

“The Evolution of White Voodoo in the Magical Realist Fiction of Alejo Carpentier, Lewis Nordan, and Sean Stewart”

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[Abstract](#)

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And thought and faith and speculation on the future and the past, the desirable and the ill, will not be dead, but will be following as servants in the train of Life, not clutching at its throat with the fingers of dogma; while on will sweep the army, ever faster, through the slaveless kingdom that, completely and imposingly is, is of this world—B. Russell Herts¹

Native mythology and folklore is often linked to magical realist texts. Critics such as Wendy B. Faris and David Mikics both discuss the significant role these aspects play in the genre. They attribute many magical elements to indigenous or primitive peoples' belief systems and/or ideologies.¹ As David Danow notes, those who read magical realism are thus “rewarded with a perspective on the world that still includes much that has elsewhere been lost” (67). Three such magical realist texts, Alejo Carpentier's The Kingdom of This World, Lewis Nordan's Wolf Whistle, and Sean Stewart's Mockingbird, invite readers to explore such a lost belief system—that of Voodoo. What the texts uncover is not only past applications of Voodoo beliefs, but also working applications within present-day society. In fact, through the exploration of these three texts, a rarely touched on aspect of mythology and magical realism is evident—that of the effect of primitive religions on non-native characters. In all three texts, white characters embrace, to varying extents, the Voodoo religion. Chronologically, the three texts are set in radically different time frames, portraying an evolution in white Voodoo

practices. Through this evolution, we see considerable differences in the way white characters acquire Voodoo beliefs and practices, as well as in the portrayal of racial characteristics among Voodooists.

Voodoo Background

First, one must establish some basic background about Voodoo and its practices. According to Carolyn Long, “What evolved into Vodou (Haiti) and Santería (Cuba) originated in the coastal West African nation-states now occupied by Benin, Togo, and Nigeria, known collectively as the Bight of Benin. Vodou is primarily based on the religion of the Fon people. . . .Santería originated with the Yoruba” (18).² The slave trade brought both peoples to the different islands. Voodoo’s movement to New Orleans came with the revolution in Santo Domingo (now Haiti) from 1791-1804 and Napoleon’s invasion of Spain (thus Cuba) in 1809. Many people fled to New Orleans, bringing voodoo with them. Voodoo beliefs were easily absorbed into the pre-existing African religions found in New Orleans. According to Long, Voodoo beliefs were carried through the slave trade from New Orleans, up the Mississippi delta to Memphis.³ Voodoo later traveled to Houston in the 1930s and 40s, Long says, when “many black Louisianans migrated to Houston to take jobs in the oil refineries and railroad yards, bringing with them a kind of New Orleans-style hoodoo. Mexican folk beliefs also entered the mix” (88). The texts we will explore follow this migration. Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of This World* is set in Santo Domingo/Haiti, Lewis Nordan’s *Wolf Whistle* is set in the fictional Mississippi Delta town of Arrow Catcher, and Sean Stewart’s *Mockingbird* is set in Houston.

The basis behind Voodoo is the worship of the *loa*, who are Voodoo spirits.⁴ These spirits, while not gods, serve a similar role in that each is responsible for a different aspect of human life, such as love, money, fertility, etc. There are dozens of different *loa*. There are also variations in the number and roles of the *loa*, as well as in Voodoo practices based on location. While Haitian and New Orleans Voodoo are very similar, many of there are minor differences. For example, New Orleans Voodoo has several more *loa* than Haitian Voodoo. Once Voodoo spread out in America, numerous differentiations occurred, particularly when combined with southern black conjurer beliefs. These beliefs often established magical abilities in conjurers or root doctors who could make potions, spells, and charms. When these beliefs mixed with Voodoo beliefs, they often became known as hoodoo.⁵

What is fascinating to note in these factual texts is the reaction toward white Voodoo practitioners. Newbell Puckett in his 1926 work *Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro* continually expresses amazement at white Voodoo participants. In his four-page section on “Diabolic Festivals,” he makes six references to whites at Voodoo events. In fact, he highlights the white Voodooists, normally female and naked, as if they are abnormal. In one instance, Puckett writes of a Voodoo gathering on Lake Pontchartrain that “Dr. Alexander, a colored Voodoo doctor, the successor of Marie Laveau presided, and here again a large number of white women of respectable middle-class families were found almost completely disrobed” (186-187). His emphasis is not on the Voodoo gathering (as it should be considering the content of his work), but on the white women, their class, and their state of undress. Puckett finds it shocking not only that whites would participate in Voodoo, but also that white, well-to-do women would participate.

Moving to Long's contemporary work on Voodoo and capitalism, a complete change has taken place. According to Long, "There has been a revival of interest in Voodoo among young, well-educated people of all races [. . .] Contemporary Voodoo priests and priestesses lead a middle-class, multiracial community of believers" (68). Voodoo text author, tarot card designer, and the botánica Island of Salvation store owner Sallie Ann Glassman is white and was raised Jewish.⁶ Additionally, Long gives a partial listing of Voodoo stores and wholesalers at the end of her work. Of the seventy-six listed with owners, whites own forty-two, Puerto Ricans own seven, African Americans own seven, Cubans own five, Mexican Americans and Dominicans each own four, Haitians and Native Americans each own two, and Brazilians, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans each own one store. It is this evolution from a black centered to a white saturated belief system that we will explore in Carpentier's, Nordan's, and Stewart's works.

Carpentier

Carpentier builds *The Kingdom of This World* not only on Santo Domingo's historical revolution, but also on the slave population's Voodoo beliefs.⁷ In fact, it is the French plantation owners' failure to comprehend the power of these beliefs that leads to a successful revolution.⁸ The Mandigue Voodoo *hougan*, Macandal, sets the revolution in motion, pervasively poisoning livestock and colonists so that

terror was gaunting the faces (of the colonists) and choking the throats. In the shadow of the silver crucifixes that moved up and down the roads, green poison, yellow poison, or poison that had no color went creeping along. . . . Exasperated with fear, drunk with wine because they no longer dared to taste the water of the wells, the colonists whipped and tortured

their slaves, trying to find an explanation. But the poison went on decimating families and wiping out grownups and children. Nor could prayer, doctors, vows to saints or the worthless incantations . . . check the secret advance of death. (Carpentier *The Kingdom* 34-35)⁹

Here is a prime example of the colonists' lack of understanding. While they pray to their god and saints, they completely fail to recognize the unitive powers of the slaves' Voodoo beliefs. As Carpentier notes in his groundbreaking magical realist article "The Marvelous Real in America," "the phenomenon of the marvelous presupposes faith. Those who do not believe in saints cannot cure themselves with the miracles of saints" (86). Belief is what gives Voodoo its power. The slaves, believing in this power, expect certain results from its practices. These expectations eliminate their fear over white's recriminatory actions.

Thus, in Macandal's name, the slaves secretly aid and abet the powerful *hougan*, distributing the poison that decimates the colonists. Rather than trying to understand the slaves and their beliefs, the colonists instead become paranoid. They pour out their anger and rage on their slaves with increasing frenzy until the situation becomes so dire that "Anyone walking through the fields or near the houses after sunset was shot down without warning" (Carpentier *The Kingdom* 35). This abuse leads to further unity and cohesion among the slaves. Not only do they see Macandal's incredible power, but also the colonists' abuse leaves the slaves with nothing to lose. By the time the colonists finally discover the culprit, the slaves' belief in Macandal's power is so strong that he is described as the "*hougan* of the Rada rite, invested with superhuman powers as the result of his possession by the major gods on several occasions . . . [and is] the Lord of Poison"

(Carpentier *The Kingdom* 36). The colonists do not realize Macandal's invincibility in the slaves' eyes. They want him dead while the slaves revere him. After Macandal's capture, the colonists burn him in a public spectacle, bringing all the slaves to witness his demise. While the colonists see the hated revolutionary burn to death, the slaves see that "the body of the Negro rose in the air, flying overhead, until it plunged into the black waves of the sea of slaves. A single cry filled the square: 'Macandal saved!'" (Carpentier *The Kingdom* 51-52). This failure to recognize and validate the slaves' beliefs regarding Macandal's death costs the colonists everything. Macandal's actions and death pave the way for Bouckman and the later revolution that frees the slaves.¹⁰ It is only after the fact that M. Leonard de Mézy, upon hearing the drumbeats, even realizes that "The slaves evidently had a secret religion that upheld and united them in their revolts" (Carpentier *The Kingdom* 78-79). This is typical of early, white "involvement" with Voodoo practices. Since the slaves are not people to the white colonists, their pagan beliefs are ignored and discredited.

Carpentier's text and plot, the oldest of the three texts being examined, illustrate the white belief that Voodoo is a primitive belief unworthy of any consideration.¹¹ Pauline Bonaparte is the only white character that embraces or explores any aspects of the Voodoo religion. Given the Westerners inability to comprehend Voodoo beliefs, much care is taken to justify Pauline's own acceptance. In fact, Pauline is carefully linked to the native, blacks in order to give her credibility. The first link that is established is Pauline's link to the primitive or primal. Pauline's primal nature is established through her sexuality, first referenced through the mention of an extramarital affair (her husband being General Leclerc) with an actor named Lafont. Shortly after our

introduction to Pauline, she is described as “a connoisseur of male flesh” (Carpentier *The Kingdom* 91). She delights in watching the desire in the eyes of both male crewmembers and passengers on the ship that is taking Pauline and Leclerc to Haiti. She plays with the men. *Knowing* they were dreaming of her each night, Pauline feigns “meditations each morning . . . letting the wind ruffle her hair and play with her clothes, revealing the superb grace of her breasts” (Carpentier *The Kingdom* 91-92). Pauline is completely comfortable both in the company of so many men and with her sexuality. She soon takes to sleeping naked on the deck and bathing there in the morning. While she believes she is hidden, her nightly ritual soon provides a show for the men. When Pauline settles into the island mansion, she orders a pool dug so she can bathe naked. She then calls on the black, native Soliman as masseuse. While Soliman bathes her, Pauline takes “perverse pleasure in grazing his flanks with her body under water, for she knew that he was continually tortured by desire, and that he was always watching her” (Carpentier *The Kingdom* 95). Sexuality is considered a more primitive or primal urge, one that “descent” women do not have/obey. In giving Pauline such strong sexual urges and such comfort with her sexuality, she is thus strongly linked to the primal and primitive.

Once Pauline is linked to her more primal urges, she is then linked with the black race. While on the island of La Tortue (near Haiti), Pauline leads a rather carefree and lazy lifestyle. She freely wears the lighter, island clothing and consumes as much of the vibrant sunlight as possible. Later, “She laughed when her bedroom mirror revealed to her that her skin, tanned by the sun, had become that of a splendid mulatto” (Carpentier *The Kingdom* 97). This is the second step in the movement toward Pauline’s acceptance of Voodoo beliefs and rites. With these two steps, the establishment of

Pauline's primal nature and the tanned skin, Pauline is linked to the native, black population. This also distances her from the aristocratic, white population. Her linked to the natives is further strengthened through her comfort on the island. La Tortue "with its parched earth, its reddish cliffs, its wastes of cactus and locusts, its ever-present sea, seemed now her native island" (Carpentier *The Kingdom* 98). Coming from the sophistication and comforts of aristocratic life in France, anyone in Pauline's position would feel far from comfortable on the island. However, Pauline is in her element. This combination of factors (her primitiveness, skin color, and comfort) aligns Pauline with the native blacks, making her acceptance of Voodoo beliefs plausible.

Therefore, it is no surprise that when her husband contracts yellow fever, Pauline turns to Voodoo. The terrified Pauline is described as giving an "ear to the advice of Soliman, who prescribed fumigation with incense, indigo, and lemon peel and prayers of extraordinary effectiveness such as those to the Great Judge, St. George, and St. Calamity" (Carpentier *The Kingdom* 98). The worse Leclerc's condition becomes, the more Pauline delves into Voodoo:

Moreover, those conjures, and driving nails to form a cross in the trunk of a lemon tree, stirred up in her the lees of old Corsican blood, which was more akin to the living cosmogony of the Negro than to the lies of the Directory, in whose disbelief she had grown up. Now she repented having so often made a mock of holy things to follow the fashion of the day. (Carpentier *The Kingdom* 99)

One of the emphases here is on Pauline's Corsican blood. Having only 15 years of independence in the 18th century, Corsican people are known for their warring and

sometimes outlawish ways; they are not the “civilized” French. This reference further distances Pauline from the French aristocratic ways. The passage also distances her from Christianity. While she obviously had a Christian upbringing, she had no interest in Christianity, which makes it easier for her to adopt Voodoo beliefs. She “repents” her condescending attitude toward what she refers to as “holy things,” but not toward Christianity. This establishes that Pauline is not interested in religion for the actual doctrine but for the spiritual aspects.

Furthermore, the passiveness of the “wait and see” game of prayer does not appeal to Pauline. She wants a religion that is more hands on, a religion where results can be attained personally. Voodoo’s practices do this. Pauline’s involvement with Voodoo begins with such tiny practices. She brings trinkets for the charms Soliman creates, she avoids stepping on cracks, and she utilizes various other Voodoo practices. When the practices fail to produce the results she wants, Pauline throws herself into full, Voodoo ritual:

French maids came upon the Negro circling in a strange dance around Pauline, who was kneeling on the floor with her hair hanging loose. Soliman, wearing only a belt from which a white handkerchief hung as a *cache-sexe*, his neck adorned with blue and red beads, was hopping about like a bird and brandishing a rusty machete. Both were uttering deep groans which, as though wrenched from inside, sounded like the baying of dogs when the moon is full. A decapitated rooster was fluttering amid scattered grains of corn. (Carpentier *The Kingdom* 100)

The frenzy and immediacy of this primitive, Voodoo ritual is something Pauline craves, something Christianity cannot provide her. Pauline sees no hope in relying on Christian faith and waiting patiently; whereas these practices and rituals, which require Pauline's full participation and her primitive instincts, give her hope in saving her husband.

What is even more interesting is the play between inferences about why Pauline makes this move to Voodoo. In most instances, as with the above examples, it is implied that she adopts Voodoo because of her distaste for Christianity. Yet, in other instances, it is her fear: "Leclerc's agony, heightening her fear, drove her still farther toward the world of the powers called up by the spells of Soliman, now become the real master of the island" (Carpentier *The Kingdom* 99). Right before she begins Voodoo, Pauline is described as "terrified" of her husband's condition. While Pauline is carefully linked to the natives and the Voodoo religion, these references to her fear also give even more motivation, as well as a way out. If Pauline is accepting Voodoo in a time of crisis, then she can just as easily abandon it when that crisis is over. While Pauline may be more closely linked to the natives, a bond that is strong enough to allow for both her understanding and acceptance of Voodoo, she also belongs to a world, socially, that cannot understand or accept the religion or its people. She does not *need* to remain immersed; therefore, she can easily return to her privileged way of life. And, she does just that. After Leclerc dies, Pauline sets sail for Paris, leaving behind the island and its Voodoo. However, in her luggage she has "an amulet to Papa Legba, wrought by Soliman, which was destined to open the paths to Rome" (Carpentier *The Kingdom*. 101).¹² Pauline maintains the ability to reside in both worlds, depending on what her situation necessitates. Necessity is also key to understanding the limited, early white

involvement in Voodoo. When all other options had failed, whether it be in saving a loved one's life or simply making someone love you, then Voodoo was worth a try.

Nordan

Moving to Lewis Nordan's *Wolf Whistle*, much less is seen of the Voodoo practices, but much more is seen of the principles and characteristics of the religion. Set in fictional Arrow Catcher, Mississippi in the 1950s, *Wolf Whistle* allocates Voodoo to both the poor white and poor black communities. In the work, white is much more frequently associated with Voodoo. Furthermore, Voodoo isn't disposable to the whites as it is with Carpentier's Pauline Bonaparte. Voodoo in Nordan's work is a way of life for *both* white and black characters. We also repeatedly see Voodoo being brought to the white characters, characters that are open and receptive. Voodoo's magic is shown as having a transformative power for the white characters who encounter it. We see these white characters forced to either evaluate or reevaluate situations they encounter, and these situations have a profound effect on their lives and/or mindset.

Voodoo is first encountered when Alice heads to the Greggs' house in Arrowhead's poor, white neighborhood called Balance Due or "Scumtown." Alice goes to the Gregg house to plan another misguided class fieldtrip so her fourth grade class can visit a severely burned classmate.¹³ On top of the stereotypical white trash images of junky cars and shack-like houses, "Bottle-trees clanked in the breeze. A hundred-year-old Voodoo woman wearing a swastika stirred a cauldron above a fire in a nearby yard" (Nordan 7). The first thing of interest is the bottle-tree, which is basically a charm. The bottle-tree itself seems to be distinctive to Mississippi Voodoo, as I have found no other references. Oxford, Mississippi has its own "Bottletree Bakery" on the square. Tucked

away in an upper corner, a small, dead tree pokes out of its pot, complete with tiny hot sauce and liquor bottles sticking on the end of each branch. Jackson, Mississippi native Eudora Welty gives an explanation of these trees in “Livvie.” The title character describes and explains these trees as

every branch of them ending in a colored bottle, green or blue. There was no word that fell from Solomon’s lips to say what they were for, but Livvie knew that there could be a spell put in trees, and she was familiar from the time she was born with the way bottle trees kept evil spirits from coming into the house—by luring them inside the colored bottles, where they cannot get out again. (229).

Additionally, Nordan gives us a white, not a black Voodoo woman. In fact, no black Voodoo women appear in the story. Nordan does make one more reference to a “hoodoo woman name of Lily” (Nordan 25). This woman not only makes no physical appearance in the story, but also no race is associated with her. So, our first encounter with Voodoo in *Wolf Whistle* comes not from the black population, but rather the white population. It is not until later that blacks are even associated with Voodoo.

When Voodoo is associated with black culture, Nordan plays with race. One “black” man, The Rider, is associated with Voodoo. However, race is subverted. The only reference to the fact the man is black is the detail that “A couple of guitar players were there, [Red’s Good Lookin Bar and Gro.—a white establishment] too, *black men*, out on the porch this morning, sitting in cane-bottom chairs with their big boxes, blues *singers*” (Nordan 24). Both men are identified as black, as guitar players, and as singers. Shortly after this, Nordan writes, “*One* of the singers sang” (Nordan 24). This man is

identified as Blue John Jackson. Thus, he is one the two, black, blues singers/guitar players. The second man is The Rider, yet Nordan claims “The other man, he didn’t sing” (Nordan 24). While Nordan likely is implying the man wasn’t singing at the time, the phrasing does create some doubt and confusion about the man’s identity and race. This confusion is compounded when we later learn that The Rider rarely speaks, which makes us question whether he actually would sing. This leaves the possibility wide open that The Rider is not the second man, nor is he black.

If The Rider is black, then Nordan also plays with race through erasure. Whereas in Carpentier’s work, Pauline’s skin is darkened, Nordan does the opposite. The Rider is described as an albino with

pale, pale skin and white nappy hair and split lips. He didn’t hardly talk. He wore him some dark shades, day and night, because his eyes was pink. . . .Everybody was scared of The Rider. Everybody said the Rider had pink eyes like a grave rat. Everybody said The Rider had done been brung back from the dead by a hoodoo woman. (Nordan 24-25)

The Rider’s pinkish skin tone disassociates him from the black race, bringing the Voodoo religion closer to the white race. This disassociation is also seen through The Rider’s name. When Voodoo spirits possess humans, the spirits are referred to as Riders and the humans the mounts or horses.¹⁴ Associating The Rider with the Voodoo spirits further removes him from his race or culture.

Yet, what is even more interesting is the spirit with whom Nordan associates The Rider. The Rider is referred to as a *zombi*.¹⁵ *Zombis* are the only result of a Voodoo priest or *boko* reviving the dead. According to Alfred Métraux, *zombi*’s have no mind or

will of their own, and the *boko* who brings the *zombi* back completely controls it.¹⁶ Given his name and his autonomy, The Rider hardly can be an actual *zombi*, a myth the townspeople have created. What is more probable is that The Rider is associated with Li Gran Zombi (also called Damballah-Wedo).¹⁷ Glassman describes Damballah-Wedo as “All consumed in white. Danbala is inarticulate, unapproachable. . . .The serpent does not speak in words” (99). Since The Rider is an albino, he is automatically associated with a loss of color, or whiteness, as is Li Gran Zombi/Damballah-Wedo. This emphasis on his lack of pigmentation occurs three times, even though The Rider only appears twice in the work. During the second encounter, The Rider is described as “the frail, frail little albino blues man, with white nappy hair and pink skin,” (Nordan 95) and a little later “his pink skin looked pinker than ever” (Nordan 100). Moreover, on top of not singing, The Rider also “didn’t hardly talk” (Nordan 25). Li Gran Zombi/Damballah-Wedo does not talk either. According to Métraux, those possessed by the god make “staccato sounds which pass for the language of the snake” (231). The Rider only utters one sound, which is the staccato-sounding “heh, heh, heh” of his laugh.¹⁸ This association of an albino Voodooist with a spirit represented by the color white hardly can be an accident. It serves to emphasize the way Voodoo is brought to a white culture within the text.

Lasirèn or the Siren, the mermaid Voodoo goddess of the water, also is associated with a character in the novel. After Bobo’s death, his “demon” eye opens, seeing the world and people around him. At one point, he sees “a beautiful creature of some kind, a mermaid maybe, as she rose up from the water, her breasts bare, and combing her long hair with a comb the color of bone, and holding in the other hand a mirror as dark and fathomless as the mirror-surface of Roebuck Lake, and Bobo knew

that this mermaid was himself” (Nordan 178). The transformation of the dead boy into a mermaid is too unusual not to carry a connotation. The connection between Lasirèn and Bobo is seen initially through the items the mermaid carries. The mirror and the comb are the first, two symbols associated with LaSirèn, both of which Bobo/the mermaid holds. In fact, Nordan places special emphasis on these two items, giving them almost surrealistic qualities. Furthermore, Glassman describes Lasirèn as “an enchantress, and the patron Lwa of song and music. She calls out with her trumpet, and entrances with her siren’s song. Lasirèn is a beautiful sorceress. . . .[her song] calls to the Spirit (145). Similarly, Bobo’s voice is described as that of an “angel, which is what a mermaid is, in water not air.” Bobo believes

His song—it must have been the magical music of his voice—drew the two white boys [Sweet Austin and Sugar Mecklin] together down the lake bank for a few yards to Sweet’s boat. . . .and Bobo’s song, like a magic carpet, eased them away from the shore and out into the deeper water. . . .Beneath the water, far into his death, Bobo sang, *I am the mermaid, I am the lake angel, I am the darkness you have been looking for all your sad lives.* (Nordan 184).

Nordan not only emphasizes the beauty of Bobo’s voice, but also reemphasizes his physical state as a mermaid. It is also Bobo’s enchanting voice that leads the boys to where his body is submerged.

Having established Bobo’s association with the *loa* Lasirèn, what is unusual is who the *loa* chooses to visit. *Loas* often enter people’s dreams. According to Métraux, they will appear in dreams to give people advice, warn them about impending harm, or

even to ask favors.¹⁹ In Bobo's case, he enters Sugar Mecklin's dream. In the dream, "Sugar stood at the end of a short pier, and Bobo became a mermaid, a bare-breasted creature combing her hair with a comb the color of bone" (Nordan 183). What is so unusual is that Sugar is not described as one who is faithful to the Voodoo *loas*. Additionally, Bobo chooses to reach out not to family and friends, but rather to a white child his own age. Here again, we see the Voodoo world reaching out to the white world. Bobo is obviously looking for a favor, wanting someone to find his body, for immediately after the dream, Sugar "woke up, he leaped from his bed and dressed hurriedly and ran down to the real-life pier on the lake bank and stood and scanned the waters with this innocent hope in his heart" (Nordan 183). Soon after, Sweet Austin arrives, and the two boys are "lured" to the body.

This use of Voodoo that allows the boys to locate Bobo's body also contains transformative powers. Before Sweet and Sugar find Bobo's body, they are referred to as "frightened children" (Nordan 183). As the two boys row out into the lake, there are repeated references to their status as "boys." When the boys finally approach the body, Bobo sings "*Don't look, don't look at me, preserve your innocence another moment longer*" (Nordan 187). While Big Boy Chisholm crassly comments "I'm sorry y'all boys had to bear witness to that floater, Bobo realizes that the boys' discovery of his mutilated, decomposed body will have a profound effect on Sugar and Sweet. In an instant, they have been forced out of their naïve youthfulness. While this transformation is not seen through the boys, it is seen through their classmates. When Roy Dale asks Wesley Where Sweet and Sugar are, Wesley replies, "They give you a day off from school is you can find a dead nigger" (Nordan 199). Sweet's and Sugar's absence from school

indicates this transformative effect, neither capable or returning to school immediately after what they've seen. Their own transformation ripples through the school. While most of the children are laughing and making jokes, Smoky Viner vehemently announces “‘Y’all ought to be shamed of yourself, laughing about a boy got killed. . . .It ain’t right”” (Nordan 205, 206). Viner forces the children into silence and thought, making them see the truth in his words, and “a boy with courage to speak words that they had not had courage even to think” (Nordan 210). In this way, Voodoo’s transformative powers pass from Sweet and Sugar to their classmates, compelling them to reevaluate ideologies.

Voodoo also is brought to the white population through Alice Conroy. Divination, prophecy, and visions are common in Voodoo. Each method; whether it be tarot cards, dreams, reading coffee grounds, etc.; provides information about the future.²⁰ While most divination is in the form of readings, actual visions also occur. Puckett gives one such account of a “conjure-doctor” named Ed Murphy. In the account, Puckett states that Murphy “lies down on his back at night, folds his arms, and a whole troop of visions swing into sight. He can see his enemies coming; can see the future. . . .By looking through a clear pebble dipped in water he claims to be able to induce these visions—in much the same manner as crystal gazing” (205). This account is very similar to Alice’s own account. While she is walking past the Montberclair home, she looks into a tiny raindrop and sees “the image of a child in the river, some river, running water, anyway. She thought the child must have drowned” (Nordan 81). Like Sugar, whose dream the *loa* visits, Alice is also inducted into the world of Voodoo through her vision. She tries to pass it off as a dream in a conversation with her uncle, Runt, but Runt admonishes that

“‘a child in a raindrop ain’t a dream’” (Nordan 89). So, Alice must come to terms with what her vision means.

In this way, Voodoo’s transformative power is seen again. It is Alice’s vision that makes her question her own belief in magic. She reflects back on her childhood disbelief in magic and realizes her views have now changed. However, she does not believe magic can actually “change anything of importance in the world” (Nordan 159). Later, while at Solon’s and Lord Montberclair’s murder trial, it is again the black race that makes Alice realize the power of magic. Looking around, she realizes that a sea of hostile whites surrounds Bobo’s Auntie and Uncle, and she “hated the whiteness of her own skin” (228). In recognizing the white hatred and hostility, Alice has allowed Voodoo to transform her. Starting with her initial vision, she has been forced to question her own ideologies and beliefs, both about magic and about race. This culminates at the trial, unleashing several magical events:

Maybe it was Alice’s will, her great need to protect if only by magic, that caused Uncle then, for no good reason, to turn suddenly, and to look back up behind him into the balcony.

“Yes!” Alice called out suddenly, without know what she was about to speak at all. “We are here! We colored people are behind you!” (Nordan 231)

Alice, having recited a chant for Auntie and Uncle, feels the power of this chant will support them. Here, we see Alice’s belief in magic’s transformative power reinstated as she calls out to Uncle. She herself is also transformed, daring to shout that she is colored

in a courtroom of hostile whites. Finally, we again see a disassociation of race—Alice’s disassociation from the white race.

When Uncle Runt’s parrot soars through the courtroom, Alice has completely transformed. She delights in the bird’s magical flight, wildly associating new thoughts and views to the surreal event. When the bird’s flight finally ends, Alice determines “the bird was the dead boy. It was Bobo—the magic of good and evil both” (Nordan 254). Through her vision and through her sudden race consciousness, Alice has come to understand that not all magic is “futile,” as she had determined earlier. Later, as she and Sally Anne Montberclair walk down an aisle of magician’s and magical items, Sally Anne asks if she believes in magic. Alice replies

“It does seem a little white-trashy, I guess.”

Sally Anne said, “No, I didn’t mean it like that.”

Alice said, “I never thought I did, but I must. That night—you know—“

Sally Anne said, “The night of the murder.”

Alice said, “Yeah, well, I had this crazy idea of getting up in the middle of the night and coming down here to Swami Don’s and trying to buy a mojo.” (Nordan 288-289)

Alice recognizes the role of both Voodoo and its magic. She can no longer deny her own belief or the power of either.

Stewart

Sean Stewart’s novel, Mockingbird, chronologically has the most recent time frame. Set in 1995-96, Stewart completely blurs the race of his central characters, characters that are the Voodoo practitioners. In fact, there is no mention as to their race.

Instead, Stewart paints a picture of a normal, middle class family. The father, who remains unnamed, is a traveling salesman, and daughters Toni and Candy grow

up in a garden, with a cranky white stucco house thrown in as an afterthought. The house once belonged to Clark Gable's rich first wife back in the 1920s. It was laid out in the old Spanish style, one room per floor. Candy and I were stuck on the top, to boil in the summer heat. Momma and Daddy slept underneath us. Both upper floors had long balconies with rust-spotted wrought-iron railings that squeaked and swayed when me and Candy swung on them. (Stewart 15-16).

Both the family and lifestyle that Stewart depicts is nondescript. Stewart simply locates the family; they are a middle class family living in a middle class Houston neighborhood. Even the names give no absolute clues as to race. The mother is Elena, the daughters are Antoinette (Toni) and Candace Jane (Candy), and the last name is Beauchamp. While the names sound very Anglo-Saxon, there is nothing to refute this. The only oddities are in Antoinette's and the Beauchamp names, which have a French sound to them. However, we are informed quickly that Beauchamp is actually pronounced "BEECH-um," (Stewart 4) removing the French accents from the name.

Thus, we must begin a process of disassociation in order to establish the family's race as white. At one point, Toni, in talking of her mother's fingernails, states, "I still remember every color of her nail polish: pearl, pink, carmine, true red, scarlet, and gold too and silver, like the black girls wear" (Stewart 9). Rather than stating Elena (and by extension her family) is black, it merely compares one tiny aspect, a nail polish color, to that of "black girls." This establishes that the family is not black. A little later, a

similar comparison is made of Candy. After their mother's funeral, Toni states that "In her plain black funeral dress Candy looked like a young Mexican widow, with her dark eyes and pale skin and her hair pinned up señora style" (Stewart 16). Again, we see the same referencing to *like* with Candy and the Latino race. She is like a Mexican, but she is not a Mexican, unlike her boyfriend, Carlos, who *is* "a Tex-Mex car detailer" (Stewart 19).²¹ Having eliminated black and Latino as a racial possibility, and considering the European sounding names, it can be deduced that the family is white.

What makes race so pivotal in this work is the fact that all of the Voodoo primarily revolves around two, white family members. One is the recently deceased mother, Elena, and the second, the one who "inherits" the Voodoo, is her daughter Toni. The second daughter, Candy, has more limited Voodoo abilities. Unlike the two, previous texts, there are no black characters who bring Voodoo to the white characters; in fact, there are no black Voodoo practitioners. Within Mockingbird Voodoo is firmly entrenched in white society. It is within this white Voodoo that we start to see unusual changes to the practice itself. The first descriptions of Elena's Voodoo sound exactly like traditional Voodoo. Elena is "mounted" and the Voodoo spirits ride her. She also creates her own zombie. Through the zombie's creation, we also learn where she learned her Voodoo, for she does "something she had seen in New Orleans when she was younger" (Stewart 3). So, Stewart does root Elena's Voodoo to the traditional, New Orleans Voodoo; however, this is where the similarities end. The zombie is Candy and Toni's dead pet frog, who once resuscitated "wasn't really alive. He never ate, he never sang. He just staggered after us as if hungry for our warmth" (Stewart 3). Rather than creating a zombie in the traditional sense and for the traditional use, Elena, instead, inadvertently

creates a zombie frog while trying to solace her daughters. The Riders, as they are referred to, are not even traditional Voodoo *loa*. While there are some minor similarities to miscellaneous *loa*, there are no similarities that definitively link Elena's and Toni's Riders to the Voodoo *loa*. Additionally, the offerings left for the different Riders (a Bible, lipsticks, perfumes, cards, and dice) either do not match offerings suitable for any of the *loa* or the offering and description of the Rider together do not match that of any *loa*.

What we see in *Mockingbird* is the recreation of Voodoo within a white family. The Riders, as they are called, assume the position of the original, Voodoo *loa*. They possess Elena and, later, Toni, in the same manner as the *loa*. They are described as “mounting” when they take possession, and while Elena or Toni are possessed, the Riders are in complete control of both their minds and bodies. As Toni says after a possession, “When the gods came into my head, they had obliterated me. Blotted me out” (Stewart 134). What is recreated are the names and functions of the *loas* themselves. Elena and Toni incorporate a total of seven Riders into their Voodoo. The first is that of the Mockingbird, who functions as a mirror. When this Rider possesses, he provides those around with a mirror of themselves, copying and imitating all. The second Rider is the Preacher, a grim, fundamentalist man who dislikes anything irreligious and vain. Sugar is the third rider, representing female sexuality and whims, with a love for beauty and fashion. Pierrot, the French clown, thrives on humor, both laughter-provoking and tear-inducing. The Widow is a no-nonsense woman who commands and must be obeyed. The sixth, Mr. Copper, is somewhat of a decadent capitalist. He does wonders with

money, but also loves drinking and gambling. The final Rider is the Little Lost Girl, who is a representation of the “lost” feeling each of the different women have.

Oddly, while there are literally hundreds of Voodoo *loa*, Elena and Toni only have seven. These seven mirror needs and desires of modern humanity: reflection, morality, sexuality, laughter, direction, money/material, and locating place within society. Like the Voodoo *loa*, these white Voodoo spirits also fulfill the needs of those who “worship” them. When Candy is floundering around, yet again, the Widow gives her direction, ordering her to marry Carlos. The Widow also gets Toni’s father to provide the money to send her to Rice University. Similarly, when the overly responsible Toni suppresses her feminine needs, Sugar takes over while at the mall. The end result is Toni

wearing a skirt so short it showed the top of a black stocking hem. . . .And garters. I was wearing garters. I could feel the cool elastic against my thighs. And a pair of panties you could mistake for a Kleenex. “Omigod.”

Candy glanced at me in the rearview mirror. “I must say, Sugar is a lot of fun to shop with. Wait’ll you see what’s in the trunk.” (Stewart 67-68)

As with traditional Voodoo *loa*, the Riders not only aid with needs and desires, but also fulfill their own needs and desires, as with Sugar’s possession. Sugar gets Toni to relax and actually spend some time and money on herself, while also satisfying her own craving for beautiful things. Furthermore, many of the *loa* have a more androgynous personality. This also comes through in Sugar, who, while riding Toni, flirts with a female cashier at Victoria’s Secret.

Another interesting aspect of the Beauchamp family's Voodoo is the way it is segmented or divided among the women. Elena and Toni, are the only two who can be possessed by the Riders, and Toni only after inheriting them. Candy cannot be possessed, as she has not inherited the Riders. Neither Elena nor Toni, though, are described as having prophetic abilities. They can both draw on the Riders' personal strengths, but they cannot see into the future. This ability lies only with Candy. However, even Candy's prophetic ability is slightly askew from traditional Voodoo visions. Candy can "see the future sometimes, in dreams and visions, but with one curious qualifier: all she ever saw were happy things" (Stewart 17). Rather than having full abilities, Candy is limited as to what she can see. Then again, she has learned to determine, as with her wedding day when a hurricane arrives, that if there is no vision, nothing good can happen. As far as Candy's visions are concerned, it is not odd that only she can have them. Among Voodooists, not all have prophetic abilities. What is unusual is that The Riders cannot possess Candy. According to Voodoo belief, as long as a person is receptive to possession, they can be possessed.

Even the passing on of Voodoo practices and beliefs has a different twist. When Elena dies, Toni literally inherits the Riders. Prior to her mother's death, Toni had no Voodoo experience. Other than witnessing her mother's abilities, Toni is not a practicing Voodooist. Postmortem, Elena leaves a liqueur called Mockingbird Cordial with explicit instructions for only Toni to drink. After drinking, Toni feels a whiteness

behind my eyes, back in my head, and it was cold. . . .the light in the garden got suddenly dimmer. Silence fell over the world. . . .

“Unh!” I stood up clumsily, knocking my chair over backwards. Where was the sound of the iron chair clattering on the stone?

Then I smelled the Widow [one of the Riders] smells, of silver polish and scorched cloth, and I knew what was happening. . . .Then the whiteness exploded in my head and the Widow came. (Stewart 20-21)

Unlike traditional Voodoo, Toni does not need to practice and learn in order to inherit the traditions, but simply can inherit them through a powerful drink. Furthermore, this drink opens the pathways for possession. Within Voodoo, possession only occurs to those who are 1) devoted followers of particular *loa* and 2) to those receptive to possession. In Toni’s case, she is neither a follower nor receptive. The Mockingbird Cordial replaces those factors, allowing the Riders to possess Toni at will.

The only similarity Toni does show to Voodoo practitioners initially is her belief in and fear of the Riders and Voodoo. This fear comes from her inability to control the Riders. Since the Riders can take over at will, Toni fears she “will be another crazy Beauchamp woman, driven half-mad by Riders. . . .You used to be sane, you used to be in control. But now the Riders can get into you. Maybe Sugar will whore you out next time or the Preacher will beat your child for its sins” (Stewart 92). Because of what she has seen her mother go through while possessed, her view of both the Riders and Voodoo is highly negative. After the Widow’s first possession, Toni wants nothing to do with what she terms her mother’s “spookery and horseshit” and her “nasty little presents” (Stewart 29). These powers of belief and fear separate Toni from “non-practitioners.” This particularly evident when Dr. Manzetti, a professor who studies American “folk magic,” comes to buy the curio cabinet with the Riders’ fetishes and offerings. Manzetti

remarks that ““Right now there are gods in that cabinet. By the time they get to the trunk of my car, they will be just puppets. That is a loss” (Stewart 136). Manzetti upholds traditional society’s views of Voodoo; it’s a nice superstition, but not a belief. Toni quickly corrects him, stating, ““If you think that, Dr. Manzetti, then you have never lived with a god”” (Stewart 136). Of course, in getting to the point where she would sell the whole cabinet to Manzetti, Toni forgets the power of these gods, which she soon pays for as they show their displeasure and prohibit their sale.

It is not until the end of the work that Toni actually becomes comfortable with the Riders, something that normally is already in place before a traditional practitioner even can be possessed. Within *Mockingbird*, Voodoo is twisted and adapted repeatedly to fit a white culture. Unlike the previous two texts, nowhere is the black culture associated with Voodoo. The religion has moved from a black-centered ideology in Carpentier’s work to a modified way of white life in Stewart’s work. Along with this, we can also trace the jagged system of race relations. *The Kingdom of This World* darkens the skin of its one, white practitioner. Linking Pauline to the natives is the only way the work can find a plausible explanation for her Voodoo—there must be some abnormality. Abnormality and racial blurring also occurs in *Wolf Whistle*. This time, it is a black that is “whitened.” Given segregatory nature of the 1950s south, how else could Voodoo be brought to the whites? The whites are indoctrinated in Voodoo, yet they rarely garner their beliefs and practices directly from the blacks within the text. Once we get to *Mockingbird*, race is blurred, but the stereotypical and prejudiced views that go along with race have completely disappeared. There is no longer any need to discriminate race, nor is there discrimination. Furthermore, whites now absorb Voodoo as their own belief system and

religion. It no longer suffices only in times of emergency—the characters are fully immersed.

Within this progression of white voodoo, we see the struggle with what Homi Bhabha calls hybridity.²² The first text reveals the colonizers' resistance to the colonizees' culture and beliefs. In *Wolf Whistle*, we see the “panic” that comes from clashing cultures, and in *Mockingbird*, there is the completed path. Hybridity has been reached with the white culture fully incorporating the black Voodoo religion into their own culture. What must be examined is why this hybridity has occurred, particularly in a society infused with Christianity. According to Keith Cartwright, “The voodoo mysteries appear most ‘marvelous’ and least ‘real’ to observers habituated to Christianity’s ‘radical divorce of spirit from matter’ and to those bound by post-Christian legacies of rationalism and positivism, systems which have led to the divorce of soul from working bodies” (131-132). Cartwright sees this divorce as a “despiritualization”. This divorce and despiritualization is seen continually within modern Christianity. Mother Theresa will be sainted despite the debate of her lack of “miracles”. Modern rationality has removed what was once spiritual and magical from religion. In a world where placing the 10 Commandments in a courtroom because they “are a good, moral code” for everyone to observe, the rational religious world has replaced the spiritual religious world. When people see mysterious faith healings, they denounce the healer as a quack—these things simply do not exist in modern religion. Yet, something is obviously missing, as in seen in such events as hundreds of people trekking to see the image of the Virgin Mary in a frosty, hospital window. Just as in society, the texts reveal that as the spirituality and the magical drain from religion, the white culture begins seeking what is

lost outside of Christianity. This is why in *Mockingbird*, the Voodoo religion has evolved from an “emergency” fix to a way of life, and why, as Long illustrates, the number of white Voodoo practitioners has steadily grown in the U.S.

Notes

¹ Faris goes into further detail in her article “Scheherazade’s Children” on pages 182-183 and Mikics mentions this link on page 374 of his article “Derek Walcott and Alejo Carpentier: Nature, History, and the Caribbean Writer. Erik Camayd-Freixas, terming it primitivism, looks extensively at ancient ideologies, beliefs systems, myths, etc. in his article “Magical Realism as Primitivism: An Alternate Verisimilitude.” This link between magical realism and myth is also touched on in David Danow’s chapter “Magical Realism,” Tommaso Scarano’s article “Notes on Spanish-American Magical Realism,” Magdalena Delicka’s article “American Magical Realism: Crossing the Borders in Literatures of the Margins,” and James Irish’s article “Magical Realism: A Search for Caribbean and Latin American Roots.”

² Long gives a more comprehensive account of the peoples bringing Voodoo and Santería to Santo Domingo and Cuba in her chapter “African-Based Religions in the Latin-Catholic Colonies.”

³ Long’s chapters “New Orleans Voodoo” and “Conjure, Hoodoo, and Rootwork in the Anglo-Protestant South” expand on the migration and variation of Voodoo practices.

⁴ Depending on the area, *loa* is sometimes spelled *lwa*.

⁵ While his views are highly racist and condescending, Newbell Puckett’s early 1900s work, Folk Beliefs in the Southern Negro, gives an extensive account of the different beliefs and practices the African American population upheld around the turn of the 20th century. Sallie Ann Glassman’s Vodou Visions gives a contemporary background on basic Voodoo principles and practices and on each of the New Orleans Voodoo *loa*. Alfred Métraux’s delves into Haitian Voodoo in Voodoo in Haiti.

⁶ Glassman’s botánica Island of Salvation store is located in New Orleans.

⁷ Santo Domingo’s revolution began in 1791 with the slave uprisings and led the creation and independence of Haiti in 1804. Peter Winn outlines both Haitian race relations and the centuries of political upheaval in Haitian in his chapter titled “A Question of Color” (270-306).

⁸ Michael Bell’s chapter, “Living with myth” (182-198) and Barbara Webb’s chapter, “The Folk Imagination and History” both examine this failure on the part of the plantation owners. Tommaso Scarano’s article “Notes on Spanish-American Magical Realism” and Graciela Limón’s article “Haitian Gods, African Roots: Identity and Freedom in Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of This World*.” also look at this issue.

⁹ A *hougan* is a Voodoo priest.

¹⁰ Bouckman, a Jamaican slave, and his followers went to the forest of Bois Caiman in 1791 where they organized the rebellion/revolution. According to Webb, within six weeks of the rebellion’s start, nearly all the plantations were burned to the ground. Later, Bouckman was captured and beheaded on the same spot as Macandal (Webb 32).

¹¹ The text was written in 1949, and the plot is set in the late 1700s to early 1800s.

¹² According to Sallie Ann Glassman, Papa Legba is “the guardian of the crossroads, Legba opens the door that divides the spiritual and physical worlds. . . .Call on Legba when you need guidance for an important decision, when you are about to set out on a journey, or when you need to improve communication, especially with Spirit” (138-139).

¹³ Other misguided fieldtrips include trips to a sewer and a funeral home.

¹⁴ See Louis Mars work The Crisis of Possession in Voodoo for more on Voodoo possession. Alfred Métraux also devotes a chapter-long study of the topic in his work Voodoo in Haiti.

¹⁵ The term is also spelled *zonbi* or *zombie*.

¹⁶ A *boko* is a Voodoo black magician. Métraux details the beliefs about and roles of *zombis* in his chapter on “Magic and Sorcery.”

¹⁷ Li Gran Zombi seems to be an American Voodoo invention, and is not found in Haitian Voodoo. There are also discrepancies as to the god's depiction. In some Voodoo beliefs, Li Gran Zombi is a powerful serpent god who has the ability to pass between the realms of the living and the dead. In these beliefs, the god is a separate god from Damballah-Wedo. In many Voodoo beliefs, Li Gran Zombi is another name for Damballah-Wedo, another powerful, serpent god thought to be the origin of life and wisdom. The way Nordan describes The Rider strongly links the association of Li Gran Zombi with Damballah-Wedo. Glassman contains a descriptive section on both in Vodou Visions. Puckett also references the importance of Li Gran Zombi in Voodoo beliefs on pages 178-179.

¹⁸ This laughter occurs on pages 99, 100, and 102.

¹⁹ Métraux deals with *loas* and dream visits in his subsection "Dreams" in the chapter entitled "The Supernatural World."

²⁰ Divination and prophecy are so common that all books on Voodoo contain large sections devoted to explanations of the different types and/or stories about actual occurrences.

²¹ The emphasis here is my own.

²³ For more on hybridity, see Bhabha's work The Location of Culture.

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