

Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*:
Untenable Sisterhoods

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Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*¹ examines Caribbean historical and socio-economic development by presenting a relationship between two women, one Black, one White, whose legacies and destinies are bound by the peculiar history of gender relationships characteristic of slavery and the plantation. In this novel, Marshall, born in the United States of Barbadian parents,² offers a perspective only possible from someone with a deep understanding of both Caribbean and American cultures. The novel links the Caribbean historical experience to the racist ideology of the American South and the northern entrepreneurial spirit that profited directly from the slave trade.

The Chosen Place, The Timeless People is a complex novel, rich in varied characters and situations. It is set in Bournehills, a small village in the fictional Caribbean territory of Bourne Island, which is home to a people whose courage to struggle against their poverty and misfortunes rests on their deep roots in the Caribbean landscape and its history.

The plot follows the development of an American foundation's research and aid plan for the village, headed by a sympathetic and well-meaning Jewish-American researcher. Marshall develops two central themes: that of the importance of history in developing the national and personal identity required to transcend the legacy of colonialism and slavery, and that of the need to foster Caribbean economic self-sufficiency as the only way to achieve and preserve true independence. The research and development project brings three strangers into the community: Saul Amrom, a Jewish sociologist; Harriet Shippen, his wealthy patrician wife; and Allen Fuso, a young research assistant; all will serve as both catalysts and victims of the change required for true community and personal growth in Bournehills.

By focusing on the typical aid program funded by an American philanthropic society, the novel explores the complicated web of relationships that are the legacy of colonialism. The colonial assumptions behind developmental programs—indeed behind the concept of "development" itself—are at the core of the relationships between these newcomers and the people of Bournehills, a close-knit group whose very resistance to the changes prescribed

by outside "experts," has been the Achilles heel of every development project previously attempted on the island.

Marshall also utilizes her narrative line to explore how the legacy of colonial relationships is nothing but the extension of a plantation-era way of life based on the exploitation of the masses. The higher echelons of the social landscape of Bourne Island may now include a local Black and mulatto elite with a small share of power, but the old structures continue in place—the economic and cultural survival of the people is still in foreign hands, and these local people are prey to decisions which they do not control. The neo-colonial relationships in Bourne Island still determine survival for the Black masses of Bournehills, who still cut cane under a scorching sun while the White manager rides past in the distance, wearing jodhpurs and a cork hat, calling to mind "some ghost who refused to keep to his grave."³ The lands are still the property of the English—in the case of Bournehills the Kingsley Group, owners of most of the land and of the only sugar mill in the district. This ownership gives them power to control even when and if the few canes grown by the Bournehills people in their own tiny plots—an important source of their pride and independence—will be ground.

The community of Bournehills, in Marshall's presentation, "might have been selected as the repository of the history which reached beyond it to include the hemisphere north and south" (402). The struggle for survival and independence which is the essence of this history is symbolized by the story of the Pyre Hill revolt—"the only bit of history" to have taken place in Bourne island—a slave revolt led by Cuffee Ned which managed to drive back the government forces in a fierce battle. As a result of this confrontation, the former slaves lived for two years "as a nation apart, behind the high wall, independent, free" (102).

Cuffee Ned's story sets the villagers apart from the rest of the inhabitants of Bourne Island as people solidly rooted in their proud past. Each year at Carnival they re-enact the drama of the Pyre Hill revolt in the Bournehills masque in a quasi-ritualistic enactment whose aim is that of maintaining the spirit of the revolt alive. The re-enactment reveals their belief that "only an act on the scale of Cuffee's could redeem them" (402).

Marshall's depiction of carnival as ritual underscores two themes: that of the ability of history to fuse individuals into a "people," and that of the latent capacity for revolution and renewal found in a people who once shared a heroic experience and are awaiting a chance to repeat it. That latent force is displayed in their

"oneness" as they march through the streets during carnival:

... And more than ever now that dark human overflow... resembled a river made turbulent by the spring thaw and raising rapidly—a river that if heed wasn't taken and provision made would soon burst the walls and levees built to contain it and rushing forth in one dark powerful wave bring everything in its path crashing down. (289–90)

Marshall emphasizes the ability of the carnival to contain and preserve the community's latent potential for the "oneness" required for social and political change. To this end, she underscores the relationship between carnival and history, a relationship that, because of its cathartic aspects and its emphasis on a shared experience, helps explain the Bournehills people's endurance amid poverty and stagnation.⁴ In the novel, the "oneness" of the people at carnival prefigures the "oneness" with which they will face the crisis of the broken roller at the Cane Vale factory, a crisis that requires true communal action if the Bournehills villagers' canes are to be ground. In this sense, the ritualistic re-enactment of the Pyre Hill revolt during carnival embodies the Bournehills villagers' determination to carve a future out of the remnants of their colonized and enslaved pasts.

The remnants of colonial/plantation structures that forged that past are exemplified by the two central female characters, Merle and Harriet, through whom Marshall explores the conflicts of power that stem from gender and race relationships in a colonial society. An analysis between the two main female characters reveals interesting aspects of the power struggles between women that dominated plantation society, and of the possibilities of destroying the structures that stemmed from it if true personal and national autonomy are to be achieved.

Merle, a wounded and vulnerable Black woman, and Harriet, the Anglo-Saxon patrician wife of the Jewish scholar, seem destined to literary fates similar to those of Jane Eyre and Antoinette Cosway in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, where the White woman triumphs over the Black, mulatto, or—as in the case of Antoinette—creole woman "tainted" by her contact with Blacks. On the one hand, we have a Black woman born and bred in the "despoiled" reality of Bournehills, who has already broken the binds of sexual convention in London, losing her daughter and husband in the process, now standing on the brink of mental breakdown. On the other hand,

there is an intelligent, cultured, rich, well-meaning White-woman, a Philadelphia heiress accustomed to emotional and financial control. Their confrontation unveils the race/class dichotomy that characterizes both foreign interventions in Caribbean affairs and the ensuing relationships between foreign (White) and Black or mulatto Caribbean women.

Paradoxically, Merle is presented as the embodiment of both the strength of the people of Bournehills and of their wounds. She is a profoundly vulnerable woman, haunted by her past and full of remorse for having lost her daughter, now in Africa with the child's father. Her personal history is representative of the colonial and self-sufficiency issues around which the narration revolves, as Merle must unshackle herself from the binds created by neo-colonial reality and plantation social structures (just as Bournehills must) before she can embark on a fully autonomous destiny.

Merle is the product of the peculiar sexual relationships that characterized the plantation patriarchy. The "outside child" of a formerly powerful White planter who died without legitimate heirs, Merle inherited both the house and what was left of the land of her father's original estate. Her mother, murdered when Merle was two years old, was thought to have been the victim of her father's legal "high coloured" (i.e., nearly White) wife, believed to have either killed or hired someone to kill her husband's coloured favourite. Merle, ignored for years by her father, was acknowledged and brought to live with him when his wife died childless.

Her complicated family history is typical of the pattern of "family" relationships created by the plantation patriarchy; it includes both miscegenation and the neglectful treatment of the coloured children of these exploitative interracial, interclass, relationships. It also becomes emblematic of the peculiar relationships between women which were part of the plantation structure, where the White wife's rage over the favoured coloured mistress often lead to abuse and murder. This aspect of relationships between women is emphasized particularly in studies of slave narratives in the American South, where sexual jealousy is presented as a leading cause of White women's violence against Black or mulatto women. Often in these narratives,

the white women's sexual jealousy becomes perverse cruelty, and the Black women are victimized again and again

by their mistresses' displaced rage at their husbands' lechery. . . In their jealous depravity, these white women become specters of slavery itself. . . [and] as depicted by their female slaves, become evil creatures, nurtured by the institution that allows them and their husbands absolute power over other human beings.⁵

As is the case with many of the planter-heroines in Caribbean fiction, Merle uses the power she acquires through her inheritance of the estate that had exploited her family and her people to attempt to destroy that power by dismantling the plantation. As Sylvia Wynter writes of Bogle, Gordon and Eyre in *New Day* (the novel by Vic Reid) the people of Bournehills are "caught in a collision and a clash that was inherent and in-built, and still is, between the plantation system, a system, owned and dominated by external forces, and what we shall call the plot system, the indigenous and autochthonous system."⁶ Merle uses her inherited power to resolve the struggle in favor of the "plot" system. Keeping the house, now turned into an inn from which she ekes out an income, she sells the land in small plots to people in the village, turning it from plantation to plot. As Allen explains to Saul: "[she] probably just gave [the land] to them since it's unlikely any of them would've had the money to pay her. But she didn't want it to fall into the hands of the Kingsley group, who owns practically the entire district" (115).

Sent to school in London before her father's death, Merle established a connection to Africa in the form of a marriage to an African student with whom she had a daughter. Her marriage is severed by the legacy of the "wild life" she had led in London prior to her marriage, she has a mental breakdown from which she has not entirely recovered. It has left her, eight years later, prey to "episodes" during which she lays comatose for days or weeks, disconnected from reality. The "episodes" stand symbolically for her inability to reconcile all the losses of her life: that of her mother, victim of the peculiar lack of sisterhood promoted by the racist hierarchy of plantation society;⁷ that of her father, who, having left her to grow up without his notice or care, later uprooted her from her late mother's realm without truly accepting her into his own; that of her husband and child, severing her from the symbolic connection to Africa, a connection at the heart of the Caribbean quest for national and personal identity.

The overwhelming losses suffered by Merle, have their roots in

the peculiar structures of plantation society and slavery, and are also linked directly to the particular racist relationships that exist between women in the plantation. From the loss of her mother—and indirectly of her father—motivated by the jealousy of the nearly White and therefore legal wife, to the loss of her husband and daughter, Merle's losses have at their root a White woman. The most poignantly presented of these losses—that of her husband and daughter—is the result of Merle's relationship with an exploitative aristocratic woman in London. Merle's trademark earrings, silver copies of saints that grace the facade of Westminster Abbey, were given to her by that Englishwoman, and she wears them "[a]s a reminder to be always on my guard against Greeks bearing gifts. . . Especially when the Greeks happen to be Englishwomen in disguise" (327).⁸

Merle describes the relationship with the Englishwoman as that of a kept woman, a relationship of power and sex with an upperclass amoral type who "used her money to buy foolish people like me." Merle's attempts to escape Harriet's control become a struggle between Merle's financial needs, especially after her father again withdraws his support, and the woman's constant offers of money. The money becomes Harriet's ultimate weapon, which she uses to destroy Merle's relationship with her husband: when faced with Merle's ultimate rejection, she goes to him with the story of their lesbian relationship, letting him know in the process about Merle's having accepted money from her to keep the family afloat after her marriage. His abandonment of Merle, taking with him her child, is the precipitating factor in Merle's collapse, a collapse that leaves her "despoiled," her "substance taken," with a face that "confessed that something of value had been taken from her. It looked utterly bereft at times" (5). But amidst this loss (which echoes that of Bournehills after centuries of exploitation) there is a glint of energy and life that needs to be freed if Merle (and Bournehills) are to recapture the essence they have lost. Traces of that essence are found in the "inner sunlight" to be found in Merle's eyes: "This said some vital center remained intact. And this duality, *this sense of life persisting amid the nameless and irrevocable loss* made her face terribly affecting, even beautiful" (5, my emphasis).

In contrast to Merle's vulnerability and to her struggle to muster the strength to overcome her profound sense of loss, Harriet stands for Anglo-Saxon control and for the neo-colonial philanthropy showered on places like Bournehills, backed up by fortunes made through the exploitation of the slave trade and the plantation

system. Harriet's moneyed, Anglo-Saxon background has provided her with the assurance and sense of certainty Merle is struggling to achieve. Where Merle is vulnerable, Harriet is "a true WASP, sure, self-controlled, well-organized, unsentimental."⁹

Harriet's path to Bournehills begins with the creation of the Center for Applied Social Research (the agency funding the Bournehills Project) by the Philadelphia Research Institute, to whose board of directors she is connected. This research agency becomes her connection to Saul, the Project Director, and her husband for a year. The Institute's largest contributor is the Unicorn Corporation, a conglomerate of old family businesses in Pennsylvania (Harriet's among them), whose fortunes were made through the shipment to the Caribbean of ordinary staples such as cornmeal, flour, lumber, candles, cloth, and the dried salted cod became the staple of the local diet. An early female forbear of Harriet Shippen had launched the family's wealth by her "small-scale speculation in the West Indies trades, which in those days consisted of taking a few shares in a number of sloops making the twice-yearly run between Philadelphia, the West Coast of Africa, and then back across the Atlantic to the islands" (37). Harriet's historical connection to the slave trade is made explicit in the text:

In a stained, faded ledger still to be seen in a glass display-case at the Historical Society, the widow had kept careful account in a neat furbelowed hand of the amounts of flour and salted cod, cornmeal and candles that went out on the sloops, the number of slaves taken on in Guinea and then just how much her portion of that cargo, both human and otherwise, had brought in crude sugar, rum and molasses in the islands. (37-38)

Having established Harriet's ties with the slave trade and the support of the plantation system and its exploitation of African slaves, Harriet's connections are emphasized through her mother, a "hopelessly superficial latter-day Southern belle" whom Harriet blamed for having prepared her to be "little more than another attractive appointment, like an expensive Waterford chandelier. . ." (41). From her mother Harriet draws a persistent fear of being a useless creature, the "better part of her in disuse." This fear stems from the negative aspects of the Southern belle mystique, a mystique whose dark underside—the conviction of the inferiority of Blacks—is an essential part of Harriet's inheritance. It is through

her mother's relationship with her objectified long-serving Black maid Alberta that Harriet learns the lessons of plantation-bred relationships between Black and White women. Her mother's tone when speaking to Alberta "had casually assumed her to be a lesser person," leading Harriet to assume that Alberta had been turned Black by the fairies "because of something naughty she had done when little!" (458). Those plantation-bred racial assumptions lay the foundation for Harriet's relationship to Bourne Islanders, male and female, but particularly to Merle.

Harriet's uneasy relationship with Lyle Hutson, a prominent Black lawyer and statesman and cousin of Merle, is indicative of how the feelings spawned by her mother dominate Harriet's relationship to Black people. Her reaction to Lyle's placing his hand on her arm approaches revulsion—as it harks back to her feelings of Blackness as a taint, of Blackness as related to guilt:

[As] she glanced down somewhat disconcertedly. . . at that black hand, she had had the impression, strange and fleeting and scarcely conscious, that it was not his hand resting on her, or any part of him, but rather some dark and unknown part of herself which had suddenly, for the first ever, surfaced, appearing like stigmata or an ugly black-and-blue mark at the place he had touched. (97)¹⁰

She managed, in her reaction, both to obliterate his physical presence, thereby de-sexualizing his touch, and to relate it back to Alberta being turned black because of something naughty she had done as a child. Her attitude reflects what Lyle himself calls in another context "those deeply rooted, almost mystical beliefs that appear to lie at the heart of [the American] racial dilemma" (422).

Lyle becomes a foil to Harriet as she, given the static notions of the place of Blacks in society to which she adheres, cannot reconcile herself to what she terms "his proprietorial airs": the custom made Saville-Row suits he wore, the large silver gray Humber Super Snipe he drove, the Oxonian accent he affected at times: "he would stride onto the veranda of the guest house *as though he owned it and everyone else!*" (196, my emphasis). It is significant that Harriet emphasizes his sense of ownership and entitlement as being what she resents most about Lyle. She is offended by his proprietary attitudes towards the people around him, and particularly by the possibility of his "ownership" of her implied by the presumptuous touch of his hand on her arm and by the sexual proposition he

makes to her shortly before her death.

Lyle is also the one to bring home to Harriet her historical relationship to the reality of Bournehills. Hearing Harriet deplore the horrid diet of "awful rice and dry, bad-smelling cod" which Bournehills people consume, Lyle smilingly reminds her that that "food fit for a slave" was foisted upon them by the metropolitan masters, making the fortunes of "some people up your way in the process." For Harriet, a person with little historical consciousness, this brings to mind the ledger at the Historical Society and "the whole questionable legacy which [she] had long ago ruled from her thoughts" (205-206).

This racial attitude also surfaces in Harriet's inability to individualize the mass of Black faces that surrounds her unless they're willing to recognize her essential superiority to them. Her ministrations to the women and children of Bournehills have a lot in them of the plantation mistress' role—that of "massa's helpmate and ruling lady." It is reminiscent of the descriptions of ladies of the American South ministering to members of the slave community offered by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese:

When [slaveholding women] attempted to extend their charitable obligations beyond the immediate circle of their family, White and Black, they preferred to do so on terms that reinforced their positions as ruling ladies. Condescension was inseparable from charity.¹¹

Harriet's dismay at not having her role acknowledged is at the center of her ultimate indifference to the fate of the people of Bournehills, an indifference expressed by her using her influence to destroy the project in order to satisfy her need to separate Saul from Merle. The inability of the Bournehills villagers to mirror her image of herself ultimately leads to her rejection of them since what they required—that she become one of them as prescribed in the carnival motto of "all of we is one"—entailed a negation of the role of benevolent mistress she had sought to play:

And there was—Harriet became convinced—something deliberate in the failure of Gwen, the children, and everyone else in the village whom she sought to help, to respond in even the slightest way to her efforts. She sensed in it a subtle but firm rebuff. . . . What was it they wanted? She could not have said. But it was too much, of that she was certain. She could

not give it, whatever it was, without being herself deprived, diminished; and worse, without undergoing a profound transformation in which she would be called upon to relinquish some high place she had always occupied and to become other than she had always been. (408)

This inability to give to Black people beyond a certain point is central to a childhood episode Harriet repeatedly recalls, and which becomes her obsession the night before she commits suicide: her inability, marked by a violent tantrum, to relinquish a toy—not a particularly favourite toy at that—to be sent to Alberta's poor Black nephews and nieces.

The people's inability to acknowledge her very presence is at the heart of Harriet's traumatic experience during carnival as she, weary of the long march with the Bournehills group, leaves it to seek the refuge of the Cockerel Club. As she makes her way towards the Club she is borne away towards that bay by the raucous green-clad guerrilla band from the Heights—would-be revolutionaries brandishing toy guns and cardboard machetes and smoking cheap cigars. In a scene that mocks her "natural" commanding role as a White woman in a Black colony, she desperately orders them, for their own good, to turn away from a course that would lead to their sure deaths in the bay, only to realize, in a moment of panic, that this army is oblivious to her presence:

They hadn't heard her. Nor, she suddenly realized, had they really seen her. But how could this be? She was unmistakable among them with her [blonde] hair. . . and her face, which despite her tan was still nonetheless white. But even the ones closest to her, the ones bumping in and pummeling her as they rushed past, appeared totally unaware of her presence. (294-95)

Her response to this inability to be "recognized" is to withdraw from the people of Bournehills, even from Gwen whom she genuinely seemed to like, and as a result—especially after learning of Saul's affair with Merle—ceases to be able to distinguish one Black face from another:

After the long weeks spent in the beginning carefully separating out the individual faces from the all-engulfing Blackness that had at first made it impossible for her to

distinguish them one from another, the faces had begun to merge and blend again, moving together to form a solid bloc against her. (431)

Harriet's racist feelings toward Blacks surface particularly when confronted with the idea of miscegenation and interracial sexuality. Initially these are brought to the fore by witnessing Lyle's affair with Dorothy Clough, the English wife of the local newspaper editor, but more poignantly when she learns (from Lyle) about Saul's affair with Merle. These are evident in her conviction of the race and class advantages that make her, in her own view, such a formidable opponent to Merle who, in Harriet's own words, is nothing but a "hopeless convulsive given to emotional outbursts. . . who had been unable to stand up to life" (425). Her initial response is to implicitly demand that Saul disregard the affair as "a little wild post-holiday fling," the result of too-much carnival, the contemporary equivalent to a harmless tryst in the slave quarters. This response confirms Harriet's superiority and dismisses Merle as incapable of inspiring a "grand affair of the heart."

Two scenes ensue which underscore Harriet's racism. The first, the continuation of her confrontation with Saul regarding the affair, concludes with Harriet openly acknowledging her dismay at the thought of Saul's "touching someone like that." Merle's Blackness thus becomes the central issue, as it is the quality that, in Harriet's eyes, should make her readily dismissible. Saul's unwillingness to dismiss Merle and her Blackness—better yet, his stating his fondness for Merle while equating Merle's Blackness to Harriet's purebred Anglo-Saxoness, which from his own Jewishness seems "equally as exotic"—lies at the core of Harriet's sense of defeat.

The second scene finds Harriet visiting Merle to offer her money to leave Bournehills and remain away, at least until Saul's project is completed. Claiming their "oneness" in their mutual concern or "how much the project means to him. . .," she asks Merle to set the amount: "You could consider it as gift or, if you like, a token of appreciation on our part" (438). As she waits for the amount to be named, Harriet watches Merle's body with morbid fascination.¹² Her gaze wandering to the "ludicrous bisque-colored heels and toes," she recalls Alberta's pink palms and the young Harriet's puzzlement at their having been "spared." She finds the feet and legs "surprisingly well-shaped," an "anomaly" given the rest of Merle's "altogether undistinguished body" with its "totally unaesthetic throat" showing in its crease a lingering trace of white talcum visible

against the dark skin. Her attitude mirrors that found in the writings of White women in the American South, writings which often reveal an intense jealousy, often marked by expressions of disgust and vituperation, of the sexual "freedom" and the bodies of Black women, feelings that stem from their inability to comprehend why these women were often preferred by White men. It reflects what Audre Lorde calls the "entrenched loathing and contempt for whatever is Black and female" that marks White American society.¹³

This confrontation between Harriet and Merle provides the climax of the novel. For Merle there is the need to reconcile the "disunity within herself" and to find something to do with her life. She has described herself to Saul as being "like someone bewitched, turned foolish. It's like my very will is gone." Merle's enchantment recalls Eric Williams' assessment of the impact on the Caribbean of the emergence of the market economy, which left the region "still enchanted, imprisoned, deformed and schizophrenic in its bewitched reality" (Wynter, 95). Merle sees herself as someone waiting for something to happen, something to take place apart from herself, to bring her back from her bewitchment. She later described what she would do if that ever happens—go see her child and claim her rights as her mother.

Harriet's fear is that she will end up as useless as her mother, with her hands being "utterly, unbearably empty." Thus, her capacity for love is presented in the text as being intimately bound with the need "to do for the beloved, to be more than just a wife, and this, in turn, was part of an even larger need. . . to wield some small power" (39). Given Harriet's own need to attach herself to someone who does something—because of what Marshall terms her "mild, but persistent dysphoria"—she even acknowledges a degree of envy of Gwen, a "header" in the cane fields who befriends her. As Harriet writes to a friend at the Institute, "[you] sense [Gwen's] very much a person in her own right, her own woman, and she'd be able to manage no matter what" (233). Harriet's own need of Saul is for his special strength, intelligence, and purpose, which made her "feel defined, given shape; she became then the image of him she held in her mind" (247). The risk posed by Merle is that of her taking away Saul, and with him that sense of wholeness that had eluded Harriet all her life until she attained it through him.

Intimately bound with Harriet's need for Saul is her need to be in control, which translates into a need to take charge of people's lives and be the force that propels their work. It is an integral part of her relationship with Saul, who describes her as having decided, "for

God knows what reason, to rehabilitate [him], to get [him] moving again." But his need to "do" for people also has its dark side, because it is bound with her need to exercise power, to control and manipulate people. It is a tendency Saul tries to combat by repeatedly entreating her not to interfere, and emphasizing the importance of the project both to him and to the people of Bournehills.

The warning is repeated most poignantly after an incident involving fresh eggs which Gwen was saving to fulfill a bartering agreement with a neighbor. Harriet, without inquiring as to their purpose, made them into an omelette upon finding Gwen's children hungry at home. Faced with Saul's entreaties not to interfere again, pointed by his stating that "there's is this thing in you which makes you want to take over and manage everything and everybody on your own terms," she argues in her defense the irrationality of selling perfectly good, nourishing eggs to buy the awful rice and salted cod Bournehills people eat, thereby underscoring her lack of real empathy with the ways of Bournehills. This need to control and manage, to wield a small measure of power, is at the heart of her betrayal of Saul, of her using her influence at the Institute to have him "kicked upstairs" and removed from Bournehills, and from Merle, disregarding thus Saul's self-regenerating commitment to Bournehills and the regeneration of the Bournehills sense of community he had been partly responsible for achieving.

It is the recognition of this need in Harriet for controlling and managing those around her that leads Merle to identify her with the Englishwoman in her past, preparing the ground for the confrontation between them that will allow Merle to exorcise "that face. . . which had attached itself like an incubus to her mind, sapping her strength and purpose over the years, debauching her will" (440). The recognition of this quality of Harriet's is present from their first encounter. Merle falters momentarily before greeting Harriet with an explicit acknowledgment of the connection she sees between her and the Englishwoman: "Why, if you don't put me in mind of someone I knew in England years ago" (71). The identification is emphasized again later when, in her rage at being powerless to do anything about the broken roller at the Cane Vale factory Merle lashes at Saul: "Blast all of you. You and Sir John and Hinds and the Queen and that smooth high-toned bitch of a wife you've got and that other bitch who tried to turn me into a monkey for her amusement" (390).¹⁴

The identification with the Englishwoman is crucial to the

resolution of Merle's emotional dilemma, because it allows her to exorcise in her confrontation with Harriet all the demons that had sapped her energy, freeing her to go on with her life—symbolized primarily by the determination to see her daughter which marks the end of the novel. Harriet's offer of money, the acceptance of which had previously led to her loss of her husband and child, affords Merle the opportunity to assert her changed self, a self that no longer accept handouts, thereby "delivering" her from the shackles of her past.

Merle's deliverance is also closely linked to Saul's Jewishness, emphasized as the quality in him that allows his deep empathy with the people of Bournehills, who find in him a "fellow sufferer" who understands persecution and exploitation. His Jewishness also provides his first link to Merle, whom he first sees shrugging her stole-draped shoulders in what he terms "the gesture of a Jew. . . Prayer shawl and all. Full of that almost indecent love of the dramatic" (64). The connection is further developed by his listening to her endless, sustaining talk, seeing her in a way as he sees his own mother, fated to live her life as a wandering storyteller, condemned to spend her life retelling the story of some unspeakably inhuman act she has witnessed. His mother's tales of the Jewish thousand-year history of exile and trial and her own personal tale, which over the years assumed "the proportions of an archetype, a paradigm," came to embody for Saul "all that any other people had had to endure. It became the means by which he understood the sufferings of others" (164).

The empathetic quality of Saul's Jewishness is explored repeatedly throughout the text, especially as it is vital to the mutual affection that develops between him and Merle. It is shown most clearly in Saul's need for atonement, in his wistful hope that by seeing Merle through the trauma caused by the Cane Vale incident, in seeing her through her life crisis, he would in some way make up for having failed his first wife, who had bled to death after a miscarriage in the jungles of Honduras after surviving the horrors of a concentration camp. In both their needs to atone and expiate guilt—Saul that of the death of his wife, Merle that of her relationship with the Englishwoman and her subsequent loss of her husband and child—they are joined in the image of a senile old man, wearing a soiled tallith, a neighbor of Saul's when he was a child, who spent his days at his window beating his chest with his fist, atoning for the sins of the world. It is an image that haunted Saul's childhood, especially after the man's death left the young Saul

wondering who would redeem and reconcile them now that he was gone. The need for atonement that binds Saul to Merle strengthens his connection to Bournehills, for which she stands in the text.

Merle's standing in representation of Bournehills is established from the beginning, when she walks into the welcoming reception for the research team as if she had "bought the entire spurned and shameless lot with her onto the veranda" (67). It is a theme developed throughout the text, as Merle's struggle to reconcile the "disunity within herself" and to forge a path to an autonomous future free of the remnants of her fractured past becomes one with the struggle of Bournehills to find a way to re-establish the sense of communal oneness that her people had briefly enjoyed under Cuffee. As Joseph Skerret Jr. points out, "Merle's long and painful process of outgrowing her haunted past parallels her nation's long and equally painful process of realizing a meaningful independence from British colonial power and its cultural and economic influences."¹⁵

This connection is the source of the deference that locals pay to Merle, as she receives the same elaborate greeting from them, a kiss received as if it were "an obeisance due to her, an acknowledgment on everyone's part of the wide suffering—wide enough to include an entire history—which her face reflected" (68). This connection is further emphasized by Saul, who believes that in his desire to know and embrace Bournehills it was "inevitable that he first know and embrace Merle" (410).

Seen from the perspective of Merle's standing as representative of Bournehills, her relationships with White women—Harriet and the Englishwoman in her past—acquire greater political significance. If seen as symbols of their places of origin, Merle's confrontations with the Englishwoman and with Harriet are a direct extension of the relationships that exist between a fragmented Caribbean looking for unity and the colonial (England) and neo-colonial (American) forces that are seeking to defend their interests at any cost. In this sense the offers of money that are central to Merle's relationships with the two women, stand as metaphors of colonial and neo-colonial relationships, where the possession and control of wealth—possessed by Whites and used to buy and enslave Blacks—is a vehicle for the perpetuation of social structures that have their roots in the exploitation of slavery and the plantation.

In this context, the parallels between Merle's relationship with the Englishwoman and Caribbean relations with England are clear

as both relationships are based on the economic dependence of Merle/the Caribbean, leading to the perpetuation of ties with the Englishwoman/England, the possessors and exploiters of wealth. It is significant that the Englishwoman manipulates Merle's economic dependency to sever Merle's connection to her husband and daughter (and thus to Africa), in the same way as the institution of slavery led to the separation of families and to the severing of vital cultural and familial roots in Africa.

Similarly, Harriet's relationship with Merle, must be seen in the context of Caribbean relations with the United States. As Joseph Skerret Jr. points out, "Merle's triumph is over what Harriet represent—abusive, neo-colonial economic power" (72). Merle's cry to Harriet at the end of their confrontation, signals the end of neo-colonial relationship in as much as they kept her shackled: "I don't like people ordering me about like I'm still the little colonial. I've had too much of that. So when they say gee now, I haw. When they say go, I stay" (442). It is a sentiment echoed by Saul, in his own confrontation with Harriet after her betrayal of him—a response that identifies her with the American establishment as if they shared one single identity. After reminding her of the damage she has done to him by taking away from him the one thing he had wanted to do in years, by interfering with something that in the long run might have perhaps made life a little easier for Bournehills, he adds:

What is it with you and your kind, anyway? . . . If you can't have things your way, if you can't run the show, there's to be no show, is that it? . . . You'd prefer to see everything, including yourselves, come down in ruins rather than 'take down,' rather than not to have everything your way. . . . (454) (my emphasis)

As female representatives of the forces confronting each other in relations between the Caribbean and the American establishment, Merle and Harriet invert the results expected of such confrontations. As Merle, initially on the brink of madness (and perhaps suicide), moves purposefully towards control and the transcendence of her shattered past, Harriet moves from strength and power to a suicide brought about by the realization that some things are beyond her control. The reversal is ironic in that Harriet's power—once removed from its source in the American establishment which she represents—becomes ineffectual and self-destructive; whereas in the case of Merle, her contact with her

past—the reaffirmation of her connection to the landscape—offers the power to transcend her circumstances.

For Merle, there is a future for her on her return from Africa—perhaps as Bournehills' representative to the island's legislature. For Bournehills, it is but a continuation of its wait, serving in its way as a "lasting testimony to all that has gone on," as a memorial "to the figures bound to the millwheel. . . and to each other in the packed, airless hold of the ship" (402).

Notes

1. (New York: Vintage Books, 1984). Page references will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
2. Marshall is claimed just as often by American critics as an American writer as she is claimed by Caribbean critics as a Caribbean author. The focus of most of her work on Caribbean reality and Caribbean migration would, in my opinion, give the greater weight to the claim of the latter.
3. Michelle Cliff, in *Abeng* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1984), echoes this analysis of Caribbean conditions in the twentieth century: "So slavery—in fact. . . was abolished, and the freedom which followed on abolition turned into veiled slavery. . . All the forces which worked to keep these people slaves now worked to keep them poor. And poor most of them remained" (28).
4. The "cathartic" aspects of carnival are not restricted to the reenactment of the historical drama. Each one of the main characters faces his or her own catharsis during carnival: Saul and Merle finally share their painful pasts with each other, culminating in the beginning of their sexual relationship; Harriet has the terrorizing experience of being borne away by a riotous masque seemingly towards the bay and certain death; Vere exorcises the image of the girl whose neglect led to their baby's death and finds a new girl; and Allen finally confronts his homosexuality.
5. Minrose C. Gwin, *Black and White Women of the Old South: The Peculiar Sisterhood in American Literature* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 61.
6. Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," *Savacou* 5 (June 1971): 96.
7. In "Merle," a novella based on *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* published in 1983, Marshall underscores the roots of Merle's mother's death in the social structures of the plantation: "You can't hold yourself responsible for what happened to your mother. Because you know as well as I do that her death, as well as her life, the way she was forced to live, her relationship with your father, even the way he treated you when you were little, all go back to the same goddamn inhuman system that began before you were born, here in Bourne Island, in my country, all over the hemisphere. You know that. So how can you blame yourself for her death? That's like blaming yourself for the entire history that brought it all about." *Merle, a Novella, and Other Stories* (London: Virago Press, 1983), 178.
8. The earrings will be sold to pay part of the cost of her air fare to Africa to visit her daughter at the end of the novel.
9. Sasha Talmor, "Merle of Bournehills" (Review), *The Durham University Journal* 80:1 (1987): 126.
10. Near the end of the novel, as Harriet keeps her pre-suicide watch, she thinks of the mark as a Rorschach inkblot that would reveal her inner self, spreading in a stain that would soon cover her entire body, turning her in effect into a "dark person" (458).

11. *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 235. Missy Dehn Kubitschek, in "Paule Marshall's Women on Quest," an analysis of the mythic elements in Marshall's fiction, presents Harriet's view of her special role from a different, but related, angle: ". . . though Marshall's characters often perceive others as facets of deities, only Harriet has the egotism to perceive herself as a savior. Her paradigm also, of course, casts the islanders as sinners, inferiors, in need of saving. The great redemptive myth of Christ has become the white colonizer's flattering mirror." *Black American Literary Forum* 21:1-2 (1987): 46.
12. Fox-Genovese describes the mirroring aspects of the mistress ministering to her slaves as follows: "For one single such sense of intimacy, affection, and love for a slave would be enough to confirm the mistress, psychologically and ideologically, in her own vision of herself as bound by ties of human fellowship to those whom she not only governed but owned—a confirmation achieved without necessarily betraying a trace of hypocrisy." Fox-Genovese (131).
13. Audre Lorde, "Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred, and Anger," in *Sister Outsider* (151). In this context it should be noted that most of the instances of racism Lorde relates in this essay involve her dealings with white women.
14. Interestingly in this connection is Michelle Cliff's reference to Queen Elizabeth, also in the context of white colonial exploitation, as "the whitest woman in the world." *Abeng* (5).
15. "Paule Marshall and the Crisis of the Middle Years: *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*," *Callaloo* 6:2 (Spring-Summer 1983): 70.

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