



Defying social norms: A critical race theory analysis of interracial marriage challenges in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998)

*Défier les normes sociales : Une analyse, à la lumière de la théorie critique de la race, des défis liés au mariage interracial dans *Caucasia* de Danzy Senna (1998)*

Sènakpon Adelphe Fortuné AZON

Université d'Abomey-Calavi, Bénin, Laboratoire GRAD, Bénin

Email : fortuneazon@gmail.com

Orcid id : <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2700-6870>

Abstract: This paper explores the enduring social challenges faced by interracial marriages in the United States, using Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998) as case study. Despite the US Supreme Court's decision *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) that removed the legal barriers to interracial unions, Black-White marriages, particularly, still confront persistent social rejection, familial resistance, and complex identity formation issues with multiracial children. Applying critical race theory, this paper aims to analyse how the entrenched racial boundaries and social attitudes that multiracial marriage partners have tried to defy, crop up to complicate personal relationships and gradually undermine family dynamics. Using the backdrop of the second-half of the 1970s which is the setting of *Caucasia* (1998) for its analysis, it highlights Sandy and Deck's union as exemplifying the said challenges faced by families with different racial, cultural, and political backgrounds, which ultimately contribute to marital instability and divorce. It furthermore reads in their children Birdie and Cole's contrasting experiences shaped by their varying skin tones, the American society's understanding of, and attitude to, multiraciality. The expected output of this analysis of trespassing social norms and complex identity formation is to draw inferences to illuminate the present race dynamics in multiracial families: the intersection of race, love, family, and identity, and to conclude that the American society remains today reluctant to moving beyond race-based divisions toward a color-blind society.

Keywords: Black-White marriages, Racism, Discrimination, Identity.

Résumé : Le présent article examine les défis sociaux persistants auxquels sont confrontés les mariages interraciaux, aux Etats-Unis, prenant *Caucasia* (1998) de Danzy Senna comme étude de cas. Malgré l'arrêt de la cour suprême des Etats-Unis *Loving vs Virginia* (1967) ayant levé les barrières légales aux unions interraciales, les mariages entre Noirs et Blancs en particulier continuent de faire face à un rejet social tenace, à la résistance familiale et à des problématiques complexes de formation identitaire chez les enfants d'ascendance mixte. Adoptant le *critical race theory* l'article analyse la façon dont les barrières raciales érigées et les attitudes sociales ancrées que les époux des mariages mixtes ont tenté de défier ressurgissent pour compliquer les relations personnelles et perturber la dynamique familiale. Utilisant l'arrière-plan de la seconde moitié des années 1970 qui sert de cadre à l'action de *Caucasia* (1998) pour son analyse, l'article met en lumière l'union de Sandy et de Deck dans *Caucasia* (1998) comme illustration de ces défis rencontrés par les familles issues d'origines raciales, culturelles et politiques différentes, facteur qui contribue in fine à l'instabilité conjugale et au divorce. Il lit en outre dans les expériences contrastées de leurs enfants Birdie et Cole, façonnées par leurs teints de peau variés, la compréhension et l'attitude de la société américaine envers la multiracialité. Le résultat escompté de cette analyse de la violation des normes sociales et de la formation identitaire complexe, c'est de tirer des inférences pour éclairer les dynamiques raciales actuelles dans les familles métisses : l'intersection de la race, de l'amour, de la famille et de l'identité, pour conclure que la société américaine reste aujourd'hui réticente à dépasser les divisions raciales afin d'évoluer vers une société indifférente à la race.

Mots-clé: Mariages Blancs-Noirs, Racisme, Discrimination, Identité.

Introduction

While once banned, and widely condemned, recorded statistics show a sharp increase of general interracial marriages from the 1970s, temporal setting of Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), to the early 2020s. Interracial marriages are said to have steadily risen along the past five decades from about 1% or 3% (1970) to 17% or 19% in 2020 (Pew Research Center, 2017; BetterHelp, 2025; U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). This substantial rise has not translated into full social acceptance. Multiracial marriage partners and children, especially families involving one Black spouse, confront the long shadows of hostile social attitudes and racial tensions in the twenty first century. These specific trials which mixed couples are confronted with, shed a particular light on broader race-related issues. They call attention to the difficulties Blacks and Whites encounter in coexisting peacefully in a society where race remains a deeply charged, divisive fault line. The issue of race becomes even more delicate when it permeates the most intimate realm of marriage. Contemporary literature offers us, with vivid nuances and varied sensitivities, representations of how the weight of social rejection and public negativity to race-mixing translates into personal drama and relational traumas that mixed families must navigate in the US.

Racial tension invading the sphere of private life in biracial families has long come under the focus of African American literature. Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), exploring interracial marriages in the 1970s, dramatizes the social tension they are confronted with, children's identity formation, and divorce. The same dilemmas that she foregrounds in her novel are still present in today's American society, nearly sixty years after *Loving v. Virginia* (1967). Interracial relationships continue to be perceived by some as a challenge to the rigid racial boundaries which upheld segregation and racial hierarchy, as they transgress and destabilize social divisions, posing a threat to White supremacy. The objective of this research work is to explore, through the novel, the serious internal and external challenges issues that people who cross race barriers to marry are confronted with that make their relationships complex. Changes in laws concerning interracial marriage do not instantly or directly alter people's behaviors or public attitudes, which continue to hold significant influence on the lives of multiracial families and contribute in shaping the children's sense of identity.

Many people entering interracial marriages do so with the hopeful conviction that their love will transcend those race-related challenges within their respective families, withstand the slurs and criticism from their surroundings, and provide a protective haven for their children, only to ultimately bump against the crude reality of an unforgiving society. The analysis of their situation is the purpose of this research paper, which discusses the major challenges interracial families struggle with, as represented in African American fiction. The study has adopted a critical race theory stance.

Critical race theory (CRT) is an interpretive lens intended to opening people's eyes to the endemic racism embedded in law, social culture and practices in the USA. Racial discrimination may be a social practice, but it is first and foremost rooted in the body of positive laws, official institutions and procedures that guarantees white people statistical privilege, using the bodies of the minorities as fuel in an interplay that generates profit for the mainstream. The racist legitimizing discourse only comes to second, justify and foster this state of things (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p.21). According to CRT, change is made to occur as slowly as possible, just above the level that may risk social destabilization. Derrick A. Bell even declares that historical landmark court rulings which purported to make real progress, betray in qua non circumstances of interest convergence : "the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites" (Möschel 43). Through the example of *Caucasia* (1998), this essay mainly argues that the change occurring in the American society has yet to tolerate racially mixed marriages. It takes up on three perspectives from which critical race theorists usually analyze marriages

involving a White and a Black partner or people from other races. It first analyzes social and familial opposition, the ensuing distinctive identity struggles that children from these families experience, and last, analyzes the reproduction of racial ideology in spouses themselves. The aim of this analysis is to draw inferences from the literary reproduction of the 1970s to critically analyze the current race dynamics in the USA and its impacts on Black-related multiracial couples. The essay finally argues that the American society is reluctant to erase race divides and evolve toward a post-racial future.

1. Social opposition to interracial marriage as a legacy of racial power

The persistent social opposition to intermarriages in the US is the proof that the historically entrenched political, economic and social dominance that have prevailed for centuries cannot be wiped out with simple laws and court decisions. The shadows of Jim Crow, rape and miscegenation laws, and white privilege, today, still constrain the spheres of possibilities of interracial couples. The harsh reality of public condemnation manifests in various forms among which : stares, whispers, derogatory remarks which impose increased emotional burdens on interracial couples. Deck and Sandy, the central characters of Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), navigate these hot waters of social condemnation after they marry. Biological differences in skin color remain a significant factor shaping societal judgment of interracial marriages. Black-and-White relations seem so far from being spontaneous for some people that they automatically suspect these unions of being primarily motivated by a swap of privileges: social status or wealth acquisition. Cheryl Harris (1993), as a matter of fact, argues that Whiteness has come to operate as a form of property with market value in the US, that guarantees or facilitates access to privilege. The proximity to whiteness is what is generally sought by the spouse of the other race. The Black partner is thus usually regarded as with high economic income, buying their access to more privileged White communities; and the white partner is said to be most anxious to take advantage of the wealth of the Black, selling their whiteness as an asset. The ever present suspicion of marriage of interest is thus a key factor which reinforces social hostility.

The partners' families, a foundational social unit, often reflect and reinforce adversarial attitudes that intensify as they see their relatives more and more deeply engaged in interracial romantic relations. Kate Choi's Social Fabric blog reports a heightened condemnation of interracial relations from families when simple engagements evolve into marriage and childbearing:

Families are more disapproving of interracial marriage and interracial childbearing than interracial dating, perhaps reflecting the fact that marriage and childbearing are perceived as longer-lasting relationships than dating. The degree of family opposition also depends on the race of the partner. Family opposition seems to be particularly strong for interracial unions involving a Black partner. (Choi 2021, p.16)

Senna's *Caucasia* (1998) eloquently illustrates this dynamic. Sandy's mother shows reluctance toward her daughter's relationship with Deck. Born and raised in the first half of the twentieth century in a traditional White upper-class background, the Boston Brahmin respectability, she represents a generational and cultural current reluctant to mixed marriages. For her, her daughter's marriage to a Black man signifies a form of social decline, a view she displays in her relationship with her mixed-heritage granddaughters. She distributes her affection unevenly, contingent on the lightness or darkness of her grandchildren's complexions. The author treats the contrast in Birdie and Cole's skin tones as experimental evidence that confirms the grandmother's racial prejudices. Birdie's grandmother, Penelope Lodges, disapproves of Sandy's relationship and favors Birdie, her granddaughter with lighter skin-tone and marked Caucasian features, showing clear preference for whiteness. At the

grandmother's house, her questions focus on Birdie and Sandy, respectively the lady's white daughter and her fair-skinned granddaughter, while Cole, the dark-complexioned granddaughter, is often overlooked. When Sandy visits her mother with her two daughters, the old lady asks: "Sandy, what kind of place is Birdie going to?" (Senna 1998, p.92). She does not even bother asking which school Cole attends, because she simply does not care. Her attitude is a reflection of deep-seated racial biases which she cannot overcome even with her own flesh and blood.

Although she knows very well that the "Golliwog doll" connotes racist implications, Penelope offers one to Cole. She thus exhibits complex and contradictory attitudes toward race and interracial families. Her gift does not evidence a simple indifference to the young girl, but a deliberate proactive aggression. However, not all expressions of rejection and disapproval readily lend themselves to an easy interpretation. Many expressions of interracial marriage rejection can be so subtle that victims are often unsure of how to interpret their meaning. Take the example of Penelope offering Cole a doll. If she had not previously shown an aversive attitude toward her elder granddaughter, how could her gift to her own bloodline, without equivocation, be interpreted as an aggression? Also, usually, people are reluctant to publicly disclose or discuss racist offenses committed by loved ones, as doing so can trigger personal trauma and draw unwanted public attention. Uncertainty and intimacy – distressed victims are unwilling to disclose their situation and denounce their loved ones – are factors that render the issue hard to accurately assess. That is what Choi observes about the famous case of the marriage of Prince Harry from England and Meghan Markle when the latter announced that they were partially relocating out of Great Britain:

Few outside of the palace walls know with certainty what happened to Meghan Markle and Prince Harry specifically. Several aspects of their story are, however, consistent with broad findings in the intermarriage literature that suggest that many interracial couples may continue to experience challenges in an era where people overwhelmingly report favorable attitudes about intermarriage as a social institution. (Choi, 2021, p. 15)

Birdie's grandmother's attitude to her daughter's family shows that she would have preferred Sandy to marry a white man, begetting children with White phenotypes that conform to the lady's ingrained racial views. According to Kalmijn (1993), attitudes toward interracial marriage also reflect deeper social detachment between White and Black communities. Cole, the dark-skinned girl, perceives flaws in her white mother's relationship with her father, Deck, and finds solace in her father's girlfriend, Carmen, whom she embraces as the maternal figure that her own mother fails to stand up to. Cole confesses: "Mum doesn't know anything about raising a black child. She just doesn't," which she repeats: "Mum just doesn't know how to handle raising a black child" (Senna 1998, pp: 52,53). Cole's acknowledgment of her mother's difficulty in raising a Black child further signifies tensions and complexities within interracial families. The mother, truth be told, has very limited skill in braiding her daughter's unruly kinky hair, which makes Cole the target of her schoolmates' jests.

Social pressure contributes to the perception of interracial unions as inappropriate, with varying degrees of opposition across races: Black people generally oppose interracial marriages less than Whites. The rejection of interracial marriages by Black people seems to come from a different reason. Black people outmarrying usually sentence themselves to rejection because they are viewed as deserters and betrayers of the race. There is a common stereotype that Black people who marry white partners are more likely to be accepted because they are socially successful (Flores 2020). The resentment caused by their "desertion" is one of the basic causes why black communities oppose interracial marriages. They may also be accused of nurturing a complex of inferiority.

This societal landscape of rejection from both sides of the racial divide impacts not only couples but also the children born into these unions. In 2009, a purported concern for the well-being of prospective multiracial children is the reason that Justice of the Peace Keith Bardwell invokes to deny a marriage license to an interracial couple in Louisiana. Bardwell is reported to have publicly claimed that the children would face difficulties of social acceptance, an alibi he uses for institutionalizing racial prejudice under the guise of empathy: interracial marriage is “a threat to American values... and a threat to American morality” (Cardwell, 2021, p. 214).

2. Identity development in children of interracial marriages: an exploration of integration and self-formation

As the frequency of interracial marriages rises, so too does the population of mixed or multiracial children. So there is an increasing population of American children today who, in the image of *Caucasia*'s Cole and Birdie, navigate life with parents from differing racial and cultural backgrounds. In *Caucasia* (1998), Cole and Birdie have a Black father and a White mother. The two girls have inherited distinct physical traits, various complexions, that influence their social experiences, family dynamics, and identity formation.

Historically, the one-drop rule dictated that mixed-race individuals, even with minimal Black ancestry, identify only as Black, engendering lifelong traumas and challenges such as parent denial and consequential identity confusion. The trope of the tragic mulatto has crystallized into a poignant, often recurring motif of African American literature, testifying to the social importance of the unresolved complexities of race relations in American society. Lydia Maria Child's *The Quadroons* (1842), William Wells Brown's *Clotel* (1853), Frances Ellen Watkins Harpe's *Iola Leroy; or Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half* (2020), are just a few landmark novels in the vast ocean of literature that expose the complexities of the mixed-race identity and the enduring trope of the tragic mulatto. The mixed-heritage protagonists in these novels are caught in a complex web of social expectation and self-definition, as they alternatively experience unpredictable circumstances of acceptance and rejection, belonging and exclusion. Their bodies resist the reductive binaries of racial classifications erected within the American society. The slippery social gaze usually compounds with the necessity of social mobility to result in a fractured identity formation. Children of interracial unions often confront varied racial identities shaped by their appearance, familial attachments, and peer interactions.

Children's sense of identity and belonging is profoundly shaped by the quality of love and acceptance they receive from individuals across various racial groups. Generally, the greater the acceptance they experience from a group which they psychologically identify with, the more secure and comfortable they feel in forming bonds within that group. Conversely, rejection or exclusion from a social group tends to generate emotional distance and accumulated frustration toward people of that group. Birdie feels more accepted by her maternal family, her mother and grandmother, while Cole is ignored and rejected. With her experience of rejection, Cole therefore develops her identity as a Black person, which, by the way, induces a rejection of her maternal heritage. Also, Deck, the girls' father, similarly sees Cole as more vulnerable to social rejection and tends to protect her more than he cares for Birdie the younger daughter. Birdie perceives this as a preferential treatment toward Cole, Deck's “Black” child. With the love and care that Cole receives from her father, she finds comfort and affirmation in her Black identity. Conversely, Birdie senses neglect and distance from her father. Their complex relations highlight skin color's profound influence on familial relationships.

Birdie later on recalls the intimate confession that her mother Sandy makes to her regarding the events that befell their family:

"We had to choose which one of you looked more like the other. We had to. In order for me to disappear. We had to choose." She sounded strange. Not drunk. More broken. Beyond crying as she said, "And the crazy thing is, your sister was the reason I did what I did. Having a [emphasis mine] black child made me see things differently. Made it all the more personal. It hurts to see your baby come into a world like this, so you want to change it." My mother 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, 2008, p. 216)

Sandy's confession evidences that even though she knows that she has two daughters fathered by the same man, the various hues of her daughters' complexions, intertwined with other life circumstances that the family experiences, keep her from seeing the biological truth and of Cole and Birdie as identical. In the same way, Deck sees Cole as his black daughter and favors her over Birdie. His differential treatment is so perceptible that the little girl herself notices and complains:

I can't say that I enjoyed these visits with my father. He never had much for her [Cole]. He never seemed to see me at all. Cole is her father's special one. She was his prodigy his young, gifted, and black. At the time, I wasn't sure why it was Cole and not me, but I knew that when they came together, I disappeared. Her existence comforted him. She was the proof that his blackness hadn't been completely blanched" (Senna, 1998, p. 54).

Birdie ultimately realizes that her father's favoritism results from the color of her skin. Nonetheless, her father's preference negatively shapes her bond to him. So the color of skin has ultimate power in perception.

As mixed-race children, the two girls frequently experience frustration and shame from both Black and White communities, struggling to find acceptance in either group while asserting their bond as siblings. Birdie's difficulty fitting in at a Black private school, where peers suspect she is White, contrasts with Cole's relative acceptance due to her darker color. Birdie's White grandmother worries about her granddaughter's ability to pass for white and sees that the teenager herself sometimes subtly shows what she calls a preference for whiteness. Birdie has difficulty fitting into the black private school called Nkrumah because her classmates think she is white, while the school accepts Cole due to her darker skin and curly hair. Family and social tissues converge to convey in the two girls a difficult identity formation and fractured sense of belonging. Shaping their personal growth on the feedback they receive from the complex dynamics in their family, reinforced by their social interactions, the two sisters gradually start drifting away emotionally from each other. Their estrangement comes to a pivotal junction when the family splits.

Sandy's involvement in the Black Power Movement forces the family to split and thus separate their two daughters with regard to their physical appearances, in order to evade the FBI's scrutiny. To avoid the FBI's search who is looking for a mixed-color family, Sandy and Deck separate Cole, who looks Black, and Birdie, whose complexion leans toward a fair, almost porcelain hue. Sandy's reflections reveal the painful realities of racial categorization, as she views Cole and Birdie through a divided lens, influenced by their skin color rather than by biological kinship.

Experiences of racial friction which contribute in shaping identity in multiracial children are not confined to private social circles but extend to encounters with institutional systems and structures. Resistance to interracial marriage persists at institutional levels as well, but a few high-profile examples do thrive nevertheless. Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown

Jackson's interracial marriage presents a high-profile counterexample, demonstrating to younger generations that love can transcend racial boundaries and that interracial unions can thrive even within prominent societal institutions. One example of friction Birdie and Deck in *Caucasia* (1998) confront from institutions is with police officers who question their familial relations on the account of their different racial features, persisting in spite of the assurance the latter give them. The representatives of the social institutions do not believe that a Black father can have a daughter who looks white. Similar experiences are echoed in the stories of mixed-race children in other literary works such as Heidi Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell from the Sky* where people usually express their disbelief in the grandmother claiming Rachel as her granddaughter. Although these occurrences may seem innocuous, they do leave long lasting consequences on the parent-child relations. Persistent racial categorization and expressions of disbelief from others foster in children and parents feelings of shame, and isolation; and identity crisis among children of interracial marriages. Nevertheless, some strive to overcome these constraints, seeking to define their identities beyond imposed racial binaries.

3. Personal experience and the reproduction of racial ideology

Interracial marriage has long been a focal point of interest and controversy in American history, eliciting significant attention in both societal discourse and in literature. Research indicates that interracial marriages have a shorter median duration compared to intra-racial marriages, with individuals of higher socioeconomic status more likely to experience divorce (Zhang and Van Hook, 2009). In this regard, Robinson (2017) identifies two unique challenges which shorten the lifespan of biracial couples and impact the quality of marital relations: family support and social opposition. First, family support plays a crucial role. Societal opposition is manifested through disapproving stares, inappropriate comments, slurs, and unfair treatment and is difficult to mitigate. But familial approval can significantly foster multiracial couples' resilience. It goes a long way towards buffering disappointment, assuaging frustration, and providing psychological comfort. When both spouses' parents accept the union and warmly welcome interracial spouses into their homes, the marriage rests on a firmer foundation and additionally provides children with a nurturing family environment circle in which they develop confidence and emotional stability.

Nevertheless, beyond external pressures, internal stresses such as financial difficulties or work-related strains also precipitate the erosion of marital stability. In *Caucasia* (1998), the instability of Birdie's parents' marriage partly stems from conflicting perspectives on race and politics: while Sandy delves deeper into Boston politics, Deck immerses himself in racial theory. Their mismatched temperaments and ideological disagreements escalate into quarrels, foreshadowing dissolution. Cole intuitively senses the fragility of her parents' relationship, commenting that divorce seems inevitable, reflecting a common pattern: "everyone's parents do" (Senna, 1998, p. 27).

Danzy Senna herself, a child of an interracial marriage, chronicles in her memoir *Where did you sleep last night* the turbulence of her parents' brief but tumultuous union, marked by conflict, violence, and eventual separation. Her mother pursues legal protection before divorce, subsequently raising her children with limited resources, while her father struggled with alcoholism and inconsistent involvement. Senna's fiction and life story poignantly capture mix-heritage children's dilemma after their parents' divorce: the painful necessity of choosing loyalty to one parent, as equal love toward both is often felt as a betrayal. Similarly, biracial children often wrestle with racial identity, especially when their appearances align more closely with one parent's race, inadvertently alienating the other.

Birdie's parents embody this discord. She cannot recall a time when her parents were truly happy together. Eventually, even during moments of apparent harmony, expressions of

affection were rare. Birdie recalls the fragility of her parents' relation, who, at the most intense, expressed mutual love in a dismal "I miss you," a signal of emotional distance:

Even when they were getting along, their union seemed fragile, on the verge of ending. I never heard them say "I love you" to each other. Instead, they said, "I miss you," when they were lying beside each other in bed, or when they walked hand in hand along the banks of the Charles River. "I miss you," they would say, and overhearing this, I didn't understand how you could miss something that was right beside you. Lately, though, they didn't even talk about missing each other. And their fighting had only intensified. (Senna, 1998, p. 27)

As their fighting intensifies, political divergences deepen: "As my mother fell deeper into Boston politics, my father went deeper into his book and his ideas about race" (Senna 1998, p. 27), suggesting that ideological divides exacerbated marital decay.

Deck's growing disillusionment leads him to focus on perceived flaws in his relationship with Sandy and ultimately to favor his daughter who looks blacker. As a matter of fact, the birth of Birdie, the white complexioned child, seems to coincide with the marriage's deterioration, intensifying the father's frustration and exhaustion. So Deck saying: "I need to go to Roxbury. Find me a strong black woman. A sistah. No more of this crazy white-girl shit" (Senna 1998 p. 31), expresses his frustration and weariness from the interracial marriage and his longing for cultural belonging. Deck's decision to separate and pursue a relationship with a Black woman, Carmen, illustrates his desire to recreate a culturally familiar environment: "Our father had a new girlfriend, don't tell Mum. Her name's Carmen and she's so beautiful..." (Senna 1998, p.76).

Sandy, in turn, confronts the dissolution of her marriage by seeking love with a White man. Still, she acknowledges that that she could never love another man the way she loved Deck. Her reckoning with the impossibility to engage in another romantic relationship with the same impetus enlightens us on the intensity of her attachment to Deck, which nonetheless goes unfulfilled. The failure of Deck and Sandy's marriage is perceived as a consequence of the social pressure they endure: they are both victims of their society's outlook on mixed marriage. Misunderstandings, often rooted in divergent backgrounds, with differing priorities, and contrasting family expectations, place immense strain on interracial relationships. Navigating the challenges of racism within and beyond the marriage requires resilience.

In the United States, the likelihood of interracial marriage increases with partners' educational attainment. Education has catalyzed numerous societal changes worldwide, including heightened intergroup contact and subsequent intermarriage. For African Americans, education historically functioned as a path toward emancipation and inclusion, viewed as essential for citizenship, equality, and economic opportunity. Formal and informal education empowered Black individuals to develop literacy and skills necessary to survive and thrive in a racially stratified society. According to the status exchange theory mentioned earlier which is proposed by Davis and Merton, Black-White marriages are often believed to involve an exchange where Black partners' socioeconomic advantages, particularly education, trade for the higher social status associated with having a White spouse. This dynamic underscores education's particular importance in interracial marriage within White communities. Statistically, educational attainment correlates strongly with income: those possessing doctoral or professional degrees earn significantly more than those with less education: the more you learn, the more you earn. Median weekly earnings increase with education, evidencing the economic benefits that come with higher learning. Although not always exactly as described in the status exchange theory, these benefits, in one way or another, have some impact in interracial marriages, as they do on other types of romantic relations.

In interracial couples, income and education often contribute to marital stability, facilitating decisions about child-rearing, schooling, and lifestyle. The case of Deck and Birdie

in *Caucasia* (1998) fosters this argument. Both are intellectuals deeply engaged in their respective fields: politics for Sandy, and racial theory for Deck. Their educational status allows them to navigate financial challenges and make choices that reflect their values. However, intellectual parity does not guarantee harmony. Their union would not have failed if it really did. Differences in political views and parenting philosophies can spark conflict, as seen in Sandy and Deck's relationship. Disagreements about child-rearing and family priorities often lead to misunderstandings, compounded by financial stress, one of the greatest threats to marital cohesion. Like all marriages, successful interracial relationships require mutual understanding, respect, and commitment. Central to enduring love is the capacity to appreciate and honor each other's cultural backgrounds while forging shared values. One challenge interracial couples often face is the societal perception that their unions are not "real marriages" due to racial differences. Navigating this skepticism demands strength and confidence in one's cultural identity and a steadfast belief in the relationship's worth.

It would not be completely wrong to state that Sandy Lee's romantic involvement with Deck comes from a deviation of the obligation she feels, as a privileged white person, toward the discriminated and underprivileged. She gets involved with Black struggle as a deviation from her romanticized outlook on racial issues as her easy cries on seeing a picture of the victims of the holocaust shows: "Her interests were literature, existentialism, and the Holocaust. She was obsessed by the footage she had seen of the Jews being liberated from Treblinka, and often found herself crying over photographs of the sad-eyed skeletons of the camps" (Senna 1998, p: 36). For want of a Holocaust victim to save, she sets her energy on Black people, and her heart on Deck:

She looked at the man across the table [Deck], who was blowing on the steaming mug in front of him. He was immaculately dressed. She told me she had wondered about this fact: Why were Negroes so neat and tidy compared to white people? She had noticed this more than once. She had no particular interest in Negroes at this time—not in them or their cause. Just a sense that they were a mysterious race, full of secrets that the white world would probably never glimpse. The ones she saw on the streets of Boston seemed so different from the happy, smiling brown faces she saw in the movies, on television—the Bojangleses and Hattie McDowell's of the world. Outside of pictures, they seemed closed, tense-faced people, forever in a hurry, forever averting their eyes from her. (Senna 1998, p: 38)

Sandy's political life and marital choices are heavy with the typical race, politics, and identity issues liberal Americans in the 1970s concerned themselves with, and her attitude, symbolic of the intellectual and political curiosity that the Black Panthers' years sparked among white progressives. She was in love of her own idea of blackness, not with a Black man, and her lack of opportunity for employment after graduation allowed her to fill that gap with the radicalism of political activism against discrimination. Her allyship filled the void of the lack of professional engagement, and since she felt rejected by white young men and never had any relation in college, her infatuation with Deck came to embody in her personal life an alignment with her political view. But her allyship lacks depth, exposing her white fragility. Her relation is more about rebellion against her own privileged background than it is about true commitment. When the cost of her commitment with the Black Panthers and survival become too heavy, she falters and retreats into her whiteness in order to reinvent her life. Her commitment is like a coat which she can wear and take off when convenient. After Sandy leaves Deck, she very easily secures a job as a tutor and university research assistant because of her race and not based on her merit. Additionally, she gets an apartment in a rich neighborhood, taking advantage of her privilege as a white person, which she has always fought against, while Deck and Cole struggle to earn a living. So Sandy Lee's is a

romanticized idea of blackness, a self-delusion, and her marriage, an experiment in (self-)discovery.

A large number of interracial marriages are built on this false, often romanticized idea of the other, where partners enter into unions not because they are in love with a person, but in love with their own idea about a certain racial group. It is one of the pitfalls people marrying across from racial divides in discriminative societies have to avoid. Also, Deck's character is introduced in the novel through Sandy's admiration for his intellectual brilliance. As her father's student, Deck embodies academic excellence and neatness, qualities that initially attract Sandy. Sandy's attraction to Deck is partly sparked by the latter's impressive education and intellectual charisma. She confuses admiration with love, which is a trap. Another trap interracial families face is the social gaze and criticism.

Partners in multiracial unions must be prepared to face criticism from family, friends, and strangers alike, recognizing that love transcends race, culture, and religion. Respecting and prioritizing each other's cultural heritage equally is vital to nurturing a harmonious partnership. Dating someone from a different cultural tradition invites both challenge and enrichment. It encourages self-reflection, broadening of perspectives, and an appreciation for diversity in customs, values, and worldviews. Effectively managing social differences requires patience, empathy, and proactive efforts to understand and engage with each other's communities. Language, customs, and traditions may necessitate adaptation, including learning one's partner's language or participating in their cultural celebrations. Recognizing and valuing these differences strengthens the marital bond and fosters resilience against external pressures.

Conclusion

Caucasia's depiction of the fight of interracial partners to stay together and the struggles of their children to forge a sense of self, is a testimony drawn from lived experience with rich nuance, rather than a product of wishful authorial imagination. Social rejection, family opposition and children's difficult identity formation compound to portray the union as a failure. Most people submit today that America is moving toward a color-blind society. This is not consistent with the steady difficulties that these families growing in number still confront. CRT teaches us that facts should be interpreted in a prism that tallies more with the experience of minorities. Examined from the perspective of minorities, race relations, especially analyzed in the light of interracial marriages, resist an openly optimistic interpretation. That official history of racial relations in the USA, as Michael A. Olivas quips, is the "slave traders' chronicle" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2013, p.15). As CRT privileges the use of narratives to subvert official history, *Caucasia* (1998) is to the point, with the nuances it reveals about interracial marriages, in offering an alternative vision of race relations in the USA. Its story is proof that literature, rooted in lived experience, can illuminate the complexities of race, identity, and belonging more vividly than abstract theorization or romanticized depictions.

Taken in a nutshell, Senna's outlook on racism in the US is skeptical, even in progressive white circle that champion allyship. The two young girls' experience in the book, while apparently diverging, ultimately are no more than two opposed sides of the same coin since the society ignores their reality and sucks them into predefined rigid categories that do not reflect the reality of their existence. Ultimately, the biracial identity is not to be viewed as a middle ground between whiteness and blackness but a specific, authentic experience to be explored in its own. In this regard, the paper makes the case that marriage, whether interracial or intraracial, should be based on true love for an individual and not for the color of their skin, for their religious beliefs or culture. Everyone deserves to find love regardless of race or religion. But the enduring legacies of racism in the US still weigh so heavily that pursuing love and marriage across racial lines often assumes the contours of a Cornelian dilemma. Still, the

steady increase of interracial unions and the growing presence of multiracial children, are a fortunate sign of the movement toward the gradual erosion of racism, which leaves room for hope.

Fortunately, Birdie, the doppelganger for the author herself, writes her own narrative, creating a space to define her own outlook, instead of letting the American society define her. This is the only path that can lead to a deepened knowledge of multiracial identity and widespread acceptance and tolerance of racial exogamy and the identity of multiracial children. Further research on the narratives of multiracial families, written from the perspective of the minority who sits at the core of race relations might give a different interpretation of the general race relation in the USA, or concur with the same conclusions.

References

- Bennett, B. (2020). *The vanishing half*. Riverhead Books.
- BetterHelp. (2025). History of interracial marriage. <https://www.betterhelp.com/advice/marriage/history-of-interracial-marriage/>
- Brown, W. W. (1853). *Clotel; or, The president's daughter*. Published by the author.
- Cardwell, M. (2021). Examining interracial family narratives using critical multiracial theory. *Review of Communication*, 21(3), 206–222. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2021.1964098>
- Choi, K. H. (2021). Family relations after interracial marriage. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/za/blog/social-fabric/202103/family-relations-after-interracial-marriage>
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2013). *Critical race theory: The cutting edge* (3rd ed.). Temple University Press.
- Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York University Press.
- Durrow, H. (2010). *The girl who fell from the sky*. Algonquin Books.
- Flores, R. D. (2020). “A little more ghetto, a little less cultured”: Are there racial stereotypes about interracial daters in the United States? *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*, 6(2), 269–286. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332649219835851>
- Harper, F. E. W. (1892). *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows uplifted*. Donohue and Henneberry.
- Harris, C. I. (1993). Whiteness as Property. *Harvard Law Review*, 106(8), 1707–1791.
- Kalmijn, M. (1993). Trends in Black/White intermarriage. *Social forces*, 72(1), 119–146. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2579670>
- Larsen, N. (1929). *Passing*. Knopf.
- Morrison, T. (2008). *A mercy*. Knopf.
- Pew Research Center. (2017). Trends and patterns in intermarriage. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2017/05/18/1-trends-and-patterns-in-intermarriage/>
- Robinson, M. C. (2017). Black and White biracial marriage in the United States. *The Family Journal*, 25(3), 208–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1066480717711117>
- Senna, D. (1998). *Caucasia*. Riverhead Books.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). Marriage prevalence for Black adults varies by state. <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/07/marriage-prevalence-for-black-adults-varies-by-state.html>
- Zhang, Y., & Van Hook, J. (2009). Marital dissolution among interracial couples. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 71(1), 95–107. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2008.00582.x>