Using the Past in the Present Struggle:
Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*

Vanessa Earley
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“Within the interdependence of mutual…differences lies that security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being.”

- Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”

**Introduction**

In the above epigraph, Audre Lorde articulates the need to delve into a chaos of knowledge in order to move into a future in which one is able to make positive, fruitful changes. The chaos of knowledge she writes of is the knowledge of one’s history, personal and collective, and the knowledge of how to relate that history to the rest of the world. It is chaotic because it is not always easy to confront that history or to relate it to one’s present situation; it is an arduous task and one that, more often than not, alters one’s sense of identity.

Using knowledge of the past in order to move purposefully into the future is an important idea not only in Lorde’s writing, but in the African American tradition as a whole. For African Americans, the past is not merely history, a distant story of people and places which is utterly disconnected from present conditions. Instead, the past plays an integral part in forming one’s identity. Much has been written on the importance of the past to African American identity; seemingly every black writer and theorist from Ralph Ellison and Langston Hughes to Henry Louis Gates and bell hooks has weighed in on the issues and theories surrounding this concept at one time or another.

For many theorists, the importance of the past in relation to identity stems from African tradition. Marimba Ani relates it to Sankofa, an Akan idea, which “tells us that it
is necessary for Afrikan people to reach back periodically into the wellspring of their ancestral legacy in order to gain the strength and direction with which to create an Afrikan-defined future” (210). She also relates it to a Zulu saying, umuntu ngu muntu nga bantu, which means “a person is a person because there are people;” for Ani, this saying stresses “the idea of value being rooted in one’s familial, cultural, collective, cultural-historical being” (211). These African concepts correlate with African American writing which deals with the past as a means to developing identity. Whether or not it was these specific concepts which had such influence cannot be said, but the connection between them is undeniable.

Other writers focus on the importance of the Middle Passage in this process, thereby connecting the historical and present relationships of Africa and the Americas: “The Middle Passage occurs again and again as a touchstone in Afro-American writing” (Kubitschek 47). Carl Pederson has termed this use of the Middle Passage in writing as the “transatlantic imagination” (Diedrich et al. 8). This type of writing places the Middle Passage “not as a clean break between past and present but as a spatial continuum between Africa and the Americas” (8). For these writers, the Middle Passage is a continuing connection, keeping fresh in the consciousness of African Americans their connections with their collective history and their African heritage.

Still other writers highlight the importance of the past in recovering a positive African American identity. In her book, Talking Back, bell hooks describes the process she went through when writing a previous book, Ain’t I a Woman: “I was compelled to confront black women’s reality, our denied and buried history, our present circumstances. The thinking, the writing, was an act of reclamation, enabling me to recover myself, to be
whole” (30). For hooks, the act of self-recovery had to begin by recalling the history that had been repressed and denied her by an oppressive society.

Regardless of the importance that African American writers place on varying aspects of the tradition, the idea of the past being used as a means of healing and forming a positive identity is common to nearly all of them. It is in this common tradition that Paule Marshall’s writing takes part: “One of the themes which absorbs me so that I find myself returning to it again and again is the question of identity. And as part of this, a concern for the role the past – both the personal and historical past – plays in this whole question” (Marshall, “Shaping” 106).

These themes may absorb Marshall to such an extent because they affect her on a personal level: “strains of Marshall’s upbringing in New York’s Barbadian community as well as the influence of her self-proclaimed multiracial literary ancestry direct the major themes in her work” (Greene 296). The American-born daughter of Bajan immigrant parents, Marshall grew up surrounded by aspects of her Caribbean culture. However, she was simultaneously an insider and an outsider to that culture; as a daughter of Bajan parents, she was a member of the group, but as an American-born child affected by American culture, she was detached from it as well. Because of this, Marshall became interested in the connections and disconnections between people of the African diaspora. This interest translates into Marshall’s belief that, if African peoples were to look to their past for a sense of identity, they could find a sense of unity within their diasporic connections.

Marshall’s works reflect this belief. Her novels include: Brown Girl, Brownstones; The Chosen Place, the Timeless People; Praisesong for the Widow;
Daughters; and her latest, The Fisher King. She also has two collections of short stories: Soul Clap Hands and Sing and Reena and Other Stories. The majority of these works incorporate the theme of returning to one’s roots to find a sense of identity. Through her exploration of the role of history in identity formation, Marshall’s “work and her vision make her an important articulator of a broader African diaspora literature as it speaks to the series of displacements and reconnections that have been central to African New World experiences” (Davies 193).

Marshall’s works tend to straddle all of the various aspects of the relationship between history and identity that were discussed above. She “believes that African myths and legends are critical to black people’s understanding of themselves and central to her writing process” (Davies 194). For example, she invokes the Pan-African tale of flying home in her novel, Praisesong for the Widow, and uses a Tiv saying for the epigraph of The Chosen Place, the Timeless People. She also utilizes the Middle Passage and the importance of the Atlantic to bring the heroines of some of her novels, such as Avey in Praisesong for the Widow and Merle in The Chosen Place, the Timeless People, to a greater sense of their history and, through this, a more complete sense of self.

In Marshall’s belief, one must know his or her past, both personally and collectively, before one can reach a definitive sense of identity and forge ahead. She characterizes the exploration of one’s past as a journey which culminates in the discovery of self: “Whether it describes an actual physical move from place to place or a psychological and spiritual one…the journey always involves the self, the question of identity. It’s always about either seeking to free, to define, to realize, to reclaim, to heal,
or to create the self” (Marshall, “Black” 31). For Marshall, this is especially true for individuals belonging to historically oppressed groups:

An oppressed people cannot overcome their oppressors and take control of their lives until they have a clear and truthful picture of all that has gone before…This knowledge of one’s culture, one’s history, serves as an ideological underpinning for the political, social and economic battles they must wage. (Marshall, “Shaping” 107)

She uses this process as a theme in her works, thus placing herself in a Pan-African tradition.

Marshall’s second novel, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, is no different, as it explores history as a means to building a sense of identity. What makes it different from her other works, and why I chose to focus on this single novel, is that it does not only depict someone of African descent going through this process; the tradition is stretched to a person of European origin and a person of Jewish origin to show the effects that the process can have on those who are not necessarily of African ancestry or a member of an oppressed group. In regards to Marshall’s choice, Leela Kapai wrote, “Self-questionings are not the prerogative of only the members of a particular group based on race, sex, or age; therefore, Miss Marshall concerns herself with people of all ages, of all races, and of all strata” (49). While Marshall had varied her characters’ age and gender in her other works, race was not necessarily a variable that she had worked with in portraying the relationship between the past and identity. It is in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* that she does so.
In the novel, the physical and spiritual journeys of two women, Merle Kinbona, an Afro-Caribbean, and Harriet Amron, an Anglo-Saxon, are portrayed. Each goes on a journey through her personal past as well as through the history of her respective culture. Through these journeys, they come to terms with their identities and attempt to redeem members of their cultural groups. Binding these women together and articulating their journey is Saul Amron, a Jewish man, who serves as the prophetic voice of the novel and who undergoes a similar process as the women.

Through the journeys of these characters, one can see the way in which Marshall appropriates the Pan-African connection between history and identity and applies it to other groups. She shows that it “is crucial for members of all ethnic and minority groups, not just for Blacks, since the same process of recovery is operable for all oppressed peoples…Furthermore…memory is equally important for the oppressors” (Meyer 101). Marshall broadens the tradition in order to portray not only the importance that coming to terms with history has on the identity of every individual, not just oppressed peoples, but also the effect that this process can have on the larger population and the interaction between oppressed and oppressor. For her, “the personal is inseparable from the political. One’s responsibility also is to work to empower that larger world that is part of your definition of self” (Marshall, “Black” 31). By using each character as a representation of their respective cultural group, Marshall is able to illustrate the connection between self-recovery and community healing and redemption in all groups, whether they be oppressed, oppressor, or somewhere in between.

I decided to organize this paper by individual sections on each character. I chose to do this in order to stress the unique concerns and qualities of each character and, thus,
each cultural group; the various obstacles that each encounters on his or her confrontation of the past; and, finally, the distinctive ways in which these characters will bring their communities to a sense of healing.

The first of the characters that I will look at is Saul Amron, a Jewish social scientist who has come to Bournehills to research a possible development project. His role is important, as he sees the sides of both oppressor, as a white man, and oppressed, being a person of Jewish descent. Because of this, he is able to serve as a spiritual guide to Merle and Harriet and help them through their individual journeys. Saul also serves as the prophetic voice of the novel, articulating the process for both the characters and the reader. Saul is different from the female characters in that, because of his unique stance, he helps other groups, not necessarily his own, come to a sense of healing. However, Saul not only helps the process along, he also goes through it. Through his stay in Bournehills, Saul is forced to relive his past and, by the end of the novel, has himself come to a sense of identity and healing.

The second character is Harriet Shippen-Amron, an Anglo-Saxon woman married to Saul. She represents the oppressors who are busy blocking out the past and taking part in what can be seen as paternalistic behavior in an attempt to disconnect themselves from their questionable collective history. She is eventually forced to confront her personal and collective histories and, after coming to an understanding of it and herself, commits suicide in what can be interpreted as a cleansing and healing act. Her success in coming to terms with who she was through an exploration of the past holds hope for the redemption of all oppressors. If it is possible for members of oppressive groups to go through this journey without committing suicide, it brings the world a step closer to
increased understanding and interaction on an equal footing between oppressor and oppressed.

The third character is Merle Kinbona, an Afro-Caribbean woman, who goes through a spiritual and physical journey that is representative of the traditional Pan-African ideal. In the beginning of the novel, though she is open with remembering and bringing up the past, she is also mentally mired in it. She is unable to free herself from the negative aspects of her personal and collective history until she is forced to confront them head on. In the end, she embarks on a trip to Africa, reliving and overcoming the Middle Passage in the process, and there is hope that she is a future redeemer for her people, as she wishes to return and improve the political standing of the people in Bournehills. She is an example of many fictional characters of African descent who come to a sense of identity by confronting their pasts, and who then become symbols of their people and mediums through which their community comes to healing: “Their transformations from colonized objects of their own self-hatred to active subjects of their own creation become an analog for their community’s healing as well” (Olmsted 265).

Bournehills and the Sea

Before the characters can be studied in depth, the setting must be looked at as its use as the medium through which the past can return to the consciousness of the characters is crucial. While the novel is set in the 1960s, the exact time is not important; the timelessness of the experiences of the characters add to the novel’s universality across time and cultural lines. The aspect of the setting which is most important is the location. Bourne Island, a fictional Caribbean island, is seemingly a carbon copy of the other islands: “Like the others, it was small, poignantly so, and vulnerable, defenseless…Like
all the rest, it seemed expendable: for what could it be worth to the world being so small?” (Marshall, *Chosen* 13).

Yet, Bourne Island is different from the others. “Marshall’s rendering of Bourne Island overlays pictures of economic, political, and historical forces on pictures of psychological experience” (DeLamotte 41). Physically, the island had broken rank and stood off by itself to the right, almost out in the Atlantic. It might have been put there by the giants to mark the eastern boundary of the entire continent, to serve as its bourn. And ever mindful of the responsibility placed upon it in the beginning, it remained – alone amid an immensity of sea and sky, becalmed now that its turbulent history was past, facing east... across the sea, hidden beyond the horizon, the colossus of Africa. (Marshall, *Chosen* 13)

Its positioning, closer to Africa than any of the islands, is important. More than any other place, Bourne Island is positioned so to be closer to its people’s history. Marshall is careful to point out that it is “ever mindful of the responsibility placed upon it,” foreshadowing the role that the island will play in the development of the characters. Also, “according to the dictionary, ‘bourn or bourne’ is a terminal point, boundary between properties” (Coser 84). Bourne Island is a terminal point, but in much more than the physical manner described in the passage; it serves as a turning point for those who stay there, it is the boundary between the end of an old life and the beginning of a new one. It is the “chosen place” of the novel’s title.

Within Bourne Island is a district called Bournehills, which is the home of Merle and the focus of Saul’s study. Bournehills is “a little, cut-off community that had, in the
days of slavery, conducted a successful slave revolt and had never forgotten it. It was a community of canecutters and fisherfolk that strangely clung to its memorial Africa – living it, in fact, each day, and resisting all efforts to modernize it into something shoddy and less secure” (Brathwaite 228). Its people “are the survivors and living embodiment of those millions drowned and unappeased and dead” through the transatlantic slave trade (Brathwaite 235). They are the “timeless people” of the novel’s title; they are not merely people of today, but are representative of the Africans and Afro-Caribbeans who went through the Middle Passage and who served as slaves on the plantations of the West Indies: “Because of this historical experience, Bournehills is consistently depicted by Marshall as trapped in the past, unable to move into the future” (Booker 44). Harriet notes this during the first months of their stay in Bournehills: “They treated the events of the past as though they had only just occurred” (Marshall, Chosen 171).

In fact, the people of Bournehills are fixated on one aspect of their history in particular: the Pyre Hill Revolt, led by a slave named Cuffee Ned. During the slave revolt, the plantation house was burned to the ground and the slave owner killed. While Cuffee Ned is later killed in a confrontation with the British army, he remains a hero to the people of Bournehills. They repeatedly recall his memory and debate the story as if it were a current event; the inhabitants of Bournehills even reenact the revolt during the Carnival parade every year as a way to sustain the memory.

The people of Bournehills take great pride in this piece of history. It takes on myth-like proportions to them, and they invoke Cuffee Ned’s memory whenever they need hope for the future: “Cuffee’s heroism reminds the residents of their successful resistance in the past and offers them hope that there will be another who can lead them
out” (Olmsted 252). However, this repeated recalling of a single moment in history also hurts the people of Bournehills: “Though the memory of this revolt clearly helps the oppressed inhabitants of Bournehills to maintain a sense of dignity and self-worth, this kind of fixation on the past ultimately impedes the ability of the people to move forward into the future” (Booker 44). Because of this inability of its people, Bournehills itself seems mired in the past. It serves as the timeless medium through which the past and the present are mixed together, sometimes indistinguishably so, to the point that it forces Merle, Harriet, and Saul to confront their pasts in order to live in the present.

It is not only the island which influences the characters’ journeys. The Atlantic Ocean, which surrounds the island, plays an important role in keeping history alive for the characters: “The narrator…identifies the voice of the sea as that of history” (Olmsted 254). Marshall articulates the history and meaning that the sea holds in her description of it:

It was the Atlantic this side of the island, a wild-eyed, marauding sea the color of slate, deep, full of dangerous currents…and with a sound like that of the combined voices of the drowned raised in a loud unceasing lament – all those, the nine million and more it is said, who in their enforced exile, their Diaspora, had gone down between this point and the homeland lying out of sight to the east. This sea mourned them. Aggrieved, outraged, unappeased…Great boulders that had roared down from Westminster centuries ago stood scattered in the surf… might have been gravestones placed there to commemorate those millions of the drowned. (Marshall, Chosen 106)
The sea is a living testament to the slave trade, with its audible outrage and mourning for the millions of Africans who were drowned during their “enforced exile” across the Atlantic and its “gravestones” commemorating the dead. The memories which the sea brings forth simultaneously incur grief in Merle, whose ancestors were the exiled ones, and guilt in Harriet, whose ancestors were the cause of so much misery. The sheer presence of it is enough to bring back memories of their personal and collective pasts which both would like to forget.

Because of their connection with the past, “Bournehills and the surrounding sea provoke both visitors and island dwellers to confront the past, their histories, or be destroyed in the process” (Olmsted 249). Saul, Harriet, and Merle are three such people; the setting is crucial to their journeys, as probably none would embark on such journeys of their own accord. The very nature of the island and the Atlantic serves as a catalyst to the development of identity in the three characters.

**Saul Amron**

Saul Amron is distinctive from Merle and Harriet as he not only undergoes a spiritual journey of his own, but also facilitates the individual journeys of the women. His unique perspective as both oppressed (being a Jewish man) and oppressor (being a white male from the Western world) enables him to empathize with both women’s experiences. It is important to understand his role in the novel in order to more fully understand the process that Harriet and Merle go through, as Saul articulates it both for the women and for the reader.

Saul is a social scientist who is “one of the early pioneers in the field of applied research who had insisted that sciences…move beyond mere research and use their
knowledge…to help improve the lives of the people under study” (Marshall, *Chosen* 41).

Saul is sincere in his desire to understand and help others; he is “honest and hard-working and has real sympathy for people and their problems” (Brathwaite 227). He works in the field until the death of his first wife, Sosha, a Holocaust survivor, who dies after a miscarriage while they are in Honduras. Suffering from “self-assessed guilt” following her death, he retires from field work and goes to teach at Stanford (Brathwaite 228).

It is Harriet Shippen who coerces him back into the field work which would take them both to Bournehills. They meet through an event sponsored by the Center for Applied Social Research, a branch of the Philadelphia Research Institute, of which Harriet is a volunteer. Saul and Harriet begin a relationship which is “a discreet and casual arrangement which did not appear to commit either of them in any way” (Marshall, *Chosen* 42). Harriet had an ulterior motive besides her personal wish to marry him; she wanted Saul to return to field work to head up the CASR’s project in Bournehills. Eventually, Saul accedes to head up the project and, before he leaves, he and Harriet marry. She accompanies him to Bournehills, though, “Saul, remembering his first wife and the tragic events in Honduras, was against her going” (Marshall, *Chosen* 48).

It is his arrival in Bournehills which heralds the true beginning of Saul’s many roles in the novel. One of the most important purposes Saul serves in the novel is that of the prophetic voice: “Saul especially is able to perceive though not to name some universal and deeply spiritual truth about [Bournehills]” (Olmsted 254). As Saul works and lives in Bournehills, he is “struck by the feeling, too fleeting to grasp, that he had stumbled upon a world that was real, inescapably real, yet at the same time somehow
unreal; of the present, but even more so of the past” (Marshall, *Chosen* 216). From the very beginning, Saul is aware, though not able to grasp right away, the effects and meaning that Bournehills has on those who live and visit there. He senses the aura “of the present, but even more so of the past” that characterizes the very being of Bournehills.

One moment of prophetic recognition occurs when Saul visits Cane Vale, a sugar mill in close approximation to Bournehills:

The first time Saul entered the factory…he was reminded of the deep hold of a ship…There was the noise, for one…the shrill almost human wail of the rollers…there was the heat, for another…and the light in the place was dim and murky as in the hold of a ship…the men working there appeared almost disembodied forms: ghosts they might have been from some long sea voyage taken centuries ago. (Marshall, *Chosen* 154)

Saul is able to subconsciously equate the current, postcolonial conditions with the slavery of the colonial era. He sees not only the physical correlations between the slave ship and the mill (the noise, heat, and light), but also the psychological hold that the legacy of slavery has on the people of Bournehills. He identifies the current workers as the “ghosts” of their slave ancestors, still trapped in a cycle of economic, social, and psychological subjugation. Through this instance, one can see that Saul truly feels the presence of the past in everyday life and recognizes the effect that it continues to have on the life of Bournehills.

Stemming from this experience and revelation, he is able to articulate the importance of using history to move forward in one’s life. He expresses this to Merle following the parade during Carnival:
It’s that people…who’ve been truly wronged … must at some point, if they mean to come into their own, start using history to their advantage…You begin, I believe, by first acknowledging it, all of it, the bad as well as the good, those things you can be proud of …and the ones most people would rather forget…Use your history as a guide…Because many times, what one needs to know for the present – the action that must be taken if a people are to win their right to live, the methods to be used: some of them unpalatable, true, but again, there’s usually no other way – has been spelled out in past events. That it’s all there if only they would look… (Marshall, Chosen 315)

It is noteworthy that Saul emphasizes the importance of remembering “the good and the bad,” the sources of pride as well as those “unpalatable” truths. He recognizes that one cannot simply fixate on one source of pride, such as the Bournehills citizens’ fixation on Cuffee Ned and the Pyre Hill Revolt. To truly move beyond one’s history, all of the past must be remembered, confronted, and utilized in order to be an effective guide for the present and future.

This passage is not only used to verbalize the process for Merle, but also for the reader. It is through Saul’s words that readers, especially those who do not have a background in African American and Pan-African traditions, can truly understand the process that all three characters go through. This passage is key to understanding a major theme of the book and articulates the ties with the Pan-African tradition that Marshall is establishing.
It is through his role as the novel’s prophetic voice that Saul is also able to serve as a spiritual guide to Harriet and Merle: “They both share an intimate relationship with Saul, who inadvertently becomes for each an agent of liberation” (Denniston 117). It is through Saul’s verbalization of the process, as well as his intimate relationship with each, that the women begin to gain the self-assuredness needed to get through the process and come to a sense of identity and redemption.

Saul’s intimacy with Merle, both platonic through their friendship and sexual through their eventual affair, allows him to influence the way she sees herself. Merle opens up to Saul and shares her past and her feelings about herself and her life. Through retelling her memories to Saul, Merle is able to move through and past them. She even says to him, “Why you’re my new Juju man from Harley Street,” referencing her past experiences with a psychiatrist in London (Marshall, *Chosen* 360). It is through his influence that Merle also begins to be more self-assured in her identity and is able to move away from negative thoughts: “Her intimacy with Saul, an intellectual and spiritual relationship as much as and perhaps more than a sexual and emotional relationship, restores Merle’s self-esteem” (Skerrett 73).

Marshall is deliberate in her portrayal of their relationship so it is not seen as the traditional exploitive sexual relationship between a white man and a black woman:

Saul’s Jewishness, which marks him as a minority figure and underdog himself…and his unobstrusive personality appear as deliberate character traits, undermining precipitous indictments of sexual exploitation.

Similarly, Merle’s strong-willed independence as well as their gradual
approximation on a mutual basis belie theories of mere male chauvinism
or neo-colonial sexual instrumentalization. (Melchior 138-139)

Because of Marshall’s characterization of Saul and Merle as individuals, their relationship cannot be looked upon as a negative one. It is “out of a sympathetic and mutual need for acceptance and confirmation” that the two embark on their affair (Denniston 117). Therefore, Saul’s influence on Merle is not out of patriarchal or colonial domination, but out of their equal relationship based on mutual respect and needs. The depiction of Saul and Merle’s relationship as one on equal footing may explain why Marshall had them enter into a sexual relationship; by portraying her characters’ relationship, which is typically seen as negative, in a positive light, Marshall is perhaps showing her readers that it is possible for such a relationship to occur without being exploitive.

Saul does not only guide Merle through the process; he also leads his wife, Harriet, through the process as best as he can. Harriet proves to be more resistant to the process, but Saul repeatedly pushes her to tell her personal history. Saul continuously mentions her family in the hope that she will divulge some information about them. However, time after time, when his comments upset Harriet, he backs off of the subject. It is during their confrontation over his affair with Merle that Saul challenges Harriet about her racist notions, which she has heretofore managed to be in denial about. In the course of their argument, Harriet says, “I think…of your touching someone like that and I can’t understand it” (Marshall, Chosen 430). Though she does not explicitly say the “someone like that” means a black woman, Saul immediately knows that is what she means. He replies, “I thought you’d get around to that. It’s probably been the thing
most on your mind” (430). Although Harriet had been denying any sense of racism in her being, it is Saul who knew it was there all along, it is Saul who knows Harriet better than she knows herself. Through his confrontation of her racism, Harriet is forced to face her own deep seated feelings about black people and the inhabitants of Bournehills. It is through this conflict that Saul is finally able to pierce Harriet’s ironclad inner walls of defense.

One question that arises from these situations is why Marshall chooses Saul as the novel’s prophetic voice and the spiritual guide of the two women. One justification is his position as both a person of Jewish descent and a person who has benefited from Western domination: “He is Jewish, a fact that partly explains his sense of affinity with oppressed peoples, despite the obstacles to understanding presented by his own American middle-class background” (Booker 40). As such, he straddles the two worlds and is able to understand both of their positions.

On one hand is his ability as a Jew and fellow oppressed person to better empathize with the people of Bournehills, as opposed to a white person who may not have a frame of reference for understanding such oppression and distress: “His personal suffering [has] made him sensitive and receptive to the needs, voice, and development of the ‘other’” (Melchior 137). Marshall stated as much in an interview with Joyce Pettis: “I felt that if I used a Jew who had developed because of his own history and the history of his people, who knew about suffering…it would permit him then to be able to enter in” (Pettis, “Interview” 126).

On the other hand, he is familiar with status as a middle class American, as opposed to an impoverished member of an unindustrialized nation. In this way, he can
sympathize with Harriet’s naïve understanding of the mindset of the citizens of Bournehills. He fully realizes that she can in no way know what their experience is like and he attempts to excuse her all too common gaffes in dealing with the people of Bournehills.  

Softening Marshall’s decision to give the male figure such an important role is the fact that she is not writing what could be construed as a patriarchal tale of “man saving woman.” Saul goes through a similar process as the women; he too finds a sense of identity and healing through recalling his past, often with the help of Merle. Through confronting his past, Saul is able to find a sense of who he is in the world and to heal old wounds and come to a sense of closure with many issues, including the death of his first wife.

Early on, Saul realizes the importance of dealing with the past: “I can’t help feeling…that I should at least try to clear away some of the dead weight so to speak, resolve those things in some way, before – how to put it…venturing forth again” (Marshall, Chosen 47). By equating his past with “dead weight,” Saul is making clear his understanding that unacknowledged history can keep a person from moving forward in his or her psychological state, just as physical dead weight can keep a person from physically moving. However, he does not truly confront and deal with his past until his arrival in Bournehills, when the past begins to intrude on his consciousness.

One very pivotal moment comes following a visit in the sugar fields with Stinger, a local cane cutter. He is inexplicably overwhelmed watching Stinger and the others work and takes off down the road, where he experiences a sense of “vertigo” and he sees the sun spinning “like Ezekiel’s great flaming wheel” (Marshall, Chosen 163). The
wording to describe the sun, referencing the book of Ezekiel, sets up the biblical symbolism which is present in the scene following. Saul, while he loses sight, is given a vision, a “double memory” in which he is shown his purpose, which is strikingly similar to the biblical Saul’s conversion narrative (Marshall, Chosen 163).

The first part of the double memory centers on his mother, a Sephardi, who “had never allowed them to forget that special heritage of hers…speaking of it…as though it were the one outstanding example of all the suffering known to man” (Marshall, Chosen 164). The story of his Sephardic heritage “came to embody…all that any other people had to endure. It became the means by which he understood the suffering of others” (164). The recollection of this story is important as it partially explains his ability to empathize with other oppressed groups. While he may not to be able to fully understand what living in Bournehills does to its people, he is able to understand their affliction on a personal level. The first half of his double vision thus explains the gift that Saul has in helping the suffering.

The second half of the vision brings to Saul’s mind an old man sitting in a window whom he had seen every day on his way to and from school: “The old man turned every day into Yom Kippur, atoning not only for his sins but, because of the steady light pounding of that fist day in and day out, for those of the world as well” (Marshall, Chosen 165). Later, learning of the old man’s death, Saul “had wondered, scarcely conscious of putting the question to himself, who would there be to atone for the world now, who to do daily penance for the host of crimes committed by man against man? Who would redeem and reconcile them now that he was gone?” (165). Saul was “scarcely conscious of putting the question to himself;” one can interpret from this phrase
that he had not consciously recognized that he may be that person who would atone, redeem, and reconcile people. Through his role in the novel, Saul takes on the persona of the “suffering Jew:” “Another child of diaspora, he is the metaphorical epitome of rootlessness and exile, the symbol of eternal suffering” (Meyer 112). Thus, the second half of the vision is prophetic of Saul’s role in the world and helps to shape his identity. This vision also brings his Jewish heritage to his remembrance: “Saul had almost entirely lost his Jewish heritage, largely through disuse, but his time on Bourne Island brings it back to him, and it, in turn, provides him with strength” (Meyer 115).

Further shaping Saul’s identity is his relationship with Merle. Through their intimacy, Saul is able to talk about and confront his past and the implications of his past on his psyche. “Saul has been more conscious in his effort to avoid or disavow his personal past, yet Bourne Island shows him that he must eventually face that as well if he wants to regain wholeness” (Meyer 115). It is Merle that Saul unconsciously seeks whenever he is troubled by something on the island. For example, after witnessing the humiliation of a Bournehills worker in a confrontation with Sir John Stokes, the condescending European owner of Cane Vale, Saul, rather than return to the guesthouse and his wife, heads toward Merle’s workplace, “only half-aware of where he was going or whom it was he sought” (Marshall, *Chosen* 223). It is also Merle who Saul accepts a ride from following his double memory experience on the road.

A turning point in Saul’s journey comes during a conversation with Merle following Carnival. In a moment of confession and recollection for both of them, Saul is able to open up about and confront his personal past and the feelings that it inspires. Through his emotional intimacy with Merle, Saul is able to tell the story of his deceased
wife, Sosha, and to admit the guilt and sorrow that thinking of her brings him: “For the first time ever he was mourning her as he had never permitted himself to do before – openly, unashamedly, his guilt and anguish undisguised” (Marshall, *Chosen* 325). Like the women, Saul had suppressed “the memory of the debilitating moment in the past that [had to] be brought into the open before the healing process [could] begin” (Meyer 112). It is through his intimacy with Merle that he can begin healing from the wounds of his past.

Saul seems to revert to Merle when things are too much for him to grasp. She is his confidant and his sounding board. They are able to confide in and guide each other not only in regards to the most painful experiences of their personal pasts, but also in regards to the difficult issues inherent in Bournehills life. bell hooks, in her book, *Talking Back*, explains her theory on what must be present before such soul searching and understanding can happen:

> Love can be and is an important source of empowerment when we struggle to confront issues of sex, race, and class. Working together to identify and face our differences – to face the ways we dominate and are dominated – to change our actions, we need a mediating force that can sustain us so that we are not broken in this process, so that we do not despair. (26)

For Saul and Merle, their relationship is the source of love which serves as the “mediating force” in their relationship and individual journeys. Their love softens their exploration and confrontation of all of the problems inherent in the world they are dealing with, which are derived from the past exploitation of peoples. And it is their mutual
confrontation of past and present concerns that allows them both to heal and come to
terms with past sufferings.

At the end of the novel, however, Saul’s mental status does not, on the surface,
seem at all positive; he does not know where he is headed nor where life is taking him
and sadness permeates his speech: “Once you’ve hit bottom as often as I have you either
stay down or start finding it easier to drag yourself up again. I don’t know which it’ll be
for me. It doesn’t much matter” (Marshall, *Chosen* 466). The air of depression is almost
audible in Saul’s speech. His opinion that “it doesn’t much matter” gives the sense that
Saul has given up on life and what happens to him. Part of his sense of failure and
despair stems from Saul’s belief that he has failed the people of Bournehills, due to the
fact that he was pulled from the project by CASR because of Harriet’s intervention prior
to her death. Saul also feels that he has failed another wife, as he does not fully
understand Harriet’s redemptive spiritual journey; he sees her death simply as a suicide,
the result of his failure to help her.

However, there is also a sense of completion, a sense of positive finality, about
Saul and his situation, despite the sadness that surrounds him. It is as if, by serving as the
prophetic voice and guiding the two women through the process of self-recovery, Saul
has done what he was sent to do. He states as much in talking with Merle during their
final days together: “It’s not just a matter of giving up and wanting to hide out as it was
the last time I quit. It’s that somehow, in a way I can’t explain, after Bournehills there
aren’t any places left for me to go” (Marshall, *Chosen* 467). It is through the realization
that he has served his purpose, that “there aren’t any places left” for him to go, that Saul
is able to reach a sense of identity: “He will be the reincarnation of [the] old Jew,
attempting to redeem mankind and reconcile it to itself” (Meyer 118). At the close of the novel, Saul leaves Bournehills “now that the lifetime (and he saw it as such) he had spent in Bournehills was over” (Marshall, *Chosen* 472).

   Saul allows Marshall to articulate her ideas, thus serving as spiritual guide to the women and to the readers. Her voice is mediated through a character who can relate to everyone, oppressed and oppressor. Through him, Marshall can reach all of her readers and make her message clear to them. He also is a character whose position in the world is not so clear; he does not clearly fall in any one category. Thus, Saul also gives Marshall a way to connect with those in a similar situation, who cannot be pigeonholed into a single class.

   **Harriet Shippen-Amron**

   The reader is first introduced to Harriet in an airplane high above Bourne Island. She is the first to see the island as the research group arrives:

   she had been quietly waiting and watching for it, her head with its disciplined cowl of wheat-colored hair framed by the oval-shaped window, her trim, tall, pleasantly angular body poised lightly on the seat. Despite the long flight, her beige linen dress looked as if it had just been put on fresh. A slender wedding band was her sole jewelry. (Marshall, *Chosen* 19)

   This description of Harriet is indicative of the way she wants to appear: disciplined, put together, simple and uncomplicated. However, her calm and simple appearance and her attempts to convey this as her interior state are belied by her personal and cultural collective history and the unwanted effects that it has on her. Despite her efforts to
contain her history and maintain the self that she wants to be, Harriet is eventually overtaken by her past and is forced to attempt to reconcile her current thoughts and beliefs, as well as her sense of self, with what she is confronted by while living in Bournehills.

Her complicated history began long before Harriet was born. The Shippen family was a part of Philadelphia high society, their wealth deriving from trade in the West Indies. Harriet’s ancestor, the widow Susan Harbin, produced the beginnings of the family’s wealth by taking stock in ships sailing between Philadelphia, Africa, and the Caribbean:

In a stained, faded ledger still to be seen in a glass display-case at the Historical Society, the widow had kept careful account in a neat furbelowed hand of the amounts of flour and salted cod, cornmeal and candles that went out on the sloops, the number of slaves taken on in Guinea and then just how much her portion of that cargo, both human and otherwise, had brought in crude sugar, rum and molasses in the islands.

(Marshall, *Chosen 38*)

This circumstance in Harriet’s lineage clearly places her in a class of oppressors, a class which exploited other humans for the sake of economic gain; it makes her “heir to the widow’s questionable legacy” and heir to a collective history which constructs a dysfunctional dichotomy in her as much as she tries to repress and deny it (Marshall, *Chosen 38*).

Added to Harriet’s dysfunction is her mother, a true Southern belle, who insists on keeping Alberta, a black maid, even when she moves from the South to the North. It
is through Alberta and her relatives that Harriet has her first encounters with black people. It is clear from her childhood recollections that Harriet has not been raised with very positive or enlightened ideas on race; exemplary of this is the fact that, as a little girl, “Harriet had wondered if the fairies hadn’t turned [Alberta] that color because of something naughty she had done” (Marshall, Chosen 168). Another example of Harriet’s thoughts toward race is, “as a child, looking at the maid Alberta’s pink palms she had often wondered how this had come about; why had this part of them been spared?” (Marshall, Chosen 440). The effects that Harriet’s heritage and upbringing has on her view of black people is clearly dysfunctional and it is apparent that she “has inherited a planter’s ideology based on the conviction of the inferiority of black people;” the fact that she sees Alberta’s pink palms as being spared of color, that the blackness of her skin must be a punishment, displays the negative connotations she subconsciously equates with black skin, despite her seeming liberalism in helping oppressed people later in life (Kulkarni 151).

Harriet’s experiences in childhood also contribute to confusion over her sense of self. Underneath “the evidence of her well-nurtured childhood – the milk, the morning walks with her brothers in the woods near their summer home on Delaware Bay, the twice-daily swims,” lay a much troubled household (Marshall, Chosen 20). Her father, a lawyer, suddenly and inexplicably gives up his practice when Harriet is twelve, choosing instead to lock himself in his office and devote his time to studying the life of Lorenzo de’ Medici. His choice nearly ruins the family financially and essentially leaves them without a husband or father figure. Following his withdrawal from normal family life, Harriet’s mother remains in the house, passively allowing the stasis of the household,
much to the contempt of Harriet, who would later hypothesize that her mother was
someone “her father had married in a moment of weakness and then promptly forgotten”
and who died from a protracted form of suicide (Marshall, *Chosen* 41). Her mother
represented “weakness, failure and utter ineffectuality” (Marshall, *Chosen* 300). For
Harriet, a lover of discipline, strength, and activity, her childhood, marred by the choices
of her parents, was in marked contrast to those ideals. This contrast leads to a deeply
ingrained dichotomy in Harriet, as she struggles between her assumed air of calm, certain
behavior and her underlying fear of being as weak and ineffectual as her parents.

Harriet’s first marriage, to a nuclear scientist named Andrew Westerman, was not
a “dramatically unhappy” one (Marshall, *Chosen* 39). However, in the course of their
marriage, his work with nuclear material led to her barrenness; Andrew had
“contaminated the house they lived in, the food they ate, their beds, even her body so that
she no longer conceived – and when she had, twice in the twelve years of their marriage,
she had lost both babies” (Marshall, *Chosen* 40). Her barrenness is the catalyst for
Harriet’s doubts about the nature of Andrew and his career, which she sees as utterly
opposed to life.

In the later years in her marriage to Andrew, Harriet began having nightmares in
which there was a nuclear explosion; one morning she realized that “it was not, as she
had believed all along, only Andrew’s hand on the lever which triggered the holocaust,
that mass suicide in which its creators would be the first to go, but that her hand was also
there, resting lightly on his, guiding it” (Marshall, *Chosen* 39). Through his dream,
Harriet is confronted with her responsibility in the mass oppression and destruction of
people: “It is the image of her own complicity, her own culpability in the oppression of
many of the world’s people, that she has been trying to avoid by blocking out both her personal and ancestral memories” (Meyer 110). Harriet cannot face her culpability in such horrific acts and she refuses to dwell on it. In fact, the very writing of the passage illustrates the lack of thought put into the dream; the quote in the book ends in an ellipsis: “resting lightly on his, guiding it…” immediately the focus shifts to the end of Harriet and Andrew’s marriage without acknowledging what the dream may mean (Marshall, Chosen 39).

Harriet decides that she can no longer be married to Andrew because of the destructive nature of his career and what that meant for him as a person: “she had felt, with a chill, how fundamentally opposed he was to the spring day, to the budding tree. If given the chance he might well destroy them” (40). However, it is not just Andrew’s career which plays a role in ending their marriage; by distancing herself from Andrew, Harriet is also subconsciously attempting to distance herself from the guilt that plagues her.

Soon after her divorce, Harriet begins volunteering at the Philadelphia Research Institute. In the opinion of Dorothy Hamer Denniston, Harriet “comes to represent the woman whose fulfillment is achieved only through her usefulness to others…Without any work of her own, without a career, she feels an emptiness that can only be filled through her importance or value to someone else” (114). As she was no longer useful to her husband, she needed someone else to be useful to and the Research Institute fulfilled that need for her. Her volunteerism also “results from her attempt to assuage the feelings of guilt that assail her when she thinks of her family’s past” (Meyer 109). By working with an institute which helps the oppressed, Harriet appeases the guilt she feels by
assuring herself that she is doing good and distancing herself from her oppressive ancestors.

It is during her work with the Institute that she meets Saul. They begin a rather casual long distance affair; Harriet is certain that they will marry, though “she was careful to conceal the full depth and determination of her love,” not wanting to scare him away (Marshall, Chosen 42). Eventually, as discussed in the section on Saul, he is persuaded to head the project at Bournehills, with their marriage occurring soon after.

It is during this time, just at the beginning of Harriet and Saul’s marriage, that Harriet’s refusal to look at the past begins to shine through. The night before their wedding, Saul comments on the differences between his and Harriet’s backgrounds. Harriet refuses to believe that their backgrounds play any part in their relationship; Saul is bothered by her reaction, as he sees it as part and parcel of her refusal to reveal much of her past:

> Whenever he tried getting her to talk about her relatives, her childhood, her marriage to Andrew Westerman, wanting to have more of an idea of what her life had been before they had met, she would very skillfully, without appearing to, evade his questions; and he found that privacy of hers, which almost seemed to him at times a desire on her part to blot out her past, to treat it as though it had never happened, vaguely disturbing.

(46)

What Harriet sees as her privacy, Saul recognizes as denial, a strategy to “blot out her past.” Saul’s comments strike a nerve and evoke submerged guilt from Harriet: “‘Must I really be held liable for them?’ she cried. ‘For all those Harbins and Shippens and what
they did and didn’t do…” (47). “It is this moment in her personal and communal past more than any other from which she wants to disassociate herself;” her family’s role in the slave trade is the moment of her history which brings out her innermost guilt, hidden even from her conscious self (Meyer 109). In reacting to Saul’s pushing, Harriet is also reacting to the very presence of history; she does not see the need to look at it, as it contradicts and confuses much of what she likes to see in herself. While she tries to shrug it off, by saying the history is too dull, Harriet is truly bothered by her personal and collective past.

Upon arrival in Bournehills, memories of her past begin to assail her. Images from her childhood begin to seep into her mind before the plane even lands and Harriet “was irritated with herself for having allowed [them] to slip past her guard” (Marshall, Chosen 21). Harriet “senses from the beginning the island’s ominous power to violate her own practiced and very effective denial of the past” (Olmsted 256). This intuition begins in the plane above Bournehills, which scarcely seemed a physical place to her, but some mysterious and obscured region of the mind which ordinary consciousness did not dare admit to light. Suddenly, for a single unnerving moment, she had the sensation of being borne backward in time rather than forward in space. The plane by some perverse plan might have been taking her away from the present, which included Saul and the new life she was about to begin with him, back to the past which she had always sought to avoid.

(Marshall, Chosen 21)
Harriet sees Bournehills as a “mysterious and obscured region of the mind which ordinary consciousness did not dare admit to light.” This thought blatantly spells out the role that Bournehills will have in Harriet’s spiritual journey through the obscure regions of her own mind, regions she had not let see the light of consciousness in a long time. She also has the feeling of “being borne backward in time,” foreshadowing the presence that the past has in Bournehills and in Harriet’s life there. However, Harriet manages to squash this feeling for the moment and “in that way she had of dealing with the unpleasant, she firmly put it from her mind” (21). It is not long, though, before more memories and subconscious feelings surface in Harriet.

Bournehills and the sea play very important roles in conjuring Harriet’s memories and subconscious feelings to the surface. The first time Harriet is close to the sea “a huge white-crested breaker which looked as if it had been gathering force and power and speed across the entire breadth of the Middle Passage broke with the sound as of some massive depth charge” (Marshall, Chosen 106). This wave brings to Harriet’s mind the explosion in the dream she had while married to Andrew, which she had not thought of in a long time. It was as if “at any moment the huge cloud, whose searing light made it seem the sun had crashed to earth, might mushroom up. She thought of the hand guiding Andrew’s on the lever…” (Marshall, Chosen 107). The force of the wave, which brings to mind the slave trade with its reference to the Middle Passage, is equated with the nuclear explosion of her dreams as both are sources of subconscious guilt. For Harriet, being near the sea stirs up these feelings of guilt associated with both her collective and personal history.
Carnival proves to be an important turning point in the journey of Harriet. Her experience at Carnival is what many critics focus on as the critical moment in Harriet’s development: “Harriet’s need to dominate, her unquestioned sense of superiority, is dramatically disclosed at Carnival” (Denniston 116). Carnival also forces her to “painfully begin to reassess what she had thought to be her fundamental racial attitudes” (Meyer 108). It is at Carnival that she is faced with important revelations about race, her feelings about race, and her place in the world.

Harriet is persuaded to take part in the parade as a member of the Bournehills contingent. She dresses as a slave, as does the majority of the Bournehills party, in their retelling of the Cuffee Ned revolt. Their portrayal becomes a very real representation of their history previous to the revolt:

The measured tread of those countless feet in the dust and the loud report of the bracelets, a somber counterpoint to the gay carnival celebration. It conjured up…dark alien images of legions marching bound together over a vast tract, iron fitted into dark stone walls, chains…rattling in the deep holds of ships, and exile in an unknown inhospitable land – an exile bitter and irreversible in which all memory of the former life and of the self as it had once been had been destroyed. (Marshall, Chosen 282)

The images that arise, those of slave raiding, barracoons, and slave ships, bring to Harriet’s attention the true history of her ancestors’ actions. The conjuring of the bitter exile of the African people from their former lives and homes brings to her consciousness the lasting consequences of said actions. This reminder of her culpability in their bitterness and pain puts Harriet on edge and makes her extremely uncomfortable. And,
as the Bournehills group reenacts the slave revolt over and over again, as they portray the downfall of the white plantation owner at the hands of Cuffee Ned, Harriet is “vaguely unsettled” by watching it (Marshall, *Chosen* 292).

However, though these events are uncomfortable and unsettling for Harriet, it is what happens when she tries to leave the parade that has the most profound effect on her. Harriet decides that she has had enough of the parade and tells Gwen, a Bournehills woman with whom she is familiar, that she is leaving to meet Saul. As she reaches the edges of the Bournehills group, she is suddenly swept up by another of the island’s groups, dressed as a band of guerillas: “She felt the ground pull away under her, and then, as if she were no more than a pebble or bit of shell caught lying on the foreshore she was being swept down the street in their midst” (Marshall, *Chosen* 293). The language, which describes her as if she was “no more than a pebble or bit of shell,” is important in portraying the feelings that begin coursing through Harriet; she begins to realize her unimportance to the very people who she previously thought she was all-important to.

As Harriet struggles to regain her balance and make her way out of the group to no avail, she realizes that the group is barreling straight toward the sea. She begins to shout at the people to turn, “almost laughing at their wrongheadedness” (Marshall, *Chosen* 294). However, they pay her no attention:

They hadn’t heard her. Nor…had they really *seen* her. But how could this be? She was unmistakable among them with her hair…and her face, which despite her tan was still nonetheless white. But even those closest to her, the ones bumping into and pummeling her as they rushed past, appeared totally unaware of her presence. (Marshall, *Chosen* 294)
Harriet is shocked at her lack of importance to the guerrilla band. She, after all, was white; how could they not take notice of her? She becomes furious and feels the need to slap a girl near her, “not angrily, but the way one strikes an impertinent child, to remind it of its status” (Marshall, *Chosen* 295). She is angry that these black people, these colonized people, are not recognizing their place, not recognizing their obligation to listen to her, the white woman.

When a man does notice her with “her white annoyed face, the imperious hand pointing,” he does not listen to her; rather, “he moved his body from the waist down in a slow lewd grind” (Marshall, *Chosen* 295). This blatant rejection of her authority is too much for Harriet: “she was seized then by a revulsion and rage that was almost sexual in its force. And terror” (295). This odd, sexual rage could be representative of the manner in which force was characterized historically between the colonizer and the colonized. Her terror stems from the sudden realization that she is not in control, shattering all that she had previously thought and believed. Harriet begins lashing out at those around her: “she aimed for the faces that had refused to heed her advice, and the eyes that stared through her as though she wasn’t there” (Marshall, *Chosen* 296). She is furious that they do not heed her or what she unconsciously sees as her higher status, bestowed upon her by her white skin: “Her impotent anger and frustration come out vivid in the carnival scene where she realizes that the reign of people like her is over and a new generation is emerging” (Kapai 54). Finally, out of desperation, she screams Saul’s name, at which the guerilla band “seemed to freeze;” reacting quickly, they throw Harriet from their midst into a doorway (Marshall, *Chosen* 296).
Following this experience, Harriet must now “painfully reassess what she had thought to be her fundamental racial attitudes” (Meyer 108). She is confronted with her true feelings, previously unconsciously felt, and now brought forward by the stress of her experience. She begins to numb herself from her feelings and begins to withdraw from everyone, including Saul and the people of Bournehills, in an attempt to keep from having to deal with these new revelations: “When Harriet is forced to realize that she cannot control the black crowd and, even more, important, the black masses will carry on out of her control and oblivious of her presence without destroying itself, she shuts herself off” (Nazareth 53). If she does not interact with black people, she will not have to face her feelings about them, her culpability in the creation of their dire situation, or the fact that she does not have the control she thought she had.

However, Harriet is eventually forced to confront those feelings and beliefs now in her conscious. Perhaps the most important catalyst in pushing this journey is her interaction with Lyle Hutson. Lyle is a barrister, originally from Bournehills, who went to London to receive his education. Upon his return to Bourne Island, he became a very successful member of the local upper class, right down to his proper society marriage to Enid Vaughan, a lighter member of the Vaughan family that Merle also is a descendant of. He takes great pleasure in extramarital activities, sometimes involving the white wives of powerful men on the island. He is a very successful and self-assured member of Bourne Island who proves to be very threatening to Harriet’s sense of race and identity.

From the very beginning, Lyle had conjured up unconscious, racist feelings in Harriet. Following their welcome party hosted by Lyle, Harriet and Saul are accompanied back to their hotel by some of the guests. When it is suggested that they go
to another bar, Harriet declines; Lyle immediately tries to persuade her otherwise, but she
still refrains from leaving and is left behind by the others. Later, Harriet

remembered then Lyle Hutson placing his hand on her arm…and how
when she had glanced down somewhat disconcertedly…at that black hand,
she had had the impression, strange and fleeting and scarcely conscious,
that it was not his hand resting on her, or any part of him, but rather some
dark and unknown part of herself which had suddenly, for the first ever,
surfaced, appearing like stigmata or an ugly black-and-blue mark at the
place he had touched. (Marshall, Chosen 97)

It is with Lyle’s touch, this appearance of a black-and-blue “stigmata,” that Harriet’s
subconscious racism rears its head. Her racism manifests itself as a physical mark,
becoming an undeniable, visible sign of Harriet’s true feelings. While Lyle is not the
first black person to touch Harriet, his touch is different, as “the coexistence of Lyle’s
success, power, and darkness unnerves Harriet;” the other black people who had come
into physical contact with her “are below her – she can see that, could number the ways –
their touch is never a threat” (Olmsted 257). Harriet is threatened by Lyle and his
success and self-assuredness; even his affair with Dorothy Clough, the white wife of the
head of the local newspaper, ruffles her, though she never states why. She is unwilling to
recognize that her uneasiness with Lyle stems from racism.

Lyle also conjures up memories of people from her past. For example, he
reminds her of her ex-husband: “something in the man’s smile, its essentially cold,
hermetic quality, vaguely reminded her of Andrew…Both men conveyed the
unmistakable impression of having accomplished all they had set out to do with their
lives, of being complete and therefore no longer in need of anyone’s help” (Marshall, *Chosen* 196). For Harriet, whose self-value depends on her ability to do for others, men like Lyle and Andrew “held absolutely no interest” for her; “She could feel nothing for them” (196).

He also threatens her through his hints that she will not make it in Bournehills. Through these hints, Harriet begins to see herself through Lyle’s eyes: as a weak, ineffectual woman, much like her own mother. In this way, Lyle makes Harriet think of her mother and recall all that her mother stood for:

> She had not thought of her in years. As with so much of her past, her mother had been excluded from her thoughts. And now, because of a few needling remarks from a comparative stranger, memories of her had begun seeping in like smoke under the door in her mind she kept bolted against her. To have come this far and not to have escaped her! (Marshall, *Chosen* 197)

Because of Lyle, Harriet’s long submerged fears of being like her mother are revived. Harriet had not outrun the legacy of her mother, as much as she had liked to think that she had. She had not yet realized that she has to face the past to move ahead; her constant denial and repression of her past had not been effective in removing those negative legacies and dichotomies from her.

When Lyle suggests that they begin an affair, Harriet’s cool, almost repulsed, reaction, leads him to draw a correlation between her and an older, American woman that he had encountered years earlier. As he was getting on an elevator, the woman, already on it, screams: “One look at my black face (she saw nothing else) and something wholly
irrational took place in the old woman’s mind” (Marshall, *Chosen* 422). In the midst of
telling this story, Lyle sees the old woman’s face superimposed on Harriet’s, making
clear the connections between the two. It also makes clear Harriet’s status as a
representative of this class of oppressors; her reactions are their reactions, her racial
attitudes are their racial attitudes, however irrational.

It is during this conversation that Lyle lets slip the truth about Saul and Merle’s
affair, truly believing that Harriet knew. Harriet’s mind becomes very clear, as “all the
vague, exasperating things about Bournehills which had made for her disenchantment and
indifference and now, at times, her outright hostility toward the place…had finally
assumed visible, tangible form” (Marshall, *Chosen* 425). Harriet now has a black person
with who she can be legitimately angry with; she does not have to acknowledge why she
truly resents Merle, which is her skin color, because she now has a reason acceptable to
herself.

However, when she confronts Saul about the affair, Harriet gets revealed for her
true self. While their conversation has been documented in the section on Saul, it is
important to reiterate the effects that the revelation has on Harriet. Now that her own
husband has actually come out and stated that Harriet is a racist, there is no plausible way
for her to deny it. She must confront the fact that her seemingly well intentioned actions
have been motivated by her unconscious belief that blacks are inferior to her, that they
are “wrongheaded” and incapable of making good decisions for themselves.

Harriet is struck by this realization and her guilt is evident. When the girl who
cooks for them arrives that evening,
Harriet thought it was Merle…and not only Merle, but everyone in the district, every man, woman and child. After the long weeks she had spent…carefully separating out the individual faces from the all-engulfing blackness…the faces had begun to merge and blend again, moving together to form a solid bloc against her. (Marshall, *Chosen* 431)

In this passage, not only do we get another glimpse into the racism of Harriet, but also the effects that this new found guilt has on how she sees the inhabitants of Bournehills. First, Harriet reveals that it took effort for her to see the inhabitants as individual people, not just an “all-engulfing blackness.” This admittance does not lend a flattering picture of how Harriet saw the people of Bournehills; it further cements the fact that Harriet is not as enlightened as she likes to think she is. Harriet’s guilt is also shown through her sense that the black inhabitants of the island would “form a solid bloc against her;” Harriet fears retribution for her guilt in the racism that has long affected their lives.

However, Harriet still does not completely comprehend that her actions could be seen as paternalistic, nor does she see how they can be offensive in any way. She goes to see Merle, offering her money to leave the island and, presumably, Harriet’s husband. When Merle soundly rejects her offer, Harriet feels angry, “like an enraged, thwarted child” (Marshall, *Chosen* 442). In her frustration that Merle will not heed her offer, Harriet writes the CASR, asking for Saul to be replaced as head of the Bournehills project.

He is outraged when he hears the news and confronts Harriet. During their argument, Saul tells Harriet that he knows she is responsible for his being replaced on the Bournehills project. Harriet begins to shut down when faced with his hostility: “a strange
rigidity had come over her while he had been talking, and this, along with the winter gray of her eyes, gave the impression her mind had closed on his voice, and that she was both there in the room and not there” (Marshall, *Chosen* 454). She enters a catatonic state and no matter what Saul says, he realizes that she will not answer. Saul tells her that their marriage is over and leaves Harriet by herself.

“Harriet passed the entire night at the partially cleared table, sitting there the long hours with her hands fallen open on her lap and her dull stare and slack body giving the impression she was asleep with her eyes open” (Marshall, *Chosen* 457). While in this state, the faces of people from her past begin surrounding her, “all those whom she had always excluded from her thoughts for fear that she might one day be the one held to account for them” (457). These include her mother, her father, the widow Harbin, Alberta (her childhood maid), and, finally, Andrew. While these faces swirl around her, all of the negative aspects of her past that she has been ducking are put plain before her face. She remembers the horrible thoughts she had about Alberta, about her skin being black because she did something naughty. She remembers the racism of her mother, the not-so-honest means of acquiring wealth on her father’s side of the family. Finally, Andrew stands before her “like some Frankenstein form of her creation,” and he remains with her the rest of the night (458). Harriet remembers the dream she had while married to him, the revelation of her guilt in their power-driven actions. Then, Andrew touches her, and a black-and-blue mark rises, like when Lyle touched her, only this time it spread, and in the spreading stain which soon covered her entire body, she saw (no longer able to shut her mind to them) all the things she had denied the years with Andrew: her secret desire, for one, to have done
with him and move on once her plan for him was fulfilled…her shattering realization…of her complicity in the destruction planned, and the feelings of guilt and horror at herself which she had sought to flee by leaving him – only, she had to admit…to seek out a Saul with whom she could repeat the pattern…The admission aged her. (458)

All of the things that Harriet has been denying, her ancestors’ roles in the exploitation of peoples, her own guilt in the actions of her husbands, and her culpability in the destruction planned by Andrew, have now been acknowledged by Harriet to herself. The stain which covered her entire body, “symbolizing the extent of her moral culpability,” forces her to see and admit all that she is responsible for, both in her collective and personal past (Olmsted 258). She also realizes that the pattern cannot continue, as it had when she sought out Saul. Harriet is finally taking ownership of her destructive actions.

She has one final revelation before the night ends, one that can be interpreted as Harriet finally learning where she has been going wrong. Upon opening the windows at dawn, “she had the impression that the night…contained the dawn, and the dawn the darkness. It was as though they were really…one and the same, two parts of a whole, and that together they stood to acquaint her with an essential truth” (Marshall, Chosen 459). This co-mingling of dark and light, the realization that they are really “two parts of a whole,” teaches Harriet an “essential truth:” she knows now that black people are the same as her, that black and white, like the dark and light, are really two parts of a whole, the whole of humanity. Through this epiphany, Harriet realizes that she not only has to atone for what she has done, but that she has to end the cycle of oppression.
Harriet collects her swimming things and heads to the sea. During the previous weeks, the sea had been going through its seasonal change. The sea’s normal “loud unremitting sob of outrage and grief, was taken to a new high” (Marshall, *Chosen* 414). The huge waves “left behind great masses of seaweed dredged up from the bottom, dumping it like mounds of rotting refuse along the length of the beach” (414). It is as if the sea is dredging up the past, reminding all of what had occurred in its waters, reminding all of its rage and anguish over the atrocities committed in its vast expanse.

On her way to the sea, Harriet feels the eyes of someone following her:

She thought she glimpsed [Leesy’s] time-yellowed eyes peering impassively at her from between the slats of the shed-roof kitchen. Or they might have been Vere’s eyes singling her out that fatal afternoon on the road. Or Alberta’s nephew, whose weighted body had been found at the bottom of the pond. Watched by them, borne down by their gaze, she continued on her way to the sea. (459)

Leesy, Vere, and Alberta’s nephew are representative of all those who had been wronged in some way by Western society, by Harriet’s society. It is their presence which makes her ever aware of the guilt she carries and which reinforces to her what she must do in order to redeem herself and, to some extent, her people.

Also reminding her of this guilt and reinforcing her actions is the sea itself. As Harriet approaches, she hears the sea before she sees it, “the massive detonation set off by the breakers on the reef. And then the spray rising in the dazzling white toadstool of a cloud” (Marshall, *Chosen* 459). This evokes the image of Andrew Westerman, her first husband, and Harriet’s reoccurring nightmare. It brings Harriet recollections of her
culpability in the destruction of oppressed peoples and strengthens her resolve to drown herself.

Though her actual drowning is not described, it is implied that Harriet commits suicide. Many critics have seen this suicide as a failure on Harriet’s part to resolve the dichotomy within her. Adam Meyer states that “her investigation into her past leads only to chaos and death” (119). Jane Olmsted also feels that Harriet’s death is a mark of failure: “Unable to accept her past – that she had perhaps ruined both of her husbands as she sought power for herself, that her attempts to ‘save’ the natives represented a foolish desire to be placed on a pedestal, that she deserved whatever scorn or hatred Saul in the end felt for her – Harriet commits suicide” (258). Denniston writes that, “Because she cannot or will not change or because she comes to recognize her own destructiveness, Harriet chooses suicide. However, Marshall portrays her predicament in such a fashion as to indict not so much the woman as the Western ideology that shaped her” (121).

While Denniston does not wholly see Harriet as a failure and recognizes Marshall’s sympathy for Harriet, she does not go so far as to see Harriet’s death as a redemptive act. For these critics, and many like them, Harriet’s self-termination can only be a failure; they fail to see the redemption that is attained by Harriet’s death.

On one level, Harriet’s drowning has a very personal meaning. She chooses to kill herself in the sea, thus cleansing herself of the guilt. It is reminiscent of the Christian rite of baptism, removing all sin through anointing oneself with water. For Harriet, the only way she could come clean of all of her guilt was to drown herself in the redemptive waters of the sea. Though she is now dead, Harriet dies with a clean soul, with the
closure of knowing that she has atoned for her sins. Her suicide, then, cannot be seen as a failure, as it is a conscious act of cleansing, not an act of desperation and despair.

Harriet’s death also marks the purification of the sea, which few of the critics seem to think is important, as few of them include it in their reading of her. Immediately following her suicide, “it was like a new sea. The water…looked as though it had been endlessly filtered to remove every impurity. And all trace of the unsightly seaweed it had sloughed off like so much dead skin over the weeks was gone” (Marshall, *Chosen* 461).

Not only has the sea been relieved of physical impurities, but it is also a hint that spiritual impurities left from the transatlantic slave trade have also been removed from the sea. The description of the seaweed as “dead skin” recalls the bodies of the Africans in the Atlantic; all traces of the legacy of death, this “dead skin,” is now gone.

It is not only the appearance which changes, as the sound of the sea also undergoes a change following her suicide:

The roar of outrage the huge breakers sent aloft as they flung themselves…onto the outer reef had lost some measure of its fury; and the high-pitched ritual keening of the lesser waves and the wind which never ceased had been taken to a slightly lower register. And though the sea continued to hurl itself in an excess of grief and mourning onto the shore, sending up the spume like tears, it did so with something less than its usual hysteria. (461)

Through Harriet’s self-sacrifice, the sea is able to let go of some of its outrage and grief. Though, it continues “to hurl itself in an excess of grief and mourning,” the sea has to some extent been appeased, as one of the oppressors has finally attempted to make
atonement for her part in the oppression. Through this lens, Harriet’s death cannot be seen as an utter failure on her part; she has in fact finally been able to reconcile herself to her past and, through her death, attempted to come to some form of atonement and redemption for it.

Harriet’s death can also be seen as redemptive for all of Western society. Not only has Harriet cleansed herself in the sea, but she has become a redemptive sacrifice for all of Western society. Her body is never recovered and Gwen “swore that the body had been borne back to America” (Marshall, *Chosen* 460).8 If one follows this opinion, which is given the last voice in the chapter dealing with Harriet’s death, Harriet’s cleansed spirit has been returned to America, well known for its oppressive practices, perhaps as a means to bring healing and redemption. Leela Kapai agrees with this sentiment: “Her death seems to be a symbolic end of all that white America stands for and the ever-mourning waves of the ocean perform the ablution of the old sins of the past” (54).

Harriet’s journey affords the reader a glimpse into the issues inherent in coming to terms with an oppressor’s mindset in a more general sense. “Revealing her deep understanding of upper-class Anglo-American culture, Marshall paints a sensitive and compassionate portrait of Harriet,” and in turn whites as a whole (Denniston 113). She shows that, though there are many subconscious feelings that have to be sought out, it is possible for a member of a group of oppressors to stop denying their part in history and learn an important lesson. While Harriet’s personal way of making atonement for her part is committing suicide, Marshall is not advocating that for everyone. Harriet’s suicide can be seen as a symbolic gesture of ending the cycle of oppression, something
that can be done by a person while they are still alive. Through Harriet, Marshall is able to illustrate the process for all oppressors and show the oppressors and oppressed alike that it is possible.

**Merle Kinbona**

Merle Kinbona represents the traditional character in this Pan-African tradition that Marshall is taking part in, a person of African descent who still feels the diasporic connections that bind her to her past: “What she is symbolically is the black man/woman of the Diaspora” (Pettis, “Interview” 125). Unlike Harriet and Saul, Merle identifies solely with an oppressed group; there is no respite, no reprieve, for her or her people from the mental and emotional state that they are in. However, through going back and truly confronting her past, both personal and collective, Merle overcomes the negativity she has felt about herself and comes to a sense of new identity. This spiritual journey culminates in a physical journey back to Africa, retracing the transatlantic passage that her ancestors had been taken on generations before. In the end of the novel, Merle has not only the hope of being whole as a person, but also the hope that she can return to Bournehills and become a modern day Cuffee Ned, redeeming her people from the colonized mindset they are stuck in.

Merle is a native of Bournehills. She is one of many descendants of Duncan Vaughan, the British owner of a sugar plantation: “People still talked about how he had sired the last of the forty children he had had from the black women who worked on his estate at the age of seventy-five” (Marshall, *Chosen* 69). Vaughan never married and thus had no legitimate children; in an act which was rare for men in his position, he divided his estate between his illegitimate, mixed race children. His descendants, now
land owners and professionals, “had sought over the generations to whiten and legitimize the line and had succeeded – with the possible exception of Merle’s father’s small section of the family, who had remained in Bournehills and more or less carried on in the manner of Duncan” (Marshall, *Chosen* 69). The connection between whitening and legitimizing their family line is important to note. Though they were well off and owned land, the Vaughan descendants did not see themselves as good enough; they had internalized that white was better and their own increasing whiteness legitimized their financial standing. They no longer felt nor wanted to feel a connection with Bournehills and the people there, with the exception of Merle. Her branch of the family’s existence in Bournehills allows her to stay closer to that “continuum” between the Caribbean and Africa; she does not disown her African roots, nor is she ashamed of them.

When Merle is two years old, her mother is shot and killed right in front of her by Merle’s father’s current wife. This scene is a great source of pain and shame for her. Merle blames herself that no one was brought to justice for the murder because she could not point the person out: “At the heart of her psychological difficulties…is this remembered scene of shameful impotence” (Skerrett 70). It is also a turning point in her life; her father gets custody of her, but wants nothing to do with her. He boards her at a prestigious local school which had mostly white or lighter skinned black students who ridiculed and taunted Merle for being black. Not only does Merle feel rejected by her own father, but she also has to deal with racist comments from her peers.

Merle later goes to London to do her university studies. She eventually gives up school and falls in with what Merle terms as a “wild crowd” (Marshall, *Chosen* 328). While in this crowd, Merle begins an affair with an older, very wealthy British woman.
Though the woman, who is never given a name, helps Merle financially at first, it becomes clear that the woman has ulterior motives. Merle remarks, “She mostly used the money to buy foolish people like me. She collected people the way someone else might paintings or books” (Marshall, *Chosen* 328). Merle also later realizes that

All her supposed generosity and kindness...were meant to do one thing: keep you dependent – and grateful. Because then, you see, you’d always be around to amuse and entertain her…We were the ones doing the giving and she the one taking. The woman was draining our very substance. (Marshall, *Chosen* 329)

In a way, this nameless woman is symbolic of all Europeans who have warranted using colonized people for their own purposes through the ruse of taking care of them. The “draining” of the colonized people, masqueraded as “generosity and kindness,” is a pattern that can be seen throughout the history of colonized peoples. For Merle, the British woman takes on not only personal implications, but symbolic importance for her collective history as well.

After leaving the woman, Merle falls in love with a Ugandan man named Ketu Kinbona; they marry and have a child together. The British woman attempts to send Merle money throughout her marriage, which Merle promptly returns. Eventually, however, money is too tight and Merle begins to cash the checks; she lies to Ketu and says the money is from her father, knowing he would not understand her relationship with the woman.

After awhile, Merle goes to work and begins returning the woman’s checks to her. The impudence of Merle’s actions angers the woman, who goes to Ketu out of “sexual
jealousy…and malicious control” and informs him of what has been going on (Denniston 113). Ketu is stunned by the news; not only has Merle been lying to him, but her lover is a woman: “He couldn’t understand nonsense like that” (Marshall, *Chosen* 334). Merle, explaining the situation later, states, “I stood for the worst that could happen to those of us who came to places like England and allowed ourselves to be corrupted. I wasn’t Merle to him any longer, a person, his wife, the mother of his child, but the very thing he had tried to avoid all his years there” (Marshall, *Chosen* 334). For Ketu, Merle is a willing participant in her own colonization, accepting the condescending, paternalistic actions of a European. He leaves one day, without notice, taking their daughter with him to Uganda. To Merle, she is to blame for the pain that has been brought upon her; she is the guilty one for allowing herself to fall prey to the woman’s motives. She returns to Bournehills a psychologically broken woman, but one determined to make a difference.

In her new start in Bournehills, Merle very much acknowledges the importance of looking to one’s collective past in order to have a sense of identity, unlike Harriet. Merle constantly brings up history, whether it is the story of Cuffee Ned or the way in which the island was colonized. Leesy, an older woman living in Bournehills, recollects how Merle tried to teach West Indian history to the high school children and the consequences of that action: “She was telling the children about Cuffee Ned and things that happened on the island in olden times, when the headmaster wanted her to teach the history that was down in the books, that told all about the English. But she refused, saying that way made it look like black people never fought back” (Marshall, *Chosen* 32). Merle understands, as Marshall writes, that “the oppressed has to know the enemy – his survival depends on it” (Marshall, “*Shaping*” 98). She calls the English “the biggest obeah men,” and at one
point remarks, “We don’t really believe deep inside us that we can plan and do for
ourselves. I tell you, they colonized our minds but good in this place” (Marshall, Chosen
67, 129). In order to displace this colonized mindset, Merle knows that the people of
Bournehills have to learn and come to terms with their past.

However, Merle also remarks on the unwanted effects the study of history can
have on the mind of the oppressed: “Ah, well, ah, history…Any of you ever studied
it?...Well, don’t if you haven’t. I did for a time – West Indian history it was and I tell
you, it nearly, as we say in Bournehills, set out my head. I had to leave it off. It is a
nightmare, as that Irishman said, and we haven’t awakened from it yet” (130). The fact
that her history is so horrendous and continues to negatively affect the island and its
people to this day, is sometimes too much for Merle to handle, but she continues to
recognize the importance of recollecting it, as she does so throughout the novel.

Merle is not as open when it comes to recalling her personal past. For Merle, her
personal past is a source of great shame, hurt, and confusion. While she attempts to hide
her past and the effects it has on her from others, her outward appearance conveys her
confusion. When the reader is first introduced to Merle, she is wearing an African print
dress, silver earrings carved into the shape of saints given to her by the British woman,
and large silver bracelets. “Her manner of dress is the sum of her personal history – the
sophistication of her English education, the brilliance of her African heritage, the ‘noisy’
bracelets, so obsessively repeated, the symbol of her obsessive connection to her West
Indian homeland” (Skerrett 69). Marshall comments on the meaning of her outfit within
the novel:
She had donned this somewhat bizarre outfit, each item of which stood opposed to, at war even, with the other, to express rather a diversity and disunity within herself, and her attempt, unconscious probably, to reconcile these opposing parts, to make of them a whole. (Marshall, *Chosen* 5)

Meaning can even be taken from Merle’s make-up, talcum powder. She always applies talcum powder on her face, lightening her skin and causing the faint impression of a whitish mask. Through her appearance, one can see that Merle cannot reconcile the different parts of her life. Like the inner turmoil between the Westernized self that her schooling and Europeans have tried to impose on her and her diasporic connections with her African people and heritage, her appearance is at “war” with itself. It stands for both a “diversity” and a “disunity” within her, words that tend to have opposite connotations to them, which adds to the depiction of confusion that Marshall is trying to paint in her character. “Merle stands suspended between her own culture and the culture of the whites that scarred her psyche,” and her appearance illustrates this (Kulkarni 142).

However, her appearance is also important as it shows that Merle, at least unconsciously, is trying to construct out of all of these different pieces “a whole,” a definite identity out of the varying experiences in her life.

The difficulty she has in reconciling her personal past is compounded by the fact that she will not face it. Merle refuses to speak about her past and, throughout the beginning of the book, the only tidbits the reader gets about her past are small snippets that people in Bournehills know about her. For example, the reader learns that Merle witnessed her mother’s murder from Leesy, who comments that Merle “still can’t bring
herself to talk about it” (Marshall, *Chosen* 33). Adam Meyer goes so far as to speculate that Merle “discusses Bournehills’s communal history interminably so that she can entirely forestall an examination of her own personal history” (105). This may be the case, as Merle continuously references Cuffee Ned and the history of Bournehills, but does not reference her personal past until Saul pushes her to do so.

Meyer goes on to say that “the strain that results from such avoidance on Merle’s part begins to cause her physical as well as psychological problems; she suffers fits of catatonia, an illness appropriately symptomatic of her numbing of herself to her past” (106). Indeed, Merle suffers throughout the novel from various “depressions,” and the reader learns of others from retellings of the past. For example, her first depression comes in London, following her divorce from Ketu, which she pulls through with the help of a “Juju man,” or psychiatrist. Other depressions are alluded to; Allen Fuso, an assistant to Saul who had stayed in Bournehills before and is familiar to Merle, is worried that, upon their arrival, they may find Merle in “one of those long, dramatic, cataleptic silences of hers during which she remained shut in her room for days” (Marshall, *Chosen* 19). Her physical catatonia signifies Merle’s mental and emotional paralysis in the past; her personal history is definitely a sticking point for Merle and, though she talks of it and recognizes its importance, her collective history is also tough for Merle to wade through.

With the arrival of Saul, this inability to look at the past begins to diminish. Merle finds her spiritual guide in Saul, her confidant with whom she can confront her past with. Because I have already discussed Saul’s role in a previous section, the general aspects do not need to be rehashed. However, I would be remiss in my discussion of
Merle if I did not study the specific interactions that occur between Saul and Merle that serve as major guideposts in her recovery.

The most important point in their relationship, and a pivotal moment in Merle’s recovery, comes at Carnival. Following the parade and Harriet’s retreat to the home of Enid Hutson, Merle and Saul go to Sugar’s, a local bar. It is here that they both spill their histories to each other. Merle is finally able to confront and come to terms with many events of the past and the feelings that these events stir up. Saul, while “he knew better than to press her,” is receptive to hearing her story without judgment, and Merle recognizes this (Marshall, *Chosen* 327).

Merle’s vocal journey through her past begins with the British woman. She opens up and tells Saul about the relationship, something which she had never done before with anyone. She articulates the woman’s trap, saying, “My friend didn’t mind helping us out a bit. What was a meal or a bed for the night or a little money to someone like her? Besides, she knew that would keep us in her debt, and that, my dear, was what she was after” (Marshall, *Chosen* 329). Merle also reveals that she wears the saint earrings as a reminder to be “always on my guard against Greeks bearing gifts…Especially when the Greeks happen to be Englishwomen in disguise” (Marshall, *Chosen* 327). Merle is not fully recovered from the degradation that the woman imposed on her and, as Merle feels, she readily accepted, especially through their economic relationship. However, by telling this story, Merle is able to let go of some of the guilt, some of the shame that has been haunting her. This partial healing is shown in her allowance of Saul to remove the earrings when they are together.
The story of the Englishwoman segues into the anger she feels toward Ketu for taking himself and their daughter away from her, for not understanding or wanting to understand the situation she was in. After recounting the story for Saul, she cries out in pain and anger, calling Ketu “Brute!” (Marshall, *Chosen* 336). For the first time, she allows herself to feel and spill out all the emotions surrounding their separation:

Oh, Lord, have some human feeling and write every once in a while and let me know how the little girl’s getting along, how she’s growing…Oh, the brute!...And what right had he to judge me, anyway?...Was he God?...Oh, damn him! Damn him! Damn him! Damn him for not understanding. Damn him for not giving me a chance. Damn him for leaving me standing there all this time waiting for them to come back!

(Marshall, *Chosen* 337)

Through her openness and comfort with Saul, she is able to release feelings that she had never uttered before. Guilt was not the only feeling associated with Ketu, though Merle had never admitted it before. She finally expresses her anger over the situation; while letting loose this anger emotionally exhausts her, it also brings her a deeper understanding about her feelings for Ketu and their relationship: “Merle has come to terms with her flawed nature and realized that she was not to be condemned for what she had done when she was so much younger. Correspondingly, her husband was not justified in walking out on her with their child” (Nazareth 57).

Following this night of revelations, Merle and Saul begin their sexual affair. It is during their time together that Merle is able to confront even more aspects of her personal past. One of the most important scenes in Merle’s confrontation of her past comes when
she begins to unburden herself of the feelings associated with her mother’s death. Merle reveals her true feelings of guilt and inadequacy: “You would have thought the little idiot of a child would have at least remembered what the face behind the gun looked like;” Saul asks her to stop blaming herself, but Merle continues saying, “I need to talk about it. It’ll do me good to say it out loud if only for once in my life” (Marshall, Chosen 358). Merle finally recognizes the need to talk about and confront her personal past and is able to articulate that recognition. She continues on, blaming herself for the lack of justice in her mother’s murder and her role in that.

It is perhaps what Saul tells her, in conjunction with her newfound ability to articulate her personal past, which helps her to come to a sense of closure and healing over her mother’s death. He states,

You can’t hold yourself responsible for what happened to your mother….Her death, as well as her life…and her relationship with your father, even the way he treated you when you were little, all go back to the whole….inhuman system that got started in this part of the world long before you were born – the effects of which are still with us….You know that. So how can you blame yourself for her death? That’s like blaming yourself for the entire history that brought it about. (Marshall, Chosen 358)

Saul is able to bring to Merle’s consciousness the extenuating circumstances of her mother’s death. He shows her that she is not the only player, not the one to blame for everything bad that happens. Saul is also quick to applaud her for her efforts in recounting her feelings, so as to not discount her by saying things were not her fault:
This with your mother is all part of your attempt to come to terms with the things that have happened in your life...And it’s a good thing you’re doing...Sometimes it’s necessary to go back before you can go forward, really forward...Mis-Merle’s going to make it. She’s going to come through. (Marshall, Chosen 359)

Not only is her relationship with Saul allowing her to open up, but it is also supplying her with the support needed to get through such a painful endeavor. Saul’s reaffirmation of her attempts “to go back and understand” and his encouragement that she’s “going to make it,” help to make the recovery and healing process relatively easier for Merle.

It is not only her relationship with Saul which prompts her to confront her past in an attempt to recover her self. At one point, though her catatonic depressions are typically seen as negative, what is perhaps the most significant and telling of her catatonic depressions forces her to confront her collective and personal past. This bout of catatonia serves as “a zone for the restoration of self, a separate plateau from which the body and spirit emerge to once again take up the fight” (Willis 82). Merle’s catatonia is a mental and spiritual break for her, a break that allows her to restore her self. This particular depression comes following the shut down of Cane Vale, the sugar mill. Merle is outraged that the European owners will not fix the broken machinery; without Cane Vale, the people of Bournehills have few options on what to do with the sugar cane that is their livelihood. After raging at the foreman, Merle is led back to her house, where she shuts herself in her room.

While normally no one but Merle’s cook, Carrington, is allowed into her room or near her when she is in a depression, Saul is allowed in to see her. It is Saul who
provides the eyes into Merle’s room and her state for the reader. He finds Merle sitting, propped up in her bed, with her eyes half open, but she is unresponsive: “It was as though she had fled completely the surface of herself for someplace deep within where nothing could penetrate” (Marshall, Chosen 399). It is this statement which leads the reader to believe that, while no one on the outside can disturb her, Merle is “someplace deep within” herself, perhaps reliving and confronting her collective and personal histories.

Her bedroom gives the reader clues as to what Merle is dealing with, both personally and culturally. Throughout the room, which is near the sea and the significance and meaning that the sea holds for Merle’s history, there are relics and remnants of her history. Some of the furnishings of the room represent her collective history, for the room was filled with furniture taken from the old estate house built by Duncan Vaughan…Dominating them all was the bed…It might well have been the bed in which old Vaughan had sired the forty-odd children…Gleaned also from the original house…were…faded prints and drawings depicting life long ago in places like Bournehills…The old prints offered beguiling scenes of the planters’ wives and daughters out for their late afternoon drives…the planters…imbibing great quantities of coffee mixed with rum…A number of prints pictured the rowdy nightlong feasts…which saw whole calves consumed by the diners while their liveried slaves, some of them no more than sleepy children, stood attendance at each chair. And there were other scenes as well, these mostly of black figures at work in the fields…and filing in long columns up the ramps to the sugar mills with
the canes on their backs bending them double. There was even a print showing them bound to the millwheel along with the oxen…In the midst of these, and overwhelming the wall upon which it was hung, and even somehow the room, stood a large, very old and probably quite valuable drawing of a three-masted Bristol slaver. (Marshall, Chosen 400)

The furnishings paint a vivid picture of life for Merle’s ancestors. Not only does she have reminders of the life of leisure that the whites led on the islands because of the work of her ancestors, but also the Europeans’ sexual exploitation of her female ancestors, represented by the very bed she sleeps in. The prints also offer a representation of the lives that her ancestors led, from the slave ship, to the pleasures that were flaunted in front of their faces while even their children were forced to toil, to the fields they worked and continue to work to this day. The overwhelming presence of the slave ship diagram ensures the reader recognizes the importance of the transatlantic slave trade in all that has occurred and continues to occur on the island. These furnishings keep Merle’s history continuously in front of her; on one hand, these allow her to be aware of her history, but, on the other hand, keep her mentally anguished by living amongst these relics.

Merle also has reminders of her personal past in her bedroom; these reminders not only represent the various events in her life, but also symbolize her muddled sense of identity:

Books on West Indian history from her student days in London were scattered everywhere. There was her sewing machine…which had been a present from Ashton Vaughan to her mother. Beside it on a chair lay piles of the colorful cloth with their abstract tribal motifs…On a crowded vanity
table nearby he saw a large tin of the talcum powder she was forever
dusting on her face and neck, along with the cruel iron-toothed comb she
heated to straighten her hair. And pushed out of the way in a corner,
almost swallowed by the deep shadows there, were a number of large
steamer trunks…These contained the remains of her life in England. They
stood open but only half unpacked. (Marshall, *Chosen* 401)

These objects in Merle’s room represent various aspects of her life. Once again, the inner
turmoil of Merle is portrayed through physical objects, namely the tribal motif cloths, the
talcum powder and comb used to make her appear more “white,” and her West Indian
history books. Her troubled relationship with her parents is represented by the sewing
machine. And her life in England, involving both the Englishwoman and Ketu, is
represented by the steamer trunks. The language is almost painfully obvious in
portraying the trunks’ symbolic link to her mental and emotional state regarding her past
in England: “they stood open but only half unpacked” paints the picture that, while she
has managed to talk about her experiences in London, Merle has only half resolved her
feelings regarding that phase in her life.

Her struggle to resolve her sense of identity is represented by her inability to
make sense of her room:

It appeared she had brought the memorabilia of a lifetime – and of the
time that reached beyond her small life – and dumped it in a confused
heap in the room…although there were, to her credit, a few signs that she
had tried to impose order on the chaos…But overwhelmed by the
enormity of the task, she had given up…It expressed her: the struggle for
coherence, the hope and desire for reconciliation of her conflicting parts, the longing to truly know and accept herself...He almost felt as his gaze wandered over the room that he was wandering through the chambers of her mind. (Marshall, *Chosen* 401)

The symbolism of her bedroom is very heavy and, at times, blatantly spelled out by Marshall, such as Saul’s feeling that he was wandering through her mind by wandering through her room. However, it renders a very clear picture for the reader of exactly what Merle is going through, exactly what she is up against when confronting her personal and collective past: “The room epitomizes the contradictions and hypocrisies concealed in her father’s (and her island’s) history” (Storhoff 59). It also gives her credit for trying to work through her confusion, although thus far she has been unsuccessful at reconciling it completely.

Merle is slow to come out of this depression. Even after she recovers, she retains a catatonic air around her, “but you could nonetheless sense her groping her way back to the surface of herself” (Marshall, *Chosen* 415). When Saul inquires on how she is, Merle replies, “You know me...I’ll live” (415). Saul answers, “‘Oh, you will, you will!’ and his laugh held not only relief but a note of personal triumph also” (415). It is this “note of personal triumph” in Saul’s laugh that clues the reader to sense that something bigger has happened to Merle than her usual recovery from a depression. One discerns that Merle’s “living” has less to do with its meanest sense of survival and more to do with coming to terms with her identity and living a full, unconfused life.

Readers get their biggest clue that something major has changed in Merle during her confrontation with Harriet: “In her final successful battle to cast off the cloak of
Western civilization and to move in the direction of her own rebirth, Merle’s confrontation with Harriet is vital” (Keizs 74). When Harriet offers money to Merle so that Merle can leave Bournehills and, presumably, Saul, Merle reacts quite strongly:

Merle suddenly gave a violent start. And in the same moment her eyes squeezed shut – her face contracting painfully with the effort – and with a choked cry of fear, horror and dismay...she fell back in the chair. She lay there for a long time...her face frozen in the painful lines; utterly exhausted, defeated; some long chase, like those which occur only in dreams, might have ended for her with her pursuer having closed the gap.

(Marshall, *Chosen* 439)

In Harriet, Merle sees the Englishwoman who had tried to buy her. The woman she had been attempting to block from memory had found her in the guise of Harriet; her pursuer, the presumptuous, condescending European, had closed the gap. Merle struggles with her need to stand up for herself and the awful weight of her former inability to do so. She screams,

sounding like a woman in labor with a stillborn child, who screams to rid herself of that dead weight. Merle might have also been trying to rid herself of something dead inside her, that face perhaps which had attached itself like an incubus to her mind, sapping her strength and purpose over the years, debauching her will. In what seemed like some ancient exorcistic rite she gave vent to the laugh. (Marshall, *Chosen* 440)

The dead weight of her self-perceived weakness and inability to stand up to the Englishwoman has dragged Merle down throughout her life. However, through this
“ancient exorcistic rite,” this ridding of the dead weight, Merle is able to face Harriet over her self-serving manipulation, shouting,

My passage paid to the ends of the earth. Get thee gone, Satan, and here’s enough money to stay gone. Oh, God, this woman must be trying to set out my head again coming over here this afternoon talking about money…Money! Always money!…They feel they can buy the world and its wife with a few raw-mouth dollars. But lemme tell you something, m’lady…I can’t be bought. Or bribed…And I don’t accept handouts…I’ve grown wise in my old age. And proud. Poor as the devil, but proud. (Marshall, Chosen 441)

By confronting and shutting down Harriet, Merle is also, in her own mind, rejecting all that she stands for, including the Englishwoman: “Merle’s lover is clearly analogous to Harriet Amron in her selfishness and spiritual imperialism” (Kubitschek 53). Through this rebuff of Harriet, Merle is able to overcome the powerlessness she connected with her relationship with the Englishwoman and, in this way, heal the old emotional scars. Marshall explains this in an interview with Joyce Pettis: “Harriet permits me to find a means by which Merle will finally be able to overcome that relationship with the English woman” (“Interview” 125). Thus, Merle is able to defeat the old demons by destroying the new ones.

At the end of the novel, the reader learns that Merle has sold all of her belongings and is going to Africa. The sale of her belongings is symbolic, as it represents her shedding of the burden of her unconfronted history. She states, “You should see my room. It’s as bare as a bone. Everything’s gone – all that old furniture and junk I had
cluttering up the place…I even sold the very bed from under me…I haven’t slept better in years…And the earrings I’ve worn all these years? Gone!” (Marshall, *Chosen* 463). The de-cluttering of her room is also the de-cluttering of her mind; the reader can sense this when she states that she hasn’t slept so well in years. Saul also notices that she “had left off the talcum powder she was forever dabbing on…as though to mute her darkness, and that her hair which she normally kept straightened flat…now stood in a small rough forest around her face…She looked younger, less scarred” (Marshall, *Chosen* 463).

Merle has abandoned the beauty practices which were done in deference to the European hegemony which pervaded the colonized world: “In divesting herself of them she has un-colonized herself” (Olmsted 255). She has gained self-acceptance, no longer whitening her face or straightening her hair, and is emotionally better for it.

Merle is also about to embark on a trip to Africa, to attempt to visit Ketu and their daughter in Uganda. She states, “Before I can think of making any kind of start I have to go see my little girl. That before anything else” (Marshall, *Chosen* 464). To fully heal from her past, she must first redeem herself to her child. Her identity as mother trumps all else. However, she also realizes the importance of Africa in her identity:

I have the feeling that just being there and seeing the place will be a big help to me, that in some way it will give me the strength I need to get moving again. Not that I’m going expecting perfection, I know they have more than their share of problems…It’s more what you [Saul] once said: 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. I believe that, too. (Marshall, *Chosen* 468)
Merle fully recognizes the importance of the past on one’s identity, but more importantly, recognizes the path she must take to recover her self fully. She acknowledges that Africa is not a utopia, that it has problems like the rest of the world, but sees that, despite this, she must still go there to be whole. This is a sentiment that Marshall wholly agrees with: “The physical return…is a metaphor for the psychological and spiritual return back over history, which I am convinced Black people in this part of the world must undertake if we are to have a sense of our total experience and to mold for ourselves a more truthful identity” (Marshall, “Shaping” 107).

Also significant is the route Merle is taking to Africa:

She was not taking the usual route to Africa, first flying north to London via New York and then down. Instead, she was going south to Trinidad, then on to Recife in Brazil, and from Recife, that city where the great arm of the hemisphere reaches out toward the massive shoulder of Africa as though yearning to be joined to it as it had surely been in the beginning, she would fly across to Dakar. (Marshall, Chosen 471)

Merle is retracing the Middle Passage, reversing the route her ancestors took generations ago to get to the Caribbean, perhaps reversing the effects that that journey had on her and her people. In using this piece of “transatlantic imagination,” Marshall is further identifying Merle with the traditional Pan-African ideal of reclaiming identity (Diedrich et al. 8).

However, Merle reveals that she is not staying in Africa and will eventually return to Bournehills: “This is home. Whatever little I can do that will matter for something must be done here. A person can run for years but sooner or later he has to take a stand
in the place which, for better or worse, he calls home, do what he can to change things there” (Marshall, *Chosen* 468). This statement sets the stage for Merle to return to Bournehills to be a redeemer for her people, a modern-day Cuffee Ned, if you will. So, though she has personally healed and found a sense of identity, it is now Merle’s responsibility to help the people of Bournehills: “her renewed self-respect and consequent interest in her personal life does not signal a retreat from her political commitment” (Kubitschek 59). When she returns, Merle’s energy will no longer “be misunderstood as craziness, but will be redirected to more powerful channels so that the change that Bournehills needs may finally come from within, where such de-colonization must occur” (Olmsted 255). It is her responsibility to return and empower them, to transform their colonized minds.

Through the character of Merle, Marshall is able to achieve many of her goals. First, she places herself squarely in a Pan-African tradition with this more conventional characterization. Secondly, Marshall is also able to portray to her readers the importance of learning history and of making a spiritual and physical journey in order to come to a sense of whole identity. Through Merle, she is able to show what she sees as the general process that all oppressed peoples should go through in order to heal. Thirdly, Marshall gives a call to political action to oppressed peoples who have gone through this process and are able to help from within to de-colonize the mindsets of others, which she sees as their duty.

**Conclusion**

Through these characters’ journeys, we are faced with the implications of our own history, regardless of our background or culture. As Olmsted writes, “The urgency of
reclaiming and re-membering history that Marshall demonstrates applies not only to those whose histories have been denied (read: oppressed peoples) but also to those who have been denied the histories of others (read: ‘Western,’ white heterosexual, male)” (257). Because each character serves as a microcosm of a larger group, almost every reader conceivable can find a window through which to glimpse their own place in the world, a character to empathize with to some degree. Whether one is a member of the oppressed group, a member of the oppressors, or someone struggling to reconcile the two, *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* provides a portrait of each, a portrayal of the personal efforts taken to come to a sense of identity.

Marshall also shows us how people who have been separated by race and experience can come together to help each other through the process: “Beyond the barriers of race, all men are the same; they share the same fears, the same loneliness, and the same hopes. And they cannot live on islands; the bridges of communication have to be built” (Kapai 54). Through the relationships between Saul, Merle, and Harriet, we are given an example of how to build those bridges of communication. We also learn that the humanity in us all overrides individual experiences and, once the characters realize this, most poignantly described by Harriet’s experience prior to her suicide, the reader too can see the ties of humanity that bind us, regardless of race.

In *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, Paule Marshall has given us a roadmap, a way in which oppressed and oppressor can come to an understanding, both of themselves and each other. By confronting and utilizing our histories, by descending into that chaos of knowledge, we are able to get beyond the past and move into a more positive future, for ourselves and for our communities. As Marshall stated in one of her
articles, “The past offers much instruction for the present struggle” (“Shaping” 112). In no other work does she display that message with more sense of universality than in The Chosen Place, the Timeless People.
**Endnotes**

1 Juju refers to a type of magic associated with West Africa.
2 One very practical reason that Marshall uses the male Saul as the Jewish character, the character who is the bridge between the women, does not need to be closely looked at. Marshall needed a white woman for Merle to confront in the end, as a deliberate, obvious connection to the English woman, and thus divvied up the roles of the couple accordingly.
3 Ezekiel 1:15-16, 19-21 (KJV): Now as I beheld the living creatures, behold one wheel upon the earth by the living creatures, with his four faces. The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel...And when the living creatures went, the wheels went by them: and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up. Whithersoever the spirit was to go, they went, thither was their spirit to go: and the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels. When those went, these went; and when those stood, these stood; and when those were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels.
This passage directly precedes God’s appearance to Ezekiel.
4 In the book of Acts, as Saul is journeying towards Damascus, “suddenly there shined round about him a light from heaven” (Acts 9:3). He hears the voice of the Lord, who tells him that he will be told his destiny upon reaching the city. Saul is temporarily blinded. The Lord later tells Ananias, a disciple, that Saul is a “chosen vessel” who will “suffer” for the Lord’s sake (Acts 9:15, 16).
5 Saul takes pride in being a “Sephardic, that is to say a dark, Spanish Jew, rather than an Ashkenazic, or a light, European one…Saul sides with the Sephardi, rather than the Ashkenazic, and thus with the persecuted among the persecuted” (Meyer 114)
6 Other critics who subscribe to this opinion include: Joyce Pettis in her book, *Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall’s Fiction* (50); Peter Nazareth in his review, “Colonial Institutions, Colonized People (53); Shanna Greene in “Paule Marshall” (299); Gary Storhoff in “Yesterday Comes Like Today (62); and Missy Kubitschek in “Paule Marshall’s Women on Quest” (58).
7 Denniston is one of the few that mention it in her book, *The Fiction of Paule Marshall*. She comments on the cycle of purification of the sea and places it at the same time as Harriet’s death, but she does not go so far as to connect the two in any redeeming fashion for Harriet (121). Kapai also mentions it, as is seen by the quote that is included later in the paper, but she does not feel that Harriet’s suicide is redemptive for her as an individual, stating that she commits suicide because “she cannot face the prospect of a useless life” (53).
8 By Gwen stating the opinion that Harriet is borne back to America, “Marshall invokes the traditional African belief that one’s soul returns to its native homeland” (Denniston 121).
9 Obeah refers to a type of sorcery or magic practiced by some in the British West Indies, South America, and the southeastern U.S.
10 The “Irishman” referred to in this quote is James Joyce (Gikandi 147).
11 The large silver bracelets that Merle wears are a common part of Caribbean women’s dress, more specifically Bajan women, of who Marshall is a descendant of.
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