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RESISTING TROPES, INSERTING SELVES: AN INTREPRETATIVE BIOGRAPHICAL  
ANALYSIS OF THE LIFE WRITINGS OF MIXED RACE WOMEN WRITERS

by

ERIN GEORGE

Under the Direction of Dr. Amira Jarmakani

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the patterns of racial formation, and epistemological points of entry that are salient to the mulatta experience in the United States, through the use of life writings. The results gleaned from this research are utilized to problematize revived political and social assertions of a post-feminist, post-racist United States.

INDEX WORDS: Mixed race studies, Feminism, Race, Life writings, Mulatta, Biracial, Women

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ERIN GEORGE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art Education

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2014

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May 2014

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Trinity George. #CopperBoom

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis seeks to locate and analyze the patterns of racial formation, and epistemological points of entry that are salient to the mulatta experience through the use of life writings. Life writings often serve as a way in which understandings of oneself and one's place in society are solidified. "Experience is the meaning maker in our lives. Our experience of the world around us is what changes us" (Atkinson 1998: 45). The experiences of the women in this study speak not only to their individual lives, but also to the ways in which their lives were shaped by their socialization. Thusly, society is consistently, if implicitly, involved in the recounts of each woman's life. In the wake of revived political and social assertions of a post-feminist, post-racist United States, this thesis problematizes the popular belief in a slow but steady arrival to a collective post-racial, post-patriarchy utopia.

The life writings in this thesis employ both novels and memoirs, used in tandem to ascertain similarities across generational divides that serve as the foundation in revealing the fraudulent, yet increasingly popular, assumption of post racialism. They are listed here in generational order: Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), June Cross' *Secret Daughter: A Mixed-Race Daughter and the Mother Who Gave Her Away* (2006), Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1999), Rebecca Walker's *Black, White, and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2001), Heidi Darrow's *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky* (2010), and Angela Nissel's *Mixed: My Life in Black and White* (2006). Through the use of Maria P. P. Roots' generational categorization, the texts will be read through and against each other with additional attention being given to the generational aspects of each life writing.

While memoirs attest to an individual's personal memory of lived events, and personally inflected novels avoid interrogation altogether through the guise of fiction, autobiographies have



traditionally positioned themselves as statements of objective truths surrounding one's life. As Leigh Gilmore explains, "Autobiography appears to constrain self-representation through its almost legalistic definition of truth telling, its anxiety about invention, and its preference for the literal and verifiable, even in the presence of some ambivalence about those criteria" (Gilmore 2001: 3). Life writing purposefully allows itself to include a broad spectrum of self-representational texts, skillfully evading the tendencies that have served to limit autobiography. The unyielding rigidity of traditional forms, such as statesmen autobiography, have simultaneously excluded and appropriated the marginalized subject. Thus, life writing allows the traditionally marginalized subject a voice and form through which to challenge the powerful myths that have been inscribed about them.

Although most scholarship concerning avoidance of antagonistic suspicion centers around claims of sexual abuse, there is also some inclusion of how racism as a traumatic event manifests itself in similar ways (Gilmore 2001). The genre of life writing allows for the disclosure of personal experience with a significantly reduced potential for retraumatization. Because of the inclusivity present in the genre, the salient narratives in my study include a range of categories under the life writing umbrella, including personally inflected novels and memoirs.

Through the application of multiple research methods, this thesis engages with and responds to the following questions:

- 1) How do the women in this study negotiate their racial identity formation?
- 2) What do the similarities in each of their respective life writings reveal about patterns of racial formation that are particular to the mulatta experience in the United States?
- 3) What are the epistemological benefits in utilizing the literary genre of life writing to explore the identity formation of biracial women?

The research attended to during this study reveals the dynamic negotiations of vacillating racial identity formations experienced by each of the subjects and furthers this area of study through the lens of the mulatta perspective in the United States. The similarities present in each subjects' life writing serve to reaffirm and reinforce a distinctly unique understanding. This understanding functions as the foundation for which the life writing benefits of autonomy, agency, and self-actualization are actively applied to deepen and expand the current research surrounding both life writings and multiraciality.

## 1.2 Literature Review

The life writings of the women in this study reflect their similar location at the intersection of societal, peer, and familial rejection and offer an intimate look at how this site of intersectional rejection has affected them in profound and permanent ways. The construction of such a site is located in historical, psychological and sociological acts of interpellation and identity formation. Omi and Winant describe racial formation as the “sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed and destroyed” (Omi and Winant 1994: 55). The mulatto/a subject often enters the “process” at the point of transformation, thus threatening the onslaught of destruction. Furthermore, because the creation of racial formation is arguably an economic one (Davis 1991, Townes 2006, Gordon 2008), there are material consequences for the disruption, questioning, and challenging of racial categories. These material consequences are often revealed through the experiential claims of those who serve as the living embodiment of the disruptive challenge. In turn, this assists in the formation and reformation of racial identities for society as a whole as well as individually.

It is imperative to address the ways in which the United States has and continues to approach the construction of race in order to examine present-day influences of this historical schema. Most notably, one must recognize that both whiteness and blackness are defined by concepts and ideology surrounding blackness. “American racial categories are interdependent, and because there is no positive definition of blackness, American racial categories are groundless—they have no empirical foundation” (Zack 1993: 11). Although Zack skillfully reveals the arbitrariness from which racial categories in the United States abound, she does not dismiss them as immaterial as there are tangible consequences for each racial assignment. “Historically, whites have worked to blacken biracial individuals to ensure white ‘purity’ by

assigning everything “other” to “blackness,” but African Americans also have a history of regarding people of white American and African American descent as ‘not black enough’” (Zackodnik 2004: xiv). Though the rejection of whiteness in mulatto/a subjects is a clear reaction to racism, it serves to ultimately weaken resistance to white supremacy as it legitimizes claims of biological differences and adversarial “bloodlines.” Furthermore, historical workings such as these are deeply imbedded in racial formation patterns and processes.

In the mid-nineteenth century, European Americans, specifically those of Anglo-Saxon origin, became increasingly dedicated to white racial pride and purity movements buttressed by pseudo scientific evidence of innate biological differences ranging from claims of lower intelligence in African Americans to assertions of polygenesis (Williamson 1980, Frederickson 1971, Zackodnik 2004). Studies “proving” such differences relied heavily on the use of mulatto/a subjects and sterility claims based on *muleology* (Williamson 1980, Parsons 1855). Joel Williamson’s *muleology* is an analytical approach concerning the historical and theoretical complexities surrounding mulattoes, especially in the United States’ South. Williamson’s research functions as a strong foundation addressing racial hybridity in the United States. He specifically attends to the historical claims of abomination inherent in the mulatto subject. “That mules had no ancestors that were mules and no descendents at all was common knowledge. Ultimately, the idea was that as the mule dies, so too dies the mulatto” (Williamson 1980: 96). This provided comfort to those who demanded a solution to their irrational fear and contempt of miscegenation, while reaffirming black and mulatto/a degeneracy.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, African American based reactionary politics made similar claims although they repositioned African American’s as superior. Mulatto/a subjects remained the reviled and contaminated buffer group of each discourse. Many black nationalists of the time

argued that the best and brightest were those of pure African blood and encouraged open contempt towards mulatto/as who they believed were in league with their white ancestors and detrimental to the superiority of blackness (Delany 1852/1968, Echeruo 1992, Toll 1979). Although black nationalists took the traditional hierarchal racial categories and flipped them to serve their political and ideological purposes, white supremacist hierarchy in the Anglo-Germanic hegemony remained firmly intact. With Europe/White occupying the most favored position and Africa/Black occupying the most reviled position (Omi and Winant 1994, Okihiro 2001, Williamson 1980), the mulatto/a subject became the embodiment of racial, cultural and even national transgression. This act of transgression was attacked using a variety of methods including but not limited to, pathologizing, demonizing, and sexualizing mulatto/as (Williamson 1980, Birnbaum 1999, Zackodnik 2004, McNeil 2010). Ideological constructions of racial purity act as a point of counter-identification, ensuring the survival of the group who constructs itself as pure in direct relation to a group that is constructed as impure, as pure also implies superior.

Although the mulatto man has been subject to a litany of oppressive, violent, and often alienating stereotypes (Frazier 1957, Park and Burgess 1921, Reiss 1997, McNeil 2010), he has also been touted throughout history as the leader of the black race/class (Dubois 1948, Williamson 1980, McNeil 2010). The mulatta has not experienced such diversified thinking in response to her ability and/or purpose. Like her male counterpart she too is reduced sexually, morally, and mentally. However, unlike him the stereotypes surrounding her often go from bad to worse (Dubois 1948, Fanon 1968, Townes 2006, Bost 2006). This has historically trapped the United States' mulatta subject in a perpetual catch-22. For example, W.E.B. Dubois notoriously refused to marry a very light skinned "colored girl" because he didn't want people to think he had "betrayed his race" by marrying outside of it (Dubois 1986, McNeil 2010). Marcus Garvey

declared (despite his mixed race wife), “mulatto women are the greatest saboteurs among our race. They corrupt and debauch the moral character of black men” (Garvey 1941). Similarly, Frederick Hoffman, author of *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*, proliferated the belief that “morally the mulatto cannot be said to be superior to the pure black; most illicit intercourse between whites and colored is with a mulatto woman and seldom with those of the pure type” (Hoffman 1896: 184). The obvious hypocrisy of both black and white men also positioned the mulatta for additional opposition from both black and white women who viewed the mulatta as a threat, both sexually and economically. This excessive and open contempt was furthered through the transference of society’s intense racial anxiety surrounding miscegenation onto the physical and mental materiality of the mulatta, quickly and resolutely diagnosing her with a litany of pathologies.

In 1881, Dr. S. Weir Mitchell asserted, “to be ill is a feminine verb” implying that womanhood itself is a pathological condition (Birnbaum 1999, Mitchell 1881). Blackness itself, in terms of the “black mind,” has also been historically linked to the feminine in an attempt to reify white male domination over both white women and enslaved Africans. In fact, S. Weir Mitchell and George M. Beard conducted a series of racist assumptions linking white women and black people based on “similarities in brain size and intellectual capacity which suggested that women’s ‘psychological and anthropological peculiarities seemed to relate them to the inferior races’” (Haller and Haller 1974: 68, Birnbaum 1999: 8). This becomes especially applicable in mulatto/a subjects, as early 20<sup>th</sup> century neurologists concluded that the innate emotional instability of mulattoes was due once again, to their “blood” (Zackodnik 2004). During this time, popular pseudo-science driven by widespread belief in the “one drop rule,” concluded that the very severe distinctions between Europeans and Africans served to corrupt the

body from within. “Neurologists decided that the electrical signals that control the body run in one direction in white people and in the opposite direction in black people. The slightest mixture was enough to upset the system and jangle the nerves...making them a shallow, flighty and fluttering people” (Zackodnik 2004: 25, Williamson 1980: 96). Therefore, to be mulatta was a priori to hysteria, nervousness, anxiety, and an ultimate descent into madness.

Such hysteria is examined from a narrative analysis in Michelle Birnbaum’s “Racial Hysteria: Female Pathology and Race Politics in Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* and W.D. Howells’s *An Imperative Duty*.” Birnbaum explores the move of the mulatta from genre to case study in her contrapuntal reading of Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy* and W.D. Howells’s *An Imperative Duty* (Birnbaum 1999). In both novels the mulatta protagonists are described as relating to their blackness in varying stages of hysteria. Rhoda, the protagonist in Howell’s novel, displays “hysterical weakness” over her “negro descent” (Birnbaum 1999). Similarly, Iola in *Iola Leroy* “breaks into peals of hysterical laughter” when confronted with the ramifications of her hypodescendancy (Birnbaum 1999). In Angela Nissel’s memoir, *Mixed: My Life in Black and White*, she attends to this legacy of racial hysteria in an attribute she gives to herself, “racial schizophrenia.” Through the experiential claims of her life writing she repositions the lunacy of racism onto its progenitor, the Anglo-Germanic hegemony. Therefore, “racial schizophrenia” acts as a metaphor for society’s collective mental illness having been transferred onto the mulatta.

This life writing returns the neurosis traditionally applied to the biological inferiority of mulattas back onto society and in the process implicitly addresses the increasing attitudinal shift towards a post racial ideology. This post-racial ideology is responsible for current claims that there is no more racism or that “racism has ended” (D’Souza 1995). In contrast to these views,

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva indicts post racial progress narratives as “color blind racism.” For example, currently there is a strong tendency to rely on cultural rather than biological tropes to explain the subordinated positions of black people in this country, a trend that is indicative of larger contemporary racial formations (Bonilla-Silva 2010, Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom 2004).

The notion that the failure of people of color, specifically black people, is a matter of inferior or pathological culture and not biological determinism as originally believed is the crux of post racial narratives. Similarly, when issues surrounding interracial relationships and mixed race children arise, the concern is not for the irrationality of intermingling superior and inferior “bloodlines” but rather the intermingling of superior and inferior “cultures.” Understanding the historical context of these “new” ideas underscores challenges to racial progress narratives and suggests that instead of racial progress the United States is experiencing what Omi and Winant might call the onset of a new “racial project,” which they define thusly, “a racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (Omi and Winant 1994: 56). Therefore, while the interpretation or explanation of racial dynamics is changing, the underlying racism is as prevalent as ever, especially towards African Americans. As efforts are made to reorganize and redistribute resources, African Americans are noticeably absent from the discussion. The conversation centers on ignoring/denying white privilege in an effort to usher in a new post-racial “equality.”

This new color-blind racism inhibits the insertion and validity of race based challenges resulting in a deadly psychological assault for those who are most negatively affected by outcomes of the current racial project (Omi and Winant 1994, Bonilla-Silva 2010, Root 2006).



Color-blind racism becomes a battlefield between what the oppressed subject knows to be true and what the oppressive hegemony tell her is true. Asserting that all claims of racism, save for the most obviously egregious, are merely various stages of mass paranoia revisits the 19<sup>th</sup> century's understanding of racist notions of sanity. In returning to the black/white hierarchical binary discussed earlier, the experiential claims of subjects who occupy both binaries simultaneously are of incredible value to the extension and deepening of scholarship that challenges the current post-racial project. Additionally, as mulattas have and continue to experience the simultaneous oppression of "deviant" biraciality and "inferior" femininity, the life writings researched in this study provide an important and valid phenomenological intersection. These life writings act in direct opposition to the body of "tragic mulatta" literature, which very few mulattas have historically been involved in creating.

Contemporary author Danzy Senna declared the year 2000 to be the "mulatto millennium" in a tongue-in-cheek essay exploring the new exoticization of mulatto/as (Senna 1998). It was during this year that the U.S. census allowed for the checking of more than one racial box. It is no coincidence that most of the life writings in this study were published after 2000. Before this time, the majority of literary texts concerning biracial women were written by white (Child 1865, Hurst 1933) or black (Brown 1853, Haley 1993) authors in an attempt to elicit sympathy for the abolitionist movement and later for civil rights (Child 1865). This resulted in their experience being appropriated for various political goals, erasing their history with mythology: "much like the figure of the Mammy, the Tragic Mulatta of the white imagination did not exist historically. She is a legend who is a memory greater than memories" (Townes 2006: 88). Indeed, Fannie Hurst, author of the novel *Imitation of Life*, represents the category of women who were not only the writers of this "tragic mulatta" genre but also the

consumers (Itzkovitz, xxv). The texts written before the late twentieth century were largely for the consumption of white women looking to reposition themselves as sympathetic to the “black experience” (Townes 2006). These authors offered little in the analysis of mixed race women as subjects. In fact, they were often dedicated to maintaining the black/white binary, and used the tragic mulatta figure to slyly perpetuate their end goal of segregation and maintaining white supremacy (Zackodnik 2004). Traditionally “passing” narratives have incorporated a sensationalized, unilateral approach to understanding the lived experience of biracial women. Of the six texts involved in this study, only one of the life writings engages in a “passing for white” storyline and it does so reluctantly and in resistance to the white aspirational tropes of more traditional “passing” texts. Furthermore, in an effort to adequately attend to the texts of the study as well as research outside traditional “passing” novels, life writings such as Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929), Danzy Senna’s *Symptomatic* (2004) and *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* (2010), Lise Funderburg’s *Pig Candy* (2009), Fran Ross’s *Oreo* (2000), and Essie Mae Washington’s *Dear Senator: A Memoir by the Daughter of Strom Thurmond* (2006) are not included in the research with the understanding that they too fit into the generational applications outlined by Root and are valid and important life writing of mixed race women.

Maria P.P. Root is one of the leading authorities on scholarship surrounding mixed race subjects. In “From Exotic to Dime a Dozen,” Root assesses the generational divide for women of mixed race into three categories: the Exotic generation, the Vanguard generation, and the Biracial Baby Boomer generation. Within each category she discusses salient commonalities pertinent to each generation, as they pertain to the lived experience of mixed race women. Root recognizes the need for scholarship surrounding mixed race subjects, and authored the first contemporary volume on mixed race people in the U.S. as a direct response to the extensive and

often times problematic historical literature (Root 1992). Root's scholarship is firmly grounded in agency for mixed race individuals. In "A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People," Root explores the challenges inherent in fragmenting and/or fractionalizing the self to ease others' anxiety surrounding race in the United States.

This return to the racialized anxiety of others is salient to the research of this thesis because it speaks directly to the conditions under which racial formation is informed. Root asserts that the means to challenging this anxiety is resistance. "Resistance is a political act. To resist means that one does not accept the belief system, the data as they are presented, or the rationalizations used to perpetuate the status quo around race relations" (Root 1996: 6). Before the 2000 census allowed for the checking of more than one box, Root distinguished herself among her colleagues through her innovative scholarship that spoke directly to generations of mixed race people. For example, Root declared: "I have the right...not to justify my ethnic legitimacy, not to justify my existence to the world, to identify myself differently than strangers expect me to identify, to identify myself differently in different situations, to create a vocabulary to communicate about being multiracial, to change my identity over the course of my lifetime and more than once" among others (Root 1996: 7). These assertions address the multiple ways in which the socio-historical legacy of racism affect mixed race subjects today. As Root states, "once you have a context, it's easier to have a discussion" (Cox and Durrow 2011). Root's framing of said context has allowed works concerning multiracial identity, experience, and agency to follow her groundbreaking 1992 volume (Funderburg 1994, O'Hearn 1998, Bost 2003, Winters and DeBose 2003, DaCosta 2007, Rockquemore and Brunsma 2008). Root's work is also felt politically; the U.S. Census referred to both her "A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People" (1996) as well as her introductory text, *Racially Mixed People in America* (1992). While

many mixed race advocacy groups celebrated the ability to check more than one box on the U.S. census in 2000, there have been mixed race scholars and writers who have objected to this new unfolding (Senna 1999, Elam 2011).

In *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium*, Michelle Elam addresses the ways in which a “box fetish” might be detrimental to greater social justice projects, her primary goal. Elam asserts, “the census was never meant as—nor should it be—a site for self-expression” (Elam 2011: 14). Elam further insists that the ability to check more than one box underscores purity discourses and reifies the claim that racial homogeneity ever existed. It is relevant to note that Root also feels some apprehension surrounding the new rules of the census. Primarily concerned with how the new data will be interpreted, Root suggests the government will need to develop “more sophisticated methods of analysis” if they are to maintain the purported goals of the census (Cox and Durrow 2009). Additionally, Elam remains critical of the actual agency mixed race people possess and claims that Root’s “A Bill of Rights for Racially Mixed People” is problematic in that it “omits mention of any structural, social, or historical constraints that might inhibit the choices qua rights for some people and not others; nor does it consider the political implications or accountabilities of racial identification” (Elam 2011: 11). Ultimately, Elam’s goal is to produce research that “helps to shape the cultural imagination, which often precedes political action” (Cox and Durrow 2009). Although positioned as somewhat divergent in their scholarship and research, Root and Elam are quite similar. Elam’s primary concern is what the mixed race experience means to and for society, while Root’s primary concern is how the individual has been affected by society in the creation of a mixed race experience. Both scholars provide the foundation for understanding the ideological context

of racial formation patterns especially when researched through the personalized experiential claims in life writings.

Utilizing the genre of life writings, my research establishes mixed race women writers as agentive subjects, inserting themselves into the collective consciousness. This level of agency allows for their direct resistance to the tropes assigned to them as personal flaws and instead allows them to resignify themselves, enabling an exploration of societal attitudes and assertions in the process. The pattern of survival strategies revealed in their life writings examines the ways in which the medium of life writing can be applied to further the scholarship surrounding socially constructed “bi” and “multi” identities as well as to expand the discussion surrounding racial progress narratives. The experiences of these women speak not only to their individual lives, but also to the ways in which their lives were shaped by their socialization during various racial projects from the 1920s to the 1990s.

### 1.3 Methods

In this thesis I apply elements of interpretative biographical research methods, feminist theory, semiotics, cultural studies, phenomenology, and Africana theory (Denzin 1989, Harding 1986, Barthes 1957, Merleau-Ponty 1945, Gordon 2008). This includes incorporating developments in critical theory concerning the reading and writing of social texts (Denzin 1989, Derrida 1967). The incorporation of critical theory in the analysis of the texts studied in this thesis is essential to the understanding of how the self is formed through and against the socio-political realities of the historical contexts in which they were written. “The biographical method rests on subjectively and intersubjectively gained knowledge and understanding of the life experiences of individuals, including one’s own life. Such understandings rest on an interpretive process that leads one to enter into the emotional life of another” (Denzin 1989: 28). The life writings of the women in this study act as personal testimonies to their realities. Further fleshing out the methodology of my research, I employ, as a framework, Leigh Gilmore’s approach to the limits of autobiography.

In *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*, Gilmore discusses the “borderland between autobiography and fiction, where writers use first person hybrid accounts to contend with institutions and disciplines for authority and knowledge” (Gilmore 2001: 48). Indeed, at times the mere potential for the questioning of an author’s life’s validity sends them (particularly women authors) in search of a writing space in which they will not be held accountable (i.e., attacked) should their assertions conflict with master metanarratives. Gilmore further problematizes this through her assertion that autobiographies employ methods of fiction in their construction: “such an admission reveals the constructedness of autobiography, both its inevitable affiliation with fiction and its recalcitrant realism” (Gilmore 2001: 98). She maintains

her position that life writing is no less valid, and no less influenced by fiction, than autobiography. Additionally, Gertrude Stein contends that the division of autobiographical lives and fiction is not only unnecessary but also impossible (Denzin 1989). Thus, the novels and memoirs researched in this thesis are analyzed and compared without distinction of genre. They are attended to interchangeably under the more accurate grouping of life writing.

Life writings represent a core tenet in the methodology of my research. While the original term “life-writing” was coined in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, it is generally believed to have been relatively synonymous with autobiography and biography, with only slightly wider boundaries encompassing modes such as journals and letters (Kadar 1992). While this version of life writing is decidedly Euro and androcentric, my scholarship begins with its resignification by feminist scholars, such as Shari Benstock and Suzette Henke. In Henke’s *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-Writing*, she attends to both her own as well as Benstock’s usage of life writing in their respective works. Through the invocation of Virginia Woolf’s experimentation with the possibilities of life writing, “feminist critics like Shari Benstock have proposed the term *life-writing* to challenge the traditional limits of autobiography through the use of a category that encompasses memoirs, diaries, letters, and journals, as well as bildungsroman and other personally inflected fictional texts” (Henke 1998: xiii). Likewise, Henke situates her own understanding within the context of her academic discipline of feminist psychoanalysis, and subsequent usage of life writing as such: “In my own thinking about women’s life-writing, I have defined the genre broadly, and sometimes metaphorically, to include confessional forms, autofictions, diaries, journals, and bildungsroman, as well as autobiography and biomythology” (Henke 1998: xvi).

Indeed, the elasticity of the genre lends itself to be utilized for a vast amount of purposes; in some cases it may be further reworked while still maintaining the same goal of expanding the often times rigid boundaries of auto/biography. Leigh Gilmore posits, “I argue that there are not so much autobiographies as autobiographics, those changing elements of the contradictory discourses and practices of truth and identity which represent the subject of autobiography” (Gilmore 1994: 13). “Truth and identity” provide the crux of the argument into why the genre of life writing is so important in providing a medium through which marginalized, traumatized subjects can testify. They often serve as a way in which understandings of oneself and one’s place in society are solidified.

As Robert Elbaz notes, “The autobiographer always writes a novel, a fiction, about a third person” (Elbaz 1987: 12). Denzin adds, “Autobiography and biography present fictions about ‘thought’ selves, ‘thought’ experiences, events and their meanings” (Denzin 1989: 24). The validity then lies with the author’s perception of experience. Sartre asserts, “if an author thinks something existed and believes in its existence, its effects are real” (Denzin 1989: 25). This has particular resonance when connecting the interpretive biographical findings with the greater socio-political structures. The ways in which reality is interpreted for an individual have a profound influence on how history and culture are perpetuated and resisted. In fact, Denzin contends, “No self or personal-experience story is ever an individual production. It derives from larger group, cultural, ideological, and historical contexts” (Denzin 1989: 73). Likewise, the life writings of the women in this thesis are informed by the cultural, ideological and historical influences of their time. Because the women were born from 1891-1974, the assumption, when following current culturally and politically dispensed progress narratives, would be that the lives of these women would be profoundly different. However, as



the research reveals, they share startling similarities. Therefore, Denzin's assertion of the greater contexts in which a person's life story is cultivated further assists in supporting the claims this thesis makes in regards to post racial progress narratives. The similarity of each life writing reflects society's stagnancy in terms of its fundamental ideology on race and gender, readily observable in tandem in the lives of mixed race women.

The life writings chosen for this study were done so in an attempt to compare and contrast the intergenerational experiences of first generation mulattas in the United States. As I furthered the initial stages of my research, it was clear that there was a definite pattern in the life writings of women with one black and one white parent. By pattern I am not referring to the traditional logocentric approach to memoir. Rather, I am addressing the pattern of identity formation, familial relationships, and peer relationships. The six life writings in this study were chosen because they reflect the dynamics of their respective generations as well as their grounding in traditional biographical methods: they each begin with their family history. Additionally, they resist the tradition to attend to biracial women only through "passing" narratives and incorporate an alternative, less sensational, and more authentic approach to their lived experiences.

Each life writing notes the salient experiences of the subjects, especially those that lead to a change in life course, whether geographical or philosophical. These changes act as the catalyst to an epistemological site of entry and are further attended to and addressed in reference to the authors' marginalized social status. After the salient experiences are fully explored, they are compared and contrasted against their intragenerational counterparts, and finally intergenerationally. Utilizing the interpretative trauma and testimony work of Gilmore, the current socio-political climate outlined in Omi and Winant's *Racial Formation in the United*

*States*, the interplay of Williamson's *Muleology*, Barthes' *Mythology*, and Root's generational identity formations, I answer the aforementioned research questions as well as further the mixed race and life writing scholarship through my specific attention to the life writings of biracial women in the United States.

## 2 CHAPTER ONE: MYTHOLOGY OF MULEOLOGY

In Chapter One, I focus on the location of hybrid identities within the context of biraciality, utilizing the term “Mythology of Muleology” to denote the relationship between Barthes and Williamson, and explore how myths function in the interstitial materiality of mulatto women in the United States. Ideological constructs are the fundamental core of myth as they function in direct correlation to historical and theoretical approaches to the human condition.

In Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*, he attends to the ways in which a socially sanctioned concept like Muleology can become embedded in the fabric of society allowing it to take on a life of its own in the collective (un)consciousness. “Myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingencies appear eternal” (Barthes 1972: 142). Thus, the medical, literary and social assumptions and understandings of the mid-nineteenth century concerning mixed race women subjects have been continuously mapped onto recurring themes in each of these arenas. In fact, fundamental concepts concerning the Mythology of Muleology have been and continue to be the leitmotif of the mulatta subject in all her forms.

Within the life writings attended to in this thesis, the legacy of the Mythology of Muleology is present in a myriad of ways. It manifests itself emotionally, psychologically and corporeally through the lived experiences of these women authors. Attending to these works from a linear perspective allows for the revelation of the repetitious interstices that frame the response to postmodern assumptions of racial progress while underscoring the racialized and gendered projects that are functioning as a result of each woman’s reality. I utilize Omi and Winant’s theory here as the lived experiences of these subjects bleed seamlessly into each other despite their chronological span of over half a century.

Utilizing Maria P.P. Root's understanding of generational markers, the Mythology of Muleology attended to here begins with Nella Larsen's protagonist, Helga Crane. In Larsen's auto-inflexed novel *Quicksand*, she reveals the life story of a mixed race woman living at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. According to Root, this places Crane at the forefront of mulatta exoticization, a category she appropriately refers to as the Exotic Generation (those born before the late 1960s). Within this category lies a myriad of psychological sites of injury as a direct result of the United States' history towards concepts of race, gender, and miscegenation. Root herself states, "I choose this term because it is how these women were described, often in a double-edged way. The lack of a visible cohort contributed to an acute self-consciousness tied to physical appearance and awareness of being evaluated and watched" (Root 2004: 21; Bradshaw 1992). In this way Helga Crane functions as the living embodiment of Root's assertion. The postcolonial apparatuses of hybridization and the occupation and location of life in the interstices used in the work of Homi Bhabha and Franz Fanon serve as the foundation for this chapter as they function as the cornerstone concepts in the analytical application of the Mythology of Muleology.

## 2.1 The Exotic Generation

*Quicksand* reveals the life story of Helga Crane, the daughter of an African American father and a Danish mother, coming of age in the United States during the 1920s. The reader is initially introduced to Crane during her years as a young teacher at an all black school, Naxos. Naxos is the premier Negro school, located outside of Atlanta in the southern state of Georgia. Upon the death of her mother, Helga Crane's Uncle Peter sends her to Naxos in part to spare Helga the unrelenting abuse and hatred of her white stepfather and stepsiblings and in part to rid the family of its most distressing flaw. Helga was sent to Naxos when she was fifteen years old

and later offered a teaching position there. Her initial reaction to the school was one of joy, “For the first time she could breathe freely, where she discovered that because one was dark, one was not necessarily loathsome, and could, therefore, consider oneself without repulsion” (Larsen 1928: 22). However, as the years passed, she began to feel “horribly lonely.” She was unable to keep up the pretense of humility demanded of her by the school.

Naxos was mired in white supremacy even as it professed to “uplift the race.” Here, Helga was expected to behave as the other teachers did. This included chastising the children for being savages when they were too loud, insisting on specific criteria of clothing, (always dull and muted, no bright or vibrant colors), and the general deferment to whiteness as a worthy and constant aspiration. As liberated as Helga initially felt by Naxos was how oppressed she eventually came to feel by it. “Helga had never quite achieved the unmistakable Naxos mold, would never achieve it, in spite of much trying. She could neither conform, nor be happy in her nonconformity. . . .a lack of acquiescence” (Larsen 1928: 7).

In fact, this contention with the realities of the constant coercion and consent of the Anglo-Germanic hegemony are salient themes throughout the text. They also reveal how the interstices of hybridization are paramount to Helga Crane’s identity formation. The Mythology of Muleology is being enacted consistently. The myth surrounding her experience functions as “a perpetual alibi” (Barthes 1972: 123). Naxos is comprised of multigenerational mulattoes. They represent the Dubosian talented tenth of American Negro society. They are educated and relatively accomplished given the extreme curtailments of their time. Through the understanding and application of “muleology” as it was understood in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, their existence is not possible. Multigenerational mixing at that level should have by all “scientific” accounts rendered them obsolete, at the very least extremely mentally challenged. Therefore, “muleology” ceases to

be a biological defect as time and space have proven it to be false; instead as a mythology it shifts to focus on the emotional and psychological as sites of permanent and perpetual debilitation. Crane addresses herself, facetiously, as a despised mulatto, in response to the envy she inspires at Naxos as well as the fear she inspires within her own family. However, throughout the text it is clear that not only is Crane's understanding of race and race relations far superior to that of her monoracial peers but it is also ahead of its time. It is the very hybridization that interpellates Helga into "mulatto girl madness" that creates the interstice for her unique and profound understanding of race and allows her some degree of momentary maneuverability at the site of her interpellation. Helga's resistance to talented tenth propriety functions as her initial act of agency as an adult.

Indeed, her inability to yield is Helga's first experience with *choosing* to occupy "the margins as a space of radical openness" (hooks 2004). Although she has always occupied the margins as a construct of her birth, it was not her choice to do so. In choosing to leave Naxos, she was choosing the margin. She was deciding not to be silenced. She was resisting. hooks describes the transient nature of occupying the margins:

Everywhere we go there is pressure to silence our voices, to co-opt and undermine them. Mostly, of course, we are not there. We never "*arrive*" or "*can't stay*." Yet when we few remain in that "other" space, we are often too isolated, too alone. . . . This space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a safe place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance (hooks: 2004: 156, my italics).

She doesn't know what she'll do or what she'll find when she leaves and yet she is willing to live on this boundary, on this "profound edge" rather than submit to Naxos' stifling propriety. Although she is unaware of her intentions, Helga is in search of a "community of resistance." This can also be applied to Homi Bhabha's understanding of boundary as beginning rather than end, "the boundary becomes the place from which *something begins its presencing*"

(Bhabha 1994: 7). The boundary Helga encountered at Naxos inhibited her ability to live life honestly. However, the presencing of what was to come would ensure it.

The time Helga spent in both Harlem and Copenhagen were periods that vacillated between passing and performance. During her years in Harlem, under the guidance of her trusted mentor and employer, she was given her first lesson in performing for a Harlem audience, “Mrs. Hayes Rore said in a too carefully casual manner: ‘And, by the way, I wouldn’t mention that my people are white, if I were you. Colored people won’t understand it, and after all it’s your business. When you’ve lived as long as I have, you’ll know that what others don’t know can’t hurt you’” (Larsen 1928: 39). By instructing Helga to withhold her identity, Mrs. Hayes-Rore insinuates that it is an identity worthy of shame. When Helga arrives at the home of her hostess she feels like a criminal. She is in hiding. However, with the promise of a new life Helga puts these feelings aside.

The concept of passing for anything other than “white” is not something that is often attended to in literature. The “tragedy” that befalls the mulatta figure is often one that is a direct result of her rejection from white society. Here Larsen engages in a far more common, yet rarely discussed, phenomenon when she attends to the motivations and benefits inherent in passing for “black”. The fact that it is necessary for Helga to be perceived as an old-guard member of the African American elite and not as a first-generation mulatta reveals the biases upheld when myths continue to be engaged. The Mythology of Muleology is hereby enacted through the rejection of Helga should Harlem society discover her heritage. This understanding of mulatto degeneracy is profoundly ironic considering the old guard’s obsession with maintaining the most European aesthetics of their multigenerationally mixed ancestry. “We learn to read the world in terms of the codes and conventions which are dominant within the specific socio-cultural

contexts and roles within which we are socialized” (Chandler 2002: 155). Therefore, Helga’s aesthetic functions as a sign signifying her rightful place among the African American elite. Additionally, she has learned to engage in code switching and performance so that she is able to utilize language, education and decorum as buttressing significations of her old-guard status. She is read as one of them. And so she is allowed a place at the proverbial table.

During the same time Helga tires of her culturally coded charade she is presented with a good deal of money from her white stepfather as well as a request to never contact him or her half-siblings again. She is also reminded that her Danish family has always wanted her and she has therefore been invited, at their expense, to come live with them. In Copenhagen, the same signs that allowed her entry into Harlem society become the physical markers of her outsider status. Although she is praised as a rare beauty and notices immediately that the venomous racism of the United States is not present in Copenhagen she is profoundly exoticized through her hybridized corporeal reality. “A decoration. A curio. A peacock. Her dark, alien appearance was to most people an astonishment” (Larsen 1928: 67). Interestingly enough, it is here in Copenhagen that her true lineage lies. It allowed for the acceptance of Helga in Harlem with people she had no connection to and created the permanent outsider status amongst her family and countrymen. Additionally, she uses the same codes of language, education and decorum to live up to the expectations her family and the people of Copenhagen wish to read in her. “Intentionally she kept to the slow, faltering Danish. It was, she decided, more attractive than a nearer perfection” (Larsen 1928: 68). Of course, this too begins to become too much to bear, especially when the subject of marriage creates deep feelings of unease in Helga; she is profoundly disturbed at the prospect of being exoticized her entire life.



“Roles, conventions, attitudes, language—to varying degrees these are internalized in order to be repeated, and through the constancies of repetition a consistent locus gradually emerges: the self. Although never fully determined by these internalizations, the self would be entirely undermined without them” (Chandler 2002: 155, Nichols 1981: 30). Subjects who occupy the interstices are rarely granted the privilege of continual, consistent “roles, conventions, attitudes and language.” They are locked into continual code switching, the roles and attitudes placed upon them change with the observer; the conventions and language are altered by their location. Although it is well understood that everyone engages in code switching to a certain degree, as a function of their survival, it should be equally understood that identities that go beyond the binary are locked into a consistent inconsistency of disjointed repetition. That is to say, they may repeat the same three roles, identities, approaches to language and decorum transiently or sporadically, as they all contend for a position that will never be realized; that of the gradually emerged locus, the naturalized self. This elusive position is a widely recognized identity that is observed and legitimized by both the subject and society simultaneously. The women in this study are consistently denied continuity, a fact that often emerges from their home life. This is effectively illustrated in the inconsistencies present in the childhood of June Cross.

In *Secret Daughter: A Mixed Race Daughter and the Mother Who Gave Her Away*, June Cross recounts her life thus far in a memoir about a biracial girl whose mother gave her to an African American couple as June’s presence prevented her from regaining the full benefits of her white privilege. As was the case with Helga Crane, June’s mother, Norma, remarries and although June was born in 1954, she is a constant problem that must be explained away. During dinner parties, Norma and June’s stepfather, Larry, request that she call them “Aunt” and “Uncle.” This places the sin of miscegenation onto Norma’s sister while casting Norma herself

as a benevolent, liberal woman who is willing to allow her niece a place to stay. One of the salient themes of *Secret Daughter* is how the birth of a mixed child impacts her family and their friends. Norma knows that she and Larry cannot admit that June is her biological daughter, despite being part of the liberal Hollywood acting community. Like Helga's family, Norma's mother will have nothing to do with June. Consequently, Norma makes the choice to place June with a middle class African American family, Peggy and Paul in New Jersey, so that Norma and Larry can begin a new life in Los Angeles.

Here the Mythology of Muleology is functioning as the taint associated with blackness. It is the stain that has the potential to cause irreparable harm to those who are too close to the consequential backlash. In 1900, Charles Carroll's *The Negro Beast* described interracial relationships as "unnatural" and the offspring of such unions as those who should be denied the "right to live" (Townes 2006: 87). Carroll was not alone in his assertions, and the pseudo science that claimed mulattoes were power hungry and ambitious because of their European ancestry and animalistic and savage because of their African ancestry was believed by both African Americans and European Americans.

Peggy finds June's inability to be seen and not heard a reflection of her whiteness, a misplaced assumptive attitude that had no place in New Jersey among the African American elite. Peggy believes that June's lack of appropriateness comes from the privilege she experienced vis-à-vis her close proximity to her white mother and is set on creating in her a strong sense of well-mannered propriety. Meanwhile, Norma focuses on challenging the teachers who "dare" to give her child a D on a report card and is most concerned with June beginning to "talk black" and exhibiting tendencies such as "nervousness" and "flightiness" like her biracial friend Regina. What is most telling here is that Peggy believes June's "poor manners" to come

from her whiteness, while Norma implies June's "nervous, flighty" behavior is a consequence of her living with Peggy and Paul and associating with children like Regina. They are both assigning the Mythology of Muleology to June while they simultaneously assign everything positive to each of their own races.

The very idea that Norma and Regina are described as flighty and nervous is a direct link into classic understandings of muleology. "Mulattoes were imagined to be a shallow, flighty, fluttery people" (Williamson 1980: 98). Norma's use of the very words "flighty" and "nervous" along with her connection of these behaviors to Regina implies that she too questions the emotional stability of mulatto girls. The fact that they are both being raised by women other than their mothers, that their fathers are absent and that they must contend with a litany of pathologies that are thrust upon them as a result of their generational designation is never even questioned as a possibility for their "behavior problems."

Additionally, during June's years at two historically white schools, The Quaker School and Harvard, her intellectual ability is under constant fire. She is accused of cheating and plagiarism at The Quaker School and is chastised and rebuffed publicly by an Asian foreign exchange student who calls June an affirmative action case (although her grades and test scores are directly in the mean) and asks the administrator in charge to not place her with any more black tutors. This is said despite June's perfect verbal score on the SATs. These dehumanizing stereotypes plague June in a myriad of situations. They reflect the historical legacy of black intellectual and moral inferiority and the staying power such legacy has and continues to have on students. However, what makes them unique to June as a mixed race woman is that she is simultaneously occupying the position of the oppressor and the oppressed within her corporeal reality. Her Aunt Peggy insists that she move away from Afrocentricity, "It distresses me to hear

you talking black, black, black!” (Cross 2006: 162), while her black rehab students treat her with suspicion and ridicule upon learning of her white mother, “You misrepresenting yourself. You acting like a down sister when inside your head it’s white” (Cross 2006: 159). Again we see June’s racial background being used in an accusatory manner to indict her as unqualified to hold and maintain her current identity. While Peggy is concerned that June is perhaps becoming too closely identified to her “blackness or black ancestry,” June’s students accuse her of infiltration and fraud based on the assumption that she harbors unyielding internalized “whiteness.” This binary approach to the political expectations of mixed race women is theorized from many perspectives in literature and sociological and cultural analysis. In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha theorizes, “the very concepts of homogenous and national cultures, the consensual or contiguous transmission of historical traditions, or ‘organic’ ethnic communities—as the grounds of cultural comparativism—are in a profound process of redefinition (Bhabha 1994: 7). Taking place some twenty years prior to the publication of Bhabha’s work, it is clear that the redefinition of such cultural norms was already being troubled. June questions both Aunt Peggy and her African American male students with their racially pointed accusations. However, she admits that doing so leaves her feeling exhausted. “It was like being back in high school, this idea that there was a ‘black’ way and a ‘white’ way of thinking” (Cross 2006: 159).

Harkening back to the pseudoscience that was the genesis of the Mythology of Muleology, June’s experiences display the power of myth to maintain its grip on a society’s collective consciousness. “Perhaps the most bizarre claim to arise in what became a veritable lore about mulattas was made by the school of neurology, which traced the ‘mental confusion of mulattas’ to the ‘strains of blood,’ both black and white ‘running’ within them” (Zackodnik 2004: 24). Thus, June’s newfound Afrocentricity is met with alarm by Aunt Peggy who believes

she is too immersed in black culture and therefore will have trouble adapting to the mainstream Anglo-Germanic hegemony despite her background. While June's students privilege the notion of a "white" mind vs. a "black" mind reinforcing the dichotomous, mutually exclusive and biologically predetermined relationship between races, especially black and white.

This mutual exclusivity was troubled for a time during the Harlem Renaissance when there was much discussion over the potential "Browning of America" (Williamson 1980: 129). When approached from a millennium perspective, this understanding is immediately mapped onto Latinidad and the influx of the Latino population in the United States. However, during the Dubosian period it was often heralded as a move forward for black/white miscegenation, and hybridization was seen both culturally and genetically as evolutionary. This sense of hybridization can be seen currently in multicultural movements and mixed race triumphalism.

Statements taken from African American interviewees in the 1920s reveal the impact of Dubosian theory, "Black was unfortunate, but yellow and white were frankly bad, and as whiteness became less attractive in the Negro world, it became less powerful in its influence upon Negroes. Not only were Negroes in the 1920s losing both their lighter and darker coloring, they were also coming to idealize the middle ground of *brownness* (Williamson 1980: 128, my italics). If "*brownness*" were to be replaced with *mixedness* or *mulattoness*, the ideas and beliefs would be readily found today. For example, the legacy of Dubois's talented tenth is reconfigured and reintroduced as multiracial triumphalism or multiracial exceptionalism. "Mixed-race African American subjects as the exceptional multiracial are represented in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century popular culture as flexible racialized bodies, the ultimate 'floating signifiers'" (Joseph 2013: 26). This is seen in the life writings of this thesis through the constant interpretation and reinterpretation of each protagonist's race, based on who is viewing the

subject. In *Caucasia* and *Black, White and Jewish*, there begins a shift towards a more racially ambiguous identity formation than seen in *Quicksand* and *Secret Daughter*. Additionally, *Caucasia*'s protagonist Birdie and *Black, White and Jewish*'s protagonist Rebecca represent what Maria P.P. Root refers to as the Vanguard generation. Interestingly enough, both Birdie and Rebecca explore, achieve and maintain a bisexual identity further problematizing the binaries imposed upon their predecessors.

## 2.2 The Vanguard Generation

In *Caucasia*, Danzy Senna tells the story of Birdie, a biracial girl growing up during the 1970s. Her family is comprised of her white Bostonian mother, her black father with Southern roots and her sister whose phenotype was read as black as opposed to Birdie, whose phenotype was read as white.

Before I ever saw myself, I saw my sister. When I was still too small for mirrors, I saw her as the reflection that proved my own existence. Back then, I was content to see only Cole, three years older than me, and imagine that her face—cinnamon skinned, curly-haired was my own (Senna 1998: 5).

This quote is instrumental in grounding Birdie in her initial identity. At this point, the thematic elements of the Mythology of Muleology have not been introduced. A description of Birdie is noticeably absent, as the focus is on her sister. The description of her sister is also the *prima facie* of the ideal shade of “brown” as understood by early 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of “The Browning of America.” This introduction further complicates Birdie’s aesthetic in contrast with her sister’s once it is revealed. During an argument concerning Birdie and Cole’s education at a pro black school, Birdie’s mother protests, “Look at her Deck...She looks like a little Sicilian” (Senna 1998: 27). As Birdie attempts to understand the meaning of the word Sicilian, as well as her parent’s hostility concerning her schooling, she is looking at both herself and her sister in the mirror. “Her hair was curly and mine was straight, and I figured that this must have something to

do with the fighting and the way the eyes of strangers flickered surprise, sometimes amusement, sometimes disbelief, when my mother introduced us as sisters” (Senna 1998: 29). Birdie’s observation speaks to how one is perceived by others versus how one perceives oneself. This is of great importance in the identity formation of biracial subjects, as they often recognize their interstitial position before and with greater consistency than those viewing them. Birdie further problematizes the notion of self-recognition when she recognizes her sister before she recognizes herself and as such her identity becomes not only inextricably linked to her sister but firmly placed with her as well. According to Lacan’s mirror image, “the Imaginary is the order in which the child becomes aware of itself as a specular image. The Imaginary is the matrix of self as other as well as self and other structured by this logic of ‘misrecognition’” (Hitchcock 2008: 158).

The other is traditionally seen as a source of great anxiety for the self. However, this is not always the case. According to Julia Kristeva, “the stranger lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity” (Robbins 2005: 250). Kristeva’s understanding of the other is remarkably similar to Birdie’s relationship towards Cole, simultaneously independent and interdependent. According to Ian Hunter, “The notion of the self is one of the most ubiquitous in the lexicon of the modern West. A powerful stream of theory insists that the self is only the surface effect of impersonal or unconscious forces. The self is now precariously poised between indispensability and non-existence” (Hunter 2005: 317). The self then becomes alienating, while the other is an intrinsic part of one’s identity. The projection of one’s own inadequacies and insecurities gets applied to the other, as other is self, and self is alienating.

Within the context of *Caucasia*, the reader understands that Birdie’s sense of self lies firmly within her sister. Indeed, when Birdie and her sister are reunited, she feels a profound

sense of pain at the realization that her sister is not nearly as dependent on her. “She had gone on with her life. I hadn’t been able to. I had believed all along that Cole was all I needed to feel complete” (Senna 1998: 406). Thus, their separation becomes the salient force, the catalyst that sends Birdie on her own journey of self-discovery and personal identity formation. When Birdie and her mother separate from Birdie’s father and Cole, Birdie begins the process and performance of “passing.” “I was knighted a half-Jewish girl named Jesse Goldman, with a white mama named Shelia—and the world was our pearl” (Senna 1998: 131). During this time on the run Birdie and her mother spend their time traveling between communes and hotels before finally settling in an apartment. It was while at the commune that Birdie begins to understand her sexuality as non-normative. She and her white friend Alexis engaged in sexualized play games and role-play and Birdie always took the position of the “boy”. “She would say, ‘You be the guy, and I’ll be the girl. Pretend you have to hold me down. Pretend you’re the boss.’ And I would hold her down and rub my body against hers, my face hot and moist in the crook of her neck, while I felt a sharp pleasure that turned to melting between my legs” (Senna 1998: 199).

Birdie’s interpellation into masculinity (perhaps as a result of her darker looks) also imposes questions concerning her gender. She has multiple racial, gender and sexual identities. She is the boy in her sexual fantasy play with Alexis, she has a notable mustache when kissing her white boyfriend, and one of her friends in New Hampshire mistakes her for a boy. However, it is notable that Birdie never objects to being mistaken for or interpellated as a boy or as a girl who has boyish qualities, unlike her perennial objections with people’s assumptions concerning her race. During the course of her young life, Birdie is consistently viewed by others as white. Her strong bond with her sister, Cole, makes this a constant point of contention. However, when she *is* recognized for her blackness, during the time in which she is “passing for white,” she



becomes unnerved because she feels exposed. This indicates that Birdie is most comfortable with interstitial identities. At the end of the text, she finds strength and solace in her firm identity as a “mixed girl.” Although, the reader is left to discern on how many levels “mixed” can be interpreted.

This sense of forming one’s identity beyond the binary is also present in Rebecca Walker’s *Black, White and Jewish: An Autobiography of a Shifting Self*. “I do not have to belong to one camp, school or race, one fixed set of qualifiers, adjectives based on someone else’s experience. I do not have to remember who I am or who anyone else thinks I am” (Walker 2001: 4). According to Maria P.P. Root, as members of the Vanguard generation, Birdie and Rebecca’s fluidity in identification is to be expected. “This behavior is fairly normative amongst persons of mixed heritage in the vanguard and biracial baby boomer cohort” (Root 2004: 26). As their name denotes, their disregard for antiquated understandings of hypodescendancy set a precedent for living beyond the binary.

In *Black, White and Jewish*, Rebecca Walker describes the ease in which she functions as a transient being in its many manifestations. “I am more comfortable in airports than I am in either of the houses I call, with undeserved nostalgia, Home. Airports are limbo spaces—blank, undemanding, neutral” (Walker 2001: 3). Rebecca’s comfort in limbo spaces is metaphorical to her overall comfort in the interstices of life. It is within those spaces that she can exist without the societal demands of conformity and rigidity. “These in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity” (Bhabha 1994: 2). *Black, White and Jewish* as a text acts as a transient space. It goes from poetry to prose, from memoir to autobiography. It disobeys the rules of temporal succession and the reader experiences Rebecca’s life through her memory process. Like Birdie’s journey, Rebecca

is initiated into the racial schema of the United States through the representation and misrepresentation of her corporeal reality. She imagines herself as a baby discerning the tragedy that lies ahead of her through the classic trope of the tragic mulatta. She even invokes the 1959 film version of *Imitation of Life*. Imagining herself as Sarah Jane casting off her selfless mother in the name of glorified whiteness. Reassuring the reader that she is aware of her melodramatic imagination, she ponders without sarcasm the life ahead of her and the trailblazing ramifications of her family unit.

Rebecca's familial situation is unique in that she stays in constant and more or less equal contact with both of her parents despite their ultimate divorce. This provides for some troubling moments of racial prejudice from her extended family. During a trip to visit her maternal African American family members in Atlanta, GA, she is confronted with the ways in which her "whiteness" is read and responded to. During a warm family moment where Rebecca's uncle is telling jokes, Rebecca responds in fits of high-pitched giggles. This prompts her uncle to say she has a case of the "crackers," which her cousins all find hilarious. "This is a word my Uncle Bobby will use again and again to describe me or one of my mannerisms... when I am grown and doing things they think are not black" (Walker 2001: 85). Rebecca responds to these racialized insults with understanding, yet she admits to feeling alienated, "like I have something inside of me that I know they hate" (Walker 2001: 85). This alienation is felt from her paternal Jewish family as well. Much like how Birdie's grandmother dismissed and discarded Cole, Rebecca's great-grandmother refused to speak to or acknowledge Rebecca's existence, "she won't look at me...but I know she hears me because her face looks tight...and her arthritic fingers clutch at the steel tubing of her walker" (Walker 2001: 35). Excuses are made from both sides. The uncle and cousins are only kidding. Her great-grandmother is old and traumatized

from the Holocaust. Though there is every reason to believe in the validity of these excuses, they don't lessen the underlying messages of rejection.

Referring back to Lacan's mirror image and Kristeva's understanding of self and other, it is clear that both of her families' rejections are a manifestation of their own insecurities. When Rebecca states, "I have something inside of me that I know they hate." It reveals the anxieties present in the close proximity of the other that is Rebecca. In each of these instances, the legacy of the Mythology of Muleology plays a powerful role. For example, following in the footsteps of her predecessor, Iola in *Iola Leroy*, Rebecca's laugh is described as "high-pitched" and "silly." Note that this is in line with descriptions of Iola with the attention being focused specifically on her laugh. Recall that Iola "breaks into peels of hysterical laughter." This is in direct response to not only the hysteria stereotypes of mixed race women but also to the lunacy of racism as enacted by the Anglo-Germanic hegemony, i.e., when one is "cracked," one is "crackers," one becomes a "cracker." Utilizing Roland Barthes' understanding of how myth functions, Rebecca's laugh can be deciphered thusly. When viewed as form rather than content, Rebecca's laugh is seen as a direct manifestation of her whiteness, the paternal connection she has to enact the insanity of white racism. Her laugh is read as revealing some biologically predetermined aspect of her essentialized self. This is how her uncle and cousins read her laugh and thus respond in kind. When viewed as a full signifier, Rebecca's laugh is viewed as being a representation of hysteria and white racism's lunacy. For example, Rebecca is not experiencing a laughing fit because she is "white." However, because the viewer is reminded of "whiteness" of the "silliness" associated with maniacal racism: "cracker" is assigned to Rebecca as a mulatta subject. Thus, the significance of Rebecca's laugh is distorted. Furthermore, when viewed as a mythical signifier, Rebecca's laugh and her ever-present biraciality are read past the

understanding of representation and social construct and they are seen as myths. They are revealed to be myths functioning with and against the story being told. “The reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal” (Barthes 1972: 128). In fact, this last statement can be applied to the mulatta experience as a whole, as any identity simultaneously occupying more than one space.

Rebecca recounts an occurrence that took place after one of her lectures where a young “dark-skinned” woman approached her and asked her advice about raising her “half-white” and “half-black” daughter. The woman was firmly rooted in hypodecendency and the legacy of the one-drop rule. Rebecca’s response to this is, “There is a ‘real’ world to be negotiated, but not wholly defined by. There are parallel worlds, I say, internal and external, no less real” (Walker 2001: 291). This internal and external reality creates a space that is at once “true and unreal.” The myths surrounding biraciality are to be continuously negotiated and troubled. Rebecca reflects on the incident concerning the young mixed girl and thinks, “She may as well be armed and prepared to fight back with what *is*, rather than what those people *wish* was...The worst that can happen is that she will end up as confused as me” (Walker 2001:292). The invocation of the word “confused” when discussing applications of mixed race is often controversial. The idea that mixed people are “mixed up” is not only the nucleus of the Mythology of Muleology, it is also the most salient modern-day trope. It is the strongest living remnant from early 1900 pseudoscience. Unsurprisingly, it is this notion of confusion that is so often pronounced in these life writings. Angela Nissel confronts this head on in *Mixed: My Life in Black and White*. Not only is the title a nod to the legacy of madness in the mulatta subject, but her story remains situated in the madness of racism both metaphorically and literally.

### 2.3 Late Vanguard/Cusp of Biracial Baby Boomers

Angela Nissel's memoir *Mixed: My Life in Black and White* recounts the story of a biracial girl coming of age on the cusp of Maria P.P. Root's Biracial Baby Boomer generation. Born only two years before the ushering in of the Biracial Baby Boomers, Angela offers a perspective for this generation's identity formation and the influence and effect the Mythology of Muleology had on the process of that formation. Like Birdie, Angela has a profound moment of realization in the implications of her hybridized status through a moment of childhood longing in her reflection. However, Birdie's identity is anchored in her sister's and as such places her primary understanding of belonging and longing with her. Angela has no such buffer and as a result is directly influenced by the Anglo-Germanic hegemony and her immersion in white culture up to that point. After being rebuffed by both her white and black peers, when attempting to acquire neighborhood playmates, Angela engages in a few days of aesthetic analysis. "I spent the next few days in the mirror, analyzing what parts of my body I would have to change to be fully accepted by the white people...I did get a little bit lighter from being inside so much, but it wasn't enough. My *boundaries* stayed the same" (Nissel 2006: 41, my italics).

While the other girls in the neighborhood, both black and white, are playing in their segregated playgroups, Angela is confined socially and literally to her front yard and house. This serves as a metaphor for her external and internal alienation due to race. Angela's internal and external alienation is the lived experience of Rebecca's theory of parallel worlds and the "realness" of each one. Furthermore, it is clear that Angela has developed a "double consciousness" (Dubois 1903) at the young age of seven. She sees herself through the eyes of the dominant white class. She specifically attends to her phenotype and judges how far/close she is from whiteness, and what would need to change before she was granted entry into generally approved whiteness. Her

use and application of boundaries function as the realization that her goal of socially sanctioned whiteness is unattainable. To this end she is confined by the readable racial boundary of her blackness. Although Angela and Birdie long for shifts in their appearance that are antithetical to each other, their experiences converge at each of their impermeable boundaries. Recalling Bhabha's understanding of boundaries as the point where "*something begins its presencing*," Angela and Birdie's boundaries can be understood at the points from which their identity formation began. As Angela matures, her relationship with blackness becomes even more problematic as she is verbally, emotionally and physically attacked by African American girls.

"I hate black people!" I screamed, before running and locking myself in my room. I wanted out of the race game. It seemed every time I learned the rules, someone had changed them on me. I was tired of fighting. I wanted to be a purebred. I went to the mirror armed with two years of junior high Spanish and practiced my new identity. "Mixed? No," I said, a frown on my face. *Yo soy puertorriqueña!*" I said, and smiled. (Nissel 2006: 97).

Angela's visceral reaction is the effect of enduring months of bullying, culminating in a full-blown attack. Angela's reference to race as a game indicates that she is aware either consciously or subconsciously that race is a social construct. As a game is made-up and altered at times to the benefit or detriment of the players, so is race. It appears to Angela that no matter whose game she is playing (either black's or white's), she is always the one losing. Thus, moving beyond the binary for Angela at this point of her life includes casting off both black and white racial assignments. Initially she experimented with identifying as Jewish. However, due to her phenotype she realizes that this identification is untenable and decides to "become" Puerto Rican.

The notion of purity is a compelling aspect of Angela's impending crisis. She seeks "purity" and yet aligns herself with Puerto Ricans who are by all accounts a multigenerationally mixed people, just as many African Americans are. However, due to cultural and ethnic

understandings of the triangulation of race, nationality and culture/language, Puerto Ricans are perceived as being distinct to themselves as well as outsiders. “Our ability to interpret racial meanings depends on preconceived notions of a racialized social structure. We expect people to act out their apparent racial identities; indeed we become *disoriented* when they do not” (Omi and Winant 1994: 59, my italics). This underscores not only the aspect of rules inherent in the “race game” but it also gestures to the “ill logic” of such rules, the lunacy present in racial designation and classification or reclassification. When members of society become disoriented due to unforeseen plays in the racial game, they immediately transfer that disorientation onto the source.

Therefore, when someone refuses to enact racialized tropes of the hegemony, they are often interpellated into the confused state that they have caused others. Angela addresses this madness directly when she reveals her stay in a mental hospital. Her stay is the culminated result of the years of convoluted, erratic and insane racism she has experienced as a result of her biraciality. In fact, her “insanity” acts as evidence that she is actually sane. She is sane enough to realize that it is the racial construction in the United States that is truly insane. As a metaphor for this, Angela actually finds her sanity in the mental institution, implying that life itself can often feel like an insane asylum in the construction of people based on arbitrary human qualifiers such as race and gender. When she diagnoses herself with “racial schizophrenia,” she is invoking the Mythology of Muleology, and reflecting the nation’s historical and scientific inconsistency and anxiety surrounding biraciality in all of its incarnations. Women are especially prone, through the use of the tragic mulatta trope, to indictments surrounding madness. Although the madness usually lies with the biracial woman herself, we see instances, for example, Dorothy West’s *The Wedding*, where the mothers of these women are also driven mad by the schematic reality of

racism, particularly in the United States. It must be noted that in this study, all of the mothers driven mad are white, suggesting that these stories function simultaneously as a cautionary tale to white women and as a tool to buttress white heterosexual male dominion. This is directly attended to in Heidi Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky*.

*The Girl Who Fell From The Sky* is an auto-inflected novel that reveals the early life of a young biracial girl named Rachel being raised by her African American grandmother after she loses her parents. Rachel is the daughter of a Danish woman, Nella, and an American G.I., Roger. Durrow's choice to name Rachel's mother Nella is a purposeful tribute to Nella Larsen and their shared Danish/African American ancestry (Durrow 2010: 273). Rachel's mother is unaware of the inconsistent intricacies involved in American racial politics. Upon learning of her pregnancy, Roger is panicked and anxiety ridden at what this means for their future. Nella can't understand why or how it would be different in the United States. "American character" or American ideology is the foundation on which the Mythology of Muleology was constructed and where it currently survives.

It is distinct in that codified language readily understood by an American subject often has difficulties conveying the coded message to foreign subjects, even after extensive explanation. For example, "The phenomenon known as "passing as white" is difficult to explain in other countries or to foreign students. In fact, *definitions of who is black vary quite sharply from country to country*, and for this reason people in other countries often express consternation about our (the United States') definition (Davis 1991: 13, my italics). The cultural codes concerning American myths such as the tragic mulatta and the prerequisite concepts of "passing" and the "one drop rule" are lost on foreign ears and subsequently rendered meaningless to them, underscoring the inherent arbitrariness of signs. This arbitrariness further troubles the



dichotomous belief of muleology and underscores not only the myth inherent in its application, but the erratic inconsistencies as well. Definitions of blackness are altered throughout time and space, they function as amorphous boundaries that must be negotiated with and attended to in order to survive one's transient classification.

The definitions of blackness are particularly pertinent to mulatta subjects living within the United States. During Rachel's first day at her new school she encounters a girl named Carmen LaGuardia. "She has hair like mine, my same color skin, and she counts as black. I don't understand how, but she seems to know" (Durrow 2010: 9). This is similar to the experiences of Birdie, "She a Rican or something?" (Senna 1998: 43), Rebecca, "Easily dismissible as Puerto Rican" (Walker 2001: 37), and Angela, "Yo soy puertorriqueña!" (Nissel 2006: 97). As members of the Vanguard generation, it is telling that they each experience an association with Puerto Ricans, who by the 1980s had established a presence in the United States that was not nearly as visible during Helga and June's lives. In fact, Rebecca's comment that she was "easily dismissible" seems to be at the crux of the constant and consistent misrecognitions of being Puerto Rican.

This simultaneously subverts and sustains the Mythology of Muleology. It's subversive insofar as it directly undermines the pseudoscientific belief that mulattoes are ultimately incapable of reproduction. At the same time it has a sustaining property in that by mapping these first-generation mulatto women onto a somewhat neutralized "Other," society can breathe a collective sigh of relief and reassure itself that the Black/White binary has not been crossed. Rachel is distinctive amongst her peers because her blue eyes represent the pinnacle of white beauty. The people she encounters are not able to "dismiss" her as Puerto Rican or a neutralized "Other" because of the signification of her eyes. "We search for binary or polar oppositions

because meaning is based on the establishment of relationships, and the most important kind of relationship in the production of meaning in language is that of opposition (Berger 2005: 24). It is this stark contrast of blended binaries that functions as the nucleus for Rachel's identity development. "I learn that black people don't have blue eyes. I learn that I am black. I have blue eyes" (Darrow 2010:10). Rachel's understanding of herself is demarcated in ways that are similar to her life writing peers and yet, because the signification of blue eyes is so consistently present, it functions on a more visible level than a laugh, hair texture or even skin color which can be stifled, altered/covered, and tanned. Thus, the arbitrariness of these codified socially sanctioned signs are further problematized, allowing the reader to understand the bewilderment faced by Nella upon entering the United States and having to contend with all of its historically implicit racial madness.

Daniel McNeil reveals, "Contemporary tragic mulatto stories are subtle cautionary tales against interracial relationships. The message is clear: if you're a white woman who gets involved with a man of color, there are three things you can count on. 1) He will abandon you. 2) You will be left to raise this yellow or brown child on your own. 3) Your child will have major identity issues" (McNeil 2010: 13). This is revealing, in that the hegemony believes there was and is a need for a telling of cautionary tales to white women. This cautionary tale is not given to black women, nor do we see black women finding it impossible to cope with their mulatto children in historical memoir and literature. Each of the white mothers in this study abandon their children in some way. Most choose to simply leave them in the care of "more capable" black hands. However, Nella's character is different in that she believes herself to be their best caretaker as she is their mother, a fact she finds herself having to prove regularly. "The woman was thinking I adopted my children? What does the woman not see? They are my natural

children (Darrow 2010: 124). And look like it...never have I been thinking of my children as black. I love them and will keep them safe (157). They will go where I go (247).” Nella doesn’t recognize her children as black because she sees their hybridity, she recognizes herself in them, and she is aware of their interstitial position. Her understanding is in direct contrast with her reality, thus initiating her subsequent break with said reality. The realization of the United States’ schizophrenic approach to racial identity becomes apparent to Nella through the racial slurs hurled at her children and the physical abuse sustained by Nella herself from her boyfriend. In her deepening depression she believes that she cannot protect her children if the world cannot recognize her as their mother and rationalizes that they will stay a family if they all fall together. Rachel lives, and this is the nucleus of the story. She believes she isn’t supposed to be alive, like the Mythology of Muleology that classifies mulatto subjects as abominations. She exists despite those claims both physically and racially. Her story, like many of those in her generation concludes on a hopeful note towards the future while resisting the colorblind tropes of multiracial exceptionalism so often invoked.

The collective stories of the women in this study ultimately serve to tell a unified narrative of personal experiences. Through their use of the life writing genre, they are able to touch on the most meaningful moments of their lives as they begin to create a contemporary canon of the life writings of mixed race women. In Chapter Two, I explore the methodological patterns most commonly employed in these women’s stories, as well as the power of testimony present in the location of injury as a valuable epistemological site of entry. This epistemological value is crucial to the validity of not only their personal work but also to their collective identity and positionality in the established academic and non-academic discourse.

### 3 Chapter Two: Life Writing: A Method of Self-Discovery and Resistance

In this chapter, I examine the epistemological validity inherent in the positionality and experience of this study's writers and explore how this is accomplished through the submission and acknowledgement of injury. Positionality is often discussed in tandem with experiential claims, which are the foundation of life writing. It is utilized to ground and locate discussions surrounding interconnected modes of oppression. The writers in this study remain engaged with both identity and positionality as they reveal their lived experiences and attempt to locate how their experiences fit into the collective cultural consciousness as well as the significance of that location. The fundamental commonality of their literary perspective lies in "an author attempting to fashion an enabling discourse of testimony and self-revelation, to establish a sense of agency, and to unearth a panoply of mythemes that valorize a protean model of female subjectivity" (Henke 1998: xvi). Therefore, it is important for the reader to understand how these lived experiences are being enacted through the literary genre of life writing. It is this genre that the women utilize to insert themselves into the racial and gendered project of the time.

#### 3.1 Genre and Form: A Mode of Reflexive Analysis

The first narrative in this study, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, falls under the category of auto-inflected novels. The similarities present in the racial background and upbringing of Nella Larsen and her protagonist Helga Crane are evident. However, to compare and contrast these similarities in any great detail serves to undermine the power and potentiality of life writing. The insertion of absolute truth creates a dichotomous relationship with what must be understood to be absolute falsehood. The realities of memories and experiences are incapable of being expressed through such binary modes of understanding and as a result must be set aside so that the most honest testimony can be given. I utilize the word honest here with the understanding that while

the two are most assuredly connected, truth and honesty are not inextricably linked. (T)ruth is often used as a political tool of oppression: recreating facts, inserting data and manipulating timelines in an attempt to control the masses. It is dominant and deliberate and positions itself as being beyond reproach. Honesty is directly connected to integrity and honor, usually in reference to an individual. The individual either chooses to divulge or not.

Should the individual's honesty conflict with the (T)ruth, they are accused of being dishonest, however, their integrity lies outside of dominant forms of epistemologies and remains safely intact within. Butler asserts her perspective on personal testimony and the use of narrative thusly, "fictional narration in general requires no referent to work as narrative, and we might say that the irrecoverability and foreclosure of the referent is the very condition of possibility for an account of myself, if that account is to take narrative form" (Butler 2005: 37). The narrative must be accepted on its own and understood implicitly to be a valid "account of oneself." Larsen was able to write *Quicksand* without fear of personal impunity because she chose to present it as an auto-inflected novel (whether she referred to it as that or not). The auto-inflected novels attended to in this thesis will not be examined for verifiable fact comparison with each author, but rather studied for their meaningful accounts of legitimate lived experiences. In fact, the memoir and auto-inflected novels in this study all follow the chronological reveal and reflection of Bildungsroman and thus are even more aptly described as life writings in the truest sense of the word. It is their personal journey, in contrast with societal restraints, that informs their self-development, self-awareness and self-identification. "Whatever the framework, the author recasts his or her life narrative in the shape of a salutary paradigm that offers both a myth of origins and an implicitly teleological model for future development" (Henke 1998: xv).

Considering the Mythology of Muleology attended to in the first chapter, the utilization of life writing as a mode of expression, insertion and resistance is all the more compelling. For example, the need for a curative balm in reaction to the implicit mental and physical illness projected onto mulatta subjects, the desire to (re)create a story of origins for oneself by oneself in response to pathologized legends of inception, and finally an epistemological approach to their existence and experience are applicable to each narrative in this study.

In *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen takes the reader on a quest to understand the life of Helga Crane. Due to the history and context of the time in which she was born, Crane's need for a curative balm and a satisfying teleological end are longed for the most and because of the time in which she was born are never fully realized. She begins her story with a famous stanza from Langston Hughes:

My old man died in a fine big house.  
My ma died in a shack.  
I wonder where I'm gonna die,  
Being neither white nor black? (Larsen 1928: 1)

The choice to utilize this poem to open her life writing immediately discloses the subject matter and approach that Larsen is exploring. The protagonist is a biracial woman of white and black parentage and she is going to examine her life from a racialized perspective in tandem with the political and social realities of her time. As she reveals the experiences that shaped her life, she is testifying to the very legitimacy of her existence. She is able to reveal her ancestry and origin. She talks back to those who say her existence is an impossibility. However, inscribed in her testimony is the psychological and emotional injury she sustained as a consequence of her generational affiliation. This is reflected in her ultimate descent into depression and impending death in a shack in Alabama. The Hughes' poem at the beginning of the novel, read alongside Crane's own psychological and physical deterioration, underscores the myth of the tragic mulatta

figure. Despite the distinction in their gender, the summation of Crane's life can be read in Hughes' four-line stanza. There is no explanation for her existence. In fact, the argument could be made that suffering is all she was meant to experience. Although this does little to resist traditional literary tropes, it does provide space for the testimony of her life. Thus, she assumes an agentive position as she inserts herself into the collective consciousness. This is incredibly significant to Larsen's authentic account, as it maps not only her self-development but also the personal exploration inherent in her journey. This stands in stark contrast to stories written about biracial women by Jewish women (*Imitation of Life*) or African American men (*Queen*). Although Crane is left in an unfortunately dreadful circumstance, the teleological element is present in the interpellation of the reader as witness. "A self-memorial says, 'I remember, and now, so will you'" (Gilmore 2001: 13). When viewed within the context of its time, the legacy of Larsen's *Quicksand* made way for each of the biracial life writings that came after. The loss of hope at the end of her story is found in the work of her successors.

June Cross's memoir, *Secret Daughter*, is able to establish a curative balm as well as an epistemological approach to her existence and experiences. Cross works her way through the knotty entanglements of her childhood and young adulthood during one of the United States' most intense racial projects. Born in the same year as *Brown v. Board of Education*, Cross's approach to her life writing reflects her generational position in many of the same ways as her fellow cohort member, Nella Larsen.

However, Cross chose to begin her story with a dedication:

To my mother,  
 Norma Catherine Storch,  
 And  
 The woman who so lovingly raised me,  
 Muriel Fortune Bush—  
*For everything you did* (Cross 2006: iix).

As she acknowledges these women, she makes a clear distinction between her mother and the woman who raised her. Although their racial and class differences have not been revealed at this point in the text, the reader is aware that these two women will be salient factors to Cross's autobiography. Their divergent racial and classed backgrounds represent Cross's continued dealings with the dichotomous aspects of her internal self in connection to her external experiences. They serve as the foundation for her epistemological approach through life and underscore the importance of recreating a personal origin story. As she continues her origin story, she informs the reader that both of her parents were entertainers. This is a telling development because Cross is subjected to the racist fallout of societal intolerance towards interracial couples, despite being the child of two entertainers living in New York City. Removed from the south and its historical and political legacy, Cross experiences racism that is only slightly more subtle. Yet she is able to create a cathartic paradigm through which she recounts her life. Furthermore, she summarizes with a teleological approach through the misrecognition of herself as her own mother. This misrecognition functions to reunify her fractured family tree, re-center her in her home city of New York and allow for a conclusive and settled end to her life story thus far.

Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* is similarly structured despite its being an auto-inflected novel. These structural similarities serve to further underscore the applicability of the life writing genre. Senna's protagonist approaches the recounting of her life through young adulthood. Without the use of a dedicational blurb, Senna begins with a half-page introduction situated between two single page headings, "Caucasia" and "Negritude for Beginners." *Caucasia* is a play on the word Caucasian, as it applies to a nation state or country, and *negritude* is a reference to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century approach to 21<sup>st</sup> century Africana application. This deliberate presentation hints to the



reader that Senna's story will center around "blackness" in a "white" environment or setting. It also suggests that there may be aspects of traditional passing narratives that have been troubled from a millennium perspective. The "outsider within" epistemological paradigm is a continuous running theme in each of this study's texts (Collins 1986). However, instead of a perfunctory nod to her multifaceted multiraciality, Senna addresses her outsider status and sets up the foundation that will serve as her epistemological approach throughout the text.

Birdie's origin story positions her as the daughter of a black intellectual with southern roots and a blue-blooded Bostonian with Mayflower lineage. Additionally, her parents are married, which is in line with her generational cohort's experience. Unlike its predecessor, the Exotic generation, the Vanguard's (of which Senna and Birdie are members) parents were more frequently married as a result of *Loving v Virginia* in 1967. This positions Birdie's origin as relatively elite in comparison with all but her closest chronological counterpart, Rebecca Walker. In extending the interconnectivity of these women's experiences, Birdie's teleological conclusion ends with a misrecognition similar to Cross's. However, instead of misrecognizing herself with her mother as Cross does, Birdie misrecognizes a "cinnamon-skinned, curly-haired girl" for someone that she knows despite being in a completely new and unfamiliar environment. The implication of this misrecognition is that Birdie is connected to and aware of a shared mulatta experience and solidarity.

This solidarity is also seen in Rebecca Walker's memoir, *Black, White, and Jewish*. Walker's African American mother is an acclaimed writer and her Jewish father is a successful civil rights attorney. Like her similarly privileged counterpart Senna, Walker's parents were also married. Her introduction is also without a blurb, instead it contains the simple dedication: "to my parents." This is an integral part of her origin story as she is making it clear that no matter

what the reader finds in her life story, her parents are to be appreciatively acknowledged. In fact, Walker makes it a point to underscore her legitimacy to the reader. “I am not a bastard, the product of a rape, the child of some white devil. I am a Movement Child. I am not tragic” (Walker 2001: 24). Walker’s pointed assertion reflects the common assumption that is frequently placed on mixed race subjects of illegitimacy and pathological tragedy. Challenging both the Mythology of Muleology and the myth of the tragic mulatta, Walker positions her origin story as the nucleus of Loving v Virginia’s legacy.

However, Walker makes it clear that her life and experiences as a mixed race woman are not without their problematic moments. She makes comments acknowledging her commitment and solidarity to those who have suffered in lieu of those who share a similar skin color or religious affiliation. She repeatedly states that her life is one that is most comfortably lived in the transitory uncertainties of life. Her teleological conclusion links her and a young mixed girl who has not yet been born when she states, “The worst that can happen is that she will end up as confused as me!” (Walker 2001: 292). Walker is not tragic, however she is aware that her life experiences have altered her in ways that are distinctly unique to the mulatta experience. As flippant as her statement referencing confusion appears to be, she is aware that there is a good chance the young girl will experience some level of ambivalence surrounding her identity and she is suggesting that it is fine, as it is merely part of the process.

Angela Nissel attends to the implication of confusion in mixed race subjects directly in her memoir, *Mixed: My Life in Black and White*. In fact, the curative aspect of acknowledging a confused state is at the crux of the salutary paradigm in which her story is positioned. Her origin story begins in the 1970s. Her parents are married, like both Walker and Senna, however she is without the educational or ancestral elitism present in the former two authors. Beginning her

memoir with a simple dedication, “For Rueben,” the reader is introduced to her origin story in the first chapter, “White Thug, Black Panther.” Although Nissel goes on to problematize these vivid descriptions, the reader is aware that there is a distinctive component functioning here. Nissel’s mother was a nurse and worked for the Black Panthers in one of their free clinics. Her father was a young “hothead” with a black step-dad and a preference for black women. There is a radicalized aspect to Nissel’s origin story that is not present in any of the other authors’ life writings. This is indicative of the time (1970s) and place (Philadelphia) in which her parents met and married.

Nissel’s epistemological approach to her existence and lived experience comes at the conclusion of years of consistently battling a state of near constant ambivalence, even during her own flirtation with Afrocentrism and university-centered radicalism. Like Walker, Nissel concludes that there will always be an element of confusion present, a state she often refers to as “racial schizophrenia.” However, she makes it equally clear that this state of confusion lies in society’s view *of* her and not *with* her. Therefore, her teleological purpose is served through the transference of tragedy, from the mulatta self to the monoracial other. This transference of tragedy is present from beginning to end within the salutary paradigm of Heidi Durrow’s auto-inflected novel, *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky*. Durrow’s life writing core slowly reveals the origin story of the biracial protagonist Rachel. However, it is clear from the introduction that the tragedy in this novel will not be Rachel’s. Although Durrow dedicates her novel to her mother: “Dedicated to my mother, Birgit, with all my love,” she also reintroduces the blurb seen in the life writings of the earlier authors present in this study.

The significance of Durrow's choice of quote is profound in that it connects the authors of this study in a cyclical completion of unity:

If a man calls me a nigger  
it's his fault the first time, but  
mine if he has the  
opportunity to do it again (Durrow 2010: 1).

This is a direct quote from Nella Larsen's novel, *Passing*. Durrow's choice of quote speaks to the overt racism, psychological trauma and subsequent perspective Larsen developed as a result of her experiences. It also informs the reader from the earliest point in the story that Durrow will be attending to the complexities of race as understood from within the African Diaspora. Rachel's origin story is unique amongst the origin stories of the other authors in that it begins overseas in Denmark. While the trope of the African American G.I. taking a white European bride is not surprising, it is easily argued that it is also not considered the norm. Rachel's father is clear in his reasoning behind his attraction to white European women in lieu of white American women. "Roger liked white girls, but not American white girls. They didn't do much for him, because they acted like you were supposed to be happy just because you got to rub your brown on their cream. But not European girls—they loved the black boys they met in the bars near the American base. Roger loved them back" (Durrow 2010: 71). Roger's attraction to Nella is attributed to her whiteness just as much as her European status. This becomes all the more apparent when Roger reveals his anger mingled with fear at the prospect of marrying Nella and taking her home with him to the United States.

Thus, Rachel's origin story is created away from the culturally encoded myths present in the United States. It is only when the couple find themselves entrenched in the United States' intense historical and deeply imbedded reservoir of cultural racism that they truly begin to experience the consequences of their interracial relationship. As was the case with Helga Crane

these consequences act as the catalyst for an absentee father and a confused, ill-equipped mother. However, Durrow allows Rachel a hopeful future buttressed by the profundity gained through the experiences of her early life. Before she decides to leave her grandmother and venture out on her own, she makes a declarative statement that acknowledges the consequences of what it means to occupy a biracial, bicultural, bilingual identity. “You want me to be special and you want me to be yours. But I can’t be both. I am Nella Floe’s daughter that’s what makes me special–me” (Durrow 2010: 237). This is what it means to occupy any space beyond the binary. These marginalized interstices act as both pedestal and penitentiary and do so simultaneously. Rachel is seen as special, remarkable even, not only to her grandmother but to her peers, teachers and other adults as well. This special status places her in the precarious position of having multiple hopes placed onto her as well as inevitable envy and ostracism. Through the realization of her interpellated status, Rachel embarks on a journey that nods to an exceptional multiracial component without the associated triumphalism. In fact, Durrow’s teleological end reveals how Rachel embodies the realization that a mulatta subject can be simultaneously remarkable and ordinary, enigmatic and relatable, insightful and confused.

### 3.2 Injury: The Site of Heightened Consciousness

The salutary paradigms and teleological ends met in the life writings of this thesis are in concert with Nietzsche’s understanding of the acquired consciousness of the self. “We become conscious of ourselves only after certain injuries have been inflicted” (Butler 2005: 10). It is from this injured entry point into consciousness that these writers are able to create and expand upon the genre of life writing. As a result, this thesis deepens the scholarship and theory surrounding concepts such as self-memorialization, cathartic testimony and the history and questionable veracity of the marginalized other. In tandem with injury-induced consciousness is

the traumatic testimonial or a testifying of trauma. In fact, testifying is often hailed as instrumental in healing traumatic events in one's life. "Survivors of trauma are urged to testify *repeatedly* to their trauma in an effort to create the language that will manifest and contain trauma as well as the witnesses who will recognize it. Thus, the unconscious language of repetition through which trauma initially speaks (flashbacks, nightmares, emotional flooding) is replaced by conscious language that can be repeated in structured settings." (Gilmore 2001: 7). The amorphous composition of life writing allows the author to engage in the cathartic consciousness of language while utilizing a medium that can be repeated in any number of structured settings. It must also be acknowledged that the use of the word "trauma" is employed with the understanding and recognition of its potentially problematic association with historical tropes and stereotypes. However, it is done so with the application of Maria P. P. Root's usage of trauma and psychological injury in "From Exotic to Dime a Dozen," and therefore supplants the trauma as a condition of society and not one of inherent personal defect.

In fact, when applied through this lens, the application of trauma and testimony in furthering the analysis of the life writings of biracial women authors is most appropriate. "Trauma from the Greek meaning 'wound,' refers to the self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury and harm. Crucial to the experience of trauma are the multiple difficulties that arise in trying to articulate it...something of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language fails in the face of trauma, and that trauma mocks language and confronts it with its insufficiency" (Gilmore 2001: 6). It is this "injury and harm" that Nietzsche speaks of when referring to an entry into one's consciousness. Just as the phoenix burns to emerge, it is the traumatic components of one's life that ultimately serve to heighten one's awareness of both self

and society. It is from the position of this heightened awareness that the subjects of this thesis are able to look back and offer analytical insight into the salient moments of their young lives. In fact, the ultimate ascendance into enhanced consciousness is seen in each of the life writings present in this study, save for Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. As the progenitor in this series of life writings, the task of coming into a heightened awareness within the context of this work lies with the reader as she attempts to analyze Larsen's testimony.

As stated earlier, *Quicksand*'s presentation as an auto-inflected novel allowed Larsen the freedom to honestly testify, while inviting as little additional trauma (through interrogation) as possible. Read as a testimony of the protagonist, Helga Crane, this life writing functions most prominently as a self-memorial and a response to the hegemony's suspicion of the submissions of the marginalized other. As Helga's life is recounted from her early days at Naxos to her last days in Alabama, she is inserting herself into the collective literary landscape. Her story has no hopeful or happy ending. It is mired in a desperate acquiescence to a fate greater than she. The only possibility for meaning or purpose then lies with those who will become keepers of her story. "I remember, and now, so will you" (Gilmore 2001: 13). Witnessing Helga's life through her retelling allows for an ultimate justification to her life, i.e., the life of Helga Crane was important, influential and meaningful not for what it meant to Crane herself but what it means and will mean to those who read her story.

Life writing fulfills much of the testimonial aspects of genre-specific autobiography. For example, "in autobiography, a person, solid and incontestable, testifies to having lived. An autobiography is a monument to the idea of personhood, to the notion that one could leave behind a memorial to oneself (just in case no one else ever gets around to it) and that the memorial would perform the work of permanence that the person never can" (Gilmore 2001: 13).

The life of Helga Crane may be told anecdotally by those whose lives she touched. However, they will be mere glimpses of her character, moments in her life, a copied version of her imagined self. Only Crane can truly immortalize her authentic self and lived experience. Additionally, because there is no satisfactory resolution, no moment of ultimate revelation or ascension into higher consciousness, Crane's testimony as it subverts the silenced voice of the marginalized other, acts as a prototype. It functions as a point of reference for those who wish to reveal and insert their suppressed histories into the dominant cultural consciousness, and, in so doing, claim a space of legitimacy and relevancy within the interstices of hegemonically trivialized identities. The lived experiences of the mulatta subject are ones that American society is reticent to support unless they buttress the historical stereotypes created through socio-political myths. It is important to note that the story of Helga Crane problematizes these socio-political myths through her personal testimony, yet ultimately submits to the hegemonically sanctioned trope of the tragic mulatta due to the pathetic conditions surrounding her untimely death.

Therefore, although Larsen resists the interpellated status of mulatta madness through the revelation of societal inconsistencies and prejudices, her protagonist cannot avoid the eventual destiny of sorrow and death that functions as her literary birthright. When read through the lens of the culturally coded context of its time, it is unclear if the motivation to end Helga Crane's story was influenced by those editing the piece or simply by the overarching understanding of publishable acceptability concerning such genres. "Consider first-person accounts of trauma by women, for example, are likely to be doubted, not only when they bring forward accounts of sexual trauma but also because their self-representation already is at odds with the account the representative man would produce" (Gilmore 2001: 23). This is not only reflective in Larsen's choice of conclusion but also in her usage of third person point of view. Further removing herself



from the character of Helga Crane allows Larsen to reveal her story with an academically sanctioned (and therefore decidedly more authoritative) slant of a phenomenological study of the subject Helga Crane sans the reflexivity or theoretical analysis. The fundamental core of Nella Larsen's account is at odds with the hegemony. However, she is offered a reprieve from critical and cultural isolation because her ending reestablishes the status quo. Additionally, it is important to note that Larsen chose to allow Crane to return to "blackness" and yet meet the same fate as her chronological literary counterparts who chose "whiteness." This can be read as Larsen's further attempt to assert an identity within the racial and cultural interstices of the United States. Larsen's success in establishing a place of resistance for the interpellated mulatta subject is seen in the subsequent life writings of this study. Her ability to announce and claim a mulatta perspective resonates in the work of her successors and allows them to utilize their individual and collective sites of injury as a springboard into higher consciousness, an evolution that her own protagonist was denied.

June Cross's memoir takes place some thirty years after the story of Helga Crane. Additionally, it was not published until 2006, allowing for further acceptability of an optimistic ending and fate for a mulatta subject. However, it is crucial to note here that this turn is not necessarily endemic of multiracial triumphalism or as Ralina Joseph posits, "the exceptional multiracial" (Joseph 2013). Rather it denotes the particular racial project the United States found itself in at the turn of the millennium and is reflective of the generationally inflected experiences of this study's mulatta writers.

Cross begins her memoir with a nod to Lacanian misrecognition as it pertains directly to her mother, "I search for my mother's face in the mirror and see a stranger" (Cross 2006: 1). This is telling insofar as Cross's choice to begin her self-memorialization outside of herself. As

Suzette Henke suggests, “the tenuous subject-in-process, the Lacanian *moi* contingent on the production of meaningful testimony, is valorized and reflected back in the implicit gaze of an auditor/reader who stands in for the (m)other of the early mirror stage” (Henke 1998: xvi). Thus, Cross testifies to her witnesses/readers in an attempt to both self-memorialize and achieve reflective recognition (and thus validation) with another. Through the process of her self-memorialization, she achieves aspects of catharsis vis-à-vis her testimonial. The recounting of her life from childhood to adulthood is punctuated by historical moments concerning key points in the civil rights movement. For example, she makes it a point to inform the reader that she was born “six months before the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board of Education*,” and when she was three, “Negroes in Montgomery, Alabama, had forced the city to integrate its city buses” (Cross 2006: 2). The inclusion of historical facts assist in underscoring the legitimacy of her childhood claims. It follows the acceptable standard of classic autobiographical writing as most commonly done by men who held historically relevant positions.

By utilizing this method, Cross preemptively strikes down any potential detractors and interrogators. This method is used continuously throughout her text and is not seen with nearly the conscious consistency in the life writings of the authors of the vanguard/baby boomer generations. In fact, incorporating salient historical moments lessens with each generation, in part because the racial projects are moving away from the intensity present in the civil rights era and in part because the authors employ other techniques to reinforce the legitimacy of their experiential claims.

In Rebecca Walker’s memoir, *Black, White and Jewish*, her primary tool for asserting her legitimacy is through her ancestral literary legacy. Walker begins her life writing with a statement that is almost prophetic given the subject matter attended to in this thesis, “I don’t

remember things” reads the first line on the first page of her memoir. She proceeds to address the reasoning behind such a pointed statement, which is even more so because as the author of her memoir she has been charged with remembering her life. However, Walker’s assertion underscores one of the most profound pillars of life writing. “Where does autobiography end and fiction begin? How do the fictive and the autobiographical traverse each other, and what prompts—or—bars their crossing?” (Gilmore 2001: 15). Although this line of questioning may seem more appropriately applied to auto-inflected novels, I chose to address it here for the very question it seeks to answer. Where does the line of demarcation lie and what is the primary motivating factor for such a line?

Walker’s admission that she cannot remember things is directly in concert with Althusser’s dismissal of rigid autobiographical modalities: “I give notice that what follows is not a diary, not my memoirs, not an autobiography. I simply wanted to remember those *emotional experiences* which had an impact on me and helped shape my life; my life as I see it and as others may, I think, see it too” (Althusser 1992: 29/Gilmore 2001: 39, my italics). What prompts the autobiographical and the fictive to cross each other are the emotional experiences of the authors’ lives. They are also responsible for the potential and probable barring that discourages writers from more frequently problematizing the conformity of traditional autobiographical standards. Thus, uninhibited testimonial provides the greatest catharsis as its functionality relies directly on lived experiences grounded in the emotional.

Walker makes it clear from the very beginning of her story that she lives beyond the binary in the interstices of life, “I feel amorphous, missing the unbroken black outline around my body that everyone else seems to have” (Walker 2001: 2). Therefore, it seems most fitting that she admonishes the need to defend the legitimacy of her lived experiences and instead releases

them so that they may cosmically congeal and in some small way give shape to her life. Indeed, Walker's approach to addressing the claims of legitimization act almost independently and implicitly through the notoriety and fame of her mother. It is noteworthy to mention here that each of the authors in this study have been privy to extensive and elite education, which further serves to strengthen their claims and experiences despite their marginalized status.

Danzy Senna, author of the auto-inflected novel *Caucasia* is arguably the most elite member of them all. She and her protagonist Birdie, share the same legitimate, blue-blooded, *Mayflower* ancestry, a trait that can be claimed by few, much less those with notable African ancestry. Birdie's racialized identifier is so rare in fact that it appears to often act as the impetus of her self-memorialization as well as tacitly buttressing her legitimization claims. Consider the article Senna wrote in 1998, "The Mulatto Millennium," in which she satirically describes herself as well as those with similar ancestry. It is especially fitting that Senna remarks on the confusion between her classification and the "Jewlatto" which is her generational counterpart, Rebecca Walker.

*Blulatto*: A highly rare breed of "blue-blood" mulatto who can trace their lineage back to the *Mayflower*. Blulattos have been spotted in Cambridge, Massachusetts and Berkeley, California, but should not be confused with the Jewlatto. The Blulatto's mother is almost always the white one and is either a poet or a painter who disdains her Wasp heritage. The father of the Blulatto is almost always the black one, is highly educated, and disdains his black heritage. Beware: The Blulatto may seem calm and even civilized, but can be dangerous when angry. Show caution when approaching (Senna 1998: 25).

Senna's quote and article are not only endemic of the multiracial project that was functioning at the turn of the millennium, but they also speak to the increase in the demand for memoir. In this vein, life writing can be included as it functions in very much the same way: the telling of lived experiences. The current culture of confession is not only limited to today's coarse media, but is often seen in literature and at times, as Senna points out in "The Mulatto

Millennium,” a voyeuristic fascination with the lives of the multiracial. Gilmore expounds, “Memoir is now dominated by the young, or at least youngish in memoir terms, whose private lives are emblematic of a cultural moment” (Gilmore 2001: 1). The relative youth of these writers is meaningful insofar as it establishes the continuation of their story after their final page was written. Their stories do not function as their swan songs, but rather elucidate the formative nuances of their journey into adulthood.

In fact, life writings in this study each follow the necessary qualifiers of Bildungsroman whether they are auto-inflected novel or autobiography. They focus on the early formative years of each subject and thus speak directly to the current demands of memoir and the meaningful significance of this cultural moment. “Thus a ‘culture of confession’ and a culture of testimony, which Gayatri Spivak has defined as ‘the genre of the subaltern giving witness to oppression, to a less oppressed other,’ coexist with a certain tension: both insist on the centrality of speaking of pain, but emerge from different contexts which are themselves impure.” (Gilmore 2001: 2). At once, Senna is able to talk back to oppression, testifying to the traumatic events that created elements of problematic and painful life experiences for her, while continuing to function as fodder for the greater mainstream’s cultural schema. In ways similar to the functionality of the tragic mulatta trope, the current interest in the lived experience of the “other” must be questioned for its desire to intrude and pity just as much as its claim to “allow” subaltern voices to be heard.

This complicated space gestures to the profound accuracy inherent in Omi and Winant’s term “racial projects” in lieu of common assumptions of “racial progress” in accurately describing the United States’ race relations. Thus, the inability of all of the authors’ parents to maintain a healthy marriage or relationship, the constant inconsistencies in their lives, the transient mobility experienced by even those of the younger generation and a repetitive theme of

peer conflict and alienation reflect a reorganization and reinterpretation that speaks to an old myth, at once invoking Ralina Joseph's claims of the "new millennium mulatta" as well as the "exceptional multiracial" (Joseph 2013). Perhaps this is seen best in the comically tragic interpretation of Angela Nissel's approach to her self-described "racial schizophrenia" and the approaches she takes towards structuring her self-memorialization.

Nissel, unlike Walker and Senna, has no elite ancestral ties to assist in supporting her experiential claims. Additionally, she is unable to utilize the heightened fervor of the historical civil rights movement to underscore the events of her childhood as Cross did. She is, however, armed with her Ivy League education (as all of the authors are) and her witty and revealing skill as a comedic scriptwriter. Utilizing humor to reveal painful truths, Nissel constructs her self-memorialization in a uniquely revealing manner. Beginning with her working class, distinctly American upbringing (an anomaly amongst the women in this study), Nissel begins to relay her life as she has experienced it thus far. It is essential that her working class background be highlighted insofar as both assertions of self-memorialization and claims of veracity are concerned.

When attempting to grapple with the troubling infamous conundrum presented by Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" the notion of class is often denied primary attention when oppressive qualifiers such as race, gender and/or sexuality are present. In fact, in Nissel's case it can be argued that she is only ultimately able to present her story, she is only able to speak her truth, because she overcomes her working-class background, attends The University of Pennsylvania and becomes a successful Hollywood writer. Through her adherence to the Protestant work ethic and her success through the framing of an American dream realized, she is legitimized in the eyes of the status quo and ever-present policing panopticon. Therein lies the inexplicable,

perpetual argument concerning subalternity, especially as it relates to life writing. Indeed, “if your ‘story’ is the one no one wants to hear and which cannot be told given certain rules and expectations about form, then silence is your sentence” (Gilmore 2001: 63). However, if one is able to speak, to not only tell their story but have it listened to, and in Nissel’s case praised, can they still be counted amongst the subaltern?

Nissel’s ascendance into literary recognition also allows her the opportunity to reveal her experience with the taboo and complicated subject of mental illness and institutionalization as well. In fact, testifying to illness in any form is often viewed with suspicion as an attempt to illicit sympathy, and interrogated through the same processes of veracity that non-illness related experiential claims are subjected. In this respect it is admirable that, despite understanding the legendary tropes of “mulatta madness,” Nissel chose to reveal her period of institutionalization. She did so in such a way as to reaffirm not only her own sanity but also the sanity of other multiracials that may be interpellated into madness due to sociologically based cause and effect. Nissel’s choice to confront the stereotype of her “mulatta madness” is in direct contrast to Foucault’s refusal to speak of his physical illness, an illness that would place him directly in the line of stereotypical fire concerning his sexuality and his subsequent contraction of AIDS.

Foucault’s refusal to confess to his own illness, despite his interest in memoir as a genre, is endemic of how closely related boundaries between resistance in confession and resistance in refusal to confess function. Gilmore expounds, “his persistent interest in memoir never disappeared despite his critique of confessional practices and its possible application to memoir. For Foucault, memoir may have represented a practice of resistance, a counterdiscourse to the official compulsion to confess” (Gilmore 2001: 34). Applying Gilmore’s analysis of Foucault’s

choice of resistance to his famous quote, “one writes to become other than what one is,” maps on seamlessly to the core concepts and properties of life writing.

The notion of what to reveal, how much to reveal and at what point in the juncture to reveal one’s experiences can also be applied to Foucauldian understandings of self-containment and resistance despite its initial confessional appearance. This becomes even more apparent as it is manifested in the postmodern mixed race female subject. In the auto-inflected novel, *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky*, Heidi Durrow utilizes a myriad of literary techniques to slowly reveal the traumatic lived experiences of her protagonist, Rachel. As the sole survivor of her immediate family, the importance of Rachel’s ability to remember (with accuracy) is heightened in ways that are distinctly unique to the other authors in this study. In fact, Rachel’s ability and reluctance to confront painful memories may well be in line with sentiments expressed by Dorothy Allison, author of the auto-inflected novel, *Bastard Out Of Carolina*, as she has repeatedly stated, “her life depends on telling this story right” (Gilmore 2001: 45). In both cases, telling their stories “right” centers around their ability to effectively communicate the significance and meaning attached to their lived experiences, and not in a positivist understanding of verifiable evaluations. Rachel’s memories are replete with death, suicide, madness and abandonment, but they are also full of culture, warmth and love. The reconciliation of these two lived realities is at the crux of Rachel’s life story.

In fact, “cultural memory, like individual memory, develops characteristic and defensive amnesia with which those who have experienced trauma must contend. Is memory simply faulty, like a machine that breaks down from time to time, or does it fail because it must?” (Gilmore 2001: 31 & 47). Rachel discloses her unwillingness to part with the meaningful authenticity of her memories despite the pain they may cause her when she reveals, “I don’t want being Danish



to be something that I can put on and take off. I don't want the Danish in me to be something time makes me leave behind" (Durrow 2010: 205). Here Rachel recognizes that the survivalist tactic of the compartmentalization of herself vis-à-vis her memories (suppression and retention) can no longer be a viable option if she is to cathartically unite her bifurcated self and embark on the next stage of her life, holistically and purposefully. The legitimization of her claims are therefore buttressed and protected by her choice of auto-inflected novel, much like her predecessor Larsen, but also through the profound ways in which her protagonist suffers. Although Durrow allows her protagonist to begin her young adult life with a self-realization and hope that Helga Crane could not imagine, she connects Rachel to both the communal suffering and post-traumatic stress syndrome inherited from her membership in the African Diaspora through the profound literary uses of Africana theory, philosophy and historical significance.

Consider the most apparent gesture to African American literary tradition in Durrow's consistent inclusion of flying as a response to the "fall" of her family. This functions both literally and metaphorically as a method that could have saved them had it been successfully employed. In fact, the last line of the novel spoken by Rachel is, "If only we had been a family that could fly" (Durrow 2010: 264). Thus, they could have flown to prevent the inevitable crash landing as well as to flee from the oppressive racist matrix in which they found themselves once they moved to the United States, whether through actual forms of repatriation or a metaphorical liberation of the mind.

In Toni Morrison's (an acknowledged influence of Durrow) novel, *Song of Solomon*, the reader witnesses the actual flight of Solomon as well as the skeptical Milkman. Although these actions are employed by African American men, they indicate the strong ancestral connection members of the African Diaspora have with the concept of flying. Durrow's attention to this

detail supports the foundation on which the mulatta experience and its testimonial genre of life writing are built. This distinct acknowledgement and appreciation for a deep-rooted tenet in Africana literary tradition extends itself to the legitimate awareness and a communal understanding of memory. The famous African concept “I am because we are, and because we are therefore I am” (Asante 2009: 143) assists in reaffirming the concept of testimonial life writing itself. “There is a long tradition in autobiography of representing the self as utterly unique and, on precisely this basis, able to stand for others through acts of self-inspection and self-revelation” (Gilmore 2001: 19). When filtered through the concept and understanding of Africana philosophy, the experiences of the “I” and the “We” are inextricably linked. Consider the harsh interrogation life writer authors such as Rigoberta Menchu were subjected to simply because their epistemological foundation of experience differed from the Anglo-Germanic hegemony’s notion of individuality and myopic understandings of experience.

In fact, it can be argued that communal memory and experience are exceedingly more accurate and profound than the self-contained, isolated model so popular in Eurocentric understandings of lived experiences. This is expressed in the community’s understanding of the significance of memory as it pertains to the titled character in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*:

“They forgot her like a bad dream. After they made up their tales, shaped and decorated them, those that saw her that day on the porch quickly and deliberately forgot her. It took longer for those who had spoken to her, lived with her, fallen in love with her, to forget until they realized they couldn’t remember or repeat a single thing she said, and began to believe that, other than what they themselves were thinking, she hadn’t said anything at all. *So, in the end, they forgot her too. Remembering seemed unwise*” (Morrison 1987: 274, my italics).

If history eventually becomes legend and legend eventually becomes myth, who is charged with the documentation of the lived experiences of the marginalized subjects of society? Although the women in this study are relatively controversial members of subalternity due to

their elite education and backgrounds, they make a compelling argument for a legitimate mulatta experience as it functions across generational divides and racial projects. Additionally, their insertion of themselves for themselves into the dominant literary canon ensures that although there will always be hegemonic methods employed in an attempt to delegitimize their works and assertions, they will not be forgotten. They have claimed their space in the life writing genre, buoyed and legitimized each other's assertions through the recognition and similarities of their own lived experiences and have created a solid, meaningful foundation. Indeed, I submit that they now function as a new set of mixed race women writers to whom future scholars will reference when furthering the analysis and understanding of the academic and social relevance of their contribution to the impact and importance of life writing as a mode of resistance.

#### 4 CONCLUSION

Through the analysis and exploration of the functionality of myths, testimony resistance, and epistemology, this thesis has: located the ways in which the women of this study have negotiated their racial identity formation, revealed patterns of racial formation endemic to mulatta subjects in the United States, and explored the epistemological benefits of utilizing life writing as a reflexive analytical tool of self-actualization.

Their identity formation is established through the juxtaposition of their personal identities in relation to their perceived or externally realized identities. As witnessed throughout the study, these two realities are rarely, if ever, congruent. Thus, the location of their development is found in the continual negotiation between self and other, self and society, and the internalized self. As Denzin suggested, “no self...is ever an individual production” (Denzin 1989: 73). This perpetual negotiation suggests that their identities will never be static, but will continue to adapt to their surroundings and ever evolving selves. However, this is not to suggest that they lack an identity. On the contrary, their identities have been confronted and interrogated much more than their monoracial peers and, as a result, they have acquired the skills necessary to maintain an identity that is simultaneously flexible and unyielding. This seemingly dichotomous engagement is directly in line with the racial formation patterns that have emerged throughout the study.

Through the historical inheritance of chattel slavery, segregation and the civil rights movement, the biracial subject in the United States occupies a unique space in the understanding of multiracial identity formation. When examined through the individual, a fluid understanding of personal identity is revealed. However, when analyzed through the experiential patterns of intergenerational subjects, a distinct mulatta identity emerges. Chandler reminds us of the

importance of repetition in identity formation, “through the constancies of repetition, a consistent locus gradually emerges: the self” (Chandler 2002: 155). This is the nucleus of the distinct identity formation of mixed race subjects in the United States.

The consistent repetition is not seen in the individual experiences of each subject but rather in the intergenerational experiences of each subject. For example, the code switching survival techniques employed by Nella Larsen’s protagonist Helga Crane throughout her transient life, such as monitoring her speech and language, choosing when to reveal her racial heritage, and a relative life of internal solitude are seen throughout each of the mixed race women writers of the study, including the most contemporary, Heidi Durrow’s protagonist Rachel Morse. The repetition of these intergenerational survival strategies reveals not only a collective mulatta identity but a meaningful and legitimate epistemology as well.

This epistemology is established at the site of psychological and emotional injuries. Through the use of life writing as a medium to recount their lives and offer reflexive analysis, these subjects establish a way of knowing that provides profound insight into not only the mulatta experience but into the human condition as well. As Butler states, “we become conscious of ourselves only after *certain* injuries have been inflicted” (Butler 2005: 10, my italics). The attention to “*certain*” injuries in the aforementioned Butler quote distinguishes the pronounced, specific injuries experienced without cessation by those of marginalized statuses from the trauma of the everyday life. Indeed, a mulatta epistemology endemic to the United States might look something like double consciousness squared. That is to say that the duality of the Dubosian diagnosis is not only multiplied but exponentially so in the case of biracial women. Seeing oneself through the eyes of the other becomes considerably more complicated when the other is also the self. Therefore, a mixed race epistemology offers not only duality but also interstitiality.

It is within this interstitiality that the subjects of this study begin to congeal a self capable of effectively communicating that self to others. The use of language in effectively communicating oneself is often a constant source of dispute. Adjectives, qualifiers and frequent misnomers are used in tandem in an attempt to categorize complex lived experiences based on the perception of others. Such distinctions are often viewed as crude and pedestrian in their implementation. However, it is my position that there is no hierarchy in the designation of such interstitial adjectives. Thus, the interchangeable usage of such words throughout this thesis reflect my assertion in the power of resignification, interchangeability, and connectivity, despite the historical, political and cultural problematization of such qualifiers. I submit that without the use of adjectives to signify grouping, the group cannot be discussed, studied or legitimized. This study encourages and reinforces the belief in a mulatta identity and as such attends to the mixed race women writers as autonomous beings with their own classification, identity and authenticity.

It is crucial to note that these women generally grew up without both of their parents; a few grew up without either. Despite this there is often a gesturing to their parents' racial background and classifications when interrogated about their race. In this way, they are bound for eternity to be identified through the identification of their parents and not themselves. Life writing has allowed the women of this study an agentive sense of self. It offered them racial and sexual autonomy. In fact, one could view the process and application of life writing to be the cumulative event for these women, asserting as Rachel does that their lives are now beginning on day one.

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