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Racial Attitudes in the United States: Racial Hybridity in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*

The United States, once a slave-owning society, has made substantial progress in decreasing the injustices and mistreatment toward black racial minorities and hybrids since the early 1900s. In the 1880s, Jim Crow laws were passed, legalizing segregation between blacks and whites. Then, in 1896, the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruled that “separate facilities for whites and blacks were constitutional” (“Jim Crow Laws”). Afterward, virtually every part of society was segregated, and new institutions such as schools and hospitals had to be created specifically for blacks. But in 1965, a turning point came in American society when another Supreme Court case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, declared that facilities separated on the basis of race were unconstitutional. During that time, the Civil Rights Act was passed along with the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 to provide blacks with rights that they had previously been denied (“Jim Crow Laws”). It is during this shift in American society that Birdie Lee is born. Through the perspective of this biracial speaker growing up in the liminal space between racism and acceptance, Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* provides readers with a view of the shifting attitudes and increased tolerance of racial hybridity in the United States.

In the beginning of the novel, Birdie makes it clear that racial relations are about to change in Boston. She says:

A long time ago I disappeared . . . This was back when Boston still came in black and white, yellowing around the edges. You could just make out the beginnings of color: red-eyed teenagers with afros like halos around their faces, whispering something about power and ofay to one another as she shuffled to catch the bus; a man's mocha hand on a woman's pale knee. (Senna 1)

Through her description, the reader can see the foreshadowing of change with respect to skin color and racial relations, particularly in interracial relationships. Birdie is born at the end of the Civil Rights era, and as she grows up, changes occur around her in the attitudes of Americans and the decreasing instances of racial discrimination. However, her childhood is marked with the memories of what it is like to be living as a biracial child during this period as society makes its way toward integration. Thus, her story becomes the voice of this era.

Before Birdie, though, come Sandy and Deck, who grow up during the racially divided Civil Rights era and taught Birdie most of what she knows about race before she is allowed to learn for herself. One being black and the other white, her parents are affected differently. Unlike Deck, Sandy is oblivious to racial injustices before she meets him in 1963. Sandy comes from a wealthy, white Boston family and seems sheltered from the harsh realities in the country. Sandy has “no particular interest in Negroes at this time—not in them, or their cause” (Senna 34). However, after graduating high school, Sandy goes to meet with her father, a Classics professor at Harvard, to discuss her future plans. This is when Sandy meets Deck, a black student, and she is suddenly introduced to a facet of life that she was virtually unaware of before. Birdie narrates:

What did my mother know of black people at this time? She read the papers often enough to know that the Negroes down South were mobilizing for their civil rights and that the Kennedy administration was getting nervous. She had asked

her father about all of this, and he had told her with a look of grave concern that the Negroes had a right to be angry. Her parents had discussed the issues with their friends, mostly Harvard faculty, some Cambridge eccentrics—actors, writers—thrown into the lot, but all with a kind of distance that struck her as odd.

(Senna 33-34)

Sandy's limited knowledge and disinterest in blacks changes after meeting Deck. He introduces her to the problems that blacks face daily, and she becomes a race activist in an attempt to eradicate racial discrimination and injustice. Because of Deck, she goes from being a "privileged white woman" to becoming deeply involved with the Civil Rights movement (Grassian 323).

Because of stereotyping, violence, and discrimination, blacks in the novel are aware of the lower position they are given in society. In a study called "Subtle, Pervasive, Harmful: Racist and Sexist Remarks in Public as Hate Speech," people who were interviewed in the San Francisco Bay area recount their experiences with racism. An eighteen year old African American remembers, "I was going through one of the buildings that connects outside [at San Francisco State University]. And there were these guys—I think it was a White fraternity—and they were selling muffins. And one guy had—I think he said, he was saying, 'muffins for a dollar.' And once I passed, I thought he said, 'monkey for a dollar'"(Neilsen 10). Another African American who was interviewed had a similar experience. He says, "[T]hree friends and I were all walking, and then this guy said, 'Oh, one more of you and you're a gang'" (Neilsen 10). These instances show the hostility that many whites have toward blacks. Still, Sandy and Deck see beyond skin color, and they marry. It was not without discrimination though, and Deck notices the "cold disregard he would normally get when he was with Sandy" (Grassian 326). Because this marriage would not have been allowed years previous to the Civil Rights era, it

shows how society is starting to make the shift toward racial equality when Deck and Sandy bring Birdie into it.

Though their interracial marriage is legal, Sandy points out that, nonetheless, it is still “a war out there. A fucking war” (Senna 18). Seeing the racial problems themselves, Deck and Sandy set out to be good examples for their children. As parents, they are “well-intentioned, but ultimately naïve Baby Boomers, products of the 1960s, who believe that they can raise their children free of racism . . .” (Grassian 322). But as Birdie Lee grows up in this household, everything around her is defined by race. Her parents spend most of their time involved in projects focused on issues of race. Sandy becomes increasingly involved in her civil rights activism, and Deck involves Birdie in race experiments that he uses to write books on race relations. Habiba Ibrahim, author of “Canary in a Coal Mine: Performing Biracial Difference in *Caucasia*,” says, “Sandy’s engagement in one dangerously illegal activity and subsequent decision to go underground finally splits the family in half,” and, furthermore, “Deck is convinced that Brazil . . . would be a more suitable place for black people to live than the United States” (156). Birdie’s parents try to teach her that race is insignificant and not a measure of one’s value, but their actions show otherwise.

As the years shift into the “race conscious 1970s,” Deck and Sandy’s relationship and “utopian ideology” begins to collapse, and Birdie finds herself caught between black and white (Grassian 323). Soon Deck moves out, and Birdie notices that her father favors her sister Cole, who looks more like him physically. Grassian says that this is because “Cole shares with Deck the condition of being visibly raced black in a racist society” (165). He can identify with her more closely than he can Birdie based on skin colors. And because of Cole’s dark skin, Deck’s blackness is given confirmation. After Sandy is unable to braid Cole’s hair, she tells her father,

“Mum just doesn’t know how to handle raising a black child, Papa” (Senna 55). Likewise, Sandy identifies more closely with Birdie. Birdie says, “It was as if my mother believed that Cole and I were so different. As if she believed I was white” (Senna 275). This favoritism demonstrates the difficulties blacks have identifying with whites and vice versa. Her parent’s failed marriage along with their preferential treatment of their children based on color reinforces society’s idea at the time that blacks and whites truly are different.

After Birdie illustrates the difficulties of children growing up in a household divided along racial lines, she begins to narrate what life is like outside her home. When Birdie and her father go to the Public Gardens, an old couple points them out to policemen who question Birdie about her relationship with her father. She remembers the cop saying, “You can tell us, kiddie. He can’t hurt you here. You’re safe now. Did the man touch you funny?” (Senna 61). Their hybrid appearance attracts unwanted attention and imposes limitations on what they can do and where they can be seen in public. Deck says, “And they wonder why we want to get out of this place. I mean, shit, it’s everywhere I go. Everywhere” (Senna 61). While this incident occurs after the Civil Rights Act is passed, change takes time and cooperation. Though racial hybridity, such as Deck and Sandy’s marriage, has become acceptable to some, this couple and Deck’s reaction symbolize the racist feelings that still exist among others in society.

When Sandy finishes homeschooling Birdie in Boston, she sends her to public schools where she develops an evolving definition of what it means to be biracial in society. Though *Brown v. Board of Education* has ruled that schools be desegregated, “urban to suburban migration contributed to the creation of racially isolated school” (Duff 79). Because of this, students are bused to different schools, creating forced hybridity. Birdie says:

It was late August when my mother drove Cole and me to City Hall to find out where we would be bused . . . We arrived at City Hall, and the woman behind the desk took one look at Cole and me and assigned us to different districts. I would be bused to a predominately black school in Dorchester; Cole to South Boston, the Irish section. (Senna 37)

However, Birdie never makes it to the Dorchester school because a riot takes place on their way there. She sees “one lone black man being pulled from his Volkswagen only to disappear under a cloud of white fists . . . I held my mother’s hand and stopped breathing, terrified by what I saw” (Senna 39). During this brief outing, Birdie is not only affected by verbal discrimination, but she also witnesses physical violence.

After this, Sandy decides to send Birdie to Nkrumba, the black power school in Roxbury. On the first day, Birdie has spitballs thrown at her and is questioned about her race numerous times. In the bathroom, a group of girls antagonize her and threaten to cut off her hair because she does not look like them. When Birdie gets home, she tells her sister, “I don’t want to go back . . . I’m scared. They’re going to kill me” (Senna 47). To fit in, you have to become black, which Birdie learns quickly. She reads *Ebony*, practices how to speak like the students at school, and buys clothes like the ones the black students wear. Gradually, Birdie is accepted at Nkrumba, but it is only because she takes on a black identity. It is clear that the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling had yet to have a profound impact on this school as they are not accepting of racial hybridity. At Nkrumba, what Birdie has been taught by her parents is being reinforced. Blacks belong with blacks, and whites belong with whites.

After Deck and Cole move to Brazil in a failed attempt to escape racism in America, Birdie ends up at a predominately white school in New Hampshire. Taking what she has learned

about race, she assumes a white identity to fit in. She goes through the same motions she went through at Nkrumba, speaking like them, dressing like them, and acting like them. Birdie learns that race does define people, but, being a hybrid, she plays along and joins whichever race she needs to join to survive and avoid discrimination and racism. Birdie's willingness to play along comes from the fear she has of what would happen to her if she does not. She feels that fear when she sees a black man beaten, and she tells her sister she is scared the students at Nkrumba will kill her. Early on, she learns that blacks and whites are separate. She internalizes this and identifies herself to the race the situation calls for.

However, it is at "her homogeneous New Hampshire school" that Birdie encounters hybridity among her peers for the first time (Ibrahim 331). It is Samantha's appearance as a biracial student whose "blackness is visible" that, to Birdie, first marks society's shift toward acceptance (Ibrahim 162). Marking the slowness of the shift, Samantha is not initially accepted among the other students. She is quiet and aloof, much like the blacks are that Sandy notices on the streets of Boston as a child. Like them, she avoids eye contact with her peers and is alienated. After seeing Samantha in the grocery store with her mom, Birdie says that "she was on the verge of being beautiful, something I had missed before, as she worked so hard to hide it in dark colors, ash skin, and baby fat" (Senna 235). Samantha tries to hide her blackness, but because of her darker complexion, she is unable to. For this reason, she is treated badly by some of the students. Repeating her friend Mona's words, Birdie says that "she's a loser. Everybody hates her. Nobody speaks to her . . ." (Senna 237). While Samantha's presence at the school symbolizes change, the negative treatment she still faces by some students symbolizes change that still needs to take place.

But, after a summer passes, Samantha comes back with a newfound confidence. Birdie says, “I saw that she was back with a vengeance, a new person, as she came striding through the door with her head in the air . . . She looked like an ‘After’ picture from a magazine makeover. . . In the past, Samantha had tried to camouflage her skin in dark colors. Now she stood before us in a hot-pink miniskirt and a light-blue halter top” (Senna 250). Once someone who tried to hide her race, Samantha now seems to be embracing it. Initially, Ibrahim points out that “it is unclear whether Samantha will survive buried beneath the names she gets called and the layers of blue eye shadow she wears” (162). However, she seems to surpass the stereotypes and develop an identity of her own, which, in turn, gives Birdie hope that she can do the same thing.

Now more than a decade into the post-Civil Rights era, times are changing, and Birdie notices, proving to her that blacks and whites might really be able to live cooperatively together. An example is Stuart who is introduced in the novel as “the black kid” (Senna 251). Stuart gets along well with most of the other students, and he is the running-back on the football team. However, students still notice his racial differences as they “called him ‘Bro’ and talked in mock slang to him” (Senna 252). Still, he is initially accepted much more easily than Samantha ever is. This greater level of acceptance from the other students and their willingness to talk to him signifies the ever-changing shift away from the once markedly racist country.

Since Stuart and Samantha are the only two students who are noticeably of color at the school, others kids urge them to date. But Birdie notices that they are not interested in one another. Instead, Stuart and Samantha pursue interracial relationships that seem to be wholly accepted by the other students. Birdie says, “Stuart wanted only Marcy, the chubby blond cheerleader, and Samantha was immediately transfixed by Matthew, the thin-lipped and freckled junior with an identical twin brother named Michael” (Senna 252). None of the students seem to

make an issue out of this, except for Mona, and she only disapproves because she is jealous.

Birdie says, “She admitted to me that she wanted Samantha’s boyfriend, Matthew. ‘I mean, fuck he’s only the cutest boy in the school’” (Senna 273). Likewise, Birdie almost loses her virginity to Nicolas, a white boy. Clearly, times are changing, even in this small New Hampshire town, as the hybridity of interracial relationships is becoming more common and acceptable.

With the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, it seems as though society begins to make its first real shift toward a more equal society as Birdie describes in detail her journey from Nkrumba to her white-majority school. At the New Hampshire school, Birdie gets a taste of the benefits of integrated schools. In an article entitled “Second Generation Desegregation,” the author discusses how students benefit from desegregated schools. He says that “integrated schools help them overcome racial stereotypes and learn different points of view” (Duff 6). This experience is valuable for Birdie as she seems to have gained confidence and a better sense of herself from it. This is proved when Birdie starts to want to tell people that she is not really white. Since other blacks are being accepted in society, Birdie feels more comfortable admitting her true colors herself.

Moreover, it is not only the schools that are changing. Charles J. Russo says that “in calling for an end to segregated schooling, *Brown* served as the catalyst for systemic change that influenced just about every facet of American society” (183). Birdie illustrates these changes when she sets off to find her father and sister. Along the way, the growing racial hybridity is apparent. She talks to a transvestite on the street and learns that whites, Puerto Ricans, and blacks all live in the same neighborhood. In Dunkin’ Donuts, there are men at the counter speaking in three different accents, “the German accent, the white Southern accent, and the Boston accent” (Senna 295). With three different types of people speaking together at the same

counter, the introduction of a transvestite, and hybrid neighborhoods, there seems to be a definite growing acceptance in the city that has developed in the four years since Birdie has been gone.

Also, Dot, Birdie's aunt, has learned to think in terms other than black and white and explains this to Birdie. She says about her move to India, "I knew my people were screwed and I wanted to get as far away from them as I possibly could" (Senna 314). The extreme racism in Boston causes Dot to flee to India in an attempt to escape the discriminatory attitudes. Ibrahim says that "in Boston, Dot tells Birdie of her own attempts to shed race and ethnicity by fleeing America to India" (332). There, Dot learns a lot about hybridity, and though she is still "never completely at home anywhere," she is no longer running from Boston (Senna 315). Now Dot does not define herself by any racial category. After learning about Dot's experiences, Birdie goes to Ali's house to get information about her dad's location. Ali's father is gay and living with his boyfriend. Though Ali is not very accepting of the relationship, the presence of homosexuality in the novel shows that the attitudes of many people in Boston have shifted, and the city has become more diverse.

Next, after tracking down Cole and Deck, Birdie goes to San Francisco, where, for the first time, we see a shift in attitudes among her father and sister. While Deck is still focused on race, as he is writing a book called "The Petrified Monkey: A Race Blood, and the Origin of Hypocrisy," he tells Birdie that race is not just black and white (Senna 390). However, Birdie does not know what to think of this as she has been taught by him her whole life that those are the only options. But instead of admitting that he had taught her wrongly, Deck recognizes his fault in favoring Cole by saying that "Cole turned out to be a different form me as any child could be" (Senna 394). For the first time, Deck appears to be able to see beyond skin color. He realizes that Birdie, the child he alienated because of her skin color, is more like him than Cole

is. Deck only recognizes this after alienating Birdie because of her appearance. Clearly, race cannot be used to measure a person, and Deck may finally be realizing this.

Finally, after meeting with her sister, Birdie's own change in attitude is apparent. As she walks down the street to buy breakfast food, hybridity is all around her. She sees a bus filled with children of different ethnicities and says:

They were black and Mexican and Asian and white, on the verge of puberty, but not quite in it. They were utterly ordinary, throwing obscenities and spitballs at one another the way kids do. One face toward the back of the bus caught my eye, and I halted in my tracks, catching my breath. It was a cinnamon-skin girl with her hair and braids. She was black like me, a mixed girl, and she was watching me from behind the dirty glass. For a second I thought I was somewhere familiar and she was a girl I already knew. I began to lift my hand, but stopped, remembering where I was and what I had already found. Then the bus lurched forward, and the face was gone with it, just a blur of yellow and black in motion. (Senna 413)

The girl Birdie sees reminds her of herself, but instead of letting herself identify with the girl because of appearance, she stops herself. After being taught that race defines a person, Birdie has moved away from that mindset. Ibriham points out that it is "clear that Birdie has learned how destructive the arbitrary boundaries of race or ethnicity can be" (335). Along with Birdie, others seem to finally be recognizing that race does not define a person. Being on the other side of the country when Birdie makes this realization shows that hybridity and more accepting attitudes are spreading throughout the United States and not just in one particular place.

Being born in the liminal space between racism and acceptance, Birdie's voice serves as proof of the shift away from the "great racial anxiety in the late 1960s and early '70s," (Cook 7).

She grows up being taught that race means everything. She sees the way that black minorities are treated, being beaten, harrassed, and teased. However, with the help of the Civil Rights acts and desegregation, the nation slowly begins to learn to accept hybridity. Birdie shows us that in the beginning, schools are white and black, but in the end, they are very diverse. Though racism still exists today, attitudes of the whole nation have shifted, and people have become increasingly tolerant of racial hybridity. Though Birdie is born in the liminal space between racism and acceptance, by the end of the novel, Birdie, along with the rest of the nation, is standing in the space that is much closer to acceptance than it is to racism.

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