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# Misreading the Hybrid Face: The Alienation of Performed and Authentic Self in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* and Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker*

William E. Landers

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Department: English

Advisor: Thomas Morgan, Ph.D.

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## Abstract

Race is epistemological. It shapes worldviews, conceptions of self, and interactions with society. It defines who belongs in the national community and who counts as fully human. The myth of whiteness as a homogenizing and nativist identity creates false personas around and within racialized others. These personas define non-white populations according to exclusionary stereotypes. These stereotypes, in turn, separate populations based on appearance and cultural practice. This thesis applies Critical Race Theory and comparative racialization tools to examine the historical implications of race on the conception of an authentic, or internally true, identity. These implications are illustrated by the dynamics of choice and racial identification for multi-racial and multi-cultural individuals in literature. By comparing African-American and Asian-American racialization in relation to the homogenizing white presence, this thesis explores the performance of race as social legibility in post-civil rights-era discourse.

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## Introduction

The melting pot myth promises a home to all American immigrants. However, those who do not fit the white somatic norm remain perceived as foreigners. Their children and grandchildren, descended from native-born generations, still retain the marks of foreignness in their faces and bodies. The inertia of racial ideology restricts ethnic and linguistic citizenship in American society. The ethnic figure is excluded from the gated, national community until he or she erases the marks of foreignness. The purification rituals include anglicizing names, learning English, and practicing a convincing Anglo-American accent. However, some marks are permanent. Asian-Americans, African-Americans, and others who do not fit the white somatic norm find that their marks remain indelibly on the surface. Their voices, after generations of assimilation and colonization, prove insufficient to qualify them for automatic recognition in the national community. American society is not a home for these non-standard individuals, yet the United States provides their only image of home. They are constructed of the American conscience but are distanced from the core white American image. Visually and socially, people of mixed races and cultures live in a state of limbo. Their faces and voices are read incongruently, and their identities are misperceived by the dominant white culture.

Both Birdie Lee, Senna's passer, and Henry Park, Lee's spy, possess hybrid identities. They belong to multiple categories of race in white America. Birdie's hybridity appears in her status as a mixed-race child in America. As a passer, the girl lives with a phenotypical hybridity. Her physical features, light skin and relatively straight hair, provide a blank canvas upon which others to imprint their racial assumptions. Birdie

associates her internal identity with African-American culture, yet she faces difficulty in finding acceptance among black classmates. Conversely, she encounters little doubt during her passage into performed whiteness. Henry's hybridity appears in the tension between the two halves of his hyphenated identity as a Korean-American. As a minority with recent, east Asian immigrant roots, Henry illustrates a cultural hybridity. He signals Koreanness in his Asian face, which dominant white culture associates with foreignness. He signals Americanness by performing a verbal, Anglo speech pattern. Henry's transit across racial boundaries relies on the spy's modulation of his Korean and American faces. These forms of hybridity illustrate a pluralistic image of the American, one that falls between, and defies, colonial boundaries of appearance. However, the continuation of these boundaries in post-civil rights era, twentieth-century America deny acceptance of the hybrid person.

Birdie and Henry survive by performing the assumptions that racial gazes place on them. Their acts result in privileged positionality, relative to outcast minorities who cannot pass. However, these characters also face rejection in every community they enter. The performance of racial assumptions creates a persona, which others read as the performer's full meaning. This persona functions by intentionally obscuring the personal attributes that complicate the racial narrative. The result is a highly mobile, yet inauthentic individual. Birdie's multi-racial hybridity creates an ambiguity of appearance, which confounds the racial map. Her appearance passes as white, but it obscures the girl's identification with blackness. Henry's multi-cultural hybridity creates a dissonance between the association of his Asian face with foreignness and his experiences as a native English speaker in the United States. Whether phenotypical or cultural, hybridity is

rejected by the dominant categorization of individuals into invented racial groups. The hybrid person navigates these borders by fulfilling the expectations of a single racial category. Birdie performs whiteness, and Henry performs Asianness. Eventually, Birdie and Henry become their performances. They internalize their temporary personas and fail to develop a personality that exists separately from their serial identities. This development pattern illustrates the way that racial performance alienates the authentic self.

## **Background: Triangulating the Experiences of Racialized Subjects**

The alienation of racialized subjects from an authentic self occurs at the intersection of multiple social pressures and racialized identities. No single racial hierarchy captures the complexity of interracial relationalities. Studies of race in the American literature have acknowledged a need to move beyond the binary, “black and white” approach. In “Comparative Racialization: An Introduction,” for example, Shu-Mei Shih defines racialization as a fundamentally comparative and relational process. Her argument suggests that the internalization and reproduction of racial attitudes occurs in relation to other racialized groups and to individuals of the same racialized group. In addition, Claire Jean Kim introduces the analytical model of racial triangulation. This model emphasizes the significance of multi-racial contact in the creation of a dominant race and subsequent maintenance of subordinate status for others. Shih’s and Kim’s concepts complement each other to provide an approach to comparative racialization, which accounts for interactions beyond the black-white binary. In the comparison of Birdie’s and Henry’s experiences in *Caucasia* and *Native Speaker*, respectively, this framework enables an accounting of the interactions of blackness, Asianness, and whiteness. Racial triangulation offers a useful model to conceptualize the relationalities between black and Asian identity formations under the overarching white gaze.

In “The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,” Kim outlines the analytical model of racial triangulation. She argues that Asian-American positionality is historically defined by comparison between Asian, black, and white bodies. This comparison takes place not in a one-dimensional hierarchy, but in a “field of racial positions,” in which a



social plane is crossed by axes, which racialize groups as “superior/inferior and insider/foreigner” (Kim 106-107). This conception creates a space to analyze racialization through components and processes. For instance, Kim’s proposed axes aid in critical readings of the myth of the Asian model minority in relation to the villainization of the black body. More specifically, Kim’s racial triangulation focuses on the processes of relative valorization and civic ostracism. The former process races and preferences Asianness over blackness, empowering the white population to “dominate both groups, but especially the latter” (107). It results in the replication of white racial prejudices by the Asian minority toward the black population. With tools, such as the myth of the model minority, whiteness constructs the Asian as superior to the black underclass but inferior to the white dominant class. The latter process ensures that the Asian minority remains inferior to the white dominant class by inventing the valorized population as “immutably foreign and unassimilable” (107). Race acts as the gatekeeper to national inclusion. By racializing Asian-Americans as foreigners, the dominant white culture conceptually excludes the middle man minority from achieving parity. These processes interact to convince the oppressed Asian minority to redirect its existential angst toward the more greatly oppressed black underclass.

Shih’s emphasis on relationality extends racial triangulation in the field of comparative racialization. It draws on Frantz Fanon’s descriptions of Adlerian and Antillean comparison to illustrate comparison and relationality. The Adlerian person “always compares himself to other blacks, inferiorizing them... turning them into objects that denies individuality and liberty” (Shih 1349). Adlerian comparison is narcissistic and contemptuous. In this description, the Adlerian mind falsely imagines itself as superior by

dehumanizing others of its class. Discontentment with racialized inferiority expresses itself in the reproduction of white racial attitudes by non-white minds. The other type, Antillean comparison, describes a racialized person who invents superiority based on an imagined whiteness. As Shih describes, “the black man’s contempt is directed toward other black men, while the subject himself lives the lie of his fictive whiteness” (1350). Whereas the Adlerian comparison creates a superior black man, the Antillean comparison creates a cognitively dissonant black man, who conceptualizes himself as white. However, this dissonant superiority myth shatters when the Antillean man leaves the black colony and enters the white center. In this setting, the Antillean man is disillusioned with his pretend whiteness. He sees himself as black, becoming “the object of contempt and comparison, not only by the white people but by himself, since he judges himself from white perspectives” (1350). The racialized subject distances itself from inferiority by pursuing whiteness, but he is denied membership in the conceptually superior community. The Antillean mind occupies a role similar to that of the model minority. In comparison to the black underclass, the valorized Asian-Americans are seen as superior by themselves and the white gaze. However, this group remains unassimilable into the dominant white identity. In comparative racialization, racial triangulation accounts for the comparisons that racialized subjects make between themselves and multiple raced groups. Extending the Adlerian and Antillean comparisons, which compare only blackness and whiteness, racial triangulation enables comparisons between strata of racial privilege.

### ***Passing and the Racial Persona***

The literary division between bodies appears in the passing narrative's stakes of identity. The passing character must manage each situation as a gamble between the benefits of abiding by a false racial pretense and the risks of revealing the authentic self. He or she actively manages a white façade in order to escape the prejudice of an imposed racial category. However, this survival mechanism requires the passer to constantly suppress his or her self-image. Passing leverages a constructed persona against a socially predetermined one, but it hazards the resulting alienation of internal identity. Passing narratives illustrate the racial norms that implicitly prescribe social behavior. These stories' key insights come from characters who can adapt to multiple racial molds, yet who truly belong to none. Birdie Lee, the passer in Danzy Senna's *Caucasia*, plays on normal assumptions of her body to blend into white and black racialized spaces. A biracial girl in 1970s Boston, Birdie socially develops as she searches for belonging in a space defined by racial boundaries. Birdie crafts different personas to either confirm or challenge misreadings of her appearance. In an all-black elementary school, for example, she struggles to gain acceptance for her claim to African-American culture, despite her light skin and straight hair. In a nearly all-white middle school, in contrast, she easily convinces others of an invented, "off-white" Jewish persona. These costumes allow Birdie to survive in spaces with no tolerance for the passer's racially hybrid identity, yet they obscure her authentic self.

Race creates persona in the American social imagination. By crafting an illusory presence of difference, it projects undesirable feelings upon the nonwhite image. Political philosopher, Charles Mills, approaches the perceptions and behaviors of racial difference

as a “white moral cognitive dysfunction” (95). He links the project of European global domination, especially the conquest of the Americas, to a socially engineered callousing of empathy. These efforts produced a white colonial fantasy, which legitimated conquest by way of a collective desensitization to white violence against nonwhite populations. As a result, the foundational reasoning of American expansion enshrined the threat of violence with a promise of white innocence. In addition, racial socialization replicates a faulty social perception within each individual, and this lens produces specific responses, which are incongruent with reality. Seminal Critical Race Theorist, Derrick Bell, further explains this dissonance in reference to race consciousness, which stunts the white ability to “ ‘imagine the world differently’ ” (8). The white imagination, calloused by a history of racial domination, subconsciously maps all social interaction in the context of racial hierarchy. The rejection of this order requires a rejection of whiteness, itself. Hence, an obsession with race impedes the white individual’s faculty of reason in the presence of the nonwhite individual. This impediment leads to misreading of non-white appearance and cognitive dissonance when the non-white individual defies racial assumptions.

The white normative imagination renders bodily difference to be repulsive. The social divisions of race propagate through a modern ideology of bodily and spatial image. This system creates raced categories, and it enforces group difference along visual definitions of normality. Charles Mills suggests that “one can pretend the body does not matter only because a particular body (the white male body) is being presupposed as the somatic norm” (53). The appearance of whiteness confers a raceless identity and mobility because the American “somatic norm” aligns with the concept of a white phenotype. In concert with Africanist personas, whiteness historically defined Americanness, but is,

itself, defined in contrast to invented others. The markers of otherness exist only as the product of a collective illusion, the white cognitive dysfunction. As a result, the categorization of appearances into homogenous races creates an artificial exclusion of non-whiteness from the national image. These racial borders, when internalized and socialized into non-white communities, also project the myth of homogenous racial identity onto the multiracial or multicultural individual. In this way, both white and non-white communities reject Birdie's hybrid self. Alienated from his or her true self, the hybrid person chooses whiteness or darkness, somatic normality or deviance, desirability or repulsiveness.

The rationalization between the white cognitive dysfunction and western systems of morality and religion results in a normality that denies its own existence. The systems of hierarchy and categorization, which historically resulted in oppression, evolve with social changes because they, themselves, are invisible. As they inform the very lens that modern people view others, racial norms remain woven into the foundations of culture and society beyond any efforts to erase them. Institutions of racism crumble as new ones are erected in their place. The definition of white bodies as normal implicitly defines non-white bodies as abnormal. The association of desirability with normality necessarily restricts the same quality from abnormality. Social normality gains definition in contrast to the invented otherness. Derrick Bell touches on the oppositional definition of nonwhiteness when he discloses that "blacks can never be deemed the orthodox, the standard, the conventional" in America (155). The image of nonwhiteness becomes starkly apparent in America because whiteness acquires a racial invisibility as the accepted social norm. As a result, white persons may observe race in others, but not

themselves. This supposed racelessness supplies the incentive for passing. A racialized person, such as the non-white hybrid passer, may shed the exclusions of racial hierarchy by appropriating and performing whiteness.

The particular geometry of race in America causes white persons to predicate their behavior on an imaginary, nonwhite figure. This figure removes the actual presence of phenotypically different individuals from social dialogue. Given its origin in a fantasy, the nonwhite figure may drastically conflict with the true personalities of the real people whom it pretends to describe. Specifically, the nonwhite figure exudes a wild and foreign persona, which provides conceptual boundaries to civility. Mills notices a relationship between savagery and race in the white social imagination, suggesting that “nonwhites may be regarded as *inherently* bestial and savage (quite independently of what they happen to be doing at any particular moment)” in white-normed societies (87). In this way, nonwhite bodies come to represent the dangerous and fearful places that lurk beyond the control or understanding of whiteness. The nonwhite figure acts as a perceptual mirage, which distances white responses from racialized individuals. Persona obscures the inner self by externally imposing a deviant status on nonwhite bodies, thereby partitioning those bodies as uncivil spaces. The American social imagination divorces normality from reality.

Persona also displaces individuality in language. Just as the nonwhite image indicates the limits of civility in social spaces, the literary invention of race defines the qualities of Americanness. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison asserts that race presents a “metaphor for the entire process of Americanization” and that “American means white” (47). She adds that an imaginary

“Africanist other”<sup>1</sup> provides the tools for crafting an American identity. In this way, nonwhite bodies became “surrogate selves” for early white American writers to define the meaning of literary Americanness “through a self-reflexive contemplation of a fabricated, mythological Africanism” (37, 47). The nonwhite persona functions as a way to approach issues of identity and group membership in language. It allows writers to explore aspects of self, while distancing their persons from the object of fixation. As the fictional, Africanist image reflects the real attitudes of American culture, it illustrates the negative connotations that the white gaze grafts onto non-white bodies.

Generally, the Africanist presence and its accompanying connotation of darkness provide diametric opposition to the qualities of whiteness. It embodies repulsion. To this end, fetishization, one of several literary strategies to mitigate the autonomy of Africanist characters, usually magnifies racial difference and the “categorical absolutism of civilization and savagery” by attaching “erotic fears or desires” to otherwise insignificant features (Morrison 67-68). Race becomes an object of reviled fixation. However, the nonwhite image, and its association with savagery, may be transformed into a mark of desire by a white actor. In this case, the white personality’s willful appropriation of nonwhiteness reverses the traditional abhorrence. The fetishized appearance creates an exoticism around the racial persona, and the desire’s forbidden nature amplifies the thrill of pursuit. Whether avoided or hunted, the Africanist persona reduces the status of nonwhites from person to object.

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<sup>1</sup> Morrison defines “American Africanism” as “the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served” (6). She argues that this presence supplied an opposing image for white self-definition.

### *The Minority Spy and the Borders of Race*

The visibility of the non-white body, juxtaposed against the normalized invisibility of the white body, ordinarily forces racial minorities into an outsider status and compels both white and non-white persons to read non-white bodies through exclusion. However, the passer and the minority spy subvert the racializing dynamic by performing racial expectations as a cover for their true intentions. The performance casts a smokescreen, which is composed of the racial assumptions that are already at play in the white perception of darkness. In the in-between space, the passer or spy gains the agency to force a reading on his or her own terms. Normally, the racial persona robs the non-white person of agency, imposing external assumptions on readings of the individual's body. Through performance, the minority spy and the passer turn racial assumptions into weaknesses for exploitation.

Through the exploitative performance, in-between figures cross the borders of reified identity. In contrast to the segregation-era passer and cold war-era spy, who cross political boundaries, the minority spy and the passer of the late-twentieth century cross the social and linguistic borders of racial belonging in America. These borders, which form through the internalization of reified visual and cultural differences, converge in the hybrid person. Ju Young Jin defines the boundaries of race within the non-white image. Quoting Rey Chow, he remarks that the “ethnic subject has become a flexible indexing figure who delineates a boundary between what is dominant and what is ‘foreign and inferior’ ” (Jin 236). Just as whiteness defines itself literarily in opposition to an invented darkness, the boundaries between recognition and rejection as American or foreign align along a negative definition of the white self as not the other. Images of non-whiteness,



themselves, act as a barrier to blending and belonging. The minority spy makes these implicit understandings explicit in his or her performances.

Ironically, this legibility-through-exclusion also marks the outsider as American. The internalization of racism and the formation of split, foreign-domestic persona define the ethnic subject as an outsider precisely because he or she lacks recognition within the national community. In a non-racist community, the ethnic subject would instead effortlessly belong. The exclusion, itself, indelibly marks the subject. In her examination of white mythology's erasure of native border culture between the United States and Mexico, Gloria Anzaldúa observes that those who identify in opposition of the white dominant culture are shaped by the existence of that culture. She writes that "the struggle is inner: Chicano, *indio*, American Indian, *mojado*, *mexicano*, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian – our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains" (Anzaldúa 109). The dominance of whiteness redefines the spectrum of identities that populate the physical border between the U.S. and Mexico as "brown" to fit the narrative of color as synecdoche for race, and race as indicative of culture or the individual. Anzaldúa argues that, by recognizing the myth and then reclaiming authentic identities, border peoples can liberate themselves from the hold of whiteness over the self-image. More broadly, this implies that the negative identification as foreigner alienates the racial outcast from an authentic identity.

Similarly, Rogers M. Smith, a political scientist, observes that U.S. government projects have historically redefined the cultural identities of marginalized populations. He defines the alteration of minority cultures by the dominant nationality as the principle of

“constituted identities” (Smith 140). This principle holds that peoples who live unrecognized as members of the polity may hold moral claim to inclusion. The grounds for this inclusion stem from “whether persons’ senses of values, purposes, aspirations and affiliations have been shaped by a community’s laws, policies, and institutions, in ways they did not choose” (140). Racism, being an historical foundation of the U.S. legal system, plays a key role in American reshaping of cultural identities. American policies have historically enforced the expansion of white mythology. Examples include the forced relocation of the Cherokee people on the Trail of Tears, which disenfranchised the native Americans from their heritage and land, and the practice of slavery and segregation, which employed brutal tactics to obliterate former cultural ties among black Americans. In this regard, Smith notes that “these policies helped constitute [formerly independent groups] as American men, American women, as African-Americans, as Native Americans” (143). In this light, hyphenated identities alienate the racial subject from both the American polity and the supposed ancestral community. The subject observes himself or herself as an outsider from the white American nationality, but possesses no other community to join. When applied to Anzaldúa’s argument, the principle of constituted identities reveals that the “inner struggle” entails a painful rewriting of the self as a product of the historical, intentional, and political enforcement of the narrative of white domination. Historical inertia perpetuates the borders of race beyond the policies that initially constructed them.

The figure of the minority spy reflects the limitations of non-whiteness in a profession that demands complete invisibility. The effective spy blends with a target group to perform a betrayal. In Lee’s *Native Speaker*, for example, Henry Park’s

assignment demands that he sell-out fellow Korean-American, councilman John Kwang. As Henry performs his cover as a campaign aide, he duplicitously passes observations to his employer, Dennis Hoagland's minority spy agency. Henry's reports ultimately play a role in Kwang's political demise. Through the extraction of secrets, sabotage, or other duplicitous acts, the spy sells out his or her target. As a result, the spy's invisibility lies not in blending with the dominant culture, as it does with the passer, but in blending with a small, ethnic enclave. As Crystal Parikh argues, the minority spy realizes the "fear of being 'sold out' and given away by one's own" that permeates minority discourse (251). The minority spy infiltrates and betrays the ethnic community that accepts him or her in service to the white dominant culture. In *Native Speaker*, Kwang orders the assassination of Eduardo Fermin on suspicion of espionage. Unlike Eduardo, Henry survives due to his fluency in Korean culture, appearance, and language. His performance of Koreanness, and accompanying suppression of internalized white influence, maintains the spy's invisibility. Henry exploits Kwang's trust of other Koreans, even as he actively betrays the councilman to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. In this regard, the spy crosses into the non-white haven as an agent of whiteness. While the passer accrues whiteness from the assumptions made about the racially ambiguous body, the minority spy accrues whiteness through his or her complicity with white dominance.

The haunting shadow of racial visibility compels the ethnic subject to map the boundaries of familiarity and foreignness as a matter of survival. The experience of navigating racial boundaries as an outsider crafts the minority subject into a prime candidate for the role of spy. In his examination of identity performance in *Native Speaker*, Christian Moraru illustrates the qualities of an effective spy. He identifies the

need for the spy to map the target's cultural terrain, noting that "a good spy is an effective scout of another's culture, a proficient reader of that culture's map" (Moraru 70).

Because the American minority spy develops from childhood to adulthood constantly observing and adapting to the racial assumptions and cultural expectations in his or her environment. In this way, the minority spy also meets the colonial and postcolonial spy's need to be "fluent in the colony's idiom," an idiom, which Toni Morrison identifies as race (Moraru 71). Minority spies prove to be highly effective at achieving cover due to their experiences in mirroring and observing the dominant culture.

To enact a racial duplicity, the minority spy performs the racial expectations of the dominant culture. The mechanism that the minority spy uses to switch between modes of invisibility rests on the tension between interpretations of the spy's opposing features. In his examination of Henry Park, Jin notes that Henry experiences a "double bind" in the tension between Henry's fluency in the American idiom and his construction as an outsider by that idiom (234). The minority spy experiences a split in personality. On one end of the scale lies the cover persona, which grants invisibility and liberation from cultural expectation. On the other lies the internal self, which retains feelings of exclusion from the same mechanisms that enable the former persona. Henry forms his personas by emphasizing either his Asian foreigner face or his well-practiced, Anglo voice. This allows Henry to blend with the ethnic community, but it also causes him to remain an outsider to the dominant white culture.

Whereas the traditional, generic spy possesses complete license through invisibility, the minority spy, being indelibly and visually marked by non-whiteness, is tied to the visibility of race. Rather than acting as a free agent, the minority spy acts as an

agent for the maintenance of the white dominant culture. The minority spy's agency is limited by his or her own complicity in upholding the racial *status quo*. In the performance of racial assumptions, the spy must avoid challenging the myth of whiteness. To do so would attract attention, and, therefore, ruin the spy's cover. Ironically, the minority spy finds liberation from cultural prejudices by upholding the mechanisms that maintain his or her own oppression. This complicity is further exemplified by the minority spy's role as a traitor to his or her targeted community. The minority spy gains invisibility among other non-white minorities, which are forced into a community by the threat of white violence. This community accepts the minority spy inconspicuously, only for the spy to sell out to his white spymasters. Unlike the passer, who blends into whiteness as an agent of darkness, the minority spy blends into darkness as an agent of whiteness. Even when performing their respective modes of invisibility, both figures remain bound by reified racial borders.

### ***The Search for Authenticity***

The pressures of somatic deviancy and polarized racial categories deny authenticity to the passer and minority spy. As an in-between, the passer blends into a wide range of social circumstances. Wearing one of his or her racial costumes, the passer performs a way into restricted spaces. However, there exists no space specifically for the passer except among other passers. The dominant culture demands a puritanical binary between whiteness and darkness. The passer is the product of both, and so authentically belongs to neither under the current regime. The passer finds authenticity, a true home, only among multiracial bodies. The minority spy seeks sincerity, acceptance without any

mask. He or she achieves authenticity when the face and voice align. However, the spy's complicity with the racial *status quo* maintains the prejudices that prevent him or her from truly uniting the American and foreign aspects of being. The practice of self-erasure and manipulative mode of invisibility indelibly mark the minority spy as unassimilable. In both cases, the crosser of racial borders fabricates an identity to show the world, but this mask can never reflect the authentic self.

The conditions for authenticity differ between the passer and the minority spy, yet both share the need to express the hybrid self. The minority spy achieves authenticity when he or she employs the face to enact the inner self, reversing the previous habit of hiding the inner self behind opportunistic masks. This "self-mimicry" allows the minority spy to vocalize "a hybrid, in-between self not easily or fully grasped within a racist society" (Jin 235). By co-opting the tools of duplicity to instead express his or her true, multifaceted self. In comparison, the conception of the singular, true self is inauthentic to the multiracial passer because it reflects an external pressure to belong to a single tribe. The passer achieves authenticity when he or she finds liberation from the internalized polarity of race. In this way, the passer expresses seemingly contradictory racial features without a normalizing gaze to separate them. This authenticity requires a complete rejection of the internalized white gaze. Anzaldúa aspires to a similar rejection of white mythology when she imagines a border culture that reclaims its independent identity. She argues that the truth of her people must be found via "a seeing through the fictions of white supremacy, a seeing of ourselves in our true guises and not as the false racial personality that has been given to us and that we have given to ourselves" (Anzaldúa 109). Crucially, Anzaldúa calls attention to the need for people in pursuit of authenticity

to recognize and reject the internalized perpetuation of racist self-images. Ultimately, both the minority spy and the passer must learn to examine themselves beyond the “fictions of white supremacy,” though they may take different paths to this end. The authentic self bears racial scars, but it is no longer constrained by them. The search for authenticity, then, ultimately leads not to the selection of a new culturally defined persona, but instead to a recognition of the multitudes within each person.

## Chapter 1: Passing and the Racial Persona in Senna's *Caucasia*

Persona defines the way that a society receives an individual. It is a purely external image for others to interpret. Americans often assume an intentionality in this visual and behavior presentation, as if each individual constructs the particular, external image that he or she desires. This understanding of persona as an agency of internal presence underlies many currents in our society, from greeting-card truisms to market-fueling consumer choices. It presumes the sovereign individuality of each person to posture, say, wear, drive, or eat whatever allows him or her to express a quintessential “me.” However, socialization, the process by which dominant views and beliefs in American culture that imbed themselves in individual perspectives, defines the creation and limits of individuality. Mills describes this process as an “agreement to *mis*interpret the world” (18). Certain illusions, especially the fantasy of white supremacy, are continually perpetuated by a cultural echo-chamber effect. The assumed presence of race is implanted within each individual and is then validated within groups. Hence, the fantasy of whiteness can claim ideological universality in a white American society. The dynamic of racial perception imbues internal character with external judgement, empowering the dominant fantasy of whiteness to invent racialized, public personas and assign them to nonwhite individuals. In this way, persona actually functions as an external distortion of self-image. It displaces individuality.

Passing narratives illustrate the dissonance between the external persona and the internality of a person. This type of story follows phenotypically ambiguous characters, who are able to pretend, or “pass,” as members of another race. This often takes the form



of a nonwhite person passing as white. This genre, which includes the likes of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*, typically explores the realities of explicitly institutionalized racism. It reveals a material advantage to whiteness, which is implicit in a character's desire and willingness to step beyond his or her private identity. However, slavery, segregation, and the general concept of legalized racism seem the province of "different times." In a contemporary frame, Danzy Senna explains passing narratives as a way to illustrate the "authentic self," the identity that an individual personally constructs (Arias 449). She suggests a converse relationship between the internal personality and the public persona, which conceals truth for the sake of mobility. In Senna's view, the passing character's phenotypical ambiguity plays on the fluidity of racial identification. Ironically, this special transience plays on, and reveals, the persistence of stringent racial categorization as a social process.<sup>2</sup> Passing narratives highlight the continuing rigidity of American racial difference within a supposedly multi-cultural, colorblind society.

Danzy Senna's novel, *Caucasia*, implements the historically relevant genre of the passing narrative to show how racial categorization produces cognitive dissonances between white and black persons in post-segregation America. Though past narratives tend to focus on the material advantages of whiteness, Senna approaches appearance as a matter of survival. Her contemporary novel deals with passing as a method of navigating potentially dangerous social terrain. It extends beyond some traditional passing

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<sup>2</sup> In her article, "The Mulatto Millennium," Danzy Senna recalls acting as a "silent witness to [her white peers'] candid racism" (18). She also distinguishes "black" self-identification as a choice to associate with a "shared history" in America, as opposed to the white assignment of difference and inferiority (15). Together, these insights concretely reference a persisting social "othering" of racial appearance and differentiate between self-image and public persona.

narratives' treatment of whiteness as a tool for profit, but it continues their central assertion that racial appearances and behaviors provide markers of operative privilege. Senna's character, Birdie, plays the role of passer in this narrative. She dons a half-Jewish identity to inconspicuously blend with her white mother, Sandy, as the two characters flee from the threat of federal agents. As the girl and her mother discuss the journey ahead, Birdie is offered a spectrum of white or nearly white personas. In that moment, appearance becomes a natural resource.

Together, Birdie and Sandy, the newly dubbed "Jesse and Sheila Goldman," crisscross the backroads of New England. A pawn-store Star of David necklace and a copy of *The Diary of Anne Frank* cement the girl's new persona in most eyes, but "Sheila" reserves a special nickname, "*meshugga nebbish*," for skeptics' ears (*Caucasia* 140). The chase leads to a small, rural New Hampshire town, where Sandy settles-down and Birdie fully inhabits her nearly white persona. Here, the girl's easy acceptance among white peers brings constant pressure to conform in appearance and behavior. Birdie employs her plausibly white persona to gain social acceptance as a covertly black interloper. However, she must sacrifice the expression of her authentic self to maintain this charade. Whatever her role, Birdie endures dissonance between her internal and external identities. The passing character balances the potential rewards of whiteness with the known detriments of blackness.

Often functioning below conscious awareness, the fantasy and its accompanying invention of race inform social interactions and judgements. A persisting white gaze reifies racial difference to impose misidentifying personas on nonwhite individuals, restricting their ownership of personal expression. This process demonstrates the way that

race, as a set of psychologically encoded expectations, simultaneously diminishes nonwhite personhood and white sensibility. Hence, racial persona restricts the humanity of persons and sub-persons in different ways. The pervasive illusion of white supremacy fractures the dominant social perception of reality in America. Social fantasy produces an imaginary persona to displace individuality and expression of the authentic self.

### ***White Norms and the External Displacement of Persona***

During the middle third of the novel, the section entitled “From Caucasia, with Love,” Birdie encounters the consequences of persona. Senna’s characters demonstrate the way that racial persona displaces nonwhite individuality and defines white behavior. In the predominantly white space of New Hampshire, Birdie can adapt her “authentic racial self” because she displays racially ambiguous features, sometimes appearing Italian, Jewish, or Indian, among other labels for human phenotype.

Yet ambiguity does not empower Birdie to escape racial categorization. Instead, it highlights the enduring influence of racial persona and a “white gaze” as influencers of social reception. Each observer assigns Birdie one of several different personas, meaning that the girl’s appearance externally defines her image. When Birdie passes as white or off-white, she faces the stakes of misidentification, just like any racialized individual would. Even a semblance of whiteness fails to provide a sovereign individuality. In addition, the character of Nicholas demonstrates the way that the logic of racial fantasy operates through persona to separate white persons from nonwhite objects. Just as the appearance of difference between racial categories invents the issue of racialized misidentification, it also causes white behavior to respond to a false persona, rather than a

real person. The socialization of whiteness overrides Nicholas' self-control, mitigating his power of judgement.

Difference embeds fantasy between apparently unlike individuals. Bell notes that the fantasy of white supremacy subtly operates through personal "preferences," which act as gatekeepers of social inclusion (7). Recalling an early encounter with Nicholas, when the boy had noticed her speaking the secret language of *Elemeno*, Birdie narrates that "Nicholas ruffled my hair and said, 'I think I'll call you Pocahontas... Because you turn all brown in the sun. Like a little Indian' " (*Caucasia* 192-193). Implicit in preferences, white norms distinguish beauty from deviancy along variations in racial phenotype. As a result, "ruffled," which conveys physical intrusion, comes to foreshadow an external meddling in identity. Following in this tension, "turn" suggests change and distinguishes between two states of body. Because "turn" specifically references Birdie's newly "brown" skin, these two states logically align with somatic normality and deviancy. They reveal the body as a neutral, accommodating canvas to be defined by external assumptions.<sup>3</sup> This sense of change invites a transformation of image, with its accompanying connotation of racial status.

The dynamic of Birdie's alternate image manifests in a new name, "Pocahontas," and new heritage, "Indian." Ordinarily, nicknames suggest an emotional intimacy between individuals. These informal, specialized monikers usually provide a sense of familiarity and exclusivity between friends. However, "Pocahontas" recalls a mythology

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<sup>3</sup> Another physical trait seems to define racial categorization alongside skin. Hair symbolizes identity throughout the novel, particularly in the way that Samantha Taper's "confused, half-nappy" ponytail reflects a growing, but limited, search for self-confidence as the only black girl in a white town (*Caucasia* 250). Just as "nappy," a characteristic that traditionally describes only the hair of African peoples, marks Samantha as a black girl among white peers, generally straight locks associate Birdie with white appearance, regardless of the girl's internal identity.

of tribal savages and noble explorers, while “Indian” invokes a history of white racial conquest in North America. This white colonial fantasy recalls a false history of white innocence, a rationalization or outright denial of white atrocity in the name of expansion. It diverges from reality and frames Birdie’s transformation within an invented heritage of racialized inferiority. Rather than mutually reinforcing a human bond, the nickname, “Pocahontas,” creates a “brown” savage, then alienates it from white civility. Moreover, “little” often confers endearment, eliciting a familial relationship like the guardian bond between a parent and child.

However, it also assumes a relationship between superior and inferior partners. When applied to the invented presence of the savage “Indian,” “little” loses its affectionate quality, instead reinforcing an unequal power dynamic. Together, “little Indian” illustrates that way that a white gaze minimizes an alienated presence. In this way, a character’s status alters as a function of her skin hue, externally imposing the fantasy of white supremacy by way of an invented persona. Birdie’s transformation from the white, or nearly white, persona of Jesse to the nonwhite persona of “Pocahontas” displaces the relative equality of shared racelessness with a racialized submission. The girl’s new position reflects not only a mythology of inferiority, but also phenotypical abnormality. As a result, phenotypical appearance defines identity in the white gaze, regardless of an individual’s own intentions. Here, the invention of difference initiates a transition from bodily normality to deviancy, thereby embedding a fantasy of superiority within the invented image.

Fantasy fabricates persona by magnifying bodily differences. As Birdie’s skin darkens, Nicholas escalates his imaginary Pocahontas by investing the girl’s appearance

with an exotic attraction. This illusion reinforces what Derrick Bell understands as the “unspoken” nature of nonwhite somatic deviancy (152). It also begins to mirror what Toni Morrison describes as a fetishization of race. As a result, the appearance of race comes to externally define nonwhite identity, but it also unconsciously determines the way that white-socialized individuals imagine nonwhite presence. Even as Nicholas seeks physical intimacy with Birdie, a socialized fantasy creates distance between the white boy and the brown girl:

Then I felt it, wet and grainy against my face, like a dog’s kiss, but not a dog. It was Nicholas’s tongue against my cheek, and I opened my eyes to see him chuckling over me.

“You have a mustache.”

“Shut up,” I said, rolling over to hide my stinging eyes. I tried to get up, but he pulled me back down.

He whispered, “I like it. It makes you look dirty, like I could lick you clean.” (*Caucasia* 200)

An embedded white gaze constructs the nonwhite persona. It controls the white character’s perception, particularly in the fetishization of female facial hair. During an examination of the codes that govern appearance, desire, and deviancy in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Garden of Eden* and *To Have and Have Not*, Toni Morrison illuminates the forbidden taboo of blackness. She documents the way that white characters come to fetishize darkness in one story, while they contrarily seem repulsed by blackness in another. The difference, what makes blackness occasionally attractive but otherwise repugnant, appears to reside in a “voluptuous illegality,” the thrill of

consuming the forbidden fruit of black deviancy (Morrison 87). This same thrill shapes Nicholas' fixation on Birdie's upper lip. A "mustache" is a traditional marker of masculinity (*Caucasia* 200). On a female character, this feature would normally undermine the certainty of gender differences and confuse a character's identity, thereby conveying an intensely uncomfortable undesirability. However, in the fantasy of Pocahontas, a "mustache" seems to heighten the thrill of deviancy. It provides a dark taboo, which inflates the forbidden undertone of encounter. Rather than marking a character for avoidance, this female "mustache" confers an alien exoticism upon the object of fantasy, further displacing the object character's own identity.

Such difference not only excites the white gaze, it stirs desire. Senna's Nicholas displays a similar logic of acquisition to Hemingway's Catherine.<sup>4</sup> The opposing traits of "dirty" and "clean" further construct the nonwhite persona. Charles Mills observes that American social and political systems view nonwhites as "incarnating wildness and wilderness in their person" (87). In this vein, "dirty" invokes a kind of wilderness in the nonwhite body and, specifically, the female mustache (*Caucasia* 200). Moreover, the text's phrasing implies an association of "dirty" with the nonwhite persona, encoding wildness as impurity. This connotation sharply contrasts with the trappings of a white middle-class home. Voicing this tension, "clean" calls images of purity and civility to mind. Hence, the dichotomy of "dirty" and "clean" marshals the underlying assumptions of normality to suggest a dynamic that resembles the relationship between a lion and its tamer. It provides the taboo of savagery, a proximity to danger, but with the control of a white master. In other words, the supposed animalistic savagery of the nonwhite persona

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<sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison observes the white, desire-obsessed character of Catherine's quest to appropriate dark appearances as concrete traits in Hemingway's *The Garden of Eden* (87).

elicits exotic desire, rather than fear or repulsion, only with the establishment of white dominance.<sup>5</sup>

Once rendered exotic, the nonwhite persona becomes an object of fixation for the white gaze. Nicholas is overcome by the prospect of consuming this forbidden fruit. His behavior turns animalistic, despite his elite background. A “lick” conveys both devouring and purification. As devouring, this action suggests a symbolic ingestion of the deviancy, an acquirement of exoticism. It displays a racial fetishization by facilitating the appropriation of a reified darkness by the white gaze. As purification, it reinforces difference between the white subject and the nonwhite object, equating the project of racial appropriation to a removal of nonwhite deviancy. In a single term, these components link a white appropriation of exoticism to a destruction of the nonwhite persona. They echo the desire for conquest, thereby revealing a bodily colonization and a role for fetishization in the white normative fantasy.

Moreover, the likening of “lick” to a “dog’s kiss” serves to invert the white invention of savagery upon itself, showing animalistic desire within white behavior. Ordinarily, a “kiss” conveys feelings of affection and emotional intimacy. It would usually suggest a genuine bond between two amorous, familial, or, at least, fully human, partners. However, describing the “kiss” as a “dog’s” conflicts this traditional connotation. “Dog’s” carries animalistic undertones. Though domesticated canines are often considered to be relatively civil as family members, friends, or even coworkers,

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas establishes a physical dominance in relation to Birdie by posturing “over” her and by “pulling” her into the position that he prefers her to take. These actions demonstrate both psychological and physical assertions of superiority, following the incursion of an actor upon an object. They also convey a sense of roughness or near-violence. As a result, they mirror one of Charles Mills’ theses within *The Racial Contract*, which states that white supremacy must be “enforced through violence and ideological conditioning” (81).



they do remain hierarchically below humans. Sharp teeth, fur, and a quadruped gait visually mark dogs in proximity to wilderness, rather than personhood. Seemingly irrational behavior and lacking communication also mark them as animals in human society. It follows that defining a “lick” as a “dog’s” likens a human to the family pet, with all the accompanying undertones of irrationality and unintelligence.

This difference inserts a barrier to full interaction between the animalistic and the human, nullifying all but the purely physical aspect of “kiss.” In a twist, it confers wildness on the white gaze, rather than the nonwhite persona. This suggests that white fixation on the taboo of savagery reveals unhuman thought in the behavior of the white, rather than the nonwhite character. As a result, “lick” comes to betray a loss of self-control by the white character, who is fully consumed by the wild fantasy. Without this control, the fetishization of female mustaches and brown skin collapses, the appearance of white domination evaporates, the lion eats its tamer. Not in the nonwhite persona, but through the white gaze does the danger of savagery cross from illusion to reality.

The nonwhite savage exists only as a figment of the white imagination. It inhabits a perceptive space between the nonwhite individual and the white observer, obscuring visual communication between the two. This image displaces the internal identification of the nonwhite individual with an object of fixation, and it undermines white self-control through a socialized obsession with race. This ultimately diminishes genuine human exchange in subtle and unconscious ways, especially in narrative authority and ownership. The fantasy of racial normality externally defines the nonwhite persona, attaching a false image to bodily deviant figures. It also controls white behaviors and

obsessions in nonwhite presence. As a result, white somatic norms displace racialized individuals in the American social hierarchy, thereby alienating them from civility.

### ***The Stakes of Misidentification***

The fantasy of white superiority displaces personal identities and alters social behaviors. To the white observer, an object image eclipses the nonwhite personality. This effect produces dissonance between the nonwhite person's appearance and internal self. Birdie's thoughts reveal stark contrast to the layers of persona that a white gaze constructs around her appearance. Even as Nicholas' behaviors toward the girl begin to address the construct of Pocahontas, Birdie continues to mediate her particular set of personalities. The tension between persona and self illustrates how the invention of nonwhiteness elicits misidentification.

Birdie tacitly accepts her identities by acknowledging their names. As Senna explains, the girl's names represent tactical decisions, "the self she's chosen" (Arias 449). Even the name, "Birdie," and the identity that it represents are consciously mantled. In New Hampshire, the character's public self, the one that she acknowledges, reflects a white Jewish girl, named Jesse.<sup>6</sup> Ordinarily light skin and straight hair allow Birdie to pass as Jesse without challenge, and none of the white locals suspect her as the black interloper in their midst.<sup>7</sup> Though the girl initially selects her identities, an external image

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<sup>6</sup> I continue to refer to the character as "Birdie" for consistency, even though this name is technically just one of the several personas that she adopts.

<sup>7</sup> However, there is evidence to suggest that the Jewish persona, which Birdie eventually dilutes into a generic whiteness with the declaration, "well, [I'm] not *really* Jewish. I mean, only my dad was, and he's dead," carries its own off-white difficulties (*Caucasia* 247).

eventually overwhelms her choices. An object persona haunts the nonwhite individual, even in passing:

The pictures were horrible, making the Congolese into hideous caricatures, but I laughed anyway at the absurdity of it.

“They’ve made us look like animals,” I said, holding my belly...

He giggled into his hand and said, “You said ‘us.’ You said it made *us* look like animals.” The hilarity of my statement sent him into hysterics, and he rolled over, silently quaking beside me. (*Caucasia* 204)

The white imagination’s opposition between civility and savagery confounds the nonwhite individual. The illustration of Africanist characters appears “hideous.” This description conveys utter aesthetic repulsion. A “hideous” object must be avoided or destroyed, due to its complete undesirability and opposition to decency. In this vein, white body norms define raceless, European features as the standard for visual allure, and they comparatively polarize physical desirability against the nonwhite body. Beauty is whiteness, and whiteness is not African, Asian, or indigenous to the Americas.

A “caricature” drastically exaggerates the cultural and physical characteristics of a subject, representing him or her as the sum of these reified components. This reduction of personality to a collection of differences is usually illustrated for comical effect. It follows that a “hideous caricature” exaggerates the visually displeasing aspects of its subject and rearranges them into a humorous persona. However, the humor of the piece also depends upon the observer. The nonwhite person, who associates with the image’s subjects, may find amusement in the ridiculous and blatant inaccuracy of such animalistic depiction. In this way, the illustration, itself, is seen as “absurdity.” It is funny in an

ironic way and only because it showcases the creator's otherworldly detachment from reality. By contrast, the white viewer might be "sent...into hysterics," overwhelmed by comedy, in response to the illustration's apparent confirmation of his or her preconception of nonwhite wildness. To the white gaze, "absurdity" lies in the situational irony of a nonwhite figure, who naturally harbors a nascent savagery, claiming full personhood. The nonwhite observer laughs at the reality behind the image, but the white viewer snickers at the illusion of persona.

The passer reveals tension between these alternate perspectives. She bears the weight of both, wrestling with the pull of multiple identities. The appearance of whiteness shields her from immediate ridicule, but an internalized blackness highlights the white perceptual dysfunction. The spontaneous line, "they've made us look like animals," betrays the passer's self-image, thereby placing her white persona in jeopardy. "Us" communicates group ownership, and "they" conveys distance. The use of "us" to reference the subjects of the "caricature" reveals the passer's internal association with nonwhiteness, as does the use of "they" to describe the illustration's creators, who are assumed white. The pretense of whiteness balances desirability against the risk of exposure, an intentional fabrication of identity against the constant shadow of racialized persona.

This threat manifests in Nicholas' reassurance, "I was just kidding about you looking colored...You're pretty" (*Caucasia* 205). "Kidding" is often elicited to superficially nullify insulting comments as humorous. This phrase's direction toward appearing "colored" invokes white somatic norming, and the use of humor explicates an oppositional relationship between nonwhite appearance and the attractiveness that

“pretty” conveys. As when viewing the illustration of Africanist savagery, the white observer gawks at the absurdity of nonwhite beauty. He also reveals perceptual contrast between normal attraction and the Pocahontas fantasy’s exoticism. Just as Hemingway’s character, Catherine, seeks a black taboo, Senna’s Nicholas chases the thrill of danger by constructing a persona of Africanist-style savagery around an ordinary girl. The fantasy’s exotic allure constitutes nothing more than a cheap thrill, a quick and dirty diversion from normality. The *status quo* of desirability reasserts itself when the thrill fades. To the white observer, Birdie’s serious beauty rests in her white appearance, not her deviant persona.

A black girl in white skin, the passer observes candid disdain for her true identity. Nonwhite socialization confers an internal outsider status, regardless of any external resemblance to the white norm. Even when she is not specifically targeted, the passer struggles against the crushing weight of the nonwhite persona. She, alone, recognizes the cognitive dissonance between white perception and the individual. In this way, the nonwhite figure must navigate the misidentification of false personas at the peril of losing the self.

### ***Conclusion***

The passing narrative illustrates a social discourse between external image and internal identification. It reveals the way that a white gaze and its judgements function as imaginary devices, rather than universal realities. The complete permeation of racial categorization underwrites the collective validity of a white bodily normality, which governs patterns of inclusion and rejection. However, the establishment of a created

whiteness relies on definition by a created nonwhite presence. Assuming this bodily normality, white observers project revulsion upon the different cultures and phenotypes of persons, who become marked as deviant.

This division may be encoded along lines of civility and savagery, whiteness and nonwhiteness, or a number of other distinctions between familiarity and alienation. The dominant position of white norming in America invents an artificial nonwhiteness around supposedly foreign populations. This persona defines white perceptions and behaviors toward nonwhite individuals. It imposes racist expectations of character and history on these persons, regardless of their actual dispositions. In this way, the invention of persona impairs white rationality with regard to race and displaces nonwhite individuality.

A haunting persona restricts the nonwhite individual's choice of identity. In the white-dominated space of a small New Hampshire town, the character of Birdie intentionally obscures her black inner self behind a white persona. She accepts a fictitious identity and furnishes it with the outward appearance of authenticity. This duality informs her encounters with white fantasies. Birdie chooses to inhabit the role of Jesse because a raceless appearance grants her the means of survival, but she never accepts the image of Pocahontas. Instead, this other persona reimagines Birdie as the object of a white colonial fantasy. In Nicholas' eye, Birdie's dark summer tan marks a significant, phenotypical change. The effect is so strong that it prompts the white observer to notice a deviancy from the bodily norm. A moral cognitive dysfunction, the modern product of historical European domination, subtly alters the white observer's perception. The boy ceases to address Jesse or Birdie as he begins to address Pocahontas. This visual difference erects

an additional, cognitive barrier between the passer's authentic self and her external image.

The fantasy eventually consumes the white perception and behavior toward the object of the nonwhite persona. The particular brand of deviancy that Nicholas attaches to Pocahontas reverses the usual pattern, reflecting an exotic attraction, rather than a savage repulsion. Interestingly, the dissonance between Birdie's internal and external selves continues after the Pocahontas illusion fades. A comic book's illustration of animalistic, Africanist characters elicits laughter from both Nicholas and Birdie. The secretly black Birdie mocks the ridiculous and inaccurate premise of such an illustration, but Nicholas finds humor in the assumed reality of the depiction.

The girl's position as a passer reveals the white gaze's historically maintained detachment from reality. Nicholas remains unaware of Birdie's internal self, just as he fails to see beyond the nonwhite persona. This leads him to define beauty and bodily deviancy, even in exoticism, as mutually exclusive qualities. Whether beneath a wild taboo or an implicit normality, the passer's authentic self struggles against a constructed figure.

The Pocahontas fantasy showcases a reified, but exotically desirable, body. The illustration of Africanist savagery highlights a casual repulsion for a black self. Birdie combats external misidentification on multiple fronts in this confusion of personalities. Moreover, the way that a social fantasy commandeers Nicholas' behavior demonstrates a subversion of self-control for white persons in nonwhite presence. Passers wager their personalities for the incentives of profit or survival. Even if they succeed, they remain haunted by the social baggage of race and the imperative to suppress their authentic

selves. The fantasy invents persona to displace the nonwhite individual in the white imagination. The result produces a collective illusion, which blockades truly equal interaction between the normal and the deviant, the raceless and the racialized.



## Chapter 2: Assimilation and Self-Erasure in Lee's *Native Speaker*

Racial ideology restricts recognition in the American community. It denies Americanness to individuals who do not fit the white somatic norm, even if they are descended from native-born generations. Chang-Rae Lee's *Native Speaker* features an anti-heroic ethnic spy, named Henry Park, who navigates the in-between spaces of racial assumptions. As a professional spy, Henry modulates the tension between his foreign, Korean face and assimilated, rehearsed Anglo voice. Like Birdie Lee in *Caucasia*, Henry Park regularly crosses the borders of race and home as a cultural in-between. However, the tensions between Henry's inner self and outer face are complicated by his professional role as a minority spy. To the dominant white gaze, the Asian is an outsider, foreigner, and infiltrator to the American nation and culture. However, Henry deploys his carefully rehearsed, Anglo-standard voice to assuage this fear. As the embodiment of a model minority, Henry erases his foreignness in favor of behaviors derived from whiteness. He internalizes the ideal image of the white American and pursues this image to appear native. Meanwhile, Henry's Asian face offers assuaging familiarity to the ethnic enclaves of his native New York City. This non-white community accepts the spy unquestioningly, but the white gaze scrutinizes Henry's face for signs of subterfuge. The ironic tragedy of Henry's story results from the spy's betrayal of the so-called ethnics who trust him to the white government that permanently suspects him. Through Henry Park's duplicity, *Native Speaker* illustrates the ways in which assimilation demands self-erasure.

The tensions of American racial identity trade the social capital of faces and bodies in a visual economy. In the “domestic visual economy,” white citizens are constructed as “native,” and thus enjoy the social capital of unquestioned inclusion (Corley 63). To retain its claim to nativism, whiteness creates categories for othered faces to exclude and contain them. In this system, power maintenance creates a scarcity of symbolic, national belonging. The Asian intruder fills a similar role to the Africanist figure in Derrick Bell’s suggestion that American identity and stability derive from “an unspoken pact to keep blacks at the bottom” (152). In Critical Race Theory’s accounting, whiteness designates the black body as the antithesis of white civilization. Hence, Bell’s “unspoken pact” communicates the reliance of whiteness on an invented darkness to maintain its implicit hegemony over national inclusion. In turn, the pact creates an imagined scarcity of legitimate belonging, which compels non-white persons to seek to accrue whiteness. This accrual provides a vehicle for assimilation, the immigrant’s hope for legitimate inclusion. In this equation, the Asian figure appears as a permanent outsider due to the *status quo* of white dominance. Corley observes that the Asian face is constructed as “inescapably foreign” in the racial-visual economy (63). Foreignness haunts the Asian face in the white native landscape, regardless of native-born status. Historically this impulse to quarantine the Asian foreigner from white America has driven several U.S. policy decisions. Most notably, the World War II Japanese Internment attempted to physically contain the descendants of generations of Americans *en masse* due to their supposed threat of espionage. This cultural and political impulse to exclude results from the imagined scarcity of legitimate belonging. The extension of unquestioned acceptance to Asian faces dilutes the power that whiteness holds over

national discourse. In this way, the Asian figure threatens the white nativist myth of homogeneity and so is permanently banished as a foreign presence.

Henry learns to navigate the tensions of American racial identity by trading the capital of one face for the other. His Asian face presents him as a threat to whiteness, but also as a confidant to other Asian-Americans. Conversely, Henry's rehearsed, Anglo-American voice acts as a "linguistically native face" to make him seem familiar, and therefore non-threatening, to the "native" white population (Moraru 77). This "double-bind" reveals that Henry's face and voice speak incongruently (77). Henry's hybridity causes white gazes to misread the spy as a foreigner, despite his status as a native speaker of English and his childhood in the United States. In addition, Henry's "native" voice allows him to accrue verbal whiteness. Because whiteness constitutes the somatic norm, this verbal normality grants the spy some invisibility. Henry becomes invisible by consciously trading the currencies of his foreign face and native voice. His Asian face assuages non-white fears of betrayal, while his native voice assuages white fears of losing power to foreigners. The minority spy inhabits the spaces between foreignness and familiarity.

Public culture and discourse permeate the national literature. Chang-Rae Lee wrote *Native Speaker* in the 1990s. This decade unfolded following the end of decades of Cold War policy and mindset in America. The Cold War mindset polarized U.S. society between supposed patriots and traitors, capitalists and communists, Americans and foreigners. Ju Young Jin observes that this logic "impels minority subjects to choose a side, denying their hybridity and in-betweenness" (226). The heightened demand for allegiance further necessitates the erasure of difference among immigrants, and it throws

non-white bodies into higher contrast with the American norm. The United States widely adopted a “containment culture” to confine communists and other perceived threats to national ideology (237). As the culmination of the racial fear-logic behind the WWII Japanese Internment and the national ideological purges of McCarthyism, the Cold War containment culture divided capitalists from communists, Americans from foreigners. In domestic policy, this concept led the U.S. government to strategically suppress political dissent (237). In foreign policy, it led the government to combat the spread of communism, notably in Korea and Vietnam (237). The combination of racial and ideological purity in the Cold War scrutinized the Asian face as suspect for both cultural and political subterfuge. Especially for the Korean-American Henry Park, this background would demand utter loyalty to the white state over the Asian ethnic community. Ideological deviance, paired with somatic deviance, threatens expulsion from the national community. Survival demands that Henry accrue whiteness through both behavior and mentality. Reflecting the Cold War mentality and history of racial exclusion in America, *Native Speaker* illustrates the bodily threat of expulsion that “un”-Americans face as a result of appearing foreign.

New York City provides the backdrop for *Native Speaker*. This setting symbolizes the cosmopolitan dream, the hope for an America that embraces a plurality of cultures. Christian Moraru argues that Lee’s novel is a turn-of-the-century take on Walt Whitman’s cosmopolitan vision for America. In this vision, American selfhood is “a container of multitudes” and “the terrain on which others do not merely feel at home but also play host for other Americans (Moraru 73). In this ideal, each American is fully included in the national community. Lee offers a glimpse of this connection by describing

both the Puritans and Chinese as “boat people,” immigrating from distant homelands (Corley 68). The Chinese in this consideration come from Lee’s detailing of a version of the *Golden Venture* incident. In 1993, a container ship, named the *Golden Venture*, was carrying approximately 300 undocumented Chinese emigrants when it wrecked off the coast of New York City (61). As Corley observes, “Literally and figuratively, the *Golden Venture* of these hopeful emigrants was broken upon the forbidding shore of New York City” (61). Americans rejected the survivors of the *Golden Venture* incident as foreigners and invaders from a distant shore. In contrast, the same population esteems the Puritans, who travelled to the same shore from similarly distant lands, as national heroes. In reality, the white nativist imagination reads these groups antithetically from one another. To define the Puritans as heroes, the white nativist mind invents the Chinese as villains. To maintain its cultural hegemony, the same mind produces the racial scarcity of national belonging. In a pluralistic America, however, both of the Puritans and Chinese would be united as heroic immigrants.

The Cold War polarization and history of racial containment policies illustrate an America that politically and culturally imposes artificial racial separations. In a local context, the revanchist politics of mid-1990s New York demonstrate the failure of the pluralistic American vision. Corley recalls the case of Abner Louima, a Haitian New Yorker who was brutally assaulted by city police officers in 1997 (66). “Giuliani time,” the police officers’ war cry, terrorized minorities with threat of similar violence and expulsion. This phrase expressed “a politics of nativism,” which blames racially marked immigrants for perceived losses in white middle-class power (66-67). The imagining of “native” Americans as white incited the police officers to violence because it frames non-

white bodies as threats. The politics of nativism reproduce the fear of foreign faces found in the Japanese Internment and the Cold War containment policy. A history of fear and anger toward minorities permeates American politics and culture, and it informs Henry's world. In the comparison different "boat people," white nativism casts Chinese immigrants as invaders but reads the Puritans as heroes. This same norm forces Henry to choose between foreignness and familiarity through his voice and allegiance to the white state. In Henry's New York, racial markers force each person to choose a side. In Henry's America, the cosmopolitan, hybrid person has no place.

### *Choosing a Side*

Childhood homes, schools, and public spaces host sites of assimilation. In these spaces, non-white minds are inscribed with the dominant culture's gaze. The forces of assimilation reify ethnicity, separating and containing white culture from the cultures of the other. They prescribe negative identities, defining the student as foreign and subservient within the white American hierarchy. The non-white student is taught to see himself or herself as derivative of the central white American. This derivative nature enforces the student in a permanent mindset of inferiority. To claim some Americanness from this disadvantaged position, the students follow socially prescribed roles, set forward by the dominant culture. These roles, which Jin defines collectively as "cultural emplacement," seal the behaviors and self-images of minorities into perpetually inferior positions. Constantly performing their culturally emplaced roles and straining to match the white ideal, these "virtual" Americans can never truly attain the effortless normality of their white neighbors. The differences and deviations from the dominant white image

become increasingly apparent with each lesson. The dissonance between performance and internal reality produces an unspoken “existential angst arising from [the minority subject’s] double life” (Jin 225). In the classroom, the house, and his father’s shop, Henry observes the modes of assimilationist visibility and invisibility that make him, in Dennis Hoagland’s eyes, a good spy. He learns that self-erasure is the price of assimilation.

Schools often appear as sites of assimilating and racializing pressures in literature. In James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, the pale-skinned, bi-racial narrator identifies as white and associates almost exclusively with his white elementary-school classmates, until his teacher imposes the label of “black” on him. The label causes an identity crisis, dissociates former friends, and casts the narrator into an in-between space in which few other children choose to interact with him. Similarly, Birdie learns “black”-associated speech and dress to assert her own blackness at the Nkrumah school, and she performs “white”-associated mannerisms and customs at a predominantly white public school in New Hampshire. She seeks to belong by emphasizing either blackness or whiteness, but not both. The pressures to conform and seek a tribe in school socialize minority children to fit a particular role. Lacking roles for the completeness of a multi-racial child, schools force in-betweeners like Birdie to choose one identity to perform. Parikh observes that the classroom offers a laboratory for identity formation, but it also perpetuates the myth of white hegemony: “schools are a ‘contradictory resource’ where students are taught to think of themselves as ‘somebody’ within systems of class, race, and gender that undergird national formations while simultaneously effecting a sense of loss of self” (267). Schools teach minority subjects to assimilate by internalizing

the prerequisite racial *status quo*. They provide the setting for minority children to develop as individuals, but they also socialize these children into racial categories.

Henry learns his place in relation to whiteness and Americanness as a public-school student. In the classroom, the Cold War ideological binary demands that Henry choose between identification with communist or U.S.-aligned Koreans. Reflecting on a school report, Henry muses that his encyclopedia mentioned only two Koreans: Syngman Rhee, the first president of South Korea, and Kim Il Sung, the communist leader. He notes that “Kim [Il Sung] was a *bad* Korean. In the volume there was picture of him wearing a Chinese jacket. He was fat-faced and maniacal. Bayonets were in the frame behind him. He looked like an evil robot” (Chang-Rae Lee, *Native Speaker* 241-242). In the binary logic of the Cold War, American influence is seen as “good,” and any opposing force is “bad.” Quoting Carl Schmitt, Jin observes that “to oppose American global hegemony is to oppose universally good and common interests of all of humanity” (240). The ideological polarity of the Cold War erased ambiguity. It categorized countries into capitalist and communist, friend and foe. Internationally, “American global hegemony” was framed as the antidote to communist expansion. Opposition to American influence signaled association with Soviet power. Hence, alignment with U.S. hegemony could be seen as suiting universal human interests by Western eyes. In the racial-ideological conflation, alignment with white nativism signals loyalty to America, while challenge to this order signals betrayal.

Following the impulse to promote state loyalty, Henry’s American textbook applies the Cold War logic to Korea. It illustrates Kim Il Sung as the “bad Korean” and contrasts him with the “good Korean,” Syngman Rhee, who was the first president of the



U.S.-aligned Republic of Korea. In his report, Henry feels compelled to choose between the two figures. His choice is obvious. The image of Kim Il Sung evokes violence in the form of bayonets, as well as foreignness and ideological antagonism in the “Chinese jacket” that wraps Kim Il Sung’s figure. In addition, Henry freely describes the dictator as “maniacal” and likens him to “an evil robot” (Lee 242). “Maniacal” connotes insanity and instability, discrediting the North Korean leader for opposing U.S. influence. “Robot” dehumanizes Kim Il Sung, casting him as an emotionless machine, while “evil” injects an anti-American moral compass. This inhuman, villainous illustration functions as the extreme pole of white nativist fears. It provides the image that whiteness associates with the broader stereotype of Asians as traitors and foreigners. A “bad” Korean is complicit with the spread of communism and violence in capitalist America, and the most obvious way to spot one is by searching for his Asian face. Without any further description of Rhee or knowledge of the Korean War, Henry’s choice is clear. He must distance himself from the “evil robot” at all cost. Bearing his “foreigner” Korean face, the young Henry needs to accrue as much whiteness as possible to find acceptance among his American peers. Association with the enemy risks social isolation. In this way, the classroom facilitates Henry’s introduction to Korean history via rejection of anti-American figures. It teaches him that erasing undesirable associations is the price of assimilation.

Again, the price of assimilation is self-erasure. The immigrant’s child must shed any negative, “un”-American connotations from his or her vocabulary. As a racially visible “non”-American, the young Henry imprints on the image of the anti-American villain, Kim Il-Sung, and discerns that he must erase any link to the “bad Korean” in his

school report. In front of his mirror, Henry practices his elocution to erase any perceived ‘un’-American accent. In seeking acceptance in the American “melting pot,” the racial minority must eliminate his or her differences from the mostly white ingredients already present. At stake is entry into the American community: perceived foreignness carries rejection.

### ***Learning to Disappear***

Invisibility is empowering. It enables spies to gather information on unwitting targets, escaping suspicion and reprisal. Just as the white, normative body is automatically invisible, the highly visible, non-white body ordinarily attracts attention. Tina Chen notes that the traditional spy’s “fantasy of invisibility” offers liberation from cultural expectations, including “the boundaries of social policy that constrain the rest of society” (645). By making himself invisible, Henry can subvert the racial expectations placed on him by white American culture. His upbringing as a minority, needing to be situationally aware of the expectations placed on him from a young age, actually aids him in this regard. As Chen observes of Henry’s past, “his history as ‘the obedient, soft-spoken son’ within his family and the invisible Asian Other in American society prepare him to move unseen when he wishes” (645). Henry minimizes the threatening and foreign connotations of his Asian face by striving to be a model minority and by modulating his linguistic Americanness. As the “invisible Asian Other,” Henry evades racial scrutiny but retains the internalized foreigner status. He fades into the background of otherness and is overlooked. This forces the spy to compartmentalize his culturally hybrid halves, leaving no room to synthesize them. Henry’s modulations grant him invisibility but cost him the

integrity of an internal self. Though invisible, He remains an Asian Other, a permanent outsider by race and profession. By constantly disappearing, Henry becomes his covers and loses his sense of authentic self.

Henry derives his invisibility through complicity with white nativism. Though he hides behind masks, he is restrained from the full mobility of anonymity by his racialized face. This begins as Henry rehearses his role as the “good Korean” in school. Stemming from this earlier practice, Henry becomes invisible by modulating his face and voice to achieve familiarity with his target community. Playing on the tension between his Asian face, which connotes foreignness, and his rehearsed, native voice, Henry adapts his presence to the target at hand. Though liberating, this invisibility offers only partial agency to the minority spy. Chen argues that Henry is “socially compromised” in his role as a spy (643). Henry remains visible to the white gaze as a somatic deviant, never achieving full anonymity or exploiting the mobility that it entails. The minority spy’s positionality is compromised because his cover is never complete as a result of this racial marking. Despite his “performative forays into the realm of invisibility,” Henry bears the marks of his erasure and the “hypervisibility of race” that underpins his consciousness (646). In other words, a public misreading of Henry, due to racial associations with non-whiteness, moors the minority spy to visibility and self-consciousness as a somatic deviant and foreigner. Henry derives his power of invisibility from racial assumptions. Even when subverting the white nativist gaze, he is permanently bound to it.

Henry learns his place in relation to other minorities by observing his father’s work in the grocery stores. He is primarily taught to see black customers as opponents and black workers as unreliable. In part, this conveyance of prejudice stems from the

stereotypical definitions of the black male form, which is highly visible against invisible, normal white bodies. Charles Mills calls this “the nonwhite body carries a halo of blackness around it which may actually make some whites physically uncomfortable” (51). Asian shopkeepers learn to read the space around the black body fearfully, and to reduce the African-American person to merely the body, through assimilation. Modelling from this racialization, the Asian middle man minority chooses to align itself with whiteness. By erasing the marks of foreignness, such as accents and behaviors, Asian shopkeepers erase their undesirable connotations as much as possible. By adopting white prejudices against black bodies, they gain relative privilege. The Asian immigrants pursue the racial invisibility that they observe in normal white natives, while also escaping the objectified, hyper-visible fate of the black body.

After witnessing Kwang mediate a dispute between a black customer and Korean shop owner, Henry recalls that his father once resisted the dominant dehumanization of black bodies, “For a time, he tried not to hate them... In one of his first stores, a half-wide fruit and vegetable shop on 173rd Street off Jerome in the Bronx, he hired a few black men to haul and clean the produce. I remember my mother looking worried when he told her” (Lee 186). Despite the fledgling nature of his tiny business, Henry’s shrewd father chose to ignore prevailing prejudices against black men in America. However, Henry’s father eventually reconsidered. The workers proved to be unreliable, “they either came to work late or never,” and a violent store robbery left Henry’s father severely beaten (186). The common theme between these occurrences became the black body, as stories of other crimes against Asian shopkeepers blamed the same somatic deviancy for Korean troubles. Racial attitudes offer a convenient explanation for the actions of

unrelated individuals. In this way, the immigrant is, himself, assimilated into believing white American racial assumptions.

Henry's father later displays an assimilated prejudice toward black customers in his stores. This prejudice becomes apparent in the father's antagonistic confrontations with black customers. Henry describes his father's ritualistic vigilance over black customers: "When a young black man or woman came in... he took his broom and started sweeping at the store entrance very slowly, deliberately, not looking at the floor. He wouldn't make any attempt to hide what he was doing" (Lee 185-186). For Henry's father, black customers are now preceded by the "halo" of their bodies. Reifying blackness into a signal of danger, the dominant culture impels the father to take a guard position by the door. As he is "sweeping at the store entrance," Henry's father is not merely cleaning the floor (185). Instead, he is "sweeping" his gaze across the shop, straight toward the activities of his black customers. The father's refusal to "hide what he was doing" telegraphs his intention for the customers note the surveillance. The tension between the pretense and the intention of the act conveys a message, telegraphing to the black body that it is under watch. As the father feigns the motion of sweeping, he locks the black body in his sight, "not looking at the floor" (186). This gaze is distrustful and accusatory. It scrutinizes and perceives only the black body because the body defines, and speaks for, the person. Through his gaze, Henry's father reproduces the nationally prescribed white somatic norm. Despite his own visibility as an Asian immigrant, he reinforces the racial hypervisibility of the supposedly lesser black minority. Fully assimilated into the racial hierarchy and prejudices of white nativist society, Henry's father perpetuates the distrust of blackness that he initially challenged. The father aligns

himself with whiteness to protect his holdings as a shop owner and, implicitly, his relative privilege as a middle man minority.

The economic dance between black customers and the Korean shop owner resonates in Henry's training. However, the dance with white customers provides the key to understanding the power that comes with invisibility. As a young worker in his father's store, Henry discovers that he can make himself invisible:

My father, thinking that it might be good for business, urged me to show [the customers] how well I spoke English, to make a display of it, to casually recite 'some Shakespeare words.'

I, his princely Hal. Instead, and only in part to spite him, I grunted my best Korean to the other men. I saw that if I just kept speaking the language of our work the customers didn't seem to see me. I wasn't there. They didn't look at me. I was a comely shadow who didn't threaten them. I could even catch a rich old woman whose tight strand of pearls pinched in the sags of her neck whispering to her friend right behind me, "Oriental Jews." (Lee 53)

Henry's father initially commands the boy to make himself an exhibition of the model minority. To increase attention on the store, Henry is instructed to "make a display" of speaking well-rehearsed English. By speaking in this manner, Henry would present himself as a prime example of the model minority. His performance of English, illustrated by the hyperbolic image of the boy reciting a Shakespearean soliloquy in the middle of an ethnic grocery store, is intended to attract paying white customers. However, this act also forces the boy into relief as the only native speaker among a stock of non-native and somatically deviant Asian workers. Henry experiences a kind of

Antillean comparison in this moment, conflicted between the “princely” privilege of his speech and the foreignness of his appearance. Speaking English would distance Henry from the other Korean workers, highlighting his cultural hybridity. Henry’s choice to perform Koreanness, rather than whiteness, places him in the opposite role from that which his father imagines. Like the Antillean man, Henry appears white, at least linguistically, when compared to his fellow store workers. However, he becomes one of the foreigners in the presence of white customers. Rather than challenging the white nativist association, Henry makes himself legible, and therefore familiar, by playing into it.

Henry modulates his voice to pursue invisibility. This ability, however, highlights Henry’s relative privilege as a valorized minority. Henry discovers that his legibility makes him unremarkable: “I was a comely shadow who didn’t threaten them” (Lee 53). A shadow is ethereal and transient. It is ethereal in that it cannot be touched, and it touches nothing. The shadow is a ghost, hiding behind an object, unseen by the light. A shadow is transient in that it morphs between shapes and sizes to fit the space that light cannot reach. By likening himself to a shadow, Henry reveals that he actively adjusts his presence to avoid detection. This ability to become invisible by seeming nonthreatening highlights a privilege of the middle man minority status. Whiteness reads Asian faces as foreign, yet valorized in comparison to blackness and other minorities. By enacting his Korean cover, Henry assures the white customer of his harmlessness. In contrast, the white gaze reads the black underclass as inherently dangerous. A performance of blackness in this instance would result in hypervisibility due to heightened fear and distrust by the white customer, rather than complacency. In his comparison of Henry’s

invisibility to the invisibility of Ralph Ellison's hero in *Invisible Man*, Christian Moraru describes the latter character as "a victim of his invisibility," whose indivisibility derives from "otherness" (79, 86). The African-American invisible man is pushed to the fringes of American society due to his racialization. For him, invisibility prevents recognition in society. In contrast, Moraru argues that Henry's invisibility is "sameness-derived" and allows him to leverage his voice and face to belong in different contexts (79, 86). By presenting himself to be legible by the white gaze as Asian and a model minority, Henry projects a kind of familiarity, and therefore un-remarkability, to both white and racialized gazes in different contexts. The Asian-American invisible man's cover as a privilege, whereas the African-American invisible man's is oppressive.

The key to this invisibility is Henry's nonthreatening and neutral presence. However, the performance of this neutrality alienates the spy from his true self. By speaking Korean, Henry fulfills the white customers' expectations of appearance. As long as the patrons believe that Henry cannot understand them, they feel liberated to say or do anything. Conversely, Henry would "blow his cover" and become visible if he were to speak English, an act which would demonstrate comprehension. With his cover intact, Henry observes the white patrons reveal more of themselves than the visible person could. For instance, the "rich old woman" reveals her prejudice toward multiple ethnic groups by calling the Korean workers "Oriental Jews" in close physical proximity to Henry. As a derogatory remark, "Jew" is likely a reference to the stereotype of Hebraic peoples being miserly and opportunistic with money, while "Oriental" attaches the stereotype to the Korean workers. This statement reduces Henry to a reading of his body and voice as foreign, while undercutting the economic success of his family. The white



speaker feels liberated from being understood by the “un”-American object, a liberation which stems from invisibility. As Chen observes, Henry’s angry reaction “finds no release in visible or verbal confrontation” (648). Henry hides his true reaction behind his cover as an ignorant, alien worker. Absorbing the lessons of school and home, where “his mother’s patient example; his father’s stoicism in the face of provocation; the cipheric blankness of Ajuhma” teach him to accept external assumptions of his identity (648). Henry embraces, rather than challenges, white norms. He acquiesces to the white nativist gaze as he submits to his school’s and family’s demands. The suppression of anger maintains Henry’s invisibility, but it divorces his true self from the enacted persona.

By accepting white nativist assumptions, Henry makes himself invisible to the old white woman in the store. He fades into the background noise of the other ethnic aliens. This invisibility grants the old woman her impunity, her license to insult her hosts. However, this security is also illusory. The woman is actually visible, unaware that Henry understands her speech. As a result of his duplicity, the unnoticed Henry gains clear intelligence on the ways in which the customer and the dominant culture read his body. The model minority remains alien and inferior to the white nativist gaze. No amount of self-erasure will grant the Asian minority enough social capital to buy completely into whiteness. Hence, Asians remain a middle man minority, the least undesirable aliens. The spy willfully stitches a costume from the prejudices surrounding him. Henry is barred from the invisibility that comes from somatic normality, so he seeks the cover of racial expectations. Writing himself as the stereotypical foreigner, Henry makes himself legible to the white nativist gaze. He becomes unremarkable due to his perfect match to the Asian stereotype.

Invisibility requires self-erasure. Racial others pursue inclusion by distancing themselves from racial foreignness. This project initiates as schools, and other sites of cultural production, which teach children individuality but also introduce them to racial stereotypes. Invisibility offers liberation from racial expectations, but its mechanism relies on the very assumptions that the misread minority wishes to escape. Like the double function of schools to educate and imprison minority subjects, invisibility both liberates the spy and captures him in various racial roles. As a young worker in his father's grocery store, Henry observes the hyper-visibility that comes with racial "darkness." However, he also discovers the power of positionality that accompanies invisibility. Occupying a precarious role between whiteness and darkness, the Asian immigrant pursues somatic norms that he or she cannot attain. Recognizing his inescapable racialization, Henry chooses to erase the influence of whiteness, rather than his permanent mark of Asian foreignness. He becomes familiar to the white gaze by playing into its prejudicial misreading. As racialization dominates inclusion more broadly, the same assumptions predispose Kwang to trust Henry, despite his espionage. By performing the cultural and linguistic connotations of his Korean face, Henry achieves invisibility.

### ***Conclusion***

As a child in American public school and a worker in his father's shop, Henry learns to abide by the dominant culture. He observes that blackness is hyper-visible in the American racial conscience, but that whiteness is invisible. Henry learns to disappear by erasing his "un"-American associations and by modulating his voice to either enhance or

diminish the foreignness of his Korean face. In the brutal death of his bi-racial son, Mitt, Henry learns that the dominant white myth rejects hybridity and racial in-betweenness. Henry cannot be openly in-between, so he instead modulates his performance of racial expectations to achieve invisibility. Beyond acceptance, invisibility grants Henry the power to infiltrate the conversation about him. These experiences inscribe a map of American prejudices and prescribed roles for Henry to follow. To assimilate and become “American,” Henry must erase his own intentions in favor of the adherence to these culturally emplaced norms. The minority spy’s invisibility flows from his or her performance of race. His limited agency stems from the assumptions that the white dominant culture attaches to him. The double mechanism of becoming American and invisible erases the self, implanting an identity that is derivative of whiteness.

## **Synthesizing Themes: Authenticity Between the Borders of Race**

The racial persona stands between the authentic self and public perception. Throughout *Caucasia* and *Native Speaker*, the assumptions of somatic normality erase Birdie's and Henry's hybridity. Whether multi-racially or multi-culturally hybrid, these characters face reduction into typecast personas. However, these figures leverage their own awareness of this dynamic to become the passer and minority spy. The passer fades into whiteness or off-whiteness by performing the appearance of somatic normality. The minority spy blends into the ethnic darkness by modulating the familiar voice and foreign face. Both achieve invisibility by crafting covers from the assumptions of the dominant white culture. They work the material of the racial persona into purposeful costume. However, both figures fail to express authenticity through performance of invisibility. Performance, itself, requires the suppression of authenticity.

The hybrid person, characterized by multiple racial or cultural readings, performs a persona among both the white dominant culture and the minority culture. In *Caucasia*, Birdie Lee relies on the word of her sister, who the other girls recognize as black, and a cultural and linguistic performance to pass as an insider at the Nkrumah school. Similarly, Birdie relies on her Star of David pendant to confirm her Jewish cover to the white girls in the New Hampshire school. In the first case, Birdie denies her "white" features. In the second, she rejects any hint of her "dark" ones. Likewise, in *Native Speaker*, Henry Park learns to perform Americanness by negatively defining himself against the "bad Korean," Kim Il-Sung. He later learns to perform foreignness by speaking Korean, rather than English, in his father grocery store. This modulation of

speech enables Henry to fade into the background of non-white immigrants, achieving invisibility to the white patrons. In turn, this practice of modulation allows Henry to blend with Councilman John Kwang's Korean household and multicultural campaign staff. The somatic norm categorizes Henry in the same space as Kwang. In addition to their shared identification with Korean culture, the racially defined Asian appearance externally pressures them together. Henry achieves invisibility in the Kwang family due to a shared somatic deviancy. An invented Asianness, a reflection of the racialized foreign face, results in Kwang's ready acceptance of the traitor. In these instances, Henry rejects foreignness to align himself with whiteness, or he denies familiarity to align himself with darkness. He tactically selects the attributes for his legend, but he always denies the parts that detract from his narrative. The mechanisms that empower these hybrid subjects reinforce the boundaries of race. The passer and minority spy cannot present the fullness of themselves among groups of dark and white individuals. Public racial perceptions strip their agency, forcing them into artificial categories. Between the borders of race and familiarity, the hybrid figure searches for others to accept his or her true face.

### ***Passing, Betrayal, and Belonging***

The passer's survival in white space depends on her invisibility. To maintain this mask, she performs the minority spy's key function: she betrays the non-whiteness in her environment. As Birdie maintains her cover as Jesse Goldman, she performs complicity with the racialization of her sister's image. This image manifests in Samantha Taper, the only black girl to attend Birdie's white high school. When Birdie first encounters

Samantha, she notes the marks of blackness and in-betweenness on the other girl. Most of all, the girl's hair catches Birdie's eye, "It tried hard not to be nappy, tried hard to consider itself just a little frizzy, but I saw what was happening in the kitchen of her skull, at the base of her neck – what she tried to hide with scarves and upturned collars" (*Caucasia* 225). In this image, Samantha craves the invisibility that Birdie wears with Star of David pendant. By layering jackets, scarves, and other garments, Samantha attempts to hide her differences from the gazes of her white classmates. Additionally, the narration personifies Samantha's hair in this passage. It suggests an internal struggle between the body's desired presentation and its actual appearance. No matter how "hard" the hair, or the girl, tries, it remains shamefully visible. Crucially, Birdie also discovers a mirroring of Cole in the image of Samantha. In the following breath, Birdie observes that Samantha's skin matches her hair in its ash-covered dryness. Underneath this cover, however, shines "The color of cinnamon" (226). This description of skin as cinnamon parallels Birdie's first impressions of Cole, who also appears "cinnamon-skinned" (5). The two girls appear as sisters, bonded by their in-between, too-dark-to-pass bodies. However, they represent different varieties of in-betweenness. Cole, with her makeover by the girls at Nkrumah, provides Birdie's image of ideal blackness. Samantha, however, reflects Birdie's denial of blackness in her neglected skin and hidden hair. Cole grants Birdie access to black space, but Samantha haunts Jesse as a reminder of the passer's uncertain belonging.

The uncertainty of the passer's cover requires Birdie to reproduce the borders of race, reinforcing the mechanisms of her own exclusion. As Jesse, the passer aligns herself with whiteness by disparaging and excluding Samantha. She mirrors the attitudes of her

white peer group and dissociates herself from Samantha, whose cinnamon skin reminds Birdie of Cole. This internal conflict strains Birdie most when Mona bullies Samantha. At school, Birdie faces a choice to participate in Mona's slander. She watches Mona conjure her most absurd story:

Mona's favorite was that she had seen Samantha get picked up after school one day by her pimp, a "huge black guy with a gold tooth and a Jheri-kurl." When the other kids laughed and said they didn't believe her, Mona would pinken and look to me for confirmation. "Right, Jesse? It's true, huh?" And I would just laugh, a hollow laugh, and look away. (*Caucasia* 253)

Birdie painfully enacts her persona during this encounter. When most of the girls ignore the story as ridiculous, Birdie performs complicity with Mona's Africanist caricature through her "hollow laugh." The laugh maintains Birdie's cover, aligning the passer with whiteness by rejecting darkness. If she were to resist Mona's stories, Birdie would risk her own cover. If she were to dispel the white girl's stereotyping of black men, her own whiteness would be questioned. The choice of complicity divorces Birdie's inner self from her outer persona. It masks girl's true feelings, leaving only a "hollow" act. The passer reinforces the borders of race through her complicity with racial prejudices. She fortifies her temporary invisibility by hardening these borders. However, she also alienates the non-whiteness of her hybrid self.

The hybrid person finds authenticity only among others of similar experience. The life of performance grants these individuals a view between the borders of race. The cinnamon-skinned girls, Cole and Samantha, understand Birdie beneath her persona. In Boston, Cole and Birdie speak in their own language, *elemeno*, and the older sister

teaches the younger the visual and linguistic markers of black culture. This training legitimates Birdie's claim to blackness at Nkrumah. In New Hampshire, Samantha identifies Birdie as a black girl after months of successful passing. This revelation prompts Birdie to flee whiteness and search for an authentic space. The search leads the passer to her aunt Dot, her father, and, finally, to Cole. The first two figures fail to provide a home. Dot rejects Birdie, and Deck disappoints her. However, Cole provides hope. After the sisters contact their mother for a covert reunion, Cole asks Birdie to live in her home. She promises that her corner of California shelters other hybrid people. When Cole describes the local high school, she alludes to a community for Birdie, saying "We're a dime a dozen out here" (*Caucasia* 412). Unlike Nkrumah or the New Hampshire school, California promises the unquestioned acceptance that only comes from others who see through the racial persona. Among others with her experience, the passer can fully belong. Birdie reflects on the prospect following her sister's offer. She thinks, "I saw myself as a teenager in a high school with a medley of mulatto children, canaries who had in fact survived the coal mine, singed and asthmatic, but still alive" (412). In this reflection, Birdie alludes to her father's likening of mixed-race children to "canaries in the coal mine;" early warnings of the state of race relations in America. In her imagination, the other children share the experience surviving under inauthentic racial guises. They know the feeling of performing external identities, which remove them from their true selves. Following this, the canaries' association with damage, "singed and asthmatic," reflects the alienation caused by passing. This passage's conclusion, "but still alive," reveals the children's successful survival. Though damaged, these imaginary peers achieve Birdie's goal throughout the novel. They survive the coal mine and step beyond



the racial persona. Alienated by their betrayals and self-betrayals, these children heal together. Their true faces become their only faces.

The passer lives in constant motion as she crosses the borders of race. She crafts personas and flees discovery. She never belongs in one place. The alienation of the performance from the inner self marks her as a permanent outsider. Birdie doubts her ability to belong. Running from city, to commune, to small town, and from east coast to west, Birdie lives in motion. While under her mother's control, these steps distance the girl from her authentic self. Once Birdie claims her own mobility, the motion brings the girl closer to Cole. When Cole asks Birdie to live with her California home, Birdie expresses uncertainty, "It was still hard to imagine myself settling down anywhere" (*Caucasia* 411). In her reunion with Cole, Birdie finds the one person who fully understands her hybrid condition. However, the experience of passing prevents Birdie from fully committing to Cole's promise. Birdie cannot easily "settle down," ceasing her motion across physical and racial boundaries. Passing alienates Birdie's internal and external presentations of self. Split across the borders of race, the girl finds difficulty in making her true face her only face. Birdie finds a possible home with her sister and the promise of a tribe of other in-betweens. However, she doubts the promise and contemplates another escape. Birdie's experience of passing prevents the girl from believing that she will find acceptance for the fullness of her hybrid self. In every other school, Birdie performs one half of her true self. She never finds the space to synthesize her blackness and whiteness. Instead, these halves compete for hegemony over her identity. Blackness dominates the girl's self-identification, and whiteness dominates her

external perception. The marks of passing internalize the borders of race within Birdie's schema of self. The fragments of Birdie's identity remain alienated from one another.

### ***The Outsider Looking In***

The minority spy's mission inherently requires him to betray the ethnic enclave. Henry, like Birdie, operates complicit with the dominance of white normality. As the spy learns in his father's grocery store, non-white invisibility derives from presenting a non-threatening persona in alignment with the expectations of white observers. Henry aligns himself with whiteness as the professional, minority spy. The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, the client behind Henry's mission to infiltrate Kwang's campaign, represents the containment of minority influence under the racial *status quo*. This pattern follows the sentiment and strategy of New York revanchist politics. As Corley observes, "the INS uses the information provided through Henry's espionage to fulfill the general pattern of immigrant containment, brutalization, and expulsion characteristic of 'Giuliani time' " (67). Rather than as an agent, Henry functions as a tool in the maintenance of white domination. His mission makes him complicit with allegiance to the mythological white ownership of America. The myth of white hegemony, which Corley calls a "despotic and imagined homogeneity," rationalizes ethnic containment through the use of arbitrary national symbols (69). As whiteness acts as a *de facto* symbol of American identity, Henry's allegiance to Hoagland's firm and the INS aligns the minority spy with white revanchist politics. Henry transforms his mapping of the visual and verbal barriers to inclusion in white America into the empowered position of spy. He accrues whiteness as a racial outsider.

This positionality, however, leads Henry to sell-out Kwang and the Korean enclave. As Chen argues, Henry functions as both victim and agent. His victimization stems from the unwanted racial persona that obscures his true face. His agency manifests in the spy's willful complicity with white domination. Though Henry bears the disadvantages of minority status, he also bears responsibility for his actions. According to this argument, Henry "cannot simply refute his acts of disloyalty toward others as performances that have been forced upon him" (Chen 659). Like his father, who exploits younger immigrants' labor for profit, Henry exploits Kwang's trust to align himself with white America. Henry identifies this betrayal as his "ugly immigrant's truth," admitting that "I have exploited my own, and those other who can be exploited" (Lee 319). The ugly truth reveals the spy's willful pursuit of survival and advantage at the cost of selling out others who accept him or who are vulnerable. In addition, Corley observes that the "ugly immigrant truth" implies a claim that "terrorizing and exploiting immigrants is quintessentially American" (75). Henry accrues Americanness by partaking in a tradition of containing and excluding immigrants. He rejects his racialized, Asian foreignness to seek entry into the myth of homogenous white identity. Reading race as a symbol of national inclusion, Henry works to exclude Kwang from entering the white polity to achieve greater relative Americanness. Yet, this action ultimately betrays Henry's own ability to express an authentic self by denying cultural synthesis between his Korean and American halves. Henry's betrayal of John Kwang alienates the spy from his own Koreanness, just as Birdie's betrayal of Samantha alienates the passer from her own blackness.

The vision of an America that accepts hybridity appears in the transformation of Henry's wife, Lelia, from linguistic standard bearer to pluralistic citizen. This transformation occurs toward the end of the novel, after Henry leaves Hoagland's spy agency to settle as Lelia's ESL assistant. This transformation, Moraru argues, creates a space in which whiteness no longer holds hegemony over national belonging. Lelia, the white native English speaker and speech therapist, represents the forces of linguistic homogenization. She imposes the norms of linguistic whiteness on the children of immigrants, erasing their foreignness. This creates more inauthentic performers of Americanness, whose faces speak differently from their voices. In contrast, the transformed Lelia encourages a plurality of speech. Rather than homogenizing, she urges the children to speak authentically. Moraru describes this role reversal as an evolution of the therapist's work: "[Lelia] is still the speech therapist, but her current 'speech work' aims less at 'curing' the non-native speakers, at 'regularizing' the other's English, than at welcoming it as it is into the house of American English and America broadly" (87). By welcoming new speakers into the American home as they are, Lelia extends true Americanness to those who white norms consider outsiders. Unlike Henry, who felt forced to align himself with whiteness, to assimilate, Lelia's students learn to synthesize Americanness into their developing authentic selves. The transformed speech therapist breaks the equation of Americanness to whiteness. Lelia reconceptualizes her place as one of a multitude of Americans, evolving beyond the standard-bearer persona.

In this pluralistic naturalization, Henry's role as helper in this welcoming provides the former spy a way to reconcile his disparate faces. Throughout the novel, Henry modulates the tension between his foreign face and familiar voice. This provides the

minority spy's cover. It also divorces Henry's internal and external selves. As Lelia's helper, Henry collapses this tension. In Moraru's account, Henry rejects white normality:

[Henry] bodies forth a version of English/America himself, is a "monstrous" deformation of what many, Lelia's students included, expect an American to look like while speaking English with a native's ease. But Henry reassures the kids that sonorous and visual dis-figuration is a "normal" figure of the native. In the "aberration," in that which draws attention and *cannot* work as camouflaging legend, the face and the voice are on the same page/face... The monstrous face no longer pretends and so positions itself ethically. Equal to itself, the face can now unite with others in the Whitmanesque house of the nation. (88)

In his costume, a green rubber hood, Henry presents a figure that wildly subverts any expectations of normal white Americanness. However, his carefully rehearsed voice evokes the image of the white native speaker. The monster hyperbolically demonstrates the alienation of face from voice. Made explicit in the costume, the tension provides no possible cover. Instead, it reveals the gulf between non-whiteness and the "normal" image of the white American. Discarding his cover, Henry rejects the mechanism that enables his betrayal and self-betrayal. In Lelia's pluralistic house, Henry finds belonging as he is. Confusion over Korean face paired with a native English voice becomes as ridiculous as a monster doing the same. As the speech monster, Henry performs self-mimicry. He enacts his internal self as his external persona.

Despite this authentic space, Henry remains marked by his performance of whiteness and internalized map of racial boundaries. His betrayal as the minority spy marks him as a permanent outsider. Henry suspects that his time as a minority spy

permanently alters him, narrating that “My years with [Hoagland] and the rest of them, even good Jack, had somehow colored me funny, marked me” (Lee 21). As a “marked” man, the minority spy bears the scars of his repeated alienation from serial identities. The modulation into invisibility leaves “an imprint that cannot simply be shrugged off” (Chen 646). Even after Henry leaves the spy agency to become Lelia’s assistant, he remains marked by the spy’s outsider status. Henry’s role as the speech monster, though closer to authenticity, remains performative. Chen observes that the former spy continues to live tenuously not only in his position as the speech monster, but also in his relationship to Lelia. Opposing Moraru’s interpretation, Chen argues that:

Despite the closure seemingly offered by the ending – Henry’s retirement from the deceptions of espionage signaling the end of the role-playing and the possibility of, finally, being himself – Henry’s desire for solidity, belonging, and a “true” identity remains, at the end of the novel, unfulfilled... Even the “happy ending” represented by his reconciliation with Lelia is unsettled by a game of perpetual pretense: “Now, I am always coming back inside. We play this game in which I am her long-term guest. Permanently visiting. That she likes me okay and bears my presence, but who can know for how long?” (Chen 660; Lee 347)

Moraru argues that Henry’s self-mimicry enables him to finally achieve authenticity. By performing his true face, the former spy synthesizes his Korean and American halves. However, Chen reveals that the performance, itself, maintains Henry’s internalized pattern of racial alienation. Henry fails to create a “true” identity because he continues to play his invented legends. In addition, Henry’s narration of his final arrangement with Lelia as a “game” in which he is “permanently visiting” suggests a need for continued

legend-weaving and performance. He belongs in Lelia's house as long as he meets the speech therapist's needs. Chen's description of this dynamic as "perpetual pretense" reinforces the notion that Henry continues to perform identity in the pluralistic house. Like Birdie, Henry appears to find an authentic space at the end of his story. However, he remains alienated from true belonging by the marks of his performance.

## **Conclusion: Reading America's Hybrid Faces**

Passers and minority spies defy racial norms through their hybrid identities, yet their performances reproduce racial stereotypes. They live between racial categories, and so belong completely to none. They constantly choose between preordained categories in the visual economy. As a result, neither Birdie nor Henry synthesize their racialized fragments into an authentic identity. In *Native Speaker*, Henry's appearance conflicts with readings of his voice. This tension alienates the two halves of his identity, but it also enables him to convince others of his fabricated role-play. Henry's awareness of the disparity allows him to actively modulate his assimilated, familiar-sounding American voice to counteract the suggestions of foreignness and subterfuge that his Asian face broadcasts to the native white population. The modulation of features prevents Henry from realizing authenticity, but it provides the tools for survival. In *Caucasia*, Birdie identifies with African-American heritage early in her story, due to her close relationship to her sister and father. However, she and her sister bond as two sides of a coin – one darker and the other lighter. Birdie is able to convince anyone that she is anything, except what she really is: a hybrid. She is neither completely black nor white. She is not Jewish, Italian, or any other identity that she considers taking upon herself as cover. She is not Indian, Pakistani, or any identity than passers-by would attribute to her, based on their own experiences. Like Henry, Birdie possesses a face that speaks differently from her sense of self. She also attempts successfully and unsuccessfully to modulate her appearance. Unlike Henry, neither the face nor the voice speaks definitively to her sense of self. Either she must marshal them to craft an active, self-aware persona, or she is



passively defined by the assumptions of others. Birdie and Henry operate according to the border of race, inhabiting an in-between space of Americanness. Assumptions of dominant culture and minority cultures, based on appearance, emplace the characters at odds with their identities.

In Senna's words, hybrid children are "canaries in the coal mine." The treatment of multiracial and multicultural individuals acts as a barometer for race relations in the United States. Birdie's hybridity stems from her biracial household and family. Her ambiguous appearance renders her visible in spaces of blackness, while it allows her to blend into the normality of white spaces. Birdie pursues blackness as her true self. She accepts positionality of discrimination because she most identifies with her African-American influences. The passer accepts no single identity into which others cast her. However, she operates as the sum of these cast roles. This life as a persona eventually leaves her unfulfilled. Similarly, Henry lives as the hollow personas that he crafts as a spy. Even after he leaves Hoagland's agency, Henry continues to perform the expectations of his internalized white nativist gaze. Unlike Birdie, however, Henry actively aligns himself with whiteness. He follows path of the model minority by his self-erasure and rehearsal of white standards for inclusion. While Birdie seeks an authentic blackness despite the role's social repercussions, Henry seeks the privilege of a performative whiteness. Ultimately, what passes as an internal sense of self is actually the internalization of racial attitudes. The social map within each character enables deft navigation of nativist white perceptions, but it fails to synthesize the fragments of their heritages. These experiences show that racial and cultural hybridity remains suppressed by the myths of white homogeneity and nativism.

In the field of racial positions, myths of white nativism and cultural homogeneity restrict inclusion to whiteness. Racial triangulation suggests that relationality and comparison occur in strata, which the white dominant culture engineers to maintain its power. Within these dynamics, the racing of somatic norms produces racial legibility through stereotypes. In the case of the model minority, this legibility leads to favorable outcomes in comparison to the black underclass. However, it also maintains exclusion from the racial norm. As the passer plays on racial assumptions, she moves between the strata of the black underclass and the white dominant class. As the minority spy modulates his racial connotations, he moves between the strata of model minority and despised foreigner. Those who fall between the borders of race can operate anywhere, but they belong nowhere. They emulate identities that they can never fully claim. They survive by alienating themselves from the aspects of their bodies and cultures that complicate dominant racial narratives. As canaries in the coal mine, hybrid people embody the state of racial assumptions on American identity. They contain the conflicting multitudes of immigrant, racialized America. The borders that empower passers and minority spies to achieve invisibility also prevent authentic recognition. The borders of race frame the image of the American, trapping authenticity behind racial personas. Until the hybrid becomes face becomes the authentic face, the American cosmopolitan promise will remain unfulfilled.

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