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Black, White, and in Color, or Learning How to Paint: Toward an Intramural Protocol of Reading

I

In a footnote in response to highly contested passages from Paule Marshall's *Chosen Place, Timeless People*,¹ I discuss "an epistemological ground for locating centers of interpretation." The central query here is not only if Marshall's work might be read in some of its lights as "homophobic," but also how the latter criticism is muted, or assumes a different perspective, if the ideology and practice of race are thrown into the mix. From the vantage of power relations, wherein race admittedly situates, the claims of "homophobia" on this novel are both misleading and inadequate. If we are right to look for the "science of a general economy of practices,"² then no single aspect/event of the socionom (the web of identity) can be perfectly isolated, nor can it occupy, from its local and particular site, the sovereign position. The ground for locating competing interpretive interests—Barbara Herrnstein Smith calls them "communities"³—for placing them in relation to one another is made up of one's leanings and inclinations toward one system, or logics of representation, and not another. This much must be admitted. It seems to me that the repertoire of isolated strands of subject-effect, which characterize our current critical inquiries, are interpenetrating and incontrovertible and that they are at play, first and last, in the realm of history and its key moments of power relations. One might attempt to forge, realizing this, a "critical pertinence" that would mobilize, at least implicitly, its own ideological biases, perhaps even *use* them, that would recognize the play of contradiction and difference as an aspect of her own critical project. What we posit as a "thereness" in any given surface of a text is as much one's conjuring with her own social positionality, as it is with a

repertory of practices designated “author.” The rupture of certainty, of the “colonization” of discourses by a mighty and irrevocable gesture of appropriation, is the promise of a fairly new reader’s tale, the outcome of which cannot be anticipated. But this jamming of the expectations, we grow accustomed to think, constitutes an intervention that could render the new attitude *serviceable*, I would dare say, to what we might think of as an “intramural protocol of reading,” how to see, really, when what you’re looking at is perceived to be some of your own stuff—a subject history, a historical subjectivity. Or, to put the matter somewhat differently, how do “look alike” behave toward one another?

Marshall’s *Chosen Place, Timeless People* systematized a response, and how I think it is done lends focus to this essay. The conflated allusion of my title to film⁴ and to painting offers a visual metaphor: one would try to negotiate, across a plurality of seeing, numerous, and subtle coordinations, as if pieces of identity as different from each other as the nerve endings of the fingers and the sense of aspiration and desire were all groping toward an exercise of attention and memory as precise as the mathematical. Heaven forbid that the reader/critic must now learn to paint and do numbers, but the protocol of reading that I would imagine is now called upon to disabuse us of the unacknowledged tyrannies of our own involvement in dominative forms. “Black,” “white,” and “in color” are precisely the figurative stops that I would engage in arriving at an adequate examination of a different interpretive practice for an African-American readership in particular.

In preparing to reread moments of Marshall’s novel⁵ and attempt another writing concerning it, I was especially interested in Roland Barthes’s *S/Z* and its five codes of reading: the hermeneutic, semic, symbolic, proairetic, and cultural codes (and we should add a sixth here, the “translative,” since the “Barthes” I mean is “in English”) inscribe a work of severe fragmentation—93 sections, 561 items, to be exact, in which the most brilliantly bizarre textual calculus is hurtled against Balzac’s *Sarrasine*—to cite, for instance, given its “tauromachian” emphasis, implies the *citar*: “the stamp of the heel, the torero’s arched stance which summons the bull to the banderilleros,”⁶ or the career of the signifier as a *citing* or *siting*. Items of textuality treated as lexical instances, followed by a running, seamless commentary that make up Barthes’s own metacritical gesture, *S/Z* demonstrates the critical project as a subversion of the proper name, just as it celebrates the proper name to be undetermined in the first place—“BARTHES” as a gathering of decided critical and cultural forces and as a dispersion of energies that replicate themselves pitilessly, as though to say that the transparent utterance of the bourgeois text must be laboriously revealed as the

distance between itself and the opaque lie that transforms “culture” into “nature.” The Barthesian performance meets our own purposes here in the most general sense: looking at a carnival scene from Marshall’s work, I will attempt to recover whatever pluralities of meaning the text might lead us to consider. Barthes’s work filters through my own understanding of reading as an elaboration and complication of competing, overlapping, and complementary discourses.

II

I will forgo the usual courtesy of providing, here and now and all at once, a plot summary of the novel, though doing so is barely avoidable. Instead, my observations start in the middle, where the carnival scenes fall in the midst of an orientation and a conclusion. We are concerned with a character named Vere and a female figure, who, for all intents and purposes, remains anonymous, except for a tribal marker in a last name called “MacFarland.” Though the events to which I refer are traversed and cross-hatched several times, they come to focus in Book III, “Carnival,” chapter 1, 267–77.

I have isolated this ten-page sequence because its riddle stands out from the surrounding narratives at the same time that it serves to reinforce the latter by (a) specifying carnival in the fictitious community as a hyperbolic function, (b) articulating “namelessness” as the central dread of an impoverished culture, whose fictional limits are traced in the novel, and (c) metaphorizing the uncanny at the crossroads of cultural exchange, or the excessively unfamiliar as a quite familiar aspect of all social choreographies. In other words, this chapter, in its terrible centrality, situates the problematic that the novel retraces as an interrogation into the *interior* dynamics of otheredness: If “I” is another, then “I” will never know other than this otherness, even if the texts of my history call upon me to think and act as if it were not so. This ambivalence in both the fictional and historical text is neither permissible, nor near the surface, but it might explain, at heart, the peculiar texture of hostilities that prevail, both openly and covertly, over the social economies of Bourne Island. But that is a tentative conclusion. What steps have induced it?

By these signs you shall know them . . .

1. Through a principle of convergence and enumeration, Marshall’s narrators range between and within scenes as the subtle admixture of omniscient and local narrative properties. Four of the actors of the plot converge on Book I, chapter 1: Vere, Allen Fuso, and Saul and Harriet Amron, each, in turn, observing the other and self in an inward narrative movement, confer