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The Pull to Memory and the Language of Place in Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* and *Praisesong for the Widow*

Merle Kinbona in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* and Avey Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow* reveal subtle, if ultimately optimistic, models of resistance to the insidious, internalized effects of racism and Western acquisitiveness. Written in 1969 and 1983, these two novels weave the spiritual power of a significant place with the psychic lives of the main women characters. In *The Chosen Place*, Bournehills and the surrounding sea provoke both visitors and island dwellers to confront the past, their histories, or be destroyed in the process. In *Praisesong*, the island of Carriacou, off Grenada, offers such a strong psychic pull that Avey deserts her luxury cruise in order to embark on what turns out to be a middle passage in reverse, a spiritual return to her African roots and the ritual healing of a self stunted by years of conformity and acquisition.¹ Both islands are located furthest east among the Caribbean Islands, closest geographically to Africa. These places, with their long and painful histories of slavery and colonialism, manifest both physical and temporal characteristics which seem to demand a kind of settling of accounts. The result is a powerful political viewpoint that Marshall claims explicitly. Of *The Chosen Place*, she writes:

In it there is a conscious attempt to project the view of the future to which I am personally committed. Stated simply it is a view, a vision if you will, which sees the rise through revolutionary struggle of the darker peoples of the world and, as a necessary corollary, the decline and eclipse of America and the West. ("Shaping" 108)

In both explicit and implicit ways, this commitment to the future relies on "a clear and truthful picture of all that has gone before" (107)—the histories and stories and spirit of the Afro American and Afro Caribbean people.

Critics of Marshall's "connective" politics have accused her of formulating a simplistic, arbitrary, or at the very least predictable and heavy-handed spiritual connection between Africa and the Americas (a connection others read as deep, complex, and subtle); some accuse her of promoting an essentialized Blackness that does nothing to help the causes of African Americans. She herself has admitted to being an unabashed ancestor worshipper and has emphasized on numerous occasions the importance of historical roots in Africa. Although some critics have attended to place, none that I have read has made the important connection between place and women's bodies as sites for transformation, resistance, and spirituality. Yet in both novels Marshall spends a great deal of time describing Merle's and Avey's bodies as the sites for radical transformation, not only of the self but of the community as well.

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Although Marshall has said that her “special” audience is “young black women trying to establish a sense of self” (“Little Girl” 21), I believe her broader audience cuts across racial, gender, and class lines. For instance, I expect that *Praisesong*, because it’s about a widow in her sixties, appeals to older women who appreciate the fictional heroine’s maturity and the fact that her transformative journey occurs late in life. For me, the importance of crossing cultural lines in both *Praisesong* and *The Chosen Place* makes them especially relevant not only to my own work as a white scholar deeply concerned about racism, white privilege, and cross-cultural understanding, but also to our need as citizens (and those who aren’t citizens) in this country to live together with dignity and hope. Writing about crossing cultural lines means that I cannot stay cautiously on my “own” turf. Yet I recognize that, for white scholars, “venturing out” is a time-honored tradition full of entitlements and privilege, that academic criticism is tainted by its institutional contexts. As Patricia Hill Collins writes, “Scholars . . . represent specific interests and credentialing processes, and their knowledge claims must satisfy the epistemological and political criteria of the contexts in which they reside” (751). In other words, my experience and training go a long way toward limiting and proscribing my vision; the extent to which I can move beyond received, exclusive knowledge claims to more inclusive understanding is going to depend on my ability to undo at least some of what I have been led to believe is true.

The Chosen Place, The Timeless People

Territory and mobility are fairly apt terms with which to introduce this discussion. Paule Marshall grew up in New York City, making frequent trips to Barbados, where her par-

ents had been raised. Among other things, the language of the Barbadians marked them in ways that separated them from other Blacks² yet helped them to maintain continuity among themselves and develop clout in the larger, predominantly white community. Marshall writes in “Kitchen Talk,” an essay about her mother and her friends’ endless talks around the kitchen table, that those women were counterparts to the Invisible Man; but “given the kind of women they were, they couldn’t tolerate the fact of their invisibility, their powerlessness. And they fought back, using the only weapon at their command: the spoken word” (27). As an “outlet for the tremendous creative energy they possessed,” language became their artistic tool; as artists, her mother and her friends took “the standard English taught them in the primary schools of Barbados and transformed it into an idiom, . . . changing around the syntax and imposing their own rhythm and accent so that the sentences were more pleasing to their ears” (26-27). With language, then, they staked out a territory—literally the kitchen, but more importantly the memories and the imagination that would link the “seen but not heard” Paule in the corner to Barbados. The inseparability of U.S. and Caribbean histories, the tenuousness of the connection, and the tension in people’s lives—these are at the heart of all of Paule Marshall’s novels, and they rise from the page in varied, mutable language. As she says, the women in the kitchen “taught me my first lessons in the narrative art. They trained my ear. They set a standard of excellence” (30).

Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is a story about resistance. It’s also a fascinating treatment of language—spoken and narrative language as well as paralanguage, that way of communicating nonverbally, through the body and through the pace, tone, and volume of speech. But language seems to be the chief complaint about the novel in two different

reviews written in 1970, the year after *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* was published. Nikki Giovanni criticized the novel for being too white and not using Black language or forms.³ Although Giovanni praises the novel for its technical brilliance and closes with the words “we are now taking their novel and making it food for Black thought,” she takes Marshall to task for “the words she refused to use to tell her story” (52). According to Giovanni, knowing what words Marshall didn’t use gives the words she does use a “deeper meaning.”⁴ In another response, West Indian literary scholar Edward Brathwaite claims that the book’s central figure, Merle Kinbona, embodies the novel’s chief flaw because she isn’t West Indian enough. Paule Marshall’s experience, though entailing those kitchen talks as well as other knowledge of Barbados and Barbadians emigrated to New York, is not sufficient to bring Merle to life, according to Brathwaite.

This “not sufficient” interests me, because the perception of Marshall’s “lack” seems to me to be a consequence of limited vision. This doesn’t mean that Giovanni or Brathwaite are wrong (I find their observations helpful in understanding my own), but that they may not be entirely correct. How much experience must one have to write and to read such literature as Paule Marshall’s? Brathwaite shows more admiration in his piece in *Daedalus*, “The African Presence in Caribbean Literature.” Here he identifies four kinds of written African literature in the Caribbean: the rhetorical (whereby the writer “uses Africa as a mask”); the literature of African survival, which deals with African survivals in Caribbean society; the literature of African expression, rooted in folk material; and the literature of reconnection, written by writers “who are consciously reaching out to rebridge the gap with the spiritual heartland” (80–81). As a representative of this last group, Marshall illustrates “unequivocally . . . a recognition of the African

presence in our society not as a static quality but as root—living, creative, and still part of the main” (99).

Attending to several long passages from *The Chosen Place*, Brathwaite notes that Marshall’s method is rhetorical and very successful: “Marshall uses the word, her words, not to say ‘it is so,’ but to say, as the conjuror says, ‘this is how it could/should be.’ So her Bajans become more than Bajans . . . ” (99). Does Merle become “more” as well? More than a “fictional presentation of the middle-class West Indian woman’s predicament”?

Published in 1969, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* takes place on a tiny island in the West Indies, located closer to Africa (like Barbados) than any of the other islands. Bournehills, which Marshall describes as a “microcosm in which can be seen in sharp relief many of the basic problems and conflicts which beset oppressed peoples everywhere” (“Shaping” 111), is the section of the island where the cane workers live. They have been the recipients of several attempts to “elevate” them from their poverty and apparent inertia, but because of “poor planning, the condescending attitude of the people in charge, [and] the failure to include the villagers directly in the process from the beginning,” all attempts have failed (157).⁵ An additional “something apart from the obvious” seems to keep Bournehills from improving, something vague and sensed but never wholly grasped, even by Saul, the leader of the latest, and most promising, attempt.

Saul is an anthropologist and a Jew deeply affected by guilt over the loss of his first wife, who died when she accompanied him to a remote part of the Honduras. Saul is a kind man, a wounded but deeply empathic character. He enters into the work of cutting sugar cane (though he is unable to keep up with the cutters), spends the necessary time getting to know the place and the people, and rather than laying down his own terms for others

to follow, assists the islanders in organizing a collective to reshape the economy. He makes friends with several of the cane cutters and is sincerely fond of them; in turn, they come to love and trust him. It is no surprise, then, that his racist Philadelphia "blue-blooded" wife proves such a disaster. She is frustrated at the failure of her attempts to save the native women and children, and goes as far as to pull strings to have Saul taken from the project after she finds out that he and their landlady, Merle, have been lovers.

Merle Kinbona is a life force among her people; at times she seems eccentric, but she is full of love and passion for justice. She too suffers from her own secret losses: As a child she witnessed the murder of her mother but is unable to remember the murderer's face. As an adult, she has lost contact with her daughter after Merle's husband took her back to Africa with him—after he had learned of a former lesbian affair between Merle and a manipulative white woman. Merle masks her grief with cascades of words, falling periodically into deep depressions from which she cannot be shaken. Merle and Saul open up to each other, offering the healing that seems so impossible for the community at large, and in the end each has helped the other restore confidence, with Saul returning to the States and Merle heading to Africa to reestablish contact with her daughter.

This sketchy outline focuses on Merle and Saul, and offers little about the impressive number of other characters, all of whom Marshall portrays with great tenderness. I am leaving out the amazing Carnival, in which the residents of Bournehills celebrate the revolt of Cuffee Ned against the white slave owners; Cuffee's heroism reminds the residents of their successful resistance in the past and offers

them hope that there will be another who can lead them out. My discussion also says nothing about the final victory in which, despite incredible odds and a back-breaking journey, the residents haul their own cane to the neighboring town when the local capitalists' processing plant breaks down (conveniently just before the residents' own cane can be processed). Of the novel's scope and politics, Hortense Spillers says, "We can expect here no straightforward vindication of various public tastes regarding race, ethos, and gender; no facile condemnation of victors or celebration of victims, but, rather, a staged dialectics of human involvement that will reinvoke, I believe, our best hopes for a New World humanity" (152). While

In Marshall's novels, the significance of the woman's body as a site for political resistance is linked to spirit and place.

Spillers's critique addresses the overall structure of the novel and the interlocking circles of meaning, I am interested here in the particular: the ways in which Merle communicates resistance, not only in her brazen speech, but in her eccentricity, her body language, and her deep association with the island itself.

Merle first appears driving on one of the roads that seems always to be washing away. She steps out of the car, giving the narrator an opportunity to analyze her appearance. Merle wears a dress that looks as if it has been purchased from a West African market, earrings carved in the form of saints from England, heavy silver bracelets that give "a clangorous, unsettling note to her every move"; in fact, Merle "moved always within the ambience of that sound." Her face, "dusted over lightly with talcum powder that gave it a whitish cast," has been "despoiled . . . in much the same way as the worn hills to be seen piled around her." The disjointedness of her appearance, the narrator says, seems to be an attempt

"to reconcile these opposing parts, to make of them a whole" (5). Even her smell is a mixture of bottled scents. Other characters view her with varying degrees of affection, tolerance, and amusement. Nikki Giovanni calls her "half-mad," and other critics as well as residents call her "crazy" and "eccentric."

But there's too much sense of justice in her, too much compassion for these labels. Beyond the eccentricity is a character who is able, as Trudier Harris writes, to adopt the qualities that the hero Cuffee Ned instilled in his people: "Peace, freedom, and the refusal to allow the self to be violated" (66). Her behavior seems eccentric or odd to other characters (or critics) who have clearly defined expectations for how she should behave, but her manner is more accurately identified as a form of resistance. Merle's most prominent characteristic is that she is noisy—her voice, her movements, her jewelry. The way her bracelets jangle is reminiscent of the great, climactic parade and celebration of Cuffee Ned's revolt against the slave holders. Despite other islanders' disdain, the cane workers from the poor side of the island reenact the revolt during the annual carnival, for the white and up-and-coming Black audiences, whose complaints and mutterings are finally silenced; with each "slurred step" of the women and girls, "they would half-raise their arms . . . , causing the heavy silver to fall to their wrists with a stunning clash" (282). Saul at one point jokes to Merle that the bracelets' "'racket is enough to keep the devil himself away'" (319).

In order to illuminate the way Merle's noise works as a form of resistance it may be helpful to back up a moment to look at what Brathwaite says about the effect of an oppressive white language on West Indian residents. Perhaps Brathwaite would argue that Marshall's "too elegant, too white"⁶ language keeps the novel from being truly radical (transformative), despite his assertion that Marshall

"offers and affirms her perception of a way towards the rehabilitation of the West Indian psyche" (183). In his *History of the Voice*, a lecture given at Harvard in 1979, he describes the effect of the educational system, which

recognize[d] and maintain[ed] the language of the conquistador—the language of the planter, the language of the official, the language of the Anglican preacher. . . . In other words, we haven't got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience, whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall. It is that kind of situation that we are in. (8)

Using poems to illustrate the rhythm of the hurricane, which "does not roar in pentameters," he shows the way a language influenced by an African model rather than an English one can ignore the pentameter. This language is called nation language: "English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English" (13). It's interesting to compare Merle's manner of communicating with Brathwaite's description of the sound of nation language: ". . . the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would think of as noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning" (17). Merle's "noisy" manner may link her more closely to nation language; if so, then this particular form of body language resists the oppressors' language of control and conformity. How effective is she? Can a form of resistance be truly transformative if it is unrecognizable as such, if people can just write her off as bizarre or broken, a mere oddity, quaint, part of the charm of the island? These questions are important to understanding Merle, especially the way in which she speaks the language of the island and embodies its history.

In addition to noise, Brathwaite characterizes the "contour, rhythm, and timbre" of nation language as distinctive from standard English. These attributes link Merle to the how of

nation language. When Merle speaks, her voice seems to be in a "downhill race with itself" (11); thus, her pace matches the pace of the island's "wrecked hills that appeared to be racing en masse toward the sea" (99). Sometimes her pace is so rapid that her sense is unintelligible. At other times her voice adopts the "exaggerated island accent she purposely affected" (71). Her voice ranges from shrill to unintelligible—when she is pleased, she "crow[s] her approval" (127). It is no coincidence that her voice can be "pitched to the highdrumming of heat" or the "unremitting whirr of heat rising," for Merle is as much a part of the island as the island is herself; her face is "despoiled . . . in much the same way as the worn hills . . . , their substance taken" (5). Saul notes on two occasions that, in order to get to know the island, he must know Merle first.

Given the identification between Merle and the island, it seems to me that Merle speaks the language of the place itself. She may adopt island speech for her own ironic purposes, but the way Merle communicates—the heat and range and pace of her voice, the effusiveness and inability to hold anything in check except for her secret losses—is the voice of the land and sea itself. Is this merely another association of the land with women's bodies—there to be harvested, profited, raped, tamed, cultured? Is Marshall making an essentialized link between nature and the Black woman? Marshall seems willing, at least on the surface, to mystify Merle's power by linking her to the mysterious power of the island, yet it doesn't feel dishonoring to me. It may be helpful to remember the way in which all of the visitors are pulled, most of them unwillingly, into communion with the island. Saul especially is able to perceive though not to name some universal and deeply spiritual truth about the place. Thus, although the language of the island may belong to Merle, the others are affected by its pull to memory, and Saul is receptive

enough to listen for it and to identify it in Merle.

The thing "sensed" by Saul and dramatized in Merle's nonverbal performances is revealed by the narrator, who identifies the voice of the sea as that of history. The Atlantic side of the island is dangerous, with unpredictable currents and reefs, "with a sound like that of the combined voices of the drowned raised in a loud unceasing lament" (106). These drowned voices of the millions of stolen Africans who drowned before reaching land fill the sea with a "marauding" noise that pushes up boulders like gravestones from the deep. The sea also speaks unceasingly, loudly, over an "ancient wrong it could neither forget nor forgive" (110). This is a sadness so great that neither the land and sea nor the human descendants can escape it. In fact, the novel is the story of their learning how to live with it, to coexist and to embrace it—not to be consumed by it—and to learn as well how to live beyond it.

Clearly, Marshall's work attempts to honor the connection between the Americas and Africa and to view history as key to healing. In Brathwaite's contention that *The Chosen Place* illustrates "the African presence in our society not as a static quality but as root—living, creative, and still part of the main," the key words are *root*, *living*, and *creative*. The sea keeps the memories alive through loud and insistent mourning, followed by a ritual of cleansing and healing. Every year when the sea begins throwing up all manner of seaweed and rotting refuse, the residents say it is cleaning itself and keep their distance. After weeks of dumping, the refuse passes on to fertilizer and the "high-pitched ritual keening" loses some of its hysteria. This ritual parallels Merle's growth from an object of her own scorn to an agent of her own transformation. Merle's "scarcely suppressed hysteria" has also been replaced by a calmer determination. In order to make money for her trip to Africa so that she can reconnect

with her daughter, she sells the earrings and bangles and the rest of her belongings. Even the talcum that seemed "to mute her darkness" is gone, and like the sea she is "unburdened, restored to herself" (463). In preparation for a return to Africa, Merle has divested herself of all the symbols that helped to define her—more to the point, helped her to speak the complex, disjointed, desperate language of history, her own and Bournehills'. In effect, Merle used the symbols of colonization (talcum powder, saint earrings) in an attempt to resist her own colonization; in divesting herself of them she has uncolonized herself.

As Trudier Harris says about Merle's transformation, it is her "commitment to freedom, happiness, and self-determination [that] illustrates her growth toward an ethic based on her folk heritage" (69). When Nikki Giovanni dismisses her transformation as the result of being "fucked by the white woman and the white man" she ignores the vast difference between Harriet (her Philadelphian blue blood) and Saul (his Jewishness so secretly exotic for Harriet). But if my contention is that Merle's manner reveals a living body of resistance, what of the divestment of symbols I mention above? Is she no longer the source of power that her strangeness once made her? I think the answer lies in her confession to Saul that when she comes back from Africa she will go into politics and start a "strictly radical" party. Her noise, her pace will no longer be confined to the body, to be misunderstood as craziness, but will be redirected to more powerful channels so that the change that Bournehills needs may finally come from within, where such decolonization must occur. It's a small admission of her belief in the future, but it is the strongest evidence of her power to learn new ways to resist.

In addition to the language of place that is developed through Merle's affinity with the island, the language and point of view of the narrator are

also revealing. The narrator, although omniscient, speaks with a tentativeness at times, appearing to share the characters' own uncertainty as they try to make sense of perceptions—a "gathering almost suggested a reunion" (109); the poses of a group of old women, tableau-like, "suggested that they had simply appeared out of the darkness" (136); Carrington, Merle's housekeeper, "could have been one of the massed shadows" (110); and so on. This kind of speculation seems to position the narrator as a visitor, yet the narrator also understands both the language of the sea and the deepest, most suppressed memories of the characters. Able to move freely around the island and into characters' minds, the narrator runs the risk of being controlling, all-powerful, and godlike. What happens when, for instance, the narrator sees the black faces of the poor islanders, who have been excluded from a welcoming reception for Saul and the others as "part of the greater blackness of the night" (75); or when a group of old women who view both Merle's and Saul's ideas with scepticism appear like a tableau, as if "they had simply appeared out of the darkness" (136)? In both cases, the darkness of the islanders is determined by the narrator's privileged gaze: They are the "others" who remain apart despite attempts to include them. This mystification of the people would be troubling if the inhabitants themselves didn't have a gaze of their own, one that collaborates with the island's pull to memory: "They saw even farther, [Saul] sensed; their gaze discovering the badly flawed man within and all the things about him which he would gladly have kept hidden." Their gaze may actually be de-mystifying as it pulls out his worst fears about himself: "his deep and abiding dissatisfaction with himself, . . . his large capacity for failing those closest to him, his arrogance, born of that defensive superiority which had been his heritage as a Jew, his selfishness . . . for in everything he did, no matter how selfless it

might appear, he was always after raising his own stock" (137).⁷ The intersection of these two gazes enacts the classic imperialist paradigm: the all-seeing ruler whose power is disrupted at the exact point that the gaze of the specific, localized "other" crosses the controlling line of vision, therefore appropriating it.

I have other questions about the narrator's voice. Why does Marshall present the narrator's descriptions of the island, the people, and the voice of the sea in standard English? Does my position as a white American reader cause me to be overly trustful of the narrator who speaks for the West Indians? What would happen if the language were closer to the dialects of the region, or if it approached nation language, for instance? Giovanni suggests that "the words [Marshall] refused to use to tell her story" would tell a different story, where the message was tougher and truer. If the narrator is a visitor, then she must speak the visitors' language. Marshall is both from the U.S., and therefore a representative of an oppressive culture, and from Barbados, where her sense of self and history are rooted. Her narrator, like Marshall herself, must mediate these two seemingly polarized cultures, must use language that is honest about its oppressor status while at the same time listening beyond the confines of language to the silences and subtler voices of sea, island, and body.

These dimensions of language have a great deal to do with the island's power to make its visitors remember the past, to have it drawn palpably before their eyes. For Allen, Saul's assistant, the island seems to be a "troubled region within himself to which he had unwittingly returned" (100). For Saul, the intensity of the heat causes a hallucinatory double memory in which he is "hurled, blinded, back into his past, into those memories that served as his reference to the world" (166). These are Jewish memories: The first is of his Sephardic mother, whose stories about their family's journey

through South America to the Americas and Caribbean sustain her despite their irrelevance to her husband; the second is of a senile old man who stood outside a candy store, making every day Yom Kippur, "atoning not only for his sins but . . . for those of the world as well" (164-65). The island's penetrating heat has thus ostensibly forced him to draw from his own memories to ask the never-voiced question of Bournehills: "Who would there be to atone for the world now, who to do daily penance for the host of crimes committed by man against man?" (165).

Because Saul is able finally to admit to Merle the story of his personal failure, his first wife's death, and the living heartbreak that refuses to be stilled, Saul is able to make peace with his past. In sharing her own story for the first time as well, Merle, too, begins to heal. Thus, the pull to memory is identical to the body's longing to speak, and the story is like the tide of the sea that pulls and pulls, beckons, argues, demands its telling. Unlike Saul and Merle, Harriet is unable to voice her history or to make peace with her past. She senses from the beginning the island's ominous power to violate her own practiced and very effective denial of the past. Even the plane taking her to Bourne Island "by some perverse plan might have been taking her away from the present . . . back to the past which she had always sought to avoid" (20). Once on the island and interacting with others, small, superficial, but irritating remarks cause memories to seep "in like smoke under the door in her mind she kept bolted against her [mother]" (197). She finally confesses in a letter to her mentor that she has been recalling her past: "It's both puzzling and annoying because you know I was never one to dwell on the past. I suspect it's this place. . . . it seems to have a way of driving you in on yourself and forcing you to remember things you hoped you had forgotten" (236).

As in nation language, where the co-existence of past and present in one phrase shocks the ears of outsiders, the past slips into the present in ways that shock the island's visitors and demand a settling of accounts. We can see the political potential of such a co-existence when we remember that denial and obfuscation of the past serve white interests. Thus, the urgency of reclaiming and re-membering history that Marshall demonstrates applies not only to those whose histories have been denied (read: oppressed peoples) but also to those who have been denied the histories of others (read: "Western," white, heterosexual, male). I believe that the transformative power of Merle's resistance becomes more clear when her methods (and what exactly it is that she is resisting) are compared to Harriet's. If Merle speaks a language that is noisy and highly visible, and holds somehow in her body the history of the place, then the form of language that reveals Harriet's inability to embrace her past or to understand political resistance (as Saul is able to) is silent, tactile, and felt internally rather than witnessed by others.

Both Harriet and Merle have white ancestors who grew wealthy on the cane grown on Bourne Island; both express a certain denial of their responsibility in past actions. What makes Harriet so dangerous is the intensity of her denial and the refusal—or inability—to recognize her own racism. These are expressed through tactile feelings, particularly at the hands of Lyle Hutson, Harriet's Black-racist counterpart. Although he is the son of an obscure village tailor, he became a Bourne Island scholar, went to England, at one time was Merle's lover, and under her influence a bit of a radical. But upon his return and marriage into the famous Vaughan family—to which Merle is related, and which is descended from a white planter who sired, supposedly, more than forty children by Black women slaves—he began to speak of moderation instead

of revolution. Now a comfortable lawyer, very much living on the "right" side of the island, Lyle has the temerity (from Harriet's perspective) to touch her in ways that are both sexual and for her deeply marked by his Blackness.

Marshall uses darkness, or blackness, to explore Harriet's experience with race (including whiteness) and her denial of its tangible effects on her life. On Harriet's first evening there, when Lyle touches her arm to detain her after she has decided to retire, she has a vague feeling that it was not his hand at all "but rather some dark and unknown part of herself which had suddenly, for the first time ever, surfaced, appearing like stigmata or an ugly black-and-blue mark at the place he had touched" (97). There are surely many layers of meaning in her reaction to his touch, which haunts her throughout the book, but I think the coexistence of Lyle's success, power, and darkness unnerves Harriet—especially because they are so alike in their smugness and snobbery as well as in their manipulations of others. Although her ministrations to the many other, poor Black islanders necessitate her touching and being touched by Black bodies, it is only Lyle's touch that sends a shock to her unconscious. Because the others are below her—she can see that, could number the ways—their touch is never a threat. Her carefully masked disgust for Black skin is unveiled several times—for instance, when she suddenly remembers Alberta, her former maid, who had been turned black, she thought as a child, because of some sin Alberta had committed when she was little.

Her equation of black with evil and her fear that she herself is black within reveal how uneasy her sense of whiteness is, how entangled it is in histories of oppression. The more her past intrudes upon her, the more her fear of darkness surfaces, particularly during times of crisis. For instance, in the closing scene, Saul finds out that she has

written to her mentor to have Saul pulled from the development project in Bournehills, with the outcome that the project will falter and the islanders will suffer. After Saul has told her it is over between them and she realizes in a rush of memories how implicated her family is in the imperialist project on Bournehills, she thinks again of Lyle's touch: "... the same dark splotch like an ugly bruise or one of the Rorschach inkblots that would reveal her, surging to the surface" (458). This time, however, the stain does not stay in one place but spreads across her entire body, forcing her through the sensation of touch to see how power-hungry her own machinations have been, not only with Saul, but also with her first husband Andrew, a leading nuclear scientist. She realizes what her recurring nightmare has been trying to tell her. In the dream, Andrew's hand rests on the lever that will trigger a massive holocaust, but it is her hand that rests over his and guides it. The overlay of memories is so powerful that the stain spreads to cover her entire body, symbolizing the extent of her moral culpability. It also marks the end of denial. She can no longer deny her "complicity in the destruction planned, and the feelings of guilt and horror at herself which she had sought to flee by leaving [Andrew]," later to replace him with Saul. When she walks down to the angry, grieving sea, the "massive detonation set off by the breakers on the reefs" brings the atomic nightmare to life, and Harriet enters the sea as "the spray rising in the dazzling white toadstool of a cloud" symbolizes her will to destroy (459).

Unable to accept her past—that she had perhaps ruined both of her husbands as she sought power for herself, that her attempts to "save" the natives represented a foolish desire to be placed on a pedestal, that she deserved whatever scorn or hatred Saul in the end felt for her—Harriet commits suicide. Unlike Merle, who grows from self-absorption to acceptance of her failings to a stronger self better able to

serve the people she loves, Harriet regresses, from one crisis to the next. The key figure in both their lives, Saul, seems less the stimulus of their growth or regression than a mirror. Through reciprocal talk and the gradual building of trust, Merle takes strength from him in order to reconcile her losses and her love of Bournehills, and to take positive action. Harriet, on the other hand, manipulates Saul's life in both subtle and bold ways in order to perpetuate her position of power and privilege, while denying her family's role in making the cane workers' lives miserable. Harriet thus loses the strength she thought she had and sees finally that the numbness in her hands—the feeling that they are empty even as they hold onto things—is the sensation of emptiness: She has emptied herself.

Through the use of subtle forms of language, Paule Marshall demonstrates that resistance works at many levels, beyond the spoken word, but ultimately comes from a place that controls—or a body that reveals—the process. Merle's actions, the style of her dress, and the volume and pace of her speech reveal a mode of resistance that embraces place and history, and is in fact inseparable from them. Conversely, for Harriet, for whom skin represents the whole, touch expresses the limits and extent of racist denial and self-awareness. Even the island is a place fully engaged in enacting history and resisting outsiders' definitions of progress, as the narrator's location and language help to demonstrate. The success of the characters to understand or accomplish resistance has to do with their ability to take responsibility for their past and all the painful reckonings it brings up. Celebration involves evoking the power of the past, as in the Cuffee Ned Revolt, re-enacted every year and reminding the residents of the ethics of "peace, freedom, and the refusal to allow the self to be violated" (Harris 66). Controlling behavior such as Harriet's, on the other hand, is a colonizing enterprise. On Bourne Island, with its relentless voices from the past,

such control of the past, of other people, results in death.

Praisesong for the Widow

In *Praisesong for the Widow*, published in 1983, Marshall emphasizes the importance of place in two interrelated ways: First, Carriacou locates the forces of memory, history, and the spirit, channeling them in order to reclaim the widow, Avey Johnson, from despair and alienation from her ancestors; second, Avey's body becomes the site for her own transformation. Sabine Bröck notes that, in her journey from one place to another, Avey is carried "through places charged with an almost religious atmosphere and symbolic weight" (88). This is true whether Avey is remembering important instances of ritual—forgotten during the intervening years of adulthood, marriage, and widowhood—or moving from location to location, ever closer to Carriacou, in alternating states of desperation, somnambulism, and cautious curiosity.

Briefly, the story is this: Avey is a middle-class widow who has been going on extravagant cruises once a year with two friends. This year she develops such a strong urge to return home that she abandons her friends in order to land on a small island in the Caribbean so that she can fly home. Although it seems inexplicable to her at the time, her unease is deep-rooted and directly caused by her proximity to Carriacou, a tiny island where an annual celebration to honor the Old People is underway. She is haunted by a dream of her Aunt Cuney, whom she hasn't thought of for years, but who used to take her as a child to The Landing. There, Aunt Cuney would tell her the story of how the Ibos, brought from Africa to be slaves, had disembarked, looked around, seen what was intended for them, then turned and walked back across the water to Africa. Unable to understand

the appearance of Aunt Cuney in her dreams after so many years, and unwilling to go with her, Avey attacks her. Surprisingly strong and insistent, Aunt Cuney fights back, and they have a raging fight with the whole white community watching. The dream is itself triggered by the sound of the islanders speaking the Patois that her old Aunt Cuney used to speak; the dream pulls her back into the past, calling forth memories that she resists just as she tries to fight off Aunt Cuney.⁸

Aside from a recurring feeling of bloatedness and nausea whenever she is faced with opulence, which is plentiful on board the ship, the memory evokes a desperation that leads her, in "The Sleeper's Wake," to relive her years with her husband Jay—her jealousy and his drive to succeed, and their mutual, though silent, agreement to forget their connections to the past in order to forge ahead into middle-class comfort and complacency. The effort kills Jay, and now it seems about to kill Avey. Thus, the chapter title refers doubly to a wake of memories for her dead husband—her beloved Jay, not the man he became, the Jerome who had lost Jay's humor, had become instead "unsparing, puritanical" (132)—as well as to an awakening for Avey. Significantly, these memories of Jay and of her own collusion in their conspiracy to forget are located in exquisitely detailed descriptions of her home on Halsey Street, which Bröck recognizes as "the tiny, narrow apartment, five flights up, in a decaying street of a neighborhood such as Brooklyn, the usual physical space the majority of Afro-American women occupy even today." This attention, as Bröck explains, is a "striking example of a language that contains in every phrase the female gaze on even the minutest detail" (87).⁹ After the long memory-dream, when she rises in the morning in the extravagant hotel where she has spent the night, Avey takes a long, dream-like walk along the ocean, missing the opportunity to catch the plane home and finding, again

seemingly by chance, an old man who will act as her guide for the remainder of the story. She is fainting from heat when she sees Lebert Joseph's small rum shop, stumbles in, and is offered a drink. Eventually she tells him of her dream, and he convinces her to go with him to the celebration on Carriacou. Inexplicably, she agrees.

The final stage of Avey's spiritual healing includes an embarrassing but transformative purging of her body's waste, a laying on of hands by Lebert's daughter, and finally participation in the "Beg Pardon." This celebration consists of different dances, first the Beg Pardon, the ancestors' yearly tribute to the Old People, then the "nation" dances, different for each of the groups descended from original Africans, and finally a closing group dance. Surprised again, Avey notes the numerous similarities between what's going on here and what happened in her own experience in Tatem, where she grew up: the method of dancing with the soles of her feet always on the ground, the power of music to bring joy and to heal, the Patois, even a washtub—the last third of the book is really a series of recognitions despite all the apparent cultural differences between her assimilated, past-denying life and this celebratory ritual of connection and memory. Clearly, Brathwaite is correct in referring to Marshall's work as a "literature of reconnection." In this book—unless one wants to explain the sudden twists and turns of Avey's actions as chance (or an authorial heavy-handedness) and the intensity of her dis-ease as psychosomatic—what pulls Avey off the cruise and out of her lethargy is a spiritual and historical force resonating from the place itself, Carriacou. And like Bourne Island, which pulls the past out of its visitors and feels like a "troubled region" (100) within, Carriacou seems to Avey as "more a mirage . . . than an actual place. Something conjured up perhaps to satisfy a longing and need" (254). Thus Bourne Island and Carriacou are simul-

taneously physical places on the globe and embodiments of human drives and needs.¹⁰

Velma Pollard, who has written about the cultural connections in this book, says that "the novel celebrates a triumph in the removal of layer after layer of cultural overlay to expose a being that finds an important core which she had lost" (297). Is the "core" Avey's conscious recognition and honoring of the "Old People," of her own past and her people's past? Is the core a mystical, spiritual connection with Africa? Pollard notes that Marshall's emphasis on Lebert's physical appearance "makes him the Dahomean god who puts man/woman in touch with the other gods, [and who] opens an entire pantheon" (290). Abena P. A. Busia makes the connection more explicit: In Afro-Caribbean practice, Legba is the name for "the lame god of crossroads. It is he who acts as the widow's guide, leading her back, at this crossroads in her life, to those ancestors whose spirits she has neglected or sacrificed, in order to move her onward" (204). Together, as Barbara Christian notes, Lebert and Aunt Cuney are her spiritual father and mother. Christian applauds Marshall for insisting that "New World black rituals are living and functional," that they express the essential African truth "that beyond rationality, the body and spirit must not be split" (83).

For readers unaware of African cosmology, these observations, admittedly general, are helpful. In addition to revealing the importance of storytelling (a tradition that Aunt Cuney insists Avey—"Avatara"—must continue), the link between body and spirit, and the reverence for "living" ancestors, Marshall demonstrates the belief of many "African peoples . . . [that] there are no distinct boundaries between the sacred and profane. . . . all reality [is] potentially sacred" (Reyes 185). Marshall demonstrates that small, loving rituals are necessary for psychic health:

They were things which would have counted for little in the world's eye. To

an outsider, some of them would even appear ridiculous, childish, cullud. Two grown people holding a pretend dance in their living room! And spending their Sunday mornings listening to gospels and reciting fragments of old poems while eating coffee cake! A ride on a Jim Crow bus each summer to visit the site of an unrecorded, uncannonized miracle [the slave story of Ibo's Landing]! (136)

These rituals speak "from the blood . . . an ethos they held in common, [which] had reached back beyond her life and beyond Jay's to join them to the vast unknown lineage that made their being possible" (137). Although this passage can be read as essentializing (culture is carried in the blood), I think it's more accurate to focus on the way the loss of loving ritual represents a separation from a lineage that depends on the memories and stories of subsequent generations.

Similarly, I think that Darryl Pinckney is underestimating Marshall when he claims that she equates the drive for success with a dangerous obliteration of the past. In his review in *New York Review of Books* Pinckney criticizes Marshall's writing for being "a kind of overcompensation. Paule Marshall has throughout her work pitted a mystical, lyrical African past against the evils of the West." As he sees it, Marshall's distortions result from "not only a simplistic view of culture but also a simplistic idea of [women's] strength"; ultimately her "manipulation of reality . . . causes us to mistrust it" (30). Despite what Marshall says about the overthrow of America and the West,¹¹ I don't think Marshall's portrayal of capitalism is a simplistic rendering of Western evils.¹² Marshall argues for a concurrent striving to improve one's "station" in life and holding onto memories, rituals, stories, and spirit, as is evident when Avey wonders if she and Jay couldn't have fought for better conditions for themselves and their children, while "preserving, safeguarding, treasuring those things that had come down to them over the generations, which had defined them in a particular way"

(139). The solution, Avey realizes after she awakens from the dream-memory, would have required:

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 would either 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. To take only what was needed and to run. And distance. Above all, a certain distance of the mind and heart had been essential. . . .

Too much! What kind of bargain had they struck? How much had they foolishly handed over in exchange for the things they had gained?—an exchange they could have avoided altogether had they been on their guard! (139-40)

They have "sold their souls," as it were, for success, which is for Avey tied to white mainstream culture, symbolized in their move from dingy Halsey Street to North White Plains—a move toward whiteness, a levelness or plateau that bespeaks conformity. Avey's subconscious understanding of this is apparent when she starts to feel ill on her luxury cruise. At first impressed ("awestruck," "reverent") with "all that dazzling white steel," as soon as they are near the island of Carriacou, any image or mention of anything opulent, excessive, rich, or "white" causes the "mysterious clogged and swollen feeling," "the odd discomfort," the "vaguely bloated feeling" that leads to hallucinations of dead and murdered white passengers on the cruise (15, 52).

What happens to Avey's body parallels her diving into her past and reliving her life with Jay; it allows her to confront what had been repressed. As she accepts greater truths about herself, Jay, and their life together, the waste—wasted years, intimacy wasted on the drive for success—passes through her. By the end she recognizes that she must take her place as the "culture-bearer"¹³ who will pass on Aunt Cuney's ritual storytelling and keep

alive the ancestors' memories. This is certainly a spiritual awakening, but until the end, she remains an initiate: Her steps in the dance are first timid, then familiar, and finally strong. The novel ends with plans for the future.

Avey's body has been the site of other processes as well. During the days when Jay and Avey were still "alive," intercourse with Avey became for Jay a spiritual experience. Poised at the entrance of her vagina, Jay can sense "the invisible forms of the deities who reside there . . . Jay might have felt himself surrounded by a pantheon of the most ancient deities who had made their temple the tunneled darkness of his wife's flesh" (127). If the deities, both male and female, reside in the Black woman's flesh, then within the heterosexual domain that is explored in this book and considering there is at this point no suggestion that Avey herself somehow has access to their powers, her body is at this point a location for mystical revelations that seem to benefit Jay more than Avey.

This mystical worshipping of the vagina is troublesome. Marshall does something similar in *The Chosen Place*, when Saul senses that in order to know Bournehills he must know Merle, "in the old Biblical sense, the way" (260). Perhaps, as Keith Sandiford says, at this period in their life "Jay thought of Avey in images that were unambiguously African . . . [and] made of her body a sacred icon, a temple wherein ancient deities resided" (379). If so, her body hardly seems her own; rather, it appears to be a medium for Jay's fantasies about Africa, scarcely different from his admiration for her "Bantu butt."

Giulia Scarpa notes that, during the period when Avey is pregnant and caring for her children, she "is blamed for her fecundity; she is confined to madness by her pregnancy. The man is expected to fulfill her growing needs for a better living, and is blamed for his impotence in providing it" (98). Blaming the woman for feeling trapped by motherhood and for "tearing down

her man," blaming the Black man for failing to strike it rich in the white business district—these stories, repeated and hardened into policy, have pathologized the Black family. "The only defense possible," according to Sandiford, "is one coherent with [Marshall's] mythic scheme." Because Jay lived "too entirely in the illusion of self-sufficiency . . . he brought to the urban habitat no effective guardianship of his family's living dead to recall him from the barrenness of the plains to the enchantment of the woods" (384).¹⁴ In other words, he has made the same mistake Avey makes; the difference is that she survives to redirect her life.

Fortunately, Avey's sexuality is not left to Jay or to days gone by. The orgasmic moment comes after she has been so seasick, when Rosalie Parvay (Lebert Joseph's daughter) brings her back from humiliation with a "laying on of hands." Although it is described in conjunction with memories of Jay's sexual excitement, Avey's orgasm represents a new sexuality, one that is not framed as a masculine Afrocentric fantasy—this time the sexual arousal is hers alone:

Avey Johnson became aware of a faint stinging as happens in a limb that's fallen asleep once it's roused, and a warmth could be felt as if the blood there had been at a standstill, but was now tentatively getting under way again. And this warmth and the faint stinging reached up the entire length of her thighs. . . . When, when was the last time she had felt even the slightest stirring there? (Just take it from me! Jerome Johnson used to say.) The warmth, the stinging sensation that was both pleasure and pain passed up through the emptiness at her center. . . . All the tendons, nerves and muscles which strung her together had been struck a powerful chord, and the reverberation could be heard in the remotest corners of her body. (223-24)

Marshall's treatment of Avey's body as figuring the potential for madness (when she is pregnant and becomes the jealous, raging bitch that both she and Jay fear), a temple for worship, a site for rites of passage, and finally an intensely personal resource is very different from her treatment of the

bodies of Aunt Cuney and Lebert Joseph—their bodies depend on Avey for definition. In her early dreams, Aunt Cuney is silent, as though “her voice, unlike her body, had . . . not been able to outfox the grave” (41). She beckons to Avey through gesture, using her body “to bridge the distance between them” (42). When she fails to convince Avey to come with her, she charges toward her like an “August storm” and fastens onto Avey’s wrist, her hand like “a manacle” (43). As a ghost or spirit, Aunt Cuney has to shake Avey up in order to force her to get off the ship and onto the island where she can be turned over to Lebert Joseph. As a force, strong enough to battle Avey, tear her stylish stole from her shoulders, clamp onto her and humiliate her in front of the white community, Aunt Cuney’s memory can also get inside her stomach and cause all the uneasiness that leads Avey to Lebert Joseph. In this instance, the site for passing on culture and survival is the woman’s body: It is Avey’s body that undergoes the rites of passage; it is she who is haunted by Aunt Cuney and drawn to Lebert Joseph. Although he is a repository of cultural wisdom, it is Avey who must go forth, return to her home, pass on his and Aunt Cuney’s wisdom . . . accepting Aunt Cuney’s role as teacher of children. In the closing scene, at the dance, the “pa’doné mwe,” Aunt Cuney appears beside her for a moment in the body of a big-boned maid, more like a patient observer than a fierce guide.

Lebert Joseph’s body, more than Aunt Cuney’s physical force against Avey’s stubborn will, changes shape and agility even more repeatedly. Is he an infirm old man? A spirit? Sometimes he moves swiftly and appears taller, at other times quite shriveled. Although these changes occur from the beginning of Avey’s acquaintance with him, in the last scene, the “beg pardon,” he is in supreme form:

He was an indefatigable host, appearing to be everywhere at once. . . . Wasn’t she tired just sitting and

would maybe like to take a turn out on the floor?—this with a sly smile, his head performing a trickster’s dance. . . . Out of the stooped and winnowed body had come the illusion of height, femininity and power. Even his foreshortened left leg had appeared to straighten itself out and grow longer as he danced. (242–43)

Corresponding to Papa Legba in Haiti, as well as other spirits in other parts of the country, Lebert Joseph is the mythic deity Legba. He is

personified by an irascible old man who usually carries a cane and limps. One leg is shorter than the other because part of him is in the spirit world and part of him moves in the world of the living. In some instances, he manifests both female and male energy. . . . In the context of *Praisesong*, Marshall employs Lebert/Legba to further the ritual structure of the novel: he becomes the messenger, the interpreter, leading the central character further along her journey . . . [He] knows that Avey Johnson is one of the people who has lost sight of her spiritual “nation” and needs to be reincorporated. (Reyes 190)

Just as his body demonstrates his place in the order of things, so does Aunt Cuney’s body reveal her role as the force of memory.

Avey’s body is the center of attention, however. Since this novel is so much about what happens to Avey’s body as well as her spirit—Christian talks about the importance in African ritual of the concept that the spirit and body are one—I think it’s interesting that Marshall has chosen Avey’s lip as a recurring physical trait. In her description of Avey frantically packing to leave the cruise, Avey’s determination is revealed in her “underlip jutting forward, exposing the spillover of raw pink across the top which she always kept hidden” (10). This “leakage” of what’s inside, normally protected by Avey’s vigilance, recurs. In fact, just a few pages later Marshall reveals that the Avey of forty years ago showed her displeasure more easily, “her bottom lip immediately unfolding to bare the menacing sliver of pink” before she unleashed a torrent of words (14). The control (assimilation) that Avey has

learned is located in this fold of flesh. When her fellow traveler, Clarice, chews her out for deserting them, the lip becomes a "knife edge of raw pink," and later Clarice notices the "no-non-sense edging of pink she had never seen before" and wonders if there is more beneath Avey's controlled exterior than she had ever imagined (24, 62). And Avey herself, gazing at her own reflection in the mirror, notes "the composed face with its folded-in lip and carefully barred gaze" (48). In the closing celebration dance on Carriacou she withdraws from the circle and leans against the tree, watching, and again her lip is a "menacing sliver of pink" (247).

This control of the pink edge suggests an attention on Marshall's part to the dangerousness of that pink inside. I am reminded of Harriet's musing in *The Chosen Place*, when she is about to attempt to pay Merle to leave Saul alone and notices "the darker line where the skin met in a natural crease . . . [and her] totally unaesthetic throat with its powdery remains" (440). For her, blackness is still what it was when she was a child and imagined her maid was black as a punishment for something the maid had done as a child. But in *Praisesong* the line between pink and black is not the site for a white woman's racist imaginings but for a Black woman's self-expression, whether it is containment or symbol of a "menacing" power within. In that closing scene when she is so near to joining the dance herself, the lip remains menacing, with no transformation or redefinition of that pink edge. Why is it still "menacing" rather than contemplative, for instance? One way to understand the menace is as a subconscious indication of her struggling resistance to enter full-bodied into the celebration and all it represents. Another, perhaps more persuasive, interpretation is that the menace is simply part of who she is. Now that she has been brought into the fold, so to speak, Avey can be menacing in a new way: not defensive, not because of

denial, but like Cuney, a fighting culture-bearer.

A final metaphor of the body: Emanating from the center of Avey's belly, silken threads confirm the theme of connection. The threads are a source of great power and connection with others: First experienced as a child and "streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was," the hundreds of slender threads would enter others' bodies, and then they would seem to come not from her but from the others. Invisible yet strong as lifelines, the threads would allow her to swim the Hudson and not worry, for if there were danger the people on shore would simply pull her in. During these very spiritual moments in which she is both alone in her sensing and connected to all those around her, "she became part of, indeed the center of, a huge wide confraternity" (191).

Along with all the other neglected memories and her sense of continuity with her own people, Avey has also forgotten the sensation of these threads. Only after she joins in the last dance, does she again feel the "myriad of shiny, silken, brightly colored threads" (248-49). The threads stream out from the eyes, navels, and hearts of the old people and, entering her, speak of possibility and hope. With this kind of communication, emanating so eloquently from the body, all sorts of connections and re-connections are possible.

Conclusion

In these novels, the significance of the woman's body as a site for political resistance is linked to spirit and place. In *The Chosen Place* Merle is elementally identified with the land: Both land and woman are ravaged by the effects of colonialism; her spirit is imbued with the spirit of the place (to know the island Saul must know her first). If her behavior is odd or self-indulgent, as Spillers claims, then it is because she is in the process of becom-

ing, just as the sea around Bourne Island undergoes its own ritual cleansing, continually processing rage and grief. The connection between human and geographical “natures,” Spillers notes—in regard to a description of the sea speaking with the voices of the millions of drowned Africans—is not a facile use of pathetic fallacy, but a dialectic display “analogous to the perspective between the synchronic and diachronic axes of time” (158). Merle demonstrates the importance of merging past and present, of balancing the new with the old. What Spillers says of the use of time and place is true of her as well: “Marshall does not mean that Bournehills is stuck . . . in its history of betrayal and oppression, but that the scene against which it enacts and reenacts its history has been decided by origins that must be appeased, at least recognized and named out loud” (158). Using circles—of time, myth, history, ritual, and ontology—Spillers demonstrates the structure of meaning in *The Chosen Place*. History is not linear; being is not fixed; myth and ritual are not separate.

The same can be said about *Praisesong*. The threads that emanate

from Avey’s belly and from the bodies of that “wide confraternity” offer another way of visualizing and understanding Spillers’s circles. The threads are the living link between the living and the dead, between people separated by distance or culture or heritage, between self and other. Through the rituals (the particular way of dancing the Beg Pardon, of loving a partner) and the myths (the Ibos Landing every bit as valid and important as Christ’s walking on the water), Avey can take her place in history, become the “culture bearer” that will link her to the future. Thus she “stands for a message, not ‘just’ for herself” (Bröck 88).

Whether conceptualized as threads or as circles, the central theme of these novels is connection: Africa and the Caribbean; present and past; memory and future; self and other; place and spirit. At the end of both novels, the women make plans for returning to their homes in order to serve their communities in new, progressive ways; thus, their transformations from colonized objects of their own self-hatred to active subjects of their own creation become an analog for their community’s healing as well.

Notes

1. Quite a bit has been written about Marshall’s critique of materialism in *Praisesong*. See, for instance, Reyes, who identifies the chief issues through the metaphors of El Dorado and the Middle Passage; she also offers a good background for many of the African referents in the novel. For two other good analyses of class, see Scarpa and Sandiford. Sandiford’s paper is especially good, as it offers the most thorough analysis I have seen about the circles of history and myth, which he borrows from Hortense Spillers’s article about *The Chosen Place*.

2. This experience with language is explored in Marshall’s *Brown Girl, Brownstones*.

3. I was alerted to Nikki Giovanni’s response after reading Barbara Christian’s “The Race for Theory,” in which she takes exception to Giovanni’s criticism of *The Chosen Place*, saying that Giovanni “criticized the novel on the grounds that it was not black, for the language was too elegant, too white. . . . Having come from the West Indies where we do, some of the time, speak that way, I was amazed by the narrowness of her vision” (341).

4. The polemical first half of the review does not even mention Marshall’s book, but opens with the claim that “the weather is a literary form,” suggesting that certain literary forms belong to certain places (like certain weather conditions), a fair enough claim until Giovanni leaps to her rationale for why the novel is not a Black form. Marshall’s very attempt to write a novel is a kind of sell-out. Giovanni closes with the sarcastic parting shot that the “sheer emotion of *The Chosen Place* can be ‘whelming.’ To say overwhelming would be to put an onus on the book, and there is no such word as ‘underwhelming’ (though some things do ‘underwhelm’ us)” (84). In other words, despite technical brilliance, the cost of standard English is a yawning book not Black enough.

5. As Arturo Escobar has demonstrated, development projects “embody the belief that social change can be engineered and directed, produced at will. Development experts have always entertained the idea that poor countries can more or less smoothly move along the path of progress through planning. . . . the narratives of planning and management, always presented as ‘rational’ and

'objective,' are essential to developers. In this narrative, peasants appear as the half-human, half-cultured benchmark against which the Euro-American world measures its achievements. . . . The result is that . . . even the most remote communities in the Third World are torn apart from their local context and redefined as 'resources' " (194).

6. This is Christian paraphrasing Giovanni.

7. Such a portrayal of a Jewish man raises serious questions about anti-Semitism. Is Marshall suggesting that his drive to improve "his own stock" derives from his Jewish "nature"? Is it inevitable that, as a Jew, he be guilty of a "defensive superiority"? Considering the number of other characters who are motivated by ambition and convictions of their own superiority, Marshall is certainly fingering the imperialist mind—a free-market mentality, the absence of a moral base. Although this description seems decidedly anti-Semitic, the overall picture does not. He too is "othered"—for instance by his own wife, who finds his Jewishness exotic—and he is able to both recognize and set aside his (Western) ambition and (white) privilege in order to listen and to sense the imperialist forces at work. At any rate, although (and perhaps because) he struggles with his identity, his sensibilities and Merle's are similar.

8. Ann Armstrong Scarboro notes that "flashbacks and dreams actually make up more than a third of the book" (30).

9. Bröck notes and agrees with Barbara Christian's admiration for this section as "the best prose" in the novel (87).

10. Although place probably tends to reflect the nature of the people who have made it their home (how often have the aged faces of American Indians been likened to the land they love?), I have not encountered other literary works in which place is imbued with such agency as in these two novels.

11. I am referring to the quotation I cited at the beginning of this chapter, regarding Marshall's comments about her view of the future: "Stated simply it is a view, a vision if you will, which sees the rise through revolutionary struggle of the darker peoples of the world and, as a necessary corollary, the decline and eclipse of America and the West" ("Shaping " 108).

12. As Angelita Reyes argues, "Certainly, Marshall and Morrison do not reject economic progress. The problem is to reach and maintain a compromise between material excess and spiritual propriety" (181). Sabine Bröck would surely agree. She argues that Marshall develops a Black, middle-class context "without either uncritically promoting upward mobility or romanticizing poverty, and without dramatizing a protagonist's defeat in isolated spaces" (88).

13. Reyes uses this term for Aunt Cuney, borrowing it from Stepto. As she notes (quoting Stepto), important values are "primarily sustained through the culture-bearer of the community, that is to say, the woman who is not necessarily a biological parent, but a 'sort of umbrella figure, a culture-bearer in that community with not just her children but all children' " (182).

14. The "living dead" refers to the African understanding of a period of time, "sasa," lasting several generations after one's death, during which the dead are considered to be the living dead, inhabiting the community with the living.

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