



# (Mis)Recognition of Post-blackness through Crossings in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*

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**Abstract**— *Post-blackness emerged as a reaction against the commonly old-fashioned and restrictive representation of blackness to enhance for a more fluid, flexible and fruitful representation of blackness. It is a shifting discourse for securing a multidimensional consideration of black identity that most contemporary African American women aspire to attain. Nevertheless, the pernicious influences of black authenticity and racial essentialism cast serious doubts on the premises of post-black rhetoric and complicate the recognition of post-black identity for African American women within and across geo-racial borders. Danzy Senna is one of the post-soul writers who shed light on this critical problem in her first novel *Caucasia*. She depicts the tiring journey of her female protagonist Birdie Lee who keeps crossing color and geographical borders in an endeavor to resist the grips of black authenticity and racial invisibility and to recognize the fluid form of post-black identity. The possibility of Birdie's (mis)recognition of post-black identity throughout her crossing journey is the central issue at stake. The present paper tends to illustrate the dilemma of her migrating female protagonist who is torn between the pressure of authentic blackness and the desire for post-blackness, between the influence of invisible blackness and the quest for black visibility. Interestingly, it investigates the extent to which she succeeds in recognizing a space of post-blackness through crossing practices.*



**Keywords**— *authenticity, crossing, identity, invisibility, post-blackness.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The ongoing celebration of multiracialism and the premises of black advancement have made blackness in vogue, and new considerations of blackness like the rhetoric of post-blackness have risen to prominence. Post-blackness emerged during the post-civil rights era as a reaction against the old-fashioned and restrictive representation of blackness, black authenticity and “any definition of African American identity and culture that [began] with an inflexible or essential idea of blackness” (McCaskili 178). Indeed, the construction of a shifting discourse based on fluid, flexible and fruitful treatments of blackness is the core intention of post-black discourse. It is “in the unstable, wobbly interstices” of blackness with other socio-racial categories that post-black rhetoric resides (Ashe, “Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic 611). It is a shift from

the fixed, authentic and patriarchal consideration of blackness to a more encompassing understanding of blackness, associating black race with distinct cultural and geo-racial affiliations. Nevertheless, this shift for securing a multidimensional consideration of black identity seems to be a complicated issue to be tackled due to the continuing influences of racism and racist attitudes.

The conception of post-blackness, that seems to be an artistic shift from the essentialist perception of blackness, contradicts with the predominance of racial essentialism and black authenticity. It is commonly believed that “American culture is so rooted in binary opposition of White and Non-White ... that to be at a point of post-blackness seems impossible” (qtd. in Byrd 37). The ongoing concepts of binarism, black essentialism and racial invisibility cast serious doubts on the preconceived

prospects of multiraciality and black progress, and they problematize the recognition of post-black identity for African American women within and across geo-racial borders.

Danzy Senna is one of the post-soul writers<sup>1</sup> who shed light on this critical problem in her first novel *Caucasia*. She reexamines the promising aspects of post-blackness along with the controversial practices of border crossings and the critical construction of black identity for biracial women in motion. Senna creates migrating female protagonists who keep floating and crossing color and geographical borders in an endeavor to grasp a more flexible and fruitful space of black identification. She explores the tiring journey of her female protagonist against the grips of racial essentialism, black authenticity and black invisibility. The unsecure quest for a fluid form of post-blackness in a world marked by the persistence of black authenticity and color essentialism is the central issue at stake in this article. In *Caucasia*, Senna engages in this threatening quest by underscoring the dilemma of her female character who stands at cross purpose between the pressure of authentic blackness and the desire for post-blackness, between the influence of invisible blackness and the quest for black visibility. She investigates the predicament of her migrating female protagonist who strives to recognize her own version of black identity through crossing.

Studying *Caucasia* from the theory of postmodern feminism, this paper intends (1) to highlight the plight of *Caucasia*'s female protagonist, suffering from the trouble of racial (in)visibility and black authenticity and confronting the predominant controversies between white visibility and invisible multiplicity as well as the desire for post-blackness in the world of authentic blackness. (2) The present article also underscores the extent to which Senna's female protagonist may succeed in recognizing a hybrid space of identification reflecting her longing for post-black sensibility and self-definition, by drawing attention to the critical significance of geo-racial crossings and border transgression.

## II. ILLUSTRATING THE DYNAMICS OF CROSSINGS, IN/VISIBILITY AND BLACK AUTHENTICITY IN CAUCASIA

*Caucasia* traces the crossings and displacements of Birdie Lee and her sister in an attempt to escape from the drudgery of black authenticity and the pressure of racial invisibility. As the epigraph of the novel entails with the portrayal of both black and white shades of two girls, *Caucasia* tackles

the struggles of two sisters, the lighter-skinned Birdie Lee and the older, black sister Cole Lee, who fight to find their home space and construct their own racial identities while crossing racial and geographical borders. From the onset of the novel, Birdie Lee is portrayed as a young, exhausted and fragile girl, racially confined within the national paradigms of body politics and socially effaced under the pressure of other's expectations. She is unwilling to cross racial, societal and even ideological borders stated by others. As Birdie clearly states, "I was nobody, just a body without a name or a history [...]. With only the body I travelled in" (Senna, *Caucasia* 1). The feelings of self-effacement and socioracial invisibility and particularly the pressure of others' judgment on the basis of visible signs bear witness to Birdie's bitter experience of crossing geo-racial borders.

Two significant phases mark Birdie's journey of crossing and jeopardize her pursuit for a non-authentic form of blackness: her life in Boston and her experience in New Hampshire. Birdie's childhood in Boston, a racially stratified and socially segregated city, exerts threatening impacts on Birdie's attempt to recognize blackness. She lives in a community in which "You are either white or black. No checking 'Other.' No halvies" as Senna herself confirms in her essay "The Mulatto Millennium" (15-6, emphasis added). To be a lighter-skinned daughter of a black American father and a white mother puts Birdie in a quandary position: She is caught not simply between blackness and whiteness, but also between her father's urge for a homogeneous form of black integration and her mother's attempt for black rejection. She is unable to secure "a balance between being 'black and proud' and representing her white mother's heritage" (Dagbovie-Mullins 62). She cannot be associated only with the visible whiteness of her appearance, and she is unwilling to identify with the invisible blackness of her racial heritage.

Even in her attempt to be identified and associated with blackness, Birdie finds herself indulged in an authentic form of blackness endorsed by her black-skinned sister Cole and her African American father Deck Lee. To guarantee a strong father-daughter bond, Birdie tries to pursue the beliefs of her black father Deck Lee who adopts a homogeneous and essentialist treatment of racial politics and frequently judges people in terms of their appearance. Furthermore, blindly, Birdie follows the steps of her sister Cole so as to be identified as black. She avers that her sister is "the reflection that proves [her] own existence. [...Her life] rotated around Cole" (Senna, *Caucasia* 5). To be defined in terms of others' rules, Birdie is self-effaced and

<sup>1</sup> The term "post-soul writers" refers to the writers who were either born or came of age after the Civil Rights movement.

racially stigmatized, unable to liberate herself from the shackles of black essentialism and color visibility.

Indeed, the identification of a lighter-skinned, African American woman like Birdie is restricted and conditioned by the predetermined dictates of racial authenticity and color visibility. She falls prey to the preconceived and ossified ideology of black essentialism in the Bostonian society which dogmatically believes in the visible blackness. Regarding her white skin, Birdie wonders “whether [she] was really invisible” within the black community, “a feeling that thrilled [her] even as it scared [her]” (Senna, *Caucasia* 14). She has a trouble dealing with a color-based system of identification in Boston in which her visible whiteness is harshly denied as an opposition to the invisible blackness. Birdie is frustrated from the way she is ostracized and pigeonholed in terms of her visible whiteness while overlooking her belonging to the invisible blackness. As Samira Kawash clearly illustrates, “[t]he modern concept of race is therefore predicated on an epistemology of visibility, but the visible becomes an insufficient guarantee of knowledge” (130).

In this juncture, this epistemology of in/visibility dominates the contemporary consideration of race construction and problematizes the interrelation of “the visible surface of the body with its inner truth” (Kawash 130). Elsewhere, Birdie is restrictively defined on how she is perceived by others, and not on what she is really being. As an African American woman with a white skin, Birdie suffers from the orthodox contradiction between “the person [she] is and the person society perceives [her] to be; that is, between who [she] is as an individual, and the way [she] is designated and treated by others” (Piper 10). Her black community frequently judges her in terms of her appearing whiteness or what she *seems to be* and not what she *really wants to be*.

In the Black Power school of Roxbury, Birdie is critically judged and harshly humiliated due to her different skin color. She is harshly teased and rejected by black pupils who “cannot accept Birdie’s mixed-race because they cannot see it” (Herrera 57). In the classroom, Birdie is beaten and humiliated by a black boy who asks in a derisive manner: “What you doin’ in this school? You white?” (Senna, *Caucasia* 43). Speechless, as usual, Birdie depends on her sister Cole to speak on her behalf, and to protect her from all the troubles she faces. Cole’s blackness is the only “badge of [Birdie’s] entrance” to this Black Power school and the sole proof of her belonging to the black race (Senna, *Caucasia* 39). After the children’s acts of bullying, Cole plainly asserts to Maria that “Birdie isn’t white. She is black. *Just like me*” (Senna, *Caucasia* 48, emphasis added).

Even though she is no longer teased and humiliated thanks to Cole’s presence, Birdie finds herself alienated and

estranged from the black folk. As she plainly declares, “I often found myself [...], as if trying to eat myself alive, [...] as if trying to *find another body buried inside*. I pondered whether it was better to be harassed or ignored” (Senna, *Caucasia* 48-9, emphasis added). She becomes aware that her sense of estrangement is due to the unperceived blackness buried inside her, and particularly lies in the inadequate and invisible blackness which contradicts with the long-established ideology of authentic blackness. As such, a lighter-skinned woman like Birdie finds herself excluded and “unwelcome[d] in [her] own community” because she is accused of “lacking ‘authenticity’ or not being ‘Black enough’” to be part of the black world (qtd. in McKibbin 148).

Birdie’s accusation of being “not black enough” and not representing black authenticity prevents her from the possible integration in the Bostonian community since she “does not appropriately articulate and perform a monolithic version of blackness” (Joseph 74). She has to abide by the restrictive paradigms of racial essentialism to shield herself from the drudgery of racial segregation in a world that provides no other options for mixed-race people: either white or black. Desperate to be integrated in her black community, Birdie decides to pass for authentic blackness and to act as an authentic black girl. She tries to learn how to become black and to be somehow “an ‘authentic’ African American” woman (Grassian 324). Birdie makes striking efforts “to blend in”, by learning to master Black English, wearing her hair in a tight braid to mask its texture, and dressing up with a pair of gold hoops, Sergio Valentine jeans and jacket with sparkles. She attempts to make her inherent blackness visible through costumes and physical appearance to guarantee an image of blackness that is “somehow more authentic, at least in the minds of her family and schoolmates” (Rummell 4). In search for this sense of authenticity, Cole too uses Jergen’s lotion to blacken her white knees and elbows so as to satisfy her black friends’ expectations. In fact, they both make the necessary to conform to the rules of Nkrumah school and to fit in Boston society.

In her attempt to cross for authentic blackness, Birdie stands at cross purpose between the obligation of a disguised body for integration and the desire for unmasked self for identification. The way she tries to cross as a black girl is the sole way of survival in the Nkrumah school; however, Birdie still asks, “[w]hat was the point of surviving if you had to disappear?” (Senna, *Caucasia* 8). She feels disappeared and invisible with her visible signs of bodily representation. Shackled by the racial paradox of in/visibility, Birdie is caught between “what the body says and what the body means” (Kawash 130). She is controlled and frequently judged in terms of her body. The way “how

to become someone else [is] to erase the person [s/he] was before" (Senna, *Caucasia* 62) disturbs Birdie's life and problematizes her pursuit for a fluid, flexible and non-authentic form of blackness.

In her home community of Boston, Birdie is racially perplexed, unwilling of securing a solid ground of black identification due to the pressure of the restrictively Bostonian system of racial binarism and black authenticity. While she comes "to consume her white-appearing exterior in order to arrive at the true black interior," Birdie can neither speak of the white part of her racial heritage nor attaining the fluid sense of blackness that seems to be out of her reach (Joseph 74). She falls prey the limitations of the Bostonian ideologues of racial essentialism and authentic blackness, blackness that Senna describes as "intellectual and defensive, abstract and negatively defined (always in relation to whiteness)" (qtd. in Dal Checco 171).

Again, moving to New Hampshire, Birdie finds herself enmeshed in the game of invisibility and lost in the meandering road of racial authenticity. Beyond her own choice, Birdie is coercively separated from her black sister and estranged from her black community to find herself compelled to flee with her white mother and to assimilate in the white world. While crossing geo-racial borders to New Hampshire, Birdie shifts her socio-racial positioning from an African American girl to a young white Jewish lady. Her mother chooses for her the name of her great-grandmother, the white suffragette Jessie, and she tells her that she becomes the daughter of David Goldman, a Jewish classics professor. Interestingly, she strives to associate Birdie "not only with whiteness, but also with her mother's racist ancestors" (Rummell 7), thereby concealing Birdie's connection with blackness that she has frequently yearned to attain.

Enmeshed in the tricks of invisibility and racial authenticity, Birdie is enforced to follow her mother's plan of performing whiteness, and to immerse in the white community of New Hampshire "that negates the racial and ethnic otherness she must repress" (Minto 202-3). The only way for Birdie to be accepted in this community is to accentuate her visible whiteness while keeping the other black part of herself invisible. She is compelled to pass for white and to act as "one of those New Hampshire girls" (Senna, *Caucasia* 233). Hence, this practice of crossing for whiteness and assuming a new faked identity instead of the real one is strikingly threatening for Birdie's longing for her own black identity.

As Danzy Senna herself asserts, crossing to whiteness and the acceptance in the white world can never be priceless. She plainly states, "where I 'passed,' I felt a part of me die" ("Passing and the Problematic of racial Pride" 84).

Likewise, enmeshed in this game of passing, Birdie with her new white identity finds her old black belonging begin to vanish. As she avers, by "allowing our new selves to bloom, it seemed the old had to disintegrate" and disappear (Senna, *Caucasia* 188). For the sake of her mother's safety, Birdie has to obliterate her inherent, black self in favor of the faked, white identity of a Jewish girl named Jessie Goldman, invented by her mother. She finds herself in a delicate dilemma since it seems to be difficult for her to mark a clear distinction between the real person and the performed persona. She is at once unwilling to reveal her inherent blackness while never being at ease in representing whiteness. Although she becomes aware that her life as Jesse Goldman, this "Jewish thing ... is a lie," Birdie cannot disclose it for fear of discovery (Senna, *Caucasia* 207). Instead, she keeps her "real self -Birdie Lee safely hidden... preserved, frozen solid in the moment in which [she] had left her" (Senna, *Caucasia* 233).

Trapped in the racial labyrinth of color binarism, Birdie feels confused between the white identity she pretends to perform and the black identity she yearns to attain. She goes through a painful sensation of Du Boisian "double-consciousness" or "tow-ness," the sense of being lost between "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals" of both races without perfectly belonging to a clear race (DuBois 8). Imprisoned in a white community, Birdie feels fragmented and misrecognized, unwilling to reconcile between the black personality of Birdie Lee and the white character of Jessie Goldman. She watches herself in a strange way, by splitting the body of Jessie from the self of Birdie. She explains her confusion by stating "I would look at my own body the way that I looked at another's. I would think, 'You,' not 'I,' in those moments, and as long as the girl was 'you,' I didn't feel that I lived those scenes, only that I witnessed them" (Senna, *Caucasia* 190).

This split between the body and the self, the "you" of Jessie and the "I" of Birdie conveys Birdie's disturbance about her self-definition and racial recognition. She estranges her white body from her black self that is oppressed and objectified. Further, she deduces that whenever the "you" or the body of Jessie comes to be real and empowered, the "I" or the self of Birdie is silenced, disempowered and even eliminated. As Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins concludes, "[t]hough Birdie does not literally vanish in the eyes of other people, she fades before her own eyes rendering herself invisible to her own mind" (69). Hence, through her attempts of crossing, Birdie realizes that her visible whiteness helps her integrate in the white community; however, this visibility regrettably leads to her feeling of invisibility and estrangement from her invisible blackness. She becomes aware that her apparent whiteness is "the



cause of her demise" (Curry 66), and her invisible blackness is in danger of disappearance.

Accordingly, throughout her restless crossings, Birdie comes to the awareness that her dreams of a non-authentic and fluid form of black identity is out of reach, and that a promising association between her blackness and other socio-racial affiliations seems to be difficult to realize. Under the pressure of "[k]illing one girl ...to let the other one free" (Senns, *Caucasia* 289), Birdie suffers from the discrepancy between the visible whiteness she is obliged to identify with and the invisible blackness she is not allowed to celebrate in her own way. She is "forced to live both [her] heritages as binaries rather than as an embodiment of multiplex subjectivities with crosscutting identifications" (Subreenduth 51). She has to learn how to reconsider these racial binaries so as to grasp an identity of her own that celebrates her black identity in association with her multiple socio-racial affiliations.

Indeed, a postmodern reading of *Caucasia* reveals Senna's intentions to deconstruct the orthodox of racial essentialism and black authenticity, and to reconstruct a hybrid space of identification transcending the limitations of national, racial and color borders. The extent to which Birdie is willing to fashion this hybrid space of identification and to ensure a heterogeneous form of black identity is the central point of discussion in the next part. Significantly, it is crucial to illustrate the way geo-racial crossings may help Birdie resist the impacts of racial parochialism and black authenticity, and procure an identity reflecting the promises of racial multiplicity and the ideal of post-blackness.

### III. REEXAMINING BIRDIE'S CROSSINGS FOR POST-BLACKNESS

The attempts of Birdie Lee to cross for authentic blackness and whiteness make her usually accused of betraying her blackness, thereby deserving tragic fate. Nevertheless, Birdie's position as a biracial migrant woman crossing geo-racial borders serves, not to reconstruct, but to deconstruct the white hegemony and black authenticity from within (Hutcheon 151). To be in motion and to detest staying in a single place means to be defiant and thereby resisting single and fixed space of belonging. As bell hooks nimbly elucidates, the movement from one place to another is "a defiant gesture" that entails "pushing against oppressive boundaries set by race, sex, and class domination", as well as dealing with "the realities of choice and location" ("Choosing the Margin" 203).

While crossing and shifting from one position to another, Birdie endeavors "to think beyond race" and "to reject imprisoning labels of color" superimposed upon her by others (Dagbovie-Mullins 59). She resents to be merely "a body in motion, forever galloping towards completion," to be completely black or white. Rather, she opts for self-agency and the sense of "comfort in that state of incompleteness, a sense that as long as [she] kept moving" and crossing borders, she would liberate herself from the limited paradigms of representation regulated by the U.S. nation (Senna, *Caucasia* 138). Throughout her crossing journey, Birdie frequently denounces the "complete," fixed identity determined by others, and she yearns for a sense of incomplete determination and "a perpetual state of reinvention" through the different crossing practices she underwent and "the people [she] encountered" (138).

In the similar line, Danzy Senna herself chooses this sense of comfort in the state of incompleteness, and she sets up for a dynamic and flexible basis of black identity, "something far more complex and mysterious," constructed in terms of her diverse experiences and different affiliations ("Passing and the Problematic of racial Pride" 83). Through *Caucasia*, Senna accounts for the impacts of one's lived experience, distinct interactions and racial crossings upon the construction of an inflexible and fluid form of blackness away from the shortsighted canonization of authentic blackness.

As one of the post-soul novels, *Caucasia* underscores the struggle of Birdie against the clear-cut and essentialist representation of black identity, by renegotiating complex and multifaceted considerations of blackness and thereby enhancing for the sensibility of post-blackness. On the basis of Bertram D. Ashe's appropriation of post-black matrix<sup>2</sup>, race performativity and Bhabha's concept of racial hybridity, this part is devoted to explore the way *Caucasia* investigates the paradigms of post-blackness, and the extent to which Birdie succeeds in securing a hybrid space of post-black identity through crossing.

Referring to Ashe's post-soul matrix, *Caucasia* advances a model of "cultural mulatto" who tends to identify as black with respect to her multi-racial backgrounds and to explore the multilayered aspects of blackness in opposition to the restrictive consideration of black race ("Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetics" 616). Accordingly, it nimbly postulates Birdie's search for a "hybrid, fluid, elastic, cultural mulattoesque sense of black identity" away from the dictates of racial essentialism and black authenticity (614). While tackling the conflicting perceptions of blackness throughout Birdie's journey, Senna aims to prove that

<sup>2</sup> According to Ashe, post-black matrix consists of three points which are the cultural mulatto archetype, blaxploration or the

exploration of blackness and then the signal allusion-disruption gestures ("Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetic" 613; 614).

blackness has to be represented as “multiple and shifting” rather than fixed and authentic, and that “identity is assumed to be performative rather than natural” (Wald 12). She intends to explore blackness, or using Ashe’s words, to “trouble blackness” in diverse socio-racial and political spheres (“Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetics” 614): She strives to destabilize the homogeneity of black representation, thereby orchestrating the fluidity and “freestyle” of post-black aesthetics that Birdie yearns for during her crossing journey.

In her way of constant shifting and socio-racial crossing, Birdie detests the others’ attempt to identify her in terms of her white skin, and to distance her from the inherent black ancestry. She aligns with Ashe’s “cultural mulatto archetype,” a lighter-skinned person of mixed-race parents who refuses to “deny or suppress any part of [his or her] complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black” (Ashe, “Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetics” 613). In this respect, Birdie resents the restrictive paradigm of “either/or” and the imposed act of “[k]illing one girl in order to let the other one free” (Senna, *Caucasia* 289). She chooses to be identified as black but with respect to “a multi-racial mix of cultures”, just as the cultural mulatto chooses to be (qtd. in Ashe, “Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetics” 613). During her trip of crossing, Birdie looks for a multiracial understanding of her black identity, or what Danzy Senna herself opts for, a “black-oriented multiracial identity,” an identity celebrating blackness in conjunction with racial mixture and multiple affiliations (Mckibbin 153). She embarks on a journey with her blackness that is constantly shifted and developed in terms of her circularity and racial switches between multiple locations, categories and identities. In this respect, her movements between black and white worlds, as well as her diverse experiences in the places she lived in and the people she came across help her make great strides towards this post-black identity.

Birdie’s preoccupation with blackness and black race emerges from her intimate bonds with her sister Cole and her aunt Dot. During her childhood in Boston, the lighter-skinned Birdie formed a solid relationship with her black sister Cole in an attempt to legitimize her belonging to the black race. She saw her blackness in Cole’s face as “a reflection that proved [her black] existence” (Senna, *Caucasia* 5). Their strong bond decentralizes the predominance of racial binary (either black or white), and asserts the possible union between blackness and whiteness. Despite her color difference, Birdie shares with Cole the love of blackness and black race. Using bell hooks’ words, Birdie “choose[s] to value, indeed to love, blackness” (“Loving Blackness” 11), but not the commonly fixed and authentic understanding of blackness.

In the Nkrumah school, Birdie chooses to act as a black girl and to pass for blackness to guarantee her integration in the black world. Her success in convincing her schoolmates that she is black despite her visible whiteness entails “the novel’s deconstruction of stable race categories” (Rummell 4). In fact, Senna tends to decentralize the stability of the color line and the potency of racial essentialism by “unh[un]g[un]g fixed categories of race” and blurring the line between visible whiteness and invisible blackness (Moore 111). Relying on Ashe’s third axe of post-soul matrix, “an allusion disruption strategy”, Senna strives to disrupt “reductive iterations of blackness”, by alluding to the permeability of color border and the constructedness of black identity (“Theorizing the Post-Soul Aesthetics” 615, 616). She intends to put an end to the biological essence of race, and to orchestrate the value of constructed black identity and racial performativity.

Focusing on the theory of performativity, race is performative based on the repetition and reproduction of certain acts so that racial identity is constantly constructed and transformed in terms of the changing acts and performances (Harrison-Kahan 27; Butler i). Hence, the formation of one’s identity “occurs through the reiteration of performances, or acts, that verify that identity” (Harrison-Kahan 27). The reiteration of these acts “risks undoing or redoing the stated norm in unexpected ways, thus opening up the possibility of a remaking of [race] along new lines” (Butler i). In the similar vein, through her acts of crossing for blackness, Birdie succeeds in “redoing the stated norms” of black authenticity by acting blackness but in her own way. She enhances for “new lines” of racial identity as constructed and performed rather than prescribed and given.

Hence, Birdie’s crossing for blackness, or her attempt to deal with blackness in a performative way, is the first step towards what Birdie calls “the art of changing” and her desired metamorphosis for post-black identity (Senna, *Caucasia* 62). She comes to reconsider the static norms of black identification and to change into someone else that others cannot expect her to be. She is able to persuade the majority of school girls that she is black only by performing blackness: she comes to speak black English and use a tight braid in her hair to mask its straight texture. Her performance of blackness is so telling that it discards the essentialist perception of black race. She is willing to deceive the authenticity of blackness by constructing a performed black identity along with her white skin, thereby enhancing for the flexible form of post-black identity. Indeed, Birdie’s performance is a “really slippery thing” that tends to decentralize the assumption of “real, fixed, solid self” and thus to advocate for multiple, fantasized and performed selves (Ashe, “Passing as Danzy Senna” 131-2). Birdie successfully comes to induce others to believe in her

fluid sense of blackness while maintaining her white self and even fanaticizing another new character for her own.

Her schoolmate Maria, who once insults Birdie because of her color difference, asserts the constructedness and performativity of her black identity. After Birdie's efforts to change into blackness, Maria confirms, "So, you black? [...] I got a brother just like you." (Senna, *Caucasia* 63). In resembling Birdie with her brother who may be "black or white, or something else altogether" (63), Maria unwittingly confirms Birdie's multiracial heritage: She accepts Birdie's performed blackness while never "ignor[ing] [her] visible whiteness" (Rummell 5). Furthermore, Maria helps Birdie make her performance more real, and her inherent blackness more visible by cutting Birdie's hair and then curling it so that she can see herself as a black girl. Through her black performance, Birdie deduces that black race is "nothing more than make-believe, a costume to be donned" (Rummell 5), and that black identity is therefore reconstructed in terms of multiple performances.

In the similar vein, through Birdie's crossing for whiteness in New Hampshire, Senna again deconstructs the fixed race category by asserting the performative essence of race and the constructed nature of whiteness. She tends to "convey the social construction of race through the metaphors of performance" (Harrison-Kahan 21). Once instructed how to perform blackness at Nkrumah school, Birdie is instructed by her mother how to assume a white Jewish identity. She is trained by Sandy to behave as a half-Jewish girl named Jessie Goldman whose father is a dead Jewish intellectual named David Goldman. Their adoption of this invented Jewish identity turns to be "a performance [they] put on together for the public" (Senna, *Caucasia* 140). As Birdie herself thoroughly depicted, "we played up my Jewishness only some of the time; Another time she bought me The Diary of Anne Frank, a book that had been Cole's favorite once upon a time" (140)

Like in Nkrumah, Birdie makes use of certain accessories (like a Star of David and The Diary of Anne Frank), and she relies on specific dialects to make her Jewish identity more convincing and acceptable. She is willing once again to mislead the white American community by reproducing the nation's socio-racial norms, but in her own constructive and performative way. Birdie's performance of a Jewish-as-white identity, which seemingly functions to reinforce the white American hegemony, intentionally deconstructs the presupposition of a monolithic white American identity.

As such, Birdie's insertion of Jewishness within the white American community leads to internalize "a third term to the typically black-and-white schema of US race relations" (Harrison-Kahan 22), or what Bhabha posits as a "liminal space" or a "Third Space of Enunciation" which reflects

"the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that [...] opens up the possibility of [celebrating] difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 4). Indeed, Birdie's association with Jewishness entails the construction of a third space of identification that discloses the intersection between white, off-white, black and Jewish. Interestingly, when crossing for Jewishness, Birdie finds the possibility to maintain her strong kinship with blackness she is forced to renounce. Her mother justified her ongoing connection to blackness throughout her Jewish performance when she "liked to remind [her] that [she] wasn't really passing because Jews weren't really white, but off-white.... She said they were the closest [Birdie] was going to get to *black and still stay white*" (*Caucasia* 140, emphasis added). Sandy explains to Birdie that the Jewish identity may incorporate Blacks' "[t]ragic history, kinky hair" and also white Americans' "good politics". She confirms that in Jewish "[i]t is all there" (140).

Purposefully, Senna employs Jewishness in *Caucasia* to deconstruct the homogeneity of white American identity, and to reconstruct instead a heterogeneous framework of black identification. She associates Birdie's crossing for whiteness with Jewishness to guarantee a continuing faith and loyalty to blackness and to accentuate the fluidity of black identity that Birdie aspires to procure. Through her adoption of Jewish identity, Birdie is willing to prove "her slightly darker hue with the genetic marker of Jewishness" (Rummell 7) since she is the daughter of a Jewfro father, and her white skin can be perceived as colored under the lights of sun as Nicholas once deduced.

Even though Birdie is accepted as a half-Jewish white girl in the New Hampshire community, she frequently attempts to preserve connection to her black ancestries. She usually feels a wistful longing for Cole's beautiful black face and her father's pertinent remarks about black race, and she brings with her a box of "*Negroabilia*" she often intends to look at. This box contains "a *Black Nativity* program from the Nkrumah school ..., a black Barbie doll head, an informational tourist pamphlet on *Brazil*, the silver *Egyptian* necklace ..., and a James-Brown eight-track cassette ..., along with Cole's *Golliwog*" (Senna, *Caucasia* 127, emphasis added). Although these items seem to be irrelevant and without any historical background, they reflect "Birdie's hidden blackness" reconstructed through different cultures and diverse national backgrounds (Joseph 81). This "*Negroabilia*" box conveys Birdie's aspiration for a fluid and multiple reconsideration of black identity and her longing for post-black recognition. It stands to be a black "product of different cultures and ethnicities" that Birdie wants to secure throughout her racial and geographical crossings (Grassian 330).



While moving between diverse socio-racial and geographical spaces, purposely or inadvertently, Birdie endeavors to decentralize the long-established racial binarism (either white or black) so as to envision a hybrid form of trans-racial and post-black identification. In each place she inhabits, Birdie strives to create a space of identification for her own where “race does not exist” and “the hegemony of racial typology” is dismantled and even eradicated (Dagbovie-Mullins 63).

Never feel at home in the Bostonian community, Birdie and her sister Cole invent an imagined world of Elemenos to secure a home space away from the outside pressures of oppressive reality and homogeneous blackness. Cole explained to Birdie that Elemenos “wasn't just a language, but a place and a people as well [...] The Elemenos...could turn not just from black to white, but from brown to yellow to purple to green, and back again. She said they were a shifting people constantly changing their form, color” (Senna, *Caucasia* 7). Since the connotation of the word “Elemenos” is “to ‘eliminate’[...] racial categories” (Dagbovie-Mullins 63), the Elemenos world serves to question the predominance of racial and color borders to pave the way for fluid relocations between multiple colors and diverse races in conjunction with her black identity.

Indeed, the Elemenos language stands to be a hybrid space of articulation “blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into question established categorizations of culture and identity” (Meredith 3). It is a new space of identification that advocates the association between blackness and other socio-racial affiliations. While appearing unfathomable, the examination of some Elemenos speeches (like “Shimbala matamba caressi. Nicolta fo mo capsala”) entails the intermixture between black heritage and other multiracial registers blurring the constraints of geo-racial borders (Senna, *Caucasia* 7).

The aspiring space of blending blackness with other socio-racial affiliations also resides in the novel that Birdie writes for graduation. In her novel entitled “El Paso”, Birdie recites a sorrowful story of a Mexican American family suffering from the vestiges of violence and socio-racial discrimination. By depicting the marginalized group of Mexican Americans in relation with the black hardships, “El Paso” entails “the shifting margins of cultural displacement that confounds any profound or authentic sense of a national culture” by creating an intersection of multinational affiliations (Bhabha 21). In addition to her indisputable desire for black identification, Birdie reveals her interest to be part of them and to be Mexican so as to blur the stated borders between blackness and other different ethno-racial categories.

In this respect, Senna's insertion of a Latina identification within an African American narrative seems to be a testament that “Latinidad accept the black experience as one of its essential components,” thereby blurring the lines between blackness and Latina sensibilities (Rodríguez 135). Senna sets up for a more encompassing and diasporic background for black experience, and advances a more fluid form of post-black identity that Birdie desperately strives to attain. The sense of rejoicing “allegiance to black pride without the black monoracial identity” is the central axis of post-black identification that Birdie longs for (McKibbin 153). Most post-black advocators tend to maintain a fluid allegiance to their black communities, away from a non-essentialized sense of allegiance. In the similar vein, Birdie somehow finds this non-essentialized allegiance to her blackness in her reunion with her sister Cole and aunt Dot.

Birdie's meeting with Cole revives in her the yearning for post-black sensibility. She no longer expects from Cole the feeling of “completion”, but basically the desire for coordination (Senna, *Caucasia* 406). The reunion between the two sisters reveals the “Third Space of Enunciation” that coordinates between their socio-racial differences (Bhabha 4). It helps Birdie recognize the importance of rejoicing her blackness with respect to her distinct ethno-racial affiliations and solidifying their mutual desire for a complex understanding of blackness. Both of them express their eagerness for this complex consideration of blackness during their crossing experience as a sanctuary from racial authenticity. While Cole declared that in Brazil she “yearned for America, for black America, whose pathology she at least could call her own” (Senna, *Caucasia* 406), Birdie mourned her camouflaged blackness in New Hampshire and ironically missed “black America without leaving the country” (Dagbovie-Mullins 74). They reveal a longing for the possibility of a dynamic and innovative form of black identity they recognize from the crossing experience of their aunt Dot to India (Senna, *Caucasia* 313).

By crossing the national American borders, Dot searches for something “deeper than skin color, deeper than politics, to something more important. Something spiritual. Something she thought she could find only in India” (Senna, *Caucasia* 313). She comes up with a philosophy that gives a privilege to the spirit over the appearance, the self over the body, and the invisible over the visible. This philosophy of crossing color visibility fascinates Birdie who has long suffered from others' perception on her body. She mused, “I wondered if I'd ever transcend the skin, the body. If I would ever believe in something I couldn't see” (Senna, *Caucasia* 321). Birdie mediates on this philosophy in an attempt to deconstruct the sovereignty of the body's visible color so as to reconstruct the potency of the soul's invisible colors. She focuses on Dot's study on colors, when claiming that “there is skin



color, eye color, hair color, and then there's invisible color—that color rising above you. It's the color of your soul, and it rests just beyond the skin" (Senna, *Caucasia* 221). Birdie admires the way Dot multiplies the color of one's self, thereby enhancing for the mixedness of one's identity and glorifying the deeply unseen essence of her black self in relation with her multiple socio-racial affiliations.

Eventually, she learns from Dot's theory that the way to transcend the skin or the body is to look for a space or "place that doesn't exist." It is a space of identification in which "you can see *everything at once*. It is the only way how" to secure a flexible sense of post-black identity (Senna, *Caucasia* 315, emphasis added). Focusing on Dot's instruction to see everything at once, Birdie has to procure an "in-between' space," using Bhabha's term, which offers "new signs of identity, and-innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation" (1-2). She needs a space of identification never constructed in terms of others' perception on her body, a space in which "she can see both races and many more at once" (Minto 207).

Regarding her geo-racial and even metaphorical crossings, as well as in comparison with others' experiences of crossing, Birdie strives to look for a space of identification beyond the predominance of black authenticity and racial essentialism. It is a space of post-black identification reflecting "the perfect blend of two [or more] rich cultures", the blend of the unseen, black heritage with diverse socio-racial and cultural belongings (Senna, *Caucasia* 337). By the end of the novel, Birdie finds this space of racial blending and post-black sensibility through the scene of school bus.

After quitting Cole's home, Birdie encountered a bus filled with students from different ethno-racial backgrounds. As Birdie described, "[t]hey were black and Mexican and Asian and white" (Senna, *Caucasia* 413). This bus epitomizes the hybrid space of identification, blurring the limitations of color boundaries and geo-racial borders and combining black race with diverse and even contradictory races: American, African, Mexican and Asian backgrounds. While scrutinizing the kaleidoscopic origins of the children on the bus, Birdie catches her attention a mixed-race girl with a cinnamon skin in this multinational bus, deducing "she was *black* like me, a *mixed* girl" (*Caucasia* 413, emphasis added). Her combination between blackness and mixedness entails her intention to secure "a profound relationship to blackness" by associating it with diverse ethno-racial orientations (Dagbovie-Mullins 75). Birdie followed the steps of Danzy Senna who once declared: "I have come to understand that my multiplicity is inherent in my blackness, not opposed to it. To be black ... is to contain

all colors" ("Passing and the Problematic of racial Pride" 85).

In this respect, Senna asserts the evidence that mixedness is part of and not separate from blackness, and therefore contemporary blackness is inherently multiple, fluid and in motion, the evidence that is commonly supported in the post-black aesthetics. As such, Birdie in *Caucasia* brings to the limelight the significant interrelationship between blackness and racial mixture in the formation of a "black-oriented multiracial identity" or a post-black identity (Mckibbin 153). In equating "black" with "mixed" in her revelation, Birdie ceases to be pigeonholed in terms of the homogeneous categories of both "black" and "mixed", and she chooses to amalgamate blackness with racially, culturally and even nationally distinct affinities. Throughout her crossing experience, Birdie never wants to resemble the biracial women she came across like Samantha Taper and even her sister Cole because she refuses to be restrictively identified with either the seamless, static category of mixed-race or the "doomed, tragic shade of black" race (Senna, *Caucasia* 321). Rather, she perceives herself similar to this black girl of racially and culturally mixed backgrounds, situating in a more dynamic space of post-black sensibility with an overwhelming essence of self-definition and racial respect. She becomes cognizant that her racial identity resides in the post-black rhetoric which provides "heterogeneous and heterodox renderings of blackness" reconstructed through geo-racial crossings (qtd. in Obenland 41).

In perceiving the "blur of yellow and black in motion" in the last novel, Birdie is willing to blur the fixed dogma of black authenticity by deconstructing it from within (Senna, *Caucasia* 413). She comes to rejoice the multiracialism of her black identity over its binarism and to revel in the desired post-blackness over the repressive and authentic one.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Birdie's journey of crossing geo-racial borders conveys the fated burden of invisibility, racial essentialism and black authenticity, the burden that has perniciously troubled her pursuit for a more fluid form of black recognition. Interestingly, a postmodern reading of this crossing journey discloses the possibility of deconstructing the authentic blackness from within by reconstructing a hybrid space of post-blackness. Through her restless crossings between cities and racially distinct circles, Birdie comes to recognize that borders can no longer be fixed but permeable and easily crossed, as well as black identity can never be authentic and essentialist but multiple, performative and ever shifting. The interconnection between black identity and multiplicity

paves the way for new, progressive and subversive understanding of black identity that sounds to be pertinent and optimistically promising for today's women of mixed-race ancestries.

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