

# *SHE A RICAN OR SOMETHING? MAKING A (LITERARY) CASE FOR DANZY SENNA'S AFRO LATINIDAD*

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper I aim to argue for a lax definition of Latino/a identity, one which would be justified by a constructionist approach to race and by the pitfalls of strict identity politics, as well as by the demographic fact that multiracial Latinos in the U.S. are on the rise, which has moved experts to foretell a future when fewer and fewer Americans will identify as Hispanic despite the existence of a Spanish-speaking ancestor in their family trees. Danzy Senna's life and work will be used to exemplify the complexity that Latino/a identity is acquiring in recent years, to explore the benefits of defining Latino/a identity in a broad way and of claiming, more specifically, for Senna's Afro Latinidad.

**KEYWORDS:** Identity politics, multiracial Americans, Latino/a identity, Afro Latinidad, Danzy Senna.

## RESUMEN

En este artículo abogo por una definición laxa de la identidad latina que estaría justificada por un enfoque constructivista de la noción de raza, las dificultades que genera una política identitaria estricta y la realidad demográfica según la cual el número de latinos multirraciales que viven en los Estados Unidos está yendo en aumento, lo cual ha llevado a los expertos a predecir un futuro en el que cada vez menos estadounidenses se identificarán como hispanos pese a la presencia de antepasados hispanohablantes en sus árboles genealógicos. La vida y obra de Danzy Senna serán analizadas para ejemplificar la complejidad que la identidad latina está adquiriendo en los últimos años, para explorar los beneficios de definir la identidad latina de forma amplia y para defender, de manera más específica, la condición afro-latina de esta autora.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Política identitaria, estadounidenses multirraciales, identidad latina, afro-latinidad, Danzy Senna.



## 1. BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION: LOOSENING IDENTITY CONSTRUCTS, FORMING NEW COALITIONS

There is a wide consensus that the 2000 census marked a great change in the way race is perceived and constructed in the United States, as it allowed informants to mark one or more races in order to best describe their racial identity (Harris and Sim 2002). The possibility of identifying oneself as belonging to more than one racial group seems to allow for a constructionist perspective on race. As opposed to the essentialist perspective that dominated the 19<sup>th</sup> century and a great part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and that was based on the presumption that race was biologically determined, the most recent constructionist perspective sees race as a tool that has been and is still used by the status quo to reinforce and perpetuate social differences. Thus, within the constructionist perspective, racial group boundaries are understood as being subjective and racial identities as fluid, which would explain the fact that racial classifications have differed across nations and historical periods, and can even vary in an individual's life (Harris and Sim 2002).

In fact, one given person may have multiple racial identities throughout his/her life, depending on a variety of circumstances that combine personal, social, and historical factors. Three dimensions have been pointed out as determining people's racial identity: first, their internal racial identity, or what they themselves believe their race to be; second, external racial identities, or what others believe about their racial identity; third, their expressed racial identity, or the specific ways through which people convey their beliefs about their racial identity, ranging from words they use to actions they carry out (Harris and Sim 2002).

American writer Danzy Senna—born in Boston in 1970—offers a good opportunity to test the fluidity and subjective nature of racial identity. The daughter of an Irish-American mother, poet and novelist Fanny Howe, and of an African-American and Mexican father, writer Carl Senna, Danzy Senna unequivocally identified herself as being black during her childhood and her youth. However, as time went by, she started to realize the problematic nature of identity politics, and by the mid-1990s she ended up embracing a more complex identity, one which allowed her to recognize herself as being multiracial (something she had despised in the past) and to shift her concern from dichotomous terms (black/white, man/woman, gay/heterosexual, etc.) to issues of power. Outside her closest circle, people have wrongly identified her as being Puerto Rican, white, or Andalusian, among other things, something that has also played an important role in her self-construction.

To that external racial profiling she has responded in various ways. In a number of essays and interviews (for instance in “The Mulatto Millennium,” 1998, and in Milian Arias’ “An Interview with Danzy Senna,” 2002), she has recounted her initial self-identification as black and her later embracing of a more complex and profoundly multicultural and multiracial identity. Her literary responses, however, have been much more varied. She has constructed several protagonists whose lives closely resemble her own, such as Birdie in *Caucasia* (1998) or the narrator in *Symptomatic* (2004). The former is a biracial girl whose mother is, like Senna's, a descendant of the white New England elite, while her father is an African-American.



The protagonist of *Symptomatic*, for her part, is a biracial young woman who has moved to New York City right after college to work at a prestigious magazine, a job that Senna herself had after graduating. But both Birdie and the narrator in *Caucasia* have wished at one point or another they were Latinas, or they have been taken for Latinas by other characters. In other literary works, her main characters are actually Mexican, as in “Sugar Bowl” (2006), or they strive to find more information about a Mexican ancestor, as is the case in Senna’s memoir, *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* (2009).<sup>1</sup>

Therefore, there seems to be a mismatch between Danzy Senna’s essays and interviews, on the one hand, and her fiction and memoir, on the other. The discrepancy arises from Senna’s failure to ever identify herself as a Latina in the former, where she is consciously reflecting on her racial and/or cultural identity, while in her works of fiction she shows a deep interest in creating characters who wish they were Latinas, or are taken for Latinas, or are unambiguously Latinos. One could perhaps find an exception to that rule in “The Mulatto Millennium,” in which Senna lists the different ways in which a person can be “mixed.” Among them, she acknowledges the existence of a kind of mulatto, the “mestizo,” who is, in her own definition, someone whose mixture includes a white and a black parent, and one of them claims a “third race in their background (e.g. Native American or *Latino*)” (“The Mulatto Millennium” 24; emphasis added); at the end of the essay, when she wonders where she fits into all those different mulattos she has listed, she admits that she has been “each of the above, or at least mistaken for each of them” (27). But certainly, she makes no specific mention of her Mexican ancestry in that particular text, just as she fails to acknowledge it elsewhere in her essays and interviews. Contrariwise, in her fiction works her Mexican (or, more generally speaking, Latino) ancestry finds multiple ways to conspicuously manifest itself, as will be shown later on.<sup>2</sup>

It is precisely this paradoxical relationship of Danzy Senna to her Latinidad that, I think, makes her case worthy of study, as such connection offers the opportunity to explore the benefits or potential shortcomings of identity politics for a collective, that of Latino/a writers and artists, that have historically been discriminated

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, I am going to consider Danzy Senna’s memoir, *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* (2009), as both an essay and a work of fiction. In it Senna writes critically about issues of race, identity, gender violence, etc., which clearly situates the book in the realm of non-fiction. But, being an autobiography of sorts, it is inevitably constructive in nature, since it takes the “form of textual ‘self-fashioning’” (Schwalm 2014). For this reason, I study her memoir as a text that moves along the blurred borderlines of fiction and non-fiction, and consequently I use it in the section devoted to Senna’s essays as much as in the part that deals with her works of fiction.

<sup>2</sup> I am conscious of the fact that dividing the analysis of Senna’s works into two sections (one for fiction, another one for non-fiction) is highly problematic, as most of her works present, to a greater or lesser extent, autobiographical elements. However, as pointed out, it is possible to affirm that in her non-fiction there is a tendency to avoid engagement with a Latino identity, while her fiction works consistently inscribe a variety of Latinidades. Besides, as it will be argued, the former tends to offer a celebratory attitude towards the hybrid, while the latter presents a less optimistic vision, one which often inscribes the frustration, anxiety, vulnerability or distress of the hybrid.



against in the U.S. on account of their cultural and racial background, immigrant status, etc. For that group, a shared collective identity, which they began to mold in the 1960s, became essential for their mobilization as a political entity. As any other social movement that develops and maintains a collective identity, Latinos have highlighted the differences between themselves and nonmembers, as the action of “tightening categories” has typically been considered by ethnic minorities as being essential “to contest institutional sources of oppression” (Bernstein 62). But, as Stuart Hall has explained, politics based on ethnicity usually show two distinct phases: after the period when groups rediscover their histories and erect boundaries between themselves and outsiders, there comes a stage which allows for more complex analyses and “a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference” (Hall 220); this new dynamic, in turn, permits the establishment of connections among different groups, the expression of solidarity across identities, and the forging of cross-movement alliances.

So, while essentialist identities have proved unmistakably necessary in the fight against oppression, it is no less certain that at given historical moments they may also be harming to certain interests, insofar as they may “inhibit the formation of coalitions” (Bernstein 63); in other cases, they may ban the inclusion of certain individuals in a particular group if their individualities fail to comply with the essential requirements of the group’s identity construction. One such group would then be exposed to losing potential constituents, hence being drained of the clout of large numbers. In this sense, if the Latino community were to disregard possible members on account of their lack of self-identification as Latinos, or their multicultural background, or their remote connection with the Hispanic world, it would be preventing itself from engaging a larger number of people, and, consequently, it would be inevitably bleeding itself, constricting its full capacity. For that same reason, at this precise historical moment when the number of multiracial people in the U.S. is consistently increasing, just as the number of multiracial Latinos is permanently growing, it appears much more advisable to “loosen” the category of Latino identity.

Such a loosening might help contest cultural sources of oppression, as Bernstein has suggested (62) by allowing activists (in this case Latino/a activists) to deploy their identities strategically. This playful deployment of identity would be inspired by the notion, previously mentioned, that identity is fluid, complex, can be one thing if the individual’s opinion is taken into account, a very different thing when he/she is seen by others, can vary over the course of a person’s life, etc. Given this vision of identity, a group based on a certain identity formation might admit, over time, that some features of its identity have lost salience; other characteristics, instead, have been added to the mixture; new actors may then be admitted to the group, their participation made perfectly legitimate in this particular social movement even if, in principle, they do not seem to be “directly implicated” (Bernstein 63).

Social and demographic studies recently carried out by the Pew Research Center have shown that the increase in the number of multiracial Americans has become a consistent trend: “the share of multiracial babies has risen from 1% in 1970 to 10% in 2013. And with interracial marriages also on the rise, demographers



expect this rapid growth to continue, if not quicken, in the decades to come” (Pew Research Center, “Multiracial in America” 3). In fact, the Census Bureau projects that “the multiracial population will triple by 2016” (7). Like all other ethnic groups, Latinos, in particular, are similarly following this trend: “When asked directly about their mixed-race background, about one-in-three (34%) Latino adults say they consider themselves to be mixed race—defined as belonging to more than one racial group, such as mestizo, mulatto or some other mixed race” (Pew Research Center, *Pew Social Trends* 7). But the report confirms that “[w]hen considering these racial identities through grandparents, the share of Latino adults with these [mixed-race] backgrounds increases” (*Pew Social Trends* 9). Mark Hugo López, director of Hispanic Research at the Pew Research Center, succinctly summarizes this tendency with these words: “Today, one-in-four Latino newlyweds marries someone who is not Latino” (2015). Besides, he adds, “[i]mmigration is no longer the driving force of the Hispanic community’s growth. Instead, births are” (2015). As López points out, the increase in multiracial Latinos and the decrease in the number of first-generation immigrants will certainly have “implications for what Hispanics call themselves in the future” and for whether or not “they consider themselves Hispanic at all.” In fact, he warns, “[a]lready two million Americans say they are not Hispanic although they indicate their ancestry includes roots in a Spanish-speaking country,” a circumstance that leads him to state that, in the future, “as the number of interracial and interethnic couples grows and immigration slows,” labels such as “Hispanic’ and ‘Latino’ may be used less” (2015).

None of this would matter, in principle, if discrimination on account of a person’s race or ethnicity stopped existing in the U.S. However, if that were not the case, forming coalitions and resorting to identity politics would continue playing a vital role in the fight for equality. But how will people of Latino ancestry form coalitions? With whom will they forge alliances if they cease to identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino? Will the categories “multiracial” or “multiethnic” be valid for all ethnic minorities and for each and every challenge? They seem to be too encompassing, much too large umbrella terms to serve all purposes.<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, my point is that even in that foretold future when fewer and fewer people with a Hispanic background identify themselves with a Latino identity, the latter

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<sup>3</sup> In the U.S., there has been a bitter controversy over the validity of those categories for a number of years, especially since the 2000 census. It has been noted that the “sharp rise of interracial marriages in the U.S. parallels a growing number of multiracial organizations committed to promoting ‘a positive awareness of interracial and multicultural identity’” (Dagbovie 93), but also that many of these multiracial organizations “have attracted criticism for disassociating themselves from minority issues and concerns” (Dagbovie 93). Thus, many African Americans, for example, have been afraid that the label “multiracial” might be, in reality, “an escape from ‘black’” (Dagbovie 93). Other people, for their part, “embraced the mixed-race movement as they saw its challenge to existing categories of race as useful to arguments hailing the end of race” (Young 289), but this rationale might also assist those conservatives who wish to end programs of what they term “‘reverse discrimination’ against whites” (Young 289). For more opinions on the negative and positive consequences triggered by the changes concerning race in the 2000 census, see Elizabeth A. Bowman’s 2001 article.



might prove very useful at specific moments, when facing particular trials. However, Latino identity would necessarily have to be understood in a flexible way, one which recognized that, over time, the rules of engagement with a certain identity group will shift; that activists can use their identity in a variety of ways to legitimize their participation in any social movement and that, in fact, any individual within a group may have multiple context-specific racial identities over the course of his/her life; ultimately, it would have to concede that the “we” of all movements is but “a public performance, an outward show of solidarity” (Siegel 59).

It is in this vein that I want to bring up the case of Danzy Senna, a multiracial and multiethnic writer who, when discussing her identity, has never actually acknowledged her Mexican ancestry as being particularly influential over her individuality; yet, in her literary works, she has often shown deep concern with it. Hence, her Latino identity is by no means conventional, monolithic, fixed, unified, or permanently performed. On the contrary, it has surfaced at some points, only to disappear soon after; it has given rise to the most stereotypical portrayals of Latinos and to idiosyncratic representations of said ethnicity; in short, it has shown that, inevitably, in the case of identity, “bordering” and “de-bordering” processes (Marotta 2008) or identity shifts are constantly, and necessarily, taking place.

## 2. DANZY SENNA’S NON-FICTION: IMPERSONATING THE *INTENTIONAL HYBRID*, CELEBRATING THE *ENLIGHTENED MULATTO*

Danzy Senna may have learnt a lesson in how to form coalitions across identities from her father, Carl Senna, a black intellectual of the Civil Rights Movement whose work has been especially related to the plight of African-Americans.<sup>4</sup> However, at one point in his life, as his daughter recounts in her memoir *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* (2009), he spent some time in New Mexico, “doing political organizing for a Chicano group” (130). His own mother, Anna Franklin, was an African-American, but his absent father, Francisco José Senna, was a white Mexican pugilist who seems to have had little interest in Anna, other than using her to get admittance into the U.S.<sup>5</sup> For that reason, he soon abandoned his wife and son, which explains why Carl Senna has no memories of his father (Senna 28), but only recollections of living in “Spanish Harlem, of Spanish voices” (93). Those voices and the vague proofs of his Mexican father’s existence were enough, nonetheless, to

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, his work *Colin Powell: A man of War and Peace* (1992), about the African-American general and statesman; also, *The Black Press and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (1993), where he discusses the evolution of the black press from 1827 to the present, paying special attention to its role in African Americans’ struggle for civil rights.

<sup>5</sup> In Danzy Senna’s words: “Francisco briefly married Anna in the forties in order to stay in the country, mistreated her, and abandoned her while she was pregnant” (*Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* 192).



help him connect, as an adult, with the Chicano Movement, and to establish links between the African-American identity he received from his mother and the Latino one he built upon his father's perfunctory influence.

Carl Senna thus passed onto his daughter a model of hybridity that could be said to fall under Homi Bhabha's category of the "postcolonial" or "intentional hybrid" (Bhabha 1994). As opposed to the modernist or organic hybrid, who is unconscious of his/her liberating potentialities and bases his/her identity on a set of essentialized identities (white/black, host/immigrant), and also contrary to the hybrid appropriated by cultural industries, whose purpose is to reinforce hegemonic messages, Bhabha's hybrid subject is aware of his/her radical subjectivity and threatens the binary logic of the modernist hybrid. He/she will refuse to be simply black or white; like Carl Senna, he can choose to be black and Latino, which further complicates a dualistic classificatory logic.

Danzy Senna, for her part, saw herself in the 1970s as being black, despite her multiracial background, because, in her own words, that was the only logic that Bostonian society recognized in the post-Civil Rights Movement era: "Before all of this radical ambiguity, I was a black girl" ("The Mulatto Millenium" 15). And she continues elaborating on this: "Not only was I black (and here I go out on a limb), but I was an enemy of the people. The mulatto people, that is. I sneered at those byproducts of miscegenation who chose to identify as mixed, not black" (15). The reason for this strict self-identification, as already mentioned, is historical: "In Boston circa 1975, mixed wasn't really an option" (15). Identifying as mixed, in fact, was for her "wishy-washy, an act of flagrant assimilation, treason, passing even" (15).

However, in later works she has come to reject identity politics, its rigid boundaries, its failure—often—to recognize the power dynamics involved in any social interaction, and how those dynamics may go beyond concepts of race; after all, she has argued, "America has always been 'the land of miscegenation'" (Milian Arias and Senna 447). She has also learnt to accept and celebrate her multiracial and multicultural background, a recognition which for her has stopped being a "treason," an attempt at "passing." This evolution in her thought, she herself has pointed out, has paralleled changes the U.S. has undergone as a nation: "We've only recently begun to acknowledge this fact, and lately to celebrate rather than deny mixture" (Milian Arias and Senna 447-448). Besides, this shift has led her to explore other issues: "I'm not so much interested in categorizing further" (which—incidentally—she does, however lightly or ironically, in "The Mulatto Millennium") or, she continues, in "adding new groups, so much as I am interested in deconstructing the premise of race itself" (448). And as identity and identity politics become "a tool rather than a definition of who you are" (Ashe and Senna 133), the possibility of strategically positioning oneself across social movements is made viable. In her case, such possibility is actually almost limitless, as it is constantly expanding with each new family addition:

My family is today, through blood and marriage, African American, Mexican, Polish Jew, Pakistani Muslim, Cuban, Chinese, Japanese, English, and Irish. We are wandering, spreading, splintering apart, all the time. We are trying to reinvent





ourselves with each new generation. We are blending new races with each new union. (*Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* 196)

Thus Danzy Senna has come to position herself as the ultimate postcolonial or intentional hybrid whose mere existence highlights the instability and porous nature of cultural and social boundaries. Of the two possible visions of the hybrid self that have been envisioned—that which sees the hybrid as a cultural homeless who is estranged and existentially lost, and that which, instead, considers the hybrid as an enlightened being with a wider horizon inasmuch as he/she can be an interpreter between different races or cultures (Marotta 2008)—, Senna's celebratory attitude towards her all-encompassing and ever-spreading family appears to fall under the latter. Her family, or so it seems, is presented as being able to synthesize and have access to an almost "total perspective" of all the mixing possibilities existent in the American society, what Vince Marotta has described as the hybrid's supposed ability to transcend "standpoint epistemologies," his/her flexibility to develop a "double articulation," that is, "an alternative mode of thinking unavailable to those who are fixed within their particularistic framework" (Marotta 308). But Danzy Senna does not simply gloat over the positive consequences brought to her by her multicultural and multiracial family. In fact, as she points out, breaking free of identity politics, in her case, "has not resulted in political apathy" or a mere congratulatory attitude, I might add, but rather it has given her "an awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of the world we have inherited—and the very real power relations we must transform" (Senna 20). It is those power relations that she chooses to be concerned with, rather than the specificities of skin color, hair texture, sexual orientation and so on. She has expressed these views in "Passing and the Problematic of Multiracial Pride" (2005), where she affirms that, at worse, identity politics can be "a distraction from real questions of power" (86), and even more eloquently in "To Be Real" (1995):

In our post-modern condition we should no longer speak in terms of "men and women," "blacks and whites," "gay and straight," but rather in terms of "powerful" and "powerless," positions which are themselves in a constant state of flux and can become obscured if we are not vigilant. Any of us, despite our biological traits, can hold and abuse power at any one moment. As my mother [Fanny Howe] says, "Whoever can, will." ("To Be Real" 19)

Given that human condition pointed out by Senna's mother, Fanny Howe, that makes us prone to abuse others if the opportunity presents itself, it seems highly desirable to further explore the ways in which identity can be deployed strategically. Such exploration may give us clues to avoid the dangers of essentialist identity politics, whose reductionist nature poses an inherent hazard, as they require both inter-group othering (those who belong are set against those who do not belong because they are outside the group) and intra-ethnic othering (taking into account gender, age, and other markers, the members that do belong to the group also establish differences among themselves). Eventually, the strategic deployment of identity may allow for





activists' intervention in movements in which they are not, in principle, directly or obviously implicated, but whose ultimate aim—that of destabilizing the status quo and its abusive control of those subjected to othering processes—may nonetheless be their goal too. Hershini B. Young has referred to such coalitions as communities based on “strategic common politics” (302) and has further described them as unions that are “noncompulsory” (302), that is, they are not “biologically determined via the logic of sameness” (297), as she puts it, but instead are brought about by “more deliberate, engaged interactions based on common agendas and concerns” (297).

In my view, it is exactly with these noncompulsory coalitions in mind that one is to go back to Danzy Senna's paradoxical attitude towards her Mexican ancestry: so influential in a great part of her literary production—as will later on be shown—, yet so scarcely relevant in her non-fiction works. In the latter, as it has been discussed, her expressed racial identity ranges from her total failure to acknowledge her Mexicanness in her childhood and adolescent years, when she irrevocably identified herself as black, to her belittling it in her essays and interviews, where she stresses her multiracial and multicultural background, only perfunctorily referring to her Mexicanness, if at all, as simply one more ingredient of her identity stew.

### 3. DANZY SENNA'S FICTION: REVEALING THE MUTT'S “TRAGEDY,” INSCRIBING LATINIDADES

In her autobiographical essay “The Color of Love,” Danzy Senna (2001) recalls her Irish grandmother, actress and playwright Mary Manning, whom she loved despite her racist attitudes and words. In particular, Senna remembers how her grandmother used to encourage her to pass as white: “she told me that I needn't identify as black, since I didn't look it” (52), and she likewise recollects one especially painful statement the old lady once addressed to her: “The *tragedy* about you [...] is that you are mixed” (52; emphasis added). Senna admits having answered back with anger: “You don't know the first thing about me” (52). But, in truth, it seems her grandmother did hit her right where it hurt most, as elsewhere in her fiction and autobiographical writings Senna acknowledges the pain of not looking black, and, what is worse, of actually looking white.

This could explain her adolescent desire of being Puerto Rican: “I remember lying in bed at night and smelling Spanish cooking from the apartment downstairs; I would close my eyes and fantasize that I was actually Puerto Rican, that everything else had been just a bad dream, that my name was Yolanda Rivera, and that I lived in the barrio” (“To Be Real” 9). Danzy Senna's own mother had similarly wished she were Latina, as having mulatto kids she often felt censored by the inquisitorial look of those who disapproved of interracial marriages; among Puerto Ricans, instead, she felt at ease: “In neighborhoods where there were Puerto Rican families with a wide range of colors and hair types among them, I felt safe; I was addressed in Spanish” (Howe XIX). In these instances, then, Latinidad is seen as a safe haven where mixed people can fit in; it is an identity that offers both Senna and her mother a sense of belonging. With her father, Carl Senna, she too experienced that need to



possess a Latina identity, as she explains in her memoir, *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?*, where she recalls the occasion when they were both trying to claim a prize and pretended to be Puerto Ricans, since that would supposedly give them more chances of looking like a couple, rather than the father and daughter that they were. Yet, they had to resort to a stereotypical representation of Puerto Ricans inasmuch as they could utter practically no words in Spanish other than a few “phrases that had been swallowed up into the larger American culture” (139).

The haven that Latinidad could potentially offer Danzy Senna, her mother and her father, is therefore not within their reach for lack of command of the Spanish language, but that does not put a stop to their wishful thinking because they perceive that their mixed condition would perfectly fit into a community of Puerto Ricans. Neither does that lack prevent some of Danzy Senna’s semi-autobiographical characters from expressing similar desires or from being erroneously associated with Hispanics by others. In *Caucasia* (1998),<sup>6</sup> for instance, when Birdie (the seemingly white daughter of a white mother and an African-American father) goes to a Black Movement school for the first time, her classmates are displeased by her presence. One of them expresses his irritation by pointing out that theirs “was supposed to be a black school” (43) and by wondering, too, whether “[s]he a Rican or something?” (43).<sup>7</sup> A few months afterwards, when prompted by her mother to write her first novel, which she will title “El Paso,” Birdie imagines a cast of characters that are Mexican-American. But ignorant as she is of Mexican-American culture, she portrays them in the most stereotypical way one can think of: “a religious, perpetually pregnant mother; a banjo-playing, sombrero-donning papa”; their teenage son, for his part, “gets in knife fights, beats and impregnates his girlfriend, and fails out of high school”; the latter, as could not be otherwise, is “sexy” and “abused” (171-172). What is especially poignant in this construction is that Birdie had seen “such a family on a news show” and had decided that she wanted “to be Mexican” (171). In other words, the knowledge she has acquired about Mexican-American culture is a deeply biased narrative (self-servingly offered by Anglo media) that combines violence and ignorance in equal shares. However, it is significant to notice that Birdie, who sees herself on the outskirts of society on account of her mixed condition and her mother’s involvement in revolutionary activities, relates to that marginalized cast of characters and does not just feel sympathy for them, but wishes she were one of them. She is learning here to put identity politics at quarantine and to build, instead, across-group alliances.

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<sup>6</sup> This novel has been deemed “quasi-autobiographical” by critic Geneva Cobb Moore (108).

<sup>7</sup> This is precisely the question that I have used as part of the title of this paper. Indeed, both Birdie’s and Danzy Senna’s mixed-race condition and ambiguous look complicate other people’s attempts at categorizing them, which at times is considered problematic by the two of them, as in the scene that is being described; however, on other occasions, that same ambiguity can allow them to engage with different groups and, as it is being argued, permit their engagement with a variety of movements.



In her second novel, *Symptomatic* (2004), Danzy Senna presents a young mixed woman who, like Birdie at an earlier age, is also taken for a Latina by Andrew, a man she meets on the subway and with whom she subsequently has a sentimental relationship: “he found the courage to cross the car and asked me if I spoke Spanish” (2), to which she angrily answers, “*What makes you say that?*” (2; emphasis in the original). Yet, as she will later on admit, she herself had once imagined, as a little girl who had got lost, that she was Mexican. When her family finally found her, sitting at a bus stop, she stood there staring back at her relatives and at the policemen who had been helping them search for her, as if she “were waiting not for them but for a bus back to Tijuana where my real family lived” (133). Once more, Danzy Senna is making a non-Latina character self-identify as a Latina at a moment of vulnerability, thus probing into ways in which a black and white identity can come to embrace Latinidad, or Latinidad accept the black experience as one of its essential components. Rather than seeing these instances as the mere result of confusion on the part of the ignorant white character (Andrew, in this case), or the tired and scared mulatto girl (the narrator as a child), my opinion is that all these cases could more fruitfully be analyzed as occasions when the mixed-race person is learning to question strict identities, to probe into the porous nature of cultural and social boundaries, to find the cracks of said boundaries, to discover the opportunities for going through de-bordering processes and building cross-movement alliances. It is perhaps not entirely accidental that such occasions coincide with phases when the protagonist sees herself in a vulnerable situation, as she can then more accurately perceive how others, in this case Latinos, systematically find themselves in similarly disadvantaged positions.

But putting aside the circumstances that Danzy Senna herself (like some of her characters) has been identified by others as looking Latina, and that she may have wanted to invest in a non-essentialist identity which would allow her to engage with movements and groups in which she is not directly implicated, the fact still remains that Senna does have Mexican ancestry, even if it is a tenuous one: “My father’s full name is Carl Francisco José Senna. He grew up not knowing his father, the source of his Spanish middle name, aware of only what his mother told him: he was the son of a Mexican boxer who had abandoned his wife with three kids and was never seen again” (*Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* 16). Over the years, the boxer, a “white Mexican” (31), became “a character out of a novel,” “a man of myth” (33), who despite his flimsy and discontinued presence in his American family managed to captivate the imagination of both his son, Carl Senna, and the granddaughter he never met, Danzy Senna. The former has actually devoted an important part of his life to tracing the steps of his Mexican father in America and in Mexico, though his search has been rather fruitless. Of her father, Danzy Senna has said that he is “neither fully black nor fully Mexican nor fully white” (123), and also “half of everything and certain of nothing” (124). But any reader of Danzy Senna’s memoir can perceive the commitment with which Carl Senna has pursued his Mexican ancestry, and the daughter’s respect for that search, which she has made hers both at a personal and at a literary level. In fact, Danzy Senna sets off on a quest for the Mexican grandfather in a desperate attempt to try and understand who her father



is and why he is the way he is, as well as the reasons for his meandering life, at times promising and visible, often disappointing and inconspicuous.<sup>8</sup> Through that search, she discovers her connections with the Deep South and similarly comes to acknowledge the lineage that unites her with people of Mexican descent whose voices reverberate in her imagination. That must be the reason why she repeats, on two separate occasions, that her father has recollections of “Spanish voices” in Spanish Harlem (*Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* 93), of “Hispanic people, Spanish voices” (160); also, as it has already been pointed out, it is that lineage that she seems to be in need of highlighting when she recalls the fact that her father once went to New Mexico to do “political organizing for a Chicano group” (130).

In no place is that involvement in her father’s pursuit of the Mexican forefather made more apparent than in “Sugar Bowl” (2006), if here the quest has turned fully literary. The text, published in *Ploughshares*, a literary magazine, has the length and one might say the nature of what could well be defined as a short story, though it is presented as an excerpt from *The Searchers*, a novel in progress.<sup>9</sup> As the short narrative text that it is in its actual published form, it presents many features that would straightaway inscribe it in the field of Chicano Literature, if one were to disregard the fact that its author has not ascribed herself to that domain. Among those characteristics, it is worth pointing out its main theme, that is, Mexican immigration to the U.S. The text, in fact, features Hector, a young man from Puerto Morelos (Mexico) who, like the Trojan hero of the same name, will be confronted with a tragic fate. Senna’s Hector, in particular, decides to cross the U.S.-Mexican border and settle in San Diego with his mind set on pursuing the American Dream. This goal had been systematically encouraged by an American he had met in his hometown, a man who kept speaking wonders of the chances his country offered to entrepreneurial leaders and brave spirits. The title of the narrative itself, “Sugar Bowl,” mirrors this fantasized construction of America as the land of opportunities: the bowl, used for holding sugar or sugar cubes, stands for the North. It represents the epitome of the sweetest dreams of personal fulfillment, economic advance-

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<sup>8</sup> In my view, two reviews of *Where Did You Sleep Last Night?* fail to grasp the importance given in Danzy Senna’s memoir to recovering the Mexican grandfather, finding the truth about his identity, and unveiling his mysteries. David Matthews, for instance, argues that the book’s main purpose lies in documenting the search for the father, that is, Danzy Senna’s father; he argues that the memoir “ostensibly sets out to answer another question—‘Don’t you know who I am?’—posed by the author’s father, Carl Senna, early in the book” (44), but he bypasses the circumstance that the search for the father will necessarily turn into a quest for Anna Franklin, the African-American grandmother (which is pointed out in Kelly’s review (44) and for Francisco José Senna, the Mexican grandfather. On the contrary, I would assert that it is the search for the latter that becomes the book’s leading force. After all, though little is known of the grandmother’s early life, it is the grandfather that remains an utter mystery. The fact that he might be either a Mexican pugilist or an Irish priest represents a terrible threat: he alone can potentially alter the whole family’s identity and compel them to reevaluate their self-perception.

<sup>9</sup> To my knowledge, however, the above-mentioned novel has not been published yet, though whether this is due to lack of completion on the author’s part or absence of publisher I do not know.



ment, social climbing, freedom from penury and hardship, and so on; it becomes the perfect metaphor to embody that Southern craving for the North, immigrants' uncontrollable desire for a place in the American paradise.

Nonetheless, as in many other instances of Chicano literature, Danzy Senna's American "sugar bowl" seems to offer Hector no appeasement for his appetite for sugary things. In fact, Hector's illegal status, his lack of a proper supporting network in the new country, his insufficient command of the English language, and, last but not least, Americans' rejection of immigrants, their actual racism, all contribute to his inability to succeed. Ironically, then, the U.S. ends up being portrayed not as a sweetly welcoming territory, but as an aggressive country that leaves Hector, by the end of the narrative, in "a strange trance" ("Sugar Bowl" 162). The latter represents his disorientation, a feeling which is boosted by his sense of unbelonging, of having lost his dreams, of being in a cultural chaos where "garbled words" are "neither Spanish nor English" (162) and where, consequently, meaning is impossible to achieve. Worse, yet, in this final scene Hector is compared to "a dog" (162), which stands for his loss of human dignity in this environment that self-interestedly exploits his vulnerability.

The critique of American society and, in particular, of its treatment of Mexican immigrants is therefore present in Danzy Senna's text in much the same way as other Mexican-American writers have made it their main preoccupation. Of special interest to me are the strategies used by Senna to show how American imperialism has commodified Mexico, purposefully constructing it as an exotic touristic destination for middle and low-class Americans. Thus, Puerto Morelos, Hector's hometown, is said to have received "a starred review" (144) in the tourists' guide, "as if it were a restaurant, calling it 'picturesque' and 'swimmable' and 'cheap'" (144). Gringos go there "to take snapshots of themselves and blow smoke in his face and laugh at his 'bobo sneakers' and talk to him like he was a village idiot" (144). Because it is cheap, because its people can easily be racialized, considered inferior, certainly poorer, Puerto Morelos can safely be turned into a touristic resort for Americans, this being the ultimate colonizing strategy. Simultaneously, when Mexicans enter the U.S., Americans denigrate them, but accept a commercial relationship with them as long as it keeps the balance tipped in their favor. In this sense, Gail Grinds, the owner of the Loma Lodge (an apartment complex in San Diego where Hector rents a room), confesses that she prefers Mexican guests to American ones, as the former are illegal and rarely complain about anything: "Half the motherfuckers in here got water dripping off their backs," she states, but she does not mind, she adds, "[l]ong as the money is U.S. Tender" (144). The disempowerment of Mexicans once they reach the U.S. is hence achieved by means of the previously mentioned exoticization of Mexico and its people, as well as by the adoption, on the part of the American characters, of a xenophobic and classist attitude which is revealed in their reductionist approach to Mexicans, who are collectively seen as "wetbacks" with "water dripping off their backs," that is, as poor illegal immigrants. Besides this, there is also a racializing process of Mexicans which, in the text, is subtly carried out through the dog allegory which structures the narrative from the beginning until the end.



In his pursuit of the American Dream in San Diego, Hector has brought along his own pet, Ruby, a Mexican street dog. Ruby's mixed race contrasts sharply with the pit bulls and teacup poodles that Gail and her son raise in their complex: they "only got pure breeds" (145),<sup>10</sup> she boasts to Hector. In this way, she introduces a hierarchy of the races: at the top, the white and blond Anglos who raise pure breeds; at the bottom, the brown Mexicans and their mixed stray dogs, a parallelism that is emphasized in the final scene when Hector is said to resemble a dog himself. This racial hierarchy is systematically reinforced throughout the text in various ways. The dog allegory, for one, is a strong reminder of the power granted to each ethnic group, but not the unique one. Whites are the only people who possess property in the microcosm of the narrative (Gail owns the Loma Lodge; a white racist old man has his own detached house); they are commuters with office jobs; they are the policemen in charge of law and order; they are the bosses, the ones who distribute jobs or fail to do so. On the contrary, Mexicans are the wetbacks who will not dare to complain about injustices; the gullible workers who, despite having no citizenship rights, accept to canvass for an organization that is supposedly trying to protect American consumers' rights—and get no money after spending a whole day doing so; they are the "Indios" (159) that patiently wait for some Anglo to "hire them for day labor" (159). Theirs is the lack of rights, of jobs, of power, of dignity. Each day, Hector thinks, brings "a new degradation" (148) for him: soon after his arrival in San Diego, he is informed by Gail that most Mexicans living in the U.S. have swum across the Rio Grande, as was stated before; a few weeks into his stay in the U.S., he is exposed to the obnoxious racist comments of the old white man who shouts at him that Mexicans "[c]ome creeping like cockroaches into our country, can't speak a dime of English, poppin' out babies like there was no tomorrow" (154). Thus he sees himself falling from being considered a wetback to being called a cockroach. The downgrading is palpable.

Given this power dynamics between Anglos and Mexicans, it is then only normal to see white people's total disregard for Mexicans' feelings and welfare. When Hector arrives at the Loma Lodge, in fact, Gail welcomes him to San Diego (142), but her salutation is self-interested: it is her prospect of having one more guest that she is celebrating, while her concern with Hector's wellbeing is null, as demonstrated by the ironic circumstance that, as she spoke to him, her "[f]alse teeth moved in and out of her face" (142); hence her body, with its fake appendages, contradicted the words she had uttered. A similar disregard for Hector's welfare is observed in the scene in which he comes back to the lodge, after a day of unpaid

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noticing that these pure breeds do not merely suggest racial superiority when opposed to Hector's mutt, but also point out at two stereotypical representations of America. On the one hand, the teacup poodles could be said to stand for an America that has been idealized as the Promised Land—that is, the "sugar bowl" the title of the narrative ironically alludes to—; on the other, the pit bulls, a race popularly—if perhaps erroneously—viewed as being aggressive, can easily be associated with an America that relentlessly fortifies itself against the arrival of undesirable immigrants, i.e. those who are perceived as being difficult or even impossible to assimilate.





work as a canvasser, only to discover that Gail's son has let Ruby run away. The dog had been Hector's support until then, the unique comfort he had had in this careless and insensitive country; despite his lack of pedigree, he had been Hector's precious jewel. Gone is now that last proof of his own value and dignity, the one being that had enjoyed and cherished his company. His desperate efforts to find his dog are totally fruitless and, what is worse, the narrative points at two possible ways out of that desperation, both of which seem equally undesirable: on the one hand, he appears to be harboring a desire for vengeance against Gail which might result in his committing some crime (he recalls holding a tiny poodle Gail had once handed to him, and thinking how easily its legs would snap if he twisted them); on the other, he dangerously approaches and develops an interest in the members of a religious sect whose headquarters are right behind the Loma Lodge. The text appears to suggest that, in the mist of such an aggressive environment, Hector will never be capable of successfully moving forward, but will only be able to veer towards crime or a brainwashing organization.

The fact that Hector's dog was some stray dog, a mongrel that literally gets lost through Gail's son's carelessness (itself a proof of his racism), acquires an allegorical dimension in Danzy Senna's narrative: like Ruby, Hector is bound to lose his bearings, as well as his dreams and his sense of self-worth. Here the motif of the stray dog is used to portray Anglos' racism towards people of Mexican descent, but, interestingly enough, it is a recurrent motif in Senna's work, one, however, she has resorted to elsewhere to comment on the challenges faced by biracial people like herself. In *Caucasia* (1998), for instance, Birdie points out that her father had often stated that his kids "were going to be proof that race mixing produced superior minds, the way a mutt is always more intelligent than a purebred dog" (26).<sup>11</sup> And in the short story "The Land of Beulah" (2011) the protagonist, herself a mixed-race woman, learns from an acquaintance that "[f]ifty percent of all so-called purebred are actually mixed. The other fifty percent—the truly pure ones—are stupid and sickly, and susceptible to glandular problems" (53). This theoretical superiority of mixed-race dogs (and, by implication, of mixed-race people) is nonetheless put into question by the short story, which presents a nerve-racking unruly mongrel and a biracial dog owner who secretly resorts to violence against said dog to quell her rage. Despite their incompatibility, both have two important things in common. For one thing, neither of them looks mixed, so people can project their own fantasies onto them (35) or, in the case of the woman, as her ex-boyfriend suggests, she may decide

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<sup>11</sup> This statement is, in fact, a commonly held belief about mutts. In "The Mulatto Millennium" (1998), Danzy Senna points out that she has read this same idea on a flyer on biracial superiority: "Ever wonder why mutts are always smarter than full-bred dogs?" (14). Throughout the essay, Senna shows her uneasiness with this kind of "mulatto supremacist" discourse and, consequently, adopts an ironic stance towards it: "According to the racial zodiac, 2000 is the official Year of the Mulatto. Pure breeds (at least the black ones) are out and hybridity is in. America loves us in all of our half-cast glory" (12). As a keen observer, she carefully considers various symptoms of this new trend, but is not quite sure whether she wants "to join or stay at the heels of this group" (13).





which identity she chooses to perform (40). More importantly, both characters have experienced rejection and abandonment, and both have proved all stereotypes wrong.

It seems clear, then, that throughout her works Senna uses the mutt vs. purebred motif to ironically comment on American society's racist attitudes and stereotypes. And just as being a mutt in her work, despite its alleged superior intelligence and health, does not result in having any luckier fate but may actually involve much more suffering, so too mixed-race people may fail to display higher moral values, but they have greater chances of ending up deeply scarred by the unwelcoming environment they live in. What I find especially noteworthy is the fact that Danzy Senna makes no difference between people who are the result of black and white parents (and are thus discriminated against on account of their biracial nature), and those who are in a position of disempowerment on account of their lack of citizenship rights, their immigrant status, or their low-class origin. By literally and metaphorically representing the dispossessed—the underdog—as the stray dog or the mutt, she reiterates her conviction that it is no longer convenient to adhere to strong identity constructs (“men vs. women,” “blacks vs. whites,” “gay vs. straight”), but it is preferable to speak in terms of “powerful” and “powerless” positions. From this belief may spring her concern with the Chicano cause, her participation in the enrichment of the body of Chicano literature, her realization that the black-and-white girl is in much the same vulnerable condition as Hector, the Mexican immigrant, and that both can therefore be represented through the metaphor of the stray dog.

#### 4. BY WAY OF CONCLUSION: CLAIMING THE SPACE OF THE AFRO LATINA, FOSTERING SOLIDARITY

I realize that, in this paper, by projecting a Latina identity onto Danzy Senna, I have acted just like the characters in “The Land of Beulah” (2011), who look at the story's stray dog and see what they want to see: “The bitch was a mystery. She didn't look mixed, more like some breed that hadn't yet been discovered. Strangers on the street were forever trying to guess her background. They studied her appearance and behavior for clues, but with each guess her identity seemed to shift. In the face of such uncertainty, people saw what they wanted to see” (35). Yet, I sincerely think that my projection is made on the bases of concrete traces: those non-Latino/a characters of hers that have fantasized about being Latinos/as; her obsessive search for the Mexican grandfather she never met; finally, the Mexican characters she has imagined and built up.

Besides, one is to concur with Lari Harrison-Kahan that race—and I would add ethnicity—“is not clear-cut and fixed, but multiple and ‘in motion’” (Harrison-Kahan 45), a conclusion she reaches after stating that in “post-ethnic America,” “identities are chosen, rather than assigned, voluntarily rather than involuntarily” (35), and also after recalling an anecdote from *Black, White and Jewish: Autobiography of a Shifting Shelf* (2001), a memoir written by Rebecca Walker, who happens to be a childhood friend of Danzy Senna's. In this book, Walker—the daughter of



an African-American mother and a Jewish father—challenges received notions on race and ethnicity when she says that, walking in the Bronx, she feels as she truly is: “a Puertorriquena, a mulatta, breathed out with all that Spanish flavor” (Walker 197-198). For Walker, her specific identification with Hispanic identity is related to class consciousness (she feels closer to those who live in the Bronx than to her upper-class relatives on her father’s side), but also with the fact that among Puertorriqueños her difference ceases to be relevant or to call for an explanation. That illuminates, in Harrison-Kahan’s words, the reasons why “she ultimately defines her multiplicity through the representation of the ‘mestiza’ rather than that of the Jew” (Harrison-Kahan 37). And though it is true that Danzy Senna herself has never overtly engaged with an Afro Latina identity the way Rebecca Walker has done (which she might have rightfully done so, given her African-American and Mexican ancestry), she has *voluntarily chosen* to establish that connection in the various literary ways that this paper has pointed out. It rests now to justify the benefits of such association for the field of Latino Studies. I owe it to Danzy Senna, who has stated that when people ask her what she identifies with, instead of giving “a simple one-word answer” (“Passing and the Problematic of Passing” 86), she prefers to “turn the tables and ask them why they want to know”, thus interrogating “their interest in [her] identity before answering” (86). Here is my answer to her, then; here are the reasons why I have chosen to build up a literary case for her Afro Latinidad.

First and foremost, searching for traces in Danzy Senna’s works to make a case for her Afro Latinidad allows all those interested in the field of Latino Studies to question the existence of monolithic identities, and to avoid the dangers of essentializing *the Chicano* or *the Latino* experience, of reducing it, compartmentalizing it, defining it in exclusivist terms, leaving some people out of the club, including only those who abide by the strictest definition. Second, the above-mentioned search may trigger a fruitful discussion about the convenience of going through bordering and de-bordering processes depending on the particular goals a given group is set on achieving; in other words, it may help us reflect on the shifts that occur in any given identity, personal or collective, over the course of time, and therefore the need to constantly negotiate identities, symbols, actions and strategies of resistance. Third, it may hopefully bring to the focus the existence and challenges of the Afro Latino/a identity, which is often obscured, or discounted, in both the African-American and the Latino communities, as if a blending of those two identities were incompatible. In the 1980s Gloria Anzaldúa herself voiced this concern when she denounced, in *Borderlands* (1987), that, as Chicanos, “we hardly ever own our Black ancestry” (85). More recently, Afro-Latina writer Icess Fernández Rojas (2014) has denounced that many Latinos actually disregard her Afro identity: “It’s as if for some of my hermanos y hermanas, one part of me, the Latina part, is worth more than the Afro part” (n.p.), which has made her wonder if being Latina excludes her from being black. “In some circles, yes,” she has sadly answered (n.p.). Having strong voices that spoke from the Afro Latina standpoint would certainly help correct that imbalance that tends to make one scale, the Afro or the Latino, weigh more than the other. Though apparently unconscious of her power, Danzy Senna might well represent one such voice.



Last, but not least, incorporating Danzy Senna into the Hispanic world may actually capture with greater accuracy the current sociological reality of Hispanics who, according to demographic studies, are becoming more and more multiracial, showing increasingly complicated identities, and are less frequently self-identifying as Hispanics. After all, as Rubén Martínez put it in “Technicolor,” his autobiographical piece for the book *Half + Half. Writers on Growing Up Biracial + Bicultural* (1998), analyzing identity in terms of dualities is neither feasible nor realistic. “America is becoming a mestizo nation” (262), he claims, and binary notions are better discarded: “Some years ago, at a point where I was beginning to tire of the binary notion of cultural identity, I wrote a poem that included the line ‘I am much more than two,’ aping, of course, our bawdy bard, Whitman (‘I am large, I contain multitudes’). And thus began what I see as the third phase of my cultural maturation, in which I’m exploring the interconnectedness of it all” (258).

Similarly, in her piece “A White Woman of Color,” published, like Martínez’s, in *Half + Half..* (1998), Julia Álvarez has strongly advocated a mestizo America, and has done so on the grounds that reductionism is both inexact and dangerous:

I hope that as Latinos, coming from so many different countries and continents, we can achieve *solidarity* in this country as the mix that we are. I hope we won’t shoot ourselves in the foot in order to maintain some sort of false “purity” as the glue that holds us together. Such an enterprise is bound to fail. We need each other. We can’t afford to reject the darker or lighter varieties [...]. This reductiveness is absurd when we are talking about a group whose very definition is that of a mestizo race, a mixture of European, indigenous, African, and much more. [...] If we cut them off, we diminish our richness and we plant a seed of ethnic cleansing [...]. (148-149; emphasis added)

It is precisely that solidarity that I have sought to invoke by questioning the boundaries of Latino identity and strategically blurring its limits, thus allowing for Danzy Senna’s works to enrich the corpus of Latino literature and, more specifically, to strengthen the body of Afro Latino literature. Ultimately, my goal has been to raise questions about the dangers, in Latino Studies and elsewhere, of falling prey to the crippling effects of both racial/ethnic monomania and all-encompassing categories, such as “multiracial,” that may lead to the invisibility of certain identity threads. Senna’s *Symptomatic* (2004) has been praised for articulating “the need for new models of community based on noncompulsory politicized identifications and strategies for redressing historical injustice” (Young 288). My contention is that she manages to do that in every single work: sometimes shedding more light on the injustices experienced by blacks and mixed-race people; at other times, choosing to stress the challenges faced by Hispanics, immigrants, and, even more generally, the disenfranchised. The remarkable feature is that, however she deploys identity, she always veers from the apolitical stance, plunging instead into highly politicized waters.

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