



Monia Dal Checco*

WHERE DID YOU SLEEP LAST NIGHT? AUTHENTIC BLACKNESS IN A POST-SOUL MEMOIR

1. The Token of Racial Authenticity and the Post-Soul Aesthetics

While Obama's presidency came to an end, it seems that claims debating his and his family's adherence to the precepts of authentic blackness have not diminished in number nor in intensity, and that the public opinion is still preoccupied with assessing if he and his wife are "too black" or "not black enough" (Sarmah 2007; Ross 2016). At the same time, debates over Rachel Dolezal's self-identification as black continue over one year after her resignation from the presidency of the NAACP division of Spokane on June 15, 2015, to the point that the activist and former professor of Africana studies has recently been described as "some sort of cultural fungus" that "just won't go away" (Britni, 2016). Assessing black celebrities' level of blackness seems to have become a sort of new pastime on the web: from Oprah to Beyoncé, from Clarence Thomas to Condoleezza Rice, black public figures cannot escape what Touré defines as the "identity cops" of the black community (2011, 7). However, if the question of authentic blackness seems to have exploded with renewed vigor in the last decade, a quick look at the history of African American literature easily reveals that the issue of racial authenticity is not recent at all and that ideals of authentic blackness have been challenged and redefined for centuries, with writers fiercely debating over the right aesthetic or philosophy for African American artists who wanted to be loyal to the black experience. We only need to think about the controversy between Zora Neale Huston and Richard Wright over the use of the black vernacular in her *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) to understand how the burden of representing the race in the "right" way has been a concern even in the intellectual blossoming of the Harlem Renaissance. Countless other disputes over the modes of "real" blackness can also be retraced, for example, in the agitations of the Civil Rights Movement as well as in modern day hip-hop culture.

As a matter of fact, the unanimity of blackness exists only in stereotypes that look at African American people as a monolithic, homogeneous group that can be represented by a handful of clichés, while reality has always been different. However, if this diversity has always been evident in the multifaceted ways of interpreting and performing blackness that the African American community has come up with, it is also true that in the post-Civil Rights era there seems to be a stronger emphasis on the uniqueness of one's understanding of blackness, and a more overt rejection of restrictive and limiting identity policies. This attitude has firstly been noticed and theorized in the context of the visual arts by Thelma Golden and Glenn Ligon, who on the occasion of the 2001 *Freestyle* exhibition at the Studio Harlem Museum have defined as "post-blackness" the kind of approach they were witnessing in a younger generation of black visual artists who, as Michael Eric Dyson would say, were "rooted in, but not restricted by, (their) blackness" (2011, xiii). The term "post-blackness" has since then undergone a wide array of critiques, the most compelling of which is that its semantics seems to suggest an overcoming or a refusal of blackness. However, the term does not claim the rejection of blackness as a significant category for one's identity, nor does it postulate the end of racism and discrimination or the denial of the specificity of the black experience in the US. In fact, it refers to the new conditions under which blackness is experienced and manifested after the end of the Civil Rights Movement, in a society in which the size of the black middle class has doubled and new educational and occupational opportunities have become available for black people, but that is still marked by subtle and pernicious forms of discrimination. This more differentiated context is inhabited by a generation that Trey Ellis, in his 1989 groundbreaking essay "The New Black Aesthetic," defined "cultural mulattos," people who are familiar with both black and mainstream culture and can easily move in both worlds, since they have been socialized in a desegregated environment and have friends and relatives from different ethnic and cultural groups.

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The generational shift that Golden and Ligon had first witnessed in the black visual arts is by now evident in every other cultural field, and this new take on blackness can be observed in the works of many contemporary African American authors, who look with suspicion at the notion of authentic blackness and perceive it as a limiting concept that will inevitably clash with their more and more complex and hybrid identities. Actually, if previous eras have shown the shifting of ideals of authentic blackness towards always new interpretations, in the contemporary scene this concept seems to crumble altogether, making space for more individualized ways of being “loyal” to the African American community and going beyond a collective notion of blackness.

One of the main reasons why this is happening has been identified in the fact that post-soul authors lack the unifying experience of political militancy that has characterized the black community and much of its artistic production up to the previous generation, and that has informed to a large extent former notions of blackness. By “post-soul authors,” in line with Bertram Ashe’s theory, I refer to African American authors who were born or who came of age after the end of the Civil Rights Movement, who identify as “cultural mulattos” and whose work displays a reflection on blackness from non-essentialist points of view, through a rhetorical device that Ashe calls “allusion-disruption strategy” (2007, 602-23). I will discuss each one of these issues more thoroughly in the next pages, but the general idea is that the post-soul aesthetic translates into a more diversified and multifaceted understanding of blackness. Touré writes that, if in the United States there are 40 million blacks, then there are also “40 million ways of being black” (1) and post-soul authors seem to agree: they refuse to discard one’s sense of blackness on simplistic charges of inauthenticity and highlight instead the non-homogeneous nature of the black experience. The concern for racial authenticity in the production of many African American authors of previous generations, matched by the “keeping it real” philosophy that informed much of the hip-hop scene until recently, is therefore being gradually revised, and contemporary black writers are pointing out to the performativity of race, as well as to the fact that authentic blackness, whatever it may be, constitutes only one, and not always the most important, of the many categories that define black people’s identity. Post-soul authors, therefore, try to expand existing definitions of blackness so as to shape a concept of “authentic black” that takes into account all aspects of their personalities and backgrounds.

This is especially true of post-soul autobiographers and memoirists. In fact, life writing is a field that is traditionally expected to be telling the truth (Andrews 1986), while at the same time dealing with quintessentially personal and variously interpretable impressions on one’s life and identity, including one’s sense of connection to the black experience. In problematizing the discourse on blackness or “troubling blackness,” as Ashe writes (2007, 615), authors of post-soul autobiographies are concerned with showing the learned nature of race: race is therefore denaturalized, and the impossibility of an “essential” or innate self in terms of race is revealed. This process of awareness and self-discovery is usually destabilizing but also liberating for the writer: the inauthenticity of race, when acknowledged, gives the narrator the possibility of exploring his or her true self, relying on other categories apart from color such as class, geography, gender and, most importantly, familial ties. Nevertheless, although it is by now well established that race is a social construct, the curiosity towards what Bracey calls “the fetish for authentic race” (Bracey 2015) has not diminished, and the ever-present gaze of society is always described by post-soul autobiographers as something that invades their personal space and threatens their freedom of setting the parameters of their blackness. For example, looking for evidence of ethnic belonging on the body or family tree of people who identify as black is still the rule, and this can be problematic for somebody who identifies as black while having a mixed-raced heritage and a fair complexion, like author Danzy Senna, whose autobiography I am going to discuss in the following pages.

2. *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* Danzy Senna and the Puzzle of Authentic Blackness

In post-race theory a mixed-raced identity has been often celebrated as something desirable, the evidence of American democracy, of the harmonious coming together of the races and of the end of passing (Elam 83). With the 1967 *Loving v. State of Virginia* groundbreaking sentence legalizing interracial marriage, and the 2000 Census allowing people to identify with the MATA (Mark All That Apply) option, it seemed that monoracialism had come to an end, and that a mixed-raced identity would finally be celebrated as the main feature of the “mulatto millennium” of which author Danzy Senna writes (1998). At the same time, critics observed that, paradoxically, the MATA option was not particularly successful, and that the tendency among people of multiracial background remained choosing a more specific racial label. As a matter of facts, if Tiger Woods can define himself a Cablinesian and be accepted as such, the reality for most people of African descent less privileged than Woods seems to be different, since the gaze of mainstream society will inevitably categorize



them as simply black, limiting their potential for self-definition: colorism, but also economic privileges and social status, interfere therefore strongly with one's ethnic affiliation.

In her 2009 autobiography *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* Danzy Senna reflects on multiraciality on a very personal level, by making sense of her experience of growing up biracial and bicultural in a society that paradoxically seems to celebrate multiculturalism, colorblindness and essentialist notions of race all at the same time. In her quest for a racial identity, Senna cannot avoid coming to terms with the most painful aspects of her life: her childhood, troubled by the disastrous divorce between her parents, her relationship with her father, and her difficulties in determining her racial identity: the result is, at once, a memoir, a family history, a detective story, and an essay on the power of race and class in shaping relationships in the United States.

Admittedly, the book was started out of a spirit of curiosity towards her paternal heritage. Danzy Senna is in fact the daughter of Fanny Howe, a poet and novelist herself and the descendant of a WASP family of illustrious pedigree whose family tree can be traced back to the *Mayflower*, and Carl Senna, African American scholar and *enfant prodige* of the black intelligentsia with no documented family history. Being the father the source of her blackness, Senna realizes that, in order to come to terms with her mixed racial heritage, she has to investigate this side of her family history for answers, to have a more complete and satisfactory picture of herself. Clearly, on the other hand her goal is also that of being reconciled with her father, a man she loves and fears at the same time, by trying to understand the context in which he was raised. In this process Senna tries to get to know her father on a more intimate level and to make sense of the many ways in which he disappointed her as a child, hoping that this will enable her to forge a more stable identity for herself and to make peace with her troubled childhood. "Don't you know who I am?" is the key-question that marks the beginning of this quest for identity and that Senna tries to answer through her memoir. It is the question that her father asks her when, after years of not seeing him, little Danzy opens the door and cannot recognize the handsome black man that stands in front of her; it is the same question that, thirty years later, he keeps asking whenever she tries to figure out his true personality. To answer this question, Senna embarks on a journey with her father that brings her South, to the many towns in which Carl Senna's extended family is scattered, in an attempt to reshape her family tree.

Senna's wish to know more about her paternal lineage clearly originates not only from her will to be reconciled to her father, but also from the necessity to answer interrogations about her racial belonging. As a matter of fact, although Senna identifies as black, this choice has always been up to debate, since her blackness does not show on her body, and her fair complexion and straight hair apparently contradicts her racial affiliation. The supposed dissonance between her physical aspect and her identification as black, therefore, makes her the target of the puzzled reaction of white people, who do not understand why somebody so light-skinned may wish to identify as black, and of the contempt of part of the black community, who see her as an intruder who will never understand the humiliation of being discriminated because of her complexion. In fact, despite the efforts of her parents to instill black pride in her and her siblings, Senna's difficulties in merging into the black community appear clear from her schooldays, when she is teased and roughed up by the children of the Afrocentric school she attends for looking so white. The messages that little Danzy receives are therefore contradictory and open to many interpretations: on the one hand she is pushed by her family to identify as black and be proud of doing so, while on the other hand people keep hinting at the fact that she will never be black enough.

As in *Caucasia*, her first and most popular novel, Senna criticizes the binary of blackness and whiteness from within, exposing the constructed nature of race and the absurdities of labeling people according to physical markers. Her experience of blackness—as well as that of her siblings—is obviously meant to testify to the inexistence of a racial self based on essentialist notions of race: race is in the eyes of the observers, who see in her features and those of her relatives a projection of their own conceptions of racial authenticity. As a consequence, Senna is usually classified as a Jew or a Southern European, her sister as a light-skinned African American and her brother as a Latino, because this is how they look like to the people who observe them and try to classify them into ethnic groups. Clearly, her aspect and that of her relatives are considered not as an indication of which race they belong to, of racial and ethnic authenticity, but rather as a sort of Rorschach test in which everybody sees what they want to see. In this sense, Senna's parents may have taught their children that they are all black, but this sense of shared blackness is constantly challenged by the gaze of society.



Senna is fully aware of this gaze and of the power it exerts on her. It is significant, at this regard, that one of the first episodes presented in the memoir strongly emphasizes a performance of blackness, carefully staged to satisfy the curiosity of white spectators. Senna describes a visit of her father to the artists' colony in which she was working when she was younger, and she skillfully reports the climate of tension that was created in the common living room as more and more artists came out of their rooms to see her father. It is evident that her colleagues wanted to see if someone as light-skinned as Senna could have a "really" black parent, and that they wanted to check for themselves just how black he was. When her father entered the living room, Senna recalls that:

I made a show of being more affectionate toward him than I would have been if we were unobserved. I felt the need to perform our closeness. In that embrace I wanted to show that I was with him, not them (...) they did not know the real me. I imagined I had gone from being just one of the other colonists to being something far more interesting because of this man by my side. (*Where* 5-6)

It is paradigmatic that to show her "real" self, Senna has to put up a performance of identity, which she enacts to satisfy the voyeuristic curiosity of the other colonists. At the same time, while her behavior is intended to show affection and complicity, the performance is admittedly marked by anxiety, since Senna fears that her father may be drunk and say something that could embarrass her, ruining the picture of the happy interracial family she has just painted for her friends. After describing this episode, Senna starts to randomly list a series of terms, with positive as well as negative connotations, that she may use to describe her father: "intellectual," "race-man," but also "alcoholic," "exile," and "chameleon." The last of these terms is the one on which the attention of the reader focuses: this image of mimicry and shifting *par excellence* is positioned immediately after a scene in which the performability of race is clearly hinted at, and this destabilizes the reader and erodes even more prescriptive notions of race. The reader in fact, at this point of the memoir, has just come to see Carl Senna as the depository of blackness, the African American scholar who is concerned about white privilege and wants to pass on to his children the ideals of black power. How can he be a chameleon too? Calling her father "a chameleon" is actually the kind of "allusion-disruption" strategy that Ashe theorized as one of the central aspects in the work of post-soul artists: ideals of authentic blackness (in this case of rhetoric of the "race man") are named only to be deconstructed by means of an analysis in terms of what Ashe calls "nontraditional expectations of blackness" (2007, 615). Traditional expectations of blackness are not completely rejected, but expanded, and black identity is reinterpreted as something fluid, malleable, unstable, and profoundly contingent.

The apparently monolithic racial identity of his father, who is much more "visibly" black than his children are, is slowly deconstructed through the memoir, as contradictory aspects of his blackness are mentioned. First of all, a gendered perspective of blackness is added: Carl Senna, Senna states, "rarely dated black women, but (...) he would give the solidarity nod to every black man we passed on the street" (*Where* 7). Carl Senna's wives (Danzy Senna's mother as well as his second wife) are actually described as an antithesis to his ideals of blackness: they are both white, blond, frail, slender; the first comes from an WASP aristocratic family of Boston, the second is a Canadian Catholic. And yet, the author reports, Carl Senna used to classify people according to their ethnicity, to distrust non-black people, to give an exaggerated importance to the surnames of his daughter's friends, in short "he saw people as symbols rather than individuals" so that "growing up, I could never keep track of which group in the population he mistrusted the most" (*Where* 7). The fact that Carl Senna spent his life writing essays on the constructedness of race while re-enacting racial paradigms in his everyday life is clearly symptomatic of how ideals of authentic blackness may be incoherent and fractioned, so that race-man Senna becomes, in the eyes of her daughter, "a walking, talking contradiction" (*Where* 7).

Carl Senna's contradictory racial policies are also presented as a result of the black pride politics of the 1960s, which Danzy Senna critically engages. In a 2002 interview for *Callaloo*, she stated that "relative few have benefited from the civil rights achievements of the 1960s, in part because those achievements were racialized, and didn't take into account class." She added that "we need to acknowledge that some of the liberal educational philosophies of the 1960s were in fact failures" (2002, 452). Being disconnected from the nostalgia associated with the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement, Danzy Senna, unlike her father, seems in the position of giving a more objective assessment of the Movement's legacy, and feels free to state the limits of its successes. Nevertheless, her critique of the 1960s is never sterile and simplistic, since it is based not on



abstract considerations on the Movement's results, but on the actual effects of black pride policies on the lives of her family members. In particular, she is aware of the fact that the emergence of an exaggerated and contradictory black pride in her father has to do with the kind of troubled childhood he had to endure, with the instability of black existence in the Jim Crow South, with the ever-present image of a single black mother struggling to bring up her children. In this sense, Danzy Senna shows a kind of critical approach towards the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s that is common in post-soul literature. As Dereck Maus noticed, "the potentially oxymoronic notion of art that is subversively respectful toward its ancestors shows up repeatedly in the theorizations of what makes contemporary African American cultural discourse distinct from that of the previous period" (2014, xiv).

Post-Civil Rights artists actually manifest a desire to be respectful of the previous generation, to acknowledge their concerns and the fact that they paved the way for a new inspection of blackness, but at the same time this grateful acknowledgement does not preclude an unbiased assessment of this legacy. Danzy Senna's vision of blackness, in line with the trend that is characterizing newer generations, is not celebratory nor uplifting, and moves beyond the binary division of whites as bad and blacks as good. This rejection of reverence is very well manifested in the many scenes in which her father, the depository of blackness, is unapologetically condemned as aggressive, inconsiderate, unreliable. Moreover, Danzy Senna asks her father for answers not on blackness, but on her personal experience of blackness, but her request is doomed to go unheard:

In place of a flesh-and-blood black family, in place of black roots, in place of a coherent black community with a history we could touch or feel, he grew obsessed with the idea of blackness, the idea of race, and how to hammer racial consciousness home to his three light-skinned children.

He projected his own sense of isolation and fear of extinction onto us, his children (...) My father constructed for himself—and imposed on us—a blackness that was intellectual and defensive, abstract and negatively defined (always in relation to whiteness). And it worked: My siblings and I never once felt ourselves to be anything but black. (*Where* 35)

The impossibility for Danzy Senna to openly communicate with her father is very representative of the kind of breakdown in communication between generations that characterizes the post-Civil Rights era. Carl Senna keeps talking about race in abstract terms, so that his children are unable to link this intellectual, defensive blackness to their actual experience of blackness. They all feel black, but their black identity is not stable nor comfortable.

Images of instability and of things crumbling are actually abundant in the text, as we can see in the episode of the desk. The author recalls asking her father for a writing desk as a birthday present, and being surprised when he actually came to her birthday party with the desired gift. Unfortunately, the desk was not only cheap and ugly, but defective and impossible to put together, so that young Danzy spent the rest of the day crying in her bedroom, consoled only by her sister, who understood the real reason of her distress. The desk symbolizes in fact the unreliable, defective kind of paternal love that her father provided, a mirror of his and her daughter's unstable and wobbly black identities. Senna acknowledges the role of the social circumstances that lead her father to become an alcoholic, but this understanding is not healing, since it is not enough to forgive her father and to fully appreciate his teachings. Senna recognizes that he provided her with many gifts: a black consciousness, the awareness of power imbalances and, more problematically, the material for her writing career. However, her father's gifts are always perceived as faulty, so that in the end she comments: "I accepted his gifts, the fire and the fury, but I wanted a proper desk to write it on, and because he failed to give me this, I could not thank him for the rest" (*Where* 182). Again, the desk functions as a token of stability, that cannot be replaced by theories on blackness.

3. *Where Did You Sleep Last Night*: Miscegenation, Multiraciality and Cultural Mulattism

Senna's memoir exemplifies very well a fundamental aspect of Ashe's theorization of the post-soul: the impulse to trouble blackness, which in its new analytic approach he defines as "blaxploration," that is an exploration of the reorganization of black life in the post-Civil Rights era (2007, 615). In Senna's writing there is never a given



in terms of identity. There is not such a thing as a true identity, even less a true black identity, there is only the identity that Senna slowly and painfully shapes for herself in an act of self-affirmation and self-definition. This process is destabilizing, but allows Senna to come up with a definition of blackness that is specific to her, and that takes into account different aspects of her background. By doing so, Senna presents herself to the reader as a cultural mulatto, since the black identity she chooses for herself is one that discards every simplistic accusation of inauthenticity based either on her skin color or her racial salience.¹ The author learns to “allow for discomfort” (2005, 86), without craving acceptance neither from the black nor the white community.

In this way Senna’s white and Mexican heritage, far from opposing her blackness, start to fit into a conception of blackness that is multifaceted, contingent, and can include multiraciality. In contrast with traditional notions of passing, black is the ideal, desired identity, an identity that is chosen rather than assigned. This is also the main reason why Senna is critical of the term “multiracial” as one that might apply to her, and prefers “black” instead: while multiraciality is a concept that seems to accept the reality of race as biological evidence, the fact of declaring herself black despite of her light skin and straight hair exposes the intangibility of race and allows her to deconstruct it from within. Senna, in fact, refuses the image of the mulatto as an evidence of assimilation, successful coming together of the races, end of discrimination: mulatto identity is never romanticized, and Senna shows just how easily racism can coexist with the acknowledgement and even celebration of miscegenation and multiraciality. Moreover, Senna is critical of a system that takes into account only black and white, making other groups virtually invisible. The Mexican heritage of her father, therefore, becomes illuminating in showing how nuanced identity can be. While the mulatto has been seen as a symbol of the joyful mingling of the races, other groups such as the Mexicans threaten this vision by evoking images of poverty, marginalization, failed assimilation. The mulatto can easily fit into the black-white paradigm, but troubled conceptions of a nuanced, contingent blackness complicate this scenario in a way that mainstream society finds discomforting.

The impulse to trouble blackness is not a prerogative of the post-Civil Rights generation, as Danzy Senna herself makes clear in one of the first scenes of her memoir. While studying the marriage certificate of her parents, she notes that it lists name, age and color of the couple, but while her mother is described as “white,” her father is listed as “brown,” not “black” or “Negro.” Senna writes: “Apparently my father insisted on this term. He was trying to make a point about race as a social construct rather than an essential biological category. If they wanted to know his color, he would give them the literal color of his skin” (*Where* 27). She adds: “(...) Looking at the form now, the word *brown* seems to point as well to the murkiness of my father’s origins” (*Where* 27). We can observe how Senna takes up again the reflection of her father on race, pushing it to a more complex interpretative level. While her father wanted to highlight the fact that race was not just a question of color, but rather of class and power imbalance, Senna points out that the word “brown” has a different significance *now*, meaning for a daughter of her generation. In fact, in her mind, “brown” evokes not only the absurdity of racial categorization according to skin color, but also and above all murkiness, a sense of unclear, unknown, unspoken, “dirty” past. It is not a case that, immediately after this scene, the memoir starts to outline the details of the coming to the world of her father in the Jim Crow South, where “miscegenation was a crime punishable by imprisonment and, more often, lynching—though in Louisiana the races had been mixing for a long time” (*Where* 27).

The reflection on miscegenation is another central aspect of the memoir, and is clearly referenced in the title. “Where Did You Sleep Last Night (Black Girl)?” is actually the title of a Southern folk song, and is intended as a way of paying homage to the great tradition of Southern black music and to Senna’s paternal grandmother, a talented jazz and folk pianist. However, the title also alludes to the secrecy of the sexual life of many black women, often forced to carry on a relationship with a white man out of violence or critical economic circumstances. The title also quotes Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (2003) in a famous scene that focuses on the relationship between black women slaves and white masters, in which the protagonist Dana has just spent the night with her white husband, who has time-travelled with her to the antebellum South and is pretending to be her white master. When Dana leaves her husband’s bedroom in the morning, she is confronted by the mistress of the house, who slaps her and furiously asks: “Where did you sleep last night?” The title therefore, although intended as an homage to black music, also reminds readers of neo-slave narratives of the violence that has often been involved in miscegenation. Consequently, Senna reminds us that “oppression is so often an act of

¹ For a thorough explanation of the concept of racial salience, see Bracey (2011, 3).



intimacy” (*Where* 178) since violence was frequently the consequence not so much of the separation of the races, but of their coming together on a very intimate level.

Senna elaborates on this theme through two parallel narratives. The main narrative is the one in which she reports the findings of her investigations in the South, where she discovers that Anna, her paternal grandmother, had an affair with a white Irish priest, who therefore might be her biological grandfather. The second narrative is that of her parents’ marriage, the union of two intellectuals who met and married in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, but whose inability to overcome difference clearly casts a shade of doubt on the possibilities of miscegenation as a cure to the racial divide. The discussion on her parents’ marriage is also the occasion to tackle a thorny subject: the violence committed by a black man (her father) on a white upper-class woman (her mother), which Senna openly discusses despite its delicacy and its historical implications. As is often the case with post-soul artists, Senna does not fear that by airing “house business” she might be considered as a race traitor, and honestly addresses an issue that may be discomforting to the black community. While soul culture insisted on the importance of positive images of the black community, post-soul artists actually focus on the diversity and contingency of experiences of blackness, subverting the canon of positive images and submitting it to explicit questioning. The frank treatment of this subject has eventually caused Senna to be sued for libel by her father, and the relationship between the two is now marked by tensions (Brown, 2015).

The final part of the text reflects what blackness will be for the generation to come, which we might call a post post-soul generation, who might avoid the trauma of being forced into an identity thanks to the efforts of their parents and grandparents. This reflection arises from the birth of the child of Danzy Senna and African American scholar and creative writer Percival Everett during the writing of the memoir. Senna takes note of the curiosity of people who look at her newborn baby trying to assess his level of blackness, the color of his skin, his curls or absence of them, even the size and color of his genitals, and shows us the perversity of attaching meaning to the racial features of a nude newborn baby: “people see my baby and in the face of his racial ambiguity their own past hurts, desires, fears, ad fantasies rise to the surface. He – the baby – becomes the Rorschach inkblot upon which all of their own projections come to the surface” (*Where* 165).

Again, race is in the eyes of the observer, but Senna tries to protect her baby from this gaze. It is not a case that she and her husband decide that their son is going to grow up in California, which she calls “the land of amnesia” and where, she notices, both the story of her father’s origins and that of her mother’s do not make sense. Of the baby she writes that “I am protective of his freedom to define himself in a way I never could do myself” (*Where* 166). The possibility of self-definition seems to be real and tangible for the baby, who will hopefully be free to decide how to interpret his blackness. The smile of the baby is therefore symbolically described as a smile that has no history and no irony, but only sweetness, since it is not burdened by the implications of race.

Possibilities of a constructive self-definition are extended to Senna’s family at large in one of the last scenes of the memoir, in which her multicultural family sit together for Christmas lunch. The family, which includes her siblings and their partners and children, has by now white, black, Mexican, Pakistani, Jewish and Chinese background, and their sitting together despite of their differences is seen by Senna as a victory, the happy coming together of people who are comfortable not when they choose an identity, but when they are given the possibility to shift, to be always in transition. The epilogue is not characterized by a ‘happily ever after’ message, since conflicts and tensions continue to exist (the fight of the children over a Golliwog doll symbolizes these frictions) and the multiculturalism and relative happiness of the family are not enough to heal the different individual traumas of its members. However, there is a feeling that the process of writing has been beneficial for the author: the problems of the family have been, if not solved, at least tackled, and the verbalization and elaboration of traumatic experiences will enable Senna to not pass them on to the next generation.

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