

Rewriting the Passing Novel: Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*

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Passing (here, signifying African Americans passing for whites) has long been a fixture of the American social landscape. Passers have masqueraded for a variety of reasons, the most common being to flee from slavery, to improve their economic situation, and of course to escape racism. The practice of passing, according to Werner Sollors in *Neither Black Nor White, Yet Both*, reached the height of its popularity from the nineteenth through the middle of the twentieth century (Sollors 247), and the majority of narratives of passing were written during this era. These narratives were especially popular during the Harlem Renaissance, when writers such as Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and James Weldon Johnson employed the motif of passing to explore the psychological, emotional, and intellectual dilemmas involved in passing for white. Novels of passing typically share several characteristics: interracial sex, fear of discovery, feelings of guilt and betrayal, and the struggle to find and claim an identity. Perhaps because of the Renaissance's emphasis on racial pride and solidarity, these novels of passing often indict the passers, portraying them as so-called tragic mulattoes or racial sell-outs. For instance, Clare Kendry falls (or is pushed) to her death at the end of Larsen's *Passing*, and Johnson's unnamed narrator in *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* wonders if by passing he "sold [his] birthright for a mess of pottage" (211). These portrayals highlight the racialized social structure of the early twentieth century: mixed-race individuals often felt trapped in a society that recognized only two racial identities: white and black.

The usually-tragic ends of these characters, however, do little to challenge that social structure; these mixed-race characters are viewed by others, and seem to view themselves, as "really" black. Samira Kawash argues

that this notion has been the "common understanding" of passing: "The one who passes is...really, indisputably black; but the deceptive appearance of the body permits such a one access to the exclusive opportunities of whiteness" (126). The narrator in Johnson's *Ex-Coloured Man*, for instance, after divulging the "truth" to his beloved, confesses: "This was the only time in my life that I ever felt absolute regret at being coloured, that I cursed the drops of African blood in my veins and wished that I were really white" (205; emphases mine). More subtly, in *Passing*, Irene Redfield laments her loyalty to the black race, which in her mind includes Clare: "That instinctive loyalty to a race. Why couldn't she get free of it? Why should it include Clare?...What she felt was not so much resentment as a dull despair because she could not change herself in this respect, could not separate individuals from the race, herself from Clare Kendry" (100). To Irene, and to the other characters in the novel, Clare is "really" black and simply "passing" for white. Thus, these novels reinforce the one-drop rule of blackness as well as the notion of "blackness" itself. And, while the novels may argue that individuals should be able to choose their racial identity, they nonetheless reduce the choices to whiteness or blackness.

More recent novels of passing, however, have seemingly moved beyond this either/or racial binary and have worked to promote a differently configured racial identity. One such narrative is Danzy Senna's 1998 debut novel, *Caucasia*, which rewrites the traditional passing narrative to reflect a late twentieth-century perspective on racial identity. *Caucasia* chronicles the childhood and adolescence of Birdie Lee, the product of a 1970's biracial marriage. Birdie's father, Deck, is a black intellectual who believes rhetoric can win the war against racism. Sandy,

her white mother, takes a more radical approach, fighting violence with violence. Birdie and her older sister Cole are caught in the middle, suspended between action and words, whiteness and blackness. Birdie physically favors her mother's side of the family (Boston bluebloods who can trace their ancestry back to Cotton Mather), while Cole is decidedly darker-skinned. When black-power politics split up their parents, Cole follows her father and his new black girlfriend to Brazil, and Birdie disappears underground with her mother, who is running from the law. Throughout the novel, Birdie struggles to define her racial self in a world that seems to offer only two choices: blackness or whiteness. In Boston, she studies how to be black like her sister; in New Hampshire with her mother, she learns whiteness from her friend Mona. Only when she is at Aurora, a women's commune, is Birdie able to escape racial categorization, but her time at Aurora is short. For most of her young life, Birdie is, to borrow from Werner Sollors, "neither black nor white yet both"; she has no solid footing on either side of the color line, and must learn to negotiate this line carefully in order ultimately to forge an identity that is neither black nor white. In this way, *Caucasia* differs significantly from earlier novels of passing.

Senna accomplishes the revision of the passing narrative by refusing the racial binary that earlier narratives insist on, thereby rejecting the notion that identity can be reduced to one position within a stable racial binary. Indeed, theories of difference that depend on the traditional either/or racial model pose significant problems for individuals like Birdie. Even multicultural theory fails to address adequately the issues Birdie faces: though it extends racial categories to include more than just "black" and "white," multiculturalism nonetheless foregrounds race by assigning identity on the basis of ethno-racial criteria. Hence, multiculturalism still operates under the assumption that there are mutually exclusive (and interdependent) definitions of race. But for an individual like Birdie, such definitions require that she negate a part of herself, and by the end

of the novel, Birdie refuses this negation. Instead, she embraces what David A. Hollinger calls a "postethnic" perspective. Postethnic theory works against multicultural theory in that the former recognizes and celebrates multiple identities (which Hollinger terms "affiliations" to indicate their voluntary, not prescribed, nature). These affiliations, however, are not limited by stable ethno-racial boundaries. Postethnicity proffers that individuals may occupy and claim multiple affiliations at once (106). Hollinger elaborates:

A postethnic perspective recognizes that most individuals live in many circles simultaneously and that the actual living of any individual life entails a shifting division of labor between the several "we's" of which the individual is a part. How much weight at what particular moments is assigned to the fact that one is Pennsylvania Dutch or Navajo relative to the weight assigned to the fact that one is also an American, a lawyer, a woman, a Republican, a Baptist, and a resident of Minneapolis? It is this process of consciously and critically locating oneself amid these layers of "we's" that most clearly distinguishes the postethnic from the un-reconstructed universalist. (106)

Hollinger is not arguing that boundaries and groups do not exist; on the contrary, he affirms their very real presence in our lived world. But he advocates an appreciation for multiple affiliations, and more importantly, the ability for the individual (rather than the group) to emphasize—or de-emphasize—these affiliations at will. Thus, postethnicity is a productive lens through which to view Senna's novel of passing. Throughout the novel, Birdie moves through numerous "circles" and, as she does so, constantly shifts her affiliations. For instance, unlike earlier passing characters, Birdie passes for both white *and* black, undercutting the

notion that she is "really" black (or "really" white, for that matter). Additionally, the novel adheres to what feminist scholar Kimberle Crenshaw refers to as "intersectionality," the idea that racial identity is part of a larger, intertwined complex of identity signifiers, signifiers which include both gender and sexual identity. Because of this complex and sophisticated approach to identity, Birdie's experiences of racial passing cannot be separated from her gender and sexual identities; she does not pass for "white," for instance, but rather for "white, heterosexual girl."

The pairing and tripling of identities is not new to passing studies, of course; Elaine Ginsberg writes that gender and racial identities have "a dual aspect" (2), and Juda Bennett argues that "passing is possible because definitions of race and sex rely on faulty binarisms" (113). Indeed, by drawing on earlier passing narratives' connections between race, gender, and sexuality, Senna moves toward a postethnic perspective by demonstrating the multiple affiliations—racial, gendered, and sexual—that Birdie adopts. Ultimately, Birdie chooses "mixed"ness at the end of the novel (413), and in doing so rejects the imposed, definitionally-dependent identity binaries that characterize both racial and sexual identity. Without stable binaries, passing narratives themselves cannot function, because passing is always structurally dependent on a stable and defining opposite. The deconstruction of these multiple binaries and Birdie's rejection of traditional racial categories mark *Caucasia* as a postethnic work, and illustrate the ways that the novel undoes the passing narrative itself by reading the genre against itself.

Passing for Black

Caucasia's most striking departure from the traditional passing narrative is in Birdie's "double" passing—before passing for white, she passes for black. Other critics have gestured towards Birdie's passing for black, but none has fully explored it. Brenda Boudreau, for instance, discusses Birdie's "pretending" to be black (62), and Sika Alaine Dagbovie writes that Birdie "also passes for something she is and is not (black)"

(105). Yet neither of these scholars interrogates the notion of passing for black: how can one pass for something one supposedly is? Reading through the lens of earlier passing narratives, the question becomes: How can Birdie pass for white and *also* pass for black? As Elaine Ginsberg maintains, "the possibility of passing challenges a number of problematic and even antithetical assumptions about identities, the first of which is that some identity categories are inherent and unalterable essences: presumably one cannot pass for something one *is not* unless there is some other, pre-passing, identity that one *is*" (4). Birdie's ability to pass for black *and* white, then, poses even more significant problems for identity, because by passing for both, she is in effect claiming neither. Such double passing enables Senna to explode the myth of the racial binary that organized earlier passing narratives, and to open readers' eyes to a more complicated racial identity that is only possible in a postethnic world. Or, phrased another way, the double passing in this novel "has the potential to create a space for creative self-determination and agency: the opportunity to construct new identities, to experiment with multiple subject positions" (Ginsberg 16). We might think of these "multiple subject positions" as synonymous with Hollinger's postethnic "affiliations" as we consider *how* Birdie passes for black.

Birdie's passing for black reverses the usual passing dynamic: though she *looks* white, she convinces her Nkrumah schoolmates that she *is* black solely through her performance of blackness. In earlier studies, critics applied Judith Butler's theory of the performativity of gender to racial identity; Elaine Ginsberg and Gayle Wald are among those who incorporate this theory into their examinations of passing. Boudreau, writing about *Caucasia*, also points out the performative nature of race in this novel (61). However, these critics are discussing characters who pass for white, not for black. None-the-less, in their discussions, skin color is the visible sign that makes the performance believable. When Birdie passes for black, though, the opposite is true: her white skin color works against

her. Consequently, her performance must be so convincing that it trumps the visible; she must perform well enough for spectators to stop believing their own eyes, which contributes to the novel's deconstruction of stable race categories.

Birdie's passing for black differs from traditional passing in other ways, as well. From her first day at Nkrumah, Birdie realizes that she has to convince her classmates that she belongs at the Black Power school. Her decision to pass for black is motivated not only by her desire to fit in with her peers, but also by her desire not to "lose [Cole] for good" (62). In this respect, Birdie is passing for black in order to keep her "black" family (Cole), rather than passing for white and having to reject that family. Additionally, while many traditional passers did so in order to improve their economic situation, Birdie actually fantasizes that her economic situation is deteriorating: while at her friend Maria's house, Birdie imagines that her "mother worked the late shift and [her] daddy stole TVs" (71). Here, Senna links the economics of passing to color, but her reversal of the usual pattern (passing from lower-class blackness into upper-class whiteness) deconstructs racial categories further.

A defining moment for Birdie comes in her first class at her new school. Her teacher explains, "at the end of each class, everyone stands and says, 'Black is beautiful.' Loud and clear" (44). But when Birdie's turn comes, she only manages to question, "Black is beautiful?" (45). Immediately afterwards, a student confirms Birdie's whiteness by taunting, "Guess you must be ugly" (45). Birdie's external "white" features, especially her "long, stringy hair" (46), cause her schoolmates to torture her before Cole threatens them: "Birdie isn't white. She's black. Just like me. So don't be messing with her again or I'll cut off all your hair for real this time" (48). And though Cole asserts Birdie's blackness, the text suggests that the real reason the girls subsequently leave Birdie alone has more to do with Cole's bodily threat than her assertion of Birdie's race. After all, the girls ignore Birdie afterwards; they don't include her in their group.

Passing for black constitutes Birdie's ticket to survival at Nkrumah just as passing for white served as a survival mechanism for earlier passers. Because Birdie looks white, though, she has to demonstrate her "blackness" in other ways in order to be accepted by her peers. For instance, when Cole tells her, "We talk like white girls...We don't talk like black people" (53), Birdie decides to teach herself black speech. Thus language becomes the first way of performing blackness, and we see Birdie practicing saying "*nigga*" rather than "nigger" in front of her bathroom mirror (63). Significantly, Cole also has to "learn" blackness to an extent, even though she is more visibly black than Birdie. Boudreau maintains that Cole's "attempts to 'become' black are...connected to visibility" much like Birdie's are (63). Cole's ashy knees and her too-nappy hair inspire laughter from the other children, so she learns to apply lotion and goes to a black hair salon for cornrows (55). But there is a difference between Cole and Birdie here: Cole's darker body identifies her as black in a way that Birdie's doesn't. Cole is not *passing* for black; instead, she is in a sense *enhancing* her blackness. She merely needs to learn "tricks of the blackness trade"—a generous dose of lotion on specific "trouble spots" (49)—in order to be accepted as black. Cole's need to "learn" blackness comes not from a too-white physical body, but from a white-inflected cultural upbringing. As she tells her father, "Mum doesn't know anything about raising a black child" (53). Tellingly, nobody in the family refers to Birdie in a similar statement, just as nobody doubts Cole's blackness. Birdie describes Cole as Deck's "young, gifted, and black" "prodigy" (55), the "proof that his blackness hadn't been completely blanched...that his body still held the power to leave its mark" (56). When she is with Cole and her father, Birdie understands that she simply "disappeared" (56) because of her not-black-enough body. Ultimately, Cole's black body legitimizes her attempts to learn blackness and renders her "performance" of blackness somehow more authentic, at least in the minds of her family and schoolmates.

Birdie's almost-white body, though, means that she needs more than just Jergen's to pass for black. In a desperate attempt to "blend in" (62), Birdie sports tight braids to hide her hair's straight, smooth texture; wears gold hoops in her ears; and updates her wardrobe to include "Sergio Valente jeans, a pink vest, a jean jacket with sparkles on the collar, and spanking-white Nike sneakers" (63). These accessories, along with her mastery of "black" speech, finally earn her notice from her peers. As Birdie reports, her "work paid off" (63)—and the word "work" indicates the constructedness of the activity. Birdie does not label this process of transformation as passing, but instead calls it "the art of changing" (62), which further highlights the performativity inherent in Birdie's identity. She ascribes her success at changing to her early days of playing dress-up with Cole: "Cole and I had gotten a thrill out of changing—spending our days dressed in old costumes, pretending to be queens of our make-believe nation. But only at Nkrumah did it become more than a game" (62). While acknowledging that it is "more than a game," Birdie nonetheless compares her current performance of blackness to her childhood performances of make-believe. Thus Senna interrogates the category of blackness: by implying that it is nothing more than make-believe, a costume to be donned and doffed at will, she suggests that the category is empty at its core. Birdie does not share an ineffable "blackness" with earlier passers, because Senna shows us that blackness, like whiteness, can (or even must) be fabricated at will and with great effort.

Birdie's "success" at passing for black is confirmed when Maria, the bully who threatened Birdie on her first day at Nkrumah, takes Birdie under her wing. Having noticed Birdie's changes, Maria asks, "So, you black?" (63). When Birdie "nod[s], slowly, as if unsure of it" (63), Maria willingly brings her into the fold: "I got a brother just like you" (63). Maria's identification of Birdie with her "Cape Verdean" brother not only marks Birdie as black, but also includes Birdie in a symbolic "black" family, one where she visually resembles a sibling. Maria's acceptance of Birdie (Birdie has been

"knighted black by Maria" (64)) does not mean, however, that she ignores Birdie's visible whiteness. On the contrary, Maria sees the visible differences and tries to help Birdie minimize them: "we're gonna have to do something about your hair" (69), she tells Birdie, and then proceeds to cut and curl it. When Birdie sees her curly hair in the mirror, she is better able to see herself as black; she imagines that Maria is her cousin, her own name is Yolanda, and she is Cape Verdean (69). This imaginary identification with Maria's ethnic background is significant because it indicates that despite her efforts to the contrary, Birdie recognizes that her blackness is simply "imagined" (69). That is, she is passing here—this evening with Maria is just another game of make-believe.

Birdie's response to her successful passing echoes that of earlier passers' in its anxiety; she confesses, "But I never lost the anxiety...a fear that at any moment I would be told it was all a big joke" (64). Most passers fear discovery, fear being "found out." Senna, though, rewrites the passing narrative by turning this fear upside-down: while traditional passers fear their exposure as "really" black, Birdie fears being exposed as white. The consequences of exposure for earlier passers are dire, and often point to the stereotype of the tragic mulatta. Rena Walden, for example, from Chesnut's *House Behind the Cedars*, is abandoned by her white fiancée and eventually dies from the emotional stress and guilt of passing. In Larsen's *Passing*, Clare Kendry falls to her death when her white husband discovers her racial secret. In each case, and in virtually all passing narratives, exposure of the character's blackness culminates in the loss of family (and often of life itself). For Birdie, the consequence of being "exposed" as white is equally severe. Despite her persistent efforts to pass for black, Birdie eventually loses part of her family when Deck chooses Cole, not Birdie, to accompany him to Brazil.

Senna rewrites the passing narrative in an ironic way. Usually the visibility of a passer's whiteness is an asset eventually betrayed by some evidence of the one-drop rule (getting "caught"

with one's darker-skinned family, as Rena Walden does, for instance). But in Birdie's case, just the opposite is true. Her parents reject the one-drop rule in favor of the visibility rule: Birdie looks white, and therefore is white; Cole looks black, and therefore is black. When Deck chooses Cole over Birdie, Senna reverses the usual passing dynamic; here, the black family rejects the "white" relative, rather than the white family rejecting the black one. That Senna consistently undercuts the traditional passing narrative by reversing the racial positions illustrates her desire to challenge the myth of the racial binary, and we see her continuing this challenge when Birdie successively passes for white.

Though Birdie is too young at Nkrumah to have much of a sexual identity, the novel does suggest the intersectionality of race and sexuality here. For instance, one factor that helps Birdie become accepted as black is All's desire for her. Since All was the student who most viciously accused Birdie of whiteness, his desire to date her—his pronouncement that she is "pretty" (64)—indicates his acceptance of her blackness. This desire earns Birdie an invitation to join the Brown Sugars, a group of girls who have boyfriends (64). On a subsequent sleep-over at Maria's house, Birdie not only gets a makeover (which includes beauty tricks to make her appear more black), but also experiences sexual desire for the first time. The two girls take a bath together, and Birdie "studied Maria's nude body," noting her "small perfectly shaped nipples like Hershey's Kisses" (70). As they dry off, Birdie "looked out of the corner of my eye at the soft brown slope of her body. I felt ashamed for looking, and hid my face in the wet tangle of my hair" (71). Maria's black, sexualized body, and the hint of homoerotic desire it inspires, is at once a source of envy, desire, and shame for Birdie. Not sure how to respond to her desire, Birdie masks it and her shame with her hair, the mark of her whiteness, as if she's hoping that her visible race will hide her homoerotic desire. This conflation of whiteness with heterosexuality will surface later in the novel, but at the moment Birdie

senses that race and sexuality cannot be separated. At this juncture, the novel accommodates a postethnic perspective, because it collapses the artificial boundaries between these constructed categories.

Passing for White

Soon after Birdie begins to pass successfully as black at school, her father takes Cole to Brazil and Sandy's radical activities cause her to run from the law, taking Birdie with her. For the next several years of her life, and for the majority of the novel, Birdie passes for white. A key difference between *Caucasia* and earlier passing narratives, though, is the age of the passer. In most narratives, the character who passes is an adult, and as such has at least a limited understanding of the supposed benefits and consequences of passing. For example, the narrator in Johnson's *Ex-Coloured Man* crosses the color line multiple times as an adult, and realizes what he is gaining and giving up by doing so. Similarly, in *Passing* Clare Kendry chooses to pass once she's old enough to marry, hoping to escape an oppressive household and gain economic status and security. In both of these cases, and in numerous others, the adult individual chooses to pass based on his or her own experiences. Senna's Birdie, on the other hand, is a child of eight when she first passes for white. She has no choice in the matter, especially since her mother tells her that passing is the only way to save both of their lives: "The FBI would be looking for a white woman on the lam with her black child. But the fact that I could pass, she explained, with my straight hair, pale skin, my general phenotypic resemblance to the Caucasoid race, would throw them off our trail...My body was the key to our going incognito" (128). Four years later, once they have settled in New Hampshire, Sandy warns Birdie that the danger of exposure is still present: "when are you going to understand that this isn't a game?" (165). Birdie's passing ensures her mother's freedom as much as it does her own. The threat of exposure, common in passing narratives, is doubled for Birdie, and reversed from earlier narratives:

whereas usually the parent avoids his or her exposure for the sake of the child (as in the *Ex-Coloured Man*, for example), here the child dodges exposure for the sake of the parent. Hence Birdie's "choice" to pass for white is not really a choice at all, and the responsibility for her mother's safety marks her as distinctively different from earlier literary passers.

Not only is Birdie denied the choice to pass, but she is also denied the opportunity to create her own "white" identity. Instead her mother chooses everything, from her new name to her genetic and racial background. Sandy christens Birdie "Jesse," after Sandy's great-grandmother, a suffragette; this name connects Birdie not only with whiteness, but also with her mother's racist ancestors (128). Such renaming links *Caucasia* to earlier passing narratives, in which characters changed their names to ensure anonymity (Johnson's *Ex-Coloured Man*, for instance).

When Sandy ponders Birdie's racial history, she looks at her daughter and says, almost enviously, "You've got a lot of choices, babe. You can be anything. Puerto Rican, Sicilian, Pakistani, Greek. I mean, anything, really" (130). But as quickly as she invests Birdie with this power of choice, she takes it away; Birdie suggests Italian, but Sandy interrupts: "Jewish is better, I think," and Birdie realizes that "the decision had been made" (130). Once again, the peculiar dynamic of Birdie's youth and Sandy's status as mother renders Birdie powerless in her own self-definition and, as Boudreau attests, Birdie is "stripped of the agency to define herself" (64). The lack of such agency highlights the way Birdie's racial identity is constructed from without rather than chosen from within at this point in the novel. In this way, Senna connects Birdie to earlier passers like Clare Kendry, whom Cheryl Wall argues suffers from "the impossibility of self-definition" (98). Unlike these passers, however, Birdie will eventually break free of the restrictive categories in order to claim her own self-definition.

Sandy creates an entire family history for Birdie, complete with a Jewish classicist father (reminiscent of Sandy's own father) who had "an afro, the way

Jews have sometimes" and for whom "Judaism was more like a cultural thing" (131). As Lori Harrison-Kahan argues, in choosing Jewishness Senna makes another important change to the traditional passing narrative, because "whiteness is not represented as a monolithic category" (2). Birdie is not just white, but a particular kind of white, and one that is convenient for a young girl who is passing because Jewishness can be a "cultural thing" that Jews can choose to embrace or not. That is, Birdie can explain her slightly darker hue with the genetic marker of Jewishness, but does not have to bone up on rabbinical law because she can reject the cultural/religious aspect of her new "race." This form of passing is ingenious. One can be a non-practicing Jew, but what does it mean to be a non-practicing black?

Birdie's performance of whiteness also resembles her performance of blackness because, in each case, the performance of race is tied to gender and sexuality. Much as she passes for black and white, Birdie also passes for female and heterosexual. For instance, when she enters school in New Hampshire, she spies a group of girls and sees "in their reflections the girl I failed to be" (219), "a girl who dressed in oversized tomboy clothes" (220). Once she makes friends in the New Hampshire town, she seizes the opportunity to make up for lost time: "I was playing catch-up with Mona, learning how to be a girl" (227). Birdie's language here supports Butler's theory of the performativity of gender in its suggestion that gender identity is something to be learned, a way of doing that becomes a way of being. It also indicates that there are several kinds of "girl," just as there are several kinds of skin color and racial identities. Birdie's language connects her gender "passing" to her racial passing: "I was usually performing," she confesses; "it must have looked like I was changing into one of those New Hampshire girls" (233). Gender and racial passing are not merely parallel; they are intimately intertwined. Boudreau traces this idea in *Caucasia*, affirming that racial identity "cannot be separated from gender" (65).

Racial, sexual, and gender identities collide in Birdie's first sexual encounter with Nick, her white New Hampshire neighbor. Nick relates the story of his loss of virginity to a black prostitute in Amsterdam by pairing racial and sexual commodification and exploitation. He "bought" a black prostitute because white ones "cost more than we had" and because he "heard that black girls were supposed to be good" (199). He thus welds together race, gender, and sexuality as markers of identity that can't be separated, despite his attempts to "close his eyes" and "forget about it" (200). Shortly after this confession, Nick licks Birdie's face and laughingly tells her, "You have a mustache" (200). On the one hand, Nick's remark about her mustache identifies Birdie as masculine, and thus not sexually desirable. Later, however, he invests this mustache with racial meaning, adding: "It makes you look dirty, like I could lick you clean" (200). Whiteness here can "clean" away faint traces of darkness or blackness, somewhat like closing one's eyes can make blackness disappear; if Birdie's mustache were removed, she would become both white and female. Further, the process of moving from black to white through licking is a sexual one in this instance, drawing the moment of sexuality towards the moment of racial and gender identity.

Nick's confession of his first sexual experience prompts Birdie to remember her own, and this juxtaposition demarcates the ways in which racial, gender, and sexual ambiguity underpin Birdie's erotic life—an opposite response to Nick's, in which identity stability seems to be a prerequisite for pleasure. Nick asks Birdie, "Are you still a virgin, or what?" (198). This question calls forth the following memory for Birdie:

I had done some strange things with Alexis at Aurora. Some nights, on the mattress we shared, I had straddled her in a game we called "honeymoon." She would say, "You be the guy, and I'll be the girl. Pretend you have to hold me down.

Pretend you're the boss." And I would hold her down and rub my body against hers, my face hot and moist in the crook of her neck, while I felt a sharp pleasure that turned to melting between my legs. (198-99)

In these pre-adolescent sexual experiments, Birdie is clearly acting the "guy's" part; she is on top, the "boss," while the "girl" Alexis is on bottom. The notion of acting underscores the performative nature of gender and sex roles, and we see here that biological sex does not necessarily determine these roles. Although Birdie and Alexis invent a heterosexual framework to organize their same-sex encounter, Birdie's confusion about her role in this experience is evident in her description: these games were "strange things."

This confusion also appears earlier in the novel as Birdie describes the story she wrote about Richie, a Mexican-American rebel-without-a-cause. She confesses that she was "in love with Richie and dreamed of him each night," but she also dreams about "his sexy, abused girlfriend" (172). Gender and sexual indeterminacies abound as Birdie relates her sexual fantasies about this couple: "it wasn't clear to me which one of them I was supposed to be identifying with—the burly, macho Richie, who lay on top, or his soft, ultrafeminine girlfriend with the pink lipstick and matching toenails, who lay on bottom" (172). The binary of sexual identity implodes here, as Birdie fantasizes about sex *with* and *as* both genders. With Alexis, however, it is the masculine role that Birdie performs, and her response to her "honeymoon" games with Alexis demonstrates the anxiety she feels: "Afterward I always felt a little bit nauseous and would pretend to be asleep so she wouldn't talk to me" (199). The text is unclear about the source of this nausea. While it might stem from the somewhat usual embarrassment of first sexual experiences, it seems more likely to stem from Birdie's anxiety over a same-sex sexual experience, especially if we remember her earlier shame when

viewing Maria's body. Fantasies are one thing, but lived reality is another, even in an environment where same-sex relationships are the norm.

This shame manifests itself again in the text when Birdie denies to Nick the importance of her relationship with Alexis. In answer to his question, she replies, "Yeah, I'm a virgin" (199). Her response indicates that Birdie does not fully understand her "strange" experience with Alexis, but nonetheless knows that it conflicts with the heterosexual norm she sees in the world outside of Aurora. Later, in Nick's room, he compliments her kissing technique and asks, "Where'd you learn to do that?" (203). Birdie "picked up the *Tintin* comic that had fallen on the floor, and hid [her] face behind it as [she] said, 'With this friend of mine, Alex. We used to make out all the time'" (203-04). In an attempt to "normalize" her sexual experience, Birdie shortens Alexis's name to mask her gender (nowhere else in the novel does Birdie refer to Alexis by this nickname). This scene, too, functions as a kind of passing. In shortening Alexis's name, Birdie masks her as a boy, and passes the moment of homoerotic desire into heterosexual desire, much like the "honeymoon" game. This scene echoes the earlier one with Maria, too, because here Birdie hides behind a "raced" comic book—*Tintin in the Congo*—rather than the "raced" sign of her straight hair. This moment can be read in two ways. If Birdie is identifying with Tintin, the white Belgian colonialist, then she uses whiteness here once again to mask her homoerotic desire for Alexis. If, however, Birdie identifies with the Congolese (as she does shortly after by referring to them as "us" (204)), then she is putting on the face of blackness in order to more closely resemble the sexualized black woman Nick has already slept with.

Moments later, Birdie explicitly connects whiteness to heterosexuality. As she and Nick begin kissing, she compares this experience to the ones with Alexis, but finds that she doesn't know how to respond (203). As she touches Nick's penis, she begins to feel "a slight tingling between my legs, the kind I had felt with Alexis," but this feeling is

quickly extinguished when Nick pushes her head down his body (203). At that moment, she realizes that if she engages in sex with Nick, her identity as Jesse Goldman, white heterosexual girl, will be sealed:

But touching him felt too real, proof that the game had gone too far. It wasn't Birdie, but Jesse, who lay beneath him, who held him in her hand, who made his eyes turn all glassy and his breath come out uneven. I nodded that yes, I wanted to stop. I wondered if he'd think I was a baby, or a crazy dyke, as my mother had put it about the women of Aurora. (203)

Birdie realizes that it is her perceived identity as a white heterosexual that excites Nick; Jesse, not Birdie, turns him on. If she touches the part of him that indicates with certainty his identity as a white boy, she will cement her identity as a white, heterosexual girl. More than simply refusing the sexual act, Birdie is refusing the identity that accompanies that act for her: her rejection of sex with Nick mirrors her rejection of the racial and sexual binaries that organize her life in New Hampshire.

Such connections between race and sex are common in many narratives about passing. For instance, Siobhan B. Somerville argues that Johnson's *Ex-Coloured Man* flees his engagement to the black schoolteacher because marrying her "would have committed the narrator to a permanent identity within a black middle-class community" (123). This identity would be both black and heterosexual. For Birdie, sex with Nick would make real her identity as white and heterosexual, and she fears taking this step even as she worries that Nick will label her a "crazy dyke." As Harrison-Kahan notes, Birdie "expresses a resistance to heterosexuality that is explicitly connected to race" (14). As Birdie passes for white, then, she also passes for heterosexual, and Senna connects the two types of passing by using the language of performance.

When Birdie tracks down Ronnie, All's father, later in the novel, he condemns his heterosexual passing in earlier years: "I could do what I did for all those years and play the straight man...Shit, I got so good at playing the part of the positive black brother I could have won an Emmy" (350). Tying together these two types of passing (racial and sexual) enables Senna to highlight the one place in the novel where passing of neither sort occurs: Birdie's time at Aurora.

Passing No More

Significantly, Birdie's homoerotic desires and experiences are normalized at Aurora, a women's-only commune where race is completely erased. Surprisingly, though critics like Harrison-Kahan, Boudreau, Hunter, and Dagbovie comment extensively on the racial dynamics of *Caucasia*, none critically examines Birdie's time at Aurora. Yet Aurora functions as a place of possibility for Birdie, a space where passing is not necessary because Aurora, as Birdie relates it, is completely raceless. Tellingly, Aurora is the only space in the text where Birdie does not classify others according to their race, and where her own body is not racially scrutinized. More importantly, Alexis is Birdie's only friend whose race is not revealed. Given their intimate relationship, surely this omission on Birdie's part is intentional.

At Aurora, Birdie does not analyze or agonize over race. In her recollections about Aurora, she identifies two women by nationality rather than race (Bernadette is Australian; Zoe is Israeli) and Birdie's choice to emphasize nationality over race seems important given the emphasis on race throughout the narrative. The only other "raced" moment in Aurora comes from Sandy's comment to Zoe that feminism was "an excuse for 'white, bourgeois bitches to complain about something'" (173). While Sandy's remark seems to indict the women of Aurora for their whiteness (a whiteness, we should remember, that she shares), Birdie as narrator is only reporting what Sandy has said; Birdie herself seems to be consciously excluding race as a feature of identity at Aurora. "Whiteness" doesn't exist at Birdie's Aurora, nor does "blackness." Color, in fact, disappears altogether, and thus Aurora becomes the one

place in the novel where Birdie doesn't have to pass or perform. The inclusion of Aurora separates *Caucasia* from traditional passing narratives—here, race disappears entirely, an impossibility for earlier narratives that reinforced the white/black binary.

Interestingly, the disappearance of race at Aurora provides a space that normalizes homoerotic desire. For instance, Birdie's mother finds "Sapphic bliss" in an affair with Bernadette (136), and it is here that Birdie experiments with Alexis (198). Late in the narrative, when Birdie visits the father of her first boyfriend, All, and hears his story of "passing" for straight, she remembers life at Aurora:

The women at Aurora often had talked about what lies they had lived as Stepford wives—before they had become real, roaring, natural women. I thought about Bernadette and my mother, their blatant kisses and hugs and nude romps to the lake. About Alexis and me, our games of honeymoon. In the context of Aurora, it had come to seem as natural as anything else. (350)

This memory is significant because it illustrates the ease with which homoerotic desire is normalized at Aurora, and because it further underscores Birdie's own homoerotic desire. The world of Aurora provides a safe space for these women to express their sexual desire that the outside world condemns. By creating Aurora as a raceless space, Senna plays on Deborah McDowell's reading of Larsen's *Passing*. McDowell argues that Larsen uses the relatively "safe" passing narrative as a way to conceal a more "dangerous" plot of homoerotic desire (160). By stripping Aurora of race, however, Senna suggests that such a strategy is no longer necessary: her passing narrative ceases to be a passing narrative precisely when homoerotic desire becomes "natural."

Aurora promises a space where race does not exist and where same-sex desire freely is expressed. But the text reminds us that such a space, a utopic vision, can only exist temporarily:

Birdie and her mother leave Aurora after one year (136). This year proves profoundly influential on Birdie, as evidenced by the way in which she narrates her time spent there. As opposed to the primarily linear fashion in which she narrates the rest of the novel (beginning in early childhood and proceeding chronologically until the end of the narrative, when she is fourteen), Birdie's narration of her time at Aurora deviates from chronological order. We read about Aurora several times throughout the text but never get a description of the full year unfolding as time was spent there. This sense of time transpires only in Birdie's memory and is accessible only through metonymic chains of association. Thus the time at Aurora takes on an almost dream-like quality, becoming a hazy montage of memories that reproduces the utopic qualities of Aurora.

We also never get an uninterrupted view of Birdie's time at the commune. Instead, Aurora enters the narrative in bits and pieces, fragmented through Birdie's memory and experience. As we have seen above, Birdie describes her games of "honeymoon" with Alexis when she and Nick explore a sexual relationship (198-99). Similarly, Birdie remembers Aurora when she relates her mother's early loneliness in New Hampshire (173). Aurora creeps into her consciousness when Sandy laments missing Cole's first period (157). Birdie's memories of Aurora flow into and out of the text sporadically until the end of the narrative, disrupting the linear development of the novel and demonstrating their power to organize Birdie's life. Further, Birdie's narration of Aurora disavows the temporal order (then/now) upheld in the rest of the novel, and this shifting of boundaries mirrors the shifting of definitional boundaries that Birdie desires.

Most significantly, however, Aurora signals the possibility of a postethnic perspective. Toward the end of the novel, when Birdie is talking to Ronnie and Ali, she realizes that while Aurora represents a separate world, that world still exists for her: "I wondered if All would turn against me if he knew my full story, if he knew all the worlds I had lived in, worlds I still carried inside of

me now" (350). Birdie's language here points to a postethnic perspective: she inhabits not one, but multiple, worlds—worlds that overlap with one another. No longer content to pass for either black or white, she flees both New Hampshire and Boston, the sites of her dual passing, and lands in California, reunited with her sister Cole. This scene, then, represents her "homecoming."

Harrison-Kahan explicitly links the moment of Birdie's homecoming to scenes in prior passing novels; in these earlier novels, she writes, this homecoming is "sometimes understood as a reassertion of essential identity" (12). But, as Harrison-Kahan cautions, to read Birdie's homecoming in this misguided fashion would preclude the post-ethnic perspective Birdie has been working toward (12). When she reunites with Cole, she identifies with her mixed-race, yet visibly-black, sister, and Cole tells her, "If you ever thought you were the only one, get ready. We're a dime a dozen out here" (412). Birdie is finally "home" in a place where she doesn't have to pass and where she's no longer limited by the black-white binary that imprisons earlier passers.

The novel itself undoes the notion of passing in its postethnic perspective. In her reunion with Deck, when Birdie tells him that she "passed as white" (391), he argues that passing doesn't exist: "there's no such thing as passing. We're all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion, make-believe. It's a costume. We all wear one. You just switched yours at some point. That's just the absurdity of the whole race game" (391). Cole and Birdie agree with Deck's latest theory, but also recognize that theories don't always function fully in the real world. Cole affirms that race is constructed, but adds: "But...that doesn't mean it doesn't exist" (408). As mixed-race individuals, Cole and Birdie refuse to be circumscribed by one racial category, but realize that such categories nonetheless exist. As Hollinger notes, "Boundaries are necessary. A postethnic perspective understands this. Which boundaries, and where? We are all left with the responsibility for deciding where to try to draw what circles with whom,

and around what" (172). And, since these boundaries are constantly being redrawn by individuals as they shift affiliations, the notion of passing takes on new meaning: no longer "permanent" and fixed, passing in a postethnic world means floating into and out of individually-drawn circles of affiliation.

The last scene in *Caucasia* shows Birdie affirming her post-ethnic identity, connecting to others like herself. When she sees a young girl on the bus, she says the girl "was black like me, a mixed girl" (413). This pronouncement is significant, because it signals the only time Birdie has fully defined herself on her own terms. Throughout the rest of her life, she let others define her—Marla, her mother, Nick, Mona—but here she chooses her affiliations and decides where to draw her own boundaries. By choosing to affiliate with

"mixed"ness, rather than blackness, Birdie rejects the racial binary that limited earlier passers in favor of a postethnic affiliation. Senna here rewrites the ending to the traditional passing narrative. Rather than sketch her protagonist to suffer the plight of the tragic mulatto, Senna invests Birdie with a self-chosen identity denied earlier passers. Significantly, her narrative ends not with death, but with dawn: "the sky above was a bruise of colors from the just-rising sun" (413). Such an ending invokes Aurora (the goddess of the dawn), and promises a symbolic new beginning as well as a postethnic space for Birdie and others like her. By rewriting the traditional passing narrative, Senna imagines a new social landscape where individuals are allowed to create their own "circles" and claim their own affiliations.

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IN ANCIENT AFRICA...
'GRIOT' WERE THE COUNSELORS OF KINGS, THEY CONSERVED THE CONSTITUTIONS OF KING-
DOMS BY MEMORY ALONE... IT WAS FROM AMONG THE GRIOTS THAT KINGS USED TO CHOOSE
THE TUTORS FOR YOUNG PRINCES... FOR WANT OF ARCHIVES (THEY) RECORDED THE CUS-
TOMS, TRADITIONS AND GOVERNMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF KINGS...
SUNDIATA, DJIBRIL T. NAINÉ
