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### Publication Date

2022

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

*The Chosen Place, The Timeless People: Paule Marshall's Manipulation of Literary and Human Genre to Estrange Western Man*

By

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THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

English

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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2022

## ABSTRACT

Paule Marshall's 1969 novel *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* has been understudied, perhaps because of its complex relation to genre within the field of literature and its interest in a wide array of character positionality. The novel, narrating a group of social scientists who arrive on a fictional Caribbean island in order to "develop" the hilly region of Bournehills, disturbs the borders between realism, speculative fiction, and the utopian. This thesis offers a reading of the novel's utopian possibility based in the island's refusal to adhere to historical scripts and its demonstration of the haunting, timeless truth of other realities. The island's residents defy the visitors' expectations through a paradoxically candid inscrutability and the landscape itself harbors symbols of collapsed time. This exploration of muddled genre boundaries is also demonstrated in Marshall's depiction of character as both individual and instantiation of type. I use Sylvia Wynter's theory of genre as a framework for discussing human categorization and the mixture of biological, social, and cultural differentiation which creates a dynamic individual. By manipulating the reader's sense of reality, invoking the utopian drive for an actionable elsewhere and deconstructing a sense of objective individuality outside of historical and social development, Marshall makes the Western epistemological worldview alien, contributing to a reorientation of the genre of human.

## **Introduction: The Possibilities of Genre**

Paule Marshall's second novel, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969) was written over the course of ten years while she was living between Barbados and the United States. The novel was produced during a wave of decolonization and independence movements in both the Caribbean and Africa and narrates the lives of a diverse group of people living and working in a poor region of a fictional Caribbean island. The brilliance and originality of this book has been critically understudied within the field of contemporary literature, perhaps because of its generic ambiguity and unyielding politics. Marshall offers, in this novel, a complex meditation on the codependent processes of physical and psychological individual development, understood as characterization, and collective development, understood as history and culture. In doing so, she contributes to what Sylvia Wynter and Aimé Césaire would theorize as a "new science" which centers the interplay between the symbolic, the biological, and the material environment of subjects. While this text should not necessarily be categorized as science fiction, it dramatizes the epistemologically productive abutment of worlds and worldviews; focusing on the utopian undercurrents of the book help us understand the limitations of Western histories of utopia. Furthermore, reading Marshall's characters as both instantiations of genre and individual emotionally dynamic people moves us toward the conceptualization of humanism outside of a shared empirical or affective core.

In what follows, I think about genre through multiple, overlapping lenses, guided by Wynter's theorization of the genre of the human. She discusses genre as an analytical category in a 2006 interview with *ProudFlesh: New Afrikan Journal of Culture, Politics and Consciousness*. In the interview, she expresses some of the ways that she differentiates her project from feminism and Marxism without substituting race into these same kinds of critical

structures. While remaining committed to excavating specific histories of the power and violence of race as a technology, she talks about how she has tried to situate race within its larger context of human categorization. She discusses the way that sociogeny, or the psychological and physiologically development of various social groups, implies a wide variety of human types or kinds outside of Western language:

Although I use the term ‘race,’ and I have to use the term ‘race,’ ‘race’ itself is a function of something else which is much closer to ‘gender.’ Once you say, ‘besides ontogeny, there’s sociogeny,’ then there cannot be only one mode of sociogeny; there cannot be only one mode of being human; there are a multiplicity of modes. So I coined the word ‘genre,’ or I adapted it, because ‘genre’ and ‘gender’ come from the same root. They mean ‘kind,’ one of the meanings is ‘kind.’ Now what I am suggesting is that ‘gender’ has always been a function of the instituting of ‘kind.’” (20).

For Wynter, seeing Western categorization as one mode of being human necessitates an alternative vocabulary which decenters Western concepts. The terms of “kind” or “genre” helps to formulate a metatheory to address the space of “transculture” which she pulls from Fanon. Genre as a theoretical term can help create room for the intersectionality of “all the ‘-isms,’” as she calls them. As noted in this passage, she sees both race and gender as a “function” of the sociogenic principles that construct western modes of being. She later cites Césaire’s resignation from the Communist party as an example of a thinker who believed “our issue cannot be made into a subset of any other issue; and so I’ve been saying, ‘What is our issue?’ And our issue is the ‘genre’ of the human” (21). This move—claiming space for a central “issue” that encompasses and supersedes specific subject positions—could be potentially alienating for both feminist and Marxist discourses because it rejects a central object of knowledge. However, Wynter’s relentless focus on a radical questioning of the Western scientific claim on both pan-cultural objectivity and the power to create and adjudicate human type is illuminated in Marshall’s novel. In *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, Marshall uses the concept of stock

characters or stereotypes in order to explore the way an individual can develop into a perceived “kind” or genre over time, an amalgamation of many identity categories and historical positionings, through social reinforcement. At the same time, she provides a way of critiquing that reading of human beings by calling attention to the impossibility of a person fully inhabiting or enacting a “kind” if they are given the respect of their full humanity (in this case, a full and sensitive portrait of their interior life). In this way, she demonstrates how genres of human beings, as well as the structures of symbolic thought to which they are inevitably tied, can potentially be muddled through attention to change over time, precipitated by historical reckoning and intimate confrontations with other ways of being and knowing. This exploration of human genre is formally tied in the novel to Marshall’s subtle manipulation of boundaries between literary genres.

Part of the difficulty and the possibility of Marshall’s novel is the way it dissolves boundaries around genre to unsettle the reader’s narrative expectations around development, history, imperialism, and science. Because of this technique, arguments might be made to call Marshall’s work speculative fabulation, from Donna Haraway, or fabulation, from Nalo Hopkinson, or speculative fiction, from Sharee Thomas or Sami Schalk. But we must also contend with the fact that the novel is firmly set in a recognizable physical world; the environment of the novel is not fantastical or speculative in any obvious way. Political, racial, and gender dynamics are representative of the 1960s Caribbean setting, and nothing supernatural occurs from the reader’s standpoint. The cognitive estrangement of the novel stems from its exploration of the haunting of the present by the past’s unfulfilled futures and the disruption of embodied norms. Marshall attends to other worldviews; the opaque reality of other beings, who not only live under different structures of racial, sexual, and national ascription than ourselves,

but who also find joy, community, pleasure, and peace in context-specific places, which can be incomprehensible to the outsider. The novel asks us to make the Western worldview other and center the Caribbean woman Merle, along with the people of the island region Bournehills, as the norm by which we are measured, even though we do not fully comprehend the standards and judgements that measurement entails. When we attend closely to literature that makes the worldviews of others both available and unavailable to us—novels that inhabit generically messy worlds which are neither realistic nor fantastic, science fiction nor utopia, but difficult to see, even as they are shown to us, we might glimpse, for a brief moment, an alien epistemological standpoint.

The way Marshall plays with literary genre boundaries around science fiction, fantasy, utopia, and realism, relates directly to her novel's implicit meditation on racialized, gendered, and class boundaries, with a specific focus on their elisions and the porousness between them. Andre Carrington, in particular, helps me to think about genre and race to show how the social process of speculation and the construction of racial categories, specifically Blackness, can be intertwined and mutually constitutive. He argues that “genre conventions and the distinctions between” “Afrofuturism, surrealism, Otherhood, and haunting” have “played a role in the struggle over interpretations of what it means to be Black” (22-3). Rather than trying to situate Blackness in relation to SF or speculative fiction as alienation or inclusion, he shows how the knowledge formations of certain speculative fictions and narratives can be transformative of the speculative fiction of Blackness itself. Sami Schalk similarly focuses on speculative fiction, but conceives of it even more broadly, including “magical realism, utopian and dystopian literature, fantasy, science fiction, voodoo, ghost stories, and hybrid genres” (17). She opens up the definition intentionally to think about how the rules of reality are structured within a text and

how those rules can help us understand the parallel construction of race, gender, sexuality, and ability in our day-to-day lives. She connects speculative fiction to Black women's writing which has, historically, striven to disrupt and expand a version of normative realism.

As has been noted extensively, genre definitions in the field of science fiction are contested, but the political stakes of utopian writing in particular provide a starting point for understanding this tension around genre boundaries. In Fredric Jameson's earlier work on utopias, he argues that "the nature and the political function of the utopian genre...its deepest vocation is to bring home, in local and determinate ways, and with a fullness of concrete detail, our constitutional inability to imagine Utopia itself, and this, not owing to any individual failure of imagination but as the result of the systemic, cultural, and ideological closure of which we are all in one way or another prisoners" (153). While we may be enclosed tightly in such a system, generations of thinkers have been working to expose the structures of ideology that limit thought, and this kind of statement erases entire movements which have fought to build better worlds—I could concede that it is impossible to fully articulate the material reality of a different world, but there are many tracts that detail the psychological and spiritual fulfillment that utopian thought might bring. The fixation on objectivity limits the capacity for both imagination and action. Jameson works in a tradition of utopian thought that examines texts written by Samuel Delany, Ursula Le Guin, Joanna Russ, and Marge Piercy, yet he engages with few feminist or anti-racist scholars. In this piece, he brings in these novels only to prove that contemporary utopias offer us a reminder of the impossibility of imagining a "real" utopia. As Avery Gordon argued in 2008, "the Western historiography of utopian thought and practice and the contemporary field known as utopian studies is a decidedly Eurocentric and racially exclusive construction" (257). She points out, among many other examples, that



“this is a field that includes the French Revolution, but not the thirty-year war waged by the Black and Red Seminoles against the United States...Karl Marx, but not Christian Priber, a German socialist exile who joined the Cherokee Nation in 1736 and was captured by the British (later to die in a South Carolina prison) because he refused to declare loyalty to the French or British and was helping to unite the Southern Indian Nations in what was then Cherokee Territory...This is a field that includes Ernst Bloch’s dreamy anticipations but not C. L. R. James’s philosophy of happiness...Brook farm and numerous white middle-class separatist communities, but not the multicultural Combahee River Collective or the many coalitional collectives like them. This is a field that includes Ursula K. LeGuin’s off-world anthropology, but not Toni Cade Bambara’s in-the-here-and-now community studies” (258).

While Jameson’s “repression of the negative” may have been one of the instituting factors of the utopian literary genre in some places and times, an expansion of the utopian umbrella to include the huge variety of political, literary, and aesthetic acts of self-determination and worldbuilding in the face of hegemonic ideology can bring a more holistic reading of utopia, not as “Happiness for everybody” as Jameson quotes from the Strugatsky Brothers’ serialized novel *Roadside Picnic*, but as cultural self-determination and an epistemological revolution on any scale.

Utopian scholars have been working to expand the field and recover versions of literary possibility outside of a narrow conception of ahistorical, unchanging, perfect societies, but part of this project is also to blur the line between utopias and science fiction. Dohra Ahmad, for example, draws a connection between the “realm of the conditional” in both postcolonial theory and science fiction which tries to separate thought “from the existing economic, political, and cultural conditions” that constrain it. She writes, “In a colonial context, we could call this process intellectual decolonization; within the study of utopian fiction, we would call it defamiliarization or cognitive estrangement” (5). The theory of cognitive estrangement, from Darko Suvin, argues that both science fiction and utopia makes our own world unfamiliar or strange through intimacy with another reality; “we see our own world anew, stripped of the

naturalizing processes of myth or ideology” (Baker, 16). Fantasy, on the other hand, “does not challenge the ‘real’” (Baker, 15). The underlying assumption with this definition is that there is some shared sense of the “real” from which we can all be estranged. The “we” who create, read, and are educated by mainstream science fiction is slippery. “Our” sense of the real implies an objective and knowable reality to which everyone has equal access, but the science fictional worlds that “always reflect our own” are premised upon a scientific Enlightenment, rational, material worldview which centers objectivity (Baker, 17). As Isiah Lavender III points out in his 2011 book *Race in American Science Fiction*, white authors narrating the development of the field of science fiction—such as Brian Aldiss and David Wingrove in 1986—often ignored both the history of racism and the fundamentality of blackness to the conceptualization of “otherness” in science fiction. These authors focus on the obsession in science fiction with aliens and the problem of “self-identity;” however, they do not attribute any aspect of this obsession with the “internal conflicts of a humanity marked, or perhaps scarred, by racial experience, our continual state of difference” (Lavender, 25-6). In *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Marshall does the work of cognitive estrangement by pulling the reader away from ideological connections to science and narratives of historical development and asking us to evaluate our own world in order to see the heartless futility of supposed objectivity. Our scientific worldview is made to feel strange and inhuman, not through comparison with a theoretical world, but through intimate contact with another way of being and knowing.

## **Critical Reception and Historical Framework**

*The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* was well-reviewed in its time, but has garnered surprisingly little critical attention. Marshall's first novel, *Brownstones, Brown Girl* (1959), about a young girl growing up in a Barbadian immigrant family in Brooklyn, received significant attention and has become more canonized. This debut novel was reprinted in 1981 by The Feminist Press which renewed interest in the book as a feminist object. In contrast, the politics of *TCPTTP* are more explicitly radical and the genre is somewhat unfamiliar, although the novel is immaculately crafted. Marshall believes that part of the reason the novel was not taken up more explicitly by Black intellectuals at the time of its publication and afterwards is because of two things: its portrayal of interracial sexuality and relationships, specifically between a Black woman and a white man (Merle and Saul) and its choice not to use Caribbean dialect (Hall, xi). However, Caribbean writer and theorist Kamau Braithwaite, in his 1970 review of the novel, praises the originality and relationality of the text. He expresses admiration for the way that Marshall puts Caribbean narrative in conversation with the wider histories of material imperialism. He goes on to state,

The question however remains as to whether the West Indies, or anywhere else for that matter, can be fully and properly seen unless within a wider framework of external impingements and internal change. The contemporary West Indies, after all, are not simply ex-colonial territories; they are underdeveloped islands moving into the orbit of North American cultural and material imperialism, retaining within themselves stubborn vestiges of their Euro-colonial past (mainly among the elite), and active memories of Africa and slavery (mainly among the folk). (125)

Understanding this "wider framework" drives *TCPTTP*. Marshall maintains a constant attention to the historical forces underlying contemporary relationships between individuals; to engage with this novel is to confront Western hegemonic conceptions of humanity through character-driven clashes of worldview. She uses the storytelling space to suggest creative possibility beyond reconciliation or assimilation.

In fact, Marshall intervenes into the Western narrative of history by presenting development as undesirable or even conceptually impossible within existing world orders. As Walter Rodney explains in his 1972 analysis of Africa's underdevelopment by Europe, underdevelopment "expresses a particular relationship of exploitation: namely, the exploitation of one country by another" (14). Underdevelopment is a process and project of relation between countries and is only intensified over time due to a dynamic of dependence. He argues that "African economies are integrated into the very structure of the developed capitalist economies" to create "structural dependence" (25). This dependence is articulated by the Bourne Island lawyer Lyle Hutson when he explains the capital city's new "development plan" to Merle and Saul in which the island will focus on creating huge incentives for attracting investors for "small industry and tourism" in order to "get into the modern swing of things" (203, 204). Saul urges him to consider focusing on agriculture, and Lyle impatiently reminds him that the island is "totally dependent on a single crop that isn't worth a ha'penny anymore on the world market..." (207). He compares the island unfavorably to larger countries in Africa and Asia, noting that the island has nothing "to bargain with" (208). Merle likens their condition to slavery and encourages cooperative resistance, only to be ridiculed for "bogus youthful idealism" and "emotionalism" by Lyle (211). Lyle, who has been educated in England and lives in relative wealth in the island's capital, can only conceive of development in relation to global capital. Lyle's viewpoint is somewhat explained by Sylvia Wynter's 1996 discussion of the teleological ideology of development and its connection to a biocentric view of human life. The people who become labeled "underdeveloped" are culturally constructed as evolutionarily deselected naturally as part of the "*telos* that institutes our contemporary global order" (307). She advocates for an "epistemological revolution," focusing on autonomy from the "local culture" of the West

which uses the premise of objectivity to paint itself as “bio-evolutionarily selected for economic growth and material redemption” (307). Bournehills, whose structural position is articulated by Merle, creates space outside of the culturally hegemonic belief in historical development.

In order to stage this critique of Western narratives of history and teleological development, Marshall sets up the book around the relationships between the three main characters: Merle Kimbona, Saul Amron, and Harriet Shippen. Although the majority of the plot details everyday life on the island, descriptions of bars, homes, and hills, interactions between the people of Bourne Island, the depth of psychological transformation in these three main characters holds the reader’s attention most powerfully. The narrative begins when Saul, Allen Fuso, and Harriet Shippen, Saul’s new wife arrive on Bourne Island, where Allen has spent some time as an anthropologist. Vere, a young man from the island who has been away on a “labor scheme” in the United States, happens to be on the same plane back to the island. The three Americans are there to complete research for CASR, the Center for Applied Social Research, in order to begin a development project in Bournehills, a small hilly region on the Atlantic side of the island, a place “behind God’s back” (197). Saul, a Jewish man with revolutionary politics, leads the group and hopes, through the process, to redeem himself for his previous wife’s death during childbirth in a rural area of Honduras. Harriet, his new wife, was previously married to a nuclear scientist who helped develop high powered weaponry and—it is implied—caused Harriet to be infertile through radioactive contamination. When they arrive on the island, they are taken to Merle’s guesthouse in Bournehills, which she inherited from her father, a white planter who stood by as her sixteen year old Black mother was murdered by a white woman. Merle herself was favored by her father and sent to be educated in England, where she studied history and socialism. Toward the end of the novel we find out that she has an African husband who left her

with their child in England when he learned of her previous affair with a wealthy white woman who was exploiting her. The main action of the novel focuses on Saul's growing relationship with the people of the island, such as Delbert the shopkeeper, and Ferguson, the history enthusiast while Saul and Merle start to build an understanding of mutual trauma, radical political ideals, and a sense of impotence in the face of evil. Harriet, on the other hand, becomes more and more isolated, repressing her sense of abandonment by Saul and her resentment of the islanders for not acting in what she sees as their appropriate roles. Vere spends his time working on a used car which he purchases with his earnings from labor overseas, while Leesy, his aunt, looks on disapprovingly. The book culminates in Carnival, where Harriet becomes engulfed in a parade of, to her, indistinguishable faces of those dressed in military camouflage, and Saul and Merle share the shame of their respective pasts, leading to a sexual relationship. In the end, Vere is killed in a car race and Harriet drowns herself after realizing that Saul could truly love Merle.

The book is highly symbolic and the primary line of critical response has taken up the question of history and nostalgia, focusing on the meaning behind anticolonial aspects of the book brought into focus by the epitaph Marshall includes from the Tiv of West Africa. It reads, "Once a great wrong has been done, it never dies. People speak the words of peace, but their hearts do not forgive. Generations perform ceremonies of reconciliation, but there is no end." Although critics agree that the book is deeply anticolonial, there is discussion around how this epitaph should be read and what the book offers as a vision for the future. Geta LeSeur writes about the role of history in this "brilliant, multifaceted, gem of a novel" as an educational tool (90). She discusses the centrality of the Cuffee Ned narrative and concludes that community engagement grounded in "cultural memory and ritual enactment" will bring change, although it is unclear what kind of change this might be. LeSeur therefore reads this epigraph as "a starting

point for personal meditation and interracial dialogue, as a possibility for change and reconciliation. Great wrongs should never be forgotten, but they can be understood, perhaps even forgiven, if confronted” (109). LeSeur sees the novel’s engagement with history as perhaps an example of how to honor and instrumentalize the past. She goes on to state that “some black nationalists” might reject the possibility of reconciliation and instead see only grief and anger “remain as cultural and artistic options” (109). LeSeur thereby places the novel within its larger political context and implies that Marshall is working toward conversation and reconciliation between racialized groups in the United States and the Caribbean. Kate Houlden also recognizes the power of historical engagement as a method for change in *TCPTTP*, but remains vague about the extent to which that change will be revolutionary or conciliatory. In her article, Houlden focuses on the idea of nostalgia, although cautions against collapsing the idea into a “kitsch, or depoliticized, nostalgia for empire and its objects” (255). She sees Marshall offering a different, subversive kind of nostalgia which is “slow and thoughtful, acknowledging the lost dreams of another time without directly wishing to return to or relive that history. It explores how communities can create a self-determined and productive nostalgia out of a difficult history, ascribing a positive value to nostalgia in the process” (255). While I agree with Houlden’s analysis in that Marshall resists the romantic nostalgia of New Bristol for a colonial past, her claim that the novel explores “how to celebrate an historic slave revolt *at the same time* as embracing progress, development and their attendant nostalgic narratives” seems to miss the novel’s worldview. The refusal to embrace progress by the residents of Bournehills and to develop slowly within the confines of their economic position is flatly refused—they remain entrenched in both their history and their present as a political act and a living archive of new possible futures.

I bring these readings up to show how critics have worked to square the artistic complexity and literary value of this book with its truly revolutionary content. Marshall herself presents an explicit reading of the theme of reconciliation and history in an interview conducted with her in 1970 with MFA students from the University of Pennsylvania. To the students who keep insisting that her book offers a positive potentiality and a lesson of hope, she responds:

“On one hand—and this has to do with the impossibility of reconciliation—I see no hope of the West and the rest of the world, the darker peoples of the world, ever being reconciled. I mean, I’m really saying that in this book. I’m trying to trace the decline and fall of the order of the West. This might be a very unacceptable thing to the people in this room. Okay? But this is my theme. On the other hand—and just as important a theme—is the whole hope and looking toward that third world of darker peoples emerging” (14).

The tension between these two themes, of destruction and possibility, refocuses the reader’s attention away from worn narratives about progress. The novel envisions, symbolically, the death of the West and the emerging reality of another form of life which has been there all along.

### **Utopian Hauntings**

Because of her attention to the barriers to and processes of world transformation and her resistance to dominant narratives of progress, development and knowledge, Marshall’s book might be read as a work of Black utopia. In his book *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*, Alex Zamalin argues that Black utopias offer another lens on the utopian tradition. While Western authors struggled to articulate a break from political norms, Black authors, who were excluded from economic narratives and denied full entry in the category of the “human” could construct utopian visions “without seeking prior approval” (12). As opposed to the romance of “wholeness, spiritual redemption, and rational teleology” that characterizes Western utopia, he explains that “Utopia in black became much more critical and infused by a sense of tragedy. It became defined by unfinished conversations, unresolved



debates, critical problematics, which resisted easy resolution. In black utopia, a sense of committed struggle in the face of the unknown was coupled with a realistic sense of subversion and collapse” (12). This “struggle in the face of the unknown” certainly describes Marshall’s imagined community of Bournehills, where people “stand in defiance of change” which is offered only through imperial mediation (LeSeur, 97).

Black utopia clearly has ties to the fields of Afrofuturism and Black Futurism, the nuances of which are not necessarily the focus of this inquiry. However, the literary roots of both Afrofuturism and Black utopias begin with a similar set of texts. Historically, two novels with utopian, Pan-African themes, *Of One Blood* by Pauline Hopkins, and *Dark Princess* by W. E. B DuBois work in the anti-modernist, romantic tradition to question the logic of Western development and draw upon the energies of “mysticism” and “irrationality.” (Ahmad, 7). Others, like *Imperium and Imperio* by Sutton Griggs and George Schuyler’s *Black Empire* stories might be labeled “critical utopias,” which “tend to focus on an individual’s contribution to the formation of a better society, and, while rejecting the status quo, present radically imperfect and ambiguous visions” (Vesela, 285). Theorists from Afrofuturism can also help us understand the unique perspective of Black utopian thought. Ytasha L. Womack, for example, in her book on Afrofuturism, discusses the “uncategorizable” in Black women’s literary and aesthetic imagination. She notes that their work often “links science, nature, and magic as one” which pushes against Western genre categories, especially because “their voice is not specifically shaped in opposition to a male or racist perspective” (102). Rather, Womack argues for a specific quality to the writing that evokes “a conscious reorientation process” in the reader: “It’s as if the artists want you to remember something, and they discuss it in such a matter-of-fact way that you figure you must know. But do you? There’s an unconscious game of trying to

remember a memory, a time or space when and where these familiar oddities weren't so bizarre" (105). This idea of a time and space that's not necessarily outside of the historical sweep of time, but more interior—a memory or truth that exists simultaneously to the present—provides another way to conceptualize the location of utopia in relation to the “real.”

The political stakes of this memory that haunts the present is examined thoroughly in Avery Gordon's reformulation of utopia in her and Angela Davis' book *Keeping Good Time, Reflections on Knowledge, Power, and People*. In her chapter on utopia, Gordon focuses on the way the term has been implemented to undercut or delegitimize desires for other or different sets of social, economic, and political relations, continuing the work of Adorno and Bloch. She notes that people tend to write off certain “idealistic” notions as “merely utopian” and therefore childish or not to be taken seriously. Gordon then insists that “The utopian is not what is actually impossible or unrealizable; rather it represents the limit of permissible truth” (122). The idea of the utopian as the impermissible can help us conceptualize the political challenge of speculation. Speculation attempts to make room for the impermissible or the unthinkable by imagining alternative histories, presents, and futures which do not spring directly from current material realities. Gordon asserts that the utopian is the conversion of longings for freedom “into *vital needs*, into things that we cannot and will no longer live without” (125). Because the possibility of these needs' fulfillment is ever-present yet often ignored, the utopian haunts the present: “The haunting presence of subversive forces and alternative values striving to become social facts is very frightening because it is a testament to the reality of living better and otherwise than we're expected to do” (129). The utopian haunts the present as the unfulfilled longings of a possible reality. We can begin to conceptualize a parallel or alternative reality outside of the dialectic of history driven by capital. For Gordon, this kind of utopian possibility

which haunts the present is manifested when people choose to live in a way that takes utopia seriously and work to break from a submission to the history of their social relations under racial capitalism. This work entails living as though the impermissible were necessary, which is exactly what the people of Bournehills do.

We could also consider the relationship between “the Black radical imagination,” as discussed by Robin D. G. Kelley, and the utopian genre. Marxist analyses of utopia which focus on the science of history and evaluation of “socialist efficiency” can be skeptical of interpersonal emotional affect. As Kelley notes, “there are very few contemporary political spaces where the energies of love and imagination are understood and respected as powerful social forces” (4). He offers surrealism as a cite of “international revolutionary movement concerned with the emancipation of thought,” and he sees “in the cultural production of social movements...the many different cognitive maps of the future, of the world not yet born” (5, 9-10). The focus on diversity of thought, the multiplicity of the potential “cognitive maps” of our collective future provides productive tension with the white historical visions of utopia or Jameson’s ideological prison. Marshall sets up the island and its residents as a space to grapple with the various terms just offered to describe the work of Black intellectual production and also utopia: a place for “emancipation of thought,” an “epistemological revolution,” a “conscious reorientation.” The utopian suffuses the region of Bournehills with an aura of ghostliness, opacity, the uncanny.

The novel gestures towards this kind of utopian haunting of the present and a yearning for new structures of thought through a strange collapsing of time. History subverts and disrupts the narrative by adding layers to both people and places, perhaps the most speculative choice in Marshall’s book, and the one that is referenced in the title, “the timeless people.” This aspect of the novel also helps to elucidate the radical political potential running through the everyday lives

and movements of the citizens—the utopian potential which remains untapped except for certain moments. The concept of the “timeless people” is first introduced by Enid, the wife of a wealthy black lawyer, Lyle Hudson, who lives in New Bristol and hosts the Americans first upon their arrival to the island. She discourages Harriet from living in Bournehills because it is “no place for decent people” then tells her, “those people are another breed altogether. You can’t figure them out. They’re like they’re bewitched or something. To tell the truth, I don’t even like to think the place exists” (70). Even those on the island who consider themselves locals, outside of the region, feel disturbed by something that lives on within Bournehills. As they travel there the next day in Merle’s car, the distance seem “vast” and they feel that they are being taken “into another time” (95). They crest the hill and look down into the “worn, wrecked hills” which have been over-farmed for centuries. The landscape itself seems to evade their sight, the haze making it “lose shape before the eye” so that “the entire place looked almost illusory, unreal, a trick played by the eye” (99). Saul sees in the region reflections of the globally dispossessed with whom he has worked during his career as an anthropologist: the Peruvian Andes, the highlands of Guatemala, Chile, Bolivia, Honduras, Mexico, the “cotton lands of the Southern United States” and the “Indians in Chiapas” (100). Immediately after, they descend into the region and come upon a hill which appears as a “blackened heap” which seems “to have been almost totally destroyed by some recent fire. It might have only just stopped burning” (101). However, the passengers in the car are told that the fire occurred hundreds of years ago when a revolutionary, Cuffee Ned, led a rebellion against a plantation owner, Percy Bryam, who was killed and the land claimed by formerly enslaved people. The region of Bournehills “then for over two years had lived as a nation apart, behind the high wall, independent, free” (102). The citizens of this part of the island identify strongly with the descendants of these revolutionaries; the image of the

hill, which appears almost smoking from a fire which seems only just extinguished, is more than a symbol. As Merle says, “We’re an odd, half-mad people, I guess. We don’t ever forget anything, and yesterday comes like today to us” (102). The people themselves live in continuity with the past, as though the fire may relight at any moment.

The novel continuously references and builds this sense of historical presence and the haunting of the present by the past, specifically by creating a porousness between the environment and the individual. Those repairing the roads work “at the same slow, almost dreamlike pace as the figures walking along the road or harvesting in the fields,” collapsing distinctions between types of labor (103). The figures who stand on the beach look like “so many ghosts washed up by the sea under the great shadow of the house” and Delbert, the shopkeeper’s, laugh begins in the “depths of his belly and traveled up with a sound almost like that of the sea at Bournehills as it moves in over the reefs, the same charged, muted roar” (139, 126). Even the mechanical spaces of the region, which are connected to global materialism, like the Cane Vale factory, are suffused with historical meaning and the individuals become caught in a sort of haunted scene within it. Saul sees the dust flying through the air as he enters and notices “the men working there appeared almost disembodied forms: ghosts they might have been from some long sea voyage taken centuries ago” (154). Although history moves forward, the inhabitants of Bournehills seem purposefully stuck in time, connected to the sea and the cane fields and becoming unimaginably old even as they are born and die.

The people of Bournehills live in places that carry the shadow of a treacherous history; however, the mystery of the region is even more enigmatic. Though Saul and Harriet read Bournehills primarily through the lens of trauma and lack, the Americans are also observed and known by the islanders in a deeply unsettling way. There is an element of judgement and self-

consciousness that the pair feel in the sight of the islanders. The first time Saul expresses this feeling when he sees the people working beside the road on their journey into Bournehills with Merle. He notices that “they would slowly raise their right arm like someone about to give evidence in court, the elbows at a sharp ninety-degree angle, the hand held stiff, the fingers straight. It was a strange, solemn greeting encompassing both hail and farewell, time past and present” (103). The fact that he interprets this gesture as a sort of witnessing insinuates that he believes his presence there is somehow on trial. There are many other moments where he is watched. After the newspaper journalist George Clough writes an article that portrays him in an egotistical light, he feels he must present himself to Bournehills on his own terms; Merle suggests a party at her guesthouse and Saul is introduced to hundreds of people from the area. Leesy, Merle’s aunt, and her friends stand disdainfully aside, silent, chill, with “tough, work-swollen hands” (135). When Saul approaches “they gave the impression of being on the verge of uttering some word, some dark pronouncement which they would intone in prophetic Delphic voices” (135). Later, Leesy speaks scornfully to herself about “these people from Away” who walk around a look at people “like they never seen poor people before” (142). She pronounces, to herself, “I tell you they’s some confused and troubled souls you see them there” and decides “He’ll never understand it. Bournehills!” (142). In fact, a large part of the novel meditates upon Saul’s soul and his rumination around the past tragedies and mistakes in his life.

Leesy is not the only citizen of Bournehills to confront Saul and to force him to reopen wounds which he has been repressing, with the help of Harriet, who makes an art of compartmentalizing. During this same party, there are people who come to witness, but refuse to come up off of the beach and fully enter into the social atmosphere of the house. The multiplicity and ghostliness of these figures make Saul deeply uncomfortable. He feels that he

cannot fully see their faces, just a “fleeting impression of the harsh high bones that structured their faces and of their deep-set eyes which seemed to be regarding him from the other end of a long dimly lit corridor” (137). He cannot distinguish between individuals and feels that “even the babies asleep on their mothers’ breasts, were in some way unimaginably old” (137). It’s hard to say to what extent Saul might be projecting a racialized fantasy of timeless otherness onto these people, but in the end he finds he cannot “penetrate the tunnel of their eyes, to get at what lay there” (137). Instead, there is something about the gaze of the islanders that surveils him fully:

“And under cover of the darkness he felt them assessing him: his outer self first—his large, somewhat soft white body that had never known real physical labor, the eyes that had gone numb after his first wife’s death, the coarse hair that had begun to recede at the temples. They saw even farther, he sensed; their gaze discovering the badly flawed man within and all the things about him which he would gladly have kept hidden: his deep and abiding dissatisfaction with himself, for one, his large capacity for failing those closest to him, his arrogance...his selfishness—for in everything he did, no matter how selfless it might appear, he was always after raising his own stock...” ( 137).

Saul finds himself assessed, discovered, and laid bare, as Marshall flips the colonial and imperial gaze which “distributes knowledge and power to the subject who looks, while denying or minimizing access to power for its object” (Rieder, 7). The fact that Saul is able to feel this and moves towards this discomfort makes him a more sympathetic character, but the power of this moment is in the hands of the unnamed who refuse scientific analysis. Harriet, who completely shuts herself off to the gaze of the islanders, becomes angry under the scrutiny of their sight. She sees very thin children on the beach outside Merle’s guesthouse who “might have been very old people who had lived out their time, and then instead of dying, had resumed the forms of the children they had once been and begun the life cycle all over again” (168). She goes out to provide them with portions of food that she can spare from her home. Their unsubmitive gaze,

however, forces repressed memories into her mind of her treatment of her Southern mother's personal maid, a Black woman named Alberta. As a child, Harriet had refused to give her mother a toy for Alberta's nieces and nephews because "she had felt she was being asked to give too much" and she "had quietly threatened to burn it" rather than let another child have it (169). Harriet remembers this moment under their "unwavering gaze" which does show neither friendliness nor curiosity. Soon, she begins "to feel uncomfortably, absurdly, like a defendant, the accused, standing in an old-fashioned dock with the children below her silent jurors" (169). Her sanguine instrumentalization of power is challenged by their power to act as they please, forgoing the role Harriet imagines for them—grateful beneficiaries whose lives improve by her generous presence—and instead confronting Harriet with their incomprehensible humanity.

As Saul and Harriet move through the region of Bournehills, they are faced with the impermeability of the inhabitants' world. Although they are physically cohabitating in the geographic space, they can feel a haunting presence of some inaccessible reality principle which asks them to renegotiate their self-narrative. Their systems for categorization seem to fall short, as they fail to distinguish between age, gender, or generation. It is not surprising that they conceptualize the people of Bournehills as ghosts or immortal spirits because they cannot apply their normative objective hierarchies into the space, so they turn to the vocabulary of the nonscientific. They experience radical difference as a haunting by the fact of another world and another way of viewing time, space, and self. Marshall offers these hints as a utopian longing for the preservation and profusion of an always already present yet inarticulable non-Western way of life.

### **Character as Genre or Kind**



In addition to these particular debates around the definitions of science fiction, utopia, and realism, the field of genre theory has been interested in general in the efficacy of boundaries and the extent to which these divisions can or should be named or policed. Some of these debates will be helpful as I move toward a discussion of Marshall's characters as both individual and embodied instantiation of socialized knowledge. For example, John Frow notes the paradox of genre: "the law of genre is a law of purity...yet lodged at the heart of this law is another, 'a law of impurity or a principle of contamination'" (1627). He also discusses the tension between genre as simultaneously a social construction and a recognizable norm with "historical force" (1628). As Wai Chi Dimock explains in her PMLA introduction to the special issue on genre, "Genres have solid names, ontologized names," but these names do not designate "taxonomic classes of equal solidity but fields at once emerging and ephemeral, defined over and over again by new entries that are still being produced" (1379). Genre is not a fixed identity category, but a description of process in a state of constant redefinition. They are formal structures with effects on both material production and methods of thinking: "More precisely, genres are everywhere as fields and frames with which to organize meaning. They produce effects of truth and authority through the projection of their 'generically specific' worlds" (Jerng, 11). While we shouldn't create a one to one equivalency between literary genres and genres of the human, as the first references static objects—texts—and the second refers to living beings with ontological development over time, it is interesting to see some of these same paradoxes in the way we perceive or read people as sexualized, racialized, and gendered (among other attributions). While we might imagine an instance of a race or gender, when those instances are actualized, they can never fully represent or encompass that human genre as a whole.

Each of Marshall's four main characters serves a dual function—as both an individual and an instantiation of type or kind. An early example of reading the book on a primarily symbolic level comes from Robert Bone, who writes in his 1969 New York Times review, “we see that Allen represents an effete civilization that has pledged its soul to the gods of technology. Harriet embodies the suicidal impulse of the western psyche: its unyielding racism and will to dominate, despite a superficial liberalism. Saul represents the possibility of transformation and renewal” (4). On one level the book does encourage reading the characters as representations or embodiments, although we could elaborate to read these characters as embodiments of race, class, sexuality, and gender as well, not only philosophical positions. It is also interesting to note that Bone does not see Merle as a symbolic entity, even though she inhabits an equally familiar literary and social positioning of an educated Black native intellectual who fights Western hegemony to the detriment of their own physical and psychological well-being. In the same conversation with the University of Pennsylvania creative writers, Marshall has a fascinating response to the students' insinuation that “the symbolic values of [her] characters might have been...more important than a complex individual characterization” (5). After a bit of back and forth, she says, “I think why I'm a bit confused is because you're implying that the symbolic content that a character might embody also makes of him a kind of stereotype, and that to me is not really...” before she is cut off by the professor. She says also that she wants the characters to “stand for very definite points of view” but also to be people (6). Her point, as I read it, is to demonstrate that every individual carries symbolic or generic content and that we are all instantiated into the world within a certain sociogenic worldview which affects the way we act, speak, and attribute value in the world. Each of us, as part of a genre-of-the-human, will “lawlikely know its reality primarily with reference to its own

adaptively advantageous production/reproduction as such a mode of being” (Wynter, *Coloniality* 311). The idea that there are people who are non-symbolic—merely biological—or who do not speak from a specific position or genre is a Western, neoliberal logic. What makes Marshall’s novel particularly powerful is the way that these genres of human beings or kinds of people are made to clash and what new knowledges those confrontations make manifest.

By intertwining history, character, and profession, the white characters become stand-ins for certain Western scientific viewpoints; Liberalism, Objectivism, and Progress. In Allen and Harriet’s characters in particular, Marshall explores how whiteness alienates the individual mind from the body and its desires through an obsessive focus on order, objectivity, and control. For Allen’s character, Marshall shows how the strong objective lens, combined with a repressive moral culture, creates a numb and detached persona. Allen’s “type” or “genre” is both obvious and shifting. We read potential tones of queer desire, but explicit terms are never uttered; through Allen, Marshall connects intimacy and passion with a rejection of heteronormative family structures without shifting into Western categories of heterosexual/homosexual. Though he is less central to the story, Marshall explores Allen’s lack of fervor for life and his repression through his budding friendship with Vere, a local Black man recently returned to the island from a labor exchange in the US. The two men build a quiet friendship, as Allen watches Vere work on the car he’s fixing, handing him tools, or when they spend time together driving up the coast to swim. Their “gentle exchange” is unspoken, but Allen starts to be confused by his feelings (188). When Vere successfully repairs the car that the entire village mocked him for buying, Allen rides with him and can’t take his eyes off Vere’s movements: “the way those hands, which looked as if they could easily snap the steering wheel in two, touched the various controls, the skill, authority, and patience with which he did everything” (239). In this moment, Allen

conflates the car and its power with Vere, thinking about the feelings that begun the moment he saw “the Opel,” the American made car. He feels “unreasonable envy, even a kind of anger” when he understands that Vere has succeeded, demonstrating his power and influence in the world. It is unclear whether Allen is attracted to Vere physically or if he wants to emulate him.

This confusion comes to a head during Carnival in New Bristol, the capital city of the island, when Vere introduces Allen to two girls he’s met in the parade. The girl Vere chooses for Allen, Elvita, is confident and attractive and pressures him into dancing in the crowd with them. Soon, Vere decides that they should all “go somewhere quiet,” and Allen rides with the group in the Opel, pressed against Elvita’s leg and arm, frightening himself with invented visions of her sexual power as they make their way to the other girl, Milly’s, room (305). They all chat together, and Vere is loud, “bold, self-assured” as Allen silently watches his “legs crossed and hands gesturing strongly” (306). Allen experiences this as a nightmare, and Marshall tells us he felt “the protective fog over his mind deepen and a paralysis began to weigh his limbs” (307). Vere and Milly retreat behind a screen in the room and Elvita shares her life story with him, building intimacy and eventually, after a few long, expectant pauses, making a move. As they kiss, he disassociates, fleeing “the surface of his body, out of her reach” and experiences a familiar “distaste” for women’s bodies, with their “suffocating softness” and the recurring fear he has of their bodies, “that once he entered that dark place hidden away at the base of their bodies, he would not be able to extricate himself but would be caught, trapped, condemned to a life-and-death struggle there for which he sensed he was ill-equipped” (309). Eventually, Elvita becomes frustrated with his lack of interest, insults him, and leaves, leaving Allen listening to the sounds behind the screen, which “enter his body through the pores of his skin” (311). He fantasizes about Vere, envisioning the movement of his body, and experiences “a wave of feeling

and desire so awesome” that he is compelled to touch himself in tandem with the noises. He finishes and cries out at the exact same moment as Milly, so that “the two sounds rose together, blending one into the other, becoming a single complex note of the most profound pleasure and release...a rending and effacing of the self” (312). He flees in fear, begins to avoid Vere, and their relationship becomes unbearably awkward, as Allen believes that Vere knows everything. His anger at the pity that Vere shows him causes him to isolate, working feverishly on his coding and waking in the night to “the same inexplicable mix of anger and admiration, envy and longing,” and an “unendurable sense of abandonment” (348).

Allen’s burgeoning intimacy with Vere, along with the fervor of Carnival more generally, gives him a glimpse into a connection with his own physicality and desire, although the experience is filled with shame. Vere shows no obvious romantic interest in Allen, and it is unclear if Allen understands his own attraction—is he fetishizing Black masculinity and subconsciously yearning to dominate his friend? Does he sexualize Vere’s power because he wants to feel purpose and desire the way that Vere can? Or is he, for the first time in his life, experiencing a small measure of real intimacy and connection due to the island’s sense of illicit possibility and relaxed rules around interracial relationships and casual sex? It is left intentionally ambiguous, as Allen does not have the tools to examine his own desire or grapple with the imprint of race, gender, and sexuality on his own psyche. At the end of the novel, in a conversation with Merle, he laments his inability to “be out there in the center” and tells her, “I’m a walking IBM machine” (381, 378). She suggests that he “find himself a nice girl,” settle down and have children, and he gives her a “look bitter with disappointment. It said better than any word how deeply she had failed him” (380). Although we don’t know exactly what Allen wants, we do know he is depressed by the possibilities open to him for a full erotic life and we

see that he yearns for something more. We leave him “staring with a strange fixity at a graph amid the papers spread before him, staring at it almost as though he saw a human form trapped behind the crosshatching” (382). With Allen’s storyline, Marshall subverts the reader’s expectations for catharsis or categorization; he is left unlabeled yet imprisoned within his experience of alienation. Refusing the identity politics of naming sexuality under familiar terms, Marshall instead focuses on Allen’s struggle to thrive at the confluence of his desire, upbringing, and the limiting possibilities for white male Western lifeways. Though he is analyzed in part as a type, he is never actualized into some complete iteration of genre.

With *Harriet*, Marshall explores the genre of the colonial white woman, further understood as the type or subgenre of the cold and frigid postcolonial white woman with generational wealth who craves power over others because her own autonomy has been stifled by patriarchy. However, just because *Harriet*’s position recalls a familiar or knowable type does not mean she is flat or simple. *Harriet* helps us to see race and racism as a deeply psychic and embodied phenomenon, as Marshall narrates the painful dissolution of *Harriet*’s identity, which has been built off a subconscious belief in her biological superiority and the inherent desirability of progress. It is difficult to name another novel from this time which offers such a tender, dynamic, yet unforgiving portrayal of white womanhood and the “deeply rooted, almost mystical beliefs that appear to lie at the heart of” the American “racial dilemma” (422). As *Harriet* realizes her repeated failure to “fix” the lives of those around her in *Bournehills*, she finally asks herself, “*What was it they wanted?* She could not have said. But it was too much, of that she was certain. She could not give it, whatever it was, without being herself deprived, diminished; and worse, without undergoing a profound transformation in which she would be called upon to

relinquish some high place we had always occupied and to become other than she had always been” (408).

In the end, Harriet has completely failed to exert power over others—the islanders’ lives have not materially progressed despite her meticulously parceled acts of charity, she has tried to bribe Merle to leave the island and been met with humiliating indifference, and her petitions to Saul’s boss to remove him from the position on the island cause only anger and the potential dissolution of her second marriage. As Saul leaves in disgust, she sits alone in their rooms throughout the night, realizing he will not be coming home and finally facing herself and her past. Her legs give out, and she sits “the long hours with her hands fallen open in her lap and her dull stare and slack body giving the impression she was asleep with her eyes open” (457). She meditates on her family’s history, from her hallowed ancestors who “trafficked in moldy flour and human flesh” to her great-uncle Ambrose Shippen talking to her father about “manipulating the market” (457). She thinks of her mother, the “hopeless, unreconstructed Southern belle” with her “unwitting and indiscriminate cruelty” and her ex-husband, the nuclear physicist who gave her dreams of global control in the form of destruction (458). She realizes her desperate need for influence and control, and “the admission aged her” (459). The mental shift creates a physical change: “The face that was impressive, even beautiful in its unshakable composure became worn, haggard, old...all the small, carefully arranged muscles that shaped its characteristic expression might have suddenly lost their tension and fallen, and in so doing brought the face down with them” (459). This moment illustrates the symbiotic relationship between mind and body. Her physical experience in the place precipitates a mental shift, which then refracts through her body and changes her affect and the way others might experience and treat her.

This final scene with Harriet inspires a delicate blend of empathy and judgement—honoring her desperate lack of power as a woman, while abhorring her presumed superiority as a wealthy and white American. Marshall shows how Harriet’s organism, as a product of her history, culture, and individual development, traps her inside a way of being and knowing, even as she tries to stretch her world—her only method to do so is control. With her character, Marshall demonstrates the incompatibility between certain worlds. She is described as tight and controlled, obsessively clean, thin and rigid; the numbness Marshall describes in Harriet points to her resistance to enter fully into her new environment and therefore her inability to shift intellectually past the internal logic of Western progress as inherently more fulfilling. Through Harriet, Marshall helps us think through the physical and psychological experience of whiteness and its implicit rejection of bodily needs and desires, joy and curiosity about other worldviews and experiences. She is compelled to drown herself in response to Saul’s rejection of her in favor of, not only Merle, but the intimate companionship of his new islander friends. Her mind and body cannot assimilate the reality with which she is confronted. Marshall asks us to hold Harriet accountable to her position and symbolic type without collapsing her individual complexity; she is exposed as a product of her sociogenic and ontogenetic world which includes cultural history.

### **Transformation across Boundary**

Although the characters carry the weight of their symbolic type, Marshall does suggest the possibility for moving across and through certain boundaries, exploring trust outside of Western knowledge structures. In contrast to Harriet’s cold separateness, Saul is portrayed as a highly physical being, whose views shift as he moves Bournehills’ environment and begins to desire connection with the residents’ ways of being and knowing. Marshall uses Saul’s character



to explore the cultural component of objectivity, even within liberal, reflexive scientific practice, and the limits of understanding between worldviews when one claims neutrality. His ethic as a scientist is first introduced by Harriet; after the history of their relationship, in which she pursues him and manipulates his professional life, the omniscient narrator tells us that Saul has been “one of the early pioneers in the field of applied research who had insisted that sciences such as anthropology move beyond mere research and use their knowledge, whenever possible, to help improve the lives of the people under study” (41). Imagining that the book takes place in Marshall’s contemporary moment, the late ‘60s, Saul’s “pioneering” days likely fall in the ‘50s. Talal Asad, in *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973) argues that the kinds of disciplinary developments that took place in anthropology between 1940 and 1966 were accelerated by “attainment of political independence by colonial, especially African countries in the late ‘50s and the early ‘60s” and the subsequent shift in political power in the countries of study; “Thus increasingly the larger political-economic system thrust itself obtrusively into the anthropologist’s framework, as did the relevance of the past, both colonial and pre-colonial” (12-13). Although Saul may be working against the power structures of anthropology and painting himself as a “bleeding heart,” (41) he still operates on “the kind of human intimacy on which anthropological fieldwork is based...one-sided and provisional” (Asad, 17). Saul at least denies political neutrality and asserts to the islanders during his speech at Merle’s that he is planning to spend six months to a year “getting acquainted” with the region (141). He tells them they will “get to know us and decide whether we’re the kind of people you’d care to have work along with you in solving some of the district’s problems” (141). He is perhaps an example of the way that “bourgeois consciousness, of which social anthropology is merely one fragment, has always contained within itself profound contradictions and ambiguities—and therefore the potentialities

for transcending itself” (Asad, 18). However, he still works for CASR, the Center for Applied Social Research which is primarily funded through Unicolor, the United Corporation of America. Unicolor’s wealth comes directly from the historical trade of enslaved people, exploiting cheap labor, and extracting resources from imperial holds, such as the Caribbean.

He spends time sitting and drinking with the men in Delbert’s shop, and he works in the fields with other laborers, allowing the island to bring back memories of his Jewish heritage, his mother, his ex-wife and her horrible miscarriage and ensuing death. This time spent embodying a new cultural reality—drinking, eating, living, moving with the rhythms and practices of Bournehills locals—inspires a meditation on his past, destabilizing his narrative of self. Hortense Spillers draws out the symbiotic process between the symbolic/psychological and the environmental/physical within Saul by focusing on ritual moments in the novel performed by the citizens of Bournehills. She shows the way that these scenes disturb Saul, who must confront an impenetrable practice and recognize his own psychic and cultural isolation. For example, the ritual butchering of a pig, which takes place every Sunday in the community, challenges Saul to recognize how “one’s *group membership*, defined along a hierarchy of social, cultural, and genetic functions, takes precedent over the unique wish that is supreme, from Saul’s agonized point of view” (164). As he watches the practice, Saul is caught between three worldviews—the evacuated and parasitic culture of the scientist observer with its attendant liberal wish for an accessible, universal humanity, his own deep and somewhat repressed connection to Judaism and its embodied refusal of pork, and the impenetrable but desirable comradeship and ritual of the Bournehills locals. As much as he wants to fully engage with the slaughter, he is conflicted, and, even after weeks he “almost gagged on his share of the pork” (257). Spiller’s phenomenological system is composed of Myth, History, Ritual, and Ontology (the individual

development across time). These components connect with Wynter's theorization of a sociogenic world, which combines all these aspects to create a certain physical and psychological experience of reality. We watch as Saul's perception of the scene begins to shift—Marshall notes that, in the beginning, “he had sometimes found the Sunday ritual with its blood, flies, smalls and ravenous dogs, its stifled animal screams and contending male voices too much to take” (258). However, during this iteration, his feelings become “far more complex” as he begins to realize that “he was and would continue to be a stranger in their midst, the outside, someone from Away” (259). Along with this disappointment at his outsider status, and the disturbing nature of slaughter, he sees “beneath the violence of the act an affirmation of something age-old, a sense of renewal” and he begins to feel a pure joy and lightness (259). Immediately after, in a conversation with Merle, she says “Sometimes you come close to being what we call in Bournehills real people” (262). This tension, between Saul's historical group membership and his transformative participation in the life of the island, is preserved throughout the book, but implies a potential for “a New World humanity” (Spillers, 152). Spillers writes, “The unborn will repeat the moment and figures now not only in a collective nervous system, but also a geopolitical synthesis, an entire structure of culture through the mother” (170). This concept of the “collective nervous system,” connecting affective nurture and the state, helps us imagine a process in which the experience of the individual and of the group is interactive and reflexive and highlights the method of embodied practice to shift emotional response.

Despite this transformative potential, Saul's implication in the logic of Western science and liberal acquiescence to capital persists, when the Cane Vale factory, owned by a British corporation and operated by Bournehill locals, shuts down, refusing to process sugar cane grown on small plots of land. The factory has completed grinding the cane produced by large, foreign

owned estates in the region and has deemed it economically unnecessary to fix the rollers needed to process the locals' crop. The threat of this possibility has hung over the novel from the beginning; however, the reality sends Merle, who acts often as the voice of Bournehills, into a rage and then a long withdrawal from her community. Saul, who follows her to the shutdown factory, calls her name, and as she turns to him he is taken aback by "the sight of that face, which at times appeared to contain in ever-shifting and elusive forms all the faces in Bournehills" (388). She chastises him, the symbol of white "aide" and "development" which fails to produce material change in the region and challenges the role of science and the scientist who cannot intervene in practical ways. She asks him to use his power to fix the machine:

"That's the least you can do. Or is that asking too much? Perhaps all you can do is walk about asking people their business. Collecting data. And writing reports. Is that all you're good for? And sitting around worrying about something you say you can't understand about the place. Well, open your eyes, damn you, and look... You're a so-called scientist, aren't you? Well, what's the good of all that science and technology they teach you in that place you're from if you can't fix one little machine?" (389).

She talks him through the process of ordering the roller and flying it in to Bournehills, reminding him of his claim of friendship with those who live there. She screams at him to look at her and to face the truth. Finally, she connects the impotence of Saul's position on the island with the goal of Western technological development: "Kill! Destroy!... That's all your science and big-time technology is good for... Everything and everybody blown to bits, the whole show up in flames because you couldn't have it your way anymore. Everything flat, flat, flat" (391). At the height of her emotional yet highly logical, systematic monologue, she details a scene of empty, deadly, absence, brought about by nuclear war necessitated by the logic of a system that denies real humanity in the name of Man.

While Merle can be grating as a character because of her voluminous, cutting monologues which leave little room for dialogue or dissent, she has often been read as a symbol or voice of the whole community of Bournehills, connecting her to the elusive, haunting mood of the region. As Paravisini-Gebert says, “Merle’s struggle to reconcile the ‘disunity within herself’ and to forge a path to an autonomous future becomes one with the struggle of the Bournehills’ villagers to find a way to re-establish the sense of communal oneness that they had briefly enjoyed under Cuffee Ned” (50). This connection between Merle’s life and the life of the island region, comes to a climax when Saul finally understands the meaning behind Bournehills that has been haunting him throughout the novel. Simultaneously, we share a rare glimpse into Merle’s psychology.

After Merle breaks down at the Cane Vale factory, she isolates herself in her room at the boarding house she operates, inherited from her father’s family. Saul comes to visit her there but she is catatonic, “as though she had fled completely the surface of herself for someplace deep within” (399). He begins to notice the objects in her room, to which she has never given him access. He sees the various historical items which she has collected: prints of life on the island during slavery of planters’ leisure and people laboring in fields, and a “meticulously rendered” drawing of a “three-masted Bristol slaver.” She also has a library of West Indian history and textiles with “abstract tribal motifs” from which she sews her dresses. Saul sees the room as a museum, an archive, which expresses her “struggle for coherence, the hope and desire for reconciliation of her conflicting parts” (401). The room, however, reveals the larger mystery of the island, which is tied to interpreting the utopian elements of the book. Saul finally recognizes the depth of the challenge that the island region poses, the meaning of the “palpable presence beneath the everyday reality” and “its odd people who at times seemed other than themselves”

which has been shadowing him throughout his time there (402). Bournehills itself is a challenge to the order of the West which, by some sort of suspension, will remain

“as a reminder—painful but necessary—that it was not yet over, only the forms had changed, and the real work was still to be done...Only an act on the scale of Cuffee’s could redeem them. And only then would Bournehills itself, its mission fulfilled, perhaps forgo that wounding past and take on the present, the future. But it would hold out until then, resisting, defying all efforts, all the halfway measures, including his, to reclaim it; refusing to settle for anything less than what Cuffee had demanded in his time” (402).

Upon realizing this truth, Saul feels “struck down and temporarily blinded so that he might see in another, deeper, way” (402-3). The novel questions this assumed power relationship between scientist observer and the colonial observed as Bournehills refuses to give Saul “access to cultural and historical information” without a reciprocal intimacy and self-analysis on his part. We watch how Saul struggles to transform from the inside psychically and culturally as he opens himself up to the people and traditions of Bournehills such as ritual pig slaughtering and Carnival. In the end, this process shows him the futility of development. Although the work of the institute will go on without him in Bournehills, and Allen will stay, he tells Merle, “it’s not just a matter of giving up and wanting to hide out...it’s that somehow, in a way I can’t explain, after Bournehills there aren’t any places left for me to go” (467). He has become so connected to the island and to the people who live there, he has glimpsed and felt, for a moment, a truly alternative way of being and valuing, and so his narrative of self and historical progress, his Marxist logic, cannot contain all the world and all its people any longer.

Merle’s final path in the novel, however, signifies another letting go and another way of moving away from the confines of Western history and science as controlling metanarratives. She decides to leave the island and travel to Kampala to search for her husband, Ketu, and her daughter, who he took from her when he discovered her past relationship with a wealthy white

British woman while in college in England. Merle describes him as a scientist as well, an agricultural economist studying to take the knowledge back to Uganda to improve the lives of “the Little Fella out on the land” (331). However, though he was strict, committed, and technically inclined he “had a healthy respect for the unscientific. He knew man didn’t live by technology alone” (317). His pride and disinterest in “the so-called glamor of the West” makes the discovery of Merle’s sexual and financial imbrication with this woman seem like a deep betrayal. He loses respect for her and punishes her by leaving with their child and returning to Uganda. There is some level of discomfort around sex between women in the novel, articulated by Ketu’s disgust, Saul, who says he has “never been able to take that kind of thing between women very seriously” and Merle, who says that the English are “experts at making anything they do seem perfectly natural” even though they are “degenerate” (327,328). Regardless, Merle’s connection to the woman causes her a deep sense of shame, and she is repulsed by her own behavior. Marshall takes pains to show that the relationship was fetishizing and predatory and that the woman particularly enjoyed making Black and Native people her dependents, manipulating them into paying a debt through sexual acts; as Merle says, “she liked us young” (328).

Through the majority of the novel, Merle is very closed off, enigmatic, erratic, and passionate about the facts of history to the point of alienating those who try to connect with her. During Carnival, the act of sharing her history with Saul, who has been trying to understand her through the novel, represents a shift in her characterization. She explains in pieces throughout the book that she’s been trying to understand herself or piece herself together by coming back to Bournehills, but the eight years have not revealed anything to her. She feels judged and dismissed as a failure by the islanders, unable to connect with them after her time abroad, but not

knowing where else to turn. The newfound intimacy and confession she shares with Saul allows her to re-experience the pain of the moment of abandonment by Ketu; “Saul saw her as she must have looked that day standing rooted to the one spot in the apartment: her dazed and stricken face, the eyes that refused to accept the meaning of the emptiness she sensed there, and then all of her slowly giving way to the paralysis, grief and collapse that had left her, as she said, like someone dead” (337). Coming after Saul’s admission of his own sense of guilt in the death of his wife creates a bond between “fellow sufferers” sharing “intimate explorations of memory and history” (LeSeur, 102). In revealing her own personal history, rather than expounding on the horrific global histories that have also shaped her, she is able to move forward. Ironically, her focus on the systems that have impacted her and her community of origin have obstructed her from living and being connected to the emotional demands of her interiority. After this, when Harriet offers Merle money to leave the island, Merle sees the British woman in Harriet’s face and has a highly physical reaction; she gives a “violent start,” squeezes her eyes shut, and gives a “choked cry of fear, horror and dismay, her hand coming up to fend off that other face.” She then lays frozen and still for a long time, “exhausted, defeated,” until, abruptly, she laughs, an “ugly anguished scream torn from the very top of her voice...her head arching back against the wooden slats that made up the backrest of the chair, bracing herself on the posts, she forced it out, sounding like a woman in labor with a stillborn child” (439). The laugh goes on, described as an “ancient exorcistic rite” in which she rids herself of “something dead inside her” which has been “sapping her strength and purpose over the years” (440). She derisively dismisses Harriet, tells her she will go wherever she likes, then exits into her house, laughing uncontrollably, and “suddenly free” (442).



The physicality of these two scenes, as Merle reformulates her body's relationship to history and power, makes room for something new within her. Her choice, to leave for Uganda and reconnect with her estranged daughter also brings the reader back to the utopian undercurrent of the novel. Though we do not fully understand Merle's interiority—we see much less of it than we do in the other characters—we understand her choice as a way of moving forward without control and moving past the obsessive focus on past evils perpetrated by imperial powers. In fact, she sells the items in her personal museum to raise the money for her travel. Instead, she will rediscover her own personal history and development; telling Saul “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” (468). Unlike Harriet or Allen, she can open herself to unknowable experience in order to spur an “emancipation of thought,” an “epistemological revolution,” a “conscious reorientation” even though the act of confronting her past scares her. As the novel closes with the first rain of the season and a callback to the first page, we are invited to see change in cycles, a non-linear process instantiated in different ways over time and space through a variety of cultural and individual ways of being and knowing.

The utopian possibility of this novel lies in its persistent adherence to a non-progressive reality which does not exist in reaction to Western worlds, where humanity is constructed using unfamiliar terms and scales. In order to produce this glimpse into another reality, Marshall unsettles our comfortable genre categories in two related ways. First, she creates literature that crosses and recrosses the line between the “real” and the “estranged,” a central distinction in literary genre categorization—the presumed “real” of Western history is made strange through contact with another way of being. Second, she upends Western theories of the human that assume a biologically separate individual enacted upon by culture. In fact, the novel contributes

to the critique of a purely “natural-scientific approach to the phenomenon of consciousness” (Wynter, 59). Marshall demonstrates the physiological imprint of our sociogenic worlds that constrain thought and feeling through a nuanced attention to her characters’ interiority, embodiment, and cultural history.

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