

Reading the Space of Desire in Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda*

Just to recap for those unfamiliar with the novel, in *The Pagoda* (1998), Patricia Powell writes the story of Lowe, who is biologically a woman but cross dressed as a man to immigrate to Jamaica during the first period of the Chinese Diaspora in the nineteenth century, the indenture period. Found hiding in the ship's cargo, Lowe is forced to become a concubine to the ship's captain, Cecil, resulting in pregnancy. Cecil gives Lowe, who is still masquerading as a man, a shop and a wife, Miss Sylvie, to raise their daughter. Set in 1893, thirty-three years after Lowe's immigration, the novel opens with Lowe's shop destroyed, burnt down in an act of revenge that kills Cecil at the same time. With the shop destroyed and his rapist/benefactor dead and his daughter married and a mother herself, Lowe is released from a life of obligation and free to define an identity uncircumscribed by any social relation. In keeping with Powell's assigning Lowe the gendered pronoun "he" and possessive "his," this is how I will refer to Lowe throughout the essay.

The Pagoda, ends with what we have come to recognize as a novel's final act – a letter that ties up the loose ends, explaining how Lowe lives his life now, the continued absence of Miss Sylvie, and if the dream of the titular pagoda is achieved, and promises a reconciliation with the distant daughter now that his true past has been revealed. This sense of closure is of course illusory. The premise of a letter itself resists closure. A letter sent to another creates a void, a longing only healed by response. Furthermore, the details provided in the letter do not seem to align with what we know of Lowe. Joyce, a village woman and the only person whom Lowe pursues out of desire and who recognizes Lowe's true biological identity, is inexplicably dismissed. Lowe instead expresses longing for the wife whom he ate with, had sex with, and slept beside but never knew. In this essay, I am interested in how this problem plays out as

Powell's exploration of the gap between self and other, a space of desire in itself, by manipulating the material markers of sexual difference and blurring the boundaries of sexual orientation. Ultimately, I argue that by placing the focus on the ambiguous desiring individual, Powell more effectively acknowledges the presence of the Chinese without falling into the trap of rewriting their experience as a romanticized relationship between them, blacks, and whites or as one united only through the joint experience of oppression. For the remainder of this essay, I will trace Lowe's psychological flowering through his intimate, if not sexual, relationship with two of the novel's principle characters, Miss Sylvie and Joyce as a means of offering a new model of the interracial relationship, at the individual and societal level, based on mutual recognition and acceptance or *soullove*.

The relationship between blacks and Chinese and South Asian immigrants during the indenture period could best be described as fraught and deliberately designed to be. In some of the colonial elite's earliest dreams of a Chinese presence in the West Indies, the Chinese would act as middlemen protecting the colony from black insurrection, an anxiety further provoked by the Haitian Revolution, by acting as a buffer race "who, from habits and feelings would be kept distinct from the Negroes, and who from interest would be inseparably attached to the European proprietors" (Colonial Office Correspondence qtd. in Lai). While this dream did not come to fruition, with most of the Chinese that emigrated returning to their native land, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, real economic motives prompted another fantasy of the Chinese. The Chinese would not only replace the volatile blacks following the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, but also be a more perfect, smarter, faster, stronger race in terms of efficiency, productivity, and social relation. When put into practice, the importation of the Chinese became a colonialist tool to manipulate wages and to stoke division and antagonism

between the black and Chinese populations by allowing the Chinese to progress to shopkeeper and to assimilate via Christianity or intermarriage while legally inhibiting blacks from doing the same.

We can read this colonialist fantasy and its enactment as somehow akin to the desire to draw connections between the Chinese and black populations based on the joint experience of oppression, which becomes an act of resistance against the colonial imperative of division between the two. *The Pagoda* does indeed play this out, connecting the experience of the Chinese and blacks through a “hieroglyphics of the flesh” and travel across the Atlantic Ocean. The Chinese plantation workers experience the same “rebirth” through loss and physical torture and the humiliation of the auction block:

The punishments doled out by the captains of foreign ships during the crossing, where many of the ships fell apart in the ocean- only one third of them ever survived the passage –their bones scattered, sunken in beds in the middle of the Atlantic. They never talked about the man markets that greeted them on the island once they arrived, how they were made to stand naked so the throng of planters could prod their open jaws and hanging testicles before buying them, how planters chopped off their glossy imperial queues and emblazoned, in bold red letters on their skins, the initials of plantations. (44-5)

They are joined to their black counterparts with “hands twisted and chewed from water pumps, scarred by deep grooves left over from cane leaves that cut like knives. They came with spit bubbling with blood, asthmatic and tubercular chests from the dust. They came without flesh, with holes in the skin, half starved from inferior food, lashed and mutilated by overseers under the muscle of plantation owners” (15). However, such a union often results in painting over the fact that not only were both populations oppressed by the colonial government and the ruthless plantation system, but they often inflicted violence and misery upon each other.

The problem that conceptualizing the interracial relationship presents is that it is dependent on/ becomes obsessed with the body, and not the psychic drives propelling its actions, leading to the potential of the taint of fetishization and the pornographic. As Jared Sexton asserts in the provocative, to say the least, *Amalgamation Schemes* (2008), *there is no interracial relationship that is not [perceived as] implicated in the obscene fantasy* that taints the reputation of more valid romantic arrangements” (178). Here Sexton is playing on Lacan’s assertion that there is no sexual relationship. Lacan makes this claim based on the belief that love is ultimately the projection of a narcissistic fantasy onto the other and the other’s body serves as a remainder that forces the subject to realize that he cannot achieve full possession of the love object, a realization that does not deter his pursuit but drives his desire and failed attempts to bridge this gap between self and other through language. Just because Lacan provides a helpful example, indeed a rare event, to explain this phenomenon, it is worth rehashing. After *The Iliad’s* Achilles and Briseis make love, Achilles comes to the realization that while he might have possessed her body, he does not hold her mind, causing him to continue to pursue her, to attempt to access what the presence of the body reminds him that he cannot obtain. While Sexton is discussing the perception of the individual interracial relationship, I would like to extrapolate this to the societal level. As a solution, Sexton proposes “the deconstruction of race, the traversal of the fantasy of interracial sexual union, and finally, the rearticulation of the concept of the body itself- an embodiment not exhausted by its biological title (Miles 199), one that is attentive to its excess and indifference, to the *multiplication* of its powers”(189).

In this reading of *The Pagoda*, I hope to explore how such a conception of the body can be rendered in text and through the novel’s depiction of sexual desire and intercourse. For a solution to this conundrum, I, like Sexton, turn to Lacan, at his most optimistic. While we are

more familiar with Lacan's pithier "there is no sexual relationship," here I would like to shift our attention to his concept of *soullove*, a way of relation based on the mutual recognition of subjectivities, of another's own will, desire, and agenda. For women to achieve soullove, women "play the part of the man (*faire l'homme*), as I have said, being thus *homosexual* or *beyondsex* themselves-it being henceforth difficult for them not to sense the impasse that consists in the fact that they love each other as the same (*ells se mément*) in the Other, for, indeed there is no need to know you are Other to be there (*il n'y a pas besoin de se savoir Autre pour en être*)" (Lacan 9; 85). In other words, the achievement of soullove requires a sort of transvestism, the refusal of occupying a place in the typical active/passive construction of the relationship, but instead assuming the same position as one's partner. Lowe, while never possessing it fully, approaches the achievement of soullove in his sexual encounters.

Miss Sylvie, an octroon who Cecil blackmails into marrying Lowe after she gives up three of her children because their skin color revealed their true heritage and murders her husband, is portrayed as the archetypal devouring woman as well as aligned with the class of brutal contract labor brokers. Her sexual relationship with Lowe reveals this dynamic as it is depicted in the first encounter at the beginning of their marriage. Phallic imagery and images of violent penetration dominate. Miss Sylvie's kisses are "a stab to the center of the throat with a pointed pink tongue" (112). Her stimulation of Lowe's genitals is remembered as finger "plunging in, a pointed tip of European nose, a taste, finger by finger the whole fist crammed in" (113). Lowe's body is acted upon/re-victimized although it "would not obey, would not dance, was not flexible and yielding, had no discipline," aligning Miss Sylvie's actions with the plantation owners' cutting off of imperial queues and branding of the skin of the newly arrived Chinese migrants.

Powell pushes this point further by merging this description in the same paragraph with the traumatic memory of Cecil raping her on the ship:

A ship. A square canvas edge of sail. A checkered oilcloth and the strange curve of flesh. Haggard breathing. Cecil's! The galloping rhythm of tongue, taste of brine on lips, a raised arm with torn wrist, a vague twilight and dreamy eyes gripped by the drug of sleep. A molten sky. An auspicious moon. A sweltering marketplace. A circling shark with a murderous tail. A leaning body full of erratic gesture, the undulation of limbs, the crunching of figues, the movement of light. Lowe could not retain the sequence from the chaos.

The experience becomes a series of disjointed images that become disturbing as a series. This series of images become significant upon realizing that are confined purely to the visual and represent a closing off of the lived experienced that would reflect an engagement with all of the senses. Furthermore, in terms of material space, the space of the ship is far removed from the space of the pagoda, which becomes entwined with Lowe's sexual encounter with Joyce at the level of metaphor. The ship in its mobility and defining social relationship in terms of the circulation of goods and the exchange of money contrasts sharply with the purpose of a meeting/ ceremonial hall that cannot be accounted for in law, which as Lacan reminds us the essence of is "to divide up, distribute, or reattribute everything that counts as jouissance" (3).

Joyce, a corpulent creole black woman and wife of a local police man, meets Lowe twenty years before the novel begins at his shop. Joyce is alienated from her husband just as Lowe is alienated from all of the members of his household. Both her un-mixed heritage and relationship to Lowe as consumer aligns her with the community of village blacks that Lowe desires to have a connection with, a desire that is fulfilled in the turning point of the novel when Lowe is able to integrate into the community through drinks and commiseration at Miss Cora's shop. However, she is able to connect to Lowe with "stories about her manic depression and anxiety, about the hideous details of their sex life and the incredible adventures of the three

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children she had for him” (58). Lowe’s relationship, despite their union at the level of speech and their union of sexual organs, does not seem to move beyond this level analogous to the relationship between psychoanalyst and patient in that the divulging of secrets appears one-sided, with Lowe on the receiving end. While such a level of relation approaches *soullove*, in that the presence of the “psychoanalyst” is a manifestation of the unconscious itself, the offering of a brief glimpse into the Other, an asymmetry between partners still exist, preventing its full exercise.

In contrast to his relationships with Miss Sylvie, Lowe’s relationship with Joyce exists primarily in the realm of sensual experience, limited to place and the present, unique in that Lowe seems to be never compelled to think of himself as Joyce’s fantasy object. In their last encounter, sex is rendered symbolically, literally through metaphor:

Years later, he would always remember that afternoon and how she had turned him into a garden of flowers and fruits. How she had made up a name for his slim and ashy ankles, for every inch of his strong broad feet, for each toe, which she sprinkled first with kisses before assigning them titles. His fists had become her flowering hibiscus, his elbows her marigolds, his breasts her star apples, his nipples her guineps, his knees her frangipani, his calves her turtleberry bush, his navel her iris, and down there, down there, how to call it, her tulip? (230)

As Jason Frydman notes in his reading of the novel, using the metaphor of the pleasure garden to describe sex with Joyce and aligns the liaison with Lowe’s dream of the pagoda, which Jake, a local contractor, encourages Lowe by imagining it having a “nice little garden and things that grow roses and hibiscus and bougainvillea and marigold” (Frydman 106). Such a rendering also, aside from “[Joyce’s] sprink[ling] [Lowe’s body] first with kisses” and “the great tongue throbbing in his mouth” (which is noticeably disconnected from a body and active agent), allows Lowe’s body to exist without being acted upon. Instead, Joyce demands for Lowe to act, to recognize her need for pleasure as well as her personhood. Her demands, “‘Open your eyes,’ she

said. ‘Otherwise I could be anyone’” and “‘Touch me,’ she cried, and she grabbed his hands.

‘Otherwise I could be anyone here with you’” requires Lowe to engage with her at the level of the sensory that does not allow Lowe to meld her into to either Cecil or Miss Sylvie or to assimilate this experience in the same space as his traumatic experience of serial rape.

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