

**Passing, Performance, and Perversity: Rewriting Bodies in the Works of Lawrence Hill,
Shani Mootoo, and Danzy Senna**

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This paper will examine treatments of *passing* by three North American authors: Lawrence Hill, Shani Mootoo, and Danzy Senna. All three authors are mixed race, that is, all of them have mothers and fathers that are from different racial backgrounds. Lawrence Hill, best known for his award-winning novel *The Book of Negroes* (2007), was born in Canada to two American immigrant parents, one white and one black. He has written extensively on issues of race, culture, and nationalism, and has self-identified as a mixed-race author, in both creative and critical books of national acclaim. In his novel *Any Known Blood* (1997) and his non-fiction text *Black Berry, Sweet Juice* (2001), Hill looks at racial identities alongside national borders, as he blurs the way that we see race and nationality. Hill's strategic use of artificial boundaries, such as national borders, underlines the constructedness of demarcations, such as race. Hill's use of miscegenation parallels his use of narrative as a storytelling tool, undermining the generic divisions between fiction and non-fiction.

Shani Mootoo was born in Ireland, raised in Trinidad, and emigrated to Canada when she was nineteen. Mootoo has a white Irish mother and an East Indian-Caribbean father, and refers to her own mixed heritage in her poems about hybridity. I will be looking at Mootoo's collection of short stories, *Out on Main Street and Other Stories* (1993), though she is most well known for her novel *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996). In her work, Mootoo uses the oral technique of an intrusive narrator, which emulates the Trinidadian method of storytelling, in order to introduce a complex rereading of hybridity. Here, miscegenation acts as a narrative device, entwining itself into the story.

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Danzy Senna was born in the USA to a white Jewish mother and a black radical father. Senna has worked on fiction as well as non-fiction (she has published several articles as a journalist), and her writing consistently questions the ways that race is complicated through its own fictionality. I will not be looking at either of Senna's two novels, *Caucasia* (1998) and *Symptomatic* (2004), but, instead, her journalistic work, as she is constantly looking for the lines between fiction and non-fiction as they mimic divisions of race. Miscegenation exposes the arbitrary racial divides which underwrite the fiction of identity. All three of these authors examine passing and the politics of racial passing in different and unique ways.

In this essay I will argue that passing is a central theme for all three authors, though the critical attention that has been paid to this particular theme differs widely between them. Passing has been identified as a key theme in Hill's *Any Known Blood* by Jennifer Harris in her essay "'Ain't No Border Wide Enough': Writing Black Canada in Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood*,"¹ to which I will return later. Senna's *Caucasia*, meanwhile, has become one of the most frequently cited texts in contemporary discussions of passing.² By contrast, passing is rarely mentioned – much less made the subject of critical focus – in discussions of Shani Mootoo. This is perhaps due to what I will argue are profound limitations in current discussions of passing, which too often neglect the politics of gender and sexuality and, even within a focus on race, tend to obscure forms of passing that operate between identities other than black and white. By juxtaposing Mootoo's treatments of passing with Hill's and Senna's more widely discussed treatments, I aim to challenge traditional models of passing (represented in this paper by F. James Davis and Frantz Fanon) through a focus on intersectionality.

Although I will seek to complicate this definition through the course of my argument, I begin with a relatively straightforward interpretation of the term passing, where to pass means to perform a race not one's own. I see one's own race as that by which one identifies oneself, or is most likely to be identified as by others. This identification is troublesome, especially in the case of those of mixed-race parentage, but this is the point of the article. "Passing" is paradoxical in this context, suggesting both that race is a concrete identity that certain persons may transgress in order to assume another racial identity and, simultaneously, that race is fluid and changeable as the transgressor is capable of performing one identity or another. This essay will trace the history of the notion of passing, beginning with its appearance in Harriet Beecher-Stowe's well-known abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), and following its transformation from a static

conception of the black person passing for white to a theoretical practice of acting out any/every race, in order to open the term up and explore why passing is considered perverse by so many and enlightened by a few.

Passing itself is as hard to define as race. In *Any Known Blood*, Hill uses what Harris calls *playful passing*³ to help his protagonist Langston Cane V define himself, and the rejection of passing becomes a moment of development for this character, the moment when he begins to grow and see himself as a raced man with a responsibility to himself, his race, and his family. Shani Mootoo's short stories in the collection *Out on Main Street* all look at the ways that race, nationality, and language work as tools of negotiation as she moves from Trinidad to Canada and attempts to define herself in the midst of a multicultural diasporic community, where she attempts to pass as herself. In her novel *Caucasia*, Danzy Senna uses the more conventional form of passing (black for white), where the mixed-race protagonist Birdie is guilt-ridden over her loss of racial identity as she is forced, by her mother, to pass for white. She realises that race is more than performance; it is the means by which she defines herself as somewhere between white and black. However, in the journalistic work that I focus on in this essay, Senna conducts a more comprehensive critical investigation of passing, recounting situations in which she felt compelled to pass as black, as well as white, in her childhood. These three authors move through and past traditional ideas of passing in order to convey a complexity of subject. This complexity is necessary in order to re-think the ways that passing is portrayed in popular culture, in the effort to re-create the ways that purity of race has been historically conceptualised. Absolutes and certainties are the underpinnings of race and the complexity of miscegenation, demonstrated through a repositioning of racial passing, disrupts these supports and allows for the realisation that race is a fiction built on a faulty base.

Traditional Passing: A Black and White Issue

In his book *Who is Black?: One Nation's Definition* (1991), F. James Davis offers definitions and explanations of miscegenation and passing. I begin here because Davis places his text specifically in the sociological space of the African American community, citing this community as unique and precious and completely distinct from the rest of the United States and the world.

This point of view also offers a popular method of seeing passing in contemporary North America. Davis suggests that:

The black experience with passing as white in the United States contrasts with the experience of other ethnic minorities that have features that are clearly non-caucasoid. The concept of passing applies only to blacks – consistent with the nation’s unique definition of the group. A person who is one-fourth or less American Indian or Korean or Filipino is not regarded as passing if he or she intermarries and joins fully the life of the dominant community, so the minority ancestry need not be hidden. It is often suggested that the key reason for this is that the physical differences between these other groups and whites are less pronounced than the physical differences between African blacks and whites, and therefore are less threatening to whites. However, keep in mind that the one-drop rule and anxiety about passing originated during slavery and later received powerful reinforcement under the Jim Crow system.⁴

Davis essentialises and simplifies complicated issues of racial identification by claiming that Black America is somehow unique, and all other race/national categorisations the same, in his treatment of miscegenation and passing. He reminds us that passing grows out of a history of black slavery (though this colonial sanctioned enslavement of Africans is not unique to the United States of America) and that, until recently, passing meant portraying yourself as white if you are black.

Passing from black to white is an important historical moment, but not the only manner in which to view passing. As I intend to show, an international perspective on colonial history immediately makes Davis’s claims that passing is specifically situated in the African American community unsustainable. However, even within Davis’s limited framework, it is easy to show that passing has never worked as simply as he suggests. One of the most influential novels about African American slavery, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, presents a much more complex view of the ways that passing has worked historically. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was begun as a serial in 1851 and published in 1852 and was often cited in debates on the emancipation of slaves in the period. In her preface to the novel, Beecher Stowe claims that “the object of these

sketches is to awaken sympathy and feeling for the African race, as they exist among us,”⁵ so the novel is written in a particular style of ethnological pity. Despite the obvious limitations of its perspective, however, the novel still helps to illustrate a far broader view of passing than that on which Davis bases his definition.

In her article “Creole family politics in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*,” Carolyn Vellenga Berman tells us that “again and again in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, mixed-race slaves pass as something other than slaves not by passing as white Anglo-Americans, but by passing as Spanish or French.”⁶ George is a runaway slave who needs to disguise himself in order to make his way to Canada. He decides that passing is the only way to manage his disappearance and opts for presenting himself as a wealthy man of Spanish background, in complete contradiction to the expectations of his former owner, who claims that George will attempt this journey by passing for white. In fact, George actually darkens his skin to complete his transformation, as “from his mother he had received only a slight mulatto tinge, amply compensated by its accompanying rich, dark eye. A slight change in the tint of the skin and the color of his hair had metamorphosed him into the Spanish-looking fellow he then appeared.”⁷ Passing, here, not only moves us outside of the black/white binary, but creates a layering of racial identities that can be adopted on an as needed basis. Davis’s argument for the insularity of passing as an African American phenomenon that moves from black to white becomes inconceivable in light of Stowe’s important and historically located novel.

One of the reasons for the continued importance of Beecher Stowe’s novel lies in the way that the author claims empathy as the impetus for her novel. In a now-familiar trope, she plays on the similarity between the restriction of women’s rights and the plight of the slave to encourage sympathy in her audience. She asserts that “I have been the mother of seven children, the most beautiful and the most loved of which lies buried near my Cincinnati residence. It was at his dying bed and at his grave that I learned what a poor slave a mother may feel when her child is torn away” in her consideration of the events that inspired *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.⁸ The comparison of women and slaves in the nineteenth century (and throughout British colonialism) is ultimately a superficial one. However, Stowe’s empathy with slaves, as a woman, is a common argument in favour of emancipation, and the roles that gender plays in and around racial marginalisation are an important consideration when discussing the subject of passing.

The relationship between gender, racial marginalisation and passing is central to *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon's analysis of the place of the black man in a white world. In this foundational text to postcolonial studies, Fanon uses French psychoanalytic theory, existentialist thought, and powerfully charged rhetoric to demonstrate the effects of colonial subjugation on the educated man. Fanon's title, *Black Skin, White Masks*, is a visual description of the black man's desire for power, for the authority of the self in performing something other than self, race, and personhood. Fanon is of mixed racial background, having been born in Martinique to a black father and a biracial mother. His arguments are all personally located and he relies heavily on psychoanalytic theory to support his views on the relationship between France and Martinique, black and white, men and women.

Fanon is particularly interested in miscegenation and passing, and devotes a great deal of his text to analysing the responsibilities of the black man and the failures of the mulatto woman. It is important to note that, for Fanon, the black person is always male, the mulatto is always female, and the female mulatto always desires to pass for white. The black man desires not to pass, but to *be* white. Fanon tells us that "out of the blackest part of my soul, across the zebra striping of my mind, surges this desire to be suddenly *white*."⁹ Fanon's treatment of this "desire" is fundamental to the reading of his text; it is not white skin that is desirable, but the privilege of normalcy. Fanon desires to present himself without skin, to *be*, rather than to *be black*; he is "uneasy and anxious indeed. An anxious man who cannot escape his body."¹⁰ The black man is in crisis, but where does this leave the black woman?

The black woman desires to be white. She does not desire the complicated whiteness of a body without skin; she desires to marry a white man, to have white children, and to live a "white" life. Fanon captures the role of the black woman here, when he states

I shall attempt to grasp the living reactions of the woman of color to the European. First of all, there are two such women: the Negress and the mulatto. The first has only one possibility and one concern: to turn white. The second wants not only to turn white but also to avoid slipping back.¹¹

For Fanon, the mulatto and the black woman are united in their desire to become white. However, the possibility of mobility is greater for the mulatto woman, and therefore so too is the

anxiety she feels, to “avoid slipping back” by continually passing as white. She will do this by marrying the white man and thereby sharing in his race privilege, so that, where the black man desires to achieve whiteness through self-accomplishment, the mulatto can only achieve a lesser condition of passing. Fanon situates his argument in essentialisms and absolutes, meaning that the mulatto woman who falls in between becomes an object of contempt, a failure of the black race in the face of European colonialism. It is also important to note that for Fanon passing always takes place within a rigidly heterosexual structure: not only are heterosexual relationships assumed throughout his account of the mulatto woman, they are in fact the sole *means* by which she is able to pass. If it is possible to find space within Fanon’s argument for forms of racial passing that might follow a trajectory other than black to white (a debatable point in itself), the mulatto woman is afforded no possibility for mobility outside of that provided by a subordinate position in a heterosexual relationship. The implicit heteronormativity inscribed in such traditional accounts of passing is one of the reasons why it is essential to incorporate the intersectional model of passing offered by Mootoo’s *Out on Main Street* into a truly inclusive understanding of the term.

Like Davis, Fanon locates his argument in a tradition of racial passing: that of the black person who attempts to pass for white. Those who are able to pass usually possess lighter skin colour, physical features that blur racial categorisations, and the ability to cross class distinctions (Fanon focuses specifically on education, but I believe that this ability is a little more complex than that). Though Fanon fixates obsessively on skin colour, I find the movement between social classes to be more persuasive as a true “moment” of passing. A more comprehensive definition of passing must allow for complexity and open up the discourse for an inclusive view of the complex performances required in order to negotiate a “multicultural” world. In order to contextualise my discussion of passing in Hill, Mootoo, and Senna, I therefore turn to Valerie Smith’s article “Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing” in the hope of finding a version of passing that offers more than the narrow definition that Davis offers on the subject. Smith states:

I locate passing within the discourse of intersectionality because although it is generally motivated by class considerations (people pass primarily in order to partake of the wider opportunities available to those in power) and constructed in

racial terms (people describe the passing person as wanting to be white, not wanting to be rich), its consequences are distributed differently on the basis of gender (women in narrative are more likely to be punished for passing than are men).¹²

Smith both localises and globalises her argument by recognising that, while there are specific differences in the manner in which different groups pass as others, passing is ultimately about privilege and access to the benefits of a higher social class. Class here is the key. Class privilege is granted to certain races, religions, ethnicities, nationalities, etc. In other words, there is a real benefit to passing as something other than oneself which is possibly white, but not necessarily.

Passing as the desire for access to power, viewed from the perspective of class considerations and intersectionality, is central to this essay's argument. The tradition of passing that follows the trajectory from black to white simply does not apply in today's world, as "the narrative trajectories of classic passing texts are typically predetermined; they so fully naturalize certain givens that they mask a range of contradictions inherent within them."¹³ Passing from black to white, what I term *traditional passing*, follows in the wake of racial fear. Traditional passing relies on a strict biological definition of race even as it reminds us that race is fluid and impossible to define biologically. There are no physical characteristics that occur in all the people of one race, and racial ambiguity is further enhanced through mixed parentage. If traditional passing demands that we re-think race as a biological fact, *class passing* (a version of passing that recognises its roots in that of class privilege) enables us to re-think an ahistorical representation of traditional passing that promotes the conceit that all non-white persons desire to be white.

"Playful Passing" into Shades of Grey

In Lawrence Hill's novel *Any Known Blood*, the protagonist Langston Cane V engages in "playful passing" in his desire to refute the mores of traditional passing.¹⁴ Langston's racial features are ambiguous, which allows him to assume racial identities that are not a part of his parentage. Langston's ability to perform any race presents a flaw in the argument that race is real, rather than a fiction. Langston's

light-skinned black body thus both invokes and transgresses the boundaries between the races and the sexes that structure the American social hierarchy. It indicates a contradiction between appearance and “essential” racial identity within a system of racial distinctions based upon differences presumed to be visible.¹⁵

Langston attempts to use playful passing as a tool in his efforts to destroy the myths of traditional passing; he poses as any race other than white in order to confuse and complicate ideas of racial passing. Playful passing acts on the individual level. Langston passes as Algerian to get a job as a speechwriter. The requirements of the position are that “only racial minorities need apply” and Langston decides to “test [his] theory that nobody would challenge [his] claim to any racial identity” in an attempt to undermine traditional passing with playful passing.¹⁶ Langston’s efforts do not prove to anyone (except, perhaps, himself) that race is an ephemeral construct that is perpetrated by and for a normalised social hierarchy that privileges a few at the expense of many. In the end, playful passing is a useless pastime that disturbs no one except Langston’s father.

Langston is at odds with his family, his race, and himself. Passing, for Langston, is symptomatic of a larger problem of racial misidentification. Langston recognises the absurdity of race, as a social category without real biological basis, without understanding the ramifications that race has as a class category. Playful passing, for Langston, always involves passing as another marginalised group; he refuses to pass for white. However, to his father, Langston’s passing is always a betrayal. After he finds out about Langston’s role as office Algerian, he says “but you haven’t done it yet. What’s the matter? You ashamed of me? You trying to pass for white?”¹⁷ The condition of the passing, that it is playful rather than traditional, matters not to Langston Cane IV. Passing is a political act that reflects a need in the individual attempting to pass, a need for access to a race (class) not his own. Langston’s father then laughs “at his own joke. It was the same laugh I’d heard as a child at countless Sunday breakfasts, when he had told stories of light-skinned blacks trying to pass as whites in the States. Stories of evasion and discovery had always been my father’s favourites.”¹⁸ Here, Langston does not think about passing as a political act. He does not think about what passing means when he chooses a new race for himself, on a whim. Because of this thoughtlessness, playful passing does not enable

Langston to re-think his own race. He has not yet realised that there is value in accepting race, as well as refuting it, and understanding the difference in both. While race remains arbitrary and ambiguous, it is also a fact that will materially shape his life.

Langston begins to understand this dual nature of race when he starts attending a black church in Baltimore and feels the need to reinforce certain aspects of his racial features. He does not desire to pass for anything but black; instead, he wishes to be considered part of a group. Langston recalls that, “I was glad that my hair was longer than usual, and combed out into an afro, because I didn’t want to be seen as a white visitor. I wanted my race clearly marked.”¹⁹ Here, Langston desires to be raced as a black man. He is invested in marking himself with the attributes of blackness, as it is required to gain acceptance into the group (or so he thinks). It is through his time in Baltimore that Langston learns that race matters, even if it does not. He needs to negotiate the in-between space of the ambiguity of race and its social ramifications, in order to claim it for himself and his family (for whom race has always held importance) as a tool as well as a weapon. At the end of the novel, Langston, his aunt, his partner, and his friend visit a museum. Langston’s aunt claims that they are family and “the clerk looked at her. The clerk looked at us. There was Yoyo, who was as dark as dark got, and a good deal darker than Mill. There was Annette, who was of a medium complexion, and then there was me – Zebra Incorporated.”²⁰ Choosing family becomes more important than choosing race; Langston learns to identify himself first through his family and second through race. It is the gaze of the clerk that forces him to consider race as real, but the support of his family that makes that stare familiar and negligible. *Any Known Blood* acts as a counter to traditional passing by working through playful passing (as a stunted counter-performance of race) and into a more complex understanding of race. Narratives of traditional passing work on “the combination of these points – passing as betrayal, blackness as self-denial, whiteness as comfort – [and] ha[ve] the effect of advocating black accommodationism, since the texts repeatedly punish at least this particular form of upward mobility.”²¹ Hill’s novel uses this idea of passing as a jumping-off platform, in order to demonstrate that race is a complicated issue that is both real and not at the same time. At the end of the novel, the group is passing as family, in spite of race. *Any Known Blood* is, rather than a novel complicit in promoting ideas of hegemony by punishing the transgression of passing, a novel that celebrates the fact that we are all passing as one thing or another, whether we desire it or not.

Cultural Passing and Community Pride

Hill's *Any Known Blood* broadens out the notions of race and passing and, in universalising a type of performance that has historically been highly circumscribed, implicitly gestures towards the broader and more complex kinds of transgression to be found in the work of Shani Mootoo. The flexibility of Valerie Smith's intersectional conception of passing as the desire for social mobility provides a useful framework in which to read these "passings." Smith reminds us that there are layers to society, and that passing is the attempt to negotiate these layers; it is the pursuit of acceptance and privilege. Of characters in narratives of passing, Smith states:

I would suggest [...] that their conditions are productive sites for considering how the intersectionality of race, class, and gender ideologies are constituted and denied; not only do these bodies function as markers of sexual and racial transgression, but they signal as well the inescapable class implications of crossing these boundaries.²²

Smith thus constructs passing as an act of intersectional transgression. Race is one way of passing, but it is informed by all other social categorisations, and the end result may be the simultaneous transgression of multiple class boundaries.

Shani Mootoo's short stories from the collection *Out on Main Street* all look broadly at acts of passing that involve, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and nationality. The title story in particular is an excellent example of an opening-up of narratives of passing to include different ways in which people attempt to pass as other in order to attain class privilege. In this story, the unnamed protagonist reflects on the negotiation of performances she (and her partner, Janet) must attempt as they walk down a crowded street. It is the confluence of outsider objectification and performative passing that make this narrative an intersectional experience of difference and social cognisance.

The protagonist and Janet are immigrants from Trinidad, now living in Canada. They are a lesbian couple who desire to find themselves in the (racial, ethnic, cultural) groups of Canada; they yearn for acceptance and solidarity. However, this yearning is complicated by difference

and, as a metonymic representation of diasporic politics of identity, “going for a outing with mih Janet on Main Street ain’t easy!”²³ Trinidad is comprised of four major racial groups: Indian, black, white, and Chinese. Two of these classifications are by colour, and two are by nationality. This is just one example of the ways that race invents itself through contradictions and misnomers. Janet and her partner are Indo-Trinidadian; they call themselves Indian and identify as such both racially and culturally (if not nationally). However, the protagonist tells us that the “reason we shy to frequent [Main Street] is dat we is watered-down Indians – we ain’t good grade A Indians. We skin brown, is true, but we doh even think ‘bout India unless something happen over dere and it come on de news.”²⁴ The protagonist recognises that there is a disjunct between the Indian of the Caribbean and the Indian of India, but in doing so she is not expressing her own opinion. Rather, this is an immigrant’s recognition of her own status, a reinterpretation of events as a result of new information. The protagonist has discovered her own lack, after moving to Canada and becoming witness (through the eyes of others) to her own failure as an Indian. She tells us: “I used to think I was a Hindu *par excellence* until I come up here and see real flesh and blood Indian from India. Up here, I learning ‘bout all kind a custom and food and music and clothes dat we never see or hear ‘bout in good ole Trinidad.”²⁵ The protagonist is corrected as she walks down Main Street, taught the right names for foods that she thought she knew, told the correct pronunciation for words that she believed she could say. The protagonist and her partner are told, all down Main Street, that they are inadequate as Indians.

The protagonist and her partner desire group solidarity, but they lack the prerequisite amount of culture needed to inform them of their roles. So, instead, they perform the act of being an Indian, by keeping conversation to a minimum and letting their brown faces speak for them instead. However, nationality is not the only barrier to acceptance. The protagonist warns that keeping quiet in this way is no defence against unwanted attention if you also happen to be one-half of a lesbian couple. She states:

Walking next to Janet, who so femme dat she redundant, tend to make me look like a gender dey forget to classify. Before going Main Street I does parade in front de mirror like a strong-man monkey I doh exactly feel right and I always revert back to mih true colours. De men dem does look at me like if dey is exactly what I need a taste of to cure me good and proper.²⁶

The protagonist worries about her performance as a homosexual woman, walking with her partner, while simultaneously worrying about her performance as an Indian (-Caribbean) woman walking through an Indian (-Indian) neighbourhood. She is an Indian passing for Indian, a lesbian passing for gay. She needs to announce these identities in the way she holds herself, in the way she walks, because otherwise there is confusion. However, this desire to pass as oneself becomes invalidated when the protagonist and her partner attempt to pass for heterosexual, in their efforts to establish a rapport with the Indians they meet in a shop.

A group of men walk into the shop and start harassing not only the protagonist and her partner, but another group of women. Suddenly there is cohesion in the room, a group solidarity formed in the bonds of womanhood, recognition that women everywhere must help each other to overcome the mistreatment of all at the hands of some men. The protagonist states that “de atmosphere in de room take a hairpin turn, and it was man aggressing on woman, woman warding off a herd a man who just had dey pride publicly cut up a couple a times in just a few minutes.”²⁷ It becomes important to be recognised as part of the group, even though it requires the suppression of the lesbian identity. The bridging together of the women is dependent on the fact of their similar sexualities, and the protagonist and her partner are willing to pass as heterosexual in order to participate in the group. This does not last, however, as two other women walk into the room and “all cover get blown. If it was even remotely possible dat I wasn’t noticeable before, now Janet and I were over-exposed.”²⁸ The two women are friends of Janet and her partner, another lesbian couple, and they are not interested in passing as heterosexual. They perform their homosexuality loudly and disrupt the grouping of the women in the room. Passing here is nigh on impossible, because no one can decide what they are passing for. The desire for class passing is inflected with the loneliness of the immigrant, as she moves through a re-identification process in a diasporic world.

Performing the Self: The Politics of Passing

The complex politics of passing as and for oneself form the topic of much of Danzy Senna’s non-fictional work on the topic. Senna’s version of this type of paradoxical passing is a particularly anxious one, requiring a modification even of Smith’s intersectional definition of the

act of passing. While Smith links passing with class privilege, suggesting that the act of passing is a response to a desire for moving upward in a normalised social hierarchy, Senna is aware that passing relies on a certain amount of status already, as “racial fluidity, ambiguity, comes with privilege.”²⁹ The ability to move oneself from one social class to another (indeed, into a more privileged space) is itself a luxury. The ability to choose is not one that all people have. In a 2002 interview with Claudia M. Milian Arias in *Callaloo*, Senna talks about the ways that race and passing are conceptualised and says that, “when we talk about race, we are not talking simply about physical features or racial ancestry, but about racial fantasies and about what a person, given their appearance, their language, their financial status, their gender, represents in the national imagination.”³⁰ Economy and status are both elements that are tied irrevocably to race, and hence to passing. Thus, Senna suggests, if we are to interpret the ways in which passing works in contemporary settings, then we first must consider what race *is*. We must, in other words, analyse how race is constructed *by* language, economy, gender, and narratives of national and cultural belonging before we are able to understand how it restricts or enables moving within and through these categories.

In her first novel *Caucasia*, Senna tells the story of two sisters of mixed racial background, one of which looks white and the other black. The novel questions the role of race in identity (as attributed by both the self and others), for if appearance is not the root of race then what is? Senna draws extensively from her own experiences as a mixed-race person for this book. She has a sister who looks black, and she herself is often considered white. In her article “Passing and the Problematic of Multiracial Pride,” she offers a thorough examination of those issues of her own life that affected the ways in which she wrote race (and race politics) in *Caucasia*. Senna tells us that, at different points in her life, she has passed as both black *and* white, both identities feeling artificially constructed as she had to perform them for an audience that could not immediately identify her race. Addressing what I have been calling traditional (black-to-white) passing, Senna notes that, “in those situations where I was silent in the face of racism, where I ‘passed,’ I felt a part of me die. I was witness to the things that white people say when they think they’re alone.”³¹ Senna also recalls herself and her sister attending an Afrocentric school as children. She remembers being ostracised for not being black enough, despite her every effort to perform the role of a black child. It is only as she and her sister move on to a more “traditional” school setting (meaning a school with a white majority in population)

that Senna is finally able to pass for black, in retaliation against racism directed at her sister. She states:

At a young age I made the decision that if the kids around me were going to call my sister a nigger, they had better call me one too. I feel now that this choice was not so much one between black and white, but one between speech and silence. It was how I learned to find my own voice, rather than letting my body speak for me.³²

Here, Senna reminds us that racial performances can be simultaneously acted and imposed. Senna chooses to use her voice in conjunction with her body's implicit passing, in her effort to undermine popular assumptions about race and racial identities.

Senna observes that "race has never been about blood, and it has never been about reason. Rather, it has to do with power and economics and history. One of my concerns about the multiracial movement is that it buys into the idea of race as a real, biological category."³³ The multiracial movement is of ongoing concern to Senna in her article; she examines what it means to be mixed race in a political sphere that enjoys static identities of easily discernible social classes. Like passing, miscegenation has the capacity to function either as an enabler of complex thoughts about race, or just another way of supporting a system predicated on the marginalisation of the majority, to the benefit of a few. Thinking about identity, and the construction of the self through racial performances, Senna states that "ultimately I'm not so fixated on what I call myself or anybody else calls himself or herself. I think that identity politics (and all questions of racial pride) can be a form of narcissism, and at their worst are a distraction from real questions of power."³⁴ Senna wants to complicate the issue as much as she can, in order to disrupt the ways in which race is constructed "traditionally." Race becomes transformative, and passing becomes political. If passing is both a privilege and the desire for privilege, then it must be either imploded or exploded as a means to deconstruct race and expose it as a self-indulgent fiction. Reflecting on her work and her life, Senna comes to the realisation that "[her] multiplicity is inherent in [her] blackness, not opposed to it. To be black, for [her], is to contain all colors."³⁵ We are all passing, perhaps not in the sense of traditional passing, but everyone seeks to better their own condition. Even if all you seek is access to a group that denies some part of you, then

you are passing. Passing is the act of self-denial; it is the fact of mis-identifying (racially, ethnically, nationally, sexually, etc.) and it exists in all layers of life.

We are all passing. We all contain all colours. Race is an imaginative construct that permeates the world (a result of European colonialism) and degrades us all. Davis would have us believe that “those who agonize over whether to pass are already mostly white genetically, and perhaps entirely in some cases. Thus, the struggle is mainly about permanently leaving the social status category, the community, that is called black,”³⁶ but Davis’s “genetics” is in itself a lie, perpetuated to give race a legitimacy that it would not have otherwise. Davis slips biological discourses of race into a discussion on the social aspects of passing in an effort to support his assertions about the anthropological tendencies of the mixed-race person. Passing, for Davis, is a unique experience; it is felt in no one else but in the African American. I disagree. I say that we are all passing, that we cannot help but pass. I say that race (alongside other social categories that marginalise and minoritise) forces us to pass for something other. Smith reminds us that intersectionality is the main consideration in acts of passing and I have argued here that it is this very intersectionality that requires all social acts to be acts of passing. Like Shani Mootoo’s protagonist who is forced to pass as herself – or like Danzy Senna, who must rewrite her body because it attempts to pass for something she has no desire to access – we are all passing in our own performances, perhaps successfully, perhaps not. The works I have discussed in this essay demonstrate that it is only through agency, through the rewriting of bodies, that passing becomes something other than passive. We are all passing, but this does not mean that we cannot confront passivity.

Endnotes

¹ Jennifer Harris, "Ain't No Border Wide Enough: Writing Black Canada in Lawrence Hill's *Any Known Blood*," *Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (2004), 367-74.

² See, for example, Lori Harrison-Kahan, "Passing for White, Passing for Jewish: Mixed Race Identity in Danzy Senna and Rebecca Walker," *MELUS*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2005), 19-48; Michele Elam, "Passing in the Post-Race Era: Danzy Senna, Philip Roth, and Colson Whitehead," *African American Review*, Vol. 41 (2007), 749-68. Gayle Wald also devotes a chapter of her book *Crossing The Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000) to Senna.

³ Harris, "Ain't No Border Wide Enough," 370.

⁴ F. James Davis, *Who is Black? One Nation's Definition* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 14.

⁵ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, intro. Raymond Weaver (New York: Modern Library, 1938), xxii.

⁶ Carolyn Vellenga Berman, "Creole Family Politics in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Incidents In the Life of a Slave Girl*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (2000), 9.

⁷ Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, 135.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xviii

⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 63.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹² Valerie Smith, "Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing," *Diacritics*, Vol. 24, Nos. 2-3 (1994), 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁴ Harris, "Ain't No Border Wide Enough," 370.

¹⁵ Smith, "Reading the Intersection," 45.

¹⁶ Lawrence Hill, *Any Known Blood* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1997), 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 400.

²¹ Smith, "Reading the Intersection," 44.

²² *Ibid.*, 57.

²³ Shani Mootoo, "Out On Main Street," in *Out On Main Street and Other Stories*. (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1993), 48.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁷ Ibid., 55.

²⁸ Ibid., 57.

²⁹ Quoted in Claudia M. Milian Arias, "An Interview with Danzy Senna," *Callaloo*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2002), 449.

³⁰ Ibid., 449.

³¹ Danzy Senna, "Passing and the Problematic of Multiracial Pride (or, Why One Mixed Girl Still Answers to Black)," in *Black Cultural Traffic*, eds. Harry J. Elam and Kennell Jackson (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 84-85.

³² Ibid., 85.

³³ Ibid., 85.

³⁴ Ibid., 86.

³⁵ Ibid., 85.

³⁶ Davis, *Who Is Black?* 143-44.

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