

cherished Borges for his complexity and elusive depth; and now, though we may not yet comprehend him totally, we are getting a far better grasp of that central vision of his that makes his literature tick—or rather, that makes us vibrate to his rhythms. Reid and Monegal have made a fine contribution to this end.

Carter Wheelock

BONNIE J. BARTHOLD
Black Time: Fiction of Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. Pp. 209. \$17.50

Professor Barthold's book is less a scholarly study than a ritual endorsement of Black Zionism. Its informing myth is the black diaspora which scattered the children of Mother Africa throughout the New World, fragmenting consciousness and destroying the continuity of time. Barthold proposes to reverse the process of cultural dispersion by inventing a unified field theory of black fiction. Her unifying device is the concept of black time.

What is the nature of this racial time, which will serve as a spiritual basis for the in-gathering of the exiles? How does it differ from the Western variety? It is cyclical rather than linear, mythic rather than historical, sacred rather than profane. Rooted in ancient religious practices, this uniquely African perception of time survived the middle passage and resisted all subsequent efforts at Westernization. Elements of sacred time will thus be found in all contemporary black fiction, whether its proximate source is Africa, the Caribbean, or the United States.

In support of her thesis, Barthold leans rather injudiciously on Richard Wright, quoting him to the effect that time is perceived differently in a traditional, agrarian order and a highly industrialized society. But Wright approached these matters in historical, not racial terms, and would have been appalled by the notion of "black"

time. His thinking on the subject derived from Robert Redfield's classic study, *Tepoztlán*, which contrasts the time-sense of Mexican villagers with that of former peasants who have migrated to Mexico City. These were of course Indians, and not the sons of Mother Africa.

Wherein does the *blackness* of mythic time consist? "Central to the themes that unite American, Caribbean, and African fiction," Barthold claims, "is the black writer's focus on the chaos of time" (p. 31). But in this respect black authors are by no means unique. What is the fiction of Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and William Faulkner all about, if not the chaos of history and the reconstitution of mythic time? Nowhere is the ethnocentric bias of this study more apparent than in the author's deafening silence on the modernist movement.

Even on its own terms, the study is parochial. For the author's purpose is "to see black fiction whole, as a phenomenon that transcends geographic and national boundaries . . ." (p. 197). But not, apparently, linguistic boundaries. Barthold's exclusive concern is with black authors who write in English. Where are the black Francophones, or the black Hispanics? Are not they too the sons and daughters of Mother Africa? What sort of Pan-Africanism restricts its purview to Anglophones alone, or tolerates artificial divisions based on the language compartments of the white oppressor?

To summarize so far: *pre-industrial time* most assuredly exists, and many blacks of many nations undoubtedly move to its rhythms. So do brown, beige, and white populations who have never, or only minimally been industrialized. In the fiction of our century many writers, both black and white, have rebelled against the tyranny of the machine by striving to reconstitute a mythic time. But to call these essentially archaic modes of temporal perception *black time* is quite unwarranted.

When you bone a fish, you have something left to eat. But after removing the backbone of this study—the dubious notion of black time—what remains is the quality of Barthold's criticism. Unfortunately, it is not very high in protein. For the value of a work of fiction seems to depend on its compatibility with her own ideology. When she discusses Toni Mor-

ri-son she is most illuminating, for critic and author share the same myth. When she turns to writers like Charles Chesnutt, James Weldon Johnson, and Jean Toomer, who march to a very different drummer, she misses the meaning or forces the text.

Chesnutt is a case in point. "One of the more complex portrayals of Ananse," Barthold writes, "is offered in the stories that comprise *The Conjure Woman*" (p. 45). Now Ananse is a legendary spider in the folklore of Jamaica, but is quite unknown in the animal fables of North Carolina. References to *rabbits* abound in Chesnutt's book, but *spiders* are nowhere to be found. That Chesnutt was familiar with Brer Rabbit goes without saying. He acknowledges his debt to Joel Chandler Harris in a piece called "Superstitions and Folklore of the South" (*Modern Culture*, May, 1901). But what do Chesnutt's conjure tales have to do with a Jamaican spider?

Barthold's treatment of *The Conjure Woman*, moreover, is factually unreliable. In her discussion of "Po' Sandy" she repeats no less than three times the error that Aunt Peggy, the plantation conjure woman, changes Sandy into a tree. The

fact is that Aunt Peggy, who figures in several other conjure tales, does not appear as a character in "Po' Sandy." It is Sandy's wife, Tenie, who turns him into a tree, and the fact of their marriage is absolutely crucial to the meaning of the tale.

The book is rambling and repetitious because of its calculated assault on history. Throughout the text, novels are denuded of their publication dates, removed from the realm of literary history, and discussed in a timeless present. Her abandonment of chronology deprives the author of a vital organizing principle. Nor does she find an alternative structure in the realm of myth. Things simply fall apart, in a desultory sampling of many texts and a welter of cross-references.

Perhaps it comes to this: that mythmaking and scholarly discourse are not the same activity. Neither is intrinsically superior; they simply satisfy different requirements of the human mind. But no good purpose is served by confusing the two modes. Whatever its virtue as myth, *Black Time* has serious scholarly deficiencies.

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