

THE CANARY IN THE POST-RACIAL COAL MINE:  
THE 21ST CENTURY MULATTO IN AMERICAN FICTION

by

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A Capstone Project submitted to the Graduate School-Camden  
Rutgers-The State University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

under the direction of  
Professor Keith Green

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Capstone Adviser

Date

Camden, New Jersey

May 2013

ABSTRACT OF THE CAPSTONE

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The American mulatto has been employed by writers over time to provide commentary on American race relations. We can look to antebellum writers like Lydia Marie Child or William Wells Brown as an example of the state of the black-white dynamic prior to or just following the Civil War. Examining Nella Larsen's *Passing* can give insight into the status of race relations during the Harlem Renaissance. But as America has evolved into a so-called post-racial society, does the mulatto still serve as a vehicle for commentary on American race relations? Through a brief examination of earlier examples of literature with these biracial characters coupled with an in depth analysis of two contemporary novels, Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* and Heidi Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky*, this paper will show several of the ways in which the mulatto does provide a model in which to gauge American race relations, for better or for worse.

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The Canary in the Post-Racial Coal Mine:  
The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Mulatto in American Fiction

*"The mulatto in America functions as a canary in the coal mine. The canaries were used by coal miners to gauge how poisonous the air underground was. They would bring a canary in with them, and if it grew sick and died, they knew the air was bad and that eventually everyone else would be poisoned by the fumes. Likewise, mulattos have historically been the gauge of how poisonous American race relations were. The fate of the mulatto in history and in literature, he said, will manifest the symptoms that will eventually infect the rest of the nation."*

*--Deck Lee, father of the protagonist (Caucasia 393)*

On the surface, it would seem that America is moving towards a state in which we live unconcerned with race relations. After all, we have come so far since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Since then our society has outlawed anti-miscegenation laws<sup>1</sup>, leading the way for an entire generation of bi- and multi-racial individuals to become adults in our country. In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau recognized the need for including the option to select multiple races and added a "mixed race" category. More than nine million Americans identified as "two or more races" in the 2010 U.S. Census with a 134% increase in those identifying as having one black and one white parent

from the previous census just ten years earlier (Cohn). And in 2008, with the election of President Barack Obama, the U.S. elected its first multiracial president. The mulatto<sup>2</sup> is becoming common in America. Surely, by now, we have arrived as a post-racial or post-ethnic society.

It is important to pause here to further define what a post-racial society encompasses. This type of society is one in which the color line has faded; one that functions free of racial categorization and victimization and is essentially colorblind. David Hollinger describes a post-racial America as one in which individuals can "affiliate or disaffiliate with their own communities of descent to the extent that they choose, while affiliating with whatever nondescent communities are available and appealing to them" (Hollinger 116). Further Hollinger states that "a truly post-ethnic America would be one in which the ethno-racial component in identity would loom less large than it now does in politics as well as culture, and in which affiliation by shared descent would be more voluntary than prescribed in every context" (129). The fluidity of identity that Hollinger suggests would theoretically be a result of an increase in multi-racial individuals within the United States and greater acceptance of all races by the majority. This type of society certainly sounds

appealing, but a multitude of arguments against this structure can be found in the literature of the social sciences. It is however, difficult to argue the trends in our society that indicate that we may be headed in this direction, like the election of the current president and the changes with the U.S. Census.

As the epigraph suggests, the mulatto figure has "historically been the gauge of how poisonous race relations were" for a given period in time. A criticism of antebellum slave literature, written by novelists like Lydia Marie Child and William Wells Brown, can provide an understanding of the dynamics between blacks and whites during and immediately following slavery through the eyes of the mixed race characters in their novels. Eve Allegra Raimon discusses this in her book, The Tragic Mulatto Revisited. Raimon details the ways that the tragic mulatto character in antebellum slave literature served as a commentary on the status of race relations for the time. Raimon says specifically of the writings of Lydia Maria Child: "her depictions of intermarriage in general and the mulatta figure in particular functioned as a rhetorical device that at once excoriated the workings of slavocracy, destabilized the naturalness of racial hierarchies and provided an occasion to envision an egalitarian future of

racial reconciliation—a utopian world of racial diversity in which the interracial family could embody the potential for a multiracial nation” (63).

Just as Raimon suggests that the “tragic” mulatto is a vehicle for understanding race relations of the period, the contemporary literary figure remains as an indicator of race relations. This paper examines the mixed-race individual, or mulatto, as a signal of the arrival of a post-racial society. I assert that despite the now common existence of mixed-raced individuals, the literary mulatto shows that American society has not achieved the utopian society that proponents of post-racialism indicate.

Through a brief look at the way mulattos have historically been portrayed in literature I will provide a foundation for which we can judge contemporary representations of biracial identity. I will discuss writers and their works from both the antebellum period and the period of the Harlem Renaissance; both marked times for discussing the racial experience of the United States. Further I will make a more critical commentary of the mulatto figure in contemporary literature. This paper will analyze two acclaimed novels, each featuring a female protagonist of mixed race<sup>3</sup>, Danzy Senna’s Caucasia and Heidi Durrow’s The Girl Who Fell from the Sky. I will show that

the twenty first century mulatto figure as depicted in these novels can and should function in a similar fashion as Raimon describes the "tragic" mulatto of antebellum slave literature; as a gauge in which to judge race relations in the United States.

### **Traditional "Tragic" Mulatto**

By the mid-1800s the mulatto was being used by writers in the antebellum South to both criticize the institution of slavery and garner support for emancipation. The character, written most often to be either the daughter of a slave and her master or the product of a forbidden and secret love between a black woman and a white man, would be met with an untimely and rather tragic death in the end of each of these stories. The tragedy of the lives of these mixed race individuals was meant to serve as a metaphor for the tragedy of slavery.

Consider Lydia Marie Child's The Quadroons (1842) in which a free black woman, Rosalie, and Edward, a white man, are introduced living happily together and very much in love. They have a daughter, Xarifa, and live blissfully together until Edward realizes that his relationship with Rosalie impedes his ambitions for success. He marries a white woman and abandons Rosalie and their daughter.



Rosalie dies soon after and Edward arranges for Xarifa's care both out of guilt and love for his daughter. Xarifa lives for a short time in a comfortable lifestyle, being well taken care of by her father and his wife. Eventually, though Edward also dies, and it is discovered that Xarifa is a great-granddaughter to a former slave. Unable to provide any documentation that she comes from a line of freed people, Xarifa is swiftly sold back into slavery. She ultimately goes mad and kills herself by banging her head against the wall. Xarifa, who had once been beautiful and very much loved by her parents, dies with no one to mourn her. Child's work reflects her view of a future America that is racially mixed through relationships as she describes in The Quadroons, as well as the mixing of the slave population with the white population of southerners even before slavery is abolished. It is evident that she envisions an America that has many of these relationships as she describes between Rosalie and Edward in the America of the future.

But Child's use of Xarifa, the mixed race character who meets a tragic ending, serves a much greater purpose. It is the tragedy of the mulatto that draws attention to the flaws in racial structure and slavery of the time, by allowing white readers to identify with the victims of the

institution. Readers are meant to be moved by the tragedy of the mixed race individual considered in the greater light of her existence in society.

Clotel, another antebellum anti-slavery work, borrows heavily from the fictional storyline of The Quadroons. It further demonstrates the victimization of black women under slavery showing that even mixed race individuals who attempt to pass as white suffer horrifically (Kirkpatrick). William Wells Brown takes his story a step further by incorporating elements of actual events and several subplots involving other characters into the story line, creating a bigger picture of race relations. He too uses the mulatto figure to make a statement on the status of American race relations, challenging the social order of the time. "Brown's text becomes the act not just of storytelling but also of mediating between the real and the fictive worlds, each of which needs the commentary of the other in the liminal narrative realm the Clotel occupies to be authorized" (Raimon 69). Brown's method of "integrating extratextual material with a fictive story achieves a thorough, if unexamined, critique of established social categories" (70). Both of these works, The Quadroons and Clotel make clear statements to the status of race relations and the social structure of the south before

the Emancipation by utilizing the unique position of the mixed-raced individuals that straddle the boundaries of the racial divide. They openly criticize the establishment and the dangers for the future.

Nella Larsen's Passing offers an opportunity to consider a commentary on race relations during the Harlem Renaissance. Passing is a story about two childhood friends of mixed race, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, who have been separated for many years. They are reunited in Chicago at a chance meeting where Irene discovers that Clare has been passing as white, and is in fact married to a wealthy white man that doesn't know of Clare's true identity. Irene is fascinated by Clare's new identity but also disgusted that Clare would completely forsake her blackness as she has. This reunion ends when Irene returns to her home in New York City and her husband, who is a physician, and children. There, Irene is immersed in a middle class lifestyle and meeting the domestic expectations that she believes her class requires.

Clare returns to Irene's life some years later, while on an extended visit in New York. Clare manages to hide from her very racist husband that she is slowly inserting herself into Irene's life, and the affluent black community in which Irene is involved. Irene resists Clare's presence

at first, but eventually resists to Clare's intoxicating personality. Although Irene tolerates Clare's friendship, she remains uncomfortable with Clare's presence, at first because she feels that Clare is playing a dangerous game by shifting from one racial identity to another and later because she believes a romantic relationship has developed between her own husband and Clare. It should be noted that Larsen's mulatto figure also experiences a tragic, untimely death just as the previous examples of mulatto figures discussed. The story ends at a party, where Clare falls from the window of a high rise building after her husband comes searching for her having learned of Clare's true racial identity. Larsen never lets the reader know if Clare committed suicide, accidentally fell, or if Irene pushed Clare; although Larsen certainly alludes to all three possibilities.

Passing explores the theme of lost black heritage, both in Clare giving up her blackness for the white experience and in Irene striving for a middle class existence (Larsen 338). It is Larsen's rejection of Irene and her values that is Larsen's commentary on the upward mobility of many African Americans during this time period. It is evident that there is a belief that there is a certain amount of casting aside loyalty to race while

seeking to become more successful in the middle class. Additionally, Larsen seems to be making the statement that the racial structure of the time period creates an atmosphere in which this casting off of race is the only way for African Americans to become successful in this white world, aside from passing completely into the white race, if the individual is capable of doing so. Larsen, like Child and Brown, is able to utilize the mixed race individual as a vehicle for commentary on her views of the racial structure of the early 1900s.

### **The Contemporary Mulatto**

Two contemporary novels provide a window into twenty-first century representations of multiracial identities. Each novel happens to be written by a biracial author so we can expect that some of the personal experiences of each writer will be reflected in their writing. Both novels feature a coming of age biracial female protagonist, with a black father and white mother. Both are developing an identity as young women, experiencing some of the normal challenges that come along with growing from a girl to a young woman. Both of these novels share some important themes with earlier works within the genre, including a tragic experience for the biracial character. Both

protagonists are faced with a different tragedy that shapes their individual experience. Each tragedy, though, is rooted in an experience that revolves around the racial structure of the United States within the last 20 or so years.

Danzy Senna's Caucasia offers a look at the biracial experience of the Northeast focused within a coming of age story. The story is told in the first person by the protagonist, Birdie Lee, who is the younger of two biracial sisters. They are growing up in turbulent, late 1970s Boston in which both of their parents are playing an active role in protesting racial discrimination. Their mother, who is white, is described early in the novel as participating in suspicious activities and harboring fugitives in their home. The reader learns from Birdie that her parents have separated and the girls are learning to get along living with their mother and seeing their father occasionally. Having been home-schooled by their mother, the girls are attending school for the first time as pre-teens in an all-black preparatory school called Nukhram. Although they experience some difficulty adjusting, the sisters are so close that they develop a language of their own that only the two of them can understand.

The sisters' lives are disrupted when their parents decide to separate them. It is disclosed by Birdie that her mother is on the run from the FBI for an undisclosed crime. It is never disclosed in the novel if she is actually wanted by the FBI or if it becomes a convention of Birdie's mother's mind that she is wanted. Birdie only knows that she must go on the run with her mother, while her sister goes to Brazil with her father and his new girlfriend in search of an opportunity to live in a place that is not defined by race. The girls were separated according to which parent they resembled the most; Cole because she was darker skinned went with their father and Birdie, because she could pass for white, went with their mother.

Birdie's mother, who fears for their safety and freedom, forces Birdie to pass as a white, Jewish girl named Jesse Goldman and they move to a small New Hampshire town where Birdie/Jesse becomes defined by her new identity. Birdie/Jesse spends much of the rest of the novel attempting to adjust to this new identity while missing the sister to whom she was so close. Birdie/Jesse, for much of the novel, seeks to understand why her family was torn apart, and wonders at the fate of her father and sister while growing into her own identity. Birdie/Jesse spends at least six years "passing" as Jesse before

ultimately leaving her mother to go in search of her father and sister.

The second novel studied for this paper, The Girl Who Fell from the Sky, is an unsettling story about Rachel, who is the daughter of an African American man and a Danish woman (who happens to be named Nella). Her parents meet while her father was stationed overseas in the military. Rachel is sent to live with her grandmother in Portland, Oregon as a young girl during the 1980s. The reader learns early on in the novel that Rachel is the only survivor of a tragic event in which her mother and two siblings die after the four of them fall from a rooftop of their Chicago apartment building. There is some mystery to this event and it is not revealed to the reader until more than mid-way through the novel that Rachel's mother purposely jumped from the rooftop, intending to kill the four of them. Heidi Durrow, the author, includes some clear tributes to Nella Larsen (including her namesake and some other thematic inclusions) and she admits being heavily influenced by both of Larsen's novels, Passing and Quicksand, and Larsen's personal life. Durrow, who is also biracial, disclosed in an interview that she "hoped that Larsen, if she were alive today, would see some of herself and her writings in The Girl Who Fell from the Sky"



(Darrow, Reimagining the 'Tragic Mulatto'). The novel is based on actual events, but Darrow fictionalized the story to create a scenario in which to play out her own experiences growing up biracial in Portland.

The two novels contain many similar themes of identity, passing, and race. It is these common themes that create a foundation for which to view the biracial character in light of the greater society. We can also turn to the writers' inclusion of the views of society on race and the racism that still exists in our current climate. Each writer employs some useful ways of doing this. Additionally, an examination of the theme of passing as it appears in these contemporary novels will show the way these novels have both characteristics of earlier passing themes and the ways in which passing has evolved into something new in these narratives. Each author has found ways to destabilize the modern racial hierarchies and both work, in their own way, towards envisioning a utopian world of racial diversity.

Both Senna and Darrow take advantage of the biracial characters ability to witness racist comments as a spectator as a way to show what people say when they believe no one will take offense. Racism is not always displayed openly or publicly. The mulatto character's

ambiguity is an ideal vehicle for which to show some of the subtle ways that racism exists currently. Able to straddle the lines of the racial divide, the mulatto is a useful tool to show the ways that racism exists towards African Americans, and also the reverse prejudices that some African Americans may harbor towards white people. Both novels utilize this unique position of the biracial character to offer a perspective on some of their experiences with stereotypes and racism. These experiences occur in social situations in which the racism or stereotypes are not directly aimed at them.

Birdie/Jesse, while passing as a Jewish girl in New Hampshire, has several instances in which she has comments made to her because her friends believe she is white; things that if they knew her true racial identity those friends would not say. During this time, she befriends an older boy, Nicholas, a neighbor from a white family. One afternoon she is spending time with Nicholas and the two are reading a copy of *Tintin*. Birdie/Jesse thinks to herself that the pictures were horrible making the Congolese people look like hideous caricatures and she laughs out loud. "They've made us look like animals" she says, and becomes instantly nervous at giving away her true identity. Birdie/Jesse describes the situation:

"He giggled into his hand and said, 'You said us. You said it made us look like animals.' The hilarity of my statement sent him into hysterics, and he rolled over, silently quaking beside me. Finally, he looked at me sideways through his slitted red eyes. 'Shit, maybe you could be colored in the right light. You better stay out of the sun'."

Not knowing her true identity, Nicholas carries on with a joke, "All right. Get this one. I heard it at school last year. When they are born, what's printed on the inside of every black babies lip?...Inflate to five thousand."

Birdie/Jesse is holding her breath throughout the episode, unable to speak for fear of giving away her secret identity. When Nicholas realizes that Birdie/Jesse has become distant, he continues: "I was just kidding about you being colored. I mean, you don't look it at all. You're...you're pretty. You're gonna look really hot in a few years. I mean it" (Senna 205). Nicholas' comments express the stereotypes that he has about the inability of a black woman to be pretty.

Birdie/Jesse's hidden identity leaves her open to bearing witness to comments made by other friends in her New Hampshire town that she is unable to respond to also for fear of giving herself away. Repeatedly in the novel, Birdie/Jesse's friend Mona makes racist comments. Birdie/Jesse says of her friend Mona; "And when I heard those inevitable words come out of Mona's mouth, Mona's

mother's mouth, Dennis' mouth-nigga, spic, fuckin' darkie-I only looked away in the distance, my feature tensing slightly, sometimes a little laugh escaping" (Senna 233). It is impossible to know whether Birdie/Jesse would react to these comments if she were not in fear for her mother's safety, as they are still in hiding from the FBI.

Both of these situations are only possible because of the writer's use of a multiracial character. Birdie/Jesse's true identity is not known to Nicholas or Mona and her family. Because they truly believe her to be white, they feel comfortable enough to make overtly racist comments directly to her. If Birdie/Jesse's true identity was known at this point, it would not be possible to see this racism in its true form. The racist comments would be made directly at Birdie/Jesse. By using the biracial character Senna is able to show that these beliefs exist, even if they are no longer made directly at the minority individual. Similar to the antebellum literary characters, passing is used as a destabilizer of existing racial hierarchies.

Each novel contains several interjections from the writers on overt racism as it exists today, but it is most apparent in The Girl Who Fell from the Sky. Durrow, for much of the book, leaves a mystery surrounding the reason

that Nella, Rachel's mother, decides to jump to her death with her children. Earlier in the novel, she even alludes to the fact that perhaps the family was pushed over the edge of the building. However, as the tragedy of the novel unfolds, we learn that Nella, an immigrant to the US from Denmark, is facing a deep hopelessness for her children in America in the face of direct racism. She jumps because she is unable to deal with the future that her children may have in the United States. While trying to figure out the mystery of the deaths, Nella's friend Laronne remembers an exchange between them, when Laronne inquired about a new scarf that Nella wore to work:

"Did your special fellow give that to you?" "Nope," Nella had laughed like she'd been tickled. "It's from my little jigaboos." She said it all with love. "Your?" Laronne paused. "My little jigaboos. It's so cute." "Nella, don't say that, it's not cute." (Darrow, The Girl Who Fell From the Sky 154)

Laronne explains to Nella what the word means, equating it to the use of *nigger*. Nella panics and becomes extremely upset, learning that she, lacking an understanding of American language, misinterpreted the word jigaboo for an endearing one and that it's a term that her boyfriend had been using to refer to her children. Darrow simultaneously points out racism that still exists while also showing the

naivety of some white Americans who claim that racism is no longer an issue in our society.

Senna also includes several instances in which a character is racially stereotyped. In one scene, Birdie is happily spending the day alone with her father in a park, until an elderly white couple becomes suspicious of the small white-skinned child that is unsupervised in the park with a black man. The white couple intervenes, and is unbelieving when Birdie's father explains their relationship. They are so suspicious that they call the police, and Birdie's father, despite having family photos in his wallet is detained by the officers.

Interestingly, both Senna and Durrow utilized the protagonist's grandmother to make additional commentary on the limitations on the black experience in the United States. In Caucasia, Birdie Lee goes to visit her grandmother with her mother and sister, Cole. The grandmother expresses a strong preference for spending time with Birdie Lee over her sister, who is the darker skinned of the two. Despite the fact that the girls are both her blood related granddaughters, it is evident that the grandmother feels that Birdie deserves the attention, showering her with gifts and promises for a successful future. Rachel's grandmother acts in a different capacity

throughout The Girl Who Fell from the Sky, constantly warning Rachel about her behavior. "Don't act like trash like your mama, it's not something black girls can afford" (Durrow, The Girl Who Fell From the Sky 237) insinuating that because she is black she will be judged differently if she behaves in a sexually promiscuous manner. Neither grandmother is malicious in her behavior nor does either seem to be aware of their racist attitudes. It was an exceptional way for both Senna and Durrow to represent earlier generations and the inherent beliefs that persist in society. The grandmothers serve as a symbol of their (and earlier) generations and the racism and stereotypes that have existed for hundreds of years. It is difficult to change these perceptions, particularly in older generations. It takes significant effort on the part of the current and future generations to change these views. The biracial characters' interactions with their elders serve as representative of the the long lasting effects of earlier generations' beliefs on both sides of the racial divide.

Senna uses the juxtaposition of the sisters, one darker skinned and one lighter skinned to further illuminate the limitation on the black American experience. Birdie Lee describes some jealousy upon spending time with

her father's girlfriend, Carmen, who is black. Carmen clearly preferred spending time with Cole and would do things with Cole that would have appealed to both girls of a similar age; doing hair and makeup, shopping for clothes and talking about boys. In describing her feelings, Birdie says "I think Carmen was the icing on the cake, so to speak. Others before had made me see that there were differences between my sister and myself-the textures of our hair, the tints of our skin, the shapes of our features. But Carmen was the one to make me feel that somehow those things mattered. To make me feel that the differences were deeper than skin...I sometimes thought I saw her looking at me with muted disgust" (Senna 91). Senna shows with this juxtaposition of the girls' skin color, that racist attitudes and stereotypes are felt from both white and black people. The experience is unique to the biracial individual and Senna would not be able to make this point if the sisters were not of mixed racial background.

In Caucasia, Senna also takes an opportunity to show the ways in which the bi-racial character can internally harbor stereotypical ideals about race and is not only reactionary to the racist attitudes within society. Birdie has some stereotypical notions herself. When in New



Hampshire, Birdie's mother assigns her to write a short novel while being home schooled. Birdie titles the novel, El Paso, about a Mexican-American family:

"I had seen such a family on a news show about alien abductions, and had decided, watching the rowdy, exotic lot, that I wanted to be Mexican...[the novel] featured a a religious, perpetually pregnant mother; a banjo-playing, sombrero-donning papa; and their teenage son, the main character, Richie Rodriguez, who is a bad seed looking for a way out. Throughout the novel, Richie gets in knife fights, beats, and impregnates his girlfriend, and fails out of high school" (Senna 171-2).

Birdie sees nothing wrong with the novel she has written presents it to her mother with pride in her work. Her mother further perpetuates Birdie's stereotypical beliefs towards Mexicans but she fails to see how Birdie has interiorized stereotypes about Mexican-Americans. Rather, Sandy is so blinded by her purported commitment to fighting racial oppression of African Americans that she can only see racial prejudice towards that one ethnicity (Grassian 327-8). It is possible to interpret this as Senna's belief that some people believe that racism does not exist outside of hatred towards African Americans. Additionally, it can be seen as recognition by Senna that modern America contains other races and national identities that are not white or black who have become part of the conversations on race relations.

As discussed earlier, passing as a white Jewish girl creates a unique position for Birdie in Caucasia, allowing Senna to show that it is only the racial solidarity of the other characters that permit them to express racist remarks around her. Both protagonists spend some time in each novel passing. Rachel, having moved to a primarily black neighborhood in Portland finds it necessary to deny her white side to fit in with the teenagers in her new school. "I don't ever mention that I'm related to white people. And most of the time, I try not to let the black girls like Tamika see me talk to Tracy, because Tracy is a white girl. And the way they say that-*white girl*-it feels like a dangerous thing to be" (Durrow, The Girl Who Fell From the Sky 28).

It is this theme of passing to conceal one's own racial identity that most ties these contemporary works to the previously mentioned tragic mulatto stories. Passing has served as a means of survival for the traditional biracial characters. The meaning has, however, changed over time. In the antebellum south, the survival may have been staying alive or out of slavery. By the period of the Harlem Renaissance, survival may be interpreted to mean a way for the biracial character to attain a more prosperous lifestyle. In these contemporary novels, survival means

something new entirely. For Birdie, it is more literal. Birdie and her mother need to survive to maintain their freedom while her mother is being hunted by the FBI. For Rachel, the survival is fitting in, in a new place after a very tragic event. Passing, as a theme, appearing in all of these time periods would indicate that the "tragic" mulatto is still serving a useful purpose.

Eve Allegra Raimon described the conventional tragic mulatto as a character who passes, and reveals pangs of anguish resulting from forsaking his or her black identity (Raimon 343). This is when the contemporary "tragic" mulatto separates itself from earlier characters. The mulatto is no longer simply passing for white. He or she is now utilizing the ability to straddle the color lines to move in and out of black and white identities. Senna and Durrow have taken advantage of this ability to provide commentary on the current status of race relations within our country. It is obvious that from their point of view, reflected in their characters, that American society has come a long way in acceptance but is still a long way from the utopian colorblind society that many are hopeful for.

In both Senna and Durrow's portrayals, perhaps expressing their personal experiences within society, the mulatto characters have developed into ones who do not

simply feel anguish at forsaking their black identity, but they feel anguish at forsaking *any part* of their identity. Referring to an openly biracial girl in her New Hampshire town that is frequently the target of racist remarks in the novel, Birdie says "I don't want to be black like Samantha, a doomed tragic shade of black. I want to be black like somebody else" (Senna 274). Birdie realizes that only by asserting agency over what this color will be will she ever become the woman she wants to be, and her identity will never be complete until she owns both her blackness and whiteness and claims her biracial body (Boudreau 68). Both Birdie and Rachel's stories include them arriving at a point in which they no longer wish to forsake any part of their identity. The contemporary mulatto character ultimately seeks to reconcile all parts of their identity into their existence.

It is the ending of these stories and the protagonists' journeys to ownership of their full identities that provides a further point of analysis. Birdie ultimately runs away from her mother and her fake identity in New Hampshire and goes in search of her father and sister. She finds them in California and is able to reconnect with her sister, who is attending college at Berkeley. The last page of the novel is a realization by

Birdie that she has found a place where she can live without sacrificing any part of her identity as she sees a school bus full of children of different races and ethnicities pass by her on the road. The reader is led to believe that Birdie will make a home here with her sister, and is hopeful for her own future. Rachel's story also ends on a hopeful note, as she too is able to take ownership of her racial identity. The realization only comes to Rachel after she learns the dark family secrets and the true circumstances of her mother's suicide. Durrow paints a picture that shows Rachel is able to come to terms with who she is and will lead a long happy life. The point here is that neither of them die or have the tragic ending that we have seen in the traditional "tragic" mulatto characters. The tragedy of these mulattos has been overcome.

This transition from the traditional tragic fate to one that becomes a testament to ownership of identity opens a new dialogue for the mulatto character, particularly in light of, or despite of their tragic circumstance. The shift indicates that the mulatto has become no longer tragic, but perhaps a metaphor for overcoming the tragedy that has plagued these mixed race characters. It may be an indication that while society still needs a lot of work overcoming a long tradition of racism and stereotypes, that

a colorblind or post-racial society is not as utopian as it seems, but perhaps even a possibility for America.

We can return to Birdie's father, Deck for another hopeful commentary on the future of the mixed race individual in American society, perhaps even another indicator that we are moving towards colorblindness. When Birdie reunites with him, she discovers that he's gotten some new theories on race since she'd seen him last:

"He began to talk about the fact that race was not only a construct but a scientific error along the magnitude of the error that the world was flat. 'That's how big a fucking blunder they've made, baby' he said. 'And when they discover their mistake, I mean, truly discover it, it's be as big as when the learned the world was, in fact, round. It'll open up a whole new world. And nothing will ever be the same again'" (Senna 391).

Birdie realizes in a hopeful way, that her father could be right. Deck further changes the dialogue of the tragic mulatto by again using the metaphor of the canary. "See, my guess is that you're the first generation of canaries to survive, a little injured perhaps, but alive. And it's a good thing you showed up." Deck Lee is correct. These canaries, the contemporary mulattos, have transcended their tragic beginnings and have become hopeful for the ability to claim their own true identity, and perhaps even hope for a colorblind or post-racial society. The contemporary mulatto, at least these written by Senna and Durrow,

provide an opportunity to glimpse an egalitarian future of racial reconciliation.

It is obvious that the contemporary mulatto figure serves a much different purpose for modern society than the literary predecessors in other time periods. But one can turn to the mulatto character in all of these time periods for an accurate reflection in literature of the status of race relations in the United States for the period. Lydia Maria Child and William Wells Brown were seeking to provide an opposition to slavery. Larsen was providing her commentary on the dangers of "selling out" and the loss of black identity for the sake of success. Judging solely by the mulatto characters examined in this paper, race relations have come a long way towards progression. However, the experiences of Birdie and Rachel do show that our society is still contending with some significant issues. Both Senna and Durrow, in the context of our times, are making their own statement that there are still some inherent social concerns that are rooted in hundreds of years of racism in America that must be dealt with.

Some Americans insist now that race no longer matters in our society. Others advocate that we should be moving towards a colorblind society in which we do not/cannot recognize race. Both Birdie and Rachel are able to

overcome their tragic experiences and that indicates that both authors seem to believe that there can be a colorblind future. It is certainly a nice ideal, but our society has not advanced this far as much as many of us would like to believe it to be true. These novels also serve to demonstrate the distance we have to go.

Nevertheless, it has not been the goal of this study to offer an explanation of when or how we will become a true post-racial society, or even to argue the potential impossibility or drawbacks of this type of society. It has rather been to determine the function of the mixed race character in that determination. One thing is certain, we can look to the biracial character, the *no longer tragic* mulatto as one determinant of an American society that has become a post-racial one. If the experience of this literary figure, which as I've shown has been traditionally representative of the racial structure of their respective time periods, one day appears consistently as one that does not revolve around their negative experiences regarding their race, it will be a good indicator that we have finally become colorblind. Further, until we reach this potential utopian society, the experiences of the mulatto in literature provide a good tool with which to measure the



levels of toxicity of race relations, exactly as the canary  
in the coal mine.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The case of Loving vs. Virginia (388 U.S. 1) was brought before the Supreme Court in 1967 by Mildred Loving, a black woman and her husband, Richard Loving after being sentenced to a year in prison for marrying each other. Their union was a violation of the anti-miscegenation statute, the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which prohibited marriages between whites and "coloreds". The Supreme Court unanimously declared the RIA unconstitutional and overturned the Pace vs. Alabama case of 1883 (the Alabama statute which declared anti-miscegenation laws as constitutional) and eradicated race-based restrictions on legal marriage in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> This paper will primarily use a modern definition of the term mulatto, simply meaning mixed-race individual. The term has had other connotations but over the years has evolved to a much simpler, less negatively charged definition.

<sup>3</sup> I recognize that mixed-race can indicate any variety of combinations, however for the purposes of this paper I will be focusing on the black-white dynamic. In this case, the protagonists are both biracial, both the daughters of a black father and a white mother.

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