THE AFRICAN PRESENCE IN THE NOVELS OF PAULE MARSHALL

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ABSTRACT

AFRICAN-AMERICAN STUDIES

RICE, ANGELA HARRINGTON B.A., CLARK COLLEGE, 1981

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Advisor: Professor Carolyn Fowler

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Africa is present in Paule Marshall's novels through ritual, history, language, and myth. Paule Marshall's work demonstrates how Africanisms operate in the United States and in the Caribbean. She articulates the need for people throughout the African diaspora to confront and use the past as a vehicle for empowerment. Marshall's protagonists are women who find that when they confront the past not only do they better understand themselves as African people, but they also gain greater awareness of their womanhood. Marshall's female protagonists discover that their African identity and their female identity are intertwined.
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CHAPTER 1

BROWN GIRL, BROWNSTONES

The presence of Africa in Paule Marshall's novels is evidenced in the use of language, ritual, myth, and history. She reconnects the African world by illustrating in her works how Africanisms function in African-American communities and to a greater extent in African-Caribbean communities. Her work symbolizes the need to reclaim African ideals as a prerequisite to achieving wholeness and as a vehicle for empowerment. Her thesis is carried out in her work by the female protagonists who, in search of a true identity, take a journey back to the past in order to restore themselves to wholeness. Marshall's protagonists find that in order to discover their true selves, they must confront not only their African identity, but their female identity as well.

It is in the past that the strength and ideals of Africa are most revealed. The strength of Africa is borne out of the experiences of those who fought to be free from spiritual, psychological and physical bondage; and out of the experiences of those who remained true to an African paragon by rejecting the values of individualism and materialism. In Marshall's work acknowledging the past is necessary if the children of Africa are to move forward.
The presence of Africa in Marshall's first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, is minimal. *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, is a story of coming of age. It depicts the entry into womanhood of the protagonist, Selina Boyce. The novel is largely autobiographical in that it parallels Marshall's experience as the daughter of Barbadian immigrants. She writes about this transplanted Barbadian community, that grapples with maintaining its cultural identity while attempting to succeed in America. In *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, Marshall preserves the traditions, folk culture, and language that was a part of her community. *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is also a tribute to the women in her household and community who taught her the power of the word.

Even though it is autobiographical and only considers Africa incidentally, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* begins the journey back to the past. At the end of the novel, Selina decides to return to the past in order to understand what has shaped her, her community, and what has provided her mother, Silla, with unaltering strength. It is in Marshall's subsequent novels that the African presence is more greatly realized.

Although *Brown Girl, Brownstones* is Marshall's first published novel, it is one of Marshall's short stories, "To Da-duh, In Memoriam," published in 1966, which seems to navigate the journey to Africa that is present in her works. "To Da-duh, In Memoriam"¹ is autobiographical. It is reminiscent of Marshall's early visit to meet her grandmother in Barbados. In "To Da-duh,

In Memoriam" a young child returns to her parents' home of Barbados and there she meets Da-duh, a woman who encompasses both past and present. There is an immediate attachment because the grandmother sees within the child a force that meets her own. A rivalry ensues between the two characters as Da-duh attempts to show her grand-daughter the wealth of her Caribbean island. However, the child is not impressed with Da-duh's island and counters with the wonders of her home in America. Their competition makes us privy to the contrasts of the two environments. The culture that Da-duh represents is based on nature and the regeneration of life, Africa as manifested in the Caribbean. Her grand-daughter represents the cold, mechanical and man-made culture of America. Da-duh and her grand-daughter seem to be in a contest to see whose culture will prevail. Da-duh holds up the natural beauty of the island as if nothing can compare to it; the child counters by holding up Western technology. Da-duh's world begins to crumble when the child tells her that the tallest palm tree on her island cannot compare to the height of the Empire State Building. This knowledge takes Da-duh's spirit. On the child's departure, Da-duh asks her to send proof of the Empire State Building's height, but Da-duh dies before receiving it. Her death occurs when England sends low flying planes over the island. She believes that the New World has descended upon her island and, faced with death or change, she chooses the former. However, the child never forgets her encounter with Da-duh, and her one and only visit with her grandmother reshapes her way of looking at the world. In her adult life the grand-daughter pays homage to her grandmother by
producing art that carries on her legacy. She realizes that Da-duh’s world is as viable as her own and that she is connected to this woman who has shunned Western ideology and clung steadfastly to her African-Caribbean heritage. Marshall writes that "Da-duh is an ancestor figure, symbolic for me of the long line of black men and women—African and New World—who made my being possible, and whose spirit I believe continues to animate my life and work." This story embodies Paule Marshall’s vision as an artist and illustrates how women carry on the ancestral presence of Africa.

In The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, Praisesong for the Widow, and Daughters, Marshall continues to explore the themes of a search for identity and the importance of maintaining one’s cultural heritage and values. Paule Marshall’s novels progressively demonstrate how Africa has been redefined in the Caribbean and the United States. Africa is portrayed not only as the motherland of African people transported to America and to the Caribbean, but as having a spiritual force that has the potential of guiding its children to freedom. The protagonists in Marshall’s novels are women in search of identity, who come to understand and accept the power of Africa.

Beginning with her first novel, Brown Girl, Brownstones, Paule Marshall starts to explore the dynamics of African-American life and uses her own experience and dual African-American and African-Caribbean heritage to inform her works. Her vision as a writer is motivated by her desire to connect the two cultures

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2Marshall, Reena and Other Stories, 95.
that shaped her. The common element that these two cultures share is an African ancestry. *Brown Girl, Brownstones* begins the progression towards Africa that is carried out in her later works.

Marshall published her first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, in 1959. In this novel, she documents the historical migration of West Indians to America and the challenges they face as they attempt to carve a place for themselves in a foreign land. The West Indians, in many cases, migrated not because they wanted to, but because of colonial oppression exerted in their island homelands. They came to the United States for economic opportunity and discovered that, as immigrants of African descent, the adjustments and compromises that they must make exceed those of their European counterparts. Abena P. A. Busia writes that "the sacrifices they must make to succeed on the terms of American society, invariably mean a severing from their cultural roots."³ It is within this context that Paule Marshall creates her first novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

*Brown Girl, Brownstones* is the story of Selina Boyce's coming of age. Born in America of Barbadian parentage, Selina attempts to come to terms with the immigrant Barbadian community as well as find her place within the larger American community. As she grows older, she rejects the values of the immigrant Barbadians because she finds their efforts to achieve

materialistic success wanting. She believes that life should consist of more than struggling to own a brownstone.

Selina seeks an identity that is more sustaining because she is able to see the fallacy of attempting to survive by the values of white America. However, when she comes face to face with the harsh realities of America, she is able to understand her community and appreciate its strength. She realizes that, in order to understand herself, she must understand her community and how it has shaped her.

A major influence on the fiction of Paule Marshall are the women in the Barbadian immigrant community. In fact, Paule Marshall credits these "kitchen poets" with contributing to her decision to become a writer. These women taught her the power of the word and the ancient African art of storytelling:

My mother and her friends would talk about their madames, as they were called then, and in describing them they taught me about characterization. How you pick up the detail that is striking about a person. I grew up among people to whom language was an art. Art which was present in the most ordinary things they said. They created poetry as they sat around a table talking. It wasn't that they read. There weren't books of poetry around the house as such, and no one read poetry. But their ability to recreate scene, to talk about people, to dissect character, that was the stuff of poetry and literature.

It was just there, in the most natural kind of living way, as Africans see art, as an integral part of life and not something set apart in a museum or theater or what have you. There was theater taking place in that kitchen each day. Theater of a very high order. . . . I was always so intimidated as a little girl by the awesome verbal powers of these women. That might be one of the reasons I started writing. To see if, on paper, I couldn't have some of that power.4

In "Shaping The World of My Art," Marshall writes: "In the first novel, the young protagonist rebels against the materialistic values of her mother and by inference the values of America as a whole. It is the rejection of American values that motivates Selina to journey back to Barbados and seek values that are more life giving than those her mother, Silla, has adopted. In Marshall's later works her protagonists are also motivated by their circumstances to journey back to the past. In each novel, Marshall's protagonists progressively get closer to the ideals of Africa. Eugenia Collier observes:

Marshall's works reveal a progression from the divided individual self to the self-made whole through merging with the community. The concept of community is ever broadening, moving from the Barbadian community in Brooklyn in the first novel to, ultimately, the entire Africa world, past, present, and future in the last.  

Selina's journey symbolically represents the need for African people to confront their history in order to truly understand themselves as individuals and as a community. One of the experiences that precipitates Selina's journey is the strife that exists between her mother, Silla, and her father, Deighton, which crystalizes in their tug of war over the purchase of a brownstone. Carol Field writes that the brownstones represent for Silla a giant step from the slavish toil she had known in Barbados. To own the once elegant building, to cut up its once elegant enormous chambers, to have a houseful of

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well-paying roomers was her dream. Other 'Bajans' were doing it, making money, getting ahead in the new world.7

Unlike Silla, Deighton dreams of returning home to Barbados and building a grand house "just like the white people own, a house to end all house."8 He is not interested in buying a brownstone and renting rooms like the other Barbadians. Instead he wishes to imitate the lifestyle of the white elite. He tells Selina:

Once I get started I gon make 'nough money. Then these Bajan with their few raw-mouth houses will see what real money is! But I wun get like them. Not me! Everybody gon say: Deighton Boyce is one man that makes good money and lives good. He wear the best of clothes. He eat the finest. He rides in the swellest cars. That's the way a man does do things.9

Conflict heightens when Deighton inherits land from home. Selina wants to sell the land in order to purchase a brownstone in New York. However, as Deborah Schneider observes:

Deighton Boyce does not want to buy a brownstone. To begin with, on his and his wife's income as a factory worker and maid, this would mean an austerity program in his daily life, none of the luxuries such as silk shirts and fancy shoes which he allows himself. Deighton could not give these things up, for he has never known or been permitted to know deprivation for the sake of a future goal.10

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9Ibid., 85.

Fraudulently, Silla sells Deighton's inheritance. This prompts the beginning of Deighton's demise, which finally comes when Silla has him deported as an illegal alien. When the ship he is on approaches Barbados, he jumps overboard.

Silla and Deighton are affected differently by the cultural values of American society. Silla accepts the challenge of capitalism and makes a brazen attempt to achieve all there is to achieve at the cost of those nearest her. But Deighton's dreams are so high that they are almost impossible to attain. He refuses to be shaped by the same mold as the rest of the immigrant Barbadian community. Instead, he satisfies his need to stand apart by wearing fancy clothes and having extramarital affairs. His approach to American life is quite different from Silla's.

Deighton loses his life because, as one critic puts it, he "maintains a dreamer's futile pride in the cruel face of American racism and disappointment." Melvin Rahming states that "Deighton loses because he has to fight in an environment where his personal armor (love, tenderness, and casualness) is turned against him in a world where aggressive and materialistic competition is glorified." If Selina is to survive whole, she must glean the best from the opposing attitudes of her mother, Silla, and her father, Deighton.

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It is Deighton that Silla cherishes. She is known as "Deighton's Selina." With him comes sunshine, "the day was certainly bright with the thought of him upstairs in the sun parlor." And as Deighton brings sunshine, Silla Boyce brings winter:

Silla Boyce brought the theme of winter into the park with her dark dress amid the summer green and the bright-figured house dresses of the women lounging on the benches there. Not only that, every line of her strong-made body seemed to reprimand the women for their idleness and the park for its senseless summer display. Her lips, set in a permanent protest against life, implied that there was no time for gaiety. And the park, the women, the sun even gave way to her dark force; the flushed summer colors ran together and faded as she passed.

Both Deighton and Silla give Selina a sense of her past as a Barbadian, yet their personal experiences are at odds with each other. Deighton remembers Barbados as "poor-poor but sweet enough." He remembers the joy he had playing as a small boy: "When we was boys coming up, we would get a piece of stick and a lime and a big stone and play cricket. If we had little change in we pocket we would pick up weself and go up Kensington Field to football." Deighton recalls his childhood as one including pleasure, whereas Silla recalls her childhood as one of drudgery. Deighton lets Selina know that he and her mother are from different class backgrounds in Barbados. His is a more privileged class, one which allowed him leisure: "I not like yuh

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14 Ibid., 16.
15 Ibid., 11.
16 Ibid., 9.
mother and the 'mounts of these Bajan that come from down some
gully or up some hill behind God back and ain use to nothing."17
Unlike Selina, Deighton was raised in town by his mother, a
seamstress who adored her son and tried to satisfy his every need
and want. Virgie, Silla's neighbor, recalls the sacrifices
Deighton's mother made on his behalf: "The sun rise and set 'pon
Deighton one, 'cause he was the last and the only boy . . . That
boy had some of everything coming up. Always with shoe 'pon his
foot and white shirt. Ianthe spend money she din have sending him
to big Harrison College so he could be a schoolmaster like the
two sisters."18

Silla tells Selina of her childhood, which contrasts with
that of Deighton's:
I was in the Third Class . . . The Third Class is a set
of little children picking grass in a cane field from
the time God sun rise in his heaven till it set. With
some woman called a Driver to wash yuh tail in licks if
you dare look up . . .

And when it was hard times, . . . I would put a
basket of mangoes 'pon muh head and go selling early-
early'pon a morning.19

On another occassion Silla tells Selina,

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't laziness.
It's just you does give up . . .

17Ibid., 10.
18Ibid., 32.
19Ibid., 45-46.
I ain saying that we don catch H in this country what with 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 headway.\textsuperscript{20}

Silla’s impoverished background causes her to reject Barbados and accept the way of America.

Although it is Deighton that Selina cherishes, it is her mother’s strength that she admires. This is evident when she visits her mother at the factory where she works. "Watching her, Selina felt the familiar grudging affection seep under her amazement. Only the mother’s own formidable force could match that of the machines; only the mother could remain indifferent to the brutal noise."\textsuperscript{21} Silla in this passage is as one with America’s technology. Deighton is, instead, harmed by it. Selina sees her mother as having the force to match that of the machine and she imagines her father "shuddering inside each time the steam jettisoned up and the machines stamped down."\textsuperscript{22}

Deighton and Silla are not the only characters in the novel who are presented as opposites: Suggie Skeete, a tenant in the brownstone, and Miss Thompson, one of Selina’s neighbors, are also. One critic writes, "Miss Thompson and Suggie, as the work principle and the pleasure principle, comprise the truly opposing pair."\textsuperscript{23} Suggie Skeete and Miss Thompson play an important role in Selina’s life; however, her life is not dramatically affected

\textsuperscript{20}Ibid., 70.
\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., 155.
by their differences because they do not function in parental roles. But their stories do provide her with lessons that broaden her awareness. Selina listens to the stories Miss Thompson tells about growing up in the Southern United States and she listens to Suggie tell of her free lifestyle and pleasures. It is Suggie who shows Selina that life does not have to be full of toil and that it is worthwhile to have pleasure in life. She urges Selina to get on with living after the death of her father:

Oh God, Selina-mahn, stop thinking 'bout death. Take off the blasted black clothes! . . . Life is too strong out here, mahn. You think your father would want you walking 'bout like this? Not him. Not the way he did dress. Not the way he did love his sport! Take them off. You wun forget him if you do. Beside, you got to do the living for him. So c‘dear, put on something bright and find yuh-self some boy or the other out there and get little loving-up and thing.24

It is Miss Thompson who urges Selina to join the Barbadian Association and not to judge them impetuously before she understands them:

So when you start talking so big and smart against people, you’ll be talking from understanding. That’s the only time you have the right to say whether you like them or not, or whether what they done was right or not. But you got to understand why first.25

Suggie and Miss Thompson serve as mentors for the maturing Selina. And in each she admires something different. She can relate to Suggie’s independence and defiance against the Barbadian community. She too wishes to separate from the Barbadian community and live by different rules. Miss Thompson provides Selina a different view of her community and "Selina can

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25Ibid., 218.
listen to Miss Thompson precisely because Miss Thompson, as a black woman born in the American South, does not belong to the Bajan community and yet shares its experience of racism.\(^{26}\)

The Bajan community must be confronted if Selina is to understand herself as an individual and if she is to become whole. In the beginning of the novel, we are made aware of Selina’s inner conflict. Her personal dilemma is illustrated by her identification with the previous white owners of the brownstones. She sits on the steps of the brownstone and visualizes herself as one with them:

And as they crowded around, fusing with her, she was no longer a dark girl alone and dreaming at the top of an old house, but one of them, invested with their beauty and gentility.\(^{27}\)

But this image is shattered:

The mirror flung her back at herself. The mood was broken... The illusory figures fled and she was only herself again. A truculent face and eyes too large and old, a flat body perched on legs that were too long. A torn middy blouse, dirty shorts, and socks that always worked down into the heel of her sneakers. That was all she was. She did not belong here. She was something vulgar in a holy place.\(^{28}\)

But Selina does not want to be like those who gather around her mother’s table to bake bread and talk of world happenings. She does not find an image there that is pleasing.

We meet Selina when she is ten years old and we are aware of her rejection of her community. As she grows older she


\(^{27}\)Marshall, Brown Girl, Brownstones, 5.

\(^{28}\)Ibid., 5-6.
becomes particularly critical of its materialistic goals, as she observes them at the Barbadian Association’s meetings. The Association’s preoccupation is to promote economic security for its community so that its members may achieve the status of white middle class Americans. The Association seeks to insure the place of Barbadians alongside white middle class Americans to the exclusion of American Blacks. When it is suggested that the name be changed to the Negro Association, the idea is overwhelmingly rejected. Selina rejects the clannishness of the Association and when asked her opinion, she remains seated and tells them in a very quiet voice,

I think it stinks, ... And why does it stink? Because it’s the result of living by the most shameful codes possible—dog eat dog, exploitation, the strong over the weak, the end justifies the means—the whole kit and caboodle. Your Association? It’s a band of small frightened people. Clannish. Narrow-minded.29

Although Selina disapproves of the Barbadian community, she is unable to separate herself from it.

Selina recognizes this when she is confronted with her own personal experience of racism. She is selected to do a solo performance in a recital with an otherwise all white dance troupe. After her performance, Selina is exuberant because she has been able to find a part of herself through creative expression. She is invited to the home of one of the dance troupe members. The young woman’s mother tells her that she reminds her of the maid that once worked for her. Selina is immediately aware that the white world would never see her as an individual. Selina "has learned that white folk are too encumbered by their own illusions

29Ibid., 227.
ever to see beyond them; she rejects forever the futile dream of acceptance into the white world."30 This encounter helps Selina to understand that her skin color and African heritage have bonded her to all those who share it:

She was one with Miss Thompson . . . One with the whores, the flashy men, and the blues rising sacredly above the plain of neon lights and ruined houses, she knew, as she stumbled past the White Drake Bar. . . . And she was one with them: the mother and the Bajan women, who had lived each day what she had come to know. How had the mother endured, she who had not chosen death by water.31

It is interesting to note that Marshall refers to Silla as "the mother." By referring to Silla as "the mother," Marshall connects Silla with enslaved African women who survived the middle passage. Mary Helen Washington writes that

there is enough evidence to suggest that the image of the Afro-American slave mother is one of the sources for the characterization of Silla Boyce. Everything about Silla's portrait suggests the slave mother—her standing on the corner waiting for suburban housewives to offer her a day's work; the emphasis on her body as an instrument she uses to protect her children; her working out all day and then returning home to make Barbadian delicacies for her family; her manlike strength."32

"The mother" connects Silla with her heritage, and with all the persons like her who have suffered at the hands of racism and survived. It connects her to Miss Thompson, an older woman in the community who shares her African ancestry. Miss Thompson also resembles the African slave mother, in that she cares for children other than her own with undying compassion, works from

sunup to sundown and has suffered physical harm at the hands of a white man. Marshall uses Miss Thompson as a metaphor of Africa:

Lights from the passing cars careened across the room, and as they swept over her face it resembled an African wood carving: mysterious, omniscient, the features elongated by compassion, the eyes shrouded with a profound sadness."33

Miss Thompson, Paule Marshall later writes, is an ancestral figure, as are those other characters in her works, based upon her maternal grandmother.34 "She appears in one guise or another in most of my short stories and in all of the novels. She embodies for me that long line of unknown black men and women who are my forebears."35

Although Miss Thompson represents the ancestral presence, Marshall makes it clear that the ancestral spirit has also been passed down to Silla, who shares Miss Thompson’s ability to survive. By showing similarities between Miss Thompson and Silla, women of two generations and from two parts of the African diaspora, Marshall demonstrates how the tradition of surviving is passed down through the female line. It is a tradition Selina also inherits.

Selina’s realization that she is like her mother comes at the hand of her lover, Clive. He paints a picture of Selina and she interprets the portrait as "someone ruthlessly seizing a way


35Ibid.
Selina does not recognize this portrait of herself; in it she sees her mother. We are able to see similarities between Silla and Selina by their deeds. It is ironic that as Silla schemed to sell the land bequeathed to Deighton, Selina also schemes to win the scholarship offered by the Barbadian Association so that she and Clive can run away together. And just as Silla fell in love with Deighton, a dreamer who does not work to achieve his dreams, Selina falls in love with Clive, someone unable to fulfill his dreams because he is tied to his mother. When Selina needs Clive most he forsakes her, much as Deighton has forsaken Silla in the struggle to survive in America. Selina finally rejects Clive, but he has served as a catalyst in helping her to realize that she and Silla share a common strength and the ability to survive. She leaves this relationship and begins to understand her mother's pain.

She is selected to receive the scholarship from the Barbadian Association, but rejects it because it represents all that she is opposed to. However, she learns to love the community and accept from it those things which are positive. She has learned that she is one with the community and one with Silla but she knows that "she must journey beyond these women to find her own self and values that will not corrode her humanity."37


Marshall illustrates that in order for Selina to understand herself, she must confront her past. This past is embodied in her mother, Silla, and in her West Indian heritage. After her experience with racism, Selina also realizes that her heritage extends beyond the West Indian. She realizes that she is one with Miss Thompson, a woman outside of her Barbadian community. The past she must confront is the one that binds all of these people together. She must confront her African past. At the end of the novel, Selina breaks with the materialism and clannishness of the Barbadian community. However, she will take with her those elements of the community that will give her the strength to endure. She also wants to give them something in return for what they had given her:

She wanted, suddenly, to leave something with them. But she had nothing... Then she remembered the two silver bangles she had always worn. She pushed up her coat sleeve and stretched one until it passed over her wrist, and, without turning, hurled it high over her shoulder. The bangle rose behind her, a bit of silver against the moon, then curved swiftly downward and struck a stone.38

The bracelet she keeps is a symbol, reminding her of her community and those things that she has gained from it. One bangle thrown, one bangle kept--these two silver bands testify to Marshall’s role as a writer, whose task has been to articulate the difficulties of being in two worlds at once and the need to reunite the children of the African diaspora.

CHAPTER 2

THE CHOSEN PLACE, THE TIMELESS PEOPLE

Paule Marshall's second novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, was published in 1969. It is an intricate novel which continues themes that are present in her earlier works. Throughout her career, Marshall has focused her attention on writing about the West Indian community in America as well as in the Caribbean. Marshall states that her work attempts to reconnect the African world.

I'm trying to trace history. First of all to make some sense of my own history and also to make some sense of the history of Black people. To take, for example, the infamous triangular route of slavery and to reverse it so that we make the journey back from America to the West Indies, to Africa. Because I am convinced that, as a people, we have not as yet really engaged our past. Part of the reason for this, of course, is that we have been brainwashed into believing it's shameful—who wants to talk about slavery, for God's sake. But I think that until you do, you really can't begin creating your own proper image and proper self. Our history is not delimited by our presence in this part of the world. There are links and associations to a larger Black world.¹

*The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is centered in the Caribbean and depicts Bournehills, a rural and impoverished West Indian community on the mythical Bourne Island that shuns modernization and clings tenaciously to the past. Barbara Christian writes:

In its analysis of characters who are inseparable from their particular culture, and its insistence on the intersections of the past and present, The Chosen Place, The Timeless People is a culmination of her earlier work. Marshall moves from a localized setting in which she focuses primarily on one family; instead she portrays the entire socio-cultural fabric of Bournehills. . . . Her scope is considerably larger than that of her previous works, yet the people of this novel are psychologically related to the Boyces of Brown Girl, Brownstones; to Mr. Watford and Gerald Motley of Soul Clap Hands and Sing; to Reena, Da-duh, and Hezzy of the short stories. The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, in its characters, themes, and techniques, is so consistent with Brown Girl, Brownstones or "To Da-duh, In Memoriam" that it creates a coherent universe for Marshall's work. Marshall has matured as a writer, but her vision has not changed dramatically; rather her emphasis moves from the way the world affects an individual psyche to how many psyches create a world."²

In The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, Marshall describes the efforts of an American development team from the Center for Applied Social Research, or CASR, to study Bournehills as the first step in creating a modernization project that will transform Bournehills from its impoverished and desolate condition. CASR is a private agency created by the Philadelphia Research Institute to administer its overseas development projects. However, the development team painfully learn as the Tiv proverb states:

Once a great wrong has been done, it never dies. People speak the words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform ceremonies of reconciliation but there is no end.³


Through the depiction of Bournehills as a West Indian community that continues to be plagued by a legacy of colonial abuse and control, and as a community that shuns all efforts of modernization, Marshall illustrates the necessity of reversing the old order and the importance of using one's history as a mechanism for change. In Bournehills the citizens are reluctant to accept modernization projects because control of these projects would come from outside the community, and would place them in a situation where they would have no control over their lives and would, in fact, be enslaved to the technology as well as to those who controlled it. Until Bournehills decides to improve its own situation they will continue their current lifestyle.

In Bournehills, not only are the vestiges of slavery and colonization evident, but also evident are African continuities. Marshall infuses the work with an African consciousness through her depiction of Bournehills as a community that continues to observe rituals associated with Africa, as well as through her characterization of the male elders, who informally govern Bournehills, and through the character Leesy Walker, an elderly woman, who honors the traditions of her African ancestors. Edward Brathwaite writes that The Chosen Place, The Timeless People is a novel of reconnection. He defines the connective process as "recognition of the African presence in our society not as a static quality, but root-living, creative, and still part of the main." Bournehill's unwillingness to change and its

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rejection of Western values and modernization efforts enable it to continue the traditions of its ancestors.

Equally, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is about Merle Kinbona, a middle-aged woman, who has returned to Bournehills after a humiliating experience abroad in England. She has returned to Bournehills, the home of her birth, to recover from her experience as well as to sort out her identity. Merle, because of past experiences, is only half alive. Marshall writes:

On a personal level, she's still trying to come to terms with her life and history as a black woman, still seeking to reconcile all the conflicting elements to form a viable self. And she continues to search, as in the novel, for the kind of work, for a role in life, that will put to use her tremendous energies and talent.5

Marshall connects character and culture in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. She depicts Merle as an embodiment of Bournehills. Not only do they share a history of pain and abuse, but they must also confront their pasts if they are to face the future. Marshall connects character and culture not only through the character of Merle, but also in her depiction of the visitors from the United States.

The American team consists of Saul Amron, an anthropologist, and Allen Fusso, a statistician. Also accompanying Saul is his wife, Harriet. Robert Bone writes in his review of *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*:

As the characters acquire symbolic resonance, we see that Allen represents an effete civilization that has pledged

its soul to the gods of technology. Harriet embodies the suicidal impulse of the Western psyche: its unyielding racism and will to dominate, despite a superficial liberalism. Saul represents the possibility of transformation and renewal.6

Marshall uses the relationship between the Bournehills community and Saul to show how Bournehills has been used by its colonizers and how it continues to be exploited by large corporations that often initiate projects in underdeveloped countries without consulting or involving the residents. These corporations, under the guise of philanthropy, often use situations that they have created to restore desolate communities back to their proper order. This is demonstrated through CASR's attempt to provide resources to Bournehills, even though it had once profited from the colonial slave trade, the legacy of which now hinders the Bournehills community from being self sustaining.

CASR's involvement with underdeveloped countries is not new. The agency is a creation of the fictional Philadelphia Research Institute. The Philadelphia Research Institute obtains money from larger American corporations to fund its projects. The Institution's goal is to uplift the impoverished of the world. This allows the Philadelphia Research Institute to save considerably on government taxes, since the money funneled into their development program is considered a charitable contribution and can be deducted from their taxes. One of CASR's major contributors is UNICOR. UNICOR was created by a merger of family businesses, one of which is that of the Widow Shippen. Harriet,

Saul’s wife, is a descendant of the Widow Shippen. The Shippens had realized their wealth during the slave trade by selling human cargo as well as provisions consisting of flour, cornmeal, and salted cod-fish. These provisions continue to provide the community of Bournehills with much of its nourishment.

Harriet has inherited the legacy of the Widow Shippen. Character and culture merge in Harriet, who represents the Western world. Harriet embodies the Western world by her need to control others. This need to control is depicted through her relationship with the residents of Bournehills and through her relationship with Saul. She is determined to reshape Saul into the man she wants him to be, as well as control his life and career. She uses her influence to get Saul the directorship of the Bournehills project. He had given up field work after an earlier project had resulted in the death of his first wife. Consumed with guilt, he pledged never to enter the field again. However, Harriet, who tries to escape her mother’s example of the ineffectual and submissive wife, attempts to find her identity as the source of power that drives her husband, Saul.

Harriet seeks to live off Saul and recreate him in the image she desires, a parallel to the Western treatment of blacks and other minorities. These characteristics, which have been the source of her power, reflect her primary weaknesses as well: having an identity based on feeding on others, she is particularly vulnerable should they cease to perform the roles she has imposed on them.

Character and culture also merge in Marshall’s depiction of Saul Amron. Saul is an American Jew and, unlike Harriet, is able to relate to the conditions of the people of Bournehills.

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because he too comes from a tradition of suffering. One critic writes: "He is the wandering Jew, who, though he has managed to get ahead in this world of the WASP, has nevertheless retained some of the empathy a tradition of suffering has bequeathed him." Although Saul, Harriet, and Allen come to Bourne Island with plans to transform Bournehills, it is they who are changed and Bournehills that remains the same, timeless.

Before the Americans go to Bournehills, they are told about its refusal to change at a party hosted by local barrister, Lyle Hutson. Bourne Island is divided into two parts by economic and class status. In New Bristol live the elite. They are men and women who have rejected most of their cultural heritage identified with Africa for the lifestyle and culture of their colonizers. "They were all, to a man almost, drinking imported whisky, scorning as a matter of status the local rum, which was excellent; all wearing dark-toned, conservative, heavy English suits in spite of the hot night." Most of these men are civil servants, high ranking government officials, doctors or lawyers, who have detached themselves from the people of Bournehills. Marshall describes Lyle Hutson’s house to illustrate the inability of the black elite class to incorporate the best of two traditions into a pleasing whole. Lyle Hutson lives in an old Georgian estate house that had been renovated in a way that left the house without character and balance.

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The house was a failure, although this was not immediately apparent, and most people thought it handsome, progressive and new. But the designer, in trying to blend the old with the new, had failed to select the best from each—those features from the past and present which would have best served his end. Instead, in his haste perhaps, he had taken the worst of both architectural styles, so that although the house stood high on its private rise above the town, and was graced by an avenue of royal palms in front and breathed upon by the flowers in the gardens spread around it, it still could not rise above the profound error and confusion in its design.

The description of the house illustrates the acculturation process of the Bourne Island elite. They are persons who have rejected the best of their dual heritage and retained the worst of their African and European heritage. The Bourne Island elite are in limbo between two cultures and the results are persons who aren’t at all sure of their new found identity, or they are persons like Lyle Hutson, who at one time was committed to the uplift of his people.

He had talked of nationalizing the sugar industry at home and driving Kingsley and Sons from the island. But once he had returned home and married into the famous Vaughn family, once his law practice had grown and he had entered politics, he had gradually started speaking about the need for change in less radical terms.

Hutson gave up his ideals and became as much an oppressor of his people as the colonizers. His idea of island development is to expand tourism by giving developers large tax incentives as well as insurance to protect their investments if their businesses should fail. Hutson’s development plan will not benefit the "little fella" who lives on the island. Hutson has not learned

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10 Ibid., 54.
11 Ibid., 61.
from his history and now serves the god of materialism to the
detriment of his people.

The Bourne Island elite are critical of their Bournehill
neighbors. They make every attempt to separate themselves from
these people whom they consider "backward." When Saul tells this
group that UNICOR is interested in investing millions of dollars
in the Bournehills development project, the men chorus a litany
of other development projects which failed or were destroyed by
the people in Bournehills, among them, a crop diversification
project, an irrigation system, and housing development. Even a
jukebox and television set were reported to have mysteriously
stopped working. One of the civil servants tells Saul, "you
don't know that place. There's no changing or improving it. You
people could set up a hundred development schemes at a hundred
million each and down there would remain the same."12

At Hutson's party, Saul and his associates meet Merle
Kinbona. Saul is somewhat taken aback by this woman who talks
incessantly and who seems somewhat neurotic. She is to be their
host in Bournehills, as they will be staying in her guest house,
the only such lodging in Bournehills. However, they quickly
learn that Merle Kinbona is an asset to their investigation,
because she is the link between the "little fella" of Bournehills
and the black elite of the other side of Bourne Island. Like
the residents on the more developed part of Bourne island, she
too has been privy to an English education and has lived abroad.
However, she separates herself from their beliefs and politics

12Ibid., 56.
and chooses to live among the peasants of Bournehills. Marshall states:

Merle is the cultural broker. She negotiates between all the cultures and classes of Bournehills. She links it all together. She is as much one of the Bournehills people as the villagers. Her mother was a cane-cutter. She comes from that source, and yet she’s been educated in England. She has her connections in town. She is able to wheel and deal in all these worlds. She is not only the link that that connects, she is the history of the hemisphere. And one of the things Merle wrestles with is how to make sense of it all.13

Book One of The Chosen Place, The Timeless People opens on Merle. It is evident from Marshall’s description that Merle is a woman attempting to recapture something she has lost as well as trying to blend her opposing experiences into a whole.

And she was dressed like a much younger woman, in the open-back shoes which featured some rather fanciful, embroidered scroll-work across the instep and raised heels to give her height, and a flared print dress made from cloth of a vivid abstract tribal motif: cloth from the sun, from another cosmos, which could have been found draped in offhand grace around a West African market woman. Pendant silver earrings carved in the form of those saints to be found on certain European churches adorned her ears. . . . Numerous bracelets, also of silver, bound her wrists.14

Merle is at odds as to how to combine her Western and Caribbean experiences into a pleasing composite. But, unlike the elite of Bourne Island, she does not reject her African identity, but attempts to incorporate it.

Merle’s personal history and the history of Bournehills are tied together and to understand one is to understand the other. Merle is a product of Bournehills. Her birth is a result of an affair between her mother and Ashton Vaughn, a wealthy

landowner of mixed heritage. At the age of two, Merle witnessed her mother's murder. Since then she has been unable to forgive herself for not remembering anything about her mother's assailant. After her mother's death her father put her in the care of an elderly woman in the community. Although Ashton Vaughn later sent Merle to a private girl's school and then to college in England, he never openly acknowledged her as his heir. In England, after dropping out of London University, she became involved with a wild crowd. She later became involved with a wealthy white woman who provided her a place to stay and money (the silver earrings were a gift from her). Eventually Merle tired of her dependency on the Englishwoman and left to see if she could make it on her own.

Removing herself from this demeaning liaison, Merle later married Ketu, an African student. They were happy for a while until Ketu discovered Merle's involvement with the wealthy Englishwoman. Unable to continue the relationship, he left for Africa, taking their child with him. Merle's return to Bournehills is an attempt to restore herself, and her abuse links her to the Bournehills community. Merle has been used by the English lover just as Bournehills was used by colonizers. Merle's abandonment by Ketu is similar to the abandonment that occurred in the island after the colonizers had exhausted the land by producing sugar, leaving Bournehills to re-establish itself. As one critic puts it, "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." 

Although Merle embraces Bournehills, she is for the most part unproductive. Her bouts of depression have left her unable to be all that Bournehills demands of her. The residents of the Bournehills community admire Merle. They see her as a woman who has had the benefit of education and travel, yet who remains one with them. She understands and shares their predicament. To the community of Bournehills, she is a symbol of their failures and successes. She teaches at a local school only to be dismissed for teaching the Bournehills children about the Cuffe Ned Revolt. Her dismissal from the school as well as other incidents disturb Merle and she frequently becomes distraught, shutting herself away for days. She sequesters herself in the house she inherited from her father. In her bedroom there is little order, Merle's personal belongings are mixed in with antique furniture and portraits from the colonial past and reflects the chaos in Merle's life. She has been unable to move forward with her life because she continues to hold onto the vestiges of the colonial past. The Bentley that Merle drives also symbolizes the hold the colonial past has on her life. Although the Bentley is in bad condition and does not function properly, she refuses to get rid of it. Merle is aware of her incapacities and sums up her predicament, "I am like someone bewitched, turned foolish. It's like my very will's gone. And nothing short of a miracle will

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bring it back I know." Like Bournehills, Merle must confront her past if she is to realize her full potential.

In Book II, entitled "Bournehills," the lifestyle and tradition of the people are depicted. The landscape of Bournehills tells much of its history. Saul immediately links Bournehills to other Third World countries he had worked in.

It was suddenly, to his mind, every place that had been wantonly used, its substance stripped away, and then abandoned. He was shaken and angered by the abandonment he sensed here, the abuse. And he felt this in spite of the occasional field he saw lying like a green scatter rug on a slope. These fields only served to make more eloquent those places which were completely bald, where the depleted soil could no longer even sustain a little scrub or devil grass to disguise what had been done to it. Bournehills has made very little change since the days of colonization. The vestiges of slavery remain. And Bournehills seems to have stood still for ages—even its people seem ageless, of another time. Melvin Rahming writes:

Despite centuries of socio-economic exploitation, the people of Bournehills have remained a spiritual unit, whose stagnant existence seems, paradoxically, to thrive upon resistance to Westernization. Atavistic and mystical, they are descendants of those Africans who made only the most necessary adjustments to the Western world. Interestingly enough, their sense of freedom is consciously motivated by an ancestral racial pride, which is possible only because of their rejection of Western influences.

Throughout the novel, Marshall reconnects Bournehills to ancestral Africa. One critic writes:


17Ibid., 100.

Africa was certainly much on Marshall’s mind during the six years it took to produce this massive novel. Not only does the narrative line point toward Africa, but the narrator has an African consciousness which infuses the work. Passing references to Africa abound, for example, the description of a laborer’s facial features having ‘the elongated, intentionally distorted look to them of a Benin Mask or a sculpted thirteenth-century Ife head.\(^{19}\)

One of the first sights that the American visitors see when they arrive in Bournehills is Pyre Hill. Pyre Hill is the site of the revolt that was led by Cuffee Ned. Although the slave revolt occurred over a century ago, the hill still appears to be burning. The story of Cuffee Ned and the Pyre Hill revolt is recalled by the residents of Bournehills as if it occurred during their lifetimes.

The Pyre Hill Revolt had been the largest and most successful of the many rebellions that had taken place on the island. Under the leadership of Cuffee Ned, the slaves had not only . . . fired the hill and the surrounding cane fields and captured Percy Bryam, who had died shortly afterward yoked to the mill wheel at Cane Vale, where he had been tied and tortured, but they had also, with weapons raided from the arsenal atop Cleaver’s, driven back the government forces in a fierce battle there and sealed off the ridge—and then for over two years had lived as a nation apart, behind the high wall, independent, free.\(^{20}\)

This memory of Cuffee Ned penetrates the fabric of Bournehills society. The Bournehill folks even wave as if they are testifying on Cuffee Ned’s behalf.

Pausing in the fields or along the roads they would slowly raise their right arm like someone about to give evidence in court, the elbows at a sharp ninety-degree angle, the hand held stiff, the fingers straight. It was a strange, solemn greeting encompassing both hail and farewell, time past and present.\(^{21}\)


\(^{21}\)Ibid., 103.
One citizen of Bournehill, Mr. Douglin, pays his respect to the memory of Cuffee Ned each day by cutting the grass of Westminster Low Road where Cuffee's severed head hung for weeks.

In the rum shop, the gathering place for the leaders of Bournehills, men continue to discuss and argue the details of the Cuffee Ned revolt. The main contenders in the continuing debate are Ferguson and Stinger. Marshall relates Ferguson to an African deity. As she describes him, "His face, his neck, his clean-shaven skull, had the elongated, intentionally distorted look to them of a Benin Mask or a sculpted thirteenth-century Ife head. With his long, stretched limbs he could have been a Haitian Houngon Man. Or Damballa." And Delbert, the owner of the rum store, is depicted as the chief of the village: "He was the chief presiding over the nightly palaver in the men's house. The bed made of packing canes was the royal palanquin. The colorful Harry Truman shirt he had on was his robe of office; the battered Panama hat . . . his chieftain's umbrella, and the bottle of white rum he held within the great curve of his hand, the palm wine with which he kept the palaver and made libation to his ancestral gods." Ferguson and Delbert carry on African traditions. They not only honor the past and recognize the spirit world by pouring libations; they also serve as the community's griots, keeping history and tradition alive by telling and retelling the story of the Cuffee Ned revolt. Edward Brathwaite writes:

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22Ibid., 121.
23Ibid., 123.
It is Ferguson who, like an Ashanti okyeame, kept the memory of the ancestral dead alive with his interminable rehearsal of the tale of Cuffee Ned, the slave rebel. Cuffee Ned becomes the ancestor of the whole village, and it is his memory and the whole African tradition which depends on it, that keeps these people inviolate under the pressures of commercialization and progress. . . . It is rhetorical, even romantic. But Paule Marshall's intention is crucial, and in it she unquestionably succeeds: to transform the Afro-Bajan out of his drab, materialistic setting with meaningful correlates of customs from across the water in ancestral Africa.24

The African presence in The Chosen Place, The Timeless People is also evident in Marshall's characterization of Leesy Walker. Leesy Walker represents the African past. She believes in duppies, foresees the future, and pays respect to the departed through her weekly ritual of cleaning silverplated plaques inscribed with the names and dates of the family dead. Through this ritual, Leesy maintains contact with those who have gone before her. She believes in the spirit world and she includes them in her daily life. Each night she drapes a dark cloth over the mirror so that the ghosts of the family dead will not come to look at themselves while she sleeps. She continues the old ways and rejects technology and machines which spell death for her and those like her.

She foresees the death of Vere, her grand-nephew, as surely as she had communicated with the spirit of his dead mother, which told her of his return. Vere's desire to restore an old car into a bright red racing machine is in her eyes a worship of alien gods. She is aware that machines "had human properties, minds and wills of their own, and they were

constantly plotting against those whom they served. They were for her the new gods who, in a far more tyrannical fashion than the old, demanded their sacrifices." When she first sees the car that Vere brings home she responds to its destructive force. Like Da-duh in Marshall’s short story, Leesy exhibits a deep-seated distrust and fear of machines. Her suspicion of the car and technology itself are well founded; her husband was killed by the rollers at the Cane Vale Sugar Mill and she is sure that the same fate will befall Vere. Eugenia Collier writes:

Marshall uses the machine as another ironic symbol of high-tech white culture. Technology, supposed to facilitate the good life, turns out to be another instrument of the oppressor. Percy Bryam, the old slaveholder, was murdered centuries ago with the mill, the machine whose appetite was both cause and result of the slave society; the warning is obvious. Now the enslaving machines are in the sugarcane factory, a whole system of machines which not only enslave, but being in constant disrepair, maim and kill the enslaved.

Marshall demonstrates through Vere the effects of European materialism and technology on the youth of the island. Enticed by the gods of the West, Vere departs from the traditional values of his community. His rejection of the humanistic qualities of his people signals death. Vere’s hopes are not put into owning a plot of land, building a house, and raising a family. Instead he places his hopes and dreams into an automobile. During the Whitmonday race, Vere is confident that he has mastered and is in control of the car, but at the climax of the race the car suddenly becomes a destructive force and turns on him. It falls apart around him and Vere is destroyed. Leesy has foreseen this.

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26 Collier, "The Closing of the Circle," 308.
tragedy and goes to the race only after Vere's death, to perform the rites that death demands.

Marshall not only recaptures Africa through the characterization of the Bournehill natives but also through the description of the island. In the first chapter of the novel, an aerial view connects Bournehills to Africa:

Unlike the others, though, which followed each other in an orderly procession down the watery track of the Caribbean, the Island below had broken rank and stood off by itself to the right, almost out in the Atlantic. It might have been put there by the giants to mark the eastern boundary of the entire continent, to serve as its bourn. And ever mindful of the responsibility placed upon it in the beginning, it remained--alone amid an immensity of sea and sky, becalmed now that its turbulent history was past, facing east, the open sea, and across the sea, hidden beyond the horizon, the colossus of Africa.27

Edward Brathwaite writes that the fictional island of Bournehills is based on the Barbados of Marshall's ancestry: "Had Marshall been a West Indian, she probably would not have written this book. Had she not been an Afro-American of West Indian parentage, she possibly could not have written it either; for in it we find a West Indies facing the metropolitan West on the one hand, and clinging to a memorial past on the other."28

Marshall also connects the Bournehills community to the millions of Africans who drowned during the Middle Passage. The sea continues to mourn its dead:

Aggrieved, outraged, unappeased, it hurled itself upon each of the reefs in turn and then upon the shingle beach, sending up the spume in an angry froth which the wind took and drove in like smoke over the land. Great


boulders that had roared down from Westminster centuries ago stood scattered in the surf; these, sculpted into fantastical shapes by the wind and water, might have been gravestones placed there to commemorate those millions of the drowned.29

Another example of Marshall's infusion of Africa in this novel is her depiction of communalism in Bournehills. This is demonstrated by the pig sticking which occurs before Carnival. Present, on this occasion, are all the leaders of the Bournehills community including Delbert, Ferguson and Stinger. Like their African ancestors, they respect all living beings and are sympathetic toward the pig in its last hours. After killing the pig, the men pass around a bottle of rum and a glass, each man drinking from the one glass and taking a bite from the roasted pig tail. The people of Bournehills continue African traditions of communalism also by their acknowledgment of the spirit world. They view the dead as a continuing force in the community. One of the most faithfully kept holidays in Bournehills is Old Soul's. On Old Soul's night the entire village cleans the graves of the family dead and afterward places lighted candles in a ring around the graves.

In The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, as the title suggests, time is an important element. Marshall writes:

The concept of time is vitally important in the novel. It is difficult, for example, to say in what time and space the villagers actually exist. Indeed, they seem apart from the Western notion of time altogether and as much a part of the past as the present.30

29Marshall, The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, 106.

Marshall's use of time also connects the community of Bournehills to Africa. John Mbiti in *African Religions and Philosophy* writes that time in African culture is circular rather than linear, as in European culture, and is related to the tasks at hand and is not viewed as a commodity that must be created or produced. "The question of time is of little or no academic concern to African peoples in their traditional life. For them, time is simply a composition of events which have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which are inevitably or immediately to occur."31 In Bournehills time is divided into two main periods— in crop and out of crop. These periods, as well as their holidays such as Carnival and Whitsun, are the indicators of time in Bournehills. When the crop season is over Saul has difficulty telling time.

And time, which in the district had its own laws: on one hand lengthening weeks into months and months into years so that Saul could no longer say for certain just how long they had been there unless he consulted the calendar; and on the other, telescoping whole centuries so that events which had taken place long ago and should have passed into history and been forgotten seemed to have occurred only yesterday—time had had a stop.32

Time is also used to indicate the continuation of life after death. This is symbolically represented by the cassia tree that appears dead, but flowers overnight into a beautiful spectacle, and also by the sea that goes through a period of cleansing and rejuvenation. Marshall also relates the concept of time to the myth of Cuffee Ned, who continues to be alive to the


people of Bournehills. Cuffee Ned will remain alive in Bournehills because its residents will not let his memory or name die. In African culture, according to John Mbiti, as long as a person is remembered by name he is not really dead. He writes in *African Religions and Philosophy*:

> He is alive, and such a person I would call a living dead. The living dead is a person who is physically dead but alive in the memory of those who know him in his life as well as being alive in the world of spirits, so long as the living-dead is thus remembered, he is in the state of personal immortality."³³

Central to the life of the Bournehills residents is the saga of Cuffee Ned. It is this historic hero who provides Bournehills its focus. The residents of Bournehills continue their lives anticipating the return of Cuffee Ned, the enslaved African, who had brought the people together and made them one. Perhaps the Cuffee Ned that Marshall writes about is based on fact. In *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624-1713*, Richard S. Dunn records that

> In June 1675, a house slave named Fortuna heard that a ring of Coromantin Negroes from the Gold Coast was plotting a general rising. The aim was to murder all of the whites (except for the fairest white woman) and install an ancient Cormantin named Cuffee as King of Barbados. The rising was scheduled for two weeks hence. Fortuna dutifully warned her master, Capt. Giles Hall, a leading planter, who alerted Governor Atkins, who hastily commissioned a dozen militia officers to examine the alleged ring-leaders secretly. This court-martial sentenced six Negroes to be burned alive and eleven others to be beheaded and dragged through the streets of Speightstown, the rebel center . . .

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authorities executed thirty-five Negroes before they felt satisfied that they had snuffed out the conspiracy.\textsuperscript{34}

Paule Marshall incorporates the facts of this uprising in \textit{The Chosen Place, The Timeless People} and in the novel \textit{Cuffee Ned} does become King of his maroon village, where he teaches his followers to rely on their own strengths and to work together if they are to survive. To the descendants of the rebel slaves, Cuffee Ned remains alive. He had taught their ancestors by example, if even for a short period, that they could direct their own lives without European intervention. Cuffee Ned's life and death have merged together to create a myth that is comparable to Jesus in the Christian religion.

In its details, the Pyre Hill revolt is a stunning portrayal of humanity at its best. The barter and sale of human beings by their brothers for thirty pounds sterling (thirty pieces of silver), the choice of death over enslavement, the baptism by fire, the destruction of the oppressor on the very instrument of his greed—these events tell symbolically a deeply human story of struggle and triumph. For although Cuffee Ned suffered physical death, his head on the pike was a symbol of triumph.\textsuperscript{35}

And like the Jesus of Christianity, the people of Bournehills believe that Cuffee Ned, or a reincarnation of Cuffee Ned, will return. This is one reason why they shun the inventions and technology of the United States; they understand that it will take a revolution to change the fabric of their society. To accept aid from Western interests would only be a measure that would trade one enslaver for another.


\textsuperscript{35}Collier, "The Closing of the Circle," 308.
It is evident that the vestiges of slavery remain in Bournehills. The livelihood of the community continues to come from the production of sugar cane, the same source that created their enslavement. The Bournehills community rely on the Cane Vale Mill, a mill that is owned and controlled by Europeans, to process their canes. Each year a representative of Kingsley and Son comes to inspect the mill and his attitude towards the community is the same as that of the overseer during slavery. Through the depiction of this representative’s visit, Marshall illustrates that Percy Bryam has been replaced by Kingsley and Son as lord of Bournehills. This is apparent to Saul during the annual visit of Sir John, who comes to inspect Cane Vale. He arrives in a black Rolls Royce that Marshall compares to "a pair of invisible horses deeply caparisoned in black." The workers look on in silence as he makes his inspection, and Ferguson, one of the most articulate persons in the community, who for months prepares to tell Sir John that the rollers need repair, becomes mute and is unable to approach Sir John. Barbara Christian writes: "When he is confronted with Sir John’s stiff superiority, he is struck dumb. The relationship between the lord and the serf has been ingrained in him for so long that emotionally Ferguson cannot suddenly strip off his long tradition of habit."

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The transformation of Stinger, one of the leading citizens in Bournehills, as he works in the cane field also suggests that very little has changed in Bournehills since slavery. Stinger begins the day a match for the canes that seem to quickly replace themselves as soon as they are cut down. But by afternoon this exceedingly physical task leaves Stinger a defeated man. Although his pace does not slacken, he becomes a broken man. His slightly built body seems to be gradually shrinking, becoming smaller and painfully bent, old. By early afternoon he appears to be nothing but shrunken bones and muscles with one arm flailing away with a mind and will of its own. Although Stinger gives the cane fields his all, he will not realize any substantial profits from his labor. The amount of money that he earns will not sufficiently feed his family.

These traditions of slavery remain intact in Bournehills and the residents know that it will take more than new development projects to remedy the ills that are manifest in their society. Leesy Walker makes this clear when Saul presents his development plan to the people of Bournehills. "Change Bournehills! Improve conditions! Ha! . . . The only way you could maybe change things around here would be to take one of Bryce-Parker's bulldozers from the conservation scheme and lay the whole place flat flat flat and then start fresh."38 The people of Bournehills know that it will take acts equivalent to the actions of Cuffee Ned to restore their community. What is needed in Bournehills is a tearing down of all that has gone

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before so that they can begin anew from their own efforts and ideas. Recognizing what is needed in Bournehills, each year during Carnival they figuratively resurrect Cuffee Ned and reenact the Pyre Hill Revolt.

Annually, the Bournehills community foregoes the rules of Carnival and the prizes awarded for original masques, to perform the same ritual. And although the Bourne Island elite are embarrassed by the masque, they too become mesmerized by its pageantry and join with the Bournehills community.

Bournehills annually performs the same masque of the Pyre Hill Revolt because Cuffee Ned is their hero and his actions are testimony to their strength and will to survive. It lets all of Bourne Island know that they are proud to be a people who resisted Europeanization. Until Cuffee Ned returns they will continue to tell their story of freedom. At the core of the whole scene is the important fact that Cuffee Ned had led them to be self sufficient and a community that had worked together. "Under Cuffee, they sang, a man had not lived for himself, alone, but for his neighbor also. 'If we had lived selfish, we couldn't have lived at all.'"39 They had trusted one another, had set aside their differences and stood as one against their enemies. They had been a people. And it is during Carnival that the residents of Bourne Island are united as one.

Carnival provides Saul clues as to why Bournehills resists change and modernization projects from American corporations. Through witnessing the reenactment of the Pyre

39Ibid., 287.
Hill Revolt, Saul begins to understand Bournehills, and realizes that what is needed in Bournehills is imbedded in its history. He tells Merle:

It’s that people, . . . who’ve truly been wronged—like yours, like mine all those thousands of years—must at some point, if they mean to come into their own, start using their history to their advantage. Turn it to their own good. You begin, I believe, by first acknowledging it, all of it, the bad as well as the good, those things you can be proud of such as, for instance, Cuffee’s brilliant coup, and the ones most people would rather forget, like the shame and ignominy of that long forced march. But that’s part of it, too. And then, of course, you have to try and learn from all that’s gone before—and again from both the good and the bad—especially that! Use your history as a guide, in other words. Because many times, what one needs to know for the present—the action that must be taken if a people are to win their right to live, the methods to be used: some of them unpalatable, true, but again, there’s usually no other way—has been spelled out in past events.\footnote{Ibid., 315.}

Saul understands that what is needed to change Bournehills is a revolution much like the one led by Cuffee Ned and not modernization projects offered by American and European corporations that represent only another form of foreign control and do little more than provide temporary remedies for centuries old ills. Saul begins to understand that Bournehills must in some way be able to confront its past and choose its own destiny without being guided by outside forces. The need to confront the past is equally true for Merle, who must, like Bournehills, use her history to rid herself of a past that has left her in turmoil. Once Merle is able to rid herself of past demons, she then can be the leader that Bournehills needs.

Marshall provides clues that Merle could be a political force in Bournehills or Cuffee Ned reincarnate:
Cuffee Ned is alive in Merle Kinbona. We receive hints of this throughout the novel: in her self-description as an obeah woman, i.e., that she is a repository of the race's wisdom and powers, in her incorporation of all religions, and in her uncompromising quality to confront others with truth . . . Her function in the novel is to interpret; in fact, she is the community's bard—rationally expressed in her role as historian but more profoundly present in her psychic tentacles that both draw and impact sustenance. This function is conveyed iconically in her role of pole bearer at the Pyre Hill Revolt drama . . . She is an uncontrollable character, vacillating in the roles of castigator, enlightener, mad-woman, and giver of language to other people's feelings, a provider as it were of form for the inchoate. But for her very human frailties she would have been a mythic-character—a Legba for example. 41

One such event that illustrates this point is her action during the closing of Cane Vale. Although the community of Bournehills is upset about the closing of Cane Vale, an action that endangers the vitality of their community, they are without a voice. Merle provides this voice for them, because unlike them she is not bound to Cane Vale economically. Thus, she openly vents her frustrations, particularly towards Saul. She reminds him that it is his culture that has made the Bournehills community afraid to act; it is his culture that has caused the death of Vere, the only person in Bournehills who may have had the expertise to repair the roller. She rants that American technology kills and destroys, and values property above human life. Although Merle lapses into one of her periods of immobility she is, however, responsible for the acts that follow: the combining of Saul's financial resources and the collective effort of Bournehills to transport the canes to Brighton.

Merle is able to confront her past on two occasions. First, with Saul, on Carnival night, she is able to share her past with someone, something she had not done before. Saul is someone who shares Merle's history of pain and someone who can possibly understand her past dilemmas. Their friendship leads to an affair. "In coming together each is reliving a crucial element of their past tragedies. To sleep with Saul, a white man, Merle must trust him in spite of her English benefactress' betrayal. Although uncomfortable about his whiteness, she calls him her ju ju doctor, one to whom she can lay bare her soul." Although she is able to reveal her past on this occasion, it does not motivate Merle to act. She is only able to act after a confrontation with Harriet, Saul's wife.

Saul also benefits from his relationship with Merle, as well as from his stay in Bournehills. Vestiges of his past emerge as he travels throughout Bournehills. It is the beginning of a healing process for Saul.

And faces from the past began to accost him along the roads, . . . Faces of his family: his mother's the day he had clapped his hands over his ears, refusing to listen anymore to that wildly imagined tale of her family's ancient flight and suffering; his father's the time when, in his youthful arrogance, he had scornfully rejected the old man's ambitions for him and declared he would go his own way. He had wronged them both . . . Once, the eyes of the young German soldier he had shot point-blank stood blue and terrified before him, hanging there disembodied in the air; another time he saw with startling clarity the face of the first woman he had ever truly loved. She had been Peruvian--a public health nurse as well as a strong nationalist even back then, who had at first questioned and even resented his presence in her country. But when they became lovers she had begged him to stay on, join their fight, marry her. . . . Remembering her


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face the day he told her his research was done and he would be leaving, the disappointment, sadness and scorn reflected there, he had to stop and pass his hand over his eyes to clear away the memory.43

The memory that plagues Saul most is that of his wife dying during childbirth in a remote part of Honduras. Saul feels responsible for her death; he also feels guilty because her life had been filled with tragedy. She had been a survivor of a Nazi concentration camp. Saul, never before allowing himself to mourn his first wife’s death, is finally able to share his burden with Merle. Saul is able to confess the horrors of his past to Merle because they share a history of painful and immobilizing experiences. Saul’s life also parallels that of Merle’s because Saul, a Jew, can relate to the pain of being marginal in society.

Harriet confronts Merle after she learns of her affair with Saul. This is the final blow to Harriet’s composure. After Harriet confronts Saul with knowledge of the affair, he does not tell her what she wants to hear, that Merle was only a trivial fling. She is unable to fathom that Saul could possibly be serious about Merle, a black woman. The only way she sees of saving her marriage and herself is to bribe Merle with money to have her leave town. It is at this moment that Merle is able to exorcise the horrors of her past. She has learned from her past the cost of accepting money not earned. She refuses to relive her past enslavement and recognizes that Harriet and her English benefactress are the same. She refuses Harriet’s money and tells Harriet:

I can’t be bought. Or bribed. I’m not like some of those thieving politicians we’ve got in Legco. And I don’t accept handouts. Not anymore at least. I used to. You might not have heard about that, but I did. And for the longest time. And because of it lost the two people who meant life itself to me. But not anymore. I’ve grown wise in my old age. And proud.  

Merle’s rejection of Harriet’s money begins Merle on the road to recovery.

Harriet, unable to control Merle with money, fears for her marriage and uses her influence to get Saul removed from the Bournehills project. Unlike Saul, she does not care what happens to the project or the people of Bournehills. She is only concerned about her loss of power to control. When Saul realizes Harriet’s complicity in getting him removed from the project, he pledges never to forgive her and to end their marriage.

Not able to have her way and seeing no future for herself without Saul, Harriet wanders into the sea and drowns. Her death not only signals the end of Saul’s role in the Bournehills project, but also signals a redirection for Merle. Harriet’s death signals the demise of the old order.

After Harriet’s death, Merle decides that in order to go forward she must journey to her past and make peace with her husband, Ketu, and see her child. In order to pay her passage she rids herself of the vestiges of her enslavement. She sells her colonial furniture, the Bentley, and the earrings which reminded her of her indiscretions in England. She ceases to apply talcum powder to her face and wears her hair unstraightened.

"Ibid., 441."
Merle's journey to Africa will not only be to see her child but to glean strength from it. She muses: "I have the feeling that just being there and seeing the place will be a big help to me, that in some way it will give me the strength I need to get moving again." Merle needs this journey so that she can become as committed to her people as her husband was to his. She tells Saul of that commitment:

He was one of those rare, truly committed people. And because he was, he hadn't been taken in, like so many of us poor little colonials come to big England to study, by the so-called glamor of the West. There was no turning his head, in other words. He had come for certain technical information and he wasn't interested in anything else they had to offer, either, as he once put it, their gods, their ways or their women. I wouldn't even try to tell you what it meant for me to meet someone like him. . . . I can only tell you what I was able to do as a result and then maybe you'll understand. First, I was able at long last to break completely with the woman in Hampstead.46

Merle's visit to Africa will provide her the strength to become whole.

In The Chosen Place, The Timeless People, Marshall has remained true to her vision as a writer. She has written a very personal, yet political, story about the lives of people who meet and are changed by the timeless quality of Bournehills. At the end of the novel Merle has come full circle. She is rejuvenated because of her decision to face her past and future in Africa. Again, Marshall demonstrates the importance of the past and how it affects one's identity. In order for Merle to truly know herself she must engage her personal past and her historical past

46Ibid., 331.
as a child of Africa. They are inextricable from true knowledge of self.
Praisesong for the Widow was published in 1983, fourteen years after the publication of The Chosen Place, The Timeless People. While The Chosen Place, The Timeless People focuses on a Caribbean community and its insistence on maintaining its cultural heritage in the wake of Europeanization, Praisesong for the Widow concentrates on an African-American woman who has departed from the cultural values of her community and adopted the Marshall illustrates the importance of the past and how it informs the present and future.

In Praisesong for the Widow, Marshall continues the theme of the search for identity, as well as the journey motif that characterizes her work. In each of her novels the female protagonist takes a journey back to the past in order to know her true self. Marshall continues to demonstrate that identity and the past are inextricable, that the past inevitably shapes the present and future and that the journey back to the past is necessary if displaced African people are to survive the effects of Americanization. Abena P. A. Busia writes:

Marshall articulates the scattering of African peoples as a trauma—a trauma that is constantly repeated anew in the lives of her lost children. The life of the modern world and the conditions under which Afro-Americans have to live, the sacrifices they must make to succeed on the terms of American society, invariably mean a severing from their cultural roots, and as Avey learns to her
cost, this is tantamount to a repetition, in her private life, of that original historical separation.\(^1\)

The protagonist in *Praisesong for the Widow* is Avatara Johnson, or Avey, as she is called. She is a middle-aged, middle-class woman who has lost her connection to the past. As she and her husband attempted to survive economically, they left behind their early life on Halsey Street which was filled not only with economic woes, but also with praisesongs and affirmations of their culture and heritage. However, in order to escape the poverty, Avey and Jerome, or Jay, as he is called, placed all of their efforts into securing a prosperous lifestyle for their children and themselves. They left Halsey Street and moved to the suburbs and no longer found the time to reaffirm their identity and heritage.

After Avey is widowed, she is encouraged by her adult children to take a vacation. Avey decides to take a cruise and after her initial voyage to the Caribbean, she and two of her friends make it an annual ritual. However, Avey is unprepared for the journey to which her latest cruise leads. On the cruise, she encounters her Great-Aunt Cuney in a dream. The dream upsets the composed Avey Johnson and prompts her to leave the cruise. But her plans go awry and she is unable to get a direct flight home. Marooned in Grenada, she meets an old man who convinces her to accompany him to the out island of Carriacou. She

accompanies him and during the visit to Carriacou she recaptures the self that she has lost to a materialistic ethic.

Avey's journey is a physical journey, but more importantly, it is a spiritual journey. It is a journey that she, unlike Marshall's other protagonists, does not initiate, but is forced to take after her dream encounter with her Great-Aunt Cuney. This dream forces Avey to begin the journey back to her cultural community and to her identity. Ironically, this dream occurs on a cruise amidst all of the luxury and ostentation of the ship, the Bianca Pride, and forces Avey to rethink her past. Her spiritual journey takes her back to her past in New York and South Carolina and her physical journey takes her to the Caribbean where she is restored through African ritual and ceremony. Through Avey's physical and spiritual journey, Marshall not only fuses past and present, but also reconnects the African world, bringing together the urban North, the rural South and the Caribbean. She also reconnects the African world by utilizing African cultural patterns that exist throughout the African diaspora, patterns that link the African-American community to the African-Caribbean community. Ten years before the publication of Praisesong, in "Shaping the World of My Art" Marshall discussed the course of her novels:

Taken together, the three books will constitute a trilogy describing, in reverse, the slave trade's triangular route back to the motherland, the source. I should add here that I'm not really talking so much about an actual return, although it is couched in those terms. I don't know if that is really possible, or even necessary. The physical return described in the novels is a metaphor for the psychological and spiritual return back over history, which I am convinced that black people in this part of the world must undertake if we are to have a sense of our total experience and to mold ourselves a more truthful
identity. Moreover, I believe this exploration of the past is vital in the work of constructing our future.²

Ritual and myth are important elements of the novel. Not only do they demonstrate how African culture continues to penetrate the fabric of Caribbean and African-American society, but the novel's structure itself is basically a ritual that Avey must go through in order to reclaim her identity and to be reunited with her community. Marshall divides the novel into four sections: "Runagate," "Sleeper's Wake," "Lavé Tête," and "Beg Pardon." The title of each section symbolically represents the process that will return Avey to herself. The first step in Avey's recovery is the realization that all is not well. On the luxury liner, Bianca Pride, Avey's recurring dream begins to shatter her composure. The dream recalls her childhood and the myth of the Ibo Landing.

Although Avey spent most of her childhood summers in Tatem, South Carolina, with her father's great-aunt, it was years since she had thought of her Great-Aunt Cuney and their memorable outings to Ibo Landing. Before Avey was born her Great-Aunt Cuney had claimed her, and apprised her parents of her impending birth. "There was the story of how she had sent word months before her birth that it would be a girl and she was to be called after her grandmother who had come to her in a dream with the news: It's my gran' done sent her. She's her little girl."³ Each summer Avey and her great-aunt would make the usual trek to


Ibo Landing at least twice a week and there her grandmother would tell her of the Ibos, who had been captured, chained, and brought to America on a slave ship. Once ashore, the Ibos looked around, and seeing not only the present but the future as well, they decided to return home. They saw that America did not promise them any good and without the benefit of a vessel, they walked on water, entrapped in irons and chains, back to Africa. Happy and showing no fear, the Ibos sang as they walked home and were having such a good time that Great-Aunt Cuney's grandmother declared she just picked herself up and took off after 'em. In her mind. Her body she always usta say might be in Tatem but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos . . ." The story, as remarked by Eugenia Collier, is "replete with linkages."

Great-Aunt Cuney's grandmother was to have been an eyewitness to the Ibo's trek across water and had handed down the story orally to her grandchild. In keeping with African culture, Great-Aunt Cuney continued the tradition by passing down the history of the Ibos to Avey. And to assure that Avey understood the importance of the story, it was reinforced by ritual.

At least twice a week, in the late afternoon, . . . her great-aunt . . . would take the field hat down from its nail on the door and solemnly place it over her headtie and braids. With equal ceremony she would then draw around her the two belts she and the other women her age in Tatem always put on when going out: one belt at the waist of their plain, long skirted dresses, and the other (this one worn in belief that it gave them extra

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1Ibid., 39

strength) strapped low around their hips like the belt for a sword or a gun holster.  

Avey would also put on two belts, and once on Ibo Landing her great-aunt would retell the story of the Ibos just as her grandmother had told the story to her. Keith Sandiford writes:

She assumed responsibility for preserving the cyclic continuum in much the same way that the traditional elders and priests of the tribes functioned in her ancestral homes . . . The devout fulfillment of these diverse roles enabled her to ward off the effects of timelessness (deculturization, mainly) imposed by a Western secularized tradition, while at the same time ensuring her oneness with the great time, the zamani of African cosmology. By her acts, utterances, and beliefs, she celebrated her relationship with the world of the living and the world of the dead.

Avey has come a long way from the summers spent in Tatem. As she cruises on a luxury liner far away from the familiarity of home, she dreams of her great-aunt. In the dream Great-Aunt Cuney beckons her to follow her to Ibo Landing. But Avey refuses to follow. She finds the idea ridiculous. She is dressed in a new spring suit, new shoes and a mink stole and refuses to follow her down the weedy path. However, her great-aunt will not be put off and drags Avey, protesting and resisting. Avey quickly digs her heels into the soil and a tug-of-war ensues. Although her great-aunt’s eyes are filled with disappointment because of Avey’s rejection, Avey is more concerned with the appearance of the fight, her neighbors, both black and white, surround them. However, Aunt Cuney continues to wage a battle against Avey by tearing at the spring suit, the silk blouse, the gloves, and the

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6Marshall, Praisesong, 32.

mink stole—the material possessions that keep Avey from following. Finally Avey fights back, "striking flesh that had been too awesome for her to even touch as a child."8 The next morning Avey's body is sore; she feels as if she had actually been fighting and all during the day she senses her great-aunt still struggling to haul her up the path to Ibo Landing.

The dream is significant because it illustrates what shapes the life of Avey Johnson. It characterizes her as someone who has rejected her past for material possessions: expensive clothes, the house in the suburbs, and middle-class status. Aunt Cuney returns to her in the dream to call her back to the Landing and the mission with which she had been entrusted when she was young. Avey's mission was to pass down the story of the Ibos as it had been passed down to her. And as the avatar, or embodiment of Great-Aunt Cuney's grandmother, Avatara, she was to have understood the importance of her mission and gleaned from the story truths that would affect her daily lifestyle. Keith A. Sandiford posits, "from the very beginning, therefore, Avey's life was not her own. Those wily and wary Ibos whose heroism and memories brood on the face of the water, and whose spirits hovered around the woods, had claimed her for themselves."9

However, Avey has rejected the Ibos and their claim on her life as well as the years on Halsey Street where she celebrated her culture and upheld life-sustaining values. Instead, she has assimilated into the dominant culture and

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8Marshall, Praisesong, 44.
9Sandiford, "The Reluctant Heiress," 375.
accepted its artificial values. Her assimilation is so complete that at times she is unable to recognize herself. On the cruise while dining in the Versailles room, she catches a glimpse of herself in one of the huge gilt-framed mirrors and is unable to recognize herself on other occasions; sometimes while shopping in her favorite department store, or on the trains to and from work, and even in her bathroom mirror at home, she had encountered this unfamiliar woman. The woman she sees in the mirror is a woman who has arrived and one who can fit easily in white society.

Although she presents such an image, on the cruise she begins to recognize the impossibility of her ever completely assimilating into white culture. Incidents that she had once overlooked begin to have added significance. She begins to feel ill at ease, as if she doesn’t belong. She gets the sense that the white diners in the Versailles Room have their backs turned to her and her companions and even when they appeared to be look at them, their eyes seemed to pass completely through them. It was the kind of thing that she had trained herself not to notice. Therefore, on the Bianca Pride, she becomes aware of her otherness and the impossibility of truly assimilating into the dominant culture because of skin color.

When she begins to eat a parfait of peaches and cream, she feels bloated as if she had eaten the entire meal despite the fact that she had eaten sparingly in order to have the desert. She finds that after only one bite she feels as if she has eaten not only the parfait, but all of the rich foods served on the ship. The next day, the feeling reoccurs whenever she is presented food or whenever she recalls the events of the previous
evening. In order to escape the feeling, she seeks privacy aboard the ship. However, when she thinks she has found a retreat, a mob seems to follow her. Unable to find privacy in some of her usual spots, she gives up the search and begins to move around the ship in a dazed and shaken state. She wanders from place to place keeping her gaze straight ahead, looking neither left or right. She finally finds sanctuary in the library. Avey's desperate need for freedom from the mob aboard ship is compared to the experiences of the fugitive slave. Marshall indicates as much by titling the section of the novel in which this action occurs, "Runagate". The title is taken from a poem by Robert Hayden which depicts the actions of the fugitive slave who runs from the bondage of the South and heads for the promise of freedom in the Northern United States. And like the fugitive slave headed for the sanctuary in the North, Avey also believes her freedom from the events of the previous evening to be her home in North White Plains, New York. The artificiality and overabundance of the large white ship, the Bianca Pride, (in Italian, bianca means white), symbolizes Avey's enslavement as well as does her dining room, which is filled with crystal and silver, in her suburban home. Ironically, it is the Versailles dining room on the ship that heightens her disease.

After leaving the ship, Avey is put ashore on Grenada, where she will make flight connections to New York. However, as she waits for a taxi on the wharf, she is almost swept up by a crowd of islanders. Away from the Bianca Pride, Avey feels alone and frightened. Her fear and estrangement from the crowd is heightened because she is unable to communicate with anyone.
because they do not appear to speak English. The islanders in preparation for an annual excursion refuse to speak English, instead they reclaim their native language for this important occasion. Although Avey is unable to speak this creole, she connects it to the language spoken on another island she had visited during the cruise and to the way people spoke in Tatem long ago. She would later recall, "There had been the same vivid, slightly atonal music underscoring the words. She had heard it and that night from out of nowhere her great-aunt had stood waiting in her sleep." 10 Through the use of language Marshall demonstrates an African continuity that exists in the United States as well as in the Caribbean.

As the excursioners pass Avey on the wharf, they greet, smile and wave. They even begin conversations with her. Avey is stunned by their casual friendliness towards her and does not understand why they do not seem to know that she is not one of them. Avey wants to be recognized as a tourist and thus separate from the group of islanders. She believes her material acquisitions have separated her from the black masses.

The problem was, she decided, none of them seemed aware of the fact that she was a stranger, a visitor, a tourist, although this should have been obvious from the way she was dressed and the set of matching luggage at her side. But from the way they were acting she could have been simply one of them there on the wharf. 11 Marshall makes it clear that Avey, New York born, is one with the Caribbean community even though she resists the idea. Avey becomes enveloped by the crowd and feels that at any moment she

11 Ibid., 69.
will be carried away by them. She uses her material possessions to separate her and protect her from the excursioners who are a part of her larger community. She builds a fort around herself with her six pieces of luggage.

Avey's separation from her community, however, does not begin in Grenada but began long ago in New York as she and her husband, Jay, attempted to escape the poverty and despair on Halsey Street. In the second section of the novel, "Sleeper's Wake," Avey's mind takes her back in time. Barbara Christian interprets the word "wake" as having two meanings. She states it is "a wake for the past, as well as awaking from the past."12 It follows, sequentially, her experiences as a fugitive in the section "Runagate," where she began to run from the white world. In this section of the novel, Marshall reveals the special qualities and rituals that Avey lost on her way from Halsey Street to North White Plains. In keeping with the motif of mind and body being in separate places which characterizes the novel, Avey lies in a hotel room on Grenada while her mind wanders back to Halsey Street over the years of her marriage. Her dream becomes a mourning period not only for the joys that were lost as she and Jay ascended the economic ladder, but also a mourning for Jay who lost his identity as well as his life attempting to assimilate into white culture.

Avey and Jay's life on Halsey Street was marred by racism and economics. Early in the marriage, Jay was barely able to provide for his family. Even though he worked long hours, he was

never offered a raise or a promotion. Avey cared for their two small children and was unhappy with her latest pregnancy as well as with their meager existence. Avey’s dissatisfaction with her life caused her to lash out at Jay for his absence.

The turning point in their lives occurred on a Tuesday night in 1947 when Avey vehemently accused Jay of having an affair and threatened to take the children and leave him. Jay was torn between leaving or staying. "She thought she saw Jay take a slight step backwards. Without his actually moving, he appeared to be slowly backing toward the door to the hall which stood just a few feet behind him." In order to keep Halsey Street from claiming his family, Jay put all his efforts into bettering himself. He began working several jobs, taking a correspondence course, and eventually returning to college. The price he paid for economic security was not only long hours and denied opportunities, but also the very things that had given him sustenance during the hard times. After work Jay would listen to the music of Coleman Hawkins, Count Basie, Lester Young, Lady Day and others to help him relieve the stress of the day. The blues records that he had so cautiously cared for were now rarely used. The summer vacations to Tatem, which he had looked forward to ended as well as the trips to Harlem.

Their move from Halsey Street was a transition that exacted sacrifices. Their Sunday morning rituals of listening to Gospel music and reciting black poetry was given up as Jay continued his marathon effort towards economic security and Avey

17Marshall, Praisesong, 110.
found only time enough for her career and the children. They had abandoned the rituals that were once important to them. These rituals protected them and connected them to the vast unknown lineage that had made their being possible. And this line, these connections, heard in the music and in the praisiesongs of a Sunday: ' . . . I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were/young . . . ,’ had both protected them and put them in possession of a kind of power."14

As Jay and Avey moved up the social ladder, they found little need or time for the praisiesongs, the poetry and the music. In Praisiesong for the Widow, Marshall suggests that it is possible to survive in America without giving up one’s identity if one is able to lay claim to and protect those cultural rituals that connect one to the whole. However, in Praisiesong for the Widow, Jay and Avey give up themselves to succeed in America. Jay’s transformation is complete when he shaves off his mustache. Jay’s mustache had been a distinguishing feature, an emblem of his pride in his heritage. He wore a mustache as his father had during World War II. It not only connected him to his past but the mustache had protected him.

The mustache was his one show of vanity, his sole indulgence. It was also, Avey sensed, a shield as well, because planted in a thick bush above his mouth, it subtly grew attention away from the intelligence of his gaze and the assertive, even somewhat arrogant arch to his nostrils, thus protecting him. And it also served to screen his private self: the man he was away from his job.15

As Jay’s lifestyle changed he insisted on being called by his Christian name, Jerome. He began to believe he was a part of the

14Ibid., 137.
15Ibid., 93.
establishment and the private man and the public man became one. He no longer felt the need for the security of the mustache. He also began distancing himself from the African-American community as if he no longer belonged, and began to vilify those things associated with his culture. "If it was left to me I’d close down every dancehall in Harlem and burn every drum! That’s the only way these Negroes out here’ll begin making any progress." He wanted to destroy important parts of his culture, the very parts that had once sustained him, the music and the dance. Critics agree, as Kubitschek puts it, that "Jay’s identity is slowly but completely destroyed by this process. His own suffering makes him vengeful toward those unwilling to pay with their lifeblood for upward mobility; he loses sympathy with lower class blacks and describes them in racist stereotypes." By the time Jay died his transformation was complete. Avey no longer recognized him as Jay, he had lost his identity and had become Jerome Johnson.

Jay’s death had taken place long before Jerome Johnson’s. There had been nothing to mark his passing. No well-dressed corpse, no satin-lined coffin, no funeral wreaths and flowers. Jay had simply ceased to be. He had vanished without making his leaving known.

Avey has also ceased being Avatara and like Jay has separated herself from the traditions and rituals that were once very important in their lives. Their friends frequently commented on how much alike they looked and sounded. Avey has

\[16\]Ibid., 132.


\[18\]Marshall, Praisesong, 135-136.
made every effort to separate herself from the woman who roamed Halsey Street looking for her husband, the woman whom Jay had accused her of becoming. Although Avey and Jay had escaped Halsey Street it, nonetheless, continued to have the power to destroy them. Avey begins to wonder if there had been another way to escape Halsey Street without sacrificing the Sunday praisesongs that had undergirded their success. She realizes that it could have been possible if only they had understood the importance of those rituals that tied them to their past and their community.

Awareness. It would have called for an awareness of the worth of what they possessed. Vigilance. The vigilance needed to safeguard it. To hold it like a jewel high out of the envious reach of those who destroy it or claim it as their own. And strength. It would have taken strength on their part, and the will and even cunning necessary to withstand the glitter and the excess. Above all, a certain distance of the mind and heart had been absolutely essential. "Her body she always used to say might be in Tatem, but her mind, her mind was long gone with the Ibos."19

Marshall writes that *Praisesong for the Widow* "is about a theme that always concerned me: namely the materialism of this country and how often it spells the death of love and feeling, and how do we, as Black people fend it off."20 Marshall suggest in *Praisesong for the Widow* that Avey and Jay could have fended off the death of love and feeling if they had maintained their cultural heritage in the wake of the challenges presented them and used their heritage as a shield. To remain whole they needed to have spiritually transcended their circumstances as Great-Aunt

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19Ibid., 139.

Cuney had done. Their need to move from Halsey Street is not questioned, but rather their acceptance of a value system that taught them to hate Halsey Street as well as themselves; that taught them to view their blackness, their heritage and culture as undesirable. The dream that Avey has of her Great-Aunt is set on the lawn of her suburban home, indicating that the fruit lay in Avey not celebrating her heritage culture in her new community.

Marshall also suggests that it is possible to maintain one's heritage as well as to achieve financial security. The Carriacouans give evidence of this. Unlike Avey and Jay, those Carriacouans who live on Grenada have achieved economic security without losing any part of themselves. They are able to accomplish this because they continue their own value system. They honor their own culture and traditions and each year they return home to reconstitute their commitment to their traditions. Ironically, as Avey stood on the dock, she was caught in the midst of those who had retained their culture at precisely the time they were preparing for the excursion. Annually, it is their custom to return home to Carriacou no matter how long they've lived in Grenada. To show their commitment to their beliefs, they even refuse to speak English on this occasion. Rather, they speak their native creole. Unlike Avey and Jay, the out-islanders understand that their specific cultural heritage is a fundamental part of their being and although their island home does not provide them the economic means for survival, it is not to be dismissed. It is one part of the formula that makes them successful. They understand that they are a part of a larger
community and they work to ensure a communal legacy. They are bonded together by a common belief system, and by helping each other, they are able to prosper. They are cautious not to place material possessions above humanity.

The third section of the novel, aptly entitled "Lavê Tête", "refers to the Haitian Vodoun ceremony in which one is washed clean." Marshall suggests through the title of this section that it is necessary for a cleansing to occur if Avey is to be transformed from her Western sensibilities and returned to an African consciousness. While spending a night in Grenadian hotel, Avey falls asleep and dreams of her life with Jay. When she awakens from the dream, she smells an odor that reminds her of a soiled baby. She later realizes that the smell emanates from her own body. To suggest that a cleansing has occurred, Marshall indicates that her mind is like a tabula rasa "upon which a new history, could be written."

And as is characteristic of a child, Avey abandons her orderly ways and ventures on the beach, giving little attention to her appearance. She leaves behind many of her material possessions and does not wear the watch that she is never without. On the beach she is like a child and is captivated by the natural beauty of the surroundings. Her interest in each living thing carries her down the beach, causing her to lose track of time and the distance she has traveled. As she drifts

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22 Marshall, Praisesong, 151.
further from the hotels, "a change came over her. Slowly she felt the caul over her mind lifting." 23

She finally seeks shelter from the sun in one of the thatched huts that line the beach and becomes acquainted with Lebert Joseph, an old man from Carriacou who is preparing to return home for the annual excursion. Lebert Joseph walks with a cane, and is the guardian of crossroads, and represents the African deity, Legba. And like Legba he has the ability to assume youthful and feminine roles. Lebert Joseph is the guardian of the crossroads because he appears at a pivotal juncture in Avey's life and directs her on a path that will reconnect her to her historical past. The symbolism here has been noted by others. 24 Lebert Joseph as Legba, therefore, has the ability to lead Avey back to wholeness, where body and spirit are one. Throughout this section of the novel, Joseph seems to know Avey's story before she tells it. As Avey tells him, without her characteristic restraint, about the dream she had of Great-Aunt Cuney and the other incidents that occurred on the Bianca Pride, she realizes that the old man somehow knew all that was on her mind. "His penetrating look said as much. It marked him as someone who possessed ways of seeing that went beyond mere sight and ways of knowing that outstripped ordinary intelligence (Li gain connaissance) and thus no need for words. 25

23Ibid., 154.


He understands that Avey’s distress is a result of not knowing her "nation" (an African ethnic group) and of failing to appease the ancestors or the Old Parents. Upon hearing that she is from New York, he places her among the grandchildren in Canada and New York who have lost contact with the rituals and traditions of their community. He feels paternalistic towards Avey because she, like his grandchildren, has failed to appease the Old Parents. She has experienced the trauma that accompanies a separation from the Old Parents. He tells her:

I tell you, you best remember them! . . . If not they’ll get vexed and cause you nothing but trouble. And they can turn your life around in a minute, you know. All of a sudden everything start gon’ wrong and you don’t know the reason. You can’t figger it out all you try. Is the Old Parents, oui. They’s vex with you over something . . . Oh, they can be disagreeable, you see them there. Is there age, oui, and the lot of suffering they had to put up with in their day. We has to understand and try our best to please them.26

In Praisesong for the Widow, Marshall demonstrates the connection between past and present, spirit and physical, New World and Africa through Great-Aunt Cuney and the Old Parents. Keith A. Sandiford writes:

Marshall conjoins the living and the dead, the past and the present by a series of strategic interactions—dreams, memories, hallucinations, rituals, and ceremonies—interactions that derive from religious beliefs and traditional practices of African societies.27

Through Lebert Joseph, Marshall demonstrates the wisdom of those who accept and honor their heritage. Lebert Joseph understands through his all knowing wisdom that Avey and others like her have replaced the Old Parents for trinkets. His reaction to the rings

26Ibid., 165.

on Avey's fingers indicates as much. He looks at the ring with fear and suspicion, compelling Avey to hide her hand.

Lebert takes over the function of Avey's Great-Aunt Cuney and invites Avey on the excursion to Carriacou, where she will be restored. Barbara Christian writes that Lebert Joseph is an apt parent for the bloated Avey who has lost her footing on the nurturing ground, for, like Aunt Cuney, he reveres the Old Parents, and is concerned with identity and its relationship to continuity and regeneration. As Aunt Cuney is her spiritual mother, so this old man is her spiritual father. But these Old Parents have also been able to go beyond gender and conflict to something deeper, more essential. Thus, Cuney strides the field like a warrior in her husband's brogans and Lebert dances the Juba in an imaginary skirt.28

And as an apt parent, he is able to coax Avey into joining him on the excursion. As Avey stands on the wharf waiting to board a schooner for Carriacou, she begins to embrace the moment. There is a noticeable change in her. She is no longer preoccupied with the excursioners claiming her as their own. Instead, she begins to take in the scenes around her and connect them to memories from her past. She is reminded of a home movie her daughter, Marion, had made of her trip to Ghana. She is also reminded of her youth and the annual boat ride that was sponsored by the neighborhood social club. These boat rides were important, as were the times she spent in Tatem watching the elder folk perform the Ring Shout. They remind her of a time when she felt connected to her people, not only those of her same class and background, but all people who share an African ancestry.

She would feel what seemed to be hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her . . .

Then it would seem to her that she had it all wrong and the threads didn't come from her, but from them, from everyone on the pier, including the rowdies, issuing out of their navels and hearts to stream into her... She visualized the threads as being silken, like those used in the embroidery on a summer dress, and of a hundred different colors. And although they were thin to the point of invisibility, they felt as strong entering her as the lifelines of woven hemp that trailed out into the water at Coney Island. If she cared to she could dog-paddle (she couldn't swim) out to where the Hudson was the deepest and not worry. The moment she began to founder those on shore would simply pull on the silken threads and haul her in.

While the impression lasted she would cease being herself, a mere girl in a playsuit made out of the same material as her mother's dress, someone small, insignificant, outnumbered, the object of her youngest brother's endless teasing; instead, for those moments she became part of, indeed the center of, a huge wide confraternity.29

Standing on the wharf, Avey recalls her childhood and her feeling of unity with all African people. Abena P. A. Busia writes:

The triple link of communal history is thus complete, from Ghana to the Hudson River of her childhood, to Carriacou, through Tatem--because Tatem also is associated with the feeling of unity symbolized by her great-aunt watching the worshippers at the Ring Shout. It is important that all the locations, both the north and south of the United States, the Caribbean Islands, and Africa, the home continent, are embraced in this memory of the connections made by silken threads.30

Marshall not only reconnects Avey through memory to members of the African world community, but also has her relive history. The journey that Avey takes to Carriacou is not just a physical, but a spiritual journey as well. Her journey also reverses the Middle Passage; it takes her back over the water not to Africa but to Carricou, which has retained its African heritage. This is symbolized by the name of the schooner, "The Emmanuel C."

29Marshall, Praisesong, 190-91.

30Abena P. A. Busia, "What Is Your Nation?", 206.
Marshall recalls that the transport and sale of Africans were done in the name of Christianity. The spiritual aspect of the journey is indicated by the old women seated up front in the schooner in their long somber dresses. Upon seeing them, Avey experiences a shock of recognition. The women remind her of the presiding mothers of the Mount Olivet Baptist Church, "all those whose great age and long service to the church had earned them a title even more distinguished than 'sister' and a place of honor in the pews up front."31 Marshall provides here an African continuity as it is manifested in the African-American religious tradition. Just as the elders are respected in Africa for their wisdom and service to the community, this tradition of honoring the elders is continued in the African-American church, where the elders are given seats of honor and are respected for their guidance. Like an initiate at baptism, the old women prepare her for a transformation.

Marshall also illustrates another African continuity manifested in the African-American worship tradition, that of call and response. Marshall demonstrates how Africa continues to exist in the Western world, and how it continues to be alive in day-to-day existence. After Avey is situated comfortably on the schooner, her mind takes her back to her childhood and a particular Easter worship service. She falls asleep and dreams of a sermon rendered by the minister about the stones of false values, stones that have disillusioned some and hindered others from aspiring to their higher selves. The sermon reveals the

31 Marshall, Praisesong, 194.
life that Avey had led, forsaking the spiritual for material possessions.

To eliminate the shameful stones, Avey must purge the excess, she must make a sacrifice to achieve wholeness. On the schooner, she releases the abundance. She regurgitates and defecates the food that she had eaten on the Bianca Pride. She is taken to the deck house and there she had the impression as her mind flickered on briefly of other bodies lying crowded in with her in the hot, airless dark. A multitude it felt like lay packed around her in her in the filth and stench of themselves, just as she was. Their moans, rising and falling with each rise and plunge of the schooner, enlarged upon the one filling her head. Their suffering—the depth of it, the weight of it in the cramped space—made hers of no consequences.32

By having Avey relive the horror and shame of the Middle Passage, Marshall indicates that the spiritual return home is painful and traumatic.

On the ship Avey’s body is cleansed just as her mind was rendered a tabula rasa after the night in the Grenadian hotel where she relived, in a dream, her marital years with Jay. The next step in the journey towards wholeness is the healing process. Lebert Joseph’s daughter, Rosalie, "prepares Avey for her later Big Drum conversion, which will have the final effect of expelling the artificiality, the aridity, and the falseness from her suburban existence."33 Rosalie bathes and massages

32Marshall, Praisesong, 209.

Avey's body and as she performs the final ritual before the Big Drum ceremony, Avey Johnson's dead limbs awaken.

Avey Johnson became aware of a faint stinging as happens in a limb that's fallen asleep once its aroused, and a warmth could be felt as if the blood there had been at a stand still, but was tentatively getting under way again. And this warmth and the faint stinging reached up the entire length of her thighs... The warmth, the stinging sensation that was both pleasure and pain passed up through the emptiness at her center. Until finally they reached her heart. And as they encircled her heart and it responded, there was a sense of a chord being struck. All the tendons, nerves and muscles which strung her together had been struck a powerful chord, and the reverbation could be heard in the remotest corners of her body.34

Avey's transformation causes her to see things differently. No longer does she think the roasted ear of corn left for the ancestors strange. It seemed as natural as the plate of food that was placed beside the coffin at funerals in Tatem. Each of these symbolic gestures honors the ancestors and is connected to ancestral Africa. It is in keeping with the African belief that there is no discontinuity between the spiritual and material realm, therefore the ancestors can function in two worlds. Avey had been cleansed and healed of her Western sensibilities. She can now see things through new eyes and is thus ready for the final ritual, the Big Drum.

The Big Drum ritual is different than she had imagined. It is not a great elaborate affair, but a simple and bare celebration of heritage.

The bare bones. The Big Drum—Lebert Joseph's much vaunted Big Drum—was the bare bones of a fete. The burnt out ends. A fete in keeping with the depleted-looking slopes she had seen from the dining window earlier, the leafless tree and the wreck of a house

34Marshall, Praisesong, 223-224.
before her now, and the faces of most of the guests which attested to the long trial of fire.\textsuperscript{35}

However, Avey is not disappointed by the bareness of the festival because she understands that what made the occasion important was not the trappings, the buildings or the drums, but the essence of the thing she was witnessing. The festival is also another African cultural manifestation in the New World. Abena A. P. Busia writes:

This is a festival of music and dance, and in the instruments too we have clear reference to the traditional music of parts of the African continent, as they have been reformed and adapted to the Caribbean landscape and lifestyle. The use of the drums and instruments of iron, in their adapted form, serves the same function and purpose as their still extant African counterparts; thus rum kegs covered with goatskin replace Onyame’s duru-wood and hide, but the instrument is played the same way, and to the same purpose.\textsuperscript{36}

The festival begins with Lebert Joseph and the older elders of the community on their knees for the Beg Pardon, pleading and petitioning, not only for themselves and the friends and neighbors in yard, but for all those who cannot petition for themselves. The climax of the ceremony is the nations dance where the elders who can recall their nation pay homage to their ancestral home by performing various versions of the same flat-footed dance. The nations dance ends and the creole dance begins. Everyone can participate in the creole dance, those who can recall their nation as well as those, like Avey, who cannot. Young and old dance the creole dance, but always with a somber tone. Although the music is more spirited, it retains a

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., 240.

\textsuperscript{36}Abena P. A. Busia, "What Is Your Nation?", 208.
somberness that pervades the entire excursion. A single note indicates the seriousness of the occasion.

The theme of separation and the loss the note embodied, the unacknowledged longing it conveyed summed up feelings that were beyond words, feelings and a host of subliminal memories that over the years had proven more durable and trustworthy than the history with its trauma and pain out of which they had come. After centuries of forgetfulness and even denial, they refused to go away. The note was a lamentation that could hardly have come from the rum keg of a drum. Its source had to be the heart, the bruised still-bleeding innermost chamber of the collective heart.\footnote{Marshall, \textit{Praisesong}, 224–225.}

Avey joins the crowd, and at first she follows their steps, but eventually her movement turns into a dance that, as a child, she had witnessed her Great-Aunt Cuney perform:

\begin{quote}
It was a score of hot August nights again in her memory, and she was standing beside her great-aunt on the dark road across from the church that doubled as a school. And under cover of darkness she was performing the dance that wasn’t supposed to be dancing, in imitation of the old folk shuffling in a loose ring inside the church. And she was singing along with them under her breath: \textit{Who’s that ridin’ the chariot/ Well well well}.\footnote{Ibid., 248.}
\end{quote}

As she performs the Ring Shout she once again feels the silken threads stream out from the old people around her. It recalls the emotions that stirred within her as she stood waiting for the Robert Fulton to go on the excursion to Coney Island, the summers at Tatem, the Saturday night pretend dances with Jay.

Dancing the Ring Shout brings Avey back into the community that she had forsaken. It not only connects her to her past and her summers in Tatem, it also represents a cultural manifestation of Africa in the Caribbean. H. Nigel Thomas has studied the meaning of the Ring Shout, stating that it was one of
the features of the early black church in America and that one of the important elements of the Ring Shout was its circular formation.

Blacks believed that without the ring the spirit could not enter into their midst . . . This practice, of course, had nothing to do with Christianity but with the physical formation of people participating in religious rituals in West Africa. This circular formation is observable even in the architecture of the Shango temples in the West Indian islands where the cult is still flourishing, and is also true of the peristyle (vodoun temple) found in Haiti.  

The nations dance, like the Ring Shout, is performed in a circle, with the elderly on the periphery to protect and guide the youth that make up the circle's center. The Ring Shout is represented in the Carriacouan Tramp. As Avey dances, the Ring Shout restores her to herself and to her community. Lebert Joseph and the other dancers begin to pay homage to her by bowing. And when Avey is asked "And who is you?", she replies, as she was taught by her Great-Aunt Cuney, "Avey, short for Avatara." Marshall gives her a name that means incarnation of a deity. By reclaiming her name she is also reuniting not only with her Great-Aunt Cuney and Aunt Cuney's grandmother Avatara, but she is reuniting with the Ibos and an African past. John McCluskey writes:

Avey is able to understand the myth of Ibo Landing as a narrative of resistance, of return as profound resistance and not simple flight. She is able to conclude that her aunt was beckoning through the nightmare of Avey's return from artificiality, guilt, and self pity. Renewed,

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centered, she was resolved to celebrate the legends which both bond and strengthen.40

By reclaiming her name, she is also reclaiming a purpose that was bestowed on her. This is a duty that she now accepts. She not only plans to tell those she meets about the Ibos, but also about the Sunday praisesongs on Halsey Street: "Her territory would be the street corners and front lawns in their small section of North White Plains. And the shopping mall and train stations. As well as the canyon streets and office buildings of Manhattan. She would haunt the entranceways of the skyscrapers."41

Marshall has written in Praisesong for the Widow a story about returning home to one's cultural roots. In it, she has remained true to her vision as a writer by reconnecting the African world. She brings to the fore African continuities as they exist in the New World. Marshall also articulates the aspects of American society that can prevent those who are different from recognizing their worth. Avey Johnson's life was one of alienation from her culture because she lost sight of the importance of perpetuating one's culture and heritage. Avey's identity is recovered once she understands that self is impossible to know if one is shut off from the past. Although Paule Marshall writes about an individual in Praisesong for the Widow, it is a story with a message for all those who have forsaken their past and their heritage.


41Marshall, Praisesong, 255.
CHAPTER 4

DAUGHTERS

Daughters, Paule Marshall's latest novel, was published in 1991. One critic describes it as "a work that has been mulled over and thought through. It is Marshall's most inclusive and sophisticated analysis of the intersection between personality, identity, family, politics, and culture."¹ Daughters is presented within the two Western poles of the African diaspora, the West Indies and the United States, and tells the story of Ursa Beatrice Mackenzie, a young woman in her mid-thirties, dealing with the complexities of life as well as coming to terms with her dual heritage and attempting to forge an identity and future for herself. She has recently resigned a lucrative and secure job to become a freelance social researcher. One of her worries is that she will not be given the assignment she really wants and needs in order to live independently. She also contemplates the direction of her romantic relationship with Lowell Carruthers. Daughters is not Ursa's story alone, but the story of the other women in the novel, who deal with the challenges of forging a future for themselves.

The novel is set in New York City where Ursa resides and in Triunion, a mythical island in the Caribbean, where Ursa spent her early childhood and where her paternal family resides. Ursa is the daughter of Estelle Mackenzie, a school teacher from Connecticut, and Primus Mackenzie (better known as PM), a charismatic politician on the island of Triunion. Ursa is their only child, born after Estelle suffered a series of miscarriages. PM and Ursa have a special relationship. From birth he has cherished his daughter even insisting that she be named for his mother, a woman he both loved and feared. Through the depiction of the Mackenzies, Marshall weaves a story that not only connects the present to the past, and the political to the personal, but a novel that also connects the Caribbean to the United States.

Within the work Marshall examines many themes. The novel focuses primarily on the relationship between black men and women. Marshall views the personal relationship between black men and women as an integral part of the struggle to rehabilitate and reunite the black community in the West Indies as well as in the United States. The novel also explores the need to achieve independence from domination on both the personal and political level, and the need to reclaim history and use it as a guide for shaping the future.

As in previous works, Marshall infuses Daughters with an African presence which is represented by the Monument of Heroes that captures in stone the legacy of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe. These two African lovers and warriors reunited the African population of Triunion to defeat their British, Spanish, and French colonizers. After casting off the control of their
colonizers, they governed themselves and were able to survive by their own skills.

Triunion, during colonial time, was divided into three separate districts, each under a different flag. Marshall says of Triunion:

Triunion. Pure invention again, albeit bits and pieces of a topographical and cultural nature were borrowed from a number of islands to fashion it. They include Haiti and its next-door neighbor, the Dominican Republic, as well as several of the English-speaking islands. I wanted to create a place that would represent the three major colonial powers in this part of the world: the English, French, and Spanish. Again, my obsession with history. My Triunion was once under all three flags and although "independent" (in quotes), it continues to suffer from those divisions. The place is meant to suggest the weakness that comes from disunity. It's meant to suggest all the poor countries and communities, including the African-American community here, that fall prey to the seduction and domination of their former colonial masters because of disunity.2

Although Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe are no longer alive, and are merely statues in the countryside of Triunion, Marshall uses their presence throughout the novel as a symbol of self determination, unity, strength, and the will to be free. Marshall uses history to make the statement that even though slavery was a brutal and inhumane institution, the enslaved Africans of Triunion used their oppression to create a bond that transcended difference and were able to fight for their freedom. Marshall states: "Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe suggested 'the way' long ago, as do other, more contemporary characters in the novel. It's about the coming together, the working together not only of black men and women, but of the entire community throughout the

The Monument of Heroes symbolizes strength by unity. Not only does the statue grouping feature Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, but it also features two other warriors—Pere Bossou, an old man from Gran’ Morne, and Alejandro, an eighteen year old youth from Spanish Bay. The monument symbolizes a coming together of all colonized people; this includes men, women, aged, and young.

The title of the novel, Daughters, suggests that the novel is woman-centered. It presents the lives of the many women who have influenced Ursa’s being. Although women are a central part of the novel, Primus Mackenzie is presented as a polestar surrounded by a constellation of women. These women include Estelle, Ursa’s mother; Celestine, a woman who helped raise PM and Ursa; and Astral Ford, PM’s mistress. These women are often controlled by PM and because of his charisma are unable to achieve autonomy in their own lives. Primus Mackenzie is a tall and striking man with a charismatic and magnetic personality that overshadows those around him. When he was three years old a parish rector had given him the name PM, declaring him "true to his initials. He was every bit a prime minister." Marshall uses the symbolism of celestial bodies in her work to illustrate that these women are not only a part of a constellation that surrounds PM, but that they are each a part of Ursa’s makeup. And just as Ursa Minor, in astronomical terms, is a collection of the stars

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3Ibid., 4.
4Ibid., 130.
that form the little dipper, Ursa is a conglomeration of the women that surround PM.

Ursa is connected to all the women in the story back to the slave woman, Congo Jane. In a *Women's Review of Books* interview, Marshall states:

The entire novel takes place within the span of two months, and yet what I do with time is a weaving back and forth within those months that takes us all the way back to slavery. The characters are all daughters who are in some way connected one with the other, back to the slave woman who figures as a symbol in the novel. One of the themes that inform my works is being not only connected with those mother poets who were my mentors and instructors but also with the women who created them. It's part of how we define ourselves as a people. How do we as black women get a sense of self? How do we create an identity that will permit us to function?\(^5\)

The creation of a true identity is a central theme in the novel. Marshall illustrates in previous works that in order for one to obtain one's identity, it is important to journey back to the past and retrieve one's cultural heritage. In *Daughters*, Marshall continues this theme. It is clear that if Ursa is to create a healthy identity she must cut away those things that block her vision of self. Therefore, confronting the past means eliminating those elements from the past that prevent growth, as well as embracing those elements that can provide insight for growth.

The novel opens with Ursa returning to her apartment after having an abortion. She keeps the abortion a secret from Lowell because she does not think that he is capable of dealing with her actions. Ursa also deals with feelings of guilt over

her decision to have an abortion and is perplexed because she has not experienced the discomfort that her doctor warned her to expect. Ursa thinks perhaps the doctor did only half a job and left a part of the fetus inside her. Marshall states that the abortion in the novel is important, "abortion meaning being able to cut away those dependencies that can be so crippling."6 What appears to be crippling to Ursa is her relationship with her family, especially her father, as well as her relationship with Lowell Carruthers. On the day of the abortion, Ursa receives a letter from her father and feels that, even though he is thousands of miles away he somehow knew about her trip to the abortion clinic.

He had consulted his crystal ball, or a little birdie had flown the eighteen hundred miles from New York down to Triunion to tell him about her appointment on West Fifty-eighth Street today, and he had seen to it that the blue envelope with the government seal would be waiting for her when she got back. As a reprimand for her carelessness.7

Ursa’s relationship with her father has stymied her growth. Marshall describes Ursa physically as prepubescent, having the form of a child, not fully developed. Ursa’s physical appearance is related to her psychological development; Ursa has not grown to full womanhood because she continues to be daddy’s little girl. In this regard, she is like her mother, whose physical makeup she has inherited. At times Estelle also seems to be PM’s little girl, when she is angry with PM she refuses to eat or speak and resorts to the childish antics of temper

6Ibid.

7Marshall, Daughters, 9.
tantrums. Ursa’s life has been greatly influenced by her parents and it is clear that in order to understand Ursa, it is necessary to understand the backgrounds of her parents.

PM's aspirations for Ursa stem from his past. PM grew up in Triunion where his parents were thriving business owners in his community; his father was a coffee speculator and his mother was a shopkeeper and the caretaker of orphaned children. His mother was a major influence on his life. She impressed upon him at a very early age the need to achieve middle class and material success. She did not want him to be like his father who had forced upon her a role that was confining and denied her a true self. She insisted that her son elevate himself to a higher class and position so that when he came of age and married he would not subject his wife to what she had endured. She enrolled him in the Edgarton Boys School, a private school in town, so that he would know "from the early how things go in this world. It's so he'll know how to carry himself in this life and what—and—what he must do to find the means to live as he would like—the motorcars and whatever else he sets his mind to." PM's mother admonished him to always be at the top of his class and once in school PM aspired to achieve this goal.

After graduating from Edgarton Boys School, PM attended college in England. After completing college he returned to Triunion and entered politics. PM wanted to make a difference in Triunion and envisioned Triunion structured along socialist lines. However, a trip to the United States on a Carnegie

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*Ibid., 161.*
sponsored tour brought him face to face with the extent of wealth and power in the United States and he became enamored of the idea of attaining such success in his own life. Once firmly in Triunion’s political scene, PM went into debt trying to attain the symbols of material success: a home of a hundred rooms, an American automobile, and a hotel where he installed a swimming pool just for Ursa. The swimming pool symbolized material excess. He installed the pool at the hotel, even though it sat on one of the finest beaches on Triunion. The swimming pool was rarely if ever used by the hotel guests, but was used every Sunday when PM brought Ursa to the hotel for a swim.

PM is unable to reach the honored position of Prime Minister and the name he received as a boy parallels the condition of Triunion. It is "an empty symbol of power and authority in a country that still takes its orders from America and the West." PM is a member of the New Progressive Party, but the Democratic National Party continues to control the island, due to its connection with the powers that be in the United States. Although he attempts to effect change in Triunion, he is only able to make small gains for his community because of the political makeup of Triunion’s Parliament. Unable to achieve his dream, PM wants his daughter to achieve material success. He wants her to be able to succeed in America where, as he sees it, the possibilities are endless.

Ursa has also been influenced by her mother, who has in her own way attempted to prepare Ursa "to walk the walk and talk

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"Marshall, Interview with Darryl Cumber Dance, 4."
the talk." In one of her letters to the "Homefolks" she expresses her desire to be back in the United States. She writes that she wants to be a part of the marches and sit-ins that are occurring as a part of the movement. Although she can't participate, she writes to them that she is grooming Ursa to take her place:

I am going to send Ursa-Bea to take my place at the barricades as soon as she's old enough. Nobody here knows it, but I’ve already got her in training. And I’ve also decided that she’s to go to Weaver High when the time comes, like her mother and uncle before her. Especially now that it’s more integrated. Primus is going to want to send her to some fancy prep school we can’t afford, but I’m going to hold out for Weaver High so she can learn how to walk the walk and talk the talk. To get her ready for the barricades.  

Although Ursa was influenced by her mother’s sense of social consciousness, her father’s influence was more powerfully felt. Since she was young she has felt the power of her father to superimpose his desires upon her and even now as she resides in New York City, thousands of miles from her father, he is still a dominating presence in her life. He constantly writes letters to her in New York, letters that she collects and keeps in a compartment over her bed. However, she attempts to pull away from his influence. In an effort to become more independent, Ursa discontinues her frequent visits to Triunion and begins to make decisions regarding her life without anticipating her father’s approval. She leaves a lucrative position at the National Consumer Research Corporation as Associate Director of Research for Special Markets because she feels that the work she

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10 Marshall, Daughters, 224.

11 Ibid., 223-224.
is required to do in many ways demeans her people. She also feels that she is selling her soul. She leaves this position even though she realizes that it will upset her father. Her position at the research firm was applauded by PM who marveled in her success:

I’m expecting to see president or vice-president or some other big title on the door to your office one of these days. After all, that’s a country where the impossible is possible. Why do you think I sent you to live up there? CEO big on the door, my lady!12

Leaving the NCRC is a dramatic step for Ursa; it indicates that she is freeing herself from her father’s control as well as discovering who she is and what she wants for her life. She is beginning to become more independent.

One of the first recollections that Ursa has of her father is that of him standing at the edge of the swimming pool and blocking out the sun:

He used to stand at the edge of the swimming pool everyone said he had installed more for her than for the guests at the so-called hotel he owns, keeping an eye on her while she made like a little chocolate Esther Williams in the water. His shoulders in the shirt-jac suit he wore on Sundays— their day to go to the pool— would look to be a mile wide above her. His head with the high domed forehead she had inherited, and that had earned him the nickname PM when he was a boy, would appear larger than the sun. Sometimes, as she glanced up and found she couldn’t see the sun or even a blue patch of sky because of his being in the way, she’d do a sudden flip, annoyed, pull the water like a blanket over her head and dive in to the bottom of the pool and sit there. Just sit in the wavery blue, sunlit silence until the last bubble of air floated up from her lips and

12Ibid, 47.
disappeared and her lungs ached to breathe in anything, even the blue water. She did it to impress, tease, and frighten him a little. She always surfaced with a grin and a wink. Then to get back in his good graces, she'd do more minilaps than they had agreed on for the day.\(^{13}\)

Even now in her adult life, Ursa’s father continues to block out the sun and the patch of blue sky. She continues to be unable to resist his charm and to separate what she wants for her life from his dreams and aspirations for her. The author writes that *Daughters* is “about the subtle deferring to men that was so much a part of my childhood and the childhood of many women.”\(^{14}\) PM does not dominate Ursa’s life only, but he seems to seduce all the women who surround him. Estelle, his wife, is unable to overcome his dominance over her life. She continues her marital relationship with him, even though she is aware of his infidelity. Celestine, his childhood nursemaid, who is ever present and who has been his shadow since birth, treats him as if she is, indeed, his wife. Astral Ford, his mistress, seems to be eliving the life of PM’s mother without the social position his mother maintained. Her life is confined to managing Miles Tree, and her only excursion is to see Malvern, her childhood friend. She, like PM’s mother, because of her confinement, begins to find gratification in food. Like these women, Ursa blindly adores her father. He is always on her mind, and is ever present in the conversations she has with her sister/friend Viney and her beau, Lowell Carruthers. PM also influences Ursa’s relationship with Lowell Carruthers.

\(^{13}\)Ibid., 9.

\(^{14}\)Baer, "Holding On To The Vision," 24.
Ursa has been in a relationship with Lowell Carruthers for over six years. And although Ursa has flown to Triunion frequently within the six years and even invited her friend Viney to come along, she has never once invited Lowell. Lowell sees the attachment that Ursa has for her father and knows that he is unable to compete with an image that looms larger than life. Ursa rarely misses an opportunity to apprise Lowell of what is happening in PM's life, even if he shows little interest and is immersed in his own problems. Lowell finds an opportunity to tell Ursa what he thinks of her relationship with her father:

Oh, sure, your body's around. Habeas corpus. We have the body, but that place and De Lawd--especially De Lawd--have your head. He alone comes in for at least ninety-five per-cent of your thoughts. . . . I'm saying that not only does he come in for the lion's share of your thoughts but that everything you do, everything you ever done, is about him in one way or another. 15

Ursa realizes that what Lowell is saying is true and that her father does have control over her life. However, she ends her relationship with Lowell. She realizes that what she feels for Lowell is no longer love and that he is resentful of her father because he has been unable to control her life.

Lowell and Ursa were once a couple who could have possibly worked together and become warriors like Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe. However, they allowed outside forces to wedge a gap between them instead of using their difficulties to create a bond between them. Ursa remembers the "free zone", a period of their relationship when they were united. It was a period that made her feel that "if they wanted to they could have picked up his

fifteen-story apartment building or hers for that matter and moved them from the Upper West Side to another planet."16 She had also felt that in the free zone, they had completed each other and created one perfect body:

Everything was held in common then—arms, legs, eyes, ears, buttocks, breasts. Everything about her belonged as much to him as to her, and vice-versa. He was stuck, as she had been for years, with a body she thought of as a case study in underdevelopment. And he didn't seem to mind, maybe because the trade-off was that he got her full head of hair to fill in the bays at his temples . . . And she suddenly possessed arms and legs that were nearly twice the length of her own, a pair of strong, shapely hands that looked as if they could snap a phone receiver in two and then turn around and delicately peel a grape; also dimples like grace notes at the small of her back, and the waistline and ass she had long coveted.17

However, the free zone ceased to exist once Ursa and Lowell became encumbered with the outside world and their own individual problems. Unlike Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, they allowed outside forces to divide them rather than unite them. Viney, Ursa's sister/friend, tells her that her relationship with Lowell has become static. Viney understands the dilemma of Ursa's relationship with Lowell because she too suffered because of a relationship that became useless and static. However, Viney frees herself from the debilitating relationship. She makes the decision to move on with her life without a man and conceives a child through artificial insemination. To indicate the completeness of her life, she boldly displays a plaque at the entrance of her home that boasts V. Daniels and Son. However, she later realizes that the haven she has created is only a

16Ibid., 100.

17Ibid., 93.
façade and is futile against the evils of society. The mistaken arrest of her son, Robeson, causes her to re-evaluate the purpose of a man in her life. When she is at the police precinct speaking to one of the officers she feels an empty space and later acknowledges this emptiness to Ursa:

I would’ve given anything to have had a Mr. Somebody standing beside Robeson and me in that police station this afternoon. I feel this awful space, Ursa, this hole the size of me next to me, could even feel the wind pouring through it . . . Okay, someone with a few problems--who doesn’t have a few?--but with enough there for you to work with. Someone useful. And it’s not that I can’t manage on my own. Hey, I’m doing it every day! It’s about dealing with what’s still out there--that Neanderthal who could’ve blown my child away and that precinct captain with his Ms. Daniels. Someone next to me to deal with that!18

Marshall illustrates that the forces of today’s society make it imperative for black men and women to come together and make themselves useful. She parallels the conditions of present day society with the ills of colonial slavery. She suggests that black women and men need to look back to slavery and accept the guide set by the many Congo Janes and Will Cudjoes who fought together to end their enslavement.

Other heroic figures are mentioned in the novel. Viney feels it is important for her son to know his history, she names him Robeson, after Paul Robeson, the legendary African-American actor, singer, and activist. She not only encourages Robeson to appreciate his history, but she shares her philosophy with those around her. She has become a second mother for Dee Dee, Robeson’s best friend. She also makes sure that Dee is exposed to her history. At a neighborhood center, the children are in a

18Ibid., 330.
play that depicts the life of Harriet Tubman, a warrior like Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe whose goal was to free her people. Dee is Harriet Tubman in the play and Robeson plays Harriet's father. Viney prepares Robeson to be useful to his community.

In *Daughters* Marshall provides a view of both the United States and the Caribbean and the oppressive systems within each that impact the lives of people of African descent. Ursa begins to see the United States and the Caribbean as a "series of double exposures . . . the same thing repeated everywhere she turns."19 She realizes that the problems she witnessed in Triunion also affect the African-American population in the United States. In Triunion, sections of the island that were once peaceful and placid have turned into huge ghettos where persons are battling increased poverty, joblessness, drug trafficking and prostitution. Many of the people in Triunion believe that the devastation that is occurring is a result of the leadership. This idea makes Ursa uncomfortable because she does not want to face the fact that her father may also be involved in the island's decay. As a form of protest, she does not visit Triunion for over four years because she is unable to face her father and inevitably, the truth. Although Triunion has gained its independence from its colonizers, it continues to be controlled by the United States and the West. This is evident by the presence of the ship, the Woodrow Wilson, that is constantly in harbor and whose presence is more than felt at elections. During elections the ship stands in the harbor with its missiles

19Ibid., 290.
Ursa’s father attempts to effect change in Triunion, but once he realizes that his efforts are rarely if ever productive he becomes frustrated. He begins to believe that he can work with American interests to create businesses and industries on the island. He blinds himself to the truth and will not acknowledge that the only interest that the American businessmen have in Triunion is in creating a sanctuary for rich executives. These businessmen have little interest in developing the island and their plans for tourism will physically and economically bypass the people of Triunion. After PM realizes the futility of his effort, he becomes more interested in personal gains than in community gains.

Ursa confronts a similar scenario in the United States when she returns to Midland City, a city that she was commissioned to study. In Midland City she finds that the lifestyle of the citizens in the community has worsened since the young black politician, Sandy Lawson, was elected mayor. Instead of keeping his campaign promises and remaining loyal to the grass roots elements that elected him, he has become a pawn in the hands of white developers who are interested in Midland City for their own personal gain. Their plans include creating a highway to make it easier for middle-class suburbanites to get to their homes. The highway will destroy communities in Midland City while allowing the suburbanites to travel to the suburbs without once confronting the poverty and decay of Midland City. This highway is similar to one built in Triunion.

Marshall paints a similar picture of the black communities in Triunion and the United States and posits that if
conditions are to change, people of African descent must reclaim their communities and work together to rehabilitate them. The desire for change, freedom, and unity are the keys to overcoming oppression. This effort requires the commitment of everyone in the community. Mae Ryland, a tireless community organizer, was able to put this idea into action when she was a campaign organizer for Sandy Lawson. She united the community in a massive effort to get Sandy elected. She solicited the help of the young to run errands, and the help of the elderly to stuff envelopes. Mae Ryland was able to get all segments of Midland City together to help defeat the incumbent who had neglected their needs and concerns. Mae Ryland, in her ability to unify the community towards a common goal, is a personification of Congo Jane.

In *Daughters*, the heroism of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe are ever present. Ursa had desired to write her senior thesis on this brave couple. Ursa’s thesis set out to prove that, in spite of the hardships of slavery, the relationship between slave men and women had been positive. Her thesis statement read:

> A neglected area in the study of the social life of New World slave communities has been the general nature of gender roles and relationships. This paper examines the relatively egalitarian, mutually supportive relations that existed between the bondmen and women and their significance for and contribution to the various forms of resistance to enslavement.

She had presented her thesis proposal to her advisor, one of the most liberal and progressive thinking faculty members at her undergraduate college, however, he found no merit in Ursa’s

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topic. Marshall states that the characterization of the professor was to "make the point that there is a good deal of resistance on the part of even the most liberal whites to admit to some of the positive and even triumphant aspects of the African-American experience in this part of the world."\textsuperscript{21}

Ursa recognized the importance of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, even when she was a child. One of Ursa's first memories, and one that has stayed with her, is that of her mother hoisting her upon her shoulders and urging her to touch the toes of Congo Jane and then the stone feet of Will Cudjoe on the statue that was erected in the Triunion countryside of Morlands. Estelle introduced Ursa to Congo Jane as a part of her history that she should be proud of and as example of what she should strive to emulate as a woman. The history of Congo Jane proved to be an antidote for the untruths that Estelle knew her child would be exposed. The model of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe is not only a model for survival but also a model for relationships and community. Marshall makes it clear that it is necessary for black men and women to look to each other if they are to survive.

In an article entitled "The Ties that Bind," Marshall writes:

Perhaps one of the ways is for us to look back at our history even as we go forward. Because there is much that we can learn from that early slave community. Their commitment to one another, their ability to work together against the common enemy can serve as important models for us today. The sexual equality they practiced can instruct and sustain us as we struggle--Black men and women--to overcome the distrust, faultfinding and

\textsuperscript{21}Marshall, Interview with Darryl Cumber Dance, 6.
stridency that so often mar our attempts at communicating with each other. Their example might help us achieve a more reasonable and productive dialogue.\textsuperscript{22}

The couples in the novel are as parallels to Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe. The early relationship between Ursa's parents demonstrates the effectiveness of men and women working together. PM's political career was aided by Estelle. Their honeymoon was spent on the road, going from village to village, announcing PM's platform. Estelle not only accompanied PM, but also delivered speeches urging support for her husband's political ideas. Estelle believed that she and PM, working together, could have moved mountains. However, their relationship faltered because with the passage of time their political views became more disparate and their relationship was further strained after PM acquired a mistress.

Ursa and Lowell are also hindered from having reasonable and productive dialogue because of forces that they allow to come between them. Viney's relationship with Willis ends because she realizes that Willis is like a parasite, who lived off the ambitions and resources of others. He was not willing to make an effort in his own security and well being. This becomes very clear when Viney ends the relationship. Immediately, Willis finds his next sponsor, a white man in the same building where Viney lives. Viney stipulates that what matters most in life is being useful, to one's self, to one's partner, family, and community:

'The woods are on fire out here', my grand-daddy used to say, 'and we need everybody that can tote a bucket of water to come running.' He used to say that all the time, talking about the situation of Black Folks in this country, you know, and the need for all of us to stand up and be counted. To be useful.23

Marshall presents in Daughters reasons that prevent one from being useful. Ursa is unable to be useful because she has not created an identity apart from that of her father. To be useful, Ursa must free herself from this image and her father's domination over her life. And just as Ursa is unable to proceed with her life because of inner conflicts and the domination of her father, Triunion is basically useless to its residents because it cannot provide them food or sustenance and it continues to be controlled by the West. Triunion's dependency on the West has prevented it from establishing its own identity and plans for its future.

In the last book of the novel, Ursa is able to free herself. When PM runs for re-election, Estelle apprises Ursa of the political situation in Triunion and PM's complicity in plans to turn Government Lands into a tourist resort for the American elite. Estelle asks for Ursa's help in resolving the problem because she is unable to. Ursa carries out Estelle's order and brings about PM's defeat by turning over incriminating documents to PM's opposition. This act causes Ursa great pain but it allows her to complete the abortion that began the novel. Marshall states that "the action taken by Ursa at Estelle's order is designed, not to defeat the PM, but rather to restore him to

23Marshall, Daughters, 102.
his original commitment and values." Before Ursa delivers the documents to PM's opponent, she visits the Monument of Heroes to get the strength she needs to carry out her plans. Once there, she falls on a pile of rock and hurts herself. She later feels pain that wracks her abdominal area, indicating the completion of the abortion and the symbolic release of her father.

The next wave of pain wells up and explodes across her belly, she just lets it take her, simply lets it take her and fling her onto the bed the way a piece of coral caught in a heavy surf is flung onto the beach.

Marshall illustrates that, although colonial slavery has been abolished, there are other forms of slavery that the descendants of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe must fight. Women must free themselves and fight against becoming possessed by the men in their lives. They must have their own vision and truly become equal. The African-American community in the U.S. and the Caribbean must end its parasitic relationship with the West and take control of its destiny. Although Marshall points out the results of negative attachments, she is, nevertheless, an optimistic writer. In Daughters everything comes full circle to suggest hope and optimism. This is evident by the defeat of PM by the younger politician, Justin. Justin resembles PM when he first entered office. Like PM, Justin believes that he can reunite Triunion and make it productive and sever its ties to the United States. Justin and his wife, a woman from Spanish Bay, are representative of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe. They are equal partners who work together towards a common goal. It is only

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25 Marshall, Daughters, 391.
through unity and independence that change can be realized. Justin is wise and knows that it is necessary to unite the best of the past with the best of the present. Instead of dismissing what has gone before, Justin views the past as an integral part of the present and invites PM to join him as senior advisor for his political platform.

The future is also represented by the children in the story. Marshall states:

A good deal of space is given to children in the book. I use them to suggest the future. This is especially true of the boy Robeson and his little friend Dee Dee. They are, for me, the modern day counterparts of Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe—inseparable, supportive of each other, united in times of trouble. Dee Dee with those ever vigilant eyes of hers and her beaded hair in black liberation colors of black, red, and green. Robeson, who stands up to policemen and is "injured," like so many black men have been injured in one way or another in this country.

Marshall envisions hope for the African world community if there is unity. This unity must emanate from the most basic element of the community. Like Congo Jane and Will Cudjoe, African people must stand together and resist the ills of society. In Daughters, like other of Marshall's protagonists, Ursa journeys back to the past in order to create a whole self. She journeys back to Triunion to reclaim a true history and perspective and to eliminate elements of the past that stifled her growth. Marshall illustrates that it is often necessary to make personal sacrifices to aid the larger community. She weaves the past into a very contemporary novel indicating that the past possesses truth that can set us free.

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26 Marshall, Interview with Darryl Cumber Dance, 11.
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