

Danzy Senna's *Colored Television*: Lacking the “pathos of distance”

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Danzy Senna's most recent novel is the best-selling *Colored Television* (Riverhead Books, 2024). It is a largely dispirited and dispiriting work that more than anything else provides a glimpse into the political-artistic milieu to which Senna belongs, obsessed as it is with race and personal identity.

Colored Television is set in Los Angeles, precariously close both to seductive Hollywood and low-rent Burbank, the two fates that seem to beckon struggling novelist Jane Gibson and her equally struggling artist-husband Lenny. Although written in the third person, the story is told entirely through Jane's eyes.

Both Jane and Lenny are adjunct college teachers, with low pay and without tenure. They have two young children, Ruby and Finn, and for years the family has moved from one dilapidated sublet and school district to another. Jane has been working for a decade on her second novel, a historical fiction about 400 years of biracial people in America that Lenny calls “the mulatto *War and Peace*.” Meanwhile, Lenny paints abstract art that does not sell because, Jane believes, he refuses to participate in the “racial identity-industrial complex.” Instead, he makes paintings “that steadfastly refused to depict Black bodies, Black faces, Black suffering.”

When we meet Jane and her family, though, they are living in a mansion in the mountains above Los Angeles. The mansion belongs to Jane's friend Brett, also biracial, a Hollywood script doctor for Marvel and zombie movies but who once was a graduate school classmate of Jane's and a serious writer. Brett and his white wife Piper are in Australia for a year, and Brett allows Jane, Lenny and their two kids to house-sit for the duration.

There is possibility in such a premise. An academic herself, Senna is aware of the corporate maw that has swallowed higher education in the U.S.—skyrocketing tuition, dwindling enrollments, bloated administrative ranks, eviscerated liberal arts departments, evaporating tenure tracks and the sinking of college faculty into the gig economy. Senna even presents an adjunct English teacher in Jane's department whose poverty has forced her to move into her office. This is a bit of sugar coating, though, as adjuncts tend not to have their own offices.

There is promise also in Senna's demonstrating an awareness that there exists a “racial identity-industrial complex” in the contemporary world of art and culture. In fact, it seems from *Colored Television*'s first chapters that we may have opened a novel ready to call things by their rightful names, to take on upper-middle class identity politics and the gross economic inequality to which it provides cover, and to confront the essentializing racialism that so dominates education and official culture generally in the US. A novel, that is, that dares to examine the class dimension of race, art, education and life in America.

Then one runs into a passage like this:

Jane came from a union like the one that Lilith and Lenny were about to embark on—ebony and ivory, together in disharmony—and

yet, perhaps because it was her origin story, she could not stand the sight of interracial love. Well, she could, but not when the man was Black and the woman was white. Of course, she didn't express this opinion often, and not in mixed company. She knew it wasn't a good look. When you hated the same thing Strom Thurmond did—albeit for different reasons—you knew you were in problematic territory. She took comfort in the fact that it wasn't white womanhood she was trying to protect. It was Black manhood she wanted to save from the clutches of white womanhood. That was different, right?

That scene takes place the night Jane first meets Lenny. She is jealous of the blonde Lilith, which could contribute to the venom of the passage. And there is the touch of self-awareness at the end of the paragraph: “right?” Perhaps the whole paragraph is ironic, even “hilarious.” Or perhaps we merely catch Jane in an uncharacteristically ugly moment. As Mark Twain said, “We all have thoughts that would shame the Devil.”

As the novel unfolds, however, we discover that the author will never provide us the distance from Jane that would allow us to criticize and even ridicule such backward stupidities. Senna consistently inhabits this zone of ironic non-irony, so to speak, which permits her, at least from her point of view, to put forward “outrageous” views, which she may—or may not—stand behind. The cool, postmodern non-committal stance grows tedious, but, more importantly, it obstructs a truly penetrating examination of contemporary American life. What does Senna actually think of Jane's racist outlook? She'd rather not say.

Danzy Senna was born in Boston in 1970, the daughter of an interracial couple, the white writer Fanny Howe and the editor Carl Senna, whose parents were black and Mexican. She earned her BA at Stanford and her MFA at the University of California, Irvine. She teaches at the University of Southern California. *Colored Television* is her fourth novel. Her first novel, *Caucasia*, was an acclaimed bestseller that won the Book of the Month Award for First Fiction, the American Library Association's Alex Award, and other awards. Senna was also awarded the Dos Passos Prize, named after American novelist John Dos Passos, in 2017.

Senna's maternal grandfather, Mark DeWolfe Howe, from a distinguished Boston family, was a Harvard law professor and a liberal who opposed the McCarthyite purges. Her mother, Fanny Howe, according to one source, “grew up as part of a powerful and gifted artistic pantheon. Breaking with tradition, she moved West, became a communist and later a Catholic, and dropped out of college three times” (Bookforum).

Senna's Wikipedia page quotes her relating that her father, Carl Senna, chose “to hammer racial consciousness home to his three light-skinned children” and that “all three have identified as Black.” This makes it a bit more difficult to read as wholly ironic Jane's attitude toward her biracial friend Brett:

He lacked the invisible thing that she possessed, that thing nobody talked about anymore: Black consciousness. If you did not get it as a child, it would not come to you later, not really.

Jane—and Lenny and almost every character in *Colored Television*—is fixated on race. In part, this is inevitable, given the book’s aim of examining ideas about race in America and, in particular, in Hollywood. The novel’s caricature of the film and television world’s racial identity-industrial complex becomes larger than life through the character Hampton Ford.

When Jane’s new novel, *Nusu Nusu* (Swahili for “partly, partly”), is rejected by her publisher, with the recommendation from her agent that she give up writing novels, she makes an impulsive decision to “sell out.” Stealing Brett’s half-formed idea for a sitcom about mulattos (Jane’s preferred word), Jane finds her way to the office of major television producer Hampton Ford. Ford has been tasked with bringing “diversity” to the programming of a streaming service and takes an interest in Jane’s idea about, as he says, “mixed nuts.”

A comedy about mulattos. ... They’re here. They’re not going anywhere. If anything, they’re multiplying like rats. So let’s get there first. Let’s get ahead of the issue. ... You all deserve it. I mean, this is America. Everybody deserves a show about people like them, right?

About Jane’s black father marrying a white woman, Ford opines,

No diss on your pops, but damn, that generation of dudes really did drown in the buttermilk. No offense.

Like a number of characters in the book, Jane and Lenny included, Hampton Ford has regressive theories about race:

See, race is like this smoothie here. ... Because the more ingredients you add to it, the more it tastes like nothing.

The over-the-top Ford, then, is clearly a satirical figure, through whom Senna rightly holds up for derision the thoroughly cynical and calculating treatment race receives in the entertainment industry. Interesting, though, is that Jane does not oppose or even privately question Ford’s racism, simply his mercenary, ultimately reprehensible methods. To Jane, the breathtakingly wealthy Ford represents the path to her dream life—an Audi and a beautiful house in an upscale L.A. neighborhood she and Lenny dub “Multicultural Mayberry,” where she can “spend the rest of her days writing novels and,” like Voltaire’s *Candide*, “tending to her yard.” And so, sycophantically, Jane nods her assent to even Ford’s most revolting outbursts.

One might want to see in Jane an Everywoman—or Everyartist—mightily tempted by the devil. In that case, the racism and cynicism to be imbibed by the black artist would then become the deal she accepts, the soul she barter, for Shangri-La. This would make of *Colored Television* a satirical, if not quite scathing, cautionary tale about Hollywood, perhaps even of art in a capitalist society.

But Jane herself—educated, arch, intelligent—is thoroughgoing racialized. Whether a particular thought of hers is semi-comically presented or not,

Jane sees the world through a racial prism that is always there before her eyes, like Kant’s rose-tinted glasses.

Her favorite epithets for white people are “mediocre” and “mediocrities.” But there are plenty more. Looking at the Kardashian sisters’ children on her laptop, Jane sees “a grid of butterscotch faces. There were a few white ones too, speckled in like dandruff...” A class of white students that Jane imagines, “a phalanx of blue-eyed stoners,” is incapable of seeing a black woman as beautiful. Brett’s new white girlfriend is “white and blank as a sheet of paper,” with a rapaciousness Jane had seen before in young white women who were the product of family money and progressive education.

And for good measure, the Japanese language Lenny is studying in preparation for a trip is to Jane merely “sounds” that are “guttural” and “almost infantile.” Where is the criticism of this sort of stuff? Senna would no doubt insist that this is not her voice. But, as noted, she never creates the “pathos of distance” that would entitle her to that defense.

Given this truth about Jane’s character, her deal with Ford is hardly Faustian. What is the reader to make of the fact that Jane, the consciousness and voice of the novel itself, is under the same ideological spell? Is Jane too, like Ford, to be understood ironically? Intentional irony in language, from a quip to a novel, presumes at least one thing: a point of view capable of recognizing the irony. Of getting the joke. But where is the alternative point of view in *Colored Television*?

There does not appear to be one. Yet according to a review in the *Washington Post*, “Senna unfurls a novel that somehow deconstructs its own racial preoccupations, as though she’s riding a unicycle up and down a set of Escher staircases.” Perhaps. For the sake of argument, let us accept that all of *Colored Television* is ironic. That is, that the only alternative consciousness to point to as evidence of the irony is the reader’s own good sense.

If this is the case, though, the target of the satire becomes wider. It is no longer simply the crass exploitation of racialism, and of artists, to be found in Hollywood’s adoption of “diversity.” The target becomes so-called diversity itself, as enshrined in the billion-dollar diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) industry. This industry dominates the academic world Jane, and Senna herself, inhabit, and it thrives on the sorts of notions Jane cultivates, albeit often more muted in its hostility. (Again, as we have pointed out, this is not genuine *social* diversity, offering opportunities for the oppressed to be heard, but merely the distribution of a share of the wealth to black, Latino or gay portions of the petty bourgeoisie.)

Good satire not only takes a target, it aims for the bullseye, the heart of the matter. And what is at the heart of DEI, of its racialism, its identity politics, and its lucrative ubiquity? *Colored Television* seems neither to know nor care. In fact, DEI on the campus is left virtually unscathed in the novel. As for Hollywood and Hampton Ford, they are simply responding, amoeba-like, to the stimulus of money, with no attempt on the part of the novel to account for why the money is invested in DEI.

The fact is that contemporary culture—academic, entertainment, even artistic—is ill-equipped to examine its own preoccupation with race and gender. That is because, as a culture largely dominated by the pseudo-left, academics and artists have been led by the carrot of salaries and the stick of peer pressure into the corral of political disorientation and pessimism. That racial politics is profoundly dangerous and serves a definite social purpose, that it aims to divide the oppressed at a time of acute social crisis, is entirely lost on this self-involved social layer.

Senna’s ideas and sensibility speak (literally in her case) to the collective, accumulated frustration, discouragement and disappointment of generations of American middle class liberals and radicals, Communist Party members or supporters decades ago, Maoists, Castroists and black nationalists in the 1970s, lefts of various stripes more recently. Disgusted by much of what exists, but seeing absolutely no sign of a political alternative, with no confidence in or even hostile to the working class,

these people are stuck in the mire of half-cynicism, half-irony, half-detachment, half-despair.

To the extent it calls into question the tyranny of identity politics in American culture, and this is an open question, *Colored Television* may represent an early and small crack in the dam. But the real shocks to the culture will be delivered in the form of the mass actions to come. Truly worthwhile artistic expressions of those shocks will follow and replace the banal and timid culture of our present moment.



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