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Shaping the World of My Art

Paule Marshall


To talk about early influences it will be necessary to take a giant step back to that stage in life when, without being conscious of it, I began the never-ending apprenticeship which is writing. It began in of all places the ground-floor kitchen of a brownstone house in Brooklyn. Let me try to recreate the setting for you. Picture if you will a large old-fashioned kitchen with a second-hand refrigerator, the kind they used to have back then in the thirties with the motor on top, a coal stove that in its blackness, girth, and the heat it threw off during the winter overwhelmed the gas range next to it, a sink whose pipes never ceased their rusty cough, and a large table covered in flowered oilcloth set like an altar in the middle of the room.

It was at this table that the faithful, my mother and her women friends, would gather almost every afternoon upon returning from their jobs as domestics. Their work day had begun practically at dawn with the long train ride out to the white sections of Brooklyn. There, the ones who weren’t lucky enough to have a steady job would stand on the street corners waiting for the white, mainly Jewish, housewives to come along and hire them for a half day’s work cleaning their houses. The auction block was still very real for them.

Later, armed with the few dollars they had earned, my mother and her friends would make the long trip back to our part of town and there, in the sanctuary of our kitchen, talk endlessly, passionately. I didn’t realize it then but those long afternoon rap sessions were highly functional. They were the means which helped them exorcise the day’s humiliations and restore them to themselves. A way to overcome. The people they worked for were usually the first thing to come under the whiplash of their tongues. For hours at a stretch they would subject their employers to an acute and merciless analysis. And they were shrewd students of psychology. They knew those predominantly Jewish housewives for whom they worked far better than the latter would ever know them. I never saw any of these women they spoke of—and had no wish to; it was bad enough that I had to wear their children’s cast-off clothes my mother brought home—yet my mother

“You deserve to dead,” Silla cried, her face working and her eyes boring into Iris, who remained unmoved and unimpressed. Silla leaned across the table to her, whispering, “Iris, you know what it is to work hard and still never make a head-way? That’s Bimshire. One crop. People having to work for next skin to nothing. The white people treating we like slaves still and we taking it. The rum shop and the church join together to keep we pacify and in ignorance. That’s Barbados. It’s a terrible thing to know that you gon be poor all yuh life, no matter how hard you work. You does stop trying after a time. People does see you so and call you lazy. But it ain laziness. It just that you does give up. You does kind of die inside. . . .”

“It’s the God truth,” Florrie whispered.

“I ain saying that we don catch H in this country what with the discrimination and thing and how hard we does have to scrub the Jew floor to make a penny, but my Christ, at least you can make a head-way. Look how Roosevelt come and give relief and jobs. Who was one the first Bajan bought a house? You, Iris. When they pass this law to hire colored in defense plants who was the first up in the people face applying? Your husband, Iris. Even I gon apply for one those jobs. So c’dear, give credit where it due, nuh,” she pleaded softly, then as Iris still ignored her, she lashed out, “You’s an ungrateful whelp.”

“Dear-heart,” Iris laughed, “I ain able for you to kill me with words!”

Florrie had listened rapt, respectful to Silla, and now she said solemnly, “Talk yuh talk, Silla! Be-Jees, in this white-man world you got to take yuh mouth and make a gun.”

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and her friends made them visible to me with their deft and often devastating descriptions. In doing so, they began to teach me all the way back then what is perhaps the most invaluable lesson for a writer of fiction, i.e., the importance of skillful characterization, the novelist’s responsibility to make his (her) people live and have their being on the page.

For me, listening in a corner of the kitchen (seen, but not heard, as was the rule back then), it wasn’t only what the women talked about, the content; above all, it was their poet’s skill with words. They had taken the language imposed upon them and imbued it with their own incisive rhythms and syntax, brought to bear upon it the few African words that had been retained. I was impressed, without being able to define it, by the seemingly effortless way they had mastered the form of storytelling. They didn’t know it, nor did I at the time, but they were carrying on a tradition as ancient as Africa.

Moreover, all that free-wheeling talk together with the sometimes bawdy jokes and the laughter which often swept the kitchen was, at its deepest level, an affirmation of their own worth; it said they could not be defeated by demeaning jobs and the day spent scrubbing other people’s floors. Theirs was the spirit you sense when listening to the blues, to the spiritual, to the driving energy of jazz. They had transcended their condition through the medium of language.

I could understand little of this at the time. The mysterious force I heard resonating behind the words, which held me spellbound, came across mainly as a feeling which entered me not only through my ears but through the pores of my skin to become part of my blood. It sings there to this day. More than any other single factor, that quality, their way with words, helped to shape me as a writer at that unconscious level where it must always begin. That is why the best of my work is really a celebration of them, an acknowledgment of the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on to me.

Many Black women, like Silla Boyce, worked in munitions factories during World War II. This photograph, reproduced from the Collections of the Library of Congress, shows women welders at the Landers, Frary, and Clark plant in New Britain, Connecticut, in June 1943. Photograph by Gordon Parks.

Women’s Studies as an Energizer of the Humanities in Southern English Departments

D. Dean Cantrell

The Rockefeller Commission on the Humanities, in issuing its thirty-one recommendations, noted: “We see our report primarily as a contribution to rethinking the humanities, not as a shopping list.” In defining the humanities, among other things, as a “turn of mind” toward history, “the record of what has moved men and women before us to act, believe, and build as they did,” the Commission recommends that colleges develop “new materials for teaching the humanities” as a “further means for invigorating [them].” That women’s studies may be a legitimate energizer of the sagging humanities seems a likely possibility when one realizes that this year at least 20,000 women’s studies courses will be taught in American colleges and universities and that more than 350 institutions have already inaugurated formal programs, with over forty awarding graduate degrees. Thus, the putative “male-centered curriculum,” which for 345 years has been less than benign to women’s concerns, seems to have begun to accommodate this new area of knowledge.

Prior to 1975, English departments in Southern colleges and universities offered far fewer women’s studies courses than those located in other geographical areas of the United States. In Who’s Who and Where in Women’s Studies (1974), thirty-seven Southern institutions