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PAULE MARSHALL AND THE SEARCH FOR THE AFRICAN
DIASPORA

The Fiction of Paule Marshall: Reconstructions of History, Culture, and Gender. DOROTHY HAMER DENNISTON. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995. xxii + 187 pp. (Paper US\$ 15.00)

Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction. JOYCE PETTIS. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995. xi + 173 pp. (Cloth US\$ 29.50)

Black and Female: Essays on Writings by Black Women in the Diaspora. BRITA LINDBERG-SEYERSTED. Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1994. 164 pp. (Paper n.p.)

Literary history has not been very kind to Paule Marshall. Even in the early 1980s when literature produced by African-American women was gaining prominence among general readers and drawing the attention of critics, Marshall was still considered to be an enigmatic literary figure, somehow important in the canon but not one of its trend setters. As Mary Helen Washington observed in an influential afterword to *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, although Marshall had been publishing novels and short stories since the early 1950s, and was indeed the key link between African-American writers of the 1940s and those of the 1960s, she was just being "discovered" in the 1980s. While there has always been a small group of scholars, most notably Kamau Brathwaite, who have called attention to the indispensable role Marshall has played in the shaping of the literary canon of the African Diaspora, and of her profound understanding of the issues that have affected the complex formation and survival of African-derived cultures in the New World, many critics have found it difficult to locate her within the American, African-American, and Caribbean traditions that are the sources of her imagination and the

subject of her major works. Marshall has embraced all these cultures in more profound ways than her more famous contemporaries have, but she has not gotten the accolades that have gone to lesser writers like Alice Walker. It is indeed one of the greatest injustices of our time that Walker's limited understanding of the cultures and peoples of the African Diaspora has become the point of reference for North American scholars of Africa, the Caribbean, and South America while Marshall's scholastic engagement with questions of Diaspora has not drawn the same kind of interest.

If there is any compensation in this uneven history of the literary canon, cultural capital, and receptionality, it is that for readers familiar with Marshall's novels, Africa and the Caribbean are not appendages to an American drama of slavery and the terror of modernity nor romantic emblems for exploring the recent fads in the metropolitan desire to represent black people as perpetual victims of their history. For discerning readers, especially those located at the various points of the Black Atlantic, Marshall's works represent the best examples of how African-American time, place, and memory perform a constitutive role in the shaping of the African experience in the New World. She engages with African-American history at its point of slippage, ambivalence, and self-affirmation. Among African readers, her works are often praised for their subtle understanding of African cultural survivals in the New World (such as rituals of return and Carnival) without the sentimentality associated with various strands of Afrocentrism. Caribbean readers turn to Marshall's work for their acute sense of the way the drama of modernity has been played out on the plantation societies of the West Indies. For African-American readers, Marshall's novels provide an indispensable bridge to the cultures of Africa and the Caribbean.

Given the breadth and depth of Marshall's imagination, why hasn't she won the critical acclaim and celebrity that has brought other writers of her generation national and international prizes and slots on late night American television? This question is the starting point of the three books under review; each of the three authors is not simply interested in placing Marshall's work in that historical continuum in which Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and black America meet, but also in explaining why literary historians have not given one of the greatest writers of the African Diaspora her due. The answers the three critics provide, as they try to unravel this literary phenomena, is symptomatic of their theoretical premises, their critical preferences, and their unique version of Marshall and her works.

In *The Fictions of Paule Marshall*, Dorothy Hammer Denniston is concerned with what one may call the anatomy of Marshall's aesthetic, a philosophy of art grounded in certain essential notions about ancestry and historical location. Denniston presents her readers with a Marshall whose major works try to negotiate the double consciousness of African-Ameri-

can life and try to bridge the gap between African-derived art forms shaped in the face of the historical experience of enslavement, the Middle Passage, and plantation society. Marshall's aesthetic is presented here as dualistic in both its ideological and formal claims: it seeks to recover Africa for the black Diaspora, but it tries to do so without negating the split psyche engendered by the history that is also the condition of possibility of these works. This dualism underwrites Denniston's readings of Marshall's novels in ways that are as productive as they are problematic.

The productive part of Denniston's project is not hard to recognize. She reads the fractured history of the New World in Marshall's novels in six detailed chapters, tracing the novelist's search for a language of double consciousness from her early experimental fiction to her great Diaspora novels such as *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*. Although some of the chapters cover familiar ground, Denniston has a great sense of the intertextual relationship between Marshall's novels and of their anxious relationship to both historical time and their time of production.

The seriously problematic part of Denniston's project relates to her theoretical attempt to read an African ontology in Marshall's texts or to ground her major novels in a unified African culture. Denniston starts with the important claim that Marshall's works are intended to reclaim African cultures for the African Diaspora. But what exactly are the forms and the terms in which Africa enters the Diaspora narrative? Denniston presents her readers with a myth of Africa that no serious scholar should take seriously: she outlines a series of questionable notions about the African ontology and reproduces claims on African thought and life that have now come to be dismissed under the rubric of Africanism. Denniston is right to recognize the significance of Africa in Marshall's works; what she fails to recognize is that unlike some African-American writers who have reproduced a racist notion of Africa in order to pursue their domestic agendas, Marshall's works are unique because of their continuous attempt to understand the way Africa has been imagined in the New World text.

Marshall's works present us with an Africa that is utopian (because it has enabled an affirmative African-American culture), but also dystopic (because it is remembered as a space of loss and displacement, as another time and another place). The issue here is not so much that Denniston reproduces the very unanimist Africa that generations of African scholars have tried to exorcise out of the critical and philosophical tradition, but that her version of African culture comes from sources, such as Levy-Bruhl, that have been discredited for almost fifty years. She fails to recognize how some of Marshall's early novels, most notably *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, were conceived and written as a critique of European images and theories of Africans on the continent and abroad.

The truth is that whether one is dealing with Africa or the history of New World slavery, Marshall's best works defy easy schematization. As Joyce Pettis argues in *Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction*, there is a sense in which Marshall's uncertain status in the canon of American literature can be explained by her production of works which seem to be at odds with both fashion and literary history. Pettis notes that the publication dates of Marshall's works distance her from the "watershed periods" in African-American literary history: her early works are produced well after the naturalistic fiction of the 1940s associated with Richard Wright and his circle; her first significant works are published just before the beginning of the 1960s and the great literature of black nationalism; her great novel, *The Chosen Place*, comes at the end of the Civil Rights Movement and before the renaissance of black women writers. Marshall's works thus seem to be out of synch with the institutions of knowledge that determine the reception of literary works.

But this sense of historical belatedness does not, in itself, explain Marshall's displacement within the literary canon; rather, it needs to be seen as part of the failure of literary critics and scholars to come to terms with African-American literature in the 1950s, a literature which did not have the erotic flavor of the Harlem Renaissance or the militant polemic of the 1960s. After all, the fiction Marshall produced in the late 1950s and early 1960s has very much in common with other writers from this period (most notably James Baldwin) whose reputations also seem to be shaky. I think what Marshall has in common with Baldwin is a certain theoretical eclecticism, and sense of intellectual independence that refuses to kowtow to the fashionable trends of the time, especially in regard to questions of race, gender, and sexuality. Both writers refused to have their lives and works redlined according to the dominant ideologies of African-American literature, and for this reason the arbiters of literary value, both black and white, did not know what to do with them.

Pettis's book is a good example of the problem critics and other commentators run into when they try to read Marshall according to established conventions. The problem I have in mind here is reflected in the title of her book: she wants to read Marshall's narratives as stories structured by the desire for wholeness and propelled by the subjects' journey toward psychic and cultural restoration. But while it is true that Marshall's novels are built around subjects whose awareness of alienation, fragmentation, and negation propels them toward cultural voyages in search of historical foundations and cultural centers, it is equally true that these novels are memorable for their moments of rupture, disengagement, and disintegration. The apparent utopian moments of closure in such novels only reinforce the gap between the subjects' longing for reconciliation with a cultural *matria* and their historical or social belat-

edness. Selina Boyce at the end of *Brown Girl* may be leaving the United States in search of the real Bajan culture in the islands, but this gesture is framed by her rejection of the Barbadian dream as it is played out in America. Merle Kinbona may have found her true self among the remnants of Africa in the Caribbean islands, but her self-discovery is overshadowed by the overwhelming reality of an incomplete modernity.

Pettis recognizes this constant play of utopia and dystopia in Marshall's novel, but her privileging of wholeness sidetracks her from the implicit theoretical problem her book raises: how can one read an aesthetic of identity and reconciliation in novels that are built around the inescapable centrality of historical rupture and alienation? While Pettis's basic claim is that Marshall's aesthetic ideology is driven by a need to overcome the alienation and fragmentation wrought on the black self by the culture of modernity, her work is underwritten by a critical method that seems to valorize wholeness and restoration against the overwhelming weight of displacement and separation evident in her object of analysis. Pettis is surely right in her assertion that Marshall's main novels are about characters who embark on journeys intended to reconcile them to lost genealogies (the most obvious example is Avey Johnson in *Praisesong for the Widow*), but she often fails to underline the incompleteness of such journeys.

It is not, of course, surprising that one can read diachrony and disjuncture in Marshall's works against the synchronic and restorative reading that both Denniston and Pettis seem to prefer. These differences of interpretation are not, however, simply the result of theoretical preferences; to a large extent, Marshall's novels are remarkable for the way they invite readers to identify with a certain critical grammar that is sometimes at odds with the cultural geography represented in the fiction. What one critic reads as primary in this fiction – the West Indian's relation to the metropolitan West or its attempts to husband its ancestral memories – can sometimes determine the kind of thick description one brings to Marshall's work. In Brita Lindberg-Seyersted's *Black and Female*, what we have is a very naive eroticization of the New World that is only matched by the author's old-fashioned critical methods. Lindberg-Seyersted's intentions are noble and there are some suggestive moments in her book, but as a whole, this work seems to be nothing more than a collection of lectures given to undergraduates with a very limited knowledge of either the African-American or Caribbean experience.

On the surface, this book promises its readers a philological approach that has been lacking in the study of African-American and Caribbean literature: the color black as a motif in African-American women's writing since the eighteenth century; the mulatto figure in African-American literature; and the representation of Europe in the works of black women. All these are important topics, but they are treated on a rather rudimentary

level and hence rarely fulfill the intellectual promise suggested by the chapter titles. The specific chapter on Marshall is quite disappointing; it rehearses familiar themes such as the African influence, the role of slavery and colonialism, and modernity without advancing them very far. If Denniston and Pettis have produced works in which readers and critics are compelled to at least rethink and debate these familiar themes, Lindberg-Seyersted adopts a critical posture in which tautology reigns. All three books do, however, make Marshall a central figure in the continuing debate on the nature of African-American literature in relation to the African Diaspora and for this reason they are recommended as important additions to this tradition.

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