



# “If I speak like you, I am you”: Racial passing in Trevor Noah’s *Born a Crime and Other Stories*

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## Abstract

In his memoir *Born a Crime and Other Stories* (2016), stand-up comedian Trevor Noah, draws on the thematic concerns of his stand-up performances, as he documents his experiences of racial passing in apartheid and then post-apartheid South Africa. Noah's reflections on these experiences of passing are integral to shaping his commentary on how racial identities are constructed and perceived. In this article, I will examine how Noah's racial passing narrative expands upon depictions of and commentaries on race presented within works of South African racial passing memoir writing. As I will demonstrate, Noah's use of elements of humour and imagination in constructing his childhood self's perceptions of the racialized world, positions his persona as one that contrasts that of the tragic mulatto as it is represented in other works of South African racial passing memoir writing. Through this contrast, I will suggest that Noah's memoir challenges the notion that one's identity is restricted and limited by systems of racial categorization by reflecting on how race can, in fact, be interpreted as a site of creative expression.

## Keywords

memoir, performativity, race, Trevor Noah, whiteness

In an interview with a documentary filmmaker, cited in *The Atlantic* (2015), South African born stand-up comedian Trevor Noah states, “I’ve lived a life where I’ve never really fitted in any particular way. Even now, people still debate on what I am [ ... ] [I’ve] been everyone and no one” (quoted in Foster, 2015: 1). Through these comments, Noah refers to the implications of growing up as the mixed-race son of a black South African woman and a white man from Switzerland, a situation which required him to “learn to cross multiple lines of difference, including language, color, and culture” (Foster, 2015: 1).

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The conflict associated with forming an identity that exists across “multiple lines of difference” has been central to the creation of his public persona and the content of his comedic work, within both South Africa and the United States, where he now resides. As Noah reveals in his stand-up comedy performances, a challenge he has encountered in shaping his identity is reconciling the differing interpretations of what those around him perceive him to be as he passes through different racial identities by virtue of his skin colour.

Used most prominently in the United States, the term “passing” refers to “the action of an individual who based on a genotype is defined as black but crosses the racial line into whiteness through winning acceptance as white” (Ehlers, 2012: 56). In *Racial Imperatives: Discipline, Performativity, and Struggles Against Subjection* (2012), Nadine Ehlers observes that passing occurs in two forms. First, the individual who passes may be one who possesses the physical markers that create an impression of his or her affinity with whiteness. Second, passing may refer to an act of identification that encompasses us all in that we all seek to adopt a specific identity in our efforts to find our place in the world (Ehlers, 2012: 88). In doing so, we pursue a “*performative pass*” by portraying the characteristics of our desired identity (Ehlers, 2012: 89; emphasis in original).

In their study of Noah’s stand-up comedy performances, Amanda Källstig and Carl Death (2021) examine racial passing through the lens of Homi K. Bhabha’s study of mimicry, which he introduces in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Bhabha defines mimicry as a process in which a colonized other imitates the colonizer, producing “*a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (1994: 85; emphasis in original). In this process, the colonized other is never completely able to replicate the colonizer. For Bhabha, this repetition’s incompleteness challenges colonial discourse’s authority by illuminating its slippages (1994: 86). In their application of Bhabha’s study to Noah’s performances, Källstig and Death refer to Noah’s opening remarks in his stand-up special *African American* (2013). Here, he observes that because he was “born a crime” due to his parents’ union, which was condemned under apartheid law, he was “never afforded a race” (Noah, 2013). This positions him as “*a subject of difference that is almost the same*” as the racial identities he adopts, “*but not quite*”. Källstig and Death suggest that Noah’s portrayal of his “racial ‘in-between-ness’” in his stand-up performances exposes the slippages of colonial discourse by mocking and challenging the assumption that categories of race and identity are fixed and stable (2021: 347).

In his memoir *Born a Crime and Other Stories* (2016), Noah reflects on his position as “*a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” in a similar manner to in his stand-up performances. In the memoir, Noah documents his experiences growing up during apartheid’s final years and, thereafter, in post-apartheid South Africa. Noah structures his narrative as a series of vignettes, each documenting events that were integral to the formation of his identity and to his understanding of South Africa’s social and political climate. Through these events, he recalls the consequences of being “born a crime”, highlighting challenges his mother encountered in raising a mixed-race infant under the apartheid system, and his own challenges in navigating his racial identity during his schooling years.

In constructing his narrative in *Born a Crime*, Noah transfers the themes, conversational tone, and humour of his stand-up performances to his prose. By doing this, he utilizes the satirical lens of these performances as he targets his American audiences’

understanding of race in both its local and global contexts. Noah employs this lens to educate readers about racism and its ubiquity (Hobson, 2019). He has stated that, “You can tackle the difficult subjects and be harsh about it, be brash, be abrasive. But adding hatred to racism is not going to help everybody. So I like to *have fun around it*” (*Huffington Post*, quoted in Kaplan, 2015: n.p.; emphasis added). As with his stand-up performances, having “*fun around*” racism is central to Noah’s critique of race in *Born a Crime*. This critique, too, emanates from his position as a passing figure who, in being “*almost the same but not quite*”, reveals the instability of categories of race and identity.

In this article, I examine how Noah’s representation of his experiences as a passing figure in *Born a Crime* highlight race’s potential as a site of creative expression. In viewing race as a site of creativity, Noah, I argue, offers a new approach to depicting and examining race within the genre of South African racial passing memoir writing. I do this first by contextualizing Noah’s memoir through an analysis of two other racial passing memoirs by Coloured South African writers: Peter Abrahams’s *Tell Freedom* (1954) and Eusebius McKaiser’s *A Bantu in My Bathroom* (2012).<sup>1</sup> In analyzing these works, I consider how the memoir form provides writers of racial passing memoirs with a unique lens through which to comprehend the complexities of their racial identities. I then examine how memoirs such as those written by Abrahams and McKaiser portray racial passing as potentially opposing the limitations imposed by racial categorizations. However, by the end of their respective narratives, each memoirist positions himself in relation to the literary archetype of the tragic mulatto by concluding that he cannot overcome these limitations. This leads him to perceive race as a restricting factor in identity formation. In *Born a Crime*, Noah subverts such a perspective on the limitations of race. He does so by suggesting these limitations can be challenged and overcome by using humour and play in forming one’s understandings of race and, consequently, one’s own interpretation of one’s racial identity. After first considering how this perspective is conveyed via his role as a comic mulatto in his stand-up performances, I observe how it is explored through Noah’s portrayal of his childhood self’s worldview in the memoir. This worldview, formed in relation to how those around him interpret his racial identity, reveals the foolishness of the meanings attached to race. Noah’s reflections on the role language plays in shaping racial identities allude to the prospect that fixed notions of race can be challenged and dismantled. In examining how Noah ultimately comes to interpret and define his own racial identity, I finally consider how he suggests that the limitations of race can be overcome by employing a creative approach in formulating one’s racial identity.

## Establishing the racial passing narrative

In *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading and Writing Personal Narrative* (2007), Thomas Larson outlines the genre of memoir by identifying the connections between the past, which the memoirist reflects on in his text, and his identity in the present. Larson defines memoir as a “record, a chamber-sized scoring of one part of the past [ ... ] it’s a version of, perhaps a variation on, what happened” (Larson, 2007: 19). In using the terms “version” and “variation”, he positions the memoirist as an active agent in creating the “version” of the world the reader experiences through reading the memoir. Larson suggests that the memoirist’s engagement in this creative process has implications for how he

interprets his present self's relation to the past. As he puts it, memoir writing allows the memoirist to "connect the past self to — and *within* — the present writer as the means of getting at the truth of his identity" (2007: 24; emphasis in original). In writing back to and reconceptualizing the past self, the "present writer" prompts a re-evaluation of the self in the present, allowing the memoirist's "truth" to manifest itself. In his study of autobiographies written by black South Africans, Kgomotso Michael Masemola (2017) observes that autobiographers and memoirists locate the "truth" of their identities by constructing narratives of "becoming". As Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet observe, whereas "being" is formed through a stable and impenetrable conception of identity, "becoming" involves the self in a constant process of creation and recreation without a fixed foundation or destination (1977: 2). Masemola suggests that black South African autobiographers are concerned with "the [historical] past insofar as it is radically repeated with new orientations, a new direction, in a bid to re-imagine otherness" and create new selves (2017: x). In doing so, they embark on the "all-important task of positing a new Self, which exists "outside the apartheid history of re-presentation" (Masemola, 2017: x).

"Becoming" is of central concern in racial passing memoirs. For instance, in *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Self* (2002), American writer and feminist activist Rebecca Walker documents her experiences growing up between the worlds of her white, Jewish father and African American mother. She describes her motivation for writing the memoir as follows: "I felt really compelled to craft a narrative out of [my] fragmented experiences and selves that I felt needed to be woven together" (Walker qtd. in Botton, 2014: n.p). Expanding on this, she observes, "I had the need to [ . . . ] create a place, even if it was a symbolic object — meaning the book — in which I could be an integrated, whole human being" (Walker qtd. in Botton, 2014: n.p). Similarly, the racial passing memoirs of South African writers Abrahams and McKaiser, create an uninhibited reflective space through which they can locate, connect, and weave together their "fragmented experiences and selves", challenging the political, social, and cultural meanings attached to racial identities within their society.

For Abrahams and McKaiser, the memoir provides a framework to develop their understandings of their Coloured identities. As historian Mohamed Adhikari observes, Coloured people's lineage descends "largely from the Cape slaves, the indigenous Khoisan population, and other black people who had been assimilated to Cape colonial society" and "partly from European settlers" (2005: 2). Therefore, Coloured identity is in a liminal space where it is considered to be "*almost the same, but not quite*"; Coloured people cannot fully inhabit either blackness or whiteness. Because their identities are defined primarily by their racial mixture, they are often referred to as "'half-caste' or even a 'bastard' people" (Adhikari, 2005: 21). They are considered to be the product of illegal acts of sexual intercourse between black and white people, which marks them as illegitimate (Adhikari, 2005: 27). In their memoirs, Abrahams and McKaiser endeavour to uncover the "truth" of their identities and "re-imagine" their Colouredness amidst systems of racialization that have denied them the opportunity to do so. Within the text, this allows them to become "integrated, whole human being[s]" with distinct identities and agency.

In *Tell Freedom*, Abrahams, the son of an Ethiopian man and a Coloured woman, recounts his experiences growing up as a youth in Johannesburg during apartheid.

Abrahams begins his narrative by documenting a childhood encounter that makes him understand the meanings of race for the first time. He recalls meeting Joseph, a Zulu youth, whilst staying at Elsburg with his aunt Liza and uncle Sam. Noting that Joseph “was not light brown, like the other children of our location, but dark brown, almost black”, Abrahams asks Liza, “What am I?” (1954: 44–45). She responds, “You are Coloured. There are three kinds of people: white people, Coloured people, and black people. The white people come first, then the Coloured people, then the black people” (1954: 46). Despite being made aware of the distinctions and differences within the racial hierarchy, he immerses himself in Joseph’s world as he learns Zulu and his cultural rituals and engages with his stories of “black kings who lived in days before the white man” (Abrahams, 1954: 47). This encounter foreshadows Abrahams’s “becoming” as, in later years, he performs political blackness after he begins working as an office boy at the Bantu Men’s Social Centre. Here, he is exposed to the writings of figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois that help him understand his world and facilitate his transformation into “a colour nationalist” (Abrahams, 1954: 226, 230). Later, he performs whiteness as his engagements with a group of white Marxists leads to a “profound revolution” occurring in his “heart and mind” (Abrahams, 1954: 297). Through these acts of passing, Abrahams moves beyond the limitations of what he refers to as “this Coloured world of mine” (1954: 231). In doing this, he journeys through different modes of “becoming” and identify formations, continuously creating a new self.

In *A Bantu in My Bathroom*, McKaiser produces a series of essays which use his personal narratives to examine race, sexuality, and culture in post-apartheid South Africa. In these essays McKaiser indicates that although he feels “coloured in [his] heart of hearts” (McKaiser, 2012: 44), passing between black and white identities offers him the opportunity, as for Abrahams, to mould his identity through a continuous exploration of new selves. In one of these essays, entitled “Don’t call me coconut, bru”, McKaiser reveals that this opportunity presents itself when he gains a “*performative pass*” into whiteness. Here, he refers to himself as a “coconut”, a term used to refer to an individual who, like the coconut fruit, is “black on the outside but white on the inside” (McKinney, 2007: 17). This implies that although this individual possesses a black skin complexion, they follow and embody characteristics and values associated with whiteness. McKaiser establishes himself as a “coconut” when he relates his experiences at a predominantly white all-boys school, mimicking the “social grammar” of his white peers, whilst maintaining a connection to his Coloured identity as he moves between white and Coloured spaces (2012: 191). Gaining a “*performative pass*” into whiteness provides him with the opportunity to develop his selfhood as he is exposed to values such as “individualism and entitlement” which help him find his voice (2012: 192). For McKaiser, reflecting on his past self’s acts of passing through memoir writing allows him, as with Abrahams, to “discover himself inside his richly hybrid existence” (Jansen, 2012: xii).

Both Abrahams’s and McKaiser’s passing narratives provide them with opportunities to confront and challenge colonial discourse as the crossing of boundaries between different racial identities suggest a potential liberation from the rigid racial categorizations that shaped South African society during apartheid and remain present in post-apartheid South Africa. However, both memoirists conclude that race, ultimately, restricts their efforts to establish their new identities. In literary terms, they embody the tragic mulatto

archetype which features prominently in racial passing literary narratives. A mulatto refers to a person of mixed-race heritage who is “light-skinned, though dark enough to be excluded from the white race” (Pilgrim, 2000: 1). The tragic mulatto or its feminine iteration, the tragic mulatta, was first identified as an archetype by Sterling Brown who noted that this figure commonly occurred in works of American fiction produced during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is defined as a character who, whether enslaved or free, will inevitably suffer a tragic end as their mixed-race identity denies them a “niche in a bi-racial world” (Clark, 2016: 260). Because their complexion unifies two opposing racial identities, Diana Adesola Mafe describes the tragic mulatto as a forward-looking visionary who undergoes a form of “becoming” that allows them to explore both the prospect of discovering a new self and the potential for an “auspicious and inclusive future” (2013: 143). However, by the end of the narrative, the mulatto is deemed tragic because this “inclusive future” has not come to pass, leaving them unable to transcend the past (Mafe, 2013: 4). Abrahams and McKaiser follow the tragic mulatto’s narrative trajectory by acknowledging how they themselves have been denied “a niche in a bi-racial world”. As *Tell Freedom* concludes, Abrahams embarks on a journey to England, expressing a desire to be “personally free” as he states, “Perhaps life had a meaning that transcended race and colour. If it had, I could not find it in South Africa” (1954: 370). In “Don’t call me coconut, bru”, McKaiser recalls his friendship with Andrew, a white school friend, as one that occurs in Andrew’s world only because of the shame McKaiser feels about his poor neighbourhood which marginalizes him from South Africa’s “hegemonic white norms” (2012: 198). Consequently, he writes of his acts of passing as ones that involve “*negotiating* different worlds rather than *integrating* them”, making a multicultural South Africa where “we get to know each other’s worlds intimately and genuinely” an illusion (McKaiser, 2012: 198). In each conclusion, the memoirist suggests that he remains limited by the constructs of race.

### **Establishing the racial passing narrative in *Born a Crime***

To distinguish between Abrahams’s and McKaiser’s iterations of the tragic mulatto and the version of the mulatto Noah presents in *Born a Crime*, it is useful to first consider the content and thematic concerns of his stand-up performances.

In her article “Trevor Noah: taking the tragic out of mulatto one joke at a time” (2015), written in response to the announcement that Noah would succeed Jon Stewart as a host of *The Daily Show*, a satirical news television show, Heidi Durrow refers to Noah’s stand-up performances in relation to cultural representations of mixed-race Americans. She observes that mixed-race identity has too often been associated with the tragic mulatto trope and credits Noah with using humour to redirect the conversation around racial identity by taking “the tragic out of mulatto one joke at a time” (Durrow, 2015: n.p.). In *The Daywalker* (2009), his first filmed stand-up performance, he speaks of how his light-brown complexion frequently causes him to pass as Coloured. The issue with this, he proclaims, is that he is “Coloured by colour, not by culture” and this is “difficult for a lot of people to understand because being Coloured is, in fact, a culture, it’s not just a racial thing” (Noah, 2009). As Adhikari notes, over 40 percent of Coloured people reside in the greater Cape Town area (2005: 2). Linguistically, they are commonly

associated with speaking a variation of the Afrikaans vernacular which is referred to as “*Capey, Gamtaal* (language of Ham), or *kombuis* (kitchen) Afrikaans” (Adhikari, 2005: 16; emphasis in original). Noah, in contrast, originates from Johannesburg and speaks English as his mother tongue, along with a combination of different African languages. In explaining this distinction further, he engages with a Coloured woman in the audience. Comparing her family lineage to his own, he states that whereas she is the child of Coloured parents and grandparents, he is the first Coloured person in his family. Distinguishing between their respective experiences of Colouredness, Noah refers to Oros, a concentrated orange fruit juice which is popular in South Africa. He states, “think of us both as Oros. The only difference is she’s diluted and I’m still in the bottle” (Noah, 2009). Through this analogy, Noah highlights the problem of being an individual whose cultural norms and values are mismatched with his skin colour. Though this is a clear reflection on his experiences of marginalization in “a bi-racial world”, he does not view them as “tragic”. Rather, by comparing himself to Oros in a bottle, Noah suggests that he perceives his position as a figure who is “*almost the same but not quite*” as one that draws attention to the foolishness of how different racial identities, and the divisions between them, are perceived and interpreted. Noah, subsequently, becomes the comical vessel whose reflections illuminate this foolishness.

In *African American* (2013), Noah establishes this function further when he recounts his efforts to pass as black. After being told it would be easier for him to pass as black in the United States than in South Africa, he recalls travelling to the United States with the aim of gaining a “*performative pass*” into black American culture. Determined not to waste his “black-portunity”, he speaks of how he practised perfecting African American Vernacular English whilst on the plane (Noah, 2013). In dismay, Noah recalls how, despite speaking African American Vernacular English fluently, he was greeted by a Puerto Rican man who spoke to him in Spanish, assuming he was of Puerto Rican origin (Noah, 2013). In response, he exclaims, “Eighteen hours of flying and I still wasn’t black. I was Puerto Rican. My dreams were dashed” (Noah, 2013). Noah uses his own positionality to expose the absurdity in the notion that one can successfully perform an identity “through hard work and determination” (Noah, 2013). This is because there will always be flaws in their performance.

Noah’s racial passing narrative in *Born a Crime* presents a similar viewpoint. As for Abrahams and McKaiser, the memoir form provides Noah with a framework through which to “discover himself within his richly hybrid existence” and establish a space where he can be an “integrated, whole human being”. Yet, here, Noah connects himself primarily with his childhood past self. This lets him recapture the experience of learning about the meanings of race for the first time. Abrahams touches briefly on this experience through his recollections of his interactions with Joseph, the Zulu boy. Noah, however, makes it a central focus as he considers how childhood play, imagination, and humour have been integral in shaping his engagements with race. In doing so, Noah’s memoir establishes race as a site of creativity and possibility, rather than limitation.

*Born a Crime* opens with a reproduction of an excerpt from apartheid’s Immorality Act of 1927 which prohibits “illicit carnal intercourse between Europeans and natives” (Noah, 2016: 1),<sup>2</sup> marking Noah’s mulatto identity as a symbol of criminality from birth. He indicates that this symbol makes him a forward-looking visionary when he

speaks of how a mixed-race person presents a “rebuke to the logic of the system” (26) in that their ability to pass between divided racial identities does not merely reveal the system’s injustices but also reveals it to be “unsustainable and incoherent” (25). Through this rebuke, he reveals his intention to challenge his readers’ understandings of how racial identities are constructed and interpreted. Noah draws on these readers’ familiarity with his stand-up performances as he transfers their themes and conversational tone to his prose. The association between performance and prose is established when he states, “I grew up in South Africa during apartheid, which was awkward because I was raised in a mixed family, with me being the mixed one” (25). These are the same words he opens *African American* with. In repeating them in the text, he connects his readers with his prose in the way they would connect with the playfulness of his performances. This connection is crucial to interpreting Noah’s childhood self’s perception of the racialized world.

Noah foregrounds this perception when he explains the motivation behind his name. As he observes, within the Xhosa culture from which his mother originates, the names “families give their children always have a meaning, and that meaning has a way of becoming self-fulfilling” (80). As an example, he refers to his mother’s full name Patricia Nombuyiselo Noah which means “She Who Gives Back”, noting that this is “what she does. She gives and gives and gives” (80). In contrast, the name “Trevor” is not bound to any “meaning whatsoever in South Africa [...] It’s not even a Biblical name. It’s just a name” (80). This implies Noah is “ beholden to no fate”, allowing him “to be free to go anywhere, do anything, be anyone” (80). By indicating he has the freedom to not follow one specific mode of identity, Noah formulates a reality in which he possesses the ability to pass as different identities however he chooses. This is implied further when he reveals his mother never refers to his father as being white or him as being mixed (65). As Ehlers observes, when the absence of clear physical markers of race is coupled with a resistance to verbally announcing one’s racial identity, this leads to “a ‘concealment’ through silence” that “defies racial injunctions” (2012: 119). By not referring to Noah’s racial identity to define him, his mother’s silence leads to his own inadvertent defiance as he is raised not to think of himself in raced terms.

Noah, instead, thinks of race through a fantastical lens as he refers to his love of children’s fantasy books which allow him to “get lost in worlds that didn’t exist” (81). Noah expresses a particular affection for Roald Dahl’s books such as *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964). Dahl’s critics have identified racism in his work (Maynard and McKnight, 2002: 153). Yet, the fantastical and humorous nature of these texts provides the young Noah with imaginative ways to engage with race. At one point he writes, “I didn’t know what race was” (65), stating “I understood that people were different colours, but in my head white and black and brown were like types of chocolate” (65). Reflecting on how the children in Soweto identify him as white because of his light skin, he indicates his confusion because he is “light brown” (65). He writes, “I just thought they had their colours mixed up, like they hadn’t learned them properly” (65). In classifying racial identities as “types of chocolate”, the young Noah formulates his perceptions in a manner not unlike that of the protagonist of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* who escapes the realities of poverty by exploring a chocolate factory’s magical workings. As with Dahl’s protagonist, the young Noah’s childhood innocence allows him to distance

himself from his social realities, whilst playfully reenvisioning them. This positions him as a comic mulatto whose passing narrative reconfigures the tragic mulatto's narrative.

## Noah as a critic of race

As with Abrahams and McKaiser, Noah's efforts to "discover himself within his hybrid existence" provide the centre point from which his critique of race emerges. In Abrahams's and McKaiser's memoirs, this critique occurs through a realization of racial difference and the meanings attached to racial identities. In contrast, Noah's critique occurs through his childhood self's obliviousness to these differences and meanings. In depicting this, Noah draws upon his childhood naiveté as he reflects on how being a figure who is "*almost the same, but not quite*" is interpreted by those around him. These interpretations become the basis through which he examines how racial identities are understood and performed.

For instance, in further documenting his experiences of being interpreted as white in Soweto, Noah recognizes that he receives preferential treatment. He notes how, when his grandmother disciplines him and his cousins for misbehaving, she beats them with a belt but does not beat him because she does not "know how to hit a white child" and does not "want to kill a white person" (62). In turn, his grandfather calls him "Mastah" and drives him "as if he were [his] chauffeur" (62). Traditionally, at communal meals, which occur after funerals in Soweto, neighbours and acquaintances eat outside, whilst the family of the deceased eat indoors. Yet, Noah is always invited to eat indoors, regardless of his connection to the deceased because, as the families put it, "You can't let the white child stand outside" (64). In each scene, Noah indicates how these individuals fashion their identities to fit within what blackness is made to be through the "image of whiteness" (Ehlers, 2012: 88). In policing their actions in this manner, they echo the observations of Steve Biko (2005/1987) whose writings criticize the black man who has been deceived by white society into "making white standards the yardstick by which even black people judge each other" (2005/1987: 30–31). Noah suggests this demonstrates how they themselves have "internalised the logic of apartheid and made it their own" (89).

Noah's childhood self, however, perceives the treatment he receives as being unrelated to his skin colour. It is merely a consequence of Trevor being Trevor (63). He views his world through a "carnavalesque" gaze. The "carnavalesque", as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984/1965), refers to the Middle Ages' carnival culture which "celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order" (1984/1965: 10). In prompting a breakdown in the "established order", it "marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions" (Bakhtin, 1984/1965: 10). In doing so, it presented the world in its "laughing aspect" (Bakhtin, 1984/1965: 13). In his stand-up performances, Noah reveals his world in its "laughing aspect" by using humour to portray his society's "established order" as illogical. In *Born a Crime*, the young Noah's naiveté inadvertently exposes his lived realities in their "laughing aspect" by observing how those around him structure the "established order" through raced images. Consequently, he presents the idea of people conceiving of their identities through meanings they attach to their appearance as being as ridiculous as the treatment he receives for being Trevor.

However, Noah cannot avoid confronting the meanings of race when he encounters the Coloured community's scrutiny, following his and his mother's move to the Coloured neighbourhood of Eden Park, months before Nelson Mandela's release that led to apartheid's end. Whereas previously he was an "anomaly" wherever he and his mother lived, here, Noah observes, "*everyone* looked like me, but we couldn't have been more different." (137–138; emphasis in original), reiterating his observations in *The Daywalker* by proclaiming he is "mixed but not coloured — coloured by complexion but not by culture" (141).

During apartheid, many Coloured people attempted to use their biological connections with whiteness to get a "*performative pass*" in white communal circles. As Adhikari observes, they believed this would gain them privilege within the apartheid system, as well as allow them to achieve acceptance as the equals of white people (2005: 8). Because of this, the Coloured community pushed to find a place within the country's dominant society which was defined and shaped by Afrikanerdom (Adhikari, 2005: 8). In their efforts to assimilate, they avoided personally associating themselves with blackness because they perceived it to be shameful (Adhikari, 2005: 11). To some members of the Eden Park community, Noah fails to pass as Coloured because he has curly hair and speaks African languages such as Xhosa and Zulu (142). For them, this is shameful because it implies that he is "trying to be black" (142). In contradiction to this, other members of the community attribute Noah's failure to pass as Coloured to his engagements with white South African English speakers as he is targeted for attending "an English private school" and learning "to get along with white people at church" (142). During this period, only the Coloured elite sought acceptance within middle-class, English-speaking circles (Adhikari, 2005: 8). Therefore, for the working-class Eden Park community, Noah's connections to English whiteness imply he is "better than them" (142). They suggest he directly opposes Coloured "racial 'innerness'", a term Ehlers uses to refer to the designated social, cultural, and psychological markers associated with the identity represented by an individual's skin colour (2012: 77). Noah's opposition to Coloured "racial 'innerness'" is, by extension, a defiance of their "white fathers, the Afrikaners" (135). When the Eden Park community takes Noah to task for not passing as Coloured, they do so based on characteristics associated with performing Afrikaner whiteness. In doing so, they themselves adopt the perspectives and attitudes of their "white fathers, the Afrikaners" by targeting Noah's affinity with blackness. In expressing their shame, they refer to him as "boesman" which, in Afrikaans, is a "common coloured slur" that associates blackness with "primitiveness" (140). By using it, this group creates a hierarchy between them and him, mirroring a scenario in which Afrikaner whiteness oppresses black "primitiveness".

In recognizing the meanings the Eden Park community attach to skin colour, Noah also realizes the restrictions they place on one's ability to explore other modes of being. To perform racial identities that do not correspond to one's skin colour is to "disavow their tribe", an act which the members of the community "will never forgive" (138). This realization appears to connect Noah with the tragic mulatto because it creates a scenario in which he too is "denied a niche in a bi-racial world" and is unable to transcend the influences of racialized categorizations. Despite this, Noah, unlike Abrahams and McKaiser, does not portray his subsequent acts of passing between racial identities as

disruptive to his efforts to mould himself into an “integrated, whole human being”. Instead, his reflections on these acts balance his critique of performances and perceptions of racial identities with depictions of how his childhood self (to use McKaiser’s terms) “*negotiates*” but also creatively “*integrates*” these identities in shaping his selfhood.

## Passing through language

In his stand-up performances, Noah’s critique of how racial identities are perceived and performed is informed by his commentaries on how language functions in shaping identities and social connections as he observes that “Language and accents govern so much of how people think of other people” (Noah, qtd. in Gross, 2016: 18). In his performances, he demonstrates this by employing his ability to code-switch and mimic accents to comment on how people construct their understandings of race and racial identities via how they interpret a person’s use of language and accents. In *Afraid of the Dark* (2017), Noah distinguishes between language and accents by referring to language as “something someone else speaks” and an accent as “someone speaking your language with the rules of theirs” (Noah, 2017). Accents, particularly, shape a specific perception of a person’s identity in that when “someone speaks a certain way, it changes how we feel about that person, for good or for bad” (Noah, 2017).

In *Born a Crime*, Noah, through his childhood self, reflects further on the centrality of language and accents in formulating understandings of race and racial identities by referring to his mother’s motivation for ensuring he speaks English as his first language. As he observes, “If you’re black in South Africa, English is the one thing that can give you a leg up [ ... ] English comprehension is equated with intelligence” (65). The form of South African English which is “equated with intelligence” is White South African English, the iteration of English which is spoken predominantly by white South Africans who speak English as their mother tongue. Considered to be the correct way to speak English, White South African English is seen as “a form of cultural capital, or more precisely linguistic capital, in South Africa” (McKinney, 2007: 10). In contrast, Black South African English is spoken by black South Africans who speak South Africa’s indigenous African languages as their mother tongue. In conversation, it is formed through blending together English and vernacular languages (De Klerk, 1999: 312–315). Because it fails to follow the linguistic codes of White South African English, it is considered to be a deviation from how English should be spoken (De Klerk and Van Gough, qtd. in McKinney, 2007: 10). In *The Daywalker*, Noah distinguishes between attitudes towards these two forms of English in a segment in which a White South African English speaker tries teaching a Black South African English speaker to speak English “properly”. In mimicking both accents, he parodies the “image of whiteness” by targeting the attitude of the White South African English speaker who associates the black accent “with stupidity” (Noah, 2009).

In *Born a Crime*, Noah addresses these attitudes further by documenting the black community’s and Eden Park’s Coloured community’s differing responses to his childhood self’s use of White South African English. In Soweto he recalls his grandmother praising him for praying in English during prayer meetings. She believes his English prayers are “powerful” because “Everyone knows that Jesus, who’s white, speaks

English” and white people who pray to “White Jesus” are “getting through to the right person” based on the privileges afforded to them (47). Therefore, for her and other members of the community, Noah’s speaking of White South African English symbolizes “upward mobility” (McCormick, 2004: 994), a belief she emphasizes when she refers to Noah’s prayers as “the best prayers because English prayers get answered first” (47).

In contrast, the Eden Park community perceive Noah’s “perfect English” (142) as another betrayal of his “racial ‘innerness’”. In Coloured communities, the form of English spoken is Cape Flats English, a reference to the area in which the majority of the Coloured population live. Characterized by its mixing of English and Afrikaans, Cape Flats English has been referred to as “‘broken English’, English that has been inadequately learned” (McCormick, 2004: 993). Noah’s speaking of White South African English is not only at odds with the English that the Eden Park community are accustomed to hearing Coloured people speak, but also exposes his inability to speak Afrikaans, “the language coloured people *were supposed to speak*” (142; emphasis added). In *The Daywalker*, speaking White South African English leads to him being labelled a “banana type” (Noah, 2009). Like “coconut”, this term implies he possesses a white, English “racial ‘innerness’” which is at odds with his skin colour.

Within the black community, Noah avoids being deemed a “coconut” by using his knowledge of African languages to pass as black. At one point, he speaks Zulu to defend himself against Zulu-speaking youths who plan to steal from him, thinking he is white. After hearing them say in Zulu “let’s get this white guy”, he responds with the words “*Kodwa bafwethu yingani singavele sibambe umuntu inkunzi?* [ ... ] Yo, guys why don’t we just mug someone together?” (67; emphasis in original). Adapting his speech, he becomes one of them as they apologize by stating, “We thought you were something else [ ... ] We were trying to steal from white people” (67).

This scene specifically highlights the linguistic technique Noah utilizes in passing through the racialized world. He deals with people who give him “suspicious looks” because of his skin colour by speaking back to them in their language and employing the accent they use (66). In using this technique, he eases their suspicions. In response, he writes, “Maybe I [don’t] look like you, but if I [speak] like you, I [am] you” (67). Through this statement, Noah signals that he never announces his racial identity. Rather, this is interpreted via people’s *assumptions* of what it is meant to be by virtue of how he speaks. For Noah, this faulty approach to recognizing and defining racial identities reveals the slippages of racism. He writes:

Racism teaches us that we are different because of the colour of our skin. But because racism is stupid, it’s easily tricked. If you’re racist and you meet someone who doesn’t look like you, the fact that he can’t speak like you reinforces your racist preconceptions [ ... ]. However, if the person who doesn’t look like you speaks like you, your brain short-circuits because your racism program has no instructions in the code. (59)

Noah’s use of the terms “stupid” and “easily tricked” playfully echoes his childhood self’s observations on the ridiculousness of classifying one’s identity in relation to skin colour. Just as his childhood self’s disregard for the connection between skin colour and identity exposes race in its “laughing aspect”, so too does his flippant use of these terms

which expose the “racism program” as flawed and superficial. In doing so, Noah suggests that his ability to find acceptance within different racial groups by virtue of how he successfully imitates accents signals that the “instructions in the code”, which construct notions of race, can be dismantled. This insight indirectly challenges Abrahams’s and McKaiser’s view that the limitations of race cannot be transcended. It implies spaces for those whose identities cannot find a “niche within a bi-racial world” may exist within South African society. It is here, then, where Noah’s views as the comic mulatto depart most distinctly from those presented in the tragic mulatto’s narrative.

## Noah and the creation of race

Noah continues to challenge race’s limitations when he decides to announce his race. This occurs when he begins his schooling at HA Jack where he sees “his country for the first time” after previously being unaware of racial divisions (69). Observing how the students divide themselves according to their racial groups within the classroom and the school playground, Noah realizes that “at some point, you have to choose. Black or white. Pick a side” (68). He gravitates towards the black students. Thinking he is Coloured, these students are fascinated by his ability to speak African languages. Denouncing the connections they make between his skin colour and his “racial ‘innerness’”, he tells them “I’m black [ ... ] like you”, a proclamation which gains him acceptance into their tribe (70).

A crucial question the students ask Noah, in trying to comprehend the disconnect between his skin colour and “racial ‘innerness’”, is “Have you not seen yourself?”, expressing their belief that one’s racial identity is primarily dictated by skin colour (71). Reflecting on this question, Noah states:

The world saw me as coloured, but I didn’t spend my life looking at myself [ ... ] I saw myself as the people around me, and the people around me were black [ ... ] I grew up black [ ... ] With the black kids, I wasn’t constantly trying to be [ ... ] I just was. (72)

In forming his identity in relation to how he sees the people around him, Noah recalls how his childhood self experiences his “becoming” as he fashions a new self which is not shaped or dictated by what people around him perceive him to be. His new self is a product of what he himself has created it to be. Noah’s reflections on this instance of “becoming” do not necessarily oppose Abrahams’s and McKaiser’s view that it is impossible to escape race’s presence and influence. In a radio interview with McKaiser, promoting *Born a Crime*, he states that most of the world’s issues can be connected to race. Therefore, we have to “acknowledge that it exists” (Noah, qtd. in McKaiser, 2016). Noah emphasizes this message in *Born a Crime* via his realization of how those around him define themselves in relation to race. However, he also advocates for rethinking what we perceive race to be. In Abrahams’s and McKaiser’s racial passing narratives, navigating between racial identities involves a “*negotiation*” that implies pursuing one identity at the expense of another to conceive of a new identity. This suggests they interpret race in the context of “categories or fixed identities” (Ehlers, 2012: 139) which are impenetrable. In contrast, by shaping his identity in relation to how he connects with people around

him, Noah implies that though he chooses to identify as black, pursuing this identity does not come at the expense of the other selves from which he is formed. Rather, he is involved in a constant process of “*integrating*” these selves. In doing so, he approaches race (to refer to Ehlers’s words) as “a site of creativity, of continual reassessment, formation, expansion, and *possibility*” (2012: 139; emphasis in original). In this context, racial identities become “sites of creative formation” (Ehlers, 2012: 139) that Noah plays with as he navigates a “bi-racial world”. In this sense, he continues seeing himself and his world through a fantastical lens, allowing him to be “everywhere with everybody” (164) and to “cross multiple lines of difference” (Foster, 2015: 1). Consequently, he constructs his racial passing narrative as one that explores the “*possibility*” of defying the limitations of race by countering the notion that one must conform to “one single modality of embodied subjectivity” or to “attempt to *arrive* at a ‘self’” (Ehlers, 2012: 139; emphasis in original). In both the memoir and his stand-up performances, Noah observes how the interpretation of his identity by others reveals the difficulty in not thinking of racial identities as fixed categories. Yet, in exploring this prospect, Noah reflects on the opportunities thinking about race creatively provide for the shaping of a new self and the building of a successfully integrated and inclusive society.

## Conclusion

In this analysis of Trevor Noah’s *Born a Crime and Other Stories*, I have explored how Noah’s ability to pass into different racial worlds exposes and critiques how race is constructed and interpreted. Noah, on one hand, exposes the absurdities of race within South African society. Through this critique, he suggests that thinking of race as a site of creativity, as opposed to categorization, opens up multiple opportunities for identity formation. In examining race from this perspective, *Born a Crime*, also offers a new take on the passing narrative as it is presented in South African racial passing memoir writing. It does so by challenging the notion that one is unable to escape the constructs of race, and exploring the possibilities that looking beyond a “bi-racial world” can provide.

## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Notes

1. In South Africa, the term “Coloured”, as opposed to mixed-race, refers to a “phenotypically varied social group of highly diverse cultural and geographical origins”. This use is distinguished from the international use of this term which refers to “black people in general” (Adhikari, 2005: 2).
2. All subsequent references are to this edition of *Born a Crime and Other Stories* and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

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