p'arts, hum' Papers in Arts and Humanities

Vol. 4, No. 2, Dec. 2024
https://doi.org/10.52885/vz4z7044

Tricksters, Travelers, and Other Places in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*

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Abstract

This article explores the narrative representations of traveling, crossing, and identity formation in Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*. Informed by Henry Louis Gates' analysis of the trickster archetype, the article casts a closer look at the role played by this symbolic figure in the two novels. Significant rites of passage require significant places, such as the "other place" in *Mama Day* or the "chosen place" in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, which are the realm of the trickster. Deeply anchored in their island communities, these characters easily move between the supernatural and the mundane and facilitate access to cultural memory and personal identity. By juxtaposing these two works, the article argues that rites of passage, performed by bridge-like characters in culturally significant places, are essential for validating the characters' inner and spatial journeys, ultimately assisting them in finding a sense of collective belonging and personal identity.

Keywords: Black community, trickster, traveler, rites of passage, identity

> *People are for people.*
>
> —Arabic proverb
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> *Tout récit est un récit de voyage.*.
>
> —Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien*

Traveling, crossing boundaries, and identity formation are central themes in African American and Caribbean-American literature. The two novels analyzed in this paper explore these subjects of predilection through the use of trickster figures who mediate

between symbolic places, the island community, and other characters, mostly travelers or "professional wanderers"[1] in search of identity and social belonging. Both novels are set on an island that can be located on Gilroy's map of the Black Atlantic: Naylor's Willow Springs, a sea island in the vicinity of the American East Coast near Georgia and South Carolina, and Marshall's fictional Bourne Island in the easternmost part of the Caribbean archipelago. These island communities display firm connections to their African ancestral past, preserving their cultural identity through rites of passage and commemorations orchestrated by redoubtable characters. Drawing on Gates' analysis of the trickster in African and African American cultural traditions, this article examines the crucial role these protagonists play, not only within their community but also in validating other characters' inner and spatial journeys, ultimately assisting them in finding a sense of collective belonging and personal identity. It is important to note that this analysis primarily focuses on the mediating role of the trickster, omitting a number of Esu's valences, which Gates highlights in his seminal work.

Significantly, the life and work of the two writers reflect a clear affiliation with the Black diaspora and its central themes of migration, identity, memory, and ancestry. Not unlike their characters, the two writers themselves are displaced; they have traveled and crossed borders and boundaries. They occupy an intermediary place, similar to Gates's trickster figure, the mediator, which is a privileged stance that allows them to scrutinize and contest both home and place of exile. Critics are in agreement that Black Diaspora women writers are border crossers, "[c]ontinually negotiating, crossing, and recrossing the borders between the personal and the political, between racial, national, and social identities" (Billingslea-Brown, 1999, p. 5). While Naylor displays a predilection for magical realism to emphasize the interaction between the supernatural and the mundane in shaping cultural memory and personal identity, Marshall's novel focuses on travel and displacement to critique the colonial legacy and the search for self.

Mama Day (1989) presents a proud, democratic community isolated from the influences of the mainland, which Christol (1997) describes as an exemplary site for a definition of 'free territory' inhabited exclusively by Black people. Despite its proximity to the American continent, the island community displays an overt reticence towards outside influences, maintaining not only its isolation but, most importantly, its identity as direct descendants of African slaves. In contrast, Marshall's remote Caribbean island is inhabited by a divided

[1] Saul Amron, one of the main protagonists in Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, identifies himself as "a professional wanderer" (Marshall, 1969, p. 321). By introducing Saul, a Jewish American anthropologist, Marshall draws a significant parallel between the African Diaspora and the Jewish Diaspora, emphasizing their shared experiences of displacement and search for identity.

community that, for the most part, has adopted the image of the former colonizer[2]. Only Bournehills, the chosen place, the poor eastern[3] part of the island, maintains its collective past alive, while the wealthier western region is marked by collective amnesia.

The two novels interrogate notions of identity and belonging, articulated through movement to highly significant places that serve as sites of memory[4] for their respective communities. In *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), the "chosen place," with its oppressive cane fields and former barracoons transformed into rum shops, speaks of the violent and alienating history of the island. In contrast, such places do not exist in *Mama Day*, as slavery and colonialism are not part of the collective memory of Willow Springs. There is, however, an intriguing locale, the "other place," a multifunctional yet cryptic setting that functions as a nucleus of *lieux de mémoire*, encompassing crucial landmarks in the Days family history, such as the graveyard, the garden, and the house.

These sacred places are the realm of the trickster, and both novels revolve around powerful characters, such as Miranda and Dr. Buzzard in *Mama Day* or Merle and Delbert in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People*, who closely resemble the Esu figure in Yoruba mythology. In his seminal work, *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1988) argues that the African trickster is deeply embedded in Black diasporic tradition, often associated with subversion, ambiguity, and rhetorical mastery. Usually portrayed as a "divine linguist" and interpreter, Esu functions as a sign of the disrupted wholeness of an African system of meaning and belief that black slaves recreated from memory, preserved by oral narration, improvised upon in ritual—especially in the rituals of the repeated oral narrative—and willed to their own subsequent generations, as hermetically sealed and encoded charts of cultural descent. (p. 5)

Furthermore, Gates (1988) explains that the trickster, as a fundamental figure of mediation, connects "truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation" (p. 6), features that will be emphasized in this paper when analyzing the four prominent protagonists in the primary sources.

[2] A distinction should be drawn here, although it will not be addressed in detail in the present article: Marshall's island is a postcolonial setting, while Naylor's Willow Springs is a Sea Island that, according to the narrative, was never subject to colonialism. However, the figure of Bascombe Wade, the pseudo-master, is mentioned in the novel as an intrinsic part of the Days' family history, which Mama Day attempts to unveil.

[3] Symbolically situated closer or facing Africa, the mother land.

[4] For Nora (1989), the *lieux de mémoire* are significant places "where memory crystallizes and secretes itself" (p. 7) invested with meaning over time and through repeated practices (commemorations, pilgrimages).

These trickster-like characters are highly mobile, transcending space, time, and logic with ease; they are connectors and veritable *bridges*. Primarily, they are the catalysts for their communities and the custodians of tradition; respected members of the community, they are direct descendants of their African ancestors. Moreover, they have unhindered access to sacred ancestral places and assist other characters, mostly travelers, in discovering these significant locales. Such symbolic sites, the 'other place' in *Mama Day* and Bournehills, the chosen place, are endowed with tremendous cultural significance in the novels. Additionally, these bridge-like characters play numerous other roles within their social groups. Mama Day is the matriarch of Willow Springs and a medicine woman, while Dr. Buzzard is the hoodoo doctor and the sprite of the communal porch, the only islander who crosses the actual bridge between the mainland and the island. In *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, the most evocative image of the trickster is Merle, the restless and noisy central protagonist, alongside Delbert, the local rumshop owner and the leader of the Bournehills carnival band.

By assigning the metaphorical attribute of the "bridge" to these characters, this analysis suggests that they belong to and share in two worlds. Their mediating role symbolically parallels the features of the chronotope of the road[5], as Benítez-Rojo (1996) contends in his comparison between two mythological characters, the Greek god Hermes and Yoruba Esu, who are:

> lords of the threshold […] both protect crossroads, highways, and commerce, and both can show themselves in the figure of a man with a cane who rests his body's weight on one foot alone. Both sponsor the start of any activity, make transactions smooth, and are the only ones to pass through the terrible spaces that mediate the Supreme Being and the gods, the gods and the dead, the living and the dead. Both […] are the "givers of discourse" and they preside over the word, over mysteries, transformations, processes and changes; they are the alpha and omega of things. (p. 16)

In contrast to traditional male representations of Esu, the two novels stage imposing female protagonists who have transcended the taxonomy of the diaspora woman and now assume the role of the Esu god. The most notable figures, Mama Day (Miranda[6]) and Merle,

[5] The chronotope, literally "time-space," is a concept that has been used by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) in his essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel". Numerous times, Bakhtin emphasizes that time is inseparable from space and considers that "every entry into the sphere of meaning is accomplished only through the gates of the chronotope" (p. 258).

[6] In Latin, Miranda means "worker of wonders." Moreover, the name Miranda is suggestive, especially in the light of the reversal of characters that Naylor performs with regard to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

are integral to the island and they preserve, adapt, and transmit the fundamental values of the community. They maintain a direct connection to African traditions, which is one of the narrative strategies to re-write and usurp the conditions of patriarchy and colonialism[7]. In Naylor's novel, the island of Willow Springs is dominated by the matriarch Mama Day while Marshall's central protagonist, Merle, is the embodiment of her native Bournehills, the memory-bearer and spokesperson for her small community. Highly respected figures in their communities, both female protagonists act as physical, cultural, historical, spiritual, and linguistic bridges: when "Mama Day say no. Everybody say no" (Naylor, 1989, p. 6) while Merle herself is as "big as life" (Marshall, 1969, p. 442).

Despite her limping and making use of her father's cane, Mama Day is by far the most mobile character in the novel: she constantly moves between different places[8] on the island and interacts with the other members of the community who would otherwise be invisible in the book. The island holds no secrets for the matriarch, who can walk through the woods "stone blind," with "memory guid[ing] her tired feet home" (Naylor, 1989, p. 88) after her duties as midwife and healer. Mama Day has a predilection for walking by night, the darkness with its familiar sounds helping her to summon up and sort out memories: "the tap, tapping of the stick on up the gravel road. Make no kinda sense, them memories" (p. 89). Tucker (1995) astutely highlights the extent to which Mama Day approaches the image of the trickster and the multifarious role she plays in the island community:

Miranda has inherited the mantle of tricksterism, as we can see by her constant movement along the roads, by her connection to "the other place," and also by her ability to read signs of the elements. She has also served as the mediating figure of the community, the bridge between the everyday world and the sacred world of her African foremother. We see her mediating qualities especially clearly in her relationship with George—who, as an outsider, has temporarily "crossed over. (p. 192)

Interestingly, Miranda lives in a trailer, which indicates a provisional dwelling—essentially, a way station. The trailer can also be regarded as a moving entity and reflects the matriarch's role as the catalyst for her small community and the link to its cultural heritage. However, her true home lies in 'the other place,' described as "just an old house with a rocking chair on the porch," "the only house with three stories and a full veranda" (Naylor, 1989, p. 224)

[7] A thorough examination of the disporic island as a feminine place requires considerably more space, which goes beyond the scope of the present analysis.

[8] Interestingly, the two female protagonists are associated with the imagery of the road; they are in constant movement, always on the road, and they do so more than their male counterparts analyzed in this paper.

on Willow Springs. There is a note of mystery about this part of the west woods, as the omniscient voice is careful to inform the reader: "Nobody, drunk or sober, would come this far into the west woods at night. […] And even in broad daylight, they not gonna make it much past the graveyard" (p. 117).

The ambivalence of the place is maintained as all further explanations are suspended; "[i]t's too near the other place" (Naylor, 1989, p. 117) is the only detail provided. Therefore, the supernatural qualities of the Days' graveyard in "the other place" remain open to interpretation and speculation. The suspense is further amplified by the immediate negation of the place as otherworldly: "Where do folks get things in their head? It's an old house with a big garden, that's all" (p. 117). The use of the free indirect discourse intensifies the ambiguity of these divergent opinions, culminating with an eloquent reinstatement of the previously negated assertion: "But then again there *was* the other place" (p. 118).

Even the name of this location connotes alterity and singularity. Supernatural events take place here (the voices that speak of past and future) as well as rituals, for example, the fertility ritual[9] that the matriarch performs on Bernice or George's rite of initiation. To reach the house in the other place, one has to pass through the family graveyard which signifies "walking through time": "They near the graveyard within the circle of live oaks and *move down into time*. A bit of hanging moss to cushion each foot and *they're among the beginning of the Days*" (Naylor, 1989, p. 150). In the "other place" where the maternal house lies, every corner and every object has a story: the garden with its well, the porch with its rocking chair, or the attic with the hidden ledger, to mention a few. First and foremost, the house is a chronotope, a temporal and spatial breach from the profane dimension of time and space, and a solid link with the past: "There was nothing to stop that house from sitting right in the beginning of the nineteenth century except a fresh coat of paint" (p. 224). This is the sacred place where Mama Day prepares her potions, the place where she connects with her family's past and the voices from the past; it is the place that eventually reveals the truth about Sapphira and Bascombe's love. Bachelard's statement of the importance of the house comes to consolidate this brief evaluation of Miranda's dwelling in the 'other place':

> the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind. […] In the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies, its councils of continuity are unceasing. Without it, man would be a dispersed being. […] It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world. (Bachelard, 2014, p. 6)

[9] The parthenogenesis can only occur in such a sacred place "where flowers can be made to sing and trees to fly" (Naylor, 1989, p. 139).

For Mama Day, the "other place" is *fons et origo*, the axis mundi. In this house, she performs her rites of initiation and magic, seeks repose or shelter during the hurricane, and explores the partly obliterated history of her family and the island. Any return to this house represents a personal miniature "eternal return," which she performs yearly in an effort to decode her family history.

The Candle Walk, a Willow Springs tradition observed on December 22nd, commemorates the ancestor Sapphira and her departure to Africa. At the end of the ritualistic pilgrimage, the clairvoyant Mama Day repeatedly endeavors to unveil the real truth behind the foundational myth of the island. Eckard (1995) posits that Mama Day's quest in the novel is for "truth, understanding, and connections regarding her own past. Miranda does not engage in this search for strictly self-serving reasons, but because she knows that memory will unleash the power she needs to save Cocoa from Ruby's psychological and physical poisons" (p. 131).

Mama Day's effort of "re-memory" is as somatic as it is spiritual and takes place in the house of memories in "the other place," replete with significant artifacts. The rocking chair, in particular, is a powerful symbol of repetitive mediation, an important tool that helps Mama Day connect the present with the past, even allowing her to transcend time and memory: "Miranda rocks and thinks […] Miranda is staring past her dried herbs, past the birth of Hope and Grace, past the mother who ended her life in the Sound, on to the Mother who began the Days" (Naylor, 1989, p. 262). The porch of the house, with its rocking chair, becomes a sacred threshold, a consecrated space where Mama Day bridges the profane world with the sacred realm. For Donlon (2001), the threshold of the house in "the other place" is a privileged locale as well as a distinct cultural territory "that is more magical than real, more African than American, more symbolic than literal. By using the home of the slave-owning ancestor to practice her ancient, secret rituals, Mama Day transforms the "place" into her own creolized "space," where the powers of her African ancestors can give life" (p. 79).

Dr. Buzzard[10], another significant character, fulfills a similar mediating role but as the omnipresent trickster on the communal porch in Willow Springs, and as the "expert in medicine or magic, a doctor of various sorts" (Gates, 1988, p. 18). His multifaceted role has been previously analyzed at length; suffice it to say that he mostly portrays the mischievous,

[10] The stories, referred to as "lies" in Gullah folklore, include animal trickster tales about Brer Buzzard, Brer Rabbit, and Brer Fox, and impart entertainment and moral teaching to the audience. Brer Buzzard, often portrayed as lazy and cunning, employs wit and intelligence to trick the other animals.

yet benevolent traits of Esu. As the main entertainer and the subject of the porch talk, he acts as a gregarious disruptor, and a Dionysian prototype—notorious for brewing moonshine in the island's south woods and selling it on the communal porch.

Dr. Buzzard serves as a bridge between the island and the mainland, in charge of bringing Cocoa home from the airport during her visits. George, the outsider, seems rather baffled by the man:

> you waited until the plane had landed to tell me that the man who would be waiting for us at the gate was a little strange. […] your "little strange" turned out to be chicken feathers in his hat, a string of white bones around his neck, and a name like Dr. Buzzard. (Naylor, 1989, pp. 174–5)

Despite his "professional rivalry" with Mama Day, he does not hesitate to act as an intermediary between a skeptical George and the matriarch's magic. When the hurricane brings the destruction of the actual "shaky wooden bridge," the unimaginable happens to George: "I was marooned on an island in the middle of the twentieth century" (Naylor, 1989, p. 256). Dr. Buzzard's invitation, "come on […] we got us a bridge to build" (p. 269), is a statement charged with meaning, implying the need for the literal bridge, and more importantly, the spiritual bridge to save Cocoa from Ruby's malefic spells.

The inhabitants of Willow Springs present an organic connection to their history, meaning that they are localized both in space and in time. Such an ideal situation is the result of several factors: the complete isolation of the island, the absence of a history of colonialism, and the presence of the centenarian Mama Day, who creates a temporal link between past and present,[11] ensuring her community's permanence and survival.

In contrast, *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* is steeped in colonialism and its aftermath, a stance that drastically impacts the characters and their identity formation. The place Marshall depicts in the novel is an island divided against itself.[12] It is a landscape of economic and political dispossession: part in decay, part a replica of the imperial power. The colonizing figures are not just the Sir Johns, the absentee landlords, but also the rich

[11] In Naylor's quartet, Miranda serves as the link between two novels, *Linden Hills* (1985) and *Mama Day* (1989), while George connects *Mama Day* and *Bailey's Café* (1992). Worth mentioning is Cocoa and George's predilection for bridges which are vital for developing a broader perspective of the landscape and, by extrapolation, much more: "Any schoolkid knows that Manhattan is an island, but you have to stand in the middle of the George Washington Bridge on a clear day to really understand. […] Standing there under and over all that incredible space, I saw how small and cramped my life had been" (Naylor, 1989, p. 98), or "the closer to a bridge the better, right?" (p. 65).

[12] Personified, it resembles W.E.B. Du Bois' "double-consciousness" of the Black self which we discuss later in relation to the central female protagonist.

layer of the indigenous population, that perpetuates the former white master's oppression. "We're much too British" (Marshall, 1969, p. 61) they contend with mockery and contempt, a claim that could be extended to describe the collective amnesia of the entire western part of the island.

The colonial control was not abolished; it merely metamorphosed and created new internal boundaries that emphasize division rather than connection. Not surprisingly, the chronotope of the road is the structuring element of the novel which opens and closes with the image of the unreliable road segment that links the western and the eastern parts of the island:

> The lower section of the road the woman was traveling, the winding stretch that lay at the very bottom of the old, soaring cathedral of a hill, had washed away as usual in the heavy, unseasonable rain that had fallen the night before. (Marshall, 1969, p. 3)

The inaccessible, damaged road symbolizes the inability that Merle, the main character, faces not only when confronted with a natural phenomenon such as an "unseasonable rain" but also with the societal dissension on this postcolonial island. Much like the "shaky wooden bridge" in Naylor's work, the road represents the only access route to Bournehills.

By strategically employing the chronotope of the road, Marshall places all her protagonists in the posture of travelers and emphasizes the need for a reliable connection between the two discrepant regions. Such a mediating role is Merle's defining trait; very mobile, she has free access to the rich community while still being the representative of her people, as her description proves—the same deep piercing look and a face that mirrors all the faces on the island, containing them all (Marshall, 1969, p. 259). Moreover, she is the spokes-person of her native Bournehills and evocatively assumes the role of the historian for the region, as she proudly asserts: "I've had to pay with my sanity for the right to speak my mind so you know I must talk" (p. 11). Always in motion, she has unhindered access to divergent milieus of Bourne Island, both rich and poor, as well as to different places and temporal coordinates. According to Hayden White (1978), the historian's task is to mediate between past and present and to connect "two modes of comprehending the world that would normally be unalterably separated" (p. 27), functions that Merle attempts to fulfill in the text.

In order to understand the island and its people, one must first comprehend Merle, who is "a damn research project herself" (Marshall, 1969, p. 118) and is undeniably tied to the poor region and its people. On one occasion, Saul, the anthropologist, reads Merle as "the way" to understand the region's complex nature:

> [h]e didn't see her simply as Merle […] For the moment she was more than she appeared. And it suddenly occurred to him that perhaps he would have to come to know and understand her, really know her, before he could hope to come to know and understand Bournehills; that she was, in the old Biblical sense, the way. (p. 260)

She is a catalyst for her community and a trickster figure, reminiscent of Esu, the translator, who connects the two dyadic sides of the island. Merle is partially introduced in the opening pages, on the road, simultaneously with the region's presentation. Similar to the island, her persona is characterized by diversity and disunity, features that become more prominent as the story unfolds. The adjectives used to describe her appearance convey a sense of deterioration and decay and are also employed with respect to Bournehills. Her face is sketched with the help of elements taken from nature and becomes the mirror of the surrounding landscape. A face sculpted by a "bold and liberal Bantu hand" (Marshall, 1969, p. 5), full-mouthed with "a shallow cleft like a valley above the upper lip" is now, in its downfall towards middle age, described as "despoiled" (p. 5), echoing the degradation of the region. In the novel's opening, there is a notable insistence, even abuse of the epithet "despoiled," as if the omni-scient narrator tried to instill this first poignant impression of the place and its people.

Only at the end of the first chapter does Merle introduce herself in a manner that becomes a constant throughout the novel: her strident, abrupt manner always accompanied by the discomforting loud dangling of her bracelets "like a monk's beads or a captive's chains" (Marshall, 1969, p. 5). Paradoxically, she is both: a savior and defender of her community and a prisoner of her troubled past and the island's history. With a very colorful, almost carnivalesque presence, Merle seems to channel two rather incongruous traditions within her persona: African and European. Her high-heeled shoes and dresses with vivid African patterns, contrast with her European pendant silver earrings and noisy traditional bracelets. These bracelets, typically worn by Bournehills women during carnival, symbolize the chains of slavery; yet, Merle wears them year-round, indicating her deep connection with the painful legacy of slavery.

Moreover, the oxymoronic image of her earrings, shaped like European saints and "trembling anxiously" in concert with her rage, metaphorically ties her to the past, both racial (Black West Indian) and personal (her exilic experience in England). A contradictory protagonist, with her "scarcely suppressed hysteria" (Marshall, 1969, p. 65), Merle has not entirely escaped the sugar-cane related "disease" that has plundered the island since the times of slavery. Yet she is fully aware of this affliction, proudly declaring, "I'm a damn diabetic" (p. 85). As a bridge-like character, she not only mediates between the two dissonant parts of her Caribbean island but she also connects the characters (foreign visitors and locals alike)

with an ancestral past. Moreover, she strives to bridge and reconcile the oppositions that inhabit her personal history: the loss of her daughter and husband, as a direct consequence of her past life in London, and the defeat of her social-radical ideals that could have brought a change for her people. Like the divided island, Merle epitomizes Du Bois' (1903) description of the internal conflict inherent in the African American experience, characterized by "double-consciousness."[13]

Delbert, the Bournehills rumshop owner, is another key protagonist in *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* who appears in a mediating posture as the refiguration of the trickster. His shop is the point of confluence and subsistence for Bournehills, where the community gets the abject supply of food and the "elixir"—rum. He is the "chief presiding over the nightly palaver in the men's house" (Marshall, 1969, p. 123) and the one who makes libations to "the ancestral gods." Linked to the idea of ritual, Delbert's broken right leg, now in plaster, is depicted as "part of a column to some great temple that had fallen" (p. 123). Initially portrayed as partially immobile, propped up on make-shift beds and enthroned on various crates, Delbert later assumes a more dynamic role during the carnival, "trudging[14] heavily in the lead" (p. 282) of the Bournehills band.

During the pageant, Delbert sounds a conch shell to punctuate the stages of the carnival performance of the Bournehills group, which relentlessly dramatizes Cuffee Ned's insurrection every year, to the great contempt shown by tourists and by the rest of Bourne Island population. Reminiscent of Esu's whistle, the conch shell metaphorically reminds the carnival revelers of the angry mourning sound of the Bournehills sea[15] and connects

[13] "One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois, 1910, p. 3). The 'double consciousness' is a problem of identity and presents the danger of modulating this identity according to others' perception. The two metaphors of "double consciousness" and "the veil" employed by Du Bois with relation to the duality of the African American could be easily applicable to the Anglophone Caribbean soul, or to any location of the Black Atlantic for that matter, by simply substituting, if need be, the appropriate imperial power.

[14] Gates (1988) also identifies the trickster as limping, a consequence of his mediating function: "His legs are of different lengths because he keeps one anchored in the realm of the gods while the other rests in this, our human world" (p. 6). This feature echoes in Mama Day's description as limping, emphasizing her mediating role between the supernatural and the mundane. Similarly, Delbert is also a recurring character in Marshall's work. In *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), another limping Delbert leads Avey on the path towards the rediscovery of her long-forgotten roots, emphasizing the connection between physical limping and spiritual crossing or mediation in these texts.

[15] The conch shell, considered the musical instrument of the spirits of the sea, implies a water connection and hints at African origins (Gates, 1988, p. 17). Suggestively, Saul identifies Merle in a similar light: "she looked like some dark, squat attendant spirit of the sea" (Marshall, 1969, p. 202). The conch shell is also an important part of Hindu religious symbolism, associated with Vishnu, the God of Preservation. Merle herself crosses these cultural boundaries: "And what do you think I'm doing when I disappear for days at a time in my room? […] Practicing a little Buddhism, that's what. Trying to achieve that peace which they say passes all understanding. And I'm as good a Hindu as any" (Marshall, 1969, p. 318). This parallel to a different spiritual set of beliefs perfectly emulates Esu's mediating traits. As Gates (1988) notes, Esu carries a satchel and a whistle indicating his role as a messenger and interpreter between gods and people.

them with a forgotten part of their history. The carnival is indeed the moment when the communal past emerges from Bournehills into the present and overwhelms the entire island.

In non-carnival time, Delbert's rumshop is the scene for incessant debates.[16] The place is not so much an arena of contestation as it is a stage upon which the great deeds of the local hero are repeated and rehearsed daily: "their voices, grappling like wrestlers back and forth across the room, sent the dust moiling, and threatened, with each outburst, to bring the flimsy walls tumbling down" (Marshall, 1969, p. 121). They are still discussing the latest "news" in the place where "it hasn't been any real news since Cuffee burned down the hill" (p. 129), centuries before. The discussion is not necessarily founded on divergent opinions—the argument is only the generator of the dialogue. Due to its repetitive nature, the verbal exchange is potentially ritualizing as well as re-actualizing, firmly grounding the community in shared historical and cultural memory.

The regular patrons are minutely described with the help of metaphors drawn from their surrounding environment: "faces, with the pronounced cheekbones rising out of them like hills and the hollows beneath like dark valleys, […] some spectacularly rugged terrain not unlike Bournehills itself" (Marshall, 1969, p. 124). Their portrait reinforces the existence of the community as a set of firm connections between people, place, and the history of the place. The rumshop owner not only imparts the "elixir of life in Bournehills" (p. 318) but he is also the bearer of a piece of brutal history "cutting deep into the flesh" (p. 124). The events of his life and "of a time that long antedated his life" (p. 124) are "scribbled over" his eyes, "recorded like a story on microfilm" (p. 124).

Part of this collective memory is Stinger, another regular of the rumshop, who compensates for Delbert's immobility with his exuberant performance. His attachment to the land is such that he never parts from his sharp billhook, which he uses to punctuate his statements in conversation. This ambivalent tool[17] used for cutting canes acquires a linguistic role in his "work-swollen hand." By its prolonged use in the field, the knife has become an extension of his hand:

> He held a hone billhook […] in one hand and, occasionally, to emphasize a point, he would bring it sweeping down in a short chopping arc close to the floor. The long single-edged knife which curved out slightly at the end seemed almost part of the man's hand the way

[16] The noise comes in stark contrast with the nearby church and the half-asleep murmuring women, whose "prophetic Delphic voices" (Marshall, 1969, p. 135) suggest that they too may be such mediators or messengers.

[17] For Edouard Glissant (1989) "le coutelas est un outil animé" (pp. 175-6). It is an ambivalent tool since it is first an imposed colonial mark which acquires in the hand of the slave a function that subverts the institution of slavery.

> he held it, something either grafted on or that he'd been born with: an extra limb nature had bestowed upon him to equip him for his world. (Marshall, 1969, p. 121)

Complementing the nightly banter about Cuffee Ned's exploits, the pigsticking ritual held behind Delbert's shop occupies a heralding mid-position in the novel: it extends and fulfills the anticipatory experience of carnival. The description of the "great white sow," once a "thief and aggressor" draws a pungent analogy to colonial oppression. Its sacrifice reflects the Bournehills people's resistance to colonial domination, with Delbert ominously predicting, "All I know this one is not going to die easy" (Marshall, 1969, p. 253). Reminiscent of Cuffee Ned's revolt, the pig's sacrifice and the ensuing carnival suggest a different type of temporality: one of permanence and survival, that is, timelessness, "there had been beneath the violence of the act an affirmation of something age-old, a sense of renewal" (p. 259), along with communion and revival.

By bringing together displaced characters who are struggling to assign meaning to time, space, and self, Marshall underlines the mediating role of the island and its community. There is a positive note of salvation for those who are trying to find their way with the help of Esu-like protagonists who *are* "the way." Likewise, Cuffee Ned, is another transgressor of borders, another version of Esu: "for Cuffee had been that also, both seer and shaman to the people, the *intermediary* between them and the ancient gods" (Marshall, 1969, p. 284, emphasis added). Long after his death, Cuffee Ned continues to mediate the two divergent parts of the island, and brings the western part closer to their ancestors' homeland: "Cuffee had died content, […] For he had seen his life and deeds as pointing *the way* to what must be. An obeah man that he was, a true believer" (p. 288, emphasis added). The African perception of time as cyclical relies on the hope of a return, as illustrated by the belief of the Bournehills people for whom cyclical time is the "certainty of salvation" (p. 119).

In both novels, the island and its sacred sites are suitable soil for epiphanies and potentially redemptive moments, all conducive to a restoration of self and identity. As a record of the past, 'the other place' in *Mama Day* encapsulates the island's entire history since it "got spit out of the mouth of God" (Naylor, 1989, p. 35). Conversely, Bournehills is a living mausoleum that bears inscribed in its very landscape the merciless history of colonialism. Characters such as Mama Day, Merle, Dr. Buzzard, and Delbert are an extension of the places they preside over, assisting crossing, remembering, and reconnecting other characters with their ancestral values. Invested with an aura of mediating between disparate worlds, these bridge-like protagonists facilitate the passage between present and past, logic and magic, self and community, as well as remembrance and forgetfulness.

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