confirmed by Senna directly: “I was born in 1970 when ‘black’ described a people bonded not by shared complexion or hair texture but by shared history” (*Mulatto* n.p.). Choice, performance, and acceptance are necessary hurdles to overcome on the path to awareness. One does not have to assume just blackness or just whiteness to be complete. *Half a Heart* ends with Ronnee accepting the telephone receiver to talk to her mother: “This is my choice” (Brown 401). *Caucasia* concludes with Birdie wistfully observing a busload of children, “black and Mexican and Asian and white, on the verge of puberty, . . . utterly ordinary” (Senna, *Caucasia* 413). Both novels are “a validation of multiplicity” (Harrison-Karan 19–15). Like Ruth McBride Jordan’s “rainbow coalition” household (McBride 277) and Shirlee Taylor Haizlip’s “ambivalence about the white part of me” (14), each seeks closure to the color question. Each dreams of biracial children being “a dime a dozen” (Senna, *Caucasia* 412).

For both girls, the solution is not in reverse-passing. It is not in pretending to be invisible. Race is not a dress-rehearsal with clothing to be shed at will. Until they are comfortable in their own color, their lives will forever be a masquerade. Be it fiction or memoir, the predisposition to malleability, not invisibility, exists. The meandering road eventually leads to confirmation of identity and a definite ethnicity.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION: "I'M WHITE, I THINK"

It is as impossible to be of no race as it is to be of no gender. In a world where race and color are arbitrarily decided according to setting, law, and choice, society dictates the distinction. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. proposes that the distinction is enhanced further through inadvertently problematic speech:

Yet we carelessly use language in such a way as to *will* this sense of *natural* difference into our formulations. To do so is to engage in a pernicious act of language, one which exacerbates the complex problem of cultural or ethnic difference, rather than assuage or redress it. (5)

Language is all-powerful, and individuals demand labels. Those who opt for an indefinite ethnicity are questioned as to credibility, intent, and purpose. They assume that having no distinct identifier will make them "invisible" to the world. Unfortunately, the world can still see them, talk to them, label them. Jordan's color of water is naught; it is transparent. One can see it; one can see through it. The illustration aptly transfers to the referenced fictional and autobiographical characters. Despite the characters' refusals to acknowledge whiteness (or blackness), the reader is still intimately aware of their physical presence. Their intentions are admirable, but their routes mirror Senna's "honkified meanderings." In their attempts to define identity with the avoidance of blithe categorization, they often inadvertently exacerbate the distinction. Rosellen Brown's "I'm White, I Think" is only a preamble (*Passing* 49).

References to running, camouflage, invisibility, and masquerade abound in both the factual and fictional selections. Tied to all, or at least running undercurrent, is the imagery of water. William Ramsey proposes that McBride's use of the "color" and fluidity of water represents his "hard earned understanding of race" (134). Graff associates the one-drop lineage to African-Americans being "legally treated as if it could spread like a drop of food dye in water

and turn its bearer (of whatever complexion) inescapably ‘colored’” (42–2). Whether intentionally symbolic or purely descriptive, the four texts illustrate that water can both give life and take it away. Without movement, water stagnates.

Gates’s linguistic prophecy lives on. “Passing” to the other side has dual connotations. In some cultures, passing represents physical death. In the referenced texts, passing represents emotional distance and alienation. Words are not sufficient without the actions behind them. Identity is not significant without perception, and it is here where Lacan’s mirror again comes into play. Lacan theorizes that “bodily integrity or wholeness is only achieved with the assistance of an ‘other’ seemingly detached object – the mirror” (“Lacanian Mirror”). Whether via mirror or water, the texts at hand use these instruments of revelation, visual and verbal lie detectors, to enable the characters to see themselves as whole entities. The liquid reflection constantly changes. The mirror image is fixed yet reveals a mindset in flux. They are not oppositional voices, and they both serve the purpose of confirmation.

Fiction adequately supports fact when dealing with indefinite ethnicity. In each of the referenced works the racial angst is rampant and the credibility is equally challenged. Brown’s *Half a Heart* is well-written fiction, but it is just that. One does not get the feeling that she lived the experience. Her writing is too predictable, too mechanical. There is little emotion. Senna’s fiction comes from a whole heart. Similar to the memoir authors, she is intimately familiar with the subject, and to her advantage, has enough literary and sentimental detachment to tell a great story. McBride and Haizlip are both a bit one-sided in their recollections but for the most part are able to provide valid insight into dual race relationships. Being the family spokesperson is a precarious position: “It is autobiographical detail that easily transmogrifies into a question of racial loyalties, because a failure to suppress such autobiographical facts, a failure to pass for fully and authentically black, can reduce the likes of Nella Larsen to the status of sellout and race traitor” (Pabst 187). Neither memoir author is a “sellout,” but Senna’s fictional freedom and

objectivity gives her a unique perspective and enables her to “assuage [and] redress” Gate’s linguistic challenge to a greater degree than McBride and Haizlip.

One has to ask why the individuals feel the need to run. Surface explanations range from Sandy’s fear of repercussions from her underground activity to Miriam’s skeleton in the closet, from Grace Cramer’s Shiva for her sister to Ruth Jordan’s hypocritically benevolent ambivalence. Each one runs from herself. And yet, each runs to family. Although not without their struggles, the requisite alienation typical in passing/reverse passing narratives is overcome. Ronnee and Birdie eventually accept their duality with a strong faith in diversity. Ruth and Shirlee eventually accept duality with their appreciation of the Other. Grace Cramer will be forever “white” because she knows no other existence. James McBride feels privileged to have the mindset of “a black man with something of a Jewish soul” (McBride 103). Only with Sandy does one get the feeling of indecision and eternal movement:

Then she will close her eyes and see the New Hampshire license plate with the words “Live Free or Die” imprinted across the bottom, and will know it was never as simple as that. But she will know that her daughters are safe, sleeping together under one roof, and that will allow her to rest tonight. (Senna, *Caucasia* 411)

Meandering is a valid diversion, but as the texts suggest, one has to go somewhere.

“Why would anyone want to?” Passing, both reverse and regular, is an effective response to a biased society. Invisibility is not. Some individuals have the opportunities and physical appearances to choose whatever ethnicity they want to be, but no one is without color. Shirlee Haizlip remains black. Birdie Lee ends up gray. Grace Chandler chooses white. Some accept duality. Others keep meandering. It is a story to be repeated: “The union of the young, inexperienced Irish girl and the light-complected mixed-race young man set in motion a complicated legacy, a delicate quadrille of miscegenation, a dance that has not yet ended” (Haizlip, *Sweeter* 51). Generations of miscegenation continue to demand recognition. Until

claims of indefinite ethnicity are invalidated, these four works remind us that the dance continues.

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## APPENDIX

### Citation Format for Unspecified Pagination in Electronic Sources

Several referenced sources were accessed via Infotrac, an electronic database which only provides starting page of the article and total number of article pages for citation purposes. There is no internal pagination. For those articles where a hard copy journal was not available, my committee chair approved the following format method to provide readers with some reference point to the citation: last name of author, first page of the article, dash, page number of the computer printout, i.e., (Harrison-Kahan 19–4) or if the author is referenced in the sentence, (19–4). The Works Cited page lists citations in traditional MLA format with the addition of the printout page numbers in parentheses (. . . *Melus* 30.1 (2005): 19 (1-20)).

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