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CARIBBEAN MIGRATION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF
A BLACK DIASPORA IDENTITY IN PAULE MARSHALL'S
BROWN GIRL, BROWNSTONES

A good deal of the scholarship currently being done in ethnic and cultural studies, as well as many other fields within the humanities and social sciences, attempts to theorize or employ diaspora models and other frameworks that enable transnational analyses.¹ This essay is indebted to and builds upon this scholarship by exploring the relevance that diaspora models might have for the way we read Paule Marshall, as well as other writers like her, and African American literature in general. In fact, I would argue that the current emphasis on diasporic frameworks and issues of transnationality not only serves to illuminate aspects of Marshall's fiction that have not been fully understood or appreciated, but also reaffirms the importance of her work.

Spanning nearly four decades and tracing roots, as well as routes, that are African American as well as Caribbean, Marshall's narratives present an especially ripe opportunity for thinking about how migration and displacement, key terms of the diaspora experience, affect the formation of cultural identities in the twentieth century. Although the idea of diaspora is certainly not new, the questions that are currently being asked – about borders and boundaries and their inevitable permeability, about syncretism and hybridity and the necessary “impurity” of cultures and identities, for example – may enable a more adequate assessment of the particular strengths of Marshall's fiction: its transnational and cross-cultural focus, its representation of migrant and hybrid subjectivities, its figuration of the diaspora as an organizing principle for Black identity.

Paradoxically, it seems that the diasporic dimension of Marshall's work has also been the source of a certain amount of critical confusion or misperception, or both. Carole Boyce Davies, for example, has noted that writers

1. In addition to numerous scholars whose work might be cited here, the works of Hall (1990) and Gilroy (1993) have been particularly useful for my own thinking on issues of diaspora and identity.

like Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde, Michelle Cliff, and Jamaica Kincaid tend to disrupt conventional notions of tradition and destabilize assumed canonical boundaries. Asserting the importance of migration in the work of these writers, Boyce Davies suggests that “the rigid compartmentalization into geography and national identity which academia forces on writers disintegrates when confronted by writers like Paule Marshall” (Davies 1990:70). In fact, the difficulties that Marshall’s work often poses for a canon-based (i.e. national) approach might have a lot to do with what some of Marshall’s critics see as a certain degree of critical neglect or underappreciation of her work.² Rather than assume that Marshall’s texts belong to one tradition or the other, my strategy is to highlight the interstitial location of her narratives, that is, their hybrid or intercultural position. Indeed, I would argue that it is precisely this hybridity – Marshall’s dislocation vis-à-vis established boundaries of place, nation, identity, race, culture, and literary tradition – that engenders the search for a transnational Black diasporic identity in her fiction.

Studies highlighting the contributions of prominent Caribbean migrants such as Marcus Garvey, Amy Jacques Garvey, Claude McKay, George Padmore, C.L.R. James, W.A. Domingo, Richard B. Moore, Hubert Harrison, Cyril Briggs, and others suggest that Caribbean migrants and their descendants have participated and often played a key role in the articulation of certain cultural discourses, Black nationalism and pan-Africanism, for example, through which forms of Black identity have been mediated in the twentieth century.³ As a corollary to this observation, I would suggest that Caribbean migration, more generally, has had a significant impact on the formation of modern Black identities, particularly transnational and diasporic forms of Black identity. There is, of course, a well-respected and sizable body of scholarship on this subject, including studies that examine the historical trends and patterns, the size and scope, the push and pull factors, and the broad social effects that characterize Black Caribbean migration

2. See, for example, two studies of Marshall’s fiction that appeared in 1995, one by Denniston and the other by Pettis. Denniston (1995:xi) claims that Marshall is among those Black women writers “who have enjoyed critical acclaim without widespread recognition.” Pettis (1995:6) notes that although “scholars of African-American and Afro-Caribbean literature ... consider her among the premier American writers ... significant numbers of Americans knowledgeable about literature remain ignorant of Marshall.” A more recent study by Hathaway (1999:10) attempts to “relocate” the work of Marshall and Claude McKay in terms of “a more pointed cross-cultural consideration of both authors that moves beyond these restrictive paradigms.” In this sense, my essay is in alignment with the general thrust of Hathaway’s argument, although my emphasis is on the ways in which the Black diaspora itself forms a construct, an “imaginary” if you will, that Marshall’s narratives help to invent and elaborate.

3. See, for example, Martin 1976, Hill 1983, Lewis 1987, and James 1998.

(to the United States and Great Britain, predominantly).⁴ The scholarship on Caribbean migration provides an important social and historical context for *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and my reading of Marshall's 1959 novel is informed in many ways by this scholarship. However, I want to suggest that *Brown Girl, Brownstones* also amplifies this scholarship in significant ways. My reading of Marshall's novel is intended to demonstrate that *Brown Girl, Brownstones* offers a complex and nuanced understanding of how Caribbean migration impacts cultural identity.

It is generally argued in the literature on Caribbean migration that Caribbean migrants to the United States, especially in the early phases, tended to downplay their ethnic difference and "assimilate" into a Black American racial identity (see, for example, Safa & Du Toit 1975, Sutton & Chaney 1987, and Kasinitz 1992). For example, Philip Kasinitz argues that the Caribbean migrants who came to the United States after 1965 were able to retain more of their "ethnic identity" than their earlier counterparts for whom, according to Kasinitz, "race, not ethnicity, was the most crucial factor shaping both where they lived and their political identity" (Kasinitz 1992:41). Constance Sutton and Susan Makiesky-Barrow (1987:105), in an earlier study that looks at Barbadian immigration before and after World War II, likewise suggest that the experience of the earlier migrants led to "an emphasis on racial rather than ethnic identity."

While acknowledging the importance of these studies, I believe that this view of Caribbean migration and its effect on cultural identity might be usefully complicated. More specifically, it would be productive to rethink our understanding of cultural identity itself, as well as the related concepts of "race," "ethnicity," and "nation." Our understanding of cultural identity, and the understanding that is implicit in Kasinitz (1992), Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow (1987), and other studies of Caribbean migration, typically presumes identity as "an already accomplished fact," in Stuart Hall's words. In contrast, we might think of cultural identity as a "production," which according to Hall (1990:222), "is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation." Understanding cultural identity as a "production" would entail a recognition of the fact that ethnic and racial identity are not static or fixed concepts, but rather fluid, open-ended ones subject to constant negotiation, modification, and transformation, a process that the either/or option between racial and ethnic identity seems to belie.

In his study Kasinitz (1992:35) states that, in contrast to the post-1965 Caribbean immigrants, "ethnic ties ... remained private" for the pre-1965 immigrants. He argues that ethnicity plays "an increasingly public role" in the lives of the post-1965 immigrants and that the "new" West Indian iden-

4. See, for example, Bryce-Laporte 1972, Safa & Du Toit 1975, Bryce-Laporte & Mortimer 1976, Sutton & Cheney 1987, Sutton & Makiesky-Barrow 1987, and Kasinitz 1992.

tity that has emerged in the post-1965 period is distinctive both in terms of the “transnationalism” that it reflects, as well as the “uncertainties” and “contradictions” that mark it as an identity that is constantly being redefined (Kasinitz 1992:7, 2).⁵ Evidence from recent scholarship on Caribbean migration suggests that transnational loyalties of the kind Kasinitz (1992) ascribes to the post-1960s migrants were not uncommon in the earlier period.⁶ This scholarship also suggests that Caribbean migrants in the pre-1965 period negotiated a complex range of ethnic and racial identities and expressed these identifications through a variety of public as well as private institutions.

The split between private and public identities can be somewhat misleading, particularly in terms of the way in which it reinscribes a dichotomy between domains conventionally associated with the private and the personal and those associated with the public and the political. This reinscription of a split between private and public might have unintended consequences in terms of the reinforcement of what Marshall herself identifies as the “triple invisibility” of Caribbean immigrant women.⁷ I would like to suggest, in the close reading of the novel that follows, that *Brown Girl, Brownstones* enables a more complex and nuanced understanding of how cultural identities were, in fact, “produced” (through experiences that were both private and public, personal and political) in the context of Caribbean migration and the crucial role that Caribbean immigrant women played in this process.

Although Marshall herself is U.S. born (of Barbadian immigrant parents), the protagonists in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* are Caribbean immigrants and first-generation Caribbean Americans. The novel is set in the 1930s and 1940s and, thus, deals with the pre-1965 Caribbean migrant experience. One thread of my argument explores how Marshall thematizes issues of migration and cultural identity in the novel. I argue, for example, that Marshall’s representation of the Barbadian immigrant community reflects the central, if not predominant, role that women played in the production of Caribbean identity in the United States. I suggest that Marshall’s representation of Caribbean immigrant women problematizes the supposed split between the public and the political, on one hand, and the private and the personal, on the other. In addi-

5. Kasinitz (1992:32) states that for contemporary West Indian immigrants, “the idea that loyalty to one nation contradicts loyalty to another is fast disappearing.”

6. In addition to James 1998 and Watkins-Owens 1996, see Von Eschen 1997 and Hathaway 1999.

7. Marshall (1987:81) uses the term in an essay: “If African Americans have suffered from a kind of invisibility (a subject which Ralph Ellison brilliantly explores in his 1952 novel *The Invisible Man*), and if the Black foreigner has been treated to a double invisibility (as Bryce-Laporte, 1972, suggests in an article on Black immigrants), then the West Indian immigrant woman might be said to suffer from a triple invisibility as a Black, a foreigner, and a woman.”

tion, I discuss how the novel thematizes a debate within the Caribbean immigrant community over the social and political efficacy of various forms of racial and ethnic identification. My reading suggests that, rather than becoming “Black” or “assimilating” into a pre-existing racial identity, Caribbean migrants also helped to shape and re-position various historically conditioned Black and diasporic identities.

Another thread of my argument analyzes the discursive intervention that Marshall’s novel itself performs. In other words, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* not only reflects the historical realities of the Caribbean migrant experience and its effect on cultural identity, it also constructs cultural identity by re-positioning and reformulating prevailing discourses of race and ethnicity. My reading suggests, for example, that *Brown Girl, Brownstones* explicitly and implicitly invokes both James Baldwin and Marcus Garvey, Black nationalism and U.S. Black nativist racial discourse, West Indian “dialects,” and African American vernacular speech forms. The discursive positionality that the text thus constructs operates between and across established racial and ethnic boundaries and consequently reflects Marshall’s attempt to imagine new (that is, diasporic and transnational) subjectivities and generate new narratives of identity and belonging.

In her much-reprinted essay, “The Making of a Writer: From the Poets in the Kitchen,” Marshall (1983) pays homage to the Barbadian immigrant women of her mother’s generation, those “unknown bards,” as she calls them. Marshall (1983a:4, 12) attributes her “first lessons in the narrative art,” to these women and acknowledges “the rich legacy of language and culture they so freely passed on ... in the wordshop of the kitchen.” Marshall further immortalizes these women in her novel *Brown Girl, Brownstones* where Silla Boyce’s kitchen becomes the central meeting place and privileged domain for the women in the Barbadian immigrant community. Marshall’s emphasis on this female-centered domain identifies not only a discursive matrix that serves as one of the chief sources of her narrative art but also as an important site for the production of Caribbean diasporic identities.

In the essay, Marshall (1983a:6-7) emphasizes the essential role that “talk” played in these gatherings of immigrant women – talk as a cheap and readily available form of “therapy,” as an outlet for creative energy, and as a kind of portable homeland: “Confronted ... by a world they could not encompass ... and at the same time finding themselves permanently separated from the world they had known, they took refuge in language.” The passionate, incisive, and metaphorically rich talk that the Bajan women engage in thus serves as one of the concrete social practices around which a sense of “Bajanness” can still be maintained within the metropole. Insofar as this cultural practice tends to fall within the realm of what is conventionally considered “private,” its importance can perhaps be easily overlooked or discounted, especially in analyses that depend on unexamined dichotomies between “private” and

“public,” “personal” and “political.” However, the emphasis that Marshall gives in her novel, as well as the essay, to the Bajan women’s “talk” compels us to rethink these categories and the way that their use as analytical concepts can work to elide crucial questions of gender and consequently marginalize the role that immigrant women have played in the migration experience and the production of Caribbean identities.⁸

Within the shared space of the kitchen, the Barbadian women are free to express – perhaps in ways that are not possible or at least not as constrained as when they find themselves in contexts that are male-dominated or Eurocentric, or both – not only the distinctive opinions and attitudes but also the unique (in this case, linguistic) forms and structures that define their Bajanness. Within this intimate, domestic space, Caribbean identity coalesces around the positions that the immigrant women take on a wide range of both “public” and “private” issues – child-rearing, marriage, religion, the war, the colonial status of Barbados, Roosevelt and the “New Deal,” etc. – and, perhaps more significantly, around the distinctive sounds, cadences, and accents of Bajan English itself: “Florrie had listened rapt, respectful to Silla, and now she said solemnly, ‘Talk yuh talk, Silla! Be-Jees, in this white-man world you got to take yuh mouth and make a gun’” (Marshall 1959:70).

As Marshall (1983a:7) points out in her essay, “it wasn’t only what the women talked about – the content – but the way they put things” that made them “poets.” What’s at stake here is not only the artistry of the Bajan women, what Marshall (1983a:8) refers to as “their poet’s inventiveness and daring with language,” but also the ways in which linguistic forms and structures can express, embody, and, indeed, produce cultural identity. As consummate practitioners of such forms, these women play a conspicuous and crucial role in sustaining Caribbean identity within the immigrant community.

A similar argument can be made for other kinds of cultural practices that tend to fall within the realm of what is conventionally defined as “private.” Culinary practices, for example represent another site wherein Bajan identity is reproduced: Silla prepares various “Barbadian delicacies” (including “black pudding,” “souse,” and “coconut or sweet bread”), which she sells to the Caribbean community as a way of augmenting her income. In fact, it is through such practices that a Caribbean identity, and the cultural heritage, communal values, shared ethos, and so forth that such an identity implies, is often passed on to a second, third, and beyond, U.S.-born generation. To delimit the effects and potential importance of these cultural forms and practices by confining them to a narrow category of “private” experience is to miss the fact that such practices can often be profoundly political, especially

8. See Bryce-Laporte 1976, Watkins-Owens 1996, and James 1998 for discussions of the role Caribbean women played in Caribbean immigrant communities and in the UNIA and the Garvey movement.

to the degree that they mutually reinforce and serve as a foundation for other articulations of cultural identity.⁹

It must be said, however, that the Caribbean identity that is produced through the cultural practices enacted within the female-centered space of Silla's kitchen is not a static, ahistorical identity. Rather, it is an identity constituted within the context of specific historical circumstances and consequently marked by all of the ruptures, disjunctions, ambiguities, and contradictions that are associated with such circumstances. To begin with, the Bajan identity that is enacted in Silla's kitchen is an identity marked by displacement, a "deterritorialized" identity defined by its interstitial position between "home" (Barbados or "Bimshire," in this case) and "this man country" (the United States). This Caribbean diasporic identity is also characterized by a profound ambivalence toward the Caribbean itself. Barbados is simultaneously the object of the immigrant's nostalgic longing, a locus for memory and reminiscences of "home," wherein Barbados is recalled as a place that is "poor, poor, but sweet," and the site of brutal colonial oppression, abject poverty, and the lack of possibility (Marshall 1959:11).

In response to a comment made by Iris Hurley about "England and the crown," Silla delivers the following scathing indictment of Barbados' colonial legacy:

Iris, you now what it is to work hard and still never make a head-way?
That's Bimshire. One crop. People having to work for next skin to nothing.
The white people treating we like slaves still and we taking it. The rum shop and the church join together to keep we pacify and in ignorance.
That's Barbados. (Marshall 1959:70)

Caribbean identity, as it is lived by these Barbadian immigrant women, is characterized not only by the discontinuities of the migration experience itself but also by the contradictions of the region's colonial history. Bajanness is something that the immigrants simultaneously cling to and want to distance themselves from.¹⁰ At the same time that Marshall suggests in the novel that culinary practices function as an important site for the reproduction of Bajan identity, she also reveals how such "foodways" and the ethnic identity they embody are often seen as a sign of backwardness by the immigrants themselves. When Deighton, Silla's husband, mocks Suggie, their tenant and fel-

9. See Hathaway (1999:103-4) for additional discussions of how Caribbean immigrants used "foodways" and language to both re-create homeland and to provide comfort and protection in an often hostile environment.

10. For an analysis of the contradictions and ambivalences of "home" in *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, especially in terms of how such contradictions and ambivalences are conditioned by gendered experiences, see the essay by Nair 1999.

low Bajan immigrant, for “stink[ing] down [the house] with codfish,” Silla agrees, “Like codfish does smell that sweet! She got to let the world and it wife know she ain long off the boat. Some these Bajan does come to this man country and get on worse than they did home” (Marshall 1959:23).

In contrast (but clearly related) to the intimate, domestic space that Silla’s kitchen represents, the Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen reflects a formal, institutionalized structure through which Caribbean identity is reproduced in the novel. The association, which, according to Percy Challenor, was “going to be the biggest thing since Marcus Garvey,” serves as a conduit for the Bajan community’s economic and political aspirations (Marshall 1959:196). Here Bajan identity is asserted and organized around a common set of economic goals: the ownership of property, the establishment of business interests, and the professionalization of the immigrants and their U.S.-born children. Predicated on a philosophy of “self-help,” the association’s strategy is to establish a fund “to which all members contributed and which in turn made small loans to members” (Marshall 1959:220).

In her study, Irma Watkins-Owens (1996) documents the prominent role that churches, benevolent associations, lodges, and fraternal orders played in the advancement of the Caribbean immigrant community and the formation of larger Harlem community during the early decades of the twentieth century. According to Watkins-Owens (1996:56-74), these organizations fulfilled several important functions for the immigrants, including providing mutual aid, assisting with economic and political adjustment in the United States, and enhancing status and influence. Watkins-Owens (1996:60,168) also discusses the role that these voluntary associations played in perpetuating “island traditions” and sustaining the immigrants’ continuing “identification with homeland.” The fictional representation within Marshall’s novel of the Barbadian Homeowner’s Association implicitly acknowledges the important part that these kinds of social institutions played in the lives of the early Caribbean migrants and at the same time reflects the complex ways in which questions of identity were negotiated within both public and private arenas.¹¹

11. The case of Marcus Garvey and his UNIA is an interesting and instructive point of reference here. Watkins-Owens (1996:71) suggests, for example, that the UNIA functioned in many ways as a mutual aid society, at least in its early formation. In addition, although the research done by Watkins-Owens as well as other scholars such as James (1998) clearly demonstrates that the UNIA was not by any means a predominantly Caribbean organization (in terms of the make-up of its membership and/or the focus of its political agenda), Garvey’s ethnicity was definitely a factor in the rise and fall of the UNIA and of Garvey himself. Garvey was variously constructed (by the native African American intelligentsia and the U.S. government, for example) as a “foreigner,” a “West Indian,” a “Jamaican,” as well as a “Black,” a “Negro,” and his self-presentation was certainly complex enough to encompass ethnic and cultural as well as racial identifications. See also Martin 1976, Hill 1983, and Lewis 1987.

In addition to revealing one of the social mechanisms through which Caribbean traditions and identities were sustained by migrants in the pre-1965 period, Marshall's representation of the Association of Barbadian Homeowners and Businessmen, perhaps even more significantly, registers the degree to which such traditions and identities were being actively contested and redefined during these years. In other words, ethnic identity and racial identity were not static, pre-given, unitary categories to which the migrants either conformed or rejected. Rather, these categories, like all identities, were fluid, malleable, "in process," as Stuart Hall would say. Furthermore, these early Caribbean migrants played an active part in contesting and remaking the boundaries of various ethnic and racial identities and in creating the social and cultural conditions from which other configurations of identity could emerge.

One of the more contentious debates within the association revolves around the question of whether or not to change the name of the organization from "Barbadian" to "Negro." This debate is sparked in the novel by a controversial speech that Claremont Sealy makes during an association meeting:

"You need to strike out that word Barbadian and put Negro. That's my proposal. We got to stop thinking about just Bajan. We ain't home no more. It don matter if we don know a person mother or his mother mother. Our doors got to be open to every colored person that qualify..." He paused and shook his head tiredly. "I know it gon take time. Wunna gon have to ruminate long, but I ain gon return till I see that word Barbadian strike out and Negro put in its place. I thank you!" (Marshall 1959:222)

On one level, Sealey's speech can be read as a critique of the values that the association represents. This critique, advanced elsewhere in the novel through the increasing ambivalence of Selina, Silla's U.S.-born daughter and the novel's protagonist, toward the value system that the association and Silla both affirm, questions the association's enshrinement of a materialistic ethos and its bourgeois vision of ownership and acquisition.

Although this value system is often characterized in critical assessments of the novel as the Bajan community's internalization of the dominant culture's capitalist value system (i.e. the American Dream), Marshall's depiction of the exploitative economic arrangements that characterize Barbadian society does not seem to suggest that she is positing an uncorrupted Caribbean communal ethos in contrast to a corrupted Western ethos of rampant individualism (see, for example, Christian 1980 and Harris 1983).

Marshall's concern is not so much the reassertion of an "authentic" Caribbean identity as it is the attempt to imagine a more inclusive and egalitarian set of values around which a cultural identity might be organized. When Selina rejects the association she is not rejecting a Caribbean or Caribbean

migrant (an ethnic) identity per se, but rather the value system that underpins that particular iteration of Caribbean identity. Marshall's depictions of the Bajan migrant community reveal the contingent nature of ethnic and racial identities, that is, the way they are always subject to contestation and transformation.

In addition to interrogating the bourgeois values associated with the association, Marshall questions the restrictive nationalist terms around which the association constructs its version of Barbadian identity.¹² Claremont Sealy's appeal to the association represents an argument for rethinking the question of cultural identity in ways that go beyond the national, or at least the national as it is narrowly conceived and expressed in the association's founding principles and organizational rationale: in terms of exclusive membership based on birth, kinship, family, and country of origin. However, Claremont Sealy's statement should not be interpreted as an argument for the Caribbean migrants' "assimilation" into dominant forms of racial identity. As Selina points out to her soon-to-be lover, Clive Springer, Sealy's speech was meant to take the association to task for "excluding *other West Indians* and American Negroes" (Marshall 1959:230). Once again, Marshall's concern here has less to do with privileging racial over ethnic identity than with exploring alternative forms of identification that are inclusive rather than exclusive and that bridge rather than erase cultural differences. Her depictions also reflect the fact that ethnic and racial identities were constantly being contested and redefined during this period.

Studies by Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow (1987) and others have suggested that the migration experience often served to heighten the sense of a shared West Indian identity among immigrants from the English-speaking islands as well as to foster a wider Caribbean consciousness that encompassed immigrants from the Spanish, French, and Dutch-speaking islands as well.¹³

12. Given that the period with which the novel is concerned (the 1930s and 1940s) also saw the emergence of Caribbean and other Third-World nationalisms, it's also possible to read this episode as a commentary or critique of nationalism conceived of more broadly. In this sense, the representation of World War II, which figures centrally, at least as a metaphor, in the novel, might also be relevant to this critique, particularly in terms of what it implies about Hitler, Nazism, and the potential dangers of a nationalist ideology taken to its illogical extremes. Indeed, Marshall's (1969) subsequent novel, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, directly takes up the question of Third-World nationalism and the unfinished project of liberation that remains even in the wake of independence. Nevertheless, the specific immigrant milieu that forms the setting of Marshall's novel constitutes the most immediate reference for the Claremont Sealey episode, and Marshall's reflections on nationalism resonate most directly in the context of the nationalist discourses that positioned the characters as immigrants, diasporic Caribbeans, "Negroes," Blacks, and so on.

13. Sutton and Makiesky-Barrow (1987:98) state that "New York offers opportunities to build common understandings among West Indians not available in the Caribbean." They also state that "just as England provides a unique context for merging West Indian

This insight is already implicit in Marshall's novel insofar as *Brown Girl, Brownstones* suggests that West Indian and pan-Caribbean identities were also a part of the social and cultural milieu that shaped the early Caribbean migrants. These migrants were positioned by discourses that marked them as Black, or "Negro," but also as Bajans, Jamaicans, Trinidadians, or otherwise, as well as West Indians or Caribbeans. The contentious debate that Claremont Sealy's proposal sparks in the association reflects the degree to which questions of cultural identity remained a heavily contested terrain for Caribbean migrants – a terrain where both ethnicity and race mattered and where categories of race and ethnicity often overlapped, intersected and, in addition to being fluid, were subject to constant redefinition.

There is a very telling scene that occurs toward the end of *Brown Girl, Brownstone*. The scene also marks a major turning point for Selina who has been struggling throughout the novel with conflicting feelings about her Bajan heritage as well as her identity in general. In this scene, Selina has a profoundly unsettling interaction with Mrs. Benton, the mother of one of her white college acquaintances. Among other things, the scene reveals how a dominant discourse of race serves to position Selina and how she, in turn, positions herself within and against this discourse. On one level, Mrs. Benton appears to recognize and acknowledge Selina's ethnicity. In other words, she is convinced there is "something different" that distinguishes "Negroes from the West Indies" from other Blacks – African Americans, presumably. But this ethnic "difference" soon turns out not to make a difference at all. In Mrs. Benton's repertoire of racist stereotypes Selina's ethnicity matters only in terms of the qualities that make "West Indian Negroes" better servants and the "delightful West Indian accent" that she prods Selina to "say something in" (Marshall 1959:287-89). Selina thus finds herself trapped by a cultural discourse wherein the articulation of race is based on a Black-White binary "with no intermediary position recognized or privileged to any notable degree by the white ruling class" (James 1998:110).¹⁴

As a result of the traumatic encounter with Mrs. Benton, Selina experiences a painful but instructive vision of community:

concerns with broader notions of Black Commonwealth and Third-World issues, New York City nourishes a Caribbean consciousness that has not been actively promoted in the Caribbean." In a similar vein, James (1998:121) suggests that "not only is it in the diaspora that fellow Caribbeans learn about their similarities and differences, it is also *only* in the diaspora that some of these similarities and differences are ever knowable at all."

14. In addition to discussing the ways in which the Caribbean differs from the United States in relation to race, James also discusses the differences in the "articulation of race" between Hispanic and non-Hispanic Caribbean societies. According to James (1998:101), these differences account for the "distinct political path trodden in the United States by black Hispanic Caribbeans compared to their non-Hispanic counterparts."

She was one with Miss Thompson, she knew, as she pulled herself up the subway steps to Fulton Street and saw the closed beauty shop. One with the whores, the flashy men, and the blues rising sacredly above the plain of neon lights and ruined houses, she knew, as she stumbled past the White Drake Bar. She paused across from the darkened Association building, where the draped American and Association flags billowed from the cornice. And she was one with them: the mother and the Bajan women, who had lived each day what she had come to know. (Marshall 1959:292-93)

In some ways it is tempting to read this passage as a sign of Selina's acceptance of and perhaps even "assimilation" into a dominant racial identity. Her identification with Miss Thompson, the older African American woman who serves as a surrogate mother of sorts to Selina, as well as with the resonant cultural symbol of the blues certainly seems to invite and support such a reading. It is significant, however, that Selina's experience of communion also includes her mother and the other Bajan women, and the flag of the association as well as the American flag. Consequently, the episode does not represent a rejection of ethnicity in favor of race so much as it does an attempt to locate the common ground shared by various, sometimes disparate, identities.

Although it can reasonably be argued that Marshall's representation of an identity that encompasses Barbadian and other Caribbean migrants as well as African Americans is somewhat idealistic, her depiction does not represent a denial of the conflicts that have often characterized historical relations among these groups so much as it reveals a desire that the narrative attempts to enact. Although they are not necessarily foregrounded in the novel, these conflicts are acknowledged in Silla's disdain for Miss Thompson as well as the association's exclusion of African Americans. The fleeting and inchoate nature of Selina's vision marks the Black diasporic identity that she dimly perceives as a potential that has yet to be achieved.

As many critics have noted, Selina's search for identity has not been completed by the end of the novel. Dorothy Denniston (1995:32), for instance, suggests that "the resolution of the novel remains deliberately open-ended."¹⁵ The vision of community that Selina experiences in the aftermath of her encounter with Mrs. Benton marks an important step in a journey that continues beyond the end of the novel. In addition, it is also significant that Selina

15. In her study of Marshall's fiction, Denniston (1995:7) points out that while *Brown Girl, Brownstones* can be read as a *Bildungsroman* in terms of how the novel relates the story of Selina's growth and development, her "coming of age," at the same time it also "moves beyond Western literary paradigms" by focusing on the development of the "collective body" as well as the individual consciousness. I would suggest, in basic agreement with Denniston, that the meaning of Selina's "coming of age" within the novel cannot be properly understood apart from the larger questions about cultural identity that the text poses.

is about to embark on a trip to the Caribbean when *Brown Girl, Brownstones* closes. Instead of a turn away from ethnicity, Marshall's text signals an imminent retracing of Caribbean roots and routes in a continuing search for more inclusive and expansive forms of cultural identification. The protagonists of Marshall's subsequent novels (Merle in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* and Avey in *Praisesong for the Widow*) pick up the journey where Selina leaves off, and these texts make it increasingly clear that the construction of a Black diasporic identity is a central preoccupation in the trajectory of Marshall's oeuvre. Moreover, Marshall's fiction demonstrates both the enduring appeal and the difficulties of invoking such an identity.

In addition to the thematization of these issues through various characters in the novel, *Brown Girl, Brownstones* attempts to enact, on a discursive level, the diasporic consciousness that Selina begins to envision at the end of the novel. Marshall's novel re-positions African American literary discourse by articulating constructions of Caribbean ethnic identity alongside African American constructions of race. The simultaneous deployment of these discourses of identity within the narrative highlights the points of contact between such discourses, the degree to which they overlap, and the ways in which they inflect and amplify each other. In this sense, the novel explores the potential and attempts to establish the discursive framework for a diasporic Black identity. Of course, the narrative also unwittingly reveals the points of disjunction between such discourses, the degree to which they diverge, and the ways in which they contradict or conflict with each other. In other words, *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, once again, reflects both the practical challenges and the ideological efficacy of enacting a Black diasporic identity.

The studies by Watkins-Owens (1996) and James (1998) suggest that, at the same time that the identities of the early Caribbean migrants were inevitably reshaped by their experience in the United States, the presence of the migrants also helped to reshape the meaning of race and the nature of racial discourse in the United States.¹⁶ These studies show that Caribbean migrants had a marked impact on radical politics and a range of social institutions (both formal and informal, public and private) that affected the larger Black community. The nature of this impact can be broadly characterized in terms of a more pronounced and clearly articulated anticolonial stance and the cross-cultural, transnational perspectives Caribbean migrants and their descendants frequently brought to the table. Marshall's novel makes an analogous impact on African American literary discourse by redefining the meaning of race in the context of a Caribbean migrant experience.

16. Watkins-Owens (1996:10) states that, as a result of the entry of Caribbean migrants during the early years of Harlem's formation as a community, "new definitions were forced upon historic conceptions of race which previously defined the boundaries of black communities."

I would like to briefly illustrate this point by demonstrating how *Brown Girl, Brownstones* invokes the key figures of James Baldwin and Marcus Garvey. My contention is that Baldwin and Garvey function as metonyms for an African American discourse of race, on the one hand, and discourses of Caribbean ethnic identity, on the other. The juxtaposition of these figures in the narrative works to redefine each discursive position in the context of the other. The invocation of Baldwin, for example, expands African American constructions of race to include the experience of Caribbean migrants. This re-signification of Baldwin within Marshall's novel works to position the discourse of Blackness as a diasporic, and ultimately transnational, cultural identity. This positioning of Black identity is reinforced by the concomitant invocation of Garvey, which once again foregrounds the anticolonial and diasporic dimensions of the racial discourse. Garvey himself is re-signified in Marshall's text, not only to emphasize his cultural meaning for the Caribbean immigrant community, but also in terms of placing him within a diasporic and transnational pantheon of Black leaders.

The key references to Baldwin in Marshall's novel take up the African American writer's profoundly insightful formulations regarding the psychological dimensions of Black-White race relations in the United States. The first instance is an explicit reference that occurs in the context of a conversation between Selina and her lover Clive. When Selina attempts to explain the uneasiness she felt in the company of a group of White classmates, Clive paraphrases Baldwin:

He gave a short laugh that was hollow at its center. "Maybe our dark faces remind them of all that is dark and unknown and terrifying within themselves and, as Jimmy Baldwin says, they're seeking absolution through poor us, either in their beneficence or in their cruelty. I don't know." (Marshall 1959:253)¹⁷

The second instance is an implicit allusion that occurs in the aforementioned episode with Mrs. Benton. The emotionally charged and ultimately explosive interaction between Selina and Mrs. Benton reenacts one of Baldwin's paradigmatic interracial scenes:

17. Here is the relevant passage from Baldwin's (1955:28-29) essay, "Many Thousands Gone": "Time has made some changes in the Negro face. Nothing has succeeded in making it exactly like our own, though the general desire seems to be to make it blank if one cannot make it white. When it has become blank, the past as thoroughly washed from the black face as it has been from ours, our guilt will be finished – at least it will have ceased to be visible, which we imagine to be much the same thing. But, paradoxically, it is we who prevent this from happening; since it is we, who, every hour that we live, reinvest the black face with our guilt; and we do this – by a further paradox, no less ferocious – helplessly, passionately, out of an unrealized need to suffer absolution."

“Oh, please say something in that delightful West Indian accent for us!” The woman was standing over her now, brightly smiling, insistent. As she gave Selina a playful shake the punch glass slid from her limp hands to the floor and broke, splintering the woman’s brittle voice and its hold on Selina. Leaping up Selina savagely flung off the woman’s hand; the woman fell back, her startled eyes arcing past Selina’s, and struck the lamp, which teetered and then crashed to the floor. Just before the darkness exploded in the room, Selina was at the door, viciously shoving aside the dazed Margaret, then rushing out, down the hall, veering sharply into the living room. (Marshall 1959:290)¹⁸

Baldwin’s analysis of the dynamics of race, especially as they are played out within the Black-White binary system that is unique to the U.S. context, is an essential part of the novel’s ideological framework. This analysis informs not only Selina’s encounter with Mrs. Benton, but also the character of Miss Thompson, the African American hairdresser who bears the physical and emotional scars of racial violence. But the racial discourse that Baldwin’s formulations epitomize also encompasses the experience of Silla and all the other Bajan characters, including Deighton, who admits with bitterness that “here and in Bimshire they’s the same. They does scorn yuh ‘cause yuh skin black” (Marshall 1959:83).

If the references to Baldwin function as a metonym for the text’s engagement with African American racial discourse, then the allusions to Garvey represent a sign of its investment in Caribbean discourses of ethnic identity. Aside from Percy Challenor’s comment about the association being “the biggest thing since Marcus Garvey,” Garvey’s presence remains largely implicit, his legacy reflected in the distinctive political views of the immigrant characters, in their hopes and aspirations, and in the cultural traditions they try to maintain in “this man country” (Marshall 1959:196). Marshall makes this implicit reference to Garvey explicit in her essay, “From the Poets in the Kitchen”:

If F.D.R was their hero, Marcus Garvey was their God. The name of the fiery, Jamaican-born black nationalist of the 20s was constantly invoked around the table. For he had been their leader when they first came to the United States from the West Indies shortly after World War I. They had contributed to his organization, the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), out of their meager salaries, bought shares in his ill-fated Black

18. The scene from *Brown Girl, Brownstones* appears to enact the explosive racial tension that Baldwin (1984:28-29) so eloquently evokes in his essay: “In our image of the Negro breathes the past we deny, not dead but living yet and powerful, the beast in our jungle of statistics. It is this which defeats us, which continues to defeat us, which lends to interracial cocktail parties their rattling, genteel, nervously smiling air: in any drawing room at such a gathering the beast may spring, filling the air with flying things and an unenlightened wailing.”

Star Shipping Line, and at the height of the movement they had marched as members of his “nurses brigade” in their white uniforms up Seventh Avenue in Harlem during the great Garvey Day parades. Garvey: He lived on through the power of their memories. (Marshall 1983a:5)

Garvey also lives on in the anticolonial perspectives he did so much to promulgate. These distinctive political views are often expressed through Silla and the other Bajan characters. They constitute, like Baldwin’s analyses of race, an ideological framework that underpins Marshall’s novel. This framework informs, for instance, Silla’s vivid recounting of her childhood in Barbados:

“School, ha!” Her sardonic laugh twisted the air. “Yes, you might call it a school, but it ain the kind you thinking of, soul. The Third Class is a set of little children picking grass in a cane field from the time God sun rise in his heaven till it set. With some woman called a Driver to wash yuh tail in licks if yuh dare look up. Yes, working harder than a man at the age of ten ...” Her eyes narrowed as she traveled back to that time and was that child again, feeling the sun on her back and the whip cutting her legs. More than that, she became the collective voice of all the Bajan women, the vehicle through which their former suffering found utterance. (Marshall 1959:45)

The juxtaposition of this anticolonial discourse and the discourse of racial identity that the references to Baldwin invokes reflects Marshall’s attempt to construct a narrative that positions both discourses within a framework for Black diasporic identity. The connections between the two discursive positions are admittedly not fully articulated in Marshall’s first novel, except perhaps for the implied linkage of a shared “Blackness.” In subsequent novels, *The Chosen Place*, *The Timeless People* and *Praisesong for the Widow*, Marshall explores the idea of common ancestral culture as the basis for this diasporic linkage. Of course, this idea of a shared diasporic culture – both historically and in terms of Marshall’s fictions – has had both its successes and its problems.

Garvey’s legacy is also implicit in the West Indian identity that the Bajan immigrants continue to assert. This West Indian identity, sustained and reproduced through a variety of formal and informal institutions and public and private practices, co-existed alongside racial identities with which they sometimes overlapped and sometimes conflicted. Watkins-Owens (1996:81) quotes A.M.E. minister William Ferris who noted that “the Garvey movement, by marshaling the West Indians en masse, made manifest the characteristics in which the West Indians differed from the American Negroes.” Watkins-Owens (1996:81) further states that “the presence of the UNIA leader helped to focus ethnic awareness in ways not so apparent before his organization

galvanized such spectacular appeal in Harlem.”¹⁹ The representation of these West Indian and Caribbean identities in *Brown Girl, Brownstones* highlights the role these Caribbean migrants played in the formation of a range of ethnic and racial identities in the early part of the twentieth century.

The interweaving of these discursive threads – Garvey and Baldwin, African American racial discourse and Caribbean discourses of identity – within Marshall’s novel reflects her attempt to construct a discursive framework that unifies and connects these sometimes disparate and dissimilar experiences. Marshall’s hybrid novel encompasses Caribbean, Caribbean immigrant, and African American experiences. The novel reveals the gaps and disjunctions that exist between these experiences at the same time that it explores the commonalities that might be found between them. If, as Hall (1990:225) suggests, “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past,” then *Brown Girl, Brownstones* attempts to provide a new narrative of identity, one that imagines a community that transcends narrow national and ethnic boundaries. Marshall’s first novel thus prepares the discursive and ideological ground for what emerges more clearly in her subsequent novels as a transnational Black identity organized around the concept of the African diaspora. This identity, in all of its historically contingent forms, obviously continues to be a productive and powerful idea for Black intellectuals, artists, and writers.

19. Watkins-Owens (1996:81) also claims that “Garvey and the controversies surrounding him helped to shift the nature of traditional politics to encompass ethnic as well as racial concerns.”

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