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The Haitian Connection in Connie May Fowler's *Sugar Cage*

IN HER FIRST NOVEL, *SUGAR CAGE* (1992), CONNIE MAY FOWLER, A WHITE Floridian with Cherokee ancestry and an early exposure to Voodoo, employs some of the narrative conventions of magical realism as a way around the impasse of Southern race relations in Florida in the 1960s. Her otherwise modernist narrative technique of nine first-person narrators emphasizes the isolation of her characters at the same time that the variety of viewpoints encourages readers to see both the interracial and international connections that elude or confuse her characters. The cultural and transnational complexities she explores, especially as regards the importation of African and Haitian belief systems and Florida's reliance on Haitian migrant workers, make magical realism an interesting, if perhaps contested, connective tissue between black and white worlds in Florida.¹ In exploring the historical circumstances that produced South American magical realism, circumstances similar to those in the US South, Antonio Benítez-Rojo argues that Caribbean revolutionary discourses, which reacted to slavery, colonialism, and the plantation economy, inform the genre. He believes that such discourses when "passing into the genres of literature" attempt "to decenter the

¹Differing views, such as those by Arnold Krupat and Richard Fleck, about whether the term "magical realism" should be applied to Native American fiction are pertinent to Fowler's depiction of Voodoo rituals in *Sugar Cage*. At the root of the debate is a question about whether the term "magical realism" devalues what westerners would identify as "magic" in such texts, thereby denying what constitutes a nonwestern reality (and so making realism a more accurate descriptor for such fiction) or whether magical realism functions as Lois Zamora and Wendy Faris argue, "as a cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation" (3). Lee Schweninger presents a helpful overview of the debate in "Myth Launching and Moon Landings." He focuses on whether the alternative "realities" in Native American fiction should be seen as parallel (and so in keeping with the conventions of realism), braided, or fused. Applying these categories to Fowler's *Sugar Cage*, the answer seems to vary: her presentation of Voodoo rituals suggests a parallel coexisting reality, the clairvoyance of Inez and Soleil Marie hints at braided natural and supernatural aspects of reality, while the fantastic ending of the novel represents a fused reality employed as a "cultural corrective."

violence of their origins with their own excess, looking for legitimation in their own illegitimacy" (212-13). In a large cast of characters, Fowler's most compelling focus is on a young interracial couple and an old African American cleaning woman, but the novel's many subplots manifest a palpable desire to reach a sphere of "effective equality" which Benítez-Rojo attributes to creole cultures, "where the racial, social, and cultural differences that conquest, colonization, and slavery created would coexist without violence" (52). This is just the place that several of Fowler's characters reach by the conclusion of *Sugar Cage*, crossing color lines, belief systems, and national boundaries to make personal connections, although hardly to effect institutional changes. Set in the seedy central Florida town of Tiama, "Prison Capital of the World," the novel begins in 1945, spans more than two decades, and examines the race relations of two generations of Southerners. By including a migrant worker of mixed Haitian and Seminole Indian ancestry in her story of Southern race relations, Fowler complicates the received biracial history of the South and presents the interracial romance between Soleil Marie Beauvoir and Emory Looney as a model for interpersonal transformation. At the same time, she shows how agribusiness has produced a neo-plantation system that exploits migrant workers of color and lingers to the present day.

At one time or another all nine narrators of *Sugar Cage* are imprisoned within their own narrow perspectives, and their individual stories are about moving beyond these "cages." Fowler creates two exceptions, characters who because of their prescience and supernatural powers take the novel into the realm of magical realism: Soleil Marie Beauvoir, a racially mixed Haitian-Seminole cane field worker, and Inez Temple, a poor African American cleaning woman. Voodoo provides a spiritual and cultural link between the two women. Growing up in a hotel for transients, Fowler got to know a woman who was a Voodoo practitioner, and she never forgot this woman or what she learned from her. Fowler makes Soleil Marie a *mambo*, a Voodoo priestess whose powers enable her to "hear the rhythms of love or hate," to protect those she loves from harm, and to see goodness "behind the pain" (61, 62). Fowler gives Inez a lineage of "good, old-fashioned witches," locally renowned for their "healing teas and protecting rituals" (11).

That the most prescient characters in *Sugar Cage* are also the most loving and nurturing makes their ability to see a bigger picture, both in

space and time, a significant and important gift. While Inez and Soleil Marie resemble earlier black saviors of deluded white characters, Fowler's use of magical realism complicates her use of this familiar literary figure. Unlike the secondary, often two-dimensional, characters in fiction by white Southern writers from Thomas Nelson Page to Padget Powell,² Soleil Marie is not a minor character who uses her special powers to help white people, but a major character who uses Voodoo to make romance with a white man possible. And although the saintly Inez could be considered a black sage, she is uncomfortable with her unconventional talents, which the white world denigrates and the black community dismisses. For example, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference ignores her letter predicting that "[s]omething bad" will happen to Martin Luther King, Jr., in Memphis (266). Thus for most of the novel, Inez disregards her powers and forgets her family's religious practices, which her grandmother has termed "good old-fashioned hoodoo" (267). Inez's story of personal growth involves learning the value of her African spiritual legacy, while Soleil Marie's survival depends on practicing the rituals of her Haitian heritage.

The story of interracial love between Soleil Marie Beauvoir and white teenager Emory Looney is plotted alongside the social activism and domestic service of Inez and the domestic sagas of Emory's parents, Rose and Charlie, and their friends Burl and Eudora Jewel. Both the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War complicate the domestic dramas of Fowler's working-class characters and remind readers that the young lovers' romance is part of a larger political and international story, in which resolution does not come easily. The way in which these plots are intertwined encourages readers to compare the similar human emotions and behaviors that underlie what seem to be very different individual and national struggles. Such plotting reveals that both domestic disputes and racial strife feed on misunderstanding, fear, and lack of trust, and that both struggles between races and wars between nations are fueled by provincial perspectives. The division of the novel into four parts—"Sweet Poison," "Mockingbirds and Goldfish," "Hauntings," and "Flying Home"—encourages readers to broaden their perspectives as well. Each section juxtaposes what appear to be two very different ways of understanding the world, but which on closer inspection have similar

²See Abernathy's discussion of this use of black characters, among other issues.

characteristics.³ Thus Fowler encourages her readers to accept another way of being in the world. While Emory's Uncle J. W. refers to his Haitian farm laborers as "weird niggers" (115) and Mr. Lackly, missing a body from his funeral parlor, accuses Inez of being a "Voodoo queen" in need of a dead body for her bizarre rituals (83), Fowler suggests that it is the white people, not the black people, who are "weird." For it is Charlie Looney who steals the body from the undertaker in order to bury his friend illegally in his backyard, and it is Harry Switzer, a self-proclaimed parapsychologist packing a Ouija board, who proves to be the charlatan, not Inez or Soleil Marie. Indeed many of Fowler's white characters resemble the grotesques ubiquitous in earlier Southern fiction.

In the first section of *Sugar Cage*, "Sweet Poison," Fowler lays bare crucial paradoxes of life in both Haitian and white communities. She shows that alluring, comforting places and attractive, stimulating people may damage those who are drawn to them. Such places and people seem to subsume the free will of Fowler's characters, whether or not they practice Voodoo. For example, Fowler depicts Soleil Marie as conflicted in her feelings about rural Florida, where she labors in harsh conditions for low wages, but where she feels mysteriously drawn to the landscape. Later after Emory's departure when Soleil Marie flees to Miami, she finds herself unhappy and spiritually unwell in the urban environment and longs for the "taste of fresh cane" in her mouth and the freedom to practice "Voodoo right out under all the stars" (239), even though moving back to the country means a return to migrant labor conditions. In a parallel paradoxical situation, Rose Looney is mesmerized by her husband Charlie, even though she knows that he is not faithful, "that his touch isn't freedom but sweet poison." When he is not around, she imagines herself confronting him, "Get the hell away from me, you son of a bitch" (39), but in his presence, she becomes intoxicated and disoriented by his charm, somewhat like Haitians who after taking the slow-acting poison containing tetrodotoxin become zombies. Jamaican novelist Erna Brodber has written of this state as "flesh that takes directions from someone" (Dayan 37). Despite Rose's desire to escape

³My interpretation of *Sugar Cage* here depends on my analysis of the novel in *Race Mixing* and uses some of that material, but develops in more detail Fowler's use of Voodoo as a structural underpinning of the novel. I would like to thank Katherine Henninger for her comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

Charlie's emotional abuse and infidelity, she cannot control herself. Inez, who cleans Rose's house, thinks of her emotional state in terms of Voodoo: "I'd seen the situation a thousand times, didn't matter if the couple was black, white, or polka-dotted. The woman would be head and shoulders above the man, but him and his groin—they would control her like a bad spell" (90).

The novel's second section, "Mockingbirds and Goldfish," highlights ritual behaviors and beliefs in both communities. Fowler repeats images and objects to mark behaviors and feelings that readers might not otherwise find similar. This technique creates what Wendy Faris identifies as a narrative "magic of shifting references," which further confuses "received notions of similarity and difference" (177, 178). For example, for Soleil Marie the lily pond on the sugar cane farm is a sacred and soothing place to retreat to after a grueling day in the fields because the Voodoo gods cool themselves there. As a poor and abused child, Charlie Looney had his own "magic pond" in his backyard (195), where goldfish "lived in a cool place, swimming between lily pads as big as my grown fist" and where he performed a daily "ritual" of making a wish and tossing a coin (193). Although his mother confiscated the money he earned each day by dancing for coins on the streets of St. Augustine, Charlie always managed to keep a penny for the pool. As an adult at an emotional crossroads, he returns to this pond and repeats his childhood wish, "Goldfish, goldfish, make me rich" (196). Fowler does not limit such parallels to plot elements. Feeling safe with Emory in a threatening situation, Soleil Marie senses that the mockingbirds who perch nearby are her deceased parents, giving her the feeling of being in "a warm, golden place, like I was dipping my whole self, my body and soul, into a lily pond near my house" (174). Wondering why her parents' souls "had taken shape" Soleil Marie intuits that their presence signals a momentous event—a baby happily "swimming in circles" in her belly (174). Such shifting between cultural worlds and such morphing of life's events into metaphor and vice versa defamiliarize the familiar, naturalize what may seem unnatural, and suggest multiple ways of experiencing "reality." At the same time these techniques emphasize the magical qualities of fiction, indeed of language itself. Thematically these parallel scenes connect poor people on both sides of the color line, their ritual behaviors constituting attempts to counterbalance their economic oppression.

Fowler's third section, "Hauntings," explores the Voodoo belief in what Western culture might call "possession," a phenomenon that Alfred Métraux assesses as "the most spectacular aspect of Voodoo and its most disconcerting enigma": "The god uses the body of a man or a woman to manifest himself to his worshippers, share their amusements, make known his wishes or his will, wreak vengeance or express gratitude. . . . Thus the possessed becomes not only the vessel of the god but also his instrument; in words and deeds, he conveys the god's personality, not his own." As a result the person is called the god's "horse" and the spirit is said to "mount" (not possess) the person (Métraux 84-85). Throughout the novel *Soleil Marie* is not the only character to be mounted by Erzulie, the goddess of love, although the white characters do not know their lovesick condition by this name. For example, Charlie feels compelled to meet his mistress Pauline DuPree, although he has an equally strong desire to break with her and be faithful to his wife Rose. In other types of hauntings, Rose is amazed by Charlie's ability to "haunt" and paralyze her after his death (226). Similarly, both Emory Looney and his young neighbor Luella Jewell feel "haunted" by their dead fathers' ghosts (230-31), and both subsequently enact their parents' behavior patterns. Finally, the memory of Emory haunts *Soleil Marie* as well, only in a more positive way, propelling her to use her powers to save his life and bring him home from Vietnam. Much like besotted lovers or children who are distraught by their failure to make peace with their parents before they die, those people mounted by Voodoo gods "appear to have lost control" and are unable to completely direct their movements, although the self is not erased (Métraux 85).⁴

In analyzing the ambiguity of the experience, Joan Dayan points out that "the god is insatiable," but "the self is also liberated from normal conventions and societal or economic constraints" (68). This is especially true in the interracial love affair between *Soleil Marie* and Emory. At times Fowler's character parallels work in multiple ways. For example, in her relationship with Charlie, Rose acts sometimes as if she is drugged like a zombie and other times as if she is empowered by a god. Dayan explains the two different states this way: "Whereas the zombie is the husk of the human emptied of substance—nothing more than a

⁴In correspondence with me, Fowler said that Métraux was one of her sources. See Dayan for a postcolonial as well as a feminist analysis of Erzulie (or Ezili, as she spells the name), 54-65.

thing—the human ‘possessed’ can satisfy needs and impulses” (72). While one might argue that Fowler’s use of psychological states to parallel religious practices could be interpreted as explaining away religious beliefs, it is clear from the novel and her article “No Snapshots in the Attic” that Fowler respects Voodoo as a belief system. In exploring these connections, however tenuous or problematic, Fowler is attempting both to make Voodoo’s practices less exotic and fantastic, although certainly no less culturally distinctive, and to make the familiar powerful emotions of love seem almost supernatural. No matter how readers interpret the use of such parallel situations in *Sugar Cage*, Voodoo is the spiritual force that drives the interracial love plot, at least from Soleil Marie’s perspective, and the mysterious quality of enchantment, otherwise known as magic, seems to propel Emory across both tabooed cultural and racial barriers.

In an attempt to win over skeptical readers to the power of the supernatural, Fowler begins the novel with a preface, in which Inez, working as a maid in a motel, encounters a white couple (Rose and Charlie Looney) on their honeymoon in 1945. Right away Inez predicts that Rose is “going to let love eat her up” (17) because of the sugar “cage” at the bottom of her empty glass. She senses that Rose is pregnant and so counsels her to stop drinking and get more sleep since Inez feels a strong “need for that child of hers to be all right” (16); “that child” will grow up to be Emory. The novel’s first chapter, set fifteen years later, proves Inez right as readers discover that Charlie regularly cheats on Rose. Their violent quarrels lead their teenage son Emory to hit Charlie and Charlie to banish Emory to his Uncle J. W.’s sugar cane farm, where Emory meets Soleil Marie. Their meeting creates what Mary Louise Pratt calls “a contact zone,” “the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations” (6). The large sugar cane farm, evocative of past (and present) racial abuses on Southern plantations, ironically becomes a transformative space for race relations, although only for these two characters. In these scenes Fowler exposes the exploitation of migrant farm workers, but she does not offer any solutions to their social and economic problems.⁵ Personal transformation, although certainly not

⁵For an account of Haitian migrant workers in Florida written during the time Fowler was working on the novel, see Grant. For a historical perspective, see Hahamovitch. For an overview of Latino workers in the South, see Murphy.

social change, occurs in *Sugar Cage* because Fowler places her white character in a black world. As the only white farm laborer on his uncle's farm, Emory is the outsider among the black cane workers until Soleil Marie approaches him.

Soleil Marie, attracted by Emory's "pretty face" (61), uses Voodoo to draw him into her orbit, not such a difficult spell to cast since Emory is already captivated by her beauty. But Fowler makes clear that Emory would not have responded to Soleil Marie's overtures while living with his parents in segregated Tiama. Soleil Marie notices that racial difference keeps Emory isolated from his fellow workers, but as a Haitian outsider to Southern race relations she judges that both blacks and whites are at fault, a perspective perhaps revealing of Fowler's own ideology. That Emory has moved out of his parents' segregated neighborhood and actually lives and works in Soleil Marie's world provides the opportunity for their cross-cultural, interracial encounter. Although at first he sees the Haitians as "a bunch of the craziest and prettiest niggers" he had ever known (111), his stereotypes about black identity and Haitian behavior are challenged every day because of this proximity. Fowler sets up Soleil Marie's use of Voodoo as a cause of their first romantic encounter. She describes in careful detail Soleil Marie's silent movement through the pine and palmetto ("humming with frogs and acacia and wild crying heron"); the specific offering to Erzulie of a piece of cane, three magnolia blossoms, and a handful of sugar-cane tassels; and the sensuous giving herself up to the pond where she floats naked among the lily pads, "watching the stars wander the black sky" (48). Later after meeting Emory, Soleil Marie asks Erzulie to bless her intentions toward him. Fowler devotes several pages to the ritual of friends' bringing gifts for Erzulie, of the *hougan's* or male priest's drawing a picture of Erzulie in flour and sugar on a stone, of Soleil Marie sacrificing a chicken and drinking rum in the glow of candlelight, and of Erzulie finally mounting Soleil Marie as the drumming increases in intensity: "It made Erzulie fast and wild, yes. She was forcing me to walk up to dancing, sweating men and rub my hands all over them. . . . She danced and danced, she pushed me against the ladies. With my mouth she nipped on their ears" (106). Making Soleil Marie both actor and observer of her own actions in this scene gives readers a sense of how Erzulie inhabits her body:

I see Erzulie make me push the lady against the stone. I see that her body covers the sugar-flour-and-blood picture of Erzulie. I think that I'm frightened, that this bold move will anger Erzulie. But really, it was what she desired, yes. Because in that very second Erzulie mounted me with all her hot fury. And you know, I remember nothing after that. (106)

The next morning Soleil Marie awakes with sugar, flour, and blood on her skin, and readers realize that "the lady" is Soleil Marie. However, at this point, Fowler does not force her readers into interpreting the romance which follows as the result of Soleil Marie's Voodoo ritual. Thus like readers of other novels of magical realism, Fowler's readers hesitate "between the uncanny, where an event is explainable according to the laws of the natural universe as we know it, and the marvelous, which requires some alteration in those laws" (Faris 171).⁶

However, by detailing Soleil Marie's evening rendezvous with Emory, Fowler attempts to move readers to the next stage, both in seriously contemplating Voodoo's power and in rethinking the possibility of interracial love. To accomplish this, Fowler switches to Emory's perspective. His attraction to Soleil Marie produces conflicting feelings of guilt and delight. The night that he goes to her house he experiences guilt at the material conditions of Soleil Marie's life and immediately plans to fix the broken screen door of her house. But at the same time he delights in the sensuous life she has created for herself—her bare mattress is piled high with colorful pillows and her one-room shack is filled with candles and suffused with the scent of herbs. Emory has heard his Uncle J. W. refer to the Haitian migrant workers as "weird niggers" because of their customs, but when Emory encounters those customs with Soleil Marie as his guide, he reacts to them differently: "what could be wrong with dipping my hands in water mixed with a few flowers?" (115). The captivating candlelit world in which Soleil Marie receives Emory and the lyrical way in which she speaks transform their lovemaking into a magical, metaphorical moment:

We moved, she and I, like the tight body of a great bird. Say I'm crazy, go ahead, but we flew. Soleil Marie was the wings, and me the darting body. . . . Below us swayed the dancing fields. Their sweet smell ruffled through us as we dipped and soared through a sky made beautiful not with stars but with candlelight. (120)

⁶This is Faris's explanation of Tzvetan Todorov's formulation of the fantastic.

Emory's continued relationship with Soleil Marie produces an emerging sensitivity to her racial position in the predominantly white world.

Communications scholars Anita Foeman and Teresa Nance have pointed out that becoming acquainted for an interracial couple is both "an interpersonal and cultural experience," often making the process more tentative and difficult. For interracial couples to survive they must become aware of four perspectives: their own, their partner's, their own racial group, and their partner's racial group (549). Fowler explores this process, complicating the encounter with Soleil Marie's Haitian and Seminole backgrounds. After Emory and Soleil Marie become lovers, they surreptitiously watch the Civil Rights March on Washington on his uncle's television. This detailed scene is rife with racial misunderstanding, insensitive remarks, anger, and hurt pride—just what one would expect in a contact zone. Emory and Soleil Marie are both called on to negotiate the difficult moment when one's lover once again becomes "the other." But their romance enables them to push beyond their initial anger and misunderstanding. The strong voice and equally strong hope of King's "I have a dream" speech, which they hear on television, momentarily displaces the racism in Emory's uncle's house.

Fowler goes on to show how their relationship not only awakens Emory's racial and cultural sensitivity but broadens his consciousness. For example, while watching the news broadcast, Emory at first does not comprehend the civil rights activists' demand for "decent housing now" but as soon as "a picture of Soleil Marie's house" flashes through his mind—no toilet and no real kitchen—he immediately understands (160). Thinking further, he makes the connection between her living conditions and her illiteracy (in order to survive she has had to work and so has not been able to go to school) and between her working conditions and her poverty (her labor has made disproportionately more money for his uncle than for her). Emory's specific understanding of Soleil Marie's life leads him to think more generally about his other co-workers, some of whom are children who work alongside their parents, all of whom labor long hours at low wages for his own "fatcat uncle" (162). Because Emory has lived in a segregated world, Fowler shows that he has not been called on to think about either the lives or the civil rights of black people or migrant workers until he sees their concerns written on the face of the young woman he loves.

Until this point, Fowler's interracial, cross-cultural couple live in a world of their own making, meeting clandestinely and remaining insulated as a couple from each other's communities. With the scene at the local Dog Days Carnival, Fowler tests their relationship by forcing them to cope with the local white prejudice against race mixing. The carnival setting for their excursion into the larger world is significant. Soleil Marie and Emory are treated like freaks in the Dog Days sideshow. They must negotiate a threatening situation as white carnival goers sneer and their children point at the white man "holding a nigger's hand!" (167). Emory negotiates this first threatening reaction to their interracial relationship by accommodation to white prejudice. He refuses to hold Soleil Marie's hand, a gesture of attachment that he knows will call attention to their status as lovers. Soleil Marie's response reminds readers of their racial and cultural differences. She is disappointed that Emory is not more confrontational, judging his behavior cowardly and therefore unmanly. But this unsettling encounter with the rural white people eventually pushes the couple to another stage in their relationship.

Soleil Marie narrates the carnival scene, and from her position as cultural outsider, a Haitian Catholic who practices Voodoo, she points up how different the Dog Days Carnival is from the Haitian carnivals of her youth. Caribbean carnivals with their masking and playful subverting of hierarchy and convention are liberating. In contrast, the Dog Days Carnival with its freak shows isolates people and points up their physical differences as grotesque, much as the crowd singles out the interracial couple. Soleil Marie's interpretation of the "huge snake, fat, with bad *loa* eyes" (168) painted on the House of Horrors as an evil spirit calls the reader's attention to the essential cruelty of the Southern freak shows at the same time that it points up the cultural difficulties that interracial and interethnic couples may experience. To ward off the evil *loa*, Soleil Marie throws a handful of dirt on Emory "for protection" and screams "Run" (169). Unfamiliar with her beliefs and practices, Emory misreads Soleil Marie's behavior as hysterical, and their growing ability to communicate momentarily breaks down. But because readers view the scene from Soleil Marie's perspective, Fowler allows us to understand what Emory does not. What readers come to see is that Fowler *has* positioned evil *loa* in this scene, but they are the white people with "a thousand" eyes who stare maliciously at the interracial couple (167). Practitioners of Voodoo believe that evil *loa* can turn themselves into

bakas, “ferocious red-eyed creatures capable of assuming whatever form they fancy.”⁷

At this point, to deal with Soleil Marie’s fear, Emory decides to escape the gawking crowd by taking her on the Ferris wheel. High above the crowd they are able to hold hands and to reconnect emotionally. As the ride begins, the operator calls Emory a “nigger-lover” (170), and when it concludes, he manipulates the wheel so that they are the last couple left on the ride. For Fowler, the Ferris wheel operator functions as a *bakas*. Thinking he has the couple fully under his control and intending to punish them for their transgressive behavior, he spins the wheel very fast, hoping to scare them. At this point, Fowler creates a Bakhtinian moment for Soleil Marie and Emory, when they are able to make the Dog Days Carnival function more like a Caribbean carnival. Together the couple render invalid the Southern racial conventions that reduce them to objects and their love to something grotesque. For the first time during their evening out, Soleil Marie and Emory together face the white challenge to their relationship and on their own terms. Initially confused, they choose to delight in their fast ride, thereby making the operator “a monster without an enemy” (172). When he attempts to scare them further by walking away after stopping them at the top, Soleil Marie and Emory once again turn the threatening situation to their advantage. They take the opportunity to enjoy the beautiful aerial view of the carnival’s twinkling lights, and Emory gives Soleil Marie a reading lesson by using the signs that they can see, “Tickets” and “Hot Dogs.” Like Bakhtin’s carnival heroes, they resist the essentializing framework “of *other people’s* words” (59). The strategy that they devise to cope with prejudice allows them to establish what communication theorists Foeman and Nance call “a culture common to them,” which helps to “ensure the survival of the relationship” (552). Their creative response works as well as Soleil Marie’s rituals, allowing them to cement their relationship in a world that would tear it apart. But coping with prejudice is a defensive move, and Fowler does not take her interracial couple beyond this stage to social activism, nor does she place them together in a public place again.

⁷See Heinl’s 1996 revision of Robert and Nancy Heinl’s *Written in Blood* (772). *Connaissance*, a term Fowler uses for Soleil Marie’s powers, appears in the glossary of the 1978 edition.

Instead, Fowler develops their romance in the foreground while Martin Luther King, Jr., makes appearances in the background. She thereby suggests that the interracial couple embody his hopes and fulfill his dreams, at least on a personal level. Early in the novel after hearing a passionate civil rights activist on the radio, Inez foresees Emory and Soleil Marie's meeting in the cane fields. In the middle of the novel, Soleil Marie realizes she is pregnant with Emory's child about the same time that Emory's mother Rose is moved and inspired by hearing King speak. By then Emory has left his uncle's plantation to attend his father's funeral; subsequently, he is drafted and sent to Vietnam. Near the end of the novel, because Soleil Marie takes a day off to mourn King's death, she loses her job in Miami, where she has fled after Emory fails to return to the farm. However, rather than sink further into despair without Emory, with whom she has lost contact, Soleil Marie flees the city in order to return to the expansive fields and cooling waters of the landscape that she loves. In Miami she feels not only imprisoned but powerless because there she loses her "*connaissance*" (272). There she calls in vain on Damballah-wedo, the "Life-creator" (209), to help her and her baby who is ill. In *Sugar Cage* poverty is worse in the city than in the country, a situation with some basis in fact, but surely fanned by Fowler's love of the Florida landscape, her environmental activism, and her knowledge of Voodoo (Kanner 51).

Métraux writes that "voodoo gods love to haunt springs and waterfalls" because they provide an "oasis of coolness, where one experiences an agreeable sensation of lightness and well-being" (92). The sights and sounds and smells of rural Florida begin "healing" Soleil Marie and her baby almost immediately (282). Wade Davis explains that Voodoo practitioners believe that "good or bad health results not from the presence or absence of pathogens but from the proper or improper balance of the individual": "Sickness is disruption, imbalance, and the manifestation of malevolent forces in the flesh. Health is a state of harmony" (183-84). Perhaps to make Soleil Marie's life back at the farm as harmonious as possible, Fowler does not depict her working in the cane fields, only luxuriating in the "cool earth" beneath her feet and "the scent of the fields," which tells her that she is "back where she belonged" (280). When Soleil Marie first thought of going to the city, a voice directed her to stay ("These fields, these swamps, they are a part of you,

Soleil Marie”), thereby making her “think hard” about the paradoxical pull of the plantation landscape:

Some moments in day and night I’m not a field worker slaving to make some white man’s money grow. No. I am a bird and what flows in my bones is swamp water. And my mama and my papa, no longer are they dead. No, they are voices that rise out of the swamp mud, mist floating between the palmetto leaves, spirits whispering in the fog during twilight hours. They fill me. (47)

Later back in the country, in a more congenial ecological and spiritual place, Soleil Marie successfully employs her powers to find Emory, and Fowler employs magical realism to conclude her novel.

In the fourth and final section, “Flying Home,” Fowler widens her cultural gyre and demonstrates a variety of global connections. She shows how life’s unfairness can be paralyzing, but she suggests that in order to find a way “home” (282) pain and disappointment must be met with determination and hope, a philosophy that most of her characters eventually employ. Fowler writes an unexpected ending for *Sugar Cage*, one that relies on the supernatural but depends on hope, on the part of both her characters and her readers. In order to cope with the harsh reality of the Vietnam War, Emory and his African American comrade Langford don “rose-colored” sunglasses, which Langford contends are the “only way to see the war” (310). In a way magical realism serves the same purpose for Fowler as she looks back on the 1960s. With Emory in mortal danger in Vietnam and unaware that Soleil Marie has borne him a daughter, most readers at this point in the novel have probably given up all hope of a happy ending. But Fowler has Soleil Marie employ her special powers, turning first to Ogu-badagri, the Haitian god of war who protects his followers, in order to try to end the Vietnam War. When this ambitious attempt fails, Soleil Marie decides that she can at least try to save Emory. Using the “[s]pecial, powerful feathers” (314) her Seminole father bequeathed her, combined with a Catholic prayer she learned from her Haitian mother, Soleil Marie morphs into a heron, flies half way around the world with her daughter, and swoops down to pluck Emory from the killing fields of Cambodia. Fowler thus reprieves and revises, but most significantly makes real, the metaphorical flying image that Emory experienced during his first night of lovemaking with Soleil Marie.

Many miles away Inez's vision of a soldier's return to an old stilt house in the cane fields of Florida gives readers hope that the love between Soleil Marie and Emory has survived the South's racism, the Vietnam War, and repeated cross-cultural misunderstandings. But Fowler constructs her novel so that readers must trust in Soleil Marie's ritual and Inez's prescience in order to interpret the ending this way. Readers never know for sure whether Emory survived the Vietnam War. We only know that Soleil Marie and Inez very much want him to. In Fowler's world, hope arises from an ability to see a broader transnational perspective that crosses cultural and racial boundaries, and to discern possibilities in a world preoccupied with prohibitions. That's when the unaccountable happens. And yet, the difficulty of escaping the burden of Southern history is made plain by Fowler's reliance on the fantastic to create a future for her interracial couple.

Fowler's use of a Native American ceremony to help secure a love relationship risks stepping into Western culture's trap of privileging individualism over community. Native American stories are most often about sustaining community rather than empowering individuals, although the best often do both.⁸ And yet, Fowler's happy ending does not totally conform to the romance mold because Soleil Marie and Emory's love story is part of a much larger political and cultural story that Fowler is interested in. Although the civil rights movement certainly figures prominently in the plot, this is a novel about global connections as well as national ones. For example, Inez, whose hope has been draining away with the successive murders of her civil rights movement heroes, regains some of her earlier optimism when she realizes the power behind her grandmother's and mother's African-inspired belief system:

I thought about all those little cures Mama and Grandmama sprinkled through my sleep. I realized how much knowledge I had squandered through the years. How I'd never really given any deep thought or homage to learning the good things they knew. . . . My mama and grandmamma never called themselves Baptist or Catholic or Seventh-day Adventist. Their religion went beyond all that. Their worship dealt with the earth and all good things growing from it. It dealt with believing everything in this world was alive and had a purpose. That every little thing mattered. Could affect you. (297-98)

⁸I am indebted to conversations with Eric Anderson and Bob Nelson for my reading of Fowler's fictional Seminole ceremony.

By the end of the novel readers see that it is not simply prescience that connects the African American character Inez and the Haitian-Seminole character Soleil Marie, but the religious and cultural heritage they share. Inez remembers “some spirit named Damballah-wedo” (296), and in a dream Inez hears her grandmother singing a variation of the rhyme that readers have heard Soleil Marie chant (210): “Day is dawning in Africa and the cock crowing cocoriko. Damballah-wedo landing in America, praying for freedom cocoriko” (296). By now readers are more familiar with Damballah-wedo than Inez is because we have seen Soleil Marie invoke his presence to watch over her pregnancy, to bring her child safely into the world, and to try to restore her health in the city. With such textual echoes, Fowler seeks to make Voodoo a part of the world that the reader knows as well as a part of the world that Inez remembers and Soleil Marie inhabits. Reconnecting with the power of the African belief system that Inez has inherited from her foremothers, she feels empowered once again.⁹ But the Haitian-African American-African connection is not the only international link Fowler draws. In Vietnam Emory questions the US power that he represents as a soldier, and he comes to disavow the war because of the connections he feels with the landscape and the people:

And because of this, because of this feeling of familiarity, the stakes suddenly grew. . . . Ever since I got over here, that’s what’s been haunting me: the eyes. Almond-shaped. Like Soleil Marie’s. Like Langford’s. So for a few minutes I just couldn’t believe it. I was in a place that looked like home. And these were just people. (310)

In his analysis of magical realist paintings Seymour Menton has noticed that art in this genre draws more on the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious than on the Freudian emphasis on individual dreams.¹⁰ Fowler seems to combine the two theories in *Sugar Cage*.

That Fowler chooses for her white protagonist a partner of color with ties to the Caribbean demonstrates the reach of Caribbean cultures into the US South. That her mixed-race character Soleil Marie turns to transcultural improvisation to fulfill her dream makes the knowledge of

⁹While not all Haitian Voodoo gods have origins in Africa, the god Damballah-wedo came to the Americas on slave ships from Dahomey in west Africa (Heinl 766).

¹⁰Menton, *Magic Realism Rediscovered, 1918-1981*, as quoted in Faris (183).

several cultures more powerful than that of one. In *The Repeating Island* Benítez-Rojo argues that Caribbean performance, including every act from walking to writing, “directs itself toward a public in search of a carnivalesque catharsis that proposes to divert excesses of violence and that in the final analysis was *already there*” (22). In *Sugar Cage* Fowler chooses such a Caribbean-inflected catharsis, both in form and content, and proves that it was already there in literature and in life in the US South. In the novel Fowler pays homage to several Southern literary foremothers, all of whom occasionally employed techniques ascribed to magical realism: she gives Inez Hurston’s hometown of Eatonville,¹¹ she bestows Lee Smith’s childhood on Rose Looney, and she perhaps playfully names Eudora Jewel, “a woman who could not live without a man” (244), after Eudora Welty. Fowler also honors her own Cherokee grandmother, Oneida Marie Hunter May. She was the likely inspiration for Soleil Marie Beauvoir’s middle name, and much like Soleil Marie, she used “strange grammar patterns”—the result, Fowler explains, “of having no formal education and of speaking in a language that was not her native tongue” (“No Snapshots” 49). But one must know where and how to look for such evidence of mobility, migration, and mixing. *Sugar Cage* provides the lenses, purposefully a bit rose-colored, so that readers can see beyond the regional to the global South.

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¹¹Fowler has said that Hurston appears in some guise or other in all of her books; however, in this her first novel, the appearance is serendipitous as Fowler had not read Hurston until after writing the novel (Kanner 51). In email correspondence with me Fowler wrote that she regrets coming to Hurston’s work late, but unfortunately Hurston was not part of the curriculum when she was in school.

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Eudora Welty

Review



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