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Is There a Self in this Text? Satire, Passing, and Life in *Caucasia*

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IS THERE A SELF IN THIS TEXT?

SATIRE, PASSING, AND LIFE IN CAUCASIA

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Arts
English

by
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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the ways in which Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* exposes the racism of the American Dream through use of a satirical passing narrative. I draw on the existing scholarship surrounding satire and traditional passing narratives and apply it to Senna's work to analyze the ways this novel differs from traditional passing narratives to comment on the absurdity of white desirability and the racial binary. Specifically, I look at *Caucasia* as a location that the main characters—biracial Birdie and Cole Lee; their white mother, Sandy; and their black father, Deck—must inhabit. This depiction of an all-white space the characters are forced to continually live in informs their racial identities and desires, which leads to a double consciousness within the narrator, Birdie. Ultimately, Senna's satire illuminates the double consciousness African Americans and biracial individuals embody because of America's fixation on the white, American Dream that manifests itself as life in *Caucasia*.

Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998) exposes the American Dream's racism by satirically representing race, specifically racial passing, through Birdie and Cole Lee's coming of age as biracial children during the 1970's Black Power Movement in Boston, Massachusetts. Traditionally in passing narratives, like Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*, the centrally figured black/white woman portrays a tragic mulatta: a "mixed race wom[a]n in American literature and culture who typically meet[s] [a] bitter fate for their transgressions of the color line" (Harrison-Kahan 19). Rather than creating a tragic ending for her mixed-race characters, however, Senna leaves readers speculating about the ambiguous future of Birdie and Cole Lee. Before reaching a hopeful future with her sister, Birdie passes as Jesse Goldman, a Jewish girl, in order to escape the FBI and travel to fictitious "Caucasia" with her mother, Sandy. Birdie's Jewish identity puts her in opposition to her black identity and allows her to move virtually undetected through the nearly entirely white world that she occupies in rural New England and upstate New York. Even though her invisibility grants her and her mother safety from the FBI, Birdie feels the loss of her black self while living as Jesse. Attempting to ease her loss, Sandy tells her, "Jews weren't really white, more like an off-white," and passing as Jewish is the closest she can come to remaining "black and still stay[ing] white" (Senna 140). Traveling through *Caucasia* for four years and eventually settling down in an embodiment of *Caucasia*, physically located in an undisclosed small town of New Hampshire, Birdie experiences and eventually rejects both the American Dream and her Jewish persona, which grants her a white identity, in favor of her black exterior and the identity she was forced to leave behind with Cole and her father, Deck.

Diverging from the traditional passing narrative's melodramatic genre and sensationalism through the use of satire and realism, Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* creates a new space for female characters and authors. Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*, and Robert Penn Warren's *Band of Angels* are passing narratives that reanimate the "shocking" sensation narratives from the nineteenth century in which racial identity, especially African-American identity, was a secret to be uncovered. The aforementioned passing narratives are but three of many similarly melodramatic novels within the genre. In novels like these, the mulatta characters are cast as tragic, feminine figures, not fitting into the racially divided world that demands individuals be either black or white, never both. Forced to choose, these women often pass as white and marry white men to avoid slavery or undue hardship in life.

In contrast, biracial male characters are not typecast as tragic figures and are more often featured in satirical novels, such as Max Disher/Matthew Fisher in George S. Schuyler's *Black No More*. After undergoing a procedure to turn his skin white, Max marries a white woman, the daughter of a Knights of Nordica (white supremacist organization) leader, who rebuked his advances earlier based on his black skin. When she gives birth to his black child, Max admits to having had the procedure, and she accepts him despite his African-American heritage. Instead of the tragic ending that his female counterparts would face in the same situation, Max/Matthew is allowed a fortunate, and even hopeful, ending. The highly gendered conventions of traditional passing narratives demonstrate a partiality towards men in the depictions of characters and storylines. Moving away from a standard plot that submits biracial women to a tragic ending at the hands of white men, Danzy Senna, a biracial, female author, pens a satirical passing

narrative featuring a biracial young woman choosing her blackness over struggling to achieve the impossible American Dream by living a deceptive life in *Caucasia*.

While Danzy Senna does not classify *Caucasia* as satire, in an interview with Bertram Ashe for *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art*, she describes her love for satire and desire to see more women authors employ satire in their work. Senna goes on to say, “the way that I deal with satire...a lot of it is the inside jokes in *Caucasia* that nobody outside of my family and friends would get...It’s almost making fun of people and types” (139-40). Particularly, Senna mocks the system that produces white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant (WASP) individuals, such as Sandy, and others who classify themselves as white, to desire life in *Caucasia* and participation in the American Dream. By creating Sandy as the ideal *Caucasia*(n) inhabitant, Senna satirically comments on the type of person who desires life in *Caucasia* and the American Dream. Using definitions of satire outlined below together with Senna’s admittance to making fun of people and types, I aim to show her use of satire to expose the American Dream in *Caucasia* the novel through *Caucasia* the place. Playing on the racial category “Caucasian” to name Birdie and Sandy’s new residence “*Caucasia*” exposes Senna’s satire of the American Dream as an aspirational fantasy for white people and an inaccessible mirage for people of color.

Senna’s stance towards satire as making fun of people and types contributes to and complements the various ways scholarship debates what defines satire and similarly what may be identified as such. Though Dustin Griffin’s *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction* emphasizes the eighteenth century, the definition still applies to Senna’s twentieth-century novel:

[Satire] seeks to persuade an audience that something or someone is reprehensible or ridiculous...it engages in exaggeration and some sort of fiction. But satire does not forsake the 'real world' entirely. Its victims come from that world, and it is this fact (together with a darker or sharper tone) that separates satire from pure comedy. (Griffin 1)

Griffin's portrayal of victims coming from the world of satire echoes Senna's two-fold depiction of Sandy as victim—losing her husband and daughter—and mockery of her background and desire to live in Caucasia. In this regard, Birdie is also a victim who loses her father and sister even as she is caricatured in her passing role as Jewish Jesse. Transitioning towards modernism and responses to suffering that often include laughter, Jonathan Greenberg argues that satire is a “contradictory phenomenon in which its purported moralism or conservatism is conjoined with sadistic or anarchic desires” while also aiming to avoid sentimentality (xiv). Quoting Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, “anything can be made to look good or bad by redescribing it,” Greenberg asks: “what else is satire but a way of redescribing things in order to make them look bad?” (9). More simply, Stephen Kercher's *Revel With A Cause: Liberal Satire in Postwar America* use of satire refers “specifically to forms of humorous expression that, by definition, deploy irony to criticize vice and raise awareness” (1). Turning towards satire specifically from an African-American lens, Ali Brox claims the satiric target is “a society that forces an entire race of its citizens to view the world from the eyes of others” (20). For Brox, satire aims to teach a lesson by pinpointing a cultural problem and proposing a way to fix it. Satire's various interpretations, from the eighteenth century to twentieth century, offer a fresh approach to Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*. Specifically, using

Brox's African-American lens when recounting Senna's critique of the American Dream creates a new space in scholarly conversation to examine passing narratives in the genre of satire.

Thinking of Senna's novel as a satire of the American Dream as well as a passing narrative allows room to consider much of the criticism written on *Caucasia* which concentrates exclusively on labeling and reading it as a non-traditional passing novel. Lori Harrison-Kahan claims that Senna's novel reinvents the passing narrative by complicating a vision of whiteness; by making Birdie "pass for a specific kind of white," Senna represents whiteness not as a monolithic category but as a more nuanced plurality of identities (21). Scholars have interpreted Senna's portrayal of Birdie in many ways, from Ralina Joseph's account of Birdie as "the sad race girl" trapped in between the barriers of blackness and whiteness (67) to Brenda Boudreau defining Birdie's white body as "stripped of the agency to define herself" (60). Focusing on the role race plays throughout, Kathryn Rummell claims the novel reflects "a late twentieth-century perspective on racial identity" (1), while Daniel Grassian asserts that *Caucasia* depicts race as "performative and considers the possibilities for its gradual effacement" (321), and Habiba Ibrahim explores how mixed-race bodies are "marginalized according to their roles as signifiers of racial difference" (155). Most unusual is Reginald Watson's account of Sandy Lee, the white mother, as a new tragic mulatta figure who severs the connections with her white family for her new black/mixed-race family and is thus forced to "go backward on the ladder of their social climb" (102). The majority of the criticism covers the racial passing in *Caucasia* and the updates Senna has made to the traditional passing narrative, such as the time period and Birdie passing as specifically Jewish

instead of generically white. However, there is a gap in criticism's focus on how Caucasia functions as a fictitious place perpetuating the American Dream and requiring the act of passing as white to enter. Filling this gap involves looking specifically at how Birdie's act of passing grants her access to Caucasia, the fictional location and aspiration of the American Dream, while living in New Hampshire. Through the lens of satire, Senna calls out this dream and those who not only perpetuate it, but aspire towards obtaining it, as racist and structurally limiting, even despite its pretense of openness and availability to all.

Giving voice to biracial adolescence, Senna's variation of the passing novel allows Birdie to satirically narrate her coming of age story through her Caucasia(n) journey through the white washed American Dream. Caucasia physically functions as a parody of a predominantly white, unidentified town in New Hampshire to which Birdie and Sandy move. At the same time, Caucasia is a euphemism for the whole United States, as Birdie's journey with her mother situates her in predominantly white spaces that require her blackness to be erased. Additionally, Caucasia is a fictional backdrop for white individuals who aspire to, or believe they have already attained, the American Dream. Unlike her much darker sister Cole, Birdie's position on the color line grants her access to the American Dream. Centuries of white male privilege positions the dream as achievable only by white, heterosexual men and, by extension, their white wives and children. Birdie's persona as Jewish admits her to Caucasia's American Dream because of her pale skinned, blonde-haired, blue-eyed mother's presence and the pretense of her darker-skinned, Jewish father's absence. Introduced to life in the American Dream by Sandy's desire for "a home surrounded by good country people" and the "salt of the earth

in its raw, unadulterated form,” Birdie quickly learns the access her pale skin affords her and her mother (Senna 141). Sandy never has issues finding work tutoring children or as a sociology professor’s research assistant, and her lack of references does not matter because “she was white, she was clearly educated” (Senna 137). Sandy secures a permanent rental on the white, upper-class Marshes’ property because they can see that Sandy “spoke their language” (Senna 149). Sandy’s white womanhood allows her to easily secure a job and residence in Caucasia, New Hampshire, as the residents equate her whiteness with the American Dream. These illustrations of Sandy and Birdie’s white exterior granting them easy entrance to life in Caucasia sets up Senna’s portrayal of the white, racist American Dream.

Caucasia shows through satire that meritocracy is a myth and that whiteness is actually the key to achieving the American Dream. In Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller Jr.’s image of the American Dream, “Presumably, if you work hard enough and are talented enough, you can overcome any obstacle and achieve success. According to the promise implied by the American Dream, you can go as far as your talents and abilities can take you” (McNamee and Miller 1). However, the promise that the American Dream can be obtained by anyone willing to work hard is deceitful—the American Dream can only be obtained by white individuals. African Americans and biracial persons unable to pass are incapable of securing the American Dream due to the fortified inequality between people of color and whites. Therefore, rather than talents and abilities granting access to the American Dream, the requirement is whiteness. Credited with coining the term in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*, James Adams writes of an American Dream “in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man [...]

a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (Adams 404). Through her satire, Senna exposes these interpretations of the American Dream as only applicable to white men. Sandy may appear to achieve the American Dream by being able to secure jobs and housing due to her race, but her gender does not allow her to fully access the success (i.e. money) that the American Dream affords white men. Senna’s casting of Sandy’s inability to earn a substantial amount of wealth, despite being able to trace her lineage back to Cotton Mather and growing up in Harvard Square, exposes the sexist aspect of the American Dream in addition to the racist aspect. However, race is Senna’s key theme in mocking the American Dream.

Traditional passing narratives, such as Nella Larsen’s *Passing* and Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*, give their characters a recognition of their blackness and a desire to exchange it for whiteness. However, Senna creates a setting where Birdie is unaware of her racial identity growing up due to her mother homeschooling her and Cole. Before learning to be white and entering Caucasia, Birdie learns to be black by attending the all-black Nkrumah School. Forcing Birdie to come to terms with her biracialism by fully experiencing both her black self and her white self, Senna brings double-consciousness to the forefront. From the beginning of the novel Birdie views the world from the eyes of her sister, seeing Cole “as the reflection that proved [her] own existence,” and imagining Cole’s face as her own (Senna 5). The assumption that her own characteristics were those of her sister soon becomes a false realization once Birdie enters Nkrumah. No longer able to look to Cole to prove her existence and as a reflection of her own appearance, racial

categories suddenly become something Birdie has to learn to fall into. Birdie seeing herself through her sister's black eyes and reinforcing her own blackness contrasts W.E.B. Du Bois's double consciousness theory. Du Bois claims the African American is "gifted with second-sight" which creates a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" and causes "one [to] ever feel his twoness,— an American, a Negro" (Du Bois 3). Essentially, black individuals are forced to see themselves from the viewpoint of white Americans, causing a conflict within themselves that produces self-doubt about the availability of both an African and an American identity. Viewing themselves through the eyes of white Americans, black individuals come to believe their lack of opportunity is due to their skin color and wish "to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American" (Du Bois 4). Senna similarly uses double consciousness to create an identity conflict within Birdie, who doubts whether she can be either black or white, even as she wants to live as both. Except in the beginning when Cole and Birdie were homeschooled, playing in the attic, and speaking their made-up language of Elemeno, Birdie always has to choose to identify and present herself as black or white even though she is both black *and* white. Situating Birdie in a version of double-consciousness that rests on the choice of opposite identities is part of Senna's satirical commentary on the American Dream. Instead of creating her identity based on a white gaze, Birdie created her first identity based on an African-American gaze. Realizing she and Cole are more opposites than reflections of one another creates a discontentment within Birdie that she, unlike her sister Cole, will never be black enough for her father. Therefore, instead of measuring herself by an imagined white gaze that creates questions about whether she is American (white) enough, Senna's Birdie challenges white

desirability and positions herself in relation to a black gaze that leads her to wonder whether her identity can be black enough.

Casting a biracial young girl as the main character, Senna emphasizes the difficulty in navigating between two races during the 1970s in white America. Senna further expounds the difficulty through Cole's "cinnamon-skin" and "curly-hair" (Senna 5), racially coding her as black, like her father, versus Birdie's "straight hair, pale skin" and "general phenotypic resemblance to the Caucasoid race" racially coding her as white, like her mother (Senna 128). The difference from her sister forces Birdie to go through learning how to act black on her own. Though Cole stands up for her at the all-black Nkrumah School saying, "Birdie isn't white. She's black. Just like me," Birdie does not fit in and make friends until she styles her hair in braids, wears gold hoops, and changes her wardrobe to match the other students (Senna 48). On the other hand, Cole is made fun of by her peers for having ashy knees and given the nickname "'Miz Nappy'" due to her hair, but she still has friends because the other students never question her racial exterior as anything other than black. Switching up the stereotype and creating Birdie as a social outcast for being too white not only shows the opposite of Caucasia's American Dream in action but also shows Birdie's vulnerability to a drive to prove her blackness in order to fit in. Senna creates a mirror image, an oppositional reflection, of what life in Caucasia is like for those without white traits and characteristics.

Senna's choice to represent whiteness through a Jewish identity is a significant satirical interpretation of the American Dream's relationship with the color line as Birdie's pale skin is only white enough to enter Caucasia because of her mother and fictional dead Jewish father. Senna gives Birdie the ability to gain access to Caucasia

because she passes for Jewish, even though the American Dream conceptually only accepts white, WASP individuals. Conclusively, the primary concern of the American Dream and Caucasia is where individuals fall on the color line instead of their true ancestry. Skin tone grants individuals' access to the American Dream in many novels, including Larsen's *Passing*. Senna takes the concept a step further by having Birdie pass as Jewish American instead of just white, an identity often aligned with a version of Anglo Saxon Protestantism that Birdie's mother will reject. Jewish individuals are seen by some, including Birdie's mother, as in between, not quite white but not black—exactly how Birdie fits within her biracial identity. The fact that Jewish Americans were historically allies of African Americans positions them closer to African Americans in Sandy's eyes: “‘Tragic history, kinky hair, good politics,’ she explained. ‘It’s all there’” (Senna 140). However, the history of Jewish Americans, in relation to both African Americans and to American whiteness, is also a history of aspiration to the American Dream, and a history that carries with it some of that dream's racist disavowal of blackness. Michael Rogin's *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* discusses the fact that by the late 1800s entertainers on stage performing in blackface were predominantly Jewish. He states, "In turning white to black and back again, minstrelsy played with the process of identity change that transformed poor into rich, daughters into wives and mothers, and immigrants into Americans" (Rogin 49). In addition to transforming themselves into African Americans on stage, Jewish actors were transfigured into wealthier American citizens. Blackface gave Jewish players a foot in the door for theater performances but led to other parts allowing the Jewish players to roleplay the American Dream lifestyle on stage. Therefore, the performance of blackface

allowed Jewish immigrants to experience the American Dream, despite it being only achievable and available through the theater. This caused blackface to reinforce the racial division, and “passed immigrants into Americans by differentiating them from the black Americans through whom they spoke, who were not permitted to speak for themselves” (Rogin 56). Performing blackface created a division between Jewish Americans and African Americans. White spectators aligned blackface Jewish performers more closely with white society, therefore giving them access to the American Dream. The opportunities of the American Dream rely on the degradation of some Other, most often African Americans, limiting and virtually obliterating the possibility of the American Dream being obtained by people of color.

In addition to the blackface Jewish performances Rogin explores, Michele Elam investigates “immigrant achievement and assimilation” as an American Dream framework that shows how passing as Jewish is a way to achieve the American Dream and closely align oneself with white America (759). Elam says, “Birdie’s mother [is] attracted to the Jewish persuasion because Jews are persuasively associated with certain American myths of self-invention” (759). The American myth of self-invention Elam refers to is the American Dream. Going on to explain this self-creation as, “leaving behind the past and...finding the fresh green breast of a frontier in which to realize fully one’s unfettered potential” echoes James Adams’s invention of the term “American Dream” (Elam 759). Despite their history with minstrelsy, many Jewish individuals became friends with African Americans and vehemently opposed racial prejudice. Jewish individuals’ identity with whites is positive, due to their blackface performances in the past, and positive with African Americans due to their opposition to racial prejudice and

commonalities with racism in Germany, creating a middle ground position that affords them benefits in both racial groups. Senna's choice for Birdie to pass as white through a Jewish identity is satirical in that she moves from being stuck between black/white Birdie to white/Jewish Jesse. Though this move seems somewhat lateral in its satirical depiction, it is a clear climb up the ladder towards achieving the American Dream in Caucasia.

Though Senna positions Birdie to achieve the American Dream by having her pass for white as a Jewish girl, she does not push her into the decidedly, perhaps simply white position of the white Anglo Saxon Protestant that her mother rejects. The WASP position remains associated for Sandy with her mother's blatant racism and blood lineage to Cotton Mather. Acknowledging Birdie's numerous passing choices, Sandy says, "You can be anything. Puerto Rican, Sicilian, Pakistani, Greek" but lands on Jewish (Senna 130). She then creates the background of Birdie's fictitious Jewish father, a "brilliant professor," paying homage to her own deceased father the Harvard Classics professor (Senna 130). Echoing Michele Elam, Sandy is attracted to the self-invention and hard work typically associated with Jewish immigrants. This attitude is further shown in her choice to live in "a town that offered the best of both worlds. It was made up mostly of poor farmers and trailer parks, the world she said she most admired. But it also sat near a university town, the world that could provide her with a job" (Senna 143). Sandy envisions herself an ally with people of color, specifically African Americans, since she married Deck and had two mixed-race daughters with him. However, her choices once she decides to settle down show different alliances. Picking a predominantly white town closely situated to a university and telling her daughter to pass as Jewish is supposedly a cover so the FBI doesn't find them, but it also resembles Sandy's life growing up and the

life she would have if she married a white man. Sandy's character satirically portrays a "good white person" attempting to remain an ally to people of color while also encouraging her biracial daughter to present as white and successfully achieve the American Dream.

While Birdie is the narrator of *Caucasia* and her coming of age as a biracial child is a large component of Senna's satirical commentary on the American Dream, Sandy's character represents *Caucasia*'s ideal citizen—she is a blue-blooded, white woman who grew up affluently with her Harvard professor father and socialite mother in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Sandy signifies *Caucasia*'s ideal citizen because she was born into an upper-class family that had been living the American Dream for generations; however, she never had to climb a social ladder to earn her spot. In Sandy, Danzy Senna identifies a type of white person that Shannon Sullivan's *Good White People* (2014) describes more generally. Sandy repeatedly verbalizes her rejection of everything her lineage and upbringing stands for, yet she cannot escape her whiteness; nor does she attempt to do so. According to Sullivan, "Intra-white class biases might seem to have nothing to do with people of color," but just as Sandy's bias against her mother and ancestry shows, "they are one of the central ways by which middle-class white people avoid taking responsibility for and fighting against white privilege" (5). For instance, Birdie recalls, "My father liked to call my grandmother, jokingly, 'the last of a noble line,' referring to her heritage, which she never let us forget. But my mother called her 'the last, thank God, of an evil line' and drove us there only on special occasions" (Senna 24-5). Sandy may have escaped her upbringing's overt racism by marrying a black man and fighting for the cause alongside other people of color, but she classifies her mother along with other

upper-class WASPs as subordinate to good white people like herself. By creating such a distance between her mother and herself, Sandy attempts to demonize her in a way that positions Sandy as incapable of her racist extremity and automatically situates herself above her mother. However, Sandy makes a list of “How to Spot a Real Wasp” and according to Birdie, “grudgingly admitted to being a real Wasp” (Senna 154). One of Sandy’s rules is, “the harder a Real Wasp tries to reject his social caste (e.g., joining a Tibetan monastery, marrying a Jew or Negro, giving all of his money to the Moonies), the more authentically Waspy he becomes” (Senna 154). While demonizing her own mother for being a WASP, Sandy labels herself as one and even gives herself a place on the list. Rather than accepting and claiming her heritage of white supremacy as a way of working away from it, Sandy simultaneously disassociates herself with every aspect of it through her language while retaining remnants such as the large painting of Cotton Mather on her wall and confession of being born a WASP. Cotton Mather, most famously known for his involvement in the Salem witch trials, also held a position as New England Puritan minister and earned his degree from Harvard where his father served as the president. Seemingly a sardonic way of proving to her family she is not a racist, it also functions as Senna foreshadowing Sandy’s underlying desire to go back to her American Dream in Caucasia.

Senna explores the concept of the American Dream as achievable by only white individuals through Sandy’s various relationships and economic statuses, showing that, regardless of Sandy’s specific situation, her whiteness bolsters her success. Shannon Sullivan claims white liberals and avowed white supremacists are not as different as white liberals believe and insist they are, especially because they both come from the

same background of assumed white domination (4). Senna dramatizes this concept through Sandy's marriage to Deck and later relationship with Jim in *Caucasia* in order to create a satirical commentary on the American Dream and how it always works out for individuals who are racially coded white enough. The night Deck leaves, he tells Sandy, "People can't ever truly get away from where they came from. And you, Ms. Sandra Lodge"—he pronounced her maiden name with venomous clarity—"need to go back to Cambridge" (Senna 24). Deck goes on to say, "You belong in the Square, just where I found you, Sandy, no matter how much you try to fight it. You're a Harvard girl at heart... And I need to go to Roxbury. Find me a strong black woman. A sistah. No more of this crazy white-girl shit" (Senna 25). Birdie characterizes these comments as "taunts," but they are also Deck's explicit recognition of Sandy's position in relation to the whiteness of the American Dream. Sandy met Deck when he was a student in her father's class at Harvard, positioning him in an upward movement towards securing the American Dream. However, Sandy saw in Deck the opposite of her current life: a black man. Both Sandy and Deck were searching for a life contrasting their current one; one running from the "cream of Cambridge society" and the other running towards it (Senna 31). Deck gained entrance to a version of the American Dream by marrying Sandy, graduating from Harvard, and working as a university professor. According to Shannon Sullivan, "[The middle class] is inseparable from the American Dream and the Protestant work ethic: everyone who works hard can succeed. There supposedly are no social barriers or caste systems that would block a person's ability to change her status in life" (7). But despite all his success, Deck still has to hide under a blanket when going through certain neighborhoods and has strangers call the police on him for kidnapping his own light-

skinned daughter, Birdie (Senna 40, 60). These instances show Deck does not have access to the American Dream due to his skin color, even though he has worked hard to succeed a position that would gain white men entrance. This realization drives Deck to leave Sandy and tell her to stop fighting who she really is: a white woman from Cambridge.

Senna's satirical commentary on the American Dream's sole availability to white people is deeply intertwined with Sandy through her childhood and parenting of Birdie and Cole. Despite having left Cambridge, not attending college, and entering into an interracial marriage right after *Loving v. Virginia*, Sandy's position and ability to obtain the American Dream never waver, thanks to her whiteness. However, her position as a white woman drives her outlook towards raising her children and the best course of action in the Black Power Movement. Notwithstanding efforts to end racism against African Americans through various undisclosed and possibly illegal activities, parenting Birdie and Cole illuminates Sandy's deeply ingrained racial bias. Sandy and Deck homeschool Birdie and Cole rather than send them to public school in order to keep them "safe from the racism and violence of the world" (Senna 26). Deck eventually changes his mind and wants to send them to an all-black school in Roxbury, to which Sandy replies: "I mean, I guess the school makes some sense with Cole. But Birdie? Look at her sometime, really look at her. Try to see beyond yourself and your goddamn history books. She looks like a little Sicilian" (Senna 27). Deck does not take Sandy's comment lightly, responding: "I know what my daughter looks like, thank you. Maybe you need to cut this naïve, color-blind posturing. In a country as racist as this, you're either black or you're white. And no daughter of mine is going to pass" (Senna 27). To live in Caucasia,

one has to accept the racial binary and throughout the course of the novel Senna explores that forced binary. In Sandy's mind Birdie is always white, while Deck makes his kids choose their black side by declaring his daughter will not pass as white. Even though both girls were raised in the same environment, they are treated as separate races by their parents: Deck favoring Cole because of her dark skin and Sandy favoring Birdie because of her light skin. Deck tells Sandy to stop pretending to be color-blind, while in reality they both racially code their daughters solely based on their skin color. For both, it is Cole's skin color that produces specific imagined actions; Sandy can justify sending only Cole to school in Roxbury and Deck will teach only Cole about African-American history. Senna not only casts Sandy as clinging to her racial bias passed down through the generations of white domination, but also casts Deck as portraying a preference for the daughter whose skin more closely resembles his own. Their racial biases not only lead Deck and Sandy to separate, but also explain their destination of choice: Deck heads for Brazil in search of black freedom, and Sandy drifts through various Caucasia(n) places for four years before settling in Caucasia, New Hampshire in search of her perfect American Dream.

Senna's portrayal of Sandy casting herself as a (white) martyr for the (black) cause not only illuminates Sandy's blindness to her white privilege, but also her white privilege toward the attainment of the American Dream. Before dividing up Birdie and Cole and going into hiding from the FBI for her unmentionable illegal activities, Sandy begs Deck to run away to Canada with her and the girls. When he rejects her pleas, she lashes out, "And to think, I actually thought you'd approve. I thought I could trust you. But you're just like my mother. In blackface" (Senna 118). Senna shows Sandy making a

martyr of herself through her belief that she has made the ultimate sacrifice for the cause by leaving her bourgeois life in Cambridge to marry Deck and fight for racial equality. Since Deck has only gained academic success, Sandy does not believe his efforts are as worthy as hers. Though supposedly fighting the same fight—racism in America—through the same Black Power movement, Deck and Sandy view each other’s approaches as nonsensical and ineffective. While Deck takes an intellectual approach by writing books, conducting research, and teaching college courses, Sandy allows people on the run to take refuge in their home, holds midnight meetings with radicals, and stores weapons in their basement. Living with Deck, Sandy is fully enthralled in the fight for racial equality; however, once she has entered Caucasia, she avoids mentioning the name Deck or Cole and immerses herself fully into her new identity as Sheila.

Representing the ideal citizen of Caucasia, Sandy goes through several changes that bring her closer to her younger, WASP self. Sandy is “seventy pounds lighter” when she settles in Caucasia, making her “the woman her mother always wanted her to be—willowy, fragile, feminine, a shadow of her former self” (Senna 145). In addition to her new look, Sandy begins a relationship with a white man, Jim. Before this relationship starts, Birdie says, “I didn’t like it when she flirted with white men. It seemed to be taking our game one step too far, becoming the other woman rather than just playing her” (Senna 144). This aversion Birdie feels when seeing her mother flirt with white men translates to her disgust with Jim. She avoids spending time at home as much as possible, so she doesn’t have to see her mother and Jim acting romantically, choosing instead to hang out at her friend Mona’s trailer. Birdie sees her mom’s relationship with Jim as the pinnacle of the American Dream—a white, nuclear family living in a picturesque home

and spending wholesome time together. Though Birdie does not label this relationship as the American Dream, she constantly avoids interaction with Jim saying, “Something in me resisted,” ultimately supporting her decision to remove herself from the American Dream narrative completely (Senna 256).

In addition to Sandy’s full appearance transforming into Caucasia’s model citizen, her new boyfriend, Jim, is satirized as the good white man, making him the perfect match to Sandy’s good white womanhood. Jim repeatedly references his three years spent living in Jamaica, as if living in a predominantly black country aligns him more closely with African Americans and gives him a better perspective on their life as a minority in white America. Additionally, Jim lives in a “little shack filled with Jamaican artifacts,” wears clogs, loves reggae music, and smokes marijuana (Senna 181). These attributes are similar to Sandy’s embodiment of good white woman Shelia, who does Tai Chi, dyes her hair with henna, and smokes marijuana. Despite his good white personification, getting lost in New Haven Jim confronts a group of three black teenagers who throw a rock at his car. When one of the teenagers sends him home, telling him, “You’re not in your neighborhood now,” he pushes the kid and exclaims, “Listen, kid, don’t tell me where I belong. I used to live in Jamaica” (Senna 264). Jim implies he is not like other white men as he knows more about black people and is comfortable living with them, for which he receives a punch in the face. Once back in the car, Jim says, “I swear, I try to be liberal, I try really, really hard. But when you meet fucking punks like that, you start to wonder. I mean, Jesus, what did we do to deserve that? We’re on their side, and they don’t even know it” (Senna 265). Retreating to his imagined identity as a good white man, Jim immediately blames the teenagers for the situation getting out of hand, completely

disregarding his own instigation and claiming he is on their side. By blaming the victimized people he claims to be fighting for, Jim erases his accountability and is able to maintain his good white man position. During the confrontation, Birdie reflects, “I didn’t want the teenagers to think I belonged with these white people in the car” (Senna 264). She quickly disassociates herself from white people, hoping the black teenagers would see her as one of them instead. Though Birdie originally aligns herself with the white people in Caucasia, specifically with Mona, Birdie steadily moves towards this turning point over her two years as Jesse Goldman and ultimately recognizes her displacement in Caucasia. Sandy already maintained a space in Caucasia and the American Dream through her WASP exterior and heritage; she just needed to reclaim that space as hers when she was ready. Birdie, on the other hand, was forced into Caucasia’s American Dream by her mother’s yearning to come back and slowly realizes it is not a place she wants to be a permanent resident.

Entering Caucasia as a biracial person with the ability to pass is the simplest part of trying to accomplish the American Dream whereas fearing the discovery of the partial black identity among overt racists is the real complication. Birdie does not fit in Caucasia, due to her biracialism, but she is also unable to escape because of her biracialism and Sandy’s decision to put down roots. Acknowledging from the beginning that she is unlike the natives of Caucasia because of her life on the road and being separated from other kids for four years, Birdie is nervous to start school. However, her experience is radically different from Nkrumah School; in Caucasia’s school Birdie is already accepted based on her skin color, saying, “I blended in perfectly” (Senna 242). Instead of being a racialized outcast, she is just a “weird chick” (Senna 220) who dresses

“like a much younger child, in high-water dungarees and a pair of hot-pink Converse sneakers...[a] T-shirt announc[ing] some truckers’ convention, and hair [that] hung unevenly” making her appear “wild and ill-fitting, like a girl raised by wolves” (Senna 144). Despite her initial label as weird, Birdie makes friends with Mona and her clique on the first day of school, based on their envy of her friendship with white, wealthy Nick Marsh. Even though her skin grants her acceptance with Mona, she changes herself “into one of those New Hampshire girls” with her new talk, walk, and application of “blue eyeliner and frosted lipstick” (Senna 233). Always aware of being an imposter, Birdie’s transformation ensures she is not mistaken as an outsider and helps to secure her place in Caucasia.

Senna’s choice to portray Birdie as Jewish allows for her satirical commentary on the racial hierarchy present in Caucasia. From the outside, other kids refer to Mona and Birdie as the “awesome twosome,” but around Mona Birdie is “usually performing, trying to impress her, but never letting her in” (Senna 233). Birdie must enact a double performance to remain in Caucasia: Jewish Jesse Goldman for her mother and a white girl from New Hampshire to remain friends with Mona. Performing two acts away from her true self as Birdie Lee slowly starts to wear on her identity consciousness and causes Birdie to drop the first act, and eventually the second. Birdie does not verbally announce her made-up Jewish background while in Caucasia, but she does wear a Star of David around her neck, up until Mona’s brother yells racial epithets at her from his car while throwing pennies at her (Senna 245-6). This encounter, followed by Mona questioning, “So, are you Jewish, or what? I mean, is that what that necklace is for?” causes Birdie to never wear the Star of David again—fully embracing her passing as a Caucasia native

(Senna 247). This act of dropping the Jewish identity allows Birdie to become the monolithic white typically embodied by passing narratives and American Dream successors.

There is always a possibility of racism towards individuals who are not racially coded “WASP,” such as Jewish Americans, despite their position on the color line. Hanging out with Mona and her family, Birdie often hears their use of racial slurs for both African Americans and Jewish Americans. Engulfed by the narrative her mother created for her to survive in Caucasia as a white girl, Birdie finds “safety in th[e] pantomime” when Mona or her family use racial slurs around her, “sometimes a little laugh escaping” from her throat (Senna 233). She says that “the less I behaved like myself, the more I could believe that this was still a game. That my real self—Birdie Lee—was safely hidden beneath my beige flesh, and that when the right moment came, I would reveal her, preserved, frozen solid in the moment in which I had left her” (Senna 233). Birdie never loses sight of the fact that she does not truly belong in Caucasia and that her persona as Jesse Goldman is just a safety requirement. Her white identity is allegedly required to prevent the FBI discovering their whereabouts and arresting Sandy, as well as making it possible for them to remain in Caucasia and achieve security and the American Dream.

Individuals engaged in passing are often hyper-aware of other biracial people, fearing their own identity could be revealed if a resemblance is detected by white Caucasia citizens. In Nkrumah School Birdie was made fun of and ostracized by the black students for looking white. Now, in New Hampshire, her whiteness puts her in a

situation where she, through silence and friendship with Mona, chastises Samantha who appears (too) black. The first time Birdie sees Samantha, she says:

The girl was black like me—half, that is. I could spot another one immediately. But her blackness was visible. Deep-set eyes, caramel complexion. She looked tired, with dark bruises of exhaustion around her eyes. Her features were a jumble of tribes and unplanned unions—full lips, a tangle of half-nappy black curls that she wore pulled away from her face with a headband. (Senna 223)

Samantha's jumbled and unplanned features not only suggest the history of rape and slavery that is tangled with biracial Americans, but also speaks to the selectivity of Sandy and Deck's planned union. Birdie's friends make fun of Samantha, repeatedly calling her "disgusting," "Wilona," and "Brown Cow" (Senna 223). Identifying Samantha as biracial like her, Birdie understands the power skin color grants or denies individuals in different spaces. Acknowledging that Samantha is degraded for her skin being too dark, Birdie remains silent while Mona and the others ridicule her to avoid them finding out she is just like Samantha only able to pass. Birdie admits to disassociating her life and identity as Jesse Goldman from her life and identity as Birdie Lee saying, "I would think, 'You,' not 'I,'" and that "as long as the girl was 'you,' I didn't feel that I lived those scenes, only that I witnessed them" (Senna 190). Yet, living in Caucasia for two years she transforms herself deeper into a New Hampshire type of girl, seemingly hoping to connect with her white identity. Samantha's presence as another biracial body that does not belong in Caucasia makes Birdie unable to shake her own incongruous identity unfit for Caucasia. At a house party with Mona, Birdie asks Samantha what color she is, and she responds, "I'm black. Like you" (Senna 286). Birdie immediately leaves the party,

her mom, Caucasia, and the American Dream behind in search of the identity she left in Boston. Birdie says, “Those words had made something clearer. Made it clear that I didn’t want to be black like Samantha. A doomed, tragic shade of black. I wanted to be black like somebody else” (Senna 321). Samantha will never achieve the American Dream in Caucasia because she is racially coded as black; her exterior positions her as the token in Caucasia, forever enduring racial slurs while vying for acceptance from the white citizens. Birdie concedes she has altered her appearance to earn acceptance into Caucasia as a black girl who can pass, and decides she no longer wants to be a shade of black that allows her to live in Caucasia. She sees Samantha’s ending as tragic due to her skin color, mimicking the tragic ending the typical mulatta faces in traditional passing narratives. Deciding to change her perceived ending as a passing character in Caucasia, Birdie leaves in search of a black identity to be proud of. Birdie’s exit from Caucasia, both the location in New Hampshire and the site of the American Dream, starts Senna’s non-traditional ending to her satirical passing narrative.

Traditional passing narratives usually have tragic endings: the mulatta woman dies; her black identity is revealed, and she loses everything (money, social status, children, etc.); or she marries a white man and sterilizes herself to avoid having a dark-skinned baby and revealing her black identity. An example of a traditional tragic ending is Nella Larsen’s *Passing*. Once her husband discovers her half-black identity Clare Kendry meets her untimely demise from an apartment window. Clare successfully achieves the American Dream by passing as a white woman, warranting the ability to marry a rich, white man and live lavishly. However, just as the Great Depression Larsen anachronistically parallels in the novel claimed the lives of various citizens who fell for

the materialistic, racialized American Dream, Clare's fall from an apartment window ends her life after successfully claiming the material and racial aspects the American Dream has to offer. Another archetypal tragic ending to a passing narrative is Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*. Peola meets a white man while passing in Seattle, Washington and plans to marry him and move to Bolivia for his engineering job. She returns to her mother, Delilah, at the home of her mother's employer, Bea Pullman, to request they let her pass and pretend they do not know her if their paths cross in the future. To ensure her secret black identity is never revealed to her husband through their children's skin color, Peola sterilizes herself and tells him she is unable to bear children due to a complication. The desire to pass as a white woman is so strong in *Passing* and *Imitation of Life* that the characters are willing to die, sterilize themselves, and never speak to their mothers again to achieve the American Dream and secure life in Caucasia.

Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* captures the passing narrative through the lens of satire, setting up her conclusion as hopeful rather than tragic for the mulatta character, Birdie. According to Dustin Griffin, "satiric endings are often obtrusively open, not because the end of one story is always the beginning of another, or because literary constructions are subject to deconstructing or unraveling, but because the form and purpose of satire seem to resist conclusiveness" (96). *Caucasia* ends with Birdie travelling to California and finding her sister enrolled in college and renting a room with two other women, and her father living alone trying to get his book, *The Petrified Monkey: Race, Blood, and the Origins of Hypocrisy*, published. Senna resolves the mystery of Cole and Deck's lives over the past few years, with Cole telling Birdie about their travels to Brazil and back to America, but she leaves questions regarding Birdie's future. Vaguely, Cole asks Birdie to

stay with her and attend Berkeley High, to which Birdie agrees, but Senna does not give us a glimpse into that life. Instead, we are left with Birdie leaving to buy breakfast and almost waving to a biracial girl on the school bus, but stopping, “remembering where I was and what I had already found” (Senna 413). The last time Birdie saw a mixed-race girl on a school bus, it was Samantha in Caucasia, New Hampshire. Birdie no longer feels the need to know who the mixed girl on the bus is, like she did with Samantha, as she has already found herself by moving away from Caucasia and claiming her biracial identity and name. The last line leaves an image of the bus and mixed-race girl gone, leaving “just a blur of yellow and black in motion” (Senna 413). The blur represents Birdie’s unclear future with Cole, but it also signals that there will be a future for her, unlike the tragic endings of many female passing protagonists. Choosing to not create a binding conclusion for Birdie, either positive or negative, Senna shows that biracial women have an opportunity to create their own future and should not be forced to settle for a disastrous ending. Accepting the novel as satire allows readers to understand Senna’s inconclusive ending as taking a stand against the tragic endings biracial female characters historically face in passing narratives.

The satirical bent in Senna’s non-traditional passing narrative is woven throughout the novel, especially through the title which functions as various predominantly white locations Sandy and Birdie travel to, including an undisclosed New Hampshire town and the upstate New York women’s commune, Aurora. Along with the settings, the character’s names—Cole, signifying her skin as the color of coal and Sandy, signifying her skin color as light like sand—are infused with irony. Additionally, Senna’s satire flows deeper, stimulating Sandy’s caricature of a good white woman, Birdie

passing as Jewish instead of a monolithic white, and ultimately Birdie's decision to ditch Caucasia and the American Dream in favor of her black identity and ability to live as black and white, rather than being forced to choose. From the beginning of the novel, Senna depicts a racial binary obliging Birdie to choose her white identity or her black identity. This binary is constantly stressed by her parents, school, classmates, and town, regardless of her physical location.

The tension Birdie feels between rejecting her whiteness in favor for her blackness while also yearning to live within her biracialism are two positions Senna implements in *Caucasia*. Early in her life Birdie desperately wants to shed her white exterior for her black exterior, namely to earn the same degree of love her father shows Cole. Though later, as she moves throughout Caucasia with her mother, she realizes the preposterousness in choosing and recognizes her true desire to live as both black and white. By the end of the novel, Birdie seems to have found a utopian society in California that does not require her to choose her blackness or whiteness and allows her to live as both at once. Cole even tells her, "If you ever thought you were the only one, get ready. We're a dime a dozen out here" (Senna 412). Senna placing Birdie in a utopia where she is no longer the token but one of many biracial kids, displays a possible way to overcome racial issues and remove the need for individuals to choose black or white. However, this rejection of racial differences verges on a cliched, easy resolution Deck satirically represents in the end when he tells Birdie "there's no such thing as passing. We're all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion, make-believe. It's a costume. We all wear one. You just switched yours at some point. That's just the absurdity of the whole race game" (Senna 391). Presenting both sides of a potential utopian solution to the racialized

problems in Caucasia, allows Senna to remain in the sphere of satire and not claim a definite answer. Instead, Senna invites *Caucasia* readers to not only recognize the toxicity of Caucasia, but also challenges them to advocate for and seek out solutions within their own communities and lives.

The ceaseless division between black and white a biracial person must decide between is the ultimate thread Senna keeps running through her satire—questioning the absurdity of forcing a body made up of multiple races to choose only one to identify and portray. As Sika Elaine Dagbovie observes, “Birdie particularly challenges the idea that people have to disappear, pass, or somehow change in order to survive or live happily” (102). Indeed, Birdie challenges the traditional passing narrative which implies that people of color must transform into white people, typically by passing, to survive or lead a happy life. Senna’s satire changes the genre of passing narratives into one that critiques the racial binary in America by making fun of a system that encourages individuals to desire a life in Caucasia and achievement of the American Dream. By casting Caucasia as a location found practically anywhere in the United States, Senna shows that racial binaries and racism is not a localized issue, and the desire to achieve the white American Dream can be found everywhere.

Senna locates (bi)racial issues everywhere by not allowing individual groups or types of people to take the blame, but to foreground the system that shapes certain types of (white) people as the problem. The idea of Caucasia enforces an artificially binary identity onto biracial people, who are called to choose between their black and white identities. Analogous to Du Bois’s double consciousness, Caucasia makes black and biracial individuals constantly view themselves from the eyes of white Americans,

always feeling the difference and incapability of achieving the American Dream. Danzy Senna featuring a biracial character attempting to find her place in a version of America that does not force her to choose her black identity or her white identity commands readers to look at the absurdity of white desirability that is represented through *Caucasia* and the American Dream. Through the use of satire in a passing novel, Senna's *Caucasia* begins to contend with the racism and colorism the various embodiments of *Caucasia* in the United States, both fictional and physical, perpetuates in order to sell a false American Dream to its white citizens.

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