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Paule Marshall Reimagining Caliban and Prospero in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*

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A confident audacity—the courageous determination to calmly write out of her deep knowing, even (perhaps especially) when she seemed ahead of her time—has been characteristic of Paule Marshall throughout her career as a novelist. This commitment is evident in *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People*, a novel distinctive among those written by African American novelists in the late 1960s. Raised in Brooklyn and Barbados, Marshall merges aspects of both the Caribbean and African American literary traditions in this, her second novel. Set in contemporary time and in actual and symbolic Caribbean space, *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People* is an epic of the black Atlantic. Central to the novel is an historically grounded examination of the possibilities and perils facing Bourne Island, a newly independent Caribbean postcolonial nation. Marshall has observed that critics typically want to categorize her as either African American or Caribbean; however, she consistently describes herself as “a writer who comes out of a dual tradition and who tries to honor both in her work” (Graulich and Sisco, 147). In an interview with Daryl Dance, Marshall declared “I don’t make any distinction between African-American and West Indian. All o’ we is one as far as I’m concerned. And I myself, am both” (6). Given this self-definition, it is not surprising that a unifying purpose of Marshall’s body of work has been developing diasporic consciousness, creating awareness of and representing the connections between New World peoples of African descent. Marshall describes herself as a writer who is intent on establishing “bridges:” “I like to think of myself, my work—especially my work—as a kind of bridge that joins the great wings of the black diaspora in this part of the world.” In fact, she concludes, “perhaps there is a certain advantage in being neither fish nor fowl”; it is a perspective that gives me a unique angle from which to view the two communities” and also provides a “certain objectivity and beneficial distancing” (Dance 12).

Marshall places her narrative of the imaginary postcolonial Caribbean nation of Bourne Island and her depiction of individual characters within the encompassing geographical and historical frame of the Atlantic slave trade and its legacy. Representations of the Atlantic Ocean as site of the Middle Passage are introduced early and are referenced throughout the novel. In her memoir, *Triangular Road* (2009), Marshall explains that she intended *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People* to be “something of a historical novel. . . It would be set in the present, the characters would be modern-day folk of various races and backgrounds, yet their lives, their situations, their relationships, their thinking and politics would reflect the past four-hundred-year history of the hemisphere and its continuing impact on them” (Marshall, *Triangular Road* 126). Marshall uses the metonymic characters of Saul Amron, Harriet Shippen, and Merle Kinbona in her exploration of issues of ancestry and destiny as they play out on Bourne Island, once a British colony and an essential link in the triangular trade. Now nominally independent, much of the island is still owned by the British-based Kingsley sugar company. In

this novel, Marshall is concerned with what the future holds for former plantation colonies like Bourne Island, and what future relationships are possible between the descendants of the enslaved and the descendants of the enslavers. In considering the future, she first establishes the necessity of examining how this history of colonial exploitation, slavery, and the Atlantic slave trade manifests within and impacts her characters. *Chosen Place* is Marshall's most Caribbean novel; for while it did not match dominant trends in African American literature, it shared a number of the concerns of Caribbean novels of the 1960s and 1970s.¹ Among these shared thematic concerns are a representation of the subjugated history of slave revolts and black resistance, a focus on subaltern subjects, a concern with the challenges faced by postcolonial Caribbean nations, and most innovatively, Marshall's appropriation of the Prospero/Caliban trope to represent relationships between colonizer and colonized women.

It is important that we recognize and acknowledge Marshall's feminist audacity in appropriating and engendering these figures for her novel. Rob Nixon observes that the "years 1968 through 1971 saw the cresting of Caribbean and African interest in *The Tempest* as a succession of essayists, novelists, poets, and dramatists sought to integrate the play into the cultural forces pitted against colonialism" (573). When she discusses *Chosen Place*, Marshall does not explicitly refer to Prospero and Caliban. Rather she invokes that dynamic in her depictions of the relationships between Merle and the wealthy English woman who "kept" her while she was a student in England and ultimately in the relationship between Merle and Harriet. Marshall does not address the absence of black women in Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*. This discussion comes later. From Sylvia Wynter's analysis of the absence of Caliban's woman to black women writers defining themselves as "daughters of Caliban" and "heirs of Sycorax," black women now insert themselves into this discourse, claiming space they have been

¹ In the United States, the Black Arts Movement was at its height; the focus was often insular, foregrounding the impact of white supremacist systems on black people within the United States. Barbara Christian observes that the "popular genres of the black movement were poetry and drama" with many of the major literary works focused on male conquest and on exclusively black characters" (237). In "A Race for Theory," Christian quotes from Nikki Giovanni's dismissive review to illustrate how *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People* was seen as outside of the prescriptions of the Black Arts Movement:

She criticized the novel on the grounds that it was not black, for the language was too elegant, too white...I was amazed by the narrowness of her vision. The emphasis on *one way* to be black resulted in the works of southern writers being seen as non-black since the black talk of Georgia does not sound like the black talk of Philadelphia. Because the ideologues, like Baraka, come from the urban centers they tended to privilege their way of speaking, thinking, writing, and to condemn other kinds of writing as not being black enough. Whole areas of the canon were assessed according to the dictum of the Black Arts Nationalist point of view...while others were ignored because they did not fit the scheme of cultural nationalism. (341)

denied. Writing in 1969, Marshall does not announce herself. Instead, she quietly appropriates the trope. In her depiction of these relationships, Marshall continues a tradition of black women's critique of white women's imperialism. Close to a decade before the black feminist manifesto issued by the Combahee River Collective and an explosion of essays by black feminist critics questioning exclusions in feminist theory and racism in the feminist movement; twenty years before seminal critical studies by Hazel Carby and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, among others; well before contemporary feminist analyses of intersectionality, Marshall depicts these historic tensions by using two women to reconfigure the colonizer/colonized relationship.

From the start of her writing career in the 1950's, Marshall has been unabashedly feminist. In a 1992 interview with Joyce Pettis, Marshall explains that because "women were essential" to her "world from very early on," she has always made women characters central to her novels:

I saw them as powerful people, and what I discovered when I came into literature is that women were not ever central to the story. So when I started writing, it was with a sense of wanting to move women to center stage...They seem to have a marvelous resonance, and that was the place for them. And so I saw them as agents of change, as embodying a certain power principle...I had a deep sense of a certain kind of power residing in women, and I didn't see the power of women as threatening to men, but just simply as power. (Pettis and Marshall 122)

Thus, as Marshall explains in a 1979 interview with Alexis DeVeaux, in *Chosen Place* she very deliberately uses women characters "to embody the whole power struggle of the world,"... "Merle embodies Black history and triumph. Harriet... symbolizes the West. She cannot share power; she can go through certain meaningless motions, but to give, to really and truly give, she cannot do... Through Harriet I try to talk about that Western need to exercise control and power over others" (48). Not only does Marshall make Merle Kinbona the novel's dominant revolutionary voice, she also makes Merle, a descendant of the white plantation owner Duncan Vaughan and an enslaved woman, and Harriet Shippen, heir to a fortune initially amassed through investments in the slave trade, representative of the Caliban/colonized and Prospero/colonizer dynamic as it manifests in relationships between women. Paget Henry and Paul Buhle have deemed the "appropriation and reinterpretation" of Shakespeare's Caliban by Caribbean writers a "discursive insurrection" (122). Marshall's appropriation and engendering of this anticolonial trope is one of the most audacious things that she does in this powerful novel.

Marshall followed most particularly George Lamming's brilliant appropriation of Prospero and Caliban from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In his essay collection, *The Pleasures of Exile* (1961), Lamming introduces into Anglophone Caribbean thought the use of Caliban and Prospero as what Silvio Torres-Saillant calls "cultural synecdoches" that explore "the structure of power relations emanating from colonial history in the Antillean world" (134). Lamming historicizes *The Tempest*, situating the play within the context of England's quest for empire and its participation in the slave trade. However, as Sandra Pouchet Pacquet observes, "(d)espite the complexity" of Lamming's analysis, "resistance and liberation are an exclusively male enterprise" in *The Pleasures of Exile*. Its "autobiographical framework generates a self-conscious, self-celebrating male paradigm that goes unchallenged in the text" (xxi). Moving beyond masculinist assumptions, Marshall engenders the Prospero/Caliban trope, first in her portrayal of the relationship between Merle and the wealthy English white woman who "kept" her while she was a student in England, and then in her powerful depiction of Merle's relationship with Harriet. Deconstructing facile assumptions of sisterhood based solely on shared gender, Marshall enters and expands a tradition of black women's critique of white women's racism/ imperialism. In an interview with Sabine Brock, Marshall comments: "let's face it, the white woman has been the oppressor, because she has been the one that Black women had to go to work in their kitchens" (70). Describing the exploitation her mother and her mother's friends experienced when they worked as day laborers, Marshall concludes: "The auction block was still very real for them" (97).

Bournehills is the meeting place for Marshall's three major characters, masterfully drawn individuals who also represent ancestral relationships – anthropologist Saul Amron, Harriet Shippen, his wife, and Merle Kinbona, a native of Bourne Island and their host. The past coexists with the present in Bournehills—a landscape ravaged by centuries of economic exploitation. Saul Amron is the anthropologist who heads the team sent to Bourne Island by the Center for Applied Social Research (CASR) to determine what developmental projects would be most effective in Bourne Island's most economically depressed district. Saul's mother is a Sephardic Jew—descendant of Jews expelled from Spain during the Inquisition. Saul grew up listening to her dramatic stories of their ancestors' flight to the New World during the time of Columbus' voyages. CASR was virtually created and is largely funded by the United Corporation of America or Unicorn, a multi-national corporation based in Philadelphia and with roots in the Triangular Trade. Harriet Shippen has an ancestral connection to Bourne Island, for she is one of the heirs to Unicorn and to the "questionable legacy" of the widow Susan Harbin who had "launched the family's modest wealth" with her "small-scale speculation in the West Indies trade." This investment had simply entailed:

taking a few shares in a number of sloops making the twice-yearly run between Philadelphia, the west coast of Africa, and then back across the Atlantic to the islands. In a stained, faded ledger still to be seen in a glass display case at the Historical Society, the widow had kept careful account...of the amounts of flour and salted cod, cornmeal and candles that went out on the sloops, the number of slaves taken on in Guinea and then just how much her portion of that cargo, both human and otherwise, had brought in crude sugar, rum, and molasses in the islands. (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 37-38)

Hortense Spillers observes that the “powerful Shippen family of mainline Philadelphia still owns the “major shares in the United Corporation of America, which in turn, makes the largest contribution to the Center for Applied Social Research. This elegant calculus of economic motives yokes the Philadelphia Research Institute, the Center for Applied Social Research, and the United Corporation of America in an unholy trinity of affluence and complicity” (156). With the character of Harriet Shippen, Marshall uses her novel to reveal what many of her readers did not know – the vital role Northerners played in slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. She shows how easy it was for an average investor to participate in these business enterprises.²

While she keeps her ancestral history hidden, it is omnipresent in Harriet’s mind and colors all aspects of her interactions with Bourne Island people. For Harriet, Bournehills is a psychological site of memory that unsettles her from her first glimpse of it. As they fly into the island, Harriet is struck by the contrast between the scarred, shadow-filled hills of Bournehills and the “pleasant reassuring green plain” of the rest of the island. She experiences Bournehills as a “mysterious and obscured region of the mind which ordinary consciousness did not dare admit to light” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 21). Here Marshall foreshadows the devastating

² Only within this century have many people become aware of how integral slavery and the slave trade were to wealth-building in the United States, north and south. For example, since 2000, detailed stories have been published in the *Hartford Courant* and the *New York Times* revealing the role many well known insurance companies played in insuring slaves and slave ships. In 2008, commemorating the bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade in the United States, the descendants of the Rhode Island De Wolf family produced and released the documentary film *Traces of the Trade: A Story From the Deep North*. The DeWolfs were the largest slave-trading family in U.S. history. In 2003, Brown University president Ruth Simmons appointed a commission to ascertain the role played by the university’s founders in the slave trade. In 2013, historian Craig Stephen Wilder published the comprehensive study *Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities*. Recently, we have seen coverage of efforts on the part of Georgetown University to address what *The New York Times* deemed their “slavery-stained” past: specifically, the account of how in 1838 the university’s administration avoided financial ruin by selling some 272 slaves to the cane fields, etc. of the “Deep South.”

impact Bournehills will have on Harriet who “has the sensation” when she first sees Bournehills, that the plane “by some perverse plan might have been taking her...back to the past which she had always sought to avoid” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 21).

Harriet refuses to acknowledge that the wealth, power, and privilege upon which she relies, were created by her ancestors’ profitable investment in the Atlantic slave trade. Throughout the novel, she is characterized by her insistence that she cannot “be held liable” for the actions of her forebears. However, she continues to benefit from their actions, just as the people of Bournehills continue to suffer because of them. Harriet is described as someone who even as a child, needed to “wield some small power” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 39). Marshall makes clear the limitations Harriet faces as an upper-class white woman, trained to be a well-appointed consort. Harriet’s deepest fear is that she will end up a “slow suicide” like her mother, an “unreconstructed” Southern belle whom Harriet despises as ineffectual and “useless” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 44). Marshall has described Harriet as “very strong-willed...something of a rebel...a woman who has in her the need to act independently, not to go along with the prescribed order.” At the same time, she is very invested in the power and privilege she has been raised to see as her due. Marshall notes: “She just couldn’t give up being a WASP” (Haydn 20-21). Harriet has made the success of her husband the primary outlet for her ambition and intelligence, but she is haunted by a pervasive sense of lack, incompleteness, and inadequacy. While Marshall depicts Harriet’s sense of lack empathetically, she also reveals the pathology, considered normal at the time, of her investment in her husbands:

At certain times...when she closed her eyes during their embrace she would feel her body expand to take in all of him [Saul]— not only his physical self but his other attributes as well: his special strength, intelligence and purpose, the depth of feeling that was his. All these became hers during those moments and, as a result, she felt defined, given shape; she became then the image of him she held in her mind. At such times it was as if the goal that had eluded her a lifetime had finally been seized. (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 247)

Harriet Shippen is a woman clearly privileged by race and class, but fatally contained by gender inequalities.

When she arrives in Bourne Island, Harriet has a very clear idea of what her role will be. She will be Saul’s helpmeet; she will type his field notes and create an orderly “civilized” space for him to come home to. She will meet the people of Bourne Island with whom her husband will be working, both the bourgeois black officials and their wives, and the children, women, and men of Bournehills. She

will be gracious and deferential, poised and self-assured. Above all, she will be useful. Although she determinedly sees Bournehills and its people through the prism of an aggressively repressed awareness of connection, the people treat her as if she were “no stranger,” but someone who was “part of the place, bound to it and to them in some way” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 171). Harriet also has the recurring feeling that Bournehills has some sort of “claim” on her; the black people there trigger childhood memories of her family’s relationship with her mother’s maid, Alberta Lee Grant, and memories of Alberta’s nephew, who had been lynched. Harriet defensively cultivates a sense of herself as the detached observer of a play.³ Marshall makes clear that Harriet’s sense of self hinges on her ability to remain detached and deny her deep connection with “those people.” Harriet has the ultimately self-destructive habit of methodically erasing all disturbing memories or experiences from her mind. She repeats this metonymic practice of willed amnesia throughout the novel and is both defined and destroyed by it.

Merle Kinbona is Bourne Island’s voice of conscience and consciousness. She is the one who takes the black government officials to task for their “colonized minds,” the one who is fired for teaching the history of the Cuffee Ned Rebellion at the local high school. Merle operates on the razor edge of sanity, occasionally retreating into catatonic silences that last for days. A strong, complex woman with a quintessentially colonial Caribbean personal history, she is introduced in terms of the disparate parts of herself that she is struggling to make a whole.⁴ In her depiction of Merle, Marshall specifically addresses the complicated legacy of black

³Of Harriet’s response to the party Merle gives to introduce Saul and Harriet to the people of Bournehills, the narrator says: “It would take her some days...to sort out her reactions to all she had seen and heard over the course of the long evening, but her immediate feeling...was that none of it had been as strange or difficult as she had supposed it would be. The main reason for this . . . was that throughout the evening she had felt like one of those special members of the audience in a Restoration theater, notables and the like, who had been permitted to sit on stage during the performance of a play...although she had been close up on the action, almost part of it, she had nonetheless, by virtue of her seat on the sidelines near the wings, remained apart, immune. So that she had moved safely through the noise, the heat, the drinking, through the gantlet [sic] of outstretched black hands, veiled eyes and faces that in their set darkness were as one face endlessly repeated. Even when the party had grown more turbulent and the voices and gestures of the men arguing out on the roadside had threatened violence, she had remained unperturbed, confident none of it could touch or include her” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 144-145).

⁴In introducing Merle, Marshall describes her as wearing a dress made of African print cloth, numerous silver bracelets, and “pendant silver earrings carved in the form of those saints to be found on certain European churches” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 4). The narrator explains that each item of this “somewhat bizarre outfit...stood opposed to, at war even, with the other, to express rather a diversity and disunity within herself, and her attempt, unconscious probably, to reconcile these opposing parts, to make of them a whole. Moreover, in dressing in this manner, she appeared to be trying...to recover something in herself that had been lost...her face...attested to some profound and frightening loss” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 5).

Atlantic women. Merle refuses to be contained by socially prescribed gender roles; she “does not accommodate, concede, or pacify and is more likely to disrupt or anger” (Pettis 102).

As the child of a mulatto planter and one of his sixteen-year-old black field workers, Merle embodies the contradictions and dichotomies of this postcolonial Caribbean society. She was the only child of Ashton Vaughan, wealthy mulatto planter and descendant of the notorious white planter Duncan Vaughan who was alleged to have fathered, with enslaved women, forty mulatto children, the beginnings of Bourne Island’s colored middle class. However, Merle was an “outside” child whom Vaughan, reenacting the sexual exploitation of black women in 1924, “a time when such practices should have been long past,” had “bred” on a pretty, sixteen-year-old “black like a real African” girl named Clara who was a weeder on his estate (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 69). While the circumstances of Merle’s birth were the continuation of a very old black Atlantic story of sexual exploitation of black women, they were only the beginning of her tragedy. When Merle was two, her mother was shot and killed, allegedly by Vaughan’s wife. Her father virtually ignored her until his wife died childless when Merle was thirteen. At that point, he acknowledged Merle legally, and though he never gave her any personal attention, he educated her “according to the standards of his class”—a fashionable girls’ school on the island and college in England, and he made her the heir to his large estate and the vacation home, perched on a cliff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, which had once belonged to Duncan Vaughan. In the interview with Dance, Marshall describes Merle as “an exceedingly important character in my work in that she sums up in her person and in the personal history I provided her with—what has happened to black people in this part of the world. She embodies an entire history. She is the child of the hemisphere” (16).

In “Beyond Miranda’s Meaning: Unsilencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s Woman,” Sylvia Wynter posits that as the category most liminal, black Atlantic women have the potential to be the most disruptive and the most transformative of the present social order. In *Chosen Place*, Marshall depicts Merle evolving into a strong counter-voice and beginning to fulfill the disruptive and transformational promise about which Wynter theorizes. When her father dies and leaves her his house and land, Merle, in keeping with her commitment to empowering the Little Fella, sells much of the land, in small plots and for a small price, to the small farmers of Bournehills. Although Merle has a revolutionary vision of possibility, she is sometimes incapacitated by a rage and sense of despair that is deeply self-destructive and results in periods of catalepsy. Eight years before when her husband, an Ugandan economist, had left her in England, taking their young daughter back to Uganda with him, Merle had suffered a nervous breakdown. A trained historian, Merle blames the region’s brutal history for “setting out her head” from time to time. Periodically, she still has breakdowns

triggered by the continuing inequities and exploitation that cause her to fear that Bourne Island's legacy of colonialism and slavery can never be overcome.⁵ With Merle, Marshall has adapted "Lamming's appropriation of Caliban as exemplary flawed revolutionary hero who models the ambiguities of the resistant, liberationist spirit" of her time and place (Pacquet xv).

The people of Bournehills are "the present-day descendants of the rebel slaves" (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 11) who followed Cuffee Ned. Marshall depicts them as they see themselves—as a strong, culturally self-defined community. What is most significant to them is that Bournehills was the site of a successful slave insurrection. Characterized by their endurance and stubborn commitment to self-determination and self-definition, they discuss the Pyre Hill Revolt as if it happened a year ago. Throughout the novel, we are told that Merle is the character who most embodies the spirit of Bournehills. She introduces the CASR team to Bournehills by identifying the sites where Cuffee Ned and the band of self-emancipated insurgents he led, defeated the brutal slave master Percy Bryam who had "owned all of Bournehills and everyone in it" (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 101). The people are particularly proud that by working together, they had managed to fend off the British soldiers and live free for almost three years. With the story of the Pyre Hill Revolt as their founding narrative, they oppose their history of insurgency and agency to the island's authorized history in which the nation was benevolently granted independence by the mother country. They insistently keep the counter narrative alive in the island nation's collective memory. Every year, Bournehills' Carnival masque is a reenactment of the revolt, following to the smallest detail the historical record in the big book in the library. Merle identifies strongly with this insurgent history of anticolonial resistance.

Carnival is the site where competing national narratives confront each other most starkly—the commercial Disney-themed masques intended for the tourists versus the celebration of insurgency masques from the subaltern populace. In "Shaping the World of My Art" (1973), Marshall asserts that two themes have been central to all of her fiction: (1) the importance of truly confronting the past, both in personal and historical terms, and (2) the necessity of reversing the present world order. These themes are represented in the subaltern contributions to Carnival. The band from rural Bournehills depicts the historic Pyre Hill Revolt, while the Twenty-Sixth of July Band from the urban shantytown of Harlem Heights commemorates the contemporary Cuban Revolution.

⁵ Gary Storhoff perceptively observes that Marshall's "implication" is that Merle's "emotional instability is not a personal anomaly but is politically and culturally induced." Thus Merle is "Marshall's representation of Frantz Fanon's theory that mental disorders are concomitant with neocolonial oppression: 'Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: 'In reality, who am I' (Fanon 203). (58)

On both personal and ancestral levels, Marshall's characters are required to acknowledge and take responsibility for their history. She has stated that in order to imagine and construct an alternative future, black Atlantic people must undertake "a psychological and spiritual return back over" their past (Marshall, "Shaping the World of my Art" 107). However, Marshall's anticolonial vision actually encompasses all who have been impacted by this bitter past. She insists that they must move beyond perfunctory "ceremonies of reconciliation" and acknowledge this brutal history in order to come to terms with it. Thus it is critical that the Carnival performances reach an international audience, and that they have a life-altering impact on Harriet.

Harriet undergoes a profound transformation after her planned performance with the Bournehills band where, without the slightest ironic acknowledgement of her family's ancestral role in this history, she marches as a rebel woman, commemorating a revolt that had been put down and that was safely situated in the past. Harriet's participation in the Cuffee Ned masque speaks to her skill in disassociating and detaching herself from what she has decided does not concern her directly. She had remained detached in the midst of the profoundly moving reenactment. However, as the parade concludes, the Bournehills band is joined by the Twenty-sixth of July Band. From the "fetid" urban shantytown of Harlem Heights, members of this band are mostly young people dressed in olive fatigues, combat boots, and helmets; they are a riveting portent of future revolution. In Marshall's richly symbolic depiction of the carnivalesque environment where highbrow and lowbrow converge and conflate and sometimes collapse, Harriet is rendered invisible. The band of marching young black people sweeps Harriet along in their wake, completely oblivious to her frantic demands that they stop. What is most chilling to her is her invisibility; the privilege to command and direct which her skin color and class background have always afforded her is irrelevant. The narrator emphasizes Harriet's feeling that she has lost control and the crisis that initiates for her. The certainties that have been her rock are shaken by the Twenty-Sixth of July Band. Harriet never recovers from this encounter with the dark, advancing Other; she begins the slow mental retreat which eventually leads to her suicide. What Harriet remembers most clearly is being overwhelmed by their set black faces and their farseeing eyes, and her own conviction that "they would reach the goal they had set for themselves" (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 297).

Marshall first represents the Prospero/Caliban dynamic through the relationship between Merle and the wealthy English white woman who had "kept" her while she was a student in England. In *The Pleasures of Exile*, Lamming explains that when the colonial comes to reside in "the country which colonized his own history," he "travels with the memory, the habitual weight of a colonial relation" and feels that he has to "win the approval of Headquarters." Even if he or she has never actually known English people, because of her upbringing as a

colonized British subject, the colonial enters all relationships with the English with “an assumption of previous knowledge.” This supposed knowledge is just “another aspect of the West Indian’s relation to the *idea* of England” (25-6). Merle acknowledges her vulnerability as a result of being what she calls a “well-trained little colonial.” Once she arrives in the “mother country” and encounters the destructive power of blatant English white supremacy, her self-hatred and lack of self-awareness make Merle ripe for exploitation.

Describing herself as a colonial pet, Merle delineates the ways colonial power operated in an apparently consensual relationship. The English woman’s relationship with Merle was not unique for she “collected foreign students” the way others might collect “paintings or books.” Merle allows that while living with her, she had “met people from every corner of the globe: India, Asia, Africa, Canada, Australia, Gibraltar...The sun, you might say, never set on the empire she had going in her drawing room” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 328). When Merle left university, her father stopped supporting her. She acknowledges that when the English woman invited her to live with her, she was grateful, even flattered: ““Good little brainwashed West Indian that I was, I thought it quite something to have a rich Englishwoman taking such an interest in me, an almshouse child who couldn’t even remember her mother and whose so-called father had for years passed her by on the road without so much as a word”” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 328).

But Caliban discovers that what Prospero is after is keeping her menagerie of colonial students indebted to her: “All her supposed generosity and kindness” were meant to keep us “dependent,” appreciative, and malleable, thus always around “to amuse and entertain her” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 329). The pathology of the relationship Merle has with the upper-class English lesbian is that it was not the result of mutual desire, but part of Merle’s command performance and thus deeply exploitative. The overt power imbalance in the relationship adds to Merle’s confusion about who she is and to her sense that she is prostituting herself. Wynter explains that historically in the Prospero and Caliban relationship, Caliban was “reduced to having no will or desire’ that had not been “prescribed by Prospero/Miranda” (Wynter, “Miranda’s Meaning” 363). The critical moment in the relationship comes when Caliban refuses to accept the identity Prospero has created for her and within which she tries to contain her. Acting as Prospero, the Englishwoman enchants and bewitches Merle and then seeks to destroy her when

she asserts herself.⁶ Merle's eventual assertion of self costs her almost everything. The Merle who reemerges in Bourne Island is in transition, is in the process of becoming her own person. Marshall does not flinch from depicting the cost of decolonizing one's mind, reclaiming ownership of one's soul.

It is a distortion to describe Marshall's depiction of Merle's relationship with the Englishwoman as "homophobic."⁷ In critiquing the treatment of homosexuality in the novel, some critics commit the fallacy of conflating the attitudes of created characters with those of the author. In the interview with Pettis, Marshall describes such criticism as a "misreading of the relationship that Merle has with the Englishwoman." On Bourne Island, Merle's mother had been "used and then discarded" by the planter for whom she worked. Marshall describes Merle's relationship with the Englishwoman as a "continuation" of the type of fundamentally exploitative relationships women of the African diaspora have been subjected to. It is representative of the relationships the English had with those they colonized "when they were the nation on which the sun never set, the British Empire" (Pettis and Marshall 125). The relationship between Prospero and Caliban is based on a power imbalance and encompasses the intimate and especially damaging ways that colonial power can manifest. The particular degradation for Merle is that the Englishwoman can compel her to behave as she wants her to; in

⁶In a passage from *The Tempest*, much quoted by anticolonial writers, Caliban describes his experience of being enslaved by Prospero:

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first,
Thou strok'st me, and made much of me; wouldst give me
Water with berries in't, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burned by day and night: and then I lov'd thee,
And show'd thee all the qualities o' th' isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile
Curs'd be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' th' island. (1.2.331-344)

⁷These charges are based on a very selective reading of the novel and the fallacy of conflating the attitudes of a character with those of the author. Most striking evidence against the charge is Marshall's sympathetic portrayal of Allen Fuso's crisis of sexual identity. Although he never acknowledges a sexual attraction, he and Vere become close friends; this relationship between an Italian-American academic and a working-class Bourne Island man is a relationship of equals. Two important points: the scene in which Allen tries to "come out" in a conversation with Merle, who is also a good friend. Merle, perhaps intentionally, completely misses the point and gives Allen the generic "you just need to find a good woman" advice that leaves him more isolated than ever. Secondly, Merle has seen both exploitative heterosexual and homosexual relationships. In the early scene at Sugar's nightclub, both are depicted.

this situation, Caliban is not gay, but by preying on her vulnerabilities, Prospero has coerced her into acting as if she were. The most severe damage done to Merle is that she loses a sense of herself as a woman in charge of her life and choices.⁸ At the same time, Marshall depicts Merle's, and later her husband Ketu's, response as reflective of a specifically anticolonial demonizing of homosexuality as a European perversion.⁹

As part of her preparation for writing *Chosen Place*, Marshall did "extensive research" on how the "whole triangular slave trade operated." She explains to Pettis that she discovered:

just how these American families were very directly involved—not only the men, the captains, brokers, and slave owners—but also how the women from respectable families of the North...These women in the North had their side trade in slaves. I found it a fascinating thing, and so I wanted to use that in some way to show how deepseated the ramifications of the whole trade were...*I wanted to make the point of complicity that American women had in the slave trade.* (emphasis mine, Pettis and Marshall 125)

As Marshall's representative of the West, Harriet can never acknowledge that her family's wealth is based on the trade in human beings or that her privilege remains dependent upon the exploitation of people like those of Bournehills. From her arrival in Bournehills, Harriet has done little things to make her Bournehills neighbors more comfortable or to make the conditions of their oppression more bearable. However, Harriet never considered the people of Bournehills to be her peers. There are clear limits to what she is willing to give. She keeps gallon cans of grapefruit, orange, and pineapple juice to serve to her visitors; she has candy, band-aids, and aspirin (pacifiers) on hand to dispense to the children. Harriet is willing to give as long as she can reach down from a detached and unquestioned

⁸In an interview with Meryl Schwartz, novelist Michelle Cliff notes that in the essay "Caliban's Daughter," she discusses the "difference between being a lesbian in Europe and a lesbian in the Caribbean." Referencing Nadine Gordimer's character Rosa Burger and Marshall's Merle Kinbona, Cliff explains that Clare's experience of lesbianism in Europe would be similar to theirs; "where lesbianism is seen as a Eurocentric, eccentric, upper-class behavior, for the most part. Decadent and exploitative of Third World women. Whereas for Clare to claim her lesbianism in the Caribbean would be to become a complete woman." Cliff adds that if Clare had had "an affair in Britain with Liz . . . it wouldn't have led her back to herself. It would have made her more foreign to the place she came from" (601).

⁹ See M. Jacqui Alexander's layered and incisive analysis in "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: Feminism, Tourism, and the State in the Bahamas" and "Imperial Desire/Sexual Utopias: White Gay Capital and Transnational Tourism." Both essays appear in her 2005 collection of essays—*Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred*.

distance, as long as her giving reaffirms her sense of superiority, for what Harriet refuses to cede is the ingrained perception of her racial and class superiority. It is “part of the larger certainty which served as her rock, that she had taken in with her mother’s milk” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 23). Metonymically, Harriet acts out of her need both to have a particular image of herself and to preserve her endangered sense of entitlement, rather than from any acknowledgment of the connection between her privilege and the plight of the Bournehills people. With this character, Marshall depicts how a seemingly benign individual can have and justify the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that create and perpetuate colonialism.

Marshall puts forward a compelling and nuanced analysis of the delusions, illusions, mythology that undergird white privilege; it is an analysis that anticipates contemporary discussions. Harriet is a complex character; part of her tragedy is that she is not clueless; she is terrified by the awareness to which she is coming. Trapped by her investment in the ideology of white supremacy, she cannot allow herself to see Merle and the Bourne Islanders as her equals. With her crisp efficiency and well-bred demeanor, Harriet seeks to impose order on an environment she experiences as chaotic and unpredictable. Characteristic of Prospero is his belief in his “hereditary right to rule people” and his “spiritual need to organize reality” (Lamming 107). Harriet’s Carnival experience has been deeply disorienting for her for she cannot make it fit the rigid paradigm she clings to because, as it turns out, her life literally depends on it. After Carnival, Harriet increasingly feels overwhelmed and frustrated by the continued relentless poverty of the people of Bournehills. “In spite of the gallons of vitamin-rich juices she served, and the aspirins, cough syrup, dewormer and the like, which she freely dispensed, with all the cuts on the children’s splayed toes which she personally cleaned and bandaged... there had not been the slightest change” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 407). Becoming increasingly paranoid and alienated, Harriet decides that their lack of response must be a conspiracy, a judgment, a challenge to her position. Her adamant rejection of that possibility is powerfully rendered:

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

Parodying Prospero’s rationale for resisting Caliban’s demands for an end to colonization, Lamming explains that “Prospero lives under the pressure of traditions” (84). Claiming the role of Prospero, Harriet has decided that the “immediacies of life are becoming too many and too dangerous to risk a change of

vision” every time she is “assaulted by a new fact of awareness.” She rationalizes that “a continuous process of change will allow no rest for evaluating the progress of change.” Prospero fears that change itself will “become a contagion” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 84). Relying on the binary oppositions that have been her certainties, Harriet cannot conceive of a relationship that is not based on hierarchy. She perceives an order she cannot direct as uncontrollable, overwhelming, and chaotic. Marshall renders her growing madness as fear of the dark Other, the barbaric hordes at the gate. However, the more assailed Harriet feels, the more inflexibly determined she is to maintain traditional hierarchies. Marshall has no illusions about solidarity between women based solely on shared gender. She portrays Harriet as “very much an expression of the West in that her behavior doesn’t go beyond a certain kind of...tokenism. She will always have the jar with the candies for the children who come, but the kind of real sharing of wealth which will in some way diminish her, she’s not going to do that.” Marshall reiterates that with Harriet and Merle, she has used women rather than “the configuration of men as the brokers of power. These two women in the novel are the ones who represent the two soothsayers of power” (Pettis and Marshall 125).

In the climactic confrontation scene between Harriet/Prospero and Merle/Caliban, Marshall deftly renders the complexity of their relationship. When Harriet discovers that Merle and Saul are having an affair, she goes to confront Merle. Marshall first emphasizes what they share; both lack meaningful work and a sense of personal accomplishment. By depicting how they are both impacted by sexism, Marshall complicates the Prospero/Caliban trope. Harriet has always been a site of memory for Merle; from their first meeting, she has viewed Harriet with veiled animosity. In this scene, Merle sees Harriet compassionately for the first time and responds with remorse for the pain she has caused her and with empathy for the complex need she recognizes in the other woman. Merle realizes and acknowledges that in having the affair with Saul, she:

had been impelled by a need as complex and enormous in its way, as awesome, as the one she glimpsed in Harriet. So that in spite of all the things which set them apart and the fact that they sat drawn up like two armies about to do battle...they were essentially the same, the look declared: two women who had long been assailed by the sense of their uselessness, who had never found anything truly their own to do, no work that could have defined them, and so had always had to look outside themselves to the person of the lover for definition, a sense of a self, and for the chance, in their relationship with him, in helping to shape his life, to exercise some small measure of power. (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 437)

But Harriet cannot accept this empathetic response from someone she needs to see as her inferior. With her gendered rendering of the Prospero and Caliban relationship, Marshall recalls and predicts the ways white supremacist beliefs have historically and continue to contaminate the ideal of sisterhood between women. Given the chance to interact with Merle as an equal, Harriet immediately shifts the terms of their interaction to the colonizer/colonized mode that reaffirms her comfortable sense of superiority. While she has offered the poor women and children of Bournehills band-aids and juice, she offers Merle enough money to leave Bourne Island and go anywhere she would like. Lamming observes that “Prospero’s fear springs from a need to maintain his power—for to lose his power is to lose face – and it is only through power that the world knows him” (114). Harriet is willing to pay substantially to feed and maintain the illusion that she is in control.

Harriet’s offer, like the support of the Englishwoman, is particular to the dependency model that Marshall depicts as characteristic of the new relationship between the formerly colonized and the former colonizers. For Merle, the scene is a bitter reenactment of her past relationship with the Englishwoman, except this time she harshly rejects the money. The relationships that Merle shares with the Englishwoman and then Harriet parallel the relationships that Bourne Island (and Caribbean islands in general) have with the imperial powers of England and the United States. In the interview with Pettis, Marshall explains that in the novel, it was narratologically necessary for Harriet to “reflect in an American way the same pattern of dominance and exploitation that the English woman represents.” It is through “reject(ing) out-of-hand Harriet’s offer to pay her way anywhere on the face of the earth,” that Merle frees herself, thus claiming her personal independence from colonial domination (Pettis and Marshall 125).

Harriet is a masterfully rendered character—representative yet individual, vulnerable and insecure, afraid of being inadequate and useless, yet arrogant and self-absorbed. Inexorably, the narrative reveals the cost of Harriet’s investment in the myth of her innate superiority, showing that it is the colonizers whom the mythology most ensnares.¹⁰ It is crucial that Harriet have a choice; without hesitation, she seeks to dominate and control. Negotiation and compromise are too risky for her. She has always been the colonizer and that is what she remains. This has even been true in her relationship with Saul. Harriet has seen her marriage to a Jew as a renunciation of her WASP origins, but from the beginning of their

¹⁰Marshall depicts the lengths to which Harriet is willing to go to protect her certainties. Englishwoman Dorothy Clough’s comment: “I’m afraid we shall be done in, the great white race, by our niggardliness and bad faith, our refusal to really take down and make room for the other fellow” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 200) and Saul’s repudiation seem to suggest that European colonizers would be toppled because of their inability to see themselves as equal to others. However, through Harriet, Marshall presciently depicts the self-destructiveness of that stance.

relationship, she has worked clandestinely to “help” Saul become what she envisions he should be. When Saul discovers that she has caused the cancellation of the Bournehills project, he repudiates her in lines Barbara Christian calls Harriet’s “eulogy” (127):

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

Harriet has consistently refused community because of her investment in her position of dominance. However, her compulsion to “blot out the past” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 47) of her ancestors reveals the mystification strategies her belief in her superiority requires. By concealing the real basis of her privilege, Harriet contributes to the mythification of the idea of white privilege as based on inherent superiority. The ultimate poverty of Harriet’s conquest model of interacting is the result of her refusal to see herself as equal to those she insistently deems “Other.”

Continuing his sardonic analysis of the plight of the colonizer, Lamming asks: “Will the Lie upon which Prospero’s confident authority was built be discovered?” (117). Describing Prospero’s dilemma with an allusion to *Hamlet*, he asks: “To change or not to change? That is the question which has already set up an atmosphere of change in Prospero...In every conscious act, it beckons him; it orders him forward; it urges him to enter the unknown territory of a life which can no longer be excluded.” Crucially, however, change will require Prospero to acknowledge the falsity of a justification narrative that has served her well:

It was a divine recognition of privilege which made Prospero’s past, the divinity which gave him the right to colonise the unarmed and excluded Caliban...He cannot deny that past; nor can he abandon it without creating a total suicide of all those values which once sanctified his actions as a colonizer. He cannot commit his name and history to the unforgivable vice of ingratitude against the once divine grace which...still promises to wash him clean of any crime resurrected in the name of colonization. (emphasis mine, 85)

Harriet fears that change can only be loss; class and racial privilege are so critical to her identity that she can only see diminution of that privilege as a loss of self.

Harriet’s dark night of the soul and epiphany with the dawn are the climax of Marshall’s portrayal/characterization of her. In this deeply symbolic scene, Harriet is assailed by the history she has so carefully repressed, by the ghosts of

family members “she had always excluded from her thoughts for fear that she might one day be the one held to account for them” (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 457). It is a history she can no longer escape. Harriet is also shown the ways in which she has used her own power and privilege while eschewing responsibility for the consequences of her manipulations. With the dawn, Harriet is granted a vision which she cannot see because of the “boarded-over windows,” symbolic of her willed and willful blindness. Depicting darkness and light as false dichotomies, Marshall again offers Prospero the opportunity to acknowledge her oneness with those she sees as “other”:

She sensed it, that dawn light, blossoming with the opalescence of a pearl and moving slowly, with all the stateliness of a royal barge, into the heart of the darkness outside. They embraced – the darkness and light, so that when she finally rose and opened out the shutters she had the impression that the night, bedding down in the great folds of the hills contained the dawn, and the dawn the darkness. It was as though they were really, after all, one and the same, two parts of a whole, and that together they stood to acquaint her with an essential truth. (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 459)

It is an essential truth which Harriet refuses to acknowledge. Her rejection of the dawn epiphany is symbolic of her refusal to amend her view of reality. Accompanied by the spirits of Alberta’s nephew and Vere, Harriet walks to the sea to take her morning swim. She is never seen again; she dives into that part of the sea where it was said one could hear the unceasing lament of nine million drowned Africans. In this novel, those who will not confront the past are destroyed by its reverberations in the present.

Marshall’s presentation is measured and poignant for she does not elide the tragedy of the black Atlantic in a hasty rush to a “they lived happily ever after” ending. Nor does she downplay the difficulty of moving beyond the pain of the past. Epiphanies come to both Harriet and Merle; each individual must choose whether to embrace or to reject the revelations they are given, but self-examination and honest self-awareness are required. We note the extent to which Harriet’s sense of self-worth is tied to her colonial and racial privilege. She cannot let it go; she believes that it is who she is. Through Harriet, we are shown how difficult it is for those who have been colonizers to admit that their privilege is based upon exploitation of others rather than divine right or inherent superiority. Through Merle, Marshall depicts how difficult it is for those who have felt shamed and degraded by it, to acknowledge the ways they have participated in the colonizer/colonized relationship. While the characters must acknowledge all of their ancestral history, they get to choose which part of it they will commemorate.

How can Merle continue healing after she claims herself through the confrontation with Harriet? Or what must Caliban do to recover wholeness? First repudiate dependency on Prospero. Second, make peace with her ancestral and personal past. Merle has inherited the ancestral Vaughan estate house, still filled with furniture Duncan Vaughan had owned. One of the most significant items is the bed in which Duncan Vaughan had fathered some of the children borne by the women he owned. In other words, the bed in which Merle sleeps is a site of the rape of her foremothers. This bed and other ancestral belongings still housed in her bedroom represent the personal and ancestral history she must release. Thus it is significant that Merle sells off the relics of her ancestral past so that she can travel to Uganda and make peace with her personal past. In contrast to Harriet's denial, the epiphany for Merle is her realization that "sometimes a person has to go back, really back—to have a sense, an understanding of all that's gone to make them—before they can go forward" (Marshall, *Chosen Place* 468). We note that the emphasis here is on what is required so that one can move forward. In 1983, Marshall returns to this character with the novella "Merle." She acknowledges that personally, Merle is still working to make peace with "her life and history...still seeking to reconcile all the conflicting elements to form a viable self" (Marshall, *Reena and Other Stories* 109). Nevertheless, Merle remains a symbol of hope, possibility and agency in the midst:

It seems to me she has escaped the pages of the novel altogether and is abroad in the world. I envision her striding restlessly up and down the hemisphere from Argentina to Canada, and back and forth across the Atlantic between here and Africa...she continues to exhort 'the Little Fella'...to organize, to rise up against the condition of their lives. (Marshall, *Reena and Other Stories* 109)

Marshall concludes: "She's the most passionate and political of my heroines. A Third World revolutionary spirit. And I love her" (Marshall, *Reena and Other Stories* 109).

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