

2002

Passing as Danzy Senna

Bertram D. Ashe

University of Richmond, bashe@richmond.edu

Danzy Senna

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/english-faculty-publications>



Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Creative Writing Commons](#), [Gender and Sexuality Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ashe, Bertram, and Danzy Senna. "Passing as Danzy Senna." *Columbia: A Journal of Literature and Art* 36 (2002): 125-45.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

Passing as Danzy Senna

Caucasia, written by Danzy Senna, is part of a growing sub-genre of African-American novels, some of which announce their themes by their titles: *White Boys*, by Reginald McKnight; *The White Boy Shuffle*, by Paul Beatty; *The Last Integrationist*, by Jake Lamar; and *Negrophobia*, by Darius James, to name a few. *Caucasia* is a “Post-Soul” novel that explores the world of “mullatos” – both cultural and racial. But even though artists such as Kara Walker, photographer Lorna Simpson, and essayist Lisa Jones also explore the vicissitudes of post-Civil Rights Movement Black identity, in Black fiction it’s been pretty much a boys’ club.

[Reginald] McKnight has suggested that, since Toni Morrison and Alice Walker have been so high-profile, most emerging Black female writers have – consciously or unconsciously – emulated them and their prose-style. As a result, it seems that most young Black women write what novelist Trey Ellis calls “Afro-American glory stories” in a Morrisonesque “Afro-Baroque” style. Or, as Danzy Senna suggested, they come from a family-oriented “kitchen” tradition, mining the past for inspiration. So while many of the male writers were influenced by men like Ishmael Reed, Clarence Major, and the other writers of the sixties’ Umbra Workshop, Senna is a woman exploring fictional territory that many of her sisters aren’t, at least not explicitly.

Educated at Stanford, Senna worked as a reporter at *Newsweek* before earning an MFA at UC Irvine. She is currently the Jenks Chair in Contemporary American Letters at the College of the Holy

Cross.

On a mild late-May morning I drove to Somerville to interview Danzy Senna. The conversation took place a few days after a reception given in Danzy's honor by the Worcester, Massachusetts-based Charles Houston Cultural Project, where Danzy read a hilarious excerpt from "The Mulatto Millennium," an essay originally published in *Half and Half: Writers on Growing up Biracial and Bicultural*.

She served tea, along with chocolate chip cookies and a small collection of light tan, dusty rocks that she assured me was sugar. "You're sitting on a gold mine," a writing professor once told her, referring to her bi-racial upbringing. The skin she's in is often made an issue by those around her. We talked about race, *Caucasia*, and much more.

BERTRAM ASHE FOR COLUMBIA JOURNAL: Let me read to you something Saul Williams said in the documentary *I'll Make Me a World*. He said, "I don't have to be like, 'I'm Black and I'm proud' – that's a given. Not to discredit that historical moment; I mean, that's totally why I'm here, you know, but the reason why I'm here – why I am here – is to transcend all of that." Is that a viable perspective for the creation of Black art?

DANZY SENNA: To transcend this sort of "Black is beautiful" rhetoric? Well, what I like about that quote is the "that's a given." And I think that's true, that we have the privilege to feel that it's a given that our parents didn't. And I guess a sense that what's different about the earlier generations of mulattos and then my experience was that there wasn't ever any shame attached to Blackness – it was like, Blackness was the thing to be. The White kids in high school wanted to be Black and the Black kids wanted to be Black, and the mixed kids wanted to be Black kids, because hip hop was the thing. You know, Doug E. Fresh, and the like. So with that as a given, there's a beauty and a richness that's not on shaky ground. Then you can start to, I think, look at some elements of Blackness in a more critical light and the whole thing doesn't fall apart once you start to look at it honestly. It doesn't crumble.

BA: Yes. Because one of the things that links this novel to other Post-Soul works is that while it's an examination of the soul era, at the same time there's a kind of critique of the era as well.

DS: Oh yeah, definitely. I mean, I was just talking about how my identity as Black comes out of a kind of joy around Black culture and love of Black culture. But I certainly had a lot of pain and rejection from the Black community, from a certain element of the Black community and that was vivid from my childhood. There was the sense that the Carmens [a character in *Caucasia*] of my childhood were so insecure of their own sense that Black was beautiful that they felt they had to kind of take that out on me – and I had that consistently throughout my life and have felt that from certain individuals. I think the difference between me and someone else from the experience is that I never saw that as representing The Black Community, I saw that as individuals in the Black community, and that's been a very liberating thing for me, just in general. I did a reading from *Caucasia* during the book tour and this mixed woman in the audience raised her hand and she said, "You know, I'm gonna speak from my experience that Black women have always treated me like shit. And I wanna know did they treat you like shit, did they treat you badly, because that's my experience." And I was like, "Black women.... You know, I have about five really good friends in the audience right now who are Black women, so I'm not going to be able to say that 'They've' treated me badly. Some Black women have treated me badly, who had issues, and others have been like incredible friends and family to me." So, you know, I think that's really dangerous territory once you start talking like that. Because then, you just start to buy into the whole, racialized thinking about people as symbols, people as just representatives, and I feel that, for some reason, I don't know why, I think my parents and my godmother and all these people in my life were able to stress that to me. It was good in the end, because you can go crazy once you start thinking like that. But once you're aware of it as [coming from] individuals, then it's free, you can critique whatever you want, because you're just talking about "Carmen" and "Redbone"

and they're types in the world that people recognize, but for every Carmen there's a Dot, for every Dot there's a Cole. Black women are not a monolith, and neither are Black men. So I think that's liberating for an artist to start to think about those terms if you're writing about race.

BA: Indeed, indeed. Well, you know, *Caucasia* is so political, but in some ways it's not political at all. I like that about the text. It's set in a world that's unmistakably political, but Birdie's experiences transcend any sort of narrow political perspective or stance. I want to read to you something that Kevin Powell says in "The Word Movement," his introduction to *Step Into a World*. He says, "The Word Movement is, in some ways, both political and apolitical. Political in a sense that any time a Black person decides to put down on paper what he or she feels, that in itself is a political act. Apolitical in the sense that far too many young writers, including some in *Step Into a World*, are only concerned with their individual lives and careers and have not given much thought to the fact that our very ability to be writers and artists stems from previously ongoing struggles." Have you found that perspective, as you talk to other writers and appear on panels, and attend artist colonies?

DS: In terms of Black artists being more individualistic?

BA: Not necessarily just being more individualistic. Part of what you just articulated, it seems to me quite clearly, was a deft understanding of the necessity to see a wide-ranging Black community at some points, but also to break that wide-ranging Black community up into individual acts at other points, in a way that's healthy, right? Some people only see individuals, and other people only see the expanse, and I'm wondering if you've run into authors who are more like the former, to the extent that Powell is saying? Here's my guess about what he's suggesting. There are people who are bugged to high heavens about the fact that there isn't more African-American fiction, just to limit it to that genre, that argues for the liberation of Black people.

DS: Yeah. Now, I told you this, that I was on a panel with Ishmael Reed when we got into it – we “had words” on the panel. He was just so resistant to any critique I had of Black essentialism. He was like, “No, that didn’t happen to you when you were little. No, that didn’t...” I said that I had gone to an Afrocentric school and was really treated badly by certain teachers, even there, and I felt somewhat isolated from the community. And he said, “Well, I just don’t believe that, because Kathleen Cleaver is light-skinned and she never had that experience.” And I was like, “I’m talking about my life.” You know? “I don’t know why Kathleen Cleaver has anything to do with my life.” So I mean, for me, I resist that kind of political bullshit that Ishmael Reed was spouting, and I think his generation in general is more vulnerable to that kind of mentality and what’s really refreshing about this generation is that we seem to have more bullshit detectors. We’ve seen that it doesn’t really move us forward as people to deny our own sort of flawed humanity. Because we are flawed, as flawed as anyone else. To kind of sanctify Blackness, or make it sacred is to deny our humanity, actually. It’s a flipside of racism in a way. We’re all the same, actually. I don’t really agree with that, with what [Kevin Powell] is saying [above]. I especially don’t see it in literature and poetry. I see that more in nonfiction, in essayists and political commentators. I see that neo-con Black-think as being really naïve about why you’re able to speak in the first place. And I see that in feminists, young anti-feminist women. Like, “Did you think you would be able to write this book if it hadn’t been for all these women?” And when I look at writers like Paul Beatty and Junot [Diaz] and Darius [James] and Trey, I see the complex relationship to Blackness that you were talking about, where it’s this refusal to feel that you have to buy into the whole essentialist rhetoric, or that you have to say I’m just an individual, I’m not Black, and there’s a real, sort of sophisticated relationship to history and ourselves. So I haven’t really come up against that strain that he’s talking about.

129

BA: Do you feel limited to having protagonists who look like Birdie, Jackie, or yourself? Or, is the very fact that I’m asking this question part of why it’s important that you continue?

DS: I just always find it interesting that nobody ever asks Richard Ford, “Do you feel limited by White, straight male protagonists? Are you gonna step out of that?” And people don’t ask Terry McMillan, “Are you gonna write about anything other than a Black woman?” I mean, I might, I might not, but these aren’t all the same character. You know? And my character in my new book is bi-racial and is very different from Birdie, and this idea that one racial thing could define, that Birdie could represent all people like that, I think is problematic. That suggests that I would have written the “every bi-racial” story in that novel. Of course, I didn’t. I mean, I know what you’re saying, but I could only write about what I care about, or the characters that I want to write about at the moment. So, I mean, I’m sure I would be given a lot of accolades and be told I was clever if I wrote a book from an old White man’s point-of-view next, but I don’t want to. So I’m not going to. And I think that, yeah, I’m always sort of aware, struck, by how I think even a Black writer is going to get that question less than I am. I think I’m going to get that question being bi-racial and being from a very particular kind of experience – appearing one way and feeling the other – so I’m going to get that question a lot. But what can you do? On one level it’s like, could Joyce stop writing about Ireland? I mean, “Come on, Joyce, just move on!”

“I mean, can’t you write about Hong Kong for once?” I think you have territories as a writer that are your inspiration, and I feel like, in a way, for me to go out and write about a Taiwanese girl right now would be letting that sort of racialized thinking control my writing. And I don’t want to do that. I felt like Jackie was in no way related to Birdie. She wasn’t Birdie grown up. Also I have so many mixed friends at this point that when I’m thinking of characters I’m often thinking of very different people and mixed people have no connection to one another. And there’s a whole sort of infinite range, I guess, of mixed-race experiences, that Birdie doesn’t begin to cover.

BA: Early in the novel Birdie says, “I felt myself to be incomplete – a gray blur, a body in motion, forever galloping towards comple-

tion – half a girl, half-caste, half-mast, and half-baked, not quite ready for consumption. And for me, there was comfort in that state of incompleteness. A sense that as long as we kept moving, we could go back to what we had left behind.” And Birdie previously referred to learning what she called, “the art of changing,” which is the process of “forever galloping toward completion.” But late in the book she says, “The name Jessie had been a lie, but I wasn’t quite sure the girl Jessie had been was such a lie. Maybe I had actually become Jessie and it was this girl, this Birdie Lee, who haunted these streets searching for ghosts, who was the lie.” She says, “I wondered if Whiteness were contagious. If it were, then surely I had caught it. I imagined this condition affected the way I looked, walked, talked, dressed, danced, and at its most advanced stage, the way I looked at the world and at other people.” Is she referring to the cost of practicing the art of changing? Do observations like this one interrogate, finally, Birdie’s early, naïve commentary about the comfort of incompleteness?

DS: I think what interested me, and one of the things that was fictionally exciting for me just on a kind of dramatic level, just purely plot and thematic level, not even personally interesting to me, was this question: when you pretend to be something long enough, at what point does the act become more real than the original? When you go into passing, you assume that you’ll always be clear on the original real self; that the performance will be just the performance. But for Birdie I think that when you do it long enough, you know, that becomes really blurry and dangerous. Your sense of identity becomes really, um, kind of precarious, and nebulous, and so, it became that, for her. I mean, I think about [*New York Times* book reviewer and memoirist] Anatole Broyard [who passed for White until his death in 1990]. Him performing Blackness for the amusement of his White friends is a perfect example. How did he see his Blackness? At what point did his performance of being a White man become real, you know? I was just interested in the idea of performance, and how it affects the performer, and that you can’t assume that there is a real, fixed, solid self that will always be there when you come back from the show. It’s just this really slippery

thing, to pretend at something, to play make believe.

I remember my college roommate and I, we decided one week that we were going to just speak in British accents, just to annoy everyone in the dorm. And we did, and we got really good at it, and then we kept trying to stop – and we couldn't. And I would say, [in a British accent] "Caroline!" and then I would try to speak like an American, but somehow it didn't sound right. So I just, I don't know, I think it's really interesting. Without any answer to it, I just think it's an interesting question. And how much of our identities do we choose – is there a "real" person, or is it all a series of passing and performance? That's why I think it's important when I say early on that she learned the art of changing at Nkrumah, that it was at the Black school that she learned to pass as Black, and then later learned to pass as White. I think Birdie's only real self, in a weird way, was that first few pages when she's playing make-believe with her sister. And even that is an act of performance. She didn't even know what she looked like, she only knew what her sister looked like. So I just didn't want to leave any solid ground, in a way. I wanted to just keep pulling the rug out and to see what happened.

BA: You said recently that you were tired of race. What did you mean by that?

DS: Actually, my whole new book in some ways is about race, but in a way it's also about – well, I don't want to get into my new book too much, because you'll read it at some point, but it's about a friendship-slash-stalking situation, and what I said to my Post-Multicultural Literature class was, "I'm writing this novel and there's this really tight friendship that's in some ways based on racial solidarity, and it becomes really suffocating, and really kind of stalker-like at some point." And I feel that about race – that it's both my best friend and my worst enemy, personified in this book. But it's like, I glance out the window and she's standing across the street looking in at me, you know? I can't get away from it. And it's served me in all these ways. It's created comfort zones for me, and it's created inspiration, it's empowering on one level, and it's also like terrifying and relentless and I can't get away from it. It's hard to feel like so

much of your life is devoted to something that's so absurd on one level, and so constructed. But on another level, that's what everything is. Everything is a construct that we believe in. I guess it's just... Yeah, it's exhausting. Sometimes I feel exhausted and suffocated by it and stalked by it. This is something very important though: I don't choose to make it an issue in my life; it is made an issue in my life. And I remember my grandmother, my White grandmother, saying to me, you know, "I wish you guys wouldn't talk about race all the time," and White people saying that to me all the time. You know, "Can you just stop talking about it?" And once I choose to stop talking about it, they bring it up, in some way or another. It's not something I choose to be obsessed with. That's important for me to say.

BA: Recently in an online version of *Siren* magazine, you said, "I make a political and social choice to identify as Black, but it's important to use identity and identity-politics as a tool rather than a definition of who you are. Now I'm trying to disrupt a way of thinking about race." Has this project, this "disruption," contributed to the fatigue of discussing race?

DS: What do you mean by "has this contributed" to the exhaustion?

BA: Well, you've talked a lot about how writing *Caucasia* – no, not necessarily writing... My sense is that your having to promote *Caucasia* has contributed to this sort of fatigue.

DS: Yes. Anybody who's ever written a very successful novel feels, I think, stalked by that novel. I don't think it's even just about race, although that inflates it. Anybody, I'm sure Dorothy Allison feels like she's never going to get away from *Bastard Out of Carolina*. Or Alice Walker can never get away from *The Color Purple*, and I think that part of my exhaustion has to do with race, and part of it has to do with a sense that I'm forever going to be defined by this book, and by the experiences it addresses. And that's a more universal first-novel-doing-well kind of experience. In a way, I think my

childhood was so defined by race, and so racialized that the only way I was ever going to transcend it was to bore myself to death of it. In a way the boredom with it is kind of liberating in a way. I don't know if that makes any sense.

BA: It does. Well, it would certainly mark a kind of turning point, in terms of your relationship to it.

DS: This is going to sound weird, but since this book came out, I feel no kind of... What's the word I want... It's not loyalty, but.... I don't feel like I have to answer to anybody anymore, and that's really nice. I feel like, as an artist, I've let go of a community in a way. To embrace my artistic identity I've had to let go of any sense of a comfortable racial community. And that's been really liberating more than anything else. I was asked at a reading – I read “The Land of Beulah” at this reading – and this Black woman in the audience who clearly didn't know what my racial background was said, “What are you?” after I finished reading it.

BA: Yow. Was that the first question of the Q & A?

DS: Yep. And I said, “I'm a writer.” And she was just like <suck's teeth dismissively, then mutters>, “That wasn't what I was asking.” But on some level I do feel that as an artist you have to kind of relinquish, or try to let go of any sense that you're going to please the community, because that's not your job. Your job is to look and see, and to reflect what you see in your work. So in a way it's just been, like, a relief. . . .

One time Sapphire and I were on this flight together because Paul Beatty organized this Black writing symposium in Berlin, when he was living there. She was saying that she sees a lot of these writers like Edwidge Danticat and Junot being kind of put in a position of being beholden to their community and being little community representatives. And there's all this pride in the Dominican community about Junot, there's all this pride in the Haitian community about Edwidge, and Sapphire was like, “Once I wrote *Push* that was never an issue for me again!” She was like, “I never got

treated like a spokeswoman again!" I think I feel similarly in a way. In a way, it's like I said with "Mulatto Millennium": "Fuck you, I'm not yours. And I'm not yours, and I'm not yours." And that's kind of the feeling I have to go into being a writer with. You know? And that's not to say anything about their work, Edwidge or Junot's work, because I think they're wonderful writers. I just think that being the first of their community to become famous writers, they have an incredible amount of responsibility. I would feel that they would. I would assume that they do. And I would think that would be hard. I think, in a way, you constantly have to resist that as a writer of color. In order to be free, in order to have artistic freedom.

BA: We were talking about "race fatigue" a while ago, and since you just mentioned it, I'm wondering about your essay "The Mulatto Millennium." Take us through the circumstances behind the writing and publication of the essay.

DS: Oh, I had just been on a book tour for a year, or maybe less, but a pretty extensive book tour, and this issue of mixed race was suddenly like really hot. I mean, *Newsweek* did a cover story that it was hip to be multi-racial, and *Time* did a cover story, and it was just starting to seem really ridiculous to me. And everyone was saying, "Oh, Danzy's the mulatto 'it' girl," the Patron Saint of the Mulatto Movement, and all this stuff – my friends were teasing me about that. And I had gotten asked to go speak at some multi-racial symposium... I was just getting asked to talk about being mixed over and over and over again. And this woman said she was doing an anthology, and it was like the third anthology I had been asked to write for on the subject of mixed-race. And she asked me to write something autobiographical about what it's like to grow up mixed – and I just couldn't do it. I tried, and I failed. I just felt like any group, including mixed people, any sort of ethnic pride movement can become a form of narcissism; any kind of identity politics can become a form of chauvinism. And I really have issues with the multi-racial movement. I find they have absolutely no sense of humor, and they're really kind of ahistorical – they don't have any

sense of history – I’ve seen their literature and stuff. So I just sort of felt like it was time for someone to take the piss out of them, basically. Also, I felt like I wanted to resist being co-opted by them, and being used as some sort of spokesperson by them. As an artist, that seemed really not a position I wanted to be in. So I wrote that, and then it was denounced by some of the people in that movement, and I felt good! It served my purpose. Actually, a lot of the people in that movement thought it was funny and were able to laugh at it.

BA: It’s interesting that you would use satire to “take the piss out of” the mulatto movement a bit. Once you said you almost felt as if your use of satire made you “a traitor to your gender” – I believe that was the phrase you used. What did you mean by that?

DS: Well, it’s funny – I just feel like satire’s often been the realm of male writers. But I’ve always been really tempted by it, and drawn to it, and I think partly because that’s my father’s sense of humor completely, and I was raised partly with him. I just feel that women are expected to be sort of sincere and realist and authentic – especially Black women writers. And whenever I read things to a lot of women... Like I just did this reading at Michigan to a bunch of housewives and Middle America women who loved *Caucasia*, and I read something from my new book, and they were in dead silence. They did not know what the hell I was doing, and I felt like I had disappointed them. The element of *Caucasia* that they could connect to was the sentimental part, the heartfelt stuff, the family stuff, and what they couldn’t relate to, what they didn’t read into, was the more complicated political commentary going on. I mean, people could read from it whatever they want, but... So anyway, I don’t know, there’s just something about this idea of women’s writing being kind of in the kitchen...

136

BA: Quilting bee type stuff.

DS: Yeah, exactly. I mean Trey Ellis kind of parodies the womanist strain [in *Platitudes*]. But when I was in college I hung out with a lot of lesbians, and I’ve always felt like lesbians got my sense of

humor better than straight women.

BA: That's interesting.

DS: My friends were more into satire, my women friends who were gay. [While at Stanford] there was this feminist magazine called *Aurora*. My friend and I, this Black lesbian woman named Toni, one night we wrote this epic parody poem of all the poems that we'd ever read in there, and we went and snuck into their office and anonymously put it into the submission box. And it was like the worst schlock that we had ever written. I'll have to show it to you sometime. It was called, ah, umm... I think it was just called "My Story." It was just – it was so funny. And they published it on the cover of the magazine and it was like the talk of the feminist community that this Black woman had anonymously written this like "wonderful" poem. There were lines in it like, umm... "Fuck this cuntry Amerikkka," spelling "America" with three k's, and "this country," with "country" spelled "cuntry"... I guess I just feel there's such danger in taking oneself too seriously that I'm always tempted to do that kind of a thing. It was very funny. And you saw *Enigma*. We did some things in there like that letter to the Oreo Cookie Factory, and "Jive 101" in the back. So I don't know, satire just always had this sort of appeal to me.

BA: Now, Darius James has said that his preferred form of satire and parody would be to take over the *New York Times* for a day or so. He would publish a bunch of stuff that the *New York Times* wouldn't ordinarily publish, but he'd retain the typeset, the format and everything so that readers wouldn't necessarily be aware that a satirical gesture was being made. And while I'm fascinated by that, the reaction to the poem that you're discussing sounds like what might happen. It almost seems as if there has to be some kind of satirical marker. Otherwise...

137

DS: Only we'd get the joke! Because *Enigma* was being published the same week as *Aurora*, so it was kind of like we were trying to sabotage their magazine. All the *Enigma* people knew about it, and

one of the editors of the feminist magazine – they were all White women – said to me, you know, “Did you see our latest issue? What did you think of the poem on the cover?” And I said, “Oh, it was really amazing. What did you think of it?” She was like, “Oh, I liked it, that’s why we published it, because we don’t get a lot of submissions from Black women, and we thought it was really edgy. But do you really think a Black women wrote that? Because some part of me thinks someone didn’t.” And I said, “I don’t know, why would you say that?” It’s as if a part of her got it.... And then later, when we told them, they were so pissed off. They were incensed at us. Because their issue was everywhere and it was just a collegiate prank. It was fun.

BA: It seems to go to the heart of the whole idea of satire. It’s intentionally edgy, and yet at the same time if one includes that satirical gesture that I was talking about, that marker, in some ways it’s an out, I suppose.

DS: Yeah, I kind of think in a way it’s funnier when you don’t include it, and then later let people know. I think that you can ruin the joke if you give too much warning. But let me tell you one of the other things I did in college, because this is one of the pranks I’m most proud of. And my dad’s a real prankster, and he kind of taught me this growing up. He loved playing tricks on people and stuff. My boyfriend in college, Omar, who I’ve talked about before, was a columnist for the school newspaper. And he wrote these political essays every week on race and gender, and he was just kind of writing identity politics essays about being Black and being pro-feminist or whatever. He whispered to me one night, giggling, that he kind of wished that someone would... that he would have a racial attack on him, that someone would do something to him, jokingly, because then he would get famous.

Sooooo... a week later, he had written this essay about the fraternity system and how messed up it was. My friend Toni and I are in my room smoking weed, acting really silly, and Omar [who is half Black and half Jewish] wasn’t in his room, I knew he wasn’t in his room, since we all lived in the Black dorm. So I called his voice

mail, his phone, and left him this message on his machine – assuming he would think it was me – in this man’s voice with Toni laughing in the background, saying, [in an angry male voice] “You god-damned nigger kike, I saw your fucking essay and we’re calling from the Psi Phi fraternity. We’re coming over there, and we’re gonna get your nigger-kike ass.” I said all this stuff – it was just really stupid and silly. But it was kind of muted and I had a towel over [the phone], and I can’t remember what else I said. So then we waited for awhile to see if he’d come back, and we got distracted, and Toni and I went out for the evening. When we got back to Ujamaa, the Black dorm, I went up to his room. And the whole Black Student Union is in his room listening to the message with these somber expressions on their faces. They had already contacted the *Stanford Daily*. And everybody was like, “Danzy wait till you hear what happened to Omar!” And he’s sitting there with this like half-upset, and underneath it, like, gleeful expression. So I said, “Oh, that’s terrible! Um, Omar? Can I talk to you alone for a minute?” Because he had already told the person in the *Daily* and it was going to be in the paper. So I told him, and he was just – he’s usually a very mild-mannered guy – he’s just like, “You bitch. What am I gonna do now?” He laughed a lot about it later, but I made him tell them that some friend at another school did it. It was just so funny, the whole thing. But anyway. I just love the image of the Black Student Union leaning in, like they had found this gold mine.

BA: What I love is that in some ways that part of the book – especially in light of the stories you just told – is a classic trickster moment! And it doesn’t have the marker, either; it doesn’t really call attention to itself in a huge way. You either get the joke or you don’t. If you don’t, it’s perfectly okay, the text still propels itself, but if you do it enhances it.

139

DS: Yeah, that’s interesting. I think that’s true; I think I tend to prefer that for myself, the way that I deal with satire. A lot of it is the inside jokes in *Caucasia* that nobody outside of my family and friends would get. Even the Aurora [feminist] group was based on this publication in college, and Redbone was someone from my

childhood... There was just a lot of stuff that I was having fun with, kind of giggling as I wrote it even though when it came out, it was very serious in the text.

BA: That, finally, clears up something for me. You had mentioned a couple of times in the past that there were elements of the book that you found humorous, and I'd always wondered about that, and until now, I didn't get it. I understand now.

DS: Well, even for me the mother is just so over the top. Certainly she's familiar to people, but just her and the Jim character... I mean, there was one review that said that they felt – in a negative review – that they felt like sometimes that the White characters bordered on parody. It's almost making fun of people and types. I mean, I think I'm always having to restrain myself as a writer. I think in that book I was very restrained in terms of wanting to go over the top in certain places, and trying to keep it under control.

BA: Why do you think it is that more women novelists, or fiction writers in general, haven't been exploring this whole identity politics idea or terrain?

DS: Identity politics terrain?

BA: Well, early in the interview when you would refer to people who were doing the sorts of things that you were doing, you would mention Paul Beatty, and you'd mention Trey Ellis, and Darius James, and perhaps Colson Whitehead, but never other contemporary female writers.

140

DS: Yeah. I think it's that kitchen thing. The only negative review I've ever written, and the only book review I've ever written – and will never do again – was of this Dominican-American writer named [Loida] Maritza Perez, or something. Book called *Geographies of Home*. That title for me was, first of all, part of my problem with the book. I was like, Did she go into a computer program that would like spit out a computer-generated book on identity? I

mean, *Geographies of Home*? And then I felt like the whole book was just so limited to the kitchen, and that idea of culture offered up on a plate, the ethnic food fair model of identity politics, and it's very comfortable. But one of the things that I've always felt was refreshing about satire and Black satire was that it shifts the gaze. There's no way for a White man to read Paul Beatty and feel that they're looking at Black culture from that comfortable, neutral White gaze. He's so much the trickster that there's a sense that you don't have a solid ground under your feet. You don't know who's looking at who, who's laughing at whom. And I think that women and Black people have always been expected, as artists, to be reporters first, to be historians, and authentic reporters from the streets of culture. And so, maybe there's something about female writers that feels somewhat locked into that model of the one being gazed at. I think it's always been the realm of White men or straight White male writers to be the invisible artist. So women and Black people and Latino people are sort of supposed to offer up their experience to be looked at, but they aren't supposed to be invisible themselves, to be artists. And I think that satire is one of those ways of reclaiming that position as an artist, rather than just as a subject.

BA: Well, I can't help thinking of both the historical figure of the Hottentot Venus and these repeated applications by post-Civil Rights Movement African-American women. I'm thinking of the essay "Venus Envy" in *Bulletproof Diva* or the play *Venus* by Suzan-Lori Parks, or the title poem of Elizabeth Alexander's *The Hottentot Venus*. You know, this whole idea of being in the gaze and dealing with and talking about and trying to decenter that gaze. But none of those three are fiction writers.

141

DS: Well, my mother once pointed out to me that today's Black women writers are only writing about the past. And I gave her my new book, which is set in the present, and she was saying that the only writer who's doing the present is Terry McMillan. Beside the fact that she was trying to be more popular, I think what was interesting about her was that she was, finally, someone talking about the present – that there were Black people living today. Of course, it

was part of the feminist movement, too, to reclaim history, and Black women – Toni Morrison, Alice Walker... Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, were all talking about the past. There was a need to do that, but.... I just wonder what that's about. I mean, what is this sort of thing about history and Black women writers. But I think that, I'm really hoping that more will write about the present. I think Zadie Smith [in *White Teeth*] wrote about the present and that was refreshing. I can't think of anyone else. It's something that's interesting about all these new Black male writers that they are kind of dealing more with the present. But I don't know what that's about, really. I just think it's interesting and notable. I think it comes out of the feminist reclaiming history thing, but I think maybe we're past that moment.

BA: When you read "The Mulatto Millennium" at the [April, 2001] Post-Soul Satire Symposium [at the College of the Holy Cross], one of the interesting things that I didn't expect was that some people who had a little problem with your book were delighted by your essay. And it was really, it seemed as if there was a kind of, "Oh, she can do that, too!" reaction. I obviously haven't read your new book, but, given the reaction to the Michigan women that you just referred to who didn't "get it," do you anticipate a kind of, "Oh, she can do that, too!" reaction to your new book?

DS: I don't know.... I don't know what the reaction's going to be to this book. But in a way I worry that the people who liked *Caucasia* will not get it, and the people who like that essay also won't get it.

142

BA: Really?

DS: I mean, that's what I'm worried about, because I have no idea. You're in a book so deep you don't know... I did show it to someone who I shouldn't have shown it to, probably. He was a very traditional White male writer who's a very New York Establishment writer, and he was completely baffled, and didn't get the tone or whatever. So I don't know. I thought it was entertaining when I

was writing it, and I get it, but I don't know if anyone else is going to get it. I just can't predict.

BA: And that really, on some level, goes to the heart of what you were saying earlier about being an artist, you know, the whole idea of not being beholden to the expectations of your audience, your readership. And I've always, quite frankly, admired people who took the Picasso/Miles Davis approach to being an artist, which is, basically, "Follow me – I'm going to do what I do, and either you come along or you don't."

DS: Yeah.

BA: I've always wondered: is that an exciting feeling, is it a disconcerting feeling? Or do you block all that stuff out, not even think about it?

DS: I have to block it out when I'm writing. Now that I think of it, there was this other place where I read where they didn't get the book at all, either. And I think one of the reasons is audience. Michigan, an all-White audience, very Middle America, didn't get the book because I'm writing about race and most White people don't feel that you can laugh at race. As I read there were these earnest expressions, but slowly as I kept looking up [the expressions] turned to, "Whaaaaat?"

BA: Deer in headlights.

DS: Yeah, they didn't know where to enter it, what kind of emotional plane to enter it on. I think one of the hardest things for me about being a writer is that you have to spend so much time alone with your work as a fiction writer – and you don't have to do that as a screenwriter, I think. But it's got to be purely yours in a way that other new commercial work doesn't. So I've just had so much time alone with this novel and it's so... it's not a light novel. It's supposed to be comic, maybe, but not light. I just have felt that "Am I crazy?" kind of feeling. My friend Joy came over one night

and I was working on it and I was like, “Oh, I have to read you this scene,” laughing, and I read it to her, and she thought it was kinda funny, but she was like, “Danzy, I think you need to get out more...” You know, it’s midnight, and I’m sitting there with all these pages. There’s just a feeling that you could be writing in Chinese and you just aren’t sure. It’s kind of intense, I think, the writing process. And I can’t do the time clock version of being a writer. I can’t check in at nine and get out of it at one in the afternoon and join the world. I literally have to go completely into the work and cut out the world when I’m writing for weeks and weeks if I’m intensely into a scene. That makes it hard on one’s sanity and level of functioning. So when you were asking if I was neurotic or crazy, the answer is, Looks can be deceiving.

BA: So: what happens beyond the upcoming novel? I heard you refer sometime ago to a possible collection of stories that you might want to do?

DS: Yeah, I mean I’ve been writing short stories not very committedly for the last few years, just things I’m working on in my computer that I haven’t even sent out. And I will fiddle with them for awhile now after this book is done. But I had an interview with someone for the Holy Cross Public Relations Page – they said I was writing a Ben Stiller comedy. Which was a joke, and I didn’t actually know she was going to put that in there, but um, I want to do something really light this year. Just, I mean, I’m going to be teaching here and I want to do something that’s not heavy and also where I can see the end in sight. Because I want to take off another probably two years before I start another novel. Unless there’s one that’s just burning to get out of me.

144

BA: Could it start burning at any moment? In other words, could you wake up one day and all of a sudden there’s this smoldering beginning of a flame?

DS: There would probably be a short story that could kind of like keep going, because that’s how *Caucasia* started, actually. I knew

eventually I wanted to write a novel, but I wrote a short story that just seemed like the right beginning, and I think that's what will happen. But I really want to write something very light after this book. I need to spend the next year recovering from it.