

Northern Michigan University

NMU Commons

---

All NMU Master's Theses

Student Works

---

11-2021

## CHAMELEON BOY: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LITERARY CRITIQUE OF BIRACIAL SUBJECTS IN A RACIALIZED SOCIETY

David Robinson  
darobins@nmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.nmu.edu/theses>



Part of the [Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Robinson, David, "CHAMELEON BOY: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LITERARY CRITIQUE OF BIRACIAL SUBJECTS IN A RACIALIZED SOCIETY" (2021). *All NMU Master's Theses*. 685.  
<https://commons.nmu.edu/theses/685>

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at NMU Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All NMU Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of NMU Commons. For more information, please contact [kmcdonou@nmu.edu](mailto:kmcdonou@nmu.edu), [bsarjean@nmu.edu](mailto:bsarjean@nmu.edu).

CHAMELEON BOY: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LITERARY CRITIQUE OF BIRACIAL  
SUBJECTS IN A RACIALIZED SOCIETY

By

David Lamont Douglas Robinson

THESIS

Submitted to

Northern Michigan University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

MASTERS OF ARTS

Office of Graduate Education and Research

November 2021

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

*Chameleon Boy: An Autobiographical Literary Critique of Biracial Subjects in a Racialized Society*

This thesis by David Robinson is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies and Research.

*Amy T. Hamilton*

11/15/2021

Committee Chair: Amy Hamilton

Date

*Matthew Gavin Frank*

11/15/2021

First Reader: Matthew Gavin Frank

Date

*Lynn Domina*

11/16/2021

Department Head: Lynn Domina

Date

*Lisa Schade Eckert*

12/10/2021

Dr. Lisa Schade Eckert

Date

Dean of Graduate Studies and Research

## ABSTRACT

### CHAMELEON BOY: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LITERARY CRITIQUE OF BIRACIAL SUBJECTS IN A RACIALIZED SOCIETY

By

David Lamont Douglas Robinson

In American society, race is a determining factor when realizing a salient identity. Social engagements, relationships, and the perception has one has of one's self are all affected and choreographed by race. Deeply ingrained within our social structure race aims to categorize humanity into easily identifiable, yet reductive, categories. However, an issue arises when the addition of the mixed-race subject throws the sorting machine into a frenzy. Unable to categorize the racially ambiguous, American society chooses to conflate their physicality to another ethnic group or race or write them off as Other. The late Gloria Anzaldúa's investigation into the limitless possibilities present within biracial/multiethnic individuals which ran perpendicular to 20<sup>th</sup> century assumptions on the condition of the biracial subject. Therefore, in tandem with Anzaldúa's theory, will concern itself with that of the Other and how biracial subjects adapt or perish in a racialized system. To accomplish this goal, this work will draw upon personal experiences through autobiography and deconstruct the racial mechanisms at work, which I will then apply to the reading of the ambiguous self in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*, which chronicles the coming of age story of Birdie Lee and her journey to self conceptualization. This dual reading of the self and text aim to emphasize the experiences that inform the ideal *I* of biracial individuals.

Copyright by  
David Lamont Douglas Robinson  
2021

## DEDICATION

For Ray and Melissa,

I will always love you both.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my thesis director Dr. Amy Hamilton and her wonderful insight into autobiographical literary criticism. She saw the potential inside of me when I wavered attempting to write this thesis and showed me the path to success. Without her guidance and attention to detail, this document that you hold in your hands would never exist.

Along with Dr. Hamilton's tutelage, I want to acknowledge the King-Chavez-Parks Foundation for awarding me the Future Faculty Fellowship which granted me the money to find the necessary time to complete this arduous project.

Finally, to my mother and aunt. Thank you for your continued support, I know my father would be proud to see how far I have come in academia.

This thesis employs MLA 9<sup>th</sup> edition formatting using traditional parentheticals along with footnotes.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	(1)
Part One – Chameleon Boy.....	(3)
Part Two – My House.....	(9)
Part 3 – College Daze.....	(24)
Part 4 – False Faces: An Investigation into the Formation of Biracial Identities in Danzy Senna’s <i>Caucasia</i> .....	(41)
Summary and Conclusion.....	(49)
Works Cited.....	(52)

## INTRODUCTION

Growing up, not knowing what to call myself, I felt sort of freed from the confines of race because I could be whatever I wanted to be when the time was appropriate. Over the years, that excitement faded and what followed was tiredness. A debilitating, listless tiredness that wore me down to the bone for I had not one group to connect to, no home to go to and rest my head. Nowadays I see race as neighborhoods bordered off from others, which signify their status as sites that the dominant culture constructs to limit the potentialities of those who live within, coercing the West into believing that people are separated by the tone of their skin or the blood that runs in their veins. For example, biracial literary critic, Frantz Fanon, known for attempting to untangle the complex relationship between his Algerian and French heritages, in his book, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1966) understood the function of race as the dominant culture's rationalization and justification for prejudice, racism, and classism because it was, and still is, a tool to keep the colonized/oppressed suppressed. Today, one is bombarded by differences based on racial politics and the vitriol associated with it. It is easy to subjugate others if information is disseminated throughout the psyche of those under the white gaze through sensational thumbnails and pop-ups.

The West cherishes a term like race because it offers our individualistic society an easy, accessible, yet emotionally detached, reference that disseminates and informs the masses about the differences between people that fail to fit into the status quo on a physical level and the members of the dominant culture. People cannot unite if they are bordered off from each other. People begin to hate if they restricted access into the homes and spaces of others in an attempt to

understand them holistically. However, Critical Race Theory within the past half a century stands to not only shatter the foundation a term like race sits upon, but also to gelatinize the very term, race, making it flexible, shapeless almost, in the aim of reforming the term and its connotations to better fit the needs of the literary world. Therefore, terms like ethnicity, which requires time, rigorous learning, and sympathy are mainstream because, while race confines people into enough groups to count on one hand, ethnicity proves that humanity is diverse. Yet while current events rage on, it is painfully clear that we are not yet at the point to consider another's multitudes, so for now, the West clings to race, like a baby to a bottle. Getting to know someone requires effort, an effort our society struggles to cope with, so race offers some insight into how people function, albeit narrow. When taken into account, race, is a tool used against itself to illuminate the cracks in the foundation. Race, in its very nature, limits groups; however, when placed into confined spaces, people wish to break out of these spaces to inhabit a more palatable one. To constrict is to begin the process of birth, in that race gave birth to inclusive ideologies like ethnicity.

However, how does one define or categorize those who do not fit the molds put in place by race? This document will take an Anzaldúain approach to racial politics, which interacts the concepts of *la mestiza* and the "crossroads" – defined as the place where one collects their experiences, traditions, language formations, etc inherent within their being to form identity, through autobiography. Anzaldúa's essay "La conciencia de la mestiza/ Toward a new Consciousness" lays down the modern frame work for biracial studies within academia, which contrasts with early twentieth century notions of biracial identity. I will excavate the aspects of my own life to expose the numerous pieces of one particular biracial experience toward a critical

reading of Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* to examine the relationship between the conflicting cultures within a biracial body, specifically the conflict/relationship between whiteness and blackness.

### **Part One – Chameleon Boy**

My father was convinced of two things: the first being where our family originated from and second his unappreciated abilities in marketing. He used to tell me a story about Rangi Zote, a lonely chameleon living in the Congo River Basin, and I could never figure out why he would bother with it, until now; so, I would like to tell it to you all:

Rangi Zote lived in a thicket of vines stashed away high up in a lombi tree where the light caresses the jungle canopy. All of the other creatures in the jungle paid him no mind or failed to differentiate him from the tangle of vines where he dwelled. One day, Green Mamba slipped its way into Rangi Zote's home in search of something to eat.

The snake called out, "I know you are here little one, but what is you and what is vegetation?" for he could not tell the difference between scales and plant matter in this tangled mess.

"I am nowhere Green Mamba. Forgive me, but if you cannot find me, you cannot eat me," replied Rangi Zote.

The spiteful serpent lurched through the vines looking for his prey, but to no avail. Eventually, Green Mamba grew impatient trying to find the creature, whose skin cradles the colors of the rainbow.

"You are but a coward. You run from your purpose in this life," sneered Green Mamba. Indeed, he is right thought Rangi Zote; I am a coward. I am a being too afraid to show others where I am, so much so that I asked the Creator for a way out of this neurotic life, a way to escape from my troubles. I begged for respite and the Creator granted me what I wanted most,

but it came at a cost – I am to document and name the colors of the world. I happily accepted without any foresight. However, I as quickly found out, there was another cost, a hidden curse to my relief. They confuse me for blood-red fruit clinging to a branch for dear life, a brown/black blight upon a tree trunk, or even see my tail as a withered parrot’s beak flower, and some cannot even see color and judge the world on base instincts, but I am incapable of this. A crushing loneliness plagues me, for I am the only one of my kind whose skin changes to fit the place. I choose to lose myself in color, for I know color is the sole entertainment in this world, but others find it superfluous, a mere ornament on the tree of life. Alone and hidden from the eye, I weep for them.

Ever since I could put together a memory at four, I have always had a fondness for chameleons and their ability to disappear into their habitat with what I assumed was a superpower or magic. My father’s rendition of Rangi Zote confused me terribly and I protested about Rangi’s sadness every time he told it to me as I lay down for bed. Even when my father ceased telling the story when I turned ten, I could not, would not, understand the bitter loneliness that Rangi chose over his own anxieties thinking that his gift was one-in-a-million.

Unique to the animal kingdom, chameleon eyes, like searchlights scanning the darkness, move independently from each other in search for prey and predator without alerting either,<sup>1</sup> while their zygodactylous<sup>2</sup> feet cling to supple vines and stubborn branches. However, I am convinced

---

<sup>1</sup> Eyes that move independently reduce the amount of movement made in capturing prey and avoiding predators; see Srinivasan (305-307), *Nature* (1999)

<sup>2</sup> Zygodactyl feet; a configuration of digits commonly found in birds and chameleons where there are a number of front facing digits along with a number of back facing digits; in the chameleon’s case it does not fit this definition as they have five total digits with digits 1, 2, and 3 in a lateral bundle (front facing); see Diaz et al.

that the real strength of the chameleon and the part of the chameleon I liken to the most is the mechanism of its color change. A chameleon's skin is a wonderful layering of guanine nanocrystals that contract or relax on the creature's whim to allow varying wavelengths of light in to display different colors, effectively making them invisible to the world around them. My father was forced to sit through short presentations about chameleons ending with an argument as to why Rangi should not be sad. Little did I know that Rangi and I shared the same kind of woe that like him my being fades away in the eyes of those trying to perceive me and any quick movements on my part would make me stand out – vulnerable to danger from all sides.

My mother used to tell me that when I was a baby, and even a toddler, store clerks and doting mothers peering at every small child in the vicinity thought I was a beautiful little girl. With a hand on her hip, she would reply with, "That is my *son*." The clerk, the mother, or whoever would get embarrassed of course, apologize, and then comment on how my long eyelashes deceived them; despite the fact, I was clad in earth-toned onesies with little trucks or sharks of different manly colors.

As I grew older, the misidentification grew more intimate, more invasive. I started to become less of a curiosity and more of an oddity. The curls the set upon my scalp began to tighten slowly and by age eight, my hair was lush, soft, and nappy. So lush in fact, in grade three, children began touching my hair and discussing the texture and not the violence they just committed upon my body. I always wondered why my hair was so special, so attractive enough for little boys and girls to touch my hair and not the other black kid's hair.

One particular day in third grade stands out in my mind:

It was the middle of March, a warm breeze finally began to creep into the chilled Chicago air, a white boy walked up and touched my hair during recess. I stopped and turned around and

wanted to punch him, but instead I asked, “Why do you want to touch me? There are other black kids with hair like mine.” I remember his look; befuddlement and regret ran all over his face while his shaggy brown hair looked feather-soft as it blew around frantically in the wind, which matched his expression in a way.

He responded after a moment with, “I didn’t know you were black.” He ran away, back to his glowing group of friends immediately after saying that. I was glad that it was over, but just when the moment escaped my mind, I noticed him bending over slightly to wipe his hands on his ripped blue jeans as he giggled amongst his peers. I remember the movement most of all, deliberate and graceful, but forceful enough for one to notice the physicality of dehumanization. I wanted, no, needed, to disappear into the faded asphalt of playground at that moment to spare myself the shame of living in my skin.<sup>3</sup> I can be anything to anyone and that gave me some confidence. However, instead of feeling unique, I felt empty and lost. I did not understand who or what I was and that little boy with dirty hair reminded me of that stinging fact.

I walked home in tears that day feeling triflin,’ feeling like my crown was spat on by angry villagers. I ran to my father, who I was living with at the time, and asked if I was black. I got an expressionless “yes” in return, but that was not enough. I asked why I do not have the same color as him. He said, “because your mother is white, son.” I never knew what that meant until I began flipping dusty pages and writing long, drawn out papers about black writers in the latter half undergrad years. Throughout most of my life, I have been mistaken for something other than what I am. My father looked at things objectively, with cool calculation. He himself attributed his candor to his own childhood experiences. Growing up in poverty and having a less than satisfactory father figure, he and my aunt understood that experiencing childhood was a privilege they were not lucky enough to be afforded. Moreover, despite the size of the Robinson

family when my father was a child, everyone was struggling so aid could only be doled out with food bought with federal aid and childcare, financial respite was out of the question. As my father passed through childhood in an instant, he had given me the privilege to stay a child longer than he had, but when he looked down at that third grader and uttered, “because your mother is white.” The answer so simple and so obvious shocked an eight-year-old me. I thought because my mother is white, I am not black, but what did that make me? To think in such binaries now as an adult writing my life story for others to read is preposterous, but to a child, at least for me, binaries were easy until the topic of my race came into light.

I remained at Garden Hills Elementary for the remainder of my third grade year, but a year later, I drove with my mother cross country to begin a new life in Virginia Beach, Virginia marking the beginning of the last half of my fourth grade year. On car rides home from the baby sitter’s to going to the Navy Exchange for groceries, I asked my mother for dark chocolate whenever I got the chance because I thought that eating it would make me more like my father. Before I ate the dark brown square, I would softly say a short prayer in hopes that something would hear my request. I would watch *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* and Tim Burton’s 2005 adaptation on repeat paying close attention to how the chocolate is made, how chocolate would take on different personalities, and adore how Gene Wilder and Johnny Depp’s reverence for the substance transformed what I knew as a simple treat to something uncanny, out of this world, and exciting. I remember buying a TV guide with my allowance to find out when the Food Network played shows about chocolate like *Unwrapped* or *Good Eats*.

At night, after binging these shows and scribbling down messy notes, I’d dream about being a chocolatier sculpting everything from statues to delicate roses out of chocolate. Michelangelo’s *David* and *The Thinker* were not spared from my artistic touch. Choosing the

chocolate that best accentuated the features of the sculptor's masterpieces was difficult because the subject was not made to be recreated from a darker material. Yet, after the tempering the chocolate sparkles like stars and the finished statue looks like a piece of the night sky plucked from the heavens. My obsession ended when my mother had to explain to me that eating chocolate would not make me darker. The look on her face when she had to explain to a child trying to look like his father was melancholic as if she had lost a family member. My mother was not so much worried about her son's chocolate obsession than she was about me running into all of the ignorance and racism in the world because of what my parents are and what I cannot be. She was worried that people would not think that she was my mother. She would worry that she would not be able relate to my problems as a mixed kid.

Fast forward to my early twenties, before my father died of a clot in his lungs, I used to ask him repeatedly if I was black enough or if I was something else entirely. He would always answer, do you feel black son? I could never answer this question completely, but it always stuck around in my head as I grew up and started to look more and more like him. I could not and still cannot give a direct answer to this question – a yes or a no, because any simple answer I come up with fails to get into the meat of the question, “do you feel...” If I say, “yes, I feel black” that would be a lie and if I said, “no, I do not” that would be an injustice to my being. I am at once Green Mamba and Rangi Zote because I know that I am a coward, hiding out in groups of people that I may or may not belong to, yet I cannot help it, for it is the curse placed upon me that warps my skin, allowing me to slip and slide in and out of boundaries of race to take on a new form – how lonely an existence this is.

## **Part Two – My House**

I have never known what it is like to live in a home. I grew up a navy brat, well, a former one; my mother retired after twenty years of service settling forty minutes outside of Chicago in Zion, IL and my father retired early in his naval career because of an eye surgery that sliced his vision in half. Living in a family dedicated to its country is admirable to most. However, to a little mixed boy with no concept of self, it was torture. There is a kinetic aspect to living with parents in the military. Motion, displacement, and the act of moving from place to place, is the only stability I have ever known and led me to feel as if I will never experience the comfort and serenity of a home. Houses and apartments, yes, I have lived in plenty, but the warmth of a home is foreign to me.

My parents' divorce and transitory life style proved to me that "Home" is a mere concept, a fancy perpetuated through the symbolic order, a social construct, an imaginary space dreamt up under a searing sun. I lack the foundation necessary to solidify it in my mind, which exacerbates my feelings of ambivalence.

Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud documented his theory on the unfamiliar, the unrecognizable, and the foreign in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny." To define what the uncanny is one must understand the difference between concept and fact, with the distinction between the two being that one is ambiguous and the other irrefutable. While genres like horror and science fiction take the charge to craft fictitious monsters, killers, viruses, or aliens that could threaten the existence of humanity, there is no referent or fact for what we find so unfamiliar that it shakes the deepest parts of our soul, only sound-images (words and symbols) that we associate

with the things that go bump in the night or dwell in the farthest reaches of the universe truly exist as fact.

At the core of Freud's analysis on the uncanny experience, lies the familiar, *heimlich* [homely] or *heimisch* [native], and its contrast against its polar opposite the unfamiliar, *unheimlich* [un-homely] and how this contrast fails to distinguish the uncanny or *unheimlich* from the familiar or *heimlich*. Freud instead asserts that the unfamiliar (uncanny) is but a facet of the familiar because "*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite *unheimlich*." (Freud 624). Meaning that what we find familiar or homely is but a concept born from the confusion and fear of the masses and the unfamiliar is a byproduct of this development. American society associates home with the *heimlich* – a place that is familiar, but most importantly constant; however, if one were to say this then the byproduct of this concept would be the house, the *unheimlich* – an unfamiliar, constantly shifting space that one inhabits out of need, somewhere that has its homely qualities ripped from it for cost, public housing, etc.. One memory stands out in my mind when considering the concept of home because it forced me to learn the distinction between the homely and unhomely in an instant:

When I could barely put a sentence together, I was taught in a colorful little kindergarten room decorated with alphabet charts and times tables that a home is somewhere grounded in time and space, cemented into the earth and unmovable, a place where you settle down, grow up, and become yourself. Our teacher wanted us to draw and color in our home. I knew that I was one exception to this rule because I didn't have a frame of reference for settling down or home, so I drew the place that I lived, a big, rectangular apartment complex made of concrete and steel. However, I loathed the color of concrete so I made the floors and walls sky blue, and the

furniture a myriad of colors. I remember the slight grin on my teachers face, the smell of patchouli, and how her red lipstick contrasted heavily from her salt and pepper box braids as she walked up to me. I had worn down the sky blue crayon by the time she had floated toward me and moved on to the purple curtains. She remarked on how fancy my home looked, how “interesting” it was, and most importantly, how impressive I was at coloring in the lines. I looked up at her and said, “I don’t know what a home is so I drew what I think it is,” and her face contorted the way one’s face does when biting into a slice of lemon. She did not believe me when I said that the concept of home was uncanny to me and I just wanted to make my apartment building look like a palace fit for a princess. Her laugh was hoarse and squeaky as if someone had continued squeezing the spray bottle after too many air bubbles formed inside the tube that carries the liquid. I thought that moving around was fun because I met new people and saw new places, but at that moment, when my teacher chuckled about my green carpet and pink flower vases, I knew then that I was missing something crucial to my development. I finished my assignment by coloring the door to my apartment pitch black because black is the color of the nothingness that the uncanny crawls out from and I thought maybe a home could come out of it.

Of course, when I take the five and a half hour drive south through Wisconsin’s long stretches of nothingness to visit my mother, there is a room, food, and love, yet it is hard for me to feel truly comfortable. I feel alien almost. Her new husband is nice, I have no issue with him being in my life and we are civil. My late father on the other hand, never owned a house, only rented one and many apartments previously. I could never tell if it was a symptom of the transitory lifestyle of a sailor, but what I do know is that my father never liked to be tied down to one spot, or even one person, even after the mutual separation.

Therefore, I have long contemplated the impact of displacement throughout my life and besides the psychological affects, which include self-alienation; I meditate on the identity I could never form. As I moved around from place to place, swapping between parents, I realized that it was futile to connect to people, become one with the land, settle down and take in the moment because I knew that I would just move again. When my mother or father would call me into the living room or bedroom with a solemn look on their face, I knew what would follow. I am still convinced that my parents communicated on a constant basis and wrote a script detailing the tone, body language, and vocabulary of inevitable departure. The bringing up, talking through, arguing about, and resolution were the same every time like a practiced ritual.

I got the impression from an early age that some incomprehensible weight was on their shoulders as they sat, never stood, with their forearms rested on their thighs to support the heavy slouch associated with the delivery of unsavory information. Then came the sigh and the look of solemnity that was like an alarm bell. The motion to sit down came next because I had to share their weight also and it was heavy every time. “David,” they would say softly, “you are going to live with...” and I would nod my head and prepare my goodbyes during school the next day. I loathed these moments not because I had to pack my bags and move again, but it was the news that all of the psychic energy you put into this place was all for not. I was never given the chance to *be* in one place, therefore, I could never *be*.

The lack of a home and the constant movement between spaces destabilizes my orientation of myself. I could not and still cannot formulate an answer to what I am because I was never given time to develop that sense. However, what I did obtain was a sense of facelessness in the shadow of a society that requires you to be distinguishable for its own gain. I became the byproduct of the symbolic order that set race to organize humanity, I became

*unheimlich*, un-homely, or rather home was removed from me because my skin is considered unfamiliar. I know it is easier, even required to some capacity, to be recognizable in the eyes of the dominant culture. Being one who exists in the margins of race, I feel an obligation, almost, to find a place in western society. Thus, I learned to be like a chameleon and change my skin to whatever color was needed to stay alive. Throughout school and into college, it continued to work because I became very good at faking what I was. For ease, I would say that I am black or if someone mistook me for something else, I would not object because otherwise I fear my life would be on the line.

I feel conflicted when attempting to place myself, to give myself a home to go to so I may rest my feet on an plush ottoman and center my being, like I am being torn between myself and what I ought to be. My home is in shambles and I have nowhere to go; this “race” that I am is nothing more than a superficial label that forces me to participate in the all American ritual of racial identification, but I fail and wander the streets of Chicago in search of something that I can call, home.

Filling out and filing official documents continues to confound me. Without fail, terms such as “Mixed” and even “Other,” followed by a small space for the subject’s clarification, creep their way into the race/ethnicity section of every personal information section. That blank line insults me every time I see it. It is never enough space to give myself a substantial characterization, so I have to boil myself down, reduce myself to the core of my being – I grit my teeth and write “black and white” in that vacant inch and a half of space. When I was younger and more oblivious to my situation, my father used to make jokes about me, light heartedly of course; yet they wound all the same as an indifferent sword does when the foible is rammed into the heart of a defeated opponent. He would brandish his weapon during short trips to the market

or outings to the local hobby shop and the tip, the edge with which my father cut me, stabbed me, tickled me, never failed to eviscerate.

“You ain’t mine, I can’t claim you. I’m taking you to Maury,” he chuckled out for the millionth time – that one always succeeded in garnering a laugh.

Always, always, I would respond with, “but I look too much like you for you to do that, too bad.” He would laugh, I would laugh, a simple yet effective jab done effortlessly and every so often, especially as I grew into a young man in high school. It was true; we were spitting images of each other. He blessed me with his smile, his hair, his walk, his patois, and part of his skin. I am my father and he, me; mirror images of each other from head to toe, one could even call us twin brothers.

Comparing myself to my mother has always and still is a complicated endeavor. Though I do have her legs – the only part of her I can relate to on the outside, along with her brain, her neuroses, her sailor mouth, and again a part of her skin. I have heard her voice her concerns for how people double take and look at us while we are in public like we are an oddity, a circus act. Yet, I cannot share this sentiment because I know she is a part of me, so I can offer myself some solace in that regard. However, what bothers me most is the misunderstanding.

My father was a bachelor after divorcing my mother, he preferred it that way, and he preferred white women (and the occasional Hispanic woman), but never black women. Therefore, naturally, two things occurred. First my worrying “preference” for a type of person and second, receiving woefully ignorant misconceptions about my physical form from curious classmates and stubborn adults. The former is not important for now, but a fact to come back to later; however, the latter is of note. My father’s long time partners were all white. Two in particular, on multiple occasions, would be mistaken for my birth mother. This simple

misunderstanding, this assumption that these women could be my mother was unfathomable. I am sure if he was still alive, this would continue, but frustration for my dad's shortcomings is for another time. However, the notion that any white woman, excluding my mother, could function as my mother hurt me, but more than that, it struck me, like a hammer, and laid me out in the pastures of melancholy. To be mixed-race, in my case, is to have their parent mistaken for someone else and if my mother were to date a black man, and then people would, I assume, see him as my father.

The loss of the parent, such a sad thing both literally and metaphorically, is a syndrome of culture's unwillingness to see me as I am, but as the parts I am made up of. I find this even more apparent when I lost my father to a vicious clot in his lungs. When he died, a part of me died with him. I felt a severing from my black roots, although it would be unfair, even criminal, of me to say that my father's side of the family forgot me after he passed. In fact, they embraced me even more because they saw me as my father's child. But without my father I lost my direct connection to my blackness; I lost a guide to my skin, a shepherd for my patois, and my teacher for my inability to put up with white people's bullshit. Only the truly lucky inherit the full scope of both parents' families, but for me at least, I lost my mother's family even before I was born. When my mother and father met in the military and found their short-lived love for each other, a large swath of my mother's family ceased any communication with her or my mother deliberately cut them out of her life. A terrible truth of being mixed race is the possibility that at the mere act of conception between lovers can shake a foundation to its core and crumble it into dust. A white woman from Muskegon, Michigan falling in love with a black man from Warren, Ohio was a dangerous equation whose solution ended up being me, and I am here to make sense of it. However, I understand that it is not my father's fault nor mine that my mother's family is

alien to me, but the fault of generations of ingrained racism that keeps me from knowing my entire story.

Alienation from family is not just a tragic fact in my own life, but is a tragedy that extends itself into the fabric of American social politics, and by natural order, literature arises that reflects this deep-seated othering of multi-racial individuals. Queer literature describes this severing of familial bonds as a source of queer melancholy that is alleviated through a found family. However, in literature firmly rooted within a critical race context the estranged family is a missing piece of the subject's identity reclaimed through multiple modes. For example, in Claude McKay's poem "Mulatto" he asserts his hatred for his "cruel father" (line 10) and confirms for the audience that he was a product of the white father's fascination for dark. Furthermore, because he is the son of this faceless white man, he feels an obligation to "dispute his title to his throne" (line 3) and "forever fight him for my rightful place" (line 4). Therefore, McKay sees his father's position within the dominant culture as something that must be contested for his identity to take shape. However, I am not making the point that to find identity one must consolidate broken connections between father and son; no, in fact, to McKay solidifying the mulatto's identity is achieved through the act of murder. In Oedipal fashion, McKay describes the murder of the father as such:

Because I am my cruel father's child,  
My love of justice stirs me up to hate,  
A warring Ishmaelite, unreconciled,  
When falls the hour I shall not hesitate  
Into my father's heart to plunge the knife  
To gain the utmost freedom that is life. (lines 9-14)

McKay points out the white father's love of justice, which informs the reader that those who relish the justice of a given system are the ones who benefit from it. The narrator then chooses to inherit the father's passion for justice, but instead of subverting the notion of justice for the benefit of black people, McKay asserts that this justice is a source of or catalyst to hatred, which fuels his murderous sentiments toward his father. However, the implementation of scripture cauterizes the poem, closing it, but leaving behind a festering wound that ceases to heal completely.

Failing to form a covenant with God, Abraham banished Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, to the vast desert. In those rolling sand dunes, Ishmael and his descendants took root and settled in the Arabian Desert. Animosity between the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac, born from the wedge driven between the brothers due to Ishmael's banishment. McKay hones in on the schism itself, the splitting of family that leads to anger and resentment. The white father figure in poem, acts as Abraham, disowning his son and a wife that failed to give him a "proper" offspring that would form a connection to the Hebrew G\*d. Thus, in retaliation, Ishmael and his descendants warred over who is the rightful heir to the throne. Both sides filled with resentment, one based on a sense of being wronged and the other out of a sense of justice and a duty to protect their homeland directly correlate to the anger that the narrator expresses. Rage and alienation from the father's disavowal consumes the narrator in these final lines, and though Isaac and Ishmael reconciled (somewhat) during Abraham's funeral, McKay omits this to emphasize the product of two opposing sides rub against each other. The energy, the heat, the violence that permeates the air and the generations after Ishmael and Isaac's death. Today, we see the reverberations of this ancient conflict as Israel and Palestine war over the land that divides them, repeating and continuing their progenitors' legacy which has seared into the fabric of history.

*Mulatto* is a poem that engages with the disdain and disavowal of the white father figure, who bore the child that is the container which is meant to (in McKay's opinion) internalize the subversive father figure's malice and turn it around on them via violence. I find McKay's use of a knife fascinating because rather than filling his father with bullets, the narrator cites the use of an edged instrument, which signifies two distinct motifs running throughout this poem: the anger or hatred for the father and the mother. Sigmund Freud and his much "acclaimed" trio of essays on the theory of sexuality asserts that the devaluing of the mother/daughter/sister is a means to protect the male genitals from castration.<sup>3</sup> This does not go to say that the white father figure in McKay's poem is afraid of his genitals being literally sliced off, but rather, he is afraid of his involvement in a sexual act with an Other that could potentially ruin his reputation. McKay exposes the unbalanced power dynamics of being mulatto (mixed-race) as the father figure, in an attempt to justify his disavowal, refuses to acknowledge his offspring through the satisfaction of removing agency from the black mother not only because she is black, but also because she lacks the sex component that signifies power – the phallus. Thus to retake his and his mother's agency back from the father, McKay situates the rage of the mulatto child and his mother on the edge of a blade.

McKay's take on the mulatto existence centers the trauma associated with a parent severing the vital ties between them and the child and rendering them unrepairable. In McKay's point-of-view, the only way the mulatto can truly achieve a sense of self is through the metaphorical murder of the father that subjected them to complete and total alienation. Now, my father was an asshole, but not one big enough that I sought to find my identity through stabbing

---

<sup>3</sup> The castration complex, coined by Sigmund Freud in "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" states that the male subject derives satisfaction from noting the absence of the male genitalia on female subjects.

him in the heart or disowning him entirely. He never felt the need to refute paternity, question my lineage, made me feel Other in the Robinson family or alien in the black community, but known for being full of charisma, he would use my mother as the punch-line to many of his light-hearted jabs toward the stark differences between our complexions and mannerisms, at once stripping my mother of the influence she had in my birthing and lightly shaming my inauthentic appearance. While on the surface, these interactions seem like small, insignificant atoms when it comes to my father and my deep love for him, they did leave me questioning the legitimacy of my skin, for the very act of poking-fun is a response to what is perceived in front of us. To try to ease the awkwardness between a father and son who look so much alike, yet are so different, my father signified my skin of that of a comedic slant, and angle in which to attack that which is different. The calling-out toward my skin, while not done to purposefully hurt me, did further exacerbate my ambivalence toward concepts of race because if my father could easily look at me and crack a joke, then who couldn't?

However, my father passed before I got the chance to respond and poke back to/at his many mocking calls and left the narrative open for me to explore what I could have said to him to get back at him. I am not a medium, so talking to him is out of the question, but it is possible to ponder the possibilities of responding to his malicious calls.

On the other hand, Langston Hughes' poem *Mulatto* (1929), though sharing a title with McKay's 1925 piece, offers to take an alternate approach to the white father's complete denial of his mixed son. The focus of Hughes' poem is a matter of acknowledging the "signifier" and the "signified" as attributes of language that are not only fluid, but also malleable. Coined by Ferdinand De Saussure, the "godfather" of structuralism, the concepts of signified and signifier are but parts of the whole of signification. If, for a moment, imagine a "horse." When thinking of

what “horse” is we would say that it is an equine creature with hooves domesticated for sport, the specifics of the “horse” are not important, so I will focus on the “horse” in general. The word we know as “horse” is the signifier, or the judger, of the signified, which is the creature, kept in stables, fed hay and barley, and made to race until its heart explodes.<sup>4</sup>

Hughes’ *Mulatto* subverts the modernist notion of the disavowed to kill off the parental figure to achieve a sense of self and plays with the concepts of *signified* and *signifier* through call and response. *Mulatto* makes full use of call and response because rather than give into the trope of patricide, Hughes begins to reshape the discourse for the mulatto’s search for agency over the self. Furthermore, Henry Gates Jr.’s “The ‘Blackness of Blackness’: A Critique of the Sign and Signifying Monkey,” defines call and response as the practice of accepting a call (in *Mulatto*’s case racist rhetoric) from a signifier [the estranged father] and the subsequent response to that call by a signified [the mulatto child] to subvert or redirect negative language.

My father’s taunts intensified in high school as my physical features truly began to mimic his. The first time I heard him say, “I should take your mother to Maury” was during a ritualized trip to the local hobby shop in Champaign, Illinois when I was thirteen. Every Saturday, he and I would climb into his fabulously ugly, bright blue FJ Cruiser and cruise the fifteen minutes down Prospect avenue toward the other half of Champaign separated by a carefully placed set of train tracks, which added the signifier north [N] to Prospect Avenue. Such a simple addition of a judger can turn a nice, quiet neighborhood into “the hood” in people’s minds. Slot and Wings Hobby Shop sits on what some would call the wrong side of the tracks on Bloomington Road tucked away next to an automotive store and a tacky Chinese buffet I used to frequent with my father.

---

<sup>4</sup> See “Course in General Linguistics” by Ferdinand Saussure in *The Norton Anthology: Theory & Criticism*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed, pp 824-840.

August in Champaign always meant that the last burst of heat washed over the Great Plains in preparation for the impending freeze of mid-October, and this Saturday was no different than any other day in the baking heat of August. The AC was cranked up to max as we drove past the tire shop that rests right before the train tracks as my father was singing along to an Erika Badu song. Then, without warning, right in the middle of one of Erika's sultry lulls in "On and On," my father turns to me and bleats out the call that shook my core,

"Good lord boy, you don't take after me at all! I need to drag your mother to Maury for a DNA test," he said while cackling like a hyena.

In curiosity I asked, "where did that come from?"

"I am just saying, look at you. You do not take after me at all. You hate sports, outside is a mystery to you, and all you do is play video games all day," he retorted.

I scoffed at him not wanting to cause yet another argument about my less than active lifestyle and turned to look for the slightest change of color in the leaves of the city planted trees. The sun sat high in the sky signifying it was about noon. Their rays shown off the deep brown my skin took on as sugar water deepens in color as it is cooked down, but before the cream and butter are added to the pot to finish off the caramel and I thought, "You are stuck with me, the summer sun baking my skin give our relation away for all to see." At the time, I had no idea why my distaste for sports and my dad's pension for hyperbole stung me like a mad hornet. All I ever heard from my mother is that in fact I look nothing like her, so my father cracking this joke not only hurt, it confused me deeply. Furthermore, my response to his jab was, if anything, lack-luster.

Hughes does not silence the white father, but instead offers his conjecture toward his illegitimate son stating, "what is a body but a toy?" (line 10) noting that, like my own father,

female bodies are nothing but play things for men, but in this case because the mother is black her agency is completely stripped away from her. The mulatto child, rather than let the energy explode and wish death upon his progenitor, he turns this mockery back toward the white father and half-brothers asking a similar question, “what is the body of your mother?” (line 18). The call toward the Othered body questions the humanity of his mother’s race and, on the other hand, the response is a question turned back toward his white, half-brothers that threatens to castrate the superiority of whiteness. Hughes masterfully engages the anger of the white family, illuminating the other side of the coin that McKay buried underneath his anger. By calling out the white mother and signifying her as something Other, the protagonist balances the scales of power forcing the white father’s rhetoric back toward his estranged family. The connection is formed as the mulatto reiterates the beginning line: “I am your son, white man!” (line 43), declaring his relation to this man rather than telling his estranged father as the white family drives away in their carriage with nothing else to say. The difference between this mulatto and McKay’s is the mechanism in which identity is established. In this moon-drenched turpentine forest in Georgia, a child proclaims his connection to his white father rather than snuffing him out completely.

These two works, aptly sharing the same title, highlight the matter of finding the self in a society that deems them doubly Othered. Therefore, I ask myself, what I am doing in this vulnerable retelling of my life? Am I attempting to murder a part of me to cauterize the wound inflicted by ambivalence? On the other hand, am I responding to society’s call for me to identify myself? I believe I am doing the latter to reclaim an identity that was never afforded to me. While language is at the core of my plight, the crossroads is the place in which this core rests and where the pieces of myself are scattered like puzzle pieces ready to be mended and put back

together to form the me that I know today. However, if I look at my situation as a puzzle that needs solving, I would be lying to myself and I lie to myself like no one else can. If I look at my existence as a sorting game to parse out the ethnic qualities of my being, again, I would be misrepresenting myself and avoiding the complexities of being mixed race. Even the term “mixed race” is worrisome. Race, for lack of a better term, runs deep in America and is, unfortunately, an inescapable social identifier. However, for me, race is malignant. A term spun out of the thread of exceptionalism; thus, we all are beholden to its tenants, even if scholars, and by extension everyone, reject its goal, it is inextricable from American society; a fact I have to take with an ambivalent grace.

To America, I am nothing more than a simple anomaly, an Other in the face of the white hegemony that categorizes non-whites, but what they do not know is that I can be everything and everyone. My own physical ambiguity is the cause of my own ambivalence, I think. I know what I look like. I look like my father, but what is the essential factor for concrete identification? Does my light brown skin mean that I am from Latin America or the Polynesian islands? Do my tight curls and short stature leave a path open for scrutiny? The obvious answers to these questions does indeed stem from racism, and thus, explains how people identify or perceive based on the physicality of an object or person, but that is not enough for this investigation or me.

### **Part Three: College Daze**

During my undergraduate years in South Dakota, I did not know who I was, let alone what I was. I decided to go into computer science because of my fondness for technology. I was an eight-hour drive away from my mother and a four-hour plane ride away from my father so the need to fit in was paramount. The first day of my undergrad was like any typical move in day. My mother and I moved all of my stuff into my dormitory and like most mothers she held back her tears as she was about to further distance herself from her son. My roommate was already there with his family. A plain looking white man named J----, and his Hallmark family standing around chatting it up with each other. We first met all together, in that tiny room. I remember the look of confusion painted on their faces as we introduced one another. A sort of twisted catharsis sprang their mouth muscles into a false smile. My mother did not realize it, she never does, but I knew this look all too well when I am with her. I make a checklist in my head when I meet new people with my mother not because I do not trust them, but because I know that in a later, more private conversation, I will have to convince them that the woman who was with me is in fact my mother:

- Eyes wide like an owl's to let in as much information as possible to comprehend the picture they are seeing.
- A smile, fake, forced, and calloused from over use.
- A limp handshake due to the distraction of the spectacle in front of them.
- The twinge of scrutiny that wrinkles the forehead and the corners of the eyes.

If more than one person is in the room, extra factors are added:

- Side-eye looking bystanders talking to each other, yet have their peering eyes on my mother and I.
- A gentle wave, followed by a confused, hello.

I carry this list everywhere like a condom ready for use at any time in any bathroom stall. It allows me to analyze a person before they get a chance to think of something ignorant to say. One could call it a defense mechanism, but I find it more predatory than anything. I used to feed on the confusion in the room, let it wash over me, because I knew I had the power of the truth with me, yet there was no truth to myself.

After everything from my bed fittings to my various hand-me-down pots and pans, my mother requested a photo from J----'s mother and she obliged. She took her phone and framed the shot, her smile turned tight lipped with a slight grimace as she took a few pictures of us. How curious we looked, a mixed kid with curly, dark brown hair and caramel skin with his short pale white mother with blond dye coating her locks. Every time I look at that picture of us standing next to each other with our violently bright, vermillion red T-shirts on covered in sweat, I think how different we look, how little of her, besides the fine details, transferred over to me, and how the impossible can become possible. Later that night, my floor mates and I gathered in the basement of the dormitory for an all floor meeting, which included the ever insipid icebreaker activity. As each person introduced themselves and gave out an interesting detail, it finally came around to my turn to participate. When it came time for me to disclose an interesting fact, I knew I had nothing interesting to say, so I said that I moved around a lot. The eccentricities of my life never felt like shareable factoids to be passed around at will. They are intimate, vulnerable, and valuable. They are shreds of experiences that I use to hide in plain sight for any occasion. Saying that I moved around a lot just meant to them that I have seen more than most people and that

satiated them for now, but to me any further detail would give away my secret. We ended the icebreaker with walking two abreast up the stairs toward the fresh summer air in time for a building wide meet and greet.

Meet and greets always put the fear of God into me because I feel that I am surrounded by the enemy at all sides each aching to take a shot at me even though I knew that fitting in is necessary for survival. Instead of disappearing behind a mask, I lasted ten minutes and headed up to my room, overwhelmed by the sea of people that I would have to live with for the next year. I went to bed that night speaking no more than a handful of words that entire day.

Over the course of a few weeks, I became comfortable with the people around me, but one day signified the beginning of the end for who I am while in South Dakota. Walking home from my psychology 101 lecture, I entered my hall like any other day. I took the thirty steps to the second floor and another hundred or so to my door, on the way though, I encountered some people from my floor as they were talking about the esoterica of college life. I paid them no mind until a fellow queer man on the floor named, P- called out to me excitedly yelling,

“Hello my Chicken McNigga!”

I paused and reacted as I always do, with a confused laugh followed by a question for clarification, knowing beforehand that he meant nothing by it except to break the ice. After seeing my contorted face that urged for him to clarify, and therefore apologize for his comment, he explained that as a fellow person of color he grew up around people saying it and he thought it would be okay to connect to me in such a manner. I wanted to say something mean about his height or how his shorts were too long for his legs, but I didn't. I told him it was fine and even thought it was funny. Up until that moment, I thought it was a hilarious turn of phrase and my laughter was genuine, but now I realize that I had only opened Pandora's box. Soon enough most

people on the floor were saying “nigga” in my presence thinking that it was fine and even endearing. To keep myself safe from danger, I acquiesced and allowed them to do it. Guilt is the feeling that washes over me now as I recollect on my own experiences because I abused a power I feel like I never had and became a commodity to the very whiteness that I hated the most.

Nigga, *n.* and *adj.* according to the OED is listed as the fifth definition of the term “nigger.” The OED buries this form of “nigger” under what contemporary society would call an unacceptable and reprehensible form of describing Black people in America during slavery or Jim Crow. The term’s vile history precedes its current connotations and regularly used forms in media. Black vernacular tradition not only depends on turn of phrase or the redirection of language, but also the appropriation of language that sought to cripple the soul and diminish the skin. “Nigga” is a signifier reclaimed by Black people in the 70s and 80s with the advent of Hip-Hop/Rap music with exponential proliferation in the music scene during the 90s. It is a term of endearment whose roots scarred American racial politics forever and attempted to signify that which is less than desirable. What once began as an appropriation of language to combat our ancestors’ mistreatment was reduced to a token of congeniality in a matter of a moment when I looked at P- and gave him a laugh of approval.

As I recount my experiences, I find myself conflicted as to whether or not I can or should say it. A question I often ask myself when tackling such matters of linguistic ownership or privilege is “am I Black enough?” Though a simple question, to answer it requires generous mental rigor on the speaker’s part, especially if the speaker, like me, is biracial. One could argue that experience is a pass to uttering such a term, but then it becomes a matter of scrutinizing the validity of another’s experiences, which is always messy business because it is not my place as a writer or person to question the “truth” surrounding someone’s life experiences. Then on the

other hand, one could stand to defend the notion that it is based on a matter of blood relation or complexion. I know that I have my father's blood in my veins because my hair winds in on itself like a constrictor snake clinging to a branch and my skin darkens in the sun instead of crisping up like raw bacon, yet that does not feel like it is enough. I have the Robinson bloodline in me because I have the same toothy grin and susceptibility for heart disease, but again it fails to validate me and prove that I am a part of Black culture. I have always felt that the blood running in my veins was a novelty. It gave me the features, but not the experience necessary to utter "my nigga." I feel a sharp jab after I invoke the tremendous power "nigga" holds and releasing the floodgates in South Dakota proved to me, as I write this confession, that I was and may not be not responsible enough to speak it into existence. That semester in 2014 ended with half the dormitory throwing it around like a dirty penny and the other half paying no mind to the desecration of such a sacred term.

During the second semester of my freshman year two major events occurred, 1. I decided to join a fraternity out of fear of being perpetually lonely and in an attempt to fit in further and 2. I found out that I had superpowers. The rush process is nothing like it is in the movies, which I should have known, but most of the people on my floor rushed for a different fraternity so I did the same. Rush events with scantily clad women and kegs on tap were nowhere to be seen, instead it was a ballroom full of awkward young men, fanning a bravado that would make John Belushi proud. A majority of the men on my floor rushed for Pi Kappa Alpha, or PIKE for short and I followed suit. I wore a dull, sea foam green sweater a size too big for my then large frame and though it was January in South Dakota where temperatures drop well below zero as the wind reaps across the state in a frenzied dance, I was sweating profusely from a mix of the campus

blasting the heat on high and stunning anxiety. I found myself tracing the footsteps of others along with camouflage.

Tracing is the act of copying art or media in general, but it is mostly applied to drawn art pieces. It is all fine and well to trace work and hang it up on your bedroom wall, but it is another to claim it is yours. I used to have a fondness for tracing and an even more serious pension to claim it as my own masterpiece. Eventually I grew out of drawing what I had seen online by taking a piece of paper and laying over the screen of my laptop like a traditional light table used in tattoo parlors or animation studios, but the habit morphed into a neurotic need to fit in, so I decided if defining myself is fruitless then I am going to trace an identity whenever and wherever I needed it. In hindsight, choosing Pi Kappa Alpha was a blessing because I would have never made it in the other organizations that oozed masculinity and stunk of Aqua Di Gio. However, the choice was driven by my ambivalence, my need for superficial validation. The imposter smiles, the useless facts about myself vomited and regurgitated over and over, the superficial athleticism projected over myself like a cold, wet blanket during NFL season faked its way through every screen, every play, every quarterback sack, all done for a piece of paper that bid my entrance into my new identity. The day I received my bid card it was a cold January night and I was still soaking from the recent trip to the skiing lodge in Sioux Falls. My floor mate T- told me to go to the room set aside for stray desks and dormitory chairs. K- was standing there with that childlike grin that could make an ice cube melt away with a small 4x4 card, with the fraternity's seal printed on it with fake gold leaf, that was the color of K-'s skin. I was giddy at the sight of this person I had just recently met holding a card that allowed me to adopt a new lifestyle. Happy that even someone as amorphous as me could find a place to fit in.

I was half right.

Some say that being in a fraternity is as if you are throwing yourself into a lifestyle, a code of conduct, an esoteric vernacular, and even a home. I agreed with this sentiment for a while and gained a new sense of confidence because I was finally included in something with a name that had meaning and structure. At first, meeting everyone and going through the initiation process seemed suspicious to me. I was never one to meet a variety of new people at once because I felt that the more people I met expanded, exponentially, the amount of reductive or restrictive descriptions people would conjure up about me. I always stuck to small friend groups in school and enjoyed the presence of the shadows that linger on the outskirts of every social climate that hid me away from perceiving eyes. This time around, in the spring of 2014, there were no shadows to hide within and the entirety of the organization was meant to be my friend group, all one hundred-and-something boys going on men. To say the least, I was terrified. Terrified of engaging with so many people at once, terrified of allowing myself to be vulnerable enough to share my *real* story for the sake of brotherhood, terrified of the prospect that everyone but me will define what I am.

Terror turned to ecstasy and gilded with stars and ornate decorations crafted from booze and the frail threads of masculinity, the spring of 2014 struck me dumb by its brilliance and I immersed myself in the organization's bosom and let it define me for a time. "Frat" parties blasting Fetty Wap and whatever else was relevant on the radio at the time while underage college students drowning in alcohol and body spray move frantically in an attempt to dance with each other was a welcome activity for a while. It was part culture like the archaic initiation ceremony, the calling of the start of a meeting, and the donning of Sperrys, all ritualized, codified down to the sweet citrus scent of Sauvage wafting off the chests of my brothers.

In the span of a few months, my crossroads became over saturated and the shards of my ego crashed into the infertile soil under the weight of this new lifestyle. I threw out most of my clothing and used my GI bill stipend to buy new khaki pants and shorts, a lovely set of dark brown leather Sperrys, and sweatshirts with my fraternity's letters stitched on. I made sure to buy clothing that fit the aesthetic of not just my fraternity but the whole of the culture surrounding fraternities. By March, my skin was pale and sun-starved because of the heavy February overcast that loomed over the days like stalactites threatening to crash into us at the slightest movement. My assimilation was in full swing during that still February and the parade of sunshine that followed in March, which exposed my then pale and almost translucent skin. Now I see that February as a milestone in my ambivalent existence. For scientific reasons my skin did not, in fact, turn into a translucent film attempting to show off my inner most color, but my wavering perception made it seem that way because for the first time my skin color was near irrelevant amongst a group of people except when the word "nigga" was involved, then, and only then does my color come back at its full intensity. I gave up on figuring out what I was because then I was simply a member of Pi Kappa Alpha and nothing more and I had friends that I could call family. So for an introverted mixed kid, being a token for the sake of family was not terrible.

That April, my transformation was nearly complete and I had almost lost all sense of my skin, but one breezy spring night crystalized two facts:

1. That I was lying to myself once again
2. I had the ability to disappear

I made these discoveries at the same time during the loss of my virginity.

Memory is a fickle thing. I can remember the rush of excitement when I got ready to finally lose the arbitrary weight of virginity that I have been carrying around for what seemed

like eons. I can picture his room so clearly: So very dark as if night was the permanent time of day due to the heavy black curtains, but I met him on a warm April evening so I paid the darkness of the room no heed. The sweet, thick smell of cigarette smoke permeated the air like invisible daggers flaying the air and the walls forever in their stench. It was wildly cluttered in his room as dark, short mountains consisting of various wrappers, alcohol bottles, empty food containers, clothes, and discarded Marlboro light boxes swallowed the light from the porn playing on his computer making the room feel darker than the time of night.

His face on the other hand is another story. The details of his face are dust particles zipping around in the wind around me, teasing me.

The winter of 2020 was mild and patches of dark earth looked like zombies rising out of their graves. I remember the snow; half-frozen, suspended under a thin sheet of ice as I walked from my office to my apartment to attended Dr. K-'s Virginia Woolf seminar. I admit the month in which the following event happened escapes me, but I recall the rain crashing into the ground the night before so it must have been sometime around March. The topic of that night's seminar was a discussion on Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past" from her autobiography *Moments of Being*. Albeit rather dry and full of commentary brimming with privilege, the essay provided a key to my predicament. Woolf's side project away from her biography of Roger Fry opens by explicitly stating the arduous task of writing a biography, which even she admits has its own difficulties. Volume, gaps, and subjects all find a way to consume the writer's focus. Woolf, after letting the reader know her disdain for not Roger Fry but writing his biography, dives into a memory of her and her mother sitting in "either a train or in an omnibus" (64). Even in the act of writing her autobiography, Woolf's memory of the event is shaky not clearly recounting this transit ride. However, her mother's dress is clearly defined for the reader:

“This was of red and purple flowers on a black ground – my mother’s dress; and she...I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close; and can still see purple and red and blue, I think, against the black...” (64)

Little minute details like flecks of gold in a riverbed shine brighter than the complete picture.

Woolf cannot recall her mode of transportation or even describe the inside of the vehicle, but like K-‘s room, the minutia surrounding me in that dark room from the smell of the smoke to the electric zap of his touch, consumes what the reader would assume to be important details of the writer’s own narrative. By nature, autobiography and its less personal counterpart is unreliable. I do not say this in the middle of my story to warn you that lies and uncertainty infest the story, but to inform you that what hold in your hands are the details that informed who I am. K-‘s face melts away every time I try to meticulously piece together the cosmic dust that is his face, but his electric words, “don’t be nervous” escaped his pierced lips and jolted me back to the focus of the memory – the physicality of losing my virginity. As he touched my skin, his fingers like diodes sent shockwaves throughout my body. It was a sensation I had never experienced, it excited me and also terrified me because I never realized that touch could be such a powerful weapon.

We met as any two gay men do in small town South Dakota – on Grindr. He was not closeted or in denial of his sexuality, but the queer community in Vermillion is scarce, mostly relegated to university-funded functions and back alley flings. So online dating apps were the best and most logical avenue to meet other men who liked men without having to know the subtle body language, social cues, and potential danger of detection; though calling Grindr safe is oxymoronic. The conversation began as any other small talk with the intent of leading to sex. A “Hey,” followed by the ubiquitous “What’s up?” serve as the opening rites to physical contact in that sleepy college town. He was very kind, but I knew immediately that the connotations of his

“what’s up?” I felt his intent over the blue and yellow text boxes and sex was his main priority rather than the person he coupled with. I remember being excited even though I knew where this conversation was heading. I was an overweight college freshman who never had experienced another person taking the time and energy to perceive them as sexual since their tumble into puberty up until that point. I did not care about the outcome because I felt seen outside of the platonic realm rather than exposed within it. The fraternity motivated me to reimage myself and K- felt like a necessary step in pursuit of that goal.

I felt pulled by him in a way like when two magnets find the correct positioning for coupling. I found myself in K-‘s hands because my fellow queer peer at the time B----- convinced me to go for it and quote, “put yourself out there.” B----- was and still is a sweetheart, but his take on “going for it” was at the time quite skewed. He a baby-faced white boy with a positive outlook on sex could and might never understand what it feels like to have to clarify your race to strangers and have them reject you in disgust because of one aspect of your genetic make-up. However, I acquiesced and gave in to lust for the night. My only experience with gay or queer life up until that breezy night was having the keen understanding from high school that fat and black people are undesirable, so it was difficult to wrap my head around the fact that someone would even dare fuck me, let alone someone who was the epitome of conventional queer beauty: a thin white boy.

He was (and I’m sure still is) quite handsome if I recall with short cut reddish-brown hair, he stood an inch shorter than me, but was much leaner, with a tattoo of a lark on his left breast. K---- persuaded me to walk the ten minutes from the dorms to the room he rented in a large house. Even in the dead of night, I could distinguish the house from the rest because it was colored a wonderful daisy yellow. The aging streetlight dripping a dingy yellow light situated on

the sidewalk in front of the house failed to give proper respect to the painter's artisanship. The instructions to find his portion of the house felt almost as a child's scavenger hunt. Wait for the okay then trudge up two flights of stairs, enter the first door on the right, if you see a hallway that ends in a wall you've gone too far, and once inside go down the hall and hang a left. I wished that the hallways were not as well-lit as they were because the light had accentuated the years of young adults abusing the dark wooden floors and the overall neglect by the leasing company. The white walls were dingy from years of cigarette smoke and those poor floors were stained and blotched from constant spillage of every substance imaginable in a college town, but after walking for what seemed like hours, I found room 201.

I knocked three times as instructed. I gave the signal of my arrival, I heard a cough then the sound of shuffling came struggling toward the door. I let out a sigh of relief when I saw him knowing the dangers of invasive catfish lurking in the pond. Within seconds we were seated on his bed, which had no frame, and I was awkwardly subduing my hands to my thighs afraid of what might happen if I let them free. His words, his fingers, his breath came colliding together as he took my first kiss and probed my body for my waistband. His touch was short lived, it seemed to me that he was on a mission of some sort, but I didn't care, I was still in shock that someone like him would want someone as undesirable as me. I began to get scared, fearful that this stranger was acquiring what I assumed to be sacred artifacts of the self, but at the time, I was convinced that I did not have the luxury of choice let alone romance because in the movies and TV no racially ambiguous characters were falling in love, they were the comic relief, the side character, never the love interest.

I used to keep my television on during bed time to watch episodes of Kim Possible on Disney channel. The heroine, Kim goes about on anti-espionage missions undenounced to her

parents. In the 2005 animated show, Kim acquires technology and gadgets for her missions from her friend Wade. I remember Wade most vividly in the show because he was the chubby nerd archetype, the shut-in prodigy who provided the protagonist all of her equipment. He is inquisitive and holds little regard for ethics or the safety of his teammates, this, along with age, relegates him to comedic relief. Representation was a fantasy during my informative and adolescent years, but Wade, though instantaneous, relieved me of the tragedy that is being mulatto because his color was a non-factor in the show's two year run time only his intelligence. I was no prodigy as a child. I felt isolated like Wade in the episode "Team Impossible" when his shut-in life style finally became a hinderance to overcome when Kim and Ron were in danger. Unlike Wade, I never overcame my isolation because I had no friends in grave danger, no academic achievements, no identity, nothing to motivate me to become a type, or anything for that matter, so I stayed shut-in and played the part necessary to survive. Wade gave me a someone to connect to even for mere moments but that April in 2015 I laid my kinship for Wade to rest as K- took my breath away with every caress. I no longer needed the chubby, racially ambiguous side character because I was being shown real intimate connection for the first time in my life.

The optimistic part of me that had yet to wither away and die I wanted to stop once his clothes came off before mine. I believed that what I was doing with this stranger (whose name I only learned drunk outside of a bar two years later was wrong) and should be done with someone I have a genuine connection with. He put a hand on my thigh and kissed me one last time and asked if I was okay and wanted to stop. I almost said yes and left his apartment not completing the task, then, out of nowhere I remembered a conversation I had earlier that week with a different man on Grindr. He conveniently had no face picture in his profile, but instead had a

picture of his gorgeous border collie. I sent the first message commenting on the beauty of his companion and we started chatting. Out of no where the subject of my race came up. I was honest and told him that I am black and white. The conversation soured like the two-month-old milk carton I had forgotten in the back of the dormitory fridge. His response, “Oh, you don’t look black that’s why I responded to you” rang through my skull and his disappointment urged me to finish the act because as I would hear later, “I should get it while I can.”

I would like to end this little story with a touching anecdote about how our time together ended beautifully with us falling asleep in each other’s arms after passionate intercourse, but that would make me a liar. The intercourse was the anthesis of passionate. The darkness of the room and my cluelessness made the ordeal comical and after a few minutes of half squatting awkwardly in the dark trying to find the mark everything fell into place. There was no affection in what we did. In the end, he got off even after the circus performance I displayed for the last ten minutes and fell into a peaceful sleep once I finished myself off. He was snoring before reminding me how to get out of the house. In clinical fashion, I picked up an old shirt near me to wipe myself off, got dressed, and walked for the door. I know now what I signed myself up for when laying down with him that humid spring evening, but when my hand clutched the door knob, it all hit me at once. I felt invisible as guilt threatened to drown me as I stood trembling at this stranger’s door. I arrived confident I was doing this to achieve some arbitrary goal and left an object used for pleasure.

As I stepped out into the dingy hallway and faced toward the path to freedom, a woman emerged down the hall walking in my direction. Not wanting to touch anybody because of the filth I thought covered me, I hugged the wall giving myself and them the greatest amount of space possible. My want to disappear grew so strong, so potent that I did. Often, when

chameleons feel threatened by their natural predators they seemingly melt into their surroundings vanishing from hungry eyes. As she got near, panic set in because I felt like she knew what I threw away in the room behind me. Maybe she was an angel coming to ridicule me I thought slowly backing into the wall behind me. Her steps grew nearer and the studs of her black leather jacket gleamed in the poor lighting. Knowing I couldn't run anywhere, I pressed against the wall letting my anxiety paralyze me in place. The woman passed me without giving my presence any consideration, her blank stare glued toward the entrance. A wave of ambivalence washed over me as I frantically convince myself that that sleeping man's touch added definition to my existence. My eyes wandered down to my arms and I saw that they were the same smoke-stained, egg-shell white of the walls.

*You are but a coward.*

Mamba was correct, I was a coward. So much so that my physicality reacted to the situation. I feared for my life, so I hid – in plain sight. I followed the path the woman took toward the entrance once I could no longer hear the heavy rubber soles of her Doc Martians strike the ground. Somehow, I found myself outside gasping for large gulps of air as my skin turned back to normal. Instead of taking time to comprehend that just happened, I ran back to the dorms as fast as my legs allowed. Before ascending the stairs to Mickelson 211 and telling B----- about my experience, I stopped at the communal bathroom located in the nexus of four dormitories that included mine. I locked myself in that bathroom for ten whole minutes and washed myself in the sink using scalding hot water all the while avoiding looking into the mirror in front of me. I did not dare glance into that time-worn mirror in fear of not seeing anything or seeing undulating colors dance across my skin because I could not calm myself. I knew I couldn't tell B----- the truth about my experience so, I lied and told him that it went well exclaiming, "I am no long a

virgin!” I remember his giddy expression, the goofy smile that split across his face, the pride in his eyes, and my compounding guilt crushing me as I let another mask save my life.

I found myself hiding more over the following three years, donning different personalities depending on the context. I reinforced my position as the token black kid within the fraternity, and for a time, I became a skill doling out parts of my vernacular like valuable baseball cards. I did away with whatever part of me that threatened my blackness, embracing what my peer group thought I should be – a caricature of my father. Those were the halcyon days before the March of 2018 when I lost my tie to the one thing that kept me visible. I was woken up by my phone ringing frantically. My dad’s childhood friend C----- answered the phone beside herself.

“Your father is in the hospital,” she bellowed.

“What,” was the only thing that escape my mouth.

She told me that he had collapsed in her driveway while walking to his electric blue 2017 Subaru WRX hatchback, black interior lined in red. I spoke to him only a week before to catch up. C----- - hung up because my father was being rushed to the ICU. The sound was sucked out of the house in an instant. I sat silently in the living room with the TV on with the only thing on my mind being how the cat was out of food. I think I did this to cope with the time dilation associated with waiting for life changing results. Twenty minutes passed before I got the call. I knew he was dead when I answered the phone and heard nothing but crying. Raymond Robinson passed away at 10:30AM on the operating table. The immediate hysteria I experienced felt like a formality born from shock which sent me into a deep slumber. When I awoke I felt empty as if an organ was surgically removed from my body. A suffocating sense of dread gripped my body not because I lost my father, it was because with his death I lost the anchor which affirmed my

body. The ground I stood upon to keep myself from drowning in a vast sea of ambivalence crumbled away; listlessly, I floated in that ocean with no direction.

## **Part Four – False Faces: An Investigation into the Formation of Biracial Identities in Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia***

In multiracial literature, the concept of itemizing and categorizing memory and/or experience is a hallmark of the genre that attempts to break the mold of American racial politics. One novel that grounds its narrative around the displaced memories of an ambivalent individual is Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*, which follows the experiences of Birdie Lee from the ages of eight to fourteen in a racially turbulent 1970s Boston. While at its core, *Caucasia* is a coming-of-age story about the journey to self-acceptance in a racialized society. However, Senna’s first novel goes more than skin deep by critiquing the methods by which American society racializes bodies within a black and white racial binary as well as how individuals that fall outside of codified categories are Othered. Senna captures this through Birdie Lee’s painful, and at times cathartic, journey to self-conceptualization within the bifurcated racial politics of a post-civil rights movement America.

The assassinations of prominent civil rights leaders such as, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcom X, and Medgar Evers, along with the rapidly changing political tides, threw the social climate of America into turmoil. Instead of crumbling, the post-civil rights era black power movement splintered with the Black Panther party (1966) and other fringe black power movements growing even more militant in the face of perceived annihilation and the rest working on the government level further reforming American legislation through direct intervention or activism. A rift was formed within America, not only a racial divide between white and Black people, but also a cultural one within the Black community. *Caucasia* immerses itself in this social unease by framing Birdie’s initial perception of herself and others within a system that still to this day aims to identify and categorize bodies in the aim of highlighting

difference rather than richness, thus lumping distinct ethnic groups and erasing the fine details that invalidate racial identification. Therefore, I argue, because difference and the need to be identified are at the heart of American socio-racial politics, *Caucasia* is a novel also concerned with the formation of connections. Humanity has survived this long because of our propensity to form groups. In numbers we find our strength, but alone we are fragile. To survive, Birdie Lee forced connections as any alienated child would – by hiding in plain sight, taking after and vying for validations from her peers, her sister Cole Lee, and most importantly her father Deck Lee.

The novel opens with Birdie confessing to us that until an age fit for mirrors, she imagined her face as her sister's, "cinnamon-skinned, curly-haired, serious" (5). Birdie having no other reference for her face latches on to her sister's image before seeing hers; however, before the reader knows what Birdie really looks like, Senna threatens the stability of the novel by presenting us with a false *imago* (Cole). According to psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in this lecture, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function," the *imago* or the "ideal-I" – an idealized, predestined version of the self free of linguistic and social determinations (76). Furthermore, the mirror acts as the symbolic matrix that orients the self outside of the self providing a catalyst for the transformation of the image into subject. The opening sequence of *Caucasia* upends Lacan's theory by supplanting the mirror with another; therefore, Birdie from birth begins her life beside herself clinging to her sister's visage for validation. A baby Birdie perceives Cole's curly hair, caramel skin, and full lips as her own and imprinted that image into her ego. While on the surface, this imprinting can symbolize the profundity of Birdie's love for her sister, underneath, however, the consequences of Birdie's attachment to the false *imago* come to a head at end of the first chapter, "Face" when the reader receives the initial description of Birdie, which is revealed to be a stark contrast to that of her sister's.

The splitting of her white mother Sandy and black father Deck illuminates not only Birdie's physicality, but also her ambiguity and the lengths her mother will take to disillusion her daughter's sense of self. Sandy and Deck Lee are products of the American social order and not only acknowledge the outward difference of their daughter in comparison to other white and black children, but also her inability to pass for anything in a society that requires one to be within a category. Fearful of the potential dangers Birdie would face outside of her protective environment, Sandy Lee, stands in the middle of the street and exclaims in her flower muumuu, "She looks like a little Sicilian" (27), to Deck following the discussion turned argument to place the girls in an all black school in Roxbury named after Ghanaian poet and revolutionist Kwame Nkrumah. By conflating Birdie's physicality with another ethnic group, Sandy not only removes agency completely, but also cracks the false *imago* that Birdie binds to for validation. Deck in retaliation, before driving off in his rust colored Volvo, calmly responded to Sandy's categorization of their daughter with:

"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 white. And no daughter of mine is going to pass." (27)

A Harvard graduate, intellectual, and author of critical race theory, Deck Lee is not unaware of the grey area his daughter resides in; however, he rejects and taunts Sandy's reason as to why sending them to Roxbury would put them, especially Birdie, in both physical and emotional peril. To him his daughter's light complexion and straight hair does not make her something that she is not and for the first time he verbalizes that his daughters are "unpassable" in front of them.

Passing in *Caucasia* is a tool, like a screwdriver or a chisel, to achieve a specified goal or gain a favorable outcome. In post-emancipation America, the mixed, Mulatto, high-yellow, and

half-breeds use the fairness of their skin to avoid legal and social persecution. Over the years, passing is no longer used as a defense tool against the racist legal practices of America, but more to gain social standing or avoid social alienation. Cole's darker skin and curly hair gave her an advantage when trying to assimilate into the social structure of The Nkrumah School<sup>5</sup>, while on the other hand, in the second act of the novel, "From Caucasia with Love," Birdie's light skin, straight dark hair, and educated demeanor gain her favor while on the run from the FBI with her mother,<sup>6</sup> who takes advantage of her white privilege in the land of "Caucasia."<sup>7</sup> However, Deck initially believes that because his daughters are biracial neither of them would ever pass as anything in a blatantly racialized society set within a black and white binary. His education and arrogant demeanor allows him to see the "truth" of America racial politics which keeps him above the "Nypical tiggers wasting their lives away" (10) on the fruitless, in his eyes black power movement by funneling his resources into his research which was "about the fate of black people in an integrated society" (27). Having severed any cultural relation to black people, Deck perceives the social unrest going on around him in the fault of the black population and approaches race in an extreme and clinical manner. His detached relationship with blackness allows him to be reductive when commenting on the state of black people from behind a pen and paper, so much so that he conducted IQ and cognitive tests with black and white blocks on his

---

<sup>5</sup> See *Caucasia* pg. 48; Birdie is the victim of bullying from the racially sound girls of Nkrumah school, but after intervention from her passing sister, Birdie's bullies step back; however because of the scrutiny brought about by her skin she is further Othered by the general population with everyone, including the bullies, leaving her isolated.

<sup>6</sup> Sandy explains to Birdie that she could pass "with my straight hair, pale skin" (128) for any white person.

<sup>7</sup> "Caucasia" is a play on the word, Caucasian, the general term for the white population in America, but because the racial politics is under the influence of the dominant, white hegemony, America is satirized by naming it the "Land of White People"

infant daughters<sup>8</sup> – the fruit of his own act of miscegenation. Birdie and Cole stand silently behind their mother listening to their parents strip their physically down to the bone.

Once, when I was too young to tie my own shoes and my parents still lived under the same roof, I overheard my divorcing parents discuss my enrollment into elementary school. My mother expressed her worry about my potential bad peer experiences in school when I have to bear the responsibility of explaining why white woman who looks nothing like me picks me up after school or when she has to clarify to teachers that she is indeed my birth mother and not a guardian, which has happened on occasion with her ramping up the attitude to eleven every time; conversely, my father did not see anything to be afraid of and exclaimed that she was overreacting. This was coming from the same man who, when I was eighteen, saw red when a Black man in some unknown African tribal garb danced along the Venice beach boardwalk stating that it was “setting us back a thousand years.” Before I learned of my father’s sensitivity to representation, I stood around the corner unsure as to why my mother would care so much about me being in school.

Deck, like my father refuses to hide his offspring away from the public, let alone people like them even though my mother thought that my extreme difference to other children would make it hard for me to make friends. Albeit harsh and misguided Sandy’s concern acknowledges and actively fears the inevitabilities of being a mother to a biracial child. The Sicilian comment is a reactionary response to the overwhelming anxiety she feels sending her children out into a world she herself has no access to even as a white woman emphasizing her daughter’s explicit difference to other black children. Sandy’s desire to shield her daughters, especially Birdie, from

---

<sup>8</sup> See *Caucasia* pg. 27-28

that difference being preyed upon by the dangers of ungoverned socialization isolates Birdie and Cole from the outside world both metaphorically and literally.

The physical isolation Sandy imposes upon the sisters by home schooling them herself, banking on her Harvard background and activist lifestyle to provide an adequate education, suffocates the self-realization of Birdie and exacerbates the anger Cole has toward her mother. While both children are well read because of home schooling from a Harvard graduate and immediate proximity to a literary theorist, their limited social development shines through as they converse in a made-up language called Elemeno during their middle childhood and spy on their parent's loud arguments about their appearance, Sandy's numerous acquaintances, and their dissolving marriage. Furthermore, the sheltering the sister's experienced quarantined them from other children, which kept them from making the necessary comparisons to others like/unlike their selves in order to form a more authentic identity.

Social psychologists, Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke postulate the overlap present between social identity and identity theory defining the social identity as the "person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group" (225). They go on to assert that the unavoidable processes of self-categorization and social comparisons work in tandem during the social development of a child. Birdie's self-categorization process is relegated to only her mother and father as references to other socioracial categories, in neither like nor acting like either category, Birdie's understanding of herself is skewed. While on the run with her mother in the second part of the novel, after attending Nkrumah school for a few years, she finds that she has no place or role in American racial politics being "incomplete...half a girl, half-caste, half-mast, half-baked" (137). Birdie expresses her feelings of alienation and aimlessness, and yet, at the same time, admits to the audience that she has never encountered another like her and Cole to

situate herself. However, at this point in the novel, the blizzard that initially separated Cole morphed into physical and cultural distance leaving Birdie without her reflection while in New Hampshire. While at first comforted by the prospect of adopting any identity as long as they kept on the move,<sup>9</sup> she later concludes that their kinetic lifestyle is detrimental to the formation of her true *imago* after learning of her mother's betrayal.

Parental intervention centers itself as the cause of Birdie's disillusionment over the course of the first two parts of the novel. Deck and Sandy intervene both explicitly and implicitly in Birdie's social development. A veil is cast over the symbolic mirror that allows the subject to configure and acknowledge the self by Deck's emotional detachment from a daughter that takes nothing after him and Sandy's overprotective manner. Though Deck Lee is distant with Birdie throughout the novel, the space created by him between him and his daughter is like an open wound trying to heal. To Birdie, and made clear through textual evidence, she is the antithesis to Cole stating that she "was his proof that he has indeed survived the integrationist shuffle" (56). Cole's "small dusky body" (56), nappy hair, and full lips draws Deck's attention away from Birdie, reduced to a failed experiment or quantifiable proof that the black race can and will vanish during the inevitable cultural slurry that will form over time, leaving her alienated from the one part of her she wants the most validation from. Deck's race fueled prosopagnosia – the difficulty to recognize close family members and friends – reaches the point of no return when, after being mistaken for a case of child kidnapping,<sup>10</sup> he physically reels back from his daughter after placing his hand Birdie's forehead instead of kissing it like he normally does. Senna signals

---

<sup>9</sup> See *Caucasia* pg. 137

<sup>10</sup> See *Caucasia* pg. 60-61; The stark contrast between Birdie and Deck's physical characteristics lead Deck to be racially profiled by police officers who question the legitimacy of his genealogical connection to his daughter. This event left Deck disillusioned and widened the emotional schism forming between the two

to the reader that Deck cannot and will not recognize the daughter that sits before him because in augmenting his affection and recoiling his touch, Deck plants the seed into Birdie's mind that their relationship is withering to the point of complete annihilation.

Unlike Deck, Sandy takes a more hands on approach to her daughter's disillusionment. By imposing the identity, Jess Goldman, onto Birdie, Sandy, after exclaiming "you can be anything," (130) buried, covered up Birdie Lee supplanting her with an identity she can only physically pass for and not culturally. However, through discovering the postcard from her Aunt Dot, one of the few role models Birdie aspires to be like, expressing worry about their well-being, Birdie realizes that Sandy has been in contact with her father's side of the family and the illusion of transitory comfort comes crashing down. The revelation forms a rift between the mother and daughter. However, this open wound highlights an important juncture in Birdie's journey to self-conceptualization. Sandy loses control of Birdie's identity through her deceit and by doing so frees Birdie's perception of herself, who for the first time, since taking on the name Jess Goldman, rejects the false identity her mother gave her and throws down the veil placed over the mirror.

*Caucasia* closing section of the novel, "Compared to What," signals to the reader that Senna is actively trying to undo the damage forced connections brought upon Birdie by explicitly questioning how she is perceived in a racialized society. This final turning point in Birdie's journey sees her remove herself from her mother's care by physically running away from New York to Boston to reconnect with her estranged family. In the beginning of the novel, physical distance framed itself as the death knell to relationships, but now during the resolution of the novel, Senna reimagines the concept of distance as an escape mechanism for Birdie's crippling ambivalence brought on by her parents. The Birdie here is a stark comparison to the Birdie the

reader gets acquainted to until the postcard is discovered. She alone acts out her will instead of her mother and seeks something salient that her father never afforded her. Senna means to inform the reader of the personal discovery of the self, one free of shrouded mirrors and misconceptions, emphasizing the solitary experiences of one's life as the influential factors toward self discovery.

The events that led up to her reunion with her father and sister shaped Birdie as a potter's hands would when tackling a new piece. Each experience a new groove, curve, or crevice imprinted upon the malleable subject representing one of infinite maneuvers the artist can make. In the end, Birdie Lee discovers the limitless potentialities present within her split lineage accomplishing the task of upending the traditional "tragic mulatto" narrative rampant in 20<sup>th</sup> century biracial literature and placing a new kind of mulatto into the American literary canon. Senna's novel follows the Anzaldúa tradition of cataloging experience in order to understand the self as it truly is and not would it ought to be.

## Summary and Conclusion

This investigation into biracial self-conceptualization within a racialized social system not only concerns itself with the lived experiences of biracial individuals and the identity that forms from them, but also the ground in which they stand on. The family unit serves as the foundation for biracial self-realization with the mother and father acting as gatekeepers to their respective cultures. Furthermore, the parental figures serve as direct references to draw comparisons from when attempting to form their identity before the introduction of other children. However, what this Anzaldúan approach to race reveals through personal experience and close reading of Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* is that when the subject fails to solidify their physical relation to their parent(s) they become ambivalent to their position in society. This confusion only intensifies when the biracial subject is introduced into social engagements with children that lack racial ambiguity.

To highlight these detrimental development factors, this piece first presented the reader with an autobiographical account of experiences that coalesced to form the basis of the investigation. Experiences of loss, detachment, and racial prejudice represent only mere particles of the whole subject, but when teased out and studied through a microscope these minute experiences become entire narratives that inform the self identification of the biracial subject both within and outside of the words on a page. Though the collection of experiences you hold in your hands are only a fraction of the pieces that form the me that is writing, they aim to humanize the biracial subject when considering their positionality in a given text. The act of citing specific accounts that draw comparisons to the text renders their isolation null in the investigation of the racially ambiguous. Both text and writer actively working in tandem to

highlight and shed light on the anxiety experienced by biracial people when attempting to find a place in society.

The genre of biracial literature and media is a blossoming one with networks now clamoring to broadcast multiethnic families going about their mundane lives. Apple TV's *Central Park* and the numerous Netflix Originals depict and attempt to validate biracial bodies in a contemporary American society. Though there is an explosion in media that concerns itself with biracial protagonists there are tropes that threaten the saliency of the subject. For example, in Netflix's case, the narrative is twisted and further disillusiones biracial individuals by removing parts of their lives necessary for development or narrative fidelity. Shows like *Ginny & Georgia*, highlight the stark differences between the white parent and the distant biracial child and remove the POC parent completely perpetuating the trope that the white parent is left to understand their physically and emotionally detached child. Therefore, the narrative snaps back to its original shape – the “tragic mulatto,” for the sake of representation. Conversely, *Caucasia* and the reality of being biracial in a racialized society, refuses to omit the detrimental experiences of Birdie Lee and others like her in order to highlight the importance of the foundation – the family unit.

## Works Cited

- Anderson, Christopher V., and Timothy Higham. "Chameleon Anatomy." *The Biology of Chameleons*, edited by Krystal Tolley and Anthony Herrel, First, University of California Press, 2013, pp. 7–55.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria, et al. "La Conciencia de La Mestiza/Toward a New Consciousness." *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4th ed., Aunt Lute Books, 2012, pp. 99–120.
- Hughes, Langston. "Mulatto." 1927, [www.poetrynook.com/poem/mulatto-0](http://www.poetrynook.com/poem/mulatto-0).
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function." *Ecrits*, 1st ed., New York, NY, W. W. Norton & Company, 2006, pp. 74–81, [www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Lacan%20Mirror%20Stage.pdf](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Lacan%20Mirror%20Stage.pdf).
- McKay, Claude. "Mulatto." 1925, [www.poetrynook.com/poem/mulatto](http://www.poetrynook.com/poem/mulatto).
- Saussure, Ferdinand. "Course in General Linguistics." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, edited by Vincent Leitch et al., Third, W. W. Norton & Company, 2018, pp. 824–40.
- Senna, Danzy. *Caucasia: A Novel*. Reprint, Riverhead Books, 1999.
- Sigmund, Freud. "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 7, 2001, pp. 123–246, [www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud\\_SE\\_Three\\_Essays\\_complete.pdf](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud_SE_Three_Essays_complete.pdf).

Srinivasan, Mandyam, V. "When One Eye Is Better than Two." *Nature*, 27 May 1999,  
[www.nature.com/articles/20550?error=cookies\\_not\\_supported&code=5486d440-6f4d-42f8-9fa7-4be4f98b408e](http://www.nature.com/articles/20550?error=cookies_not_supported&code=5486d440-6f4d-42f8-9fa7-4be4f98b408e).

Stets, Jan E., and Peter J. Burke. "Identity Theory and Social Identity Theory." *Social Psychology Quarterly*, vol. 63, no. 3, 2000, p. 224. *Crossref*, doi:10.2307/269587