In the Middle, In Between:
Cultural Hybridity, Community Rejection, and the Destabilization of Race in
Percival Everett’s Erasure, Adam Mansbach’s Angry Black White Boy,
and Danzy Senna’s Caucasia

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ABSTRACT

Cultural hybridity, a term first introduced by post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha, has been a shifting and difficult to define concept within academic discourse. My thesis will focus on cultural hybridity as the embodiment of a pluralistic identity that encompasses the characteristics or attributes of more than one culture or race. I will examine three contemporary literary works of racial satire – Percival Everett’s Erasure, Adam Mansbach’s Angry Black White Boy, and Danzy Senna’s Caucasia – that present culturally hybrid protagonists and explore the ways in which these protagonists are utilized to destabilize race. Furthermore, I will demonstrate the tensions that this destabilization creates through community rejections of each protagonists’ hybridity – tensions that become inherent to hybridity itself.

My exploration will include an analysis of the protagonists’ hybridity - the ways in which they do not fit into the existing notions of what blackness or whiteness is - and how this hybridity is marginalized by their communities. Following this, I will explicate the protagonists’ responses to their marginalization – their creation of dual identities or alter egos and the racial/psychoanalytic significance of this process. I will draw upon post-colonial and critical race theory writings, as well as Freudian and Lacanian theory, to frame my analysis. But most importantly, I will draw upon the work of scholars – including Marwan Kraidy, Jopi Nyman, Sabrine Broeck, Pnina Werbner, Peter Burke, and Robert Young – to theorize hybridity within my analysis.

Finally, I will examine the novels’ conclusions, during which the protagonists’ dual identities are forcefully merged, and demonstrate the lack of resolution that this merging creates. This examination will reveal that the community rejections of hybridity
in each novel are, in themselves, impossible to mediate. Thus, I will prove that each protagonist’s hybrid positioning not only destabilizes race by challenging the concreteness of racial categorizations, but that this positioning, and the community’s response to it, also demonstrates the tensions inherent to hybridity itself. In this way, each text undermines the black-white binary, while also affirming the tensions that result from not willfully engaging in it.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background to the Problem

Cultural assimilation, as well as the performativity of race, are issues that have been addressed within both African American literature and American literature as a whole. The central example of this, within African American literature, was the late 19th/early 20th century passing narrative. These narratives told the story of black protagonists with passable (racially ambiguous) features that entered the white world via assimilation and performativity. Nella Larsen’s *Passing* tells the story of Clare Kendry, who passes to gain the power and privileges only afforded to the white world. In Ellen and William Craft’s *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*, Ellen Craft passes as a white man to gain her and her husband’s freedom from slavery. The protagonist in “Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man” passes as white because he can no longer deal with the socioeconomic and psychological effects of racism. These instances of assimilation and performativity were, quite literally, tools of resistance and survival.

Similarly, white interest in black culture and resulting instances of assimilation have been addressed by white American authors. Norman Mailer’s 1957 essay “The White Negro” explores the phenomenon of whites in the mid 1950’s to early 1960’s who adopted black culture and claimed it as their own. Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* connects beat culture with black culture through the protagonist’s partial assimilation into black life. John Howard Griffin’s *Black Like Me* details the author’s experiences disguising himself as a black man and assimilating into black culture.

African American authors have also written about the phenomenon of white assimilation. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* describes the ventures of white women
slumming in Harlem. Henry Dumas’s “Will the Circle be Unbroken” details the journey of a white group of friends into a black jazz club. The out-casted Becky in Jean Toomer’s _Cane_ and Tar Baby in Toni Morrison’s _Sula_ serve as examples of white characters who have been labeled race traitors for living outside of the white hegemonic norm. More contemporary works, such as E. Patrick Johnson’s *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*, explore white assimilation into black culture and the performativity of blackness. Unlike the African American passing narrative, these instances of white assimilation into black culture were not methods of survival or resistance; rather, they were rooted in an element of white privilege, the privilege to *temporarily* venture outside of one’s racial boundaries for exploration and amusement.

However, in the last fifteen years, novels exploring the transcendence of racial-cultural categories have emerged that differ from the above listed examples of assimilation, appropriation, and performativity. These novels, many of them racial satires, present readers with a new category of protagonist – the cultural hybrid. Hybridity, a term coined by Homi Bhabha to describe post-colonial cultural blending, has, in more recent years, been expanded to include those who blur the lines of racial performativity. Now, as contemporary literary works such as those examined here introduce culturally hybrid characters in a social context that is increasingly referred to as post-racial, questions arise concerning the sociopolitical implications of writing about such a phenomenon. Do culturally hybrid characters allow texts to demonstrate the instability of racial constructs? Is it even possible for culturally hybrid characters to exist in a context in which they are not recognized or socially accepted as such? Contemporary
literary works that present readers with culturally hybrid characters must be reevaluated and not treated as simple tales of assimilation and performance; Rather, the characters themselves must be redefined as complex representations of a blurring of the black/white binary – a blurring that entails reinterpreted performances of both blackness and whiteness within one singular body. Furthermore, these characters must also be redefined as testaments to the tensions surrounding hybridity itself – tensions that result from their positioning being inadequately theorized and/or under-recognized by society.

**Statement of the Problem**

What do we know about race? It is generally accepted that race is a socially created construct and is not biological. Before defining hybridity in our given texts, we must first historicize race in American society. David Theo Goldberg attributes the construction of race to the post-modern world. He writes:

[A] refashioning of socioracial histories suggests a response to the controversy over whether racial thinking marked premodern conceptions of self and society, and by extensions whether there is racism in ancient or medieval worlds. Clearly, discrimination of an ethnocentric variety pervaded pre-modern worlds… such ethnocentrisms in some ways served as precursors while failing to amount to modern forms of racist exclusion and subjugation (161).

Goldberg credits modernity as the “crucial point” in which race is given significance and becomes a determiner of power, as achieved through “modern state projects” i.e. processes of government endorsed and institutionalized racism (161). Examples of this range from manifest destiny and chattel slavery to the formation of the Black Codes, Jim Crow laws, and similar legislations. Thus, the “category [of whiteness], a characteristic
cultural/historical construction, is, in turn, achieved through white domination” (Broeck 56). But Goldberg also acknowledges that the formation blackness is not simply reactive to white oppression. He writes:

‘Being black’… should not be thought of as simply reactive, either in a forced or resistant sense… blacks fashion an identity in relation but not reducible to the identity created for them informally in social culture and more formally through state formation (162).

In this way, whiteness and blackness are developed simultaneously but not always reactively. The opposition that exists between them is a result of the conflict between oppressor and oppressed, rather than on of codependent identity formation.

But what of culture? Robert Young calls culture “a way of giving value to sameness and difference” (27). While race is comprised of socially constructed categories that enforce power and domination, culture serves as the group attributes that each race acquires along the way. Acquires is, here, quite literal: “in English, ‘culture’ in its early use was a noun of process” (29). Thus, a race’s acquisition of a culture is a process – a growth and development of group identity. Throughout this process, it gradually becomes unclear whether a race’s culture is solely developed by that group or merely ascribed through the continuity of cultural tradition: “the historical movement whereby the externality of the category against which culture is defined is gradually turned inwards and becomes part of culture itself” (28). In this way, blackness and whiteness develop as opposing cultures, and society is led to willingly ascribe cultural markers to each race, respectively.
In recognizing this, it is also crucial to note that these divisions are nothing more than social constructs: “cultural identities and subject positions have never been inherently pure” (Broeck 53). America’s notions of racial essentialism (the purity of each racial group) are imaginary: “social classes, tribes, and castes have all been ‘deconstructed’ in the sense of being described as false entities” (Burke 1). But, the concept of cultural hybridity, as I address it here, is not a blurring of racial purity; rather, it is a blurring the essentialist racial-cultural categories that we are socialized to define ourselves by.

My master’s thesis aims to examine contemporary literary works that present culturally hybrid protagonists, works that utilize these protagonists to both destabilize race and to demonstrate the tensions this destabilization creates through community reaction. More specifically, I will focus on Percival Everett’s *Erasure*, Adam Mansbach’s *Angry Black White Boy*, and Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*. In each novel, readers are presented with protagonists who are cultural hybrids and do not fit into the existing notions of what blackness or whiteness is, respectively. Each protagonist presents a conflict to the outside world between the physical and behavioral attributes of their assigned race. This conflict creates discomfort among others: “[it] undermine[s] singular, essentialist self-representations,” thus challenging the racial status quo. (Werbner 241). As a result, the aspects of the protagonists’ social/cultural experiences that don’t fit in with previous ideas of blackness/whiteness are marginalized by their communities. In response, the protagonists choose to navigate the black and white worlds via performance, literally creating dual identities for themselves. But in the end, when these dual identities are forced to merge and an “in between” space is established, each story
concludes with both conflict and resolution. In this way, each protagonist’s positioning destabilizes race by challenging the concreteness of racial categorizations themselves, while also addressing the inherent tensions of occupying such a tenuous space.

In each novel, the author creates protagonists who are cultural hybrids; the protagonists’ behavior and experiences are outside of the established norms for their race. This hybridity is a destabilization of race in itself, suggesting that race is neither biological nor cultural; it is not specific to the protagonist’s physical appearance nor is it limited to the expressions of one singular group. The community and the protagonists’ peers are threatened by this destabilization of racial categorizations. They cannot accept or embrace the undoing of a boundary by which they define themselves. As a result, they exhibit one or more of the following reactions:

1. **Violence** - they become angry and reject the protagonist through hegemonic acts of physical aggression

2. **Criticism** - they condemn the protagonist through insults and social ostracism

In response to these reactions, the protagonists then go through a process of racial negotiations, navigating their way, via performance, through the black and white worlds. This navigation is not simply comprised of behavioral shifts; the protagonists literally create separate racialized identities:

1. Monk Ellison becomes Stagg R. Leigh (a representation of offensively contrived blackness)

2. Macon Detornay becomes Uncle Macon (a rural white supremacist)

3. Birdie Lee becomes Jesse Goldman (a rural white girl)
In each story, the plot concludes with a lack of complete resolution when these identities are forcefully merged. Throughout the novel, the protagonists navigate between blackness and whiteness but cannot fully occupy these roles at the same time. In the end, when each character is forced to merge their identities and occupy a middle space, they still cannot achieve comfort or acceptance because their positionality has not been adequately theorized by society; there are no socially accessible labels, constructs, or theories by which to view or define culturally hybrid individuals. Thus, the novels are able to undermine the black-white binary while also affirming the tensions that result from not willfully engaging in it. Each protagonist’s hybridity is never fully recognized, addressed, or accepted by his or her community; as a result, tensions surrounding that hybridity, created by the disparity between the characters’ chosen identities and the lack of recognition of or respect for these identities by others, are inherent.

**Review of Literature**

Cultural hybridity is a complex term: “a concept whose definition is maddeningly elastic” (Kraidy 3). Homi Bhabha originally described it as “the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal… the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination” (154). Indeed, through the colonization process, and the resulting erasure of pre-contact cultures, hybridity has been historicized in our global past: “cross-cultural encounters are historically pervasive. Encounters between cultures… have been so pervasive that the self-enclosed culture is in fact a historical aberration (Kraidy 3). But today, hybridity entails much more than just the merging point between colonizer and colonized.
Outside of the colonial context, John Hutnyk’s “Hybridity” acknowledges that the most recent working definition of hybridity “appears as a convenient category at ‘the edge’ or contact point of diaspora, describing cultural mixture where the diasporized meets the host in the scene of migration” (79). Elaborating on this, Marwan Kraidy defines hybridity as any “cross-cultural contact, [that] occurs across national borders as well as cultural boundaries” (5). This hybridizing across cultural boundaries is the most relevant to the analysis of the texts provided here, describing the potential for hybridizing between black and white American culture.

Hutnyk concludes that hybridity does have the power to “undermine [notions of] racialist absolutism and… reassign fixed identity into what becomes merely the jamboree of pluralism and multiplicity” (99). The texts that I have chosen support this claim, through their demonstration of hybridity’s potential to undermine racial constructs. However, they also complicate Hutnyk’s claim, illustrating the inherent tensions created by social/community rejections of pluralism; in many ways, these text demonstrate society’s violent and drastic attempts to maintain racial absolutism in the face of hybrid individuality.

Currently, academia is usefully employing hybridity to provide a “unique analytical vantage point on the politics of culture by acknowledging the intricate and complex weave of any heterodox and heteroglossic community” (242). This perspective provides critics and readers with a useful tool for examining the cultural hybridity of contemporary characters who do not fit into one side of the black-white binary. For the texts that I am examining specifically, Phina Werbner’ assertion is perhaps the most relevant: “intentional hybridity as an aesthetic is inherently political… [and] questions an
existing social order” (137). The texts that I am examining, through their undermining of race and their illustrations of fictional community reactions to this undermining, suggest the political and even anarchic potential of cultural hybridity; the power to question and even overthrow the racial hierarchy through an undermining of its defined boundaries is, as Werbner asserts, “inherently political.”

But despite this growing discourse, there is a lack of critical attention connecting the texts that I have chosen to the concept of hybridity. Rather, the texts are treated simply as satires of race or tales of cultural assimilation.

Adam Mansbach’s *Angry Black White Boy* has received almost no critical attention since its publication in 2005. Stephany Rose’s article “Miscegenated Nation: Adam Mansbach’s *Angry Black White Boy*” is the only full length article addressing the text. Rose argues that Mansbach’s book demonstrates that we live in a neo-racial society rather than a post-racial one; in other words, we live in a society that rejects overt displays of racism but still embraces less obvious acts of covert and institutionalized racism. Through textual evidence, she demonstrates the ways in which the book’s protagonist, Macon, seeks to reject his whiteness and abolish whiteness in general, thus seeking to prove that “whiteness… and race for that matter, is a consciousness and set of behaviors – not only personally ascribed to but collectively attributed” (210). Rose does briefly insinuate both double consciousness and hybridity in Mansbach’s narrative. She writes:

The book’s alternate title, or *The Miscegenation of Macon Detornay*, is aptly illustrated in Macon’s post-modern inversion of Du Bois’s “double consciousness” and in his hybridization of racialism… Detornay has not only
become conscious of the veil that whiteness has created in American society, but he has also become consciously opposed to its existence… Mansbach utilizes Macon, then, as a compact symbol of hybrid identities” (220-21).

However, Rose’s focus is on Macon’s overall goal to abolish whiteness within a neo-racial society. The dual identity and cultural hybridity that this goal creates are treated as merely minor details. I aim to unearth the significance of these factors and the community response to them as a representation of the tensions inherent to hybridity itself.

Percival Everett’s Erasure, although it has received more critical attention than Angry Black White Boy, has been underemphasized as a novel about cultural hybridity and racial performativity. Critics treat the work as a “clear… rejection of artistic conformity… which satirizes publishing industry pressures to write formulaic racial fiction” (Ramsey 130-31). In “Race Under “Erasure” for Percival Everett,” Margaret Russett says that Everett’s satire “looks less like a personal refusal to address racial themes than like a critique of how the demand for authenticity cloaks essentially generic expectations” (360). However, outside of expectations for black authors, these critics fail to address protagonist “Monk” Ellison’s cultural hybridity and the tensions surrounding his navigation between the black and white worlds.

Of all the novels that I am examining here, Danzy Senna’s Caucasia seems to have garnered the most existing scholarship. In “Letting the Body Speak: “Becoming” White in Caucasia,” Brenda Boudreau calls it “a novel which insists that a racialized identity has everything and nothing to do with the body” (59). She posits that “Birdie’s chameleon-like abilities to change color depending on where she is and who she is with
allow her to move between a black and white world, but her racialized subjectivity gets caught somewhere in the middle” (Boudreau 62). Boudreau also recognizes Senna’s problematizing of racial contracts, asserting that her work “as a whole destabilizes the hold of normalizing representations because Birdie can never fit neatly in” (62). Sika Alaine Dagbovie’s “Fading to White, Fading Away: Biracial Bodies in Michelle Cliff’s Abeng and Danzy Senna’s Caucasia” argues that Birdie occupies a white body while still ascribing to blackness: “the white bod[y]… of Birdie Lee misrepresents [an identity] that remains ascribed to, yet not confined by blackness” (93). She maintains that Birdie is forced to navigate between black and white, and these “attempts to construct [her] own racial identity bring pain… [because] Birdie suffers erasure” (i.e. a loss of a clearly defined identity, whether black or white) (100). However, although these analyses come close to addressing the tensions surrounding existence outside of the black-white binary, they attribute these tensions to the biracial body rather than to cultural hybridity. In my study, I will examine these tensions as they relate to cultural hybridity and the social discomfort created by undermining racial categorizations.

Thus, a void exists in the recognizance of each of these works as both destabilizations of race and explorations of cultural hybridity. My thesis will examine these texts with a focus on the protagonists’ cultural hybridity, the destabilization of race that this hybridity creates, and the inherent tensions that exist as a result of social rejection or non-recognition of hybridity as a viable identity categorization.
Theoretical Framework and Methodology

To explore this topic, I will primarily use critical race theory. I will draw upon works that theorize hybridity and historicize race. I will also incorporate elements of post-colonial theory, specifically work by Homi Bhabha, to aid in explaining cultural hybridity and the psychology behind the protagonists’ purposeful identity shifts. In addition, I will utilize psychoanalytic theory, specifically Lacanian thought, to further explain the protagonists’ identity shifts.

Plan of Research

In my introduction, I will provide relevant background information (similar to what is stated here in Background to the Problem, but in greater detail). In chapter one, I will look at Erasure by Percival Everett, evaluating the black protagonist’s cultural hybridity, his labeling by others as not black enough, and his subsequent adoption of the “black” alter ego Stagg R. Leigh. Next, my second chapter will look at Angry Black White Boy by Adam Mansbach, evaluating the white protagonist’s cultural hybridity via assimilation into black culture, his labeling as not white enough i.e. a race traitor, and his adoption of the identity of a “black” taxi cab driver. Finally, chapter three will focus on Caucasia by Danzy Senna, the only story featuring a mixed and female protagonist. Here, I will analyze the protagonist’s cultural hybridity, her performance of blackness, and the subsequent creation of her white/jewish identity Jesse Goldman. In all three novels, I will analyze the ending/point of resolution in which the characters must merge their two identities (their blackness and their whiteness). I will use this analysis to demonstrate each story’s destabilization of culturally defined racial constructs and demonstration of
the tensions surrounding hybridity via community reaction, lack of social acceptance, and hybridity as an inadequately theorized positionality.

**Definition of Terms**

1. **Blackness/Whiteness**: As previously noted, I am treating blackness and whiteness as racial-cultural categories. In viewing culture as both a process and an ascribed tradition, blackness and whiteness are treated, here, as socially defined terms. Since they are socially defined and in a continual process, the definitions of blackness and whiteness are shifting and determined by the established social contexts of each text. In all three novels, the consequences of holding such loosely defined racial-cultural standards are satirically explored.

2. **Rejection of Blackness/Whiteness**: A hybrid individual’s refusal to accept or abide by their society’s standards for blackness or whiteness, respectively.

3. **Cultural Hybridity**: The abandonment of an identity defined by an individual’s prescribed race, and the embodiment of a pluralistic identity that encompasses elements of both blackness and whiteness.

4. **Racial Performativity**: The performative expression, or acting out, of blackness or whiteness, as according to the social definitions of each.
CHAPTER 2: PERCIVAL EVERETT’S ERASURE

Percival Everett’s Erasure, a contemporary satire of race in America, tells the story of Monk Ellison, an African American author who is rejected by the literary community for not being “black enough.” In response to this rejection, Ellison creates a dual identity, Stagg R. Leigh, who acts in accordance with socially accepted, preexisting notions of blackness. Stagg Leigh authors an offensively stereotypical portrait of black life, entitled My Pafology or Fuck; but, to Monk’s surprise, Stagg and his book receive overwhelming praise from both the black and white community. This eventually forces Monk to admit to the world that he, himself, is Stagg R. Leigh.

Critical response to Erasure has been sparse but supportive. Primarily, critics treat the novel as a satire of race and artistic integrity. As such, there is a lack of recognition of other themes addressed in the novel, specifically cultural hybridity. Cultural hybridity – the state of possessing a pluralistic identity that embodies the characteristics of more than one culture – is a central theme in Everett’s text. The story’s protagonist, Monk Ellison, is a hybrid; his racial categorization does not align itself with his individualized chosen identity. This disparity presents a conflict to Monk’s community; they recognize that the physical and behavioral attributes of his positioning do not match, and this recognition creates discomfort among them. Monk’s hybridity effectively “undermine[s] singular, essentialist… representations” of race, and threatens his counterparts who define themselves by essentialist categories (Werbner 241). In response, both black and white members of Monk’s community reject his hybridity through acts of verbal criticism and violence. This rejection leads Monk to create a separate racialized identity, Stagg R. Leigh, to perform within the boundaries of socially defined blackness, eliciting an
overwhelmingly positive community response. However, the novel concludes with a purposeful lack of resolution, as Monk is forced to merge the identities of himself and Stagg and is once again rejected for his refusal to conform. By presenting a protagonist who defies any fixed definition of blackness, Everett is able to effectively illustrate the instability of racial categorizations. However, by demonstrating the social marginalization of a culturally hybrid individual, Everett’s novel also illustrates the tensions inherent to cultural hybridity itself.

Everett begins the novel by establishing Monk’s identity to readers through a series of voiced self declarations; these descriptions – comprised of Monk’s interests, skills, and abilities – are expressed to readers as identifiers that exist outside of race. Everett begins this introduction with Monk’s proclamation of the interests that help to define him. “I am a writer of fiction… a son, a brother, a fisherman, an art lover, a woodworker” (1). The primary introduction ends with the simple statement, “I am Thelonious Monk. Call me Monk” (1). These descriptions demonstrate to readers that Monk defines himself based on a variety of personal interests and professions, and even his own name (a tribute to jazz musician Thelonious Monk), rather than by his blackness. They serve to establish the lack of credence that Monk, himself, gives to racial constructs.

Following this brief introduction, Monk goes on to describe other skills, abilities, and interests. He informs readers that he “graduated summa cum laude from Harvard and hated every minute of it” (1). He “listen[s] to Mahler, Aretha Franklin, Charlie Parker, and Ry Cooder on vinyl records and compact discs” (1).
He is “fairly athletic [but] no good at basketball” (1). These descriptors further allow Monk to define himself as a human and an individual, rather than as simply a representation of blackness.

After briefly establishing his personal identity, Monk explains his racial categorization to readers, first in a very literal sense. He provides a basic description of his physical appearance: “I have dark brown skin, curly hair, a broad nose” (1). He then situates this description within a socio-historical context: “some of my ancestors were slaves and I have been detained by pasty white policemen in New Hampshire, Arizona, and Georgia” (1). This simultaneous combination of physical identifiers, historical foregrounding, and social treatment allows Monk to explicate the socially accepted definition of what constitutes blackness in America. He concludes that because he fits these qualifications, he must deduce that he is black: “so the society in which I am living tells me I am black; that is my race” (1). Everett’s use of “tells” denotes Monks understanding of race as a socially created construct. He affirms this, stating: “I don’t believe in race. I believe there are people who will shoot me or hang me or cheat me and try to stop me because they do believe in race, because of my brown skin, curly hair, wide nose, and slave ancestors. But that’s just the way it is” (2) Thus, the society that Monk lives in has “told” him that he is black. He recognizes the reality of their perception, but chooses not to acknowledge the label itself.

It is Monk’s recognizance of his racial categorization that sets the precedent for establishing his hybridity. Everett makes it explicitly clear to readers that Monk is black. However, throughout the novel, he follows this foregrounding of Monk’s race with indicators of a cultural identity – origins, voice, and style – that does not align itself with
the assigned attributes of Monk’s racial categorization. Monk, himself, recognizes and voices the disparity that exists between his identity and the existing notions of what blackness is. This recognizance informs readers of the obvious conflict between who Monk is and what society expects Monk to be.

Monk’s cultural identity is expressed through the circumstances in which he grew up. Monk expresses these circumstances by contrasting the stereotypical childhood of a black man with his own reality: “I did not grow up in any inner city or the rural south. My family owned a bungalow near Annapolis. My grandfather was a doctor. My father was a doctor. My brother and sisters were doctors” (1-2). This declaration establishes Monk’s family’s elevated economic standing and overall position of respect in their community. Monk’s use of contrast places emphasis on the disparity between the expected, often stereotyped, black experience and his own.

But even more prominent than Monk’s origins, is his voice. The voice, a tool for communication as well as a component of personal and cultural identity, is, for Monk, a medium that sets him apart from his black counterparts. Monk first defines his voice, much like he does himself, with descriptors that exist outside of the racial paradigm: “I grew up an Ellison. I had Ellison looks. I had an Ellison way of speaking” (151). But he soon admits that he is aware of his voice, and in the difference between the ways in which he and other black men are comfortable communicating. Everett writes:

I could never talk the talk… I remember the words, the expressions. Solid. What’s happenin’. What’s up? Chillin’… I’d try, but it never sounded comfortable, never sounded real. In fact, to my ear, it never sounded real coming from anyone, but I could tell that other people talked the talk much better than I ever could (166-67).
Thus, Monk confides that he was never able to express himself in colloquialisms and slang particular to the African American community, or more specifically, what society deems the black voice. Again addressing performativity, he acknowledges that this speech sounds forced coming from anyone, but even more so coming from him. In this way, Monk also acknowledges that he makes the choice to not perform this voice. His voice, an “Ellison way of speaking,” is unique to him and does not conform to social expectations of blackness.

Much like Monk’s recognizance of his voice, he also acknowledges that his overall style does not fit in with socially acceptable notions of blackness. He admits that he “is no good at basketball” and “cannot dance” (1). In social interactions with his black peers, he “never [knows] when to slap five or high five, which handshake to use” (167). Overall, Monk recognizes, again, that he cannot perform stylistic expressions of blackness in the same way that his peers can: “I saw myself exactly as I have never wanted, but always did, awkward and set apart” (195). But, although this bothers him as a teenager, it is an individuality that Monk comes to accept and embrace: “no one cared about my awkwardness but me, I came to learn later, but at the time I was convinced that it was the defining feature of my personality” (167). Monk, as an adult, regards his diversions from contrived blackness as a source of individuality and integrity.

It is these departures from the socially accepted definition of blackness, these expressions of cultural identity in conflict with the social expectations of Monk’s racial categorization, that establish his hybridity. Monk is not simply “acting white” i.e. attempting to assimilate, via performance, into white culture. Some of his interests, such as his love for jazz and soul, align him with, albeit out of date, socially accepted
definitions of blackness. Additionally, Monk’s hybridity, as instilled in him through is upbringing and sociocultural experiences, is not voluntarily assumed. Hybridity itself, is regarded more as a conditional identity development than a choice. Sabine Broeck writes:

The question whether hybridity is chosen or imposed, accepted or rejected, is decisive but often remains hidden under a certain aesthetizisation of the phenomenon… and the social positions from where one may or may not feel interpellated… may not to be taken up voluntaristically (50).

Monk’s inability to conform *solely* to contemporary standards of performative blackness establishes his involuntary hybridity.

It is this hybridity that creates discomfort among *both* black and white members of Monk’s community and, as a result, is rejected. The aspects of Monk’s experiences and identity that do not fit in with existing notions of blackness are marginalized by society: thus demonstrating society’s rejection of hybrid subjects and inclination to “fear or condemn them” (Burke 1). Monk is, in a sense, more discriminated against for his hybridity than for his actual racial positioning: “the irony was beautiful. I was a victim of racism by virtue of my failing to acknowledge racial difference and by failing to have my art be defined as an exercise in racial self-expression” (Everett 212). He experiences this discrimination in the form of verbal criticism and violence, directed against him from the black and white communities, respectively.

Everett focuses Monk’s experiences of rejection within the black community as mostly occurring throughout his awkward childhood. In a basketball game, when Monk misses a shot, admittedly because he is contemplating Hegel, the boys that he is playing with chase him away with threats and criticism: “get him… where the hell did you come
from... you’d better Hegel on home” (134). Monk, himself, addresses that his peers’
views of his hybridity were negative: “You know, Thelonius Ellison, he’s the awkward
one. Talks like he’s stuck up? Sounds white?” (167). These criticisms from the black
community are documented as occurring primarily during Monk’s youth for two reasons.
Firstly, as Monk grows older, he becomes less awkward and more accepting of his own
hybridity. Secondly, as an adult, Monk is an introvert and interacts primarily with his
family and the predominantly white literary community. Monk’s family, because of their
closeness to him and their shared experiences with him, are in no position to reject his
hybridity. As a result, the majority of the novel’s documented criticism of Monk’s
hybridity is voiced through white characters.

Monk’s white literary agent, Yul, constantly reminds Monk that his writing is not
“black enough” to sell books. Everett writes:

“You’re not black enough,” my agent said.

“What’s that mean, Yul? How do they even know I’m black? Why does it
matter?”

“We’ve been over this before. They know because of your photo on your first
book. They know because they’ve seen you. They know because you’re black for
crying out loud.” (43)

Yul outlines the expectation for Monk to express himself within the confines of socially
defined blackness, as re-interpreted and articulated by the white community. This view is
proliferated by other white literary representatives and book buyers, who maintain that
“the market won’t support” the non-blatantly black literary voice that Monk uses (61).

Everett’s use of white characters as the most frequent voices of rejection and criticism of
Monk’s hybridity is strategic and ironic. It demonstrates the absurdity of strictly defined racial constructs and their resulting performative boundaries. When the surveyors of a culture are allowed to play a role in defining the people that they can only observe, the entire concept of authenticity is undermined.

Thus, the society that Monk lives in is, as a whole, uncomfortable with the idea of his hybridity. Monk reflects, “Some people in the society in which I live, described as being black, tell me I am not black enough. Some people whom the society calls white tell me the same thing” (2). In this way, Monk’s hybridity is marginalized by his entire community. This rejection of his hybridity, as expressed through verbal criticism and violence, is a demonstration of the tensions inherent to hybridity itself, which I will elaborate on later in this chapter. However, this community rejection also leads Monk to create a separate racialized identity, under the alias of Stagg R. Leigh.

Stagg R. Leigh – with a name derived from bad man Staggerlee of the African American oral tradition – is Monk’s racialized alter ego, a manifestation of the socially defined blackness that Monk cannot perform. Stagg, originally created by Monk during an angry night of writing, appears as the author of “My Pafology,” a narrative that seems to be stream of consciousness in its inception. Everett writes:

The pain started in my feet and coursed through my legs, up my spine and into my brain and I remembered passages of Native Son and The Color Purple and Amos and Andy and my hands began to shake, the world opening up around me, tree roots trembling on the ground outside, people in the street shouting dint, ax, fo, sreet, and fahvre! and I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn’t sound like that, that my mother didn’t sound like that, that my father didn’t sound like
that and I imagined myself sitting on a park bench counting the knives in my switchblade collection and a man came up to me and he asked me what I was doing and my mouth opened and I couldn’t help what came out, ‘Why fo you be axin?’ I put a page in my father’s old manual typewriters. I wrote this novel, a book on which I knew I could never put my name. (61-2).

Everett writes this critical passage, which details the creation of Stagg R. Leigh, in a style that indicates Monk’s erratic state. His employment of a single run-on sentence and repetition of “and” between clauses denotes a sense of uncontrolled and uncensored release. Thus, Everett makes it clear that Monk’s writing of “My Pafology” is not a premeditated, controlled, or meticulous act. Rather, Monk enters into a manic state, and creates the narrative as a vehicle to release his repressed thoughts and emotions. Monk’s repressed thoughts become an determiner of identity, creating a new consciousness: “repression… the expunging from consciousness… doesn’t eliminate [these thoughts]. Rather, it gives them force by making them the organizers of our current experience” (Tyson 13). But Monk’s release does not simply give voice to what he has repressed; it also creates a separate identity for those repressed elements of his subconscious to be attributed to. In the midst of his erratic rant, Monk carefully notes that “I knew I could never put my name [on “My Pafology”]. Thus, Monk does not simply release his anger, he creates a separate identity to own and develop that anger, and most importantly, to communicate that anger to others.

Unlike Monk, Stagg is a symbolic expression of unadulterated preconceptions of blackness. This is first communicated through his outward appearance. When
contemplating how to dress Stagg, Monk is initially unsure how to present blackness to the world. Everett writes:

Stagg was a little nervous about the lunch and so he spent extra time preparing. He stood in front of the bathroom mirror and practiced frowning, carving a furrow into his forehead, above the bridge of his nose… Should he wear knob-toed shoes? Sneakers? County jail flip-flops? He decided on brown weejuns, khakis, and a white shirt with blue stripes and a button down collar. The clothes were available (216).

This description demonstrates Monk’s own lack of knowledge regarding the accepted black aesthetic. In the end, he presents Stagg in Monk’s everyday clothes, because they are “available”. But, most notably, Stagg must “practice” frowning, a gesture that does not come naturally to Monk. In this way, he presents black masculinity to the world as a positionality dominated by the presence of anger and aggression.

But as Stagg’s identity evolves, so does his appearance. When preparing for interviews, Monk’s agent asks him, “what are you going to do? Dress up like a pimp or something?” Monk replies, “No, I’ll just put on some dark glasses and be real quiet. How’s that?” (209). This outward guise of dark clothing and sunglasses, directly paralleling Richard Wright’s “Rhinehart the Runner” from *Invisible Man*, allows Stagg to pass by his colleagues at close proximity, unnoticed (245). It eventually becomes an expression of blackness itself: “Stagg Leigh is black from toe to top of head, from shoulder to shoulder, from now until both ends of time” (245).

However, Stagg R. Leigh’s presentation of blackness, as expressed in his outward appearance, is *not* aided by an alteration to Monk’s normal speaking voice. When
creating Stagg, Monk makes the purposeful decision to not speak in dialect, motivated by his disgust at the dialect heavy urban fiction that he despises. Stagg speaks to a representative of the publishing company in a voice not dissimilar to Monk’s own: “[the publisher] was surprised, if not put off by my diction, being not at all what she expected. I wasn’t going to put on an act for her” (156). When Stagg meets the head publisher, Wiley Morgenstein, he experiences a similar reaction. Everett writes:

“You know, you’re not at all like I pictured you.”

“No? How did you picture me?”

“I don’t know, tougher or something. You know, more street. More…”

“Black?”

“Yeah, that’s it” (217).

In this way, Stagg’s blackness is not conveyed through his voice. Rather it is primarily expressed through overall dominant and aggressive behavior.

Much like Stagg’s outward appearance, which is defined by a perpetual frown, his behavior is centered around the stereotypical ideal of angry, aggressive black masculinity. After questioning Stagg’s authenticity based on his voice, Wiley Morgenstein’s belief in Stagg’s blackness is reaffirmed through a testament to his aggressive behavior: “‘They say I killed a man with the leather awl of a swiss army knife,’ [Stagg said]… Morgenstein stiffened briefly, then seemed relieved. ‘Here I was about to think you weren’t the real thing’” (218). Stagg handles the publishing house representative in a similar way; he refuses to answer her questions, convincing her of his authenticity based on his hostile behavior: “my abruptness was pleasing to her, if not downright exciting. I detected a change in her breathing” (156). Stagg’s audience is
accepting of his hostility, accepting it as a natural facet of authentic black behavior. In this way, Stagg asserts the authenticity of his contrived blackness, through socially acceptable displays of aggression and dominance via physical appearance and behavior.

In stark contrast to the blatant rejections of Monk’s hybridity, the community response to Stagg R. Leigh’s contrived blackness is embracing. Monk’s peers, both black and white, are relieved to be presented with a man who expresses his blackness in a way that does not conflict with their existing notions of what blackness is. Stagg’s conversation with the representative from the publishing house leaves her “more gung ho than ever” (158). After meeting Stagg, Monk is told that the book’s white publisher, Wiley Morgenstein, loves him: “the guy’s in love with you. He’s scared to death of you, but he said ‘That fuckin’ guy’s da real thing’” (222). Black talk show host Kenya Dunston calls Stagg talented and gives him an “approval, endorsement, [and] blessing” (251). Monk recognizes the overwhelming acceptance of Stagg with dismay and confusion: “there [Stagg] was for public scrutiny and the public was loving him” (248). Stagg’s contrived blackness, in fitting with preconceived expectations for what blackness should be, is welcomed by the community.

But notably, throughout this process, Stagg exists as a separate entity from Monk. This separation is first evident, as mentioned previously, in the dichotomy that is created between Stagg’s contrived blackness and Monk’s natural hybridity. Monk creates a division between Stagg and himself out of the necessity to preserve his own identity: “I refused to admit that I, Thelonius Ellison, was also Stagg R. Leigh, author of Fuck” (233). Monk must let Stagg live to take responsibility for the thoughts, actions, and writing that he does not want to own or have attributed to him.
But this separation is also demonstrated in the division of the actual language that Everett uses to refer to Stagg and Monk, respectively. The separation between Stagg and Monk is apparent when Monk draws the distinction himself, referring to Stagg in the third person. Monk states, before meeting the publisher, that “Stagg was a little nervous about the lunch and so he spent extra time preparing” (216). After leaving the lunch, “Stagg was confused, angry. Outside, he scratched the dark glasses from his face and disappeared” (219). This transition, when Stagg “disappears,” marks Monk’s entrance back into the plot. With the simple removal of Stagg’s dark glasses signaling a change in identity, Monk resumes psychological control over the characters’ shared body. This distinction between two characters occupying one body is much like that of a person with multiple personality disorder; when one identity (Stagg) fades into the background, the other identity (Monk) comes forward to resume control. Monk refers to Stagg in the third person repeatedly, treating him as an autonomous entity.

Albeit, this separation, as expressed by Monk, is first meant as a humorous observation of the situation’s absurdity. He contemplates the boundaries of his charade and “wonders how far [he] should take [his] Stagg Leigh performance” (162). When his editor asks him what he is going to do, Monk jokingly replies, “you mean what is Stagg Leigh going to do” (236). But although Monk does refer to Stagg in the third person, he initially acknowledges Stagg as just a character that he is performing: “I would have to wear the mask of the person I was expected to be” (212). However, as the novel progresses, the identity of Stagg becomes increasingly autonomous. Everett writes:
“Thelonius Monk and Stagg Leigh made the trip to New York together, on the same flight and, sadly, in the same seat. I considered that the charade might well turn out of hand and that I would slip into an actual condition of dual personalities” (237-38)

Monk begins to notice that Stagg is gaining control and gradually becoming a competing force within him: “had I by annihilating my own presence actually asserted the individuality of Stagg Leigh?” (248). It becomes apparent that a textual climax is approaching, as Monk realizes that he and Stagg cannot exist in the same body much longer. Monk contemplates a metaphorical murder of Stagg, but weighs it against the reality that Stagg is not an actual person. Everett writes:

“What would happen if I tired of holding my breath, if I had to come up for air? Would I have to kill Stagg to silence him? And what did it mean that I was even thinking of Stagg having agency? What did it mean that I could put those questions to myself? Of course, it meant nothing and so, it meant everything” (248).

Monk’s very consideration of Stagg’s agency is evidence enough to assert that he has, indeed, achieved autonomy within Monk’s body; he has become an outside entity for Monk to consider, debate, and brood over. Stagg’s gaining of agency gives life to Monk’s separate identity; by achieving the power to silence Monk, Stagg represents the power of Monk’s subconscious, or id, to overrule his superego and his conscious self: “the superego is in direct opposition to the id, the psychological reservoir of our instincts” (Tyson 25). Monk’s repressed thoughts and feelings are voiced through Stagg; thus, Stagg becomes a living embodiment of Monk’s id, and a conflict between the two forces
is established. But this identity, which gives voice to Monk’s id, is also an alter ego in itself, following Lacan’s reconstituting of Freud’s theory: “There you have m, the ego, and a, the other which isn’t an other at all, since it is essentially coupled with the ego, in a relation that is always reflexive, interchangeable – the ego is always an alter-ego” (321). Thus, the fact that the id and superego must always coexist creates the constant reality of an alter-ego – Stagg living within Monk.

But this conflict is not just a battle between Monk’s superego and id. It is also a battle between two ideologies – an identity strictly defined by racial categorization versus an identity defined by hybrid individuality – being waged within his body. Monk reflects on the irony of his dilemma, that a piece of writing that was supposed to free him has actually imprisoned him within a struggle of warring identities: “so I had managed to take myself... reconfigure myself, then disintegrate myself, leaving two bodies of work, two bodies, no boundaries, yet walls everywhere” (Everett 257). Imprisoned by Stagg and at risk of losing himself, Monk makes the decision to kill him.

But this act, in itself, presents a dilemma to Monk. Stagg is Monk’s creation, an entity that shares his body. If he kills Stagg, Monk will also destroy a part of himself. Everett writes:

I had the strangest of thoughts. I reasoned, for lack of a better word, but perhaps no word is better, that if I were to go out into the streets... I might find an individual who by all measure was Stagg Leigh and then I could kill him, perhaps bring him home first for a meal, but kill him after all. But there was no such person and yet there was and he was me. I had not only made him, but I had made him well enough that he created a work of so-called art... I had to defeat myself
to save myself, my own identity. I had to toss a spear through the mouth of my own creation, silence him forever, kill him (259).

Thus, Monk concludes that despite the risk, the only way to defeat Stagg is to defeat himself. But even further, the only way to achieve this is to admit that he and Stagg are the same person. Monk resolves that he must “press [Stagg] down a dark hole and have the world admit that he never existed” (259). In other words, the only way to defeat Stagg is to show the world that they are one and the same; Stagg’s murder will be achieved through a merging of Monk’s and Stagg’s identities.

Everett’s novel ends with a purposeful lack of resolution when the identities of Monk and Stagg are traumatically merged at a literary awards reception in which Monk is the judge and Stagg is the winner. In this way, Everett’s merging of the characters’ identities is first achieved through spatial manipulation. This is the first time in the novel that Monk and Stagg are forced to occupy the same space at the same time. By requiring presence from both identities, Everett places Monk within a situational ultimatum; he must choose to attend the event as himself or attend the event as Stagg.

Secondly, the merging is achieved through a psychotic break that Monk experiences. Monk arrives at the event as himself, but when Stagg R. Leigh is called to the stage, he responds to the call. It is at this point that the characters’ identities are traumatically merged. Everett writes:

“I hope Mr. Leigh was able to make it,” Harnett said.

I stood and began to approach the front of the room. But somehow the floor had turned to sand… My steps were difficult and my head was spinning as if I had been drugged. I couldn’t believe that I was walking through sand, through dream
sand. Off to the right were members of the *Noveau Roman* Society along with Linda Mallory and perhaps my high school librarian. To my left were my father, my mother, and the woman I knew to be Fiona on either side of him and behind them my brother, sister, and half sister. There were others I knew but failed to recognize and they all pressed around me, urging me forward and the camera flashes blinded me and made the room black during their moments of absence (264).

Monk experiences sensory alterations and visual hallucinations: the feeling of being drugged and walking through sand, visions of dead family members and non-present acquaintances, and an overall loss of rationality. These symptoms signal a psychotic break – a detachment from reality that indicates that this merging is traumatic to his psyche. He is psychologically unable to cope with occupying two identities – Monk and Stagg – at the same time. Everett continues:

> The faces of my life, of my past, of my world became real… then there was a small boy, perhaps me as a boy, and he held up a mirror so that I could see my face and it was the face of Stagg Leigh. “Now you’re free of illusion,” Stagg said.

> “How does it feel to be free of one’s illusions?” (264).

Monk witnesses himself as a young boy while simultaneously viewing himself and speaking as Stagg. Thus, it is evident that the two identities have been successfully merged and are acting in tandem.

But, just as the community had previously rejected Monk’s hybridity, they also reject this re-joining of Stagg and Monk, the resurrection of a literally pluralistic identity: “This man needs help” (265). Thus, Everett treats this merging as a metaphorical
representation of Monk’s original state of hybridity. The fractured pieces of a previously hybrid or pluralistic Monk are rejoined, and once again, rejected via critical community response. This conclusion leaves readers without any formal sense of conflict resolution. Monk is still unable to peacefully exist within his hybrid positionality.

As such, Everett’s text becomes a critique of race in two ways. Firstly, by presenting readers with a protagonist who defies any conventional fixed definition of blackness, the text undermines the process of categorizing individuals based on racial constructs through “hybridity’s challenge to fixed categories” (Kraidy viii). Monk foregrounds his racial positioning with descriptions of his physical appearance and the socio-historical context of possessing such physical characteristics. He then concludes that society has assigned him the label of black. Following this introduction, Monk demonstrates the pluralism of his identity throughout the text. Because his cultural identity – origins, voice, and style – is frequently in opposition with a socially accepted representation of blackness, readers are led to question what blackness actually is. It is generally accepted that race is not biological; thus, we conclude that the lines of racial categorization can be drawn based on cultural, or shared in-group, experiences. Monk’s character complicates this assumption. Throughout the text, it is made clear that he is categorized as black, but his character has very few shared cultural experiences aligning himself with the black community. Thus, Monk becomes a living example of the arbitrary and shifting nature of racial assignment.

Secondly, we have established that Monk’s character is a cultural hybrid, and that the instinctive community reaction to his hybridity is vehement rejection. Furthermore, we have established that when Monk becomes Stagg R. Leigh and acts within the
 confines of socially defined blackness, even at a level of performance that is offensively stereotypical, he is welcomingly accepted by the community. This rejection and acceptance demonstrate the tenuous positionality that cultural hybrids must occupy. By presenting an individual’s hybridity as constantly at odds with the society in which that individual lives, Everett illustrates the tensions that are inherent to hybridity itself. Monk’s peers reject his hybridity because it forces them to confront the destabilization of racial categorizations, the constructs that they define themselves by. This reaction is constant throughout the text. Monk, as a cultural hybrid, is never accepted by his community, and this conflict presents a tension that Everett’s novel never resolves. This lack of resolution presents the tensions inherent to hybridity, resulting from community response, as a permanent social response.

Thus, Everett’s text critically interrogates the themes of racial constructs and hybridity. Everett presents readers with Monk, a hybrid protagonist whose racial categorization as black is in conflict with society’s preconceived notions of blackness. Community rejection of Monk’s hybridity leads him to create a dual identity, enacting a performance of contrived blackness in his place. But when Everett traumatically merges the identities of Monk and Stagg, Monk is once again presented to the world as a hybrid, this time with a literally pluralistic identity. The community’s subsequent rejection of this identity allows the novel to conclude with a purposeful lack of recognition; it reinforces the reality of the tensions that are created by social rejections of hybridity. In this way, Percival Everett’s *Erasure* undermines the validity of the construct of race, while also investigating the tensions inherent to hybrid positionality itself.
CHAPTER 3: ADAM MANSBACH'S *ANGRY BLACK WHITE BOY*

Adam Mansbach’s *Angry Black White Boy* is a contemporary satire exploring the influence of hip-hop and black culture on the white community. Mansbach presents readers with Macon Detornay, a twenty-year-old white college student from the suburbs who has built his identity upon hip-hop culture and blackness. Macon’s rejection of his whiteness and self-view as an exception to that whiteness allow him to embody a hybrid identity. But this pluralistic identity presents a conflict to the outside world. Both blacks and whites reject Macon’s hybridity through verbal criticism and acts of violence. As a result, Macon creates a separate racialized identity, Uncle Macon, who embodies the characteristics of extreme whiteness (a racist ideology, a rural dialect, and a privileged detachment from race) and receives a positive community response. But when Macon is forced to remerge himself with Uncle Macon and reclaim his hybridity, that hybridity is once again rejected. Thus, Macon’s character challenges the stability of racial constructs, by providing an exception to them, while also demonstrating the tensions, resulting from community rejection, that are inherent to hybridity itself.

Mansbach begins the novel towards the end of the plot’s timeline, foreshadowing the protagonist’s eminent fall. He includes a prologue that describes Macon riding on a bus, escaping the chaos that he has created in New York City and accepting the conflict of his own hybridity. In this way, Macon’s hybridity is immediately established to readers. The first lines, voiced by Macon, declare, “I’m here to tell the white man in the mirror the truth right to his face. I have seen the enemy and he is me. No competition, I battle myself. I’m Macon Detornay, a white nigger in the universe” (1). This pairing of terms creates a linguistic dichotomy, insinuating that Macon is both white and black at
the same time. Readers are immediately forced to question Macon’s positioning; it is clear that he is white, but his use of the word “nigger” connotes either a racist ideology or a presumptive and unjustified identification with blackness. Macon’s assertion that he “battles himself” further complicates readers’ perceptions and foreshadows the conflict that his hybridity creates throughout the novel. Mansbach concludes this prologue by indicating that he will elaborate on Macon’s identity development and tell “the bone chilling story of how a nice kid from the suburbs got so black and twisted, revolutionary, [and] niggerfied that he renounced his race and became one of them” (3).

The first chapter brings readers back to the beginning of the plot’s timeline, when Macon has just moved to New York City from the suburbs of Boston. This move is critical, marking Macon’s displacement from a predominately white suburb and entrance into a culturally pluralistic environment: “the occurrence of contact [needed for hybridity] often involves movement of some sort” (Kraidy 5). However, Macon’s hybridity predates this move. Mansbach begins the chapter by establishing Macon’s self-identification with blackness, specifically with hip-hop culture. Macon drives throughout the city, listening to classic rap songs on the radio and narrating his personal history as an interwoven part of each track: “he turned the music up, digging the unity of place and soundscape, relishing not just his understanding of each line of Rakim’s verse, but the fact that he could scarcely remember a time when he hadn’t known this shit” (16). By presenting Macon’s childhood memories interwoven with rap lyrics, Mansbach demonstrates Macon’s sense of belonging, his interconnectedness with hip-hop culture and his self-identification with blackness as a whole.
Macon is described as “the New Radicalism… what happens when white people listen to hip-hop” (139). He admits that “it’s hip-hop that makes him hyperaware of personal movement in a way that enhances his cool rather than ruining it” (105). Through this perceived transfer of culture, Macon believes that he embodies not only hip-hop but blackness itself. Mansbach writes:

Every stereotype had rubbed off on Macon; every handshake and shoulder-bang embrace had darkened him imperceptibly, and he’d welcomed the transfer of every myth: coolness, danger, sexual superiority. And reaped the benefits, played both sides against the middle… as the closest thing to black that was still safe, he’d even scooped the occasional white girl looking for a cross-cultural experience (104).

Thus, Macon views his identification with hip-hop culture and his identification with blackness as one and the same, demonstrating “the tremendous power of cross-over culture to undermine both white solidarity” (Ignatiev and Garvey 1). He is “darkened imperceptibly” by each authenticating interaction that he experiences and welcomingly assumes the stereotypical myths of black masculinity: “coolness, danger, sexual superiority”. He even views himself as exoticized by women within his own race.

But it is Macon’s appropriation of blackness that initially creates a conflict within himself; as a child, he is unable to reconcile his own whiteness with the black cultural beliefs that he has adopted. Macon familiarizes himself with the ideologies of the Five Percent Nation of Islam (The Nation of Gods and Earths): “Macon knew the five percenters’ rules as well as any white boy could” (14). These beliefs include the doctrine
that black men are gods, black women are earths, and white people are devils. This ideology torments Macon and threatens his hybrid identity. Mansbach writes:

Were all white people devils? Could there be exceptions? What about that dude Paul C., who’d engineered Eric B. and Rakim’s album? What about Macon, who built with the Gods morning, noon, and night?... Macon had lost sleep looking for a loophole back in the 1990… and wondered what it would take to be scratched from the devil list for good (17).

This is a critical point in Macon’s identity development. To fully commit to hip-hop and black culture, he must submit to their ideologies in totality. But these ideologies seem to directly reject him.

Macon’s first attempt at resolving this conflict is to reject his whiteness, through a disavowal of his white privilege. He temporarily abandons the label of white, and attempts to identify with his Jewish heritage. Mansbach writes:

He’d retreated briefly into his Judaism, *Jewish-not-white*, with its analogous history of victimization and enslavement, but couldn’t make it fit, couldn’t make himself feel Jewish, didn’t know what being Jewish felt like. He tossed the Star of David medallion Grandma had given him back into the dresser after a day. (17)

Thus, Macon seeks Jewishness as an alternative to whiteness, but cannot culturally identify with Judaism. In truth, he identifies with blackness more than whiteness or Judaism, but must find a rhetorical framework that reconciles his whiteness with black culture, a framework in which he can exist as a hybrid.

Macon finds this framework through a reworking of a Five Percenter ideology. Mansbach writes:
He lay on his bed… and went to work constructing a rhetorical framework that would allow him to embrace the Five Percenters’ truths without capitulating his soul. *White people aren’t evil, but evil is white people.* There it was. Simple.
Elegant. True. It bought Macon space to live in, to be special, angry, the exception, the crusader. The down white boy. *You my nigga Macon. You a’ight.* (18).

This passage describes the defining moment of Macon’s identity formation, the ideological breakthrough that creates of a safe space for his hybridity to exist and flourish. By authoring the mantra “white people aren’t evil, but evil is white people,” Macon allows himself the space to simultaneously condemn whiteness and exist as an exception to his own rule. Mansbach describes this revelation as buying “Macon space to live in;” Macon’s ideology, literally, provides a space in which his hybrid positionality can exist without being constantly disrupted by an identity conflict between culture and race.

By providing a positionality for Macon’s hybridity to exist, while also conveniently choosing to not address the continuing reality of his white privilege, this mantra allows Macon to completely disassociate himself from white culture. By regarding himself as “special” and “the exception,” he is able to view his whiteness with an individualism that frees him from any association or affiliation with white privilege or other whites. Macon treats his self-assigned role as the exception to whiteness with great pride. He brags that he “feel[s] uncomfortable if [he’s] not the minority” and that he “even get[s] suspicious when [he] see[s] other white folks poking around black culture.”
He frequently refers to white people as an entity that does not include himself. Mansbach writes:

“All you white kids out there listening to hip-hop,” [Macon] said, “keep in mind that hip-hop doesn’t need you – I mean us. Maybe you should leave it alone. No, wait, keep listening to it but don’t try to rap. No, all right, but don’t listen to it. No, okay, you can do whatever you want, just be respectful and realize that you’re not who it’s for… you didn’t create it and your people are exploiting it” (144).

Macon habitually refers to white people with pronouns that are not self-inclusive – as “you” or “them” rather than “us” or “we.” He attempts to correct himself once, “I mean us,” but then continues, addressing the rest of his accusation to “you” – an entity that does not include himself. His roommate, Andre, attempts to point out Macon’s hypocrisy, asking him, “What’s up with all this ‘white people shit?’ You an undercover brother or something?” (49). Ironically, Macon interprets this skepticism as a part of his own authentication process, telling himself that “black people’s friendships meant nothing unless they were suspicious of whites” (49). Thus, Macon’s hybrid positionality allows him to view himself as an exception and disassociate himself from other whites.

However, it is this self-identification with blackness that makes the hybridizing of white subjects potentially problematic. Sabine Broeck writes:

One could argue that the fascination with hybridity has replaced, in some… the modernist shiver a Josephine Baker could send down white audience’s spines, but with a vengeance. This time ‘we’… may partake in oscillated and invigorating otherness without being called on our biographical and sociographical legacies of racism (52).
Thus, Macon’s detachment from whiteness, and his view of himself as the exception, is also a dangerous detachment from his own white privilege. Although his hybrid positionality is genuine, Macon’s freedom to live vicariously through a falsified sense of otherness leads eventually leads to his demise.

But first, this detachment from whiteness leads Macon to challenge the authenticity of both whites and blacks alike. Because he views himself as an exception to whiteness, Macon can question the sincerity of other whites’ interest in black culture without feeling like a hypocrite. He attends an open mic in the city and is suspicious of the other whites that he sees. Mansbach writes:

This was the desultory multitude who’d never known a world in which hip-hop didn’t dangle from every corner street lamp. When Macon started listening – ten years ago, and a good four or five before most of these kids… information had been precious, limited… This was hip-hop’s whitest generation yet, the growth factor exponential – to the point where a white presence onstage or a white audience majority came as no surprise – and yet they never seemed to wonder what their proper place was” (70-1).

Mansbach narrates Macon’s thoughts in a slightly condescending and presumptive tone. Although he is only twenty years old himself, Macon refers to the other attendees at the show as “kids.” He criticizes the whiteness of hip-hop without an explanation or analysis of his own role in the culture. He questions what “their” proper place is without ever questioning his own.

Macon’s challenging of other whites’ authenticity seems to originate from his view of himself as the only exception. His roommate asks if he “just [doesn’t] like white
people,” and Macon replies ambiguously, “I don’t like whiteness. And as a white person looking for some heroes, it’s lonely out here. The museum’s empty” (50). However, in some cases, Macon chooses to empty the museum himself. He undermines almost all other examples of white exceptions, including the revolutionary legacy of John Brown: “You know why John Brown tried to free those slaves? His old lady left him for a slave owner. The whole thing was a crazy, ill-conceived act of revenge. Fuck John Brown” (51). This fact, in actuality, is totally fabricated. Mansbach alludes to this by Macon’s roommate’s skeptical reaction: “Andre’s eyes were narrow. “I never heard that shit about John Brown”” (51). Thus, Macon’s challenging of other whites’ sincerity, no matter how unfounded, serves as a reinforcement of his own authenticity.

But just as blatantly as he questions whites, Macon also feels entitled to challenge the authenticity of blacks. He attends an Intro to Black Studies class and objects to the professor’s lesson in front of the entire class: “Fuck a culture, Professor Alam” (103). He shows up uninvited to a Black Student Union meeting, and contests the president’s ideas in the middle of her speech. Mansbach writes:

“You know what Frederick Douglass or Fred Hampton or Ida Wells would say?... They’d tell you to get ready for battle, because you’re inside the belly of the beast right now,” Macon revealed. They’d ask if you were ready to die for the cause. Whether you were learning to speak truth to power and how you planned on preventing yourselves from being co-opted by the system you’re becoming more a part of everyday you’re here” (124).

This speech demonstrates Macon’s boldness and lack of recognition of his own whiteness. Additionally, the absurdity of Macon’s claims presents him to readers as an
extreme example of cultural hybridity – an illustration of a white man who is completely and blatantly detached from his whiteness. As a hybrid who identifies with black culture, Macon views himself as a member of the in-group, someone who can rightfully speak both to and for blackness. He feels entitled to speak for the Black Student Union and determine what is right for its members. However, “individuals and social groups partaking in ‘practices of hybridity’… do not, beyond location in time and space, share the same subject positions via their very being supposedly hybridized” (Broeck 50-1). As such, Macon’s entitlement is, ironically, a demonstration of white privilege in itself. As Stephany Rose points out, “who gets to criticize and in what manner, are questions which, when it comes to race, Macon does not thoroughly consider” (Rose 214). Thus, by questioning the authenticity of blacks along with whites, Macon reinforces his supreme authenticity – his role as the one sole exception.

This role, as the sole exception to whiteness, leads Macon to constantly pursue self-authentication, thoughts and experiences that will reaffirm the sincerity of his blackness. This is first expressed through his selective perception. Mansbach writes:

His hand twitched, remembering the feel of the gun, and Macon’s brain secreted an obedient montage of authenticating moments: late-night graffiti missions with Aura, the two of them smearing fame across the belly of the ghetto, and dinners presided over by regal black matriarchs, the mothers of his closest friends – Macon so black he used more hot sauce on his food than anybody, so much that little sisters with antenna-looking braids peered over the table at his plate wide-eyed. Macon kept such snapshots on instant recall; they occupied a larger percentage of his memory than of his life. Their opposites, the times Macon had
felt awkward and abandoned by blacks and whites alike, the awful moments he’d let nigger glide unchecked from his white friends’ mouths instead of punching them in the face – moments when vigilance had been too much of a hassle to disrupt the party for – were stored where Macon didn’t have to see them (50).

Macon controls his thoughts, reliving moments of perceived blackness and suppressing the memories that undermine them. This process of selective perception is critical to the process of sustaining his identity.

Macon also discredits his insecurities through authenticating acts. He walks alone through dangerous areas of the city, to avoid being labeled as the scared white boy: “he wanted to emerge unscathed and be able to say, people are tripping. The park is fine at night. And then he’d never set foot there after dark again (84). He navigates the world in a state of hyper-awareness, going out of his way to avoid being perceived as entitled or privileged: “[he] wondered if [his] posture was too comfortable too quick, a typical cavalier-whiteboy-lounging-cuz-the-world-is-my-domain move… only white kids act like this, Macon had thought” (32). Macon is constantly focused on authenticating himself through behavior that does not indicate overt white privilege.

But, even more often than this, Macon engages in authenticating acts that demonstrate contrived blackness. Rooted in the socially defined conception of race that links black masculinity to danger and aggression, Macon feels the need to be involved in dangerous and oftentimes criminal behavior to “satisf[y] the slice of him that needed to be linked to illegality somehow” (53). Growing up in a suburb of Boston, he frequently ventures to the city on illegal graffiti expeditions in “the belly of the ghetto” (50). During the Rodney King riots, he sets a police car on fire miles from any of the actual riots (94).
Finally, in New York City, his desire for illegality is totally fulfilled when he robs the white passengers in his cab and denounces their privilege: “you’re an ignorant white devil asshole, and you and everybody like you deserves to be robbed every day of your life” (24). For Macon, this robbery is not simply an act of protest or defiance; it is an embodiment of the militant black ideology that he, even as a white man, subscribes to wholeheartedly: “his jaw still hummed with the violence, wit, and ideology of what he’d done. The robbery had been a giant step into himself, into the enormous suit of warrior’s armor he’d always felt it was his destiny to fill” (29). Macon views these robberies as the ultimate acts of authentication, especially since his victims initially describe him to police as a black man: “A tall white woman, twenty-five maybe… [asked Macon] “You haven’t heard it? It’s all over the news. He’s some kind of black militant wacko or something… he robs white people and the cops can’t find him”” (108). Macon wonders if this will be the moment that finally solidifies his separation from whiteness. Mansbach writes:

Did the world merely call traitors to whiteness black? What was the turning point, the secret password, the moment when you were no longer recognized, the instant when your picture faded from the ferry pass and you had to stay on the island of Blackness forever or swim back on your own” (109).

Thus, through selective perception and intentional acts of risk, Macon authenticates himself as a “black white boy.”

However, Macon’s hybridity is defined by the pluralism – simultaneous blackness and whiteness – of his own true identity. Even his authenticating thoughts and acts are efforts to not only assert his blackness, but also to suppress his whiteness. His hybridity is defined by this collection of experiences – the ones that he celebrates and the ones that he
attempts to forget. These experiences, of both whiteness and blackness, create his pluralistic identity, but they also remind Macon of the reality of his own whiteness. Despite his identification with blackness and hip-hop culture, Macon is still entrenched in the insecurities that this whiteness creates. Driving his cab through New York City, he overhears the racially insensitive discourse of two white businessmen and experiences anxiety at the thought of ever becoming them: “The eternal fear of waking up as one of these mix-and-matchable bar-hopping assholes kept Macon clenched with vigilance, tight as a fist” (21). Macon is, in fact, filled with feelings of confusion and anger whenever he recognizes white supremacy as something that feels familiar; he has the same reaction when he is arrested by a racist police officer: “there was a shade of the familiar in the cop’s demeanor, and Macon’s sense of recognition only scared him more” (127). Thus, Macon perceives his whiteness to be a threat to hybrid identity, a reality that holds him at risk of abandoning his hybrid self.

The insecurities that Macon has in his blackness are also admitted to in his own thoughts. He asserts his authenticity then worries over the response that he will receive: “For a hot second Macon panicked: He’d taken it too far… The world would realize just how little he had studied and stab him fatally through the holes in his scholarship… red-stamp INVALID, DISCREDITED across it” (193). He experiences nervousness when faced with potentially awkward “daps”: “Nique’s hand swept toward him and Macon braved a familiar instant of panic before he caught it in a satisfyingly well-executed pound. Botched handshakes made him feel lastingly lame, the flustered white dude stumbling through the Negro Greeting Ritual” (54). He admits that sometimes he must boost his own self image: "part [of my mind] is busy reassuring me that I am cool,"
reminding me of all my black friends, and resenting [black people] for treating me like just another white dude, not realizing how down with black people I really am” (143).

Overall, Macon fears that any failure or awkward moment in his performative blackness will undermine his credibility and expose his true whiteness. It is this fear, a feeling that stems from recognition of his whiteness, that asserts Macon’s hybridity. He identifies with black culture and asserts his own authenticity, but still experiences anxiety regarding the role that his whiteness plays in this process. This internal conflict, between his perceived whiteness and proclaimed blackness, is a continual source of tension for Macon, despite the hybrid space that he has created for himself.

However, the tensions inherent to Macon’s hybridity are, more accurately, rooted in the negative community response that he receives from both blacks and whites alike. This rejection of his hybridity is expressed through verbal criticism and violence. Growing up in a suburb of Boston, the white kids at Macon’s high school criticize him for not behaving in accordance with socially defined boundaries of whiteness. A white classmate confronts him: “you think you’re pretty fuckin’ cool, huh dude? Sitting at the black table, kickin’ it like you’re Vanilla Ice or something… people laugh at you, dude” (20). Later in the novel, a white man calls Macon “a disgrace to the white race” (315). But Macon also faces physical attacks, acts of violence, in response to his hybridity. A white classmate “slam[s] him against a locker” (20). White police officers brutally beat him during his arrest. Mansbach writes:

“I’m asking you Macon, you’re a real nigga, right? You get mad love in the hood… white folks might have a bone or two to pick with you, son,” … he said, “Macing Macon in the face… [the officer] yanked him upright and jabbed Macon
in the gut with a nightstick… “I’ll bet you’re from the suburbs, aren’t you?” (128-29).

The police officers express distaste not just with Macon’s views, but with his conventional whiteness in contrast to those views: “bet you grew up in the suburbs.” They express their anger through a summation of the white community’s view: “white folks might have a bone or two to pick with you.” The white community’s response to Macon’s hybridity is in direct reaction to the way that his hybridity threatens their essentialist self-view – the “suppressed creolization of ‘our own’ [white] culture, the ‘hybrid parts in each of us’” (Broeck 49). Thus, the white response to Macon’s hybridity is intensely, and sometimes even violently, angry, as expressed through community rejection.

But the black community’s response to Macon’s hybridity is also not accepting, as expressed primarily through verbal criticism. Community leaders are offended by Macon’s inclination to speak as a member of the in-group rather than an outsider: “What makes a twenty-year-old white boy such an expert on the black community?... What we need is to be left alone by outside agitators like you” (Mansbach 203). But, more notably, even Macon’s black friends reject his acts of blatant self-authentication. They react in sarcasm as well as anger: “Mufucka got a Rodney King tattoo? Shit, I thought I was black” (48); “So you’re it, huh, dog? The downest white boy in history” (51); Andre ground his teeth until his jaw flared (142); “he has a black friend. Slick how he’d slipped that in there” (33). Their reactions can best be summarized as "amused and disgusted" (124). Blacks, as well as whites, are unable to reconcile Macon’s behavior and self-identity with his racial categorization.
This community rejection of Macon’s hybridity drives the plot towards a climax when Macon establishes a national Day of Apology, during which whites are instructed to apologize for all the wrongs that they or their forefathers have committed. Macon tells white people to “meditate on what it is they’re apologizing for… then follow brother Malcolm’s advice and walk right up to black folks on the street and say they’re sorry. Don’t expect forgiveness; the point is to… take a little bit of personal responsibility” (204-05). But the Day of Apology quickly becomes disastrous, evolving into a full-scale race riot with shootings, murders, robberies, and looting. Even worse, Macon continues to treat himself as the exception and exempts himself from the apologizing process. When black people on the street demand an apology and then attempt to rob him, he refuses to acknowledge his personal debt. Mansbach writes:

“You ain’t gonna apologize, Macon?… We know all about you, big man. And I quote: ‘White people owe a debt and we should be giving back before the people we owe start taking back.’ … So what will you be giving back today? Let’s start with your wallet”…

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” said Macon calmly…“Not everyone’s a foot soldier. The extent to which a beat-down would expand my consciousness is insignificant, I can assure you” (248-49)

This exchange reveals Macon’s detachment from whiteness and, even further, prompts others to view this detachment as hypocritical. Macon’s black friends, Andre and Dominique, react in violent rejection. Mansbach writes:

Here’s what you do, [Macon]. Grab that gun sitting next to your dick and apologize by blowing out your fucking brains. That’s what I wanna see. That’s a
white boy who ain’t going home when shit gets thick… take out the so-called blackest white boy in America, Macon… die by the gun like a real authentic nigger” (265-66).

In this way, Macon’s pluralistic identity – his white racial categorization paired with his self-identification with black culture – leads to an eventual rejection of his hybrid self by both his friends and the community as a whole.

Macon responds to these rejections through a complete and total abandonment of his hybridity; he creates a separate racialized identity, a demonstration of performative whiteness, that he calls “Uncle Macon.” The shift from Macon to Uncle Macon occurs when Macon leaves New York City and renounces his authenticity. Mansbach writes:

“‘I’m giving up,’” [Macon] told the world. “This whole thing was a mistake. White people, if you’re listening, forget it and go home. I was wrong to think that you’ve got what it takes to change… power doesn’t have the power to change, only to self-destruct. If you want to make a difference, kill yourself.” Macon shoved the barrel of the gun into his mouth… he closed his eyes and tried to summon the courage to pull the trigger… he took the gun out of his mouth and dropped his hand. “I can’t do it,” he said flatly. “I’m just as full of shit as all of you… Macon Detornay’s a coward and a sellout” (268).

Thus, Macon admits to being unauthentic, “a coward and a sellout,” and announces that he is “giving up.” He means this in complete literality; Macon makes the decision to give up his blackness and retreat to the white world.

This retreat is evident in two ways. Firstly, it is a literal retreat to a different place. Macon leaves New York City, a diverse environment that embodies hybridity, and takes
a bus to a small town in Alabama. The town that he arrives in is the antithesis of
hybridity – homogenously white, both racially and culturally. But this retreat is also an
abandonment of Macon’s own hybridity, a cultural retreat into whiteness. It is here that
Macon is kidnapped by Burleigh and Johnnie, racist whites. But Mansbach suggests that
this kidnap is purposeful on Macon’s part. He writes:

“There used to be a saying in this town,” [Burleigh] told Macon softly, “no one
comes here by accident… you’d have to intend on coming here,” Burleigh
elaborated, “or you’d never have any reason to so much as get off the bus… I
think you wanted to get caught… “Maybe so,” said Macon” (325-26).

This confirms that Macon is not simply a victim of kidnapping; he is a man seeking
reeducation and a new identity.

Furthermore, when Macon joins Burleigh and Johnnie, he immediately slips into
character as Uncle Macon, “a redeemed sinner, a new fishing buddy who’d been crazy
before, done some very wrong things and seen the error of his ways, taken the beating he
deserved and been reborn” (321). He begins to engage in overtly racist dialogue: ““[I’m
an] ex-nigger lover,” said Macon… “I’ve had a change of heart!”” (305-06); “Boy, I’m
glad to be out here… New York was driving me crazy. Mix a fella up so bad that he
forgets who he is (323); “Burl. I can’t thank ya’ll enough for letting me come down here
and get my head straight… no bullshit, man… I been living with niggers, talking to more
niggers than white folks for years” (323-24). Uncle Macon uses phrases such as “fella”
and “ya’ll,” employing the rural dialect of a southern white man. He uses racially
offensive terminology and tells racist jokes, employing an ideology that is the antithesis
of Macon’s. He even inflicts violence on Leo, a black man that his captors also kidnap:
“‘All right, Uncle Macon,’” said Burleigh… “it’s time to show and prove”… Macon’s four fingers closed… and the blow gathered, become a death blow. Leo’s face was soft and pulpy. Macon’s fist sunk in” (228-30). Throughout these encounters, Macon is strictly referred to as “Uncle Macon,” denoting a purposeful identity shift.

It is also made clear that Uncle Macon’s presence is not simply a performance or a temporary state of being. Macon physically perceives his shift into Uncle Macon:

“Something was spreading through Macon, sliding though his veins. He felt like a high-speed reverse film clip of decay… Macon was being rebuilt, stitched together. Strength rushed to his brain for one last panicked, manic rant” (322). Furthermore, Uncle Macon expresses his intent to start a new life and abandon his previous self forever. Mansbach writes:

You couldn’t fault a man for yesterday if he stood changed and repentant today. He would be Uncle Macon, the best damn Uncle Macon he could be, the citified and backward-thinking but fast-learning, lovable, spineless, chameleon-changing, credit-to-his-race, great-with-the-kids, helpless, have-mercy-on-poor Uncle Macon (321).

Uncle Macon describes this process as “outrunning himself, becoming the New Macon with such ardor and velocity that they’d stop hating him, could not hate him because he was what he should be now” (321). Thus, Uncle Macon is not simply a performance put on by Macon; he is a separate and autonomous being, a complete identity shift from Macon’s old self. This shift can best be described as a transition into an alter-ego in the Lacanian sense; Macon embodies the identity of Uncle Macon – and identity that encompasses both repression and outward identity: “in a relation that is always reflexive,
interchangeable – the ego is always an alter-ego” (Lacan 321). Thus, Uncle Macon is not a new creation, but, rather, a reemergence of Macon’s whiteness – an alter-ego that gives voice to the id.

Unlike the community’s rejection of Macon’s hybridity, the community response to Uncle Macon is accepting. His violent acts of racism are met with “cheers and hollers” as the men affirm, “Way to go Make… I knew he had it in him” (Mansbach 229-30). Mansbach presents this acceptance of Uncle Macon’s whiteness in contrast to the blatant rejections of Macon’s hybridity. Uncle Macon receives acceptance from his peers because he acts within the confines of socially defined whiteness, illustrating the ways in which the “category [of whiteness], a characteristic cultural/historical construction, is, in turn, achieved through white domination” (Broeck 56). Macon’s demonstration of racialized violence serves as a testament to his regained whiteness.

But when confronted with the prospect of proving his whiteness through murder, the identities of Uncle Macon and Macon are forcefully and traumatically merged. Burleigh gives Macon his shotgun and asks him to kill Leo, their black captive: “I’m gonna give you one last chance to act like a white man” (316). This ultimatum forces Macon to emerge and reclaim control over Uncle Macon, as demonstrated through the psychological break that Mansbach narrates. He writes:

“Kill me. The words pulsed in Macon’s clotted, clodding brain. But he couldn’t make himself say it…

[Burleigh] thrust the rifle to Macon’s chest…

“Put him out of his misery and all of this is over, Macon… you’re gonna walk back here a bona fide white man as good as me or any”…

51
Macon clenched his jaw and felt his body come abruptly into focus, tingle and stiffen and belong to him again (330-31).

Macon is able to reemerge and thinks “kill me,” instructing Macon to kill the separate racialized identity of Uncle Macon and reclaim control. Macon then experiences a feeling of his body “com[ing] into focus” and “belong[ing] to him again.” He then aims the gun at Burleigh, and attempts to shoot him instead of Leo (331). Arguably, Macon reclaiming control over his body could be interpreted as an illustration of the total destruction of Uncle Macon. But Uncle Macon is simply an embodiment of the whiteness – the insecurities and repressed memories – that Macon has possessed all along. In this way, Macon’s hybrid self regaining control serves to stifle and repress Uncle Macon rather than kill him. Macon once again regains command over his hybridity, a pluralistic identity that encompasses both blackness and whiteness.

But just as the community had rejected Macon’s previous hybrid self, they also reject Macon and Uncle Macon as one singular identity – the embodiment of black and white. To further establish the community aspect of this response, Mansbach absurdly reenters characters from Macon’s past – his black friend, Dominique and his white doctor, Donner – to witness Macon’s rejection. Almost immediately after their entrance, Macon is shot by Burleigh. Mansbach writes:

“Letting this son of a bitch live would be a crime against humanity”…

“Please, Burl,” [Johnnie] pleaded, “I know you don’t wanna kill a white man.”

“He ain’t been white for a long time,” [Burleigh said]…

Burleigh pulled the trigger, and Macon joined his ancestors (334-35).
Johnnie asserts that Macon is a white man, but Burleigh argues that he hasn’t been white “for a long time,” reinforcing the pluralism of Macon’s identity. His murder is the ultimate act of violence, a final rejection of his non-conformity, as executed by his white counterparts. In this way, Mansbach ends the novel with a purposeful lack of resolution. Although Macon does finally reclaim his hybridity, he is not allowed to live to enjoy it.

In this way, Mansbach’s novel critiques race in two ways. Firstly, Macon’s hybridity serves to destabilize racial constructs. By presenting his audience with a white character who defies all conventional cultural definitions of whiteness, Mansbach forces readers to question what whiteness truly is. It is established that Macon is racially categorized as white. It is also established that his self-view, as well as his actions, are dictated by hip-hop and black culture. It is generally accepted that race is not biological, and is determined by shared cultural or in-group experiences. Macon’s character complicates this assumption, demonstrating the possibility of a white man who is, in many ways, disconnected from his whiteness. This disconnect illustrates the arbitrary nature of racial categorizations.

Secondly, Mansbach’s novel demonstrates the tensions that are inherent to hybridity itself. Although Macon is able to create a rhetorical framework for his hybridity to exist and thrive, this framework is eventually dismantled. His hybridity is rejected, through verbal criticism and violence, by blacks and whites alike. The community is unable to accept anyone who challenges the stability of the constructs by which they also define themselves. As a result, Macon is cast out and creates a separate racialized identity. But when he merges this identity with his own and reclaim his hybridity, he is rejected once again. Mansbach uses Macon’s rejection and ultimate demise as an
illustration of the futility of occupying hybrid positionality. The novel’s lack of resolution reminds readers that although racial constructs are arbitrary, the consequences of defying those constructs are not.

In this way, Adam Mansbach’s *Angry Black White Boy* undermines racial constructs while also demonstrating the tensions that are inherent to hybrid positionality. Macon Detornay is a cultural hybrid, a “black white boy” who embodies both blackness and whiteness simultaneously. His pluralistic identity is constantly rejected because it challenges the boundaries that others define themselves by. Macon responds to these rejections by creating Uncle Macon, a separate racialized manifestation of extreme whiteness. But after merging Uncle Macon and himself and reclaiming his hybridity, Macon is still rejected; he ultimately loses his life for being both black and white. Although Macon’s simultaneous blackness and whiteness undermine racial categorizations, the consequences of that identity proves the tensions, stemming from community response, that are inherent to hybridity itself.
CHAPTER 4: DANZY SENNA’S CAUCASIA

Danzy Senna’s Caucasia is a coming-of-age novel that follows the growth of Birdie Lee, a half-black and half-white female protagonist growing up in 1970’s era Boston. The novel explores Birdie’s racial identity development, as she realizes that, unlike her sister, she does not physically appear to be black. However, Birdie is also too dark to simply be considered white. But while her physical appearance establishes Birdie’s racial hybridity, her insulated upbringing also leads her to develop cultural hybridity and construct an identity that is not defined by racial boundaries. However, this hybridity is rejected by both the black and white communities, as expressed by verbal criticism and acts of violence, throughout Birdie’s childhood. As a result, Birdie creates two separate racialized identities, one that embodies blackness and one that embodies whiteness, to aid her in navigating a world that abides by racial constructs. This differs from code switching because Birdie develops each identity as an autonomous entity, literally creating a separate identity for herself. But when these identities are inevitably and forcefully merged, Birdie’s regains her hybrid positionality. Through these experiences, she recognizes that her hybridity will never be accepted, thus proving the problematic nature of hybrid positioning. But Birdie’s hybridity also challenges the stability of racial categorizations by directly contradicting them. In this way, Danzy Senna’s Caucasia undermines racial constructs while also demonstrating the tensions, stemming from community rejection, that are inherent to hybridity.

Senna begins the novel by introducing Birdie Lee, the story’s protagonist, as a young girl. She immediately establishes that Birdie’s mother is white and her father is black, allowing readers to logically conclude that Birdie is biracial. But Senna makes it
clear that both Birdie and her sister, Cole, as young children, do not have a self-awareness of their own racial categorizations. The sisters grow up in an extremely insulated environment; they are home-schooled and have limited exposure to the outside world (6). As a result, Birdie and her sister build an imaginary world for themselves. They create their own language, “Elemeno,” and even construct a cultural history behind it: “Cole was explaining that it wasn’t just a language, but a place and a people as well. I had heard this before, but it never failed to entertain me, her description of the land I hoped to visit some day” (7). Birdie and her sister’s only understanding of black and white is in the literal sense of color: “The Elemenos, [Cole] said, could not turn not just from black to white, but from brown to yellow to purple to green, and back again” (7). Thus, Birdie grows up as a hybrid in two ways; she is biracial, and her lack of recognizance of race allows her to construct an identity outside of blackness or whiteness. She is member of the Elemenos, “a shifting people, constantly changing their form” (7). Birdie’s only acknowledgement of the outside world is that she senses there is a threat there. Senna writes:

I had some vague understanding that beyond our window, outside the attic, lay danger – the world, Boston, and all the problems that came with the city. When Cole and I were alone in our attic, speaking Elemeno and making cities out of stuffed animals, it seemed that the outside world was as far away as Timbuktu – some place that could never touch us. We were inside the secret and fun and make-believe, and that was where I wanted to stay (6-7).
Birdie is wary of a more complicated life, outside of the culture that she and Cole have created for themselves. However, she is content to exist as she is, in the insulated world of her parent’s attic.

Aside from being “Elemeno,” the only other determiner of Birdie’s identity as a young girl is her sister, Cole. Growing up with a white mother and black father, Birdie does not initially recognize racial constructs or consider her own categorization. Rather, she sees herself in the face of her sister. This identity marker is reflective of the Lacanian concept of the mirror, which demonstrates the ways in which a child can formulate identity from the reactions or mirrored appearance of others: “whether the child sees itself in an actual mirror or sees itself mirrored back to itself in the reactions of [others]… the child develops a sense of itself as a whole as if it had been identified with the whole image” (Tyson 27). Senna writes:

Before I ever saw myself, I saw my sister. When I was too small for mirrors, I saw her face as the reflection that proved my own existence. Back then, I was content to see only Cole, three years older than me, and imagine that face—cinnamon-skinned, curly-haired, serious—was my own… That face was me and I was that face and that was how the story went (5).

Because Birdie identifies with the image of her sister, she does not realize that she may be different until she is cognitively aware enough to interpret other’s reactions to her. Birdie soon realizes that although her sister is “cinnamon-skinned” and “curly-haired,” her own appearance is not the same. As an individual who is not only culturally but also racially hybrid, she cannot “deny or mask [her] hybrid composition… [under] the myth of pure lineage” (Broeck 46).
The reactions that Birdie first notices are the well-intended but misguided observances of her parents. Birdie’s mother comments, “look at her sometime, really look at her… she looks like a little Sicilian” (Senna 27). Birdie notices her father paying close attention to her physical appearance: “My father was looking at me, seeming to ponder my features with a scientific interest” (58). She later realizes that her mother seems to identify more with her than her sister, regarding herself and Birdie as white women” “My mother did that sometimes, spoke of Cole as if she had been her only black child” (275). Thus, through her parents’ comments and reactions, Birdie begins to realize that there are socially constructed differences that exist between her and her sister.

These incidents cause Birdie to speculate over the significance of these differences. Because she does not yet have an understanding of race, her observations are focused on physical facts, such as difference in hair texture and skin tone. Senna writes:

I glanced at my sister’s reflection behind me… Her hair was curly and mine was straight, and I figured that this fact must have had something to do with the fighting and the way the eyes of strangers flickered in surprise, sometimes amusement, sometimes disbelief, when my mother introduced us as sisters (29).

Birdie focuses on simple facts; Birdie’s hair is straight and her sister’s is curly. She later notes, “Cole’s hair was soft and crunchy at the same time, and my fingers got caught when I tried to run them through it. Mine was thick, but straight, dark, like an Indian girl’s head of hair” (54). Birdie also compares her and her sister’s skin tones: [Cole] had turned honey-colored over the summer, though later, in the winter, when she lost her tan, she would turn closer to my own shade of beige (42). But these simple physical observations gain meaning once Birdie learns the difference between black and white.
This understanding comes when she and her sister are entered into a majority black environment at Nkrumah, a “black power school” in Roxbury (41). Newly exposed to the outside world, she encounters the black community’s rejection of her racial hybridity.

Birdie’s arrival at Nkrumah is immediately questioned. She is regarded as an outsider, while her sister is immediately accepted. Senna writes:

The woman looked at us now. She stared hardest at Cole. At eleven, Cole’s tight black ringlets hung around her face in a bob… She had my father’s kinky hair and small, round nose… “is this our new student?”… “Both of them are new students,” my mother said with that edge to her voice. “They’re sisters” (42-43).

After registering, Birdie encounters verbal criticism from her black classmates: “Who’s that?… She a Rican or something?;” “I thought this was supposed to be a black school;” “a boy threw a spitball, which hit [her] square in the forehead. Laughter sprinkled the room. He hissed, “What you doin’ in this school? You white?”” (43). Birdie is still unsure of the meaning behind racial constructs and is confused by the criticism. At the end of class, she participates in the traditional ending recitation and is further criticized:

“My voice quavered: “Black is beautiful?” It had come out more like a question. I heard one boy – the same one who had thrown the spitball at me – say into his cupped hands, “Guess you must be ugly.” Snickers filled the room” (45). Although Birdie is criticized by individual students, the entire class affirms that criticism by laughing and reacting with amusement. Thus, the immediate community reaction to Birdie’s racial hybridity – her claims of blackness paired with her white appearance – from her black classmates is rejection.
At Nkrumah, Birdie also faces an attempted act of violence. In the bathroom, a group of girls threatens her with scissors. Birdie’s sister, Cole, comes to the rescue before the girls fulfill their threat: “I didn’t cut anybody. We was just playing. Just cause she’s white she thinks she’s all that” (48). But these encounters quickly teach Birdie the reason for her rejections – the meaning behind the physical differences between her and her sister; Birdie begins to realize that she is passable as white, or, at least, not physically distinguishable as black.

Birdie also endures numerous instances of verbal criticism from her father’s black girlfriend, Carmen. For Carmen, Birdie’s hybridity is an unwanted reminder of her boyfriend’s past. Carmen accepts Cole, buying her gifts and taking her on trips. But when Carmen meets Birdie, “there was something in her look that made [Birdie] pause – a sort of surprise and hesitation before she attempted a smile and mumbled a lukewarm “hi”” (89). Later, Carmen attempts to humiliate Birdie in public, joking to the women in her beauty shop, “yeah, that’s Cole’s little sister, even if she doesn’t look like a sister” (93). The rejections of her classmates at Nkrumah combined with Carmen’s lack of acceptance finally allow Birdie to see the significance of race as more than a physical reality. Senna writes:

Others before had made me see the differences between my sister and myself – the textures of our hair, the tints of our skins, the shapes of our features. But Carmen was the one to make me feel that those things somehow mattered. To make me feel that the differences were deeper than skin (91).

Thus, Birdie realizes that her sister’s physical appearance is considered black, while hers is not. Even further, she realizes that this will dictate who will and will not accept her.
Birdie is a racial hybrid, too white looking to be considered black but too dark to be accepted as simply white. She quickly realizes that she must abandon this hybridity and, through the formation of a performative identity, choose a race to label herself as.

Since she is in a majority black environment, Birdie naturally chooses to become black. She notes that Cole has already done this successfully: “Cole had already done it. Changed. It had started with the Jergen’s lotion, then with her hair, and before I knew it she was one of the most popular girls at the school” (62). Thus, Birdie chooses to do the same and “learn[s] the art of changing at Nkrumah, a skill that would later become second nature to [her]” (62). She creates a separate racialized identity – an embodiment of the socially accepted definition of blackness.

Birdie abandons her hybridity and embodies a black identity, both verbally and physically. She stops speaking Elemeno and no longer identifies as a member of a shifting people. Her sister instructs her to start speaking in black English: “We talk like white girls, Birdie… We don’t talk like black people. It says so in this article… they have examples in here. Like don’t say, ‘I’m going to the store.’ Say, ‘I’m goin’ to de sto.’ Get it?” (53). Soon, Birdie adopts this new way of speaking: “I went to the window… “I don’t see nothing.” “Anything. You don’t see anything!” [my mother] hissed back from the sofa… she didn’t like my new way of talking” (75-76). Birdie perfects her linguistic performance of blackness through practice and repetition: “I stood many nights in front of the bathroom mirror, practicing how to say “nigger” the way the kids in school did it, dropping the “er” so that it became not a slur, but a term of endearment: *nigga* (63). Thus, through a manipulation of her language and communication skills, Birdie creates a black identity that can speak the part.
But more importantly, Birdie also attempts to mask the physical markers of her hybridity. Senna writes:

I started wearing my hair in a tight braid to mask its texture. I had my ears pierced and convinced my mother to buy me a pair of gold hoops like the other girls at the school wore… with my sister shouting orders to me, I bought a pair of Sergio Valente jeans, a pink vest, a jean jacket with sparkles on the collar, and spanking white new Nike sneakers (62-3).

Birdie braids her hair, to “mask” its straight texture – an effort to disguise her racially hybrid appearance. She buys clothing and accessories “like the other girls at school” wear, to match the appearance of an average adolescent black girl. Through a manipulation of both her speech and her appearance, Birdie creates a racialized identity separate from her hybrid self – one which “mask[s] [her] hybrid composition” by acting within the confines of socially defined blackness (Broeck 46). This separate racialized identity is also an oppositional one. Tatum writes:

Sometimes the emergence of an oppositional identity can be quite dramatic, as the young person tries on a new persona almost overnight. At the end of one school year, race may not have appeared to be significant, but often some encounter takes place over the summer and the young person returns to school much more aware of his or her blackness (61).

In this case, Birdie’s exposure to black culture and the black community’s criticism of her hybridity allows an oppositional identity – one which embodies blackness – to emerge.
Unlike the community’s rejection of Birdie’s hybridity, the response to her singular black identity is accepting: “sometime late that fall at Nkrumah, my work paid off… Maria spoke [to me]. “So, you black?” I nodded, slowly, as if unsure of myself” (63). Birdie’s classmate, Ali, asks her to be his girlfriend. As a result, she is invited to join the “Brown Sugars”, a group her classmate Maria created. Eventually, the entire school accepts Birdie’s blackness, but she is always aware of her other, hybrid self: “Now that I had been knighted black by Maria, and pretty by Ali, the rest of the school saw me in a new light. But I never lost the anxiety, a gnawing in my bowels, a fear that at any moment I would be told it was all a big joke” (64). Still, enjoying the social acceptance that rejecting her hybridity has brought her, Birdie vows that she will never return to her former identity: “there was no way I was going back to the never-never land of my old self” (65). It is not until Birdie is forcefully removed from a majority black environment that she must once again face her hybridity.

After her parents’ divorce, Birdie’s father expresses an interest in moving to Brazil. Birdie’s mother, after participating in a revolutionary project, believes that she must evade the CIA and go underground. As a result, both Birdie’s mother and father decide to leave Boston. However, the decision that they arrive at regarding their children is based on the very racial constructs that they raised their daughters to ignore. Cole is sent to go with her father and Carmen, forming a black family. Birdie, because she does not look black, is sent with her mother (121). Her father leaves Birdie a box of “Negrobilia” – souvenirs to remember her blackness in his absence; it includes “a black Nativity program from the Nkrumah School, a fisted pick… a black Barbie doll head, an informational tourist pamphlet on Brazil, [a] silver Egyptian necklace… and a James
Brown eight-track cassette” (127). With this box of “Negrobilia,” Birdie is sent with her mother into the white world.

After leaving Boston, Birdie’s mother explains to her that “the fact that [Birdie] could pass… with [her] straight hair, pale skin, [her] general phenotypic resemblance to the Caucasoid race, would throw [the CIA] off [their] trail” (128). Thus, Birdie is forced to surrender the black identity that she created for herself at Nkrumah and begin a new life. Her mother dominates this process, creating an identity for Birdie rather than allowing her to choose one herself. Senna writes:

“We’ve got to think of a new name for you”… she didn’t wait for my answer. Instead she slapped her knee and hooted, “Jesse! That’s it!... Now for the last names. That’s a little trickier. We’re gonna need to use our imaginations. You know, make up a history for you… You’ve got a lot of choices. You can be anything. Puerto Rican, Sicilian, Pakistani, Greek. I mean, anything, really”… “I don’t know,” [I said]. “Italian, maybe? I like spaghetti–” She cut me off: “Jewish is better, I think” (128-30).

Thus, the black Birdie is, out of supposed necessity, erased. Birdie’s new identity, as a half-white and half-Jewish girl, is created and forced upon her by her mother: “My mother schooled me on my Jewish self” (130). The identity of Birdie Lee is abandoned, and Jesse Goldman takes her place: “So that morning…I was knighted a half-Jewish girl named Jesse Goldman, with a white mama named Sheila – and the world was our pearl” (131).

But the abandonment of Birdie’s blackness does not immediately allow her to embody the whiteness of Jesse. First, she undergoes a process of erasure, becoming an
invisible mulatta… suffer[ing] erasure… kept on the run by other characters’ attempts to define [her]” (Dagbovie 100). Birdie’s physical shifts between homes and racial shifts between identities demonstrate “the price of hybridization… [which] includes the loss of… traditions and local roots” (Burke 7). Birdie and her mother remain “on the run,” living without a permanent residence for four years. During this time, Birdie reflects that “names… were the only things about us that remained constant” (Senna 139). Physically, Birdie matures into a “lanky twelve-year-old” (139). But since Birdie is most often alone with her mother on the road, her Jewishness and the identity of Jesse are used infrequently. Senna writes:

We played up my Jewishness only some of the time; other times we nearly forgot about it… “mostly [it] was like a performance we put on for the public… in the privacy of our car, on those long drives up and down the eastern seaboard, I was allowed to ask [my mother] about our real past (140).

In this way, the forced abandonment of Birdie’s blackness leads her to once again enter into a state of hybrid positionality. She is not permitted by her mother to be black, but her Jewishness is nothing more than an infrequent performance. As such, she is an individual with no race, no singular identity to claim. But this hybridity is once again subjected to rejection when her mother decides to settle down “surrounded by good country people” and moves Birdie to New Hampshire (141). The town that her mother chooses is small, rural, and overwhelmingly white.

Upon settling in this homogenously white environment, Birdie quickly realizes that her appearance, cultural interests, and overall identity are not in keeping with her new community’s definition of whiteness. She observes that the kids around her are all
“townies, born and raised, eventually married and mated to one another, in this same small town” (218). The insularity of her peers’ lives leads them to create and enforce their own particular definition of whiteness – “townie” culture – which they expect everyone to ascribe to. Birdie notes that all the girls she encounters seem identical to one another: “They were all dressed alike in pastel short-shorts and little half blouses that showed off their belly buttons” (169). Their appearance, interests, and self-prescribed identities are purposefully drafted within the bounds of their town’s standards for whiteness: “solidarity is demanded… it is a chosen state for those that actively express their whiteness” (Martinot 177-78).

Secure in their own homogeneity, the town’s youth quickly perceive Birdie’s hybridity – the underlying blackness that creates her pluralistic identity and sets her apart: “if hybridity signifies a crisis of homogeneity, how do white people relate their whiteness to that crisis? The reverse side of the lure is the sense of being threatened” (Broeck 52). Thus, the community rejects her hybridity through verbal criticism: “They all cackled wildly… “What the fuck kinda zoo she escape from?”… “I don’t think she speaks English”” (Senna 169). Like at Nkrumah, some of Birdie’s peers do not voice these rejections but everyone laughs, affirming their support: “they all cackled wildly.” Later, at school, Birdie is identified as “that weird chick from the summer… the fuckin’ freakazoid… she looks like she’s from another planet” (220). These criticism – “kinda zoo she escape from,” “I don’t think she speaks English,” “looks like she’s from another planet” – serve to question Birdie’s race and origins. Although Birdie’s physical characteristics do not give away her blackness, the town’s youth recognize that she is not simply white. Even her only friend, a neighbor she meets during the summer, jokes about
her non-whiteness in an expression of subtle disapproval: “You turn all brown in the sun. Like a little Indian” (193); “just kidding about you looking colored” (205). Thus, Birdie’s hybridity, as communicated by her inability to conform to the town’s standard of whiteness, is criticized and rejected by her peers.

The only other person who is more vehemently rejected than Birdie is Samantha, the only black girl at her school: “She’s disgusting. We call her ‘Wilona,’ you know, like the lady on ‘Good Times.’ The boys call her “Brown Cow’” (223). Birdie witnesses the harassment that Samantha receives as a girl who is readily identifiable as black. Senna writes:

[Mon] called Samantha “Chunky Monkey,” “Big Butt,” and “Samanthapantha.” Mona liked to make up stories about Samantha and then recite them in public, where she would pretend they were the gospel truth. She said that Samantha had given the whole high school football team blow jobs… that Samantha had a night job as a nude dancer… 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-curl” (253).

Birdie observes the ostracism that Samantha must endure, the criticism and over-sexualization of her identity, and sees that as a possible future for herself. The harassment of Samantha paired with the rejections of Birdie’s own hybridity leads her to, once again, create a separate racialized identity. It is at this point Jesse Goldman begins to gain autonomy as “a white girl who wasn’t even Jewish at the end of the day” (311).

Birdie transitions into Jesse when she is confronted by a group of her classmates in the bathroom and questioned about her cultural identity: “So, what kinda music you listen to?” (221). In her own thoughts, she admits that “the last group [she’d] ever really
loved was Earth, Wind, and Fire,” but in an effort to conform to the groups standard of whiteness, she “repeat[s] some of the groups [her neighbor] had played for [her]: “J. Geils Band. Kim Carnes. Hall and Oates. You know. Rock” (221). In stark contrast to their previous rejections of her hybridity, the group’s response to Jesse is welcoming. Senna writes:

“The girl smiled and said, “I’m Mona. What’s your name?”

I told her I was Jesse. I had said the name so many times before, but this time it felt more significant… I was surprised at how easily they had let me in, and stumbled after them for the rest of the day in a pleasant state of shock (221-22). Thus, Birdie voices the name “Jesse” and truly begins to embody that identity: “it felt more significant.” She describes this transition in terms that allude to being reborn: “I reentered the world that morning” (219). This moment marks the total emergence of Jesse as Birdie’s Lacanian alter-ego. From this point on, Birdie remains suppressed and Jesse’s identity becomes dominant.

Jesse quickly modifies her appearance to conform to the town’s standards of whiteness, becoming a member of the homogenous group of white girls who once criticized her: “we dressed identically: cutoff jean shorts, halter tops that exposed our tan bellies, and jelly shoes on our feet” (245). She admits that this identity is a performance: “Around Mona, I was usually performing, trying to impress her, but never letting her in” (233). However, it is clear that, at least to the outside world, Jesse is in control: “it must have looked like I was changing into one of those New Hampshire girls. I talked the talk, walked the walk, swayed my hips to the sound if heavy metal, learned to wear blue eye-liner and frosted lipstick and smack my gum” (233). Throughout this process, Jesse tries
to reassure herself that she is not destroying Birdie, but rather, preserving her. Senna writes:

Strange as it may sound, there was a safety in this pantomime. The less I behaved like myself, the more I could believe that this was still a game. That my real self—Birdie Lee—was safely hidden beneath my beige flesh, and that when the right moment came, I would reveal her, preserved, frozen solid in the moment in which I had left her (233).

However, it becomes increasingly apparent that the more agency that Jesse gains, the less Birdie is able to survive as a separate entity. What began “as a kind of game… innocent and practical, just as [Birdie’s] mother liked to see it,” evolves into a total separation of consciousness (189).

Through living her life as Jesse Goldman, Jesse begins to lose the identity of Birdie altogether. First, Birdie’s real memories are replaced by Jesse’s fictional creations: “My father was fading on me. Not the Jewish father. I could see David Goldman clear as day… it was my real father, Deck Lee, whom I was having trouble remembering” (188). Then Jesse begins to lose Birdie’s sense of blackness, slowly identifying more and more with white culture. Senna writes:

Something was changing here. Something slow and sneaky. At night I stared into my box of negrobilia, fingering the objects… and tried to tell myself, “I haven’t forgotten.” But the objects in the box looked to me just like that—objects. They seemed like remnants from the life of some other girl whom I barely knew anymore, anthropological artifacts of some ancient, extinct people, rather than the
pieces of my past. And the name Jesse Goldman no longer felt so funny, so thick on my tongue, so make-believe (190).

Thus, Jesse and Birdie become separate entities. Jesse begins to view Birdie as “some other girl whom [she] barely knew,” a stranger that exists outside of herself.

This identity divide begins to literally manifest itself when Jesse starts to experience episodes of physical detachment from herself:

Something else changed in New Hampshire… it was simply a sensation I had at times, when I experienced a sense of watching myself from above… I would, quite literally, feel myself rising above a scene, looking down at myself, hearing myself speak… with the detachment of a stranger… I would think “You,” not “I,” in those moments, and as long as the girl was “you,” I didn’t feel that I lived those scenes, only that I witnessed them” (190).

This detachment, as manifested in the out-of-body experiences that Jesse perceives herself to be undergoing, demonstrates that she is experiencing the Freudian phenomenon of selective perception, “hearing and seeing only what [she] feels [she] can handle (Tyson 15). These instances of selective perception are linked to racially traumatic events that Jesse witnesses, the times when she hears “those inevitable words come out of Mona’s mouth… nigga, spic, fuckin’ darkie” (233). It is during these times, that Jesse psychologically removes herself from her own body, so that she does not have to “live those scenes.” Senna writes:

They often talked like this around me… [they] needed no prompting. It came up all the time, like a fixation, and there was nothing I could do to avoid it. Now I
felt myself floating, looking down at us… “We’re gonna look like little niggers if we stay out in the sun any longer. Especially you, Jesse” (248).

Thus, Jesse must leave Birdie’s body – a body that encompasses blackness as well as whiteness – to escape criticisms of blackness. It is these moments that demonstrate the flexibility of Birdie’s alter ego: “in a relation that is always reflexive, interchangeable – the ego is always an alter-ego” (Lacan 321). During these encounters, Jesse must psychologically leave the black body that she occupies in order to preserve her whiteness and maintain her identity.

However, Jesse’s reactions to racially traumatic events are not always manifested in detachment and escape; her attempt to “preserve” Birdie within herself sometimes allows Birdie to reemerge during these moments of trauma. While smoking marijuana with her neighbor, Jesse listens as he tells her racist jokes and shows her a comic strip that makes “the Congolese into hideous caricatures” (Senna 204). During Jesse’s altered state, Birdie reemerges and voices her disapproval: “they’ve made us look like animals,” I said… he giggled into his hand and said, “you said ‘us’” (204). When Jesse’s mother encounters a black girl in their local grocery store and becomes distraught, Birdie reemerges instinctively, questioning her mother angrily: “‘We’re both black?’ It had come out before I could stop it” (237). Birdie even reemerges and reacts violently when Mona uses a slur during a racially motivated fight: “‘those niggers are gonna kill him.’ I punched Mona’s shoulder hard and hissed, “shut the fuck up. What do you know?’” The reaction had been automatic” (263). In each of these instances, Jesse refers to her actions as “automatic” and to her words as spoken “before [she] could stop it.” This sense of immediate and unpremeditated behavior denotes a quick shift in consciousness from
Jesse to Birdie, as prompted by the psychological stress of these racially traumatic encounters.

These infrequent but pronounced incidents of Birdie’s reemergence prove that Birdie does still exist, suppressed within the consciousness of Jesse. The novel addresses this, concluding with a purposeful lack of resolution when the identities of Birdie and Jesse are forcefully merged. Jesse attends a party where the only other black girl at her school, Samantha, is in attendance. Drunkenly, Jesse asks Samantha what color she is. Samantha tells Jesse, “I’m black. Like you” (286). This admission prompts Jesse to undergo a psychological break. She leaves the party and walks three miles through the town: “the only thing that mattered was that my feet kept moving, not where they led” (286). In her mind, she sees an image of her sister and cannot differentiate if it is real or imaginary: “If I closed my eyes I could see it… I wasn’t sure if the image had been a psychic explosion or if I was simply making things up again” (307). Jesse then flees New Hampshire and takes a bus back to Boston. Throughout this escape, Birdie reemerges in two ways. Firstly, Birdie leaves Jesse’s physical home – the homogenously white environment that she flourishes in – and returns to Boston, where Birdie can reassert her blackness. Furthermore, Birdie refers to this escape as the literal killing of Jesse: [I was] killing one girl in order to let the other one free. It hurt, this killing, more than I thought it would, but I kept walking” (289). Thus, by escaping the white environment that suppressed her and regaining psychological control, Birdie Lee reemerges in Boston.

But contrary to her previous assertion, Birdie quickly realizes that she cannot simply kill Jesse. Jesse has become a part of her, engrained into her adult identity: “The name Jesse had been a lie, but as I walked [through Boston] that day, I wasn’t quite sure
the girl Jesse had been such a lie… maybe I had actually become Jesse, and it was this
girl, this Birdie Lee who haunted these streets, searching for ghosts, who was the lie” (329). Since she has lived as Jesse for so long, Birdie must accept that Jesse will always remain a part of identity. The forced merging of Jesse and Birdie create a new hybridity, a pluralistic identity that literally encompasses whiteness and blackness.

Eventually, Birdie succeeds in reuniting with her father and sister in California. Her sister even presents a false sense of resolution regarding Birdie’s hybridity: “if you ever thought you were the only one, get ready. We’re a dime a dozen out here” (412). However, the novel concludes with a purposeful lack of resolution when Birdie realizes that her hybrid identity will always be met with resistance and rejection. Senna writes:

Everybody had their own way of surviving… and then I thought of me, the silent me that was Jesse Goldman, the one who hadn’t uttered a word, the one who had removed her Star of David. It had come so easily to me. I had become somebody I didn’t like. Somebody who had no voice or color or conviction. I wasn’t sure that was survival at all. I spoke my thoughts aloud. “They say you don’t have to choose. But the thing is, you do. Because there are consequences if you don’t” (408).

Thus, Birdie finally realizes that no matter where she goes, her hybridity – the pluralistic identity that encompasses both blackness and whiteness – will not be accepted by society. She acknowledges that if you do not choose to identify and act within the confines of either blackness or whiteness, respectively, “there are consequences.” This realization prevents Birdie from finding resolution after reuniting with her sister: “I had believed all along that Cole was all I needed to feel complete. Now I wondered if completion wasn’t
overrated” (406). The reality of Birdie’s hybridity prevents the novel from concluding with any real sense of resolution because the tensions surrounding that hybridity are not easily resolved.

Thus, Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* explores race in two ways. Firstly, the novel destabilizes racial categorizations themselves. Birdie Lee’s racial and cultural hybridity challenges any fixed definition of whiteness or blackness. The pluralism of Birdie’s identity forces readers to question what whiteness and blackness are, respectively, and to realize that they are impossible to concretely define. Even further, readers are led to draw a parallel between racial constructs and the imaginary world; race is just as make-believe as Birdie’s childhood identity marker – the Elemenos. As Birdie’s father reflects: “Race is a complete illusion, make-believe. It’s a costume. We all wear one. [Birdie] just switched [hers] at some point” (391). In this way, Birdie’s hybridity undermines the stability or racial constructs.

Secondly, the black and white community rejections of Birdie’s hybridity demonstrate the tensions that are inherent to hybridity itself. When Birdie lives in a majority black environment, her hybridity is rejected, and she is forced to create a separate racialized identity that acts within the confines of socially defined blackness. Similarly, when Birdie lives in a homogenously white environment, her hybridity is also rejected, and she is forced to create another separate racialized identity – this time acting within the confines of socially defined whiteness. As such, Senna presents hybrid positioning as a space filled with inherent tensions. Whether she is in a black community or a white one, Birdie’s racial and cultural hybridity will not be accepted. She will, in essence, have to choose a side.
Thus, *Caucasia* is a text that interrogates race in two ways. Senna presents readers with Birdie Lee, a mixed race protagonist who is both racially and culturally hybrid. As such, Birdie serves as a living testament to the arbitrary and shifting nature of racial categorizations. Her very existence defies the boundaries that these categorizations have been defined by. In addition, the community’s rejections of Birdie’s hybridity, which force her to create separate racialized identities, demonstrate the tensions that are inherent to hybridity itself. In this way, Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* explores the power of hybridity to undermine preconceived notions of race while also addressing the tensions inherent to such that undermining.
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