Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present the problem of racially-based prejudice in the USA in the post-Civil Rights Movement era. The article is based on Danzy Senna’s critically acclaimed novel, *Caucasia* (1998). Being a so-called Movement Child of interracial couple, and growing up in the USA in the 1970s, Senna met with different kinds of biased thinking coming from both sides of the color line. The novel tells the story of a young, biracial girl, Birdie, and reflects Senna’s experiences. The article analyzes the different forms and levels of racial prejudice which Senna depicts in her novel to comment on the pervasiveness of the problem in the USA of the 1970s.

Published in 1998, *Caucasia* is a contemporary variation on the theme of racial passing. Its author, Danzy Senna (1970–), is a biracial daughter of the African-American scholar Carl Senna and the white writer Fanny Howe, who married in 1968, just a year after the legalization of interracial marriages in all of the US. Growing up in racially divided Boston, Senna developed a strong black identity, complicated by the fact that her features define her as white (Boudreau 59). It can be argued that *Caucasia*’s main protagonist and narrator, biracial (but phenotypically white) Birdie Lee, is Senna’s alter ego; the novel mirrors many facts from the author’s life.

The plot of *Caucasia* revolves around the experiences of a mixed-race Bostonian family between 1975 and 1982. The family consists of an African-American father, Deck Lee (a Boston University professor), a white mother, Sandy (a social activist) and their two daughters, brown-skinned Cole and light-skinned Birdie. Both girls come to self-identify as African American even though the authenticity of white-looking Birdie’s blackness is commonly
called into question. Soon after the end of their parents’ relationship, the mother has to go into hiding because of her involvement with a black militant group. The parents decide to split up their daughters. Deck, his girlfriend and Cole leave for Brazil in search of a racism-free utopia. Sandy and Birdie assume new identities; disguised as Sheila and her half-Jewish daughter Jesse, they lead a nomadic life before eventually settling in a small New Hampshire town. Tired of living a lie, Birdie runs away from home to reunite with her sister and father; she eventually finds them six years after their parting. The aim of this article is to explore Senna’s outlook on the problem of racial prejudice in the USA in the post-Civil Rights Movement era – the times of her childhood and adolescence.

American racism and racial categorizing, as seen through the eyes of a biracial child, are among Caucasia’s main themes. Senna mentions many instances of racism that the biracial family encounters. The plot includes a reference to a historical event, namely, the Boston busing crisis. In the 1970s the enforcement of Massachusetts’ school desegregation law met with a strong opposition, resulting in years of protests and riots. As Birdie succinctly states: “Boston was a battleground... Forced integration. Roxbury. South Boston. Separate but not quite equal. God made the Irish number one. A fight, a fight, a nigga and a white...” (Senna 7). In the novel, Birdie and Cole get enrolled in a predominantly white school. However, the girls’ first contact with public education is interrupted by a riot against busing white students to black schools. The conflict escalates and soon the girls are petrified to watch a TV footage of a black man being beaten by the mob (38–39). As a result of the riot the girls never reach their school and are later transferred to a private one, run by Black Power sympathizers, where they acquire radical ideas about race and race mixing.

Another instance in which racism becomes very real for the girls is when a group of Irish-American girls humiliates and insults Cole by pushing her and sticking chewing gum into her hair (40). Conversely, Birdie is bullied by black children at school; they call her ugly and threaten to cut off her hair (43–47). Moreover, whenever the family drives through white neighborhoods, Deck ducks down and hides under a blanket, while pretending before the girls that he is simply playing hide-and-seek (249). The most striking example of racism occurs when Deck, sitting in the park with Birdie, is interrogated by the police as a possible child molester and kidnapper (59–61). Although humiliated and furious, he is prevented from manifesting his frustration (Ibrahim 159; Boudreau 65).

Later on, when Birdie passes for white, she is exposed to racism to an even greater degree (Boudreau 65, 67–68). As people are unaware of her real background, they freely make racist remarks in her presence, e.g. her neighbor Nicholas tells her a racist joke (Senna 204). What is more, her friend
Mona and others use racial slurs and racial stereotyping on a daily basis (233, 248, 259, 263, 267, 269). They mock and spread gossip about a biracial girl, Samantha, calling her “Brown Cow” (223) and “Chunky Monkey” (252–253). All these actions and words are not directed towards Birdie, but she, nevertheless, feels immersed in racial hatred: “the white folks needed no prompting. It came up all the time, like a fixation ...” (248).

Ironically, it is not only the outside world that is guilty of racial prejudice. As Senna argues, racism is ubiquitous and can lurk even in a mixed-race family. The girls’ maternal grandmother clearly favors light-skinned Birdie. Her obvious preference is reflected in how she interacts with the girls when they come to visit: she talks only to Birdie (Dagbovie 98) ignoring Cole’s obvious attempts to attract her attention (Senna 103–104). Moreover, she obsessively tries to prove that Birdie could in fact be French or Italian and that she closely resembles a European relative (104, 107). While she presents herself as an unbiased person (e.g. commenting on the “delightful black man playing Jim” in a *Huckleberry Finn* adaptation), she makes such blatant mistakes as giving Cole a Golliwog rag doll – an offensive, grotesque representation of a black man (98, 104).

An ambiguous approach to race is also connected with the girls’ father, Deck. It is repeatedly suggested that he is a mulatto himself. When Sandy meets Deck, she does not think his skin is very dark nor his features very African; his curly hair makes him look Jewish and his features give him an appearance of a Native American:

[I]t was only his milk-chocolate skin that gave his race away. His face spoke of something other – his high cheekbones, his large bony nose, his deep-set eyes, and his thin lips ... reminded her of the drawings in her high-school history book of half-nude natives at the first Thanksgiving. (34)

However, Deck never considers himself to be a person of mixed race; he seems to ignore his bodily features that mark him as such; what is more, he increasingly cherishes his blackness. When he marries a white woman in the 1960s, it is an act of courage, and the couple is frowned upon by Whites and Blacks alike. However, a few years later Deck starts to question this decision. His fascination with the Black Power Movement results in the marriage falling apart. Deck starts to point to “strong black women as evidence of [his wife’s] inadequacy” (324). In one fight he calls Sandy a “fat white mammy” (7). In a final argument before their separation Deck reproaches her for having a privileged Wasp background:

It’s a law of physics... . People can’t ever truly get away from where they came from. And you ... need to go back to Cambridge... . You’re a Harvard girl at heart.... . And I need to go to Roxbury. Find me a strong black woman. A sistah. No more of this crazy white-girl shit. (24–25)
Ironically, it is Sandy who is more radically engaged in the black resistance. While Deck is a theoretician, Sandy is a revolutionist. She gives shelter to political fugitives and collaborates with a black militant group, storing their weapons in her house; she also organizes community work (18–23). Still, Deck realizes that their interracial relationship is a mistake and their racial differences are irreconcilable. He decides to move into a relationship with Carmen, with whom, apart from her skin color, he has little in common. While Sandy is certainly a strong woman, she is not a strong black woman and, all things considered, that is what makes her unfit to be Deck’s partner.

Deck’s newfound interest in his black heritage affects not only his relationship with Sandy but also his daughters (Grassian 325). Although he firmly states that both his daughters are black, his actions prove that he, like most other people, sees his daughters as different from one another and, what is more, clearly has a much stronger connection with Cole (Dagbovie 94). The reason for this preference lies in their different looks. Cole is dark-skinned and her features are more negroid than Deck’s. She is synecdochically described as “the small dusky body, the burst of mischievous curls (nappier than his own), the full pouting lips (fuller than his own)” (Senna 56). Her appearance probably allows Deck to pretend that she is an offspring of a typical non-mixed marriage; according to Sandy, he is trying to forget that “[he] ever dabbled in the nitty-gritty land of miscegenation” (114). Moreover, Cole is “his proof of the pudding, his milk-chocolate pudding” (as Birdie puns)(56); she is the conclusive evidence of who he really is:

[Cole’s] existence comforted him. She was the proof that his blackness hadn’t been completely blanched ..., that he had indeed survived the integrationist shuffle, that he had remained human despite what seemed a conspiracy to turn him into a stone ... . Her existence told him he hadn’t wandered quite so far and that his body still held the power to leave its mark. (56)

As Sika Dagbovie aptly observes, “[e]ven Cole’s name connotes black (coal, colored) and thus Cole represents the blackness that Deck tries to hold onto despite his anxieties that he sold out” (103). For Deck, the blackness of Cole’s skin asserts his own true black identity, blurred by years of white education at Harvard, his conformity with white milieu and his marriage to a blue-blooded Cotton Mather’s descendant (Boudreau 62).

Because of her appearance Birdie cannot perform a similar function and is treated by her father “with a cheerful disinterest ..., a kind of impatient amusement, as if he were perpetually tapping his foot, waiting for [her] to finish [her] sentence so he could get back to more important subjects” (Senna 56). Birdie is aware of her father’s preference from an early age: “[H]e never seemed to see me at all ... . [Cole] was his prodigy – his young, gifted, and black ... . [W]hen they came together, I disappeared” (55–56).
Deck also insists that Cole (but not Birdie) needs a black mother. He tries to transfer the girl’s filial love from his wife to his lover Carmen but ultimately fails (394). Although Carmen treats Birdie with “silent irritation” and “muted disgust,” ignores her presence and jokes about her paternity (92–93), Deck never tries to correct her behavior (111–113; Grassian 326–327).

Deck persistently attempts to educate the rather uninterested Cole about his theories on the race relations in the USA, Black Power values and white people’s prejudices. Ironically, it is the white-looking Birdie who absorbs his ideology, even though Deck’s teachings are not intended for her (Senna 71–72). An interesting scene takes place during one of the girls’ car trips with their father:

My father pointed to an interracial couple [with a baby.] ... [He] laughed a little and said, nudging Cole, gesturing toward the couple: ‘What’s wrong with that picture?’

My sister shrugged, blowing on her nails ... . She didn’t seem to remember the right answer – or perhaps didn’t care – but I did and, throwing my hand in the air ..., piped in from the backseat, ‘Diluting the race!’ (72–73)

The absurdity of the scene is clear on at least three counts. Firstly, desperate for her father’s attention, Birdie immediately responds to his question with the words she must have heard either from him or at school; however, in her fervor, she does not notice that she herself is a product of such “diluting.” Secondly, Deck does not seem to remember that both sisters are of mixed-race. Directing his question at Cole, he does not envisage or expect Birdie’s response. He laughs at his younger daughter’s silliness because in her case the realization of her mixed heritage is inescapable; a light-brown girl is talking about adulterating racial purity. However, he does not see the absurdity of the fact that he would be pleased to receive a similar answer from Cole. Thirdly, Deck speaks to Cole as a black man speaking to his black daughter, while in fact both of them are biracial. If Deck is a mulatto then Cole is a quadroon. When Deck asks: “what’s wrong with that picture?” it is as if he was asking: “what’s wrong with us?”

According to Habiba Ibrahim, by describing how Birdie absorbs Deck’s racial theories originally intended for Cole, Senna criticizes racial essentialism (165):

[It] undercuts the assumption that ... the personality of any visibly black subject would be primarily determined by raced concerns. While Cole shares with Deck the condition of being visibly raced black ..., she also occupies very different positions with regard to gender, age, and sexuality. (165)

Cole’s disinterest in Deck’s teachings suggests that “a range of black subjectivities [is] not easily united under a single banner of racial concerns”
Moreover, even though Birdie’s blackness is regulated differently than her father’s or sister’s and is not reflected in her looks, it is “not less viable” (165).

Another powerful image of the intricacies of biased thinking emerges from the scene in which Birdie’s inquisitiveness leads her into asking her father some difficult questions. When Deck uses a derogatory term for a white person (ofay) in a conversation with his friend Ronnie, he is overheard by Birdie:

I was pretty sure “ofay” meant white, and without really thinking, I piped from the backseat, “Isn’t Mum ofay?”

I heard Cole snicker into her hand beside me.

My father threw me a sharp look. “Yeah, but that’s different.”

“How?”

He sighed, about to launch into a long explanation, when Ronnie began to laugh...

“Kids are too smart for their own good. Always gotta watch your back.” (10–11)

In the end everything is turned into a joke and Birdie never gets her answer because, of course, answering such a question is impossible. It can be argued that this situation bears resemblance to a classic Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale: “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” In the tale, it is the innocent child who exposes the nakedness of the Emperor and the hypocrisy of the adults. In the above-mentioned scene from Caucasia Birdie plays a similar role. Her insistent “How?” reveals the inconsistency and irrationality in her father’s racially essentialist attitude. The fact that she is depicted as speaking in a high childish voice further increases the effectiveness of the image; the innocence of the child is contrasted with the indoctrination of the adults.

In yet another scene Deck uses the argument of racial purity. Ironically, arguing with a biracial man, Redbone, Deck calls him a “fake-ass half-breed” and questions the sincerity of his involvement with an unspecified black radical group; for Deck, Redbone “ain’t no brother” (16). Redbone’s retort is sharp: “Don’t get black and proud on me. You’re the one with the white daughter” (16). Sandy also casts racial slurs on Redbone, calling him “that high-yellow Uncle Tom sellout” in Birdie’s presence (175). She, too, does not understand the irony of using such a curse in front of her mixed-race daughter.

Sandy, similarly to Deck and most other people in the novel, recognizes the racial difference between Birdie and Cole and thinks that her daughters’ bodily features determine their racial identities (Boudreau 61). According to Kathryn Rummell, Sandy and Deck “reject the one-drop rule in favor of the visibility rule: Birdie looks white, and therefore is white; Cole looks black,
and therefore is black” (6). For Jewelle Gomez, Deck’s and Sandy’s conviction that their daughters are racially different is in fact a betrayal of their children (364). When the parents decide to split up their daughters, they base their “tacit agreement” on the girls’ looks – the darker-skinned Cole moves to Brazil with Deck, while the light-skinned Birdie goes into hiding with Sandy (Grassian 328). In the words of Dagbovie, “rather than racializing their daughters’ actions, they racialize the daughters themselves” (94). They fail to see that “how Birdie looks has nothing to do with who she is” (Boudreau 64).

For Sandy, as well as for Deck, Birdie’s racial ambiguity is most unwelcome. Birdie suspects that in fact both parents would prefer to choose Cole instead of her (Senna 275–276). In the case of Sandy, Birdie’s appearance is a constant reminder of her privileged white background, which she wants to erase. The daughter’s Caucasian features are a proof that the mother did not “wash out” all the blue blood that haunted her (193). What is more, when Sandy and Birdie go into hiding, Sandy explains that she became an activist for her black child – Cole (Grassian 327; Trudell 137). Birdie notes that it is not the first time that Sandy differentiates between her daughters: “[She] did that sometimes, spoke of Cole as if she had been her only black child. It was as if my mother believed that Cole and I were so different. As if she believed I was white, believed I was Jesse” (Senna 275). The repetition of the word “believed” and of the phrase “as if” seems to emphasize Birdie’s rejection of and irritation at such categorizing. Sandy’s comment “erases Birdie from blackness, causing Birdie to feel racially invisible” (Dagbovie 104); it makes her feel that her former life as a biracial girl was merely an illusion (Gomez 363).

Senna presents a vision of the world of her childhood and adolescence in which racially-based prejudice can assume different forms and have various intensity – from outright racial violence, through peer bullying and casting racial slurs, to holding essentialist preconceptions about racial allegiances. In Senna’s view, this prejudice is truly ubiquitous. Whites, who occupy the position of power, are biased against African Americans and vice versa. Additionally, African Americans discriminate against mixed-race people (while Whites simply do not recognize the distinction between blackness and mixedness). Ironically, even biracials hate other biracials (as evidenced by the “Diluting the Race” scene and the conflict between Deck and Redbone), thus becoming “the other of the other,” to use Eva Saks’ term (77). However, Senna’s outlook on the matter is not entirely bitter as the novel ends with a rather optimistic scene featuring an unnamed mixed-race girl riding an integrated school bus. The scene symbolizes the acceptance of ethnic multiplicity and envisions, however with caution, an alternative for American race relations.
NOTES

1 Race-mixing in the American colonies was penalized as early as the 1660s in Maryland and Virginia (Zackodnik 11). Interracial marriages were first banned in Virginia (1691) and Maryland (1692), followed by Massachusetts (1705), Pennsylvania (1725) and other states. The process continued; in the year 1800 miscegenation was criminalized in the ten of the sixteen states and punished with “enslavement, exile, whipping, fines, and imprisonment” (Kennedy 144–145). After a period of relative acceptance of interracial relationships in the early 19th century, the tightening up of the law came after the abolition and the Civil War (Raimon 3; Saks 64–65). From the Reconstruction onwards the anti-miscegenation laws were strictly observed. When they were finally repealed by the Supreme Court in the famous Loving v. Virginia case (1967), there were still seventeen states that banned interracial marriages and cohabitation (Kennedy 144–146). All in all, 40 states had anti-miscegenation laws at some point (Foeman and Nance 542).

2 In the final argument with Sandy Deck shouts: “Cut this naive, color-blind posturing. In a country as racist as this, you’re either black or you’re white. And no daughter of mine is going to pass” (Senna 27).

REFERENCES


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