MARGIN TO MARGIN, CHINA TO JAMAICA: SEXUALITY, ETHNICITY, AND BLACK CULTURE IN GLOBAL CONTEXTS

Winifred Woodhull
University of California, San Diego

ABSTRACT

Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda* (1998) examines the entanglement of sexuality, gender, and ethnicity in late 19th century Jamaica, mainly through the character of Lowe, a Chinese immigrant who is raped during the "middle passage" bears the child of the white rapist, and lives for 30 years passing as a man. Lowe's wife Sylvie, a mulatta passing as a white woman, raises "the daughter." While Powell's narrative relies on traditional notions of identity politics in its evocation of indentureship in colonial Jamaica after the abolition of slavery, the textual dynamics notably structures of repetition and enumeration —disclose the permeability, fragility, and mutability of several inter-related dimensions of subjective and social identity. *The Pagoda* marks a sea change in African American writing, moving beyond the Black Atlantic to explore connections between African and Asian diasporic cultures.

KEY WORDS: Sexuality, gender, ethnicity, indentureship, colonialism, Caribbean diasporic cultures.

RESUMEN

The Pagoda (1998), de Patricia Powell, examina la interrelación entre sexualidad, género y etnicidad en la Jamaica de finales del siglo XIX, sobre todo a través del personaje de Lowe, un emigrante chino que es violado durante la travesía, da a luz a la hija del violador blanco, y vive durante 30 años haciéndose pasar por hombre. La mujer de Lowe, Sylvie, una mulata que se hace pasar por blanca, cría a "la hija". Aunque la narración de Powell se basa en nociones tradicionales de política de la identidad en su evocación del sistema de "contratación" en la Jamaica colonial tras la abolición de la esclavitud, la dinámica textual —sobre todo las estructuras de repetición y enumeración— revelan la permeabilidad, fragilidad y mutabilidad de varias dimensiones interrelacionadas de la identidad social y subjetiva. *The Pagoda* marca un cambio en la escritura afroamericana, traspasando el Atlántico para explorar las conexiones entre las culturas de la diáspora de África y Asia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Sexualidad, género, etnicidad, "contratación", colonialismo, culturas de la diáspora Caribeñas.

In the historical novel *The Pagoda*, the Jamaican-born, Boston-based black writer Patricia Powell casts a critical gaze on the history of nineteenth century Jamaica. Using terms and references from black culture, Powell reexamines the history of slavery and indentureship in the Caribbean, exploring the relations that can now be seen to pertain between various peoples' experiences of violence, subjection, and symbolic erasure: enslaved Africans and their descendants, to be sure, but also the indigenous Caribs and Arawaks as well as the Chinese, East Indians, and Europeans (notably the Irish) who went to Jamaica as contract laborers or as kidnap victims after the abolition of slavery, from the 1840s to the 1890s. Yet Powell is as concerned with subjective experience as with social history and the politics of historical discourses. Her writing powerfully evokes the numbness and exhaustion that often accompany repression of painful memories of the past, as well as the wrenching yet ultimately liberating process of gaining awareness of that past, which in turn transforms one's understanding of the present, one's vision of the future, and one's sensuous existence in the world. In my analysis of Powell's novel, I hope to suggest that it presents black culture in global terms and, at the same time, makes readers acutely aware of the power relations that structure the many geopolitical positions from which "the global" is conceived and lived.[1]

The main character of *The Pagoda*, Lowe, is a Chinese youth who stows away on a ship bound for Jamaica. Impelled by poverty and by his father's rejection of him in adolescence, but also by the stories and dreams of adventure that his father had shared with him earlier in his childhood, Lowe sets out for the new world, "not to work but to explore" (25). A young girl who loses her father's love when she reaches puberty, Lowe cross-dresses as a boy during the ocean voyage. Aboard ship, Lowe falls desperately ill and is discovered by the ship's white owner, Cecil, who nurses him back to relative health, repeatedly raping him all the while and keeping him hidden in his cabin in order to retain exclusive possession of him. When Lowe becomes pregnant, Cecil arranges for the child to be born in secret in Jamaica and to be hidden from public view until Lowe, passing as a man, can be married to a wealthy white-skinned woman named Sylvie, who will pass herself off as the child's mother. Cecil arranges this marriage as he arranges everything in Lowe's life, never asking Lowe what he wants, preventing Lowe from asking himself what he may want, and avoiding any explanation as to why Sylvie agrees to marry him.

Sylvie, it turns out, is an octoroon passing as white. In her first marriage (to a white attorney who was in league with Cecil in the coolie trade until Sylvie murdered him), Sylvie bore three "dark" children, whom a servant, Dulcie, spirited away in an effort to hide Sylvie's black ancestry from her husband. When he accuses Sylvie of being a "nigger" who has deceived him, she strangles him. Subsequently,

[1] A preliminary version of this essay was presented at the conference "Blackness in Global Contexts," organized by Moradewun Adejunmobi and Riché Richardson at the University of California, Davis, March 28-30, 2002.

Cecil helps her to escape and to adopt a new identity by marrying Lowe, Cecil's key motive being to provide his and Lowe's daughter, Elizabeth, with a mother. Cecil also provides Lowe with the capital to set up a shop and rum bar, an operation Cecil controls for most of Lowe's life. But after thirty years of subjection by Cecil and loveless marriage to Sylvie, Lowe begins to hear voices "rioting in his dreams, command[ing] that he signify, give testimony" to his own existence and his own desires. One important way in which Lowe will signify, in fits and starts over a long period of time, is by writing a letter to his estranged daughter, whom he hardly knows. Lowe has the twofold aim of revealing his identity as Elizabeth's mother and of *becoming* her mother in some meaningful sense. This will involve communicating his own painful history of cross-cultural and transgender migration, as well as integrating his fragmentary memories of a rejected Chinese culture into the daughter's understanding of who she is as a Jamaican, as well as his into his own self-understanding. However, it is not only in the frame of a personal relationship that Lowe will signify; Lowe plans to testify publicly by building a pagoda to house a benevolent society that will provide a library, newspapers, scholarships, and a symbolic home for the Chinese community which, henceforth, will be recognized as an integral part of Jamaican society.

In the course of the narrative, Lowe comes to terms with two forms of hell he has endured throughout his fifty years of life. The first is "meeting hell at the hands of the Negro people and the few Europeans that controlled the country" (6). Although he has lived in the same village for thirty-two years, Lowe is viewed with suspicion by virtue of being a foreigner and a successful shopkeeper. As Lowe himself observes, "there were opportunities to be had [for the Chinese], but only at the expense of other people. They had been brought there only to supply cheap labor and keep down wages. They had been brought there only to keep the Negro population in check" (45). Lowe's financial success is deeply resented by the emancipated African slaves, and as the novel opens Lowe's shop is burned to the ground by one of them, Omar, a man whose position could not be more contradictory since he is a loyal servant of Miss Sylvie's, an overseer who inflicts brutal physical punishments on the laborers under his control. Far from being an unambiguously racist act of "native defense" against the Chinese or a radical political move tied to the black labor protests against the ruling class, which had once been led by his mother, Dulcie, Omar's destruction of Lowe's shop is an act of revenge against Sylvie. For Omar is trying to acquire Sylvie's for himself through blackmail. Moreover, he envies Sylvie's sexual relationship with Lowe not because he knows that Lowe is "really" a woman, but because he desires the particular sort of female masculinity that Lowe performs. As for the Europeans, who are of course hated by many Jamaican blacks for essentially replacing African slaves with "Coolie and Chinese" (15), they are indifferent to the disaster that befalls Lowe when his shop is burned, because their only concern is to protect their own property.

The other form of hell that Lowe endures is his exile from his female identity. For most of his life, Lowe experiences female identity as a form of abjection. His rejection of an abhorrent femininity mirrors his beloved father's rejection of him, that is, the girl child whom his father can no longer treat as a son (for instance,

by educating him) once "the riveting stench of puberty" (36) separates them. Lowe is summarily married off at age fifteen to an old man in payment of a family debt. This utterly demoralizing marriage is particularly intolerable to a "restless girl thinking of expeditions" (139). Paternal rejection then, together with a demeaning marriage, prompts Lowe to adopt a male identity and flee to the Americas. Cecil's violent sexual abuse of Lowe during the sea voyage serves to reinforce Lowe's equation of female identity with abjection.

As I read it, the narrative in *The Pagoda* posits the existence of a core gender identity and follows a trajectory leading to the discovery of the protagonist's "true self." A key figure for the process of discovery is that of "unraveling" the unraveling of deceptions such as Sylvie's concealment of her past as an octoroon mother of three and the righteous murderer of her white husband (143), and the unraveling of Lowe's male persona. Lowe first sheds his "ridiculous" false mustache, then his men's clothes and the band he has wrapped tightly around his breasts for more than thirty years. Finally, he begins wearing Sylvie's clothes after she leaves him, and acquires new "feminine" gestures. His transformation culminates in his managing to write the letter to Elizabeth that he has been composing and crumpling up for years. Lowe's supposedly true female self is figured in the "I" enunciated in the letter that comprises the last pages of the novel, as well as in the Chinese name he signs: Lau A-yin. Indeed, the feminine Chinese given name, which is literally the last word, seems definitively to resolve the ambiguities of identity with which Lowe has been struggling, not only in terms of gender and sexuality but in terms of ethnicity as well.[2] For where ethnicity is concerned too, the narrative relies on a stable, bounded notion of identity which is affirmed in Lowe's dream of building the pagoda. The pagoda is meant to preserve the fragments of the Chinese past that have been brought to the new world by immigrants, and to provide the Chinese of Jamaica with a firm sense of cultural belonging that counteracts the feeling of placelessness that had plagued Lowe from the moment of his arrival in Jamaica.

I want to suggest, however, that Powell's novel is at odds with itself in a fruitful way. That is, although the narrative relies on a rather reductive politics of identity, the textual dynamics work against the narrative almost to the point of unraveling it at certain moments. Most obviously, we never learn whether the letter written to the daughter is received or even sent; and in any case, its main function seems to have been to engage Lowe (now Lau) in an ongoing process of self-reflection that will perhaps enable him, or rather her, to develop a relationship with a daughter she has kept at arm's length for the better part of a lifetime. Similarly, the construction of the pagoda is never finished; it literally remains a construction site, a locus for the politicized activity of producing new cultural forms in an ever-changing social formation. Lowe refuses to run away with Sylvie to escape persecu-

[2] I thank Aimee Bahng for sharing this insight with me, and Leslie Hammer and other graduate students for their thoughts on *The Pagoda*.

tion in Jamaica once they are openly exposed as the odd couple they are; he insists upon staying in Jamaica, which he now claims as his country, and pursues the pagoda project in the here and now.

More interesting, though, is the attention to the materiality of language, and the textual staging of discursive processes by which all ethnic, gendered, sexual, and cultural identities are produced, decomposed, and recomposed while also being shown to intersect —in specific historical situations. For example, after his shop burns, and after Sylvie leaves him, Lowe goes to the shop of a Chinese couple and tells the husband about the pagoda project, hoping to spark a sense of camaraderie in the man based on the simple fact of their shared national origin. But the man stares at Lowe uncomprehendingly, "as if wondering what the hell all of this was about" (174). This exchange is in tension with the earlier, gratifying ones between Lowe and other Chinese at Kywing's house, although even there Lowe is shown to be affectively distant from the new arrivals who still have illusions about the life that is possible for them in Jamaica. The most compelling figurations of ethnicity as a process rather than an entity, however, materialize in Powell's deployment of language, in two senses of that term. First, Lowe speaks in the same pidgin English as Sylvie, Omar, and other Jamaicans; his speech marks him as one who "belongs" in Jamaica in the same way that others belong. Secondly, the narrator continually refers to Lowe in terms that highlight the commonalities between African slavery, Chinese indentureship, and gender subordination in colonial Jamaica. Lowe's voyage to the new world is termed a "middle passage," and as he runs down to his burning shop he is said to be "flayed" and "flogged" by leaves blowing in the wind (12), words that irresistibly recall the whipping of slaves. True, Lowe is hated because of his class position and his supposedly privileged relation to Cecil, and he is subject to racism on the part of blacks who call him by the generic "Chinese" name "Mr. Chin" (14). But the text vividly shows how the identities of Lowe and the black villagers overlap and intersect even as they conflict with one another, and also how the blacks are at odds with themselves in their response to the destruction of Lowe's shop. "Rooted in the orange orchard next door the shop" (14), Lowe watches the villagers dousing the fire:

> The ones who set the fire and those who sat by with folded arms and crumpled faces. Those who didn't know anything at all. But everybody was dousing nonetheless. For it was theirs too. He watched them with their arms folded across chests, listening to the tick and crack of the last pieces of wood, their eyes glued to the dying embers, as if the destruction had somehow eaten away parts of themselves. He watched their loose empty gentle faces, withdrawn and tucked under. (14)

In passages such as this one, the lines demarcating races, ethnic groups, and even social classes are decidedly blurred, not only because the Chinese and the blacks working in the nearby cane fields do so under the same conditions —conditions that differ relatively little from those under slavery— but also because Lowe ("the Chinaman") is as much an instrument of Cecil as the blacks, and because Lowe's shop is a contradictory but communal space shared by all.

Similarly, where gender is concerned, the textual dynamics in *The Pagoda* complicate the narrative's deployment of identity politics. Despite Lowe's narrative destiny to find his "true self" and recover his femininity and despite the author's rather narrow view of the novel's characters as representations of selves[3] —the text repeatedly evokes the arduous process of constructing an identity and maintaining even a semblance of stability. When the Chinese shopkeeper mentioned above fails to bond with Lowe on the basis of Chinese identity as Lowe has construed it at that moment, Lowe's gender identity begins to fall apart. Lowe thinks to himself: "Did this man know that he no longer felt comfortable in his clothes, in his skin, that the persona that had once clothed him, shielded him, had come undone and there he was now, just unraveling?" (174).

This raveling and unraveling of Lowe's identity as a gendered and racialized subject is sustained throughout the novel. Indeed, his discovery of his "true self" and his embrace of his putative core gender identity at the end are undermined by the consistent use of the pronoun "he" to refer to Lowe throughout the third-person narration of this text. They are undermined as well by Powell's use of metaphor and her way of cascading from one spatio-temporal zone to another, interrupting the flow of the narrative and disrupting the subjective coherence of her main character, as in this remarkable passage, where Lowe's thoughts wander once he has withdrawn from the group of immigrants conversing at Kywing's house:

> And the shelves of his mind tumbled again, down into the rusty hull of Cecil's ship, and his ears were filled again with the cry of sails ripping to rags in big winds [...] There was the smell of grease and of smoke, of burning rubber, the smell of grain gone to rot, and then there had been the fever blazing through his limbs for days now [...] How many days now, how many nights, had he lain there the rats walking his face and teasing his veins, waiting... (47)

The figure of "the shelves of his mind" tumbling not only recalls the shopkeeper identity that Cecil had imposed upon Lowe, and that he had lost, suddenly and traumatically, when the shop was burned down. It evokes as well the collapse of Lowe's way of organizing his thoughts, strictly separating the past from the present, and compartmentalizing his psychic and emotional life, for instance, by storing the terrifying memories of his middle passage in a remote corner of his mind and never speaking of them. The "cry of sails ripping" recalls Cecil's rape of the struggling Lowe, just as "the smell of grain gone to rot" echoes the many references to Lowe's "voice gone to rot" (158), due to age and especially to his inability to come to terms with his past suffering.

---

[3] In "The Dynamics of Power and Desire in *The Pagoda*," Powell writes, for instance, that "The charged interactions that cross boundaries of race, class, sex, and gender have allowed me to investigate the dynamics of power and desire between characters" (190). And later: "How to write sexuality so as to best illustrate the charged interaction that characters face is an unending struggle in my works" (192).

Just as much as Lowe, Sylvie is a character whose identity is shown to be continually shifting and overdetermined. A mulatta, she is a familiar literary figure in terms of her position at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and the racialization of those categories in the context of new world slavery and colonialism. In this context, a mythical racial purity is wedded to an equally mythical sexual purity in white ruling class women, defending against the anxiety induced by the perceived threats of rape and miscegenation through excessive regulation of sexual and racial relations, and through unspeakable violence. In *The Pagoda*, however, the usual instabilities and "impurities" are complicated by Sylvie's omni-sexuality and by the many figures that associate her with the orientalism and crushing colonizing force of the British ruling class, to which many of her ancestors belonged. Examples include her Oriental rugs and her "alabaster-porcelain" skin (33), contrasted with the skin of Lowe, to whom Cecil mockingly refers as "Miss China Doll" and "Miss China Porcelain" (99). Other telling examples are the tea and silk scarves that circulate as commodities in Sylvie's everyday life, and that are equated, at certain moments, with Lowe, in his guise as a commodity, in the system of indentureship, as one of the "stolen Chinese" on Cecil's ship, "stowed tight with chests of tea and silk" (17).

If figures of Asian commodities such as Oriental rugs, tea and silk position the racially and sexually ambiguous Sylvie as a not quite/not white colonizer in relation to Lowe (one who ruthlessly takes land from black farmers to increase her own vast holdings), the topos of maternal loss subordinates her to Lowe along the axis of gender. In vain, Sylvie looks to Lowe to fill the terrible inner void left by the loss of her three brown children, a loss she was never able to grieve or to acknowledge openly. Lowe responds to Sylvie's "feminine" stance in classically "masculine" fashion: when she clutches at him he shuts her out emotionally, fleeing the "empty arms" of a woman "brimming with need" (47). It is only after she has left him that Lowe realizes that it is his own desperate need, his own insatiable longing that make him fear Sylvie's need for him. Only at that point does he learn to love her.

Images of commodities, which are central in this text, are generally deployed through figures of enumeration and repetition, and are systematically tied to the theme of capitalist exploitation in European colonies. As an example, let me cite a passage evoking the goods discernable in the "heap of destruction that was [Lowe's] shop" (18) after the fire:

> Wooden shelves leaning against the wall, holding cakes of soap and boxes of detergent and oats and bottles of beer and stout, aerated water, white rum, boxes of clothes peg, hairpin, button, phensic, tins of condensed milk and mackerel in tomato sauce, corned beef, sardines in vegetable oil, two- and three-pound bags of rice and flour and sugar and cornmeal, the closet filled with spiced buns and bread and water crackers, two unopened tins of New Zealand cheddar, the glass case leading out to the doorway, with home-sweet-home glass lamps and shades and tilley lanterns and bolts of calico and silk, spools of thread, brand-new Wellingtons, unused machetes, the oil drum, exploded. Nothing. (18)

Yet because these figures recur throughout the novel and are necessarily repeated with a difference, their meaning and affective charge change in each new

rendition. This variation holds the promise that the prevailing structures of domination may be dismantled and that the subjective and social worlds may be built anew.

The textual dynamics in *The Pagoda* point to the important political force of black aesthetics in today's world. Through its appeal to affect and sensuous experience, it can make business as usual appear discordant and disquieting in ways that other modes of thought and expression cannot do. Moreover, it has a special transformative power; through the senses and the imagination, it can generate a vitality that counteracts the deadening effects of dominant discourses and institutions. It is worth noting that the novel is not centered on the hierarchical relationship between the Jamaican colony and the British imperial power, although that relation fundamentally structures the colonial society evoked by Powell. Instead, *The Pagoda* brings to the fore relations between Jamaicans of African descent and Chinese and Indian immigrants, relations between the Caribbean and Asia. It emphasizes relations of margin to margin and how they speak to the specificity of Caribbean history, which has its own shape, its own materiality, its own spirit things that cannot be accounted for through reference to the supposedly paradigmatic histories of Britain or France or the United States. The novel also rewrites what Powell calls "the incredibly virulent histories" of Caribbean peoples, interweaving them with the histories of several other cultures in such a way as to spark reflection on new ways of thinking about black cultures and black liberation today. Finally, it is worth noting that *The Pagoda*, written by a young black Jamaican woman in Boston, emphatically is *not* about Caribbean peoples in the United States. Her work signals a sea change in African American literature, one to which literary critics are now beginning to respond. Having considered the many ways that Black Atlantic migrations and cultural flows have shaped black culture in the United States, scholars are now starting to look closely at black peoples' interactions with a host of other cultures, and to examine the intricate entanglements of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity in a broad spectrum of geopolitical relations. Undoubtedly, in these largely uncharted territories, narratives that seek definitively to resolve the ambiguity and mutability of identities will seem like relics of a past to which we can gladly bid farewell.

WORKS CITED

POWELL, Patricia. "The Dynamics of Power and Desire in *The Pagoda*." *Winds of Change: The Transforming Voices of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars*. Ed. Adele S. Newson & Linda Strong-Leek. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. 189-94.

—— *The Pagoda*. New York-London: Harcourt Brace, 1998.