

The Red of His Shadow, by Mayra Montero

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In “The Red of His Shadow,” Mayra Montero focuses on the behaviors of proletarians. But not just any proletarians: rural proletarians, Haitian proletarians, born in a country with a two-century old history of independent, isolated and impoverished life, descendants of a *mélange* of African Creoles and native, forcibly uprooted Africans who once rose up against the plantation slavery system based on the cultivation of sugar cane. Forced by poverty and injustices off their land in Haiti, these rural proletarians labor in the cane fields of the Dominican Republic in conditions that human rights groups have repeatedly described as being akin to slavery.¹ There they live alone or with their women and children in the Bateyes which are worker settlements often set on state-owned plantations. Little but oblique references are made in the novel to the larger Dominican society itself.

She then proceeds to demonstrate that beneath the masks and despite the harsh conditions that foment animal-like behavior and the expression of raw feelings without the veneer of norms imposed from above by the dominant classes or the host society, there’s undeniable dignity and tenderness, sentiments that cut across ethnicity, classes or nationality.

Montero’s characters defy the norm, for they are simultaneously of this world and not of this world. Virtually all the protagonists in the story escape into the netherworlds. They easily escape the eye of the vodou neophyte for the often vilified religion emanates from virtually every page of the story. Vodou gods enter the story as if they really inhabit this world. The story did not however need vodou to lend it an aura of mystery, for deciphering the behavior of people living in a world dominated by strife, violence and the elusive quest to fulfill basic needs is fascinating in and of itself. In their world there are no upper or middle classes as known in the modern sense, but nonetheless there is a hierarchy, power relationships that spring from the customs and beliefs that they practice, the world they construct to make sense out things over which they have little or no control.

First among the Haitians is Zulé Revé, the young manbo (vodou priestess) whose first name invokes the spirit of the *lwa*² Èzili, most commonly known as the goddess of love, and whose last name conjures dreamy images. *Reve* in Haitian Creole means to dream. Zulé is precocious

¹ For a fuller discussion of the situation of Haitians in the Dominican Republic, see Patrick Gavigan, *Beyond the Bateyes*, National Coalition for Haitian Rights, 1995 at <http://nchr.org/reports/bateyes.pdf>.

² A *Lwa* is a vodou god. Creole spelling is used in this instance and will be used throughout the text whenever necessary.

and fearless, endowed with the strength to challenge taboos and a reigning vodou priest on his own turf, follow her own counsel, yet not impervious to the havoc that feelings of “love” can stimulate in any conditions. Jérémie Candé is a mixed breed, a Haitian “China man,” who remains tied to Zulé “as submissively as if a holy *amarre* had been put on him,” for he is her protector, servant, a lover spurned but still hopelessly in love.

Anacaona is a Dominican woman living among the Haitians, a rare occurrence in a society where scorn and hatred of Haitians as impure and African – as opposed to Christian and European – has been cultivated for decades since Dominicans wrested themselves free of Haitian rule in 1844 and declared independence over the eastern part of the island of Haiti.

And then there’s Similá Bolosse, an elusive and ruthless houngan (vodou priest) whose thirst for power is achieved through brute means, but who is not beyond using cunning as a weapon to do battle and win over Zulé, not despite of her powers but because of them. Thus in his hands, seduction is the weapon most cunning for it induces and invites the victim’s cooperation and self-deception in the deed to be accomplished. “He had a mellow voice with its own echo, like a reciter of prayers, and it reminded her of the voice of mysteries she had never heard.”³

We would be amiss however if we fell for the notion that words alone are enough of a spark. “When you meet a strong candidate for love,” says Doctor Love, “your limbic system is flooded with a powerful chemical concoction – so powerful that scientists now believe that the euphoria of infatuation is a bona fide, altered state of consciousness. It is induced by the action of phenylethylamine (PEA), which is a naturally occurring, amphetamine-like neurotransmitter. Michael Liebowitz, a research psychiatrist at the New York State Psychiatric Institute, explains that when we come into contact with a person who highly attracts us, our brain becomes saturated with a love cocktail comprised of PEA and several excitatory neurotransmitters, including dopamine and norepinephrine... It’s clear that what we call being in love could also be called being under the influence.”⁴

Thus in this altered state, one lowers guards and looks for ways to keep alive the burning flames of love that drive us to reach out, embrace, take under our wings, and provide paternal or maternal protection to the one that lit our natural tendency to nurture.

“Similá Bolosse had lowered his shoulders to show humility... asked for some hot rum to lower his fever and Zulé came over to him, touched his forehead, and found that it was true: he was burning up... then he began to tell everything as if he were half-asleep... as soon as he opened his eyes, Similá Bolosse asked for majá fat to cure his sores, and Zulé offered to spread it on.”⁵

³ Montero, page 71

⁴ Love, page 28

⁵ Montero, page 72-73

Once she has connected with him through touch, it is no longer a question of whether she has fallen under his spell, it is rather an issue of when and how his possession of her will manifest itself.

“Zulé never knew if the man from Paredón said those words or if she sensed them, looking into his eyes, sinking into the sunlit circles of that forbidden glance. The next thing she heard was the thud of her own body as it fell to the dirt floor, helpless and kicking like a turtle on its back. Similá Bolosse slaughtered her just as turtles on the coast are slaughtered, he conquered her among the overturned stools, he subdued her a thousand times, making her kiss the ground.”⁶

Aided by the love cocktail, Similá has shifted the balance of power in his favor. No longer weak and submissive, he reigns supreme as a leader of leaders, the uncontested master of a powerful *manbo* who has become the victim of a potion mixed from within her very own soul. “...she watched him leave... but did not have enough voice to say his name, enough tongue to call him back, and she was weeping and whorish like Metresa Freda, submissive and great like the Virgin of Erzulie.”⁷ Indeed she succumbs to a force more powerful than the *lwa* who give her legitimacy and whose mythical presence regulates relations amongst her followers in the gagas that she leads in celebration of the faith and to affirm her power.

Having been subverted, the *lwa* must regain their rightful place in the pantheon of the dead that they have entrusted to her. That is why a confrontation with her lover is inevitable. No two *lwa* can inhabit the same space.

“...Similá Bolosse is waiting for her. And with Similá are the macoutes, ready to fight as soon as the master gives them the battle signal. If she wanted to, she could still change her route... but her fears are not what count in this ill-fated, foul-smelling hour; what counts are the desires of the Baron of the Cemetery, which are as exacting and unfathomable as the approaching night... Changing the route now would be like breaking the Gagá she swore to protect from harm and the brutal hand of men. If she did, then Similá would become the implacable master of the boundary lines, the hidden scourge of all the bateys.”⁸

As the story unfolds, one is tempted to look at the struggles around love as the genesis of the struggles that, spiraling out of contentious relationships, involve groups and extend to classes. The need for control of one’s emotions and environment – nature and the people who inhabit it – takes the protagonists to different stages where methodologies used to “slay” members of the opposite sex can be used as well to excite passion among followers, committing them to actions to which they would otherwise be impervious. Though skeptical of Zulé’s determination and strategy as she leads her gaga through a route that takes her on a collision path with Similá, her followers nonetheless submit to her leadership, resigned to the inevitable confrontation. They sense that once in his presence, Zulé will once again bow before Similá as she has done before

⁶ Ibid, page 73

⁷ Montero, page 78

⁸ Montero, page 95

despite the warnings of her flock. Yet how can those who trust in the rule of the *lwa* not put their fate in their hands?