

## Race and Communion in “Floating Power”

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In the introduction to the Afro-Brazilian short-story collection *Women Righting*, Geni Guimarães' story “Floating Power” is summarized as a call for the education of black women in order to continue the progress of the Afro-Brazilian race. Yet besides this goal, Guimarães' story also points out the dire need for improvement in the education of white children so that fear and racism might be eliminated from Brazilian society (*Women Righting*, 21). The young teacher-protagonist in the story wishes to accomplish both of these goals, but by the end her efforts lead her to the discovery of her own role in this process of racial harmonization.

Both this particular story and the anthology in which it is published have examples of what Christina Christie deemed to be the two separate elements of African influence in contemporary Brazilian literature: first, the introduction of the negro motif as subject matter and second, the importance of negro authorship in the Brazilian literary canon (263). “Floating Power,” told from the first-person point of view of a young black school teacher, reveals this female protagonist's thoughts as she begins a very difficult first day of teaching elementary school children. Entering her new job nervous, excited and hopeful, the young teacher immediately finds herself in an embarrassing situation when a “sweet, beautiful and white girl” refuses to enter the classroom because she is afraid of her new black teacher. When the headmistress discovers the little girl's uneasiness, she is ready to solve the problem by removing the little girl and placing her in a class with a white teacher where she will be more comfortable, and the transfer ought to be a quick, quiet, and simple solution (Guimarães 67). This is a prime example of what Anani Dzidzienyo calls a special “etiquette” in Brazilian racial relations which resists any confrontation with or discussion of the country's racial situation (qtd. in Kennedy 200). In this mindset, if the girl is unhappy because she does not want a black teacher, conflict must be avoided at all costs. However, the teacher proves to have what Dzidzienyo calls a “disposition to challenge the ‘etiquette’” when she challenges the headmistress' proposal and asks permission to try to persuade the little girl to stay in the class. When the headmistress agrees to give her one day to win the little girl over, the teacher recognizes for the first time the high duty she has to prove her capabilities to this tiny prejudiced person. In an interview with Charles Rowell and Bruce Willis, Geni Guimarães claims that “prejudice is ignorance” (811), and it is indeed at this moment in the story that the teacher becomes determined to rectify the little girl's ignorance, thereby curing her of immature intolerance. Here there is an assumption on the part of the black teacher that challenging the girl's intolerance will bring about an improvement, a positive change that will make the girl somehow better or happier. While there is no need to question the teacher's motives on behalf of herself, since reducing racial prejudice will obviously result in more respect directed towards people like her, her motives on behalf of the little girl must be examined a bit more closely.

As the story progresses, this little girl is repeatedly characterized as being afraid, and the fear is explicitly connected to her discomfort with cross-racial connection in a school setting. She is “tearful,” “uncertain,” “even a little frightened” (Guimarães 69). She is probably not used to interacting with black adults, and she remains cautious, sizing up this new situation. Yet the more the girl is characterized

by her fear, the more the teacher emphasizes a growing sense of duty to remove this irrational fear, to make the girl feel happy, comfortable, and at ease. After promising herself that she will find a means of changing the little girl's mind, the teacher admits, "I needed to. I had to, both for her and for myself" (Guimarães 69). This determination hearkens back to what the author referred to in an interview with Rowell and Willis as the "duty of resistance" (811). In the face of the passive discomfort of the little girl, the teacher takes action. Allowing the girl to sit in a special seat and "take care of" the teacher's pocketbook is a way to make the girl feel privileged, but it is not a privilege that is undeserved; by accepting the teacher's offer, she benefits by finally finding away to let go of her fear.

As the divide is gradually bridged between the two alienated people, another theme comes into the spotlight: humanization of the other. When the girl begins to feel more comfortable, she innocently reveals her own vulnerability by drawing a picture of a dog with no tail. Her explanation that her dog puts its tail between its legs when her grandpa drinks sheds light on her unique personal struggles. The stereotypical polarity of the oppressed, underprivileged black as a category and the oppressing, privileged, and discriminating white as a separate category is shattered, and instead both parties are characterized not by such flat stereotypes, but rather by a rich humanization acknowledging the suffering and the joys of each. If the reader at first thought the white little girl a privileged snob, she is now presented as a very vulnerable creature who also must endure undeserved suffering, just as the teacher refers to her own "tumultuous" childhood (Guimarães 69). It is at this point that the teacher and student achieve what Agier, in elaborating on the system of racialism, would call the merging of two opposite "true interest groups" that have been established in a binary system where racial phenotype is attached to social rights and "legitimate cultural differences" (247). Yet despite these differences and the conflicting interest of opposing racial groups, the teacher and the student in the story have found a very common ground in their simple human suffering, and they are also able to share common, simple little joys like a lunch of bread and airplane butter (Guimarães 71). Guimarães herself admits in her interview that she is attempting to portray, above all else, a "human way of life" (812).

Indeed, the beauty of the brief scene where the teacher and student share bread and airplane butter is in this human connection, where the goal is not only racial harmony or the elimination of fear and violence, but something more than that. It is a type of communion between two individuals, where difference is forgotten in the moment of sharing something of value. The teacher's reaction to this moment is powerful and emotional. She was already beginning to develop the protective, maternal feelings that started to bloom the moment she stepped in the classroom and saw the "agitated little ones" (67), but by the end this sensation has blossomed into something deeply emotional and powerful. Her goal accomplished and the little girl won over, she feels the effect of a figurative afterbirth (Guimarães 71). The teacher plays the role as both a maternal and messianic figure. Through her efforts she has birthed a sense of trust in a frightened child, or perhaps she has given the child an invaluable opportunity to be reborn into a more peaceful life where she will find harmony with others, no matter their color of skin. She calls herself a shepherd, one who leads her people towards harmony. The black woman has multiple roles, but all point to her duty to resist racial prejudice for the sake of humanity at large.

Her crusade to win the girl over, thus doing justice to both races, is won in the end. She has provided a prime example of leadership. She is proactive without begin

aggressive, vengeful, or violent, and it is only by carefully and persistently demonstrating her love that she accomplishes progress and healing.

### Works Cited

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